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Wyatt & Roderick Townley: Roots that anchor and entwine
By Lynn Anderson

It wasn’t her beauty and it wasn’t his chivalry.
The qualities that drew two Johnson County residents together more than a quarter-century ago in New York City were their love for words and for savoring life, slowly and with great attention. When they found those in each other, the journey of a lifetime began.

One enchanted evening
Wyatt and Roderick Townley celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary in February.
“We met, as tall people can, across a crowded room at a poetry reading in New York,” Wyatt recalled.
The two aren’t hesitant about discussing their height. She stands 6 feet 2 inches tall, he comes in just under 7 feet. It was a James Merrill poetry reading, and both of them almost didn’t go. They were each nursing broken relationships, and despite a feeling of inertia, each managed somehow to show up at the event (though she arrived a bit late, which made it even easier for him to notice her).

“Roderick found me at intermission,” Wyatt said. “When he approached, the first thing I did was drop my glass of wine. The first thing he did was drop to his knees and mop it up.”

When the reading ended, they went for a drink and then walked for hours. They agreed to meet the next day in Central Park, taking their favorite poetry and champagne to share while bobbing in a boat on the park’s small lake.
The next day was Easter and they met again, Wyatt suggesting they watch New York’s famous Easter Parade—not realizing that there is no parade, other than the watchers themselves, meandering down this street and that.

“I felt very natural with her,” Roderick said. And “natural” is important to both of them.

A couple of years later, in 1986, they married. Wyatt got the role of a lifetime, but on the eve of opening night, she was dropped from a height of 20 feet and broke her neck. Her orthopedic surgeon told her she would not dance again.

The accident “was, in the long term, a blessing,” Wyatt said. “I had to find a way to move that would heal instead of hurt. I lay on the floor, closed my eyes, and started my physical re-education all over again, in a way that grew out of the breath, from the inside out.”

Wyatt did return to dance, and then went even deeper, developing a keen interest in therapeutic movement “to reclaim the body.” For more than 30 years she has shared the techniques she developed through a practice she calls Yoganetics®, offering classes at Unity Church of Overland Park. The yoga system has spread to 10 countries and is explained in her book Yoganetics: Be Fit, Healthy, and Relaxed One Breath at a Time (HarperCollins) and her Yoganetics DVD.

Wyatt has written poetry since childhood and has always straddled two worlds: dance/yoga and poetry/literature.
“It’s increasingly satisfying as these seemingly polar forms come together,” she said. “The practice of yoga and the practice of writing are really the same endeavor. We’re looking to connect with the spirit that underlies everything we do—to experience life as poetry in motion.”

Being Wyatt
Wyatt Townley grew up in Kansas City, Mo., graduating from Southwest High School. For a time she attended the North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem, studying ballet and modern dance, but seeking a better fit she transferred to Purchase College, part of the SUNY system. There she launched her own enterprise, Dancers Company, in 1976, and after graduating taught ballet as a member of the faculty.

Along the way, Wyatt got the role of a lifetime, but on the eve of opening night, she was dropped from a height of 20 feet and broke her neck. Her orthopedic surgeon told her she would not dance again.

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Being Roderick
Roderick Townley was born in Essex Fells, N.J., then grew up “in New York City and all around.” After high school he earned a bachelor’s degree in English literature from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., then a doctorate in modern American poetry from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J.

“The PhD was an apprenticeship to poetry, from its beginnings in Beowulf to William Carlos Williams,” he said. “Then I did some teaching, which I enjoyed, but I knew that was not my calling. I was always trying to be a poet.”

He traveled to Chile on a Fulbright scholarship in 1979 during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, teaching college-level English and developing a taste for other cultures and the riches of travel.
“I made good friends and heard horrible stories [about the dictatorship],” Roderick said.
In response, he pushed some political boundaries. He played Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech for his students, who were drawn by its power.

“Many students made copies, but they also warned me to be careful,” said Roderick.
After he returned from Chile, he became an adjunct teacher in Philadelphia for a time. Then for his daily bread he turned to journalism—writing for TV Guide, a job he kept for nine years.
“I ghosted articles for Joseph Heller, Luciano Pavarotti, and Gloria Steinem,” he said. “I got to travel to El Salvador to cover the media’s coverage
of the war. I interviewed Pierre Salinger in Paris and Jack Lemon in Canada. I worked to get the stories I wanted to write.”

Those were heady, glamorous years, but Roderick still hadn’t found his calling.

“I could only go so long having a stomach ache every time I rode the elevator to the 28th floor of the Sperry Building,” he recalled. “I thought, a lot of people could do this. I wanted to do something only I could do.”

Wyatt and words

The Afterlives of Trees, Wyatt’s fifth book, was just published by Woodley Press. She won a $5,000 Master Artist Fellowship in Poetry to help her complete the book of elegant poems and lush photo images by Michael Johnson. It took her nine years. She calls the book “a dialogue between the imagery and the images.”

She notes that after a published book lands on the author’s desk, the author wishes to move on—but publishers require more.

“You birth a book, and then you have to bring it up,” she said, referring to author appearances, news releases, and other forms of marketing that many writers wish they could forego.

Wyatt’s lyrical poetry is sourced in the natural imagery and weather of Kansas, specifically the family farm homesteaded by her great-grandparents in the early 1860s. Her other published works are The Breathing Field: Meditations on Yoga (Little, Brown), honored by The Kansas City Star in its Best Books List; Perfectly Normal (The Smith), a finalist for the Yale Series of Younger Poets; Kansas City Ballet, a 50th anniversary commemorative history; and Yoganetics, deemed an “Editor’s Choice” by Yoga Journal.

Her work has been recognized with a Hackney National Literary Award and the Poetry Fellowship from the Kansas Arts Commission in 2002. In 2004, she was invited by the Kansas Arts Commission to help establish the state’s Poet Laureate program.

Her work has been widely anthologized and featured in diverse settings, from The Paris Review to Newsweek. Most recently, on April 3, Garrison Keillor read a poem from The Afterlives of Trees on his National Public Radio show, “The Writer’s Almanac.”

Roderick and words

Roderick is a rare bird in the field of writing—the author of children’s, young-adult, and adult books, including books of poetry, novels, nonfiction, and literary criticism. He points out that “This is a case study in how not to build a writing career! Publishers sometimes have an attitude of ‘How dare you change genres!’”

His affinity for knowing what will resonate with young readers is marvelous and he knows what doesn’t work, as well. The novels don’t skate on the surface of things. On the contrary.

“Some themes are so profound and deep that they can only be dealt with in children’s books,” he says. “I don’t want to write about teen problems like ‘Who can I get to take me to the prom?’”

When Roderick first was published, he was clearly in the beginner’s ranks.

“I’d write something and it would be published, and I’d be paid with two copies of the magazine,” he remembers with chagrin. “When I received a check for $5 for a piece I’d written, I thought I was in the money!”

That was long ago. Now he is sought after.

In 2001, he began the Sylvie Cycle, a trilogy about the spunky, fictional Princess Sylvie who lives her life in a book. The Great Good Thing, the first volume in The Sylvie Cycle, was a Top Ten Book Sense Pick and has been optioned for film.

When Roderick writes for young people, he meshes reader, character, and paper in almost mystical ways.

“The death of a good reader is very hard on a character,” he says.

That is not typical writer-talk.

To achieve accuracy, Roderick researches, interviewing an astronaut who had set foot on the moon; trekking to a castle in England; peering into sewers in New Hampshire; studying mining, geology, and mythical creatures in ancient cultures.

His honors include the Peregrine Prize for Short Fiction, the Thorpe Menn Award, the Kansas Arts Commission Fellowship in Fiction, the Kansas Governor’s Arts Award, and first prize in two contests sponsored by the Academy of American Poets.

He continues to write poetry, publishing his work in The Paris Review, The Yale Review, The North American Review, and other journals. And his most recent book, The Door in the Forest (Knopf) was released at the same time as Wyatt’s The Afterlives of Trees.

“I’ve always loved to write,” he said. “I can still see myself at 8 or 9, scribbling a story in a notebook, my brothers jesting me in the back seat while my parents drove into town. Of course, lots of kids like to write. Luckily I have a couple of other things going for me: I actually like to rewrite.”

A non-dueling duo

The subject of rewriting makes a great segue into life at the Townleys’ Johnson County home. The sprawling space, with high ceilings, library, art, and cozy places to rest, is the perfect nest for two people who are intimate partners in both love and work.

Do they talk of their work? “Only morning, noon, and night,” said Wyatt.

They share each other’s writing as it unfolds, through editing and a process they call “powwows.”

“It took us awhile to learn how to talk to each other, learning to name strengths before exploring weaknesses,” Roderick said.

They describe their logistics as “a shared solitude.” On the home’s lower level is a work room in which they each have desks, canted toward each other at about a 45-degree angle but separate enough that they have to stand up or crane their necks to see each other.

Their routines aren’t about discipline so much as flow.

“We can let our work take us where it wants to, when it wants to,” Wyatt said, noting that they often work quite late (“We tend to really light up at night!”) and sleep late.

They start and end the day with reading. While she’s still in bed, he fixes breakfast. They eat it and read to each other in bed from a poem-a-day book. Then they share bits from favorite nonfiction.

“We’re always in the middle of a half-dozen books at these reading parties,” Wyatt said.

When the day finally ends, sometimes at 3 or 4 in the morning, they read silently until sleep sweeps in.

Still, they’re not an island of two.

Research takes them out and about. So do book and writing festivals, where they spend time with other writers. They wrap themselves in the wonders of nature, oiling up their bikes and taking to the trails just behind their home.

Wyatt sums up the partnership this way: “How fortunate I am to live with my best friend, my true love, and my in-house editor!”

Now

2011 has already been a big year for the Townleys, with simultaneous publication of books on a shared theme. Now it’s time to take the show on the road. They will appear regionally and travel back to New York to meet with editors and kick off a writers conference.

Meanwhile, they’ll stay in touch with their two children, Jesse and Grace. Jesse Townley, 40, who is Roderick’s son from an earlier marriage, lives in Berkeley, Calif., and manages a record company. Grace Whitman Townley, 23, is a social worker, having just graduated from KU with her master’s degree in social work, specializing in aging.

Wyatt is taking a sabbatical year from teaching Yoganetics following hip replacement surgery. For her this is a time to take a breather, heal, and devote herself to writing projects.

Working on his own writing, Roderick will be at her side.
Hard-earned wisdom

Johnson County is richly endowed with readers and writers. For those who yearn to be published, Wyatt and Roderick Townley can offer some wisdom:

- Start where you are, geographically and emotionally.
- As Ernest Hemingway suggested, apply the seat of your pants to the seat of the chair.
- See the page as a place to play. When work becomes play and play work, you’re onto something.
- The road to success is paved with rejection slips; every no is another no on the way to a yes.
- If writing is something you must do, then you must do it!
- The art of writing is vision. The work of writing is revision. Revision is what makes writing glow on the page.
- Blur the boundaries between writing and living.

Of her work and her partner’s, Wyatt said, “We’re learning to remove our blinders, and in so doing, recognize the extraordinary in the everyday.”

Their books are available at Rainy Day Books, CommUnity Bookstore at Unity Church of Overland Park, RoderickTownley.com, WyattTownley.com, and Amazon.com. ♦