

Remembering Mark Sweeney

It was warm outside, early November, just a few weeks after the 89' earthquake. Mark and I were living in a small apartment in San Francisco when he appeared in my doorway and leaned hard against it, looking perplexed. Now, it wasn't unusual to see Mark perplexed, especially in front of a computer, propped on an elbow, hand wrapped across his forehead, eyes fixed on the problem in front of him — mouth agape.

But this was different. His mouth was shut. Something was wrong.

“She knows we're supposed to be together,” he explained.

Catherine was living back East and planning a trip to Europe with her boyfriend. Mark had given her no indication that their future was so clear to him.

“I don't get what she's doing,” he said. His arms crossed. “She could get serious about this guy.”

I was feeling fairly self-righteous. I saw this coming and knowingly asked, “When's the last time you talked to her about it?” Years, I was thinking.

That's when his mouth dropped open and his eyes fixed the problem.

“I need to call her,” and he disappeared into his room.

Most people don't realize that was the night everything changed for Mark. He made the best decision of his life. That night he set out to convince the girl that, amidst his generous flinging around of superlative compliments to everyone in his midst, “cutest,” “sweetest,” “bestest,” it was she who lived first in his heart, nobody else.

She believed him.

And the angels sang big.

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Then the angels put us all to the test.

A few weeks later Mark was diagnosed with cancer for the first time. Besides the tumor in his brain, the months that followed would also reveal what I will name, without hyperbole, Enlightenment.

It's no secret that worry and regret baffle our ability to live fully. It's not new information that happiness is elusive and transient, uncontainable. But to picture enlightenment as peace in the face of chaos is just trite and misguided.

Enlightenment is something else.

Mark's presence in my life was enlightening, shining a light on the truth about being alive I constantly fail to accept, that now is all we have and that — even when life is crappy, harrowing — it's okay.

How true, and it's easy to say right now, but Mark lived it. He showed us. That's enlightenment.

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It started with severe headaches and vomiting. A call from the first doctor Mark referred to as his hero sounded the alarm. Mark was in danger. Almost immediately surgeons opened him up to put in a shunt and relieve the pressure until the tumor could be removed. As they shaved his head, I couldn't imagine how he wasn't crippled with fear. Instead, he reminded me of the tickets we had to see Laurie Anderson at Slims. Laurie Anderson, at Slims — this Friday! That was the furthest thing from my mind, but there was Mark, inhabiting, at once, terror and giddy anticipation.

The next day Catherine flew out to be by his side.

That Friday, the day of the concert, Mark's way in the world enlightened me again. Overly ambitious, he and Catherine drove to Berkeley for a day of play, but it was too much. On the way home Mark's head had started pounding again. The pressure was building, and by the time they got back to our apartment, he was throwing up with pain. His stitches popped. We were scared.

As Catherine called Mark's father, I stuck my head into the dark bedroom to check on him. I had never seen Mark cry before. I was about to fetch Catherine, but he waved me over and leaned his head against my stomach. "Bad day," was all he said, and we both cried for a bit. We laughed, too.

Bad day. How true.

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I want to be more like Mark. I try to be. I try to live my life like it's okay, even in the middle of a really bad day. I try to let giddy anticipation live next to fear.

I want to be more like Laurie Anderson, too. And the Red Hot Chilly Peppers and Tibor Kalman and Lao Tsu. I want to sing like Elvis Costello and write like Italo Calvino and enchant everyone I meet like— Prince.

Mark enlightened me to each of these wondrous humans and many more, but unlike me, I don't think Mark wanted to be anything but Mark.

To be like Mark means to just be me. To just be.

How true.

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Mark endured more than most of us can imagine. None of us knew there would be so many doctors Mark would call his hero. Cancer clutched at him twice and then this third time dragged him away. I am so very sad he's gone but I am so grateful his pain is gone, too.

The world is bigger and better because Mark Sweeney was in it. We are all lucky we got to be with him. That's not always true. Some people are awful. Mark was the opposite.

Mark endured more than most of us can imagine, but didn't he also live more than most of us can imagine?

He invited us all to be Kindred Spirits— and one of us to be his Soulmate. He gave us hope in the form of two fabulous young humans we get to keep loving and through whose eyes we can visit his laughter.

He confounded our precious sense of promptness. He drew bunnies and little hearts, and while that level of cutesiness nauseates some of us, his appreciation for gory and absurd movies and his passion for mind-bending philosophy and science books cured us of any illusions he was only light-hearted. Yet, in the middle of the most worrisome times Mark would say, "For all my bad luck, I'm really lucky."

Again. How true. We all loved him, no doubt. He was lucky that way.

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Catherine, I was on your first date with Mark 28 years ago.

(My girlfriend had just gotten engaged, to someone else, and Mark thought it was a good idea to get me out of the house so he brought me along. I'm sure you appreciated that.)

The movie we saw together was *Being There* about a man who changed everyone around him just by showing up. The last words of that movie are, "Life is a state of mind." What a mind our Mark had. He knew more about being there than anyone I've known — at least, once he got there.

You shared with me words he spoke to you a few months ago. The news was not good, and he said, simply, "I thought we'd have more time."

Goodbye, Mark. I love you. I miss you terribly. You were a beautiful man.

You made a life of being there, and we got to witness it. We thought we'd have more time, but you showed us that now is all we have, anyway.

How true.

We hoped we'd have more time. We wanted more.

That's true of everything good.

Isn't it?

—

David Delp
Upper Montclair, New Jersey
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