TABLESPOON OF PANIC

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What has always seemed most amazing, fascinating to me over these fifty-some years is how often wonderful things—ideas, notions, relationships—sneak up and pounce without any warning. Seems like a perfectly normal day, breakfast as usual, not too much bran, coffee strong and thick, and then “Shazamm!” I rarely see it coming. There was, for instance, that morning at the beginning of the 1994-95 school year.

The summer just completed had been terrific. I had wandered the trails in Idaho’s White Clouds and dabbled my toes in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. From bear, elk, and Castle Peak to frolicking Orca whales, what a treat. What a marvelous time of adventure. What a disastrous distraction! Plainly, I was no more in a mood or state of mind to bound into a school year loaded with pep assemblies, fire drills, and obscene graffiti than I was to tackle another season of ninth-grade English and Introduction to Theatre.

Theatre, of course, always presents its own set of difficulties in education. Having taught the subject for more than twenty years and worked for many more as a professional actor, director, and so forth, I had come to find the beginning of each school year to be less than exciting. Though my students were often very excited (the word manic comes to mind), I found that I had to work harder and harder to generate the kind of enthusiasm that would carry me through more than nine months of classes and numerous major stage productions. And then, right on cue, along came “Job Alike Day.”

In my school district, one of the regular events at the start of each year, during that week of meetings, discussions, sweep-ups, hang-ups before the students swarm back into the halls, is an item called “Job Alike Day.” The title would give the impression that all of those teachers who share similar assignments in the high schools and middle schools of the district would get together and, well, do something. That certainly is the intent. Hiding behind this label, however, is a desperation, a certain queasy uneasiness hatched in the hearts of those similarly assigned teachers at the thought of the nine-plus months rolling off into the distance like ocean swells piling up ahead of a broiling blow.
“How about a cup of coffee?"

“There’s no coffee!"

“But—who’s in charge here?"

“That stuff? That’s not coffee."

Not a great start. Then came the time to share plans for the coming year, to talk of productions and possibilities, to visit old desires and invent new fantasies. One of the other teachers, a good friend of mine, began to talk about a scheme that he had considered a number of years before, a vision that had tantalized him but which he had never been able to pursue.

“I’ve been thinking about doing a thing with my kids that would put them in touch with senior citizens, I mean really old folks. I’ve been thinking about a sort of interview kind of project. Something like that.”

For some unexplainable reason, having something to do with a tablespoon of panic and a cup of genuine interest, my mind immediately tackled the notion with gusto. Now here was something that would be exciting for students and teacher. I asked my friend if he would mind if I considered his project myself. He was more than happy to share and was not the least bit certain he would actually get to it himself that year.

I did nothing about it that year, either. But the following year, having never forgotten about the interview project, I mustered my Advanced Theatre class to the task. Only modest success resulted. The class did get through the interview process, but by then I had decided to charge from interviews with senior citizens all the way to essays to monologues to an actual piece of theatre. The whole undertaking turned out to be far more time consuming than I had anticipated. Into a box labeled “Try Again Another Day” I filed notes and partially completed essays. But I never forgot about it.

It was, in fact, a bright morning in April 2000 when eleven senior citizens from the local senior center arrived at our high school. I had contacted the gentleman in charge of activities at the center two weeks before and asked him if he might have a few seniors who would be willing to work on a project with a group of my students. He said that he would certainly “run the idea by some folks” and get back to me. He did, and those who agreed to give it a try ranged in
age from their seventies to the late nineties. Four men and seven women, they had volunteered to entrust the stories of their lives into the hands of twenty-two high school students, eleven two-person teams. We are talking serious courage here. To say, however, that they and the high schoolers awaiting them were a bit nervous would be to miss the truth by a fair distance.

The initial interview session was scheduled to last just under an hour and a half. For some it lasted nearly two hours. Afterwards, both groups involved, the senior citizens and the high school students, admitted to fear and trepidation. I walked a quartet of elderly women to their automobile. One of them grabbed my arm and confessed: "Oh, we were frightened. All we hear about today's young people is how violent they are, always using drugs. Frightening! But these children are wonderful."

Back in the classroom/auditorium when I returned, a gaggle of students swamped me with similar feelings: "Oh, man, oh, that was so scary. Old people are so scary. I never thought we'd be able to just sit and talk like that. They were great. I'm so glad we got to do this. Oh...."

And that was just the beginning.

The project, eventually titled "Way Back When—The Stories of Our Lives," required fairly sophisticated techniques on the part of the students involved. To meet the goal of successful interviewing, I introduced them to Studs Terkel's book Working. Terkel, never one to pull a punch or disappoint, based his book upon a wide-ranging series of interviews held with working people of all classes and descriptions across the United States, from newspaper carriers to prostitutes to corporate executives. From these interviews he wove a fascinating tapestry of life. The book that resulted was later adapted to the stage and presented as a musical, with lyrics from the everyday soul.

In preparation for the first step in this process, each team of students designed a set of questions with one goal in mind: to allow the interviewee the opportunity to "reveal" him/herself. Fearing a fairly trite and superficial list of queries ("Where were you born?" "How many children do you have?" "What's your favorite breakfast cereal?") , I pushed and prodded the teams to invent questions that would demonstrate their understanding of Terkel's keen ability to inquire without prying.
Remarkably enough, the process worked quite well. A few of the “revealing” questions presented to one of the gentlemen—a most charming and delightful soon-to-be eighty year old—were these:

* Do you have a favorite song/poem that describes you in some way?
* What are your fears at this time of your life?
* Who are your heroes?
* Have the dreams of your youth come to be?
* What makes you want to get up and face the new day?

From the questions came biographical essays. I insisted that the students make their essays personal, insightful, charming, intelligent, profound, and exciting. They had to discover the words needed to encapsulate the spirits of those who had entrusted their stories to them. While much of the information gathered through the questioning was included in the essays, a great deal was culled out in the writing process and included only by inference. The culling process was in itself an important part of the learning that took place.

The most interesting part of this project, at least for me, turned out to be the insight and work necessary to go from the essay section to the monologue form. The model that I gave them for this part of their writing was Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology*. This Pulitzer Prize-winning work began as a long series of poems, each one giving a first person account of the life and death of a citizen in Spoon River, Illinois, from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century. The good citizens come back one at a time to recount important events that dragged each of them through the times of their lives. In the late 1950’s, Charles Aidman and his friends took these poems, chose nearly seventy of the pithier and more poignant, and tied them together with appropriate music of the era into an excellent theatrical piece.

An important lesson I had hoped my students would learn in the project was that what people say *about* themselves in essay form can be extremely different from the actual words of dialogue that come from their lips when they are allowed to speak *of* and *for* themselves. A great deal of the essay has to be translated into mannerisms, inflections, gestures, pauses, sighs. And, of course, much that appeared in

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the essays will simply be part of the background of life carried inside each character.

Making the transfer from essay to monologue presented a number of interesting problems for the young writers. This is how one team took information about their interviewee, Molly, and "monologueized" it:

**Essay**

Her senior year (in high school) was described as the best. There was a total of 52 students in the whole school and there were only 13 seniors that year due to many dropping out and getting jobs to help out their families. The senior sneak was another great adventure in her life. The senior sneak is when all of the seniors in the school skipped school for a whole week and went on a retreat of some sort. Molly's class went to the Lake of the Ozarks. All 13 seniors went. It was beautiful and fun. There was a hang-out there that was a little restaurant, inside was a jukebox and great food, not to mention the boy who worked behind the counter. She thinks his name was Charles, but she didn't seem too sure. They talked a lot that week and at the end, when she told him good-bye, he gave her an 1846 penny and told her it was good luck. She still carries it around to this very day.

**Monologue**

*(Stands LC, turns and moves DC, looking for something throughout monologue.)* Oh, I know it's here somewhere. I just had it. Wait till you see it. It's the neatest thing. Oh, I've just got to find it. There goes my luck. I just got back from my senior sneak week, and I can't find it. Well, we went to the Lake of the Ozarks, all thirteen seniors of the class went, and with only fifty-two students in the whole school, our sneak week left the school pretty empty. Not that I'm a bad student. I've got the third best grades in the county. High school's great.

Not only did the two interviewing writers take essay information and turn it into believable verbal language, they accomplished another most important dramatic bit/device. They found a piece of mysterious physical work that would carry them through the entire monologue. This was most gratifying to observe. They took the reality of the gift of the penny and used it to tie their piece into a neatly unified
package. Only at the very end of the monologue is the object of Molly’s opening search revealed.

I’m going to miss life here a lot. The games, like the hanky game, and ice-skating, and swimming…. Wait, how did I get on this subject anyway? Oh, yes, my penny. *(Finds penny on floor after searching throughout the monologue.)* 1846. That boy from my senior sneak week gave it to me. I’m going to keep it forever.

After the monologues had been written, rewritten, rewritten, and then finally rewritten, the experience that the class had signed up for arrived. From the outset, one of the team partners had been designated as the eventual actor and the other as the eventual director. My hope and presumption were that since both had been involved in the interviewing and the writing, both would have developed a keen awareness of the senior with whom they had been dealing. Each would know what the person looked like, how he/she sounded and moved, the underlying attitudes inherent in the person’s life. I saw, in fact, that both actor and director were able to bring personal understanding to the task of turning an interview, an essay, a written monologue into a believable stage presentation. The person they had interviewed was important to them. They wanted that person to be well represented and clearly understood.

The rehearsal period consumed nearly two weeks of determined work. During this time, each team contacted its senior citizen and told him/her of the progress being made, asked additional questions on presentation, informed the senior just when the performance was to be held, and invited the senior to be present and to bring a guest.

And then, on June 2, 2000, a wonderful event took place at the senior center. Two very unlike groups of people, dissimilar in ages and histories, coalesced in a large multipurpose room—tattooed with banners for the next week’s country-style barbecue and cluttered with remnants of the morning’s card party—into a joyful journey’s end. I, for one, was deeply moved, gratified, brought to tears. Since that day in late August of 1994, I had imagined this moment and wondered if it would ever come to be. And now, finally, here it was. A twining together of hearts and souls with insights and devotion that could sing a freshly spirited song for years to come. Amazing.
In a note after the performance, Audrey—one of those interviewed, written about, rehearsed, and performed—wrote to me:

Dear Mr. Reinbold,

Please convey my congratulations and thanks to your students for their presentation of the stories they gleaned from the interviews with seniors. Especially to my interviewers. I’m sure the rest of the seniors represented felt the same.

Again, thank you for bringing young people into our world and helping them to know what our lives were like “way back when.”

What has always seemed most amazing, fascinating to me over these fifty-some years is how often wonderful things—ideas, notions, relationships—sneak up and pounce without any warning. I will certainly never forget those magic, blossom-scented days in the spring of 2000, and I’m quite sure that those seniors and young people will hold the moments precious forever. From 1994 I had thought that this would be a fine project, a good notion, but its depth moved my soul and surprised my aging heart. I had been in education far too long to be stunned by something as blatantly straightforward and simply human.

But then, of course, I rarely see it coming.