

Chapter 42

CLOSING A LIFETIME OF DOORS

“Closing doors” is a phrase used by Kathleen Brady (nee Osgood), who was both my wife Jeannie’s friend and roommate at Penn State and our lifetime friend. Kathy is one day older than I am, and we still have weekly telephone chats. She commented recently that she is closing some doors – at the moment, the door she is closing is travel to Chautauqua’s and other similar events dear to her heart.

When people are young, many doors are opened to them; however, many are lost throughout the lifetime. Some opportunities are grasped with both hands and never relinquished, but reflections on the ones never grasped sometimes cause great regret. Reading was a door opened to me before I was in elementary school, and the passion continues to this day. I am happy that this particular door has not been closed to me.

On about my 12th birthday, I was given a heavy, fat tire, one-speed bicycle, the common bike in those days. This gift opened the door to my association with natural systems initially because the bike drastically reduced the time needed to travel to both Pott’s Quarry and the Schuylkill River – I could fish by moving from one location to another within an area. I went on all these trips alone, partly because I didn’t know anyone else with a bike who wanted to go fishing and explore natural areas as much as I did. Also, during the Great Depression, even bikes were not common. In any case, this adventure was my first experience of outings entirely on my own. I missed the companionship of others, but this time alone allowed me to experience the exhilaration of trying out new ideas at times of my own choosing. I had great adventures by opening the easy-mobility door. In those days, fishing was primarily a summer – out of school – activity. A major door had opened for me, which I closed only when Jeannie’s Alzheimer’s worsened and I had to be with her constantly. I closed the door firmly with thanks for being able to enjoy fishing for most of my life.

Two doors I opened myself were the jobs at Hamilton Paper Co., Miquon, PA, and the Eastern Regional Research Laboratory at Mermaid Lane, Wyndmoor, PA. The first opportunity gave me confidence that I could earn money, even in a depression, and the second exposed me to a major research program. Both jobs are described elsewhere in this volume, as are the educational doors I opened.

Individuals have doors they open and quietly shut after a few years. Some doors are opened, enjoyed, and then closed because other, attractive doors present themselves. One such door for me was an interest in house plants in the late 1970s and 1980s. A house plant society offered a seed “bank,” from which I could obtain seeds for a modest shipping fee, for plants that could not be purchased in most areas. I usually obtained one species at a time. Jeannie and I had always had house plants, but, during this time, one of the graduate students who took care of our Blacksburg house and plants while we were at a field station during summer told me I had 64 plants. Our house had huge windows on the second floor (the house was on a very steep hillside) that faced west. At first, I used an assortment of tables to set the plants on, but Jeannie, as a surprise, took the course “Carpentry for Incompetents” and built two long tables with upper and lower shelves for the plants. Eventually, other interests (research) lured me away from my infatuation with house plants.

Another door that quietly opened and then closed for Jeannie and me was folbotting. The faculty member who helped me most when I arrived at Virginia Tech in 1968 was Alan Heath, who let my graduate student Rip Sparks use his laboratory and equipment to measure the respiratory rate of fish until my laboratory in uncompleted Derring Hall was available the following year. Alan and his wife Gloria were avid white water folboters. Jeannie and I purchased a folbot and were tutored by the Heaths, starting with #1 rapids and moving up to #4s. I sat on the seat back when going through rapids because the view was better. Once, on a steep rapid, the boat went out from under me and I landed in the New River. The boat went on through the tail of the rapids with Jeannie still giving alerts to obstacles. We gave up the white water trips after about 12 years because we were getting older and could not manage folbotting during the day on Saturday and folk dancing in the evenings.

Jeannie and I opened many doors together (e.g., folk dancing, field stations) or had opened identical doors before we met (e.g., swimming, hiking). When Jeannie’s Alzheimer’s worsened, many doors closed (e.g., folk dancing, high altitude hiking) because we could not do them together. I wanted to be with Jeannie, even though we could not continue to share previous life long experiences together. I have no regrets that these doors closed – Jeannie and I had been experiencing and enjoying them since 1941 and being with her was more important than my attempting to keep the doors open.

In April 2010, the lymphedema in my right leg worsened significantly. The initial treatment has been to elevate my right leg on pillows for 40 minutes, after which I can sit or stand for 30 minutes. Walking can be

done anytime since the muscle contractions moves the lymph. This regime is curtailing my scientific writing because I have only a few minutes of sitting time to write. A door has partly closed – no longer can I spend 2-4 hours daily reading professional books and journals plus 2-3 hours writing. The reading and writing, which have been a life long source of joy, have been markedly reduced. However, I was only initially depressed – I had been able to publish up to and including age 87 from age 25. Still, I feel a pang of regret that this important joy of my professional life has been diminished.

For most of my professional career, I dictated manuscripts, which were transcribed and then given to me for editing. I acquired the dictating habit at the Academy of Natural Sciences. The Limnology Department was supported by grants and contracts that typically involved both proposals and periodic reports that developed my writing skills. At that time, I was invited to produce a book for the American Institute of Biological Sciences Patterns in Life Series. I could not produce the book, *Population Dynamics*, during working hours, so Jeannie transcribed the dictation for me at my desk in our huge dining room. I dictated in our tiny living room (we lived in the gatehouse of a large estate that had been divided). Usually I looked after the children while Jeannie transcribed. Our marriage might not have survived a second book since I was so focused on dictating and that I often failed to hear the children “fighting” at my feet. Jeannie could hear the children over the tape when she transcribed it. Needless to say, when the book was finished, I employed another person to transcribe my dictation.

Quite a number of people transcribed for me until I formally retired in 1995 and returned to writing manuscripts, but three stand out. (1) Teresa Moody was the fastest typist I have ever encountered. She would not leave the office each day until all the tapes had been transcribed. Consequently, I always hid those tapes dictated late in the day so she could lead a normal life. (2) Eva Call was a linguist who quickly absorbed scientific terminology and who took a great interest in the transcription of my autobiography. In fact, I became convinced that writing the volume was worth the effort when Eva commented that she and her husband (a graduate student in another department) hoped I would finish the chapter (Chapter 6) on working for a woman scientist (women scientists were rare at that time) while they were still at Virginia Tech so they would know how the chapter ended. (3) Last, but far from least, my editorial assistant Darla Donald has been with me for over 35 years and even takes dictation over the telephone. I still have three or four dictaphones and Darla has the transcribing equipment, but the problem with dictating is that I can no longer keep all the information in my head that is needed for steady and consistent dictation. So, my production of manuscripts is diminishing, but will not cease – at least not until some new affliction of old age appears.

Except in cases of sudden death, most people will need a caregiver at some point in their lives. Institutions, such as assisted living and nursing homes, are essential, but caregivers are still necessary. One problem with caregivers is that they forget to give themselves adequate care. As Jeannie’s caregiver for years, I managed to end up in the same hospital she was in at a point when nothing I could have done would have extended or improved the quality of her life. My daughter Karen is currently my primary caregiver (she lives in Blacksburg where I live), and she returned from 2½ months in India just as I needed to be taken twice weekly to the wound care center in the town about 10 miles away. This routine has been followed immediately by two trips weekly to a nearby lymphedema care facility near my assisted living center.

I have never had a group discussion on my aging with all our children. However, during Jeannie’s long bout with Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s, I touched on related subjects with them, such as my feelings on nursing homes, death, and so on. I do not fear death, but I do fear near total loss of independence if my mind is still working. Recent changes in my health have prepared me for the need for increased services in my assisted living center or in a nursing home. On trips to the wound center and for lymphedema care, Karen and I have discussed such things as my reaching 90 years of age and the adjustments that may require – I may need a companion during the day if I experience a serious decline in self-care abilities. Living in a retirement village reminds me frequently of the precarious aspects (e.g., fall, heart attacks) and the rewarding activities (e.g., writer’s group) that I may have time for. However, I remember that everyone lives in precarious times and the major risks (e.g., climate change, food and water shortages) affect all ages. If the positive carbon feedback loops are activated, runaway climate change is almost certain to occur, and such a catastrophe could easily override my personal plans. A number of irreversible changes will occur, and humankind must attempt to adapt. I will not get to select which risks I will be exposed to, and I cannot expect a risk to go away just because I ignore it.

The only closed door that is still on my mind daily is the loss of Jeannie in February 2005. Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s typically produce a long, drawn-out door closing. I have pondered the difference between a long “goodbye” and a sudden death. Probably death will be a huge shock however it occurs. Jeannie and I had been companions for about 64 years and married for approximately 61 years. That was the longest continual association in my life, and loss was certain to bring pain. However, the joy of those years exceeded the pain by many orders of magnitude.

Our children have said they cannot imagine Jeannie's and my being married to anyone else – neither can I. I was blessed that the door to Jeannie opened in 1941 and did not close until 2005. The life we shared was full of joy.

Acknowledgments. I am indebted to Darla Donald for transcribing the handwritten draft and for editorial assistance in preparation for publication.