

An Obituary for My Friend

by George Friedman - June 4, 2021

In 2003, I received a call from someone named Jim Hornfischer, a literary agent whom I had never heard of or met, but who wanted me to write a book about the jihadist wars. He said he had read some of my writings at Stratfor and had asked around, and thought I was the one who might be able to put the events since 9/11 into context. Literary agents are shameless in gaining access and ruthless in ridding themselves of dead weight. He came out to my house and met with my wife and me, and convinced me to go with him to New York City to meet with some editors. He arranged an auction among several publishing houses and extracted a significant advance. I had written other books before of various kinds and quality but never with an agent like Jim to speak for me. Over the course of 20 years and five books, he has overseen my career as an author with a warm but unsentimental hand.

Jim differed from other agents in that he himself was a remarkably successful author. He wrote four books on the U.S. Navy during World War II, books that grasped naval strategy and the agony of the sailors who carried it out. He had never served, but he loved the Navy deeply.

Jim died Tuesday night of cancer. He was 59. It was unfair, but he died with extraordinary grace, fully aware of his coming fate and unwilling to capitulate to it until it took him. I didn't get to see him in the dark nights he had to endure, of course, but I saw his wife carry herself with extraordinary grace, courage and an unwillingness to grieve before it was time. Jim wrote of bravery and rigorous self-control as the natural condition of war. He and his wife lived as he wrote, and he died on his own terms.

I last saw him about two weeks ago. The U.S. Navy, having learned that its great contemporary chronicler was dying, awarded him the Distinguished Public Service Award. It is the highest honor the Navy can give a civilian. Admirals and captains gathered in his living room, with zoom connections to Washington and people standing at attention as the medal was awarded. Everyone knew he was dying, yet for the moment it didn't matter. He had celebrated the Navy and with it his country, and his final gift to it was showing how a man should die.

There is a Latin phrase, said to have come from Epictetus, that I cherish and always seem to recall in times like this: Dum vivimus, vivamus. "While we live, let us live." To me, it means life is finite but we find infinity in continuing to exist in other people's minds after we're gone. Life must be lived with

a will and joy. You must control it, doing not only what you want but also what is seemly and just. Life must be a stew of the stoic and hedonistic. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, “Gladly did I live and gladly die, And I lay myself down with a will.” Jim lived well, and he helped me live well, not only in the words of the books I wrote. He showed me what I had failed to see in my mind.

So long Jim, not goodbye. We will soon see each other again in the place where time does not make life urgent. I have no doubt your first words will be: “How’s the new manuscript coming?” I didn’t realize I loved you until I lost you.

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