

# Ode to John Holleman

by Craig Dostie

Nobody likes talking about it, so it's weird when you have to deal with it regardless of what you know or, more importantly, what you believe about death. It is that season for my friend, and thus for me and a small group of friends who have rallied around John since he was diagnosed with colon cancer just over three years ago.

The day he found out was the day that my relationship with John Holleman was transformed from casual to close. My response has been the signature ingredient of our friendship ever since. My response was prayer. Some of you may think that quite appropriate, and indeed I agree, but at the time it was a very unnatural response, not just because of who I am, but also because of my relationship with John.

John was my ski bud, a man who had entered my life as a roommate when I first moved to Truckee to put Couloir magazine in high gear. According to my other roommate, Corey Stern, John was a ripping telemarker.

We didn't ski together that much initially, but whenever we did we just made small talk on the trail, pumped each others egos and rarely discussed anything beyond the bro-brah level. But John and I had a deeper, unspoken understanding and agreement on other things. It was a sense, based on mutual nods of incidents we observed whenever we were together. Talk remained superficial because sharing the mountains was enough to sustain an uncomplicated friendship.

When John called in late July, 2008, I was shocked that he would call to tell me what was going on. I'd never heard that tone in his voice before but when he said, "I'm scared man" he was dead serious. And understandably so. He had just gotten back from seeing a doctor and was going in to surgery the very next day.



The doctors had determined the reason he hadn't been able to go the bathroom for a week was because of a tumor. Then he reminded me of when he had gotten violently sick six months earlier. That had been the final warning in a decade long series of symptoms that something was wrong in his guts. But he didn't investigate, he just toughed it out like we men do.

I couldn't do much. I felt helpless. I knew I needed to call in the big guns but felt weird about it. John knew I went to church regularly but never let on any interest or belief in such things. It was understood that he and I wouldn't discuss that stuff. But I offered to pray anyway.

Again he shocked me when he say, "that would be awesome," because I could tell he wasn't just saying that to go along with me, he meant it. Then I was on the spot so I asked God for a miracle that the diagnosis was wrong, that it wasn't a malignant tumor but if it were, to give the doctors amazing hands to remove it all and at all costs to bring John through the surgery alive.

"Holy Crap!" I screamed after I hung up.

That was three years ago. Several doses of chemo ensued after which the doctors claimed the cancer was gone only to remove what was left of his large intestine four months later still. The result of that second operation was for the doctors to call the family to say to hurry up and say your goodbyes because John won't be leaving the hospital ever again. I'll tell you more about that one later and you can decide for yourself if it was, as I believe, a bona fide miracle of God. Suffice it to say John walked out of the hospital five weeks later, Sept 5th, 2009 and did his darndest to live the best way he knew how until last June 2011.

Since then his body has been on a downward slide towards the yawning crevasse of eternity. His determination to live

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has allowed him to beat the odds offered by the gods of better living through scalpels and pharmaceuticals, but not forever.

That's the most interesting part of this whole drama. Since that day when John called unwittingly for prayer, that aspect of our relationship has dominated. Not like we are prayer warriors together. Not hardly. We'd still rather make small talk on the skin track and just enjoy the face shots. Except when it matters. And it matters now.

It's hard talking to a friend about their imminent death. It's hard when they look so unhealthy you can't deny they're dying. It's hard to assure them with nothing more than words from a book that 90% of the people on this planet deny is anything more than flagrant fiction. Both of us once agreed with that perspective. But both of us now know that, but for God's grace, we would have dealt with this conversation two years ago, or perhaps worse, have missed the ability to have it because our understanding of death was so unprepared.

So it is bitter sweet that a two year extension is now drawing to a close. But it seems that those two years were granted to allow John to come to terms with passing on to eternity, and having the faith, though it be as small as a mustard seed, that he will cross that expanse and land on the other side in the twinkling of an eye in better shape than ever before. Such is the hope of heaven.

For now though, it remains a wrestling match between John's fear of death versus a faith in what lies beyond. Dealing with the pain of a body rotting from the inside out, and daring to believe that there is a spiritual body awaiting is an amazing concept to consider, especially when you accept we can't earn it and we don't deserve it. So all I can do at this point for my friend John is to pray that the passages of scripture that I read and my insufficient explanations will help him, assure him and strengthen him for the path he is walking and the destination I believe he is bound for. Before long I believe we'll be making turns together again in a far far better place than here.

