

## THESE MOMENTS IN TIME

Thanksgiving 1984, my cherished family of friends gathered as a group, the first time on this mountain for a joyous reunion. John and Grant came from Baltimore, Jack and Mark drove down from New York City and Butch, drove up from Florida.

We had so much to be thankful for  
as a great and elegant feast was prepared  
and at dusk all the candles in the house were lit.  
*But dark and foreboding were in attendance  
for those who came as teachers of unconditional love.*

We gathered in the studio at a great table  
readied for this endearing pause.  
We reminisced the hours away  
with stories of love and achievements  
Growing intoxicated with laughter and Champagne.

Listen to the laughter  
How it lifts the pulse  
*this is the last  
this is the last*  
How we loved life  
Spirited breath  
*this is the last*

With naive innocence the souls  
united around that table  
did not know  
*this is the last.*

With cheer, the last gathering.  
No more laughter, but tears.  
No more Champagne  
but trial drugs disabling.

There was only one we knew about.  
For the rest, we did not know  
*this was the last.*

Of AIDS they all suffered  
died martyrs of love incarnate.

Martyred all, save one.

Tragically we all knew about one, John Haunch. John and Grant, had moved to Baltimore, Maryland where they bought a home and John became a partner in a design firm. It was at this time John became sick and was diagnosed. He and I had remained very close throughout the many years since we first met in Florida and even though he was ill, we visited each other often.

The AIDS epidemic was in its infant stage. As a matter of fact it was not even called AIDS. There was no medical name given to this strange illness other than it was known as the *Gay Plague*. All of the sudden, I'm hearing that a number of acquaintances and friends were sick, or had already died of this strange sickness. The medical profession literally didn't know what they were doing.

John's infection was one of the earliest and was treated very much in an experimental way as his disease progressed. All the doctors could do was treat the symptoms. One curious part of John's case had to do with the lack of understanding by the Doctors of Homosexuality. As a human being he was treated as a curiosity, a freak of nature. He was isolated in the hospital and his food left on the floor outside his room. Most of his nurses were afraid to even be in the same room with him.

Throughout the early fall of 1985 I traveled back and forth between my home and Baltimore in order to help Grant care for John. Grant had to work and it was difficult to care for John and hold down a job at the same time. When John was home I would stay with them, doing the cooking, cleaning and keeping John company. When he was in the hospital, which was often, I would come back home.

I remember many evenings after giving John his numerous medications and his dinner, sitting at the kitchen table with Grant. . . getting drunk. Grant would have his bottle of Scotch and I with a bottle of wine trying to anesthetize our mutual pain. The two of us would talk half the night reminiscing about John. We always cried and embraced each other, comforting our grieving souls. What would life be like with out John?

John had put his house in order and wanted to die at home. Grant and I worked feverishly preparing to bring him home from the hospital for the last time. We turned a bedroom in their home into a hospital room, portable oxygen supply, hospital bed, potty chair, wheel chair, medications, bottles upon bottles. . .morphine, disinfectants. And lastly, I alerted the Funeral Home John had selected. Grant and I did everything according to John's wishes.

The appointed day arrived and John was brought home in an ambulance from the hospital. He was alert and happy to be home. He was wearing his baseball cap to hide his near bald head, the side effects of many chemotherapy treatments. His body was consumed with KS,[Kaposi Sarcoma] being swollen and almost solid black with lesions.

Once in the house we put him in the wheel chair and brought him into the living room. I had prepared a feast of his favorite food in celebration of his return home. He was excited to have a home-cooked meal. Grant and I joined him and nervously watched as John began to eat. He couldn't, he tried, but couldn't. Within a short time he was exhausted and wanted to lie down, Grant and I helped him get into the hospital bed.

Early the next morning Grant left to go to work stressing to me the importance of John getting his medications on time. John was having a lot of difficulty swallowing. Many times the pills would just dissolve in his mouth. We would always ask him to open his mouth wide to see if he had swallowed the pill. If not, offer him water to wash the pill and bad taste out of his mouth. John did not like this and after Grant left for work he pleaded with me to stop the medications. He said he even had difficulty swallowing the water. I promised him that I would no longer force or give him any more pills. He smiled and thanked me.

I did call Grant at work and told him about the agreement John and I had made. At first Grant was upset with me for making such a compromise. Then I said, "What's the point in giving him all those pills? They are not going to do him any good." Grant reluctantly agreed.

The remainder of the day John was sleeping off and on. When he was awake, we talked. He wanted to share with me an old art book he had. I found the book and we talked about it as he directed me to turn the pages. The rest of the time I sat quietly next to him and said nothing.

By the time Grant came home from work John had slipped into a deep sleep, perhaps a coma. John

had become incontinent and it was easier for Grant and I to clean him and change the bedding than for one of us to do it alone. I had waited for Grant to come home to do this.

The head of the bed had been raised all day, John could breath better. We lowered the head of the bed to start to clean up. As this happened, John's eyes opened and rolled back as a thick black liquid oozed from his mouth. We both called to John, but there was no response. Grant began to panic and said we must call an ambulance right away. "He needs to be back in the hospital."

Once, not too long before, I was standing next to a dying person, my father. That experience taught me a lot. Once again that inner voice spoke to me. I do not know where it comes from, but I answered Grant without hesitation. "No, it's not what John wants." As soon as I said those words I felt the responsibly of the meaning. I was, we were, going to allow John to die. No last minute heroics. The reality of that choice, John, lay helpless before us. We would give John his last wish.

Without another word Grant and I continued to give John his bath and to change the bed. When all was complete we, as usual, ended up in the kitchen, sitting at the table, with a drink, crying.

**October 10, 1985, 8:00 a.m.**

The nurse from Home Health Care arrived to check John's vitals. There had been no change throughout the night. John just seemed to be resting quietly.

The nurse, Grant and I ended up in the kitchen for some time, talking about what, I don't remember. All of the sudden, the conversation stopped as we all stared at each other. I think we all three said, "John," at the same time. We immediately went to John's bed side without saying a word. Grant pulled up a chair and sat close to the head of the bed. He took John's hand. I walked to the other side of the bed. Standing, I took John's other hand. The nurse stood behind Grant.

Grant said, "John, ever since you have been sick you have told me not to be afraid when this moment would come. Now, I must say to you my love, please don't be afraid." There was silence. . .then John drew his last breath. The nurse checked John's heart and said, "He's gone." We wept.

After a short time Grant said, "I'm so glad he doesn't have to live in that package anymore." The nurse, almost with an angry voice started to leave the room saying, "I sure as hell don't know what is going on here, but I know love when I see it."

I left Grant alone with John and telephoned the Episcopal Priest that John and Grant had befriended. I told him the John had just died and could he come to administer Last Rites. I then called the Funeral Home. They said they would be there in an hour.

The Priest arrived and administered *extreme unction* with Grant and I present. After the Priest left, Grant and I took turns calling all of John's friends to give them the sad news. Then the reality of the outside world began to set in. John had died of AIDS, a mysterious disease that kills Gays.

After waiting six hours for the undertaker, I called. They would not come to pick up the body. They did give me the phone number of another, which I called. They said they would be right over.

When the undertaker arrived I explained to them what John had died of. They agreed to take the body, but did not want to touch it.

By myself I picked up the cold body of my dear friend and placed it in a body bag. Only then did the undertaker offer to help by placing the body on the gurney and taking it to the station wagon in the driveway. John's body was then taken away to be cremated.

At this point I packed my bag and for all intents and purposes, slipped out the back door. Yes, I said a tearful good-bye to Grant, but my work was done and I did not want to take away from the attention that Grant would soon be getting. Friends and family were on their way to see him.

That was October 1985. Four months later I met Dr. Elisabeth Kübler Ross, *by chance*.

## COINCIDENCE OR SACRED DANCE?

In the early 1980's a friend handed me a magazine article about a remarkable, enlightened woman named Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. I was greatly moved by her words, so I remembered her name.

In 1986, a radio reporter friend welcomed me as a tagalong when he went to interview Elisabeth at her home. We ended up spending the entire day in her kitchen talking, laughing, and eating her wonderful food.

By rural standards, we were practically neighbors, and I wanted to return Elisabeth's hospitality, so as I was leaving I invited her to my home to see my paintings. I presumed she was quite busy, and I left with no expectation that I'd hear from her anytime soon.

A week later, to my surprise, Elisabeth called and said she'd like to take me up on my invitation. On February 22, 1986, just as a heavy snow started to fall, she arrived at my front door with a friend.

After dinner we went into the studio for a presentation of my recent works. As I displayed the paintings one at a time, I explained them this way: "These are simply a documentation of my own journey toward the light. You'll notice that, in each, the source of the light is slightly obscured, just out of sight. With each successive painting you seem to be moving closer to the source of the light--yet the source is never revealed."

Elisabeth asked if I would ever paint the source of the light, and I answered. "Oh no! ...uh...perhaps this stems from my own puritanical upbringing and my own sense of self-worth...no, I don't think I'm good enough to paint the source of the light. Hopefully I'll see it when I die." Elisabeth said no more to me about the subject.

By the time I'd shown all the paintings, it was snowing quite heavily, and I urged my guests to spend the night. Later that evening, Elisabeth's friend came to me in private with the following: "Elisabeth just shared with me her insights about your work. She said, 'You know, it's amazing, he has already seen the light and doesn't even know it. The light is in all of his work.'"

The next morning, as they prepared to leave, Elisabeth invited me to come as her guest to one of her *Life, Death and Transition* workshops. She said, "I want you to see the work I do."

Arrangements were made, and I attended the five-day workshop. The intensity of Elisabeth's work was life-altering for me. What a catharsis!

I "came out" publicly in front of a hundred people. Previously, this act would have required panicky courage. However, in an atmosphere of unconditional love and safety, a dynamic was created for me to share openly that denied part of who I am. One hundred people compassionately and unconditionally accepted me as a human being, and through that unconditional love I learned to accept myself. Finally, after nearly fifty years of denial, my sexuality was no longer an issue for me. I was freed to be myself with no condemnation. I was spiritually healed. I owe all of this—singularly—to Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.

Elisabeth soon invited me to serve as a member of the Board of Directors for the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Center where I stayed until the center's 1995 closing. During those years I got to know this exceptional human being as a colleague and personal friend. I grew increasingly protective of her name and her mission for humanity, and I was careful never to take advantage of this privileged

friendship, nor to burden her with my personal problems. However, on three occasions I specifically asked for her wisdom and comfort--in each case, out of love for a lifelong friend who was nearing death from AIDS.

Elisabeth responded always in the most personal and caring way. Amidst her busy schedule, traveling worldwide, she stopped being Dr. Ross, and as if she were an old friend, called my ailing loved ones. I witnessed those conversations and saw my friends' faces light up; despite never having met her, they spoke to her with such ease, and they smiled as if sharing a secret. She knew them so well, knew their journey quite beyond mortal understanding.

Many of Elisabeth's teachings have become integrated into the everyday life and lexicon of this culture. Her personal authorship of this wisdom seems to have been lost along the way, her genius plagiarized on too many occasions. Yet, I suspect, if I were able to tell her of my concern, the consternation on my face would be met with a wry and knowing smile on hers.

Elisabeth came into my life at a fate-full moment. She awakened me to self-love, and out of that came the strength and insight to assist others in finding, not only their own source of infinite love, but also the peace to make their transition into the everlasting Light of unconditional Love. There's a mountainside on my property that has become a memorial to their lives. I've covered it with the ashes of too many of my friends lost to this disease known as AIDS. It is my honor to provide them a resting place away from a world that judged them so unfairly. Because Elisabeth helped me find my own strength and the courage to accept myself. I could be there for them on their last journey. I thank her for allowing me to give her and her loving counsel as a grace-filled final gift to those loved ones.

Some might say I met Dr. Elisabeth Kübler Ross by chance. I don't think so. AIDS was about to become an epidemic, and many soldiers would step forth, with Elisabeth leading, in the battle against rampant ignorance and prejudice. As I heard Elisabeth say many times, "There is no such thing as coincidence." With all my heart I believe we met by means of a sacred dance, choreographed long before we knew each other's names.

My shortest Elisabeth Kübler-Ross speech:

Within each century mankind is blessed with just a handful of great teachers. Their teaching elevates all human kind. Moving humanity closer to a state of authenticity and enlightenment. Withdrawing humanity away from ignorance and poverty. This century has given us Gondi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Dr. Ross brought *death and dying* out of the closet, laid the foundation for the world wide Hospice movement and last but not least an understanding of what is meant by *Unconditional Love*.



Jack held a dream and in 1987 that dream became a reality. After selling his loft in Manhattan, he and Mark bought and moved into a large colonial Manor house on St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands. For anybody that certainly would be a dream come true, but they wanted to go a step further.

They transformed this seventh century residence into an extraordinarily successful business, *The Mark St. Thomas*, an Inn of the highest caliber with an elegant restaurant in the great room of this impressive stone building. located high up on Blackbeard's hill overlooking the capital, Charlotte Amalie.

The day Jack and Mark moved in, I received a phone call from Jack, he was so excited, "I want you here. You have got to see this incredible place." Without hesitation he said he wanted to fly me down to the island to share in celebrating this new adventure with he and Mark.

I had been to St. Thomas once before, but under very different circumstances. While I was still living in Florida, Butch had broken his ankle and fractured a vertebra in his neck, resulting from a freak accident. His lower leg was in a cast and he wore a neck brace. I moved him in with me in order to take care of him. After some weeks of convalescing, Butch could get around, but he was understandably bored. I offered to treat both of us with a seven-day Caribbean boat cruise. We had a outstanding time together island hopping and it goes without saying, any trip with Butch is "another story." Even though my first venture to St. Thomas was just for one day, it was memorable inasmuch as I was with Butch.

But now my foremost friend was living there and within days I was on an airplane to St. Thomas. Jack met me at the airport with an affectionate greeting and a big hug. As we drove across the island, he talked non stop, his enthusiasm had not waned as he revealed his new found island paradise with someone he cherished.

He said he had always respected my taste and judgement and would I be willing to help. I ended up spending weeks sitting at a drafting table drawing up contingent floor plans for the Inn. It was the least I do for Jack, assisting with the designing and adding any suggestions I might have. Not at all a bad way to stay busy. But there was something else I wanted to do, something I knew would especially delight Jack, something I could do really well. I offered, as a gift, to do a large painting for the Great Room. Jack and Mark were enamored with the idea. This was not totally an unselfish gesture on my part. I really wanted to paint there using the unbelievable characteristics of the atmosphere and light of the Caribbean. However, I wanted foremost to give the painting to Jack.

The materials for the painting were ordered from New York and flown in and within two weeks the painting was completed.

Jack and Mark were so pleased with the painting that a grand unveiling party was held, the first official occasion of the *Mark St. Thomas*. I really liked working there and in the years to come I returned to St. Thomas a number of times, completing a measure of new paintings.

After the Inn and restaurant opened, Jack wrote in the brochure for the *Mark* the following:

*The large oil painting in the Great Room and smaller ones in most of the guest rooms, are the works of Robert E. Singleton. A nationally recognized artist, Robert lives in West Virginia and is represented by galleries in New York, San Francisco and Florida. He is, not incidentally, a best friend and the Great Room oil is really a gift of love. (There is no way we could afford its actual market value!)*

## The Journey with Steven Russell

### Prologue

Throughout the telling of this story, I speak often of my dearest friends and how important we were to each other. They were my family. But, I haven't mentioned my involvements, companions, *lovers*.

Much of my adult life I have spent without that special person, not an easy task. It's not that I didn't want that unique love, I have known it. Yet, I feel I have to qualify what I mean by companion or lover. There is the obvious, but there were those in my life that came and went. Call them affairs, only because the connection, though impassioned, did not stand the test of time or fidelity. Foremost, just call me old fashion, I have always been an ardent believer in monogamy, wanting to give a unique love that is attached to one person only. For those I gave this love to, more times than not, slept in someone else's bed.

My first love, it very well may have been puppy love, was John Haunch,. *The first man to break my heart*. As you already know that relationship grew into a friendship of the highest order. Beyond John . . . let me take you back to a letter I wrote Jack and his new pardoner. They had been here for a visit primarily because Jack wanted to introduce me to Mark.

September 13, 1981

Dear Jack and Mark,

Can you believe it? Two letters in one year. I don't know what has come over me. Many times, people have jokingly said it would take an act of congress to get me to write a letter. I can honestly say, congress has nothing to do with my writing habits.

It has now been a week since we were sitting at this table. I was enjoying the companionship of, without question, my closest friend. And now, because of Jack, I have found a new kindred spirit. I miss you both very much.

I'm setting here looking out these windows feeling a sense of anticipation with a little anxiety thrown in. The season is about to change, with each new day now there are more and more signs of that change.

The light is rapidly changing as the sun is well on its journey south. With each new day the sun seems to be accelerating its descent in order to shorten the days so that the nights might be longer.

Yesterday, I counted five Monarchs on their migration to some where in Mexico, soon there will be hundreds a day. I see all of this as a setting in which a transformation will soon take place on this hill, that's the anticipation part.

The trees are about to reveal their true identity, giving up their summer camouflage, storing away their strength, enabling them to endure the bitterness of winter. They hold that strength remembering the storms will pass with time.

They know there will be a new life, a rebirth, a new beginning. Next spring the tree will be older, but wiser. We all must die a little before we can grow.

Unfortunately to man that sometime death is hard to endure without the same inner strength. I wonder which the tree feels the most comfortable with in early spring, holding in their strength or letting it blossom forth. Perhaps what sustains the tree is knowing just when to show itself or else be burned by the cold. We have all indeed been burned many times by exposing our selves. Yet, we come back for more, willing to take another chance to find that utopia. Searching for the light of love which gives life, without that light the tender branch will wither.

How else can I say it,  
But from an aching heart.

From a soul which cries out  
from the dark for another.  
For a light by which  
I might open my eyes,  
To love another.

I am painfully lonely, your visit brought this into sharp focus for me. Seeing the love that exists between you and Mark gave me such a bittersweet feeling. There was great joy in my heart for you both and to know that my good friend Jack is really happy. That does mean a lot to me. I watched every movement, the affection, the touching, the understanding, all outward signs of an inward love. The two of you side by side, me alone, on the other side of the table.

That is very much how my life has been, me on the other side, alone. Even as a young child I was brutally beaten and locked away. My family was not warm or showed any affection. Never touching or giving a warm embrace. My status was simply, "You're not worth the powder it would take to blow you up."

Jack, I do not know how to deal with the need for love in my life.

How I ache for a shoulder to rest my head.  
For a hand to reach out and touch me.  
For a voice to say I understand.  
For eyes to see what is inside.  
And perhaps most important,  
for me to be able to say.  
Here is my shoulder  
Here is my hand  
I understand.

For one who feels so weak and inadequate, it seems in retrospect those people I was involved with gravitated to me for my strengths and perhaps what I could give to them.

I have been thinking about those people. I do not have a very good "Scorecard." That is painful for me to admit. I honestly tried, the best I knew how. I was completely willing to accept the best and the worst of each in order to maintain and develop a mature relationship. But, one can be kicked just so many times before you say this has got to stop. "Please stop, you are hurting me."

Jack, please bare with me. I feel the need to expose to you and myself the hurt I feel concerning those specific people. You knew everyone of them.

TJ - How I loved him, but oh the agony. I helped him finish his last two years of collage. He didn't work at all during this time. He was promiscuous as hell and well on the road to becoming an alcoholic, I know this now, not then. He was out to the bars at least once a week, for the night, creating a constant state of lying. I had to compromise my feelings in the relationship, wanting it to be monogamous, but allowed his promiscuity. I never, in four years, stepped out on him.

Once while I was away at MacDowell our/my house was "broken into." The entire sound system was "stolen." I will never know what happened. He was living there, not working and passed off the house, to his tricks, as his home. I did not exist.

I gave him his collage ring, he hocked it. As you know he gave me the Rauschenberg print for Christmas. Years later I found out you paid for it. TJ became completely dependent on me in all ways, except for his nights out. I began to recognize that his dependency was unhealthy - he would never grow as a person, never able to stand on his own feet. With great pain, I tried to end the

relationship.

I made up my mind that it was over and left Florida to visit Richard Vesely. I did this in order for TJ to become independent of me. He was to find a job and a place of his own to live. It didn't work. TJ went completely berserk, he cut himself from head to toe with a razor blade, saying to me. "Look what you made me do." I put him in a hospital and made arrangements for him to see a psychologist. He did not expect me to do this, he thought I would take him back. I truly wanted to, but I knew in the long run it would not work. Painfully with time we did go our separate ways.

LO - Years later I met a man who was in the Navy stationed in Orlando. After several months of dating he moved in with me. We were very happy, I thought. A major change was about to take place for each of us individually. LO was about to be transferred. And after nine years of living in Florida, I sold out and moved to the mountains of North Georgia. We were separated for a few months when he received a discharge and came to the mountains to live with me. While there he expressed a desire to go to collage. He wanted to return to his home, Pensacola, and go to school there. I said OK and closed up the house and we left.

We found an apartment, I bought all the furnishings from pots and pans to bath towels. He started school. I paid for everything, his books, tuition, rent on the apartment and bought him a sound system.

After a number of weeks I was becoming unhappy, I could not work and felt guilty because of that big house being closed up. He suggested that I return to the mountains to work and we would get together when possible. I returned to Clayton and went back to work. I continued to cover all of his expenses including flying down to see him a number of times.

The last time I visited, I knew something was wrong. He was so very cold to me. He finely came out with the following. "I have never loved you, I went along with you in order to get what I wanted. I wanted you to set me up and put me through school. You are a fool Singleton, now would you please get out of my apartment."

I literally walked to the airport in a state of shock. There was no flight until that afternoon. I went back to the apartment desiring to resolve the problem. When I entered the apartment, LO was in bed with his lover. I turned and left without a word, not angry, but humiliated. How could I have been so blind?

Butch once told a friend of his, "If you want to have a large collection of Singleton's, have an affair with him, he'll give you the shirt off his back and a lot of art."

Although Butch and I never had an affair, I gave him a lot of art. He recently sold all of it to attain the down payment for his new house. I was pleased my work could help him.

None of these people owe me anything. I have never asked for anything except their love. Perhaps LO was right, "Singleton you are a fool."

I am still willing to help, support or provide for that special person as long as there is some honesty with their needs. Someone who would contribute to, rather than just take. I am generous, it's part of my nature. I want to continue to give all I have and all that I am. How happy that would make me.

The affection I saw between the two of you is in my mind and heart . . . the way *we can live and love*. With completeness, bring a very special peace, a very special gift, the gift of giving yourself.

Not on Screamer or the many years here was I blessed to find that unique love. That is, until . . .

The summer of 1987 I had been invited to be "Artist in Residence," at a private high school and College in Florida. This school was located in a small community about thirty miles from Orlando. I arrived in the fall of that year to begin the residency. Besides a salary, I was given a large home off campus. The

house was on a lake, with a pool. Maid and yard work, all provided by the school.

It was good to be back teaching and a nice break from the long and hard winters of West Virginia. I stayed very busy with classes between the two schools and in addition setting up and teaching two adult evening classes. The winter term passed rather quickly.

What little time I did have to myself and as I had no social life outside the school, I spent many quiet evenings with a rented movie. The closest store to rent a movie was a Seven-Eleven in a neighboring town. I went to this Seven-Eleven at least once a week. After a time the clerks knew why I was there, to rent a movie. One such clerk would always let me know what new movies had arrived. At times asking me what type of movie I liked or suggesting a film he had seen. He was a young man, small in stature with blue eyes and blond hair. Handsome, yes, and on several occasions at the check out register, we made [a split-second-longer-than-normal] eye contact. I admit I was curious, but very shy. After a number of weeks and these encounters, I gained enough courage to ask him if he would like to join me sometime, for a movie. He said he would like that.

In brief, that is how I met Steven Russell.



**May 1, 1988** The journey began the day we met. There was a mutual attraction, but not understood, for me, a reservation about an involvement with someone much younger than I. Steven soon challenge me on that issue. "Robert, if you have a problem with our age difference, it is your problem. It's not a problem for me." Whenever I would bring up my concern again, he always gave me the same answer. And so, we began to see each other almost on a daily basis.

We went to movies, shopping for dinners we prepare together, and long drives. All through those first months there was always lots of conversation, basically getting to know each other. Steven had a wonderful sense of humor, always keeping the conversations on the light side. I, at times, being more serious, would probe and perhaps ask him questions that he had not been asked before. On one such occasion, we were talking about our future. I wanted to know about his aspirations, whether he had set any long-term goals for himself. His answer was brief. "I have no long-term plans. I just want to get by." I interrupted, "You don't really mean that, do you?" "Why should I, I won't live to see 29." I thought what an odd thing for a young man to say. He never said that again.

As we saw more of each other, it become apparent that this was more than just a friendship. The fates had indeed brought us together, drawn us together and this union became permanent. Our lives intermeshed, a bond that was never broken. There was always this uncanny knowing that we were together for a purpose.

When the school year ended, I was to return to my home in West Virginia. Steven returned with me and we started life together on that remote mountain top.

For Steven, the move to West Virginia was a major change from the familiar surroundings of home and family. He was the youngest of ten children. His mother, and nine of his brothers and sisters all lived in the same community there in Florida.

This was the furthest north he had ever traveled. He had never seen the mountains or snow. That first day, when we arrived here, he was ecstatic. He absolutely fell in love with the total environment. He said, "As long as we are together, I could be happy any place, but living here is more than I could ever wish for."

Before we left Florida, we talked at great length about life here in the mountains. He was concerned about finding a job. I made him a business offer. We could be come partners in my work. He could work in the studio with me, as an apprentice - assistant. In exchange, he had room and board plus a percentage of the income generated from the sale of works. I know this offer sounds a bit dry, business-like, for two people in a personal relationship, but, I understood his concern. He was going to give up his job, leave his family and friends, to run off to a remote mountain top with a person he had only known three months.

We honestly examined all the ramifications of living together before we left Florida. I must say at this point, we did talk about AIDS and the importance of safe sex and a blood test. I had recently had such a test

which was negative. In addition, I was celibate. Steven assured me of the same. He was negative. This was a serious and important issue to resolve between us. The question of our mutual HIV/AIDS status was resolved and was no longer a concern. We knew we were safe and, as long as we were monogamous, we would continue to be safe.

As far as my painting was concerned, I had only one reservation. I had always been alone when working. I did not know if I could paint with someone in the studio with me. It had been more than nine months since I had worked. So I was a little slow getting motivated to start. Besides, Steven was here and I wanted to share everything with him, a totally new experience for both of us. For him, everything was new, for me everything was renewed by sharing it with him. How else can I put it. Steven loved it here and I loved Steven being here.

I had two suggestions for Steven. One, to keep a journal. As time passed, he might want to look back at his experiences on this mountain. Second, and most important, he could explore a creative outlet of his own.

An artist's studio is full creative toys. We were together twenty-four hours a day, joined at the hip. I was not pushing him away, I wanted him to find an independent means of spending time. He admitted to me that he had never tried either. He was curious to try both. The journal was easy. We found in a bookstore a bound book with blank pages. I also told him that his journal was private and I would not look at it. He started writing in it immediately.

The second suggestion took some time for him to find the right creative outlet. Photography. I had a lot of professional camera equipment. I told him he was welcome to use all of it, after I spent some time teaching him how to use it. After that he would be own is own. He said he knew nothing about photography. Once he understood the mechanics of a camera and some tutoring from me on basic photography, he blossomed. He ended up taking a camera with him every place he went. Within a few years he won a top award in a photography contest and started selling his photographs.

Life with Steven was not always so profound. Our relationship was not always so positive. At times, the negatives became overwhelming. He could become very insecure, possessive and jealous of me. I, in turn, would become defensive. There were times when the age difference did create problems, probably more for me than for him. When we met, I was 50, he told me he was 26, a big gap. Later I found out he was only 23. He did not want me to know his true age.

The first year we were together was, for the most part, full of growth. It takes time for two people to evolve in a relationship. There was so much we did not know about each other. I had a tendency to be an open book with Steven, which at times, depending on what I was sharing, would send Steven in to a jealous rage. Steven on the other hand could be very closed. I don't believe this was because he wanted to keep anything from me. He just had never articulated, to himself or anyone, his personal history.

With my own history and an understanding of the importance to be at peace with one's history, I encouraged Steven to talk about himself. This was something he was not accustomed to. This was a person I cared a great deal about. I recognized in him, in many ways, myself at his age. I wanted to help him get his head screwed on straight. Yes, he was young and inexperienced, not a perfect balance in a relationship.

In part, we were fulfilling the needs of each other. For both of us some of these needs were self-serving, perhaps not in the best interest of the other. At first Steven was incredibly insecure with himself and the relationship. I fulfilled the roll of stability and security for him. But, I could not meet his prodigious physical needs. I know this was singularly due to the age difference. Steven, as with many young people, equated lust with love.

For me, Steven fulfilled the deep desire to love another person. However, my own lack of self worth opened the door to anyone who would choose me as a life partner. So I say, I allowed him to choose me. We did choose each other. Yet, the motivation behind that choice was based on the needs of two lonely and insecure people.

I will not judge whether these are the right or wrong reasons for two people to be drawn together.

Some shrinks would say it was a perfect text book codependent relationship. Or, a cynic would call it a May-December relationship.

Yet, in so many ways we were able to maintain a loving balance. There was an unidentifiable, underlying purpose in being together. We knew, but never questioned, why we were together. All I can say is we were human beings with our own unresolved problems, trying to work through them together.

As time passed and Steven began to feel more comfortable opening up, he shared, for the first time, his relationship with his father. There was none. His father had, more than once, abandoned his mother, who, alone had to care for ten children. He said that they were very poor, at times, his mother and all the children worked as migrant pickers. Steven being the youngest, his mother carried him on her hip as she picked vegetables. He jokingly said if his family were to be on the "Oprah Winfrey" show, Oprah would retire.

Perhaps what was most difficult for him to share with me was his father raping his sisters and then leaving, never to be seen again. Steven also quit school when he was in the ninth grade. He did this in order to work, to help support the family. He was not a stranger to hard work. These were all reasons, he thought, not to feel good about himself. He was also very private about his sexual orientation. He did not want any one to know he was gay, that is, outside of close friends.

As you can see Steven and I talked a lot. I was an open book to him, telling him anything he wanted to know about my personal life. Many times we would sit with a pot of tea and talk all day.

With Steven's permission - from those first entries in his Journal

### **Steven's Journal**

July 25, 1988

6:19 p.m.

Don't know where to begin, never had a journal before. I guess by telling the events of the day.

First off, I got up about 8:00 a.m., had breakfast went to Cumberland, Maryland for the day. Also got Bear groomed. It was about time, he was starting to smell, but I still love him.

Robert is fine today, in much better spirits than in the past. Possibly because he is going to start working soon. That will make him happy and me too. I want him to be happy, as happy as I am.

July 26, 1988

Got up around 8:45.

After breakfast Robert's calcium deposit is hurting in his right arm. He called the Dr., I went into the shop to start stretching canvases. Dr. Razzok wants to see him in an hour. It's an hour to Romney, gotta go soon, like right now, no work today.

Thank God, no shot for Robert, just drugs. Stopped by in Romney to see Father Reece, nice man, but I was kinda uncomfortable. I don't know why, I guess I'm just weird.

July 27, 1988

Got up around 8:00 a.m., stayed up till midnight, I'm so stupid, I caused friction between me and Robert, maybe because I'm sexually frustrated. It's either three times a day for one day or it's nothing for two weeks, it really confuses me, not that he is getting tired of me. Sometimes I think he would rather be friends than lovers, but it could be just me, he's a very complex man and I haven't yet figured him completely out. Hopefully everything will work itself out and I won't have all this bullshit going on in my head.

Robert is the kindest, sweetest, nicest person I have ever met, and he doesn't deserve the shit that goes on in my head, the jealousy, possessiveness and immaturity, that I have yet to overcome. My jealousy is the worst of all, I don't understand that at all, it seems I am jealous of everything, including past and present things and people. I cry each time he mentions any of his old friends or any male who has stayed in this house. I have ill thoughts, and my mind gets in a frenzy. Not that he will be

unfaithful to me, but my mind does wonder, which it shouldn't, but it does. Maybe as I grow that will all cease, enough, enough! I have to go to work now. Enough writing in this darn book!

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Gotta write some more, about to go crazy, I need too much, maybe. I got a bit uncomfortable this afternoon. I don't really know why, after coming from Moorefield, I go and lay across the bed. Robert comes in and turns on the tele, after cleaning up the shop. I scoot over and let him lay down in his spot of the bed, he knows there's something wrong with me, he pats me on the shoulder and that's all. Then, in the mean time, Bear lays between us. Robert starts petting and caressing Bear for a long time. I'm not jealous of Bear, it's just right now I wish I had half the affection he's giving Bear. Maybe all he wants right now is a friend and companionship, not a lover. I can't just be his friend. I need more than that, a lot more, maybe he doesn't. But I can't explain that to him, I can write it, but I can't say it. He would think I was jealous of Bear, which isn't the case, I just need love too. Love is all new to me. I don't think I've ever been in love before, till now and I'm having such a hard time of it. I wish it were easier. Every night, I look forward to bedtime, when the kiss and the hug comes, and if I'm lucky, an occasional snuggle. It's really sad that I have to be this way. I know it's not suppose to be easy, but damn! I might loose my mind if I don't get over this soon. My worst fear is that I'm gonna drive him away from me, or he's gonna lose interest in me. Time will tell, I'm so glad I got this journal, at least I can relieve some of it in here.

July 28, 1988

This morning I got up around 9:00 a.m., fixed myself a cup of coffee and sat on the stool in the kitchen. Robert came upstairs and I proceeded to be a bitch, saying, "No, I don't want any juice. No, I don't want any tea. No, I don't want any toast." Just being very negative. Robert goes off the handle and says, "Fuck it!" Maybe that's what I wanted, a rise out of him. So I go off down into the studio, not to bother him, and have my coffee. Then, when I finish my coffee, I come back up stairs and fix myself another. Robert is sitting at the long table in the window having his tea. I come over and sit down with him, by this time things have sorta settled themselves, we talk for a minute. I don't really know what's going on in his head right now, I hope things are O.K., I can't handle much more. I love him so much and I don't want to hurt him.

July 29, 1988

Got up around 8:00 a.m., Robert was up and came upstairs to fix breakfast. I stayed in bed, not asleep, just laying there thinking, if this doesn't get better soon, I may have to leave, because I'm not gonna live with him and just be his friend. Which brings me to last night. Earlier in this journal I said how I looked forward to the kiss and the hug at bed time, well last night there wasn't even that. Robert reached over and got my hand, as to shake it and said, "See ya in the morning," which confirmed my fear, that he just wants a friend. So I got up the nerve to ask him a question I've been playing with in my head for about a week and a half; "Are we gonna just be friends." His first reply was, "I don't know," which really scares the hell out of me. That, to me is a 50-50 middle of the road answer, like, maybe, maybe not.

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This is what he would have seen, if he could have seen into my mind. Questions, lots of questions I can't even ask. Tons of questions, few answered. I wish I could see into the future, so I could save Robert and myself from some awful pain.

Breakfast was without in-depth conversation. I guess on my part, I didn't feel like talking much. He questioned, I told him everything was O.K.. I'm such a liar. Why can't I just say, "No everything's not O.K.?" and tell him I feel lonely, separated from him, frustrated that I don't know what's going on. But, I can't. I just lie and say everything's fine.

Right now, Robert is in the studio working. Yes, working. I'm not kidding, it's about time.

Maybe that will help. At least I feel better about that.

7:30 p.m., Just had another confrontation with Robert, he got upset, told me he loved me. Then said, "But, I don't think I can give you what you need, maybe I should have someone younger." That's what he said, I don't agree. "Someone who thinks like me." I don't agree, I want someone like him, but without all the problems. He says he can't take anymore, neither can I. I'm about ready now to go home, but it's gonna hurt so bad to give up Robert. I think I should go down stairs and tell him, but I'm afraid to, his reaction will probably be, "Well if that's what you want." I don't want to do that, I really want to be with him.

I really think this is all in my head, maybe I'm really blowing it out of proportion.

This is so nice, just now, Bambi and her mother walked through the front yard. It's no wonder they call this God's country. There is nothing as beautiful as a deer and her fawn.

Robert just came up and told me a Danny Devito and Rita Pearlman movie just came on, I guess I'll go watch it and break the news to him, that I would like to go home. That sounds so sad, and it's gonna hurt so bad.

July 30, 1988

Got up around 7:30, Robert was so nice this morning. Couldn't do what I was gonna do last night, and I'm glad I didn't. I love him too much just to let my dick get in the way of that. He is going through a lot right now. If I can't be patient then there must have not been much there to begin with. I decided he was worth the wait.

Today was a wonderful day, Robert worked just about all day, and got a lot done, and that makes me feel good and I'm sure it makes him feel good too. It's gonna be a beautiful painting. Of course Robert got screwed, one painting was gonna be \$6000, but BP decided he wanted a triptych. So Robert said, same price so BP is getting \$18,000 worth of paintings for \$6000. Robert gives to much away. In a sense he could be sittin a lot better than he is, but I understand he doesn't paint for the money, he does it for himself, which makes sense.

This afternoon we had a frog strangler [that's a fairly good storm] and now I'm sittin here writing by candle light, it's kinda nice.

I wish things were like they use to be. This would be the perfect opportunity for a romantic roll in the hay, but that's O.K. for now, it's still very nice.

Believe it or not . . . just now with just the sound of the crickets, a big tree, yes a frigging big tree, with hardly any wind, just fell over in the woods with a crash and a rumble.

And oh ya, Dinner, it was excellent, we had fish, my suggestion, and steamed vegetables. For desert cheese with wonderful crackers, this whole day was very nice, hope there's lots more of these. Goodnight for now.

[Note, incomplete]

In that remote area, we did not have much of a social life. However, there was a small community about 20 miles away. Weekly, we would go there for shopping and have lunch or dinner depending on the time of day. We found a small restaurant, *Annee's Cottage*, we liked a lot, but more important, the owners-chef's Annee and Stanley. In a short time, the four of us became great friends. Annee adored Steven calling him her "little brother." As our mutual friendship grew, Annee had convinced Steven that she could train him to become a chef and after much discussion and excitement, Steven went to work at restaurant under Annee's tutelage. He did so well that Annee trusted his cooking skills so much that she would leave him in charge. Stanley, on the other hand, who was in charge of the floor and serving area, wanted Steven to become a waiter. It was so obvious they both liked him and saw Steven as a great plus for their business. Steven agreed to help Stanley out. In addition to cooking weekdays, he began waiting tables on weekends. I must point out that

Steven's going to work at the restaurant was not a point of contention between us.

Annee and Stanley became our extended family as they both knew and openly accept Steven and me as *Gay* partners. Although, at the beginning, Stanley was a bit set back by such a relationship. Steven took care of that. In this safe environment Steven became open about his sexuality and with his humor, daily confronted Stanley. Stanley began to laugh with Steven and learned not to be intimidated by Gays. As their friendship grew, many times after the restaurant closed, the two of them would go out for a beer. As Steven was small in stature and Stanley a very big man, people in these watering holes knew not to “mess” with Stanley. He became very protective of Steven on these outings, saying, “If anybody messes with Steven, I’ll pound them into the floor.”

Annee on the other hand was a woman of the world, recognizing when we first met that Steven and I were partners. With her candor she immediately put us at ease. In time the four of us became a real enigma, almost pairing off. The odd couple, Stanley and Steven. Annee and I became soul mates. She often said we had been married in another life.

Annee, perhaps was the only local person to recognize my calling as an artist. Many times coming to my studio to see the new work, not only did she appreciate it at face value, she more than anyone, outside of Steven, understood its creator. We found each other to be mutually trusting, becoming father confessors for each other. What was so wonderful about this foursome is that there was no jealousy. Even Stanley, knowing that Anne and I spent a lot of time alone together, was not in the least suspicious. His only concern was, on our outings, Anne and I would buy something ludicrous to decorate the *Cottage* with.

The *Cottage* became the hub of our social life, meeting and getting to know many local people, celebrating birthdays, anniversaries or just a place to hang out. However, in time the *Cottage* and Annee facilitated something rather remarkable for my work.

It began simply, I was there waiting for Steven to get off work, talking with Annee, when the subject of a painting I happen to have in the car came up. I was describing it to her when I said it would be easier to just show it to her. I went to the car and brought it into the restaurant and hung it on the wall. She loved the painting, but even more, seeing one of my works hanging in her restaurant. It did look good hanging there. I agreed to leave it there for a while because of Annee’s reaction.

### *The best kept little secret.*

Whether my withdrawal from the art world was a conscious effort or not, I had closed the door. As it turned out, the 1982 show at Vorpall would be my last one person show in New York and with time, to their dismay, I stopped sending work all together.

No longer did I want or need public affirmation. All the ties with New York and Florida slowly dissolved into anonymity. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

Please don’t misunderstand, I was not independently wealthy nor did I have the luxury of retiring to the country and living out my remaining years in comfort. One, artist don’t retire. Two, I had to support the daily expense of living here through an occasional sale out of my studio or with commissions. Granted that daily expense was minimal, Steven and I did not live a lavish life style. We had each other, this house and the wonderful surroundings of a unspoiled wilderness. However, he know first hand that “One day it would be chicken, the next feathers.”

I had never shown my work in this local community or any place in the region. Up until this time I had kept my life and work very private, showing the paintings only to friends in the studio. I had an idea I thought would thrill Annee and for the first time share my work with the local community. We put together an exhibition of the work, turning the *Cottage* into a gallery. With the special lighting I provided and the warm atmosphere of the restaurant, the paintings looked as good as if hanging in someone’s home.

On a Sunday afternoon a reception was held as Annee and Steven beamed, watching a crowd of curious lookers gathering at the *Cottage* to see this local mystery’s art.

The next year, with some remodeling, a small room was created in the restaurant to become a permanent *Gallery* to exclusively show my work. *The best kept little secret*, no one knew or to this day knows anything about the artist whose works hang on the walls of this little restaurant in a tiny town in the remote mountains of West Virginia.

I recall being at the restaurant one day visiting with Annee. A local Catholic priest was in the *Gallery Room* having lunch. Annee and I stopped at his table to say hello, when he announced, "You know Robert, some day I really ought to buy one of your paintings, who knows, one day you might make a name for yourself." Annee and I just looked at each other and grinned. I answered, "Been there, done it, over it." The priest did not understand.

By the time I stopped sending work to Vorpil in New York, the price for a painting ranged from the low to mid five figures. However, I never received the full price, the gallery commission was two-thirds, that was a hefty chunk of change. Realistically I could not ask that kind of money for a painting at Annee's *Cottage*. All I really wanted was to make enough to get by. And so the paintings were priced ranging from \$300 to \$2000. Annee often commented, "I can't believe it, the paintings hanging on these walls are worth more than this restaurant." I have indeed sold many paintings at Annee's *Cottage*. In essence, I'm just a local artist trying to get by.

It was about the time I first started showing my work at the cottage that Steven's photography was really blooming. He had an innate good eye with a strong feel for the abstract in nature. He took the camera with him every place. He had heard that in a near by community a statewide photography contest was going to be held. We talked about it, he was insecure, not feeling his work was good enough to be entered in a competition. "Hay buddy you're talking to a pro here, it's good enough to win an award." "You really think so." "Absolutely." With a little help from me, he selected a few prints, matted, framed and submitted them to the competition.

On the evening of the award ceremony we were there. The award winning works would be announced and were selected from the preselected photographs that were on display. There was a very large crowd there, shoulder to shoulder. We did not even know if his work had been selected for the exhibition. As we made our way through the crowd, my heart jumped and Steven froze with a grin. There hanging on the wall was one of his photographs. The awards were broken down into various categories. Steven's print was in the landscape category. As the awards were announced, it became like a count down. Each category, then starting with third place, then second and finally first place. I not only could feel Steven's anxiety, I could see it in his face, that frozen grin. Then, "The winners in the landscape category are, third place . . . second place. . . Steven was absolutely frozen, holding his breath. "The first place goes to Steven Russell." I heard him gasp for air as the grin became an ear to ear smile. He said, "Robert please come with me, I have to get out of here."

I followed him as we made our way to the front door of the gallery and out on to the street outside. He took about ten paces and completely left the sidewalk with a leap straight up into the air. "Yea, did this really happen. I'm sorry Robert, but I had to let it out." I too was beaming from ear to ear.

The exhibition stayed up for a month. In the meantime I had an idea which was happily welcomed by Annee and Steven. I suggested he display and market his photography in the *Gallery room* at the *Cottage*. It would be a means of exposing his work and he could pick up extra income if he sold anything. Up until now the only way Steven had seen his photographs were as 4"X7" from the photo processors. He now had nine that had been blown up, matted and framed, all looking very professional. He was so proud of his work and rightfully so, it was good.

The time had come to hang his first show. One evening, with just the two of us at the *Cottage* we

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<sup>1</sup>In order to protect the integrity of works sold in New York and Florida, all the work sold carries with it a certificate of appraisal reflecting the value of comparable sold work in other markets.

began. As he was cleaning the glass on his prints, I took down my paintings. He then wanted me to hang the prints for him. "You know better how they should be displayed." Happily I started to hang them. As I was doing this I remember the small identification cards with the title and price. "Steven, did you remember to bring the price cards." "Oh Robert, they look so nice, I wana keep them for myself." "Steven. . . that would defeat the whole purpose . . . you wanted to earn some extra cash form these." As only Steven could say it. "Robert. . . I'm not a whore like you." Out of the mouth's of babas . . . and he did sell his photographs.

The Fall of 1989 we went to Washington, D.C. to see the AIDS Memorial Quilt. It was laid out on the Ellipse in front of the White House. Neither of us had seen the Quilt before. It is hard to describe the experience. I had a number of friends whose patches were part of the Quilt. As we approached, an overwhelming sense of reverence came over us. Steven said, "It's like a cemetery." Each 3' x 6' patch representing one life taken by this virus. There was very little dialogue between us. We just seemed to wander among all those lives that were gone. Steven was especially moved by the patches for babies and children. He had his camera with him. He would wander off by himself and begin to photograph the Quilt. It was a catharsis for us both. We left with heavy hearts.

On the way home and fo days, we continued to talk about the experience of seeing the Quilt. Steven became outwardly angry about prejudice and ignorance. He blasted Jerry Falwell, "How could anybody say it's God's wrath. God wouldn't do this to little babies. Falwell is so ignorant, the "S.O.B!." You know, the people around here are no different," I suggested. "If you feel that strongly about it, why don't you write an article and send it to the local newspaper. Besides, you have all those great photographs you took. Do an article about AIDS and the Quilt . . . with photographs." He did not even hesitate, "I will! and they had better print it." Well, he did write the article and submitted it with his photographs. He made the Front Page. At the top of the page were his photographs. The editor picked up other short pieces and devoted the whole page to AIDS awareness. I was so proud of Steven. He took a public stand on an issue he had been deeply moved by -- AIDS and the Quilt.

### **The Rose Garden**

Besides photography, I think one of the thing Steven liked the most was growing and taking care of plants. His first summer here, he planted a rose garden behind this house. He became the caretaker of the roses over the years. At first, each summer we also planted a small vegetable garden. Later, Steven suggested we plant nothing but flowers where the vegetable garden had been. We did, and by mid-summer, there was a blaze of color behind this house. The flowers attracted many varieties of butterflies. He also spent most of that summer in the garden photographing.

Steven also learned a curious thing about what was his pride and joy, his roses. In the Fall, when the light of the day begins to wane, the blossom stems become very long as they reach for the waning light. It is also only at this time of the year that the roses produce their largest blossoms as they too reach for the light.



Steven had told me many times that I was his mentor, he would look to me for advice and, at times, to help him find his way through his personal problems. I did take this role seriously, always searching for the right answers, the truth, as I knew it.

On one occasion, I wrote to Steven the following, although now it seems I was writing for both of us. In some ways, we both came from the same background.

### **September 11, 1990**

Gentle soul  
How frightened you were  
Your heart cried out,

When you were a child  
You screamed, why?  
Why, the love in your life,  
The love you first trusted,  
was withholding and angry  
you did what was safe  
retreat into hiding  
living in shadows  
hoping the hurt won't find you.

Gentle soul  
don't be frightened  
please don't be afraid  
It's safe now  
you can learn to trust the light  
your light

Gentle soul  
come out of the shadows  
and stand in your own light

Steven,  
I know life must seem a painful riddle that has no solution.  
I think we are for our whole life trying to solve the riddle.  
Life is a journey and on this journey we do find clues to the answers.  
Answers are given each day, but we must learn to recognize them.

*"Grant that we may not so much seek to be  
consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned. St. Francis*

We had no way of knowing where our life's journey was about to take us. It would seem our souls were preparing for the nearing.

**June 18, 1991, 2:00 p.m.**

I was sitting on the porch with Bear having a glass of iced tea. Steven had just showered and was dressing to go to work. He had to be at work at 3:00. That day, he was to work as a waiter. For this, he wore his khaki pants and a blue oxford cloth shirt. These clothes were new, as he had just started waiting tables at the restaurant.

When he had finished dressing, he came out on the porch and sat down with me. I happened to notice, as he walked across the porch, that his clothes seemed to be very loose on him. I commented to him, "Steven, have you lost weight or are your new clothes too big? They seem loose." He did not answer. As I looked at him, he appeared flushed in the face. He said, "I have a problem, I don't feel well." I asked what was wrong. "I don't know." I got up and felt his forehead. "You must have a fever." I got a thermometer and took his temperature -- "It's 104. You can't go to work with such a high fever." He said Annee was counting on him being there. I said, "I'll call her and explain. There is no way you can work with a temperature that high."

I phoned Annee and explained that Steven was sick and could not come to work. She was not happy. Since, at this late notice she would have to hastily find someone to work in Steven's place.

When I returned, I assured Steven that it was okay, he did not have to go to work. I asked him if he had any other symptoms. "I haven't told you because I didn't want you to worry." "Haven't told me what?" "You are right, I have lost weight, and I have been throwing up for weeks now."

This was all so out of character for Steven. One, he was never sick and, second, if he was, he never complained. Now, he was telling me he thought he was sick and was concerned about what it might be.

As we continued to talk, a sense of dread came over me. A feeling of knowing, but not wanting to acknowledge. That dreaded word came to mind. I dare not say it. But, because of my concern, mixed with the fear of just saying the word, I said, "Please don't misunderstand me, but I think it's important that you get a blood test. It's just being on the safe side." I could not say the word. Steven knew exactly what I was hinting at. He became defensive, I knew he would. "It's nothing like that. Besides, there is no place I can go to around here without everybody knowing." He was partially right. Living in a small rural community, gossip was the favorite past-time of the locals. We had consciously tried to maintain our anonymity in regard to our relationship. So, I had to convince Steven that there was a way to get a blood test without anyone knowing.

He was defensive, and rightfully so. The mere suggestion of what might be would alarm anyone. I pleaded with him. He had to trust me. On the one hand, I tried to play down the possibility in order for him not to be alarmed and at the same time convince him that the test was necessary. He had to trust me. I could make arrangements for him to be tested and the test would be anonymous. I explained to him that I once had been tested locally. I had been hospitalized a few years back with pneumonia. Out of my own concern for my HIV status, I asked my doctor if it was possible to have a test while I was in the hospital -- and would the test be confidential. The doctor assured me both were possible. I was given the test and the results were negative.

I told Steven this story and assured him I could contact that doctor and he would make the arrangements for the test. Steven reluctantly agreed.

So, with Steven's trust, I called the doctor and explained the dilemma. I also wanted assurance, for Steven, that the blood test would be confidential. The doctor assured me the test would be confidential. An appointment was made.

**June 20, 1991:** Steven was still running a high fever and was getting weaker. I was relieved he agreed to see a doctor. At the doctor's office, Steven wanted me to stay with him in the examination room. I did. The examination was brief. He looked so frail and frightened as he lay on the table. The doctor gave no diagnosis. He just told us where to go to have blood drawn. He also assured Steven there would be no written record (using Steven's name) of this office visit. And so it was done, the blood was drawn and sent off. The doctor told us it would be about a week before the results would come back. We went home.

In the next few days, Steven continued to get weaker, he could not eat and his temperature started to become, dangerously high.

**June 24, 1991:** Steven had become so weak he did not get out of bed. His temperature had gone to 106 degrees. I could not just watch and do nothing. Once again, I asked Steven to trust me. I had to do something. "I trust you Robert, do what you think is right."

I did not know what to do. All I did know was that he needed help. I called information and got the number for the National AIDS Hotline. I contacted them and they gave me the number for the State AIDS Hotline. I called and explained what Steven's symptoms were. They were very caring and instructed me to hang up and they would have a regional representative call me as soon as possible. In a matter of minutes, the phone rang. The call was from a woman named Joy B. She explained that she worked with AIDS patients. She also told me she was in charge of infection control for City Hospital in Martinsburg, West Virginia which was about 90 miles away.

Once again I explained what was happening to Steven. When she heard his temperature was 106 degrees, her response was "You must get him here right away." She told me that there was a doctor on the staff

at the hospital who specialized in AIDS. She said she would alert the doctor and the emergency room that we were on our way. She also, in a very kind way, assured me she would be there when we arrived.

I then told Steven what I had done, relaying to him all the conversations and, most important, the conversation with Joy. He easily agreed he needed help.

And so, with his pajamas on, a blanket around him, pillows for comfort, and a bucket between his legs, we started our journey.

It took an hour and a half to get to the hospital. As instructed, I pulled up to the emergency entrance. Thankfully, Steven had fallen asleep. I got out of the car and went inside and asked for Joy B. She was paged, and in minutes was there. I introduced myself and with a wheelchair we went to the car. There was not a lot of conversation. We got Steven out of the car and wheeled him immediately into one of the examination rooms. It was only a moment before the doctor came in. There were lots of questions while a nurse took Steven's vitals and drew blood. The doctor, Dr. Steven Malott, examined Steven. The events here become a bit blurry for me. There seemed to be a lot going on at once. All I remember is that Steven and I were there together.

Then there was quiet. We were left alone. Steven was on the examination table wrapped in blankets with me sitting in a chair right next to him. We did not speak. We did not know what to say. Just quiet. We were waiting . . . waiting for the word.

Soon, Dr. Malott came back into the room. Standing across from me, and looking at both Steven and me, he said the word, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Steven, but you have full-blown AIDS." My heart shattered as I looked at Steven. He was motionless and said nothing. Dr. Malott said, "I will leave you two alone for a short time, and then we will have to admit you in the hospital." At that, he left the room.

Steven rolled his head over to look at me. When our eyes met, we both started to cry. He reached his hand toward me and I took it in mine. "Robert, I'm so sorry if I've done something to you." "No, Steven, there is no one to blame. There is no fault here. We will get through this. There is no one to blame. We will just take it one day at a time, that's all we can do." He then answered, "I love you." "*I love you, too.*" We wept.

How does a young man of twenty six embrace the news that he is dying of AIDS?

His relish of life was silenced,  
few words were uttered,  
in his hushed voice he denied,  
but wept grieving tears for none to see.  
*I have that tell all gaunt face,*  
proclaiming to all, I have AIDS.

Hide me,  
so none will know,  
hide me from reflections,  
that my eyes will not see what you know.  
Is it true my journey's over so soon?  
When I've just begun.

A passage began that would take him beyond the realm of mortal experience. A journey that would last two years to the day. A journey for Steven that would encompass so many lives. A journey for Steven and me that would begin with such pain and end in loving peace.

It meant long stays in the hospital, a forced separation from the life he loved so much.

He was admitted to the hospital and this began the first of many long hospitalizations. After many tests, he was diagnosed with *Pneumocystis*<sup>2</sup> pneumonia. For many, this is the first illness which serves as the

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<sup>2</sup>*Pneumocystis carinii* is a parasite that commonly causes lung infection and pneumonia in people with HIV infection. *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia ("PCP") is the most frequent serious opportunistic infection in people with HIV infection. . . . [I]t is an AIDS-defining diagnosis. *The*

means by which the AIDS virus is discovered.

Besides our separation, I commuted 90 miles each way, every day. I had to maintain the house and take care of Bear at the same time, spending each day with Steven in the hospital.

Joy had insisted that I be tested right away. I agreed and she was kind enough to draw the blood in the privacy of her own office. Then came the waiting and the adjustment of knowing what the test results would be. Truthfully, I was not alarmed. I was so focused on Steven that I did not concern myself with the results. I already knew what the verdict would be. Positive.

**August 4, 1991:** After lunch, Joy came to Steven's room. There was some small talk, then she said, "Robert, I would like to see you in the hall." I got up and followed her into the hall, just outside Steven's room. "I have something for you." She handed me a white envelope. "What is this?" "It's your test results." I took the envelope. Feeling weak, I leaned up against the wall, with my head down. I just stared at the envelope and began to tremble, like the defendant standing before a judge and jury about to receive the verdict and a sentence of either Life or Death. There was no in-between. "Aren't you going to open the envelope?" "Oh, oh, yes." I broke open the seal, and pulled out a small yellow piece of paper. My eyes searched the paper. It was an official Health Department form with numbers and a lot of small print. I did not know where to look. Then, there it was "HYGIENIC LABORATORY RESULTS ELISA FOR HIV ANTIBODY -- REACTIVE, NONREACTIVE. There was an "X" next to NONREACTIVE. The verdict, Not Positive. The sentence was not death, but life. I yelled out, "IT'S NOT FAIR!" and began to cry. My thoughts were immediately of Steven. My legs weakened and I slid down the wall, crumbling to the floor. Weeping and saying, "It's not fair." Joy was confused, "I don't understand." I answered, "It's not fair. Why Steven and not me?" Joy said, "Don't you want to tell Steven?" Reluctantly, I said "Yes," got up and walked back into his room.

From his bed, Steven watched as we came back into the room. He was silent, but when our eyes met I could see an expression of concern in his. It was obvious that I was crying. I stopped and just stood looking at him from the foot of the bed. I hurt so much for him. All I could think was, why him and not me. Joy spoke up, "Aren't you going to tell Steven the news?" I could not speak. I just handed Steven the piece of paper. I held my breath as he, too searched the paper for its meaning. "What is this?" Joy answered, "It's Robert's test result." He looked at the paper searching for the results. I blurted out, "It's negative. I'm sorry, Steven." I began to weep. "I'm so sorry." My soul was weeping for another. I would have gladly changed places with him. He was only 26 years old, just starting out on life's journey. I was 53 and had lived a rich and full life. It wasn't fair. Why was I spared? By all rights I should have been infected. By some twist of fate I was spared, Steven was not. Joy was now beginning to understand my grief and said, "Robert, don't you realize this absolves Steven of being responsible for infecting you. He did not infect you. You are not infected. He is not responsible." It took a few seconds for me to fathom what she was saying. As I began to understand, I felt relief for Steven, but I still had a sense of guilt. Joy then said she needed to go back to her office.

I was still standing at the foot of Steven's bed. He had not said anything. We just looked at each other. At times, Steven would see things very much in a black or white way, perhaps not wanting to see the grey in-between. This was one of those moments. He broke the silence with a weak voice, "I know why I'm sick and you are not. You are a good and spiritual person. I'm not, that's why." "Oh, Steven, that is not so." He had somehow placed a moral value on this heinous virus. "I must be bad, that's why I'm sick." He was saying what a lot of our society had been saying. We both had heard this many times about AIDS -- it was God's wrath, the virus striking down gays because gays are an abomination. In all his young innocence, he had heard this. He was gay and now had AIDS. It must be true. What could I say to him other than the truth, "It's not what you think. Being good or bad has nothing to do with it. You are a good person! You are a spiritual person!"

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*Guide to Living with HIV Infection*, John G. Bartlett, M.D., Ann K. Finkbeiner, Developed at the Johns Hopkins AIDS Clinic, The Johns Hopkins University Press (Baltimore), 1991.

God did, however, have something to do with it. Not a curse against homosexuals, not a judgment of damnation. Gays are only a very small percentage of HIV/AIDS cases. They have just been made the scapegoat; made synonymous with AIDS. If there is any judgement, then it is humanity that is being judged.

My friend, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, once told me that each person who dies of AIDS dies a martyr. That is profoundly true. I must add that it is God's great two-by-four up against the head of humanity, trying to get our attention saying, "You are living in the darkness of prejudice and hatred." Those with AIDS, through their suffering and death, have spoken these very words, "It is a gift of love."

For every one person infected with the virus, there are eight affected. Faced with a choice, these eight must choose between love or the abandonment of love. There are many with AIDS that have been abandoned by families and loved ones, saying they are getting what they deserve. Yes, passing what *they* think is God's judgment.

<sup>3</sup>In one of his plays,  
John Anlouilh describes the last judgment as he sees it,

*The good are densely clustered at the gate of heaven,  
eager to march in, sure of their reserved seats,  
keyed up and bursting with impatience.  
All at once, a rumor starts spreading:  
"It seems He's going to forgive those others, too!"  
For a minute, everyone' dumfounded.  
They look at one another in disbelief,  
gasping and sputtering,  
"After all the trouble I went through!"  
"If only I'd known this . . ."  
"I just can't get over it!"  
Exasperated, they work themselves into a fury  
and start cursing God;  
and at that very instant they're damned.  
That was the final judgement, you see.  
They judged themselves,  
they excommunicated themselves.  
Love appeared,  
and they refused to acknowledge it.  
"We don't know this man." . . .  
"We don't approve of a heaven  
that's open to every Tom, Dick and Harry."  
"We spurn this God who lets everyone off."  
"We can't love a God who loves so foolishly."  
And because they didn't love Love,  
they didn't recognize Him.*

To recognize implies previous knowledge. To recognize someone means you have had a previous encounter. At the moment of recognition that which is recognized has revealed itself. How did I come to recognize my own soul? That which I acknowledged but did not see in its own light, my soul was revealed to me through a common union with another soul, Steven's. Our two souls would speak. What is a common union, a communion of souls? How do I describe this loving union?

To begin, words were minimal. Most of the content was in what was not said. Yet, there was complete mutual understanding of that content.

The unspoken, in almost every case, were based on our own mutual history. Our lives before and after we met, a knowing, without ever having to explain. Many times, this union was spontaneous, never prepared for in the conscious mind. Now, for me, those unions are *bittersweet* memories.

*Allow me to move back and forth in time,*

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<sup>3</sup>*That Man Is You*, Louis Evely, translated by Edmond Bonin, Paulist Press (1964) *Nihil obstat*: John F. Dede, S.S., J.C.D., *Censor Deputatur*, and *Imprimatur*: Lawrence J. Shehan, D.D., Archbishop of Baltimore (April 8, 1963).

*as I weave in and out, through my mind  
with threads of memories,  
creating a fabric of light.*

Our souls must have known the destined journey the two of us would travel.

It was within days after Steven had first been hospitalized and the results of my blood test, that the level of our communication was thrust to heights we had not ever experienced. We talked about life and death and all that would occur between. In one of those early conversations, Steven opened a very profound door. "Robert, our relationship has moved to a higher plane, it has become purely spiritual." "Yes, the highest realm of love." There was complete mutual love recognized. Love, the very bonding agent between souls. I now know that without that "purely spiritual love," our souls could not have communicated. Our mortal beings could not have coped.

Mutual truth and trust became the foundation of our relationship. It would seem all we had was each other, as we were humbled before a prognosis of death. We made a mutual pact, we would never lie about his illness to each other. I said I would always tell him what the doctors told me. There would be no protecting him from the truth.

He told me that he spent the long and lonely nights in the hospital, crying. A cruel reality for Steven. A young man just starting to reach his prime. This gentle person who loved the joys of song and dance, of humor and laughter, who loved all of life, who had never knowingly harmed a living soul. Now, this young man was grieving for his life, cut short.

Another part of that cruel reality, for Steven, he had AIDS. If there is such a thing as making a terminal illness easier to cope with, it is not the case with AIDS. In rural America, fear, ignorance and prejudice of gays and AIDS, runs rampant. For Steven, his illness became the classic double-edged sword. If people in our community were to find out he had AIDS, they would surmise he was gay. Oddly, just the reverse happened. When the rumors started, that Steven was in the hospital, people said, "He's gay and sick, then he must have AIDS."

As he began to improve, there were many discussions with his doctor about the multiple ways Steven's life would be altered. In one of those talks, I asked the doctor, "You know we live in a rural community. What are we going to tell people?" Dr. Malott thought for a minute. "I understand what you are up against. Just say he has Hodgkin's Disease. The symptoms are very similar." And that is what we told people. At first, there were only four people who knew the truth: Steven, Annee, Stanley and myself. I had to tell Stanley and Annee the truth, Steven wanted me to. Both were in a state of shock, "How could this happen to our Steven?"

When she could, Annee traveled with me to spend the day with Steven in the hospital. She always brought him wonderful and sometimes outrageous gifts. Of course food from the restaurant, but on another occasion she brought him in a large stone crock an enormous arrangement of wild flowers she had collected. The arrangement literally filled the entire corner of his room. Annee wanted more than anything for her "little brother" to have the best treatment and attention possible. "If I can get the staff to know Steven, pamper him, that would make all of us happier." She knew how to bribe the nursing staff.

At the restaurant she prepared one of her excessive deserts, a *Paris - Brest*. This is a large puff pastry ring, filled with whipped cream, custard, strawberries and chocolate poured over the top. One Paris-Brest could serve a lot of people. When we arrived at the hospital the very sight of this desert turned heads. When we entered the elevator it was very crowded with hospital staff. Someone asked, "Is that for a patient?" Annee announced, "Oh no, it's for the nurses on the fifth floor." An unidentified voice uttered, "Does it count if I used to work on the fifth floor." Needless to say our Steven became favorably known in the hospital.

When he came home after the first hospital stay he was a mere shadow of his former self. Still very sick. Only a few days passed and he was running another fever and uncontrolled throwing up. In the middle of the night I took him back to the hospital. This happened repeatedly. The doctor decided to stock us with

a lateral pharmacy of *as needed drugs*, primarily for nausea. The nausea impart, resulted from the regiment of toxic AIDS related drugs, AZT to name just one. We had heard and read from many sources that marijuana was a known panacea for many AIDS related problems, such as nausea, appetite, head aches and anxiety. On one office visit with his doctor we asked about the possibility of having marijuana prescribed legally.

Dr. Malot said that it could be obtained legally but the bureaucratic red tape was so involved, "The stacks of forms and applications was so time consuming," he felt this was intentional in order to discourage doctors from making application at all. He concluded the conversation saying to Steven, "If I did try, because of the time it would take," he paused "You won't live that long."

Desperate people do desperate things. It was at this time a choice was made to acquire the drug illegally or grow it. Both was done, but I ask you to consider if you had the same options what would you do? On my part, the choice was out of desperation and compassion, anything that would help alleviate Steven's suffering. I can honestly say that the drug helped in controlling the many side effects of both the treatments and the illness itself. As a result, for Steven, the quality of his life was tolerable and most important, with dignity. I must stress this was not a result of just the marihuana. The drug was used only when needed. What was so important to Steven was being in control of his life, free to make choices that affected that life. I do not believe anyone has the right to control or tell a terminally ill person what is right or wrong for their life. As Steven would say, "Whose life is it anyway?". If I acted out of conscience then it is my conscience that sees the apathy of a political system willing to allow its terminally ill citizens to suffer needlessly, all in the name of what is "politically correct".

Fortunately Steven did have short periods of remission with no overt symptoms. He was well enough to restart his life, but never to be the same person as before. He was courageous, never complaining or showing his inner strife. Not even using his illness to obtain favor or sympathy. He was back to photographing, going to the cottage to see Annee and Stanley and life with me.

We had gone shopping one afternoon when he found a newly released album by Michael Jackson, *Dangerous*. We shared the same passion for music, but in very different genres. Nonetheless, crossing over into each others appetite for music. Music for him was away to express himself, singing and dancing to the solid beat of the rhythm, snapping his fingers, bopping around the house. He could remarkably remember lyrics after hearing a song two or three times.

When we returned home from shopping, he immediately put his new album on the stereo. I was involved in something other than the music. After Steven had listened to the album several times, he asked me if I had been listening to the lyrics of the songs. "Steven, you know I can't understand lyrics. They all just run together, it's hard for me to make out the words." "I want you to stop what you are doing and sit down and listen to this song with me. Here are the words." He handed me the CD jacket with the lyrics printed, so I could read as we listened together. When the selection ended we looked at each other as my eyes filled with tears. He was almost expressionless when he said, "This is for you, it's me talking to you." He turned his head and would not look at me, as if embarrassed that he had been so candid in asking me to be there for him.

Here are the poignant lyrics, Steven's words to me, the words of all terminal ill.

***WILL YOU BE THERE***

Hold Me  
Like the river Jordan  
And I will then say to thee  
You are my friend

Carry Me  
Like you are my brother  
Love me like a mother  
Will you be there?

When Weary  
Tell me will you hold me  
When wrong, Will you hold me  
When lost will you find me?

But they told me  
A man should be faithful  
And walk when not able  
And fight till the end  
But I'm only human

Everyone's taking control of me  
Seems that the world's  
Got a role for me  
I'm so confused  
Will you show to me  
You'll be there for me  
And care enough to bear me

Hold me  
Lay your head lowly  
Softly then boldly  
Carry me there

Hold me  
Love me and feed me  
Kiss me and free me  
I will feel blessed

Carry  
Carry me boldly  
Lift me softly  
Carry me there

Save me  
Heal me and bathe me  
Softly you say to me  
I will be there

Lift me  
Lift me slowly  
Carry me boldly  
Show me you care

Hold me  
Love me and feed me  
I will feel blessed

In our darkest hour  
In my deepest despair  
Will you still care?  
Will you be there?

In my trials  
And my tribulations  
Through our doubts  
And frustrations  
In my violence  
In my turbulence  
Through my fear  
And my confessions  
In my anguish and my pain  
Though my joy and my sorrow  
I'll never let you part  
For you're always in my heart.

Steven's mother over the past year had suffered a number of small strokes. We had already been to see her once, but now he felt he needed to see her again. He told me he had to go. "I want to go see her and release her. I also want to say goodbye to my family." I understood.

He had expressed to me, more than once in the past, his desire to die here. However, there seemed to be an unspoken understanding that when he left for Florida, he might not be able to return.

He began to pack with my help. I could not help but notice the things he was packing. He was being very thoughtful about what he selected. We packed his luggage full, but there was not enough room for all he wanted to take, so we found boxes and packed them.

And so for the first time in years, I was without Steven being near. I could not go with him. I had work to finish, besides he was well enough to make the trip alone. We also understood this trip was something he needed to do on his own. Still, I was saddened to see him leave and a bit lost without him.



It is difficult telling this story from two perspectives. One, as I have traveled through life, telling this story about what I did not know and how I learned. The second perspective is what I now know and have known since starting this book. I have attempted to give you the same insights that I had while writing. The difficulty has come in keeping the two separate. These two perspectives are about to merge, the two time lines are about to meet.

It was at this time in 1992, that the letters to my parents, and a draft for, *Not a matter of choice*, were written. The text that follows is dialogue I was having with myself in the form of a journal I was keeping while writing. Please remember, as my life unfolded, almost the entire contents of my childhood was not part of conscious thinking, not until this date.

Everything in its time. On April 3, 1992, at 54 years of life, the truth was about to be revealed to me.

Paramount above all is what precipitated this awakening.

The reality of a very personal and painful loss.

I had witnessed death before, but please, not my Steven.

With Steven, I had found love, with him I was complete.

Now, an insidious virus was going to take him,

the very fulfillment of love.

The very possession withheld from that child,

the very contents

I tried to fill with work, acceptance and God.

Now the cumulative effect of Steven's illness and care

was before me.

He had to go to Florida, put his house in order, to say goodbye to his family. I was experiencing life without him, even though we spoke to each other daily by telephone. I was beginning to grieve for a loss that had not yet happened. **Grieve** is the pivotal word, that is what this writing was all about, **Loss**.

The contents of this writing became like an isolated island in a sea of caring for Steven's life and soul. Yet, there was no mention of him by name. It was like the two of us were on separate and independent, soul-searching missions.

For Steven, the impending loss of his life.

For me, the impending loss of Steven. His love.

It would take the loss of love, known

To find love denied.

Through this writing, I grieved for both.

What I found profound about this awaking is the intensity and swiftness with which it came. I have

intentionally left out the letters to my parents. What is here was written at the same time, but being the byproducts of those letters. I was articulating with words an intense quest in to my very being.

After a half century of searching in every conceivable way. Once again, I became that child, but confronted with the painful truth, as an adult.

## **HERE and NOW**

**April 10, 1992:**

It has been a week since I've begun writing. The more I write, the more I remember. The more I remember the more anxiety I feel.

It is like putting a puzzle together. My memory contains all the pieces. Each event I conjure up is a piece of the puzzle.

A detailed picture is beginning to emerge, the illusion dissolving, bringing me to a reality. Perhaps it is a subjective reality, that which my mind wants to color, shade, in order to justify its existence. I want to justify my existence. I must try to remain objective in order to control my emotions through this work.

I truly feel shame, "You should be ashamed of yourself," my parents are still yelling. I'm full of self-doubt. What I'm doing is bad. It must be a secret, not even a thought. But, to write it brings it into reality. Guilt. I am doing something I shouldn't. They would not approve. I'm "in for it." "Wait till I tell your father." Fear. I'll be punished. It is not just the beatings that were so frightening, but the words, "You're no damn good!" "I'll fix you." "You're not worth anything." "You're not worth the powder it would take to kill you." "Get out of my sight." Those words are an indelible, permanent part of my psyche. The physical pain is long gone.

My mind immediately starts to look. I need to find a compensation, to substitute this pain with something I want, to escape, to find solace in things that are non-threatening, that I have control over, that satisfy some base instinct.

"What's the matter with you? Look at you. Stop that crying. Stop that shaking. Why are you so different from the other boys? I'll slap you if you don't stop. Stop it, I said." My mother would torment me when I would cower. I would escape to my room. Times she would follow, never letting up. "You're disgusting, the sight of you makes me sick. What am I going to do with you? God know's I've tried. What have I done to deserve this?" She would work herself up into such a rage until she would pick up whatever was at hand and hit me with it. I was so passive I would just sit there and let her beat me. Through tearing eyes I looked at the anger that was in her face. I heard the anger that was in her voice. All I would say was "why?" and tremble. I was being totally consumed by her anger, negativity, rejected and despised.

Enough, enough, I must let it go. I know there are good people who would advise me to let it go, it is time. Pick up the pieces and go on with your life. But, there remain nagging questions about self. My psyche wants to know if it is really bad, worth nothing. It can't admit that, so it compensates perhaps creating a more acceptable illusion of who it is. To be what it isn't, just seeking acceptance, in whatever form may come, not authentic. Yet a part of me knows the truth. I plead for that truth to reveal itself. I do not believe the intellect has the truth. It can only justify, rationalize.

There are many external standards that I can look to for guidance and answers, but it must be the truth. What is the Truth?

**April 11, 1992**

If there be such a thing -- then I have a sainted Guardian Angel who must have been a teacher, a very old teacher. He would have to be a master to get me to this point on my journey. With the hand I was dealt, the lessons I have had to learn, either I am paying back a lot of bad karma, or I am about to graduate. I feel so close, if I could just hold on. *You can do it, you've come this far, just use what you have learned, and you'll do just fine.* Oh, the Bliss, the sheer bliss to stand in the light, free.

P.S. If God were Greek then my Guardian Angels would have been the Muses. They are extraordinary teachers, and I do believe that they teach on a graduate level. You already have to have a Masters in life before you can do graduate work with the Muse, a very specialized few can work in this area. I am special.

*See, that wasn't so hard to say. Now believe it. You've been in this school long enough. Stop being so angry, stubborn and a little more motivated. Don't worry, I'll stick with you, until you get it right. It could be tomorrow, or if it takes 40 more, I'm with you all the way. Don't worry. You'll get it right, you'll see, part of this lesson is learning to believe without knowing.*

*Your lesson is:*

*Learn to believe blindly, and be you at the same time, just be yourself and believe that God will take care of the rest. Love yourself, it is allowed, you're a good boy and I love you, unconditionally.*

### **April 12, 1992**

Palm Sunday

It is not as clear as just believing. It's a matter of trust, unconditionally, to become vulnerable, transparent. It's the fear of another hurt, another disappointment. Is it my expectations that hold me back? What are your expectations? Mother, what does "promise" mean?

I need to find identity through the recognition of another. For me, it takes another to validate my actions (self worth to me or to them), a confirmation of whatever I am doing is all right.

### **April 17, 1992, 6:00 a.m.**

Good Friday

Sitting here with pencil in hand, I ask myself what I am going to work on today. I start shuffling papers, looking for a clue. As I do this, I become weary with emotions. There is a sadness, wanting to cry, but not allowing myself to. I start examining in my head the "Why?" I am feeling grief as if I have lost something. Isolated.

This moves on to feeling alone, not loneliness. I want to share my new insights with a friend. "Look what I discovered." But, to be more honest, it goes deeper than the insight of the new discovery. It is through the act of sharing the discovery that something more important happens, or is needed. Validation. I am alive, thinking, and "Look what I have just discovered." *Did I do good?*

Having just reread the above, one thing jumps out. Validation of worth. "Look at what I am doing, have I done good?" Is this being needy? "He's too needy." Why not, "I'm, I?" Could it be at this point in my life (54 years) I am still seeking my father's approval? Intellectually I can understand, knowing now how my early relationship with him was, I was deprived of his love. I should have outgrown that need by now. However, at my core, the base of my emotions, I am still that child, desperately seeking approval from my father. Should I just accept this as part of who or what I am? No, I don't think so. How do I move beyond this predetermined role?

### **April 19, 1992**

Easter Sunday

If I were to describe my self as a religious, I would be a 'Doubting Thomas', always questioning, as a result, finding mysticism in the unanswerable questions. The answers are always based on blind faith. In this is the struggle. In blind faith there can be no sight, no show me, prove it.

Yet, spirituality has always played an integral part of my entire adult life, like a thread of a tapestry. This thread at times disappearing and at other times becoming visible, bold, the essence of

the picture. The thread is always there, visible or not, but so important to the structure of the tapestry.

**April 22, 1992**

7:30 p.m.

With each day I write, what are becoming very clear to me are my incredible inadequacies, those fundamental rights to my own humanness. Those basic ingredients needed to make us human. How, with my personal beginnings, I have survived with only a fragment of those rights. There is a void in me. The more I try to identify, the should-be contents of that void, the more aware I am of the void and my own inability to fill that great empty pit. Instinctively, I have known of the void since I was 12 years old. How? That is when I first felt that **I should not be**. The cover to that empty pit was closing. I was desperately trying to fill it before it closed. After what now seems an eternity, I am desperately searching for my humanness, trying to fix it.

Who am I?

Those things I have chosen, external and internal, to be consequential, believe in and trust are of a different reality. My reality of mind and the perception of the world around me is separate and apart.

I am not of this world.

My perception of the world around me is literally singular from my fellow humans, in the very way I see, respond intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. The importance, in life, of the search for universal truth through spirituality. The importance of the individual finding, accepting and loving their own definitive truth. The importance of balance between the natural world and human values. All as paramount in my life.

These choices have separated me from my peers, both philosophically and spiritually, and in this is the aloneness, the isolation I feel. Why did I make such choices? It was not to separate or to isolate myself from the world. I believe they are consequential and speak to the highest state of the human spirit.

One explanation I have found, I did not, of my own free will, make such choices. They all came to me perhaps in a mystical way as gifts and are now an indelible, intrinsic part of who I am. The resulting isolation is intended to lead me on a path of healing, which is not the path of least resistance. To make certain aspects of life more arduous in order to find a greater freedom. Nevertheless, the very gifts that brought on the isolation are the very gifts that sustain me.

**April 22, 1992**

5:00 a.m.

Once again, I'm sitting here, having told myself I need to spend more time writing . . . looking back.

My mind starts to search into what are now shadows.

My emotions start. . . sad. . . sadness wants to take over. . . I know if I allow this, I will spiral down. Down and down to self pity. . . No that's wrong.

So I look around me. . . out the window. . . I see, but I don't, my mind is preoccupied. . . I look at my desk, what's on it. . . the flowers from Easter are still in bloom, they look nice. . . a single candle burning. . . I stare at the light. . . another feeling. . . I want to connect with something, not an object, it's another time, another place. . . is my mind wanting to escape the moment. . . the feeling is real. . . I can feel a slight pressure in my eyes. . . they want to tear. . . my face feels long. Physically I even feel uneasy. . . my stomach is uneasy. . . it could be something I ate yesterday. I sigh. . . look out the window again.

In a classic sense, am I avoiding something. . . some heinous deed, buried deep in my sub-

conscience ? . . Maybe I suffer from terminal sadness. . . melancholia. . .

Could it be that I might be of value to other people? In my head, I hear my friends answer, "Of course you are, that's absurd for you to even think that." True. . . I am of value to them. . . The real question is, am I of value to myself?. . . There is a hole in me - a void - a sense of lacking - a space not occupied - something that should be there. Sadness again. . . my intellect wants to answer. . . there are lots of answers. . . no. . . it's something I want to feel, not justify. . . Sadness is the result of a symptom of the void. Sadness moves to grief. . . something I have lost. . .something I lost? Something I had, but no longer have? Or something I never had. . .

Something I never had? Feeling the void must also mean there is a space. . . an appointed place in me that is empty. Then this space can be filled. . .with what?

I think I know. . . It does not come from assurance from others. This essence has to come from within. . . Something you can not hold, put in a box, put on a shelf. It does have substance, but is intangible.

I feel I should go do something. . . action is only an escape from the void, to try and fill it with anything, to substitute the emptiness with distractions, sublimations. . .

When I feel dry inside,  
I seek to fill the void by my actions,  
I am not moving to God.

To seek the dryness out of love for Him.  
Then I know when the dryness comes,  
it is the soul emptying itself in order  
for God to fill it. . . .

"He that would save his soul will lose it."  
"He that would loose it for my sake will find it."



This is where the writing ended. The truth and my response to it. The hand written pages were put away, as I had an urgent mission to go to Steven.

When he left to go to Florida, we knew there was a chance he could not return. And such was the case. He was never able to return to his beloved mountains. He did see his mother, but later told me he could not release her. Shortly thereafter, he became ill and was hospitalized. I went to Florida to be with him.

Steven was in the hospital with his third bout with PCP (pneumocystis pneumonia). He was on ten liters of oxygen, the maximum. He was failing fast. The doctors told me it was only a matter of time, perhaps two or three days. At that point, I stayed in the hospital room with him day and night. One morning, I was at my vigil seated right next to him, holding his hand, listening and watching his breathing. He had a full face mask for oxygen, covering the nose and mouth. In order for him to speak and for me to understand him, I would slightly lift the mask and put my ear close. Steven motioned for me to lift his mask. He wanted to say something. I gently lifted the mask and listened. "Robert, am I going to die today?" Without thinking, I answered, "Steven I am not God, but I don't think so." He smiled and motioned for me to put the mask back down.

I knew without question Steven was a spiritual person, not religious. He was very private about his spirituality. He had many times told me he prayed, even if sometimes it was to win the lottery. He also knew

the story about the silver cross around my neck.

After his question, I became gravely concerned for Steven's soul. My only resource was my interpretation of what the church teaches about the soul and the hereafter. As Christians, we have been taught salvation -- being Saved. I also knew that if a man with his dying breath calls out to God, he is safe, his soul goes to the light. I must admit this teaching has a bit of fear in it and it is the teaching of fear that I am not comfortable with. However, at that moment with Steven, I was fearful. I felt I would do anything to ensure the salvation of his soul, this person I loved so much.

I squeezed Steven's hand and motioned to him, I wanted to tell him something. He shook his head that he understood. I said, "Steven, I want to give you something." He watched me as I reached around my neck and started to take off the silver cross. I saw a frown on his face. He shook his head back and forth telling me "NO." Then I heard him speak through the mask, "No, it's yours, you need it." I said, "I want you to have it." I had not ever taken the cross off since the bishop blessed it and placed around my neck.

I had taken the cross off by this time and was starting to put it on Steven. He asked, "Are you sure?" "Yes." I lifted his head and put the chain around his neck. I took his hand and put the cross in it, saying, "If ever you are afraid and I'm not here, just hold this, it will comfort you. HE will be near you, so will I." He smiled and drew his hand tight around the cross. I then leaned in close to his ear, "Will you repeat what I say?" He shook his head "Yes." "Blessed Jesus," "*Blessed Jesus,*" "have mercy on my soul," "*have mercy on my soul.*" As I pulled away from him, a sound came into my head. The sound of a great roar of wind, the roar became thousands of voices saying "Praise God." I was not alarmed by the sound, as something in me recognized it. I did what I thought was right and Steven did not die that day.

I have great reservations about sharing the last part of this story. One, because it is so personal and second, because I don't want to be judged incorrectly. I do not consider myself as wearing my faith on my sleeve. Nor do I consider myself to be a "Bible totin', Bible quotin', Bible thumpin', hypocrite. People like these frighten me because of their self-righteousness and [right-wing] judgments. What I did came from my care and love for this person. In no way was I arrogant enough to think that I, Robert, was going to save Steven's soul. I was truly humbled by his question, "Am I going to die today?" We needed some form of assurance that Steven's soul was safe. He, too, knew the significance of what was said. Call it what you may, but I believe the depth of that moment came only from our souls. Steven wore that cross with dignity until the end of his journey.

**September 11, 1992:** Steven was back in the hospital again. Again, the doctors had given him just a few days to live. He knew this and made it very clear to me that he wanted to go home to die. To accommodate his wish all the arrangements were made, Hospice was contacted. He needed a portable oxygen supply, medications and caregivers.

He was brought home in an ambulance, when all his support was in place. He told me he wanted only four days in order to say goodbye to his family. I know that sometimes these numbers are self-propheying. When the fourth day arrived, I was fearful that Steven might die. Not so, Steven had a miraculous recovery. His oxygen was slowly cut back and he started to gain weight. Jokingly I told him his recovery was due to steroids and a coconut custard pie every day. That's right. He would eat a whole pie a day. And so, my dear friend passed by death's door one more time, although each bout with PCP, left him weaker, but able.

I had been with Steven in Florida now for months. He was much better. I started thinking I needed to return to West Virginia. The house had been closed up, and I had obligations to take care of. At the same time, I was afraid to leave Steven. He could, at any time, take a turn for the worse. If I left, I might not see him again. Steven and his family had laid a heavy burden on me. They told me, including Steven, that whenever I left, Steven would get sick, and whenever I came back, he would get better. I believe this was just a coincidence. However, they believed this was true.

I was afraid to even mention to Steven that I had to go. I did not want to upset him. He was weak and

probably would never be well enough to return with me. We both knew this. I did not know what to do.

And then it happened, one of those indelible moments, out of the blue. Steven was laying on the couch, I sat down in a chair next to him. I had no idea what was about to come from my mouth. "You know, Steven, you will probably go before me." Calmly, he answered, "Yes." "I have to return to West Virginia." "I know." "When I leave, I'm not going to say goodbye, it won't be long and we will be together again." "Yes, I know." "I'll just say, see you soon." I paused, "When my time comes, and if I have difficulty, will you help me over?" His eyes opened wide and with a twinkle, he said, "Oh, yes, I will call you when it is your time." He smiled . . . "but don't shave, so I'll recognize you." We both laughed. I said, "I want to ask you something. You, more than anyone knows my love of the light." "The light?" "You will be in the light." "Oh, THE LIGHT." "Will you help me paint the Light?" "Yes! I'll help you see it -- if it's allowed," he smiled.

Then I said, "You know, I'm not afraid of dying, it's the process of getting there that frightens me. Steven: "I know, I agree, I won't be afraid when that time comes; I have no problem with that. It's the hell I am going to have to go through before that time comes."

I was so moved by that dialogue that later that evening, I wrote it down in order to remember what was said. I did return to West Virginia and Steven continued to improve. I returned for his birthday and Christmas and again in February of 1993. He was well enough to go out, but only for short periods of time. He was in good spirits, his old self again, full of his humor. There were times we completely forgot that he was sick. However, each day we were reminded when he had to take his medication. By the clock, six to eight times a day, it seemed like dozens of pills. He had become so accustomed to this, it really did not bother him. He never complained.

After my return home in February, I started to work on what would become a new series of paintings. There was something very different happening. One, about the paintings, and second my state of mind while working on them. I remembered clearly that dialogue with Steven about the Light. As I was working, I kept thinking "What will he see?" Steven and I were at peace with the inevitable. Something almost mystical was happening to me and the paintings. Again, it was my state of mind. As I worked, and images began to unfold before me, I thought "This is where he is going . . . this will be his vision." Even though we were a thousand miles apart, I felt a closeness to him, almost as if in some way he was already helping me to see the Light. I end up entitling the series "Circle of Light." While working on these paintings, Steven and I were in constant communication via the telephone. This was difficult, because neither of us could afford the long distance phone bills. We did try to discipline ourselves, but neither of us could go more than a couple of days without picking up the phone. Steven was always hard up for cash. Whether I could afford it or not, I would send him money to help pay his phone bill, or, closer to the truth, to keep his phone from being cut off. One such occasion, after I had sent him money to pay the phone bill, I received the following note.

The note is dear to me because it says so much about who Steven was, his humor and yes, who or what I was to him.

**April 23, 1993:**

*Robert: Once again thanks, not only do you save my life, you save my butt all the time too. For this, and all kinds of other reasons, I love you, and wish you were closer so I could see you and talk to you without it costing a fortune. You're the only person I can talk to about anything. I never had anybody like that, never, until now. Thanks for being my Guardian Angel, friend, soul-mate, and my everything. I love ya more than I love my luggage. Love ya! & Bear.*

On the side of the note he traced the outline of the silver cross and drew the chain.  
This was my last note from Steven.

**June 21, 1993:** Perhaps a week before this date, Steven and I were calling each other daily, sometimes

more than once a day. I'm not sure what prompted me, but I felt an urgent need to go see him. Now I know.

Steven did not tell me that he was becoming sick again. As I said, he would never complain. I did not know until his sister, Helen, called and told me he was getting worse, weight loss, fevers, throwing up, weakness. He had not been out of his room in a week. I immediately called him and fussed at him for not telling me he was sick. He tried to assure me that it was nothing, he would get over it in a few days. I said, "I want to come see you." He answered, "Don't you think it's too soon?" His soul answered me, and I knew what he meant. "No, Steven, it's not that, I just want to come see you."

He knew the story of my father's death and how I had released my father, telling him "you can go now." Steven thought I might tell him the same thing.

After the call to Steven, I called Annee to tell her I was going to Florida to see Steven and that he was not well. Off the top of my head, I said, it would be wonderful if she could go with me. Steven absolutely adored Annee. What a joy it would be for him to see Annee again. Much to Annee's and my surprise, Stanley thought it was a good idea. I called Steven back and told him Annee was coming with me. He was very happy.

**June 21 -- Morning:** I drove to the restaurant to pick up Annee and start our trip to Florida. While at the restaurant I told Annee I wanted to call Steven and tell him we were about to leave. And then it happened again. After I told him, we were all packed and about to go out the door. He said, "Do you think it is too soon?" I was not prepared for my response, "Do you think it's time?" He answered, "I don't know."

**June 22:** Annee and I arrived mid-day. I was so anxious to see Steven. His sister, Helen, met us at the door. She said Steven had been asking her all morning, "Are they here yet?" We followed Helen to his room. There he was, this beautiful soul, laid in bed in a fetal position. Helen said, "They're here." All he could do was raise his head, but oh, what a smile. Annee and I sat on the bed and gave him a big hug. He wanted to sit on the side of the bed. We had to help him. Then I knew. He was so frail, too weak to even stand up. As I looked into his eyes, the window of his soul, that spark that had always been there was dimmed. We knew, but our souls did not speak of it. Here we were, Steven and I, about to complete that journey started two years before.

I remember. . . .

. *"Robert, our relationship has moved to a higher plane it has become purely spiritual." "Yes, the highest realm of love."*

**June 22, Evening:** That night, Steven and I had a soulful conversation. "I'm so tired, tired of being sick. I have pneumonia again. I don't want any treatment." I said nothing. I acknowledged by moving my head with a Yes. We understood each other. No more was said.

Love can let go.

**June 23:** There was a sliding-glass door to the outside from Steven's room. Earlier that spring, with the help of his brother Mike, Steven had planted a garden just outside this door. The garden was small, only about 4 feet by 6 feet. He had planted a couple of tomato plants, squash and, oh yes, lots of flowers. In the afternoon, Steven said he had not looked at his garden in some days and he would like to see it. There were a number of people there, his sister Helen, his niece Lisa, Annee and me. We all scurried around to help Steven have his wish. "I'll get a stool for him to sit on. I'll open the door. Steven, are you warm enough, do you need a jacket?" We all wanted so much to please him. He could not walk on his own. We got him up, standing, and with Annee on one side and me on the other, he would take very small steps, almost a shuffle.

We got him outside and seated on the stool. He bent over so he could be close to his plants. I stepped a few feet away and took a long look at him.

How can I describe what I saw? He was so thin, his face gaunt, he literally looked like a very old man. However, there was something else. He was so much at peace and there was a look of great wisdom on his face. I noticed that he was starting to sway, so I quickly moved behind him and took hold of his shoulders in order to steady him. It felt nice to touch him. He leaned back against me. I felt a sigh from his body. *"Robert, you know what I have done with the rose bushes? I have let the long stems grow up through the briars so*

*that the blossoms can reach the Light of the Golden Gate."*

At first, this did not make sense to me because there were no rose bushes in his garden. It took a moment for me to fully understand what he was saying. I was the only one present who understood the significance. He was speaking of his rose garden in West Virginia. He knew when the light of summer began to dim, his roses would reach for the light. *"Reach for the Light of the Golden Gate."*

A short time later, he wanted to go back inside. I helped him stand and walk to the door. Once there, Steven was his old self. "I can make it by my self." He crawled on his hands and knees inside and sat up yoga style. "See, I can still get around."

All the others that were with him seemed to disappear into the other part of the house, leaving Steven and I alone. I was setting on the floor with him. We somehow ended up in the same Yoga position. Facing each other, knees touching. Looking eye to eye, smiling at each other. He reached out and pulled my hands to him. There was no conversation, we were just "being". For a moment we were collected, so untroubled, touching and looking, being one.

Annee later told me that she started to enter the room, but stopped at the door when she saw us. She said she knew something spiritual was happening. "The two of you were glowing, there was an aura around both of you."

That night, Annee prepared a beautiful meal, jumbo shrimp and pasta. I truly do not think he was hungry, but with Annee's help he ate what he could. He knew it would make us happy to see him eat. After dinner, he wanted to hear some music. The music was soft and slow. Annee turned to him and asked him if he would like to dance. He looked confused as if to say, "How." Annee stood up in front of him, putting her arms under his, she pulled him up until he was standing. She put his arms over her shoulders and had him put his feet on hers. It was almost as if she was dancing with a rag doll. He smiled and held onto Annee, as they slow danced around the room.

At 10:00 p.m., Steven had his medication to take, and, we were all tired. Annee and I stayed in the room with him. She slept on the couch and I slept on a mattress on the floor. It was time to put Steven to bed. Annee was perhaps already asleep. The lights had been turned off except for Steven's bedside lamp. He was sitting on the side of the bed taking his pills. I left the room for just a minute. When I came back, I do not believe Steven heard me. As I approached him, I reached out and touched him on the shoulder. He drew back almost as if frightened. I said, "Do what you have to." I have pondered those words many times as they were the last words I would say to Steven. I believe my soul and I spoke simultaneously with two different meanings. For me, these words were said with anger, for my soul knew that Steven would soon part. My conscious mind knew none of this. I only felt the emotion of loss. Steven was going to leave me and I was angry, "Do what you have to." His soul and mine both knew . . . it was "Time."

**June 24, 1993:** It was two years to the day when I took Steven to the hospital for the first time, when he was diagnosed with AIDS.

It was my soul that saw and understood these happenings. For the two of us, there was a weaving in-and-out of this plane and the next. For me, the needs of this side, for Steven, the expectations of another state, where he was becoming more and more pure love. The closer he came to the end of his journey, the concerns of our finite existence were no longer meaningful.

**7:00 a.m.:** As usual, I was the first one up. It was time for Steven's medications and to fix his breakfast. As I headed for the kitchen, I walked past Steven in bed. He was propped up with pillows, he could sleep better that way. I paused for just a moment to look at him, then went to the kitchen and started to fix his breakfast. Something told me to go back. Something was not right. I dropped what I was doing, and returned to Steven's bedside and looked at him. He seemed to be resting peacefully. I reached out and touched his hand. It was cool. I felt his face, it was cool. I put my hand on his chest, he was breathing. I softly said "Steven," he did not answer. My whole being knew.

I went to Annee and woke her. "It's Time. It's Steven. Get up, but you don't have to rush." I then

went into the other part of the house and woke Lisa. I told her the same. I called Helen, Wayne (a friend of Steven's) and Hospice. It seemed only minutes would pass when all were at Steven's bedside. The nurse from Hospice examined him and turned to me and said, "You are right Robert, it won't be long." We tried to contact the rest of his family. Most were on their way. Annee, Lisa and Wayne were on the bed with him. Helen, the two people from Hospice and I were standing next to the bed. Those on the bed with him through weeping voices, pleaded with him not to go.

His work was finished. The separation between this world and the next was ending. Lisa said, "He stopped breathing."

*It was over.*

*This gentle soul was gone,  
"Reaching for the Light of the Golden Gate"*

*I stood frozen, locked in time, listing  
as a great cry rose from all  
"No, No"*

*I went to him,  
held him in my arms,  
with aching tears  
removed the silver cross from around his neck  
replaced it on mine,  
then ever so carefully lowered him back onto the pillow.*

*Annee said,  
Sweet dreams, my Prince.*

*Those with AIDS, through their suffering and death  
have taught us  
“It is a Gift of Love.”*

*This blessing was not unique to just Steven and me.  
Whenever the Gift of Love is present  
there is a communion of souls.  
The entire meaning of Steven and I meeting  
and the union that followed  
had but one purpose  
to be together these moments in time.  
Being gay had nothing to do with it.  
It was true and **human**.*

The morning that Steven died, I had a phone call from Jack Hepworth. Jack had called me at home in West Virginia first. The answering machine did not answer, because of this he figured that I was away, as the machine is always on when I am at home. He then called the Cottage in order to find me. They told him that I was in Florida with Steven.

The reason he was so persistent in trying to find me had to do with a vision he experienced of Steven the night before. He did not know that Steven had passed away that morning. When the call came, I thought Jack somehow found out that Steven had died. However, when I took the phone, Jack said, "Is Steven all right?" I answered, " Oh Jack he passed away this morning." Jack was audibly upset and offered his concern for me.

If there was any one person that I wanted to speak to at that moment in time, it was Jack, my closest friend. He then told me about the events that took place the night before. He had gone to a symphony concert in San Francisco. He said the last work was a Mozart symphony. In the middle of this work, he began to think of Steven for no apparent reason. He could not get him off his mind. Then he began to see an image of Steven. Jack said Steven's image was very vivid and distracting, so much so that he could not concentrate on the music. I asked what time this took place. He said it would have been around 11:00 p.m. west coast time. This would have been 2:00 a.m. in the morning in Florida. Jack said that the vision bothered him so much, he had to call me to see if Steven was all right. My only explanation is perhaps Steven slipped into a coma in the early morning, around 2:00 a.m., just hours before he died. This would coincide with the time Jack had the vision of Steven.

There is a meadow here, off to the side of the house. This meadow rises and becomes a dome-shaped hill. At the top, in the center, stands a tall hickory tree. We knew this tree well, Steven and I. It had been the subject of many of my paintings over the years. One of those paintings I gave to Steven. On one of my trips to Florida to be with him, I took the painting, and we hung it next to his bed.

In one of those many intimate conversations, we talked about what his wishes would be after he was gone. He said he wanted to be cremated and wanted me to take a portion of his ashes back to West Virginia and scatter them up on the hill under that tree. He said it was comforting to have the painting of the tree next to his bed. We also talked about his service, he wanted Father Reece to officiate and the service be held in the studio. The music he wanted, Michael Jackson's *Gone Too Soon* and *Will You Be There*, and the Neville Brothers *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*. All was done as he requested.

In the morning the day after the service, everyone had gone. Alone, I walked up the hill and sat under the tree. The ground was covered with his ashes. As I sat there, I picked up a few of the tiny bone chips and truly pondered the meaning of life. Looking at the fragments in my hand, I thought, is this all there is? I came back to the house and wrote Steven a letter.

*Dear Steven:*

*It is Sunday, July the 11th, 1993. It is the day after your funeral  
and the scattering of your ashes.*

*I am still numb with disbelief  
All that I am is challenged  
My mind knows the truth,  
as I witnessed your passing  
But my heart does not accept that truth.*

*Even my faith is challenged  
Believing you have passed on into the Light.  
All I have done is speak of that faith  
But I am frightened of my mind which doubts  
Doubts of your immortality.*

*Doubts that we are no more immortal  
than the tree we scattered your ashes under.  
That my heart ache is no more than what makes  
that tree lose its leaves in the Fall.  
My heart ache is no more than  
your ashes giving nourishment to that tree.*

*My love for you is no different  
the tree will wither without light.*

Months passed after Steven's death before I began to paint again. The reason was complex, but clear. My hesitation to begin work was based on that dialogue with Steven about the Light.

*"You will be in the Light"*

*"Will you help me paint the Light?"*

*"Yes! I'll help you see it."*

Did I believe this? Do I believe what he said? The more I thought about Steven and the Light, the more I began to perhaps understand what it would mean for him to "help me see the Light." I asked him to help me paint. He did not answer with, "I'll help you paint." It was to *see*.

At first, I thought it would be technical, what brush, what colors, well a little more than that, but basically how to, the craft of painting. Steven knew I had the craft. The more I processed this in my head, I began to understand more. In order to paint the Light, I had to understand the Light; not as an image, but its meaning in life. The Light of the world, my Light, his Light. And still through all this thinking was a hesitation, not knowing, whether it was doubt or even fear. Would this union between souls continue, that connection made visible through the first painting I would paint after his passing? I would bring all of this to that first painting. How would all this translate into an image?

When I did start to work, the first painting, then the second, and third, my conscious mind was focused on his vision, that place where he was. What would that light be like? The light of eternity.

### **August 10, 1993**

I was again sitting on the porch with Bear, relaxed by the tranquility of a summer afternoon, having a glass of iced tea. From the porch I could see the hill and the Hickory tree, reminders of memories. Two years ago Steven sat here before me. I wanted to return to the past, but all I had were reflections, daydreaming about happier times. I was still in a daze, not at all thinking clearly. As I was sitting there, I heard way off in the distance, the muted sound of a helicopter. I scanned my eyes across the distant mountains. There it was, just a tiny speck. I watched the movement and listened as both almost faded. My mind moved back to mousing about Steven. But then, the sound of the helicopter came back, only this time it was loud and getting louder. Even Bear became alarmed. I stood up and walked to the back of the porch, in the direction the sound was coming from. Like a giant specter with deafening sound, this enormous military helicopter rose up out of the valley behind the house and hovered above me and the tree tops. I stood there watching with amazement. Looking up at people in the helicopter looking down at me. Why was this happening? I thought, oh it's one of those commercial photographers taking an ariel photograph of the house and then they will try and sell it to me. No, I looked down onto the steps coming up on to the porch. There amongst the potted Geraniums were several small, skinny, half dead potted marijuana plant. Standing there looking at the source of a thundering sound, I did not know what to do.

The helicopter started to move off toward the front of the house, out of sight. I panicked and out of the most basic instinct for survival hastily sniped off the plants and put them in a trash can. Bear and I then walked to the front of the house to the sight of this thunder from hell, landing. The Hickory tree was twisting and bending from the wind as the helicopter landed on that hill, on hollowed ground.

This gray haired old man and his Cocker Spaniel stood there and watched in disbelief as State Police and National Guardsmen ran, bearing weapons, wearing battle fatigues, stormed us and our home. (Please . . . laugh with me, this was such a ludicrous and outlandish picture.)

When they reached Bear and me, I greeted the State Police lieutenant whom I had known socially for years. He did not answer me as I followed all to the back of the house and the steps to the porch. Then he said, "Alright Robert, where are they?" I said in the trash can. I asked the lieutenant if we could please go in the house because the sound of the helicopter was deafening. Inside he immediately asked if they could search the

house without a search warrant. I said of course, "I have nothing to hide." And search they did, leaving nothing unturned. By the time they started searching the studio I was being helpful, opening doors and cabinets.

The Studio was still setup as a chapel from Steven's funeral. On the *Alter* was a votive candle burning. Next to it a miniature wooden box containing a few tiny bone chips I had picked up the morning after Steven's service.

I was in another room, helping, when I heard one of the officers say, "Ah, I found something, I think it's crack." I walked around the corner to see this person holding the small box and with his finger examining it's contents. The hair on my neck bristled. "If I were you, I'd put that back . . . right were you found it . . . NOW! You are holding human cremains, not a drug." I felt the sanctity of Steven, our home and the hill had been grossly violated. Steven's name was never mentioned.

To add insults to injury, I was asked if I was producing porno videos. I had been editing together all the videos I had of Steven as a memorial for his family. The lieutenant stood before the piles of tape and editing equipment. "Are you making a porno film?"

For the first time in my life I was arrested, jailed, finger printed, photographed, and humiliated before the many curious on lookers at the court house. I did call a lawyer who met me at the jail. I would be charged with manufacturing a controlled substance for distribution, a felony. He explained I could have my home and land confiscated, a \$50,000 fine and ten years in the penitently.

After a hearing before the magistrate, was released on bail, putting up my home as collateral.

The next day I wrote a letter to my attorney and the prosecuting attorney in my own defense. I also realized that if I told the truth I would be revealing the truth about Steven which I had tried protect. It would also mean for me to "Come Out" to this community. I had nothing to be ashamed of.

### **August 11, 1993**

To Whom It May Concern:

I, Robert Singleton am not a drug dealer, nor have ever been. I am a proponent of the law, and am not a dishonest person nor a threat to society.

I came to West Virginia 15 years ago on a spiritual sojourn earnestly seeking the truth, to try philosophically and theologically to unravel the many questions I had about this journey we call life. As the years have passed and life on this hill have unfolded, I may have found a few answers, one of which is a great respect for the truth, to be honest with one's self and to unconditionally respect my fellow man's truth without judgment.

To me, the law is either black or white. It has to be clear and defined with no ambiguity. However, life is neither black nor white. Life is experienced between the many subtle shades of gray, full of ambiguities. With your indulgence, I would like to tell the truth about the life and death events which culminated on August 10, 1993.

In June of 1988, Steven Russell, a close friend from Florida, came to West Virginia to share life with me in this wonderful, unspoiled sanctuary. We both had our own vocations, he as a photographer and I as a painter. It was a healthy symbiotic relationship. As a result, we both grew in our own independent disciplines.

June 24, 1991 was a black day. Steven was diagnosed with a terminal illness, full blown AIDS. I shall never forget that day. I made a pledge to Steven that I would stay with him and help him with whatever he needed. I would be with him and support him to his death.

As this heinous disease began to take its toll, we began to reach out to the many support systems. You must understand even as I write this letter there is no cure or effective treatment.

The many drugs Steven was prescribed were experimental, all of which were extremely toxic. Many times these drugs would make Steven even sicker. I stayed up many nights as Steven continued

to vomit, or try to help him through periods of anxiety and depression which come with any terminal illness.

We had been told many times by the AIDS underground that marihuana would stop the vomiting, increase his appetite and help with his anxiety, even though possession of marihuana was illegal. He was able to procure an amount of marihuana and smoked it. The drug was indeed a panacea, particularly when Steven had to have 21 days of chemotherapy.

Fortunately, he had short periods of total remission. During one of these remissions, he grew a few marihuana plants in order to have it when he needed it. I must stress that these plants were grown for his own use and not for distribution.

The following year there were many medical crises, transporting him to Florida in order to tell his family the truth about his illness. There were many times the plants were left on their own to fend for themselves. My focus was completely on Steven's needs and not the law pertaining to the small amount of marihuana growing on my back porch.

On June 24, 1993, Steven passed away after a heroic battle. I was with him and he died with peace in his heart. I know I made a poor judgment, but my judgment in the last weeks has been clouded by Steven's death. There are many things in this house that were Steven's. His clothing, hats, etc. I have not been able to bring myself to put them away or even move them. I am not ready to let him go. Such was the case of the plants. There was no other intent in keeping the plants other than symbolically, the plants were alive, a living presence against the heartbreaking reality that Steven is dead.

If I have committed a crime against society, then all that is right, all that is good, is of no value.

I will not recant the many events that took place before the trial other than I changed lawyers, wrote a brief in my own defense, was asked to give names of "other drug dealers" as an attempt to plea bargain and finally the charges were reduced to a misdemeanor.

There were a number of court dates with me always showing up. On the first trial date my lawyer did not show nor did the "arresting officer." I was there the Judge and the Prosecutor. All present knew that if the proceedings had started without the arresting officer, by law the charges would have been dropped. Neither the Judge nor the Prosecutor volunteered to act on this law.

When the word of this event reached my many friends a chain reaction of letters started arriving to me and the lawyer. All these letters were addressed to the judge as testimonials on my behalf. Although none of these letters, my letters or my brief were ever presented to the Court. Nevertheless, under the stress of that time, for my friends to come to my defense with such fervor, caused me to truly know how blessed I was.

Finally, on my birthday, December 13, 1993, the trial was held with a plea of no contest. The trial was not a trial at all, just a formality. Still, it was unconventional. No one present wanted to be associated with me. Even my lawyer would not sit with me as the proceeding took place. I asked if I could present my case or the stack of letters I had with me. I never uttered one word in my defense. All the terms had been prearranged. I was given a \$1000 fine plus ninety days in jail (suspended). One year probation plus \$82 court cost. I was told by the Judge that if I broke probation, "You will serve the ninety days in jail."

How and why this happened I will never know. There was one theory based on what eventually happened to Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and her center. Elisabeth's life had been threatened, her pet Lama shot and killed and her home burned to the ground. All because of her association with AIDS and gays. There are those who believe what happened to me was an attempt to harass or get me to leave. After all I was queer and probably had AIDS. Elisabeth did close the center and left the area because the State Police and the local Sheriff told her they could no longer be responsible for her safety or life.

**November 25, 1993**

It was a cold and bitter wind that blew across the mountain top. The ground crunched under our feet as we made our way up the hill. It was just two of us, James a neighbor who knew Steven and myself. Our strained voices echoed off the stark landscape as we struggled to carry the heavy granite stone. My heart bounded from the strain and anticipation of reaching the crest of the hill. It had started to snow as we reached the top and I looked up at the Hickory tree. It was stately, as I watched the snow flacks filter down through the barren branches. Falling to the ground, blending with the still visible tiny bone chips. At the foot of the tree, lay the dried remains of a bouquet of flowers Annee had put there the day of the funeral. She had tied all blue flowers with a blue ribbon, "to match his blue eyes." I picked up the bouquet and told James this is where we should place the stone. It was Steven's 29 birthday. After placing the stone, I spoke to Steven. "Happy birthday my friend, this is your birthday present from all of us who love you and miss you so very much."

Here lies the ashes of  
STEVEN GRANT RUSSELL  
Nov. 25, 1964 - June 24, 1993  
Gone too soon

Little did we know this would be the first of many stones to be placed on the hill.

#### **January 30, 1994**

Up until this date I had not allowed myself the catharsis of purging my grief over the loss of Steven. There had been many moments of being choked up with tears, but almost out of necessity from the day he died, I had become stoic. The responsibility of taking care of all the finale arrangements fell on my shoulders. I knew what he wanted. However, to meet the needs of his family, a spontaneous memorial service was organized and held in his room just two days after his passing. I was asked to deliver the eulogy which I lovingly did. But, I needed the composure to deliver it and also embrace his family as they had always looked to me for council throughout his illness and now with their own loss and grief. I was heart sick and knew the healing that can come from crying out. I wanted to, but the longer I continued on without this purging, the more difficult it became. Even the ordeal with the law robbed me of both my dignity and prolonged the grieving process.

Bear was now fifteen years of age and very much an old man. My *other* loving campaign had also reached his end.

The day began with one of those horrific January ice storms that had me marooned up on this mountain. Bear had been failing with the veterinarian telling me that his kidneys were about to shut down. I did not want him to suffer. Painfully knowing what had to be done. I put it off twenty-four hours too long. I spent the night before on the floor with him, wanting to comfort and be close to him. He had already started to be in pain with whimpering. As I was iced in, I could not get him to the veterinarian. At 6:00 a.m., I called her about Bear being in pain. She said with her four wheel drive truck, she could make it up my driveway. She was on her way. I wanted it to be over as quickly as possible knowing a grave had to be dug through the ice and frozen ground. I called James, the neighbor, who also loved Bear and told him what was occurring and what had to be done. He and his father volunteered to hike up the mountain and dig the grave. They arrived before the veterinarian and wanted to know where . . . "Up on the hill with Steven."

When the veterinarian arrived, I met her at the front door. She immediately put her arms around me and said she understood my anguish. Bear was on his pillow looking out the window, his favorite place. The doctor and I sat on the floor next to him talking to him as the doctor gave him the lethal shot. He did not even notice, just stared out the window. I asked the doctor, "Is he." "Yes." I reached for him with an overwhelming cry. My entire insides came apart, wrenched with despair. Uncontrollably my core ripped open with a flood of belated wailing and tears. The veterinarian put her arms around me with a consoling voice. "I understand." "You don't understand. It's Steven . . . my Steven. I have not wept for him, grieved with tears . . . and now Bear."

We sat on the floor, in front of Bear, as I purged the long past due.

I wrapped Bear with his toys in his blanket and carried his little body up the hill. James and his father were there waiting, leaning on the digging irons used to break open the frozen earth. I stepped down into the puncture of the earth and laid Bear there. "He doesn't belong here." I weep for days . . . until I was dry. The healing began, *but my house was empty.*

#### **Tell him he can go**

May 30, 1994

Just ten months after Steven's passing, the end of April 1994, I received a phone call from Butch. I

knew from previous calls that he was not doing well and that he was experiencing the beginning of AIDS related dementia. However, in this phone conversation, he sounded clear and lucid. At the first, I wanted to know how he was doing and with his usual humor he started describing this gorgeous male nurse that was taking care of him as part of Home Health. "I'm in love, he is tall, blond, dark tan, a surfer-type. Oh, Robert, He's Gorrreous!" I laughed, "You always know how to pick 'em." There was more of his humor as I tried to find out tactfully how he was medically.

There was suddenly an awkward pause. Butch broke the silence saying. "Robert, there's only one person I want to be with and only one place I want to be." "Butch, do you want to come up here?" He answered with a strong, "Yes." I knew what he meant. Using symbolic language, not saying with direct language, he was asking if he could come here to die. "Butch, you know you are welcome for as long as you like. I would love for you to be here. I will take care of you . . . I know what I will do with you." "What?" "I'm going to get two rocking chairs and put them on the porch. The two of us can sit like two old geezers and just rock away. We'll watch the sunset over the mountains." He laughed, "Oh I'm gonna love it."

All the preparations were made including a number of phone conversations with Butch's mother and father. They were agreeable for their son to come here to live out his last months.

The day arrived for Butch to come to the mountains of West Virginia. His mother was to take him to the Daytona regional airport and I would pick him up here at a local airport. I left early in order to find two rocking chairs, which I did. Then off to the airport to meet Butch as he got off the plane. I was very excited to see my dear friend. The plane arrived, but no Butch. I went to the service counter and inquired about my missing friend. They had his name, but said he never got on the airplane in Daytona.

When I returned home there was a message on the answering machine from Butch's mother. He became very sick at the airport, too sick to make the trip. I placed the two rocking chairs on the porch and stood there looking at them thinking how Butch would have loved sitting there with his friend. It was never to happen.

A week later I received a call from Butch's father. Butch was in the hospital and in very bad shape. I quote, "If Butch can't come to the mountain, can the mountain come to him." His mother and father wanted to fly me to Orlando in order to be with Butch.

Within a few days I was at Butch's bedside and there I stayed for seven days, spending the last three nights on a cot next to him. The first full day I was there Butch recognized me with a big grin. He was never once able to speak but, oh, the expression in those big eyes. I have many times seen that mischievous twinkle in those eyes. His body was almost skeletal making his eyes appear even bigger. That is how he could communicate, through those eyes. At times he would roll them as a response to what someone had said. Like, "Get her," or "You've got to be kidding." Always with humor.

The second day I was with Butch, we were alone with me sitting next to him on the bed. I thought, "It's time." I reached around my neck and removed the silver cross and chain. It had not been removed since I replaced it there shortly after Steven passed away. I held it in front of Butch. "Do you know what this is?" He smiled and nodded yes. "May I." As I started to place it over his head, his eyes opened even wider with a look of expecting me to say more. "Do you know what it means? . . . Let's just call it insurance." There was an even bigger smile when the chain and cross were on him. I put the cross in his hand just like I did for Steven. I watched as Butch too drew his hand tight around the cross. "Sweetheart, don't worry. You are going to do just fine, you're safe." He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The gathering of family at a loved one's death bed can many times be difficult. Such was the case of Butch's family. His mother and father had been divorced for years. His younger brother had not spoken to Butch or their mother in a long time. His sister and father seemed to be the only two that would communicate with the entire family.

Butches' impending death brought his family together. For the first time in years the entire family met awkwardly under one roof. For his brother and sister the death of a sibling was traumatic, they had not witnessed the death of a loved one. They both expressed their fear to me, not knowing what to say or what to

do for their dying brother. Butches' brother told me he was afraid to even go into the room. In a conversation just outside Butch's room he said, "It's been a long time since I have seen him. I don't know what to say." "You don't have to say anything. Just be yourself, sit next to him. If you want, take his hand in yours. He will know you are there and that is all that counts," at which point I opened the door to Butch's room. "It's all right, you have nothing to be afraid of. You don't have to say anything." He cautiously entered the room. I gently closed the door behind him. Alone with Butch, his brother stayed in the room for half an hour. From that point on Butch's brother visited him daily.

I describe Sissy, Butch's sister with great affection. Even though she said I was there for Butch and his family, she was there for me. Yes, I too was in pain over the eminent loss of my lifelong friend.

I had not seen her in many years. There was an instant recognition and bonding as we reminisced about Butch and the years I lived in Florida. However, the conversations moved to the immediacy of the moment. What was happening to Butch? As best I could I counseled *on death and dying*, stating the importance of a union, through love, with Butch. He was going to depart this life and as his loved ones, it was our love for him that could help him make that transition. "It's all right to help him, release him. He is ready, tell him he can go." Within a few hours Sissy was accepting as the two of us became the constant that was at Butch's bedside.

I shared with Sissy my feelings about Butch's last days being spent in the antiseptic environment of a hospital. Unfortunately circumstances did not allow him to be any other place. We knew that if Butch had his way he would have chosen some place outrageous. What could we do for Butch? We talked about kidnaping him from the hospital and taking him to the beach he loved so much. We would wrap him in blankets, prop him up and let him spend his last hours watching the sunrise. Not to be foiled, I found a tape recording of the sounds of the surf. The next day Sissy brought to the hospital a portable tape player. She had also made a special trip to the beach to gather up sand which was put in a child's beach bucket. We set the stage for Butch, the sound of the surf as Sissy helped Butch put his hand in the bucket of sand. He rolled his eyes at both of us as a big smile came on his face. It was the least we could do.

For a mother and father to lose a child disrupts all that is inherent in the natural course of human life. Even though Butch's mother and father had been devoiced for years, this unnatural order of survival brought them together. A lot of mutual anger and pain was forgiven as they united in support of each other through the common bond that was their dying son.

And so my friend Butch became a teacher of unconditional love. His family healed and came together out of love for him and each other.

Early one morning after I spent the night next to him, I awoke and looked in the direction of his bed. There he was, staring at me, as if he had been waiting for me to wake up. He never took his eyes off me as I sat up. We looked at each other with such power. I was mesmerized by the knowing and love that was in his eyes, something he knew that I didn't. A knowing that I have seen too often, a knowing that the time is near. I felt his peace. By mid day, Butch's life was indeed waning. He fought all day to let go as all of us coaxed him not to suffer anymore. But, the body is a machine that does not like to surrender. Not until the late hours of that night, surrounded by loved ones, did he take his last labored breath. With Sissy's help we reverently removed the silver cross and I replaced it around my neck. Butch was gone . . .

Butch's remains were cremated, but nothing had been determined for a memorial service. I shared with his family the story about Steven wanting a service here and his ashes being put up on the hill. I offered a place on the hill for Butch. It was a welcomed suggestion by his entire family.

Shortly after my return home I received a letter from Sissy. Here is a portion of that letter.

June 4, 1994

My dearest Robert,

After days of thought and deliberation, I have concluded that there is simply no way I can put into writing the message I so passionately want to convey to you. Words seem trite and extremely inadequate when trying to express the multitude of feelings I have been privileged to experience as a

result of your visit and Butch's death. Either event, singularly, would have certainly affected me, but the beauty with which you gently and gracefully guided both Butch's and my introduction to death has had a profound impact on my life. Your positive influence on one of the most dreaded and misunderstood events in life has not only created wonderful memories, but has instilled in me a strong desire to continue your work with others.

I continue to marvel at God's goodness! Two weeks ago I was praying for strength to enable me to get through Butch's impending death: scared of how I might react: and wondering how I could ever deal with the consequential feelings of not being there for him due to my fears and inadequacies. Then, poof!, a name from the past surfaces and the answer to my prayers walks through the hospital doors (and you thought you were there for Butch!). Indeed you were there for Butch, for all of us present, and for all those who will yet be touched by the reverberations of your mission.

I can't thank you enough for your visit and the love and compassion given to Butch and the family. The moment we hugged each other, I sensed an instant "knowing"; a bond that had just been renewed, one which has linked us together for a long, long time.

"Sissy"

A month later, Butch's mother and father flew here bringing his ashes. On June 24, 1994, the first anniversary of Steven's passing, a second service was held in the studio and up on the hill with Fr. Reece officiating. A stone had already been placed to welcome Butch. A small portion of his ashes was held back and later scattered on the ocean in Florida by his friends.

ROBERT A. BAIRD II

"Butch"

October 5, 1947 - May 30, 1994



A month and half after Butch died marked the beginning of a memorial in memory of Steven Russell. He had told me numerous times during his illness how much at peace he was here. And how he didn't think he could handle being sick any other place but here. "You know, it would be nice if other people, sick people, could find the peace I have found here." I remembered his words and probably at first, out of my own grieving, wanted to make his words a reality. Having been his primary care person for two years, I knew first hand how hard it is to watch a loved one slowly succumb to this virus.

My wish was to turn this place into a retreat for Care givers. It would be called Russell House, a living memorial to Steven. So my commitment to other AIDS patients stemmed from memory of Steven or in memory of him. This gave me a greater sense of mission in life.

I began with great enthusiasm, sharing my idea with many people. Researching the need for such a retreat. There was no such facility located in the entire eastern part of the country. There was one, only one in the entire country, that one being north of San Francisco. Without question, there was a great need.

A little more than a year after Steven's passing, July 19, 1994, there was a meeting held here in the studio. Attending from all over the country was a large group of friends and acquaintances I had managed to pool together in order to help Russell House become a reality.

It was a bitter sweet gathering as all present were genuinely excited and supportive of my dream. Yet, nearly everyone present had been touched in some way by a loss due to this virus, they identified with the need. However, for those who had not felt the anguish of loss, by the time they left the meeting they knew first hand someone who was nearing death from this infection.

My life long friend Jack had planed one more trip to the east coast to see and say goodbye to members of his family and to come here to be with me to begin his "Closure." A failing Jack gathered up enough strength to speak to the group.

He absolutely shined as he spoke, articulate, holding nothing back as he sheared his story and that his life was soon to end. He disclosed his last wish of, "Robert, my best friend, I have asked him to see to it that my ashes be scattered up on the hill." When he was nearing the close of his powerful words, he said, "I don't want any of you to leave here feeling down . . . please . . . I would like to share with you a conversation I had a few days ago with my oldest daughter. I was trying to console her . . . *As heinous and painful as this disease is, it is a gift of love.*"

## Mission

*Russell House* is a sanctuary for the caregivers of the HIV/AIDS community including doctors, nurses, counselors, administrators, volunteers, family and life partners.

*Russell House* is a sanctuary for those on life's journey living with HIV/AIDS. A safe, loving environment which can add quality and dignity to the lives of its guests.

*Russell House* is a true human and wildlife sanctuary, a totally spiritual and creative environment; Located on a remote mountain top, protected by acres of unspoiled forest providing complete privacy.

*Russell House* is a place where you can take the TIME to rest, to heal and be introspective. You will find your own SPACE to breathe freely, search for answers and experience quiet.



This was the mission of my dream. At the meeting all agreed this place was perfect for a retreat house. It is indeed a sanctuary. All with their various talents and skills offered to volunteer and participate in the operation of Russell House.

What was needed to accommodate the guest? I presented to the group a full set of architectural plans, I had drawn, showing the wing to be added onto this house. There would have been four bed rooms with private baths, common space and kitchen with a cost estimate of \$100,000. This amount included all furnishings, full kitchen and disabled accessible bathrooms.

At the conclusion of the meeting I felt encouraged, but it was up to me to promote and raise the funds. I put together a packet of material including a twenty minute video highlighting the speakers at the meeting, including Jack's poignant words.

Here is the cover letter:

Dear Friends:

I am writing you this letter about a subject that is so urgent, truly a matter of life and death. I am speaking on behalf of those living with HIV/AIDS and their caregivers.

As the AIDS epidemic continues to grow at an alarming rate, the caregivers are proportionately suffering from complete burnout. For the caregiver, in the midst of stress, exhaustion, grief and loss, there is an urgent need to stop and find a quiet place. Caregivers are indeed "wounded healers." Who cares for the caregivers? ?

Russell House will give these people what is so needed, a retreat from the front lines of this epidemic where they may find a respite, a safe sanctuary.

My dream for Russell House stems from such personal experiences, first as a close friend, then as a primary care person. In the past decade, I have witnessed the loss of almost all my lifelong

friends. In part, Russell House already exists, my home, which is located on a remote mountain top in rural West Virginia, has well served those lifelong friends as a sanctuary. My dream is to expand the existing structure in order to allow more people, on an ongoing basis, to benefit from this safe and loving environment.

Life's clock is running at an accelerated rate for too many. Time is running out for even more.

Please help me give these wounded souls a place to heal.

Sincerely yours,  
Robert E. Singleton

I produced and mailed twenty-seven of these packets to individuals and corporations I had some kind of personal relationship with. There was not one response, not even an acknowledgment of receiving the material. Not even a thank you, but no thank you. So the dream withered on the vine. To quote a friend, "Robert, you have all the right ideas, you are just in the wrong place." However, what is most important, there was a positive spin off. There was no building but, Russell House became a mission for a small group of loving individuals. I believe that mission can best be expressed the following way: *Keep us mindful that we are here not to preform Great Tasks, but small ones with Great Kindness and Love.* There was a need right here, in our own small community. The mission became one person at a time.

Even though I had some previous connection with George Clayton, he was the first to be embraced by the support of this group.

I had already been living this mission, reaching far beyond these mountains.



### **Under the watchful gaze of a full moon**

(Incomplete)

Jack and I had pledged we would be together when his time came. Not to many years before he called me from St. Thomas with the news of the result of his blood test. Positive. We both knew what the results would be long before the blood was even drawn. He had waited a lengthy time, not wanting know, not wanting to have an official conformation of what he already recognized. All, bar a few of his many lovers, were already gone. The odds were very much against him. Still, to be told, to hear those very words, "You are HIV positive." Shattering all hope, any chance, that by some fluke of fate you're not going to be sick, spared. This was not to be the case for my brother of brothers.

Even though we were thousands of miles apart, we wept, together. My soul screamed an inaudible scream, *No, not again, not Jack.* How many more, dear God, are you going to take?

Jack and I knew the end was coming, but let Jack speak with is own words through the letter he wrote to the Judge in my behalf.

October 3, 1993

To Whom It May Concern;

I am writing this letter to tell you about Robert Singleton.

I am doing so because I have known Robert for over thirty years, and count him as my very best friend.

Robert is many things.

He is, first, a brilliant, nationally recognized, artist. Rare among America's artists, he supports himself entirely through his art.

Perhaps of even greater importance than his creativity, Robert is a very special human being. He is intelligent, kind, peace loving, spiritual, law abiding and incredibly caring and compassionate.

Although I have seen him with a glass of wine on special occasions, he is not a drinker of alcohol nor does he use other drugs.

In recent years his compassion has led to his having devoted much of his life to assisting people with AIDS. Primarily with direct care to the ill, but also through his work with Elizabeth Kubler Ross and her foundations.

I have AIDS. I was diagnosed HIV Positive in 1988, and although my health is stable at the moment, there is a certainty that soon, in a few months or years, I will need to be taken care of. Robert has pledged to do that for me, to be my "caregiver".

There can be no better testimony as to the worthiness of this special person.

Jack Hepworth  
San Francisco, CA



February 15, 1995 at 10:15 p.m. under the watchful gaze of a full moon, my father passed away. Peacefully and surrounded by loved ones from every stage of his life. Andreas and Yiannis his tender lovers, Robert Singleton and David Cardenis, his dear and trusted friends, Mary Hardin and John Zimman from his NYC years and four daughters to represent his large and scattered family. Eloise, his faithful dog, was at his side.

Our vigil was interspersed with tears, sobs and humor as we reminisced within his earshot. He lived a varied and exciting life from rural and urban New York to sunny Florida to European cities. Amsterdam being one of his favorites. St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands and lastly, here in San Francisco. He did more traveling than most people do in a much longer life span. There were plenty of stories to share and let his memories wander.

We sang to him. We sang Amazing Grace, he mouthed the words with us.

A man with so much enthusiasm for everything in life, a risk taker, was preparing for another giant risk, and he was going unafraid.

Finally the labored breathing quieted, then stopped. The dog howled along with our outburst of sorrow, and Jack died. It was over. Jack Brooks Hepworth was not suffering anymore.

Linda Hepworth

I had a dream . . . which took place some time after Jack was diagnosed as HIV and after Steven became ill. I shared the dream with both.

In the dream, there was no specific time reference, only I was aware that it took place in the distant future. It would seem that Jack had already died. In the dream Jack came to me and said, "*We are all over here now and we have had a meeting and decided that it is time for you to come home. The decision is unanimous, we all think your work is done, you have done enough. I have come to get you.*"

[Incomplete]



### REFRAIN

[Very Incomplete]

These eyes have been my windows  
through which I come and go,

allowing me to see that which is not viable,  
where there is no language,  
where existence is beyond names and symbols,  
seeing space occupied and not occupied,  
neither being greater.  
Through these windows all is equal.

I have experienced a distant star,  
a distant mountain,  
a distant cry of sounds not heard,  
of sights not seen,  
of thoughts not thought.

My mortal reasoning sees it is a great mystery.  
To many links in a chain to comprehend.  
Our essence predicated on choices not made.

I offer no explanation other than,  
I did not and could not have chosen.  
Thus, the great mystery of life.



The reality of life brings forth the birth of a human being.

*How could you --*  
your son, your child, your infant,  
bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh --  
*How could you* turn away  
and not love your child as a child must be loved?

How must I "Act" in order for you to accept me, love me?  
I should have asked you that question when I was a child.  
If I act in a certain way, will you love me?  
Will you recognize me?  
Will you verify that I exist?  
Will you comfort me when I am wrong,  
help me to grow instead of beating me down . . .  
down to where I did not know who I was . . .  
lost, frightened, never knowing love,  
just your rejection?  
Your anger?

Because you denied me,  
then I must not be.  
You are . . . Therefore, I am not.

"Never feeling whole,"  
implying a vague knowing there is more.

Some instinctive knowing,  
Something is missing.  
Acting out,  
which always misses the mark,  
a compensation,  
an equivalent -- not the real need.

Then my life has been an illusion.  
I am an illusion to myself.

Alone

To escape the pain I retreated  
I was different and despised for that difference  
I grew as did the differences.

I welcomed sleep, *no more*.



I heard loud voices,  
a blend of all known human emotions  
vocalized.  
Screaming, from someone in great agony.  
wanting to be heard.

My eyes opened wide,  
seeing the source, what my ears feared.  
Seeing other eyes,  
staring, gazing at me.

I looked away,  
heart pounding  
I felt genuine terror.

The incurable romantic had been burned.

What is it that makes a man?  
What is it that does not make a man?

Is it inside or  
Is it outside?

Love for one or  
Love for the other?

What is it that makes one strong?  
What is it that makes the other weak?

Is it to abide or  
Is it to die?

Love for life or  
Love for death?

I was different and despised for that difference.

Alone,  
to escape the pain, I retreated  
finding sanctuary in the natural world.

There I saw  
horizons between heaven and earth,  
between hope above and dust below.

Seeing that ancestry between  
the creation of promise above  
and the clay of Adam below.

I saw, what I felt as a child  
The clay of disallowed actuality  
of isolation, cast out.

Spellbound by this linear edge  
I walked into that simplicity alone  
With hope in the sky above  
feet in the dust below

Finding a human emotion in the natural world.

Empathizing with this great vista  
What I was seeing reduced to resonating emotions,  
Loneliness translating into images  
along an empty stage, a blank canvas  
on which life's quest would be played out.

The tie between the visual and the spiritual self merged.

I knew in my heart the natural world would never disappoint.  
The sun would always rise and set regardless of what men did.

I wept from the depths of my soul,  
as I watched the mother of life purify the blood-stained beach.

I knew by the next sunrise  
all the rancor of man would be washed away.

As I look to the east,  
a thin line of scarlet appears  
framed by a fringed darkness  
of the waning night.  
A scarlet radiant,  
a scarlet of hope preparing  
the world for the birth of a new day.

I feel a love for nature,  
and a sorrow for men who may never  
see or feel the splendor of nature,  
a sorrow for civilization caught up in time.  
Man has become complex.  
He cannot stop to see the great  
beauty of simplicities.

The magnificence of wonder,  
the scale of human life eclipsed  
by the proportion of creation,  
automatically drawn into a state of contemplation,  
humbled by the marvel witnessed.

Life had reached its time ---  
to become,  
my soul wished to speak.  
The beginning --- authentic —  
The darkness dispelled.

All that was ever needed was acceptance  
as a HUMAN . . . BEING.

The choice made. A definition given, the instrument that would lead to exposing the very image of my soul.

Through creation, the voice of the Creator's identity speaks to the spirit of all humankind. Communicating the intangible components of life. Not to be held or touched with the hand. But, recognized by the soul.

I say, my soul wished to speak.  
Do I believe I have a soul,  
the container of love.

I have spent my whole life developing and using Your most precious gifts.  
Do I love the gift more than the giver?



I aspired, I achieved, I had attained,

but it was time to find authenticity.

By what standard can I  
Judge or be judged  
Is man the measure  
Of all things?

*Let your self go  
Let your will go  
And you will find true freedom*

But,  
I am a battle ground  
The eternal  
Good versus evil

We are taught in death is triumph.  
But the battle must be fought first.

But,  
I am so weak.  
What did I bring, I wanted to leave?  
What did I hope to find that I did not have?  
Love, will it ever be?

*To Love another  
Love your self  
To Love your self  
Love another*

*It must be total  
In that is God*

*For in true Love there is no superior  
Not one above the other  
Love is equal  
A canceling of two  
A making of one*

*Trust -  
Control knows no love.*

But the battle must be  
fought first.  
Death is final to the living only.

Alone,

I'm caught between the light  
and my shadow.

With back to the source  
This heavy shroud that covers  
sculpts a dark silhouette shadow  
giving perception of only *my* design.

This heavy shroud that covers  
obscures the source  
to the shadow of its maker.

I am but a battle ground  
A battle between light and dark  
Declared with the dawn

Alone - I cast my own shadow.

*True wisdom*

*To turn around and see the light  
is to understand the shadow.*

*Earthly vision extinguished,  
Transcended.  
Finding Clear Light,  
The Clear Still Light of a New Dawn*

*How many eyes will be opened,  
finding "That" Light?  
Setting into motion ascension.  
When motion accelerates  
and time stops.*

*Earthly vision transcended,  
framed by the fringed darkness  
of waning time.  
The triumph of New Dawns Clear Light  
accelerates motion into eternity.*

*How much can one moment hold. . . ?  
To put into motion in a moment  
perception. . . .perpetual.*

*One small flower, blooming  
on a mighty mountain,  
changing the currents of the ocean floor.*

*There is an inner voice that is silent,  
yet communicates  
It is silent with words  
But speaks to the heart  
It is the darkness that a blind man sees  
Yet knows the way  
As if walking in clear light*

*God comes silent, in the dark  
Be silent and blind yourself  
of all earthly wisdom  
open your heart and hear*

*Be quiet, be still  
and listen at the center  
Try not to understand*

*Trust without understanding  
is faith*

*Seek not to be recognized  
But to recognize*

*Self is that which chooses,  
not to be,  
in order to be,  
That is not the question, that is the answer.*

*Speak not of yourself,  
concerned only with the external moment  
and what it will bring to you.*

*Be Humble for your life  
Do not raise yourself above others.  
Take the lowest place,  
That pride might die,  
That your faith might be pure  
In order to see His Light.*

And so I have put into motion the desires of my heart,  
having put aside the need for acceptance,  
only to know peace.

The desire to give Love in order to find it.  
The desire to find peace in order to give it.

To be as the song of a bird,  
ascending on still air  
rising aloft,  
soaring higher and higher.  
Hastening into eternity  
Till I become light



I came to the wilderness.  
readied for a mission.  
A mission mind and heart could not have survived,  
had I not been strengthened.

Friends I wish there were a stronger word.  
Friends transcend the fleeting.  
Friends with shared respect the unconditional is celebrated.

Come with me now, it's time to go up on the hill.

with threads of memories,  
creating a fabric of light.

At dusk all the candles were lit.  
But a fateful foreshadowing was in attendance  
for those who came as teachers of unconditional love.

How we loved life  
Spirited breath  
*this is the last*

With naive innocence  
the souls united  
did not know  
*this was the last.*

For they all suffered,  
died martyrs of love incarnate.

Martyred all, save one.

Proud heads raised,  
mouths silent.  
Eyes fixed on the goal.  
Passively tread through  
a corridor of cruel lunacy.

Eyes fixed on the goal,  
where, bathes in forbidden water  
kneeling in silent prayer,

prepared to be baptized  
in their own blood.



His relish of life was silenced,  
few words were uttered,  
in his hushed voice he denied,  
but wept grieving tears for none to see.  
*I have that tell all gaunt face,*  
*Hide me,*  
*so none will know,*  
*hide me from reflections,*  
*that my eyes will not see what you know.*

*Is it true my journey's over so soon?*  
*When I've just begun.*

Gentle soul  
How frightened you were  
Your heart cried out  
  
You did what was safe  
retreat into hiding  
living in shadows  
hoping the hurt won't find you.

Gentle soul

don't be frightened  
please don't be afraid  
It's safe now  
you can trust  
your light

Gentle soul

come out of the shadows  
and stand in your own light

*In my trials  
And my tribulations  
Through our doubts  
And frustrations  
In my violence  
In my turbulence  
Through my fear  
And my confessions  
In my anguish and my pain  
Though my joy and my sorrow  
I'll never let you part  
For you're always in my heart.*

*"Our relationship has moved to a higher plane  
it has become purely spiritual."  
"Yes, the highest realm of love."*

Love can let go.  
It was over.  
This gentle soul was gone,

*"Reaching for the Light of the Golden Gate"*

Up on that hill  
We scattered your ashes under a tree.

The tree will wither without light  
My love for you is no different

*Come with me and let us go up on the hill so I might introduce you to the very  
people who illuminate the meaning of unconditional love.*

Love is a offering given.

John, Steven, Butch and Jack:

Might I

with threads of silver  
stitch your name in my heart.

*It is a gift of love.*

## UNTIL I BECOME LIGHT

Therapeutically, the telling of this story has enabled me to become whole and uncover who, not what I am, a vital necessity of life. This very process has been a catharsis and helped in giving definition. Most importantly, to finally put to rest the source of my emotional pain. Through this process, I have allowed myself to deal with denial, guilt and shame. Finally, to come face to face with all that I am.

**I am.** Two small words. The definition has taken a half century to find. I am a **human being** who is spiritual and creative. This human happens to be Caucasian and male with certain learning disabilities balanced with proportionate compensations. This human also happens to be homosexual. **Nothing in this definition did I, at any time, make a choice to be.**

Sharing this chronicle with others confirms the truth of the story. It was not all in vain. Not one event should have been different. There was and is purpose.

If there is any truth to this story, then that truth is universal. Yet, this is one perspective of the human condition. It is life, from the blackest, darkest corners of humanity, to the highest aspirations.

The one absolute truth of my life has been my art, a visual communication, the very expression of an authentic search. At a given moment in time that expression became a composite of the entirety of this person's being . . . bringing all that the creator is to that expressive discipline. The creative process, often, is not cluttered with negative human frailties. Still, art is a subjective reflection of those frailties, an expression of both the pain and joy of life.

The pain of the internal search and the joy of the found ---- expressed.

I can make the same statement about my internal search for the denied love of that child. *The joy of the found ---- expressed.* The irony, the container of love, the very contents of which I was searching, **I would give order to find.** I have known love.

On this journey called life as we become older and more accepting of our selves. The need to prove or validate our existence through other people is no longer consequential. All that matters is the truth of whom we are and loving that person along with our fellow human beings unconditionally. I personally feel the single motivation of life centers upon the spirit of the connections we share with our fellow humans.

Because of our own incompleteness, we daily fall short of this aspiration. The unconditional begins with self, by forgiving your shortcomings, loving your unfinished being. If I cannot forgive myself, I cannot emerge to the full potential as a person. The lack of self forgiving will transpose to lack of forgiveness of others. It is a vicious circle. That which you will not forgive in others, you have not forgiven of yourself. For every judgement of a fault, the "wrong" I find in others, there is a direct correlation with my own personal, unresolved issues. "*Judge not, that you may not be judged.*"

When we can love our self with no judgements, positively, only then have we unconditionally accepted

all of humankind.



### **A Matter of Choice**

When I was baptized, it was a solemn and joyous event for me. The prayer I had written and asked the Bishop to use, was intended to be in reference to my painting. Yet, in the most profound way it was prophetic. Foretelling of a mission I could not have known, but my journey took me to. Nor would I know of the significance of the silver cross that came into my life the very day I came to the wilderness. That it would become a tangible, symbolic connection between God, Steven, Butch, Jack, George and me.

Please reread those passages again. The meaning is entirely different, but gives definition.

When this was completed the Bishop placed his hand on my head making on the forehead the sign of the cross using Chrism. *Robert, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever. Amen.*

At the conclusion of the Baptism, the Bishop blessed the silver cross placing it on me, he then read from the piece of paper I had given him:

*Robert, do you from this day forward dedicate your life and works to the Glory of God?  
With God's help, I do.*

*Almighty God, giver of all good things:*

*Please grant to your servant, Robert, the strength and wisdom to understand his calling.*

*Grant that in his search he may find in himself the vision to see thy truth, to use those talents you have entrusted in him, as an instrument of Your Love.*

*Grant that through his works others may see and feel the light of thy Glory.*

*This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

I speak of *the light* many times. I use it purely and simply as a metaphor. The light representing in the broadest sense, all that is good, a value judgement based on my personal history and beliefs. The light of enrichment, positive as opposed to negative.

The reason I mention this is to clarify the metaphor. What it means and what it does not mean. It does not mean a substitution for a belief, more accurately a cult worship of light. It is not meant as deception, used as a tool to lure one away from certain beliefs.

It has been said that Lucifer is the angel of light, that he uses light to entrap and mislead. I prefer the biblical metaphor when Christ said, "*I am the Light.*"

*" I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."*

John 8:12

*" In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*

John 1:4

It is this Light that I speak of.

The paradox of darkness.

When my father, John, Steven, Butch, Jack and George passed away, I know in my heart their soul saw the Light and moved to it, "Reaching for the Light of the Golden Gate." For me, I do not see the Light because I am human and in that is the *grace* darkness. My sight is the conditional, my own unresolved belief in trust. I have not allowed myself to be worthy of that Light. On this earthly journey the soul travels in darkness, totally blind. It is a matter faith, belief in the unseeable. To welcome the darkness is to welcome faith. When partially sighted we prefer to find our own way. Trusting only our self to be the guide. In absolute darkness we trust our direction totally to a guide, lest we fall. How else do you attain bearing than to trust God through the unknown night, unconditionally? *Thy will be done.*

I have often said that my work is simply a documentation of my soul's journey in search of that Light. "*An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.*"

We do know this Light will enough to long for it. And still . . .

It is a matter of choice, this Light, being the One I quest after.

Until out of darkness, I go home.

**Until I become Light**

**If my paintings are my soul speaking**

**then hear them**

**They sing of the light**

**Causing me to wonder**

**Might I be Home**

**Standing in the light**

**No hate, no grief, no prejudice**

**No pain**

**No conditions**

**Does my soul know of these things**

**It welcomes darkness**

**Desiring Light**

**Blinded by**

**Faith**





**DEDICATED TO THOSE WHOSE LIGHT TOUCHED MY LIFE.  
WHO CAME AS TEACHERS OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE.  
THEY SUFFERED AND DIED OF AIDS,  
MARTYRS OF LOVE INCARNATE.**

**JOHN HAUNCH**  
*1985*

**DAVID LAMBERT**  
*1987*

**RON WEST**

**GRANT NEW**

**OTHO DUKE**

**JOHN REXROAD**

**JOHN PAUL**

**RON SHANEWTON**

**STEN HODGSON II**  
*1992*

**CHUCK BETS**  
*1993*

**STEVEN RUSSELL**  
*1993*

**OWEN**  
*1994*

**ROBERT 'BUTCH' BAIRD**  
*1994*

**WILLIAM 'BILL' DEWEES**  
*1994*

**ALFRED 'AL' SMITH**  
*1994*

**JACK HEPWORTH**  
*1995*

**VERNON SEE**  
*1995*

**GEORGE CLAYTON**  
*1996*