

A TRIBUTE TO BOB “OXO” CORBETT
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By Mark Staples

GOOD MORNING, I'M MARK STAPLES. LIKE HE WAS TO MANY OF YOU, BOB CORBETT WAS A DEAR FRIEND TO ME, SO I'M HONORED THE CORBETT FAMILY ASKED ME TO “SAY A FEW WORDS” ABOUT HIM. I WANT YOU TO KNOW AT THE OUTSET THAT I'M NOT HERE TO PAY MY LAST RESPECTS TO BOB, BUT MY LASTING RESPECTS TO HIM... A MAN OF SUCH OVERARCHING AND ABIDING . . . INVENTIVENESS, THAT I BELIEVE WHEN DOTTIE WAS STILL EXPECTING HIM, SOMEONE MUST'VE ASKED HER, EVEN THEN, “CAN BOBBY COME OUT AND PLAY?”, BECAUSE HE OBVIOUSLY ANSWERED THAT CALL AND MORE THAN ANY PERSON I EVER MET, PLAYFULLY ENGAGED HIS ENTIRE EXISTENCE.

THE FIRST TIME I MET OXO, HE WAS IN THE 8TH GRADE AND I WAS IN THE 5TH, AT THE CITYWIDE SCIENCE FAIR WITH THE 12 CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OF BUTTE COMPETING.

I HAD WON THE 5TH GRADE CONTEST AT THE I.C., - (I MAY HAVE BEEN THE SOLE ENTRANT AS I RECALL). MY ENTRY WAS A PIECE OF STYROFOAM WITH THE IMPRINT OF A HUMAN EAR CARVED IN IT AND THEN THE WORKINGS OF THE EAR LAID OUT IN COLORED CLAY. TRUTH BE KNOWN - AND I TRUST THE STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS HAS RUN - MY DAD, A SURGEON, DID THE WHOLE THING EXCEPT THE LETTERING ON MY ACCOMPANYING POSTER. WHILE I STOOD AT MY TABLE AT THE CONTEST FINALS, GETTING ONLY HMMMMM'S” FROM THE FEW PASSERSBY, A CROWD WAS GATHERED TWO DEEP AROUND A NEARBY TABLE WHERE A KID FROM ST. JOHN'S HAD BUILT HIS OWN TABLE-TOP, HAND-CRANKED ELECTRICAL GENERATOR, WAS RUNNING LIGHT BULBS FROM IT, AND TO BOOT, HIS POSTER WAS IN 3-D!!, AND HE WAS HANDING OUT SPECIAL GLASSES TO READ IT.

IT WAS OUR BOY, BOBBIE. AT SOME POINT, COMFORTABLE THAT NO ONE WAS GOING TO STEAL MY NON-AWARDED “LIFE-OF-THE-EAR” EXHIBIT IN MY ABSENCE, I WANDERED OVER TO BOB'S TABLE, BY THEN FESTOONED WITH BOTH A BLUE RIBBON AND “BEST OF SHOW.” FROM BEHIND THE X-RAY GLASSES HE GAVE ME, I MARVELED OUT LOUD ABOUT HIS PROJECT. HE SAID SOMETHING LIKE “THANKS, . . . I WAS GOING TO BUILD A WHOLE MODEL CITY FOR IT TO POWER, BUT I RAN OUT OF TIME . . . AND TABLE SPACE.” THEN HE SAID WHAT I SUPPOSE BEGAN OUR FRIENDSHIP, HE SAID, “HEY, I SAW YOUR STYRO-EAR, I LIKED IT A LOT, IT WAS REALLY COOL.” THAT WAS BETTER THAN ANY RIBBON I COULD'VE GOTTEN.

I GOT TO KNOW HIM BETTER AS A HIGH SCHOOL FRIEND OF MY OLDER BROTHER. THEY HAD A GANG OF BUDDIES THAT FAIRLY LEVITATED ON MENSA LEVEL, 99TH PERCENTILE INTELLIGENCE AND EQUALLY HIGH LEVEL HUMOR. I WAS JUST THE KID BROTHER, BUT THEY'D LET ME HANG AROUND - A LITTLE BIT - IF I FETCHED THEM COKES AND COULD MAKE THEM LAUGH, SO I DID AND SOAKED IN AS MUCH AS I COULD GET OF THEIR MADCAP BRILLIANCE.

EVEN IN HIGH SCHOOL, BOB, THOUGH NOT YET MONIKORED “OXO”, ALREADY HAD THE FLASHIEST CLOTHES (THAT WAS HIS V-NECK AND PENNY-LOAFER INCARNATION), DROVE THE FLASHIEST GIRLS, IN HIS FLASHIEST CAR, GOT STRAIGHT A'S AND NATIONAL SCHOLASTIC RECOGNITION, YET SEEMED TO DO IT ALL EFFORTLESSLY, WITHOUT INCURRING THE TYPICAL TEENAGE RESENTMENT FROM HIS PEERS, AND WAS ALREADY DEEPLY INVOLVED IN EVERY HIGH SCHOOL CLUB THAT WAS COMMUNITY-MINDED.

I LOST TRACK OF BOB WHEN WE BOTH WENT TO COLLEGE, BUT I KNOW FROM FRIENDS AT BOZEMAN THAT HE WAS A BMOC WHO AGAIN WON EVERY SCHOLASTIC AWARD THERE WAS TO WIN, IN THE TOUGHEST CURRICULUMS THEY HAD, WHILE STILL HAVING MORE FUN THAN ANYONE IN THE GALLATIN VALLEY BEFORE OR SINCE.

LATER, SOMEHOW OVER THE PERIOD OF THE 70'S AND EARLY 80'S, LIKE SOME BEDRAGGLED MINING CITY VERSION OF CAPISTRANO SWALLOWS, MANY OF US DRIFTED BACK TO BUTTE FROM OUR ACADEMIC SOJOURNS. BY THAT TIME BOB HAD SOMEHOW EVOLVED INTO “OXO”, AND BUTTE WAS ABOUT TO BE GRACED FOR DECADES BY A MIND AND HEART IN FULL BLOOM AND RARE FORM (NOT TO MENTION A MUSTACHE ALSO IN FULL BLOOM AND RARE FORM).

OXO HAD GROWN INTO THE CORNUCOPIA OF A MAN WE ALL NOW VENERATE. HE WAS THAT SPECIAL KIND OF BUTTE PERSON WITH CHARACTER WHO IS ALSO A CHARACTER, BUT OXO WAS EVEN MORE, A TRUE ONE-OF-A-KIND DISTILLATION OF PRACTICALITY AND FREE-ASSOCIATION, REVERENCE AND IRREVERENCE, SELF-

INDULGENCE AND ALTRUISM, SATIRE AND SENTIMENT, PERCOLATING WITH IDEAS ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE, (AS WE NOW KNOW, LOTS OF CONCRETE). HE WAS LEFT BRAIN . . . RIGHT BRAIN . . . AND ALL HEART.

AT A TIME WHEN AS YOUNG ADULTS MANY OF US WERE STILL TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO DO NEXT IN OUR LIVES, OXO WAS ALREADY GOING FULL-BORE.

HE'D SOMEHOW ACQUIRED THE OLD MASSIVE ABANDONED ORE BIN ON THE SOUTH BUTTE HILL AND WAS CONVERTING IT TO HIS "HABITAT." HE WAS WINNING AUTO SHOWS FAR AND WIDE WITH HIS STUNNINGLY CUSTOMIZED CARS. HE WAS DOING THINGS ON HIS COMPUTER THAT WERE CUTTING EDGE WHILE MOST OF US WERE STILL LEARNING HOW TO TURN THE INFERNAL THINGS ON, AND HE WAS ONE OF THE LEADING LIGHTS - AND IN MY MIND SOULFUL CENTER - OF THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY (NCAT), WHICH BROUGHT SO MANY NEW UPBEAT, VISIONARY PEOPLE TO BUTTE AT A TIME WHEN FRANKLY, THE TOWN WAS DOWN ECONOMICALLY AND SPIRITUALLY.

OXO PRODUCED MANY WORKS OF ART, HIS CARS, HIS HOME, HIS POSTERS, HIS DESIGNS, HIS BUILDINGS, BUT I THINK HIS GREATEST WORKS OF ART WERE HIMSELF AND HIS IRREPRESSIBLE CREATIVE SPIRIT. AT A TIME WHEN A NUMBER OF US WERE EITHER RETURNING HOME TO BUTTE, OR ARRIVING FOR THE FIRST TIME - BY SEEING BUTTE THROUGH OXO'S EYES, (AND YOU WERE POWERLESS NOT TO), WE TOO GOT TURNED ON TO ITS OFFBEAT CHARMS AND ITS WIDE OPEN CANVAS FOR CREATIVE PURSUITS. HE INSISTED THAT BUTTE WAS "REALLY COOL" . . . AND SO IRRESISTABLE WAS HIS ENTHUSIASM, . . . THAT WE ALL CAME TO AGREE.

OXO SHOWED US THAT UNLIKE IN SOME AREAS WHERE IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO MAKE A MARK, IN BUTTE, IF YOU WANTED TO HELP, YOU COULD, WITH YOUR ART, OR YOUR INDUSTRY, OR IN HIS CASE . . . BOTH.

AT THAT POINT OXO WAS NO LONGER V-NECKED AND PENNY-LOAFERED. WITH HIS NEW PONYTAIL AND BERET, I'VE HEARD SOME PEOPLE SAY OXO HAD BECOME A "HIPPIE." I THINK A MORE ACCURATE CHARACTERIZATION WOULD BE A "BEATNIK", BUT TO BE SURE, A BEATNIK WHO COULD CONCEIVE, DESIGN AND CONSTRUCT A MAJOR BUILDING, WHICH WAS "GREEN" LONG BEFORE THAT TERM, BECAME POLITICALLY CORRECT. BESIDES, HIPPIES ESCHEWED MATERIAL THINGS; OXO LOVED, COLLECTED, AND BUILT COLORFUL, BIG (AND SOMETIMES VERY FAST) MATERIAL THINGS. HIPPIES ALSO WANTED TO BE "ONE WITH THE GREAT OUTDOORS!" OXO, LEST WE FORGET, DEVOTED PRODIGIOUS AMOUNTS OF GENIUS TO DEVISING WAYS OF KEEPING THE OUTDOORS . . . OUTDOORS!

I WAS TRAVELING A LOT IN THOSE YEARS, PLAYING MUSIC IN JOINTS IN THE REGION, BUT ALWAYS WHEN I GOT HOME, ONCE I'D CAUGHT UP WITH MY FAMILY, I'D WANT TO FIND OUT WHAT OXO WAS UP TO, AND I GUARANTEE YOU WITH HIM IT WAS NEVER "SAME OLD, SAME-OLD." HE WAS WONDERFUL - WITH AN EMPHASIS ON WONDER - TO JUST HANG OUT WITH. IT WAS LIKE BEING ON THE SETS OF TWO PBS SHOWS AT THE SAME TIME: *NOVA*, AND *KAPTAIN KANGAROO*.

WHETHER IT WAS HIS COMPUTER PRODUCTIONS, HIS BOWLING BALL-HEAD PEOPLE, HIS MIRROR-CAR, HIS POSTERS, HIS HOT-RODS, HIS WONDROUS, FANTASTICAL HOME, OR NOT LEAST OF ALL HIS NEWEST WORLD-CHANGING ENERGY EFFICIENCY DESIGNS, HE WAS A PRODUCTIVITY DERVISH, BUT HE WASN'T WHIRLING, HE WAS BURROWING, DEEP INTO THE HEART OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE TRULY, PASSIONATELY ALIVE.

HE COULD'VE BEEN A LEADING LIGHT IN ANY AVANT- GARDE ART OR DESIGN CIRCLE IN ANY MAJOR CITY IN THE WORLD, AND HIS CIRCLE OF FRIENDS WAS BY THEN GLOBAL IN CIRCUMFERENCE. BUT THE CENTER OF HIS UNIVERSE AND HIS GREATEST MUSE WAS THIS LITTLE ECCENTRIC BURG TUCKED UP AGAINST THE DIVIDE. HE FOUND IT A VERITABLE BOTTOMLESS MINE OF INSPIRATION FOR PROJECTS BOTH ULTRA PRACTICAL AND EXUBERANTLY FANCIFUL.

AND MEANWHILE, HE ENCOURAGED AND BRAGGED-UP EVERYONE ELSE'S ARTISTIC UNDERTAKINGS; HE WAS ONE OF BUTTE'S FOREMOST "PATRONS OF THE ARTS", HIGH AND LOW. YOU'D CALL HIM WITH SOME FAR-FETCHED PIPE DREAM, AND ASK "HEY, OXO, WHADAYA THINK OF THIS CRAZY IDEA?" AND HE'D SAY, IN HIS INIMITABLE STACCATO, "YEAH, YEAH, THAT SOUNDS REALLY COOL" . . . LET'S DO IT."

AT THAT TIME, I WENT TO WORK IN THE MOUNTAIN CON MINE FOR A YEAR TO HELP PAY FOR LAW SCHOOL, AND IN MY FREE TIME FORMED, WITH LOCAL ARCHITECT STEVE HINICK AN ERSATZ HOUSE BAND AT THE NEW DEAL BAR, FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS LIKE HALLOWEEN, ST. PAT'S, AND THE 4TH. ON THOSE NIGHTS, I'D BANG AWAY AT THE OLD STAND-UP PIANO IN THE CORNER, STEVE BANGED ALONG ON A CONDENSED DRUM SET, AND WE SAT IN A CORNER NOT BIG ENOUGH TO SWING A CAT IN.

OXO HAD, AMONG A THOUSAND OTHER UNDERTAKINGS, BECOME SORT OF MY “AGENT” FOR SOLO GIGS AROUND THE BUTTE AREA, - THE SILVER SADDLE IN BASIN - THE WHITEHALL CREAMERY, THE MELROSE CLUB – YOU KNOW, THE BIG TIME.

HE WAS ALSO A HUGE FAN OF A GUY HE WORKED WITH AT NCAT, DAN HAGAN, WHO IN HIS ALTER EGO AS - “FLASH” - PLAYED GUITAR WITH HIS OWN BAND, THE “ROCKONAUTS.” I HAD NOT ACTUALLY HEARD “FLASH”, BUT OXO SO RAVED ABOUT HIM, I WAS INTRIGUED.

HINICK AND I NEVER REHEARSED. I’D JUST PLAY WHATEVER CAME TO MIND, STEVE WOULD RHYTHMICALLY FOLLOW, AND WE’D ROCK OUT ON TUNES LIKE “HONKY TONK WOMAN” OR “HUNKA, HUNKA BURNIN LOVE.”

FOR ONE NEW DEAL GIG, OUR “AGENT”, OXO, DECIDED WE NEEDED “FLASH” TO FILL OUT OUR GROUP, THE “T AND A BAND” – (SHORT FOR “TONSILS AND ADENOIDS”, WHEN ASKED) SO WE - WITHOUT ANY REHEARSAL - DEBUTED WITH “FLASH” ON HALLOWEEN NIGHT. “FLASH”, WHO TURNED OUT TO BE A VERY ADEPT GUITARIST, FIT INTO OUR IMPROV “MINESHAFT BOOGIE” GROOVE QUITE WELL IN THE 1ST SET, BUT IN THE 2ND, AS THE SPIRITS OF HALLOWEEN (AND BACCHUS) BEGAN TO INFUSE THE CROWD, (AND THE BAND) FLASH’S PLAYING STARTED RESPONDING TO A FREQUENCY NOT OF THIS GALAXY, AND HE WANDERED WITH HIS GUITAR OFF INTO THE DANCING REVELERS, HIS CORD SNAKING BEHIND HIM, AS HINICK AND I BECAME LESS AND LESS RELEVANT TO THE CUT OF HIS JIB OR CONSTRUCT OF HIS TUNE. AS OUR PERFORMANCE GREW EVER MORE . . . CONTRAPUNTAL . . . (TO BE CHARITABLE) . . . I LOOKED AT STEVE QUIZZICALLY AND HE MOUTHED “WHAT THE . . .” I NEXT LOOKED ACROSS THE BAR FLOOR AT OXO, OUR “AGENT”, LOOKING EXULTANT, AND EVEN WITH HIS CHESHIRE GRIN MANTLED BY HIS CUMULUS COLOSSUS OF A MUSTACHE, HE CLEARLY MOUTHED “THIS . . . IS . . . REALLY COOL!”

I COULD GO ON AND ON WITH OXO ANECDOTES, BUT IN THE INTEREST OF BREVITY, I’LL CLOSE BY BRINGING THIS TRIBUTE BACK TO THE ESSENCES OF THE HOLY MASS WE ALL JUST SHARED.

HAVING BOTH BEEN RAISED IN THE OLD SCHOOL OF MANNERS, OXO AND I NEVER TALKED ABOUT RELIGION. I THINK IN ADULthood, HE WAS FAIRLY SECULAR, BUT HIS CHRISTIAN UPBRINGING NEVERTHELESS SUFFUSED HIS CHARACTER.

HE OBVIOUSLY BELIEVED IN AN OMNISCIENT CREATIVE SPIRIT, BECAUSE HE VIBRATED WITH THAT FORCE AND HE ENTRUSTED HIS LIFE TO IT.

SO, GOING THROUGH A SHORT CHECKLIST OF CHRISTIAN PRECEPTS, LET’S SEE HOW IT THEY APPLY TO HIM:

“HONOR THEY FATHER AND THEY MOTHER:”

CHECK, DOUBLE CHECK.

“LOVE THEY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF:”

CHECK, CHECK, CHECK

“WHAT YOU DO UNTO THE LEAST OF YOUR BRETHERN YOU DO UNTO ME:”

GOT THAT ONE WELL, WELL COVERED.

“THOU SHALT NOT KILL:”

- EXCEPT FOR KILLING US WITH LAUGHTER OR KINDNESS, I THINK OXO’S SLATE IS CLEAN THERE.

FINALLY, AND MOST DEFINITELY,

“LEST YOU COME AS LITTLE CHILDREN, YOU SHALL NOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.”

I CAN’T IMAGINE ANYONE OVER NINE YEARS OLD ARRIVING IN PARADISE WITH HIS CHILDLIKE COUNTENANCE MORE INTACT THAN OXO.

AND, ACTUALLY, I THINK AN AFTERLIFE IS JUST THE KIND OF ADVENTURE OXO WOULD EMBRACE AND JESUS IS DEFINITELY THE KIND OF WELL-INTENTIONED AND RESOURCEFUL GUY OXO WOULD LOVE TO HANG WITH. I MEAN, JUST THINK, OXO, WITH JESUS’ CONNECTIONS, NO MORE NEED FOR YOU AND BARB TO HUNT FOR

GRANT MONEY! AND JUST THINK, JESUS, HEAVEN GETS PERHAPS A MUCH OVERDUE MAKEOVER: HOT RODS REPLACE CHARIOTS . . . BOWLING BALL-HEADS REPLACE HALOS . . . YOU GET *LOTS*A MIRRORS . . . 60,000 BUBBLES A MINUTE . . . AND IT'LL ALL BE ENERGY EFFICIENT!

FATHER, THANK YOU (AND I'M SURE OXO THANKS YOU) FOR SUCH A BEAUTIFUL "RESURRECTION" SERVICE IN THE VERY CHURCH IN WHICH BOB WAS BAPTIZED 60 YEARS AGO. I DO SUPPOSE IT'S FOR THE BETTER THAT OXO CROSSED OVER UNEXPECTEDLY, AND THUS DID NOT GET TO PRESCRIBE HIS OWN FUNERAL DÉCOR, OR I'M AFRAID THIS ALTAR WOULD HAVE BEEN AIRSPRAYED WITH TOWERING DAY-GLO FLAMES, WHICH I SUSPECT WOULD NOT BE LITURGICALLY APPROPRIATE.

AND, THOUGH I BELIEVE OXO IS ON A BLUE LIGHT SPECIAL TO HEAVEN, I DON'T THINK HE'LL EVER BE CANONIZED, NOR WOULD HE WANT TO BE - TOO MUCH PAPER WORK. BUT HE'LL ALWAYS BE *OUR* PATRON SAINT: OF SELFLESSNESS, GOODWILL, COMMUNITY SPIRIT, UNFETTERED INGENUITY AND PRODUCTIVE WHIMSY. AND MANY OF US WILL CONFIDENTLY INVOKE HIS INTERCESSION WHENEVER WE'RE CREATIVELY OR MORALLY STALLED.

DOTTIE, DAVE, BEVERLY, THANK YOU FOR SHARING WITH US THIS MARVELOUS MAN, AND OXO, THANKS FOR MAKING BUTTE YOUR HOME AND MAKING IT - LITERALLY - SUCH A BETTER HOME FOR SO MANY. THANKS FOR YOUR INSPIRATION, YOUR FRIENDSHIP, YOUR LAUGHS, YOUR LEGACY.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR "SHINIEST OLDSMOBILE" OF A LIFE . . .

...IT WAS REALLY COOL!

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