

Words shared at Pete's Wake Service. No. 7
Friday, March 10, 2023

You're probably wondering WHY I am dressed so casual. No, this is NOT the NEW WAKE CASUAL. So WHY? This is how I've dressed for the past, almost three years, as I journeyed with Pete down the Alzheimer's path. So it's to honor Pete. What will I wear tomorrow? Wait and see.

Tomorrow, I'll reflect upon the gift of Pete in the lives of each one of us. This evening, I desire to be more personal: How Pete was the greatest gift in my life. I've titled my words: Tale of Two Buses. If I were Tony Russo, my friend, I'd tell you the Tale of the Little Red Wagon. I'm not Tony Russo. This evening, he's even dressed more sharply than I am.

The Tale of Two Buses: the First Bus is named My Greatest Sin and the Second Bus is named My Redemption.

My Greatest Sin. In December, 1968, I have just returned to the United States after spending one year in Vietnam serving as a Medic. I am stationed at Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas where I had been stationed prior to departure to Vietnam. I spend the next 17 months in San Antonio before discharge. I am in my initial stage of thinking about religious life. I've actually contacted 4 or 5 religious communities. Only one responds. Guess which one? Yes! The Priests of the Sacred Heart.

I began to settle into a rhythm of how I spent my Saturdays before discharge from the Army. I remember the rhythm this way.

Late morning, I take a bus from Fort Sam Houston to downtown San Antonio. There are three or four movie theaters in close proximity. I usually have already chosen the movie I want to see. Remember, this is pre-internet days. No advanced purchases. Be early or wait for the next showing.

Following the movie, I'd walk up the street to Old St. Mary's Catholic Church located along the San Antonio River. The Church is staffed by the OMI's - the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. I arrive in time to attend Saturday Evening Mass for Sunday. Departing the Church, I walk back down the street to the Walgreens Drug Store which is located at 300 E. Houston and Navarro. This intersection is a major transfer point for the San Antonio Bus System.

I enter the Walgreens Drug Store to enjoy a lite supper before returning to Fort Sam Houston. STOP! Remember, this is 1969, Walgreens still has lunch counters. I'd almost always order a hamburger, fries, and a chocolate malt. Finishing my burger, I go directly outside to wait for a Fort Sam Houston bus.

This is during the Vietnam War and Fort Sam Houston is at full capacity. Thus there are many buses traveling to and from Fort Sam Houston and downtown San Antonio. It's usually a short wait. Upon departing Walgreens, I join a large crowd of people waiting for buses. It's Saturday afternoon, downtown San Antonio.

As we wait, many of us in the crowd see a young man walking towards us. He's obviously drunk. The crowd all most immediately begins to move in zig-zag unison, in an effort to avoid encountering this drunk. When he zigs, we zag. We go back and forth. It must appear comical? I'm certain, if a video of this scene had been placed on YouTube, if YouTube had existed, there would have been a million hits before morning.

The zig-zagging continues. Unfortunately, when I ought to have been zigging, I must have zagged. The man walks directly to me, and tightly grabs my left arm. It is obvious, he has no intention of letting go.

I'm overwhelmed with embarrassment. Surely the crowd doesn't think I know this drunk? He tells me he is partially blind and needs assistance identifying his bus. He presumes I'm going to help. He holds my arm more tightly. He starts to share information about himself, as if I have the slightest interest.

I learn his name is James Murphy. He is partially blind, the result of an accident. He is drunk and his clothes smell. He tells me he is a dishwasher at a restaurant. And he has just finished his shift and is on his way home. Is this guy slow or what? I'm don't have slightest interest. I just want to get out of here. He is concerned about the alcohol because he lives with his mother and she will be upset. Not interested!

My embarrassment is increasing by the second. Out of frustration, I ask him which bus is his. He tells me, and I respond I'll wait. As if there's a choice. My left arm is turning purple from his grip.

I wait with him. Three of my buses pass by before his arrives. I walk him to the front of the bus. He walks toward the bus driver and realizes he doesn't have sufficient money for the fare. I quickly take out 2 quarters from my pocket and give them to the driver. He is gone. He is history. I am free. My bus arrives shortly thereafter. I get on, sit down with a sigh of relief. I'm still feeling sorry for myself, making all kinds of judgments about the man who has bruised my left arm.

My bus heads toward Fort Sam Houston. And as real, as I'm standing before you, the Holy Spirit slaps me on the back of my head, saying, "What the F-ing did you just do?" I PAUSE. Here I'm thinking about religious life. And I couldn't get rid of James Murphy quickly enough. Did he get home? I didn't have the slightest, zero, concern for this person in need. Total disregard for my fellow being. My fellow creature of God. My only thought and concern was ME. When I arrive at the barracks, I go directly to my bunk, and write a poem so I'll never forget my failure. I title the poem: The Lament of James Murphy.

Friends both then and over the years have tried to comfort me in this failure. At times even lessening its seriousness. Saying, "Don't be so hard on yourself." I've appreciated their sensitive, but I know I refused an opportunity to encounter Jesus, in the person of one who is in great need of love and comfort.

I didn't want to have anything to do with the drunk, zig-zagging on the street. I couldn't get rid of him, Jesus, soon enough. This is my Greatest Sin. The memory of this encounter is forever interwoven into my memory.

Fast forward to January, 1988. Nineteen years later, I find myself back in San Antonio. I'm one of the directors at our formation house. Br. Peter Mankins is assigned co-director. I slightly know who Pete is, but not in any real sense. I mean, by age, we are separated by 17 years. Pete is only 59 years old. But at the time, I think he is really old. I wonder why I have to work with him. Couldn't leadership assign someone younger?

Now remember, we're in San Antonio, the site of My Greatest Sin.

By September, 1988, a friendship is beginning to form between me and Pete. In May, 1989, we take our first road trip to the Grand Canyon. We hike the Blue Angel Trail. Together we wash our feet in the Colorado River. A friendship is being formed.

As each year unfolds, our friendship grows. I don't know the moment when we became BEST FRIENDS. It has to be within the first three years. Each year we take a vacation together. In the course of our friendship, we visit every state in the Union together, except Alaska. We each visit Alaska, just not together. In the unfolding of our friendship, we come to share in the most significant events in the life of the other. WE ARE BEST FRIENDS!

Sometime in 2016, I realize something is amidst with Pete's memory. I arrange for some testing. And days later, the frightful answer: Alzheimer's. Over the next seven years, as his Alzheimer's journey unfolds, Pete receives the best of professional care. Yet, we all know, there is NO CURE for the Alzheimer's. It ALWAYS ends in death.

A year into Pete's diagnosis, while sitting alone in my apartment, shortly before retiring for night, the Spirit reveals to me the importance of accompanying Pete on this Alzheimer's Bus. The Spirit reveals, I MUST join Pete, my BEST Friend, on this Bus. It is clear that once I board the Bus, I cannot get off, until Pete arrives safely home. This bus ride with Pete will be my redemption for failing to ride with James Murphy.

It is a most glorious Bus ride. Joyful, painful, exciting, surprising, comforting. As we journey on the Bus, I hoping the ride will never end. We arrive at Pete's stop, Saturday morning, March 4, 2023, at 6:15 a.m. in the morning. Pete, I'm incredibly happy you are home. But for me, it feels much too soon.

Thanks for your patient listening. Now, I am anxious to hear your stories of how this person we knew as Pete, touched your lives. Please share. I know Pete's listening.