

Buttes and Old Men

Wells Shoemaker, December, 2024



Death Valley is not a fair name. This is more accurately the Valley of Light and Life, Wind and Space, Water and Fire. Death may be inevitable, but the lifeforms here include some of the most dedicated survivors on the planet. I have learned a lot from them.

In the first week of January, 2000, unemployed for the first time since age 14, I headed alone to Death Valley, carrying baggage and driving my dear friend Robin's 4-wheel capable truck. The baggage featured what I call "red anger," which is a corrosive and crippling burden. Retreats to desert solitude are not exactly original strategies for humans, but they're not to be taken casually. I was feeling miserable and needy.

Eventually, after 2 weeks of reflection and walkabout, I returned with "blue anger," which can be wielded like a sword, with cautious purpose. It requires a deliberate sense of timing, and it doesn't work if it's squandered upon trivial or selfish ends.

I've written about the more melodramatic parts of this trip to the winter desert and the parables that emerged,ⁱ but not the anecdote I'd like to describe today.

Before 2000, I had traveled to Death Valley for recreation a few times in the springtime, but never in the dead of winter. I had not yet spent a night on the ground there, either. That has changed, with another 40 or so trips in the last 25 years, some solo, some with one companion, and several with three or four. They were all treasures.

In my millennium trip, I stayed in Park lodging for the first nights, doing progressively more ambitious day hikes before finally strapping on the backpack. For one of those day hikes, I hiked to the Death Valley Buttes, a pair of volcanic pyramids on the East side of the Valley, rising almost 3000 feet above the valley floor.

Driving East towards Daylight Pass, I found a small parking lot, a sun blasted kiosk, and four unoccupied cars. I set out through the creosote bushes and chollas. There was no well-trodden path, but that was welcome, and the Buttes were an easy target less than 2 miles distant. The desert floor was littered with lava and flashy mineral fragments, the names of which I didn't know then. Deserts are justly famous for hypnotizing people.

Reaching the upthrust base of the first Butte, a subtle trail appeared. Clearly, not many people ply this path. The climb took me over jagged rock that seemed freshly blown out of a raging volcano, although that could have been a million years ago or more. I was plenty familiar with Trinity Alps granite, but this stuff seemed determined to shred my soles that same day...and draw blood for any stumble. As I approached the summit, I thought I heard faint voices, but figured, *Naah, that must have been a trick of the wind.*

Not so! Just below the summit, in a sheltered hollow, I came upon five elderly men sitting on the rocks, grinning broadly. They welcomed me to their circle. These guys were all around 80 years old, and they had been making trips of this theme together every year for decades. Several were Ob-Gyn doctors from LA.



Winter sun sinks below the Death Valley Buttes

At this time, I had turned 54, and let's say it was a surprise to find full generational elders...incontrovertibly *old* men...in a raggedy place like this...under their own power.

I'm aware that in 2024, it's unlikely that any of these old friends are still with us. But their example offered some messages that I embrace.

Eighty years is a long time. Whatever struggles I was facing would melt into the puddle of time if I kept my bearings, my head clear, and my hands on the wheel. For the most part, we get to choose our directions.

The value of friendships is precious and everlasting. People's strength and their cognition will decline in later decades, but among friends, there is much joy yet to seek. That takes specific intention...and company. Eighty year old men don't get from decay in LA to spots like this by watching TV and complaining.



Like rough weather, adversities of body and spirit are inevitable...and may not always be conquerable. One doesn't need a medical degree to grasp that. However, determination and some luck can extend the time we have to appreciate the wonders of the world and the beauty of the people in our lives. I have added a qualification to the goal of longevity...which is merely an inert number. Generosity and kindness define the quality of a person's life. The Dalai Lama said that more articulately.ⁱⁱ

Over this conviction...we have control.

There's another matter. Friends, no matter how sturdy, bright, resourceful, or even superhuman, need the hands of others. I am immensely grateful for the hands my friends have offered when I couldn't get up, and I regard it as a privilege to reciprocate.

Now, about that age 80 business. It's here, and it happened fast.

Thanks, Guys. Never waste a day.

Wells



A very old Sierra foxtail pine and slightly less old friends of comparably enduring fiber ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ *Water in the Canyon and the allegory of the African Queen*

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ⁱⁱ Dalai Lama paraphrased: *The quality of a person's life is not defined by how much he (or she) extracted from the world, but by how much he improved the lives of others.* My personal addendum is that the scale doesn't matter. Caring for one person, a family, a community, or a whole country...they all count. Do what you can.

ⁱⁱⁱ Old Friends...two different songs of the same title, both poignant, by legends beloved to many of us: Guy Clark and then Willie Nelson with Roger Miller. They're on You Tube