

## HE WAS WHAT HE WAS

BY

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*"We'll be around for a long time to come, and passive will be done. See you there."*

Seven and a half years ago, in university, Warren and I were unceremoniously expelled from a trivial but mandatory course called *Introduction to Marketing*. Though we were prepared for a hysterical reaction when we handed in our identical papers, being hauled on the carpet was an amazing reality rush. The academics said "plagiarism;" we said "group effort." The charge, the arguments, and the ensuing punishment were, at the time, fodder for extensive general debate. The result was that in addition to repeating the course, we had an experience none of our classmates had or might ever have. Now almost a decade later, whether we broke the letter or the spirit of the law – even that we were expelled – is forgotten and immaterial, especially to Warren.

I found out Warren died last month. Although I have heard rumors that he was a victim of the blight of the late 20th century, the cause of his death I really do not know, nor do I care to be told. All that matters is that he won't "be around for a long time to come." The epitaph marking his time on this planet is a passage from Exodus: "I AM THAT I AM." It is the perfect epithet because he was fiercely and unapologetically individualistic, and just like him, the words are absolved from judgment. But even this final statement is God's words plagiarized from Moses – likely without attribution. In death as in life, Warren pushed it to the limit with the powers that be.

He was what he was, at least while I knew him. During those ten years of our friendship, his righteous defiance and willpower were globally annoying and insulting to the sheep he taunted, but he demanded and received respect from everyone in spite of being – or because he was – "that smart but weird guy." Few really understood him, and they were just as happy to let him go as to try to get a feel for him. That never mattered to Warren, and thus theirs is the loss. In that most of all I admired and mourn him.

Doubtlessly, my requiem will not touch on many. Warren was not famous except among those of us who knew him. So his passing caused a mere ripple in the sea of life: family grieved, doctors detailed, and a newspaper printed his obituary far from page one. Around him the hustle bustle continued not skipping a heartbeat. He was not special and people just like Warren die to someone else's despair and grief every day. But a little part of the world will have a gaping hole where he once filled the void.

Warren was in his early thirties when he was pulled from the mortal coil. I hope he went out kicking and screaming, but I know that passive was done. One might consider it a tragedy for someone so young to be robbed of life. But Warren lived every day like it was his last, anyway; and though he was probably disappointed at not having had more time, I somehow doubt he regretted any part of his life and was satisfied with what he did in the time he had.

Warren held to a maxim that, "Any given political authority exists only because men consent to obey it. In this sense what exists is not so much the authority as the obedience." Through university, Warren and I felt duty bound to test every limit of obedience. We went about this in methods of our own choosing, yet chafed the authorities with equal efficiency. Being slightly older than me, Warren was quieter, more introspect, and far more convicted in his beliefs than I. I have always prided myself in being a free-thinker, but lacked his conviction in the face of popular disapproval. Mine was always a tempered rebellion, tempered by aspirations to some higher social plateau. Warren, on the other hand, seemed to not care less than about his place in society. As far as he was concerned, society had no debt with him and he owed it nothing in return.

He was an adventurer, like so many nine-to-fivers wish to be but haven't the courage to try when talk stops and action starts. Warren dragged me along, to my great joy, on many innocuous but important tests of social mores and authority. I knew what to test and how, but unlike Warren, was too rigid and concerned by the consequences to try. He was the igniting spark. Adventuring, no matter how great or small, requires risking something, be it physical or spiritual, and it demands the true gambler's resolve to lose as much as you stand to gain. The largest risk for most people, especially the materially driven (which come as both "grey flannel suits" and as yuppies), is to lose their standing within the status quo. Getting the most out of life is not for the faint of heart.

Getting the most out of life is not about acquiring riches or attaining fame. Both of these are points accumulating on the vast cosmic scoreboard, defeating the loneliness of being an insignificant spot in the universe, but neither is a register of what one has gotten out of a life, be it nine or ninety years. The real benchmark of venture is satisfaction with one's time on the Earth. Experience to look back on, on one's deathbed, is the measure of a healthy and rewarding existence.

Pierre Trudeau provided one of Warren's favorite mottoes when he said, "Experience is overrated." At the time it was perfectly reasonable to think Warren believed it. We were constantly trying new things, things we did not have the experience for, and somehow succeeded in, or at least survived every time. Now, however, I sense that axiom was a contradiction to how Warren really lived for experience. True, the authorities' demands for "experience" in every undertaking is exaggerated, to the detriment of untested common sense and rational thought. But life without experience is repetitive and painstaking, and in that respect, experience – for its own sake – albeit overrated, is inescapable and to be striven for.

In his way, which became my way too, he brashly and ignorantly met every new endeavor with thoughtful passion until it too became the very experience we thought so overrated. Taking on these challenges was mental and sometimes physical torture which could have been avoided had we passed them by in favor of chores with which we were familiar. Yet we pressed on, toppling

our dominos of undone feats one by one. And after all the grades and accolades are silenced, what else were we doing it for but experience?

I'm glad that his impact gave me the courage to continue on that same track as far as I can go. The belief that a wide general knowledge is inferior to a narrow expertise prevails in our culture. But staleness in life is directly proportional to the degree of specialization one assumes. In a song called, *The Last Mango in Paris*, Jimmy Buffett sings about listening to an old man whose interesting life included having "a damn good run on Wall Street," yet waking up in Africa with only a Swiss Army knife. In the end he says, "There's still so much to be done," meaning that a life to be envied is one rich with experience. Warren knew that, and he lived his life beneath that Damoclean sword of social contradiction.

We lost touch for several years until I met Warren for the final episode of our friendship near the corner of Bay and Bloor. By this time both of us were disillusioned with the business world we had staked out for ourselves, primarily because in our own ways we had come, we had seen, and we had conquered; it was time to move on. Just as we went to university believing that business was the field and wealth the scoreboard on which we would compete, we now agreed that life's markers were what was left behind: thoughts, words, and designs.

As far as I know, Warren died without leaving words or deeds to the world at large. What he left behind, at least to me, are thoughts and a design on life. I don't miss him, per se, because I never missed him during those years we were apart. In our friendship we enjoyed and respected each other's company and wit; we gave a lot to one another. Maybe we were selfish that way. Still, he won't be a phone call away should I ever want to seek him out.

No, I won't miss him, but I don't believe he's completely gone. Warren gave me the impetus to seek out experience for its own sake: to make life exciting and worthwhile. He also gave me the insight to understand how the words of God can apply to each of us. "I AM THAT I AM." I don't have to answer to you, only to myself and to Him. Accept me, don't judge me; know me, don't understand me. He was that he was, and that is all we have to know.

Good-bye my friend.

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