

Coming Through!

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Screwarch Bridge
(*State II*).
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TERRY WAS ABOUT AS BLAND A STUDENT in my freshman composition class as you can imagine. But I do remember his response to an in-class, warm-up assignment, which was to write his own obituary for the newspaper. “Your death will occur fifty years from today,” I told the class. “What will be said of you?” This assignment was supposed to help students to visualize with specific details, but I also wanted them to realize that they created their lives everyday and to consider how they could live more intentionally now so that at the end they would have something to look back on with pride. Contemplating one’s death should motivate a person to seize each day instead of letting life simply happen.

Most students dutifully cited their future children and grandchildren, future travels to exotic places, and future life trophies. But Terry wrote:

On May 6, Terry S_____ of 124 Walnut Street died from a lack of excitement. He suffered from the affliction his entire life, and doctors stated they had never known such a case to last seventy-one years. He is survived by no one and leaves behind only an old gray house that is the neighborhood eyesore.

His accomplishments were few and dull. He was the fore-

man of the litter-cleaning crew at the local minor league baseball stadium. A company spokesperson estimated he lifted 1.5 million times his own weight in peanut shells while employed there. He woke every morning except his final one, helped an average number of old ladies across busy streets and once shined the shoes of a drunk. He had nearly completed his college degree when he realized he did not know why he should bother, so he quit. No memorial services are planned.

I was moved by Terry's honesty and vividness and complimented him for saying what many people vaguely sense but seldom admit. I also spoke to him about his deep resignation. He was not upset, certainly did not seem depressed in a clinical sense, for he arrived each class on time, prepared and groomed and was neither downcast nor glassy-eyed. His was a philosophical vision of the blah-ness of human lives and the mundane ends to which we whirled in time's eddies. He saw clearly the half-lives most people live and accepted such a fate as one accepts a sunset or rainy day. A handful of people might shoot up like rockets from the crawling mass of humanity and light up the darkness for a moment, but he knew he would not.

It was hard to deny that his vision accurately described many lives, but I rebelled at someone young, intelligent, and healthy being so devoid of hope, an adventuresome spirit and zest. It seemed to me that by anticipating boredom, he caused it. He ought to be leaping into the years ahead like a deer on a May morning, not burrowing into mud like a toad expecting to wait out winter. I told him, "You can do more with your life."

"How?"

"You can finish your degree. You're quite capable."

"I know," he agreed. "Then I'll pick up pieces of paper instead of peanut shells."

I laughed at his tartness. "Do you have a girlfriend, Terry?"

"Mmm. Sure."

"Wouldn't she mourn you?"

"I guess so—for a while."

So it went. After we talked, he returned to being the quiet guy near the back of class and wrote nice 'B' papers the rest of the way—enough to do well but nothing that would incite the professor to request another chat. He passed through my life over twenty years ago and never contacted me later, nor have I heard a word about him. I saved his paper and my scribbled notes, and sometimes I wonder how he has made out now that he approaches the halfway point to that possible obituary. Did he graduate? Had life been as dreary and flat as he predicted, or did he discover something worthy of passion? Did he still think enthusiasm was a hollow reed that would blow over in the first storm? I'm sure he would be surprised to know that of all the

other students in that comp class who have vanished into my memories' dark crevices, I carry only him with me, for his one flight above the ordinary.

In college as in life, vitality and resignation do not seem predictable based on logical cause and effect. Consider a second student. James's legs looked dehydrated in his wheelchair. They'd never leaped, run, or even stood. But James wore work boots laced to the top as though he were prepared to haul skids onto the loading dock at a moment's notice. He operated his wheelchair like a forklift, zigzagging through crowded halls with reckless abandon, ramming doors open. Students stepped aside smartly when he whizzed past, his head tilted forward as if into the wind. A few grumbled about the handicapped "maniac." When he wheeled into class, he bumped chairs as he K-turned.

Sheltered and isolated at home for most of his thirty-two years, James had been at his mother's mercy. She loved, pitied, protected, and controlled him. Regardless of current hairstyles, Mother cut James's hair short and slicked it back, since he could not lift his arms high enough to brush stray hairs from his eyes. He loved his parents but was imprisoned by their care and fought furiously to create an identity for himself. He refused to be the person his parents saw. They were afraid to let him enter the world and only reluctantly allowed him to attend a "center" three days a week to learn "life skills." That whetted his desire, and James lobbied for six years before they finally allowed him to enroll in college.

As most therapists will tell you, the expectations and encouragement of my first student's family, friends, and high-school teachers should have been first-class tickets to success, yet all Terry saw were peanut shells. He used only half his effort and even less of his potential passion to pursue these expectations. On the other hand, James had to smash down his parents' and teachers' walls (he had no friends). He should have gone nowhere without encouragement and a support group. Yet he surged with enthusiasm, and his energy seemed far greater than his flesh's capacity. It makes me wonder if "You can't" is a stronger motivator for some people than "You're supposed to." Can crisis, solitude, and struggle be more our allies than we think?

Since he could not raise a hand high when he wanted to speak, James signaled with a looping waggle of his head. As he spoke, his head flopped backward, then caught and slowly settled forward before jerking backward again. His voice clacked, not in a stutter, but with excess precision that sharply enunciated each letter. His ideas were equally meticulous; he supported each point with evidence to make himself invincible against retorts. If another student disagreed

with his viewpoint, James cut the argument to shreds, often adding that certain positions were “id-i-o-tic” or “lame.” I had to remind him to be courteous. I’m not sure he really understood the concept of courtesy—perhaps because life had shown him so little.

I worried that he set destructively high standards for himself that would poison his future. ‘A’ minuses were weak; ‘A’s were ordinary; he needed ‘A’ pluses to repair his broken world. More often than not, that is what he earned in his classes. His writing was not imaginative, for he scorned metaphors as silly fluff, but his style was direct, bold, grammatically perfect, and hard-hitting. He conveyed information and argued cases with overwhelming evidence. One day I heard a classmate who had just been skewered by James mumble in the hall, “Sure, he’s smart; what else can he do but study?”

The blind harshness of the comment shocked me. Didn’t this boy see what James had done? Didn’t he see that we were *all* handicapped in our own ways and that James was setting an example for all of us? We only become fully alive when we defy our limits. Terry was correct that the implacable forces that shape our ends eventually hem us in. But James gritted his teeth, rammed into them, and learned he could shove some aside, at least for a while. When the smothering pillow of routine and time is lowered over our faces, that is the moment to summon our passion. We do not have to cooperate with death’s agents.

To get to his next class after mine, James had to wheel down a long hall to an elevator, rise a floor, then race down three long halls back the way he came. So as the clock approached the hour, he prepared like an eager sprinter in the starting blocks. He did not look on any of this as exhausting, unfair, or stressful; rather, it was exciting just to live at full throttle. He shot out the door as soon as released. I handed him his papers first and offered to let him leave a minute early, but he refused. “I might miss some-thing,” he said.

“Have I said anything worthwhile the last minute?” I asked with a smile.

“Not yet,” he said, “But you might get luck-y.” He grinned back—his first smile.

One December day when six inches of wind-whipped snow piled up, and a third of my students did not make it to class, James arrived a few minutes late—his only lateness. He banged his wheelchair furiously into the other desks. “It’s okay,” I said, making a palms-down motion with both hands. “Don’t get upset.”

“They have not plowed the side-walks yet,” he fumed. “How am I sup-posed to nav-i-gate my chair in that?”

“Maybe you need snow tires?” I suggested. A second smile flickered on his face, but he doused it. Jobs should be done or else.

Everything should be what it was supposed to be and done properly. There was no room for excuses or mediocrity in his philosophy.

James, of course, made the dean's list and the honor society. This seemed to please him, although he did not relax when he won these official stamps of approval. They were mere platforms leading to the next level, where he would gather another basket of golden eggs. Treasure waited ahead for whoever was plucky and energetic enough to grab it. Who says there are limits? If there are, a person won't know until he's thrown back totally exhausted for the third or fourth time.

As a result of these successes, early the next term he received an award from a local rehabilitation agency that he attended on off-school days. His picture and story in the college newspaper announced that James had been named "Patient of the Year" from among several hundred clients. That week I flagged down his wheelchair as he rocketed along a hallway. Reluctantly, he slowed so I could keep pace, consideration I rated as a professor. "Congratulations on your award," I said.

"For what?" he replied. "Pa-ti-ent of the Year? I am not a pa-ti-ent. Nor a cli-ent. I am a man." Then he pressed his hand down hard on the accelerator, pulled away from me toward a knot of shuffling students clogging the hallway, and shouted, "Com-ing through!"

M. GARRETT BAUMAN recently retired after many years as a professor and plans to write more about his students. He is a 2007–2008 fellow for The New York State Foundation for the Arts and has been published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Sierra*, *Yankee*, *The New York Times*, and several issues of the *Chrysalis Reader*.