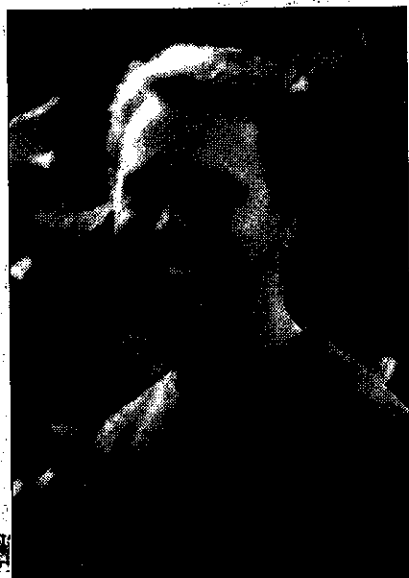


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In MEMORIAM by Ryan Lenz  
MARC WILLIAM BUNNELL  
April 13, 1977 - November 1, 2003

Ten years ago today, in the quiet hours of a Saturday morning, my dear friend Marc Bunnell was killed in a skydiving accident near Coolidge, Arizona. He was 26-years-old with a shock of ever-changing blond hair, a devilish grin and a conviction in the excitement of a life truly lived. This is the first public notice of his death.



I imagine he would think it quite funny to know that people would be reading of it so long after the fact. But there are reasons those who remember him, his family and friends, have clung so long and so proudly to his memory. It's not up to fate and the complete inability to understand its cruel mechanics. Or maybe we thought if we waited, it wouldn't be true.

But it is true.

On November 1, 2003, Marc was racing through another day spent falling from airplanes. On his last jump, his main parachute tangled with a smaller reserve parachute, and it was impossible for him to separate the two. As he struggled to cut through the snare of nylon and cord, the last thing he saw were two sheets of dazzling color moving against the blue skies above him.

I've often wondered if he noticed that and if he saw some beauty in his final moments. I think he did. Or maybe, this many years later, it is important for me to think he died being chased by dazzling color. I know that would have mattered to Marc, my dearest friend.

For him, life was governed by nothing if not the unbending rule that beauty existed at the heart of everything: the absurd, the tragic and the profane. There was heaven in a bowl of vanilla pudding, beauty in the dropped-D tuning of a guitar. There was nothing like the danger of driving into the dark clouds of a storm, and in the chaos and wind and roar of human flight he found majesty. But in grander terms, it seems that we should remember not just the simple passions of his life, but also how he lived. For Marc, there was whimsy in simply being alive.

We first met when I was 19, and he was 18. We were both beginning college and eager to set fire to our lives. And so we did. In the years that followed, as I consumed my days with career and the distance I had traveled from Iowa, his concerns were elsewhere.

After graduating from the University of Iowa in 2000, he found a small community of skydivers near Coolidge, and set out to define his life in the adrenaline of a free-fall tumble from high above. I did not understand the appeal then -- few of us did -- but I accepted. Because we accept the passions of our loved ones, even if in so doing, we witness what comes of it.

The Montana novelist Norman McLean once wrote, "It is very important to a lot of people to make unmistakably clear to themselves and to the universe that they love the universe but are not intimidated by it and will not be shaken by it, no matter what it has in store." I've never found more perfect words to describe his life. And on this, the anniversary of his death, I can say with certainty that Marc was never shaken by the universe, not even in the end.

I sometimes look from the window of a jetliner to the ashen earth below and wonder at what elevation he realized it was the end? Were the final moments of his life measured in scale? And then I realize that this is a grim fool's errand. There are more important things to ponder.

What would he have become? How would he have changed -- as a friend, a man, a son, a brother? None of us who live on without him will ever know the answer to the questions. But maybe that doesn't matter.

Ten years later, the stories of his life have been told a thousand times. They have blended into a dream of a life. At the core of that dream is a beating heart ready to spring forth, like a whisper in the dark, to remind us that everything in the world passes, even the young, the beautiful and truly inspiring. All of that passes except in the reach of our memory.