

In Memoriam

WILLIAM F. UNSOELD
1926-1979

On Sunday afternoon, March 4, Willi Unsoeld and one of his students, Janie Diepenbrock, were killed in a slab avalanche on Mount Rainier. A few days later more than 800 people came together to weep and to laugh; to recount; to remember. Guided by Willi's wife Jolene, and their children Regon, Krag and Terres, their gathering became a celebration; a celebration in the sun, on the first day after winter.

Many stories were recounted that day, and many were the Willis we heard about. Some stories were shouted aloud, in songs and in speeches, broadcast for all celebrants to hear. Other parts of Willi traveled softly among us; close-up accounts heard only by few; memories of the man told in wordless gestures. Tearful moods moved from person to person through the medium of touch, mingling with the waves of laughter sparked by still another Willi anecdote.

As the celebration neared its end I realized why I had found the event so satisfying. During the thirty years I knew Willi I had seen the *Willi Unsoeld Legend* grow around him. There were times in recent years when the Legend stood between us, distorting my perception of him, blurring the living edges of a lively man. I wanted to chastise Willi for allowing his legend to grow. "Willi", I wanted to say, "please stop; don't go away!"

The celebration brought him back. Through 800 different stories told by 800 different friends, he was there LIFE-SIZE. It dawned clear in me that, legend be damned, Willi had never gone away! With the simplifying legend stripped away, the celebration became a *confrontation* with the most complicated person we have known.

So I am left as perplexed as always. Is there some *central principle* which held the many parts of Willi Unsoeld together? A principle that will help me comprehend him as a single, mortal man? I have been trying for years to find it, to "figure Willi out"; and every time I thought I was getting close *he changed before my very eyes*.

It was a game we played between us. Willi, always searching for the key to his own character, knew that I was looking for it too; so he made the search into a game we played together. ("Willi", I once said, "if you'll just hold that pose a minute more, I'll have you figured out; then I'll tell you all about you." My grin met his roaring guffaw, the one we can all still hear. "Di-i-ick! Do you really think I'll let that happen? I'll *change* before I let you figure me out!" I thought I had him then.

PLATE 77

NANDA DEVI UNSOELD
1954-1976

WILLIAM F. UNSOELD
1926-1978



"There's the answer, Willi. You just did it again. You always compete, whether on a climbing rope or in this 'search-for-self! You're more interested in beating me to the answer than you are in the answer itself! You would rather *compete* with me, than acquire all those virtues you like to call 'self-knowledge!'" Willi returned my grin, and he spoke softly for maximum effect: "Perhaps, . . . Just maybe. But competition takes *two*. So now, Dick, let's talk about *you!*" Zap! Try again tomorrow.)

That's the way it went for years, and I can't stop now. I am still trying to find the "central principle" in Willi Unsoeld. I wish that I could let him know that I think I have now found a new clue.

I stumbled onto it the day after the celebration, seven days after Willi's death. Pat and I sought the company of a close friend; a non-climbing friend who might help turn our minds away from Willi for a few minutes. It didn't work.

"I guess you didn't know it", Howard said, "but I climbed with Willi too. In Oregon; about 1949; twenty Oregon State students went up Three-Fingered Jack with him. Maybe I didn't actually climb with Willi. He was the shepherd and I was one of the flock".

Thirty years after Howard's "flock" of students had dispersed, Willi stood in a storm in Cadaver Gap with twenty-one Evergreen students gathered inside the protective folds of the leadership. They were circled up against the storm, trying to hear his voice, to receive his plan and to execute his last instructions. The route they had marked with wands on their ascent now gave them quick passage through the storm to the security of Camp Muir. The flock was to follow Willi's rope down the Gap with ropes spaced far apart to reduce their exposure. Only the first rope was swept away. The last ropes reached Camp Muir without realizing they had no shepherd; and no further need for one.

Yes. That is it. . . . THE SHEPHERD . . . that is the word which put yesterday's gathering into perspective. The celebration was a round-up of many flocks; for Willi had been something of a shepherd to us all, whether in the guise of teacher, guide, or companion. As the celebration unfolded, a central fact became clear. It was not that we all knew Willi. The legend alone would make that so. Rather, it was the fact that Willi knew every one of us. Up close, in a very personal way, we had each been *singled out* as the sole object of his concern. The nurturing shepherd is the only metaphor which does half justice to what, in Willi, was a natural trait. No other word so well summarizes his career, his relationship to others, and, most pointedly, his image of himself. Flock after flock of students, clients, and young climbing companions have gathered around him, grown and gone their way. No other climber in the history of American mountaineering has traveled the hills with so many different people; and like Howard, none of them would forget the

trip. For if Willi was along, it was a sure thing he would be *leading!* And with the shepherd's style of leadership he would *nurture* every person in the party; he would *press* them, one at a time and in unison, to move, to go, together. He would *insist* that they learn and grow, if only because he was compelled from within himself to *teach*.

The shepherd in Willi's makeup could never rest content with "teaching" students in a classroom. He took them out among the wolves; to a place of real danger; to the only place where they could learn the very basic lessons he could teach.

When I heard the 1979 details of Cadaver Gap, my head flipped back to 1960. Nick Clinch, Jawaid Akhtar and I were trying to get off Masherbrum. We got down to Camp VI well after midnight, done in. When morning light came, the peak was invisible, and it was snowing. The route to Camp V was a descending traverse across a slope *always* swept by slides during storms; and there was no way to wait this one out. We cut the tent cords free in order to break camp fast in a race against the buildup of snow.

I was about to suggest to Nick that we abandon two of the packs in the interest of a speedy descent, when *the strains of a harmonica* came up through the white-out below, announcing Willi's coming. (Do I dare suggest a comparison with the mythic shepherd, Pan? No, Willi played a different instrument.) Down at Camp V he and Tom Hornbein had figured out exactly what our situation was (and what their situation would be if they came up). They moved up fast with no packs; they measured in rope lengths the size of the ice face which they knew would be invisible on the descent. They took two of the loads and we flew down slope, with small slides brushing our heels. At the appropriate wand, Willi turned us down the fall line for exactly eight measured-out rope lengths, and a flat traverse brought us straight into the tent at Camp V.

So Willi probably saved my life. So what? My belay definitely saved him from the bergschrund under the North Face of the Grand. But there is a big difference between a routine belay and his extraordinary rescue! Willi *sought* the opportunity to protect and nurture. It fed the shepherd in his soul. (Sitting in bivouac with Hornbein on Everest, Willi gave the warmth of his stomach to save Tom's feet, while priding himself in the belief that his own feet were not cold. They were, of course, frozen).

But, if the shepherd metaphor requires that Willi's flock be seen as "sheep" beside him, then the metaphor breaks down. Willi would not long abide passive people in his company; and while dependent persons were welcome, it was only for a while. He pressed hard upon his students to become his peers. (A group of young climbers were bouldering with Willi, when he noticed one young woman hanging back. "I haven't seen you climb yet," he said. "Willi," she replied, "I'll climb *with* you, but never *for* you." Again, the ringing peal of laughter. He loved it!)

Twenty-one-year-old Janie Diepenbrock, who died with Willi, climbed *with* him.

And having declared yourself his peer, whether in mind or body or climbing skill, the contest had just begun. For Willi forced you at every turn to confirm your claimed equality, and help him, in the process, revalidate himself! It was a joking rivalry, but it was no joking matter. Fun times were spent with Willi, yet he would not spend a single minute on anything purely "fun." It was a laughing confrontation at every turn.

CONFRONTATION. And fatigue when it ended. How many times had Willi carried us through that cycle? He required that I cope with the mountain *and* with him until we both grew weary and fatigued; with that special form of fatigue which testifies to added strength. He required that I find the ethics in my actions, and justify myself to me. And now I am left alive, but with this apprehension: in Willi's absence will I grow fat? and lazy? If that should happen, don't let Willi know you saw me in that state.

RICHARD M. EMERSON

VERA WATSON

1932-1978

On October 17, 1978, Vera Watson fell to her death on Annapurna I. She and Alison Chadwick-Onyszkiewicz were climbing roped together on a steep, icy slope near Camp V when they apparently slipped. Both were killed. Earlier that day they had left Camp IV in high spirits and had proceeded strongly up the slope towards the last camp. From there they had hoped to reach the summit of Annapurna I.

Two days earlier, on October 15, two other members of the American Women's Himalayan Expedition, Irene Miller and Vera Komarkova, had succeeded in reaching the 26,545-foot summit of Annapurna I. In doing this they not only became the first American women to climb an 8000-meter peak but they realized a dream of every expedition member, of their hundreds of friends and supporters, and, most particularly, of Vera's.

Vera's interest in mountain climbing started relatively late—when she was in her 30's. Rock climbing in the Shawangunks and winter climbs of Mount Washington led to mountaineering in western United States and then to expeditionary climbing. In 1974 Vera made the first woman's solo climb of Aconcagua. That same year she climbed Mount Robson in Canada and made several first ascents in the Kenai Range in Alaska. Rock climbing, however, remained her first love. The face of a rock became a dance floor under her feet—every move was made with style and grace. Her strong hands would seek out holds and then not seem to use them. Annapurna's "Dutch Rib" with its exposed