

JOHN CATON
A LIFE OF BALANCE FOUND BY LIVING ON THE EDGE

In his own words, John Caton, Managing Director, Clayoquot Wilderness Resorts will tell you that it has taken a lifetime, traveling many paths, to arrive at his destination. That this destination is a remote tract of pristine wilderness on the rim Vancouver Island is only a fraction of the story of a man who has lived life on the edge, and in doing so, found balance.

He was a wild kid. Born in Brampton, just outside of Toronto, he grew up making his parents crazy. Rules were to be broken and limits were to be tested. His father, an entrepreneurial real estate developer in “boomtown” Southern Ontario, gave up and turned his son, the class clown, over to the Quakers. Raging against the “system”, the “man” and “authority,” Caton went biting and kicking into boarding school, never imagining it would turn him around, giving him focus and direction.

The first direction he headed once he’d finished school was the “University of The World.” Knapsack, chutzpa and a wry sense of humour took him around the globe over a four year period. From Europe to the Yukon, boat building to mining, Caton did whatever it took to make money and keep moving. He was a placard carrying “anti-establishment-long-haired-hippy” and he is proud of every single moment of that part of his life.

There is one other pivotal moment in his young life for which he is “fall-to-your-knees” grateful and that was meeting his wife of 33-years, Adele. Soul mates, their meeting was half serendipitous, half providence, all tied to a pillar of Lithuanian Catholic strength and wisdom, which is a tribute Caton gives his wife at every opportunity.

Adele and John were married in May of 1973 and set off in a 1968 VW “flower-power” van with a road map pointing west. The journey had them starting a new life for themselves, reaching the shores of Vancouver Island three weeks after leaving Ontario.

They settled outside of Comox and built a small house on the Oyster River. Caton started his first successful business, along came two sons and his new life seemed to be well underway.

It was then his father called from back east. Southern Ontario was exploding with growth. His father was building golf courses, apartment complexes, and whole new neighbourhoods. He wanted his business to be called Caton & Son...in other words, “Johnny Won’t You Please Come Home?”

This is when life sped up, so much so, it started to speed out of control. Caton and Adele returned to Ontario. Caton got his real estate licence and went into business with his father. From 1977 to 1982 it was work, work, more work and work harder. At the end of five years, Caton and his wife escaped city life, bought a 200-acre farm on Georgian Bay and disappeared over the hill to raise kids, buffalo and horses and to get a measure of their life back. That was the plan anyway.

A year later a phone call from an old high school friend set Caton off on another path. This road was one of rock and roll, big deals, late nights, high-rollers and the “Who’s Who” of the North American music industry.

Caton went from gentleman farmer to music mogul in the blink of an eye. Everything he’d done before was the launch pad for his new career. Along with the glamour and the high stakes, came late nights and long days. Life was fast, with his pedal pushed right to the floorboards. Now working as a talent agent for Warner Brothers Music, Caton was flying 200,000 miles per year and managing such Canadian legends as Blue Rodeo and Prairie Oyster. His candle was burning at both ends and a few places in the middle.

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In the words of Sir Elton John, his life was almost a “candle in the wind.” In 1989, at the age of 39, Caton had a major coronary, followed closely by a major epiphany. Overweight, with an inoperable hole in his heart, a substance abuse problem and a life careening out of control, he decided that as he had not “bought the farm,” he was sure as hell going to move back to his 200-acres and reconnect with his family, life and the things that mattered most.

For two years, he disappeared off the face of earth, or so it seemed. His refuge was his farm, family and the land. He spent his days in rediscovery -fencing, working the farm, tending animals and teaching his boys. He was healing inside and out. It was a rebirth and a reconnection with nature. It was also the birth of an idea.

In recreating his life, he created a concept for a wilderness resort. Adele was as excited as Caton about the idea. Neither of them knew anything about the hospitality business, but across the water from their farm was Griffith Island, a 3000-acre luxury retreat created to house and hide, in style and comfort, Canada’s pundits of government and industry.

Caton and his wife applied for jobs at the resort and started their apprenticeship in high-end resort hospitality. Adele in housekeeping and Caton doing just about everything else that needed doing including looking after the hunting dogs. Simultaneously, Adele started college taking a course in entrepreneurship using their business plan for a wilderness resort as her thesis. They learned the resort business from the inside out and from top to bottom, then put this knowledge into the business plan. At the end of the year, they had their template, a sound plan and a whole lot of expertise.

Their plan, in simple terms, was a “tents in the bush” concept. It would be a four-season resort with horses, dog-sledding, ice fishing, great food and great comfort, with an under-lining philosophy of giving back to their guests a measure of the things in life they had lost a connection to or with.

Caton and Adele were a few short steps away from going to the bank, pulling out their life savings and putting their hearts and souls into building their dream. Adele stopped in her tracks. It was Caton’s heart she was worried about. What if? They were a team. She was not willing to go it alone should the big “if” happened.

For Caton, anniversaries and birthdays have always occasioned amazing events. Big stuff has come to pass on or near his February birthday or his May wedding anniversary. February 1998 the phone rang. It was old friend Randy Goddard. Goddard has connected with Canadian millionaire entrepreneur Richard Genovese. Genovese dream was to build a luxury eco-tourism resort that offered guests a true remote wilderness experience while also teaching them to appreciate, nurture and respect the land, her people and nature. A shiver of excitement ran down Caton’s spine. Dreams collide.

By May 1998, on their 25th wedding anniversary, Caton and Adele had relocated to Vancouver Island and were working at the “floating” Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge during start-up. By late summer, they were running the place.

Caton and Genovese had still never met. Genovese was living in Europe. They spoke daily via long-distance and the relationship built. A year later, Caton got wind of an adjacent 500-acre parcel of land that was coming on the market. He could see his vision of a “tents in the wilderness” retreat as a complement to the existing floating lodge a few kilometers away. His pitch to Genovese was, “I’ve got the business plan. You buy the land. Together we’ll make it happen.”

Happen it has. Six years later the world knows about Clayoquot and The Outpost.

The concept is unique and unparalleled. It is a model born of a commitment to creating an experiential offering as fundamentally different as to change the way a person views themselves and their world. It is a desire to open up peripheral vision and let in the light. It is a way of allowing people to come back to their senses, naturally.

When asked what his legacy would be Caton talked “next generation.” His next generation and nature’s next generation. To his grandson’s Riley Cougar Caton and Brennan Ryder Caton; and his grand daughter, Laterra Mairead, he bequeaths crystal clear flowing rivers full of trout and salmon. In making this commitment to them, he makes it on behalf of the wild untamed wilderness regions of Canada as well.

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