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When the mentor's work is unread, he still pays the tab at the restaurant

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The following is taken from a work-in-progress, a collection of essays.

"I just admire your writings so much," murmured the voice on the other end of the line. "Is it OK to say that? Is that the right word?"

Laboring under a yearning to gush, my caller seemed to sense that gush might lack appropriate dignity; yet, in a delicate balancing act, he figured that a light sprinkle could get the desired result from the consumer. I was the designated consumer, an "author."

He was the son-in-law of a woman I like. It was my duty to hear him out. "So tell me," he continued, "how do you get editors to publish your oo-ver?" He had read the word "oeuvre" someplace and understood that it was the polite way to refer to a writer's work.

Dissonant emotions stirred. I wished to answer: Oh. I pay editors and critics. I send cases of champagne to their home addresses. A rumble of disagreeableness began to roil my soul, making a music like the concluding storm of "A Night on Bald Mountain." But instead of surrendering, I reminded myself of my friend, his mother-in-law, and said with the practiced eloquence of a person who has lived by words, especially active verbs, for many years now: "Ummm ..."

"I know, I know, you don't have to tell me," he said. "They know you from before. You're tried and true, like a name brand. I fully understand." Perhaps he didn't realize that I was probably published once for the first time. I had been an unknown entity and still haven't met most of my editors. For me, God invented mail; and in due course the children of the Lord invented the telephone, fax, and e-mail, not to mention couriers on ponies. Back in history, for example, "Betty Crocker" was an unknown brand name. My name will never be that famous.

"Tell me," I inquired, seeking to express mild curiosity, a step on the path toward helping me help him by understanding how I fit into his life's plan. "What have you read of mine?"

"So you've been writing forever, gradually built yourself up through the years?" he asked.

"Tell me."

He sighed. He was patient with artistic temperament, since he had one of his own. I waited, letting my breath sound into the telephone; not plagiarizing his sigh, but emitting a soupcon of pushiness. He said: "Haven't actually read anything of yours personally, but I've googled you."

"Pardon?" "On my computer. I search-engined you up. That Google is a terrific service -- " My entire oo-ver was at his command with a few hits of the keys and wiggles of the mouse.

" -- and I see you're well-respected and, and, and you must be ..." What were the additional concepts he was groping for? "Respected ... make a good living ... work from home and you don't have to go to an office. That's what I want to do with my oo-ver.

"Just today I came home from listening to my boss telling me what to do, but now I'm my own boss. I write and write until I feel too sleepy or my wife, Bonnie, complains I'm not listening to her when all I want to be is a distinguished American literary figure like, you know ..."

"Yes, yes, thanks."

All through history, writers, editors and teachers have criticized, stimulated, and therefore encouraged younger ones. Saul Bellow, reading early stories of mine, sometimes said. "Put it through the loom again," meaning revise and expand and contract; or: "Your characters are still in Immigration," meaning that not all of the necessary forms had been filled out, go back to work. Both the jolt of criticism and the resulting thought were marvelous gifts.

Perhaps there was a wise actor who said to Shakespeare, " 'To be' is a nice optimistic remark, but how about if you darken it a bit, because life is difficult, and add '... or not to be.' " Or there was a geriatric bard who waved his invisible arms at poor blind Homer, suggesting that Apollo was a strong character who needed to be fleshed out: "Make it 'Far-flying Apollo,' babe."

The contemporary term for this process is mentoring. I owe a debt in memory of those who helped me. I hitchhiked thousands of miles when I was a runaway pre-beatnik lad; now I pickup the occasional hitchhiker although it turns out that some of them are hitch-hookers or outpatients -- very few future novelists. I concentrated my mind on my friend of fond memory, the googler's mother-in-law. "OK, let's talk," I said.

We met. It's the duty of an older professional in the mentoring posture to pay for the coffee; this didn't cut too deeply into my children's inheritance because we met at a sincere artist's retro-beatnik funky hangout, not Starbuck's. In preparation, he had scrambled his hair (an artist with his head in the clouds) and carried with him a portfolio stuffed with printout. He had beseeching eyes. I was ready to mentor, but not yet ready to let him slide the portfolio toward me.

"Since we spoke on the phone last week," I inquired with the kind of curiosity that never dies, especially in an author, "have you refreshed your sense that you and I might be" -- I searched for the right language, but tumbled helplessly into pomposity -- "on the same page?"

"I'm a very busy man," he said. "My day job, plus all my spare time writing." He cast another fond but beseeching glance toward the overflowing portfolio, which seemed to be inching its way across the table by some inner power of its own.

I tapped it back by some outer power of my right arm, firmed up by regular morning calisthenics. "So I guess you haven't read one of my actual texts?"

"Not personally. Like I explained, I've got a lot on my plate these days."

That was OK with me; or at least OK enough while, like the gathering clouds of the thunderstorms of my Midwestern boyhood, rage accumulated in my vengeful heart -- this is the typical inept poetic strophe of a confirmed author who doesn't need precision anymore because he has already arrived in the marketplace.

The hunger for encouragement never dies unless an artist sinks into megalomania, some do, of course, and I omit examples because anonymous insults hurt less. I have friends who give me good counsel; we give each other counsel. But the hunger for help which intends to target success through magic contact -- no, no, no. My new friend figured he could save time by punching his keys, performing the act of google, working the telephone -- by efficient, post-modern basking. Sometimes I fear the capacity for malice has diminished in me, but evidently this isn't a serious problem. Now I fear that the capacity for compassion may be failing.

I tried to explain, commanding myself in sentence fragments: Cold world out there ... all here together for a brief time on Earth. ... Ramp up the empathy!

Minor discomforts are easily forgiven. For example, most writers don't refer to themselves as "author," just as no one but a newly hatched lawyer, the yolk still sticking to his feathers, would refer to himself as an "attorney-at-law." I hope and pray my local politicians don't refer to themselves as "statesmen" or "statespersons." (It feels OK to say "writer," "poet," "novelist," "journalist" -- there are many available choices.) I was willing to educate my googler on tasteful lingo.

Oh, I explained so much. I received eager nods of agreement. He appreciated my pedantry.

The next day, my googler wrote me a letter asking for forgiveness, dipping his quill into the pool of abjectness (another excessive metaphor, dear reader). He stated that his greatest desire and, indeed, newest goal in life was to read one of his favorite author's oo-vers. Which would I recommend? Remembering, of course, that he's a very busy man.

So which was the best?

I suggested by phone that he not ask a parent which of his children is the best. My googler was growing wiser by the minute. Byte by byte, he was learning about metaphor and other tricks of the literary trade. "You mean, like a book is your child and you want all of them to have the best things in life, like a best-seller and an interview on Terry Gross?"

Something like that. I wondered if he used Terry Gross on National Public Radio as his example instead of Oprah because, due to my pedagogy, he was heading upscale, elite-wise.

Whatever.

"So when do we meet again?" he said. "This time, the coffee's on me. Unless you want to have lunch?"

Isn't that what authors do?

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