

Fieldwork

I FOUND MYSELF OUT OF SYNC, out of place, and out of time as I finished up my senior year of college. About to receive a degree in metallurgical engineering/materials science from Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), a top engineering school, I had bleak prospects. I had gone to job interviews with button-down-shirt-close-cropped-hair recruiters. Me—in my dirty bell bottoms, shoulder-length locks, thick beard, and earrings. This was 1972, and I was under the influence of the hippie culture. I knew I didn't fit in with U.S. Steel or Rockwell International. I felt like a Black Panther trying to join the Augusta National Golf Club.

At nearly the last minute, March of my senior year, I decided to apply to a number of graduate schools in metallurgical engineering/materials science. It was a long shot—I was about to graduate in two months *summa cum nada*, with an average eking into the two-point range, thanks only to my English and history courses. I had scored fairly well on my GRE, however, and my pedigree was CMU, and its metallurgical engineering department was ranked in the top three in the world.

After several rejection notices, the University of Cincinnati (UC) accepted me into their graduate program and saved me from a job I would have loathed, and likely, failed miserably. I should say that the University of Cincinnati put me in limbo. I spent the next two years treading water as a research assistant. As a lowly grad student, the university paid my tuition and a stipend, which was just enough to live on.

When I arrived in Cincinnati just five weeks after graduating, it took me about an hour to figure out why UC wanted a slug like me. I was American, spoke unaccented English, and had applied. The metallurgical engineering/materials science department was awash in research grants from the U.S. Defense Department and desperate-

ly needed dozens of graduate students to help conduct research for the profs rolling in the government's dough. I was one of six American graduate students in that department. The rest were Chinese and Indians, dozens of them. They were all extremely bright men—yes, all of them were men—and I befriended a number of them. But here's the point: many of them were from wealthy families in their native countries and worked in research labs for a lot less than my own stipend, and in some cases, for free. One young Indian grad student was so rich that he said he'd be insulted if the university paid him such a lowly amount of money. The American students all received living stipends, and the Ph.D. students received enough to afford car payments!

My lab mate was Yuann Kwang-lin, or Jimmy, for short. Jimmy was a native Taiwanese who desperately wanted me to help him learn English. He wanted to be able to pick up American girls, whom he perceived to be loose and available, unlike the few Chinese girls at hand. I helped him as best I could, his English improved markedly over the two years while we shared the lab, and he was eventually successful, which means that I was a successful teacher—my one success at the University of Cincinnati. As payment, I asked Jimmy to make a poster for me in Chinese characters that I could display in my lab space: "Take Heed. Screw You!" It took me weeks to convince this shy man to make such an impolite use of his native language. Last month, I finally discarded this poster, moldy and mildewed in my garage, after my eight-year-old son asked what it meant.

UC's engineering graduate students worked in laboratories. They ran experiments, collected data, gathered "findings," and wrote reports for the professors to send to the grantors, and eventually received master or doctorate degrees. We would work all day on our experiments, go home for dinner, and come back at night to the lab. At 9 PM, we left our labs and took up our table at the legendary Lakewood Bar across Colerain Avenue from the campus. Each night, seven nights a week, we drank and smoked cigarettes until 2 AM. This was in the 1970s, when you could smoke just about anywhere late into the morning—pitcher after pitcher, lighting butt-to-end chains, arguing over data, findings, and sports. . . . and girls—but for us graduate students, there were darn few of those to talk about.

During these two years, I lived only in the moment. I felt I had delayed my future, but I wasn't worried about that. I had no idea what my next step was, but it didn't occur to me to plan anything. I was floating on Little Kings Cream Ale, drifting on Marlboro smoke, and my research was failing miserably. My professor was a young Turk with a newly minted Ph.D. in materials science, which covers not only inert materials like plastics, but also biomedical materials. My young

Turk professor talked daily about his “friend at the National Science Foundation” who would award him his first research grant, as soon as I, his research student, acquired some good data.

I spent one year looking into a compound called hyaluronic acid, notable as being a component in the fluid of human joints. The theory was that this compound broke down, and its breakdown was critical in the development of arthritis. The compound was very difficult to isolate, and the hypothesis floating around at the time hoped to make hyaluronic acid synthetically, which would then somehow be used to treat arthritis, possibly as a replacement for the natural stuff in your knee. About the only thing I discovered in one year was that hyaluronic acid could not be isolated nor could it be made synthetically—at least not in my lab. After one year of frustration, my professor decided to drop that line of research and focused on coatings, i.e., paint, so that his “friend at the Sherwin-Williams company” could fund our research.

I spent the second year of my tenure at the University of Cincinnati developing various coating compounds, applying them to steel plates the size of index cards, and then soaking them in various solutions to track the corrosion resistance of the various coatings, and dropping weights on them to test the impact strength of the coatings. I spent several hundred dollars of my professor’s personal money on large aquariums in which to soak the steel plates. I kept a few goldfish in them and one night, on a lark, tested the effects of liquid nitrogen on goldfish, actually flash freezing a goldfish and watching the little critter come back to life after I dropped it back into the room temperature water. I didn’t tell my professor about that experiment. He had no friends in the cryogenics industry. About the only thing I truly accomplished in that second year was the development of this cool instrument that dropped weights on the metal plates from adjustable heights. A known weight dropped from a known height hits with a calculable force, and in that way I could detect the strength or resiliency of the coatings I had applied to the plates. Unfortunately, my results never seemed to be reproducible or consistent in any way. My methodologies were somehow not methodological, and I never did get the hang of designing the experiments correctly.

All of the other graduate students laughed at my efforts. After all, they were doing important research, like testing highly sophisticated titanium alloys used in jet engines. One of the students, Dane Miller, was testing materials for artificial joints, and after receiving his Ph.D., he founded Biomet, a hip- and knee-replacement manufacturer in Bloomington, Indiana, that reported sales of \$1.6 billion in 2004. While Dane Miller’s hip machine mimicked the stresses of years of walking by rubbing the ball of a stainless steel femur into

a polyethylene cup for weeks and months, even while Dane was drinking beer at the Lakewood Bar, I was watching metal plates rust. My lack of data, my lack of clear “findings,” spelled a lack of career progress for my professor. My research was literally worthless, and at the end of two years, I had only one clear finding: I was not going to receive a master’s degree.

It was during this time that I started writing a lot: fiction, poetry, nonfiction. It was the one thing I was good at in college, and to amuse myself, I spent time writing short stories, weird poems, and kept a journal. This was also the Watergate era, and the stories of Woodward and Bernstein permeated the air. I would often stay at home from the lab, mesmerized by the televised Watergate hearings. Because I was a tuition-free graduate student, I was allowed to take courses anywhere in the university, so I took a few courses in journalism during my two years at UC. The university did not have a journalism department, but there was a track of three journalism courses in the English department, taught by a young prof named Jon Hughes, a former reporter. I mastered “the 5 W’s” and the “inverted pyramid,” but most importantly, got to know Professor Hughes because we tipped a few mugs together, and he shared his stories from daily newsroom work. I expressed my desire to get out of engineering and possibly into journalism. He suggested that I write a sample article or two for a small local biweekly newspaper, *The Clifton-Vine Reporter*, which covered five urban neighborhoods within the city, all of which surrounded the university area. I lived in one of those neighborhoods, called Clifton, just off the corner of Clifton and Ludlow Avenues, a block from the Virginia Bakery and the Skyline Chili parlor. The idea for beginning journalists is to acquire what is known in the trade as “clips,” or samples of published work to build a résumé. Jon told me that he would speak with the editor of the paper about me. This was in the summer of 1974, Watergate in full swing.

A couple of beers later with Jon Hughes, he mentioned that the editor of that little newspaper would interview me and asked if I’d be interested in meeting him. I jumped at the chance. The next afternoon I walked into the offices of Richard Bird, who was one of the more unusual characters I’ve met. The man had the worst case of blue-black acne I’d ever seen, even on the face of a teenager, and he was clearly in his thirties. He smelled foul, like not showering in days, and his face was oily and shiny, his clothing disheveled and dirty. Ben Bradlee, he was not. He interviewed me for fifteen minutes, then gave me my first assignment. I was to cover the next day’s City Council meeting and write an article about an issue of concern to his audience—the elimination of gas lights on the streets of these old neigh-

borhoods. I attended the council meeting the following day, made a few follow-up phone calls, wrote the piece, and handed it to Mr. Bird.

My first article was published in the following issue of this bi-weekly newspaper. Mr. Bird took me out for a beer that night. I was quite naïve back then, and, remember, this was the 1970s when things were not as open then as they are now. While I noticed that the bar was filled only with men, some dressed as cowboys, right in the middle of the city, it didn't register as it might today. Mr. Bird seemed nervous, asking several personal questions, but I was quite confident about my writing and riveted upon his every word. He was my new boss. I was open to his tutelage, and he held the keys to a new path for me. He told some war stories about his reporting, about his connections at City Hall, about the history of *The Clifton-Vine Reporter*, and about the typographics company he ran alongside it, which supported the paper financially. Then he asked: "Do you want to become editor of this newspaper?" Bird said that he needed to step back from the hands-on effort and work more on the business side of the operation. I was dumbstruck, but not struck dumb. Of course I jumped at the opportunity. I became the editor-in-chief of this little newspaper, my first job. The pay, \$100 per issue, biweekly, meant \$200 per month. I would have to give up my research stipend, which was more than double that amount.

The day before Thanksgiving 1974, I walked into my professor's office and told him that I was leaving engineering to become a journalist. He told me I was crazy, and so did my father, when I told him on a visit home that holiday weekend. But I felt that I had thrown away six years of my life, four to get a B.S. in engineering that I would never use and two more years failing to get a graduate degree. I knew in my gut that I was beginning something that I wanted to do, that I loved to do, that I was built for. I had a sense of purpose . . . I felt it physically, inside. My direction felt right for the first time in years.

About two months after I started at the *Clifton-Vine Reporter*, Mr. Bird departed abruptly when an audit of the business uncovered his hand in the till. I never saw him again. I spent the next two years at that little biweekly newspaper, and that's where I learned journalism, made some mistakes, did more things right, and had fun. I wrote many of the articles. I pasted up the newspaper by hand (this is before desktop publishing). I delivered the proofs to the printer and then delivered the newspapers to the horde of ten-year-olds who delivered the papers to the doors of five neighborhoods in Cincinnati. I hired a couple of reporters, for \$10 a story. I hired two reviewers, one for books and one for music, and that music reviewer, Steven Rosen, later became a top music critic at the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and the *Denver Post*. After that, I landed a job on a small daily, the

Middletown Journal, then went on to earn an M.S. in journalism at Ohio University. In 1978, I finally used my engineering degree when I landed a job at *IEEE Spectrum*, a science and engineering magazine in New York City, which won the first of its three national magazine awards while I worked there. I covered the first space shuttle launch and the Three Mile Island nuclear accident while on staff there.

Wanting to leave New York City and sensing opportunity at a small publishing company in Tennessee, I relocated to Knoxville in 1982, to work for the firm that eventually became fast-growing and innovative Whittle Communications. I grew with it, rising to executive editor, running a large group of media properties and a staff of twenty-five editors and designers. During those years, I became an expert in health and medical media. During my time in Knoxville, I lost a wife and remarried. In 1994, I moved to Portland, Oregon, where I helped start up the first commercial health website, then was recruited to Atlanta in 1998 to help start up the firm that eventually became the Internet juggernaut WebMD. I was, and still am, the founding editor-in-chief of WebMD, leaving there in 2001 to go back to my first love, creative writing. I've since earned an MFA in creative writing from the Queens University of Charlotte, have published numerous poems, essays, and criticism, one chapbook of poems, and,

A.R. Penck.
Eau de Cologne.
Synthetic polymer
paint on canvas,
114¼ in. x 114¼ in.,
1975. The Museum of
Modern Art, New York.
Anne and Sid Bass Fund.
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ever-still an editor, have just published an anthology of poems that I compiled.

Mr. Bird, the man who handed me my first job in journalism, unfortunately, met a tragic end. Jon Hughes, now a retired professor, told me the story during one of our periodic phone calls. He was murdered by a young man he had picked up in a bar, after a tryst in his apartment. The man stabbed him to death, and then apparently became so panicked by what he had done that he fled through the window and ran right off the second story roof, breaking his leg in the fall, allowing him to be captured by police.

I often wonder what Mr. Bird saw in me.

TOM LOMBARDO's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the U.S., U.K., Canada, and India in *Oxford American*, *Ambit*, *Subtropics*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Pearl*, *New York Quarterly*, *Poet Lore*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Orbis: Quarterly International Literary Journal*, *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, *Salamander*, *Kritya: A Journal of Poetry*, *The Louisville Review*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Crucible*, *The Worcester Review*, *Ascent*, *Ars Medica*, and many others.