



WALKING UP THE MOUNTAIN

by George Vukelich



Photos by Bruce Fritz

Climbing the mountain we hit an occasional plateau and are allowed respite, such as at this site overlooking the fast and lovely Wisconsin River.

WHEN WE START OUT in this life, our assumption is that we're running a race.

We're trying to beat out the competition, to win.

We're trying to win Love and Happiness and Power and all the goodies and perks that come with finishing in the money.

You look around and that's what

George Vukelich is an outdoorsman, columnist, freelance writer and radio show host who lives in Madison, Wisconsin. Excerpts from his long-running column North Country Notebook will appear in an upcoming book.

everybody seems to be assuming. It's not only a jungle out there; it's a rat race. Everybody says it.

So, run hard. Give it your best shot. Do your best — or your worst — to win. Do whatever it takes to win.

Try to WIN BIG and if you can't WIN BIG, then try to WIN small and if you can't WIN small, then try to just WIN, squeak in and if you can't squeak in, if you can't win at all, then try not to embarrass yourself or your family or your friends by the way you are losing.

BANGO! You're off. We're all off running in a pack, bumping into each

other, boxed-in, trying to find some running room, some openings, some space: Over the river and through the trees, past Grandmother's house we go.

Then the pack literally disappears.

The crowd disappears. You find that you are running *alone*. There must be people running ahead of you and there must be people running behind you, but for the first time, you get a sense that this might not be a "race" after all that you are running.

You get the sense that this might be a "journey" that you're on and at the pace you're going, you'll burn out

like a comet.

That's when you stop running and start walking, to conserve yourself a little. Then, you stop walking all the time and start sitting down every now and again to conserve yourself a little more.

Then you leave the race course itself.

There are many paths to the top of the mountain, the Wise Ones say, they are all different and they are all the same.

So, you leave the main roads and travel the side roads, the trails, the faint tracks.

One day it comes to you that this trail you're on, this strange trail, is very familiar to you, *you've been on it before* — and when you discover *that*, that's when the journey starts to be fun for you. It's like being in the fun house with all those crazy mirrors, and you know which is the reflection and which is the reality.

It is at this point that many people just laugh out loud at the awareness and other people simply chuckle to themselves. When it happens to you, you know now that you are not alone, you were never alone and you can never be alone. The paths up the mountain are full of people, journeying. They're spread out, but they're there.

"IT'S FUNNY, MY friend Steady Eddy likes to observe down at the bait shop when he babysits his grandson, Bugs, "when I was young, I was always hanging out with Old People. Now that I'm old, I'm always hanging out with Young People."

When I was young, I hung out a lot with my father, mostly in wooden fishing boats in the North Country lakes of Wisconsin.

The Old Man had fled his native Yugoslavia to avoid conscription in Emperor Franz Joseph's Austro-Hungarian Army, and the lake country of northern Wisconsin always reminded him, he said, of his native land. His father had arranged for him to have the forged visas and passports that brought him to freedom. It was my father's dream to go back

one day and see the Old Country but he died before he got to do it.

He died in the hospital at Rhineland, Wisconsin. He was 78 and all his systems were breaking down at the same time and one night he fell out of the hospital bed and broke his hip. I know now he was telling us something.

We held hands and I cried because I was feeling sorry for myself, seeing myself there in this bed one day, and he knew all that and patted my hand and reassured me.

His eyes held the greenfire of the dying wolf that Aldo Leopold wrote about, and every year the month of March is an anniversary of the great watershed we both passed the day he died.

IT SNOWED TODAY, starting early, a Christmas kind of snow in the month of March. By midmorning, the words no longer came, the writing freezing up like the creeks outside.

I built the fire up, swept my little corner clean, put a pot of chili on, got the kettle going good for tea.

It was this kind of day that had been the Old Man's last in that terrible hospital bed.

***Shrunken, shriveled,
all the light leaving him
like a fire that has
nowhere to go because
there's nothing left to burn.
In that north country bed
that small body was my father.
My God, My God.
Where did the rest of him go?***

It came to me then that some of him had gone into me. Looking into the mirror, I saw parts of him there for the very first time.

"That is your nose," I said out loud. "Man, that is really your nose. As a matter of fact, that is really your face."

***What is happening here?
We are no more father and son.
We are brother and brother.***

I fished a lot with Dynie Mansfield

after the Old Man died. Arthur (Dynie for Dynamite) Mansfield was the baseball coach at the University of Wisconsin in Madison for years and one of the best walleye fishermen in the Manitowish Waters country. As good as the Old Man, maybe better, but that's like comparing Babe Ruth with Henry Aaron.

I used to sit there in the bow on Little Trout or Little Crab or Constance, fantasizing the Old Man and Dynie in a head-to-head competition, like two teammates hitting balls out of the park in batting practice for the bragging rights.

Of course, I was also fantasizing that Dynie was the Old Man now and he wasn't *because I was the Old Man now*.

I think when I realized that — accepted it — that was the moment something happened inside me. Something clicked and made sense, and I knew, I just knew, that something was "right." I could hear my Old Man chuckling, the green wolf-eyes full of laughter, as he tapped a forefinger to the side of his head. When I fish with our Vincent now, I'm the Old Man.

"You get to be my age," my father used to tell me on the rockbars when he was catching walleyes and I was catching none, "and angels talk to you."

***We are here
learning to live
with each other.
God is our Father.
Karma our Mother.***

***The sins of the father
are not visited upon the son.
The sins of the son
Are visited upon the son.***

That is Lesson Number One.

After you've lived a while on this planet, you realize that it's like standing in line at O'Hare International.

You're surrounded by people who are coming and going, rich and poor, bound for all points of this planet, bound for business or pleasure or pain and your paths cross and you'll never see them again.

"We come and go," Nat King Cole



Bruce Fritz

Realizing that our 'friends' include the dead, with whom we commune through books and records as frequently as we do with the living, George Vukelich enjoys a meeting of the spirits with author August Derleth.

used to sing, "like the ripples on a stream."

We are as ephemeral as a hatch of Mayflies and we try to pretend that we're permanent when we know we're not, but not knowing anything else: *What else can we pretend?*

The sense of *loss*, the sense of *endings*. The sense of *impermanence*, of *changingness*, the sense that time sweeps us relentlessly down river, without a chance to get out and explore today's shore — without a chance to go back and explore yesterday's shore — this sense of powerlessness in the current can defeat us, can destroy us.

Steady Eddy says it's like we're all going to school down here, because we all have lessons to learn and we can help each other with some of our lessons and with other of our lessons, we can't help each other at all.

It is very difficult to help an alcoholic if you're not an alcoholic. If you've been through something yourself, the experience should make you a better teacher for someone who is going through that same experience.

It should also make you a better student of the whole game down here.

That's one reason your circle of friends is always changing. Friends need new challenges. You need new challenges. One way or another you drift away from each other, to new lessons, to new teachers. Or you cling desperately to the old ones.

WHAT IF, AS THE Wise Ones say, you blow your brains out with a handgun and then *bango!* there you are a minisecond later, sitting there conscious, alert, aware, holding a handgun pointed at your head.

What if it's not a minisecond later, but a lifetime later, or two or three or four more?

When you tumble to that knowledge eventually, will it make you chuckle or smile?

"Some of us," says Steady Eddy who used to knock down batters regularly with his intimidating fast ball, "don't acquire knowledge until it hits us where we hurt."

You take a circle of friends for granted in this life. You grow up with them around your family. Some are close and some are not so close and some blow back and forth like the wind.

To a certain extent, I developed friends the way the Old Man did. He had friends he worked with. He had friends he fished with. He had friends he played cribbage with or poker or pool.

I had friends like that.

And I found that I could do things with friends that I had absolutely nothing in common with except the thing we were doing.

Dynie and I, for example, were light years apart in our politics so we never really talked politics. We just fished walleyes and when we did that we were in the same boat. When I was younger, I thought Dynie had the best of all possible worlds: when he wasn't coaching baseball he was fishing. That applied to the Old Man too in a way. He never coached baseball, but he watched enough of it to

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be pretty smart about it. They were both so smart about baseball that they never let it interfere with their fishing.

As I grew up, and gravitated toward writing — and reading — I read somewhere that most writers read a lot of books to educate themselves. I realized that our house didn't have a lot of books. Not a dozen, including the Sears Roebuck catalog.

I had the good sense to marry a reader and our house overflows with books. They are not only in their bookcases. They are in the bedrooms, the bathroom, the kitchen — if we're not careful, they will force our record albums right out of the house.

The point that I want to make here is that our circle of friends includes all those people who wrote those books and recorded those albums.

Our circle of friends includes a lot of dead people who still speak to us — and quirky though that seems at first — when you think about it, in this electronic age, in the magic lantern light of television — most of us, I think, are now spending more and more time watching dead people and listening to dead people than we're spending with living people.

We read Henry David Thoreau who told us to: "Simplify. Simplify."

We listen to Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith who warned us of "Love, oh, love, oh careless love."

We remember always the considered judgment of Steady Eddy when *something* pulls the red and white bobber below the greasegreen waters of the Catfish Flats.

"I think," Steady says, trying to keep his excitement down, "I think we're on to *something*."

Or perhaps, as Dynie Mansfield liked to speculate up in the Manitowish Country, *something* is on to us. ■