

Eulogy for Kosti Uusikartano

(27 October 1939 – 10 February 2017)

by Carolyn Thauberger, 12 March 2017

Intro

Kosti was a special person, an unusual man. In him, the spark of life burned brighter than it did in the rest of us. You could see it when you met him. He stood out in a crowd. Everyone else was painted black and grey, but Kosti was in colour.

Dancing

Kosti was a fine dance partner. I used to walk around with him after performances. People, friends and strangers, would come up to him and tell him he was the best dancer there. They said he looked like he was having fun, actually dancing, that he was a joy for them to watch. They never took their eye off him. Nobody comes up and tells the rest of us that we were the best dancer there. Well. Maybe my mother. But it happened to Kosti over and over. He connected with the people in the audience.

Language

Kosti had trouble with language. It was the same for him in both English and Finnish. He had difficulty putting his own ideas into words and difficulty following when others talked. Now it would be called a learning disability and people would know it had nothing to do with his intelligence. But many people still made the mistake of assuming Kosti thought less clearly than he did. He read a good deal, mostly non fiction in both English and Finnish newspapers and books. Many didn't know that. He especially enjoyed books on Finnish history. He wanted to understand because he had been there when it happened.

Clever hands

The intricacies of language may have eluded Kosti, but he was clever with his hands. As a finishing carpenter he crafted works of art with wood and with birch bark. His mother used these bark boxes in the kitchen, Kosti said, for things like flour and sugar. Whenever she needed another container she would ask him to make it for her, even when he was still very young. His parents had seen to it that Kosti knew as many skills and ways to behave as they could teach him.

Warm Affection

Kosti had a warm heart; he was affectionate and knew how to love. He loved easily and all the time. People, dogs, skiing/fishing/hunting, and most of all his two boys. I cannot count how many stories I have heard about how wonderful they are, how Jari could play the piano good enough to train for a concert pianist if he wanted that and Tomi should have tried out to play football for the Lions. Kosti dragged those boys with him everywhere and what adventures they must have had together. When they were small, Kosti skied with both of them tied on front and back. One night he tied their boat on too

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short a rope and the tide went out. In the morning the front of the boat was left away up in the air and Kosti had to save them. He was a good father and his children responded with love and respect.

Kosti liked almost everyone but there could be an exception. One day he was taking a break from logging. His pal was sitting over there by the trees and Kosti was fishing, rifle over his shoulder. This was bear country. Kosti heard his friend shout and he turned around. A bear was rushing straight at him, jaws open. Kosti threw down his rod, lifted his gun and fired . . . right into the mouth of the bear. He killed him. He killed that bear dead. Unfortunately nobody told the bear's feet. They kept going and the bear landed right on top of Kosti knocking him back into the water. Blood was everywhere, bear blood, and Kosti was pinned underneath. He yelled for help. Kosti's pal took one look at all that blood and ran away into the forest, shouting. Kosti was furious. His friend had gotten scared and left him. He extricated himself from the bear, but he never forgave that friend.

I had never quite believed this story. The way Kosti talked it was sometimes hard to get the straight of all that happened. But one day here at the Centre Kosti said, "There he is. There is the man who left me when I needed help." He wouldn't talk to him. But when I had a chance I went over and introduced myself. I asked him to tell me the story of that bear. What he said matched exactly with the story as Kosti told it. With one exception. Where Kosti reported that his friend abandoned him, the other guy said he had seen the blood and thought Kosti was badly hurt. Kosti could be dying there, and he could not lift that bear off him by himself so he ran back to camp shouting for help.

Did things

Kosti did things. He did things and he took you along into his adventures. One evening Kosti's friends Frank and Passi were sitting in his living room looking at a bottle of beer each. Kosti had gone down to check the sauna. Frank and Passi said to each other, "How come we hang out with an old guy like Kosti? We're in our 30's, away younger than he is." They considered this idea for a bit. "It's because he does things," they decided. "Being around him is exciting because he does things and he takes us along." It was true.

Action

Kosti liked to move. Not long ago he dislocated his shoulder downhill skiing. He went down the wrong slope and hit the moguls. The doctors fixed him up. Yet again. But he had to stay still at home for a week with his arm in a brace. I dropped in to see how he was doing. Not good. Kosti's floor was covered with the pages of several newspapers, books were stacked and open all around him, TV and stereo were both blasting, and his

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computer was on. In the middle of all this was Kosti sitting on his couch, mad. Very Angry. “I’m not a couch man,” he said to me by way of greeting. “I have never been a couch man. I am not going to be a couch man.” And he stomped to his feet and took me to see his garden.

Accidents

Kosti got into so many serious accidents that I am astonished that he thought to die peacefully at home sitting in his own living room. He had a plastic square in his thumb because he almost cut it off and parts of it were missing. Some fingers were crooked from various smashes. His big toe was sewn back together at a funny angle.

He chain sawed his knee in a landslide. He had thrown away his saw (it had no automatic shut off), but the slide took him straight into the saw spinning around at the bottom of the slope. It slashed a huge rip through Kosti’s knee and the insides of it were hanging out. (That’s how he explained it.) He stuffed his knee back in and hobbled to base camp. The doctors said he would be lucky to walk again and certainly, he would never be able to dance or run or ski. This accident was just before Kosti won all those medals skiing and racing. What do doctors know when they are dealing with a Finn.

Adventures

His life was so eventful. When he was six his little cousin knocked down a sythe hanging in the barn and it stuck in the bone of Kosti’s forehead. He lived. He was once kidnapped by a guy with a knife. He was in several very serious car accidents though never when he was driving. It wasn’t his fault. He sold his motorcycle after it tipped him over and slide him through 30 metres of mud. When he was driving an ambulance in Finland, he had to attend to five bad boys who had robbed a bank and driven their get away car straight under a semi truck. Kosti had to pick up their heads from all over the road. Kosti used to go out with a girl who had been Miss Finland the year before. Police once tried to give him a speeding ticket for going too fast around the hill at Queen Elizabeth Park. . . he was on roller skis at the time, training for a race. This stuff happens to the rest of us.

Friends

It is good to have friends and Kosti had the most of anyone I know. He liked people of any sort and they liked him back. He was very hospitable and a super cook and fantastic baker. He used to make his own wine from grapes. He was honest with his friends. One day he said to me, “You are a little bit fat, but I like you anyway.” He told you the truth and he liked you as you were. So we remained friends. Barely.

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Kosti helped his friends all he could and he used them for support in turn. Many times I have been called to help him deal with letters or forms. Once I came rushing over because he said he was in serious trouble. “I have to fill out this form and this form and these ones he said, slapping down a stack of papers. “Or I can’t get my pension from Finland.” He was desperate. I looked at the forms. Indeed they were several pages long each one. They were also in Finnish. I don’t read Finnish.

Electronic toys

Kosti loved fancy high tech devices, expensive toys that he bought and then had to try to figure out how to turn them on. He had machine that could call a goose or a wild turkey. He practiced from his balcony at Finnish Manor. That is likely why we have so many crows around here. And a next door neighbour who keeps his balcony door quite shut. Kosti had a telescope that would let you count the antlers on a deer if you were standing here and the deer was in Surrey.

Kosti figured out how to make these toys work by calling up his friends. Most times it went well. But once when I was visiting him he would not turn on his computer. He explained that the friend he called who was a computer geek, had “accidentally” got him into a prohibited site in the Pentagon. Kosti’s whole computer flashed red and a siren blew. Kosti was keeping his computer off for a few days to give it time to settle down. And he had his eye out the window in case they came to get him.

Love of animals

Kosti loved animals and they loved him back. If you were walking with Kosti and you met a dog he would stop to scratch an ear and have a conversation with it. One day we passed a squirrel. Kosti veered off the path and over to see the squirrel. “How are you doing,” he asked the squirrel? What’s the matter. Can’t you find a nut. Don’t go that way it’s the street. There’s cars. You better to go up that tree.” And he pointed with his finger. The squirrel went up the tree. Animals and Kosti understood each other. Even fish jumped onto his hook when he told them to.

Sisu

Kosti was strong and he was tough. He had sisu. Sisuu is a kind of superior power that only Batman, Superman, and Finns have. One time a ski competitor had been taunting Kosti for days that he would again beat him in the race. Kosti got mad. He determined to win no matter what. He bought new ski shoes. Sure enough, during the race the guy swished ahead. Kosti could not have that. He pushed himself. Hard. His muscles were tired, he was out of air, and his feet were hurting something awful in the new shoes. But he beat that guy! When he took off the ski shoes, his socks were soaked in blood. Kosti’s toenails had pulled off. He shook them out of his socks onto the ground. Sisuu.

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Stubbornness

It was useless to argue with Kosti once he had made up his mind. Some experts say this is related to the way your brain is organized. It is what psychologists call perseveration. I learned to adjust to Kosti's plan. But I am thinking of this story. In Finland, Kosti had to drive a woman to the hospital in his ambulance because her baby was coming. "We'll make it," said Kosti, and he stepped on the gas. The woman groaned in the back seat. Kosti went faster. Suddenly the woman shouted. "Stop the car! Stop! The baby is coming." Kosti refused. He was driving to the hospital and that is what he would finish doing. Even babies had to adjust to Kosti's plan. I told Kosti he was rude, he should have stopped. He explained that he had just cleaned the car didn't want any mess. So much for the psychologists.

His smiling face

Kosti had a lot of trouble in his life. He could have been a grouchy old guy in a scowl. But no. His face shone in a beautiful smile. Photographers always took his picture. One summer Kosti's photo appeared in the Vancouver Sun 4 times. When do we ever get our pictures in there. Kosti was there all the time. It could get annoying. After a dance tour in Finland, the Purpurit dance instructor, Helena, opened her Finnish Folk Dance magazine and there was Kosti's picture. He was showing some Instructors how to do the horse polka. Helena told him: It is bad enough I have to see your face every time I open the newspapers here. Now I have to see it even in the Finnish papers. I guess after a dance tour in a bus with a whirlwind like Kosti one might well have seen enough of his face for a while.

One day Kosti's family in Finland read in the Helskinki paper that their Minister of Sport, who was in Vancouver for the Olympics, had presented an award to Kosti for his work with sports especially skiing. His sister called him. "What have you been doing now?" she said, skipping over congratulations and getting to the main point of the call. What had he been doing. One never knew.

I learned a lot from Kosti. Here are five of the most important things.

- Be nice to animals, babies, and people, all kinds. Be nice to them all . . . unless they run off and leave you under a dead bear. That doesn't happen often. Fortunately.
- You don't have to change your mind. Never. Not ever. If you are sure you are right and that is what you want, then do it. After a bit, most people will start to help you.
- Keep working until the job is finished. Get it done. Even if doctors tell you you can't or your toenails fall off, keep going. Sisu.

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- Enjoy your life. Enjoy your whole life. Fish and hunt and dance and play and read books. Drink wine and enjoy the company of friends. Right to the very end.
- Smile. Let them take your picture.