On a cold Boston morning in November of 1830, Ralph Waldo Emerson sat down to his journal and wrote:

“A man is known by the books he reads, by the company he keeps, by the praise he gives, by his dress, by his tastes, by his distastes, by the stories he tells, by his gait, by the notion of his eye, by the look of his house, of his chamber; for nothing on earth is solitary but every thing hath affinities infinite.”

It is in this spirit that I’d like to describe a kind and wonderful man by the company he kept, the stories he told, and the ideals he cherished.

For those of you who knew Ed—really knew him—you may find yourself smiling inwardly at the memory of his antics and idiosyncrasies. Perhaps you’ll recall the incalcitrance of his youth with a roll of your eyes and a shake of your head.

Or maybe, like me, it's a gentle malaise you’ll feel, for a world prematurely deprived of a great man’s contagious exuberance for food and drink and art and nature.

For those of you who knew Ed Levin only by reputation, perhaps the tale of an artist so wholly in love with his medium, so dedicated to his craft, will bring you some small measure of inspiration.

Regardless of whether you knew Ed well, or not at all, you may be pleased to know that my purpose here is not to proffer sainthood, whitewash difficult times, or paint anything less than the truest, most faithful picture I can manage.

My intent, rather, is to depict the character of a man who was buoyed by his passions and beset by his foibles; who lived by an insatiable desire for learning, experiencing, and enjoying.

Ed's first wife, Anita, once described to me a scene from his early days as a timber framer.

There she was, alone in a field, save for Ed, a small tent they called home, and the angular skeleton of a timber frame in the making.

Anita, young and slight and pregnant with their daughter Cora, put a hand to her brow against the high New Hampshire sun and looked up.

Her gaze floated to the treetops, scraped the cloudless sky, and settled peacefully down to Ed, perched on the far reaching beam that held his rapt attention to the exclusion of all else.

"He worked alone," she told me. "And though it was impossible, you could just see him trying to figure out how to be at both ends of that beam at once."

Of course, to Ed, the task was never impossible. These were the puzzles he lived for, the ones that started as a notion on a single sheet of paper, and then somehow became the elegant curves of a vaulted ceiling, or the hallowed halls of a synagogue.

As his career progressed, Ed found himself in fields around the world, among those who shared his passion for the long and storied tradition of timber frame design. But it was in helping his cherished community of artisans knock down their own creative barriers that Ed found his greatest passion.

"He was," as friend and colleague Ken Rower said, "a timber framer's timber framer."

"He's the only person I know," Ken told me, "who had the complete respect of the Timber Frame Engineering Council, and never took an engineering course in his life."

Each call was an adventure, each challenge a hit of his favorite drug. And as he hung up the phone, project in hand, he'd slip sublimely from the taunting of life's shouts and murmurs; lapsing, untroubled, into the familiar embrace of quiet concentration.

I can't help but smile at the thought of my old friend, hunched over the keyboard, his face pallid in the artificial computer blue. Quiet, alone, and satisfied completely in his distance from life's comings and goings, consumed entirely by the task at hand.

How comforting that sounds.

In preparing to speak here today, I had the opportunity to connect with some of those who knew Ed best. I was looking for some insight, something more than I was able to divine from the too few hours I spent in his company.

The danger, of course, was coming back from these conversations with too many peaks and not enough valleys, such that it might seem as if I had invented a hollywood superhero with no faults at all.

But it seems that those who loved him most, loved every aspect equally. Which, I suppose, is why they felt no compunction in describing to me both his higest highest highs and lowest lows, knowing full well—if you'll excuse the cliche—that the whole of Ed was far greater than the sum of his parts.

With that said, I can tell you that the angular joints of his character sometimes made living, loving and working with Ed a frustrating experience indeed.

Orson Welles once said: "Everything about me is a contradiction, and so is everything about everybody else. We are made out of oppositions; we live between two poles. There's a philistine and an aesthete in all of us, and a murderer and a saint. You don't reconcile the poles. You just recognize them."

I think Ed recognized the contradictions of his character. I think he wore them day in and day out, like a tattered coat, too threadbare to insulate, too familiar to replace.

And even though his passion for logic, and reason, and the immutable laws of physics defined him as much as anything else, still he was beset by the inner demons that pulled his focus from the fundamentals of family, and business, and health.

In a letter to his dear friend, Dan Daley, Ed very elegantly described the warring factions of his complicated mind.

"Happy Ed Levin puts in the occasional appearance, swapping out for his alter ego," he wrote.

"Our dialogue got me thinking about how to frame the dichotomy between these two. Posed one way, the question is, which of these guys holds the lease and which the sublet?"

"Alternately, is unhappiness a chronic and happiness an acute condition? (One would prefer the reverse.)

"The problem is, after decades of consideration, I don't know and am clueless how to proceed. Perhaps there is an uncertainty principle which obscures the metaphysics of happiness, since the primary observer, perpetually trapped in one state or the other, is unable to self-observe with dispassion and clarity."

I sometimes wonder if, in another time and place, Ed might have lived a life of perfect balance and equanimity.

But then again, how often do we celebrate life's great thinkers and doers for their sameness, their convention, their mild temperament?

Who could honestly wish for Ed to have been plain and predictable, when so many of us found pleasure in his messy, beautiful life?

Not I.

June 1st of this year was just another Sunday, unremarkable to me in every way. That is, until I realized the day marked exactly one year since the last time I had had the pleasure of Ed's company.

He had boarded a train that delivered him to New York City mid-morning. Cora and I met him on the corner of East 2nd and Avenue B, and steered him toward one of our favorite brunch spots to begin the day's culinary adventure.

A couple orders of fried catfish and a few too many mimosas later, we ambled back to our apartment to escape the heat and plan our next move.

I was sitting quietly, lost in my thoughts when suddenly I looked up and chanced to see love.

It was the sight of Ed and his daughter that caught my eye, as the patter of their conversation gently bent and curved.

For reasons I still don't quite understand, it is the memory of that very moment, viewed with a clarity only time can provide, that illuminated for me his most precious quality: Ed was a hopeless romantic.

There was romance in the stories he told. There was romance in his giddy anticipation of the Timber Framers Guild meeting he'd attend in a few short weeks.

And there was romance in his delight of life's simplest pleasures, like time spent with those who require no more of us than the comfort of our company.

And now, suddenly, it's clear to me: there was a subtle romance to everything Ed did.

It was the glorious frames he raised like a child; the nobility he imbued in every arch, every angle.

Ed's greatest gift was his ability to infuse any structure, any story, any phrase with gravitas, whether a lonely covered bridge, quietly aging by a country meadow, or the nostalgia of a long ago summer day, as in his letter to a dear friend:

"What I have savored down the years," he wrote, "is the delicious irony that, freshly fledged from the academic nest, my first job, in the employ of my cerebral friend and his professorial client, was dumb, backbreaking labor, moving dirt with shovel and wheelbarrow."

"Which has left me to this day unable to distinguish the nobility of, or the essential differences between, shaping earth, laying brick, and joining wood, versus the parallel activities of the mind with words and thoughts."

You see, for the hopeless romantic, it's nostalgia that brings a heroin escape on the days when he feels dragged, kicking and screaming, from youth.

It's the sound, the smell, the touch and taste that alights on the tip of his tongue, calling to mind at once the smallness of a single word, and the vastness of the universe.

It's how he knows he's not alone.

Which brings me back to that day in June, and the nonchalance of Ed's "Oh, I don't know, whatever you want do." - the simple truth of his having undertaken the adventure without an ounce of contrivance.

It was Cora who finally suggested the activity that—now, one year past—strikes me as so perfectly apropos.

"Why don't we watch Civil War?" she said.

It wasn't just that we were hot and tired, though we were. And it wasn't just that Ed had trouble walking that day, though he did.

It was simply that, no matter the time or place, Ed loved sharing his passion for the past with his family and friends. And we loved it too.

And so we sat together, the three of us, in amiable silence, engrossed in a beautiful story of a terrible time. It was all we needed. We were satisfied.

Later that evening, after a sumptuous feast at a little place in the East Village, with an absent minded waitress who brought us one more salted caramel sundae than we really needed, Cora and I walked Ed to the corner and saw him into a cab.

If we had known that the smile he gave us through the open taxi window would be the last we'd have for the rest of our lives, what would we have done differently?

I've asked myself this question from time to time, having recently arrived at the age where one ponders the deeper ponderances of the universe.

And here is my answer: Nothing.

I would have done nothing different, I would have said nothing different, I would have spoken not a single word to fill an empty space that was quite naturally meant to be. Of that day, I would change nothing.

Because, like Ed himself, that day was perfect in its imperfection.

It was a wonderful, memorable dalliance, lighthearted and joyous in its promise of another and another and another.

And, though our goodbye was short, uninformed as to the consequence of its brevity, it was a goodbye. And for that, I am thankful.

As I turn to the last page of the story of Ed, I find myself looking between the lines for the sage advice you could always count on him to offer.

And perhaps it is simply this: In the grand scheme of things, we control very little.

There isn't a single guarantee that the sun will rise tomorrow, no method by which we can accurately predict the course of our lives.

But everyone one of us here has the gift of time—as much as we're allotted by fate, and not a second more.

To spend it wisely, in pursuit of love, life and all the things that truly matter—as Ed did—is to honor the gift, however long it may last.

In this, I wish you all the very best.

Good luck. And thank you.

by KJ 