

*From Joan Andelman, Oberlin Class of 1968
Remembering Gideon Schein (1947-2020)*



Gideon has been a cherished friend since our earliest days at Oberlin. It was in early November, when his doctors were assessing his body's ability to withstand a heart transplant operation, that they discovered that cancer had metastasized through his body. Typically, Gideon determined to withstand a regimen of chemotherapy on the slim chance the doctors offered that it might buy him a little more time.

I struggled for words and thoughts to send him that might comfort us both. I believe that Gideon would not mind my sharing with you this last letter I wrote to him; it is my truest effort to capture the essence of this astonishing being I was so lucky to have as a lifelong friend.

November 2020

“You and Night and Alfred Lord Tennyson”

Dearest Gideon –

Just thinking and thinking about you. Remembering so vividly the time – 56 years ago!!!! – that I first set eyes on you at Oberlin College. How you dazzled me, with that gorgeous mane of hair and that smile that lit up rainy gray Oberlin with a thousand rays of sunlight.

What a total triumph you have made of your life, against all the odds that could be stacked against one person from such a very young age. Such prodigious talent, so much erudition and vitality and passion you have lavished on every single direction you have chosen to turn your attention, your time and your dedication to. Never saw you give a half-effort. Never saw you indifferent or blasé or disengaged.

I guess that's the word I've been searching for – you have always stayed engaged, body and soul, in wherever life took you, and whatever you were destined to bear, sick or well, joyful or depressed, elated or deflated, you have always been so present, and IN it. And made those around you more alive and engaged themselves, because of how contagious your own spirit is.

How I cherish you, for the gift you have been in my life over all these long years that have seen us from youth to – to what? Old age, I guess. Except – I don't feel old. And part of the reason for that is the person I've aged with so closely – you – doesn't seem old to me either. Your determination to keep going and achieving and accomplishing and contributing, no matter what, has often made me ashamed of my frequently half-hearted efforts. And besides – we have always managed to make each other laugh. Also, no matter what. And there have been plenty of “what's” over the years.

Remember “Ulysses”? It was a favorite poem of mine when I was very young and had not the faintest insight into what its words would eventually mean to me more than half a century later. It has particular relevance for both of us now – me since my own bout with cancer – and you, because my experience pales beside what you are confronting right now with such massive courage and will. I'm not bothering to look the poem up just now, but just to write the lines that still come back to me randomly from its conclusion, likely out of order – but lingering decade after decade in the poetic parlors of my psyche. With apologies to Tennyson:

‘...For all experience
Is an arch where through gleams that untraveled world
Whose margin fades forever and forever when I move....
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks
The long day wanes, the slow moon climbs, the deep
Moans round with many voices,
Come my friends, tis not too late to seek a newer world;
My mariners,
Souls that have wrought and thought and toiled with me,
You and I are old. Old age hath yet its honor and its toil
Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.
Push off, and sitting well in order, smite the sounding furrows
For my purpose holds to sail
Beyond the baths of all the western stars before I die.—
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down.....
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles
And see the great Achilles whom we knew....
Though much is taken, much abides, and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are we are,
One equal temper of heroic hearts
Made weak by time and fate but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find – and not to yield.’

Sail on, my beloved old friend. You are an inspiration beyond any mere words I can ever summon.