

Pete Smith was a tower of strength. He was certainly that for his family. He was also that for this community. Pete lived in Athens County for nearly fifty years, but his influence, especially when it came to his veterinary practice, extended well beyond and indeed worldwide. The massive outpouring of support for Pete and his family shows the magnitude of his impact on so many lives—and the depth of loss we feel. What can we do when a solid rock like Pete dies? It didn't seem possible, did it? Pete was like a mountain range or a force of nature. I think most of us assumed he'd always be there.

He died the way he lived--without a safety net. The story of Pete [crawling] up the hill after that tree [mortally injured] him and driving [the bulldozer] home will become part of his legend. Fifty years from now, as the tales are told, he'll be bigger and stronger than Paul Bunyan. But in Pete's case, at least half the stories will be true.

Pete was so very, very tough; it's hard to remember that he was seventy-one years old. A lesser man would have stayed there in the woods and died. But Pete managed to get himself home. In fact, if some Good Samaritan had stopped to help him, Pete might well have refused. He was fiercely independent--even ornery. He was also wickedly funny and smart. At times he had to be to survive. He left home very young.

There must be something in the water up in Maine--or maybe it's the weather. Pete reminded me of lots of folks from Maine, who are some of the strongest, most independent, most determined people on earth. But Pete also called to mind the West, where he worked on ranches, met Jody, studied veterinary medicine, and rode rodeo. And he was very much identified with Athens County, where he chose to make his home.

There was a tender side to Pete. Those of us who did not know him in his personal life probably saw it best in his care for animals. I have an eleven year daughter who is still grateful for the miracle he worked for her guinea pig. I can only imagine what miracles he worked for some of you. Here too, his

legend will only grow. Pete's care for animals went beyond his consummate professionalism as a vet. With Pete, this came from a place of deep empathy. There was part of him that identified with suffering creatures in ways few of us manage for our fellow human beings. His passion for horse rescue through the Last Chance Corral speaks volumes about his priorities in life.

How deeply he will be missed--this strong and compassionate giant of a man. Again I ask us, what can we do now that Pete no longer lives among us? How do we go on now that Pete's days of cheating death are over?

In the first place, we turn to God. Pete himself often did that. The way he lived his life, he needed to rely on his faith more than most. In God, he found the One he could count on when his own strength failed. In God, he found the Almighty, who created the people, the land, and the animals he loved. In God, he found the Savior, whose love is stronger than death.

Even now this Savior—the Lord Jesus—is leading Pete by the hand into paradise. For he is the Good Shepherd, and Pete is a member of his flock. His sheep—even the ornery ones—know his voice and follow him safely home. Even in the tomb, they hear his voice and live. Through death's dark vale, they follow him into larger life.

The Lord's presence with us cannot remove our sense of loss, this "cry of absence" we feel so sharply now. But it does provide hope and strength for the days and weeks ahead.

For, in this Easter season, we remember the victory of Jesus over sin, death, and the grave. And we remember his promise—that nothing can ever, ever, ever separate us from his love.

Death is not the end—not for Pete, not for us--but is instead the gateway of eternal life.