

## Mark

John Muir boldly proclaimed that being in Yosemite rejuvenated and transformed him physically, mentally and spiritually. Many of the Biodesign students agreed, especially those who were gifted with witnessing the lunar eclipse from the top of Half Dome.

A “red neck” is normally not a health problem that needs medical attention. It is a multifaceted idiom that can be used in a playful, derisive, humorous or sarcastic way. I thought it was gender-specific until I “Googled” the term and discovered that females have also been granted the assignation. Regardless of gender, teachers are not likely to call students “rednecks.”

Yet in the early 1980s, Mark entered my biology classroom with all the credentials of a bona fide “redneck.” He was wearing heavy-duty, outdoor boots, a camouflage jacket and a well-worn, John Deere Tractor baseball cap. I had often seen him driving his dad’s Jeep to school. None of this was alienating; I grew up on a ranch and was driving a tractor by the age of six. And, although I did not chew tobacco, I shared a common bond with the redneck guys (before girls qualified) who enjoyed the outdoors.

It soon became obvious that Mark was bright, curious and not only loved nature, but was highly knowledgeable about the outdoor world. He had much to share, especially when we discussed fishing, hunting, and mushroom gathering. One of my great joys of teaching biology was being able to show the lower classes the slide-shows of Yosemite (later Grand Canyon) and Mendocino created by the Biodesign students. Each show was a visual-musical celebration of students regaling in the beauty and wonder of nature. As a junior, Mark was obviously impressed with the slide-shows, and I suspect that a seed was planted. Nevertheless, I was a little surprised when he enrolled in the Biodesign Class the following year.

Many of the “redneck” students had little interest in attending college and the class was designed as a college prep course. The class of '81 was highly successful and Mark’s

skills as an outdoorsman contributed to the success. At the time, neither of us knew it but he would eventually chaperone 10 more trips, including two to Grand Canyon. Over the years, his interest in fishing and hunting waned and rods and guns were replaced with high-quality photographic equipment. He became an outstanding nature photographer.

If this all sounds like a prelude to a crescendo moment, it is, and involves one of the most amazing synchronicities in the 24-year class history. It will also show that, aside from Christie, no other person contributed as much time, talent, and treasure to the Biodesign program than Mark. In addition to his warm, magnanimous personality, and leadership skills, he provided over 1,000 high-quality “Kodak moments” that students eagerly used to create 10 slide-shows. A quick check with ex-students revealed that he was the ideal chaperone, an incarnation of Sasha’s “cream pitcher.” He worked quietly, often behind the scene, and could anticipate and head-off problems, often before I was aware of the need. He related easily to all kinds of students and provided a steady, calming presence. The guys admired his wilderness knowledge and skills; the girls regarded him as a thoughtful big-brother.

Neither Mark nor I knew that Biodesign '97 was going to be the last class when he volunteered to chaperone the Yosemite trip that year. Visiting Half Dome had become so popular that overnight camping was prohibited; therefore, we planned to spend the afternoon on top then retreat to our camp at Little Yosemite Valley. When we arrived, I was aware of the fact that there was going to be a total lunar eclipse, but it would occur after nightfall, and taking a class down the cables at night was not a risk that I could reasonably take. However, as the time neared for our descent, I saw a group of guys huddled with Mark. I had seen this behavior before, and it usually meant I was about to experience some grief.

Their arguments were familiar. “This will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience; you know what John Muir would have done; Mark is an expert trail guide; we brought headlights along to enable us to descend safely.” A monumental decision had to be made.

Under much duress, I decided to split the group. I would lead the first group down the cables, down the granite stairway, and send them down to our camp at Little Yosemite Valley. The remaining group would stay until dark, enjoy and photograph the eclipse, and descend the cables in the dark. I would wait for them at a promontory near the bottom of the stairway, where I could see the cables. I was anxious and knew that I would not have entrusted the group with anyone other than Mark.

Everything went as planned—almost! The eclipse was stunning, and shortly after dark, tiny lights appeared on the brow of The Dome, and began to descend. They made steady progress until the midway point and then the lights began to vanish. Within a minute, they were all gone. Immediately my heart started to palpitate. My spine tingled, and the hair on the nape of my neck bristled. My thoughts immediately raced to the worst-case scenario. Headlines began to scroll across my mind; “Unknown factor causes hikers to slip to their death off Half Dome.” It was a typical horrible moment of waiting that accompanied nearly every trip. All that I could do was wait, and fret, and desperately pray.

After a very, very long 30 minutes, the sound of laughter and merriment echoed down from the trail above me. Minutes later, the group greeted me, excited about their adventure. I blurted out, “I hate this goddamned work,” and told them my tale of anxiety. They laughed! I had forgotten that the higher reaches of the shoulder blocked the view of the lower half of the cables. What was clearly visible at day became invisible and scary at night.

Ansel Adams would spend days, weeks, perhaps years anticipating the ideal conditions that would hopefully allow him to capture the “perfect image.” His photo of the moon rising over Half Dome is world-famous. So what were the odds that Mark, a gifted photographer, would come along on the final Yosemite trip and arrive at the top of Half Dome on the night of a total lunar eclipse? But, there is more! He was there at the ideal hour, season, and under perfect weather and light conditions, all of which enabled

him to capture an image that parallels the beauty of Adams' photo. It was a thrilling synchronicity, but only part of a greater mystery.

Scientists generally agree that the Earth is 4.5 billion years old. There are nearly seven billion people living on the planet. The fact that Mark is alive, at this time and place in the universe is scientifically unfathomable. So what are the odds that a 17-year-old "red neck" would enroll in a biology class, join spirits with his mentor, morph his personality from hunter to photographer, help redesign the mentor's program, and grow to be as close as a brother?

Most rational people would describe them as impossible.