

SUSHI: A REMEMBRANCE

My brother Philip, fifteen months younger than I, did not believe in wind chill factors, allergies, or cholesterol. If he did not believe in something, he did not want to hear about it and was especially unsympathetic towards someone who had complaints about winter cold, allergic symptoms, or high blood cholesterol.

In the early 1980s, Philip moved to the West Coast. I'd visit him, often alone, occasionally with other family, and we'd explore the wide varieties of available Asian cuisines: Vietnamese, Korean, Cambodian and Thai. I had my first Chinese dim sum breakfast in San Diego with a Chinese-American friend of Philip's guiding our choices. I came to understand the meaning of "Pacific rim" and the accompanying sense of connection between the west coast of the Americas and the east coast of Asia.

One of our favorite things to do together during my California visits was to make the rounds of the sushi bars in the Japanese communities. In Los Angeles, we would enter the downtown Japanese neighborhood through a gate-like display memorializing the internment of the Japanese-Americans during World War II. In San Francisco, my visits often coincided with his birthday weekend, so the sushi was part of the celebration.

Sometimes we'd have one or two items and move to another sushi bar. When we found one we liked or Philip knew to be especially good, we would stay for a lingering meal and long discussions. I'd usually have a quart of an imported Japanese beer with my selections of raw or lightly cooked octopus, tuna, salmon, shrimp, and other sushi. However, Philip did not like alcohol. The loss of control frightened him.

During one of my San Francisco visits, Philip announced that he decided to stop going to sushi bars. This was one of the ways he coped with having AIDS, acknowledging that raw fish was perhaps not the best food for someone with an

impaired immune system.

Philip spent a long time coming out to me. In the early 1980s, while I was visiting him in Los Angeles, he expressed his fear of gay bashing. On a later visit, he wondered why a cure for AIDS could not be found.

I was amazed. I thought that my usually self-absorbed brother was developing a social conscience, perhaps becoming an activist like his older brother. Only after Philip came out to me did I realize that Philip's concerns about gay bashing and AIDS were concerns about himself.

Philip was an artist who chose theater as his medium. He did set design and lighting for plays, dance and performance art, and video and photographic documentation. He struggled, trying to come to some understanding of what artistic or theatrical success would mean to him. Philip was good at what he did. Unfortunately, after he went to the West Coast, he joined the legions of good artists whose lights were lost in the beacons of the giants. I often wonder whether, had he settled elsewhere, he could have been a great in a smaller community.

While Philip worked as a technician with the Japanese-American artistic, performing, and cultural community in Los Angeles, he shared in the Japanese-American consciousness of their World War II relocation and internment. Like many gay men, Philip shared the fear of societal retaliation for being gay and having a poorly understood contagious disease. Philip feared a fate similar to that of the Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Philip tried several times to get his masters in fine arts. He worked on a thesis about Polish theater. His thesis efforts seemed to be a parable about our family. We suffer from low self-esteem, so he would often underestimate his abilities. When he could overcome that low self-esteem and underestimation, he would overreach. Trying to write a thesis on Polish theater without being able to read Polish, only using English translations, was one example of such overreaching. Yet, his desire to feel connected to his ethnicity and therefore his family continued to inspire his thesis choice.

Another of the ways he coped with AIDS was to throw away his unfinished thesis manuscript and the photocopies of translated articles. I was with him that day, helping him pack to move. I wanted so much to save it, read it, perhaps try to have something published from it as a memorial to him. However, I could not figure out how to retrieve it from the trash without upsetting him and our relationship. So his thesis was buried before he was.

We grew up in an inner city Chicago neighborhood of mixed ethnicity: central and eastern Europeans, French Canadians, Appalachians and Mexicans. We served as altar boys together at services including Christmas midnight mass and the English and Polish processions through our neighborhood. The processions concluded with ceremonial kissing of the plexiglass encased bones of St. Anne, the grandmother of Jesus. Our Polish grandmother would come to our home where she would sit on our front porch to join in singing Polish hymns with the throngs across the street on the church steps.

I stayed in touch with our European roots by following events in Poland, especially by reading translated articles from *Solidarność*. I obtained some *Solidarność* pins from Polish exiles in Wisconsin and sent one to Philip.

Philip expressed his need to be connected to Poland and Polish culture by continuing to attend Polish language Roman Catholic Christmas midnight masses in Los Angeles. Philip liked the hymns. Our mother came from a Sicilian family, and as our parents were first generation, English was the only language used with us. Still, the sound of Polish was very safe, warm, and familiar since it was the language spoken by our Dad and his siblings during our visits to our grandparents on Chicago's near northwest side. Philip described himself as a Zen Buddhist, but I think he emotionally remained a Polish Roman Catholic.

My brother spent a lot of energy trying to come to terms with being gay. In the early 1980s, he began psychotherapy. He told his therapist and later he told me that he had no memories of childhood, only vague recollections of feeling unwanted, unloved, and rejected. He always knew he was different, but had

no name for the difference. He asked me for help. I tried to fill in some of the gaps, telling as many stories as I could remember while we visited, writing short stories of my recollections which I mailed from home. I helped nudge his memories, and he was able to find some of his own of shared events. I took the opportunity to confess and apologize for petty, though hurtful, acts I committed against him as a child.

We remembered our bike race when Philip lost control of his bike and crashed into a cement staircase, suffering a small but deep and bloody gash on his face. I helped him home. After he was stitched, I helped him find the sidewalk trail of his blood from the accident site to home.

Philip and I recalled my obsessive enjoyment of war play with friends or alone with my plastic armies. Philip was not interested and rarely joined me. Ironically, the threat of the Vietnam era draft turned me into a peace activist, an interest I continue to pursue in a variety of ways.

In our twenties we moved from the periphery of Chicago to the city center. We went to the University of Illinois where we got our bachelor degrees, his in theater and mine in nursing. One summer, Philip moved into my apartment to assist me after I had broken my collar bone in a bike accident. A decade later, I would reciprocate.

Moving to San Francisco, where Philip felt safe and welcome, was part of his process of achieving a measure of peace with his sexuality. His crisis with AIDS took so much from him that he had little energy and diminishing time to pursue his artistic goals or to do personal work to come to peace with himself. AIDS left him so far from where he hoped to be.

In late 1990, I went to San Francisco for one last time to bring Philip home to Madison. His health was deteriorating rapidly and dramatically. By the time I got there, he was too sick to travel, so I brought him to a Pacific Heights hospital. While waiting for him to get stronger, I would spend the days with him in his hospital room.

One evening, I left the hospital with Philip's chiropractor and a friend, another Midwestern artist who had

found her way to the west coast. I had not had a good sushi meal this trip and asked for their help. On the way back to Philip's apartment, where I stayed, they escorted me to what they said was, if not the best sushi bar, at least one of their favorites.

The next day, I reported to Philip on my sushi adventure. I'd sat alone at the bar, sipping from a pot of tea and a bottle of Japanese beer. I asked the chef to serve a combination of my choices and his recommendations. A string of fish delights came, some on a small bed of rice, others wrapped in rice and seaweed, a few heated, most raw, some I recognized, and others I didn't. I told Philip of my enjoyment, dipping my sushi into a horseradish and soy sauce mix, and clearing my palate with slices of fresh ginger between selections. I told of the soup, and, of course, the California rolls, lightly spiced avocado surrounded with white rice and wrapped with seaweed.

Philip eventually became strong enough to fly home with me to Madison. He died three months later, in early 1991. At the request of my parents, Philip was buried in Chicago. Being an intellectual Buddhist, he would have preferred cremation and scattering in San Francisco Bay. The cemetery is a very strict, traditional Polish Catholic one requiring a letter from a priest stating that Philip died a Catholic in good standing. A friend in Madison found a gay sensitive priest who wrote such a letter.

After Philip's death, with funding from his last Social Security Disability check and his pension fund contributions, our family, friends, and I made a NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt panel. We decided to include his work in the quilt square.

Philip left behind sketch books, prints, negatives, some videos, and thousands of slides: dances, performance art, computer graphic mandalas, indoor and outdoor stage designs for U.S., Asian, and European artists. Some were from Bertolt Brecht plays, which were among his favorites. Philip could be shy and protective of his art. Going through these pieces, I came to a deeper knowledge of my brother as artist.

I felt a deep sense of loss when I saw slides of him alive, and when he, wearing a wig vaguely resembling Andy Warhol's hair, appeared in a video with colleagues and the audience in a

"fifteen minutes of fame" performance art event.

I eventually figured out his system for cataloging what he thought to be his best work. I selected a number of items: a still from the video biography of Ed Harris, a Bay Area surrealist painter; two dance performances from the Japan-America theater in Los Angeles; a poster he helped design for a dance performance by the choreographer with whom he had what he called an artistic marriage; Garrison Keillor at "A Prairie Home Companion" road show in Los Angeles where a row of lights Philip designed is clearly visible; and one of his sunset photos.

I went to the T-shirt store at a mall, where the images were transferred onto cloth for sewing to the panel. After a private showing in my home and a public showing at the Madison AIDS Support Network, I shipped the quilt to San Francisco in time for it to join the national display of the entire quilt in Washington, D.C.

I am still trying to catch up on some of Philip's recommendations for arts experiences, so I saw the new release of the director's cut of *Blade Runner*. On one of Philip's guided tours of downtown Los Angeles, he pointed out places where scenes were shot. I understand his appreciation as a set designer for what the film accomplished. All Los Angeles was transformed into a dark, wet, futuristic and decaying performance art set.

I've dreamed about Philip several times. Among the few possessions I inherited from him I especially treasure his small Zen library. I have adopted what I think to be a Zen attitude towards these dreams. I enjoy and appreciate them, not trying to find any deeper meaning other than that these dreams are part of my experience.

Two weeks before I brought Philip to Madison, my family and I moved into a new home. Not until the spring after Philip's death was I able to install our porch swing. At our old home, which Philip frequently visited, he enjoyed that swing, especially with my two young sons. I have a picture of Philip, our older brother, and me on it taken the spring before Philip died. I spent several hours assembling parts and bolting the swing to the porch. That night, I dreamed I called Philip, something I would

have routinely done while he was alive, to give him a status report, as if he was coming soon for another visit.

Although I am a nurse, I chose to limit my nursing of Philip to personal care, and left the riskier activities to the clinic, hospital, and hospice nurses. Still, the fear of catching AIDS remained with me. Months later, I dreamed I stuck my finger with a syringe after injecting Philip with a dose of pain relieving medicine. I tossed throughout the night, fearing I had contracted AIDS.

My favorite dream, though, came shortly after he died. I went to a University of Wisconsin film department's showing of *Lost Horizon* with cuts restored. A few nights later, I dreamed the final scene. I was following Philip instead of Ronald Colman into the Tibetan mountains. When I could follow him no more, as he was about to leave my vision and enter Shangri La, he turned. I could see he was smiling. He looked at me and waved good-bye. He turned again, resumed his journey and left my sight.

The *Lost Horizon* dream reminded me of some of Philip's and my conversations just prior to his death. He was slipping in and out of various levels of consciousness. I suggested that he remember how he had talked about trying to find a door out of his sufferings. I suggested that he look for that door, and I would accompany him to the threshold, but that he would have to cross it alone. My dream gives me another image of Philip's exit, that of going into the mountains where I could not follow.

I reflect back on Philip's feelings about allergies, cold weather, and cholesterol. I remember that after Philip moved in with my family in Madison, he complained about the taste of nonfat yogurt which was my usual selection. He wanted the fats and cholesterol to keep his weight up as he battled AIDS. I recalled how AIDS, or the drugs he took to treat it and the accompanying infections and cancers, caused him to have occasional odd allergic reactions. Although he moved to the west coast because he hated Midwestern winters, after he died I found a note he wrote remarking that he had forgotten how beautiful winter could be.

I miss Philip deeply. I especially miss our times together

in the *sushi* bars of Los Angeles and San Francisco. A *sushi* bar opened in Madison with an atmosphere reminding me of those on the West Coast where we had good times.

I will never get over the loss of my brother. However, I am moving to different, more subtle forms of grieving. I share stories like this, and I go to Madison's *sushi* bar for Japanese beer, *sushi*, and to remember.