

Eulogy honouring Dr. Tom Sutcliffe by Stephen Boshoff

St Andrews Church Newlands 18 April 2024

[Watch the full memorial service on YouTube.](#)

Dearest Kathy, your and Tom's children, grandchildren, and family, friends ...

In speaking about Tom, as often in other matters, I cannot help but to be drawn to Tom's own thoughts and writing for guidance.

In 1984, Tom wrote an obituary to John Beams, a close friend of Kathy and his, who passed of cancer. I quote:

"The death notice in today's paper read simply: BEAMS, John. Gone Fishing. Left peacefully ...

Without him – can we even think of fly-fishing without him? – ... each friend of kindred spirit, fly-fishing itself, is suddenly poorer.

End quote.

We can say the same – and more – about you Tom ... Can we even think of our lives and fly-fishing without you?

...

Not knowing John Beams but having listened to Tom about the nature of their relationship, I think that should they meet onstream now, John would ask: "Tom, what took you so long." Competitive as they were, Tom will reply ... "I finished what you did not ..."

...

To appreciate the impact of a large part of Tom's life, we must consider how he approached trout and fly-fishing.

He did not agree with sentiments that our trout and fly-fishing are merely – as often said – about a colonially introduced fish and associated past time pleasuring the privileged. To Tom, trout and all that surrounds it were intrinsically part of the "Capeness" of the Cape and our South Africanness. The fish and place mutually constitute one another.

For over a hundred years, Tom, and his predecessors used trout and its networks to attract investment and visitors, enabled research into understanding local fauna and flora, and its protection. Through Tom and other men of trout critical public infrastructure and facilities were built, war victims supported, fledgling democratic movements financed, and solace provided in response to many a misfortune. They worked to make a better home – what we now have – over the long term.

At times trout provided the stage and shared networks for deliberations and securing support on hefty challenges facing our society. We know that Tom quietly used trout as the "flotant" to further much in public health through people like the erstwhile Minister of Health, Dr. Willie van Niekerk, the UK ambassador Robin Renwick, and others.

Tom's support for the Red Cross War Memorial Childrens' Hospital was important. He used what he had to enable and direct, including substantial contributions by the fly-fishing community. Not least, the contribution of his fly fisher friend Clem Booth and his wife Deborah to establish the new ICU at Red Cross.

Trout and fly-fishing were an extension of Tom the doctor. He saw trout – the survival of which depends on the cleanest water, in turn determined by optimum conditions of nature and its use – as a proxy of health and goodness. Surrounded by illness, Tom, the healer, sought health.

To him, the methods, writing, art, human relationships, and institutions of fly fishing were the instruments and medicine for attaining and sustaining health.

Tom sought the health that trout brings with a passion, achieved mastery in its instruments and medicines, and made an impact wherever he found himself unmatched among the high priests of trout globally.

To Tom, fly-fishing was a way of being fully present in the natural and human world, with all the ethics of care, compassion, and value that that worldview entails. The time he spent fishing was spent working.

...

In thinking of Tom, I am reminded of his keen eye spotting trout holding in a stream, not noticeable to most. He suggested we look for the shadow, not the trout itself.

I think of his prowess recalling the distinct details differentiating trout from different streams. His love of the Karoo, where he saw much in a land barren to many. His sense of loss of friends gone, reminding us that we are because of each other.

I think of Tom the reader. He loved a passage by his friend, publisher Nick Lyons, which could also describe Tom's soul living between the two worlds of city and nature. I quote:

"I do not want the qualities of my soul unlocked only by this tense, cold, gray, noisy place – full of energy and neurosis ... art and anti-art ... getting and spending – in which the business part of my life must necessarily be lived ... I have other parts of my soul ...

Nothing in the world so enlivens my spirit and emotion as the rivers I know. They are necessities. In their clear, swift or slow, generous or coy waters, I regain my powers ... Stillness. Patience. Green thoughts. Open eyes. Attachment. High drama. Earthiness. Wit. The Huck Finn I once was."

End quote.

...

Forever the doctor, I think of Tom rushing to assist arranging care for countless a fly fisher or friend when in need.

I recall, my awareness, while spending considerable time in ICU – plagued by hallucinations of the contemptuous politicking of high public service office – Tom's "voluntarily being there", a shadow behind Leonie, a watchful and supportive rather than directive presence.

Recently, in us wading beats of the river “chemo lounge” together, the way he engaged with our guides, the loved sisters, and carers.

Tom, I recall Kathy entrusting you with cutting her hair ...

...

Beyond fly-fishing, Tom’s love of cricket and astute analysis of especially the five-day game; eleven-side chess played on a board of green.

When Tom phoned me, he would always end a conversation by saying – almost formally and in a manner as if to accentuate – “And our very best and love to Leonie as well.”

On Tom’s last trip to Rhodes and the Maclear district with Chris Bladen, Mario Cesari, and I, we saw and lived the fullness and nature of the man.

Yes, his mastery on the water. At Jurgens’s lake, with Tom announcing time for lunch, and us all reclining in the grass, he casually made a short cast, as if just wanting his tackle out of harm’s way. Promptly, he hooked the best fish of the trip.

But also, his compassion for all that lives. The little Maltese at Donie and Juan-Marie Naude’s Vrederus – whom we thought was shorn with sheep shears – sharing a specially prepared place in Tom’s bed nightly.

The mindful Tom, engaging fully with the moment. On two occasions, first when leaving Beaufort West following his beloved R61 to Graaff-Reinet, and then on starting the gravel road at Barkly towards Rhodes, Tom asked to drive. Chris consented, albeit we knew that Tom was taking morphine to calm pain. Steering a trusted truck along the rich landscape of the troutless central Karoo – identifying local birds, plants, a mysterious farmhouse – and the somewhat treacherous gravel road to Rhodes, is every much as part of hunting trout as the first take enticed on-stream.

His dry, confident moments of humour. At the famed Walkerbouts, I was instructed to remove a treasured oil painting of proprietor and Rhodes legend Dave Walker (affectionately called Dawid Stapper by Tom) from the dining room wall, so that Tom could adorn the establishment with another trout over pebbles wall painting.

The deep unwavering respect in which he is held. Donie and Juan-Marie, accomplished and distinguished people, my age, would still, after decades, address him as “Doctor Tom”, not Tom. An act portraying much more than Afrikaans cultural tradition.

His manner of sharing. Last week, in speaking to Chris, we concluded that, to Tom, fishing was an incidental reason for taking us to Rhodes and Vrederus. He wanted us to share his medicine, the fullness of place and the human relationships he forged in pursuing trout. Again, he acted as the generous emissary for the full health of trout. Mostly, he wanted us – once he was gone, and he saw that coming – to care for his medicine, and to share it, even with tiny acts like placing a floating fly on Basie Vosloo’s grave.

...

The legendary English chef Marco Pierre White, reflecting on the chefs he met and worked with through his life, suggested that very few are artists. He proposed that the person who

works with the hands is a labourer, the one who works with hands and brain, a craftsman, and the one who employs the hands, brain, and heart, an artist. On- and off-stream, Tom was an artist.

...

While not fishing since our trip, there was no stopping to Tom. When he fractured his right arm in a fall, and could not paint daily, he responded poorly to my cheeky suggestion that he takes up casting and painting left-handed. Suffice it to say – in my eye – a two-month break at the time brought a new dimension to his work. A new realness, translucence, and life. Life and its portrayal merged, and Tom became one with trout.

Underlying it all, I think, was his awareness, which enabled truly seeing, both the specific and pattern, and things “beautiful”. This, in turn, bred care, and the will to experience and share more.

...

I find solace in that Tom left us with lived examples, views – and directives if you will – on many things, including managing loss through death and how to live.

In *Shadows on the Streambed*, he reflects on having lived a long life. I quote:

“The other fact when you cross the 65-year divide is the chances are you’re going to have known a lot of anglers who now fish celestial beats in other parts of the universe, and that some of them will have been real good friends of yours ... You miss them, you give them thought, but basically you don’t spend too much time moping and being nostalgic that they’re not around because you suspect none of them would be pleased to know that you are down there behaving like a wistful wimp. They’d rather know that you’re down there on trout water somewhere trying not to act your age and getting on with things like enjoying yourself ... collecting a few more memories.”

In how we should live, he suggested:

“... I’m closer to a personal philosophy now than ever before, which is that you’re okay if a packet of tobacco and a bottle of whisky lasts you a week, and an hour on a river still feels like ten minutes ... I’m also dabbling more with the notion that shadows on a stream bed can be a lot like the opportunities in life itself, in that they’re important to success in their own way, are mostly fleeting, often get missed or wasted, can turn up unexpectedly and sometimes go unnoticed because you took your eye off the ball.

... I still work, but only on my terms, doing consulting and then only in those aspects of medicine that I like most – or is the right word here not admire most?”

End quote.

...

In closing, I refer to Norman Maclean’s book “A River Runs Through It” which fictionally chronicles the life of Norman, his brother Paul, and their Presbyterian minister father as they fished the Big Blackfoot River in Montana post World War I. The book is filled with the depth of Norman’s sadness over the troubled Paul’s death through an unsolved murder, and his inability to save him. It reflects on how those closest to us at times alludes. Like trout, we cannot fully understand them.

When Norman and his father discuss Paul's death for the last time, Norman says: "If you push me far enough, all I really know is that he was a fine fisherman." His father replied: "You know more than that ... He was beautiful."

Tom, on behalf of many, spread as we are across the globe – many a home-water – thank you for everything.

You were beautiful. What you left us is beautiful, and what it will enable in years to come is beautiful.

Your shadow on the streambed is so large, we can spot it clearly.

Stephen Boshoff

18 April 2023