

Eric Trethewey

Circling, Cutting Back

An old letter from him has turned up among my papers. It could not have meant much to me when I put it aside, but I'm thankful now that I saved it. Written more than a dozen years ago, it begins by thanking me for a note I sent him when he was in the hospital for a heart bypass operation. It's a long letter, penned in a nearly elegant hand, though the spelling and punctuation are less than scrupulous. What it has to say is certainly clear enough.

Writing of his mother's last days, he says,

She had all her faculties right up until the end. As a matter of fact she insisted on taking Louise [his new wife] and I out to lunch the nite before her death. She took a little weak turn in the lounge—Coachman, Sunnyside Mall—not far from home. We were used to the little weak turns but she always had her pills at hand this time she didn't.

We got her home and a pill into her and she walked smartly up the steps I took her boots off and she the rest of her outer clothing. She sat in her chair and read a chapter in a book finally got up announced that she was retiring said good nite that was the last thing she spoke.

Early the next a.m. Louise's Siamese cat that sleeps at the foot of the bed sprang up all brisseled up awoke Louise who shook me awake finally as I was under sedation, said "Your mother seems to be snoring unnaturally."

I got out of bed and checked the time five forty five a.m., listened to her breathing and knew it was the type that indicates death near at hand;

once it starts its impossible to change the pattern. The pulse is usually strong right up until the end; and then nothing. So she went the way she wanted to. She wasn't a burden to anyone was active and kept up a steady stream of correspondence.

He goes on to mention details of the funeral arrangements he has made, says something about his own condition ("The plates showed the coronary arteries too badly blocked"), and mentions some procedures leading up to the operation before him. Toward the end he adds,

If you are ever planning to come north again maby we can go on a real fishing trip. This operation is suppose to put me back in pretty good shape "if successful." I should be able to do some quite long distance walking.

His final paragraph is a postscript almost:

I went to Henry Stellenbach's funeral with Charley Royster. He thought quite a lot of Old Henry, as he called him.

Love as ever
Dad

Henry Stellenbach was my grandfather, my mother's father. Charley Royster is an old friend of the family, one of my mother's childhood buddies. The fishing trip mentioned near the end of the letter actually came about, a year or so later. There's an account of it in my journal, although it does not seem to me now as it did then.

Hearing from my younger sister, Sheila, that I was back north for a visit, staying at my mother's place, he telephoned to say hello. He had recovered from the operation. Was doing well. As usual, he was reticent on the phone, almost absurdly formal. Of course, we had never been very close and had drifted even farther apart over the years since he and Mom had split up for good when I was thirteen. Still, his exaggerated formality annoyed me.

When he brought up the possibility of going fishing, I inwardly dismissed the suggestion as no more than a goodwill gesture and changed the subject. But he circled back to it; before hanging up he had talked me

into an outing with him at the end of the week. I suspected he felt wounded that I had not yet called to say hello.

He picked me up in the city. When I saw his jeep pull up in front of the house, I was all set to grab my gear and go out the door. Mom, who had insisted over my objections on getting up at 3:30 to fix my breakfast, said "Ed, tell your father to come in. He probably hasn't even had a cup of tea yet."

I had been away this time for five years or so, too long to jeopardize a homecoming by arguing with my mother, though I couldn't avoid feeling a flare of annoyance at the way she said "your father," when she knew perfectly well it wasn't so.

I didn't argue. I walked out to the jeep and said, "Phil, Mom says to come in and have some tea."

He peered at me in his questioning way, a look that could sometimes border on bewilderment. At such times it was as if he desperately wanted to speak but couldn't quite think of the right words to say what was on his mind.

Suppressing irritation, I shook his hand, grinned at him, and didn't wait for an answer. I started back to the house so as to give him no opportunity to do anything but my mother's bidding. He got out of the jeep and caught up with me just as I was opening the front door.

In the kitchen, a place set before him, he blinked at me, cocked his head to one side, and ventured a smile.

Mom bustled around, pouring tea and frying more bacon, for all the world as if we were two decades upstream from here and the years we had lived through since then were no more than ripples on the shimmery surface of things.

Phil drank his tea and chewed his toast and bacon. He ate and talked in that same tentative, halting way of his, making as if to put each morsel of food into his mouth two or three times before he actually did it.

Even after all these years spent away from home I wasn't able to smother entirely the irritation I felt at his uncertainty. He had recently remarried, and he and his young wife had a new baby. Watching him, I thought, "Why is he doing this? Why doesn't he just relax, let go of the past as a bad deal, no one's fault, and get on with his new life?"

I felt better once we got out on the road. There, I had a choice either of early morning silence, the quiet satisfaction of watching the country-

side come awake as light filtered over the horizon, or of steering whatever conversation arose between us toward one of the two or three things I knew he would be ready to talk about.

Like fishing.

It was too late for salmon, he said, but he knew a couple of streams running into the Shubenacadie River where we might tie into some trout.

"Okay," I said, "sounds good to me."

He knew I liked to fish. I remembered an evening more than twenty years gone when the two of us hiked out to a point where the Petawawa River empties into the Ottawa. I couldn't have been more than eight years old. Some army buddies of his were supposed to pick us up there in a boat and take us across the Ottawa for a weekend at their fishing camp.

They didn't show, and though I remember growing disappointed as a half-hour wait dragged on to an hour and beyond, I also recall not really being surprised that they didn't. As painstaking as Phil could be when it came to some kinds of details—he was a first-rate cabinetmaker—plans that he made frequently failed to amount to much in the outcome. This time, however, he managed to salvage something from the ruins.

We made camp at the tip of the grassy point, baited up, and proceeded to cast. Before long, he had caught a couple of pickerel and I had flipped a small bass up on the bank. I think that was the first fish I ever caught.

Then, just before dusk, he hooked into something big. As he reeled in, I could hear his line ratcheting out. Until that time, I don't think I had clearly understood why fishing reels have drags on them.

"Get the dip net," he called, nodding toward the bank.

When I stumbled out to the table of rock where he stood, banging my knees and shins in my excitement, and clambered up beside him, I could see the dark shape swirling just below the surface.

Holding his rod steady, he told me how to get the net deep underneath the fish so as not to interfere with his line and risk dislodging the hook. I could feel myself trembling as I made a first attempt.

I missed. The fish twisted over the silver hoop. It came up empty.

On the second pass I raised from the water a net so full of dancing fish that it almost danced me off the rock.

Phil took it from me then, carried it ashore.

Back up on the bank, well away from the water, he held his catch up by the gills. "Largemouth bass," he said. "A good seven or eight pounds."

He got a fire going with twigs while I scrounged around in the dusk for larger pieces of dead wood. Then he put some tea on to steep. Along with the slices of cold boiled potatoes we'd brought, he fried his two pickerel and my small bass. Later, content, we slept soundly in our sleeping bags on the point above the confluence of those rivers.

Did he remember that long-ago evening? I wondered as we drove into the early morning light. To this day I don't really know, since we never talked about it. Or much of anything else that was between us.

We followed the highway northeast for nearly two hours, then turned off toward the coast along a gravel road. After ten miles or so of breathing dust, we wheeled off on a smaller dirt road, winding up and around hillsides, between pastures dotted with leaning bare-board buildings.

We pulled up at the edge of a hayfield. A herd of Guernseys grazed in the corner of pasture between us and a large white farm house. Several hens scratched and pecked in the yard.

A farmer in overalls came out of the house, heading for the barn. Spotting us assembling our rods in the field below his place, he waved. We waved back.

Phil had brought a small backpack into which he was loading his lunch and thermos. "Put your lunch in here," he said, eyeing the plastic bag I was holding.

I did as he told me, but a moment later, just as we were about to set out across the field, I reached for the pack an instant before he did and slung it over my shoulder. He glanced at me, questioningly, but said nothing. The prospect of hard walking beside a man with a rebuilt heart and a pacemaker made me uneasy.

About half a mile away, at the foot of a long, sloping pasture, a column of trees marked the stream we were planning to fish. When we came up to it, the clear, tea-colored water gliding beneath overhanging alders looked perfect. It was the kind of water that convinced you at first sight that as soon as your line hit the surface you would catch fish.

A few yards separating us in the beginning, we began to work the stream. The morning was heating up. Dragonflies we always called

Devil's Darning Needles droned around us in the sunlight, and small birds skirred in and out of the alders. As we cast into open pools or let the current carry our lines beneath overhangs, we could hear off in the distance the intermittent tunk of cowbells.

It was an ideal day. But the trout didn't hit.

We moved upstream, slowly, crossing over and fishing from the opposite bank when we could. For stretches of time, after rounding a bend, I would lose sight of Phil. But sooner or later I would look up and there he'd be, casting in his careful, practised way, hitting every foot of likely water within reach of his rod. I had resigned myself to angling with worms, but he, as usual, was casting flies, changing them every so often when they proved ineffective. Nevertheless, he beat the water with his line as fruitlessly as I did with mine. That whole day the only action either of us had was the occasional tiny perch nibbling at the worms I was using. I don't think Phil had a single bite.

For three, perhaps four hours we crisscrossed upstream, casting, not speaking except now and then to draw each other's attention to a motionless heron or a partridge with her brood of chicks in file behind her, foraging at brookside. By the time the sun had climbed the sky, we had about decided we had caught all the trout we were going to.

"Well," I said to him as he sloshed up to where I was sitting on a deadfall lying athwart the channel, "looks like it's not our day." Sunlight pooled on the flat stones at our feet and shimmered on the water falling behind him in pleats over the gravel bed.

"No," he agreed, one of those tentative smiles hovering around his mouth. "I've heard a lot of good things about this run, but it sure as hell hasn't lived up to its reputation." He breathed deep, as if trying to suck air into his lungs.

Then it struck me that in the last few moments his movements had been sluggish. Even speaking seemed to demand an effort.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm a bit peaked. Maybe it's time to call it a day." He peered back downstream the way we had come. From our patch of sunlight the shaded brook with trees folded in above it resembled a tunnel, dark, slightly mysterious.

Turning, squinting across the landscape, he pointed north, away from the stream. "We've followed the water in a sort of half-circle. If we cut

back straight, cross-country, we should come out on the road after about a mile or so."

Looking in the direction he was pointing, I saw a stretch of fairly open country that appeared to be a bog. Here and there were islands of scrub willow and juniper. More than a mile away I could make out a smudge of outbuildings and, beyond that, the green of a pasture rising into a dark line of spruce.

When we started, I walked slowly, trying to stay behind so as to make it appear as if he were setting the pace. But no matter how slowly I tried to move, since we weren't in single file, I kept getting ahead. So I would stop and wait for him, pretending to empty twigs out of my boots or to inspect the bark and leaves of a tree.

Well into the bog, we found the going more difficult, what with the knee-high bushes, the hummocks of swamp grass, the soft spots into which we sank to above our ankles in muck.

Once, having drifted ahead, I turned to discover that he was nearly fifteen yards back. I sat down on a granite ledge rising out of a patch of high ground in the middle of the bog, hoping that when he caught up he would sit down as well and "take a breather."

I watched him laboring toward me through the bushes. He would take a few steps, pause to suck air into his lungs and peer around, and then take a few more, a small man with a precise mustache on a pallid face. At noon, the sun blazing above us, the bog throbbing with the hum of insects, it seemed very strange to me that I was here with him, a man I had never felt close to, a man I had once believed was my father.

Until that winter when I discovered for certain he was not. I suppose I must have come to understand, almost immediately, the distance that had always been between us in the light of this new knowledge: he wasn't my father and that was why he did not seem to care much for me, not the way my grandad did. The truth was no doubt more complex. Things happen to us, and later we try to sort out the feelings that surface in the wake. But most of what is important remains on the bottom.

The winter I was thirteen—or was it one year later? I'm not certain. Most of what happened back there and then is buried beneath the snows of all the winters since. The events of one evening, though, whatever year it was, remain with me.

I remember a boy and a young man sawing firewood in the dim circle of light a bare bulb casts on the snow. The young man, in his late twenties, has been drinking. His name is Stan McDowell. He has lived with my mother since Phil left—because of Stan. Stan has hitch-hiked home from the auto-shop in town where he works, downing a pint of rum on the way to keep up his spirits and to keep himself warm. We are sawing wood for tomorrow's fires, a chore that we perform almost every evening, barely managing to stay one stick ahead of the cold.

An argument arises between us, perhaps something to do with Stan's habit of forcing the pulpsaw—he was raised in the city—and for some reason Phil's name comes up.

I don't remember just how it came about. What I do recall clearly is Stan, on the other side of the sawhorse, glaring directly into my eyes, saying, "Phil ain't your real father, anyway."

It was if he had hit me with the axe standing up in the chopping block beside us.

My impulse was to leap at him, strike him back. But I didn't, and I didn't know what to say. Seconds must have passed before I spoke. "You're lying," were the only words I could think of to fling at him.

He sneered. "Okay, Mr. Know-it-all, I'm lying." He slid the log ahead on the horse. "If you don't believe me, why don't you ask your mother? Phil *might* be Sheila and Laura's old man, but he sure as fuck ain't yours. Your mother got knocked up by a Kiwi passing through on his way overseas, before she ever met Phil. And the son-of-a-bitch was long gone by the time you popped out."

It was a gesture of almost pure drunken meanness, perhaps mixed with confused jealousy. But what he said was substantially the truth. My mother didn't even try to deny it.

So here we were twenty years later, Phil wallowing toward me, both of us tramping across a bog, heading home after an unsuccessful day of trout fishing. And never once had either of us said a word about the terrain between us. To give things an extra edge, I expected any time to see him fall to the ground, clutching at his chest.

What would I do? Real solicitude for his health was no proof against recurrent flashes of irritation that he should have engineered this situation in the first place.

And to what end? What in Christ's name was the point after all these years?

We kept plodding, the stink of bog slime on our boots, skirting the hummocks, brushing aside the scrubby growth, until we reached the fence. Ahead again, I watched him struggle the last couple of yards, willing him not to collapse. Placing my foot on the bottom strand and lifting the middle one with my hand, I forced the barbed wire apart while he bent over and stepped through. The road was there again, all dry white dust in the sunlight.

Some boulders lay clumped at roadside. He sat down on the largest of them.

Surveying the landscape in the general direction from which we had come since early morning, I could make out, through a distant grove of trees, the roof of a farmhouse near where we had parked. It looked to be a good mile away yet.

"How you feeling?" I asked.

"Short of breath," he said, trying to take a deep one.

"Why don't you give me the keys to the jeep, and I'll go get it and pick you up back here?"

He seemed hesitant. "You can if you like, but I think I'll be okay in a few minutes, soon's I get my wind."

"I might as well. It won't take me much more than ten or fifteen minutes."

He fished in his pockets for his keychain and handed it to me.

When I returned in the jeep, he was sitting on the rock as I had left him, head cocked to one side, quizzically, as if he were not quite sure what to make of things. For some reason, I felt a surge of impatience and fought it down. I can see him there yet, a small neat man, white faced, breaking into a smile as I drove up, for all the world as if what we were about were perfectly natural.

Then we drove back to the city, eating our lunches on the way. After dropping me off at my mother's house, he drove on home by himself.

And a few years later, when he died, I didn't go to his funeral.

In retrospect, there might even seem to have been an appropriate irony in the fact that it happened during the one year of the past twenty or so that I was close enough—only 300 miles away—to have made the trip

with little expense and inconvenience. Any other time I would have been 3,000 miles away, a distance sufficient to justify my absence. Perhaps.

That year, however, it would have been a simple matter for me to cancel my classes at the university, get into my car, and drive for six or seven hours to the cemetery where he was returned to the great wheel of things.

But I didn't go.

When my sister called to tell me he had died, and where and when the funeral would take place, perhaps I knew why, or could give reasons for why I wouldn't be there. Apart from the fact that we had never been close, had been scarcely other than strangers from first to last, there was something else. I had reached an angry, selfish point in my life. The whole thing had come to seem a dreary succession of failures—most of which I failed to resist the temptation to see as somehow rooted in my dismal past. Frustrated, self-pitying, bitter as I was, I had no stomach for an occasion that would oblige me to rub elbows with that past. I might even have explained to myself—convincingly no doubt—other reasons for staying away, something to do with the hollowness of symbolic actions not rooted in authentic feeling. I've always been adept at such explanations.

But we don't know ourselves, and the better we are at explaining what we don't know, the greater our need for correction. Unfortunately, correction comes after the fact, on the tail end of error. Too late. Which, of course, is why we need something else as well, forgiveness, absolution, what you will.

There's a photograph, the only one I have of the two of us, taken when I was seven. I'm standing beside a new bicycle, fists firmly clamped on the handlebar, left foot resting on one pedal as if I'm about to mount and ride off out of the picture. My mouth is smiling, my eyes squinting into bright sunlight.

Phil stands behind me, one hand on the handlebar, the other on the seat as if to steady the bike while I get up on it. The service ribbons on the left breast of his tunic—he fought in the Italian Campaign—are just visible above my tousled head. He's a young man in army uniform who has come back from a bloody war, smiling confidently into the camera, his head cocked slightly to one side.

A young man, a boy. Neither knows where he may be going, but for the moment something has brought them together. Perhaps the young man is thinking, *This is my son, a child I am raising as my son, with his first bicycle. This moment and others like it will hold us together through time.*

Living by and among gestures, we learn to suspect them as evasions, stand-ins for substance. Given our weaknesses, how can we not?—until memory raises one from the grave of time, red earth still clinging to its roots, possibility floating around it like pollen from a flower, haunting reminder of all that was never uttered.