

Letter to Mart

January 31, 1987

Dear Mart,

It's nearing midnight. I'm still floating on thoughts of you since waking from a dream this morning.

It's all because of a movie I saw last night that's called *Stand By Me*.

Now, while I'm sipping my cup of coffee, I'm drifting into gratitude for being able to say that I can still recall what it was like to have a pocketful of buddies when I was young and careless and as happy as the summer days were long.

This letter to you is to let you know that among all my childhood and teenage friends, Steve Wolf, Jim Hutchins, Mike Daggett, Wayne Swanson, Jerry Bender, Ben Lifson, Paul Goulding, Bob Groff, and some others who you may not have known or may not recall, among them all, you appear in my mind and heart as being the one who walks forward when I hear or say the word *friend*.

All the while I was watching this movie, I could not hold back the joy I felt as I witnessed so many reenactments of what it was like to have experienced Youth with you.

During the past couple years I have been cataloging those moments so as to write about some of them in a manner that may be of interest and of some benefit to my "just-married" wife, Tracey, her family, my nephews and nieces, and their parents.

But most of all, I suppose I write about my youth as a way to give myself some concrete sense of where I've been and to acknowledge those folks who have been important to me in the journey, and why they were and still are and always will be important to me, both in this life and in all those other lives we choose to live in our eternally adventurous futures.

This sounds all too abstract and mystical. I'll be more specific. I'm writing this letter so that I can be specific. I was tempted to call you, instead. But, as with most of my telephone conversations, most of what is expressed usually turns to mist and then too soon evaporates altogether. I want you to hold onto these words for a while, to take them to your heart.

What I could not say in a phone call to you, or perhaps even in a personal visit, is that I love you. I love you for the fact that you were as warm and as generous and as humorous, and as kind and as caring as any man I have met in my life. And to have met you as early as I did, at age 12, was one of God's great gifts to me.

You became, in less than a few months after you invited me into your life, the best person to share a thousand "dumb" questions with, the best person to take long walks with, the best person to play tennis with, the best person to listen to music with, the best person to talk about sex with, the best person to go to movies with, the best person to go to school each morning with, the best person to study with, the best person to share fears with, the best person to cry with, the best person to double-date with, the best person to go out and have a late-night cup of coffee with, and the best person to laugh with.

Each time we did something together, from ages 12 to 20, it seemed to me to always be an adventure. Maybe it was because you always seemed to be so full of all of the possibilities that life affords a young man, and unlike most young men, you were never afraid to talk about it with me.

While I would tend to keep my mouth shut when a gorgeous woman walked by, you, on the other hand, would talk freely and openly to her about her beauty. For that matter, whenever you recognized anything that was beautiful, you expressed the fact and would get me into a conversation about it. You were probably the first artist I can recall knowing. And the effect of it on me has only in the past few years been appreciated.

You see, whenever I was around you I never consciously behaved like you, at least not in a manner that exhibited your joy and gusto for life. In your presence I'd let you be you (flamboyant, exuberant, witty, intelligent, sophisticated, full of vitality) while I always played my part as your appreciative, often embarrassed, and almost always amazed audience. But whenever I was not in your company, I found myself being much more expressive with people. I saw myself and all things, and most people in the world as being increasingly interesting and vital.

Jim Hutchins and Steve Wolf and Ben Lifson had a similar effect on me. But not anywhere near the degree you did. I suspect it was you who encouraged them, as you did me, to become more aware of all that there is in life to be excited about, and that it was important to express our excitement to each other.

One of my first memories of you goes back to when we were first becoming friends and you invited me, for the first time, over to your house after school.

After somehow avoiding serious puncture wounds from your guard dog, whose name I recall as sounding something like Motto, you introduced me to a game called chess and then took me down into your basement to show me what most kids our age were only able to fantasize about: a full-blown, legitimate chemistry laboratory, complete with every kind of glass-spun container, funneling device, and gadget that any mad-scientist movie set could display.

Within an hour we had set so many chemical processes in motion that to this day I wonder why we escaped from blowing your entire house and lot off of Thomas Avenue and into the middle of Lake Harriet.

When your father came home that night from teaching chemistry at Augsburg and beheld what we were in the midst of destroying, as he walked from the garage into his laboratory, I was instantly convinced that I would never be allowed to step foot in your home again.

After his rage subsided he invited me to stay for dinner, but insisted that before we or anyone else in your family could eat we would have to clean up the foul smelling mess we had made.

I can still see you standing in the middle of that basement laboratory, wearing a black rubber apron and black rubber gloves up to your elbows, flashing a grin that today I only see in the face of Jack Nicholson, surrounded by bunsen burners, vats of boiling, foul smelling, sulfurous chemicals flowing red, green, black, gold, purple in a Rube Goldberg Contraption manner from one vat to another; chemicals flowing through rubber tubes or specially hand-blown curling glass tubes, or in waterfall fashion from levels over our heads to lower levels, to yet even lower levels, and then on up to other tubes, and on up to yet another vat, and then on over to large hand-blown glass bowls with bunsen-burner fires under them.

Our purpose was to invent or discover something that had eluded the best scientific minds of both the Western and Eastern worlds. We also wanted to concoct something lethal, something that would explode, poison, or maybe disfigure our nervous seventh-grade science teacher, the one who always put her hand inside her blouse when she was lecturing us.

We knew that what we were up to was dangerous. Perhaps that's why we were up to it.

That first dinner with your family was my first experience with genuine foreign food. I'd eaten the Cafe di Napoli's spaghetti and what was considered by my American family to be a Chinese dish or two at the Nankin before, but never something that had yet to become a staple in an American restaurant. I wasn't ready for what your beautiful mother served me. I don't remember the names of the Estonian dishes. I couldn't even pronounce them a moment after she told me what they were.

After sampling a little of this and then a little of that, I wondered how I was going to get it all down without betraying the fact that it was the worst dining experience I had ever had since the day my Grandmother Mary made me try her sauerkraut dishes. To a kid raised on a steady diet of graham crackers, Wheaties, frozen French fries and hamburgers, your mother's exotic dishes, especially those composed of what may have been more or less uncooked fish parts or eel or herring or God knows what, left me sort of reeling in ways that your sulfuric chemistry lab would affect most other people.

After I had escaped from what your family, including your lovely sister Eva, thought was a wonderful meal, you took me back down into the basement to show me something that would leave me convinced for weeks that your family was straight out of an Addams' Family cartoon.

You led me into another basement room that was stranger than the laboratory. The room was dark and dank.

As we groped around within the room, I said to you that the rows of pine boxes, shelved one on top of the other, gave me the feeling we were in a basement of a funeral home.

Each pine box was open at the top, just inches from the one directly above it, maybe five or six or seven high to the black ceiling. And with only the dim light that edged through the room's half-open door, I couldn't make out what was in the boxes, though the fragrance was as familiar as that of moist dirt. I was convinced that whatever was in those boxes had to be unspeakably sinister, and might even be snakes.

Before you could get me to take a look into the boxes I was out the door and on my way up the staircase to get my coat and go home.

Several days passed before you could convince me that all that was happening in that room was the harmless cultivation of some exotic mushrooms that brought your family a pretty penny or two among people who actually ate such things.

After talking it over with my parents, who had never served mushrooms at our table, they convinced me that your family had a harmless and probably enterprising hobby. But they nevertheless advised me not to eat mushrooms because some were poisonous and could cause a painful death.

I avoided visiting your house for several months after that and it wasn't until the Great WDGY Treasure Hunt that we started to do things with your parents again.

That treasure hunt marked for me the beginning of our friendship. Although it was more than 30 years ago, I remember moments of it as clearly as I remember the dream that I awakened from this morning.

Because so much of your life up to that moment had been an adventure, including that fact that you lived in Estonia during World War II and you had somehow, miraculously, escaped to the United States, I doubt if the WDGY Treasure Hunt is an event that could be categorized by you as a high point during your formative years. But take it from me, I was a kid who had been leading a sheltered life in a conventional comfortable middle-class neighborhood, and the Treasure Hunt was a Big Moment.

It seems to me that it was held during the late spring of our seventh-grade year and it continued on into the summer. As you introduced it to me, we could win \$50,000 if we could find a treasure that had been hidden by this rock-and-roll radio station.

To find the treasure we had to listen each day for cryptic clues provided by the disc jockeys. Each of the clues were designed to steer us toward a location in the Minneapolis area that might hold the treasure.

You and your mother had been taking turns listening to the station and had already collected clues.

We began the search by hopping a bus after school that took us downtown to Loring Park. Your clues contained oblique references to Ole Bull, a buffalo head, a pond, an antique store, and something about a bottleneck.

We were convinced that we would be searching in the right area and were only worried that others had also put two and two together. After all, there was the statue of Ole Bull in Loring Park, and there, across Hennepin Avenue, was that big statue of a buffalo in front of that insurance company's headquarters, and in the basement of an apartment building a block away was an antique shop.

If that wasn't enough to make us believers, there was a pond in the middle of Loring Park. Better yet, the park, the insurance company, and the antique shop were all located

on that suicidal intersection everyone in Minneapolis called “The Bottleneck.”

We were going to be rich! All we had to do was keep our eyes open and leave no stone unturned, even though the disc jockeys promised that the treasure was not concealed and was in full view to the naked eye.

We searched the area every afternoon and evening after school for a week, all the while delighted that there seemed to be remarkably few other searchers about; that our chances were indeed promising.

But, as more and more clues came from the DJ voices of WDGY, we shifted our search to include the area around the downtown post office. That was not only just as fruitless, it was downright scary.

As you may know, the area around the post office in no way resembles today the area that we wandered for several days and nights in June of 1954. We were there because a new set of clues, which I can’t remember, gave us every reason in the world to be there.

But I wasn’t prepared for the neighborhood, which was wall-to-wall winos for what was at least four square blocks. Everywhere we searched we were stepping over old men in torn clothing, some out cold on the sidewalk, or on park benches, or on the grass, under trees. No telling if they were dead or alive. Those who were conscious, hundreds of them, lulled about like rudderless boats. Some would fall down and not get up again.

I had heard about tramps and bums, had once or twice seen one begging in our all lily-white neighborhood. Until then, I thought there probably weren’t more than a dozen in all of Minnesota, maybe the world. But there they were, looking to me to be, in their torn drab rags, as if they were Confederate casualties in a war movie we had seen called *The Red Badge of Courage*.

As we continued to search for the WDGY \$50,000 treasure, I noticed many of tramps displayed open wounds on their faces. Some of them asked us what in the hell we were doing there. We didn’t dare tell them.

Today, what was then an entire slum area is now composed of new office buildings and yuppie condos. The only old buildings that remain are the post office, the old Milwaukee Road Railroad Station, and the old Federal Building. And the railroad station is vacant.

Well, as you know, we never found the \$50,000 treasure in that slum district.

We did, however, continue searching throughout much of the summer, with it all ending one hot Sunday afternoon while we were sitting in the back seat of your folks' black Plymouth, the one you had spray painted the dashboard powder blue.

We were parked out by the charred remains of a burned-down bridge on a road that cuts between Sunset Cemetery and Hillside Cemetery, where my father and his parents are now buried.

Your mother and father, and I think your sister Eva, too, had come up with some clues that contained the phrase "burn your bridges behind you" and something with a reference to a hillside and something else with the word *sunset* in it. But this time, unlike our Loring Park forays and many of the others, there were at least 1000 people searching the area.

We were exhausted from an afternoon in the sun, and had chosen to sit in the shade of the car, tuned to WDGY, in hopes that we would snare a late-breaking clue that would take us straight to the treasure.

What we heard instead, was that the search was over. Someone had found the treasure in a field, God-knows-where. It was only a note inside a lipstick tube. But you know what? I'm not so sure that's true.

Perhaps after more than 30 years I just want to believe that's true. Now that I'm thinking more about it all, I believe it's possible that what we actually heard on that radio in your car, while I was complaining to you about how the freshly dried spray paint on the dash board smelled like my mother's fingernail polish, was that the deadline for the treasure hunt had arrived, and because no one had found the treasure, WDGY, along with someone from the Minneapolis Police Department, was at the treasure site, and the exact location and description of the treasure would be confirmed by the police official.

Yeah, I think that's what really happened.

All I remember now for sure was that it ended out there between those two cemeteries. What hurt most was the feeling that the adventure was over. After the Loring Park and the post-office-area-slum searches, I had lost any real conviction that we'd find the treasure.

But that didn't matter. What mattered was that I had discovered a guy who had a way of turning something as dumb as a radio station promotional gimmick into a quest that had all the pizzazz of the Holy Crusades, Robert Louis

Stevenson's pirate stories, and all of the Sherlock Holmes detective stories rolled into one.

Those are my first favorite memories of the two of us being together, Mart.

One of my last memories of you is watching you and John Durocher sword fighting with real fencing swords at the bottom of the exit spiral in the downtown Minneapolis Dayton-Radisson Parking Ramp, when we were nearing age twenty and beginning to apprehend the different roads we knew would separate us, with you inevitably moving to the East Coast while I muddled around the Midwest.

Layered between those first memories of when we were twelve and when we were twenty are so many others. One that comes to me now is the time you called me on a bright spring morning and asked me to go with you on a five-mile hike and cookout, so we could fulfill one of the requirements for becoming Second-Class Boy Scouts.

Our five-mile boy scout hike. Our compact boy scout cook kits. Our raw hamburger. Our potatoes. Our tin foil. Walking along Xerxes Avenue trying to avoid mad barking dogs until we could make it all the way out past 60th where the streets began to disappear and the farm pastures began. Climbing through a barb wired fence, climbing a hill, building a fire, cooking our hamburgers and potatoes from our cook kits and drinking some sweet swirl from our canteens while looking out over the farm lands and wondering what in the hell was going on over by that weird looking new blue water tower that was the same exact shape as a bicycle horn.

From our vantage point on some farmer's hill, we watched giant earth moving machines plane down acres of land for what would become a few years later one of our high school "play grounds," and what others would later call the world's first indoor shopping mall: Southdale.

Right there, as we were turning our hamburgers over our sensibly-sized camp fire on some farmer's land, we were watching what turned out to be the beginning of "the malling of America."

As long as I am recalling the crap we did to become second-class scouts, let me jot down a few more recollections that now come to mind: Bob McCloud, or was it John McCloud. Along with Rolf Bjelland, another legendary Eagle Scout, McCloud went beyond Eagle, I think, and soared to some ethereal height that only the grandest poohbahs in scouting know about.

I recall him showing up at our scout meetings in the basement of that church on 50th and Beard, at every award ceremony, to receive ever greater and greater awards, all after he had reached what I thought was the Boy Scout's zenith: Eagledom. He's probably still in the program and by now, who knows, could be as high as Space Shuttle Scout.

McCloud would stand out on the sidewalk in front of your house (wasn't he your neighbor?) and practice cracking a black bull whip.

He once got you to hold a rolled piece of paper in your mouth and stand about fifteen feet from him, sideways. Then he rolled back the leather whip and in one smooth motion, a lot like that of a quarterback throwing a football, he unfurled the entire length of the whip toward your head.

As the tiny tip of the whip passed near your nose, he snapped the entire length of the thing, exploding the paper extended from your mouth in all directions.

I couldn't figure out who was crazier, you or McCloud. But whip snapping, especially snapping paper or balloons out of some other guy's mouth, was one of those things the big-time Eagle Scouts were always doing in those days.

I remember our seeing more than 20 of them, all in a row, at our first Boy Scout Jamboree. It was kind of like a whip snapping bake-off or pie eating contest. They'd keep whipping and whipping until one by one, failing to snap out the paper or the balloon, or, God forbid, maybe snapping out someone's eye (it had to have happened at least once, and I bet they don't do it anymore at today's Jamborees, if they even have Jamborees anymore) they'd be eliminated.

When they got down to the last two finalists, for the tie breaker they'd go from a rolled piece of paper to an unlit cigarette. It was all I could do to bring myself to watch it. And what in the hell kind of badge did they give the dumb kid who held the cigarette in his lips? The Lash Larue Medal of Honor?

Yeah, the Boy Scout Jamboree was special. There was the Chariot Race, probably inspired by the movie *Ben Hur*, for which we sewed together gunnysacks so that John Beardsley could stand on the gunnysack material in stocking feet while the other ten or so of us in the Wolf Patrol pulled him around the entire circumference of the Minneapolis Auditorium floor, where the champion Minneapolis Lakers played basketball. I think we probably won that race.

The Wolf Patrol always seemed to win every contest it was in, whether against other patrols in our own troop, 151,

or against other patrols from other troops, especially that troop my dad was scoutmaster of, Troop 73.

Dad's scouts were almost all wimps. My brother Larry joined Troop 73 because he was a wimp. Maybe that's why Dad became their scout master. He may have felt sorry for Larry and the Troop 73 wimps. Many of them were his former Cub Scouts.

But anyway, the Wolf Patrol was made up of real men: Jerry Bender, Wayne Swanson, Jim Bonneville, John Beardsley, Ben Lifson, John Billingsly, Steve Nash, Lynn Thorkildson, and of course, we two.

We won log chopping contests, tug of wars, canoe races, fire-building races, knot tying contests, just about anything you could think of.

I can't remember if we went up to Many-Point Scout Camp just for one summer or for two. I do remember, however, we shared a tent together. And my father came up to visit us on a weekend. He brought up about a dozen crates of peaches to give to our troop, even though he was the scoutmaster of our rival troop, and he let the two of us stash a crate in our tent.

The day after he left, you, Jim Bonneville, and I took our crate up to the dirt road and we ate the entire box and then discovered what peaches do to relieve constipation.

One morning you awakened to discover that a mouse had chosen our tent as the place to give birth to her babies, about three or four in a little nest under your cot.

We took the baby mice down to breakfast to show to Howie Whateverhislastnamewas, our scout master, who was supervising the breakfast cooks. He was so revolted that he took them from you and threw them into the fire.

I can still see their tiny bodies writhing in the flames and then suddenly popping open.

We couldn't eat our breakfast.

After more than thirty years I still have not forgotten that. Funny what you remember.

And I suppose it's even sadder what you forget. These are more than just memories to me. They are a way for me to understand that whenever I add a little flair or zest to my daily doings, especially to my personal relationships, it's in no small measure attributable to the fact that I learned from you how enthusiasm is often more important in any daily venture than the actual outcome.

We all end up winning or losing our share, or winning or losing more than our share. So what? Ultimately, we all end up losing. Either each other or someone or something.

Perhaps losing is the price we all pay for living. But losing also allows us to begin new adventures.

Here's hoping you recall some of the moments I've mentioned here. They contribute to the bedrock of what has ever since been my wonderful life. And I want to emphasize that the moments were memorable because of the people who not only happened to be in them, but who made them happen.

As I expressed to Mike Daggett in a letter to him, I hope that when we meet again in our next lives, I do a better job of bringing those I love into my life.

For now, however, the least I can do is express the gratitude I feel for the fact that you included me in your life at a time when friendship is perhaps most vividly treasured.

At the end of the movie *Stand By Me*, the story teller, the movie's narrator, his last statement goes something like this: "I never had any friends as important to me as those I had when I was 12. Jesus, has anyone?"

I may have implied this letter was provoked by a dream. Most of the stuff I write is. Maybe I should stop dreaming, huh? But fact is, I treasure my dreams.

I once wrote a poem about my dreams:

I find sleeping a golden moment
And dreaming delight, often atonement.

For in dreaming I gather people I need
To make my night what day should be:

A patchwork quilt of family and friends,
Gathered together, heavenly.

A patch of blue, you;
A patch of green, Sue;
A patch of plaid, Mom;
A dab of dapple, Dad.
Larry, Rick, and Sylvia?
Raspberry red, yellow, and fuchsia.

I'm so sublime, content,
When patchwork patterns become my tent.

Some of my dreams are fantasy things in which I have conversations with people I admire.

Quite often my father appears in my dreams. We have wonderful conversations.

During some of those dreams we acknowledge that he died more than twenty years ago, but for some unexplainable reason, we rejoice that we have been brought together again.

Sometimes when he visits me in my dreams, we figure out we are only meeting in a dream, and we shrug it off, saying "So what?" And we continue on with it, enjoying being together, knowing morning comes too soon.

Sometimes my brother Rick, who disappeared in 1972, appears in the same way, but not often enough. Those dreams are normally so vivid that upon awakening from them I feel a momentary sense of remorse for having been lulled into feeling we were once again truly reunited.

What I have learned from my dreams is that we are never completely separated, just as we are never completely at one with each other.

I would never want the dreams to stop, just as I prefer that my friends would never move out of my life. But, as I have expressed, it seems that friends do leave us, or we leave them. At least that's the way it appears when they move on to some other place, or to other friends, or when they die. And yet in spite of wherever they go, they continue to visit, in my dreams and in my thoughts.

So I've concluded that they don't truly leave me.

And I hope I've not left them. I like to think that we all seem to just hang around, to haunt each other. In pleasant ways, though not exactly in an altogether coherent manner.

However, as I now think about it, none of us have ever been all that coherent, anyway. This long, rambling letter is just an example of that fact. And the fact that it's so damned hard to simply say, "I love you." And let you go with that.

Good night Mart, and pleasant dreams,

"Cosmo"