

Sand Mandala Ceremony

In honor of John Stephenson

We can trace the fact that we stand today in these magical woods with Tibetan Buddhist monks to a singular man, John Stephenson, former President of Berea College, protector of trees, lover of children, champion of the Tibetan cause. He was also the most important mentor in my own life, and in the lives of many. John believed in people, great and small.

It was my good fortune to introduce John to these woods—we first walked this path in 1987. And also my good fortune to be present when John first met Tibetans in 1989. He was immediately charmed by both. John wrote poems in these woods, walking this path, contemplating this beauty, and we know now, his own impermanence.

It is fitting that Tibetan Buddhists stand today in what is now the Stephenson Forest, to pour consecrated sand into these sparkling waters for the healing of our troubled earth. The healing of the earth, of the mountains and of mountain people, was very much on John's mind. Perhaps it mattered more to him than even his own healing. John carried much of the bodhisattva spirit so revered by Buddhists.

The Tibetan people adopted John, as he did them. He was deeply moved by their tragedy, their bravery, their infectious humor. To have seen him surrounded by dozens of bright eyed Tibetan orphans, their arms up to be held, to watch him tenderly lift and hold each one as his own eyes glistened, was to know the man.

The sacred sand that enters the waters of Stephenson Forest today will flow on down to Clear Creek, to Roundstone Creek and then to the Rockcastle River. From there it will enter the Cumberland River and tumble over Cumberland Falls, find the Tennessee River and the mighty Mississippi, empty into the Gulf of Mexico—there, we may hope, to be scattered across the wide oceans, blessing the world, a little.

It pleases me to think that somewhere in this vast cosmos—so beautifully represented by our sand mandala—that John Stephenson is watching, his eyes glistening with joy.

*March 1997
The Stephenson Forest
David Sawyer*