

Wed., July 26 & Thu., July 27: Meaningful Meetings

Buddies Old and New

After showering in the two-headed shower Wednesday morning, I reluctantly left the Green Room and soon was back on Highway 12, yet again on a Scenic Byway. It carried us through irregular farm fields featuring high rectangular three-sided metal frames I'd never seen before, with ramps leading to the open sides. A roadside marker explained these were used for building haystacks, required because of the high winds. The ramps were used to haul the hay bales up, forming large bread-shaped stacks. Modern equipment makes them unnecessary, but some farmers still use them.

Too soon we rejoined I-90, a section I was taking for the third time. I reminded the Sage that the only time he and I traveled it, we were going in the opposite direction hauling a trailer with my few possessions and two tall plants, with Groucho in the back of the car.

Nearing the border, I pulled into the St. Regis Travel Center, which claimed on several signs to have the "World's Greatest Milkshake." It came in one flavor only: huckleberry. This claim I had to test. After peeing, I got in line behind a guy who ordered one, and all I had to tell the older woman in the tiny kitchen was, "I'll have the same."

World's greatest? Not quite. But that flavor... ahhh.

I reluctantly drove past the "Cherries for sale" banners by a produce stand, knowing I had no way to keep them fresh, and continued across Lookout Pass into the Idaho Panhandle for the first time in 15 years. Crossing the Panhandle only takes an hour. I'd been looking forward to this, as I remembered the drive past Lake Coeur d'Alene as spectacular. The first part remains so. But soon I was sickened to find myself in standard American urban sprawl, the much-enlarged city of Coeur d'Alene having merged with Post Falls and Spokane, Wash., into a disappointing megalopolis.

Once back in Washington, a state I lived in a total of 11 years in two stints, I let MapQuest lead me to the southwest bulge of Spokane. Told I had arrived at my destination, I took a hard left, past an ornamental guard station watching over a tidy if predictable set of crammed-together homes, into the driveway of Guy and Connie Pace. Here you and I re-enter the Friend Zone, with its prior caveats.

When I first moved to Washington in 1986, I had dropped out of graduate school. Much as I love the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, it was my fallback school. After

useful couple of semesters, I looked at the second year of UNC's journalism program and decided it wasn't going to give me what I wanted. I was looking for practical training, and the next year seemed more about preparing people to teach. (Knowing what I know now about life, I should've stayed.) A job as a copy editor at a business journal only lasted a few months, due to differences with the managing editor over journalism standards—as in, I had some, and she did not. Steve had moved to Pullman to start grad school at WSU in history, and said he could use a roommate; another friend needed a ride from N.C., to Des Moines, Iowa; and depressed from a breakup with a girlfriend then in Salt Lake City, I needed a life change.

Hence my first pass through that stretch of I-90. The first place I looked for work was the local semi-weekly, *The Pullman Herald*. I walked in unannounced, and was introduced to the editor, Guy Pace. A sweet-faced bear of a man, he dropped what he was doing to talk. He had no open positions, but said he would keep me in mind for stringer (free-lance) work. Not long after, he assigned me a business profile he apparently liked, because he gave me my first front-page, “above the fold” story. Steve, a friend of his, and I got drunk in celebration the night it was published.

I did some other stories for Guy, and worked as an “insertor,” stuffing the sections of the paper together by hand, for a couple hours' pay per issue. I also filled in for Guy for a week when he went on vacation. In the course of these experiences, I met Connie Eastep. She was the insanely skilled typesetter, a job that no longer exists. Before computers took over, someone had to type every word of every issue onto strips of heavy paper that were cut, waxed, and laid out on grids to create what you saw in the paper. She worked controls that looked like a combination of a typewriter and a pipe organ, including many keys for formatting. It was difficult and stressful, but she handled it with humor.

She and Guy, both divorced, found love for the second time together. I was at their wedding, and hung out sometimes with Connie's terrific teenagers Chad, Lori, and Loni. It was tough to leave them when I split from Pullman to return east, eventually getting into Mizzou as you know, my first-choice school. (Rejected the first time around due to my low NCSA grades, my solid “B” average at Carolina got me in on the second try.)

The Paces were part of the reason I moved to the Seattle area from Albuquerque in 2001, along with other friends in the region, plus my sense I could find work there—and, of course, my wanderlust. We visited often, Guy and I usually hitting the annual Seattle Boat and Auto shows, among other outings. When my marriage ended horribly amidst a mental health crisis, they took me in and nursed me through the first wrenching weeks. Yet again, it was tough to leave them when I moved east in 2008. Guy helped me pack

the U-Haul. Not too long after, though, they themselves moved to Spokane. As noted in the second paragraph of this book, Connie's threat... er, offer... was the primary cause of my Northwest Passage.

The Paces and I are unlikely friends, though that could be said of many of my friends. They are very conservative, Republican Christians; I am a progressive Independent and Buddhist. They like being housed close to others; I live on a half-acre lot screened by woods. I detest homeowners associations (HOAs)¹; Guy is the president of theirs.

I have extremely liberal friends as well. Given what I know about the heritability of political and religious beliefs², I tend to focus more on how people treat other individuals—and me, of course—in choosing whether to be friends. Threaten violence in support of your beliefs, for example, and you're out. (Threaten it against me, a 40-year martial artist who knows how to use a gun, and you'll be mocked!)

We only had time for a perfunctory greeting before Guy and I went off to pick up their grandchild Charlize, Loni's oldest, from gymnastics. Char's avocation gave me a chance to ask some questions about her, whom I was first meeting, and the sport. Given my training, I am gobsmacked by what gymnasts can do physically, which seems to defy physics. I am yet more impressed by the courage it takes to *try* what they do, much less try it over and over again knowing you will often take hard falls and are guaranteed to have bad injuries. Therefore college gymnastics is appointment television for me. "Charl" hopes to join those ranks. But she is not interested in making the sacrifices required to achieve the Elite level you see on the world stage. As with the other two grandchildren I met, she has an impressive brain and is beautiful, but I will protect their privacy by sharing little else.

After dropping her off, the Paces and I went for a late Thai lunch, and then returned home to bond with Buddy, their tiny and unfathomably cute dog. His name carries echoes from past pets. When they were choosing a name, Connie told him, "Whatever you name him, you're going to just end up calling him Buddy. So why not just name him that?" Buddy had two canine behaviors I have never witnessed. For one, when excited and wanting something, he would bounce on all four feet, straight up and down. Even more

1 In many neighborhoods, these maintain common areas like parks or pools and, to my objection, set rules for what you can do with your house and yard.

2 Twin studies have shown that identical twins adopted out as babies to different families grow up to be more similar in political and religious beliefs than fraternal twins or non-twin siblings raised together. In fact, comparisons of these combinations of blood and background suggest about 50% of our personalities (which include religiosity, though not the particular religion) are genetically determined. Another 25% comes from events that happen to us as individuals, so only the 25% comes from family experiences.

amusing, sometimes he would prance: Right or left legs apart and the other set close, and then switch, switch, etc. An impossible-to-describe sound I learned from chimpanzees, sort of a raspberry without the tongue, completely freaked him out—so I kept doing it until Connie couldn't take the noise anymore. It was a fun start to a fun few days of catching up with them.

In Search of All-Stars

Thursday morning's theme requires a difficult story. In November of 2007, while living in Seattle, I got a call from Connie and Lori. Lori's husband Tony had gone missing in Brazil.

Tony Harris was a leader of a WSU basketball team that made it to the NCAA championship tournament in 1994. He went on to play professionally in Mexico, South Korea, and Brazil, where he became a huge star. His WSU coach failed to ensure he graduated, so after retiring from Brazil, he struggled to find work. When Lori became pregnant, Tony felt compelled to return there when his old team in the capital Brasilia came calling. But soon after arrival he began having a mental health crisis, and eventually fled town. Taking a taxi cross-country toward a friend's home, he abandoned it at a rural gas station and disappeared.

Lori felt she wasn't getting straight answers from the American embassy and Brazilian authorities. After getting turned down by two other men in her life, she asked stepdad Guy to go to Brazil to push for information. They wanted me to go with him. The stated reason was that I am a good bit more assertive than Guy; the unstated reason, which I stated for them, was as a bodyguard for Guy. Lori's brother, a cop, had channeled warnings from a police friend in Brazil not to go, that anyone who went would be a target.

Obviously, I said yes. Emergency visas were arranged through the U.S. State Department. Lori, looking very pregnant, insisted on seeing us off at the Seattle-Tacoma Airport early one morning.

Tony's story was national news in Brazil. When we arrived, a camera crew from the biggest network, TV Globo, was awaiting Guy. I dropped back and watched the crowd. An interpreter from the basketball team, Carolina (car-oh-LEEN-ah), met us, and her boyfriend drove us into town. She sent us off to dinner at a nearby mall. My head was on more of a discreet swivel than normal, watching for threats while trying not to draw attention to ourselves (beyond that of any Americans in a Brasilia mall). Fortunately we were still anonymous at that point. Later in the week, people recognized us.

When we got back to the hotel, where Carolina had stayed to handle any media who showed up, she handed her phone to Guy. It was the U.S. Consulate. A body matching Tony's description had been found.

The next morning we would see ourselves as headline news on Globo's morning broadcast. The next few days were a cyclone of bad experiences. We met with consular officials, the FBI, the Consul General³, and the U.S. ambassador. We were taken to a morgue 45 minutes east to identify the body, which looked and smelled like something out of a horror movie. A paparazzi shot of us in head-to-toe scrubs appeared in the next day's paper. Then we were escorted by the national police to the site where he was found hanging in a tree, and at our request, to other locations related to his disappearance. We were double-checking their story. Though the police never issued a definitive cause of death, I believe it was suicide. After the worst Thanksgiving in my life (stated as someone who hates Thanksgiving), we brought his ashes home.

This is not the venue for the rest of this story. If you want details, see the links in this footnote.⁴ But the context is necessary for you to understand why a brief conversation we had this morning was so precious to me, one of the key reasons for the trip. You see, I had never met that baby that was in Lori's belly, Lovie. Maybe I saw her once as a newborn, but that doesn't count.

Guy and Connie called to ask if we could drop by, and she bravely overcame the usual teenage reluctance to say yes. She was getting ready for something and couldn't talk long, but she, Guy and I chatted briefly at the front door. (Connie has mobility issues, so she stayed in the car.) We talked volleyball a bit—Lovie's a budding star, accepted to a travel team while I was there. But what I'd daydreamed about saying, I did: "I've wanted to meet you a *really* long time." I managed to control the emotion welling up, with some effort. There's more to come.

The Paces and I went to brunch at a favorite diner of theirs. A white guy in a hoodie carrying a duffel bag caught my attention as he entered. As always, I had taken the gunslinger seat. I eyed him as he spoke to a server and became animated. About the time I was going to get up and move closer, he turned around angrily and slapped the door on the way out. Presumably he wanted to use the bathroom. My attention was split for the rest of the meal.

3 While ambassadors handle official relations between governments, the Consul General is in charge of services like supporting U.S. citizens' needs in the country and visas for that country's residents.

4 See: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230411071800/http://www.espn.com/espn/eticket/story?page=tonyharris&redirected=true> and https://www.espn.com/blog/truehoop/post/_id/4310/wright-thompson-on-the-last-days-of-tony-harris.

After dropping off Connie at home, Guy and I went to see Lori at her office. She and a partner have a very successful counseling practice—so successful, it had expanded since he was last there, so we wandered a bit in her office building before finding the new entrance. Lori has a master's in social work, and was a manager for the county for years before forming the practice. We had an invigorating conversation, in which it bled out that she did not share the conservative leanings of her mother and stepfather, which meant she learned the same thing about me. To Guy's great credit, he suffered in silence as she and I agreed about things he surely did not. I got to meet her business partner, who knew my role in the Tony story and sweetly gave me a grateful hug on leaving.

Next up was pickup duty again, for Loni's other daughter, Kai. She was attending a camp at her grade school. She hesitated on seeing my unfamiliar face through the window of the truck she was approaching, but then hopped in the back. The way she pushed back on her grandfather's banter proved this is a child who will have no trouble standing up for herself as she gets older. I liked it.

Loni took time from her busy day running her equally successful beauty business to come see me briefly at their house. Connie insisted I view a party pergola Loni put in the backyard. Rain sensors would cause the slats to close automatically, and color-changing LEDs could be programmed to dance. My heart danced to see her doing so well. We had too short of a catch-up, but I understood why and appreciated what I got.

After she had to take off for her next appointment, Guy and I left on a mission. With some poking around the Web on my phone, I had called a store in a mall about my All-Stars. The clerk came back to their phone with the happy news they had a pair of black canvas oxfords, size 10, the model I wear, and offered to hold them for me. It was a bit of a drive, but Guy insisted on taking me. Finally after more than two weeks of outdoor hikes and museum crawls in a blown-out rightie, I had my new Chuck Taylors. They would come in footy for my return to touring use the next day.