

Bob Chassell, a Tribute

I'm sorry that I can't be with you today to celebrate Bob – Bobby – Chassell's singular life. Especially since it is thanks to Bob that I've known and enjoyed the company of so many of you who have gathered today in his beloved Stockbridge to remember him.

Bobby and I met thanks to Kim Resnick – a fellow Brandeis student with jet red hair and a jet-hot wit – who brought us together in the late sixties, when I was still a teenager and antiwar undergraduate, while Bob was already out of college, an anti-academic intellectual in his gap year – the first of many.

For two years, we shared a low-rent apartment on a quiet block in the (then unfashionable, now toney) town of Somerville, Mass – a few blocks north of Cambridge's Porter Square. Bob was the dream roommate. He had already developed his trademark costume – corduroys, flannels, cap, and boots – which, as you probably all know, he wore up to and through his last days, but even more uniquely for someone barely twenty, he already had his trademark good temper.

Remember Colonel Pickering, in the Lerner and Loewe musical, *My Fair Lady*? When the irritating Henry Higgins asks his companion...

*If I were hours late for dinner, would you bellow?
If I forgot your silly birthday, would you fuss?
Would you complain if I took out another fellow?*

... To which his roommate, Pickering, answers: *Never! Of course not! Nonsense!*

Voila Bob. He was inevitably cheerful, and consummately good-natured, and up for anything – new food, new friends, new facts and ideas. Naturally our tempers sometimes flared, but instead of topping my energy, Bob would go under it. His cheeks might darken; his gaze become more fixed; but Bob's response to stress was invariably to deploy rational force against a rising emotional tide.

Which explains why I felt so safe flying in his rickety old plane; and why I wasn't terrified the time my door swung open in mid-flight, leaving me looking out on a freefall of 5,000 feet.

Bob's response? *Oops*, he said, in a singsong voice, while casually, but competently, leaning over to secure the door.

Grateful as I am for that one door he closed, it is really all the doors Bob opened to me for which I am most grateful. And there were so many! As a city-kid with asphalt blood, I was utterly untutored in the tastes and tests of country boyhood. I cannot imagine how much poorer in spirit I would be today had not Bob and his family, so welcomingly and generously, helped me fully experience the New England outdoors.

Probably like many of you, when I think of Bob, I think not of books and megabytes, but of pond swimming, pollywog hunting, mountain-hiking, long-distance running, maple-sugaring, and meadow mowing – all the choice country talents that Bob happily taught me by example.

He also brought me under his parent's tutelage, from whom I learned to play flute, sharpen a scythe, and pinch tomatoes. In fact, the Chassell home on Rattlesnake Mountain Road, Bob's home base, with its rich culture of ideas and nature in which he and Karen were raised – that home was opened by Bob to a generation of his peers, myself among them, all of whom became, summer after beautiful summer, faithful pilgrims to its fabled gardens, meadows, and ponds.

As it happens, I was at the home with Bob the afternoon that Joe, his father, died. I had already seen many times his uncomplaining devotion to Joe. Once, during his final weeks, Joe challenged Bob to arm-wrestle with him. Emotional intelligence was not a virtue that Bob ever flaunted, but it was plainly there in heaps, as Bob made absolutely certain that his father would be convinced – although on his death-bed, and weak beyond calibration – that he, Joe, still had enough fight in him to beat his son Bob fair and square.

I also saw Bob ministering to Margot, his mother, during her last days, also with exquisite consideration. It was that same exquisite consideration that Bob again showed when he checked himself into Fairview nursing home in order not to burden anyone, once he understood his terrifying diagnosis.

Bobby, I used to think, was an eccentric hybrid – a man with a city boy's mind, a country boy's spirit, and a mamma's boy's heart. Indeed these are some of his unusual and marvelous qualities.

But reflecting on what Bob teaches us through his writings and other accomplishments, I now see him more as a precocious explorer. Bob lived in 21st Century cyber-reality, long before it arrived; while keeping faith with 19th century Emersonian reality, long after it disappeared.

He was a flyer whose head always searched the clouds, while always keeping his wheels within reach of this precious strip – the Stockbridge Bob loved, and the Stockbridge that loves him.

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