

EPIPHANIES OF PURPOSE

My mother, who hated an empty wall, garden row, or canvas, taught me an early lesson in purpose: “Make the desert bloom.” She issued this directive a few days after my twelfth Christmas when I was whining about my “poverty.” A painter by avocation, she pulled out a balsa airplane model that I’d just received from my father in Korea who probably knew I wasn’t getting the chrome-plated pogo stick Santa had promised. Together she and I cut, glued, and pinned down one side of the fuselage of my Piper Cub, and before I realized it, I’d forgotten the pogo stick. Supper slowly called Mother to the kitchen, and as my plane rose from the plans, I was left with the “desert” blooming within.

My development as an individual for better or worse has been assisted by several people like my mother who consciously or unconsciously taught me lessons in purpose. These lessons often arrived like an epiphany and like bones were buried, but like the forgotten femur, the buried purpose continues to nourish even as it decomposes. My family and friends’ reasons for living became my own through a nuanced process of understanding and imitation.

As a military engineer, my father was pleased with my models; he thought they showed promise. Occasionally we built airplanes together and flew them in the park. During these excursions, Dad instilled in me what he called the “paradox of the arch”: counterintuitive as it sounds, the more weight a builder places on an arch, the stronger it becomes. I suppose there are limits to what one can stack upon the keystone, but I know that a well-made stone arch supporting a hundred pounds is much less stable than one supporting five times as much. My father, who had earned an Eagle Scout badge while delivering for a bakery and going to high school during the Depression, expected no less of me in better economic times. So I joined the Boy Scouts and took a job delivering a morning newspaper. I was pleased that my grades did not suffer although the time I had for playing football and baseball did. Still my arches did not flatten.

When I took a sick friend’s route on top of my own and my grades did suffer, I told my father of my academic woes. Dad revealed something I’d never suspected—he too had failed. At the University of Illinois, he’d been nominated for the ROTC “Honor Graduate” award at the start of his final semester. “Unfortunately,” Dad said, “a personality conflict developed between me and the instructor in my last required design course, and, to put it briefly, I flunked.” Unfortunately, the class was not being offered again until the following year, so he lost his scholarship and went home in disgrace. Dad’s commission was presented to his roommate, who thought himself lucky when he was sent to Bataan in the summer of 1939 to serve under Gen. MacArthur. Though this was the Depression, Dad found work cleaning large chemical drums at an East St. Louis refinery after being turned down by over ninety employers. Living at home, he saved his money, reread the textbook, went back to Champaign-Urbana in the spring of 1940, enrolled in a section of the course he needed but taught by a different instructor, made an “A,” and graduated. That summer with commission in hand, instead of being shipped to the Philippines, he was sent to Ft. Benning, Georgia, where he soon met and married the woman who would become my mother. Incidentally, Dad’s roommate was shot and killed on the infamous Death March while attempting to escape his Japanese captors. The tale gives me an unholy shiver every time I think about the handful of points in a grade book that meant the death of one man and my own existence. If nothing else, Dad’s failure has forced me to think hard about the judgments I pass on students.

When I did poorly in chemistry and failed my English class at Georgia Tech in 1959,

I chose to take a “time out”: I enlisted in the U.S. Army and asked to be sent to Germany. I had no interest in cleaning chemical drums, and the war we were currently fighting was considerably cooler than the one I was born into. Growing up, I had mistakenly assumed that I shared my father’s purpose, and I needed some time to determine what I wanted to do with my life. Why had I chosen engineering as my major when I loved poetry and fiction? At Tech, we had not read a single book that miserable quarter, and four misspellings in any written assignment for English spelled “F.” Though Mother and Dad were not happy with my decision to enlist, I knew it was best for me. As luck would have it, I landed in a remote corner of Germany within a stone’s throw of the badly rusted Iron Curtain. Here with a mosaic of college dropouts, I had ample time to read books of my choosing. My “military operational specialty” required that I intercept and record East German and Russian radar signals, but a uniformed ape could have performed those duties. With one hand on the toggle switch scanning the radar frequencies, I did my work. My other hand held a book, which occupied my mind. As a result, Remarque, Steinbeck, Spillane, and others became my companions, so much so that by the time I re-entered college, I made an “A” in freshman English with the unconscious assistance of my “friends,” who’d taught me to spell.

Though I was not the best soldier, four years of military duty did yield an enhanced sense of purpose, and I’ve been a proponent of national service ever since. Being married and expecting a child, however, produced an even greater change especially in my attitude toward academics. Looming responsibility like being shot at has a way of focusing one’s attention. My wife, Ingrid, worked until the day before giving birth to our son and returned to her bank job just four weeks later. Her dedication to our small family led me to conclude that I had no alternative but to perform. I know many men exploit their wives’ selfless commitment, but my parents had installed a Presbyterian conscience in me very early.

Besides resuming my education, I returned to the arms of the church, where I had long been my grandmother’s designated “tithe,” but mother church didn’t embrace me for long. I’d attended various German churches, but the language barrier was too high for me to hurdle. Since the mid-1950s, I had attended the First Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Georgia where the Rev. Robert McNeill was making national waves by inviting blacks to worship beside their white brothers and sisters. Before leaving for Germany, I read an article in *Look* that he’d written about his commitment to non-violent integration. After returning from Europe where I’d tracked the nascent Civil Rights movement in *The Stars and Stripes* and *Time*, I was eager to hear Rev. McNeill preach again, but I learned that the elders had dismissed him for turning the national spotlight on their congregation and his premature righteousness.

The latest issue at this church’s door was a proposal to use the Sunday-school wing as a day-care center during the week. The problem was that most of the families who might benefit from such a facility were African-American. Despite what Rev. McNeill had said about the church existing to give itself away, the proposal was dismissed, and I went with it. My sympathies were largely with the oppressed, thinking, as I did, that Martin Luther King was the apotheosis of courage and integrity. I was working with two black men at the plumbing wholesaler where I had a part-time job, and I knew how much inexpensive day care would have meant to their families. It was not to be, however, but from disappointment comes renewed purpose when one is young. I wasn’t ready to give up yet.

Just as my wife’s example of familial dedication turned my attention toward the books and a career, so did my Aunt Clarice re-energize my commitment to a career in education. Clarice was a first-grade teacher in Harris County, Georgia during the integration turmoil of the 1960s. School administrators in consultation with Clarice chose her to teach the first two black children admitted to a white school in that district since Reconstruction.

Court-ordered desegregation would be accomplished best, the administrators decided, if there was a minimum of fanfare, so she was ordered not to make a public issue of her black charges. All went well until one day Clarice held up the work of one of her black students as a model for the rest. When white parents learned from their children that not only were they being taught in the same classroom as black children, but that the penmanship of a black child was being used as an example of excellence, whites started withdrawing their progeny and sending them to the segregation academies that were sprouting like acorns under a mature oak. Clarice was reassigned to the county high school to teach home economics, but she always maintained that she did nothing wrong, and I concurred.

Justice, I came to understand, is a slippery concept; how it is defined and related to purpose depends on a number of greasy variables. Before their deaths, my wife's parents taught me that lesson in the stories I collected over their supper table. During the Second World War, my wife's mother, Ilse, had become a convert to civil disobedience while her husband was at the eastern front. Responsible for her two frail parents as well as two children, she asked the farmer who employed her occasionally if she could barter a few automobile parts for some potatoes since her cupboard and basement were bare. "You know the law, Ilse" said Herr Schultze. "Everything I grow must be sent to the front. God knows we don't want our boys to starve before they're shot. I can't sell you any potatoes, but you can steal some," said the farmer with a wink. And so on moonless nights during the harvest, Ilse, dressed in black, dodged the guards, and gathered all of Schultze's precious tubers that she could carry. She knew at least one soldier who wouldn't begrudge her "theft."

In December of 1947, Ilse's husband, Otto, returned to his family in Germany from a French war prison where he had learned lessons in self-reliance and expediency himself. The shortages of food and fuel that his family was suffering struck him hard, but he soon decided on a course of action: after planting some seeds in old jars in the kitchen, he sharpened his bow saw, pruned the overgrown orchard, and built a wagon of cherry, apple, and pear. As soon as the snow melted, he put out his seedlings and took his two children into the forest around the village of Wolsdorf. With his son stationed a hundred meters to his left and his daughter a hundred meters to his right, he threw a weighted string over a leafless branch. To the string, he tied a heavier rope and pulled it over the limb. When the moment was ripe, he snapped off the dead limb, hoping the forest master was far enough away not to hear the report. Although the medieval ordinance that only fallen deadwood could be gathered was still in effect, providing for his family outweighed the letter of an antiquated law. On the way home, he and the children gathered various berries, mushrooms, and beechnuts, which could be pressed for cooking oil.

As much as my family inspired my admiration, which in turn stoked the furnace of my purpose, I must credit the German governess my parents hired in 1946 for nurturing my interests in fields as diverse as bullfighting and anatomy. When I showed an interest in the Spanish national pastime, Annelore found someone in war-ravaged Rüsselsheim with a toreador costume and traded some coffee for it. My parents and I were expecting nothing more than a *papier-mâché* mask, but Annelore appeared with the whole nine yards. After some judicious cutting and stitching, she reduced the nine yards to something that would fit. I wore my gold-embroidered outfit complete with scarlet cape, hat, and sword on a single night of trick-or-treating, but I'll never forget the time Annelore took for me. When my mother asked her why she had gone to so much trouble, Annelore quoted a German proverb, "Begging your pardon, Frau Eisiminger, but a shroud has no pockets."

On another occasion, I casually mentioned that the human heart resembled a valentine. She promptly disabused me of that naïve assumption by taking me on her day off to the University of Heidelberg to see a plaster cast of a human heart as well as a student production of *Carmen!* I like to think that the seeds of her interests took root in me.

Whether I was captivated by bullfighting or anatomy, my curiosity has served me well over the years keeping my mind irrigated through seasons of drought. I've long loved to read outside my field much to the despair of department heads who have labeled me a generalist in a profession that prefers specialists. Long before I had a boss, however, I favored Aristolochus's rangy fox, which knew many things, and a bias against his coiled hedgehog, which knew one thing thoroughly. After a six-year stint as the assistant editor of *The Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, I decided that if I ever had to read another essay on *The Scarlet Letter*, it would be too soon. Hawthorne, however, still holds my interest, but it's a book of non-fiction this fox reads with greatest interest today.

Mario Livio's book *The Golden Ratio* is one that has recently renewed my confidence that humans do have an overarching purpose, and that our existence is part of a complex if opaque design. Livio, an astrophysicist, makes the astonishing point that the shape of the human inner ear follows the same logarithmic curve that pinecones, pineapples, chambered nautiluses, spiral nebulas, and countless other animate and inanimate things follow. Surely, that similarity is no coincidence. The creator has to be a mathematician, and while there are mad scientists, the force or spirit responsible for the Big Bang did create the universe we all share. After all, He, She, It, or They could have left it a colossal void. Instead, the "desert bloomed." Such creative generosity should be a purposeful inspiration to us all regardless of our faith.

In *The View from a Distant Planet*, another favorite, Harlow Shapley notes that nitrogen, like carbon and water, is essential to life. Moreover, each breath we draw contains a few atoms of this finite resource that Jesus and Mohammed drew into their righteous lungs. Each breath! That notion alone ought to impress everyone with our mutual dependence on the planet's finite resources. The air each of us depends on is the much-recycled breath that our grandchildren and their children will have to breathe for the rest of their lives.

Following the news of scientific research, especially the explorations of space by rocket and telescope, has made many of us more purposeful. I've never been beyond the troposphere myself, but having seen the disturbing pictures of our planet framed in black, I'm convinced that the heightened awareness of civilization's vulnerability is the program's greatest value. Many have understood this point staring in slack-jawed wonder at that blue and white gem displayed against the black velvet of space. Near my desk, I keep a picture taken by Voyager 1 of Earth as seen from beyond Pluto as the spacecraft departed the "snug" confines of our solar system in 1990. Needless to say, one must squint to see us. Now that's perspective!

I realized in college that God inspired Copernicus and Galileo as surely as He inspired Moses and Matthew. Indeed, the deity has inspired every one of us who has expressed the truth of experience in words, paint, marble, or music. Reading Philip Roth's short story "Defender of the Faith," for example, I was impressed by the inspired characterization of his protagonist, Sergeant Nathan Marx, a Jewish infantryman in World War II. After the war when he finally has a moment to reflect, Marx realizes that he had somehow managed to deny himself, as he says, "the posture of the conqueror—the swagger that I, as a Jew, might well have worn as my boots whacked against the rubble of Wesel, Münster, and Braunschweig."

I thought that trio of German cities sounded familiar, so I called my father, a veteran of Sgt. Marx's war. Indeed, Wesel is where Dad crossed the Rhine, was nearly killed, and won a Bronze Star. He survived, however, to lead his 660 black combat engineers through Münster and Braunschweig without losing a single man. Though thousands of men in the Ninth Army fought through those three cities, Dad never permitted himself or his men, including two Jewish officers, the "posture of a conqueror." When two of his men raped a British homemaker before the battalion crossed the Channel, Dad caught and sur-

rendered the suspects to the local authorities, who, after a trial had confirmed their guilt, hanged them. When the *Stars and Stripes* reported the executions, Dad promised his men that anyone who perpetrated a war crime would be prosecuted regardless of which side of the Channel it occurred. On his watch at least, no German women were raped and very few war souvenirs were collected. As he often has said, "We had a job to do, and we did it the best way we could."

Peace, however, did not end his commitment to the "job." In 1946, he volunteered to return to Germany, this time with his family, to rebuild much of what he and his fellows had destroyed. From 1948 to 1949, he helped build Berlin's Tegel Airfield to assist his former foes during the famed airlift. The love that I hold for my parents has only inspired purpose. With the legacy that I've inherited, how can I feel anything but pride and a determination not to disappoint?

Though Dad maintains he was just doing his job, I'm convinced that he was acting on the universal principle of "doing for others." My father never was much of a churchgoer, and his parents were guarded Midwesterners put off by the merest whiff of the didactic. Nevertheless by some moral osmosis, the result of being part of a large family in a loving home, he learned this most basic of lessons: until we know otherwise, the other person deserves our respect, or, as Desmond Tutu once put it, "Whether you are Christian, Muslim, or Jew, the God in me greets the God in you."

My own optimistic sense of purpose was buoyed long ago by reading that every major religion in the world shares the same Golden Rule. What a stunning and hopeful agreement! Emerson, I suppose, would say that each inspired founder tapped into the mind of God where absolute truth resides. I figure if Confucius, Buddha, Rabbi Hillel, Zoraster, Jesus, Mohammed, Emerson, and my parents did it, the rest of us can too.

CREATION MYTH

Long ago and far away,
a young insurgent
stole into a print shop
and placed a nuclear bomb
beneath the type cabinet.

Mirabile dictu!

Some thirteen billion years later,
colons, commas, and letters in all cases
settled heavily back to earth
from *A* to *zyxt*,
and Oxford's great dictionary
was set.