

In Memory of My Friend Myler

Myler was a very good friend of mine, a person I got to know well over 32 years. He was an intellectual of great depth, and he was emotionally intense when situations required it. I loved the man for his attitude toward life and for his loyalty to his friends. In all my years working with him and traveling with him and socializing with him, he never let me down.

Initially, I met Myler when he was finishing his Ph.D at McGill and applied to teach English at Selkirk College, and I as Department Head actually hired him. With Selkirk's venture to bring Soviet writers to Western Canada for readings and tours in 1989, Myler wrapped himself in all the events.

Myler loved all things Russian, and when a sister-city, sister-college tour was arranged for a team to go to Russia and try to set up these connections, Myler was ready to be involved. His job as it turned out was to negotiate a sister-city relationship between Castlegar and Chern, a city not far from the Russian Doukhobor village of Arkangelskoi and not far from Tolstoy's Estate.

I well remember the day Myler made these arrangements. We had been taken on a tour featuring the countryside both Turgenev (Myler's favourite writer) and Tolstoy wrote about. Our host, a man named Volkov, was the head-man of the city of Chern and area. At day's end, we had had a lot of Vodka to lubricate us and as much pear juice to chase it, so that we were reeling a bit as we were taken into Volkov's City chambers.

Myler sat across from this very powerful Russian leader and with translator Galena Alexeev set up Chern and Castlegar as a sister-city connection. He told Volkov it would only work if the Doukhobors in both countries accepted the pact. They shook hands--and then Volkov pressed a button and a secret doorway slid aside to a hidden room. Volkov strode away and returned with a first-rate bottle of Russian Vodka, which he presented to Myler.

A few days later as we traveled from Moscow to St Petersburg by train, we were all absolutely tired and mostly asleep in our compartment when Myler pulled out this bottle of vodka and wanted to celebrate. For him, the pressure was off as there were no more meetings and negotiations. The rest of us were so exhausted we simply said a loud no.

Later, we drank Myler's gifted bottle of vodka in St. Petersburg on the day of Leonard Voykin, our translator's 50th birthday. There we were joined by George Koochin, a Castlegarian student studying art in St. Petersburg.

After that trip, Myler and I went on many trips together--often disguising them as professional development initiatives. One trip we made to a university in New Mexico where we met up with a Russian friend, Alexander Vaschenko, and where Myler read a paper and I had a poetry reading. We got to stay in a nearby village of adobe cottages surrounding a lovely square--all made famous because Billy the Kid had lived there for awhile.

When we traveled north to the Mesa Verde area to view the Anastazi cliff dwellings, Myler and Alexander and I were extremely excited. We had a rental van and we drove right up to the edge of where the cliff dwellings began. We were so keen to get going that we rushed off almost before our feet hit the ground. It was magnificent to climb rock ladders and explore these dwellings that were abandoned way back in the 13th century.

After several hours, we made our way back to the vehicle only to find it locked and the motor still running. What to do? We found a side window near the back partly open, and Myler had the brilliant idea to use a dry tree branch to reach through and hook the keys. That didn't work, so we each took turns using the wooden pole to jigger the door lock up. And after two hours, we managed to do so. Nobody ever blamed anyone for that mishap. It was just something that happened.

Another trip I remember was one that History Instructor Duff Sutherland, Myler and I set up to explore the Cypress Hills and in particular to view some of the places of conflict between whisky traders, Northwest Mounted Police, and local Indian habitat. We began at Elkwater in the Alberta Cypress Hills and quickly missed a turn and got lost. Here we were on the top of a butte looking south to Montana and north and east to Saskatchewan. But how to get to Fort Walsh, where the NWMP set up a fort in the 1870s?

Eventually, we figured it out, and had wonderful visits to historic sites, to ghost towns, to old abandoned NWMP sites, and to the village of Piapot, where Chief Piapot blockaded the railway way back in the early 1880s. One day coming down through the hills, we saw a sign announcing the location of a First-Nations healing lodge. It was a place where Indian and Metis women given prison sentences were taken instead of to a standard prison.

We stopped at the gateway and had a look, which was all we could do because visitors were not allowed. Myler decided that wasn't okay, and so he went up to the gate, pressed the button, and talked for a long while on the intercom. Eventually, two women came out to the gate, took our keys and our wallets and led us into the Healing Lodge. We had a marvelous tour of the entire facility and met many of the inmates. Myler bought a designed quilt to remember his visit there. And on we went.

That's the way Myler was. Where others backed off or said no, he strode forward. That's the way the Mir Centre was created. He and his wife Linda had come upon the idea of converting the broken down Doukhobor communal house into a peace-centre once the last family moved out. I remember him involving me and Leonard Voykin in clearing boards and junk from around the building. But when we looked into the building, we saw that the roof leaked water all the way through it, and the second floor had collapsed and was halfway onto the first floor.

I was on Myler's Peace Centre committee for awhile, but we were getting nowhere and the building was still a mess, so I slowly weaned

myself from the operation. A year or so later, Myler somehow got the attention of President Marilyn Luscombe and also managed to get the Head of Maintenance on his side. In bits and pieces, resources appeared and workers renovated the inside of the building in spare moments. And one day, Myler came to visit Alexia and me and told us the Mir Centre was a reality. He simply had a vision and enough tenacity to see it through.

Myler and I participated in a lot of outdoor activities together. We golfed together occasionally during most summers. Myler particularly liked the quiet and simplicity of the Valleyview Golf Course near Winlaw. Each year, we would also enter the Selkirk College staff opening golf tournament, and one year we won first prize. So we're looking at each other thinking we might get a a major prize. Instead, as our names were called, we had to go up to a table where many small items were wrapped and choose one item. So we chose a likely prize, and when we opened it, we were rewarded with two large chocolate cream Easter eggs. We laughed so hard we broke one of the chocolate eggs.

Myler and I spent many summer hours scrambling through bush and over hillsides seeking and picking huckleberries. And in most years, we picked a lot of berries. I remember one time when we traveled high up above the village of Ymer to one of the best huckleberry patches we'd ever seen. In no time, both of us picked two pailfuls of huckleberries each, and in celebration we voted ourselves the best berry pickers anywhere in the world. But a black bear lumbered out of the nearby woods, and we nearly lost all those berries in our scramble to get down to the van and to safety.

We did a lot of canoeing together, too. One summer day we decided to canoe the Slocan River from above Winlaw down to Crescent Beach. But we hadn't checked the water levels, and when we entered the Winlaw Rapids, we bumped and banged off of rocks and then got wedged into a spot between rocks. The aluminum canoe filled with water, and though we could walk in the shallow water, we couldn't budge the canoe. We tried everything, and then we bailed water and eventually dragged the canoe across rocky terrain to the shore.

But now the canoe had holes and tiny cuts in the side, and we still had to canoe many kilometres to our take-out destination. I'm sitting on shore, devastated, soaked through, and completely exhausted when Myler said, "We can fix these holes." He walked over to a few nearby evergreen trees and began to scrape pine sap onto a small board. Then he came back and began to fill each hole and cut on the canoe with this sap--a kind of resin. And after an hour or so, we slid back into the river and completed our journey.

Over several summers, Myler and a few of our friends like JJ Verigin, Leonard Voykin, David Sharp, Hazel Kirkwood, Renate Belczuk, and Webb Webster set out on canoe trips up and down Slocan Lake, camping at nearly every spot on the west side of the lake known as the Valhalla Wilderness.

The first trip Myler came along with us, he arrived without any camp plate and utensils so we had to find him some extras so he could eat. Another time, JJ had promised him a tent to sleep in, but it turned out to be a plastic sheet barely adequate to cover a person. However, Myler burrowed into the little opening and told us the next morning he had the best sleep he'd had in a long time.

On these trips, because we partied a bit around the campfire in the evenings, we had each been told to bring a bottle of something. On this occasion, Myler had brought a really nice bottle of white wine. I told him white wine was a lot better if it was chilled. So, he dug a bit of a hole in the water and sand at the edge of the beach, and weighed the bottle down with a few rocks.

The next afternoon, he discovered the bottle had slipped its mooring and floated away. Because we were to use that bottle for the next evening's drinks, we took a long while searching the inlet--but never found it.

We headed home a day before the rest of the group, and a day or so later, there was a knock on my door. I opened it and discovered two of the ladies who had been on the trip. They were holding Myler's wine bottle in front of them, and they were laughing because they found it and drank it all up--and so there! I'm not sure I ever told Myler about them finding his wine.

I learned a lot from Myler Wilkinson. I learned about careful and complete editing because he was the best at it. Neither of the two books he and David Stouck from SFU edited on B.C. short story writers and B.C. essayists has a single error or typo. I learned to improve my poetry because Myler read all of it and wrote lovely criticisms of each poem in his delicate feathery handwriting. I learned that it's important to hang in there, that things usually will work out. I learned that friendships are important and need to be revived from time to time. Ultimately, I learned that dreams can be fulfilled, and in Myler's too-short life, he accomplished so much of what he set out to do--a real example for the rest of us.

These memories are only a few of the many good times Myler and I had together. He was easy to be around, and I miss him some days with every fibre of my being. His passing was an enormous loss to all his friends and associates--and really a loss to the world of literature and peace and culture.