

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

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One Day You Are Going to Write About Us

I

The metals were never displayed and hardly ever discussed but we all knew there were many, including two purple hearts and a bronze star. When people outside the family learned of his time in Vietnam, they would ask if he served multiple tours. No. He spent one active, physically and emotionally damaging, year in that country. My mother would always say, "your father was a different person before Vietnam." To sooth his body and soul, he took to self-medication, which quickly spiraled out of control. After countless visits to the VA, he was certified disabled and started seeing a host of professionals to help with the various ailments. The physical therapy certainly helped but only moderately. What truly changed everything, for all of us, was when he joined Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA would provide the basis of true sobriety. It also became the center of his world, as he would attend meetings every night and built an entire social life around the "Friends of Bill." The dedication was so deep that my adolescent years were spent in "open meetings" while my mother was at Al-anon. However, this level of commitment was not enough; when I was 13 years old, my father moved to a small, studio apartment in the city to be close to a 24-hour meeting spot.

II

The studio was in the basement of a 5-story walk-up brownstone with access through a brick open arch hallway on the left side of the building. It was a mere 400 square feet that housed a couch, galley kitchen, double sized bed, and a desk. Three small windows opened to the courtyard so very little light entered. Although the studio was small, it became the epicenter of action for dozens of people before and after AA meetings. There was a constant gathering of individuals talking about sobriety. But the level of time in the program varied for the studio dwellers and some needed more help than just a conversation. Soon after moving in, my father purchased a room divider and the studio quickly became a bed and breakfast of sorts that was open to anyone that needed a place to stay. Over the twenty-five years that my father lived in the studio, countless people stayed on the couch or on an air mattress on the floor – some for a few nights, some for a few months, and some for a few years. It was commonplace to step over people to turn the lights on in the morning. It was well accepted that dinner would include whatever "friends" were assembled. It was understood that any belongings left in the studio were to be shared wholly.

As an only child, I accepted that our relationship would come with a stipulation: to be part of my father's life meant being inextricably linked to the studio dwellers. Accepting this fate meant building an existence that revolved around being an insider but not a "friend of Bill." This role was

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both comforting and confusing. There was a certain sense of relief knowing that my father was always surrounded by the only people he believed could help soothe the inner demons. But it was confounding to hear a world view that always centered on the individual. There was very little talk about politics, film, sports, family, or food if it did not relate back to how someone was progressing through the program. For instance, inevitably all dinner conversation made its way to dissecting what people were versus what they did. It seemed that everyone was something else other than their job and the job was holding them back from achieving true spiritual development. The electrician was a saxophonist; the waiter was a lead singer; the insurance agent was an actress; the cab driver was a day trader; the window installer was a hairstylist; the fish distributor was an actor; etc. etc. etc. It was difficult as a teenager to understand how someone could define themselves in a way that was not what they were paid for or what was visible and present to the public.

Of all the dwellers, there were a few that stood out, including the financial journalist that was a record broker. The financial journalist rose through the ranks during his career to work at some of the most prestigious magazines in the U.S. None of that mattered though. All this Texas transplant wanted to discuss was collecting and “redistributing” rare records. My conversations with him took on new meaning when while a young PhD student, I helped the financial journalist clean out a dangerously cluttered apartment. After packing and carrying dozens of large contractor bags full of garbage down five flights, it took a month to organize and catalogue the records littered throughout the apartment. Toward the end of the project, the financial journalist looked over and said, “One day you are going to write about us.”

“Me? Why? This is not my life”, I answered.

“You see [me as] a journalist, but I moved to New York to be part of the music scene. Remember, the job does not make the person,” the financial journalist said. “It just so happens that everyone in your father’s studio is willing to talk aloud about how their passions do not always align with what they do.”

That particular conversation lasted only a few minutes but every time we crossed paths after that, the financial journalist would call out, “One day you are going to write about us.”

III

After his body and mind broken down entirely, my father returned to the suburbs. The space he occupied was again a basement but this time it was in the family home he had left all those years earlier. This basement was a stark contrast to the studio. There were multiple rooms, ample light, and areas for different living spaces. As he lost the mental and physical capacity to host dwellers for prolonged periods, lots of them would make day trips and convene just as they did in the studio. Little by little, many of the dwellers stopped making the 20-minute train ride and eventually only a small circle remained, including the electrician, the window install-

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er, and the waiter, to name a few. The financial journalist was one of these dwellers and during each visit would repeat his mantra to me, "One day you are going to write about us." Life continued on this way for several years until the financial journalist passed away...followed closely by my father.

All of the dwellers are now long gone. What is left are memories of individuals that chose a different path than most of society. As a tenured faculty member, I have spent years writing about media and communication. This work has been strictly rooted in a formulaic discipline of data collection and analysis. Surveys, content analysis, social network analysis and natural language processing are the writing methods that I've used up until now. All the while, in the back of my mind, sits the words of a financial journalist/record broker. It took decades for me to come to the understanding that we cannot be defined by what we do – so here I sit, a professor that is a storyteller or at least wants to be one. "One day" is now.