

Excerpts from; Winters with the Whale, by Robby Pitagora.

"If you see something that needs to be done, do it. And since your doing it, you might as well over do it."

That is my favorite Whale quote. I am not exactly sure when I first heard him say it, but I know he shared it with me more than once. Eventually the sentiment sunk in and hopefully I've passed it down the line.

It says everything about the Whale then, as the 70's flowed into the 80's.

We met at around midnight on my first graveyard shift at the Park City ski area and my life would never be the same...

... winter had come on slow, very limited snow. The first week in January the resort was offering "unpaid leave" to anyone interested. Whale and I headed south the next day, happily stuffed into his Subaru Brat. It turned out to be quite a trip.

Somewhere on the Navajo reservation we passed an old orange Dodge Dart. Stripped, no wheels, up on blocks. "That's my car," he said. "What?" "Yea, it died right there, years ago."

Whaler told me the story of breaking down there with all his possessions in the car. He was heading to Flagstaff for the winter, so he had all his skis and warm weather gear etc. Basically it was everything he owned. He hitchhiked to Flagstaff and it took him a couple of days to return to his car. Everything was gone, including many critical auto parts.

In typical Whale fashion, he started asking around... After several interviews, he was directed to a nearby wash where he recovered most of his stuff. "There were my skis and ski gear and most of the rest of it, just dumped into this wash," he said through the laughter. "It was quite a sight." He gathered it up and headed back to Flagstaff. The Dart was abandoned and remained there on the side of Hwy 89 for a long, long time. Another Whale monument...

...the learning curve was steep. My skill operating a snow cat limited to a few weeks, a ski run with stumps hiding just beneath the thin snow, moving downhill and, of course, me not wearing a seat belt. Bad combo. I stamped the windshield. Hard!

Being in the back of the pack it must have taken awhile before the team got back to where I was. I suppose I was quite disoriented, because the next thing I remember, the Whale is opening up the door to my car and asking, "What the hell is going on?" Didn't take him long to put 2 and 2 together. "Grab your stuff you're coming with me," he said.

The next several hours I rode packed into the cab with Whale. He must have been worried I had a concussion, so he kept me awake and alert with stories. Some from of those stories were from the river, but what I recall is him telling me of his days on a helicopter in Vietnam. It was the only time he ever spoke with me about his days in the military. The stories were violent and graphic and sad (except for a few while he was on leave in Saigon – wink, wink!). Maybe he figured I wouldn't remember them, or maybe it was his way of keeping my attention so I wouldn't fall asleep, or maybe it was just the time to let it out. No matter, he was taking care of me as best he could. Like he always did...

Most of my memories of Whale, that winter of 1980/81, are now limited by time and distance. The stories elude me even when I concentrate to gather them. Those brain cells carried away like silt down the Colorado River.

What I am left with is a feeling. The feeling of what it was like to walk, ski and work beside the Whaler. In those days at the Park City ski area, Whale was clearly our leader. Yet he insisted we walk beside him, never behind. That is metaphorically speaking of course, for in the snow cats we always followed him around the circuit like so many ducklings not wanting to get too far behind their mother. He always wanted to hear our opinions regardless of how far fetched or ridiculous they were, and he never judged or put down any of us. And believe me, he had plenty of opportunities.

His leadership was done by example.

To me, he was a hero. Someone to be admired and looked up to, we all did. I especially gravitated to him, possibly because we had the river in common (I had just finished my first season as a guide) or maybe just because I needed him in my life. He was my barometer, I always looked to what he did, how he acted (and reacted), how he treated people and mostly how he lived in the moment.

Sharing that infectious smile and laughter. Being snagged by that twinkle from those deep blue eyes. Somehow always getting drawn up in the mischief of the moment, never to take advantage of a situation but to position ourselves to make the most of what came our way. He was a master of making the most of the moments. He also was ever willing to extend a hand.

There was the time I was having some difficulty. I went up to his south facing house on Mars hill (the "Aloha Paradise") above Park City. Of course, he was day sleeping (working the graveyard shift) but I woke him up anyway. Whaler moaned, rolled and with heavy sleep in his eyes he sat up. He didn't get out of bed, covers still over his lap, reached to his bed stand, pulled out a bag of Drum, rolled and fired up a cigarette. He didn't give me a hard time for waking him or hassle me about my obvious selfishness. He just looked at me and listened. Whaler nodded occasionally, saying "yea" every once in a while but mostly just smoking and listening and looking at me. After ten minutes or so of talking to him, I suppose I got out what I needed to say, so I rose and said "thanks, Whale I feel much better" and split. I don't think he said a word.

That is how he was...there for me. Whale was there for all his friends, which explains why he had so many friends.

He showed patience (unless pushed to the very edge) and kindness. He always saw the other point of view and he rarely took a side. He just wanted to get along and have everyone else get along as well.

Now, a quarter century in hindsight, I see he was coming into the peak of his life. The next four or five years were true glory years for the Whaler. It is that period of time that most of my memories of the Whale remain. That perspective he helped me to gain has shaped much of my life.

... that first winter in Park City when we were pushing snow all night. Whale was the one who woke me up at the end of our 3 am lunch break (I would be crashed in one of the beds in the Summit house ski patrol shack). "Time to get up, boy." He would be laughing, brimming with life, motivating me (and the rest of the crew) to get back out there and finish the job.