PREFACE

Baboon in the Mirror

The Spirit of man is nomad, his blood Bedouin, and love is the aboriginal tracker on the spoor of his lost self: and so I came to live my life not by conscious plan or prearranged design but as someone following the flight of a bird.

– Sir Laurens van der Post

What you can plan
Is too small
For you to live.

What you can live
Wholeheartedly
Will make plans
Enough
For the vitality
Hidden in your sleep.

– David Whyte

O swallows, swallows, poems are not
The point. Finding again the world,
That is the point. Where loveliness
Adorns intelligible things
Because the mind's eye lit the sun.

– Howard Nemerov

Ultimately, as Howard Nemerov says, "poems are not the point." But it is through them that comes the thrill of "Finding again the world." Life is deeply mysterious. That mystery is the lifeblood of poetry; poetry not only of words but also of the rhythm of events and the rhyme of people who have shaped us most. The poems in this book are my way of looking for that rhythm and rhyme. They are my way of asking you to join me in this search. They are my hope that as you search you may also begin to hear the poetry deep within your own life.

These poems are signs along the way for me. They mark places of discovery in the physical world and places of self-discovery that occur along side. They point to places where the veil of mystery that covers understanding is ripped just a little, revealing glimpses of what lies hidden deep inside.

Sometimes the poetry forces us to realize that we are the deepest mystery. Tearing that veil over the mystery makes a painful rip. I have found that it is usually others who do that ripping for us. When that happens we can figure out how to look inside that rip or we can pretend not to see it. Poetry has often been the way I look inside there. Two men, in very different ways, have been instrumental in making rips in my veil: Sir Laurens van der Post and my father, Campbell Revere Osler. It was "not by conscious plan or prearranged design" that these men entered into my life, but as Whyte says, none of my plans for life have been as big as the things that have happened to me, including these two men.

Dad excelled. Dad was iconic and stern. Dad was a great athlete and a natural leader. He married my mother, Dorothy Elizabeth Ridout in 1940. Six months later, aged 22, he went overseas in the Artillery to fight Nazi Germany and its allies and was wounded in Italy in 1943. He



Campbell Osler, 1940s



Betty Osler, 1940s

returned in 1946 to Canada as a lieutenant colonel in the Reserves. He graduated with a law degree and was called to the bar in 1948. He joined the family law firm, which became one of the largest and most influential in Canada. Mum and Dad had four children, Vicky, Lawton, me and Campbell. They had been married for 57 years when Dad died in April 1997.

Dad could fix most anything with his big, calloused hands and he was an accomplished woodworker. I remember standing in Dad's workshop at Crocombe, the family's country retreat in the mixed forests northeast of Toronto: a hot fire in the stove pushes back the Canadian winter and the warm air holds the sweet scent of sawdust. Dad hunches his broad shoulders over a roughly milled board of black cherry we are marking out for cutting and floats his wide hand along the grain, divining its secrets. He takes my hand to show me what he feels.

Mostly, however, the two of us were not such a natural fit and we had to cut and sand more than our fair share of rough edges. He was uncompromising, which put him in high regard in law and society but lifted him often beyond my reach at home. Once, at a warm summer party, I sent him into a fury when I took off my suit jacket. He could no more remove his coat than he could his stiff, Victorian sense of honour and propriety in social situations.

In public debate he was sharp and penetrating – or swift and brutal. Inner dialogue eluded him or was just irrelevant. He believed deeply in God though he had little to say about his faith. Even as a boy, I had plenty of questions about spiritual journeys. Dad made boxes and cabinets out of black cherry, walnut and oak for the pleasure of making them. I liked doing that too but, speaking figuratively, I wanted to talk about what we might put in them as well. That was the difference between us. That was what drew me to the works of Sir Laurens van der Post.

My father was understated and modest; Laurens was exaggerated and dramatic. He wrote and spoke in a richly symbolic and spiritual language completely foreign to my father. He was still the man's man: born in South Africa, he lived for a time with the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa and learned to speak their peculiar clicking tongue; he explored Africa and spoke out against apartheid before anyone even

knew of the word, wrote 29 books including a biography of Carl Jung, soldiered and endured three years as a prisoner of Japan's Imperial army in Java; Prince Charles took him as a close friend and named him godfather to Prince William. He could go where my father could not. I saw Laurens navigating the drylands of the soul with the same curiosity and wonder that took him into the Kalahari.

Laurens believed in synchronicity or meaningful coincidences. My relationship with him was filled with these incidents of synchronicity. The first ones occurred the day before I met him in London. My wife, Susan, and I had been travelling in the country and made a day trip to Bath. I had become an avid book collector and, as was my habit, I insisted on stropping at a second hand bookshop to ask for any first edition van der Post. The shopkeeper dug out a 1955 first edition of "Flamingo Feather" that had come in from an estate sale. As I began to re-read the book in the car I realized that the main character in the story lived in a house called Petit France. Coincidently, the name of the hotel we had stayed in the night before was called Petty France, and even stranger, it turns out it was remarkably close to a farm Laurens had owned in the 1930s. Stranger still, the book had been signed by him to a friend.

The next day, when at last Laurens and I met, I related this string of funny little coincidences as he was making his way up the narrow circular stairs of his penthouse flat in the Chelsea district. He turned abruptly and asked me if the book had come from a man or a woman. A woman, I told him. He asked if her name might be Eileen Mahoney. Indeed, it was. Eileen Mahoney had been his producer for the 1956 documentary "The Lost World of the Kalahari". I can no more describe the significance of these coincidences today than I could then on the narrow steps of Laurens' home; I suspect it is not actually necessary to do so. But it has become an article of faith for me that these quirky turns of fate are a clarion call to pay attention, a warning that something important is happening or nearby.

Once one is aware of the phenomenon, it appears everywhere. Four months after Laurens died in December 1996, and only days before cancer claimed Dad, I was in Israel in the ancient town of Sepphoris, near Nazareth. I was lost in a reverie on an especially beautiful mosaic nicknamed the Mona Lisa of the Galilee. Then someone pointed to a nearby

low wall. That's when I saw the Praying Mantis. This felt somehow like a sign from Laurens. The mantis was a central image in his life and work.

Laurens often remarked on how important it was that the Bushmen picked this insect for their god and not something much grander, like an elephant or giraffe. He thought it showed an appreciation for overlooked and small things; things like Nazareth, for example. Two thousand years ago it was a tiny hamlet dwarfed by the marvelous city of Sepphoris, but it was Nazareth where a young carpenter who would grow up to change the world made his home.

Laurens was a larger than life hero for me. Being a regular business commentator for more than nine years on CBC Radio's Morningside programme hosted by Peter Gzowski, I sometimes got a chance to be interviewed on non-business topics. That's how I got the chance in 1991 to talk about that first meeting with my hero. I had a kind of over-the-top way of speaking that Peter enjoyed and I recall in this interview saying something like our heroes were like booster rockets that started us off in the right direction, but we still had to turn on our afterburners and fly off on our own – you can't let a hero live your life for you. Peter pointed out with journalistic skepticism that some heroes have feet of clay. We butchered a few more metaphors that morning before we agreed that the way to regard heroes was to see that they put their pants on one leg at a time – just like the rest of us.

Laurens, it seemed, could not keep his pants on. Two days after he died stories of a quite different kind started to circulate. They climaxed in September 2001 with the publication of an authorized biography. It described him as a ruthless self-promoter and a storyteller with a lot more fabrication than facts in his stories than we ever guessed. The revelations in the book read like a bad soap opera. Laurens is portrayed as a serial womanizer and the book seems to confirm that he got a 14 year old girl pregnant when he was 46 years old in 1952. Laurens died in 1996. But in some ways the 1952 episode, first revealed one day after his death, was the most painful blow to me.

Whatever the relationship between truths and the so-called facts in Laurens' stories they still resonate with deep truth for me. The one that holds special meaning for me is the story of the baboon in the mirror.

When Laurens was growing up in Africa he and his friends would play a darkly comic game of baboon baiting. The game became an important metaphor for Laurens. It seemed to perfectly illustrate the psychological state of "projection," as described by Carl Jung.

The 12th century poet, Rumi understood the concept well.

When you think your father is guilty of an injustice
his face looks cruel. Joseph to his envious brothers,
seemed dangerous. When you make peace with your father,
he will look peaceful and friendly. The whole world is a form for truth.
When someone does not feel grateful
to that, the forms appear to be as he feels.
They mirror his anger, his greed, his fear.
Make peace with the universe. Take joy in it

The baboon game, it you can call it that, would start with someone setting a standing mirror in front of a captive baboon. The animal would first look inquisitively at the image in the glass. Then curiosity would turn to irritation when it could not find the other baboon behind the mirror. It would try provoking its twin but of course each threatening gesture was instantly thrown back, aggravating the baboon even further. Inevitably, the poor creature would be driven into a horrific, howling rage and would destroy the doppelganger by smashing the mirror to pieces. The baboon never gets the joke, he never figures out that he is looking at himself.

Neither do I most of the time. But now I am on the lookout for my own ghostly image when I respond strongly to people. It's an inside joke between me and life. But it still tricks me a lot. It tricked me with Dad and Laurens. I got the joke eventually, not through my own cleverness, but through their deaths.

In the book "The Night of the New Moon", Laurens' account of his time in a Japanese prison camp, he wrote "Forgiveness, my prison experience had taught me, was not mere religious sentimentality: it was as fundamental a law of the human spirit as the law of gravity. If one broke the law of gravity one broke one's neck: if one broke this law of forgiveness one inflicted a mortal wound on one's spirit…" In burying these two men I learned to forgive. That became the key for recognizing myself in the mirror.

In the Holy Land, there is an ancient custom of preparing a tomb to receive the dead. The burial chamber is carefully, ritually cleaned before the body is laid to rest. On my visit to Israel I toured the Convent of the Sisters of Nazareth. I walked through an iron gate and down some steep stairs that took me past the foundations and remains of a Crusader church. Then I climbed down more stairs. I went down past a rough hewn Byzantine Chapel and cistern, then down further still past a first century door, across a narrow wooden plank and a narrow opening to a rolling-stone tomb. It had a preparation chamber, two small enclosures and a hollowed out room that had been made into a small chapel. Some believe that this is where Jesus might have prepared the body of Joseph, the man who had given him a father's love, for burial. It occurred to me then that I needed to roll back the stone of my dark place full of need and want and empty it of all its sour bitterness and sadness before I could lay my father to rest properly.

When I learned to forgive I learned to see myself, the baboon in the mirror. I could now see others for what they really were and not what I projected them to be. Instead of lashing out at, or admiring others unthinkingly, I could more constructively lash out at or admire parts of me.

When I forgave my father for what he hadn't given me in life, I was free to see all that he had given me. He may not have given me the romantic and poetic vision of life that Laurens had, but as it turns out he gave me something more – a life of utter honesty and unassailable integrity. The forgiveness became what prepared my father's tomb so that it was swept clean of bitterness and regret. So that my memories of him could lie in peace there and I could be free to come up from that dark place and take my place in the world where night is balanced by day and winter by summer.

When Laurens died the revelations of the darker and disturbing aspects of his life freed me to see him more realistically. It also helped me to see that the real hero in my life was my father – not Laurens.

It is ironic that in the end the forgiveness that Laurens had taught me to be so important in life was what has saved and salvaged my relationship with him after his deaths – his literal death and the death of his self-embroidered public image. I have needed to forgive him so that I could be free to

love the poetic inspiration that still remains for me in his life and work.

Once I freed these men from my expectations of them they resumed their more truthful forms. If life is all about finding the truth behind people and things and I think it is, then these poems are one of my ways to grope for that truth.