

WGBH TALKS WITH ROBERT PERKINS ABOUT “ONE MAN’S JOURNEY”

WGBH: In your first two films of the trilogy, you leave people you love and go on a canoe trip—your father in “Into the Great Solitude” and your girlfriend in “Talking to Angels.” How could you leave them at such difficult times in your lives?

RP. It certainly wasn’t easy. Yet both times that’s what I did. Like any young documentary filmmaker, I didn’t know what life would give me. Little did I suspect that two films would document times in my life when people I loved were ill. In each case—first by my father and then Rene—I was encouraged to go and to make the film.

WGBH. What was it like not knowing for seventy-two days whether your father was alive and well?

RP. My father said there was nothing I could do to make him better by staying at home. He was a very practical man. It’s unusual not to know an outcome for that long, but by the same token, my dad did not know if I was alive, either. In the 1980s there were not the type of communications like the SAT phones we have today, where from the remotest areas of the world I can talk to my family. The part of “Solitude” that lifts it beyond just an adventure is when I reflect on my relationship with him. In our culture it is unusual for a son to talk about his relationship with his father, and that happened on my journey because I had all that time by myself to think about him. Happily, he did survive, lived another nine years, and that gave us the chance to become foursquare with each other. The film has become a cult classic and was voted best of ten years of outdoor films at the 1999 Water Walker film festival in Toronto.

WGBH. Tell me about “Talking to Angels.”

RP. There is a shocking statistic I heard about patients with life threatening illnesses: eighty percent of their partners leave them, really leave them, not just go away for a while like I did. Not because they don’t love them, but because they can’t stand the pressure and pain. Rene was a physiologist working for Dr. Herbert Benson at the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. She helped children with communication problems. During

her cancer treatments, she decided to change the focus of her practice to assisting cancer patients with their issues. She felt a film would be helpful to others going through a similar journey; helpful for the patient, the partner, their friends and families.

WGBH. But leaving her while she was undergoing treatments?

RP. It depends on how you think about love, doesn't it?

WGBH. Meaning?

RP. I won't boil it down for you. You'll have to see the film to understand more about our love, and listen to Rene's last remarks to me in the film, there is a clue there. It's a beautiful statement.