REMEMBERING SIR LAURENS VAN DER POST

BY VANCE G. MARTIN, EXECUTIVE EDITOR

A CURIOUS ASPECT OF MY TEENAGE YEARS n-as that I loved nature and wildness, but spent quite a lot of time in the house. To my parents’ way of thinking, this was for good reason. It had to do with wildness, but not the wilderness type.

In any event, the excessive time indoors needed filling, so I read a lot-mostly about the outdoors. During one of my involuntary retreats, after rushing through every one of Louis L’Amour’s books and learning about the craft of formula writing, I came across a crumpled paperback, Heart of the Hunter: I meandered through it and discovered the art of storytelling. Even more, I experienced for the first time someone who could write about what I really felt—the sense and texture of wildness. I discovered Sir Laurens van der Post.

Laurens left our midst on December 15, 1996, two days after his 90th birthday. A human being of singular character, he was the most complex man I have ever known. Except for the fact that it is a cliche, I would even call him unique. This is nowhere more evident than in the many obituaries that appeared in the major newspapers of the world. Each touched upon that aspect of himself which Laurens had revealed at some time to that particular writer: prolific author, exotic explorer, courageous soldier, profound philosopher, classical scholar, psychologist, champion of forgotten tribal people, friend of the elite, unofficial diplomat, confidant to princes and prime ministers. None of these labels alone do justice to a man who willingly claimed to not even know himself. Yet this claim had little to do with self-knowledge or understanding because, in that respect, Laurens knew himself better than one thought possible. It actually had more to do with a profound personal experience and belief in that which is best described in a line by a poem from his friend, T.S. Eliot: “... knowing myself yet being someone other.”

Laurens firmly believed in the “someone other,” and this is why he was one of the great wilderness figures of the 20th century. To him, wilderness is more than a collection of wild-life, plants, and naturally occurring processes. It is certainly a template which reveals the proportion and relationship necessary to sustain human civilization in contemporary jargon, a sort of formula for sustainability, if you will—but it is also at once a mirror that reflects the best of human potential and the worst of human excess and alienation. Even more, it is an environment of hope and healing, where hubris has no place and the now is everything. Most of all, it is the doorway “through which we can venture to the interior, and in an unspeakable manner experience the “someone other.”

If this sounds a bit far out, it is purposely so: Laurens was a person of profound perspective. Yet this rarified visionary self was well-salted with humor and a quirky appreciation of irony, and grounded by a rigorous, well-tested discipline. And his many dimensions were strictly compartmentalized, the result of a survival instinct forged through hardship, of which he suffered much in his life. One such extreme experience spawned in him a remarkable capacity to forgive those who trespassed against him, as he did to the Japanese in whose prisoner of war camp he endured three years of hellish abuse and torture during World War II.

But further, when he was freed from the camp, he performed, without a moment’s hesitation, one of the greatest acts of emotional strength, physical endurance, and mental resilience of which I’ve ever known. He immediately went back on active duty as a senior officer in Lord Mountbattens command, as postwar Java came under British rule. Laurens was incredibly tough. He served in this capacity for more than two years, before finally allowing himself a break and returning to Africa. Upon arriving on his native soil, before seeing a single friend or member of his family, he went into the African lowveld wilderness, to spend 30 days healing and rediscovering himself.

In a wonderfully synchronistic event, 15 years after reading Heart of the Hunter, I met Laurens when he sat down next to me in the very back row of the open benches at a race track which was the crowded, jostling site of the public opening of the 2nd World Wilderness Congress (Australia 1980). Later that day, Ian Player formally introduced us, after which ensued one of the most memorable nights of my life in which I joined Laurens, Ian and Enos Mabuza (now the chairman of the National Parks Board in South Africa) around the kitchen table of a modest motel in Cairns, Queensland, eating fried chicken prepared by Enos’ wife, Esther. We talked late into the night, around the campfire of an incandescent bulb, and they welcomed my story as one with theirs. Over the next 20 years, the opportunity to work side by side with Laurens in shaping and convening the World Wilderness Congress, and at times being both encouraged and firmly schooled by him, was a great gift from the someone other. Thank you, Laurens.