

Daily Journal

"Be just and fear not."

RILEY MANNING: To my dear Uncle Harry, whom I miss badly

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I lost an uncle and a friend this week.

My Uncle Harry was a figure in my life nearly as constant and reliable as my own dad has been. He and my aunt have occupied the same house in Columbus my whole life. Even now, the back bedroom where my brother and I used to spend the night is hardly changed. I could enumerate every Transformer toy and Army man in the bedside table, though I haven't opened those drawers in over 15 years. He was present and proud at every turn.

Uncle Harry grew up in a country way, often joking that possum was the only meat he'd never eaten. In one of our last conversations, he told me about his high school years, coming home in the afternoon, saddling up the horse, and riding out to count the cows. If they were clustered up in groups, he said, you could tell it'd be an easy day. If they were scattered, you'd be out there for hours. I could picture him that way, on a horse, drawing his coat against a winter wind, riding under the heavy clouds, trying to make his count.

He was a tough but gentle man, though I would suggest that the toughest people are the gentlest ones. He spent a lot of his time on the family farm tinkering with an old tractor and watching deer. He was never interested in hunting them, he simply loved God's creatures and drew comfort from nature.

When I was young, he and my aunt would set cat food out for a family of raccoons, and we'd watch them through the glass porch door when the critters emerged from the woods to eat. He taught my brother and me how to fish on that farm, in a small pond stocked mostly with bream, though we caught the occasional bass and, once, a huge snapping turtle.

Harry married my Aunt Martha back in 1966, when he was 20 and she was 17. They both joined the Navy and shipped off, first to San Francisco, then Key West, then Guam. In her own words, he tended to her every need in their nearly 54 years of marriage. Everyone who knew them knew the strength of their bond.

Harry had an honesty you could feel right away, and I doubt you could find anyone who could say he'd dealt with them in anything less the most upright manner.

A social distancing funeral doesn't offer much closure or catharsis. We laid Harry to rest standing 10 feet apart, then we just went home without the customary gathering. I can't lie, that was maybe the hardest part about it.