

PRIVATE LESSONS

A Paper
by
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In keeping with my bias regarding the papers I most enjoy and appreciate given by my esteemed colleagues in this august organization, this paper will be based on my *personal experiences* and the ideas, philosophical enlightenments and life altering changes, the lessons I thus derived. I.e., expect no bibliography of references, no listing of facts to understand and memorize and no final exam, and certainly no profound philosophical insights. This is just my *stuff*.

I would like to be able assure you that each of these episodes and the messages they delivered have become an indelible list of rules that inform and guide my life, but this would be silly and hypocritical. I did note the messages thus delivered, remembered and learned them well, but I practice them quite poorly.

Lesson One - Priorities

Bert Lahr, best known as the Cowardly Lion in the movie "The Wizard of Oz," was the star of a short-lived musical comedy based on the opening of the Klondike, a show named "Foxie." Cleveland and the Hanna Theater were set for the pre-Broadway tryout of the new script, sets and musical score.

It was in the dead of a brutally cold Cleveland winter and the orchestra rehearsals were held in the heatless ladies lounge.

The score was arranged and orchestrated by Eddie Sauter, a brilliant musician with many fine credentials including the Glenn Miller orchestra and his own highly entertaining, short-lived dance band in the early to mid fifties, the Sauter-Finnegan Orchestra.

The band and all of Sauter's arranging style was innovative with clever use of unexpected solos and bizarre instruments including, for example, the whole sax section performing occasionally on kazoos, others chest thumping in rhythm, and two percussionists (one a friend of mine, the renowned hoaxist Alan Abel) playing an assortment of exotic percussion instrument; the band in toto a highly clever and sophisticated spin-off of another unusual novelty band of the era, Spike Jones.

Lahr, along with the other notorious Wizard co-stars Ray Bolger and Jack Haley, was an old vaudevillian who learned and practiced the art of elbow-ing, an ongoing battle to be front-center and in the spotlight, the challenge we now call "getting face time."

I was a newcomer to the Hanna pit orchestra, nervous and insecure. We worked for several weeks with Sauter and two copyists correcting and editing the new score and instrument parts. The orchestra members, including me, had come to thoroughly enjoy these fresh, interesting arrangements. Sauter, as was his style, had laced them with many solo musical “fills”, those orchestral interjections that fill the space between the ends of singer's phrases and the start of new ones. And these, which I call “doo-da-lee-boops,” featured many rare chances for individual players to be heard, including me. In fact it seemed that I had more than my share of these in my part.

Bert arrived at his first rehearsal with the orchestra with a grand flourish, decked out in a raccoon-skin full-length coat complete with a fur hat, boots, and a huge smile.

The conductor started the first number, a soft-shoe bouncy rhythm similar in style to the one used in “Once in love with Amy.” As each phrase was played and the solo interjections appeared Bert's jovial smile began to darken...and he eventually tapped the conductor on the shoulder saying “Maestro, tell me who's gonna be funny in this show, me or the damned orchestra? Start again and we'll circle some stuff.” “Circle” in pit orchestra parlance meant “do not play.”

We started again and Bert yelled, “circle that!” as each offending solo was played.

As luck would have it, I had many of these solos and I grew increasingly nervous, scared really as I was the focus of many of Bert's admonitions.

He eventually noticed my discomfort and stopped the conductor, turned to me and said “Young fella, *circle your chair.*”

His tease broke the tension and we all, even me, had a great laugh.

Lesson Two - The Real Price of Success

I was, for a time, the alternate conductor for shows at the Front Row Theater, meaning that entertainers who did not travel with their own conductors, comedians and the like, needed a local conductor to direct the orchestra for incidental music, play-ons and exits. The assignments were usually straightforward and simple since the music was largely incidental.

It was a surprise then when, several weeks prior to his appearance, Marvin Hamlisch' manager and then Marvin himself called to ask me to conduct for him. The reasons they gave for the calls were that they wanted to know my credentials but, perhaps of more importance, they want to know how much I would charge them for my services.

Now, Hamlisch at this time was receiving huge royalties from his music for the very successful musical “Company” and others and thus could have easily afforded to bring a conductor with him who was familiar with his music and thus assure a no-hassle engagement.

Once I told them I would be happy to work for the union scale minimum and that I did indeed know how to hold a baton they hired me and set a time for us to meet and review his scores before the rehearsal.

I arrived at his hotel on time and was made to cool my heels for a half hour or so before they told the desk clerk to summon me. As I made the turn into the hall to their rooms I saw the tops of two faces sticking out through adjacent open doors clearly looking for me. They quickly withdrew as I approached.

I knocked and after an appropriate pause Hamlisch's manager opened the door and with a flourish announced in a stentorian tone "This...Is Marvin Hamlisch" waving to the man himself doing a regal pose in the window frame across the room.

I entered without bowing and stammered "How ya doin' Marvin?"...And thus began a very successful week's engagement...aided by the fact that Marvin, an avid baseball fan, was allowed in the radio booth at an Indians game and learned from one of the announcers that I was a reasonably well know figure in Cleveland's musical fraternity.

The lesson: the message I got was that no matter how successful, celebrated and rich one becomes the price of success likely always includes dragging our personalities and basic insecurities along with us.

Lesson Three - The Futile Search for Agreement

I also conducted the Mills brothers, a trio that had been together forever! At rehearsal the blind brother gave me very strict directions as to cues and tempi for their numbers...while the very heavy set brother stood behind him and gave hand signals that corrected and often contradicted those of his brother. I followed the sneaky ones directions in rehearsal and during the week of shows.

Each night after the show I was summoned to their dressing room to be corrected and chastised by the blind brother while, as before, the fat one over-rode his brother's orders silently, assuring me that I was doing a good job.

I concluded that, after a bazillion or so performances of "Moon Glow" that if these brothers couldn't reach *reasonable agreements* there was little hope for me or the rest of us humans.

Lesson Four - Anthropomorphism and its derivatives.

Webster defines anthropomorphism thus - the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to a god, animal, or object.

I think of this a bit beyond that definition; that humans see many things with skewed vision according to a bias that relates to our innate and primal fear of being alone and feeling isolated. In other words I apply and possibly stretch a bit of K-Mart psychology to

this premise.

As something of related side bar reinforcement, Peter Whistler, C.S. Lewis antagonist in “Shadow lands” quotes his father, a teacher, “We *read* to know we are not *alone*.”

In my five or so years tenure as a Sea World unofficial “resident composer” I had several chances to see interspecies communication, the interplay between trainers and their animals, as I worked with producers and directors to create supportive music scores for their new shows.

Though most incidents were primarily related simply to conditioning a la Pavlov's dog experiments, there were and remain for me some questions about the mystery of what's really going on...versus what I and others wanted, perhaps actually *needed* to see.

I arrived at an early morning training session at the San Diego Sea World Shamu Stadium pool to be confronted by a delay due to an accident. Their most reliable and teachable killer whale had injured a girl trainer in a practice exercise. The trainer was lying alongside the pool being attended to by their medical crew.

I was amazed to see the whale, a female named Candu, remain in the water close by the trainer (the animals, mostly females, all had individual names but were all presented as Shamu for show purposes).

It seemed to me that I saw concern, sadness and contrition in that whale's eyes. True or perhaps absurd, I believe I had an involuntary human *need* to read this interpretation into the incident.

This, in my view, may be a root cause of why humans give human-type names to so many different, totally unrelated things; hurricanes, ships, animals, Disney cartoon characters, even cars and other totally unjustified animate and inanimate objects.

I likewise think I almost automatically anthropomorphize and impose my emotional need to connect with my dogs, other animals, and, for that matter, with humans. My deep-seated fear of being alone causes me to make unsustainable assumptions about people; that we share similar mental capabilities, talents, sense of humor, ethics, morals and beliefs, etc.

I have made and continue to make these foolish assumptions at my peril...and have had to engage in an ongoing battle with that naïve idea stuck somewhere between my ears.

Lesson Five - Misappropriation of credit and blame.

I believe that a huge and common failing of humans, certainly including me, is that we often seize on wrong ideas, statements or gossip and then, far too often turn these erroneous conclusions into unquestioning rules which guide our lives, often to our detriment.

My dear departed friend, Vince Patti, was a well-known dance bandleader in the 50's and 60's and I was privileged to play in his sextet for many dances, weddings, country clubs and such. We were a fine band and very close friends.

One occasion was a Wittenberg alumni summer dance held in the ballroom above Public Hall, a little used location with no air conditioning. And it was hot!

Several Wittenberg friends of mine invited the band to join them for drinks after the dance in their hospitality suite across the street at the now long gone Auditorium Hotel.

My friend the bass player, Harry DiMarco, and I traveled together and we persuaded the drummer, Bob Valyo, to join in with us to quench the terrible thirst we had after a grueling, hot evening. We gulped several large scotches.

Harry and I giggled our ride home but managed luckily to avoid problems.

Bob Valyo, on the other hand, reported a week later that he had encountered a mysterious malady after getting home. He was hungry and ate a bowl of Rice Krispies...and immediately vomited all over his kitchen floor.

For the rest of his life he insisted he had ingested a bad batch of cereal!!!

Lesson Six - Learning about knowing life's unknowables.

There are many puzzles that all of us humans seem endlessly to try to understand and solve, perhaps none more so than the mysterious spiritual forces that seem somehow occasionally to be at work as one muddles through life.

I don't mean to refer to the spiritual aspects of religions in this category though I know for some this may be a religious or anti-religious subject. I refer instead to *spontaneous, uninvited* occasions as opposed to those that humans create and try to order up in the form of religious rituals, prayer and meditation.

My wife Nora was heavy, increasingly uncomfortable and impatient carrying what was destined to be our fifth and last child, John, in the early summer of 1961. He was, like most of our babies, quite large, a very real load to carry.

I was teaching in Shaker Heights, playing in the orchestra at Musicarnival Theater nights in Warrensville Heights and we lived in Macedonia.

Nora's anxious call to me at the school led me to believe that there was some urgency about getting home to take her to Babies' and Childrens' Hospital. My dash home was delayed by a Shaker policeman's ticketing me after making a call to our house and getting no answer. Adding to my anxiety, Nora was bathing and didn't hear the phone. I later was able to prove the urgency and have the ticket rescinded.

Having called her doctor and getting his agreement to check her, Nora had made arrangement for friends to care for the four kids at various locations which meant that only one had to ride with us to the medical building where Dr. Clifford Vogt had his office. He, after an examination, said there was absolutely no rush but he rather reluctantly agreed to have Nora admitted with the possibility of inducing labor. Nora can be **very** persuasive at times.

We had a leisurely ice cream in the medical building pharmacy, deposited Nora at the hospital and daughter Amy and I proceeded to Nora's parents home in Lakewood. We enjoyed dinner being reassured by several calls to the hospital that nothing was happening, that I should proceed to the theater, a half hour drive away.

Allowing a mere ten minutes leeway, I started my drive when, for no reason at all, I became upset driving on the Lakeshore Freeway halfway toward downtown Cleveland, so much so that by the time I reached the corner of Ontario and Carnegie I felt *possessed* and was literally compelled to pull off and call the hospital, only to be once again assured that there was no cause for concern. I, for no logical reason whatsoever, decided to drive to the hospital instead of continuing to the theater.

Hurrying to the labor floor, I was gowned and led to Nora's room. She had been anesthetized to semi-consciousness and looked after by a nurse who, once again, was most reassuring. In spite of this I, for reasons that I still do not understand, insisted that Dr. Vogt, who was napping due to a previous overnight delivery, be awakened. He came out rubbing his eyes and mumbling at me in an annoyed, clearly P.O.'d manner.

I went around a corner to a pay phone and, just as I got through to the theater to warn them I would be late, I heard the wail of a newborn baby. Rushing to the room I saw John in all the glorious, gory details of a new arrival. It was, I was told, the first time there had been a delivery in a labor room, that John was in the process of being born when I arrived and I was, apparently, the only one who sensed it!

A mad dash to the theater followed and, considering the small time window I'd allowed, I miraculously made the downbeat of the overture.

An interesting post observation was that I thought perhaps Nora and I had achieved some sort of ESP connection but a friend suggested that, instead, *perhaps it was John and I*.

Lesson Seven - Natural Abilities versus Education, Nature versus Nurture

I've never been able to answer to my satisfaction just how or why some gifted humans obtain and sustain their remarkable accomplishments in arts, academia, business, athletics, research, invention et. al. particularly with respect to their talents, educational experience or lack thereof...and some do not!

John Alexis was a teenage amateur rock band singer brought to one of my recording

sessions by the producer to perform on a music commercial I'd composed for Cotton Club ginger ale. I dreaded spending expensive studio time and my precious efforts on what was likely to be a futile experiment with an amateur.

To my surprise and eventual joy, John was very talented and a quick study though he did not read music or had any educational background. He disdainfully told me when I asked, "I don't sing in no damned high school choir."

In order to get his performance I had to sing the parts to him line by line. Surprisingly, he almost immediately picked up what were some rather unusual and difficult musical challenges; singing the original and rather sophisticated melody but then overdubbing harmony and octave unisons. It was truly an amazing, *virtuoso* performance.

The first conclusion I got from this experience was that great talent trumps education and that there is an unfortunate aspect to this; to me it's quite likely that education too often defines the *difficulty* of learning any skill or achievement, that John just might not have been able to do what he did had he been subjected to an educational awareness of the great challenge to meet.

An addendum to this episode was that I was able to use John on several subsequent occasions but he somehow began to lose his wondrous, spontaneous natural ability.

Which led to my further conclusion; that indeed a measure of education and the discipline it requires, whether achieved formally or experientially, might be an important factor in ones ability to *sustain* a strong level of achievement.

Lesson Eight - Differing Points of View

Try as I may I will likely never fully understand or appreciate the fact that all of the *others* in my life do not see or accept my attitude, ideas or opinions as being the be-and-end-all of all on subjects I believe are true, that mine is *the final word*.

As an example; I could go on for hours about my "Private Lessons" and never fully understand that you, my captive audience, are not likely to share my joy in inventorying these magnificent chunks of wisdom.

I am not, however, totally devoid of compassion...and will end this egocentric verbal excursion *now*.
