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sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

Just One

by Doug Canter

Not so long ago, I could toil through a sixty-hour work week, hike the Billy Goat Trail on Saturday, and consume several glasses of Silver Palm at Lia's with my wife on Saturday night. But people decline physically much like an old car wears out. Identifying with precision the moment of change is difficult. For me, the evolution was revealed through a series of reflections: the former neighbor who didn't recognize me walking down the street; the middle-aged woman who called me sir in the grocery store; the Dunkin Donuts cashier who rang me up with the senior discount without asking my age; and, most recently, the students who asked me, gently, when I'm going to retire.

Two Januarys ago, I lay in cubicle 10 at the emergency room of Suburban Hospital, the same space where my father had received medical care eight years ago before his passing. My wife, a doctor, two nurses, and five EMT professionals viewed the monitor behind my left shoulder. A constant and uneven beeping penetrated the room from there. Intravenous tubes extended like small hoses from my forearms. Like an out of synch orchestra, my heart rate had suffered three different kinds of arrythmias, beating almost four times its normal rate, well over two hundred beats per minute.

Days later, a fresh breeze wafted against my cheeks as the light rhythm of my feet accompanied me up a slight incline on our neighborhood street. The rattle of lurking fears faded under the chilly, light-blue sky, and I realized the blessings of being alive. Yet, deep down, as I walked comfortably in the winter air, some of that old invincibility tried to claw its way back. That got me thinking about my life and my next turn, the one that would bring me solidly into old age. In retrospect, that was only the beginning.

Several months after my hospitalization, after submitting notice of my intended return to my Montgomery County teaching assignment last year, I sipped a cappuccino outside the

local Starbucks and listened to the birds sing, watched the morning light creep slowly higher, and pondered whether to return to my high school reunion. Ultimately, I decided to skip my fiftieth, opting instead to visit my elderly mother in Connecticut and have dinner with a friend and Kent classmate living in the area. But the occasion prompted me to pull out a letter one of my Kent teachers had sent me years ago.

Before he died a quarter century after I graduated from Kent near the end of the Vietnam war, I received a letter from Bill Armstrong with three excerpts: passages of poetry from Leigh Hunt's "Abou Ben Adhem" and William Wadsworth's "Tintern Abbey," and an essay excerpt from Henry David Thoreau's "Walking." For twenty-five years, I kept the now faded letter and enclosures in a box filled with other memorabilia. I often wondered why he had sent them to me and what they meant.

Bill Armstrong, author of the young adult novel *Sounder* and textbook *Study Is Hard Work*, was well known to the Kent students. In the third form—ninth grade—we were consigned to a year in his study skills course, a mixture of Greek history, English, and planning strategies. When a classmate once asked him why he shaved his head, Mr. Armstrong replied that the Greeks did it as a sign of mourning. "Who are you mourning," I asked in a smart aleck tone.

"The human race," he responded gruffly, a knowing smile on his stern, clean-shaven face.

When thinking of Mr. Armstrong, I can't help but see the ox yoke atop his faded wooden desk and the framed quotation from the Greek poet Hesiod that hung on the wall above a window that opened onto a view of the rushing, cold Housatonic River. In law school when the work became oppressive, as a young man when confronting difficult legal cases, as a father when imparting notes of understanding to my children, the words of that Greek poet, which in my mind have become Mr. Armstrong's own, rose in my consciousness: "Before the Gates of Excellence, the high gods have placed sweat." The statement became a mantra, and it hangs in my classroom now.

But I have Hesiod's words posted on a self-made white poster taped on the front cinderblock wall of my classroom. It's a poor cousin to Mr. Armstrong's solid framed version, and I fear that none of my students have ever even read it. That's one of the problems with getting older. Things get diminished by our perception of how others will

value them, if at all, when we are gone. I don't think I'm alone in this desire to obtain a legacy that stacks higher than "oldest living white belt," an honor my wife once lovingly bestowed on me years ago during a moment of joking sarcasm. I really hope my family has something kinder to say at my funeral than "the guy could really pack luggage into a car trunk."

In his 1996 letter to me, Mr. Armstrong wrote, "[after fifty years of teaching], my voice has given out." Then, he added the pondering statement: "Years fall away and yesterdays and class periods…. There is a mellow wondering about—hoping their lives have pleased them." In rereading the letter, I asked myself if Mr. Armstrong's questioning statement revealed his own internal wondering.

Against that backdrop, the letter created the image of a man in the final years of life, not looking back, not trying to recall the seashells on a beach faded by the washing tides of memory, but rather a man glowing in the setting sun of life. In "Walking," Thoreau says, "We walked in such a pure and bright a light … [E]very wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium, and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening." In "Tintern Abbey," Wadsworth says, "While here I stand, not only with the sense/Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts."

Now, that's heavy stuff, and it left me feeling a wee bit inadequate, particularly when I measured their examinations against my own realizations. You see, I'm not bathing in the glow of anything really. I feel almost as uncertain about many things as I did when I was seventeen. Mr. Armstrong cited poetry to describe his glowing path to Elysium while I'm thankful that I engaged in all the horrible experiments I did as a teenager and young adult. On some days I am still trying to figure out who I am, and who I want to be.

After over three and half decades of practicing law, my intellectual accomplishments filled numerous lines of my resume. A stack of thick red timebooks with my billable hours from over thirty-five years of private law practice recorded in quarter-hour increments memorialized these notable professional experiences. But my visceral achievements, those that really seemed to matter, felt negligible. The fake silver memorial coin I received to mark the construction of a natural gas pipeline that I helped navigate through the federal regulatory process felt like a token of something lasting, but it was like

a confederate monument. Deep down, I always saw myself as the motorcycle-driving seventeen-year-old with a long black ponytail who cherished nature, not a partially bald corporate lawyer with a white beard who helped energy companies build pipelines through people's back yards. The small evergreen tree I planted in the frozen ground of our front yard with my oldest son one January morning decades ago seemed much more important than any professional accomplishment.

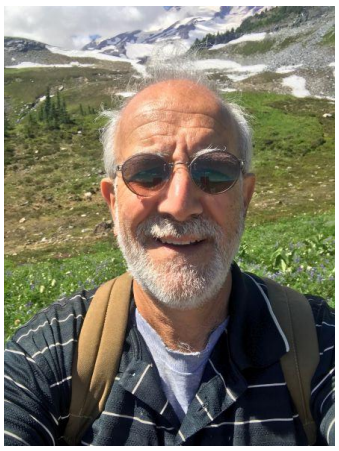
To be clear, private practice was good to me. There were enjoyable intellectual challenges, like trying to put a complicated puzzle together, and there was a unique feeling of exuberance when tireless hours helping clients resulted in a fat bonus. In those times of self-indulgence, I'd say to people with a laugh, "God, this is a great country."

Burn out is like a rot that often can't be seen from the outside. Even though I knew it was time to make a change, letting go of a profession I had toiled so hard to grow was difficult. I spoke with financial planners, my wife, and parents. Ultimately, two things happened to convince me to make the jump to a second career. First, I declined a new business referral from another lawyer who had developed a conflict of interest because I didn't want the client to end up losing two lawyers if I left my practice. At that point, I had developed a small footprint as a writer, received a master's in nonfiction writing, and applied to an alternative teacher certification program for career-switchers. Second, my daughter's enthusiastic "no" when I asked her if a career change was crazy. I sat in my window office overlooking the National Press Building two blocks from the White House in the early evening after another soul crushing day when I asked her the question. In an animated tone, she said: "I think giving up your partnership to teach high school kids English literature in Baltimore City would be kick ass, Dad." And that was it. Eight years ago, I took the leap of faith from being a partner in a Washington, D.C. law office to becoming an unemployed teacher-in-training in Baltimore City.

Over last summer, memories of the school year reformulated themselves. With space to reflect, I reread an e-mail from one of my student's parents: "In all honesty, I gave [my daughter] a hard time when she chose to change her schedule and join your writing class. I said to myself, 'two English classes.'" The mother added: "I have to admit that this was … a great choice. I'm so happy for her. My daughter was inspired and what more can a mother ask for." It was as much a testament to Mr. Armstrong as it was to

me, and it provided an affirmation that I and other teachers need. Like planting a young evergreen tree in the frozen January soil days after Christmas, what more can anyone ask for?

The deleterious presence of age crept up on me like a scorpion in the night. I'm not emotionally ready to retire fully. I still enjoy teaching, and I'm still trying to figure things out. There are trade-offs that come with even partial retirement. But at a minimum, I need enough free time to make all my doctors' appointments. So, after a school year filled with a hip replacement, other surgeries typical of the passage to old age, and a couple of emergency hospitalizations, I'm preparing to transition to a new high school with a part-time teaching position. In a strange way, the process of getting older reminds me of trying to chart a path as a high school and college student. But now, many of the people I might ask for guidance are dead. I'm just taking it a year at a time, and I think a lot about the many people who helped me along the way.



Doug Canter is a retired lawyer, Maryland-based writer, and high school English teacher. His writing has previously appeared in *Books 'N Pieces Magazine*, *Adelaide Magazine*, *Hedge Apple Magazine*, *Evansville Review*, *Talking Writing*, *20-Something Magazine*, and *Public Utilities Fortnightly*, among others, as well as on *Solstice Magazine's* Features Blog and the websites of the American Bar Association, Discovery Channel Tech, and Danya Institute. In 2011, Doug received a Master of Arts in Non-Fiction Writing from Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C. Doug is currently an online MFA Fiction student at Lindenwood University.