

CLOSE TO HOME

The storms of November, the call of conversation

By DAVID CAMPICHE
FOR COAST WEEKEND

T'was the witch of November come stealin.'"

So says Gordon Lightfoot in his famous ballad "The Wreck of the Edmond Fitzgerald."

It may have been too rough to feed the sailors on that doomed coal ship, but our luck, this blustery November, was that the gang from the evening before hung on, and we ate a satisfying breakfast. And then pleasant conversation came with a chorus of wind and rain, making a "tattle-tale sound" and rattling the 120-year-old window panes.

Several of us sat around a round oak table in the cozy dining room at the Shelburne Inn, drinking gallons of black coffee and eating Porcini omelets, talking and talking, while the rain poured, and the north wind blew ferociously. We were surrounded by rain clouds, but we were content.

A klatch of poets

Robert Michael Pyle is the Walt Whitman of southwest Washington. He is a man of steady, careful words. His skill of observation is unrelenting. His collection of published books numbers more than 20 and grows each year.

Some people call him a genius, but most of us just call him "Bob." His keen eyes follow his keen words, and an intelligent man will listen carefully, as Pyle himself does, filtering knowledge like a Willapa oyster, separating micro plasm from brine. He is a man with an effusive personality and a penchant for detail.

His partner, Florence Sage, is a fine poet and performance artist. Her words spill like quicksilver rain. She always knows how to light up a crowd — mostly small rendezvous, because poetry gatherings tend to be small. But then, Florence is larger than life.

Steve Caskey — the third contributor to the previous night's performance — is a pastor from the small village of Morton below the mighty shadow of Mt. Rainer. He loves adventure, running, climbing and the sculpted word. He brought a story about stones, chisels and a reborn



Beth Caskey, left, and her husband, Steve Caskey

DAVID CAMPICHE PHOTOS

cathedral. His story and slide show were enlightening. Though a Christian pastor, he endorses the teachings of other masters. He is a wonderful listener. His wife, Beth, is a teacher of four decades and describes education as a journey and not a race. Let me just say that the human circle around that 19th century table was invigorating.

So, what goes on when the winds turn around and the storms of November come racing? Well, that all spells out why poets and friends add to the richness of our community and to the enlightenment of our souls. They talk and share, laugh and smile and, sometimes, beguile. Roar, storm, roar!

Feed your head

Yes, good talk is rich.

So is a writer's community that fills in several hours talking about cedar trees, miracles and the state of the union. And authors. Books of rare, distinguished

revelations, and more common ones — so be it! Read, read, read. And food. Always, food. Food for the body, food for the mind.

I wish you were with us that November morning, because love and friendship can be as simple as warm casual conversation — though, this rendez-

vous lasted nearly three hours.

My point is that we are generally so busy, too busy. Busy at work. Too busy to sit, or eat a carefree or prolonged meal. To stop and see a neighbor. Or, simply, to sit at that round oak table and talk.

I often feel that family discussion has faded into an alternate reality: cellphones, computer games and an average of six hours of TV each day. My father, a busy doctor for 50 years, insisted on family time, an hour nearly every night when kids and adults shared in the ritual of the spoken word.

Sometimes there were reflections of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, and

sometimes recollections of peace or discussions of the Civil Rights Movement. Vietnam came and went, and so did Richard Nixon. We landed on the moon. Khrushchev died. So did Ronald Reagan. Jimmy Carter made us proud as a retiree. (Thank God he is still inspiring.)

So much passed around that oak table, the same one that even now resides in the Shelburne Inn. And the good doctor might just as well have posted a tent sign that insisted, "Contribute or else!"

Another cup of coffee for the road

I'd argue that coffee is good for the soul. I often wonder what happened to those small cafés that sold a cup of Joe for a dime, where the vets and businessmen, hobos and poets congregated like gangs of penguins?

Perhaps those cozy cafés have been replaced by Starbucks and other coffee houses, by intimate bars and bistros. But with drive-in windows and Americans on the run, time and place simply seem transposed into a faster way of life. We can't catch our breath.

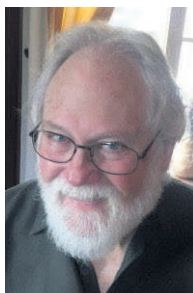
Robert Bly, another renowned poet, blamed this breakup of communication on the Industrial Revolution. Industrial capability split up the traditional family, particularly fathers and sons and an age-old apprenticeship system. Men were off to the factory.

And what about cellphones, Facebook and Twitter? How do we fit a meaningful message into 140 characters, compared to the experience of unfolding ideas that are exchanged in engaging conversation?

Write a poem for God's sake! It need not be a masterpiece. Poet laureate, William Stafford, said that if you were having trouble expressing yourself, "Just lower your standards." He understood the power of commitment.

Back at the oak table, Bob takes a deep breath and begins to extol the genius of Brian Doyle, a brilliant author and poet who just passed (read "Mink River," please!). Doyle was barely middle-aged and many mourn his early departure.

And the coffee talk rolled on... 



Robert Michael Pyle



Florence Sage