

The Pete Hamill I Knew

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In his presence, you had his attention. His interest. His appreciation. He made eye contact, asked good questions, and leaned in for answers, nurturing — then capturing — the conversation, as if it were the Most Important Thing he might accomplish that day. He knew what he was doing, but so did you. You didn't squirm or flinch under his scrutiny; you trusted; you gave. And Pete gave back, with a nod of understanding, a head-throwing laugh, and maybe a story of his own.

That ability to connect made Pete Hamill a great writer, sure. But he also was a disciplined newspaper reporter and columnist, a practiced, deliberate observer and chronicler of things that others dismissed as unremarkable, or just missed because they weren't paying attention, or because they weren't the kind of people who noticed things.

Not Pete. Pete took note. He was a journalist, feeding a hunger for information, and an artist, honing his visual sensibilities.

He savored long, slow walks through the cities he loved — New York of course, but also Mexico City, where he had studied oil painting and cartooning on the GI Bill, and where we met in 1986 when he became editor and mentor-in-chief at the English daily, *The News*, where I was a cub reporter.

He would amble in the cacophonous metropolis, population then a mere 18 million, negotiating towering piles of rubble that still had nowhere to go a year after the great earthquake. He inventoried the sidewalks and storefronts, block by teeming block, recording in his mind each feature, in order, in detail. Later, sketching the streetscape on a legal pad, he would label and annotate the nail salon, eatery, flower stall, newsstand, subway entrance, Lotería vendor, or reeking garbage can.

He could tell you the color of the stripes on the flapping-in-the-wind awning of the tacky souvenir place, the name of the money exchange next door to the cantina with the bullet holes in the walls, the one where the woman was scrubbing the sidewalk out front. He described the sound made by the metal shop gate rolling up on itself to announce, "We're open now." If pressed, he would recite the list of what he had smelled that day: Fetid water, Lysol, gardenias, coffee, body odor so offensive it would gag the less committed.

Not Pete. He inhaled and remembered, so later he could recount.

Years later, back in New York, I interviewed him for a newspaper story as the city was preparing to mark the first anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He was reliably precise, recalling how

he had found himself that horrible day, standing alone at the corner of Vesey and Broadway when just a moment before he had been running down the street, holding hands with his wife Fukiko. Desperately worried, disoriented, and coated in the muck of what had been lower Manhattan, he tried to process all he had seen, heard, and breathed, piecing together that he was now staring into a gutter at the remnants of someone else's ruined morning. Dutifully, he recited: "an unopened bottle of V-8 Splash, a cheese danish in a cellophane wrapper, a woman's black shoe, sticky with blood." If I had asked, I'm confident he could have specified the shoe's size or whether, in that moment, the traffic light at that intersection was red or yellow.

No, I didn't ask. If it were important to the story, Pete would have included it.

Since his death last Wednesday, various Pete obits have painted him as a poor Irish Catholic kid who drank too much, a high school dropout, a boxing fan, a Brooklynier from Park Slope, a wannabe cartoonist turned journalist, a tabloid editor standing up for the little guy while holding the powerful to account. They've called him an insatiable reader, a prolific novelist, a brother, husband, and father of daughters. Inevitably, they've noted his long-ago status as a celebrity divorcé, when, between wives, he had serially kept company with the Big Three mentioned in every story ever written about him (and here too): Shirley MacLaine, Linda Ronstadt, and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, sister-in-law to Pete's friend Bobby, whose assassination he had witnessed at close range.

All true, and part of the whole of Pete's incredible life. Still, here's what I remember:

- Pete diverting the conversation when asked about his famous dates: "Only a cad would kiss and tell," he'd say.
- His careful selection of just the right word (see "cad" above).
- His tie, a prop worn loose around his neck in the newsroom; properly tied for interviews.
- His promise to himself: to write every day and to walk every day.
- The discreet way he slipped a coin into the hand of an exhausted panhandler or a child hustling *chicles* on the streets of Mexico City. "If they can bear the indignity of begging," he reasoned, "they need it, and more than I do."
- His genuine, abiding love for New York City, with all its imperfections, and his lifelong embrace of Mexico City. "Brooklyn is my home," he once told us, "but I could never shake the dust of Mexico off my shoes. It will happen to you, too."
- His guidance of young journalists, helping them navigate the craft through a sea of difficulty, disrespect, and despair, absorbing, as he'd taught us, the stories of those who'd endured too much.

Pete's brief tenure at *The News* ended in the winter of 1987 when he refused to censor the paper's coverage of the student viewpoint in a battle over tuition at the local university. Our publisher had been livid over a front-page photo of a yellow bus that had been fired upon as it shuttled peaceful student protesters. He issued Pete an ultimatum, which Pete immediately rejected, and warned the rest of us to toe the "good news of Mexico" line.

Pete's abrupt departure was quickly followed by a staff walk-out on deadline. As we rushed to empty our cubbies, one editor pleaded with us to reconsider: "No one will ever hire you," she threatened. We laughed at the notion, then cried, then walked. In the days that followed, newspapers and wire services carried positive news of our decision locally and internationally, but we also drew fire from critics who portrayed us as naive children under the spell of "the Pied Piper of Hamill."

Some of the reporters were done, not just with the paper, but Mexico too. After a string of *despedidas*, we scattered, a few eventually regrouping in Pete's New York to ply our trade. Over the years, as Pete had predicted, we returned repeatedly to Mexico, unable to resist its pull.

Over the span of decades and despite sporadic contact with Pete as we chased careers across the country and around the world, he continued to take our phone calls and accept invitations to coffee. He shared books, restaurant recommendations, and sources from his Rolodex.

Yet more than once, waiting in line at a book signing, I found myself silently rehearsing an awkward re-introduction in case Pete failed to recognize me. I didn't expect him to remember after so long, given all the people he knew and all the people like me who claimed to know him. But Pete paid attention. He noticed things and stored things. He didn't forget.

During one event at a Houston art museum, Pete did a double take when he spotted me with my husband, queuing up to purchase his biography of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. Quickly apologizing to an admiring reader, he put down his pen mid-inscription, jumped up, and made his way around the table to greet us — a kiss on the cheek for me; a handshake with both hands for Scott. His flustered hosts struggled to hold the line as people broke ranks, trying to see what was happening, trying to figure out if we were somebody.

Self-conscious, I urged Pete to return to his signing and restore order. He just laughed, threw his arms out wide, and shouted to the crowd in all caps: "These are my friends!"

Many friends of Pete knew him better, or longer, saw him more frequently, or were invited more closely to him, and a few had seen him more recently, accompanying him on walks through his favorite neighborhoods and treasuring his stories to the last.

But this was the Pete Hamill I knew, and lost — the artist who saw everything, and the writer who explained it to the rest of us.

