

The Healing Land and Teddy Roosevelt's Broken Heart

Teddy Roosevelt's ego is legendary, his ambition quite amply illustrated by his unsuccessful run for a third Presidential term, backed as he was by a political organization with the goofiest name in American political history, the Bull Moose Party.

A year after he got thoroughly beaten, he nearly died in South America on a madcap trip up uncharted Amazon waters, an expedition he took on to assuage the hurt from that embarrassing loss, not to mention the fury of friends and followers who believed his cartoon candidacy gave the election to Woodrow Wilson, the Democrat. Roosevelt got the heck out of Dodge and stepped into a Amazon canoe.

Teddy Roosevelt was asthmatic from birth. When he was a boy, his father told him he lacked nothing intellectually but much physically. If he wanted to succeed, young Teddy needed to work on his body, the old man said--which he did, even becoming a boxer. By all accounts, Teddy was indefatigable. Whatever he lacked, he worked to get it himself.

Mostly.

On February 14, 1884, he took hits no one should. His loving wife, Alice Hathaway Lee, diagnosed with Bright's disease; and died on Valentine's Day. Alice Hathaway Lee was his college sweetheart, a woman he'd often described as far too good for him. About that, he may well have been right.

That very same night, his mother also died from the ravages of typhoid fever. Thus, in one catastrophic night he lost the two most beloved women in his life. "The light has gone out," he wrote in his journal. He literally could not go home.

So he went west to the Dakotas, driven to believe that when darkness arrives, the only cure is to lose yourself in adventure and openness and extremity. He was on his way

up the Missouri, in April, the temperature somewhere just below zero, when his boat was stolen. Without a moment's hesitation, Teddy Roosevelt, the high society New York City boy, went after the thugs and almost single-handedly brought them to justice.

He was a tough guy, but what he needed was something the city boy could only get way, way out in the open country of the Great Plains. At that point, so much grief and sadness haunting him, he had the good sense to believe that the big land all around him might well be his therapy. Light came back into his life because of the time he spent, often alone, on the Great Plains. Out in the open spaces, he was blessed to find the strength to pull himself up, kicking and screaming, back to life itself after a single night's horrendous losses and grief few of us could bear.

I'd like to think that when Teddy Roosevelt, who was not a big man, stood up high on a hill and felt his broken heart in his chest, he looked over a seamless horizon of land and sky, maybe a hawk or an eagle soaring somewhere far away. I'd like to think that infinity all around, the sheer empty spaces sculpted and humbled his grief. I'd like to think, what many of us feel while standing at the top of Spirit Mound or at the edge of the Loess Hills, is the sheer power of mighty silence. I'd like to think the endless world all around quietly put away what it could of his grief.

I don't know that Teddy felt at home out here, so much a city boy. But it seems clear that he went back east, a stronger man from having been held in the arms of a world so much bigger than he was.

"We did not think of the great open plains, the rolling hills, the winding streams with tangled growth as wild." So said Luther Standing Bear. "Earth was beautiful, and we were surrounded with the blessings of the great Mystery."

That may well be the recovery Teddy found out here amid so many miles of open space.