

FIT TO BE TIED...IN KNOTTS

I love a good rainy day cry, especially when the lump in my throat swells with fond reminiscences of the passing of a wonderful friend who warmed my hearth and heart. Don Knotts, a one bullet, pistol packing shining light of laughter, recently passed. I bet he's patrolling the heavens, or mythical Mt Pilot, and singing solos in the town choir.

Barney Fife's not manly? I think Knott. More than one Thelma Lou pined for not tying the Knott when first given the chance to an irrepressible but hard working, loyal and hysterically adorable dreamer. Barney was a gentleman, a gut wrenching romantic and a sentimentalist.

Barney Fife, a dysrhythmic, overeager, musical klutz who should stay in the back of the band bus? I think Knott. The Barney Fife's in our lives add music to our smiles, write stanzas of laughter in our eyes, and pulse rhyme to the rhythm of often hum drum lives.

The rubber faced, bug eyed sidekick to his best pal, "Ange", sheriff of Mayberry, was an impeccably gifted craftsman of comedy and pathos. Knotts won Emmy Awards as best supporting actor in 1961-3, and 1966-7. The last two were for guest appearances. Fife, while posturing as a nervous, pencil necked, big dreaming foil unable to escape his ineptitude, was actually a window to the mind, heart and souls of us all.

Some condescendingly mock the hapless deputy as a one bullet wonder that shot himself in the foot. Yes, but he shot himself once- only once, and kept his powder dry from then on having learned his lesson. Can all of us say as much? It seems to me that I hear the artillery of asinities firing off at pretty regular intervals these days. Barney did indeed have a sharpshooters aim. In eight years on the air, the show never dropped below seventh in the Nielsen's. The deputy's uncanny marksmanship was a principal reason. Barney fired a missile of merriment and humanity that always hit the mark by zipping past our mental defenses, sliding by the cynicism we cultivate in our soul and landing smack dab in the funny bone.

Barney Fife, a stupid dolt? Nope, Knott by a long shot. It is a wonderful gift to live each moment to the fullest, savoring the highs and lows, while at times agitated like a tempest in a teapot and at times tied in knots. Yet in the end, Barney was always loyal, contrite, endearing and sincere. He dreamed with the best, but always savored today, his town, his townsfolk and his time with them.

Some say Barney was a mere supporting character and clearly not an iconic family man, like Andy Griffith. Some say we never saw hide or hair of Fife's family. Once again, Knott true. Barney's family was no farther than the reflection off that cathode ray tube we all huddled round weekly. His family is me and you.

Barney never aged. How could he. He was perpetually pop-eyed wowed with wonder, as the very eager child in all of us should be. The rhythms of his comedy resonated with us because they were real. It was us; silly-stupid-sad-sanctimonious at times and perpetually engaged in life.

I had a turn in command, and I tell you, there is always room in the group for a shiver voiced right hand man, eager, faithful and as funny as a golden retriever pup. Some folks are finely tuned comedic compost for enduring friendships and humbling self reflections that remind us all that in the final analysis, we are all one bullet wonders who could stand to take a cue from Deputy Fife and nip our stupidity right in the bud.

The day of Don Knott's passing is a day I hope to remember when my heart was tied in knots. The kind of knots no one should tamper with. Thanks, Barney.

Kevin Ryan is a retired Colonel, physician, musician and author who lives in Fairfield.