

IN MEMORIAM



I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
- Robert Frost¹

Some things can be summed up in a sentence. The way I feel about my father is not one of those. Frost offers us a glimpse – a sentiment that, at least in part, provides a snapshot of the imaginative, brave and wonder-filled man that he was and an image of the road that he and I traveled arduously together on for the greater part of my seminal years. When my father passed away in 2010, it felt as if my world was over and that road, gone. In reflection, however, our journeys into the great wide open have never stopped; for even though he is now “six feet under,” my father has never left my side. Instead, it seems, that he has gone back to that “primordial ooze” of the abyss (from which we all come) and which Loren Eiseley so magically describes in *The Immense Journey* as:

the one place on the planet where conditions remain as they have been since the beginning...where the cold is the same at the poles as at the equator, where the seasons are unchanging, where there is no wind and no wave to stir the ooze above which the glass sponges rise on graceful stems, or the abyssal sea squirts

¹ Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken,” in *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*, ed., Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1969), 105.

float like little balloons on strings above the mud. This is the sole world on the planet which we can enter only by a great act of the imagination.²

It is likewise a world my father could not wait to return; he loved the water, he always had. Years prior, he had revealed to me the various rivers and bodies of water that he wished to be returned to upon his death. “I don’t want any of this burial crap...and no funerals either,” he said, “though a party is fine (as long as it’s a good one).” Moreover, he exclaimed, waving his arms about like a mad scientist, his hair equally participating in the excitement: “cremate me — preferably in a ‘green’ facility — and then scatter my ashes in the water.” In the midst of all of this somewhat theatrical display, he would then grab his diamond-willow wading stick, his green, trusty, disaster-of-a-fishing-hat, and his binoculars. Then for good measure, just before leaving, he would turn and shout over his shoulder, “It’s back to the ooze for me, kid!” And then, just like that, he would slip out the door — off to explore some far away corner of the great outdoors. He could be *so* dramatic when he wanted to be; but I loved that about him. Curiously, in light of his musings, I always wondered (though never asked) if I was *also* supposed to provide him upon his scattering with a pair of waders or a flashlight, or even perhaps some fins. It is, after all, dark down there in that abyss, and it’s quite a haul to the bottom! Nonetheless, giant leap into the primordial ooze aside, my father still speaks to me; he never ceases (despite his physical absence) to teach me something. In this way, it is fair to say, then, that not only has taking “the road less traveled by” made all the difference, but so too has he with whom I first embarked and continued along with on such a journey.

In 1973,³ my poppa graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara.

This is not to be dismissive of his pre-collegiate years, however. It is just that I have

² Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey: An Imaginative Naturalist Explores the Mysteries of Man and Nature* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 34.

limited time, I suppose, to provide you with what can only be referred to as the “incomplete highlights of an otherwise complete life.” So however disjointedly it may seem, it is from this point that I commence. Not surprisingly, given his long-standing proclivity for operating “outside of the box,” my father’s doctoral thesis was the first of its kind.⁴ It is even (alongside some other studies of his) a current resident of the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum and several related-in-kind academic journals and publications. What he had to say and what he did made a difference. He changed the course of Southern California history, in fact, his efforts resulting in the preservation of land, plants and various species of animals, among them the ever-elusive white-tailed kite and the long-sought-after-by-many-a-fly-fisherman steelhead trout.⁵ He also changed the course of academic history in the state of California in terms of establishing a viable interdisciplinary approach to the study of biology, ecology, and the various social sciences that (according to my father and other like-minded thinkers) *must* be considered

³ This is one year prior to my being born and approximately eleven years prior to our paths’ intersecting.

⁴ For greater detail about my father’s dissertation, see: Lee B. Waian, *The Behavioral Ecology of the North American White-Tailed Kite (Elanus leucurus majusculus) of the Santa Barbara Coastal Plain* [Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, (Appendix I: 14 Minute Sound, Color Film), 1973]: 1-123. Dissertations & Theses: A & I, ProQuest [Publication No. AAT 7414848 (Web. 28 Nov. 2010)]. See also: Lee B. Waian and Ray C. Stendall, “The White-Tailed Kite in California with Observations of the Santa Barbara Population,” *California Fish and Game* 56 (1970): 188-198; Ray C. Stendall and Lee B. Waian, “Observations on Food-Caching by an Adult Female Sparrow Hawk,” *Condor* 70, No. 2 (1968): 187; Lee B. Waian, “A Resurgence of Kites,” *Natural History* 85, no. 9 (1976): 40-47; George Lepp and Kathryn Vincent Lepp, “Being a Basic Biologist” in *Wildlife Photography: Stories from the Field* (New York: Lark Photography Books, 2010), 125-127.

⁵ My poppa (alongside Michael L. Hazzard and others) also had a hand in the development of a Southern California-based grassroots group geared toward the preservation of various streams, tributaries and watersheds in California with the intent (among other things) of gaining protection for the steelhead trout. The group is fittingly called “The Steelhead Militia” and is represented visually by way of an illustration that always makes me giggle: a beret-donning trout carrying a surfboard, diligently marching back to the salty waters of the endless sea. For more information, see: Aliso Creek Steelhead Organization, “Steelhead Militia,” “Friends of the Aliso Creek Steelhead,” and “Clean Water Now Coalition,” <http://www.alisocreeksteelhead.org/> (accessed 28 Nov. 2010), and <http://www.cleanwaternow.com> (accessed 28 Nov. 2010).

holistically, as part of one coherent system of thought.⁶ By way of the paradigmatic environmental studies program that he created and proctored (alongside some of his fellow colleagues), his impact was felt in colleges statewide and, to a large degree, nationwide. His classroom⁷ became a model to which all other schools looked; his methods and findings informed the creation and evolution of dozens of new programs and inspired countless individuals to join the ranks in fighting the good fight for Mother Earth.

His impact also extended beyond California, finding its way inevitably into one of my father's favorite destinations. By way of his research in Yellowstone Park and its surrounding areas shortly after the great fires of 1988, his influence stretched invariably into Wyoming and across the infinite skies of Montana, that "big sky state" that so rightly deserves its majestic name. But my father's preservation efforts and successes were certainly not limited to Yellowstone. In 1996, with the intent of eventually retiring⁸ and watching over the land like the good steward that he was, my father purchased 160 acres of open space, roughly fifteen miles outside of Helena. He set the land up under a strict conservation easement, one that would serve to protect the land for centuries to come. He dug a well, and further, set up solar panels and a wind machine so that the cabin he would soon come to design and help build would be self-sufficient and "off the grid" — always something for which he strived, both literally and metaphorically.⁹ Upon his

⁶ For some video footage regarding this approach, see the Saddleback College archived media and library collection: Pat Grignon, "Spotlight with Pat Grignon and Guest Lee B. Waian," VHS (Mission Viejo, CA: Saddleback College, 1990) and Greg Bishop, "Spotlight with Greg Bishop and Guest Lee B. Waian," VHS (Mission Viejo, CA: Saddleback College, 1994).

⁷ The heart of which was (and is) located at Saddleback College in Mission Viejo, CA.

⁸ My father retired in 2002. In addition to other capacities and research endeavors, my father taught at the collegiate level for nearly 30 years (23 of which were at Saddleback College).

⁹ Not coincidentally, one of my father's favorite movies (alongside a host of other gems) is a wonderfully, eccentric film titled *Off the Map*. In it, the wife of Samuel Elliott's character loved to garden in the nude —

death, I became trustee of this land, bestowed with a trust and faith in my abilities to mindfully care for the property in the same, or at least equivalent, fashion as that with which he exercised. Thus, while I certainly have hesitations in terms of my abilities to be as good a steward of the land as my father, given my background in the sciences is nowhere near as extensive, I am now the proud (and honored) steward of my father's legacy — that special place he calls 'Merlin Nature Preserve' and that last tangible piece of everything that he stood for; it was (and is) the culmination of his work and evidence of his amazing love and dedication for "all things wild and free."

It is not an understatement to say that my father was a great man. He was the greatest man I know, in fact. In the years prior to his death, he had evolved into what George Carlin might refer to as an "old fuck," and I say this knowing that that is precisely what he would have regarded himself as had he had the opportunity to watch Carlin's final filmed performance in 2008. He was not an "old man" or an "old fart," the former being a state of mind, the latter being a complacent and somewhat bland, if not crotchety, type of lemming. No, he was an "old fuck" to be sure! A "prickly pear," as mom and I used to call him, "with one hell of a bloom." And when he was young, he was a "young fuck"! He kicked and screamed through life his whole way through — his slender legs taking him, his intellect, and his cool charm wherever they led, but he always took time to howl at the moon along the way. He called it like he saw it, but was never afraid to listen and, likewise, never afraid to tell you that he loved you or that he was wrong. He questioned the system but more importantly created solutions to address its inadequacies;

down (at least on one level) to her bare essentials working *with* the bare essentials. Of course, my dad also loved *Earnest Goes to Camp* and *Tremors*, films that are (quite defensibly) nowhere near the same in caliber. However, these "inconsistencies" just make me laugh; he was a unique bird indeed — that father of mine — and quite complex!

and though it pained him when people refused to see his point and he often balked loudly when his message got lost in translation, this never discouraged him from trying. My father laughed, loved, and cried with the best of them. And he was an amazing fly-fisherman, with — as I only recently came to find out thanks to my mother’s recollection — an odd affinity for polishing shoes. He had other idiosyncrasies too, including (but certainly not limited to) feeling compelled to whittle spoons or door handles (every so often) out of wood, and (on a more regular basis) eating all but one corner of each potato chip (which I usually snatched up). What is more, he quite arguably — followed closely by only my mother, in second place — let the *loudest* and *longest* farts I have *ever* heard (though I’m sure if he were here right now to contest such a claim he would do so vehemently, despite its being true). My father was brave, too; in terms of medical procedures, for example, he had the wherewithal to withstand more intensive surgeries in his final years than he could count on two hands. And despite his fervent loathing for such measures and his equally ubiquitous dislike and distrust of doctors (save a handful for which he had quite the rapport),¹⁰ he made it through each and every one of them like a champion — bruised and battered, but still ticking; the same can be said, no doubt, of the various healthcare professionals brave enough to enter the ring with him and endure. My father was also and, without question, *brilliant*. He was so smart and so eloquent, in fact, that he swam laps around himself even — he was a trailblazer in every sense of the word, a true sophisticated cowboy. And while he certainly “enjoyed the hell out of the ride” — pissin’ and moanin’ when the mood hit him, or equally, just to see if he could get

¹⁰ Here I mean to include doctors/professionals: from Southern California — John Zamorra, Beverly D., John Brizendine, Paulo Zizzo, Frank Rivera, Vanessa Madrigal, Kenneth Martinez; from Manchester, NH and The Elliott Wellness Center — James Conway and Chamille; and from Boston Medical — Samuel E. Ellias, Jules M. Nazarro, Thai Vu, and Oz Shapira. Your professionalism and respect for those with whom you interact speak volumes!

a rise out of someone — he did so with as much strength and grace as humanly possible. “I’m not perfect, kid,” he would say. “Yeah, yeah, I know,” I would reply, all the while thinking that “perfect” is exactly what he was despite any proclamations by him that he was anything *but* flawless. The truth is, my dad was perfect for me even if he wasn’t “perfect” in an absolute sense. He was exactly the father that I needed and, without hesitation, exactly the kind of friend I needed, too. And he came into my life at precisely the right time; though, I must admit that I struggle still with being able to say definitively that he left with the same sort of exactitude in which he arrived. Of course, death is just a part of life; I know this. I understand this. For my questioning his time of departure is not a reflection of his judgment or even of the fairness of life; it is, rather, really only a testament to my missing him so terribly and wishing, furthermore, that he were still here. “Life is not for pussies,” he used to say, grinning. “A famous actress said that, you know?” “Yeah?” I replied, already nodding my head as he looked at me with a goading expression, as if to jog some ancient memory in my “sieve of a brain.”¹¹ “Yeah,” he would say, smiling infectiously still. “I concur,” I agreed, “it most certainly is *not* for pussies.” And there we would be — both of us grinning — him at me, and me at him...together, like two idiots.

Truth be told, life is a bitch, or rather she can be. At the least, she seems a fickle one — sometimes fair, sometimes harsh...usually an amalgamation of both, along with a dash of some other veritable spices.¹² Either way, I suppose, she’s pretty amazing. Had it not

¹¹ This is a quality or characteristic that my mother oft reserves when referring to herself and to which I have subsequently clung.

¹² Of course, if I had to speak literally, life would not have any of these value statements attached. Life just IS. It is a process — a process of which we are a part and which we have the ability to affect and ideally perfect. Life can certainly be considered amazing in its own right (and ought to be). But it is only when we speak of morality (and thus things which fall under the scope of reason) when labels of “fairness” come into play. That is, while life *itself* cannot be considered fair (or otherwise), things that take place *within* the

been for her, I would not be sitting here today, nor would I have had the opportunity to spend so many wonderful years with such an amazingly bright, articulate and passionate man — one who so powerfully impacted my soul that the effects of his presence are still yet rippling and unfolding. Brian Andreas writes in his book, *Some Kind of Ride*:

They left me
with your shadow,
saying things like
Life is not fair

& I believed them
for a long time.

But today, I remembered
the way you laughed
& the heat of your hand
in mine

& I knew that
life is more fair
than we can
ever imagine
if we are there
to live it.¹³

While I certainly do agree with Andreas' message, I must confess that the way in which my father was inevitably forced to spend his twilight years was anything but "fair." However, when one considers his life holistically — from the vantage point of that immense sky in which the sun both *descends* and *ascends*, I suppose — his final hand reveals something far greater than his last minute dealings. His was a hand that reflected

process of life can certainly be considered so. This is because reason (and all that reason entails) concerns a notion of rights. It concerns what we consider to be valuable and important as individuals and a collective people. It also concerns a belief in the importance of balance and harmony. And when these things are violated or infringed upon in ways that shake us to the very core, resonating into the chambers of our hearts a discord of immeasurable proportion — or equally that leave us barely capable of picking our grief-stricken heads up out of our hands and unable (impotent from the *unfairness of it all*) to stifle from our lips the vitriolic words: "nature is a whore" — this is so because we desire a certain sense of justice. We desire, in the end, that which is good and that which is beautiful.

¹³ Brian Andreas, "More Fair," in *Some Kind of Ride: Stories & Drawings for Making Sense of It All* (Decorah: StoryPeople, 2006), 33.

the life of a great man who did great things. And he was a *great man* until the day he died, despite perhaps what *he* might have thought about this, given the debilitating effects of Parkinson's on his body and mind. Even with Parkinson's, his final exit was powerful and strong and, quiet fittingly, in total agreement with the Walden pickerel of Thoreau's pond to which Eiseley refers. "He lived with me all that winter," Eiseley writes:

and his departure was totally in keeping with his sturdy, independent character. In the spring a migratory impulse or perhaps sheer boredom struck him. Maybe...he felt, far off, the pouring of the mountain waters through the sandy coverts of the Platte. Anyhow, something called to him, and he went. One night...he simply jumped out of his tank....He made his gamble like a man — or, should I say, a fish.¹⁴

As far as I'm concerned — man *or* fish — my father never came off the pedestal I put him on; nor, in fact, will he ever. He deserves this degree of adulation. He just *IS* that to me and a usurpation of his crown (or fin) is impossible.

I hope with all of my heart that he knew all of this — that he knew my respect, love, like and admiration for him were and are rivaled only by my gratitude for having had the opportunity to be a part of his life and to learn from him the many poignant lessons that I did (and still do). We had our moments, of course. We butted heads, frustrated the hell out of one another, and became so angry with each other at times that we would even fall into deep, intractable spells of silence, though this usually only lasted until one of us broke — either with a laugh, a hug, or an "I'm sorry" (often all three). I suppose this is something that every father and daughter relationship endures, at least, that is, "any that's *worth* a damn," he would say.¹⁵ It most certainly is something that friends endure, and moreover a distinct scenario to which the "care-giving/care-

¹⁴ Eiseley, *The Immense Journey: An Imaginative Naturalist Explores the Mysteries of Man and Nature*, 23.

¹⁵ I smile to myself here, recalling what has been attributed to Confucius concerning the importance of challenge: "The gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without trials." No doubt he wrote this with fathers and daughters in mind!

receiving” union relates. Through it all, we stuck invariably by each other’s side. We were loyal wolves, he and I. And while it is true that a bit of me died with him when he passed away — moving from my “self” into that vast unknown, grasping desperately as he swam away,¹⁶ holding on tight so that I, too, might return to the primordial ooze with him and not be left behind — I feel comforted in the thought that perhaps this vacancy in my heart will only serve to allow more room for the lessons he will inevitably continue to teach me in this wild ride we call life. Like Plato, my father continues to exist in the “spaces, breaths, and moments in between.” He lives forever in my heart and in my mind — among those things eternal¹⁷ — and has thus bestowed upon (and within) me the greatest, though, perhaps most bittersweet gift of all...LOVE.



Dr. Lee B. Waian, Ph.D.
September 10th 1935 – May 16th 2010

...Father, Teacher, Mentor, Friend...

¹⁶ I think here of another favorite movie of my fathers (and mine): *Big Fish* — an enchanting tale about a father, his son and the mysterious relationship between fact and fiction (among other things).

¹⁷ Among those things that seem to be unfettered by space and time.