

# Introduction

HOWARD HEALY

This book is a tribute, a testament, and a portrait.

It is a tribute to Jim McGrath, a valued colleague of mine for more than a decade at the *Times Union*. It is also a testament to Jim's stature as a journalist and writer, as can be seen in the articles, editorials, commentary, and recollections that are collected here. And it is a portrait because, after you finish reading this book, you will have gotten to know Jim in all his dimensions—as a seeker of justice, as a voice for the marginalized, as a conscience for a community that often tried to deny its failings. It also shows Jim's other side—his generosity of spirit, his loyalty to friends, his unwavering allegiance to the Red Sox, his memories of growing up in Boston, his love of Albany, even his nostalgic, almost sentimental, attachment to a pay telephone booth that stood lonely and unused in the age of the smartphone. And much more.

More than anything, though, this book is a work of love. It was inspired by Jim's loving wife, Darryl, who saw it through from concept to the final printed volume. It was her hard work and steadfast loyalty to the memory of her husband that made possible the book you are now holding in your hands. I was privileged to work with Darryl as a coeditor of what we informally called "the Jim book." I contributed my memories of working with Jim, some of which are included elsewhere in this volume. I also offered my advice when warranted, but mostly I just stood by, in awe of Darryl's devotion.

Together we selected what we considered to be the best examples of Jim's writing. It was no easy task as Jim wrote more than 3,000 editorials, features, opinion pieces, and essays during his nearly 40 years in journalism. A few of the pieces that made our cut have never before been published, but we thought they deserved to be, and so they are in this book. And one piece included here Jim did not write at all. It is a transcript of a radio interview he did the day Governor Spitzer resigned, and it is included because you can hear how Jim's mind framed an editorial by the way he spoke. It's also vintage Jim, for its enthusiastic tone and its subtly sardonic wit.

We decided to catalog the 62 pieces we selected under six categories: "Albany," "Politics," "Social Justice," "Journalism," "Sports," and a sixth category called "I'll Be Home." That last section contains more personal writings, including a fellowship application essay that sketched out the early plans for a memoir Jim

had hoped to write, and from which the title of this book is taken. If you knew Jim McGrath, or just admired his writing from afar, this book's long roster of names and places, issues and events, will resonate. But if you're not familiar with Jim's work, we suggest you begin with the "I'll Be Home" section, which contains some of Jim's longer works on topics that touch all our lives—family struggles, small triumphs, sudden joys and lingering disappointments, heartache, life and death. Jim wrote about them all.

Our contributors wrote several of the introductions to various sections, as well as the foreword to the book, a very fitting appreciation of Jim and an intimately knowledgeable description of the Albany that Jim knew so well and loved so much.

The opening epigraphs are excerpts from the essays of some of those contributors. Their words speak for themselves. But Jim's words make up most of this book. They speak for themselves, too, Jim's words, their power unbroken.

Howard Healy was the editorial page editor at the *Albany Times Union* from 1988 to 2008.