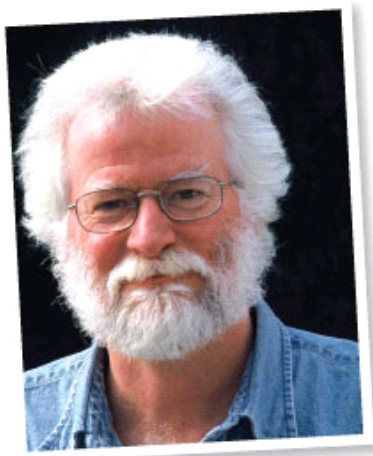


5/29/2015

Ralph Cramer: A Eulogy

John Friel



John Friel

My very good friend Ralph Cramer, owner of the cut flower farm Cramers' Posie Patch, died with his wife Lynn on Sunday, April 12. My father's 101st birthday, if he were alive, which he's not, so never mind.

That first week without them was a hard stretch. We'd traveled together: Grand Canyon, Lake Powell, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, England. We visited growers around Pennsylvania. I interviewed Ralph for articles on cut flowers, high tunnels and grapes.

Ralph Cramer was a large guy—not huge, just solid, blocky, sturdy. But on a slow day, Ralph was about 15% larger than life. He liked to keep busy. He built two businesses from scratch. He shipped and sold high tunnels from the UK. He loved rowing big whitewater, including the Colorado through Grand Canyon six times. At 70, he was gearing up for another big Western river, the Yampa. He never got there due to another love, building hot rods. He and Lynn died when his favorite, a topless roadster, left the road, hit an embankment and flipped.

Two days later, my son and I were in the woods with Ron Strasko, owner of my employer's friendly rival Creek Hill Nursery. We were cutting firewood to replenish our winter-ravaged stockpiles, dismantling a big beech; it blew over two years ago, but still had living roots and was sprouting. We gradually worked our way through what had been its uppermost branches, severing myriad limbs, and began bucking the main trunk to firewood length. Soon the wood was thicker than my chainsaw bar is long. We made those cuts in stages, alternating sides, clambering across the horizontal bole.

We whittled away at the thing, amputating major chunks until, unexpectedly, we arrived at a tipping point. The root mass finally outweighed the remaining upper structure and the tree stood up. It nearly took Ron with it, which would have been very uncool, but it didn't so it's funny. It looked as if it were felled by a lumberjack on 12-ft. stilts. There it stands, startling and hilarious. Also apt and timely.

That tree's surprise resurrection evoked another balancing act for Ralph and Lynn's friends: weighing the pain of their ugly, abrupt death against the joy of knowing them all these years. It was so very cool to have them as

part of our lives, and to be part of theirs, that the sudden messy end of their joined existence was, and is, a shocking spiritual wound. They loved to laugh, loved to make others laugh. We learned they could make us weep, too. But we have these memories, shared and unique, of times, travels, events and, most of all, of laughter.

The balm of time is a powerful analgesic. Eventually, some day too distant to quite believe in at first, accrued good memories achieve critical mass and outweigh the bitterness of the unacceptable. There comes, unbidden and probably unrecognized, a tipping point.

You don't "get over" losing wonderful people any more than you get over losing an eye. You just learn different ways to get along. Like that tree, the spirit rises and stands—damaged, but resilient and alive.

See, this is what writers do. We distill emotion—pain, love, rage, sorrow—into words. Words, we can handle. We whittle away at things, trying to make sense even where, especially where, no sense can be made. But we're as helpless as anyone else when fate slams a period into a sentence that shouldn't have ended yet.

Eventually, we reach that tipping point where good outweighs awful, where joy conquers hurt.

Let the rest stand. **GP**

John Friel is marketing manager for Emerald Coast Growers and a freelance writer.