

Eulogy for Bill (part) - April 24, 2009

Bill walked into my life in late 1993, in a context that marks the man so well: My neighbourhood was doing a “Vision” exercise (there being a big bad developer at the door) and Bill served on our Committee as the representative of our neighbours to the south – the Hunt Club community. The Southern Corridor separates his from my neighbourhood, Riverside Park.

Service to the community, that was Bill, 110 percent. He provided excellent service to us then, and for many years he served on the Board of his own Community Association.

His knowledge of laws and regulations, of things in the natural world, and his quest for knowledge about almost any subject, that too was Bill. Long after I’d gotten to know him, he told me that, fresh out of university, his interest in observing nature had been awakened by walking along the bank of the Mississippi River in Carleton Place, where he worked for IP Sharp on developing something called “e-mail” – that was the 1970s, folks!! You’ll hear more about that aspect of Bill from Joseph, I’m sure.

So you’ve got three 100 percents already:

- generous in all his social interactions
- way ahead of the curve in the digital world
- and an insatiable curiosity for things nature

He joined the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club in 1978 and served on its Conservation Committee from 1997 onwards. He developed a knowledge of the natural history and 'existing conditions' of this region, and generally he could readily draw on a near-encyclopedic knowledge about an astonishing range of topics. And this he gladly shared with any and all.

Also in 1997, the Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital was born. If memory serves, Bill attended the second meeting of this new group, in October 1997. He immediately became one of its mainstays.

He not only singlehandedly created a web site with tons of information, but also managed a mailing list that is still going to about 100 people in the region.

Until just these last years, he attended virtually every monthly meeting of the Alliance, and let me tell you, his exuberance and breadth of knowledge could be a challenge for anyone wanting to be home before midnight...

But Bill also served as Chair of the Alliance for about two years and lo and behold, his meetings then were a model of efficiency and we were done by nine!

When, much later, I recalled that contrast in a chat with him, he gave me a little mischievous smile, as if to say: "See! I can do that too!"

But on top of all that, it is certainly the hope of many people in this room that Bill's lasting legacy will be the realization of the Poets' Pathway here in Ottawa.

Here is how this got started, in February of 1995. Bill was snowshoeing in his favourite area, the edge of McCarthy Woods in the Southern Corridor – the meadow stretching out to the west. He was putting food in the bird stations – his service to the community included service to the community of birds! – and looking out over the western horizon, that’s when these last words of Archibald Lampman’s Winter Uplands came to mind –

– oh yes, since high school days the lad had developed a great love for poetry, and for Lampman in particular. So that the lines – you heard them earlier –

*The crunching snowshoes and the stinging air*

*And silence, frost and beauty everywhere*

– that these words came to him looking out over this winter landscape, was not at all strange, and it was the birth of his idea that certain landscapes could be preserved as a memorial to – (as the idea first went) – Canada’s – Ottawa’s – Confederation Poets, this country’s nature poets *par excellence*.

His idea was to do a 2-for-1: Commemorate Canada’s poets and preserve pieces of nature in an emerald necklace through the urban area of Ottawa.

Nothing pleased him more than that one anchor of the Pathway – Poet’s Hill here at Beechwood Cemetery – has been established. A committee of brave souls continues to nurture the Pathway and, again, let us hope that this marvelous idea will come to fruition.

But beyond all this –

- his advanced computer knowledge
- his extensive knowledge about nature, laws and many other things
- his eagerness and ability to share that knowledge with others for the common good
- his love of poetry and the power of his imagination, proposing this dual-purpose pathway,

there is one thing that I have learned from Bill, and for this I will be forever grateful, more even than anything else he has taught me. And that is the example he gave of how to face the fact of dying.

I had personally always wanted to believe that life and death are a continuum, that there is no rational basis for “fearing death”. Death just is, like life.

For that attitude Bill was a shining model. He who was suffering so much ever since 2004 – he was on his third life by my count – would cheerfully explain what was the matter or relate how therapy affected him, without emotion except that drive to know, to understand, (that curiosity about everything), that defined his life.

Bill, my friend, your example is sustaining me, as I am sure it is sustaining you Rhoda, and Linley, Amelia and Jessica – daughters that made him so proud – and it will sustain many of you in this room, now and in the future.

For that I am most grateful.