

## REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF JOHN ONACILLA



A song came to my mind the evening John died. I don't know why. I went to my computer and found the lyrics and said, now I know why.

### *Big John*

*Every morning at the mine, you could see him arrive  
He stood 6 foot 6, weighed 245  
Kind of broad at the shoulders, narrow at the hip  
And everybody knew you didn't give no lip to big John*

Well, maybe not narrow at the hip. But I wondered how a kid who played hooky from school in Newark felt, when confronted by this massive presence at his front door. After the initial shock, I am sure it wasn't too long before he also got to know a man of great compassion and understanding.

*Nobody seemed to know where John called home  
He just drifted into town and stayed all alone  
He didn't say much, kind of quiet and shy  
And if you spoke at all, you'd just said hi to big John*

*Somebody said he came from New Orleans  
Where he got into a fight over a Cajun Queen  
And a crash and a blow from a huge right hand  
Sent a Louisiana fella to the promise land*

John had more than his share of pain and suffering. And he used it all as a way to move forward with his life. He was proud of belonging to the 12 step program. He did his homework, kept coming back, and giving back.

The Serenity prayer was often on his lips.

*God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.*

I met John over twenty years ago. He became a big part of my life - always supporting whatever I did. He was a good friend.

*Then came the day at the bottom of the mine  
When a timber cracked and men started crying  
Minors were praying, and hearts beat fast  
And everybody thought they had breathed their last 'cept John*

*Through the dust and the smoke of this man made hell  
Walked a giant of a man that the minors knew well  
Grabbed a sagging timber and gave out with a groan  
And like a giant oak tree he just stood there alone, big John*

He was that kind of person. The giant oak tree for so many. He responded. When John walked into a room, it was filled with his presence. His smile, his compassion, and his total attention to you were beautiful gifts. His capacity to listen, his generous heart, his concern, his willingness to help, and just being there for you, were blessings we somehow just expected from John.

*And with all of his strength, he gave a mighty shove  
Then a minor yelled out, "There's a light up above!"  
And 20 men scrambled from a would be grave  
Now there's only one left down there to save, big John*

I think of how many hundreds of people could come forward and share a story of how John helped turn their life around. How he was the guardian angel, that support person, the one who never gave up on them. John didn't boast of the things he did. He just did them.

John was the enfleshment of the Prayer of St. Francis:

*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is sadness, joy.*

*O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console,  
To be understood as to understand,  
To be loved as to love;  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life*

John was truly a wounded healer. Because of his own pain, he knew the pain of others.

*With jacks and timbers, they started back down  
Then came that rumble way down in the ground  
And as smoke and gas smelched out of that mine  
Everybody knew it was the end of the line for big John*

*Now they never reopened that worthless pit  
They just placed a marble stand in front of it  
These few words are written on that stand  
'At the bottom of this mine, lies one hell of a man, big John.*

*Big John, Big John  
Big, bad John  
Big John*

*[Jonny Cash]*

*Bill*