

BEHIND THE BOOK: REVERE BEACH ELEGY: A MEMOIR OF HOME AND BEYOND

I don't remember exactly how it started, but for a while in the 1990s I was a fairly regular contributor to the *Boston Sunday Globe Magazine*. It was a time before digital "content", when the newspaper and magazine were both healthy, when there were a lot of opportunities for freelance writers and a lot of courage among editors, and the magazine ran a number of my medium-length essays on subjects as varied as tobacco farming in the Connecticut River Valley, the atmosphere at the Canadian-U.S. border, and a new golf course built from a family farm. They even accepted and published a six-part serialized novella called *The Boston Tangler*.

Deanne Urmy, an editor at Beacon Press (she's now at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) called the house one day, said she liked the essays, and, somewhat sheepishly, asked if I'd be interested in putting together a book of personal writing. We went to lunch in Boston - I liked her immediately - and that was the start of what became *Revere Beach Elogy*, a memoir in ten parts.

Some of the pieces had appeared in the *Globe*, some elsewhere, and half of them were new, written specifically for Deanne. Beacon had, and has, a reputation for making attractive, high-quality books. They did a nice job with *Elogy*, the reviews were great but sales were modest, and I was unsurprised when they didn't ask for another book, and quite a bit surprised when *Elogy* won the 2003 Massachusetts Book Award for non-fiction. After some years, the rights reverted to me, and Peter Sarno reissued the memoir from his just-born publishing house (which now also has a reputation for attractive, high-quality books), PFP/AJAR Contemporaries. That publication was the beginning of a fruitful partnership and a valued friendship.

I won't talk about all the essays in the memoir, but I'll mention a couple of favorites. The lead piece, "What a Father Leaves", is a long remembrance of my father, Roland Sr., who talked his way into law school at age 50, with no undergraduate degree, a full-time job, an hour-plus round-trip daily commute by subway, and three teenage sons. Somehow, he managed to graduate and then pass the bar and he enjoyed a few years of private practice before his sudden and untimely death at age 66 in 1982.

He was a wonderfully supportive father and his grit and persistence served as a key example for me when I was struggling to make a writing career. His warmth and devotion serve as daily examples to me now, in my own years of fatherhood.

On a lighter note, there's an essay called "The Notion of North" in which I lived out a slightly weird fantasy. One day I simply got into my car and drove north as far as I could go (with a four-wheel-drive truck I could have gone a bit farther). This was done with the encouragement of my good and adventurous wife, Amanda, (who did not accompany me on that trip) and it led me far up into Canada to a place called Chibougamau, where the trees were about my height, the storefronts had signs in what I believe was Cree, and where I took a cool, solitary dip in a pond fringed with stunted fir and tiny white birch, then turned around and drove back home.

Thanks, I suppose, to a penchant for no or poor planning, a spirit of adventure that sometimes borders on the foolhardy, the aforementioned supportive wife, and a determination to make a career of writing rather than pursue something with more security to it, I've had an unusual life. The pieces in *Revere Beach Elegy* touch upon various stops along that crooked road - a hospital stay during which I grew three inches, a terrifying summer job on the John Hancock Tower as it was being built in Boston, an abbreviated stint in the Peace Corps in Micronesia, years of working in the former USSR, an important trip to Italy, and the beginning of my relationship with Amanda - we've been together 37 years (married 36) this month.

As somebody once sang: "Regrets, I've got a few, but then again, too few to mention." I've been very lucky and very unlucky, had a fair share of suffering and more than a fair share of enjoyment. The truest thing I can say is that I have appreciated the simple fact of being alive, and still appreciate it, and I tried to put that sense of appreciation into *Elegy*.

Strangely enough, that word is associated with mournfulness, and it's really, on balance, a happy book. I suppose the mournfulness comes from the idea, the awareness, that, at some point, the leaf has a short stretch of bright last days, the stem lets go in a storm or a gentle breeze, and you tumble and twist in a final trip back to where you came from. The memories subside. The relationships with those we love, well, who knows - I like to think they persist in what the Bible calls "the fullness of time". Maybe, as Buddhists and Hindus believe, we take another form, learn other lessons, circle back again and again into the lives of the ones closest to us. Or maybe we just play unlimited free golf in heaven with those who made the voyage on an earlier breath of air, and we look back at what we did, or failed to do, and laugh.