

“Brother Blue’s Gift”

Sometimes when you’re lost in a strange new place, somebody finds you. That’s the way I intersected with Brother Blue (real name: Hugh Morgan Hill), the itinerant storyteller of Boston and Cambridge, who passed away this week. I was pretty young when I first met him, a recent college graduate who had just moved to the big city. It was a time of transition for me, not only from college to looking for work, but also from a fairly rural area to a bustling urban environment. Also, as sometimes happens in such periods, I had left behind a guy I loved to pursue my dreams.



(c) Roger Gordy

Here is what happened. It was a chilly autumn evening in Harvard Square, and a daunted, pensive young woman was emerging from the subway, eyes momentarily dazzled by the lights of the night, head buzzing with thoughts, regrets, and hopes. I was also distracted by hunger and worrying about my low funds. In short, I had a lot on my mind. “Oh MY!” a great voice boomed. Confused, I looked around, and there he was, in a nearby alcove.

A crouching, swooping black man dressed all in blue, peering into my heavy heart. He gestured for me to come closer, and like a moth to a flame, I did. “Oh my my my,” he continued, shaking his head at me, holding out his hands (which, I noticed, had blue butterflies painted on them). “You need a story,” he declared. And he told me a story. I wish I could remember it more fully now—something about a thirsty boy and an animal who helped him. What I do remember is his vivid blue clothing, his sparkling eyes, his confidential manner, and, I believed, his compassion for little lost me.

I used to see Brother Blue again from time to time, sometimes there, sometimes downtown, sometimes on subway platforms. I saw him perform at First Night celebrations. He always wore blue, always seemed to be barefoot, and always drew a crowd. And I never failed to gravitate toward him, unable to resist his great spirit, unable to avoid his orbit. True storytellers are like that: irresistible.

In the article about Brother Blue in the Boston Globe, I learned that he was 88 when he passed away. This amazed me, for I thought he was really old (and wise) back then. I was also fascinated to learn that he had a Bachelor’s degree from Harvard in “social relations” (how do you teach that? the man naturally understood humanity), a Master’s in playwriting from Yale, AND a doctorate in storytelling from Union Graduate School. But rather than do shows on stages or in nightclubs, or on the radio or on TV, he apparently preferred to work his magic on the streets. He also took his stories into prisons and schools.

Have you ever been to a memorial service of someone you didn’t know very well or didn’t keep in touch with? As a result, you are not inclined to get up and speak, instead content to sit there with your private memories and listen to others’ tributes. And as the event goes on, you start to

realize that other people have your late friend's number! Themes emerge; a full portrait develops, one that you agree with, one that is familiar. If at first you feel defensive ("Hey, he's MY friend"), as the service proceeds, you realize this person belonged to everyone there.

So when I read the following anecdote in Brother Blue's obituary, I understood it on a deep level, it resonated. A woman who attended his service recounted how she had once boarded a city bus "in a foul, miserable mood," and Brother Blue looked at her and remarked, 'I bet you have a great story.' "The effect was magical," she recalled. "It was like someone who looks inside you and can see all the life and the joy. All of a sudden, I couldn't remember why I was in such a bad mood."

That was OUR Brother Blue's great gift. I'm not bothered that this woman's story is similar to mine—I bet there are many, many people who were touched by him in this manner. For he understood something that storytellers in our midst know and are always trying to tell us as we travel through this world, if we would only pause and listen (and here I am quoting another storyteller, Barry Holstun Lopez), "Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive."