



Wilbur on the Sudbury—black ice!

PROLOGUE

Life serves up certain experiences that carry with them the imperative to be shared. It may be that this is why these experiences happen at all: they have an impact on the experiencer — perhaps even an awakening, of sorts — and the news must be “put out there” in some fashion. These experiences may even be completable only to the extent that their being shared or made known is accomplished, or at least attempted.

So it was with my relationship with my dear friend Wilbur, a man I met on river ice in the late 1960s when I was in my early twenties and he was in his early fifties. That chance encounter led to a strange, wonderful and ultimately thrilling association that time wove on the loom of thirty-plus years. Chance encounter very, very gradually became friendship, and then, unexpectedly, kinship of a very special sort. This precious chapter of my life, now completed, left me with the sense that I was, to the best of my ability, meant to communicate about it.

This strange and wonderful connection, so randomly reinforced over the first twenty years or so, was, paradoxically, a kind of constant in my life as I traversed the territory from being a young man with certain fascinations (many of them destructive), on through young adulthood (including my first marriage and the rearing of young children), returning to school in my early thirties to embark on a new career, mid-life demolition (it used to be called “transition”) in my late forties through early fifties, and restoration and renewal (in which I currently, gratefully abide).

For my friend Wilbur this span of years carried him over his own mini-epochs: late career culmination and “retirement,” ongoing pursuit of naturalist interests and travels with his wife Vivian, devotion to inmate advocacy and the prisoner-run newspaper at the local penitentiary, outdoor adventures of all sorts, and then senescence and rapid, advanced decline.

I would like to think that out of the apparent randomness in which our friendship was birthed, each of us had a precious, unforeseen role to fulfill in the life of the other. In hindsight I recognize that our respective roles, over the years, passed back and forth, depending on context. Although, for most of our shared journey, neither of us would have thought of our presence in the other’s life in terms of assuming, or living out, a “role,” we each, nonetheless, completed what, for the most part, we didn’t even know we were engaged in. As arcane as this sounds, it will all become clear with a reading of the narrative and its attendant commentary.

In more recent years I have come to recognize that God has blessed me with certain abilities as a writer, although I don’t want to make too much of this. Actually, my fear, throughout the writing of this book, has been that whatever expressive gifts I may possess would fall short of what the account warrants—of what it deserves on its own merits. I have been somewhat comforted, and my reservations somewhat assuaged, by the recognition that the story itself, in its factual elements, is likely compelling enough to pull the reader along, notwithstanding whatever gaps and lapses exist in the rendering of it into language. I hope this proves to be so.

It was a privilege to know Wilbur, and it is a privilege to provide this account of one facet of his life—that involving our relationship with each other.

I hope that you, my readers, may be buoyed and uplifted by the account that follows. A “commentary and analysis” is included to help orient you as to the methodology and biases I bring to the recounting and reporting of it.

Yours, with the love of a kindred spirit,
Stephen Rich Merriman

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