

Thomas More McFadden 1935-2022

Eulogy delivered by William Pickett

December 17, 2022

Good morning. I'm Bill Pickett, and I'm the person who had the good sense to hire Tom at St. John Fisher College as our chief academic officer. I had the pleasure of working with him for the five years he was there. Then like everybody else, when Tom was a part of your life, he never let go. He's been a part of my life ever since that time.

When Tom asked me to do this..well he didn't quite asked me, exactly. It was a typical kind of [McFadden] move with a little charm and some humor. So, this was a telephone conversation the week before he died. At the time there seemed like there might have been a path to a treatment that he was considering. And he said to me--Marilyn and I were both on the phone with him--he said, "Now, Bill, I want you to do me a favor. Will you try and keep my eulogy to under 50 minutes? Maybe 45 if you can't quite fit it in?"

I, of course, did what you just did. I laughed. I said, "Well, Tom, it's going to be hard to do, but I'll give it a go." And I kind of knew in the back of my head, and certainly once we got off the phone, I realized what had just happened. Maybe he didn't know he was going to die so soon, but he was beginning to make preparations. And he had asked me, in his own way, to give his eulogy. So, here I am.

Irenaeus was a second century bishop who had a line that is often translated as, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." And that's Tom. I mean, he fully inhabited who he was. He fully inhabited his abilities and skills and his relationships. He was, as David said and Ed said, fully present in whatever the moment was. He was fully alive. He was a student, a scholar, a teacher, a priest, an educational leader. And if that weren't enough, he was, from a young age, a gifted athlete. He played baseball and had a lifelong love for the game. Tennis, golf, sailing. I didn't know about the tennis until I read David's very fine obituary, which if you haven't read, you should. I learned some things about Tom. It's such a well-done job.

Eventually you get to the point where you can't participate, but Tom was a great fan of any kind of athletic endeavor, great fan of baseball from an early age, a lifelong ... Well, I thought he was a lifelong Dodgers fan, but turned out he was not because as a young boy--this is almost unbelievable, growing up in Brooklyn--he decided that he needed to decide who he was going to root for among baseball teams by figuring out which baseball team had the most Catholics. And to this day, I'm not quite sure how he figured that out. Something to do with players wearing scapulars. I don't know how this all worked, but he determined that it was the St. Louis Cardinals. So, as a young boy, he was a Cardinal fan. He got over that and became a Dodgers' fan, of course. And then, when they left and scampered out to Los Angeles, there he was back home with the Dodgers.

He was also a fan of his children and especially his grandchildren. You couldn't spend any time with Tom and not know what the four of them were up to, what their academic achievements were, what their athletics, their professional. He always had that information, and he was always so proud of them. He attended as many of the athletic events as he could, and thankfully, many of them were close enough to drive to, and he really enjoyed that. And somehow, he got the nickname on the

fields at Mercyhurst after games of being Grandpa Jello Shot. I'm a little confused as to how that happened. It had something to do with celebrations at mid field, and Tom participated as he did. I'm not sure he completely was down with the Jello shots, but [inaudible 00:05:22] he wasn't having a scotch in the evening.

Tom was a man of many accomplishments, as we've heard, but people aren't really remembered that much for their accomplishments. Any of us can have a list of things we've done, institutions we've served, all of that. What we remember about people is how they did it, who they were as a person. And Tom, from my time working with him and being with him as a friend, did his work and did his accomplishments with a grace. He was graceful in these settings. It was the grace of a natural athlete, the one who can stand relaxed, crack jokes, talk about other things even though there's an impending task because he knows he has the confidence in his own ability. And when that task comes, he'll be able to perform.

Now sometimes, that confidence as a natural athlete put Tom in some perilous conditions. He and young David, younger than David is now, found themselves on the north shore of Oahu, Hawaii because they, after all, were skilled at being in the surf off the Jersey Shore. So, they wanted to go see what all of this big wave stuff was about on the North Shore. And as they entered the water, they noticed somehow that the lifeguard towers were much, much higher than the ones on the Jersey shore. But they didn't take time to figure out why that would be the case until as they're out chest deep in the water, they hear a claxon go off and an announcement that, in fact, from one of those high towers, they have now spotted a 40-foot wave that was headed their way. And anyone who wasn't very experienced should get the hell out of the water immediately, which they did thankfully, as we know.

But Tom did have that grace of a natural athlete. And another thing about him that I know my wife, Marilyn, always treasured, and I know you do too, it was particularly evident during Covid when we had to cover our face, was that Tom's eyes were always smiling eyes. There was something alive and comfortable and humorous in the twinkling of those eyes that came through to people as they related to him. Now, for someone who was as comfortable doing all the things he did, a lot of people didn't realize how hard he worked because that kind of easiness. It's like the story about the dock, very calm on the surface, underneath paddling like hell.

And one example of that is his work on accreditation. Something that most of us don't thankfully have anything to do with, but if you have had anything to do with accreditation, you know it requires a close reading of some of the worst writing that exists in the world. It's not graceful writing, and it's about material that is absolutely dull, but essential to the accreditation process. And Tom, even after he left California, as president of a college when you're expected to do that, he continued doing accreditation work and was actually called in to handle some very difficult cases. Things like, "Should we pull the accreditation from a college or not?" That's a very serious step. And Tom was called in to work on that team, "Should we grant accreditation to new institutions?" One in California. And he worked in Kurdistan, I think working with some institutions there.

He was trusted by his fellow professionals, and they knew how hard he worked. The only other person who knows how hard he worked is Monica, who would see him constantly in the den, in the study, reading these reports, taking careful notes, and then working to write those to send back those reports and going out visits. And most people may be outside of the higher ed network, don't know this, but you don't get paid for that work. That's all volunteer work. That's commitment to the enterprise of higher education, to which Tom was very committed, and he worked so hard at that.

But if I had to say one thing about Tom, it would be he was a great teammate. He really was. He loved nothing more than being part of a group with a common goal. And everybody wanted to be on a team with Tom, or if you had a team, you wanted Tom to be on. When I interviewed him in 1987, I was in that position, and I knew that I wanted Tom McFadden to bring himself and his person into the team that was responsible for the college. And he had an impact well beyond what you might think he would've had at the college. And it still stands as the best decision I ever made in my career.

But you wanted to be on a team with Tom because he found joy in whatever the work was, no matter how unpleasant or how difficult. He found a sense of joy in that. And he was always affirming other team members. I don't think I ever heard him be critical. He was affirming of other people and their attempts and the ways in which they were trying to help the enterprise. And he found humor in all the appropriate places, especially himself.

So, towards the end of Tom's first year at Fisher, he came up with this idea that there should be a baseball game between administrators and faculty at St. John Fisher College and St. Joseph's College in Philadelphia from whence he had come. And he found out that you could, without paying any fee, use Abner Doubleday Field in Cooperstown because they want baseball being played here. I'm not sure they wanted our kind of baseball. So, the only requirements were two, you had to have team uniforms, and you had to pay these two old umpires because you needed to have an umpire. You just couldn't go off and make calls yourself. And if any of you have remembered the film "League of Their Own, at the very end of that, there's a reunion game in Cooperstown, and if you ever see that, you'll see those same two umpires. Those are the guys who umpired our games.

Each team got a ringer. And so, my son, Brendan, who was going into his junior at Aquinas was our ringer because God knows we needed somebody to play catcher. That was way beyond any of our capabilities. And the other team had a ringer, as well. So, we had our ringer, and turns out we only really had one pitcher, Thomas More McFadden. We decided we probably needed to get together for a practice. So, we did. We gathered on a field, and as my son, Brendan, told me this week when I was telling him, he said, "You know, Dad, none of you guys had any business being on baseball field." But we had to practice batting. So, we had Tom throw batting practice during our practice, which meant that the next day his arm was absolutely dead. So, we go down to Cooperstown without a pitcher. Although he throws the ball, it was not a pretty picture. So, we lost both games. We came from behind and stayed behind.

But while we were there playing, looking kind of like two baseball teams, people would come in. People who are visiting Cooperstown would come into the stadium. You know, you kind of go in, peek around, see what's going on. And so, there were a group of Japanese tourists who come into the stadium, and they're all over, and they're taking pictures of us playing baseball, and they're going to go back home and talk about how at the birthplace of baseball, they saw these two teams slugging it out on their Field of Dreams. Tom loved telling that tale because of what it said about him and his ability to find humor in what we were doing. It was so ridiculous what we were doing. We never did it again. Tom couldn't recruit anyone to do it again. But as I said before, once you were part of a team with Tom, he just never let you go. He stayed in touch with people from every organization he had been a part of over his entire life. It's just amazing.

Some of us, maybe most of us don't do that, but Tom did. He did. And when Tom asked you, "How are you doing?" it wasn't the way I asked, "Hey, how you doing?" It was, "No, how are you doing?" And he really wanted to know, and he listened to what you said, and because of that, you really told him how you were doing right then at that moment. I've had conversations with Tom, such a close friend of mine, that I've never had with anyone else because he listened and was present

and listened to you. And because you no matter what you said, you didn't put anything at risk in terms of Tom's love and affection for you. You weren't risking anything. And no matter how things were going, people always felt that Tom had a profound sense of happiness about him, no matter what.

Some people set high bars for friendship but Tom didn't. He saw humanity in every person, and he was inherently interested in anyone that he came across. Tom and I had breakfast every Saturday, once they got back to Rochester, every Saturday for years until Covid and then, his illness began to make that impossible, or to interfere with it, at least. And these were not quick breakfasts. No, they went on at least two hours, and we talk about all sorts of things. I mean everything. And the image that came to my mind, and it came to Tom's, those of you that ever saw The Muppet Show, the two old guys in the balcony looking down at what's going on in the stage, a stage they had been on. But they weren't on that stage anymore. They were up here, and they were outraged that the stupidity and they couldn't explain was going on in the world. And then, maybe not like those two guys, soon we would find things that would generate hope for the future in the country, politics, higher education. And there was so much about today's world that neither one of us really understood. I used to explain a lot of technical things to Tom, but I couldn't explain TikTok. I mean, I can't. I know what it is, but why? I don't know. So, we would throw up our hands just like those old guys.

We all miss Tom. My life, your lives, all of our lives are less light-filled, less bright, certainly less filled with good news. We miss him. And what I'm about to say is probably theologically suspect, but I'm sure Ed will appreciate it. And I know Tom would.

We miss Tom, but I think Tom misses us. Tom's life was never a one-way street, a street laid out to get efficiently from point A to point B. It was never that kind of street. I like to think, to imagine, it was like those streets in Brooklyn where he grew up. It was filled with traffic and vehicles of all types, stick ball games, jump rope, hopscotch, street vendors, people gathered on stoops, children, parents, teenagers, and seniors. And then,, Tom walked through those streets, stopping to engage with groups, sharing his life with each one and receiving back from them that energy that came from that interchange. This past week, we've been reading about fusion. Some of you may have been reading about that. I mean, I don't really understand what's going on, but I know that they've reached something called ignition, which was for a very brief second, the energy that they bombarded this BB with created more energy than that total energy used. And I thought, "That's Tom." That's Tom and his relationship with people. His energy created something in us and our relationship that generated even more more energy, more affection, more sharing.

Until Covid came, we would go to a lot of movies, the four of us, Monica and Tom and Marilyn and I. Tom and I had very different aesthetics when it came to movies. I always accused Tom, not accused him, well yeah, of being way too Aristotelian. He wanted a straight narrative line. And at the end of that, he wanted to find a message, some deeper meaning. And I was a little more post-modern. I just said, "Tom, sometimes there isn't any meaning. It's just stuff is happening, and you just got to engage with it. Maybe meaning emerges, maybe not." Never did get him convinced to go see the Lobster or the Swiss Army Man, if anybody remembers that. But we did go to see The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent, with Nicholas Cage. And Tom admitted, he said, "I really enjoyed that." And he said, "I wouldn't have gone to see it unless it was your week to pick the movie." So, I felt great victory there. We would go to these movies, and Marilyn knows I always want to get there before the trailers start because I want to see what's coming. Right? And so we go, and the four of us, in the nice comfortable recliners now, would be watching the trailers. And at the end of that, the three of them would go like this. And I'd be down on the end saying, "Oh, I think

this is pretty good." I never did get around to trying to convince him to see "Everything Everywhere All at Once."

But I think now Tom would say, "Well, Bill, if what you described is a movie about my life, what's the meaning? What does it all amount to when you get to the end?" And I think it's pretty simple. For Tom, the most important thing in life was human relationships. And they were too important to be left to chance. You needed to step out and be proactive and contact people and be in touch with people. Don't let it go because a relationship can die and wither away. And then your life becomes less full. And the life of people you would be in touch with would be less full. So, if each one of us, going forward, just would do that a little bit more than we've done or than we think is comfortable for us, we'll do great honor to the memory of this remarkable human being who was father, husband, grandfather, uncle, and my closest friend.