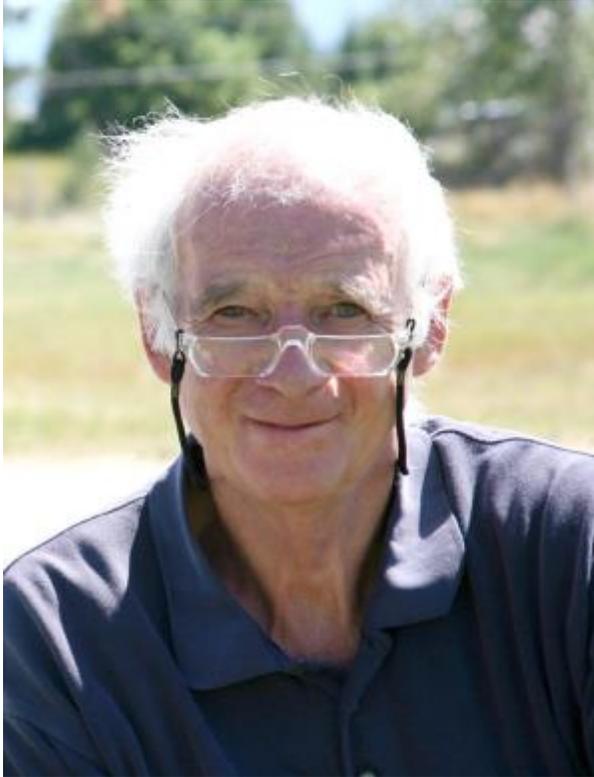


A Tribute to Bill Kerr

By Sarah Kerr, delivered at Bill's funeral, April 18th, 2017



James William Kerr was born in Jan 24th, 1936, in Coleman, Alberta on the coldest day of that winter. He was the middle son of Jim and Florence Kerr, coming between his older brother Jack, and his younger brother Gordon.

Bill died a few minutes before midnight on Wednesday, April 5th, 2017, in his room at Mountain Lakes Seniors Community in Nelson BC as the earliest Spring flowers were blooming outside. I was with him as he took his last breath, and Sheila, Julie, Craig, Ella and Amy and I had spent most of that day at Bill's bedside.

In the 81 years, between Bill's entry into, and his exit from, this world, he lived a large and full life. He loved, and was loved by many, and it really means a lot to our family to see you all gathered here today.

There are so many ways to describe Bill, it's hard to know where to start.

Professionally, he was first and foremost a geologist.

After high school, Bill left the Crowsnest pass to do his undergrad at the University of Alberta, then went on to complete his PhD at Columbia University in New York City

He was an early and passionate explorer of the Canadian Arctic, and even up to his death he could talk about the details of his work on Ellesmere and Baffin Island and how much he loved that life.

Bill left geology in the 1990's to focus on real estate development with Sheila. They opened a self-storage facility in Inglewood, and Bill loved the combination of physical work and

business strategizing. The place attracted a quirky cast of characters, all of whom my Dad welcomed with open arms. He always said that life there was worthy of being made into a sitcom, and he wanted Bob Newhart to star as him.

Though he did many things, over the course of his life, I think Bill's secret dream was to be a southern Alberta rancher. There wasn't much that made him happier than to be at our cottage at the lake, hauling rocks around in a wheelbarrow, chopping firewood, or rebuilding the boathouse. He loved broken-down old vehicles, trailers, tools, and sheds. He adored puttering around, and he had seemingly boundless physical strength and energy.

Sheila talks about how Bill never, ever complained: not about being uncomfortable, or about something being too hard, or too much work, or not being the way he wanted it. He just set himself about doing the thing that needed to be done, and always assumed that he'd achieve the goal he was aiming for.

Bill loved growing things and one year he had a scheme to grow potatoes in an ever-heightening pile of tires. This experiment was the source of much conversation all summer, and culminated in a ceremonial public unveiling in the fall. The contraption ultimately yielded a harvest of 3 tiny spuds and a 5-foot potato stalk, but Bill was as happy with the entertainment value of the whole experience as he would have been with bushels of potatoes.

For a while Bill's passion was clematis, and everyone who came to the house was taken out to the yard to be given the update on the races between different plants stretching across the arbor. Then it was rhubarb, and then raspberries. And always, saskatoons.

In his professional life and in his personal life, above all else, Bill was a people person. He was warm and gregarious, and always had an interesting conversation topic to spice things up. For a while 2000's he took to carrying a small oval magnet in his pocket, and if there was a lull in the conversation, he'd pull it out and ask people to guess what it was.

I don't know if anyone ever correctly guessed correctly, but it was a cow magnet, something that's fed to cows in order to collect staples and other bits of metal they might ingest, and prevent them from moving through their digestive systems. This particular magnet had been through a good number of cows, and Bill loved the conversations his little prop started.

Bill was undaunted in his cow magnet campaign, and when he attended his old friend Jim Lowell's 70th birthday in Colorado, he happened to find himself at the bar beside Jim's son-

in-law, Richard Gere. Instead of asking what it was like to be a famous movie star, Bill pulled out the cow magnet and asked Richard to guess what it was.

Bill loved parties and he and Sheila threw some great ones. Many folks here will remember a New Year's bash at Windermere complete with blackjack tables, a roulette wheel, and croupier hats. We decided to start a new tradition, and at midnight, my dad emerged from the basement, blackened with soot like a chimney sweep, holding a squawking piglet; just because it was a fun and memorable thing to do.

I have a vivid memory of traveling to the Pass with him for a Christmas party at the lodge where my Grandmother lived out her last few years. My Grandma and I were sitting at a table, and there was a dance floor in the center of the room. There were more women than men there, and my Dad was dancing with everyone he could find - the nurses, the other residents, his old English teacher, and they all loved it. At one point, I looked out and saw him in the middle of the room, in the moment between songs, scanning the room for his next partner. It's an image of him I'll never forget, he had a smile on his face, and was swaying a bit to the music, and as he looked around, I could see that he was trying to decide who to ask next, who he could make happy for a few moments.

Bill was a good father and husband, but he used to say that the thing he was most proud of was being a grandfather.

He devoted himself to Amy and Ella and, and he and Sheila lived across the street from them for the first few years of their lives, spending lots of time with them. When Ella was born, he told me he'd been thinking hard about his responsibilities as a grandfather, and he'd come up with a list of what he was going to pass on to them.

He was going to teach them magic tricks, and about the stars, and about how not to do more than one thing at a time. And he was going to teach them how to fall sleep (Bill was very proud of his ability to fall asleep on a dime, and that once he'd successfully taken a nap standing up). He also made a rule that he wasn't ever going to say no to them. I'm not sure about the value of that last one in a child's development, but it was clearly an indication of his love for them.

I once saw an amazing example of Bill's care for the girls. We were standing in the back alley, beside one of the many trailers in his extensive collection. (In a lovely coming together of his academic and pragmatic sides, this one was propped up on 4 old editions of the

Encyclopedia Britannica.) Bill was holding a 2-month old Ella in his arms, when he stepped backwards into the trailer hitch. He toppled backwards, landing flat on his back on the gravel, with both his arms still wrapped around Ella who lay unharmed on his chest.

In 2008, Julie and Craig and their family moved to Nelson, BC. I was in California, and after a while here in Calgary alone, Bill and Sheila decided to pick up stakes, and move to Nelson.

In January of 2010, they went out there for a few months, rented a house, and were working on a piece of development property they'd purchased. Bill was overseeing the work on the property, when he hit his head on the end of an exposed pipe in a crawl space. The blow caused an internal bleed, and Bill was rushed to surgery in Kelowna. The surgery was successful, and we thought all was well, but then a week or so later, while he was sleeping, Bill had a massive stroke.

Bill's stroke left him completely paralyzed on one side, but fortunately he was still able to speak. and had retained most of his impressive comprehension skills. But life had changed. He could no longer live at home, and required full time care.

Bill and Sheila returned to Calgary for Bill's treatment, but when it became clear the rehab wasn't going to restore his functioning, they moved to Nelson to be near Julie and her family.

Bill moved into Mountain Lakes, a lovely facility that was easy walking distance from both Julie and Sheila's houses. He was well cared for, and not in any physical distress, but it wasn't the life he had lived.

Especially for a man with such vigor and vitality, Bill's last years were difficult. Confined to bed, and spending most of his days watching TV (which hadn't been part of his world before). Bill's life got much smaller. But he never complained.

Bill's death was not entirely unexpected, and while it wasn't sudden, it was certainly fast.

On Sunday April 2nd, Julie and the girls visited Bill, and it seemed like he'd taken a turn. They went back the next morning, and he was worse. Julie called me, and I left Calgary immediately, arriving late Monday night. I visited with Bill on Tuesday, and while he wasn't speaking much, it was clear he knew who I was, and what was happening to him.

I took the girls up on Tuesday evening, and although Bill had declined further, we still had a lovely visit. He only said a few words, but he was very much present. Amy and Ella sang to Bill, and told him over and over how much he meant to them. He blew kisses, and reached out to tweak their noses.

Julie was with Bill on Wednesday morning, and just after she got home at noon, we got a call that his breathing had changed. Craig picked the girls up from school, we all went to his room, and stayed around Bill's bed until about 9:30 that night.

At that point, everyone else went home to sleep, and a volunteer from Nelson Hospice came in to take a shift. I got ready to take a nap in the games room down the hall, and just as I was laying down the nurse came to get me. Bill's breathing had changed again.

I rushed back to his room, bent over his bed, and put my hands on his shoulders. I was only this far from his face. Bill looked into my eyes, took a few quiet breaths and died.

There are many ways to describe what happens to us when we die, I'd like to share with you one that was introduced to me as being from the Ojibwa tradition. It's one that resonates deeply with me and it may have some value for you.

The understanding is, that when we die, we find ourselves on the shore of a river. On the beach are footprints, and these footprints are left by our ancestors - those we love who've died before us, whether they're related by blood or not.

But the people who left the footprints aren't there anymore. They've crossed the river, from the Village of the Living on this side, to the Village of the Ancestors on the other. Of course, these are really just different parts of the same larger village. Death is a change of address, not a separation from community.

The dead travel to the Village of the Ancestors, but they need the help of the living to get there. The task of those of us in the Village of the Living is to build a canoe. We build it out of our love, and it's this canoe that carries the person across the river.

As we launch the canoe from this side, and it's the power of our grief that fuels it. Our grief carries it halfway across, and from the other side of the river, the Ancestors reach out with their joy and pull the canoe the rest of the way. And with a great glorious celebration, they welcome the person home.

After Bill's last breath, we laid his body out in clean clothes, and for the next 2 and a half days, he stayed in his room, and was never left alone. We were building his canoe with love, and filling its paddles with grief.

There's a perspective that it takes the spirit a while to leave the body, and we certainly experienced that. As we tended to Bill's body, we could feel him slipping further and further away, until finally, he was well and truly gone.

On the final day, we held a goodbye ritual in Bill's room. He was in a rustic casket we'd hand-painted for him. We gathered the staff who knew him best, and one by one, each person laid a flower on Bill's body, and talked about what they loved about him and what they would miss about him.

It was heartbreakingly sad, and also heartbreakingly beautiful. Even in his compromised state, Bill had brought light and warmth to his home at Mountain Lakes, and he was deeply loved by these people who had become his village.

We loaded Bill's casket into the back of our van and, after it spent the night in the coolness of Craig's shop, Julie Craig and I drove it to the tiny crematorium in the Nelson Cemetery. On a rainy April afternoon, we loaded it into the retort, and we said goodbye to Bill's earthy remains.

We're still deliberating on what kind of urn would be most fitting for my dad, perhaps an old tool box? We'll get it picked out, and sometime this summer we'll inter his ashes at the tiny graveyard near our cottage at Rosen Lake. It's where all of Sheila's family is, and where we have also have a family dog and a few guinea pigs buried. It's where Bill wanted to be, and it's a place we visit often.

What we're doing today is finalizing the launch of Bill's canoe. We're releasing him from the Village of the Living, and helping establish him in the Village of the Dead. That's what we mean when we say "Rest in Peace". We're asking that Bill continue to be held in a web of love and connection, even after his death.

Though his death is a huge loss to those of us who love him, Bill is not lost. He's joining those who have gone before, in a place that we, too, will all go when our time comes. And

when each of us take our turn crossing the river, I like to think that Bill will be one of those waiting on the far shore for us to make our arrival.

We love you Bill, may your next journey be as wonderful as this one was.