

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, March 24, 2016: “Take time to create kindness.” Casper Star Tribune of March 26: “A few instances of kindness before our time is up”

Whenever I set out to travel, be it flying to family in Germany or driving to California for grandparent duty, I am overcome with dread. I look around my home and wonder whether I'll return. Will I be tempting fate once too many? Then, when it's time to say good-bye to the people who welcomed me, the sense of doom arises again. I look past the faces of loved ones and think, I may not pass this way again. This may be my long good-bye.

As we age, thoughts as these may be inevitable. Many deaths happen in the course of a lifetime. When I mentioned Professor Elizabeth Williams in last week's column, I knew I'd have to speak to her and her husband's tragic demise, more than a decade into the past by now.

The image that recurs, described to me from court records: Beth next to him, Tom at the wheel. He thrusts both arms across his face to shield himself at impact. What must have gone through their minds, those moments of glimpsing the semi barreling their way?

“Beth and Tom were an extraordinary husband-and-wife team,” says Walter, turning somber at the memory of his peers.

Indeed, they were memorialized as “sharing a unique experience and commitment to wildlife” and representing “One of the most productive husband-and-wife collaborations in the history of conservation, a combination that is difficult to find and impossible to replace.”

Beth and Tom were returning from a family celebration, traveling in their truck on Highway 287 from Fort Collins to Laramie. It was a snowy evening in December.

“They always drove heavy-duty vehicles,” Walter reminisces. But the best-built truck is nothing against an out-of-control eighteen-wheeler.

“Tom Thorne was an exceedingly careful and cautious driver. One time, when I had to drive 287, he warned me to be careful. That road is a beast, he said.”

Tom had amazing people skills, adds Walter. “He retired as wildlife vet to advise various stakeholders. One time I was riding with him to a meeting and he said, ‘We have to convince so-and-so to proceed in such-and-such manner.’ The next morning, the head honcho presented Tom's thoughts as if they were his own.”

My son owns a framed photograph of Beth Williams, who, as professor of veterinary sciences, was his dissertation director. The snapshot, likely taken by Tom, shows her seated on a rock, wide-brimmed hat shielding her from the sun. She is lowering a hefty pair of binoculars. A slight smile plays over her face. She looks young, energetic, and relaxed.

Beth was a tenacious individual, yet soft-spoken and patient—unlike my son, who sometimes indulges in angry outbursts.

One time Walter got into it with a friend who was easily riled, at an occasion that was supposed to be a fun time for all to reminisce.

Walt's brothers had organized a reunion of their college band and arranged to perform outdoors at a winery. Living all over coastal California, they'd yet managed a few practice sessions. Two of the former members now performed professionally—not my sons, though Frank was the one who organized the band. For the event, Walter flew in with wife and daughter, staying at her parents'. I had driven from Wyoming to my youngest son's, the former drummer.

At the winery, Walter ended up staffing the barbeque. Because he had practiced a number to perform with his two bothers, he asked the friend to take over for him. Perhaps he was anxious about playing with his betters and spoke gruffly.

"I want to celebrate; it's my birthday," the hothead replied. "I'm not doing this."

There followed an exchange the upshot of which was, the friend split with wife and child. He'd been a huge fan of the boys' music-making. We heard nothing from them for a couple of years.

I was visiting in Texas when, out of the blue, the estranged friend called and started talking with Walter. At one point I overheard my son inviting the caller to go boar hunting with him. "No hunting license required," he said. "These hogs are hugely damaging to the land."

"Out of the blue" happened right after my daughter-in-law entertained a telephone conversation with the former friend's wife.

I mentioned above a sense of dread at leave-taking. It's a reminder that we, too, will generate waves of grief at our passing. And so, it's important to create moments of kindness before our time is up and leave a few good memories for our loved ones in their sorrow. A woman surveying the wilderness with her binoculars, glad to be involved. A man persuading a policy-maker to do the right thing for wildlife. A telephone call, enabled by female intuitive decision-making.

Note: At the former Sybille Research Station a plaque advises that the area was renamed "in memory of Tom Thorne and Beth Williams in September 2005." Through "cooperation of state and federal agencies, local landowners, and sportsmen" Wyoming Game and Fish is able to offer the 2,700 acres as winter range for mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, and other species. The area also provides for hiking, sightseeing and photography, plus fishing at Johnson Creek Reservoir, and hunting.