

Steve of the Woods

Rummaging through a plastic storage bin recently, hoping to find a calendar notation about some personal matter I wanted to verify, I came across a large envelope labeled *Steve Dyer*. I knew what was inside, and like many things that we mark, file away and forget about, they remind us how quickly time passes, and in this case, how fleeting a connection with any one person can be.

I opened the flap and withdrew the small stack of colorful prints—made by a homeless man over two decades ago. Steve Dyer slept in a small bivouac tent situated within a circle of granite boulders in the woods off Route 128, near Gloucester, Massachusetts. The area includes a natural feature called Red Rocks—and that is how I first met Steve. I was scoping out the place for future rock climbing, and I ran into him on the access trail. I talked with him awhile, and discovered he was camped up near the rocks.

On subsequent visits, we spoke often, either in his camp or at the rocks, and he disproved many of the stereotypical perceptions one might have regarding a homeless man. Fifty years old, he was very articulate and engaging, expressing interest in a wide variety of

topics. When I first met him, he said he was studying French. I knew he had a daughter, because he told me she had given him the book to study. He liked to jog, and did some climbing—barefoot—as I witnessed one day. I never understood why he ended up homeless—I don't remember discussing it with him—but those things are often deeply personal. I did get the impression he was sensitive, and perhaps rather not deal with certain societal or familial pressures—but that is only conjecture.

One time he introduced me to his woodcuts and the prints made from them. He used scraps of lumber he found to carve his designs, and made his own brayer, or roller for inking—covered with rabbit fur. I liked his bold and primitive compositions, and I bought several. One afternoon, as I arrived at the rocks, I had to smile—his prints were clothespinned to a rope like Tibetan prayer flags. He was selling them to the climbers.

The last time I saw Steve was on a cold but sunny December day. I walked into his camp not on the way to the rocks, but to say goodbye—I was leaving the state to be with my new wife. We had been separated because of work, and it was time to act like we were married. I lingered in camp long past sundown, speaking with him before a crackling fire. He told me he was learning many things from the animals around him, and from spending so much time in

nature—listening. We spoke of Buddhism, as I was meditating at the time, and he wrote out for me, as a gift, the complete Heart Sutra on some notepaper—from memory.

We conversed by mail after that (mine to an address that belonged to a relative) and his messages were always carried on a woodcut print, either in postcard form or in a card folded over. He wrote about family issues, meeting a Micmac Indian riding a bike, selling more art, and his dreams of climbing higher cliffs in New Hampshire and New York. But as is often the case, the thread ran thin, and at some point I realized it was broken. I don't have his permission, but I decided to showcase some of his art here on my website. Steve, wherever you are, and as a fellow artist—I hope you don't mind, and I hope you got to climb those big cliffs.

“Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha” (“Gone, gone, gone to the other shore beyond”) —the Great Bright Mantra, from the Heart Sutra.

PS: An odd thing—the topic and date for this blog was not planned, but today I found a journal entry dated February 21, 1993. I wrote about meeting Steve the day before, a Saturday—exactly 24 years ago.

For pictures, see the image gallery.