

Small Talk – August 9 2021
By Michael Small

My sister, the Rev. Anna D. Small sends daily stories from the Portland Oregonian. I read most of them. The column below, written by Steve Duin is a remarkable telling of a story of life and death, despair and joy, wonder and miracle – and surprise. It is a story that needs to be shared and told. Thanks Steve for your telling.

‘And death i think is no parenthesis’
By Steve Duin from the Portland Oregonian Newspaper
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Roman Martinez brought two dozen yellow roses to Willamette National Cemetery in May. He set the flowers on Bob Lavey’s grave in the light rain, then lingered beneath a nearby tree, fumbling with his emotions. “I think I spent five minutes crying,” he says.

Home alone that night, still restless, Martinez cautiously reached out to Lavey’s son, Dan, for the first time on Facebook. “I hope I am not crossing any lines here,” he wrote, but he wanted to share a 10-year-old memory with someone who might understand the difference it made in his life.

He was part of the crew on the 2011 Alaska Airlines flight on which Bob Lavey, returning to Portland from Boston and Fenway Park, died in seat 19C. This past Tuesday afternoon, on the rooftop bar at Revolution Hall, Martinez spent an hour with Lavey’s three sons. He answered their questions about the final moments of their father’s life.

Greg, Jeff and Dan Lavey? They assured him the saga of their father’s death just keeps getting better and better.

“How you die is a part of your life,” Dan Lavey says. “And what an exclamation point!” I wrote about Bob Lavey’s final flight 10 years ago. He was one of the Diehards, hardcore Red Sox fans from Oregon who spent three decades rendezvousing with the team at Major League ballparks around the country.

They loved to boast of those adventures. In 2010, two of the Diehards, Jack Faust and Jim Larpenteur, were carrying on with another Boston fan at AT&T Park in San Francisco when the guy asked if the Oregonians ever made the pilgrimage to Fenway.

Not often, Larpenteur admitted. “You know how hard it is to get eight seats together?” Not all that hard, it turns out, when you’re chatting with John Henry, the owner of the Red Sox.

At 82, Lavey was the senior member of the band that went to Boston that May. Surrounded by friends in the owner's box, he watched the Red Sox beat Detroit. Two nights later, he met Martinez in the aisle of that Alaska Airlines jet.

"Your dad stopped right in front of me," said Martinez, who has flown with Alaska for 28 years. "I asked him how he was doing. It was kind of a forced smile. Then he started telling me about the baseball game."

Well, of course. Lavey loved talking baseball, coaching baseball, and watching his grandsons play the game.

Four hours later, Martinez was at the back of the plane, preparing for the descent into Portland, when the call lights flared. "When one call light goes off, it's a refill on Coke," Martinez said. "When four or five go off ..."

It was a massive heart failure. A stunned and ragged circle of friends. An emergency landing at Tri-Cities Airport in Pasco, Wash.

And 10 years later, a memorable conversation about life and death on the roof of Revolution Hall.

Martinez heard how Bob Lavey and his wife, Jackie, met during their freshman year in that building, the old Washington High School. Photos in the trophy case memorialize his play on the Colonials team that won the state basketball championship in 1945. He served as an air-traffic controller – and baseball coach – for the Air Force on Okinawa during the Korean War, then spent four decades in the wood-products industry.

Martinez was with him when he took wing from this world. Helping the cardiologist from first class with the CPR in the aisle. Watching over Bob long after he was gone.

"I've never been able to let go of the experience," Martinez told Lavey's sons. "It changed my life." What's more, he said, "Your dad was the catalyst for enormous changes in our company."

Better preparation for crews in dealing with medical emergencies, now that seven to 10 passengers die on Alaska flights each year. More counseling and time off for the crew members who tried to save them.

"It's nice for you to say Dad was the catalyst," Dan said. "But you were the catalyst. You and your crew. Your eyes were the last eyes he was looking into. It was your hand he was holding."

"You were taking care of him," Greg said.

When you've seen death convey bitterness and despair, it's humbling to watch it inspire gratitude and generosity. Martinez wanted the brothers to know Bob Lavey didn't die alone.

"He's a big-hearted angel," Dan said of Martinez. "How lucky were we to have a person like that there at that moment in Dad's life? What a gift to have him reach out to us."

Greg, Jeff and Dan, awash again in old memories, wanted Martinez to share their peace that Dad spent the final hours of a full and glorious life with the Diehards and the Red Sox.

"We could not script a better way for Dad to die," Dan said. "It was just the kind of story he loved to tell."

"And now," Jeff added, "we have another chapter of that story."

Live well – and for us all – may we also, when the time comes, die well. May our lives be never ending chapters of gratitude.

In the spirit and agape love of Jesus, Michael

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