

July 22, 1975

3060 Colima Road
Atascadero, California 93422

Dear Mr. Johnson,

What an utter delight to return home from a short trip to find your letter about Bert. I had long since given up hearing from you and had decided you must have moved or died or decided I was some kook to whom you didn't wish to respond. And so your letter, so warm and human and alive with recognizable truths about Bert, as well as new knowledge of him, was an unexpected and welcome gift.

So many of your indefinable feelings about Bert I immediately recognized as my own. I can't tell you how grateful I am for the time you spent trying to put into form things that elude it. I well understand why you put off writing because what I requested was a tall order indeed; I have spent many, many hours myself attempting to give definition to my experience of Bert, our mutual affection, his uniqueness, his affect on me, his life -- wanting to do this without distorting the truth of it or him. The more people I have interviewed the greater his mystery becomes for no one can pin down why he acted as such a powerful magnet in their lives -- only that he did and that they loved him, wished they had made more room in their lives for him while he was here, and feel his absence acutely.

Your letter made my day. It is the shot in the arm I needed, what I consider my good omen for getting on toward my goal. In the last few months my work on the book came to a halt because of a constellation of things -- my new job (Programs and Appeals Analyst for the Welfare Department which is a fancy way of saying I have been elevated to my level of incompetence in the pit of futility and frustration better known as the bureaucracy), some illness, a couple of hospitalizations, an accident in which my 11 year old nephew was nearly killed and suffered a broken neck, broken pelvis, three breaks in both legs and multiple other injuries which kept us all in a state of constant agitation and then subsequently, surgery which has had the fringe benefit of giving me time to get my head together. With my precious time off drawing to a too rapid end I had just gotten into some research at the library and museum, interviewed Bonnie Grimont, a friend of Bert's in Long Beach, on Sunday and then came home to find your letter last evening. And now I am impatient to get on with it. So many people have cooperated and really want this book; more effective encouragements are hard to find.

There is such a ring of truth in what you say. I, too, feel that I didn't get beneath the surface of what Bert wanted to show me. But then paradoxically, in another way, there was always a silent understanding between us that makes me feel that in some indefinable way we did. Like you, too, there were many areas in which I felt it would be an imposition, an infringement on Bert's privacy to attempt to enter and so I didn't.

I love your account of the New York Times episode. He was some bundle of contradictions for a hermit, wasn't he? Of course, Gene, my husband, and I, never imagined that he might have means of any sort and were always taking him fresh fruits and vegetables, canned meat, bread, etc. I even had the audacity to try to talk him into applying for Medi-Cal so he could have his teeth fixed. "Why, you think I don't HAVE anything, don't you?" he bellowed at me. Of course he didn't apply and he never let me forget my audacity at such a suggestion. So it was like opening a time bomb the day we received a copy of his will in the mail and found it to be a complicated eight page document. To this day we don't know what it means. But it deepens the mystery, for Bert was much too intelligent and lucid to have gone to all that trouble for nothing. The book's completion must await the final explanation of that will because it adds yet another dimension to a many faceted man. For me, the greatest thing about receiving it was that it provided the names and addresses of those he cared about the most and was, therefore, a resource for my project. I am curious about it even moreso now that you say his interest in the stock market dates back to at least 1947 as he told Harold Guiton shortly before his death that he must now become knowledgeable about the market. Then, of course, we learned he had left half of his estate to Harold, a tenth to you, two-tenths to Gene and I. If you have not received a copy of the will, I will be glad to send one to you. I learned from Bonnie Grimont that she had not received a copy and didn't even know what he had specified for her in the will although she had learned she was mentioned in it because of the NOTICE OF FILING OF REPORT OF INHERITANCE TAX REFEREE received in April. If that is the case with you, too, let me know and I will get a copy in the mail to you. I believe Angus sent them only to a few people.

Somehow related to the will I can't help but feel, is your account of Bert sending you a \$10 bill. He also sent us one in September, 1973, with a similar explanation -- that the "Great Spirit" told him he should send it to us because we had taken him so many gifts. I immediately sat down and told him in a letter that a gift is not a gift when it is bought and paid for and that I thanked him, but I could not accept it. He never mentioned it again. Now I am intrigued to find out from others mentioned in the will if this was a pattern. It is almost as though it were a kind of test. Bert had been exploited by so many people; perhaps this was a way to determine one's true motivations.

You put in quotation marks this statement: "Only the dunes soothes the spirit." Is that something Bert said to you?

The Kodachrome slides you mention would be of inestimable value to me. If you can obtain them and send them to me as soon as possible (or duplicates of them) I will be glad to reimburse you as soon as you let me know their cost.

I have reread your letter at least eight times already and it never fails to delight me. It substantiates my own experience of Bert. Of vital importance to me is that I should give an undistorted view of this unique and special man. Since each pair of eyes that looks upon a person sees him tinted with that individual's needs, prejudices, likes, dislikes, and God knows what else I see portraying Bert honestly and wholly as a herculean task and an incredible challenge. I don't want to limit him by the tint of these lenses. So when I find another who saw him as I did and values him as I do I feel a bit more solid about my perception of him.

If you find your way to the west coast again, my husband and I would consider it a genuine pleasure to have you^{and your wife} come to dinner so that we might get to know one another. It would be a delight to share further reminiscences of our mutual friend. There is no question that anyone that Bert valued as much as he did you is also someone we would enjoy knowing.

It is only through help such as yours that my dream can become a reality, my promise to Bert be fulfilled. So thank you so very much, Mr. Johnson, for your hours of thought and introspection and sharing your knowledge and affectionate remembrances of Bert with me. Your response gives me renewed vigor and the encouragement I needed.