

**Brush with Greatness**

by J.D. Scrimgeour

At the end of summer in 1982, my family drove me from our home in New Milford, Connecticut, a town of 20,000 in the southern Berkshires and helped me unload my meager belongings—a few bags of clothes—in Carman Hall, the freshman dorm at Columbia University. While I had been to the city a few times, living in the frenzy of Manhattan was an adjustment. One time that first year my family joined me in the city to watch a basketball game, and when they returned to their car, they discovered that someone had broken into it. The thieves had stolen a couple ratty sleeping bags and a few of my siblings' high school textbooks. The following year, two students in Carman Hall found a rolled-up rug in a dumpster and carried it back to their room. When they unrolled it, they discovered a corpse inside, a man who had been shot twice.

It wasn't just the grittiness of New York in the 1980s that left me disoriented; I had to adjust to being around so many people who had lived lives so different from what I had known. As someone who had attended public schools, I was fascinated by all my classmates who had attended private boarding schools, places I'd only read about in *The Catcher in the Rye*. And Columbia was cosmopolitan. I remember going for ice cream during orientation week with students from Italy and France, hearing languages and accents that were foreign to my ears.

Another adjustment was that there were so few women. My class, the class of 1986, was the last all-male class at Columbia, a fact that I'd hardly registered when I decided to attend. I knew that Barnard was just across the street, and I had assumed that the students all took the same classes. They didn't. In order to meet the women from Barnard, I would go with friends to the campus pub where we'd drink pitchers of beer. At some point, I'd muster courage to saunter up to a stranger and ask her to dance. She usually said no, and I'd slink back to my table and pour another into my

plastic cup. It seemed simply impossible to meet a woman. Even if a conversation were to begin amid the too-loud music, what was I supposed to say?

I was adrift, and even the routines that I developed were those of someone who was lonely: playing hours of pick-up basketball in Levien Gymnasium and watching David Letterman's late-night show in the TV lounge at the end of our floor. I got a kick out of Letterman's sardonic humor, his stupid pet tricks, and his "Brush with Greatness" segments, in which members of the studio audience shared comic stories about how they crossed paths with celebrities. Having a brush with greatness may have been one of the reasons I chose to attend Columbia. Being in New York held the possibility of seeing famous people, and, in fact, I walked past Letterman himself in Midtown one afternoon as he was filming on the street.

That first semester I'd take *The Odyssey* or Euripides' plays out to the campus lawn and lie reading in the sun, hardly registering the words, dozing off more often than not. My classes all went well enough, except for the class in my declared major, Math. Before the semester started, I met with an advisor to help choose my classes. "Wouldn't you like to take a class with a world-famous mathematician?" he asked, and so I decided to take the test to place into a theoretical calculus course taught by a professor named Lipman Bers. The test was like the SAT, and I did well enough to get in.

Lipman Bers was old, from eastern Europe, with a thick moustache and a thick accent. He had us buy a book with more equations than words. Unlike my math classes in high school, we never had to turn in homework. It wasn't always clear what our homework was.

It was a small class, a dozen students in a musty room. Although a seminar table filled the space, we didn't sit around it exactly. A blackboard ran along one side of the room, and Bers would lecture in front of it, so we would sit in two rows on either side of the table, facing the board. I sat in the back corner, the table in front of me. In the front center sat Daniel, the thirteen-year-old with a bowl cut of black hair and just visible fine dark hair above his lip, the beginnings of a mustache. Daniel was, I'd heard, the captain of the U.S. math team, whatever that meant. I don't think he was enrolled at Columbia; he was just taking this one class.

It seemed like Daniel was the only person, besides Bers, who spoke in class. He'd raise a scrawny arm and ask a question that I didn't understand. Bers' eyes would light up. "That's a very interesting question, Daniel," he'd say, and the two of them would engage in a long dialogue while the rest of us—or maybe it was just me—sat in befuddlement. Eventually, I began doodling in my notebook, rehashing my stats from my senior year baseball season or reviewing possible starting line-ups for the Knicks. I passed that class with a gentleman's C, dropped down to a more standard Calculus class the next semester, and dropped that after I bombed my first test. I wasn't going to be a math major.

I've told the story of that math class many times. It seemed a story about discovering one's limits, though, to be honest, it involved pumping my ego, too—I was good enough in math to place into that class, after all. And the audience always got a kick out of my embellished description of how lost most of us were while Daniel and Bers held their abstruse conversations.

But recently, while writing about this event, I began to wonder about Lipman Bers. He really was, of course, a world-famous mathematician. He was born in a Jewish family in Riga, Latvia, at the beginning of World War I, and his early life was colored by the political upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century. He spent time in St. Petersburg and Berlin. While studying math at the University in Riga, he became a political activist who argued for human rights, an orator and columnist for an underground newspaper, defending democracy in the face of Latvia's dictator. A warrant was issued for his arrest, but he escaped to Prague. He fled from Prague to Paris with his family, and then, just ahead of the Germans, he fled to the United States. Living as a refugee, he continued to work on mathematics. He eventually did math work assisting the allied war effort, and then went on to write many important papers in the field, known for their elegance and clarity.

He was admired by his students and fellow mathematicians, and a recent book, *Lipman Bers: A Life in Mathematics*, celebrates his achievements. Mathematician William Abikoff writes this about Bers:

Lipa possessed a joy of life and an optimism that is difficult to find at this time and that is sorely missed. Those of us who experienced it directly have felt an obligation to pass it on. That, in addition to the beauty of his own work, is Lipa's enduring gift to us.

Bers had a way not just with numbers, but with words. I laughed aloud when I came across his line that "Mathematics is a collection of cheap tricks and dirty jokes," though I don't know enough about math to really understand it. Throughout his career, he also continued to advocate for human rights. Here's Bers himself, speaking about human rights in 1984, when he was awarded an honorary degree from SUNY-Stonybrook:

By becoming a human rights activist ... you do take upon yourself certain difficult obligations. ... I believe that only a truly even-handed approach can lead to an honest, morally convincing, and effective human rights policy. A human rights activist who hates and fears communism must also care about the human rights of Latin American leftists. A human rights activist who sympathizes with the revolutionary movement in Latin America must also be concerned about human rights abuses in Cuba and Nicaragua. A devout Muslim must also care about human rights of the Bahai in Iran and of the small Jewish community in Syria, while a Jew devoted to Israel must also worry about the human rights of Palestinian Arabs. And we American citizens must be particularly sensitive to human rights violations for which our government is directly or indirectly responsible, as well as to the human rights violations that occur in our own country, as they do.

Bers retired from teaching at Columbia in 1982. The class I took with him may have been the last he ever taught.

I wish I could claim that Bers and his vision, expressed so eloquently above, had an impact on me, but it's only through the lens of time that I see more than myself in that room—those other students may have been getting a lot more from the class than I

imagined. And, having learned a bit about him, I can better see Bers, a man brilliant and committed, see the spark between him and Daniel. What did I know?

It was my first semester, and I was a lost boy. I needed grounding myself to see others. I went on find circles of friends at Columbia, to find a girlfriend when I lived in Barnard dorms my sophomore year. Eventually, I no longer needed David Letterman's late-night company. And my junior year, I started to put my own words down. I took classes with the poet Kenneth Koch and legendary literature professor Wallace Gray, early steps on the path to becoming a writer.

That same year, I took to the cold March nights to join students who blocked the doors to Hamilton Hall, a main classroom building, demanding that the University divest its financial holdings in South Africa and South African companies. Some of my friends scoffed at the protests, and their cynicism made me doubt my conviction, but, ultimately, I could do the math.

I was usually alone those nights, one of the crowd. Many of those around me were people who, I had been taught, did not look like me. I sat among them all and listened to the speeches, the music, the drumming.

I took in the world, and the world took me in.

Writing this essay, I became curious about Daniel. Perhaps discovering Bers' words, his insistence on being aware of all others, made me wonder about Daniel and his life. I googled "Daniel, mathematician, born 1970," and I discovered Daniel, a mathematician at an Ivy League university. I thought the thin face, something about the nose, looked familiar, and so I sent an email. Sure enough, it was him. He read the essay and was gracious and self-deprecating. He confirmed the bowl haircut; he didn't recall the table. He said he had read some of Bers' papers and built on his work. I hope that in my own way I'm building on Bers' work as well.



**J.D. Scrimgeour** is the author of three books of poetry and two of nonfiction, including *Themes for English B: A Professor's Education In & Out of Class*, which won the AWP Award for Nonfiction. Recent essays have appeared in *blackbird*, *Solstice*, *Sport Literate*, and *The Woven Tale Press*.