

CONNECTIONS

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...'

If those words sound familiar, they should, as the Bible and the Declaration of Independence excluded, those are probably the most memorable beginning lines of any work of English literature over the past couple of centuries. While it would undoubtedly be a treat for those Literarians assembled here tonight for this, or any paper to continue in such an estimable vein, unfortunately the only similarity between this author and that one, is an early beginning in a town named Portsmouth, and heeding the words of wisdom of those two great friends Joe Biden and Rand Paul, whenever you plagiarize something, you need to be sure nobody remembers the first author. So that's pretty much going to require me to identify those opening words from A Tale of Two Cities, by Charles Dickens, as everyone here undoubtedly already knew.

But what you might not have known is the extent of Dickens's reach and breadth beyond his prolific writing talent, and how he melded all of his talents into

a business enterprise of extraordinary reach, all tied back into and emanating from his writings. Dickens was born in 1812 the second of eight children, with all going well until Dickens reached the age of 12 and his father was thrown into debtor's prison, with the wife and youngest children having to join him there as was the custom of that era. While Dickens had been placed with a guardian to provide housing and so he could continue schooling, he soon had to leave school and work ten-hour days at common labor in a warehouse under rat-infested unhealthy conditions of a gruesome nature, to pay his living costs. Fortune intervened when a relative died and left an expectancy to Dickens's father which allowed his debts to be paid and the family to reunite, and Dickens to resume an education, but all on a much lower basis than had been their prior circumstances, and Dickens's next school was noteworthy only for what he called its haphazard teaching, poor discipline and sadistic brutality

No wonder Dickens left that school to begin employment as clerk in a law office, and after several years became a shorthand reporter for legal matters, and thereafter transitioned into a career as a legal journalist reporting on political and legal affairs for newspapers and periodicals. In 1836 his serialized publication of The Pickwick Papers established his real career as an author with over 20 years spent editing a weekly journal, 15 novels, 5 novellas, and myriad short stories, including some of the world's best known literature, much of his work dealing with social reforms in labor conditions, education, and especially children's rights.

His works were noted for their humor and observations of the human condition, in particular those injustices and inhumanity he observed and lived firsthand. Child labor laws was an oxymoronic term in Dickens's day, as was universal education, and his writings detail the conditions of his day in terms eliciting sympathy and understanding. He spoke widely and established lecture series on these subjects and many others, as well as readings of his increasingly popular works.

The lives of the underclasses in England, one of the most developed countries, were nevertheless lives of misery and mistreatment in many cases, and other than A Tale of Two Cities and Barnaby Rudge, his only historical fiction novels, formed the subject matter of his novels. In addition to his witty commentary and of course his ability to tell tales of great interest, his characters were colorful and often scoundrels and scamps with names amusing all by themselves. In addition to writing about a class of people in the majority, he also appealed to their pocketbook by serializing his novels usually at the rate of a chapter or portion a week, or depending upon the publication, in monthly installments. This distribution method had the advantage of creating continuing interest for the next installment, and also widening due to lower cost per chapter, the circulation of his works.

Eventually Dickens became the editor of the publications in which his novels were serialized and finally became the publisher as well, bringing in house all components of creating, producing and disseminating his novels, with the

resulting profits from all sources going to Dickens. His lecture tours built on the successes of his publications and before he was through, he was viewed as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era.

Not only did Dickens create stories of hardship and descriptions of poor boys and those of unfortunate conditions aspiring to better themselves, his tales had character after character appearing in the novels and stories, only to disappear or their time on the stage complete, they exited stage left. Then later these same characters or their words of advice came tumbling back in a rush, presenting an “aha moment, now I understand”, with such connections befriending the subject of the story, lending a hand up or a word of advice, often of a life-changing nature.

Great Expectations Dickens’s 13th novel published in 1860-1861 was probably the memorable event of freshman year in high school of more than one of us here tonight. It has the whole agenda of a Dickens novel on display. It is a tale of and by a poor orphan boy, his ups and downs as he grows, and the characters and conditions he encounters along the way. Pip starts out poor and is taken into the household of Miss Havisham to serve as a companion for her adopted daughter, the beautiful Estella. The story opens with Pip coming upon two escaped convicts who prevail upon him to bring them food and a file so they may escape their leg irons, which he does. Unfortunately the authorities encounter the convicts and re-arrest them, returning them to the prison ship carrying them to Australia, where they were sentenced to live out their days. Pip’s sojourn with Miss Havisham, who

had offered the lovely Estella, intending that a relationship develop, breaks Pip's heart when she sends Estella away to school. After Pip is left heartbroken, he is apprenticed to a blacksmith and destined for that life when he is advised that he is coming into an expectancy. Pip feels it must be from Miss Havisham, the only person of means he has ever met, but discovers his new-found wealth is from the convict he helped, who had become a man of means in Australia, but who has returned to England in violation of the terms of his sentence and thus faces a death penalty; however he felt the need to see Pip and to avenge a wrong by a con man, which he does, while it turns out that that crook was also the cad who jilted Miss Havisham, explaining her never wearing anything other than an old wedding dress and her hatred for men. Pip visits the old mansion years later and encounters Estella, both scarred by events over the years, where they re-commit to each other.

While Dickens's readers were enthralled with his tales of hardships, and help and advice from those in a position to offer it to those who could benefit, please do not expect any of what follows as great as would have come from the pen of Charles Dickens:

It was a sprawling steel mill, the largest employer in the county, covered with acres of multi-story buildings, some open at the ends to allow the heat and smoke out, and the steam engines to traverse, not unlike those train station scenes Monet incongruously applied his impressionist talents to that now reside in acclaimed and honored positions on walls of major art museums throughout the

world, but of course a real steel mill bears no resemblance to anything in the impressionist world. This steel mill had been created over the years as demand for its products dictated, along the Ohio River for ease of transportation and access to water and railroads, and long ago had last really bothered to engage the little community that surrounded it, as all those living there well knew that their livelihood and very existence was directly tied to that plant. Sheets and other clothing hanging out to dry turned gray, and noxious fumes and smoke were a small price to pay for those jobs.

And so it was that recently graduated from high school and in need of money for college, I got an interview for summer employment and then an application to complete, and best of all, a call back with instructions to bring in a doctor's health certificate and show up for assignment and further preliminary matters. Most of those at the assembly hall were there to begin their careers, and only 3 or 4 others were recognizable as being in my condition, of having graduated high school and going off to college by Labor Day. I had met only one of the job applicants in the room before that day. But it made no difference, I'd be there, do whatever I was told, work hard and at the end of summer, go off with more money than I had ever earned at a job in my short life. I could surely do that.

The first thing we were instructed about was the potentially dangerous nature of the work place and the work performed there. We were never to be on plant property without our steel-toed leather work boots, and white safety hard hat.

Period. While at the plant and working, we were to wear leather gloves and protective eyewear, and in a few places, masks. Work pants, or heavy jeans only, were permitted, and long sleeve shirts were required near any heat sources or similar dangers, but for the summer, short sleeve shirts were permitted if your crew boss authorized them.

There were three shifts and this bunch of new employees would be assigned wherever there was a need as a result of vacations being taken by present employees, or shifts to be filled. We were to be in place at the part of the plant assigned by the time the whistle blew. The shifts were each eight hours in length and started at 7am, 3pm and 11pm. There was a half hour for lunch in the middle. You could arrive starting a half hour before the start of your shift but not before. We were shown where to clock in and out, where to pick up work assignments and where to pick up pay checks. We were shown the showers and locker rooms, and where our job assignments were. We were also shown the nurses' station in case we had need of that, which it was hinted shouldn't be necessary, and where the union office was, which seemed to be viewed as also not particularly necessary. We were then sent to pick up work assignments and dismissed to go buy work boots and gloves and work pants.

The first two weeks, went off smoothly and I was able to get my boots gloves and work pants and shirt later that initial day, and was assigned the 7am shift for all five days each week. I picked up my hard hat and glasses and easily

found the assigned part of the plant. As you may suspect everything in the whole place was gray, unless it was black, except where there was molten steel, where it was varying shade of yellow orange and red, with searing heat rising. The molten steel seemed randomly distributed throughout the acres of the plant and after being poured from enormous pots controlled by overhead crane operators into ingots or shaped into ingots, it was run through various presses and lines, into ever lengthening rails or sheets, pressed and shaped and shaved, and run through ever more presses in a cacophony of noise and heat and steam, with men (there were no women anywhere among the plant workers) going everywhere in subservience to the machines and the steel being produced.

A multitude of processes went on all about us, yet it was totally organized and throughout the various processes, it was eventually formed as directed by all these machines and men, of which I was becoming a very small part. Since I knew not much at all about what was happening or how things got from point A to point B, I just did what I was told which was primarily moving things from one place to another. Simply stated, I was a janitor, as my main tool those first two weeks was a large broom and a garbage can, but the money was good.

In addition to seeing the molten steel mostly from afar, I was occasionally dispatched to deliver items to those shaping and heating the steel ingots into sheets and rails. More often though I was only allowed to be around the machines that shaped those steel bars and coils by pressing and rolling them in the desired

thicknesses and stresses, and then trimming the edges of the rolls, and the wire trimming machinery, which left particles for me to sweep up, but only after I had been there a few more weeks, since those particles when accumulated were quite weighty, and sharper than rose thorns.

From the very first, the crews I was assigned to were helpful and saw that I understood my assignments; and by my second “lunch” (that’s what the eating period was called, no matter the shift or time of day), I realized that steelworkers did not bring their lunch to work in brown paper sacks, and it did not consist of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich cut into little triangles. From the third day on, I had a proper black rounded top metal lunch pail with a handle and a thermos secured inside by wire clasps and containing a meat sandwich. It could be bologna or left over meatloaf or anything that came from something that had once breathed, and the thermos could have coffee or soup in it, just the first of the helpful little hints from my new compatriots. My co-workers were all card carrying ironworkers, and pretty much exclusively farmers and country boys, who grew their own vegetables and other food products, and filled their lunch pails with the same.

The crew boss was Fred but everyone called him Red. I guess when younger he had hair that wasn’t gray, or maybe it just took less work to say Red. Anyway he decided I was too green to be let loose without words of wisdom every lunch, and the other crew members also enjoyed giving advice to a college boy, even if I

weren't one yet, and sharing their homegrown 'maters and other produce with the city rookie—I guess as with most things it's all a matter of reference, since the city consisted of under 25,000 people, but if you don't keep livestock on your property, even if you have a garden, you are different from those who do. You know it and they know it. You don't meet their definition of country, you're a city boy.

Red typically led the charge most days challenging why I did not want to just make the steel mill a career since the money could be so good. I got along fine with my co-workers and they seemed in general to be as interested in what I was doing and why, as I was interested in finding out about them, each side seeming exotic to the other, if that is imaginable. But it all worked for me and all of the guys in the crew included me in their conversations and continued to share their garden products. And Red continued to dispense words of wisdom and ask me about my intentions with college and beyond. Red had discussed good shift assignments and warned of bad assignments, and suggested if I ever had any choice, I should stay away from the coke ovens. I really didn't have choices but just took whatever assignments were offered for fear there might not be another. When I asked what was so awful about the coke oven shift, Red just looked at me and said he hoped I never had to find out.

My first assignment to a line different from Red's crew occurred a couple of shifts later, and after that lunch, one of the crew approached me and asked what I was doing. "Just sweeping like I was told," I responded. "Is there something the

matter?” “Well, kid, you’re going off to college at the end of the summer, aren’t you?” “Yes that’s what I’m going to do,” I said. “Well here’s the problem” replied my older co-worker. “You see, you’re here now, and then you’re going away. But the way you’re sweeping, you’ll have everything all swept up in another half hour, and sweeping this area takes the whole shift to do. And if you work as hard as you are, that means the rest of us are going to have to work that hard, and not just now, but after you’ve gone. So you see the problem.” “Well yes, but what am I supposed to do about it now, as I’m almost finished? I was just doing the job I was told to do.” Try as I might I just wasn’t very good at the slowed work speed and the next thing I knew, I was told to report to the office on the way out of the plant that day, where I was given a different shift and time. Probably just a coincidence.

My next shift turned out to be a very desired assignment. I was still a sweeper, but I had been assigned to an afternoon shift on the pickling line. It sounded exciting and strange to me, and the men on the line were surprised that a summer hire would be assigned to them, as they never stopped the pickling line the entire shift. The crew just ate independently and in series, and only took 15 minutes for lunch. They worked at full speed the whole shift, and dealt with large coils of rolled steel, and earned incentive pay, which with their work schedule meant they produced twice what had been scheduled or proposed at least, and they got a minimum of double their hourly rate. I swept like a banshee to keep up, and keep the floor clear around their work area, as the rolls of steel were run through a

machine the size of a swimming pool to bathe the steel in a chemical solution, or pickle it, and then trim the edges to make the coil uniform. That was a great assignment. It only lasted four days, and I got nine days pay, just for sweeping. I was never sure if that explained why there's no operating steel mill in Portsmouth any more, or why it lasted as long as it did.

For my next assignment I was told I was getting the 11 pm shift and I should try to take a nap before the shift started to get acclimated. I tried but it didn't work out too well, and when I showed up for the shift I was sent off to a large building at the far end of the plant. My boss came up to me, and the conversation went something like this: "You the kid I get tonight?" "Yes, I guess so" "Well, where's your book?" "Uh, what book?" "Look, you don't have to have a book, but you should bring one, or something to read." "Why, what kind of book?" "Well, see that tin shack down yonder?" I peered into the gloom and saw way at the other end of the warehouse, what looked like some sheets of rusty corrugated steel forming a shack like structure against one wall of the building which itself was about 4 stories high, open at the far end, with either a busted up concrete or gravel floor, and along the side wall row after row of 12 foot steel coils 7 or 8 deep, some stacked two or three high on top of each other, waiting further processing or delivery to customers. I said I could see the shack. "Well I'll be in there if you need to find me, which I do not expect to happen. You will be some place else". "Like where?" "Anywhere you won't see anybody, and most important, they won't

see you. I suggest you find a nice comfortable steel coil, crawl inside and only come out when the lunch whistle blows, and when the shift is over.” The two of us were the only live people in that building between 11 pm and 7 am all of those five nights, and over those last four evenings, I finished The Catcher in the Rye curled inside a roll of steel. And I never had to keep a straight face and explain to anyone that I had just seen my boss, but had no idea where he’d gone unless it was to the bathroom. This shift left little doubt in my mind why Portsmouth no longer has a functioning steel plant, or why neither grandfather, nor any parents, aunts and uncles ever voted anything but Republican.

I had one more short assignment with my first crew, and Red took it upon himself to tease me about leaving them all behind, and being so young and inexperienced, I obviously could stand some grown up advice in the ways of the world, especially since I was going off from home, and had been saving all the money I’d been making all summer long and not spending any of it on fun things.

One specific concern Red kept returning to first involved girls I might be dating over the summer and then those I might be meeting after leaving for college, who could prove to be deceptive, with warnings that I had to be on the lookout. Of course I bit, and said, “on the lookout for what?” “Why, foolers of course” said Red. What are foolers I wanted to know. Red and the boys were laughing, and said they knew the college boy had no idea. Foolers are those things ladies wear, it was explained, to enhance what they lacked on top, and you have to be very careful not

to get fooled—and end up disappointed. Good advice Red. And I have to admit to us boys here tonight, that I did try to take that advice to heart and follow it ever thereafter. And I'm happy to share that wisdom with all assembled here tonight, though it may not be as timely as when it was imparted to me. Sorry.

Finally, my last plant assignment was a solitary shift, just me and nobody else anywhere in sight, involving the dreaded coke ovens. There were four of them and they were reputed to be the largest in the world in 1947—so I guess by the 1960's that was no longer the case, and there was some talk about larger ones being constructed in India. Darn, if fame isn't truly fleeting.

These home grown ovens were black and soot-covered, 6 or so stories tall from ground level on the outside and easily in their row looked like the biggest blackest things at the plant. This is really where the Dickens's early Industrial Age descriptions of inhumane working conditions became up close and personal.

The job required first a trip outside to a railroad siding where a large high sided coal car sat on the tracks. You needed to climb up and see what the status of the waste ash was in it, how high and where it was located, and then attach a steel cable to the car and winch it into the most appropriate position to receive that night's collection of ashes under the chute from a tipple shack several stories above the car that directed the evening's ashes into the car. Then you went down to the tunnel below the bottom of the coke ovens. Wearing the full complement of equipment, hard hat, goggles, mask, long sleeve shirt, gloves and safety boots—in

the middle of the summer in a tunnel barely big enough to walk through, under the coke ovens with first a wheelbarrow into which you emptied the flues filed with the shift's coal soot, tiny hot particle like grains of sand only billowing up as you emptied the flue into the wheelbarrow. It took at least 6 trips down the tunnel for each of the two flues per oven.

You ran the full wheelbarrow down the tunnel to the end, started the conveyor system which took that stuff thirty feet or so away on a belt, to a chain drive of buckets that took those tailings up to a conveyor belt going into the tippleshack where another conveyor belt changed the direction out to the tippleshack chute and from there into the coal car. After that procedure for each coke oven, with the last trips having glowing ash, it was time to put the wheelbarrow away and push the coal cart on the rail tracks set in the tunnel floor into position and begin emptying the coke oven tailings into the carts. From the first, hot coals and embers came out with the ashes, filling the little air in the tunnel with soot, smoke and embers and heating everything including the cart, which had to be pushed to the end of the line and emptied as with the flues with at least 8 trips required for each of the 4 coke ovens. Then watch the belt and buckets until they had delivered all of the ashes before turning the system off.

All the time the air was filled with ashes, heat and soot. Everything was totally black at the end of the shift. The protective respiration mask had long before turned from white to solid black, as was the case for everything in that tunnel and

on my body, including me, too, of course. A shower did not come close to getting you clean, only enough to allow you to sit on a sheet or towel in the car on the way home, and the clothes from the night before had to be taken home in a trash bag for cleaning, something my mother from time to time used to mention.

My days as a steelworker had come to an end after the last day of that coke oven shift was over at the plant. I did have to go back the following week for my last paycheck, and when I did, there were some snickers from the office girls and a note to find Red at the close of his shift, which was about 15 minutes away. So I waited for Red who insisted I follow him and the rest of the crew to the local bar, where they wanted to buy me a beer but I was able to get away with just a soft drink. It was only 3 pm and I wasn't legal yet. I had no idea what they were all talking about, but it seems the conveyor from the tipple had somehow gotten caught and the gears stripped, which caused the entire last night's accumulation, about half a coal car's worth of ash and flue tailings to build up in the tipple, filling it to the brim. The doors could not be opened and every square inch of the tipple house was jammed with debris. Workers had to go up from the chute side of the tipple and it had taken them 3 days to get the waste product out of the tipple and begin to repair the conveyor and rest of the equipment.

Red's crew members attributed this total accident to the smart college boy getting even. No, it was strictly an accident, I told them, but my protests to the

contrary did not assuage their belief, and they left the bar still laughing and congratulating me.

Red said he'd walk with me back to my car, and as we went along, he confessed he knew who I was, which came as a surprise since I was unsure what he was talking about. He said he had worked with my grandfather after whom I had been named, and he had been a beginning steel worker when my grandfather was going up through the ranks from his start as a laborer through management to become plant manager, in effect joining the other side; but Red proclaimed he had always liked working with and for my grandfather and that he had been a straight shooter, and he had been a manager the men trusted, although growing up I am not sure my grandfather shared that same affection, and know for certain he did not after he became plant manager, which was my total experience with him.

Red went on to explain that he wanted me to experience all there was to experience at the steel plant, to see if I would tough it out, and also not waiver in my professed determination to go to college and never reconsider and take a job at the steel mill. He said he was sure that would have been what my grandfather would have wanted, too.

When I asked him if he had arranged that awful assignment under the coke ovens, he asked me if I had stymied that tippie on purpose, and we left each other's questions where they were, unanswered, shook hands and said our goodbyes. As we parted, Red called back that my grandfather would have been proud.

Ernest Eynon

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