
I Salute Bobby Cox, Via Bart Giamatti!

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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For those of you who do not know, or who have been too far East of Eden, or who left Paradise long ago, let me notify you, with regret, that Bobby Cox has retired from his job as manager of the Atlanta Braves baseball team. Those of us who follow baseball knew this day would come; indeed, Cox announced it almost a year ago. Nevertheless, the day is sad and sober.

When the Braves arrived in Atlanta in 1966, I was ten years old, the perfect age to become a baseball fan. I fell in love with Tony Cloninger after that first major league baseball game in Atlanta when he pitched ten innings—far too long for the first game of the season, his arm was never the same—and then, later, when he became the only pitcher in history to hit two grand slam home runs in the same game. I will always revere Henry Aaron—Hammerin' Hank Aaron—who still is the best gentleman and best athlete this city has ever known.

But the Braves were a truly dreadful baseball team during most of their first years here. 1969 and 1982 were strange aberrations (when they won their division). Their woeful performance did not deter me. My wife, Boog, and I, serving our first church, in Smyrna, Georgia, would often get to the stadium at around 4 p.m. in the afternoon, a full three hours before the game was scheduled to start. We bought two tickets and got a whole section to ourselves. Nobody else was there.

I suppose that those years were what taught me that baseball is actually a game for losers. The sheer odds reveal it. The best batters get hits only three out of every ten tries. The best teams still lose thirty to forty percent of their games during a season. Baseball teaches us how to lose, how to lose gracefully, and how to return the next day with a new record, with the attitude that nothing is impossible, with the glory of resurrection!

Besides Bobby Cox, my other baseball hero is the consummate fan, A. Bartlett Giamatti. His is the only autograph I have truly treasured in my sports life, but it does not adorn a baseball or a bat or a souvenir program. He signed my diploma from the School of Divinity at Yale University, where I graduated in 1982, and where he was President of Yale University. He resigned the presidency of Yale in order to become President of the National League and then the Commissioner of (all) Baseball. From glory to greater glory; I believe in that progression.

When he was not writing about Renaissance literature, or kicking one of the greatest players of all time out of baseball (Pete Rose) for gambling on the game, Bart Giamatti also wrote some of the most beautiful lines of all time about the game. "It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart." In another book of his, a little masterpiece called *Take Time For Paradise*, Giamatti developed the lovely theme that baseball is the narrative of epic romance and of the Odyssey of Homer; home—home plate—is where the adventure both begins and ends.

"Virtually innumerable are the dangers, the faces of failure one can meet if one is fortunate enough even to leave home. Most efforts fail. Failure to achieve the first leg of the voyage is extremely likely. In no game of ours is failure so omnipresent as it is for the batter who would be the runner ... The tale of leaving and seeking home is told in as many ways as one can imagine, and there still occur every season plays on the field that even the most experienced baseball people say they have never seen before."

(p. 94, *Take Time For Paradise*).

It is the Odyssey of Homer. Baseball is the Odyssey. My point is this: the Atlanta Braves, from 1966 through 1990, could not get home. They were adrift and aimless. They helped me learn about loss and life, but they were terrible.

Then, from 1991 through 2005, Bobby Cox led the Atlanta Braves to fourteen straight division titles—a feat no other professional sports team, in any sport, has ever matched. Bobby Cox became their hero, and he became my hero. This year, his admittedly less talented team still led the division much of the season, and even made the championship series when player after player fell to injury. They did it because they knew Bobby Cox valued them. He was a players' manager, who knew how to play every one of the players on his team. He was loyal, and his players knew it.

"It's designed to break your heart." That's what Bart Giamatti, the great renaissance scholar, said about baseball. And he's right. Our hearts were broken again this year when the Braves fell to a very good San Francisco Giants team. But so be it. Here's to Bobby Cox! Bobby Cox has taken us around the basepaths of both jubilation and defeat, success and loss. His greatness is measured in all the small things done well, over and over again, and in an amazing loyalty to his players. He has exemplified baseball at its finest and loyalty at its most stubborn. Now, he is safe at home, and so are we.

Sam Candler signature



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