

08/20/2001 Entry: "A few words about Doc"

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I did not know the professional Doctor David Peakall, the scientist, the toxicologist. I saw glimpses of this side of him from time to time, as he worked on his journals and letters in the quiet of the morning, a cup of tea at his side, body and mind rapt in concentration, or when he discussed issues beyond my comprehension with colleagues, conversing in numbers and values, the hard language of science.

The man I knew was Doc Peakall. The Doc I knew was a family man. He was a man who loved watching birds, understanding their fragile inner mechanisms while at the same time reveling in their song, their plumage, their simple and marvelous act of taking to the skies. This love of beauty also extended to art, and he often gleefully traveled thousands of miles to see a favorite piece in a rare exhibit, expending time and money for a few moments of quiet contemplation before a piece of canvas daubed with color. He got immense enjoyment out of cricket matches, both current, and those from the past, which he could experience through his collection of Wisdens, the bible of cricket. He was a man who always enjoyed a brisk walk across a field or over a hill, and in this pursuit he walked the ground in far-flung lands which many of us will only ever dream about. He was a man who loved to cook, and when in the kitchen his dual natures worked a wonderful harmony as science and art came together, the wizardry of blending elemental compounds being balanced and fixed not by any formula or law, but by the intangible, immeasurable sense of good taste with which he was born, the final result being wonderful dishes that defied description and served no other purpose but to be a feast for the senses. In the kitchen, and afterward at the table, he would work another much more subtle form of chemistry, making people like myself who came late to this family, feel as if I had always belonged there.

Like many great men Doc Peakall could be frustrating, vexing, an occasional pain in the ass. Like all great men, these qualities, which we all have to some degree, were made insignificant by his professionalism, his intellect, his joy of life. Doc had a remarkable ability for self-animation, be it telling an old story and nearly losing track of his narrative in laughter, or venting his wrath upon aspects of modern life which irritated him until he would pound the table with his fist or furiously strut about while tucking his shirt, declaring explicitly, and without shame, exactly how he felt about the object of his ire.

Francois Rabelais once said, 'Nature abhors a vacuum,' and indeed, when something is removed from existence it is always replaced by something else. Yet this particular void can never be filled. With Doc Peakall gone there will always be an empty place inside of us, but we should not treat this emptiness within as a bitter wound. We should instead consider the pain and sense of loss a testament to his warmth, his vigor, his intelligence, and his love, all of which we will miss, even as time tempers the hurt and blends it with the sometimes inexpressible feelings we all had for the Old Bear, feelings that will always be with us in some form, as he himself will be. I know Doc didn't believe there was anything after this life, but I think he has been proven wrong, in a most wonderful way. If, as a man of science believes, life and thought and spirit are mere energy, then he will go on, transformed and transported perhaps, to some state we can only try to imagine, but he will continue to be, for as the first law of thermodynamics tells us, energy is never lost, it is just transferred somewhere else.

I think no more fitting final words can be spoken than those of Winston Churchill, a man Doc Peakall greatly admired, in a quote which he delighted in passing on to others.

"I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter."

-John (Rufus)