

# John's Jades

*Recollections at the celebration of the life of John Tanton*

ROY H. BECK

I am here as an outsider, unlike most of you who knew John through years of living in the same community with him. I have wondered as many people have when they came up here to Petoskey and spent some time with John: Are these attributes of John, or is this just the way people do things in Petoskey? (*laughter*) I've been to salons and great books club meetings here, so I have a little bit of a sense of what goes on inside your minds.

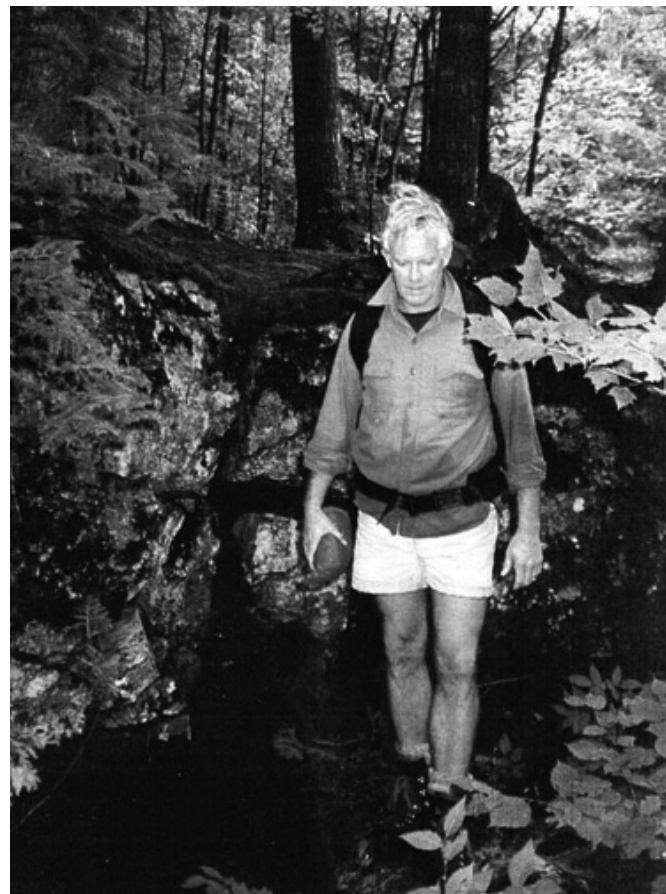
I was a newspaper reporter covering the environment back in the '70s. Reporters who would give John a chance would get a tour. We'd get a chance to climb a hill and hug John's favorite tree. I guess that's one of the things you do here. (*laughter*) We would take a walk through the woods. John was really big on stopping and smelling the roses. Of course with John, "roses" was just a euphemism for a lot of different smells. And you had to know the Latin names.

One of the first times I took a hike in the woods with John, we came to this little opening with the sun streaming down on a patch of wildflowers up to our waists. He said, "Look at this. This is a great sanctuary here." I kind of turned and heard him behind me say, "This would be a great place to lie down and just look up at the wonder of it all." I turned back around, and John was gone. And then I looked down. There he was lying on the ground enjoying the view. (*laughter*)

The day after John's passing, I found my wife Shirley in our Arlington, Virginia, living room, focused on the jade plant that greets us there every day.

"This is from John," she said, stating a well-known fact about the jade that constantly reminds us of our *organic* connections to the Petoskey botanist.

A few decades earlier, Shirley had been admiring the jades in the Tanton home and was commenting about having had a fine jade started in Grand Rapids ,where I worked for the *Press*, and then she transported it to Cincinnati, where I worked for the *Enquirer*, and to Dallas, where I worked for a national United Methodist newspaper, and then to Washington, D.C. But it had not survived — like many things that move to D.C. (*laughter*). Well, as soon as she said that, John immediately went over to that jade and did a cutting so Shirley could take it, nurture it, and let it grow into a jade that was our very own — fit for our circumstances. And cuttings off our jade have been going off to other places across the




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country and thriving in their households, which value knowing the connection to the original Petoskey cutting. This jade next to the podium is also from a cutting from John's jade. John was always about having the right props.

As I spent time with our jade on that morning of July 17 last month, I got to thinking about a different kind of cutting that may have been one of the most important aspects of John's generosity.

I'm talking about "cuttings" from John's prolific gardens of aphorisms, collected wisdom from others, personal experiences, and observations about — well, seemingly everything.

Especially valuable were his Ben Franklin-like observations about aspects of everyday life, everyday business, everyday relationships. About how to have a balanced life while at the same time being incredibly efficient and effective with every hour you have to live it.

Now, when I first began to hear about John when I was a reporter in Grand Rapids in the '70s, balance was not the first thing that came to my mind. What I heard about was prodigious productivity. That was pretty much my image of him for a long time. But many years later, when I guess I was trying to imitate what I thought was his prodigious productivity style, I got an envelope in the

mail with an Rx from his prescription pad. It was signed "Dr. Tanton" and it prescribed "one Sabbath a week for rest and nourishment."

Now for John, his idea of balance was very structured and disciplined. But he did have balance. And he found his balance and his nourishment from nature, and from all of you in this community of Petoskey, and from his national community. And he found nourishment in that incredibly diverse library of well-thumbed books filled, with underlines and annotations.

From that mix of the library, from all of you, from experiences and nature came these special John Tanton aphorisms. John's intellectual cuttings were hyper-prolific — and some justifiably and thankfully withered. But many were like precious jewels — jade.

How many of us over these decades have received buckets of these cuttings from John — and nurtured many of them into successful applications in our own lives and special circumstances?

John passed around these cuttings as naturally and easily as the exhaling of breath.

And though *his* breath in this earthly realm has ceased, I expect that not a day goes by without somebody somewhere around the world remembering and referencing one of the lifetime of cuttings from John's wisdom garden. John's jades. ■

