

Watershed friendship - *(long walks with a tall peer)*

Paul Snyders 2011

Thirty years doesn't seem a very long time to me anymore. I read a lot of history, and I'm working on my fifth decade alive. Still, a lot of things about the world I know have changed since the eighties. Most of them aren't often discussed.

In some respects, particularly the ways that people earn (and corporations skim) their money, the early eighties seem an almost sweet and innocent time compared to now. I was a monster-kid (*a general term for us 'freaks', long before someone began to market the subculture as 'gothic'*) and, like many of my friends, fairly nihilistic in my philosophy. But the world around us all, scary though it was, was still lush, chaotic, complex and diverse - and corporate exploitation was as relatively-unsophisticated compared to 2010, as the silly advertising of the nineteen-fifties looked to us, in the eighties.

Alternative music was still truly experimental, independent record-labels really were, and the wildest night-clubs were not all herded into 'entertainment districts' by zoning and taxation, for optimal police-control. Things were lumpy and irregular, and that lack of standardization and monopoly, left room for many eccentrics and artists to thrive. As much as we knew the capitalists and greed-heads were 'out to get us', back then, they didn't really understand how to find us. *The underground was under the radar.*

But socially, that was a time when a lot of basic sorts of relationships had been smashed, and new norms had not yet begun to form and gain strength. *The 'traditional family' was more or less extinct, and no one was sure what came next - especially us teenagers.* The cynicism and nihilism which famously characterized so much of the 'underground scene' of the time, weren't just signs of our ingratitude or ignorance. We were the first generation raised by boomers, and thus the first to be stuck trying to help rationalize our own parents neglect, in order to justify the near-sociopathic philosophy of freedom that their generation championed. *The still not-fully-digested 'me' revolution.*

We felt we had to help justify it, so that we in our turn, would be allowed to seek and take, without considering the needs of others. *That money-bribe didn't ever really show-up for our generation, but back then we still confidently expected it would.*

Of course there was a basic moral conflict there – a philosophy that defines sacrifice for family as dull, conventional and oppressively-limiting, cannot possibly lead to happy relationships. Sacrifice is part of honour, trust and love – and limits are, too. We traded something we've always needed (each other), for dream-stuff that we felt we wanted -

a very weird definition of freedom that continues to do damage to this day.

Some of us X-ers worked-through that unhappy philosophy and found a better way to relate to others than our parents had, some just carried-on the new 'freedom' tradition, by staying brats right into middle-age (and still show few signs of progress).

I was out of the house at the age of twelve – and so, probably at the extreme end of the youthful-loneliness scale – but among the monster-kids, my upbringing didn't seem that unusual. *You don't actually need a monster-mask, if you're happy with the face you have.* The funny thing was that wearing what was basically a Hallowe'en costume every day, gave me a way to recreate and re-socialize myself, despite my total lack of confidence. Spiked-hair, combat-boots, makeup and vintage monochromatic clothing were my ticket into a tribe where I didn't have to explain-myself, or else feel totally useless.

But just because you can get a smile of recognition from a night-club doorman, and talk to a girl or two who you've never met before, that doesn't win you top-shelf cool. All culture-pockets have levels within their levels – the orchestra-fans and the art-gallery supporters too. There are those who are inside the tribe, and then those at it's apex. I was still too needy, and too much of an emotional mess to be very 'cool' back then. Self-contained and self-controlled are (strangely) characteristics of people who are in some sense 'over themselves'. I had a few years of emotional nourishment to go, before getting-there. *But like all young men before me, I could definitely dream.*

Lwellyn was top-shelf cool – everything about her was appealing to me. *Her close-cropped blue-black hair, her attitude of mild disdain for everything that didn't actually make her laugh, her big clear eyes and extraordinary chin, so sharply-carved, and yet so tiny and delicate, and those lips – sigh, the memory of the shine from her lips can still fascinate, decades later.*

A perfect female - *princess-Leia as a punk* - only Lwellyn was real, no special-effects. Better still, she worked at a coffee-and-dessert bar right in my neighbourhood, where I could (and usually did) visit her several times a week. *Yes, I had a crush.*

I lived in a cheap-rent industrial area, just outside the pretentious middle-class neighbourhood known as *the annex*, where I'd been raised. And I had a crappy night-job on the other side of that pocket of rambling 'Victorians' and intellectual-alienation. Lwellyn worked right in the middle, well within range of my always-ready boots.

I considered myself a serious walker – and still do. Not that I'm competitive about it, or regard it as a sport of any kind, but only that it remains my idea of premium-transport. *Cars cut-you-off from all the best creative raw-material stuff – things heard, smelled and seen,*

out on the street. Basically, I hate the armoured speed-boxes. *Not the sinner, just the sin.*

For a lonely soul working (*and walking*) nights, a cafe which is open all the time, and has good coffee and a beautiful girl to chat-with, is a treasure. When it's also an easy walk from your door, it can fast become your favourite place to be. *An oasis of contentment that you can look forward-to during the worst shift, or retreat-to, to write lonely caffeinated poetry in the table by the window, on a rainy day too sublimely melancholy not to be used.*

I also went to downtown night-clubs on the weekends (and walked *there* as well, though in some cases that could take an hour). So when I was handed a flyer one day, by a impish crew-cut punk-girl, and saw that it was an invite to the opening-party for a new night-club, just a block away from my favourite all-night cafe, I was overjoyed.

I probably expressed my happiness in snobbish terms like, "I hope it doesn't get overrun with a bunch of lame suburban losers too-fast, like the last new club." But that still meant I was hopeful. *How could I not-be? It was right in my area – and it would make my local scene almost perfect, if only it turned-out to be as cool as promised.*

~~~~~(\&\_&\_/)~~~~~

My style of dress for clubbing varied a lot, but for an opening-night it seemed only appropriate to pull-out all the stops. *Black-satin, studded-belt, clip-on earrings, those very honestly broken-in combat-boots, and a careful job on my makeup and (now synthetic-red) hair.* I had to make sure that the hipster staff didn't mistake me for a poser, by, *well – posing.*

The place was packed, and my first impressions were that the owners had done a good job of setting-it-up. They'd hired the first superstar DJ that any of us ever followed, and they also poached many other familiar cool people from competing clubs. Perhaps the bar and seating areas seemed overly large, and the dance-floor a little smaller than I would have liked, but found it kind of neat that they actually had a real official liquor license – quite unlike most of the dance clubs I knew. That meant I only had to pretend to be old-enough to order a drink, rather than also having to act like my beer was just ginger-ale, in case of any snoopy 'undercovers' in the crowd.

I recognized a lot of acquaintances from other clubs there, and they also seemed to cautiously approve of the place – and then, as if it needed any more, I looked through the tasteful gloom and saw my perfect Lwellyn. She had a server's-apron tucked around her tiny hips, that glowed purple in the black-light, like a fluorescent miniskirt - and she was carrying a tray of drinks! *She worked here too? Wow! Best club ever.*

~~~~~(\&\_&\_/)~~~~~

Now that I've been a waiter too, I understand how it goes. It's great to have a friendly customer who likes to tip you, but it's very easy for them to mistake your professional care for them, for something personal that you never intended. *Way more-so for girls.*

I adored her, but for her, I was just a stupid kid – zero possibility of reciprocity. After a few weeks of seeing me at the cafe and the night-club, smiling at her hopefully, she must have been ready to scream. But she did something much cooler instead.

She said, "Hey Paul, there's this guy over here that I really think you should meet. I just know that you and Robert will get-along."

I followed, as she lead me to a table at which sat a clean-cut Germanic fellow with beige pants and a high-collared white-checked shirt. For a moment I felt horrendously insulted. Then I remembered that this was my sweet Lwellyn recommending our acquaintance, and decided I should at least give the fellow a chance to be interesting, rather than just writing-him-off for his obviously square taste in clothing.

And the guy was interesting, too. We started on bands (where his knowledge of obscure underground acts from Europe quite impressed me), but we soon moved-on to science and politics and the arts – and he showed intelligence and mental industry in each area. The only place where his thinking was a little light, was in his cynicism and nihilism – but I was used to meeting people who shared all my bleakness, but weren't anything like as curious as me, so that seemed a very forgivable fault.

When I showed-up at the club the next week, Lwellyn sat me at Robert's table without even asking, and we resumed our intense and enjoyable conversation immediately. *She had solved two little problems very neatly there.*

Of course we discussed our mutual appreciation of Lwellyn's fine qualities at first, but it didn't take long for that topic to be overwhelmed by less dreamy affirmations. He greatly appreciated my devotion to urban walking – it seemed he was 'into' getting around on foot as well – only in his case, he'd actually taken it to a medal-winning level.

"Orienteering?" It was so unknown to me, that I wondered at first if he was just making-it-up to sound impressive.

"Yeah, how to use a topological map and a compass to make your way around a wild unmarked-course, from point to point, in the least possible time – *on foot, of course.*"

It had been a long while since I'd been anyplace out of the city, so despite my fear of being humiliated by his cheerful athleticism (a big contrast to my basement-sunless, cig-smoking self), I agreed to go along with him and let him show me what it was all about.

~~~~~(\\_&\_\_&\_/)~~~~~

'The forks of the Credit' (river), is a beautiful place to hike. My combat-boots worked fine – and though we didn't see anyone else who wore nothing but black, all day long, I didn't get any of the sharp judgemental looks that I so often got in the city, either.

Unlike artificial urban scenes, communing with nature is not a snobby and exclusive pastime – *every kind of human is entitled to a bit of animal-empowerment, or none of us are.*

As we walked, Robert showed me the maps he'd brought, so I could begin learning how a path could be found, if you truly understood the elevation and terrain-markings. After a while, we climbed down from a soft dense forest into the rocky river-gorge itself, then hiked along to a small concrete building which had once had a hydroelectric generator, way back in the thirties. *Now filled with beer-cans and cigarette-butts, of course.*

Then Robert let me lead us for a while, to see how much I'd picked-up so far – and we shared a nice laugh when I took us first into an impassably steep gully, then on to a long rocky promontory, with no exit. He showed me the contour-lines again. By the end of our hike I felt exhausted, but surprisingly not humiliated.

Here was a guy who was sharing his 'thing' just because he really liked it. Not so that he could get me up-to-speed-enough to boast, or spar and beat me silly. *Very nice stuff.*

We went out again a couple of weeks later, and hiked all day through a misty forest that neither of us knew, except through the maps. Sure-enough, his interpretative skill could appreciate a million subtle facts about the path ahead, and his quick eyes kept me out of the poison-ivy more than once, too. Nature-walking with him was like having a master conductor explain the score of a symphony, as it was being beautifully played.

He gave me the nicest compliment an athlete has ever paid me – he said I had a marathoner's build – a combination of nimbleness and endurance. Then he asked me if I knew how to do the J-stroke.

~~~~~(\\_&\_\_&\_/)~~~~~

The Toronto islands are nothing but a tree-planted and gussied-up sandbar, but anyone who lives downtown comes to love them, because on their far (lake-facing) side, you can feel completely removed from the city for a few hours, when you really need to.

Robert also considered it an excellent place for a little bit of training – and he was right.

I'd been going to 'the islands' since I was a kid, so I knew they had boat-rentals there, but as a person used to being fairly broke, I'd never considered actually trying it. Robert insisted there was no other way to learn the J-stroke but by doing it – and so I found myself in the back of a red rental-canoe, trying my best to follow his directions.

What is the J-stroke? It's a paddle-stroke (for the person in the rear), that goes back, but also turns outwards – so that you propel the canoe forward, but your back-end-leverage doesn't steer the little boat off it's straightest course. It's a lot subtler than it sounds, and if you haven't practised it, it's bound to give you interesting new types of muscle-strain and calluses. *But like all the practical physical skills, it yields real satisfaction when you do get-it, because it can't be faked – just look at the nose of the canoe.*

I'm not sure what sort of grand canoeing venture Robert had in mind, when he decided to train me up that way (we drifted-apart before we could ride any Amazonian rapids) but after an hour or so, he seemed pleased with my efforts and progress that day. Then we paddled into a thick patch of reeds by the shore, so that we could trade places, and he could give me a demo of what a real J-stroker could accomplish.

The front spot (and straight-stroke) was so much easier, that it was as good as resting as far as I was concerned – and he certainly showed no fatigue. For my gentle J-stroke practise-session, we'd stayed strictly on the shallow muddy lagoon-system which cut that one big wide sandbar into a myriad of different islands. But as soon as Robert was powering-us, he headed us straight out the channel and into the harbour itself.

I checked my lifejacket (I was nihilistic, not stupid) but I figured that Robert knew what he was doing, so I gamely paddled-along and quite enjoyed the extraordinary speed that the little craft could pick up when we got co-ordinated. *Downhill-bicycle hair-blow.*

The city-side of the island had very different-looking banks from those gentle lagoons. The harbour is wide-open enough that there is always a good cool breeze, which meant that the waves were now within a few inches of the sides of our canoe – and even more ominously, many of the spots where one might have wished to climb ashore, were built-up with high concrete structures - to prevent erosion, or allow ferryboat-docking. *Might as well have been steep cliffs and whitecaps on the treacherous reef below.*

Even the smallest of skiffs from the sailing-school across the harbour, loomed high above us in the water – and the wake of the ferryboats, the power-cruisers and the occasional float-plane, became immediate navigational imperatives. The difference between taking those steep double-troughs sideways or dead-on, being the difference between being in a working boat, or clinging to a piece of sunken debris.

If I'd been on dry-land, I think I would have jumped twenty-feet when I heard the feedback-squeal of the megaphone, from the little police-boat which pulled-up about fifty-feet away from us – but there was a certain amount of relief to being caught.

"Please return to the island," said the scowling officer. "Turn that boat around, now!"

Robert, being less rebellious than I, immediately nodded. He even smiled at the policeman quite openly, something I could never have managed – and we headed back.

But I've wondered many times since, whether those harbour-police were acting for our safety, or if someone really was crazy-enough to have built a racket, stealing those bright little rental-boats, by paddling them right the way across the choppy harbour?

~~~~~(\\_&\_\_&\_/)~~~~~

Getting out to Robert's house on the transit was pretty ridiculous. Some places really are not made for people without cars – and outer Scarborough was definitely one of them. The fact that he was the very suburbanite that my club-friends all habitually denigrated, didn't bother me at all by then.

He was very intelligent, curious, open-minded, and an all-around nice guy. Even at my weirdest and most self-indulgent, that stuff has always counted for a lot more than style with me – *and I'd recommend that philosophy to one and all, if you want any fun in your life.*

But that didn't mean that Scarborough didn't freak me out. All those houses, perfect duplicates – and nothing to do for miles. No cafes, no bookstores, no galleries – nothin'. I had a hard time understanding how an intelligent guy like him could stand it.

Then I met his family – and I saw some of it. They were not like the parents I knew growing-up. Not self-obsessed boomers – *they were German immigrants who'd actually faced real post-war hardship, and recognized and appreciated the luxury they had here.*

And they loved their kid like no one's business. They encouraged him, they challenged

him – they paid attention, because they wanted him to have a chance to be able to be his very best-possible self. All of which was quite unlike the 'freedom' (neglect) that my own posse had been raised-with.

Of course his room looked like a 'normal-guy' room – when you live with your parents you can't go hanging parachutes from the ceiling or mounting swords on your wall, without expecting to catch hell for it. *He had to play it straight.* But his record collection was the real thing. He wasn't bullshitting about his passion for European underground, and he turned me on to a lot more interesting music than most of my 'hipper' friends.

He also showed me what a curious and intelligent man, who happens to understand contour-maps and enjoys foot-racing a difficult course, does for fun, way out in the wilds of furthest-Scarberia.

~~~~~(\\_&\_\_&\_/)~~~~~

We only had to walk a few blocks from Robert's house before we reached our turn-off. A long down-curving gravel road leading into a gully, with a high cliff of bare cut rock and perilous-looking sandy-overhang on one side, and a rounded hump-hill covered in recently re-grown low scrub on the other. Green-space, technically, but about as ugly as that could ever get.

"We really want to go down here?" I said, skeptically. *I was so sure that I could see better and more foresty-looking terrain in another direction.*

"Trust me," said Robert, with a big smile.

It did look prettier a few hundred meters on. There were more trees, and beyond them were even some very pretty grassy up-sloping plains, that looked almost like fake patches of African veldt.

He lead me up to a tall double-fence, then pointed up the hill. "Okay, you go wide around there, but fast, and try to stay low till you get to those trees, then get over the fences beyond them, quick as you can. Got it?"

I nodded, then watched him vault the fences – very glad of my trusty combat-boots. *Sprinting on broken terrain just ain't for cheap runners.*

There seemed to be a lot of activity over the rise of the hill, but I concentrated on following as close behind Robert as I could. It wasn't until I got over the far fence, quite

out of breath, that I looked back and realized what the activity was – *an entire friggin' herd of wildebeests!*

"Did we just run across the African savannah enclosure?" I couldn't believe it.

"Welcome to the Toronto Zoo," he grinned.

No, he wasn't into ripping-them-off – he was a regular supporter of the zoo, and always tried to be safe and respectful when it came to the animals and the facilities – *but yes, he had worked-out no less than six separate ways to sneak-in from the surrounding ravines.*

I've never enjoyed the zoo more than that day – fully adrenaline-charged and *animal.*

~~~~~(\&\_&\_/)~~~~~

The same river-system that fed the zoo, also spread out much lower-down into the Rouge-river valley conservation area – the site of our last great hike. Here was a place as wild as any forest that he'd driven us to, and yet still within range of a bus-token. A lot of people have added to my knowledge-of and feeling-for the city I have enjoyed all my life – but no one else ever did so much to change my sense of it's topography.

Watersheds and river-systems from the Credit and Humber in the west, to the Don and Rouge in the east – canoeing – even the sandbar-protected harbour where the city meets the lake, these were the very reasons that Toronto was founded where it was. Resource-gathering from the rivers, processing in the city, shipping on the lake.

Of course the founders didn't think about rusted-out Volkswagen beetles abandoned in the overgrowth, or tiny derelict hydro-stations turned into beer-and-ciggies shelters for small-town kids with no other place to escape parental oversight. Nor did they plan for the shimmering domes of a nuclear power-station, visible from the beach where kids played with sand and buckets, and moms listened to portable radios, and deliberately cooked their skin with radiation from a somewhat more distant fusion-reactor.

But the signs of the water-infrastructure we'd begun-with, were still there to be discerned – and the contours which fed and washed and watered us, continued to provide, despite our often thoughtless and ungrateful exploitation.

To see them, all you needed was to tune your mindset a bit, *and learn how to read a map.*

~~~~~(\&\_&\_/)~~~~~

There was no dramatic break-up between us. I moved down to Queen St. for easy walking-access to all the best clubs, and got a straight day-job as a junior clerk, in the nearby (also walkable) financial-district (*for which I had to glue my chin-length bangs back with hairspray every day*). He got accepted into a very prestigious laboratory for some post-graduate research work in his chosen technological field. *Our lives were changing.*

I've always hoped that he wasn't kept away from walking the wilds for too long, though I soon found myself distracted by an intriguing temp-girl at my office, who would eventually introduce me to my charming (glowering) spiky-haired monster-girl cutie (and wife-to-be).

My wife and I don't get out of the city much – but I have had a couple of occasions to use the J-stroke, while paddling her around in a canoe, to visit with nature respectfully (beavers hate powerboats).

Every time I ride the ferry-boat to the island, I think about how different the harbour looks, when your ass is parked a few inches below water-level. And every time I see someone show me a crappy little digital-map, and tell me how great it is, I sigh, and wonder if there will ever again come humans who realize how boring they get, when they let machines do all their thinking (and especially interpreting) for them.

No GPS will get you down a cliff-face safely, or keep you ahead of the wildebeests. You can't discover new things, if you only ever pay attention to what you've asked-for. Preference, especially nothing-but-preference, is a form of blinders – *steer that course only, pay no attention to the richness of real, non electronically-mediated experience.* It is a form of bias, that disguises itself as 'choice'. Another dangerous false-freedom.

Life is not a struggle for optimum consumption. Humanity is for learning and experiencing. Following-after an interesting girl is not following a link – and making a friend who enriches your life, is definitely worth a hundred-thousand 'hits' on anything.

I could so easily have taken one look at those beige pants and that checked-shirt, diagnosed Scarborough-syndrome, and walked away from Robert like a disease. And my whole life would have been smaller, for sticking-to what I already knew I liked. *I could so easily have stayed seamlessly nihilistic – instead of seeing that bright ray of nature-filled sunlight, and realizing there was much more to life than measuring-up-to 'cool'.*

Oh and Robert, if you're out there reading – *yes, orienteering is very very cool.*
- Thanks, eh?