

The Courage to Be Tender

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Some rivers are older than the mountains they flow through. As tectonic forces raised the mountains, the rivers cut down, eroding through the upthrust stone lining their inexorable pathway toward their destination, perhaps a distant ocean or a meeting with another stream. One such river is the French Broad that flows to the northwest through the North Carolina mountains, west of the small town where I grew up. Those streams were where I first rafted and canoed, and the French Broad was the setting for one of the most luminous days of my young adulthood.

Walnut Cove, NC, has changed little from the town of my youth. Major highways have been routed elsewhere, and like an eddy in a stream, Walnut Cove seems to pull back in upon itself, never advancing far from its center. I launched out of there to college and then to places I'd never imagined, some I didn't know existed. During the summer after my freshman year, I took my first geology course, a month-long trip backpacking and camping

out west—Yellowstone, the Tetons, the Badlands, the Uintas. I read books like **The American Landscape** and **Desert Solitaire**, and I journaled furiously each evening. Our group found a public shower once per week and in between dumped over each other buckets of cold water hand-pumped in the parks and national forests where we camped. We hiked miles, saw mountains and bison, and slid on glaciers in July. And some of us became friends.

Before the trip, I'd never met Lee, or if I had, he had left no impression. But around the camp in the evenings and, later, on the trails, his sense of humor and lack of irritability at being with 22 people for four weeks attracted me. We became hiking partners, the people who stick together on a trail, talking as they go, stopping to munch gorp at a pretty overlook, and singing songs, including the Carolina beach music that we heard growing up—"Why do you build me up, buttercup baby, just to let me down?" A couple of weeks into the trip, on the side of Beartooth Butte in Montana, Lee's love of music nearly killed me.

Beartooth Butte is covered with loose slabs of rock of Devonian age. Some of the slabs have parted to reveal ancient fossils of early fishes, the justification for our scrambling up the rocks. Soon, the scramble became its own reason-to-be, as Lee and I, young and fit, raced up. Below us was the lake along which we'd camped, complete with a floating dead moose covered

with flies, kept company by swarms of mosquitoes that had welcomed us to the campsite and continued through the evening to disturb our sleep. Closer below us lay the loose rock over which we had just scrambled and now must descend. Lee and I decided that I would go first—only after I reached a safe distance would he follow. As he waited, he began singing, patting his foot to the music. Perhaps a crescendo in the music or a little dance step followed. Lee's singing turned to my name.

“Dale,” he shouted. “Dale. DALE!”

I turned my face uphill toward him just as a rock the size of my head flew past. A blur I caught out of the corner of my eye rather than on my skull. I didn't dodge disaster—it passed me by.

The following fall, my family wasn't as lucky. Just after Thanksgiving, my father was diagnosed with leukemia, and in the second week of the spring semester he died. I spent a dreadful but benumbed evening at the front of the funeral home next to Dad's casket, greeting people who had known him. A van-load of my friends soon showed up to the funeral home, brought by my choir director. It was Lee he contacted to find out who to invite. No surprise—most of the van was full of students who had gone on the geology trip. Among them was Nick whom I knew mainly from the four weeks of the trip where he wore headbands and strummed his guitar, sitting on the rocks in the evening playing “Brown-Eyed Girl.” That night at the funeral

home he gave me a hug and said what I remember as most profound of that God-awful night: “I hate this shit.”

After that semester, Lee dropped out of college. He took a summer job at a camp up in the North Carolina mountains. I stayed home that summer to help mom around the farm—mowing hay, reshingling the roof, bricking the old well top that was rotting and about to fall in our water supply, and underpinning my grandmother’s trailer that sat in our yard. Lee and I wrote a few letters in those pre-email days, and when he had a day off from camp, I drove up to meet him.

The day was warm and clear, and we decided to canoe on the French Broad. We launched our canoe around 2:00pm, not worrying about the lateness. Lee sat in the back and steered. The summer days were long, with sunset six hours away. No need to rush. I seldom needed to paddle. The section of the river we floated had rocks and rapids but nothing that threatened to capsize us. There was plenty of time to chat. We floated silently by a deer in the edge of the water, then near a heron that would notice us, fly ahead for a distance, and seem to wait for us to catch up, and then fly ahead once more. We hadn’t done any research on this section of the French Broad, no planning at all, really. Most of the river was lined with hardwoods, including oaks and the odd sycamore, that helped slow the eroding of the incised but climbable banks. An occasional bridge was the

main sign of civilization. Definitely not urban. But as I watched from my perch at the front of the canoe, on the right side of the river unexpectedly arose Biltmore House, the largest privately owned home in the U.S. Built in the late 1800s, it towered like a fairy castle, perhaps more beautiful for being so unexpected.

Soon after, we stopped to climb out on rocks midstream and talk. The river was 250 feet wide or so, isolating us on both sides.

“Do you remember when we climbed down that arroyo in the Badlands?” I said.

“Yeah,” Lee replied. “There was an amazing lightning storm that night. It was lighting up in every direction. No rain though. Good thing. You always slept outside the tent.”

I thought of the many nights under the stars. The night Lee was talking about, I slept on top of a picnic table.

“Anyway, before we got there, I read Eiseley’s **The Immense Journey**,” I continued. “He rode his horse to a spot like where we started down. Climbing into that slot was like a trip back into time—older and older layers as he descended. At one point, he looks up and a fossil is poking out of a rock at him. It was like going back along the paths humans had taken to the present.”

We sat with our thoughts for a few minutes, watching the water, listening

to its progress.

“I’m signed up this fall for a Mel-Keiser course on Eiseley—it counts for religion credit. I had Mel’s wife this spring for a course on Chaucer. She gave an assignment on death the week before Dad died.”

“Intense,” Lee said. “I’ll miss some of that. I had a great class this spring. Modern literature. The lady prof was a trip.”

“Yeah, I read some of the books,” I said. “Hemingway. Faulkner. Good stuff. What did you think of **Lady Chatterley’s Lover**?”

“My prof loved it. She got all excited talking about Lady Chatterley and her lover dancing and making love in the rain.”

“I liked those two. Not so much Lord Chatterley. Putting him in a powered wheelchair? Not subtle.”

“Maybe,” Lee said. “But he was more of a support player anyway. The key person was the gamekeeper—Lady C’s lover. He still loved nature—remember him with the little birds? How he touched Lady Chatterley? Sensual.”

“Yeah,” I said. “So?”

“She said that was the key part—he had *the courage to be tender*.”

As I thought of this, I was reminded of my own behavior the previous January. I had gotten the call that Dad wasn’t expected to live through the day, that he was in intensive care. He was being kept alive by the machines

he was hooked to, a fate he thought we'd promised to help him avoid. I didn't want to see him that way, so I just sat in the intensive-care waiting room. Waiting. Waiting 18 hours till he died.

We got back in the canoe and floated on. Lee was quiet with his own thoughts. He was the son of a successful doctor but had dropped out of college. He had the appearance that day of some noble savage, with strong cheekbones and a prominent nose, lean and serious. We were both unsettled, trying to figure out how to go forward when major parts of our pathways could no longer be travelled. He was already thinking about going out west again, what would later result in him becoming a short-order cook in Yellowstone where he met the waitress who became his wife. But that day on the river, we were on the cusp of an adulthood that our culture marked with no ceremony—no bar mitzvah nor adult circumcision ceremony. We weren't even in a fraternity to get hazed. Still, from the present vantage point, it looks like we were on a vision quest, guided by the phrase from Lee's literature professor, being tender, trying to regain our courage.

As we continued to drift downstream, the sun sank in front us on the ancient westward-running French Broad. About 8:00pm, we came to our takeout. Putting the canoe upside-down on the car's roof, we headed out toward the nearby Blue Ridge Parkway to look for a camping spot. The BRP is a two-lane highway—no trucks allowed—that wanders above the face of the

1800-foot-tall escarpment. Before turning onto the beautiful but convenience-store-free BRP, Lee bought a six-pack of beer and I bought Champale, undoubtedly a drink that ranks with Boone's Farm wine as having the least value beyond its alcohol content. But it was cheap. We then drove onto the Blue Ridge Parkway, now dark. Much of the adjoining land is national forest whose campgrounds—our destination—soon proved booked for the night. Fortunately, a ranger helped us out.

“Go up the next road you'll come to,” he said. “It's still in the National Forest. Pass the third bridge, pull over, and camp wherever you want.”

The forest road was dirt but passable. As we crept along, all signs of civilization and our alcohol supply gradually diminished. Most of the road was lined with pines, their sharp needles underneath. An occasional rock poked up to endanger our oil pan, but Lee avoided disaster, showing that like any good non-Baptist Southerner, he could hold his alcohol. The summer air was clear but cooling. In the strip of sky that we could see above the road, stars were abundant. After the third bridge, we found a wide spot, backed Lee's car into it, and climbed out.

Behind the car was a clearing that looked flat and clear enough for camping. By now I had a pleasantly strong buzz going, and I stripped down and wandered into the clearing nude. It was covered with ferns, cool and tender under my bare feet. I grabbed my sleeping bag out of the trunk and threw

it out, the ferns making a soft pad beneath it. As I climbed in, I vaguely remember saying to Lee, “We are living like primitive man.”

Primitive man lacked tents. At 5:00am or so, I awoke to raindrops on my face and a raging ache in my head. We located and donned our scattered clothes, dashed to the car, threw our sleeping bags in the back, and headed out looking for coffee and breakfast. After breakfast and dropping Lee back at the camp where he worked, I headed down from the mountains toward the house in the small town where I’d spent my youth. From the upbringing I had in Walnut Cove’s First Baptist Church, my previous night’s behavior should have brought at least guilt, if not shame. Fortunately, I had also been reading John Steinbeck:

I have always lived violently, drunk hugely, eaten too much or not at all, slept around the clock or missed two nights of sleeping, worked too hard and too long in glory, or slobbered for a time in utter laziness. I’ve lifted, pulled, chopped, climbed, made love with joy and taken my hangovers as a consequence, not as a punishment.

Perhaps that day with Lee is worthy of some sort of divine punishment, but I long ago decided that that was unlikely. Unlike the Baptists, I believe Jesus turned water into real wine, not grape juice—certainly better than Champale. And my headache disappeared after a couple of aspirin and some

coffee. So I expect that if I ever get any sort of cosmic grief, it will be for my lack of taste, not my behavior. Instead, the real grief I've experienced is mostly due to failing often to come as close to Steinbeck's zest for life and Lawrence's courage to be tender as I once did wandering among the ferns and floating down the French Broad River.