

## Remembered: Brent Cuthbertson

*Brent Cuthbertson was a good friend to the Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, as a regular reviewer, author, and trusted sounding board. He died unexpectedly on October 28, 2014 at the age of 53. The following is a compilation of tributes to Brent from friends, colleagues, and students.*

Brent was born in 1961 in Northern Rhodesia, in what is now Zambia. His family moved to Canada when he was a young boy and he lived in Canada for most of his childhood and adolescence. Brent's love of the outdoors was evident from early on. A pivotal time for him was his Camp Stephens days where he went first as a camper and later joined the staff. I was struck by how many of the postings on Facebook and on the online condolences site mentioned experiences with "Chase" (his nickname at that time). That he formed, and maintained, strong bonds with people from his Camp Stephens days is not a surprise given who Brent was. Indeed, he was the sort of person who once you had him in your life you wanted to keep him in your life.

Brent went on to earn a BEd in 1989 from the University of Winnipeg, an MA in Outdoor Education in 1992, and a PhD in Outdoor Education in 1999, both from the University of Alberta. Brent joined the School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism at Lakehead University in 1996 and was the Director of the School between 2007 and 2011. He was also an adjunct professor in the Faculty of Education.

Brent was the author of two textbooks and numerous articles, was a past co-editor of the *Journal of Experiential Education*, and he also wrote very good short stories and poetry on the side. He was internationally recognized for his expertise in outdoor leadership. His overarching concerns were our relationship to the natural world and our relationships with each other. As such, he was deeply committed to the flourishing of both natural and human communities and he saw these as intimately intertwined. Drawing inspiration from environmental philosophy, he urged outdoor leaders to consider the ethical and material implications of the choices we make. Brent himself lived simply and was particularly critical of our society's rampant consumerism. One could see that in the clothes he wore, for example; he had what one might say was a rather limited rotation of clothing. Brent lived in a very deliberate way, trying as much as he could to live his life in congruence with his values. He was humble about this attempt, knowing full well that we are all creatures rife with contradictions and that we often stumble, but that it is important that we continue trying to do the best that we can. This was a key concept he wanted to share with his students and I can tell from statements by his former students that this message was heard.

Students speak of Brent as a brilliant instructor. Indeed, many former students have shared how he impacted them, both professionally and personally. Many are now educators themselves in one setting or another and have described how Brent was a role model for them. Others have talked about how he inspired them to

think deeply and critically about a whole range of topics, to be compassionate, and to live deliberately. He has impacted hundreds of people over the years through his teaching and they, in turn, have impacted many others. What an amazing legacy.

In the tributes to Brent I have read on Facebook, the online condolences page, and in personal correspondence, a number of words pop up frequently: smart, kind, gentle, compassionate, thoughtful, ethical, genuine, playful, funny, inspiring. There also has been much mention of his warm smile, his wicked sense of humour, and his infectious



laugh. All of these ring true for me and I would personally add that Brent was also a loyal and trusted friend. Another word I would use to describe Brent now is happy. Seven years ago, Brent met Kim, the person he called his “greatest love.” It warmed his friends’ hearts to see him so very happy. Brent and Kim were married just a few short months ago, on July 7, 2014, but they packed a lifetime worth of good memories into their seven years together.

I close now with an excerpt from a favourite poem of Brent’s, Mary Oliver’s (1992) *The Summer Day*. In it, she asks, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” This question resonated deeply with Brent and was one he asked not only of himself, but also of his friends, and his students. As a way of honouring Brent’s life and memory, then, I challenge each of you to ask that question of yourself not only today, but in the days ahead, especially when you find yourself just going through the motions or being caught up in the demands of daily life. It is clear that Brent did much with his own wild and precious life. He taught us. He inspired us. He made us better people. He was loved, he will be missed, and he will live on in our hearts.

**Connie Russell** is Editor of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* and an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, Lakehead University. This tribute has been adapted from the eulogy she gave at the celebration of Brent’s life.

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I had an enormous amount of respect for Brent and I was honoured to be the officiant at the celebration of his life. Many people have family and a few close friends. Some are lucky to also have a few close colleagues. Brent, it is clear, had a very, very large family of people who loved and respected him if his online memorial book and his Facebook page are any indication. And if all of the people across the continent who Brent touched had been able to be at the celebration of his life, we would have needed to hold it at the Community Auditorium.

Brent would have been touched and honoured by the celebration of his life that brought together over 350 people, but he had an amazing humility and might not have known quite what to make of it. We can only be certain that his smile would have been huge. Brent gave so much to so many people. I don't have space to share all the incredible and deeply moving passages on the memorial website and on Facebook, but there are hundreds. They brought me to tears many times. Words like "nicest person," "you have served as unrivalled inspiration," "deep humility," "magic," "deeply connected and committed to the natural world," "educator, mentor, philosopher, innovator and activist," "life-changing," "forever grateful," "honoured to have known him," and "every so often we are lucky enough to meet someone in our lives who change it forever." Or comments like, "His extraordinary passion and commitment to us had a huge impact that continues to ripple outward; many of us are now teachers ourselves, and we share the lessons he taught us in the lecture hall, in the woods, around a campfire, or by the river with our own students. I feel so blessed to have known him." And, "You, Brent Cuthbertson, were an inspired and passionate teacher and had massive impact on so many of your students. You took us seriously and were curious and engaged and hilarious. You brought us into the woods and had us lie in the tall grass and read to us as we watched the sky... it was radical and beautiful." In reading these I can feel Brent's influence. I think Brent would be smiling a bit sheepishly right now if he were reading these words. I'm sure he would want to tell you that he became who he was, and the teacher he was, not on his own and that he learned from the people he knew and the students he taught, and through those relationships became who he was.

I suggest that we think of what it was about Brent that those who knew him admired: his passion, his enormous respect for others, his humility, his ability to inspire others, and his dedication to students. Living what Brent showed us or taught us is a way to honour him, to remember him, and to continue the work that he did every day just by being himself, the often quiet work of making the world a better place.

**Paul Berger** is Associate Professor and Chair of Graduate Studies and Research in the Faculty of Education, Lakehead University.

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At the memorial service for Brent, his Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism students offered attendees the opportunity to make a “trip bracelet” in his memory. These cordelette bracelets are a long-standing tradition in Outdoor Rec. They signify a journey shared together and help to keep such adventures and the people with whom they were shared close to the heart. Many at the memorial service were fortunate to have shared a part of Brent’s journey. As he lives on in our hearts, he will continue to be a part of our own journeys. His life was one incredibly well lived.

I want to thank Brent. I know that my voice doesn’t sing alone when I thank this incredible man for being a role model, a mentor, and a close friend. I am grateful for all of the smiles, laughs, warm hugs, questions, and teachings that have helped me grow to become the person I am today. Thank you, Uncle Brent, for inviting me to be a part of your life.

**Stephanie Potter** had the good fortune of knowing Brent her entire life. She is now a student in the School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism, Lakehead University.

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Though I generally feel at peace with the cycle of life, I find myself heartbroken at Brent’s passing. His death has shown me that I am so not ready for friends of my graduate school days to be dying. Not ready at all. I always imagined that our supervisor Harvey would be the first to go and on some level I have been preparing myself for that heartbreak for some time now. But Brent’s death I was not ready for. Life is reminding me once again of how dear and ephemeral relationships can be. Brent came into my life during our years as graduate students at the University of Alberta, a deeply formative time for me.

I remember sitting for long hours in the grad carrel area, feet up on our desks, leaning back in our chairs, discussing our most recent readings about Arne Naess and deep ecology. We were earnestly trying to articulate and write something meaningful about our evolving ecosophies. So much so that at one point we had over 20 pages printed off the dot matrix printer sitting in front of us. In a good way, it seemed there was no end in sight to these deliberations. Though we were unsuccessful at that time in writing an article, the journey itself was well worth the time we put in. And the thoughts we generated have lived richly in both our lives as we evolved into the (somewhat) adult beings we have come to be—deeply connected and committed to the natural world.

I remember sitting on Brent’s back deck talking about our inner wilderness and the way that wildness itself moved in and through our lives. What would we do with our “one wild and precious life,” we asked ourselves? And when I saw the photos that others have posted recently I see this joy of *being* Brent embodied, and I remember co-facilitating Spring Camp with Brent and him teaching me to glissade.

I remember Brent as the first person with whom I began to truly ponder the power of hegemony and how unconscious cultural patternings affect our lives. And, more importantly, I recall our thoughts about how we would try to actively challenge them. This was an early call for me to a lifelong commitment to staying awake in a culture that wants us to be unaware and asleep to its machinations.

I remember when I left to take on a position at Lakehead University and managed to burn myself out in record time. Fortunately, I was introduced to email that year and Brent was the first person I reached out to share my thoughts about feeling overwhelmed with work and my thoughts about leaving. I admit to not believing I could simply press the send button and the message would travel through cyberspace to Brent. Not only did it, but he responded within minutes! I remember smiling a mile wide just knowing he was out there. He listened, and reminded me to follow my heart. And if I did leave, he teased that he'd be happy to take my place. In fact, that is exactly what happened. Though following my heart, I felt badly about leaving students with whom I had developed meaningful connections, so I felt deeply relieved in hearing Brent had gotten the position as I knew how positively and profoundly he'd impact future students. His commitment to students' wellbeing and growth was like no other.

I remember that Brent taught me to take life less seriously. And, in the spirit of one of our favourite Arne Naess quotes—"the road to enlightenment is paved by hypocrisy" —Brent helped me laugh at myself when I couldn't meet my vision. I believe we taught each other something about living with deep integrity, as well as challenged one another to be the best educators we could be. From his early explorations of veganism, to his roles as grad student, TA, taxi driver, wilderness guide, outdoor educator, and university prof, Brent was the one who most taught me that *how* we do what we do is as important as *what* we do—that it's really about the journey.

I remember that whenever I attempted in those grad school years, however awkwardly, to share how Brent inspired me, he just laughed it off. Deep humility was another of his traits. Now I get to say it again—Brent served as unrivaled inspiration to me and so many others. Though gone in the physical world, he truly will live on in our hearts. If Brent were here now, I would share with him the three words that encapsulate my current ecosophy—to be love—and Brent, he would gently shake his head at me and laugh a little bit. From 20 pages of scattered thoughts to just three words. So simple and yet so complex we turn out to be. I am so, so grateful that Brent chose to pass my way for even a short time.

**Nicky Duenkel** is a transformative educator focused on the health and wellness of individuals, communities, and the planet.

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*The following was written by the last group of students Brent taught in a 4<sup>th</sup> year course in Experiential Education with the assistance of the colleague who stepped in to complete the course.*

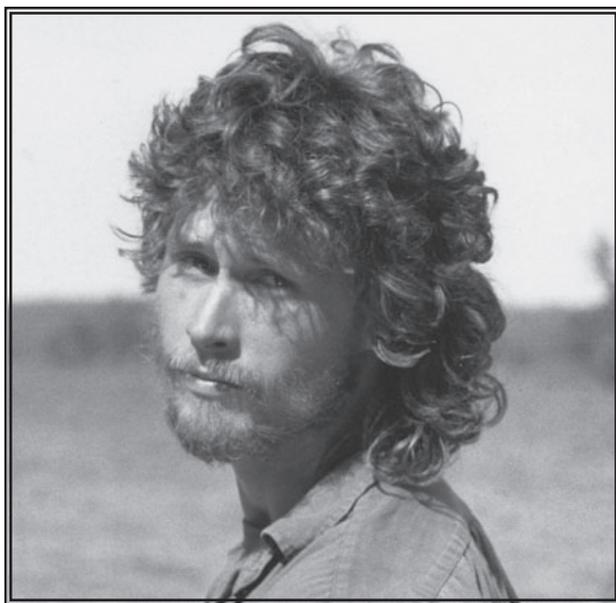
Brent Cuthbertson was a man of the utmost passion, value, and conviction. It was evident in his lessons, his day-to-day interactions, and his enthusiasm for life. This zest was especially apparent in his love for the outdoors and ecological theories. This passion was particularly visible in two examples. The first occurred in a second year course when Brent shared his enthusiasm for snow. Not just any snow, but stellar dendrites! While leading a backcountry ski trip, Brent always kept his eye out for teachable moments. While racing down a hill, Brent spotted a spectacular stellar dendrite specimen; he stopped abruptly, nearly causing a backcountry skier pile-up. He then proceeded to get the class to walk halfway back up the hill, in order to show them what he described as “the most beautiful stellar dendrite [he] had ever seen.” Although it may have seemed ludicrous at the time, his actions showcased his belief in the value of experiential and environmental education. It was teachable moments like these that Brent’s true, passionate self came through.

The emphasis on the importance of ecological theory also became evident during a third year sea-kayaking trip that Brent led earlier this year. Shortly after pushing off the rocky shores of Lake Superior, Brent discovered a spider tagging along on his kayak. To the students’ disbelief, Brent announced that they should paddle back to shore, to save what others might have thought of as a useless creature. Brent believed that all creatures had their own intrinsic value, and thus made the decision to postpone their day by an hour in order to return the spider back to its home. Like that spider, we are all better off for spending time with Brent. He graced us with the knowledge of applying theory to the real world and adding our own experience to theory. He taught us that it is okay to express intense passion for concepts and practices that others might think insignificant.

Brent was a man who also embodied humility and feminism. When walking into his class, one became immersed in his teachings thanks in part to his gentle nature. Students were his greatest concern, and he was fully engaged in their personal journey of learning and growth. To ensure everyone had exposure to diverse ideas, he would incorporate a variety of group development activities to make us think deeply about our personal interactions. One activity that particularly sticks out was a class exploring the importance of reflection. Each student was provided with a quote that Brent had carefully chosen. Everyone was then challenged to find one or more others with quotes that aligned. The goal of the activity was to have the students eventually all coalesce in one group, noting how we are all interconnected, no matter how different we may perceive ourselves.

Class with Brent always involved celebrating successes, exploring struggles, and helping each other move forward. We learned in a safe space where we

were consistently excited to notice and address. As students, we never felt alone in our learning; somehow Brent always enabled us to feel strong and thoughtful in his presence. We knew we were, at that moment, his #1 priority. Brent's classes were personalized. He allowed each student to challenge her or his own values through philosophical discussion and he would, in turn, challenge students further with great excitement



and passion. He embraced the friction that sometimes emerged as we worked to understand his lessons, and used that as a means to further explore ideas. His love of learning was shown in how he explored diverse values through discussion with students. He knew there was always room for growth.

One particular class included a discussion about ontology and epistemology. During this class, the content sailed over almost everyone's head. Some of us initially felt that there was no need for us to learn about these concepts given we could not imagine how they applied to the real world. Brent observed how the discussion was really about how we construct reality. "Well, what is constructed reality?" a student asked. It was then that an almost sly smirk came across Brent's face because he knew he had a simple story to put it all into perspective for us. He applied the ideas we had just discussed to a situation that we had undoubtedly all experienced. We imagine this was his plan all along. Brent had an understanding and holistic approach to learning. He anticipated students' confusion and frustration and had a plan to address that through everyday life stories to which students could relate. Brent felt that the confusion or frustration that occurred was an important part of learning, and he often said that he liked to "see people struggle."

Many of us took an Outdoor Professional Leadership class with Brent the first time he offered it. Brent told us that he was piloting things with us, including a new project, a professional portfolio, he planned to assign his future students. We were required to assess ourselves based on who we are at that moment, describe the self we were striving to be, and develop a plan on how we could

achieve this ideal self. Furthermore, we were required to seek out a “sounding board” of people closest to us who could help us critically analyze our description of our actual selves. Brent asked us to identify our key beliefs and values and then evaluate the consistency between our actual self and the beliefs and values that we held. This project comprised 50% of our final mark, and, in essence, took each of us on a profound personal journey. We would often tell Brent how much work he was putting us through. He would smile at us and remind us how he liked to see people struggle. Brent was a huge advocate for personal growth and development. In his teaching, he challenged students to move outside of their comfort zones, try new things, not be afraid of failure, and reflect on experiences. He often argued that the best learning comes through failures and hardship, not just in the experiences themselves, but in the personal reflection and analysis that ought to follow. He was able to convey the beauty of experiential learning in a way that resonated with each of his students.

Brent was the master of enabling self-determination. He had a way of making students want to succeed that went beyond the classroom. We remained dedicated because he consistently displayed how much he truly cared about us and our learning. Through his own excitement, he could generate passion in his students; his excitement was infectious. He made learning a truly positive experience. Every class was a new challenge, and by understanding his students’ motivations, desires, and limits, he was able to push them to exceed their own expectations of what they could do. He displayed a confidence with his students that allowed him to set forth controversial ideas and aggravate almost the entire class! Then, he would turn the whole lesson around through debriefing and reflection, allowing everyone to fully understand and benefit from the struggle. We understood his emotional investment in us. He would make us work for every learning opportunity, even if it meant frustrating us all. The end result was something that all of us will remember and cherish. We are all grateful for the growth and empowerment we experienced because of Brent. Thank you, Brent.

**Darrell Makin** is a contract faculty member and **Taylor Britt, Paige Carson, Leah Clement, Robert Furlong, Matthew Hartman, Tara Holmes, Luke Maw, Abby McKelvie, Dayna Musselman, Jasmin Neve, Morgan Nisbet, Matthew Plows, Adelia Rodger, Colby Sadler, Calla Sampson, Andrew Scott, Lucas Shewen, Sarah Shruiff, Griffin Slimkowich, and Kathryn VanTil** are undergraduate students in the School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism, Lakehead University.

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Brent went by many names: Cuthbertson, Boss, Cuthbert-something, Big Ears, Uncle Brent, Chase. I’ve known him since we went to grad school together at the University of Alberta. Since then, together we paddled whitewater rivers, sailed

Lake Superior's waters, surfed in Hawaii, skied the back country of the Rockies, fly fished the waters of Arizona, and driven through slot canyons in Death Valley. We swam with green turtles and cut test pits for avalanches. We slept under Ponderosa pines overlooking the Grand Canyon and snored behind signs at Interstate rest areas and in the backs of trucks, planes, buses, and on hotel room floors. We were detained by border guards and caught on a mountaintop in a lightning storm. We were lost at 10,000 feet on the snow-covered peaks of New Mexico.

We taught together, laughed together, shed tears together, published together, attended conferences together, did home renovations together, played backyard boot hockey together, and celebrated Christmas together. We debated all aspects of outdoor recreation and our home department, the School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism. Through all of this, our relationship deepened. My friend and colleague Rodney Swatton was an important part of all of this too. We were a trio, the three musketeers. The three of us celebrated our birthdays together each June. Without Brent, one of the legs of our tripod is missing.

My relationship with Brent was the most natural and easiest of friendships. What we did do best was laugh. His sense of humour was delightful. He was mischievous with a twinkle in his eye. I think with fondness of Brent-isms like, "Onwards and sideways" and "Live and don't learn."

I frequently went to Brent for advice. His wisdom was astounding.

We have been through both joyous and difficult times together, and he made it fun and he made it real. Seeing him smile made you feel like everything was going to be all right. He was humble. He found such joy in life. He cared deeply for his family, Kim and Breanne, his friends, and his students. His sensitivity was extraordinary. Brent looked and saw with his heart, and he knew what is most important in life is invisible. He loved children and youth and had a magical way of making them feel special. He was a fabulous uncle although a lousy babysitter, as my wife Teresa Socha can attest given the chaos we would sometimes return to after a night out when the kids had an evening with Uncle Brent.

He was guided by his moral compass that had a declination of '0.' Ethically, he pointed the way to what was true and just. Brent was a man of courage and compassion. He would never compromise his morals to take the easy way; he took the honourable and right way. Sometimes this was challenging and caused him grief, but he never wavered in times of turmoil and he persevered forward in the best way he knew how. Brent never pushed his beliefs upon anyone. He was a phenomenal role model.

Brent also had incredible communication skills; he could always win an argument. In meetings he frequently communicated what I was trying to say.

Students were paramount to Brent and teaching well was critical to him. He was a patient and gifted teacher. He was creative in his teachings and was not afraid to challenge students. Many students say that Brent has been the most influential person in their lives; a former student once wrote to Brent: "My beliefs

on education come from Gandhi, Mother Teresa, William Woodsworth, Pope John II, and Brent Cuthbertson.” Not bad company!

With Brent’s passing, my heart aches and feels broken. I need to remember Brent and encourage my heart to smile, knowing that is what Brent would want. He would also want us to suck the marrow out of life, to savour each moment, and to find joy. He would want us to stand on guard for social justice, and to treat each other and the Earth well. He would want us to work together for a better world. He would want us to smile, laugh, and dance. To celebrate his life and be joyous that he lived a life of deep meaning. Thank you, Brent. Happy sailing, my amazing friend. I love you, brother.

**Tom Potter** is an Associate Professor in the School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism, Lakehead University.

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In many ways, Brent reminded me of a skilled musician, but the outdoors and the classroom were his stage, and his mind was the instrument. Brent was an exemplary practitioner of life who knew the rules and knew the correct beats, rhythms, and structure that the greatest minds would suggest we follow for a meaningful and ethical existence. But Brent was no mere follower. Like the greatest musicians, artists, and scholars, he would play around with those rules and structures to develop his own voice and to carve out his own path, to be an authentic person in a world that regularly thwarts our attempts to achieve an enriching life. His gift was to model this for others and to take so many of us with him, inviting us to join him on his journey, but also encouraging us to find our *own* path.

Brent was also unparalleled in being able to talk about things that really counted in life. I distinctly remember a discussion where he said it was important to encourage people to contemplate their own mortality and to help them see their death as a beacon for their life and as a tuning fork for the choices they make in living that life. In that sense, Brent was not only a guide for outdoor expeditions, but was also a guide for inner exploration and for meaningful social relations. Through his influence, Brent lives beyond death.

**Mark Burgess** is Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom.