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Remind Me: How Did I Reach Middle Age So Fast?

Happy 65th Birthday to Me: Birth of an Accountability Watchdog

by Patrick Monette-Shaw

I have a confession to make: I stole part of the title for this article from my friend and mentor, Patricia Nell Warren. As they say, imitation is one form of flattery!

On turning 60 in 2011, my mother — who was then living in a nursing home in South Milwaukee unable to live independently as she had for nearly 80 years — wrote in her last birthday card to me, which featured a tiger on the cover:

“Happy Birthday to My Son, the Tiger.

You remind me of a Tiger the way you have attacked the “Establishment” pursuing your beliefs and interests. I’m very proud of you and all you have achieved over the years.”

— *Happy Birthday, Mom*

I think she did so because I had routinely sent her copies of various articles I had published in San Francisco’s *Westside Observer* newspaper, at that point for over a decade. We shared quite a few giggles when I ran for Mayor of San Francisco twice, in 2007 and 2011, both times unsuccessfully, obviously.

In stark contrast, my father never once said to me he was proud of the man his son had become, I suspect because he knew as early as my turning age five that he had a queer son on his hands. Later, my father shunned and shamed my long-term partner who had contracted the virus that causes HIV/AIDS. I kicked my dad out of my house, and never saw him again.

A lingering question is: How did I survive and reach 65, relatively unscathed and still stirring the public accountability pot all these years later?

Running Away From Home

Between graduating from high school in 1969 and June 1975, I floundered, attending college at Whitewater State University in Wisconsin and then transferring to the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where I focused on a degree in humanities, but eventually dropped out.

By the time I was 25, I knew that in order to save my life I had to escape the dysfunctionality of my birth family, and ran off to join the U.S. Army against admonitions from my family that the military wouldn’t take me due to my hearing loss since birth, and my obvious homosexuality.

My family was wrong on both counts, and after barely advancing out of boot camp, I served honorably (or what passed for it) for five-and-a-half years in the army as a glorified “secretary,” then called “Unit Clerks,” since real men in that man’s Army couldn’t be called secretaries. I spent most of those years in Germany, where I gained an invaluable perspective on how foreign countries viewed America and Americans. But by then, I was on my way toward a 40-year career in the secretarial field, up until the day I retired the day after Halloween in 2015 at age 64.

Influence by Authors

Between junior high and high school, I spent the summer reading 20 novels and writing book reports on them in order to earn admission to my high school’s advanced English program. It was among the best things I’ve ever done, as it led to a life-long love of reading.



Patrick’s Evolution: High school senior in 1969, to U.S. Army Specialist 5 c. 1978 in Germany, to San Francisco City Government watchdog with current City Supervisors, June 2016 (photo 2007).

“ I knew that in order to save my life I had to escape the dysfunctionality of my birth family. ”

In high school, I was enthralled with William Faulkner and read all of his novels in hardback, bought from earnings working part-time my senior year for UPS loading and unloading trucks. D.H. Lawrence and Franz Kafka were favorites, among others, and Walt Whitman was my favorite poet. Advanced English course work introduced me to a whole slew of authors and new ways of thinking.

Between my 20's and 40's, I treasured literature written by gay and lesbian authors. Over the years, I've been comforted and inspired by many LGBT authors, including Patricia Nell Warren, Patrick White, Edmund White, Larry Kramer, Rita Mae Brown, Christopher Isherwood, and Paul Monette — to name but a few. Each of them not only served as unwitting mentors to me, but were heroes who helped shape my world view. They helped save my life.

Patricia Nell Warren's Influence

Across the years, I devoured Patricia Nell Warren's novels, including, *The Front Runner*, *The Fancy Dancer*, *Billy's Boy*, *The Beauty Queen*, *The Lavender Locker Room*, *Harlan's Race*, *One Is the Sun*, and my favorite, *The Wild Man* — before her most recent collection of essays, *My West* was published.

And that brings me to my admission that I stole part of the title for this article from her essay "Happy 65th Birthday to Me" in *My West*. I wept reading that essay, in part because it rang so true to my own life history.

She wrote, in part:

"Looking back, I'm amazed that I survived — the closet, the bad marriage, a few near-fatal wrecks with cars and horses, drinking, poor health, spiritual despair, thoughts of suicide, and the challenge to reinvent myself quite a few times. At 65 I feel like I just finished boot camp. The survival skills I learned ought to get me through the next 40 or 50 years ... The big 65 ought to be business as usual, not a point of no return."

She also vowed: *"I'm going to keep writing till I fall over dead on my keyboard,"* a sentiment I had already shared with co-workers and allies about myself, even before reading her words.

Unlike Warren — who had thoughtfully set out on a path to live a committed and creative life as a writer — I just stumbled along, enjoying life as best I could, until I moved to San Francisco when I was 45 following my partner's death. From there I waded, incrementally, into becoming an accountability activist, and a columnist and reporter for the *Westside Observer* newspaper, which weekend-warrior second career finally brought me a purpose and meaning in life.

Across the years, I've been fortunate to have communicated via e-mail with Patricia as one of her loyal fans. I treasured the dedication she inscribed in my copy of *The Wild Man*, a novel set, in part, against the backdrop of the fascist Franco regime in Spain in the 1960's. Warren inscribed my copy: *"Dig your toes in; Lady Muse will guide you then to your El Bravo."* So I dug in my toes, and focused on my advocacy work.

When I ordered *My West* in April 2016, I was honored by Warren's inscription: *"With all my appreciation and admiration for what you do for human rights."* Me?

I'm not convinced I deserve an accolade for defending human rights, which I hadn't consciously set out to do, but perhaps stumbled into as a side achievement after years of scoring little, but important, victories along the way by standing up for vulnerable elderly and disabled people, dialysis patients, and others, and challenging the "powers who be" at their every scams and attempts to exclude regular citizens like me from the political process.

My West is well worth the read for a whole host of essays. You can order it from Warren's publishing firm, Wildcat Press, at www.wildcatpress.com.

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Men Who Graced My Life

Across the years, several men graced my life as lovers and significant others. Tony Y. brought me out when I was 15. At that point I clearly knew that I was gay, and that's what I wanted. I was 27 and living in Heidelberg, Germany when he committed suicide in Washington, DC after he tumbled into mental illness. As my first lover, I'll never forget him.

Other partners included Larry G. in Milwaukee; Chuck S. in Heidelberg when we were both stationed at U.S. Army Headquarters–Europe; Manfred K., a Czechoslovakian living outside of Frankfurt, Germany; and eventually my long-term partner of 13 years, Carl Shaw, who I met in Chicago when I was 31 and who died from medical malpractice in 1995 in Atlanta, Georgia when I was 44. Each of them graced my life; each taught me much about who I am as a gay man.

Carl's Medical Malpractice

When my partner Carl was first diagnosed as being HIV-positive in the late 80's, it was then almost a sure death sentence. Scores of our gay friends in Chicago quickly died, and after a few years of treatment, he retired and we moved to Atlanta, as I wasn't going to abandon him in his time of need. We bought a house 30 miles north of the city, which caused grueling three-hour round-trip commutes to my job in the city to support the two of us, once he qualified for Social Security.

Shortly after three years of relative tranquility in which he could tend his one acre of God's green earth — as an avid gardner with a blessed green thumb — Carl's health suddenly deteriorated. I plugged in two years of his 30 various blood test results into a Microsoft Access database I had taught myself to use, and confronted his doctor asking whether Carl had developed neutropenia, thrombocytopenia, or mere anemia, after buying a copy of *Mosby's Medical and Nursing Dictionary* to try to learn the medical issues involved with the prescriptions Carl had been prescribed.

A week after an extended consultation with his doctor, his doctor yanked Carl off of six of the medications he had been taking, including a highly-inappropriate 22-month course of treatment with alpha-Interferon, then an experimental “prophy” to combat HIV/AIDS — which Carl should never have been on for longer than six months, and then only if he was showing signs of clinical improvement. Which of course he was not showing any improvement. The 22-month cost of Interferon injections — \$60,000 — had benefited his doctor, who had a financial stake in the pharmacy co-located in his medical suite.

“ So I flipped a coin, and headed to San Francisco to reinvent my life at the ripe age of 45. Then I dug in my toes.”

Carl died within six months after being yanked off of alpha-Interferon, which by then had turned his liver to rock, or mush. I was essentially comatose for three days after he died, unable to get out of bed myself, engulfed by guilt I had been unable to monitor what it was his doctor had been doing to him until it was too late.

After obtaining Carl's medical records six months after he died, I concluded it had been medical malpractice — including untreated neutropenia, thrombocytopenia, and anemia — not HIV/AIDS, that had killed him. I was devastated, again.

So I flipped a coin, and headed to San Francisco to reinvent my life at the ripe age of 45. Then I dug in my toes.

Becoming an “Accountability Advocate” Watchdog

Pulling the shaking U-Haul truck into San Francisco with the brakes complaining from the journey from Atlanta — with only our miniature Yorkshire Terrier (“J.J.,” short for Jumping Jupiter) as my cross-country companion and knowing nobody in town — I settled in, still distraught Carl had been unable to access services from the Atlanta AIDS Foundation.

Soon, I was monitoring the San Francisco AIDS Foundation over its outrageous salaries paid to its then CEO, Pat Christensen and the enormous rip off of AIDS Walk funds from smaller Bay Area AIDS non-profits. The *Bay Area Reporter's* then editor, Mike Salinas, encouraged me during AIDS Foundation board meetings to hold AIDS organizations accountable for stewardship of scarce AIDS funding. In June 2003 I launched my website www.theLastWatch.com — named after Paul Monette's book, *Last Watch of the Night*, which had been a comfort to me while Carl was dying — to monitor the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and its dreadful and insulting “GayLife” social media campaign featuring Ouchy the Clown.

From there I began monitoring meetings of San Francisco's CARE Council (which allocated millions of dollars in federal AIDS funds among City agencies and non-profits), and monitored meetings of our local HIV Health Services Planning Council, holding each agency to the fire over Sunshine Ordinance violations and their flawed processes. From there I dived into monitoring the San Francisco Department of Public Health's AIDS Office, which was a bit tricky, as by that point I was a City employee working at Laguna Honda Hospital (LHH), the City's long-term care facility for elderly and disabled San Franciscans, a facility managed by my employer — the Department of Public Health. It's then Director of Public Health, Mitch Katz was a large focus of my attention, and soon I was monitoring San Francisco's Health Commission, even though Katz was my ultimate boss.

On October 31, 2004, I launched another website www.stopLHHdownsize.com when it became clear the City was attempting to eliminate 420 of the skilled nursing facility beds from the LHH rebuild. That led me to start writing articles in the *Westside Observer's* predecessor publication, and I continue to be a columnist/reporter for the *Westside Observer*.

I initially curtailed my articles to focusing on the downsizing of the facility and the massive cost overruns of LHH's Replacement Facility. Annoyed with me, Katz and LHH's then Executive Director engaged my supervisor, Dr. Lisa Pascual, Chief of LHH's Rehabilitation Services Department in which I worked in a bald attempt to bully me into curtailing my First Amendment free speech. Pascual would fly into my office, slam my door, and scream "*Can't you tone your articles down, Patrick?*" to which I always responded "*Let's see, First Amendment, free speech, writing after hours and on the weekends? The answer is 'No,' Dr. Lisa.*" I had no intention of being bullied, and by that point, I wasn't afraid of anyone any longer, because I don't react well to bullying or intimidation.

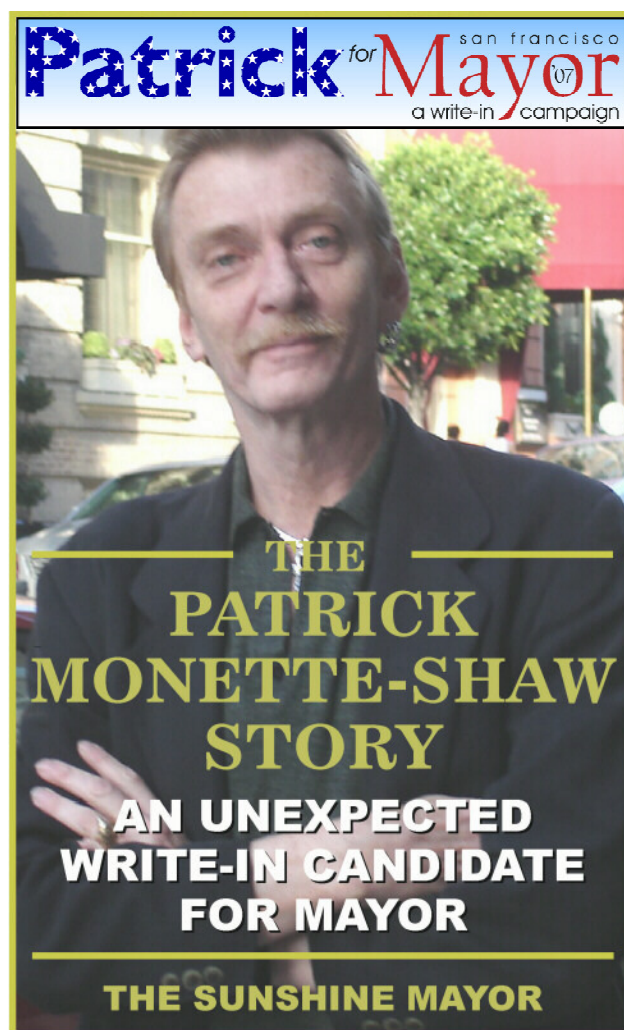
Along the way I've had some major successes — like collaborating with the UCSF nurses to prevent moving the San Francisco General Hospital outpatient dialysis unit to Laguna Honda's campus, which would have burdened dialysis patients by fragmenting the locations where they received care for multiple medical issues, and burdening their use of public transportation. I've had minor successes along the way, winning several Sunshine Ordinance complaints against several City departments for violations of access to public meetings and public records.

And, of course, I've endured my share of failures, including losing two San Francisco Superior Court lawsuits involving Laguna Honda Hospital that were filed on my behalf by public-interest public health lawyer extraordinaire, Lynn Carman on a pro bono basis — even while I was employed at LHH.

And for the fun of it, I ran twice as a write-in candidate for San Francisco mayor, first against Gavin Newsom in 2007 and then against Ed Lee in 2011, both times on a lark. What a hoot!

As part of my accountability activist evolution, I grew into monitoring the Board of Supervisors, the Mayor, and various City departments, now including the San Francisco Employees' Retirement System board of directors. Now that I'm retired, it's my full-time job, reading government documents and writing exposés of public corruption in San Francisco.

" 'Can't you tone your articles down, Patrick?' 'The answer is "No," Dr. Lisa.' I had no intention of being bullied, because I don't react well to bullying or intimidation."



Candidate for Mayor: The campaign logo is from my race for mayor in 2007 against Gavin Newsom; the book jacket is a send-up from my race in 2011 against Ed Lee, a spoof of "The Ed Lee Story," written by disgraced political consultant Enrique Pearce, who was later charged with felony possession of child pornography.

Receiving the Society of Professional Journalists–Northern California Chapter’s *James Madison Freedom of Information Award* in the “*Advocacy*” category in 2012 was a great privilege.

When I sent birthday wishes to Patricia Nell Warren who turned 80 on June 15, I urged her to keep up writing for many, many more years. She replied saying: “*Yes, I will still be writing till I fall over dead on my laptop keyboard.*” I intend to do the same.

In my mind’s eye, that’s what’s only fitting for accountability watchdogs, which I’ve proudly become. After all, the pen has always been mightier than the sword (or NRA rifle), and it’s the only way to honor Margaret Meade’s aphorism “*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever does.*”

“That’s what’s only fitting for accountability watchdogs, which I’ve proudly become. I’m grateful to have joined thoughtful, committed citizens almost a decade-and-a-half ago. That’s when I began to fly.”

Along the way, my favorite singer has always been Joni Mitchell, ever since her first album, *Song to a Seagull*, in 1968 just before I graduated from high school. Mitchell’s song, *Down to You*, from her *Court and Spark* album in 1974, has always brought me comfort. A portion of the lyrics are:

Down to You

*“Everything comes and goes
Marked by lovers and styles of clothes
Things that you held high
And told yourself were true
Lost or changing as the days come down to you*

...

*Everything comes and goes
Pleasure moves on too early
And trouble leaves too slow*

*Just when you’re thinking
You’ve finally got it made
Bad news comes knocking
At your garden gate
Knocking for you
Constant stranger*

*You’re a brute you’re an angel
You can crawl you can fly too
It’s down to you
It all comes down to you”*

— Joni Mitchell
Court and Spark (1974)

Happy Birthday, Me!

Reaching 65, I’m grateful to have joined thoughtful, committed citizens almost a decade-and-a-half ago. That’s when I began to fly.

Now, if I can just reach turning age 80, like my friend, Patricia! Meanwhile, I’m enjoying turning 65 this year, amazed at how the years — and a 45-year career — have flown by.

When I’m dead, I’m praying someone will pry my cold dead fingers off my keyboard. I can’t take the keyboard with me, and it will be someone else’s turn to join other thoughtful committed citizens.

Monette-Shaw is a columnist for San Francisco's Westside Observer newspaper. He received a James Madison Freedom of Information Award from the Society of Professional Journalists–Northern California Chapter in 2012. He can be contacted at monette-shaw@westsideobserver.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to Patricia Nell Warren, with profuse apologies for shamelessly stealing part of the title for this article from her lead, and to my partner Carl Shaw who loved me for thirteen years, despite the many flaws in my glass.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge all I learned from my mother, Patricia, all of my co-workers over the years who willingly mentored me on everything from proofreading to software features, and in particular the 9-1-1 dispatch operators whom I supported in my final job with the City for adopting me as family. I continue to deeply appreciate my friendships with Sylvia Alvarez-Lynch, Vivian Imperiale, and Billie McDaniel, and guru's Herb, Lou, Victor, and Claire.

My deepest thanks to those in the Sunshine and Open Government community in San Francisco who have mentored me over the past 20 years, including Michael Petrelis, Oliver Luby, Kimo Crossman, Larry Bush, Alan Grossman, Bruce Wolfe, Lynn Carman, Derek Kerr, George Wooding, and other members of Friends of Ethics. Lastly, I deeply appreciate my publisher and editor at the *Westside Observer*, Mitch Bull and Doug Comstock, for allowing me space in the greatest community newspaper in San Francisco and putting up with me all these years!