As a young boy, I always looked up to Richard as an adventure hero – a pretty rascally one, needless to say, but a hero nonetheless. One hour, he’d be scaling the Ranch House chimney with climbing ropes. The next, he’d be strapped to his hang glider, dodging crab apple trees. And somehow, he’d usually emerge from these escapades without broken bones.

One summer afternoon when I was 7, I saw clouds of dust near Cataloochee’s barn, then a small sports car whipping up the Ranch House drive. As the car came to a skidding halt near the outdoor ping pong table, I saw Richard’s mischievous grin behind the wheel.

“Ever ridden with a race car driver?” he asked me.

I hadn’t. But I figured Richard had the maturity to handle that car. He was 11, after all. So I climbed in. What came next was a blur of flying gravel and panic-stricken cows. Thanks for the memories, Richard!

~ Ames Alexander

About three days before he passed away, I went by for a visit. On the cd player in his room, a Rhonda Vincent song came on. Richard’s hands started strumming and picking, doing the “air banjo” and his foot wiggled like he was keeping time. It was poignant because I’d seen him do it thousands of times before. It made me feel good seeing him like that. All the way to the very end, he was enjoying his music.

~ Ron “Hounddog” Howell

At the Colony meeting when Richard and Juju made a little presentation about their work with the Chestnut Foundation, Richard explained all that was going on and plans for the first Chestnut Saturday. Clearly they both had lots of enthusiasm for this work. As he wrapped up, he said that the best part of the whole project for him was working on it with his mother. He looked at her and they both teared up a bit. It was very touching and a window, I think, into their connection.

~ Nancy Truluck
We have known Richard as builder (our deck, twenty years ago), Ranch Manager, lover of music, and friend, but on one evening, he was simply our hero, the guy who saved an important day, even the whole weekend, for us.

It was Friday evening, July 20th of 2012. The tent was up in the Wildflower Garden. The arrangements were on the tables, and the caterer was stirring around. Then, water began bubbling up near the water pipe which was the sole supply for the event. It became clear that the site of the evening’s rehearsal dinner and the following day’s wedding was becoming a mud hole moment by moment.

Richard answered the call for help. He came and organized one repair of the pipe, stayed to be sure it was right, and had to go back to repair yet another break of this old pipe before being satisfied. He and his crew worked right up to the time of the party. His quick, effective response saved the evening, indeed the weekend, for all of us. For Babbie and me, he was our hero.

~ Waid and Babbie Shelton

I must admit, I had a little crush on Richard. After I met him for the first time, I asked Penny about him. She said he was married and had been for years. I was disappointed. Richard had such pretty, kind eyes. Whenever I saw him, I’d give him a hug. He always hugged back, almost as if he was aware of my crush.

I’ll never forget when Peter Rowan was scheduled to play at the Ranch. A woman was in a panic because her husband hadn’t returned from a hike. It was getting dark and cold. The show was about to start, but Richard asked around to try and determine which direction the man might have gone. He went out and tracked him down and brought him back safely to the Ranch. Richard missed most of the show that night, but most likely saved that man’s life.

I saw the couple the next night, they were both so grateful for Richard!

~ Peggy Redfern
Richard, Hounddog and I were out in the Wasatch Mountains in Utah in the winter of 2010. We had just finished a terrific day of backcountry skiing and were back at the parking lot unwinding and getting our boots off. We opened some beers and put some good bluegrass music on the car stereo and had it blasting out of the open car doors. The mood was high, and Richard brought out some white liquor that he had been keeping for just such an occasion. While we were having a few sips, some young local college fellows from Salt Lake City arrived back at their car which was parked a couple cars down from us. As they took off their gear they kept looking up at us, what with the music and the obvious high spirits we were in.

Richard noticed them looking. He was standing there at the back of the car, mason jar in hand, and he looked down there and hollered out “Waaaaugggh!” at the top of his lungs (we call that holler the “lonesome hobo squall,” and we have used it to hail one another for years.) Well, when he let out that holler, those boys jerked their heads in our direction and Richard hollered out, “What ho, you fellers! Come up h’yar and git’che a horn o’ likker, I God!!” Bewildered, not really understanding, one of them timidly said, “What?” Richard said, “White likker, boys, come up h’yar and have ye a sip!” They were not at all sure about this and looked at one another, trying to figure out whether to venture up to our car or not. I said, “Come on fellers, you’ins’ll like hit.”

It’s worth mentioning that in situations like these, we always revert back to the most extreme mountain dialect and pronunciation we can muster, partly because we are proud of our WNC heritage and partly for the effect it has on “outlanders.” Anyhow, the boys, a little wary, started shuffling up in our direction. Richard handed one of them the mason jar and said, “Have ye a drink, son. Hit’s good fer what ails ye!” The poor fellow took the jar, sniffed it, and immediately jerked his head back as if away from a striking snake, and said, “Man, I don’t know about that!!” His buddies egged him on and he finally took a sip and had it halfway down when he violently coughed, blowing the rest of it out like a whale clearing it’s blowhole. He looked up at us, his eyes red and brimming with tears, and said, “Well, that’s not bad, I’ll have another if you don’t mind!” Not to be outdone, the other two boys tried it too, a little more prepared than the first one.

We introduced ourselves and they did the same, and we all stood around for a few minutes, taking a few more sips, talking about the day and listening to the music. After a while, one of them said, “Where on earth are you guys from, anyway?” Without hesitation, Richard said, “British Columbia.” Their mouths dropped open and Hounddog and I strained not to bust out laughing. One of the boys said, “Gosh, I didn’t know they talked like that up there!” That’s when the three of us lost it. After regaining composure, with the boys staring at us wide-eyed, Richard said, “No son, we’re really from the mountains of Western North Carolina, home of the best bluegrass music in the world, I God!

The music played on, everyone was feeling fine, and a brief discussion about bluegrass began, with Richard holding forth with his vast knowledge of the genre while a sip or two more was had by the group. After a while, Richard said, “So, do you fellers like bluegrass and white likker?” The boys sort of looked at each other and then said, almost in unison, “Now we do!!”

That is one of my favorite stories about my dear friend Richard Coker.

~ Keith “Karo” Calhoun
Richard was a man of few words. I was riding in the car with him last spring, on the way to Black Mountain to see Peter Rowan. As usual, I was chatting away and he was listening. As we drove, I thought of Flash, the beautiful black colt with a white tail, born at the Ranch the year before.

I asked Richard something that had been puzzling me for months. “How come you, Judy B and Mary don’t seem crazy about Flash? Every time I mention how gorgeous he is, all three of ya’ll kinda grumble.”

Richard thought for a second, then replied, “He’s got a big head.”

“Oh my gosh! You mean he’s conceited because of all the attention he’s gotten from the guests and the colony and Liz and me? Like he’s a celebrity horse and thinks he’s better than the other horses?” I speculated on and on and on. Richard just kept looking straight ahead, not saying a word.

Finally he said, “He’s got a big head.”

Then it hit me: Flash’s head is big in proportion to his body because he’s a Tennessee Walking horse. The Cokers had been educated to appreciate the more refined features of a Thoroughbred.

Even though he didn’t talk much, Richard always made me laugh.

~ Penny Redfern
One time last winter, we were really busy at the Ranch for breakfast and the family was the only help we had. Richard had been really good about helping, but one day he was like 45 minutes late. It was just me trying to get more food out, picking up dirty plates, glasses and cups. I was really frazzled trying to get everything done when he finally came in.

I said, “Where have you been?! I’m swamped.”

He replied, “Well, if you’d give me a fake raise to go along with my fake paycheck, I might be more prompt!” I thought it was hilarious and couldn’t stop laughing.

~ Liz Smith

He was on the phone, talking to Melinda while we were saving his picture on the Bald. And laughing. It was such a Richard moment: “Look now, can you see me on the webcam?”

~ Tammy Brown
When news of Richard's passing, from cancer, reached me, I thought of how many times we enjoyed his and his family's hospitality, playing music, walking, horseback riding up on Hemphill Bald, picking ramps! One of my fondest recollections is playing the Maggie Valley Opry and swapping moonshiner stories. Richard had booked the show with Raymond Fairchild. My brothers and I played there on the night of a mighty blizzard in early November. I can still see Richard standing by the pot-bellied stove, the only heat in the building! And his smile....My brothers and I played for the small (12 people?) audience, and for Richard and the gang from the ranch. We spent the night up at the ranch and left the next morning for Florida with our van full of illegal substances: eagle feathers, tortoise shell guitar picks, and of course, five gallons of moonshine! Richard's quiet presence....I will miss him.

Let us bless each other and our environment, remembering Richard’s goodness. And above all, let us keep the music flowing, for that was Richard's great joy!

~ Peter Rowan

A few years back, young Richard survived a bad fall from the roof of a house he was building. I dropped in to check on his progress one day, only to find him outfitted head-to-toe in all sorts of metal devices holding him together. Being somewhat personally familiar with pain and broken body parts, I asked, “What’s the last thing you remember?” Without hesitation Richard said, “Just for a second there, falling felt like flying.” Then he grinned and added, “Can’t say that I remember the landing!”

Fly away, young Richard. You are free now. God’s speed on your journey.

~ Ernie Edwards