



AAC Publications

HERBERT AUGUST RICKERT, 1926 – 2021

In a gesture befitting how he lived his life, close to nature and its poetry, my father, Herb, chose the harvest moon, September 20, 2021, for his departure. His focus around the appreciation of nature, both in its raw elements and its lyric forms, and in what he saw as the poetic synchronicity within it, was rooted in a profound well of literature, art history, mythology, and natural history; his spark was most lively when weaving together these strands, giving resonance to kinships he recognized.

He was the professor who at once functioned in the scholarly while revering simplicity and embodying the valuing of it, with inarguable but unlabeled dirtbagery and simultaneous dignified uprightness.

Herb's early life was spent exploring the woods around Cleveland with friend Don Eckelberry, formative in shaping his interest in nature and art. While studying engineering on the GI Bill at the University of Kentucky, he met Willie Unsoeld. They began climbing on nearby cliffs and took glee in scaling campus edifices. The climbing interest grew into trips out West on furloughs to chosen objectives in the Rockies, the Tetons, and Cascades. When the war ended, Herb traveled to Switzerland, studying literature in Zürich and at the C.G. Jung Institute with Marie-Louise von Franz, and he worked with Ernst Feuz at the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research, testing and developing mountain equipment and climbing in the Alps.

In 1949, Herb and friends Willie Unsoeld and Englishman Laurie French, embarked on an attempt on 6,596-meter 2Nilkantha in the Garhwal Himal. To fund their trip, the trio worked an entire winter in a Swedish iron foundry, then spent weeks aboard a cargo ship, peeling potatoes en route to India to earn their keep. The adventure of this undertaking, without modern logistical support, at a time when the highest peaks had yet to see ascents, was as much in the efforts and unknowns of the journey as in the climb itself.

Always a minimalist and improviser in the mountains, he never did need a stove, hardly graduated from his tube tent even for snow camping, and often preferred to repose directly on the ground or needles. In the mid-1950s, he walked the John Muir Trail without a sleeping bag by means of an insert he'd sewed for his jacket that allowed him to rest by day and hike by night, subsisting on oats and raisins and cold instant coffee. In 1957, together with friends Dave Armstrong and John Hestenes, he made a traverse of the Bernese Alps, climbing 40 peaks.

Out of teaching basic English courses at UC Santa Barbara grew Herb's idea of a wilderness writing class. From the mid-1960s to early 70s, he taught this celebrated course, focusing on nature writers and writing, and taking groups of bright-minded, thirsty students on free-form outings in the High Sierra through all seasons, each trip a continuing of his own exploring of the range. Herb and the kids drove their VWs and jalopies to the mountains, piecing together rudimentary gear, sleeping in tube tents, scaling summits, skinny dipping, suffering and savoring in ways that to this day summon enlivened recollection of and exuberance over the confident and bold spirit of these trips.

Taking this spirit into the chapter of his life as an older father, a period of free-flowing mountain outings and family journeys across Europe followed, quietly and steadfastly supported by my mother, Susanne Pestel. The travels were guided by his continual study of everything from literature to geology, maps, cultural history: first, with a newborn infant in the Sierra, on to the Rockies, bringing along Herb's mother, Eva, in progressed Alzheimer's, with two large rescued dogs and a goat, Heidi.

And in 1981, with Susanne and their four-year-old daughter, he began a series of long-distance travels on foot through Europe. Walking thousands of miles and connecting paths from the tip of Denmark—joined by a billy goat, Marzipan, and at times overnighing in the straw of welcoming farmers' barns—along the Iron Curtain, and for the length of the Alps through Austria, Switzerland, and France to the Mediterranean; ultimately, with a horse and two dogs, and Super-8 film camera perpetually in hand, tying steps to the westernmost tip of Spain at Finisterre. Other cultural and landscape pilgrimages included taking in the length of England in winter, coastal paths of Normandy, and the foothills of the Pyrenees.

Just as Herb was perpetually immersed in study, he was also devoted to the appreciation of art and music through the practice of each. He saw these, along with time spent in the mountains and nature, as an expression of honoring and preserving wildness in the world and the human spirit and soul. As a writer, he excelled in the letter form; in art, at sketching. When he lived on the Eastern Sierra, a tiny blue-trimmed home centered around the baby grand piano. In exception to his minimalist equipment, he had no hesitation to carry his fiddle to a summit in celebration of a composer's birthday or a solstice or equinox. Herb's father, August, had been a bassoon player for over 30 years in the Cleveland Orchestra.

Living on the West Coast, Herb kept a routine of morning beach visits for decades, beginning in the 1950s. A committed conservationist by nature and principle, he was always frugal with resources and a steward of the land and beach, carrying out loads of bottles, cans, and rubbish. He believed in the innate joy of man as a scavenger, and also in being generous with his resources and time. Day in, day out, after a jog, he swam out past the breakers, and continued this ritual, floating daily in the often icy Pacific, until his 91st year, returning home with observations of the morning, the seal that had popped its head up beside him, the herons of the slough, the moods of the light.

In these later years of life, Herb also took greatest pleasure in being with his family in the mountains, watching his grandson, Finn Zeugswetter, grow into his own love for nature. And he cheered and studied along vicariously on his daughter Hjördis' and then partner Bernd's mountain-driven life, from Karakoram 8000ers to the summits and surrounds of the Patagonian spires, the Sierra, alpine capers and rocks near and far.

Nearly half a century after his footsteps on the John Muir Trail, he walked the remaining Pacific Crest miles at age 80, with a wistfulness to the ending of a cheerful theme. Into his old age, Herb retained boyish impishness and exuberance, remarkable balance and spring to step, taking to spontaneous dance with his dogs; delightfully off-keel with quip and larking remark; at times erupting in body-trembling glee at a literary passage or some mischief. And always yodeling and joyfully waving at reuniting and at bidding good-bye!

— Hjördis Rickert

Images



Herb Rickert with his family, west side of the Tetons, 1980.



Herb Rickert.

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