

16th Storyworth: What Inspires You?

Let's start with a premise; EVERYBODY suffers adversity, to greater and lesser degrees, in their lives. Some people's response is to whine about it, and others to be more stoic. I make no claim to be quiet; I am an American, so bitching is not merely a right, it's an OBLIGATION. And while I am sure there are plenty of people who can attest to my own whining, I doubt many of them would assert it lasted for long. I prefer to simply get on with it.

So when it comes to inspiration, I tend to be impressed by those who, despite their own adversities, nonetheless endeavor to improve the lives of others, and at the very least try to CAUSE as little adversity for others as possible. I like to think that one of the reasons I had a successful career was because my approach to getting MY work done was to recognize that I rarely if ever actually DID it myself – I accomplished through the achievements of others, many of whom might just as reasonably have fought me most of the way there.

So in general terms, my inspiration comes first from a sense of a worthwhile goal; defined as trying to leave the world better off for my having been there. It must be acknowledged here that my career was essentially that of eliminating the need for others' careers. As a Production Engineer, my primary role was that of reducing the cost of whatever we were producing, as well as to improve the product for usability, reliability and function.

Part of why my Ex, Lynne, suggested my moniker of "Idea Man" was because I was creative in thinking about solutions to issues, and usually not merely in a linear fashion which would only address the specifics of the moment, but whether there was not a fundamentally better way to do things in the first place. When you consider my patents, you can see they were intended as solutions to specific problems. But those led to the seed of asking whether there were not a better way to trap the mouse than perhaps even a "better mousetrap".

And that inspired me to think sufficiently outside the box that many of my ideas could have qualified for patent status had their ultimate beneficiaries and owners been willing to invest in their legal form. I would suggest that occurred for as few as only one in twenty concepts I developed, and it is with some sadness that I recognize that many of those which I conceived never made it to fruition, for a variety of reasons. But I would also surmise that most creative people have felt that many of THEIR best ideas somehow never made the cut either, so I feel no real uniqueness in those results, nor ultimate discontent at their doing so.

For me, creativity is an "applied science". When I consider people like Gordon Lightfoot, Bob Dylan, Albert Einstein, and Carly Simon, I am amazed at their ability to combine abstract thought with concrete concepts like music theory, to result in the volume of works for which they are all famous. While I love much of their music and ideas, I cannot imagine where their spark comes from to start the process in the first place. For me, solving a specific problem was always at the heart of my thinking, and it was only the free association to which that led which resulted in the oft unrelated concepts which I developed.

I suppose, then, that one of the people I most admired was my Uncle Dan, who was also an "applied" guy, although I would bet better than even money he could have been just as creative in a broader sense. As a child he had polio, which left him in leg braces like those of FDR. And, like FDR, he did not accept the "world around him" as being the limit of what was possible for him. While I did not have daily interactions with him, and most of my response is based on what I came to understand only after the fact, his approach was certainly inspiring. He was, I am sure, well schooled in my Grandparents' admonition that civil service was not merely an admirable career, but a preferable one in many cases because of the relative security of the role once you passed the "tenure" point, because they had seen the effects of the Great Depression on so many in private industry, while they had personally been secure because of working in government.

And with his “handicap”, I am sure his job gave him a sense of value which he might have not been granted by society as a whole, based on the prejudices of the time. My Dad was not the source of whatever mechanical skills I have, nor my Mom, although she had more than my Dad. I believe it was my Grandpa Drout who showed talents in that arena, and I am sure those rubbed off on Dan. But I also believe that true creativity is the ability to take disparate ideas and fuse them together in a combined form which provides for usability in a way perhaps not previously envisioned. A classic concrete example is the use of dish detergent to help trees grow faster because of the surfactant (thinning) characteristics of detergent, which thereby allowed the trees to better use whatever water was available at their roots, which supported faster absorption.

So Dan took a concept of which I doubt he was the originator; hand controls for a car, and applied them to a car which had unique properties which could address his specific needs, thereby providing for his individual liberation, which is one of the reasons I consider the personal automobile the greatest expression of personal liberty there is, because it allows you to be somewhere you could not otherwise be, essentially at a whim. However he became aware of them, Dan took three BMW Isettas and took advantage of their unique design feature of a front clamshell opening which left a flat floorboard at just the right height, and swung the driver controls out of the way in doing so. That enabled Dan to pull himself up onto the front bench seat and pull the clamshell front closed, which left him behind the wheel of a vehicle with a manual gearbox, to which he'd had hand controls adapted which allowed him to drive the cars as easily as I could drive an unmodified one.

He represented a “textbook” definition of what inspires me – dealing with your own adversities while moving on to be a productive member of society, and imposing as little adversity on others as possible. The best definition of a “good citizen” I think I will ever see. Couple that with intelligence and determination, and you see a person who could represent an inspiration to anyone. He certainly was to me ;-)

He is by no means the ONLY person who inspires me. I am regularly astounded to learn, typically via PBS, of people who achieve extraordinary things while seeming in so many ways to be as ordinary as it gets. And I think that is why my caveat of “doing as little negative to others as possible” is a prerequisite for inspiration as well. Unfortunately there have been LOTS of people who have led extraordinary lives, but when examined in total can be seen to have abused others in whatever they have achieved, which detracted greatly from their value totality in my mind. And note that it is NOT that they might have had egos; I doubt that George Marshall was much of a wallflower. But he demonstrated a sense of awareness of and empathy for others which I admire.

My career, in essence, required me to eliminate the jobs of people. But I think the vast majority of those so affected recognized that HAD to be my role, so only a small minority actually resented it or took it personally. But that was also why I tried wherever possible to first learn from them what THEIR daily problems looked like, and tried to provide solutions for them in concert with seeking their cooperation in doing MY job. One manifestation of that attitude was my insistence on buying donuts for group meetings, and assuring I knew who liked what and making sure their favorite would be available when they participated. I believe that made many of my projects implement far smoother than they otherwise might, and if I presume the psychology I used, it was to recognize that I gave their egos visibility they might otherwise never have seen.

And I was certainly inspired by those who seemed to recognize it and expressed appreciation for it ;-)

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