

562

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PERSONAL PROVENANCE

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As the title suggests, this evening's presentation is something of an autobiographical essay. During its preparation I have mused as to what led me in the direction of preparing such a personal document. I was surprised to realize that it had been 14 years since I first presented to this audience my recollections of childhood in North Minneapolis. A small sense of urgency overtook me when I recently learned that McDonalds had introduced yet another new product, the McBagel, to its menu. My earlier presentation, titled "One Man's Madelaine", among other things, railed against the transmogrification of that ancient culinary art form. Confronted with the reality of this latest gustatory deconstruction I determined that I had best record some further memories before time, corporate America and my own relentless descent into dementia erased even more of what I value.

As I prepared to skate further out on to the dangerously thin literary ice of autobiography I recognized that one could create a classification, however imperfect, of the various forces that influence and lead to autobiographical efforts.

In the case of biographical writings, one can recognize classifications such as personal biography, scientific biography, intellectual biography, and the like. In the case of the auto biography - that's pretty much it. It's about the author and reflects his perceptions. As I thought about the psychological determinants - forces, if you will, that might lead to an autobiographical account, several leaped out at me. The first three are fairly distinct but have some overlapping. I would label these the egocentric, the ethnocentric and the ethocentric.

The first of these, the egocentric, might be written by someone whose life, in their view, has been marked by such great accomplishments or engagement in such important events that the world is thirsting for details - that history would be much the poorer without them. The other side of that same coin is the fact that their life might have been characterized by misdeeds, disasters and such notoriety that a recitation of personal failings could be instructive in the hope that others might be dissuaded from pursuing similar activities.

The autobiographical stories of an ethnocentric sort deal with, or derive from, or describe the influences or activities of a social group - not necessarily racial - the group may have common religious preference or they or their forebears may have emigrated from the same town or region - and the events and anecdotes are common to - though not necessarily unique - to the group of which the autobiographer is a part.

A third set of forces I will group under a neologism (a practice I ordinarily disparage) that I will call ethocentric. Here, I mean reasons that permit the autobiographer to illustrate or derive some of his stories from the beliefs, the values, the spirit that motivates or directs the behavior of the

individual or group under discussion. In some sense the ethocentric might be subsumed under the ethnocentric but I believe some subtle differences justify the separate consideration.

Finally, at least so it seems to me, emotional forces, perhaps irrational forces, can propel and inform the autobiographical essay. This surely is the case for this author. My identity, my affections, my loyalty, perhaps an hypertrophied sense of pride - all of these combine with the fear that the passage of time is diminishing and even erasing the story of these individuals and neighborhoods that seem unique.

Tonight's imperfect recollection is both of persons and places, and particularly of neighborhoods. Webster's Third New International offers several definitions of NEIGHBORHOOD.

The first is "the easy agreeable relationship usual among congenial neighbors". That, I fear, is not what I am talking about. How then could I include my own father's behavior while I was still in my infancy, in what might be described today as a preemptive strike. Under cover of darkness, he went into our neighbor's mesh-wire fenced in backyard and strangled the patriarchal rooster who had hitherto dictated the time of awakening of neighbors near and far. In separate accounts, comparable only to those of the characters in the Japanese movie, Rashomon, my father insisted that his action was preceded by negotiations only slightly more complex than those that led to the establishment of the League of Nations. My mother's version of the episode was that it was somewhat more precipitous and finally led to a cash settlement that compensated the rooster's owner for the loss of a bird of international fame as well as for the flock of hens' heartbreak, grief and loss of companionship.

It is Webster's fourth definition of neighborhood that more nearly describes what I am trying to remember and portray. That is "a number of people forming a loosely cohesive community within a larger unit (as a city or town) and living close or fairly close together - and usually having some common identifying feature (as approximate equality of economic condition, similar

social status, similar national origins or religion, similar interests and usually some degree of self sufficiency."

Thus, my imagery is much more than the location of the neighborhood and its physical attributes but includes language, behavior, character, even values common to the group. Where much of this took place was in front of the Desnick Bros. pharmacy on the northwest corner of Penn and Plymouth avenues in North Minneapolis. The regulars among us were considered to be drugstore cowboys, something most parents discouraged as a mode of spending free time. A lot of the conversation was of the "one-upmanship" sort; mildly gratuitous insults, exaggerating classroom escapades, and merciless teasing if a female classmate happened by. The salutations - comparable to the current "Yo, brother" of the inner city, was more likely "Hey, Jew" - a recognition of affirmation totally unacceptable if offered by someone outside that group.

It is difficult to be confident that what we now recall is, in fact, what actually took place, that buildings no longer standing were as we remember them, that the wit was as spontaneous as we now recall with delight. We are left with what the author and critic, Cynthia Ozick, recently described as "the neighborhood of the mind". And this, I believe, is not a bad thing.

Serious historians would understandably require more factual documentation. But we recall what comforts us and perhaps what pain has instructed us.

And, so, while I have struggled to remember persons, places, events and conversations as accurately as I am able, it may be that the prism of time through which all of this has passed, analogous to light passing through a prism, the prism of time has distributed them into their component emotional wave lengths that, collectively, represent the true whole.

The corner of Penn and Plymouth Avenues was for me during adolescence as much the center of the universe as the earth was for Ptolemy in his time. While it was

much more than a thousand years from Ptolemy until the Copernican concept of the sun as the center of our universe was espoused, it was a little less than that until I was prepared to admit that Penn and Plymouth could not remain the center of mine. But for the years that my personal Ptolemaic vision of that intersection governed my Weltanschauung, it was a funny and formative time.

On one corner stood the Desnick Brothers drugstore, on another corner Bette's Beauty Salon, the third corner was occupied by the Conoco service station first operated by my oldest brother Mike, then in partnership with Mike and my brother-in-law Arnie Dobrin, and finally by Arnie and brother Shy. On the fourth corner stood a three story brick building that at first glance seemed to be an apartment house - which in fact it may have been in an earlier life - but in mine housed a 30 bed sanitarium - as it was then known - for the mentally ill. In later years I came to understand that it was something of a triage station for the troubled, who, if judged to require more than a few weeks of care, were beamed up to the mother ship nestled in Glenwood Park, a mile or so distant. Many neighborhood acquaintances managed to become patients during those years. As I look back the distribution of diagnoses probably were not much different than we would encounter today. What was different for me then, however, was that these were people that I knew and while I might have known that their behavior was occasionally unusual, I had not arrived at the level of sophistication where I could understand that they were mentally ill. Some that I remember more clearly than others - and with some affection - all long since deceased - were Hymie Zaidel, a gentle, winsome, affectionate and intellectually challenged fellow who probably was 10 years my senior. Hymie suffered from myopia that no laser yet invented could correct and, as a consequence, wore glasses with lenses that had the thickness of the covers of Mason jars. Hymie sold Liberty magazines from door to door and on the street and how he supported himself I simply do not know.

Knock-out Sherman was about the same age as Hymie - intellectually impaired and off to a slow start from birth and not at all aided by a brief and stunningly

unsuccessfully career in the ring. Knock-out Sherman would amuse the hangers-on at Charlie Bank's pool hall down the street by literally punching himself in the jaw and affecting a state of unconsciousness until sufficient coins had been dropped at his side to make it worthwhile to recover and move on to repeat his act in front of one of the barber shops further down Plymouth Avenue. Then, another recurrent patient was Max Wold, short of stature, long on theory, an extremely bright professional liberal and chronic political science student at the University. His pale blond hair and sallow complexion earned him the all too accurate sobriquet of Wax Mold. Regardless of season Max wore a heavy wool overcoat whose sleeves were easily four inches past his finger tips.

I remember clearly the early summer evening when one of the periodic patient break outs occurred. Rusty Grossman darted out of the building and sought refuge in the men's room of the gas station. Heinzie Zipperman, not so fleet of foot as his co-conspirators, reached only the telephone pole on the corner, wrapped himself tenaciously around it with all four limbs, and as two classically garbed white jacketed attendants struggled to free him from his perpendicular sanctuary, poor Heinzie called plaintively to my brother Shy to save him.

Shy was standing, absolutely incredulous, on the driveway of the gas station observing this Marx Brothers spectacle unfolding before him.

At that moment Dr. Ralph Rossen, a neighbor and the director of the state hospital for the insane at Hastings, just south of St. Paul, came walking by with his favorite dachshund on a leash, both of them out for their evening constitutional. Dr. Rossen, a regular customer at the gas station, paused, took a long draw on the Sherlock Holmes pipe he favored, nodded and smiled in Shy's direction, commented "Nice practice" and slowly continued his walk.

During the early 20th century many other immigrant families settled in the Twin Cities. Among them were the Berenberg family. Berenberg senior was a baker and soon, with two partners, established the Lincoln

bakery, first on Sixth Avenue North, then on Plymouth Avenue some six blocks farther north. His three sons, Boonie, Izzie and Morrie, followed him into the business and all became expert bakers. I make note of the Berenbergs because they became central figures - something of models of the transformation of the immigrant families in their fight for success. They also emerge as examples of the socialization of the second generation. Following World War II - in which all three served in the Marines in the Pacific - and survived, but not without wounds, they moved the bakery and opened a delicatessen in a newly prospering area on Lake Street in South Minneapolis.

Morrie Berenberg was a man of few uncertain opinions, quick and outrageous wit, intense loyalties, generosity of spirit and some inviolable principles in running the delicatessen. The quality of his products was very high, sufficiently high in his view, that they were beyond criticism. Woe to the patron who ever questioned the quality of any of the dishes served. That was an invitation to be banned, ordered out on the spot and instructed to take his business to Bernie's, a delicatessen Morrie viewed as much inferior, just a hundred yards or so up the street. Morrie also had a powerful aversion to the customer who had the temerity to ask if they could order only a half sandwich. Never mind that the sandwiches were of huge size. Ask for a half sandwich and you were out on the street! Talk about the Soup Nazi, made famous on the Seinfeld show. A pale successor to Morrie Berenberg. The only person I knew whose culinary criticisms Morrie might occasionally honor was my mother. After my father died she took an apartment within walking distance of the Del. Mother was a wonderful cook. I say that not only as a loyal and grateful son but as a statement of fact. My older brothers delighted in tormenting Morrie Berenberg with stories of my mother's fantastic, airy, Passover cakes of unmatched delicacy.

Finally, provoked by these comparisons to his own baked products, Morrie challenged them for a sample. My mother, not without her own pride in these matters, created one of her finest efforts, using 14 egg whites whipped to a fare-thee-well and ultra-refined matzo-meal flour, resulting in a cake of such towering

magnificence that one was moved to silence in its presence.

That afternoon my older brothers Mike and Shy brought Morrie to the apartment. The cake had been placed in the center of the kitchen table. Morrie slipped on his glasses, slowly circled the table occasionally gently tapping the cake on its top to estimate how much spring and resiliency he could elicit, and then called for a fork and a quart of cold milk. He sat down and consumed the entire cake and quart of milk in perhaps 15 minutes. This was not entirely unanticipated because Morrie would sometimes sit down and eat an entire box of Snickers by himself. He leaned back in the chair, gave a belch that rattled the windows in the apartment, turned to my mother and said, "Mrs. Troup, the sacks my flour comes in have a better taste and texture than that cake did!" and walked out of the apartment to a stunned silence. Moments later the telephone rang and it was Morrie. "Mrs. Troup, you know I was just teasing. We couldn't possibly match that cake of yours in quality. You're the champ!"

Morrie had suffered for years from hypertension and vascular disease when he had a stroke that selectively impaired his speech but little else. He simply employed a plastic pad, a version of a child's art toy, to express himself in writing, which he did effectively, supplemented by the occasional outburst of forceful expletives common to some patients with expressive asphasias.

Tom Friedman, two time Pulitzer prize winner and now international correspondent for the New York Times, grew up in Minneapolis where his father had been a childhood friend of Morrie's. Tom was unable to attend Morrie's funeral but, sitting in the airport in Detroit while en route to a foreign assignment, he learned of Morrie's sudden death and was moved to record some of his thoughts to be read at the funeral. With Tom's permission, I would like to repeat some of those comments to provide an even richer sense of what Morrie was like.

Tom wrote: "The philosopher Aristotle once wrote that the true measure of a man's character is what he would do if he knew he would never be found out. How would he behave if he knew that no one was looking? By that definition I know the true measure of Morrie Berenberg.

Twenty-one years ago my father, Harold "Iggie" Friedman, passed away. My dad died just as I was preparing to go off to Brandeis for college. As often happens in those kinds of situations, many old friends of my dad came by and said, "Tom, if you need any help give me a call."

And then there was Morrie. He invited me over to the Lake Street Del one day and said in his inimitable way, "Look Jew, you can't afford to go to Brandeis now. How are you going to manage this?" I was still in the aftershock of my dad's death and wasn't quite sure at the time myself. Needless to say, Morrie helped make it happen. He made it his business to make it happen. He didn't wait for me to ask. He didn't discuss it. He just did it. He was that kind of guy. Years later, the only thing he would say about it was that he considered me his "best investment."

Tom continued, "Morrie represented to me a certain generation of American Jews, my father's generation really, who grew up on the North Side, experienced real anti-Semitism in their teenage years, and the limitless opportunities of America in their adulthood. He never forgot his humble roots, never forgot where he started. He had no time for people who did, or for people who turned their backs on the community. No time at all. It was from Morrie that I learned the maxim: Remember the people you meet going up because you may meet the same people as you come down."

Indeed, Morrie never went to college but he taught me more lessons about life than I ever learned at Oxford. I will share with you just one.

In the days that the Del was really booming I used to ask Morrie why he didn't go into some other kind of food business. After all, he seemed to have the golden touch. He said to me "Tommie, I know one thing. I

know how to make bagels. I'll stick with that." His message was, stick to the basics, do whatever you do well and don't try to spread your self thin. Don't ever think that because you are good at one thing that you are a maven on everything else. When ever people approach me to change careers, maybe go into television or teach a college course, I always tell them:

"Hey, I'm a journalist, I know how to make bagels; that's it." They usually look at me with an odd stare and ask what bagels have to do with it, and then I tell them Morrie's story.

"So long, Jew. I'll really miss you."

And then there was the Benjamin family. While the genealogy is not germane this evening, suffice it to describe the three branches in our generation, the Benjamins, the Abrams and the Kronicks. Kal Abrams is one of my oldest friends, dating back to early childhood, the late Leo Kronick was a friend of all of ours, intermediate in age between my older brothers and myself, and Marvin Benjamin, more nearly my older brothers' age and easily the wittiest, with a Groucho Marx quality to him.

Ed Litin, the pride of the neighborhood, and a dear friend of all of ours, had become chairman of the psychiatry department at the Mayo Clinic.

Not all that many years ago Marvin Benjamin found himself in Rochester and, unannounced, presented himself at Ed Litin's office. Ed was out of the office and Marvin, despite the secretary's protests, entered Ed's private office, having dismissed the young woman's protests by saying he was an old friend. With the door closed, Marvin immediately removed all of his clothes and lay down naked on the everpresent couch in the office. When Ed returned to the office some 30 minutes later the secretary apologetically told him of this aggressive visitor who simply insisted that he go into the private office area. Ed reassured her that it was quite all right, quietly and carefully opened the door and discovered Marvin sound asleep on the analytic couch, naked as the day he was born. Ed quietly gathered up the clothes, placed them in the closet,

closed the door and then asked his innocent secretary if she would go into the office and tell the visitor that Dr. Litin had returned. She opened the door, gasped audibly, and Marvin leaped up, unable, of course, to find his clothes that Ed had hidden in the closet. From Ed's description, Marvin performed a dance unequalled since Sally Rand first appeared at the Chicago world's fair except, rather than ostrich plumes, a semblance of decorum was maintained by the judicious and artistic placement of outdated psychiatric journals. After a few moments Ed returned the clothing, begged and received his secretary's forgiveness and some semblance of normality was restored to the usually staid environment of the Mayo Clinic's department of psychiatry.

Leo Kronick's mother, Clara, was a Benjamin as was Kal Abram's mother, both sisters to Marvin Benjamin's father. Leo was about two years my senior, with bright red hair, a prominent nose - bulbous rather than hawk like - and possessed of a deep husky voice that usually sounded like he had incompletely recovered from a serious case of laryngitis.

Leo entered the Coast Guard following graduation from high school and following the war found a sales position with the Wembly gentlemen's neckwear company. At the end of the sales season Leo sometimes favored his friends with samples of the year just completed. Normally I eschewed those samples, not being a fan of Wembly's rather middle-of-the-road patterns and styles. To Leo's great delight, however, Wemblys rose up and purchased the Countess Mara Co., adding fashionable heavy Italian silk neckties to Leo's portfolio. When the end of his first successful season arrived I asked Leo how the Countess Mara supplies were holding up. Leo, quickly recognizing my interest, put me down by suggesting that I wasn't really ready yet for the Countess Mara label.

Leo married later than most of his contemporaries and before that lived at home with his parents, Ben and Clara. Clara was easily the neighborhood's best informed gossip and took considerable pride in her skills and sources. My brother Shy, for his part, took a perverse delight in tormenting her whenever, with

husband Ben, they drove into the gas station he operated. He would sidle over to her side of the car and stun her with some piece of juicy gossip, preferably about some close relative of hers. Such as, "Isn't it a shame that your nephew, Irving, broke his engagement on the same day he failed out of dental school?"

Clara would color deeply, say little, but get on the phone the instant she got home in an effort to confirm Shy's sources.

One summer evening Shy and Leo were out socially with several other friends. Leo had imbibed sufficiently freely that Shy felt it unwise for Leo to drive his own car home. Instead, Shy persuaded him to leave his car at the club they were frequenting and accept a ride home. Shy pulled up in front of the Kronick home, let Leo out of the car, waited until Leo had wended his way up the walk, managed to get the front door open, enter the vestibule, turn on the lights - and then Shy heard a large crash. He waited just a moment more and left Leo to his fate.

The following day Shy called Leo to offer to drive him back to pick up his car that they had left the previous evening. "By the way, Leo, what was that large crash I heard after you got into the house last night?" "Oh, I managed to trip and knock over a large floor lamp that my mother liked a great deal." "So what did she say?" "Well, first she said, - 'Leo, is that you?' Then, 'You've been out drinking again haven't you?'" "No, Ma - just a couple drinks with the boys - I didn't even drive home." "So who brought you home?" "Shy Troup drove me home." A long pause - "Shy Troup - he's on all the committees."

Perhaps four years ago I was visiting briefly in Minneapolis and Shy said "You know Leo is very ill - he is back from the clinic where they found a malignancy in his chest that cannot be removed by surgery." We called to ask his wife if Leo had enough interest and energy to see us if we stopped over to visit. She reported that he would be thrilled so we quickly drove over before I had to leave and return to Cincinnati.

Leo was seated in a wheelchair in a large sunny room that had been converted to a sick room. I had not seen him for years and his once flaming red hair was white and sparse secondary to the futile chemotherapy he had been receiving. His face was thin and his eyes just short of expressionless, a watery blue in color. His voice was whispery and cracked as he spoke, not the husky and throaty roar of his younger years. I leaned over and we embraced, then sat down to attempt to bridge the many years that had passed since our childhood. As we reminisced, a remarkable - almost magical - transformation seemed to me to take place. His pitiful scanty white hair became thick and carrot colored as it had been in his youth; his eyes regained their bright blue sparkle, his voice deepened and strengthened and his nose - his nose colored and once more resembled the Benjamin icon we knew. He turned to Shy and said, "Shy, you know you have been my hero since I was a kid. I always believed that I could count on you if I ever needed any protection or help." Shy smiled and said "Leo, you know you can still count on me - but I didn't know you really ever looked up to me." Leo then went on with a story that I had never heard and Shy only dimly recalled. Shy was perhaps fourteen and Leo twelve. It was springtime and the park board baseball program and practice was just beginning. It looked as if Shy had a shot at the starting first base position. He was, and is, a lefthander and had just purchased a new and favorite Louisville slugger which he was swinging very well. It was shortly before dinner time and Shy had stopped in at Malcoff's delicatessen just across the street from the Homewood Theatre after a very encouraging practice in which he had stroked the ball very well. Leo also was in the delicatessen but soon left to go home for dinner. Moments later Leo suddenly re-entered, sobbing and holding a blood soaked handkerchief to his nose which was bleeding profusely. Between sobs he reported that as he left the delicatessen three young men suddenly attacked him while shouting obscenities and anti-semiotic slurs. As Leo recounted the story, Shy grabbed the new baseball bat and raced out the door. Quickly spotting the three strangers, laughing as they entered a sedan across the street in front of the theater, Shy called to them. They leaped into the car and while the driver fumbled to start the ignition,

Shy, failing to get them to come out of the locked car, in a blind rage, with his new baseball bat, circled the car smashing the tail lights, both head lights and shattered the windshield as the engine roared to life and the car raced away. Leo was tearful as he completed the story.

Shy, somewhat embarrassed by the recitation said something to the effect that "I guess I had a pretty bad temper when I was young." Leo, wiping his eyes, and now returning in my vision to the frail dying friend he was, said, "No, Shy, you were my hero."

We embraced lightly, spoke our goodbyes which all of us knew were final and turned toward the door. As we did so, Leo offered me a final benediction.

"Kid, I think you're ready now for a Countess Mara."

Leo died quietly at home about 10 days later.
