

Ink and Memory

by David Raney

Let us treat men and women well; treat them as if they were real; perhaps they are.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

“What is the point of collecting autographs?” asks a 2008 article in Britain’s *Guardian*. The author’s answer is clear from the follow-up: “What are you going to do with the damn thing when you’ve got it? Frame it? Sell it? Eat it?” In five paragraphs he disparages collectors, sellers who milk “celebrity cash cows,” famous people who sign, famous people who don’t.

This is mildly amusing, if a tad overwrought. I’m no celebrity sycophant—I don’t know many of the luminaries staring at me in checkout lines—but I have lots of autographs, and I like having them. Is wanting the signature of someone you admire *really* the same as “the need to smoke Kurt Cobain’s remains,” as the author suggests?

That seems...strong. And I think it’s motivated by a more complicated attitude toward celebrity than the author lets on. Why else translate Ringo Starr’s announcement that after a half century he’s through signing as an instruction to fans to “Curl up and die”? Why scorn someone who “once asked me for mine simply because I’d been standing near a musician they adored”? Maybe the really painful part is not being asked.

I’m in education, not show business, so no one asks me for *my* autograph, and all my celebrity meetings have been happy accidents. I literally bumped into John Houseman one evening crossing a dark street in Washington, blurting “Excuse me” and receiving a sonorous “Not at all” in *that voice*. I stepped into an elevator in New Orleans and found myself sharing it with John Goodman. I wasn’t changed by those moments,

and you wouldn't see me differently because of them. You don't know me, any more than I know Goodman or Houseman.

Still, while those were random, brief encounters, there was nevertheless a small electric thrill in "meeting" someone granted celebrity status, and for me it's the same with autographs. When I was young, twelve or thirteen, I wrote to many people I admired—musicians, politicians, athletes—and sometimes that resulted in my tearing open an envelope at the mailbox to find a personal note from a famous stranger. It happened again recently. The note was from Lin Manuel Miranda, to whom I'd written an appreciative letter without expecting a reply, much less a handwritten one. I'm a bit past thirteen but still recognized the buzz. We were in the driveway, and my son said "Dad, you okay? Your face looks funny." By weird chance I had invoked Miranda seconds before while pulling on the parking brake.

It got me thinking about autographs for the first time in a long while, and curious what other people think. So I asked the Internet. Within minutes, of course, I was wishing I hadn't.

The consensus was that if I collect autographs it's to pretend I'm every celebrity's BFF when I'm just a schlub living in Mom's basement. (To be fair, I did have my own room as a teen.) One post starts off reasonably enough: "I don't know really, I guess it's a lovely memento of when you met someone of note ... proof that we once met that person whom we admire." This at least has *lovely* and *admire*, though it doesn't address why I'd want a signature from someone I know I won't ever meet. Just about everyone else committing themselves to digital immortality held a darker view.

Autographs are about "awe...homage...worship," one declared. Another invoked the woman in Luke 8:43 who's "magically healed by kissing the hem of Jesus's cloak"—except "200 pounds of bodyguard stands between your lips and the hem of Mick Jagger's jacket." Some mused that autographs are "manna" or "steal a little piece of the person's soul" or represent "a slightly tragic symptom of the belief that celebrities are from Mars."

That seems a little out there. When I went to Mets and Yankees games with my dad and leaned over the railing for a signature during warmups, I wasn't looking to be

anyone's teammate, drinking buddy, or surrogate son. And if the players thought I was stealing a ballpoint's worth of their soul, they didn't act like it.

You may know celebrities, but I doubt you consider them godlike, their touch sacred—probably less so the better you know them. But even that would be inside the orbit of the writer who claimed autograph “hunters” need “to own the celebrity they accost.... An extreme way of doing this would be to kill the celebrity.” Here's someone who, I'm pretty sure, never met anyone famous he admires. Or if he did, it didn't go well.

It seems to me that *meeting* requires more than standing in the same spot—rubbing elbows, a handshake, polite words. I once got to ask legendary sportswriter Frank DeFord a question at a conference, which was fun, and I briefly spoke by phone long distance to Vitas Gerulaitis, a hero from when I played tennis, about a boring matter unrelated to sports. I doubt either of them told their families about it at dinner. At what point does connection attenuate to zero, and when does it become real?

All my signed records, movie scripts, books, and photos are images of *me* at a certain age, not of the person signing, much less a sliver of their soul. They're reminders of what I was reading, watching, and listening to, the sports I was playing, what it was like to be me. Each is a reminder, too, of a small kindness—a link, however tenuous, to another human.

And what if you admire that human less than his or her work? Modernist aesthetic theory says that makes no difference—a statue has little to do with the sculptor, a short story with its author. I tried to take that on board when I studied literature, not wanting to be the silly grad student who cared whether a novel I liked came from the pen of an arrogant narcissist, a nasty drunk, someone rotten to their family. But as with other artists whose singing, acting, or painting I admired, it did make a difference. Pete Rose will sign and sells anything that moves, but no degree of scarcity would make me seek out his autograph, whereas I treasure Sandy Koufax's—not because it's rare but because I admire him as much as I did when I was twelve. I was thrilled to get OJ's in the mail as a kid, but now it seems as fake as Richard Nixon's autopen signature.

How can you not put yourself into your work? To a hardcore modernist, Frank Sinatra's *Wee Small Hours* isn't about breaking up with Ava Gardner. It can't be. The album is all covers, he didn't even write them. But it is. Lawrence Tibbetts, who performed everything from Pagliacci to Peter Pan, sang "Last Night When We Were Young" for years. When someone played him Sinatra's version, he said "Oh I see."

One of several differences between Meryl Streep and me is that Meryl has a real Nixon autograph. At age twelve she was watching a parade Nixon was in and, running alongside, got his autograph on a Milky Way wrapper. I have no idea if she still has that or feels the same about it—I would guess not—but it got me wondering whether stars themselves ever get starstruck.

"People ask me if I'm ever starstruck," Stephen Colbert said in a recent interview, "and I say No, not really—except for musicians. That seems like magic to me." Emma Stone says she regresses to babbling teen around the Spice Girls, and in case you're interested, *People* magazine recently listed "27 Celebs Who Have Gotten Starstruck by Meeting Their Favorite Celebs." I didn't know around half of those listed, which makes me not callous or jaded, just over thirty.

Benedict Cumberbatch had a nuanced response to the same question. "Every time I've met someone famous who I've been in the audience of, I have the same butterflies and inability to be cool.... To meet people who thrilled me with their work for my entire life in such a concentrated manner as has happened over the last few years has been mind-blowing.

"I approach them as a fellow member of the human race, as the next person in their audience does."

Another actor was equally excited to meet *him*. Asked to share "the weirdest encounter you've had with a fan," Cumberbatch said without hesitation "Ted Danson at a pre-Oscar party, screaming across a floor of people like Leonardo DiCaprio, Ray Liotta, Kristen Stewart, pushing past them and knocking their drinks, saying 'Oh my God! It's f***ing Sherlock Holmes!'"

Danson, for his part, was asked how he handles that transaction from the other side. "Guy comes up," Conan O'Brien asked, "wants a picture, you're a nice guy but how do you preserve your sense of self? How do you handle that?" Danson's response

is as generous as you could wish, and it's another reason I like him—and Cumberbatch, and Yo-Yo Ma, who's just as thoughtful about fame and fandom—even if we won't all be having beers soon:

A big percentage of the time I enjoy it. Because people are smiling, they're remembering something I was a part of that made them laugh—oh hey, funny moment guy. ...

I also believe that my job is to host people's impression of me even though I know it's not me. And be gracious about that and match their energy so that I'm not leaving them feeling like they're an ass for doing this. I think that's kind of a contract.

Moving the clock back, Faulkner once followed Joyce around Paris for days, unable to get up the nerve to speak to him. To me that doesn't make him a loser or stalker just because he hadn't yet written *As I Lay Dying*, hadn't become himself. FDR collected autographs long before he was FDR. William Dean Howells, a substantial figure in American letters, wrote a campaign biography of his hero Abraham Lincoln and "was expected to interview the candidate," Rachel Cohen writes in *Chance Meeting*, "but he didn't feel up to the task and instead asked a law student of his acquaintance to go." Howells thus missed, he wrote, "the greatest chance in my life of its kind, though I am not sure I was wholly wrong, for I might not have been equal to that chance." Howells was later appointed consul to Venice, specifically for the biography, but when he happened to see Lincoln in a White House hallway he once again didn't go over, introduce himself, shake his hand.

I don't think I'm particularly awed by fame, although if Springsteen were to walk into a coffee shop and ask to share my table, maybe I'd be struck dumb. It's never come up. And perhaps I'm protesting too much, but is it really so awful to have heroes? Diffidence like Faulkner's or Howells's may be mostly personal shyness, but it also evinces a sense of history, of art. The times I've held back it's been out of respect for personal space and time as much as legacy.

I looked up once to see Alison Krauss, a musician I admire, at an outdoor table before a show in Atlanta. I'm sure she would have been gracious if I'd strolled over and asked, but she was eating, not performing, and in an odd way the encounter is more memorable for not asking. John Goodman was staring at his shoes in that elevator, clearly trying to make it to the lobby without one more person asking for his signature, and I'm glad I decided not to. It isn't any connection at all if you don't care how *they* feel about it.

The desire not to be That Guy almost cost me my Oscar Robertson moment. I'd locked myself out of my car and was waiting for a bus when a cab pulled up at the curb, the passenger calling out "Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to the Miller-Ward House?" Relieved it was a place I actually knew how to find, I began naming streets before realizing I was talking to the Big O, who had rolled down the rear window. As his driver turned around, I thought, *When will I have this chance again?* and, flagging him down, said "I'm going there myself—give me a ride and I'll show you." Keeping "I know you" out of my face, I climbed in, and a few minutes later was riding up in the elevator to Robertson's speaking engagement. I said, "I expect you're going to be doing a lot of handshaking, so I'll warm you up. My name's Dave." "Hi Dave," he said, "I'm Oscar."

Years later a friend offered me her ticket to the charity premiere of *The Pirates of Penzance* when she fell ill the day of the event, and as I'd recently seen *Sophie's Choice* and thought Kevin Kline was astounding, I donned my blue blazer, shined my shoes and headed to the Kennedy Center.

Picture Kline surrounded by friends (or colleagues, handlers, who knew) and me sipping champagne and snatching caviar off passing trays, feeling like the pretender I was. I hesitated as a string trio played and tuxes and gowns glided past, but finally I thought *what the hell* and went over. Kline could easily have brushed me off, his 400th stranger of the day, but he could not have been nicer. He asked my name, twice, and told me he was pleased to hear *Sophie's Choice* had struck a chord since, "We watch our movies in a screening room with ten other people. I'm not seeing the reaction out in the theaters. So that's really good to hear." I didn't ask for an autograph—I don't think it crossed my mind—but I'll probably see every movie he ever makes.

Around the same time I found myself lost in Boston. In those pre-cell phone days I'd stopped on a dark street to use a pay phone, and as I walked back to my car I saw a group of four or five crossing from the corner, a man in front raising his hand to get my attention. He asked if I knew where a certain restaurant was, and when I laughed and said, "Boy have you got the wrong guy," explaining my circumstances, he laughed too and the group turned to cross again. That would have been it, except I noticed a tall man in back who seemed to be trying hard not to be noticed, keeping his face from the streetlight. Refocusing, I realized it was Christopher Reeves, in town for a play (I learned later) and headed to dinner with friends or fellow actors.

Though this too was no real meeting, I find it as memorable as the elbow-rubbing ones. I smiled slightly and nodded, letting him know I wouldn't be asking for a Superman tattoo or a night on the town, and his relieved, grateful smile, whole body untensing, is something I can still see. Just a few seconds long, it felt truer than two hours onscreen.

Autographs are another version of this, they just arrive from a greater distance. Someone who's touched me in some way—artistically, athletically, intellectually—has also touched a page and a pen, representing themselves with a scrawl or doodle or flourish, something we've all been doing since elementary school. It isn't intimate, but it's about as personal, as individual, as it gets. With a signature you write yourself.

I couldn't have articulated this at age twelve, but it's what I wanted when I sent small notebook pages to big people to sign. I found their addresses at the library in a *Who's Who* the size of a family Bible and sent along handwritten notes. Written slowly, tongue between teeth, I'm sure these looked as homely as you'd expect, something Opie Taylor might have sent. Maybe that's why so many responded. Or maybe it was just a more trusting time, before autographs became big business. (Or obsolete—Taylor Swift recently said, "I haven't been asked for an autograph since the invention of the iPhone with a front-facing camera.")

Either way, I got a lot of mail.

Each piece was a pleasure, and I'd often examine the handwriting to see if it seemed appropriate. Sometimes it was, like Jack Klugman's unreadable scrawl or Harry Belafonte's graceful swirling capitals. I didn't expect to be added to Bing Crosby's

Christmas list or to Arnold Palmer's next foursome, but when both returned my little loose-leaf, one signed in blue ink, the other in black, it brought a thrill I can still recall. It was gratifying that a person I admired for something I couldn't do—still can't, as you'd know if you saw my golf swing or heard me in the shower—had taken a few seconds at office desk or kitchen table to scribble their name. If they also wrote "All good wishes" like Leonard Bernstein, or "Peace" (Arthur Ashe), or "God Bless You" (Johnny and June Carter Cash), or "To David—a pleasure" above a drawing of Jimmy Durante in a hat at his piano, all the better.

It isn't about celebs dragged down to mere mortals, or me lifted toward the gifted gods. Those aren't the only choices. The impulse is to connect, certainly. But more than that it's to feel alive. And to remember.



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