

Return of the Hurt

It's spring again. There is that inexplicable thump in my chest and hurt in my stomach. The thump is the excitement I feel at the onset of another baseball season: spring training, reports of holdouts, who's hot, who's up-and-coming, who's fading, who's likely going to have his last season, opening game, and the anticipation of the hurt.

Like so many others, I know hurt because I am a Boston Red Sox fan. I have been a Red Sox fan for about 50 years now. We Red Sox fans know hurt. Each year, around this time, we wonder if this is the year that it will end; if this is the year that we will find redemption in all of our suffering; if this is the year, if only ephemerally, that we can hold to the low, lintel up, the cup of victory in the World Series.

For me, I believe the hurt is all the worse because I am of the subspecies of Boston Red Sox fan who dwells in the diaspora. I do not know how many we are, but I know that we are. There were more of us when I dwelt on the East Coast for some 30 years, living and working in New Jersey and then in Washington, D.C. A resident of southern California since the summer of 2000, I am very lonely as a Red Sox fan. But, as a member of the diaspora, I quietly read the sports pages, looking for the latest news, reading to myself in a cantic quality that suggests to my wife that I am practicing some strange religion. Well, I am.

Admitting that one is hopelessly addicted to the Red Sox is not unlike admitting that one has an incurable disease – a disease

that, while it provides occasional highs, could ultimately do one serious damage.

My addiction began in the early 1950s when I came in possession of a baseball card that came along with the piece of gum that I purchased. The card featured one Ted Williams (genuflect). So impressed with the numbers on the back of his card, compared to the numbers of just about anyone else, I decided to follow him and his team. This was easy for me to do, as I was born and raised in a small city, Williamsport, in north central Pennsylvania that was an unaffiliated city, for the most part, in its baseball fandom. One would think that, situated as it was, the baseball fans of Williamsport would tilt toward either Philadelphia, in the southeastern corner of the state, or Pittsburgh, in the southwestern corner of the state.

There were a few of those in my hometown. But most Williamsport baseball fans were of two types: New York Yankee lovers and New York Yankee haters. I and my family (I have five sisters and three brothers) were among the latter. Raised Catholic, there was an odd but comfortable affinity between my religion and my hatred of the Yankees. Maybe it's because the Yankees were owned by Protestants, or something like that. Maybe it's because both taught their followers about the redemptive quality of unearned suffering.

Being a Yankee hater and a Red Sox fan kept me busy during my boyhood summers. Ted Williams kept adding to his great numbers, and the Yankees kept winning the American League pennants, interrupted only briefly by the White Sox. This meant rooting against the Yankees in the World Series. It meant cheering on the

Brooklyn Dodgers in 1955, when they won their first and only World Series – against the Yankees. It meant cheering for the Milwaukee Braves when they beat the Yankees a couple of years later. And, of course, it meant cheering for the Pittsburgh Pirates in their improbable 1960 World Series victory over the Yankees, which was capped off by a game-winning home run hit by Bill Mazeroski, who once played minor league baseball in Williamsport.

But, mostly, the period from the time I got that Ted Williams baseball card through the 1950s meant following Ted Williams. Oh, I came to like players like Jackie Jensen, Jimmy Piersall, Russ Nixon, and others. But it was following Ted Williams and his numbers that gave me the greatest thrill as a Red Sox fan, especially in 1957. I was 11 years old and Ted Williams was 39 when he finished a season batting .388, the highest average of any Major League Baseball player since 1941, when Ted Williams hit .406.

As did others my age, I tried to play Little League baseball. It was invented, after all, in my hometown of Williamsport (the site of the annual Little League World Series), but that is another story in itself. I did not do well as a player because, although I was short, I was also slow. I should mention the fact, however, that my oldest brother, Andy, played in two Little League World Series at the end of the 1940s. It should be noted, though, that the “world” of Little League baseball at the time was all of a dozen or so leagues in North Central Pennsylvania.

During this period, I never got to see Ted Williams or the Red Sox play in person. One didn’t get around too much as one of nine children being raised on the salary of a meat cutter. I wondered what it would be like to go to a Major League Baseball game. Well, I didn’t get to see the Red Sox play, but I did finally get to see Ted Williams, in person. It was late in the summer of 1961. Ted Williams had come to town to attend the championship game of the Little League World Series. He also came, I learned, to be the guest of John Alden Knight, an outdoors writer and fisherman of some repute

who lived in Williamsport, just off the Williamsport Country Club golf course. This I knew because, in 1961, I caddied quite a bit at the country club.

I schemed to meet Ted. I walked downtown to the Lycoming Hotel, where he was staying, and waited in the hotel lobby. I had with me a piece of sketch paper on which I had prepared a couple of years beforehand a pen-and-ink drawing of Ted Williams. He was at the end of his picture perfect swing, having hit a home run. I had used a newspaper photo of him hitting the home run as my model.

There was a cluster of kids waiting in the hotel lobby waiting to see him. I don’t recall waiting that long when he began to stride through. I was shy and did not know how to approach him (I learned only later that he was not that approachable, but he was on this day, perhaps because the cluster of kids was not that large, and he stopped to sign autographs), but I got my chance as he was standing and signing.

I held up my picture and said, “Mr. Williams, I drew this myself.”

He took the picture, signed it, gave it back to me, and patted me on the head and said, “Good job, kid.”

To a boy in the diaspora, this was equivalent to Moses signing a copy of the Ten Commandments and giving it one of the faithful who would never make it to Jericho.

I went back home and proudly displayed the signed picture to anyone who looked. Even my Dad was impressed. From the time I had an office of my own, beginning in the early 1970s until my departure from Washington, D.C. in the summer of 2000, that picture hung on my wall.

It didn’t get much better than that. But it came close, two summers later, when I had a sudden and surprise chance to actually see the Red Sox in person. It was the summer between my junior and senior year in high school – my last summer of real innocence. I call it thus, because the fall of 1963 marked the

assassination of President John F. Kennedy. For a Catholic kid in what was still a WASP-dominated part of the country, a Catholic President was a confirmation of hope. And it was dashed.

That summer Sunday, though ...

Early in the morning, a close friend of the family, Father Francis P. Corcoran, came to the house long with my Uncle Joe Berrigan. Father Corcoran had come into possession of four tickets to a doubleheader that afternoon in New York: the Yankees vs. the Red Sox. There was room for one more, and would Tommy like to join us.

Hurriedly, I got dressed (It was such an important occasion, I wore a suit and tie) and we drove off to New York. Realizing I had not yet gone to mass, Father Corcoran, my Dad, and Uncle Joe dropped me off at a church in Tunkhannock, Pa., had breakfast while I went to mass, picked me up after mass (They bought me a sandwich or something to eat on the way), and continued along to New York.

The Interstate Highway System was not yet in place in the summer of 1963, so the drive took longer than it would today -- five hours or so. It would have taken less, except that we got lost somewhere in what I now know to be Spanish Harlem in Manhattan. This was pretty freaky for me, as we drove blocks and blocks and blocks, and everyone I saw was brown and had different shades of hair -- black, and brown, and blonde. Yes, blonde. (I did not know at the time that, seven years later, I would marry a woman from New York who was brown and had reddish-brown hair, and would have fit right in the neighborhood.)

Afraid of what we did not know, the four of us drove and drove along the same street in this neighborhood. It was near the end of this drive that I learned that, if one was to be lost in New York City in 1963, it was good to be lost with an Irish Catholic priest.

“Here’s what ya do faddah,” said the policeman before whom we stopped to ask directions. He explained things very carefully, and repeated himself so that we were sure not to get lost again.

Not too much later, except that we were late for the start of the first game (it was in the second inning already), we came to Yankee Stadium in the Bronx. Not a parking space in sight, Father Corcoran pulled his big black car up to another policeman, just steps away from one of the main entrances to the stadium.

“Excuse me, officer, can you tell me where I can park?”

“Goin’ to the game, faddah?”

“Yes, we are. We’re late because we got lost a little while back.”

The big policeman sort of looked left and looked right, then looked directly at Father Corcoran. “That’s OK, faddah. You just leave your car right here. It’ll be all right.”

In a gesture that would be positively foolish and amazing in today’s environment, Father Corcoran turned the keys over to the police officer, and we went inside Yankee Stadium.

Well over four hours later, when we left the stadium and returned, the car was exactly where we left it. A different police officer saw us and approached Father Corcoran.

“You da priest that went to da game?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Have a good time, faddah?” said the police officer as he turned the keys to the car over to Father Corcoran.

“Yes, it was quite a couple of games. Tommy here really enjoyed it. He’s a Red Sox fan.”

I wish he hadn’t said that.

A steely glance from the police officer, who turned back to Father Corcoran.

“Where ya from, faddah?”

“Williamsport, in North Central Pennsylvania.”

“Is that coal country, faddah?”

“It’s nearby.”

“Well you drive safe, faddah. We don’t want nothing bad to happen.”

Apparently, the police officer had taken in the aroma of strong spirits emanating from Father Corcoran and my Dad.

Which takes me back to where I should have been – the baseball game.

Even for one who was a rabid, fervent follower in the diaspora, I, Red Sox fan, was duly impressed by the majesty of Yankee Stadium. For about 30 seconds. Then, I realized that, among 40,000 people, I was the only Red Sox fan present, and I heard obscenity and profanity being yelled nonstop at the Red Sox. And as we walked toward our seats, where we were directed by an attendant who said “faddah,” tipped his hat, and turned down a tip from Father Corcoran, my mouth agape, I knew at that moment that this was something I would never experience again. My first time at Yankee Stadium. It was, and remains, the only time I ever saw the Red Sox play, in person.

We arrived at the aisle where our seats were, and four young men were sitting in them. Looking innocently perplexed, Father Corcoran turned toward another uniformed officer, who asked: “Somethin’ wrong, faddah?”

“Uh, yes officer. Those young men seem to be in our seats.”

The police officer pulled Father Corcoran’s hand with the tickets closer, looked down at the tickets, and looked up at the seats ... at the four teenagers who were having a good old time in someone else’s seats.

“Get the #@+! outta here, you little ##\$% @!” the officer told the young men, yanking one of them out of his seat and into the aisle. The three others followed quickly.

“Thank you very much, officer.”

“No problem, faddah. You need anything, you just hollah.”

It was good to be with an Irish Catholic priest in 1963 in Yankee Stadium in New York City.

Father Corcoran was an obvious favorite. “Hey faddah!” “Hi, faddah!” “Hey, are ya’ praying for the Yanks, faddah?” I believe that he got a couple of beers (one for himself and one for my Dad) and was not charged. “That’s on me, faddah.”

At one point, Father Corcoran removed his coat and collar, and was down to a t-shirt, exposing his generous rolls.

Over came the police officer who had ushered him into his seat, confiding in Father Corcoran that he liked the way that Father Corcoran was down to earth.

But the special attention ended in short order. Both Father Corcoran and my Dad were not exactly one-beer baseball fans. And the stairs next to our seats led up to an opening, over which was a sign that said “Stadium Club Entrance.” We saw a few well-dressed people go in.

In one of those rare, unbelievable, statistical occurrences that, today, make me shake my head in disbelief, Father Corcoran’s desire to get into the Stadium Club was soon satisfied.

A certain Tommy Richardson happened to walk in front of us. In his 60s, white-haired Tommy Richardson was from Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The owner of a Buick dealership, he was also, at the time, the commissioner of the International Baseball League (it’s a long story, even longer than this), the premier AAA-level baseball league in the nation.

Business obviously took him to Major League Baseball functions. And Tommy Richardson was shameless. (Later, in the 1960s, with his fortunes not what they used to be, he ran for elective office in Lycoming County, of

which Williamsport was the county seat. He ran for the post of Register and Recorder, which furnished its incumbent with considerable income, it turned out, because of the fees the office holder collected on transactions conducted through the office. Tommy Richardson was Catholic and campaigned hard among the Catholic minority in the county. Too hard. It developed that, in order to demonstrate his devotion to his faith, he went to both mass and communion at a number of Catholic Churches on Sunday – the same Sunday. Tommy Richardson did not win.)

He had with him a younger, heavily painted woman who, I assumed, was a secretary or something like that. I later realized, in the conversation among the men during the drive home, that she was not his secretary.

Father Corcoran knew Tommy Richardson, and Tommy Richardson knew Father Corcoran, who decided to be a tad shameless himself.

As Tommy Richardson walked by, in a pale blue seersucker suit, with his secretary's arm on to his arm, Father Corcoran hailed him.

“Hey, Tommy.”

“Huh? Hey, Hi, Corky! How ya doin’?”

“Tommy, how do we get into the Stadium Club?”

“Here ...”

Tommy Richardson reached into one of his pockets, pulled out what appeared to be tickets to the Stadium Club, and gave them to Father Corcoran.

The two exchanged good-byes.

Within two minutes, Father Corcoran had put on his collar and coat and, along with my Dad, gone into the Stadium Club, where the two remained until about the eighth inning of the second game of the doubleheader.

I cannot remember who won either game that day. I remember mostly that I got to see the Red Sox play in person. I got to see big Dick

Stuart, the first baseman who had come to the Red Sox from the Pittsburgh Pirates, hit a home run over the left-center field fence in Yankee Stadium, a shot in the neighborhood of 475 feet; I got to hear Stuart heckled mercilessly by the New York fans, even when he hit the home run.

It is interesting, today, as I try to stretch my memory of what I saw that day. I do not remember future Hall-of-Famer Carl Yastrzemski, who was no doubt in the lineup. And what about Mickey Mantle? Or any of the other Yankees who I hated? I just go blank. I believe I might have seen Dick Radatz, the big relief pitcher for the Red Sox, come in for a stint, but I am not sure.

All I am definitely certain of is seeing Dick Stuart, the wooden-handed first baseman who probably had as many errors as he did home runs in 1963, hit that majestic home run.

The memories do not register, perhaps, because the real star for me was Yankee Stadium. I've been in a few others in my life, including the updated Yankee Stadium, but none have affected me the way that place did.

Although the doubleheader left me sweaty and smelly --one fan spilled half of his orange drink on me once when he stood to cheer—I did not mind. It was, and is, a memory that stoked me well for the drive home, which was quite a harrowing experience.

In a rare show of good judgment, both my Dad and Father Corcoran, who had no idea of what happened on the field that day, decided not to drive. Father Corcoran turned the keys over to my Uncle Joe, a non-drinker. Still, Uncle Joe scared the wits out of me when he drove. When I was a child, I threw up several times with Uncle Joe at the wheel. And that night, he careened this way and that way over the roads through New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He seemed intent on passing and/or tailgating every car in front of him.

The remainder of the 1963 season gave me nothing to cheer about, even though the Red Sox still had a good team. Yastrzemski, who had taken Ted Williams' place in the outfield,

was beginning to hit his stride. There was Malzone at third base, and ...

Then, it was 1964. I took a bit of a Red Sox fan's detour that year, prompted by a visit to my oldest brother, Andy, who was living and working at the time in Long Island, N.Y. He took me to see the World's Fair one day. Another day, he took me to see the New York Mets. And I must admit, they seduced me for a season or two.

Please let me explain and, then, maybe you'll forgive me for this digression. First, the Mets were in the National League, so I wasn't really abandoning the Red Sox. Second, the Mets were absolutely flatout terrible. They were destined to lose. One expected them to lose. They did lose. And they were funny. (It isn't funny when the Red Sox lose).

That summer day when Andy took me to Shea Stadium would have seduced anyone. It was the inaugural year for the stadium, and the last full season as manager for Casey Stengel, who after his long and distinguished career as player and manager (including the hated Yankees, no less), joined the Mets, created in 1962 as an expansion team in order to fill the void left several years earlier by the departure of the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles.

Andy and I showed up at just about the start of the game. "Sold out, boys," said the fellow in the ticket booth. Then, looking at us for a moment or two, he said "Ah, what the hell!" shoved two tickets at us, and took the money for regular-priced seats. Andy and I proceeded to watch the game in enclosed press mezzanine seats behind home plate.

Those Mets fan cheered anything the Mets did, especially if anyone on the team made an error. They cheered wildly anytime Casey Stengel walked on to the field. The New York crowd was so different than the New York crowd at Yankee Stadium the summer before. They were not as mean spirited.

Maybe it was because there was a majesty that unfolded itself to me, sitting behind home plate, three or four stories high, and able

to see more than 50,000 people all at once: losing didn't have to hurt. Because, as I've noted, the Mets were expected to lose, and no one seemed to mind. But it hurt when the Red Sox lost. It really hurt.

So, I actually followed the Mets for a couple of years. And I went back to Shea Stadium in the summer of 1965; again, it was a part of a trip to visit my brother, Andy, on Long Island. It was not as much fun the second time. We got seats that were not that great, the crowd was not as much fun—they didn't cheer at every mishap- and the overall experience was not as much fun. Casey Stengel must have thought so, too; he quit in mid season. (The fade in fascination with Mets turned toward bitter animosity when, in 1969, in just their eighth season of existence, they won the World Series.)

Something else happened in 1965 that made me a different kind of baseball fan. Recall that I was, and am, short and not too fast. When I do play ball—at my age, it is now softball—I play safe positions for the short and slow: second base and catcher. In my teens, the option of softball wasn't readily available. So, with the help of the father of my friend, Larry Gramling, I became an umpire. First, a season or two at Little League, then a season at both Little League and the 13-to-15-year-old league.

Then, I made a big leap in 1965. I became an umpire in the West Branch League in North Central Pennsylvania. It was a semi-pro league. I actually got paid: \$8 a game, and a few dollars more for behind-the-plate duty.

I had been behind the plate before, of course, but not behind catchers who really knew how to catch and pitchers who knew how to pitch against batters who knew how to hit. Comprised of men of who liked to play, the teams representing the small towns of the West Branch League were also waiting rooms for guys who had enough talent to be on the way up, or not quite enough, and were back down after their try at the big leagues.

After the nervousness of calling from behind the plate got out of my system, I really had fun, at times, behind the plate. There is no better place to watch a baseball game than behind the catcher. While my job was well-defined, I also got to see and sense the game unfold in its entirety -- the infielders and outfielders shifting according to who was at the plate, who was on base and where they were—with its endless, subtle movement on the field.

Unless one is behind home plate, one does not sense this. No one, especially not the sportswriters who sit in their perches well above the scene, can sense the game in its entirety and intimacy in the way a home plate umpire does. If baseball is a painting in progress, the home plate umpire is watching it over Picasso's shoulder.

Umpiring broadened my appreciation to that point that, while I never became less of a suffering Red Sox fan, it allowed me to appreciate individual effort more than I had before.

Stationed as the second umpire in the infield or along the right field foul line, I came to enjoy the contest between a good runner capable of stealing a base and those who tried to prevent him from stealing: the pitcher, catcher, and first baseman.

I came to marvel at the contest of skills between a good a good hitter and a pitcher who had his stuff working. A hitter who could string out such a pitcher by fouling off his good stuff was a joy to watch.

But, when a pitcher had his good stuff really working, it was nirvana. I cannot say that I wanted to call strikes in such an environment; I was eager, however, to see what the pitcher was going to do with the next hitter. When a pitcher reaches such a higher level of performance, both the catcher and umpire realize it without any verbal communication necessary. Both enjoy their "work" more. And with the game over, I might talk about it with the catcher in the way we would talk about any craftsman and his just-finished piece of work.

With this note as preface, I must say that, in my life, there have been only three Major League Baseball pitchers who have played in such a plane and in such a zone that they were so masterful and so dominant that I had to admire their work, no matter what the team. Others will disagree, but the three are Sandy Koufax, Bob Gibson, and Pedro Martinez.

More on Pedro later.

Others have had a great single season, or have had longer stretch runs of solid performance, but it is hard to compare anyone to Koufax of the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 1963-1966 period. In the year of his final run, the year that I had come to appreciate pitching as never before, I had no problem sitting and watching his mastery, alone, on television. Others might have found a Koufax game on television boring, but not me. He was artistry, precision, and consistent power.

Add a little more power and, beginning near the end of 1967, for the next several years, there was Bob Gibson of the St. Louis Cardinals. And wouldn't you know it? 1967 was the year, the first year of my life that I could remember, that the Red Sox made the World Series. The Cardinals, we all know, won that series as Gibson toyed with all of our hitting power, winning three complete games. He gave up a total of three runs in all three as the Cardinals won the series, four games to three. Every Red Sox fan in Fenway Park, New England and in the diaspora knew that, in game seven of that series, it was all over when Gibson got a 2-0 lead in the top of the fifth. Hope came in the bottom of the fifth when the Sox got one run, but hope vanished in the top of the sixth when the Cardinals got a 5-1 lead.

Also vanishing with that series, for the better part of a decade, was my fondness for the game (even though I would take a look at the sports pages in the newspaper for my occasional dose of hurt).

There were a number of reasons. I stopped umpiring in the summer of 1967, which

I spent living with my sister and her husband near Forth Worth, Texas. My brother-in-law, Bob, who had a respectable career as a pitcher in the farm system of the Philadelphia Phillies – He effectively ended his chances at a spot in the majors when he threw his arm out during one spring training—had closed out his career with the old Dallas-Ft. Worth Rangers of the AAA-level American Association and remained in the area. He got me a job selling cars at the dealership where he worked. I learned that I was not cut out to be a car salesman that summer.

I returned to my sophomore year in college in Williamsport that fall. The combination of a real interest in my studies, part-time work at my father's meat market, and my repeated failures at finding a girlfriend I really liked, or who would tolerate me, combined with my growing opposition to the war in Vietnam, captured my focus.

It was harder still to think about baseball in the summer of 1968, which followed the assassinations of two heroes, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby Kennedy. All hope seemed to be gone. Then, a friend, Art Kiernan, left for Vietnam. He got the station manager at a small radio station in Williamsport, WLYC, to give me his job there. I remember that the Red Sox faded that year, in a pitcher's year: Denny McLain of the Tigers won 31 games and, over in the National League, Bob Gibson posted numbers that no one in modern baseball will approach, ever – an ERA of 1.12 and 13 shutouts.

Though WLYC wasn't major market and the assignments not quite that major –I did everything from make silly commercials to call bingo over the air—I really enjoyed the work. I was on radio!

I even got to cover several games in the Little League World Series. Stations from all over the country would call, seeking a feed on games that featured a local team that was playing in the series. And I saw Mickey Mantle up close. He attended the final game of the

series and I saw his security escort shove everyone, including kids waiting for the chance to get an autograph, out of the way when Mickey departed.

Then, I transferred to a college in northern New Jersey -- Drew University. There, I got lucky, immediately securing another part-time job working as a news reporter for WMTR Radio in nearby Morristown.

The next five years were such a blur that I never watched evening television. I went from working nights at WMTR to working at nights (and, sometimes, days) for a local newspaper in Morristown, got married, went to graduate school, got my Master's degree, and hooked up with the Congressional campaign of Helen Meyner. The wife of former New Jersey Gov. Robert B. Meyner, she won the 1974 election, as did many other Democrats, in a fluke.

It was off to Washington, D.C. For a political and governmental groupie, this was the major leagues.

(March 4, 2003. As I wonder where I am going with this thing, something happens today. Wearing a recently purchased Boston Red Sox baseball cap, I enter the Burbank Family YMCA for a morning workout. I turn over my membership card to go into the locker room and gym attendant.

From the attendant, I hear:

“Nice hat!”

“Huh?”

“Nice hat!

“Oh, yeah. I'm part of the diaspora.”

“What?”

“The diaspora. I'm one of those fans way out there.”

“Yeah. That's for sure. Cool, man.”

Another Red Sox fan in the diaspora. When I see the fellow later on in the gym, we nod and smile at one another. We have a special

bond. We don't know a single thing about each other, but we know a lot. We are Red Sox fans ... in the diaspora. You, on the East Coast; you, in New England; and you, in Boston, especially Boston, do not know how hard we labor to keep the faith, to pass it on. When we find another who shares the faith, the bond is ... well, beyond religion.)

So, I missed a lot in the early seventies. I missed the passage from Major League Baseball, while they closed out their careers while wearing Red Sox uniforms, of Luis Aparicio, Orlando Cepeda, and Juan Marichal – Hall of Famers all. And I missed caring too much about the Oakland As tearing up baseball during that period. Just didn't care, or have time to care.

Then, came 1975 and the renewal of faith. I will not waste a lot of time here talking about my renewal, for I am but one of millions who renewed their faith in October 1975. The sixth game of the 1975 World Series between the Red Sox and the Cincinnati Reds was the greatest baseball game ever played. It is said that the game returned a generation of Americans to the sport. I believe it.

I later learned that, at one point, that the Reds' Pete Rose came to bat during the game, turned to Red Sox catcher Carlton Fisk, and said something like: "Ain't this something Fiskie? This is the greatest game ever played, and you and me are a part of it."

I was working late, sort of, in the office of Congresswoman Helen Meyner (I was her press secretary), drinking beer. The day's business was done, and some of us were hanging out, drinking beer, and watching the game. No one wanted to leave for fear of missing something. We all knew that we were witnessing something special. Not since I saw Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon in 1969 had I felt so.

Fisk's home run released a howl and scream of satisfaction unlike anything (non-physical) I have ever experienced. Even fellow

staffer Tim Lovain, a long-suffering fan of the Chicago Cubs (they seem, more than others, to know how Red Sox fans feel) cheered wildly.

The Red Sox had won the greatest baseball game ever played.

Then, the next game, it was the return of the hurt. Of course, we won the game, but the score says we lost. An enfeebled umpire missed an interference call at home plate, and it led to the loss of the game and the 1975 World Series.

As hurtful as this was, it was not as savage or searing as the hurt I felt three years later.

October 2, 1978. I was living and working in Phillipsburg, N.J. I had taken leave from the Congressional staff of Helen Meyner to go handle press work and other functions in what turned out to be the congresswoman's losing campaign for re-election to a third term in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Angry is the only way to describe my mood at the time: angry that I had to spend time (10 weeks without a single day off) away from my son, who was born in February 1978; angry that I lived in a house owned by the parents of a fellow campaign staffer – they were nice people, but no one wants to live in someone else's house at the age of 32; and angry because the campaign was not going well by the end of September 1978.

I was also angry that year because the Red Sox had let a big first-place lead evaporate (sound familiar?), and slid into second place behind, of course, the Yankees. They came back to tie for first place in the American League's eastern division. The season over, it came down to one game pitting, at the time, the two best teams in baseball against each other.

Our campaign headquarters was in Phillipsburg, roughly in the center of the congressional district in northwestern New Jersey represented by Helen Meyner. During the day, I spent time on the road, making calls on radio stations. In the afternoon, I listened to the

game on my car radio in between stops. I was hurrying back to Phillipsburg and headquarters when, with the Red Sox ahead 2-0, Bucky Dent, the weakest hitter in the Yankees lineup, popped a home run over the left-center field wall. An out in any other ballpark, it put the Yankees ahead, 3-2. The Yankees scored two more runs as I raced, almost in tears I was so angry, back to headquarters to listen to the remainder of the game.

Back in Phillipsburg, I raced into headquarters, turned the radio on, heard that the score was 5-4 Yankees, with two out and men on in the bottom of the ninth. Yaz was up. Thank God. Then, we all know what happened.

I do not know what got into to me, but I remembered the frightened, startled looks on the faces of other campaign workers as I picked up a wooden chair and threw it across the room. It struck the wall and broke into pieces.

They #*\$@'in did again! Trying to focus my anger, all I could think about was that #4% @ wimp, Bucky Dent. #*\$@'in Bucky Dent! #*\$@'in Bucky Dent! #*\$@'in Bucky Dent!

Thereafter, whenever I intoned that name, as it came up in discussion of that game, he was forever known, not as Bucky Dent, but, as #*\$@'in Bucky Dent! Over the years, I realized that other Red Sox fans had also given him the same first name.

As the poll numbers became increasingly discouraging for the congressional reelection campaign, something happened two weeks after the most painful baseball game in my life that provided one of the more enduring stories about the game. It had to do, of all things, with the papal election taking place in Rome. Catholics were not really prepared for the election. Pope Paul VI died in August 1978, giving way to Pope John Paul, formerly Cardinal Albino Luciani, who died after a little more than a month in office.

I can't say that I followed the matter with much concern or interest; I was more involved in an election of my own. Besides, the speculation on who was to be elected once again focused on a small cadre of Italian cardinals. Then, with radio station wCBS of New York – an all-news station that I left playing in the election headquarters, much to the chagrin of others, especially the volunteers, who preferred several popular music stations- playing in the background, I heard a “Standby for a news bulletin from Rome.”

My interest picked up a little as CBS switched live to Rome. Then, came the ritual announcement: “Habemos una papa!” (I think that's how it's spelled). Suddenly, a flummoxed announcer said: “Uh ... wait ... it is Karol Cardinal Wojtyla.” Silence. There should never be dead air on a radio broadcast, but there was a reason. No one had any background on this surprise selection ... “a Polish Pope.”

The jokes rolled in immediately. On the other hand, I made sure that Helen Meyner, as WASPy as they come, acknowledge the fact in campaign appearances in Ewing Township, N.J., especially at the Polish Democratic Club.

Later –I forget the specific occasion- I was in an audience before which the late Speaker of the House, Thomas P “Tip”. O'Neill Jr., was holding forth. I had become enamored of the Speaker, who campaigned for Helen Meyner in April 1978 and with whom I shared time on a Washington, D.C. flight to and from New Jersey for that appearance. Some months after that appearance, I went to greet the Speaker as he was shaking hands with guests at a Capitol Hill fundraiser for a fellow Democratic Congressman. Certain that Speaker O'Neill would not remember me, I approached him, but before I said anything, he stuck out his hand and put his beefy arm on my shoulder, greeting me with: “Tommy! How ya' been?”

No wonder he won reelection, regularly, with 90 percent of the vote.

Tip O'Neill was a great story teller. And on the occasion, months later, he was on his fourth or fifth story, when he told this one:

"You know, I was very honored to head the U.S. delegation for the coronation of the Pope, our first Polish pope. When I returned, I told [Carl Yastrzemski](#) about it. Carl and I are friends. His eyes got big and wide when I told him about my private audience with the Pope."

"We talked about you, Carl."

"You did?"

"Yeah, Carl. He's a big fan of yours."

"He is? What did he say?"

"He said ... Why ... did he have to pop up?"

Even with the loss of the playoff game in 1978, something began to happen in the years after that season that gave Boston Red Sox fans hope: the decline of the Yankees. In addition, we had the team that had the players who had the skill and the numbers to take us all the way. The 1980s were good years.

Outfielder Jim Rice, the 1978 MVP, was an all-around player who was putting up numbers that made everyone take notice. (It is an absolute travesty that he is not in the Hall of Fame and Bill Mazerowski –though a favorite-with his light hitting record, is.) Yaz was still around until 1983. In 1984 came Roger Clemens (who now belongs in the Hall of Shame for his inexcusable performances against Mike Piazza). We came close, or won, the division, much of the decade.

The problem with the decline of the Yankees, it seemed to me at the time, is that it created opportunities for other American League teams who never seemed like rightful contenders. Kansas City, Chicago, Milwaukee, California, Toronto, and Minnesota had a good couple of years during the period. Baltimore and Detroit showed flashes of their old greatness.

Still, the Red Sox won the division several times, and even made the big show once: 1986. Aah, 1986. Here we had Cy Young Award winner Roger Clemens and Bruce Hurst on the mound, and hitting power and percentages throughout the lineup: Rice, Wade Boggs (he won his third batting title), Don Baylor (I forgave him for playing for the Yankees the three years before), Rich Gedman, Bill Buckner.

Aaah, forget it.

More than the ground-ball-through-the-legs-in-the-tenth-inning-that-cost-us-the-series play in game 6 of the World Series, I was angrier that year when I got my first and only chance to go Boston, but failed to see the Red Sox play in person.

Sure, the series loss hurt, and hurt searingly. But, consider what happened to me, one of the diaspora faithful, on his sole experience in Boston late in July 1986. I worked for a national trade association at the time. The organization's summer board meeting was held in Boston. The meeting was a family affair, with board members invited to bring spouses and children for some pre- and post-meeting visits and tours to various Boston-area attractions. Not bad – we even had a private lecture from Dave Powers (President Kennedy's special assistant) at the Kennedy Library.

The Massachusetts official who served on the board and who was liaison for the meeting, knowing of my devotion to the Red Sox, had promised me one of the 10 seats he had set aside for a Friday night game at Fenway Park. The holy land!

In pretty good physical shape at the time –I ran regularly in the 1980s, racking up a dozen marathons in the Washington, D.C. area- I went out early one morning from our downtown hotel and ran around Fenway Park, stopping momentarily to behold the historic structure. Soon, I would be inside. At last.

Came Friday night, I learned that there were already enough children of the board members to take the 10 seats. I couldn't go. Not

even as a chaperon. Besides, I was told, I would enjoy attending the “wrap” party held that night for “Spenser for Hire,” a TV detective drama set in Boston. They apparently had completed the series’ exterior shots before taking it back to Hollywood and the studio to do the rest of the filming for the year.

I didn’t go to the wrap party. I walked around, aimlessly, trying to take in the excitement and nightlife all around me. I never recovered from the disappointment of that evening. And I have never been back to Boston.

We came close again in 1988. This helped me. I had begun to follow the Red Sox a little more closely than before, as I began traveling more – about once a month. On the road, the box scores provide connectivity in the diaspora, a contact point that one can hold on to.

It was a connecting tissue through a divorce that was my wanting, and my fault. They were something to turn to when I felt friends turn from me because of the divorce and my remarriage, almost immediately, to a younger woman with whom I had fallen in love, and to whom I am still married.

But it was hard. During much of the nineties, the pattern seemed to be the same: Red Sox at front, or close, for most of the season. Then came the fade. I began to make cruel jokes of it with other Red Sox fans. The meanest, and the one that got the best laugh, came during a discussion on what to do with our organization’s national conference. It was somewhat of an inconvenience, a noisy inconvenience, when the Cleveland Indians won their AL divisional playoff in October 1997. Our conference hotel was within earshot of “The Jake,” where the Indians played. It was around 11:25 p.m. when they won. Everyone at our conference knew, because we heard the noise.

Beyond the inconvenience of the noise, the conference experienced a considerable drop-off in the number of local and area delegates, who usually make up a quarter to a third of all those attending the event.

During a table discussion of how to plan for such a contingency, I turned to the fellow from Boston who sat on the conference planning committee and suggested: “Why don’t we schedule it in Boston? Nothing ever happens there in October.”

“Oh that’s mean, Berrigan. That’s mean.”

But he didn’t contest it.

I wasn’t one of those fans who got fed up with the game or pissed off at the players during the 1994 season that was interrupted by a player’s strike.

Greedy players? Hell, they’re athletes, but they’re also entertainers. No one in my crowd seems to mind paying box seat ticket prices to see an aging rocker like Mick Jagger, who never could sing anyway, helping him earn more than any ball player earned in a single year. And ballplayers have a talent.

With the passing of communities that used to field teams and the greedy owners with little talent (Anyone ever see George Steinbrenner do wind sprints or a set of 25 pushups in his entire life?) except to replicate IBM by gobbling up the talent and squashing the competition, ballplayers became market commodities. They deserve ... whatever the hell they can get.

I’ll still watch.

On the afternoon of July 5, 2002, I call my sister, Mary, to check in and hear what is happening with the family in my hometown. Mary passed 60 earlier in the year. She is the oldest one of the brothers and sisters of our family home. Generally, when I call she tells me how my Mom, now 85, is doing. I try not to talk too much about my children, but I do. I try not to talk too much about physical ailments, but I do. I try not to complain about financial woes, but I do. We don’t do much of any of this kind of conversation today.

She answers the phone, and before we go through the normal pleasantries, there is this:

“Oh, Tommy, isn’t it terrible?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I thought you knew ... Ted Williams died. I thought that’s why you called.”

A different kind of hurt seizes my chest. A feeling of profound grief comes upon me.

“Oh no!”

I begin to cry.

We end the conversation immediately. I put down the phone and begin to cry some more.

The great Ted Williams is dead.

Into the baseball environment of the mid-to-late 1990s came a slightly built, quiet fellow from the Dominican Republic – the finest pitcher that baseball has seen since Sandy Koufax and Bob Gibson had their great runs.

While I might have heard the name of Pedro Martinez mentioned, or seen it somewhere on the stats pages, probably when he won the NL Cy Young Award in 1997 while pitching for Montreal in, I was not prepared for the purest joy I have had watching baseball since I had umpired behind the plate more than 30 years earlier.

“What are you watching?”

“Pedro Martinez.”

“Who?”

“Pedro Martinez. He’s the best pitcher in baseball.”

Angela, my wife, is a high-energy person who would rather play a sport than watch it. On the occasion of the above-cited exchange, she watched a couple of innings and grew wretchedly bored. To me, though, even on television, with its angles that distort the length

of a pitch, as well as one’s depth perception, one can still see the beauty of Pedro’s work.

When he is on, it is, as Angela’s reaction attested, boring to most people. To me, a Pedro Martinez game is a clinic.

His mental book on a pitcher tells him where to pitch, what speed, when to change speeds, and when to cash in – i.e., when to walk someone. He doesn’t need lists and charts and intelligence reports on hitters.

A three-inning rotation is usually something like this: ground ball, ground ball, strikeout, single, popup, strikeout, grounder, soft fly ball, ground ball, ground ball.

Pedro seems emotionless when he pitches. He is a surgeon at work. His hands, in fact, are those of a surgeon. He seems to have longer fingers than most people. He is thus able to control the spin of a pitch better than anyone else.

He doesn’t overpower or blind a batter with speed, as does the Big Unit, Randy Johnson. He does not purposefully intimidate a batter by throwing hard directly at them or, in the euphemistic language that a Roger Clemens or Curt Schilling might employ, “protect the strike zone.” This does not mean that he will not target someone’s head if his teammates have been threatened. He’s been suspended for that.

I saw that Pedro, after one of his early efforts in spring training this year, during which he did well, said matter of factly, “I know I’m the ace.” It was not an egotistical statement. It meant exactly that. He knows he’s the ace. He knows he should do well. Koufax and Gibson were like that.

Watching Pedro is a natural high. As soon as I know when a game is on, especially with Pedro pitching, I will plan to watch it. And what makes it better is that Pedro is part of the Boston Red Sox.

Pedro is just one of the Red Sox, however, who have been there before, during, and afterwards for me, even if I ignored them

from time to time. One doesn't desert friends like that.

And, so it is 2003, and I have been a Red Sox fan, now, for a half century.

And it is springtime. While I enjoy the sunny, warm consistency, of southern California, my home for the past several years, I must confess to missing the opening symphony of spring back East. One of the fondest memories of my childhood goes back to the time when I was 12 years old. My brother Andy, living home after a two-year stint in college proved too costly, had a job as a bread truck driver, and he would occasionally take me along with him on his delivery route. He made runs through a number of small towns west of Williamsport – places like Mill Hall, Flemington, Beech Creek, Lock Haven, Salladasburg, and even smaller places in between- delivering Vaughan's bread, buns, rolls, and pastry to small grocery stores, all-purpose gas stations, and little, one-stop operations that served as post offices, coffee shops, and what many would today call convenience stores.

It was a warm Saturday morning in March. The ground and the plants seemed to be poking their heads up through the topsoil up all over. Melting snow generated little streams along the small-two lane roads we drove over between stops. And as the sun got higher later in the morning, I could see boys starting up baseball games in damp fields. Life was back. It doesn't get any better than that.

Baseball does that. And for me, the Red Sox do that. Hope returns. When the Yawkey estate sold the Red Sox outright a few years back, hopes got higher. And now, we know we

have the talent. We've got the pitching. Along with Pedro, there is Tim Wakefield, waiting to show us a 20-win season. Mendoza is a mean reliever. And we've got the sticks. Nomar, Manny, and Benny are the core of a team that had a .277 team batting average last year, second only to the Anaheim Angels. And if Anaheim can win it all, as they did last year (I saw them once, and the team, its setting, and the fans seemed so synthetic to me, but I rooted for them, of course, when they played the Yankees in the League Championship Series. And they did play one of the most exciting World Series I've ever seen.), well, you know the rest.

With hope, however, there is the anticipation of the hurt. Every Red Sox fan knows what I mean. It is a part of our life. It is what connects me to others in the diaspora, to a Boston I likely will never visit again, and to a Fenway Park, my Jericho, that I will probably never see on the inside.

But this no longer troubles me, as I have come to realize, especially as I have written this, that the Red Sox, and being a Red Sox fan in the diaspora, have helped me in my life. Yes, winning matters. It is the pursuit of winning, however, and the way in which we pursue it, that teaches us lessons in life. Life is about hope. Life is about coming back from losing, as I have, and am. Life is about living serenely with what one has.

Lifelong Red Sox fans are not just fans. We are a part of the team. We are Red Sox ourselves.

We don't need to win the World Series to learn the lessons of life, nor do we need to win to find out what winning is like. But it sure would be nice to find out.

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