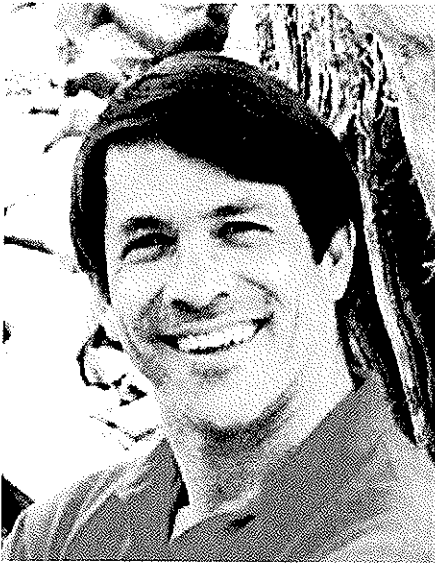


# HIS VIEW: Cherry blossoms and the human condition

Daily News

Posted on: Thursday, June 30, 2011



Brock

I had never given much thought to cherry blossoms until last month, when my first-grade daughter began researching a school project on the topic. After delving into the taxonomy, she learned of the high cultural esteem in which cherry blossoms are held in Japan.

"Sakura," as they are known, are metaphors for the beauty, fragility, and ephemeral nature of life. In a society that, to Western eyes, can seem mystifyingly oblique, they are a potent symbol of human mortality.

I gave a lot of thought to sakura last week, after my friend Tom had a terrible accident at work. A builder of sublime skill and talent, he was transforming an old grain mill into a bright and airy living space.

One moment he was up on a scaffold. The next moment he was tumbling headfirst into a stairwell.

Suddenly, his world was filled with operating rooms, anesthesia and emergency surgery. It was a terrifying glimpse into the abyss between life and death.

The good news is that he appears to have escaped any neurologic damage. His wry wit and self-deprecating humor were not broken in the fall.

Less than 48 hours before his accident, Tom was in the bow of my canoe as we paddled a wild section of the Grande Ronde River. The river was high and swollen, chafing at its shores, eager to buck us out in even the mildest rapids.

There were moments of doubt, plenty of them, but we parried all of the river's thrusts. The canoe filled with water, time and again, but we maintained control. When we finally reached the take-out, a few miles upstream of Troy, Ore., we were grinning like we had won the lottery of life.

Two days later, Tom was fighting for his life.

In my mind's eye, cherry blossoms began to fall.

It's painful enough to contemplate the fragility of human life in a grown man, but it's almost unbearable when a child is involved.

One day after Tom's accident, a little boy in my neighborhood was run over and dragged by a car. He survived, but I understand that one leg was badly broken, among other injuries. His bicycle helmet was destroyed, but it served its purpose. The flickering candle of life continues to burn.

More cherry blossoms fell.

Now I'm boot-deep in cherry blossoms as I pack my gear for a few days in the Tetons. The plan is to hook up with an old friend to climb the Grand Teton via a challenging and committing route.

I've climbed the mountain before, by routes both harder and easier, but past successes are no guarantee of the future.

I was single the last time I climbed the Grand Teton. No wife, no kids, no mortgage. I could run out the rope as far as I dared.

This time around, I've got people counting on me back home.

So I'm feeling a little selfish as I pack my gear. I've been climbing for decades, had a few falls, gotten busted up a few times, but I keep going back to the mountains.

It's a calculated risk, and I still like the odds. When you dance with the Devil, be sure you know the steps.

Prior to this trip, I was at the center of my world. But now I have two children and a wife, each of whom fills my spirit in ways that mountains and whitewater cannot.

So I'm wondering if I should stop climbing big lines, stop tying into the sharp end of the rope, and stop peeking into the abyss. I've lost some friends in this game of ghosts - Rob Hall, Alex Lowe and others - and I'd be a fool to think it couldn't happen to me.

I'm filling my rucksack with cherry blossoms and pondering whether it's time, in the words of Desiderata, to "take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth."

**William Brock** lives in Pullman.