

Keynote, the Father Kieser Award 2007, The Hilton Universal

Well, this certainly puts a ding in my atheism.

Still, as Simon Weisenthal once said, "Any Jew who does not believe in miracles is not a realist."

Of all the interruptions anyone who farms his head for a living can plot, plan or hope for, nothing in this world beats an invitation to appear somewhere to speak.

You cannot imagine what a change it makes from working all by yourself with no one but your alter egos to bid you good morning; no one to ask where you went to dinner, what did you order, how'd you like the movie, you believe how many times Charlie Rose interrupted that guy last night?

I suppose if there is any upside to working in such monastic isolation, it's having the confidence that no one's ever likely to charge you with sexual harassment.

Grateful though I am, you will forgive me if I say that awards are relatively easy to come by. You just do your very best work and then you pray that you'll outlive the competition.

The sweetest awards—the best rewards—are the kind you don't seek at all.

Truly though, just how many times can you go back to the buffet for another helping of recognition? How many times can your friends and colleagues be asked to do yet another draft of their eulogies for you?

Three seconds in, three morbid references. There comes a time in your life when every hole you see dug—no matter for whom it's intended—they all have the feel of a gimme.

So much for morbidity. I didn't come here today to rain on your parade. Although with incontinence, who can ever be sure?

While custom dictates a modicum of modesty at moments like this, I'm afraid I'm unable to summon up so much as a millisecond of it right now.

Any kind of modesty—real or even a half-way decent imitation of it—that kind of attribute would have been far more appropriate several weeks ago, when Father Frank first phoned me.

I must confess, and who better to? It's not every day in the week that I get a call from a priest. In truth, I think the only man of the cloth I really ever knew was an uncle of mine in the garment business.

Frank, as it turned out, wanted to know if I would be willing to accept not just a Humanitas Award, but the one that has Father Bud as its patron saint.

That would have been the time to exercise whatever might be left of my overripe reticence. That would have been the time to thank Frank profusely, jump-start my humility and then go on and on in my best

George Bailey manner, pointing out the oh, so many others who were far worthier of such a singular honor.

That was what I should have done, instead of what it was I did do, which was to put down the phone and immediately begin trolling through my tuxedo pockets, searching for any number of previous acceptance speeches that I was never called upon to deliver (either because of some mix-up in the voting, or someone else's foul play, or possibly even their far superior worthiness).

I should never have combed through all of those heartfelt expressions of gratitude that I'd written on spec; all of those carefully crafted ad libs; those glowing tributes to the wonderful people upon whose shoulders I stood, making me too tall for them to ever stab me in the back.

But if the antidote to immodesty is gratitude, then I've brought a bucketful of that with me today.

I could make a thesaurus cry "Uncle" looking for the proper superlatives to describe what it was like to start four year's worth of mornings with Gene Reynolds.

If there was ever anyone happier than I was to be working on the Fox lot, it could only have been Shirley Temple. Or possibly Rupert Murdoch. Especially when pay day rolls around—which, for Rupert, must mean whatever day he says that is (except for the seventh one, of course—that being the day on which we all know that he rested).

In a town where the envy can be so thick it sometimes causes LAX to shut down, Gene Reynolds is a man whose decency can be measured only every June 20th or occasionally on the 21st—depending on which of those two dates turns out to be the longest day of the year.

He is that rarest of collaborators: generous and totally noncompetitive—unless it's with the best of whatever he himself has done.

*Together, we knew the ecstasy of putting our craft at the service of our consciences. We also knew the agony of being told by a CBS executive in the middle of our third season of M*A*S*H: "Some day, I'm going to tell you guys just how you blew this series."*

That fellow, if I'm not mistaken, is the very same one who parked my car out front just a few minutes ago.

Having arrived at the point in life where I find myself knocking wood a lot more often than I do other people, I hope you'll forgive me for not revealing the name of the aforementioned network executive, the one who was so eager to rescue Gene and me from the jaws of success.

While normally not looking forward to remembering the past, there is not a setting I share with Gene that doesn't remind me of the very first time I ever set foot on the 20th lot.

It was in 1945. I had just turned 15. (I'll wait while you do the math.) The purpose of my visit was to see Mr. George Seaton.

A man of many accomplishments, Seaton, a successful playwright, was, at the time of our meeting, directing a light as a feather comedy feature called "Junior Miss." Although he had a number of his own impressive screenplay credits, the script of "Junior Miss" was the work of another successful author of

the period, a Mister F. Hugh Herbert—which I always thought was the perfect name for a writer in this business.

Still a student at Fairfax High School, I had the chutzpah, if you can believe it, to be screen tested for a small, no more than an eighth-of-a-page role, one in which I tried getting a goodnight kiss from my date, a part played by a pretty young actress of the day named Mona Freeman.

Much to Seaton’s annoyance, Miss Freeman ruined both of my takes by cracking up each time I got up the nerve to make my move and close in on her, our lips and our saddle shoes only inches apart.

Time being money even in those days, Seaton was finally compelled to take her aside to a spot close by; just close enough so that I could hear every word of their exchange.

“What’s the problem,” he asked her. “Why do you keep laughing at him?”

“I can’t help it,” she said. “He’s so funny looking.”

You can imagine, I’m sure, what wonders that did for my acne-fueled self-confidence.

*Flash forward. 1974. Introduced to each other at a Directors Guild meeting, I was taken by surprise when Seaton launched into a torrent of appreciation of the M*A*S*H series, then in its third season.*

As lengthy as he was effusive, he went on and on—and on—about the quality of my work. Reluctant to cut him off in mid-adoration, I finally said: “Actually, you know, this is not the first time we’ve met. When I was 15, you tested me at Fox for ‘Junior Miss.’”

“And did I give you the job?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “You gave the part to Mel Torme.”

Without missing a beat, Seaton shot back: “Why didn’t you tell me who you were?”

It would be nice to think that the work Gene and I did together had some lasting, positive impact on the world at large, but after Vietnam came Grenada. Then came Panama. Then, Bosnia and Herzegovina, both just a tombstone’s throw away from Kosovo. Then, Somalia; then, Desert Storm, which, in turn, begat Afghanistan; which all-too-soon begat our neo-conflict in Iraq (or Son of Desert Storm, if you prefer), the questionable war decreed by a questionable president and foisted on a for far too long, otherwise distracted, unquestioning public; a military misadventure that does double duty as a sequel, while serving as a trailer for some future Middle Eastern mischief.

*Like an endless stream of M*A*S*H reruns, history, I’m afraid, seems to be on a loop.*

Given our present-day moral meltdown—a time when the extreme is the norm, virtue has been rendered quaint, shock is a distant memory and shame is on the endangered emotions list—it is nothing short of miraculous that, against all odds, we are assembled to celebrate a select group of artists who have been able to break through the bombs and bimbos demanded by the landlords of the nation’s screens: the big one, the one that seeks mainly to help make us forget what so many of us seem to have already forgotten: that is, not only who we are, but who we were and, without question, certainly who and what we might try one day to be again.

Then there are the other, smaller screens, the ones increasingly paved over with ads and promos.

When Gene and I worked together, each network half hour contained 26 minutes and 20 seconds of content—almost 5 minutes more than the new and improved twenty-two minute half hour.

On the web, daily episodes of “Prom Queen,” run for as little as 90 seconds each. Time which used to fly, can now barely get off the ground. What’s next in terms of future story telling? The biblical tale of the Six Commandments? “A Hundred and One Arabian Nights?” iPhone productions of “Prince Lear?”

The corps of caring, gifted men and women that Humanitas honors today, those who know that the low road is always a cul de sac, each of them belies the myth of the downtrodden Hollywood writer. This is a glorious uptrodden bunch, their efforts all the more impressive given how tiny the window of entry has become for any content even resembling meaningful substance.

There’s not a writer worth the salt that’s been rubbed into his wounds who hasn’t got a sad story to tell about how hard it is to get a good word in edgewise. Even in a medium as writer-friendly as the theater.

A number of those same years ago, I was contacted by one of Broadway’s most prestigious producer/theatre owners (again, as a matter of enlightened self-interest, the man must remain nameless since members of his family are not only still living, some are on the Tony committee as well).

Hearing that I’d finished the first draft of a satirical take on the then-current Iran-Contra scandal called “Mastergate,” he phoned, saying that he had to be the first to have a look at it. I, of course, rushed a copy right over to him.

At lunch the very next day, he told me that he had read it at once (I’d guessed as much, actually, seeing how chapped his lips were), and proceeded to channel George Seaton in his praise for the work.

“This is the best thing you’ve ever written,” he said. “We’ve got to get this on the stage just as soon as we possibly can.”

His words were so sweet I felt no need to order dessert. Then, he suddenly put a stopper in his praise. It was “drop-the-other-shoe” time. After running out of superlatives in which “masterpiece” was petty cash, he said he only had one question to ask me about the play.

“Ask anything you like” I told him.

“Can it be about something else,” he said.

Oh, well, another windmill, another broken lance.

I must say I was neither devastated nor deterred by that question coming on the heels of his initial enthusiasm. But then, he was a man who always had his initials put on everything. In truth, I don’t think I ever am—deterred, that is.

Flashing back on a lifetime or two—thankful at having so far avoided any signs of Nate n’Alzheimers—I recall uncapping a miraculous gift I’d been given only a few weeks before as a Bar Mitzvah present: a lovely, fat, orange Waterman pen. Dipping it into a bottle of royal blue, permanent ink

(ah, the cockiness of youth), I composed an essay for a Chicago newspaper competition, one that was to provide me with my first writing prize: a \$25 United States Defense Bond.

The subject was “Why I am Proud to be an American” and entries could be no longer than 25 words or less. The limitation imposed no creative hardship on me. At 13, I’m not sure I’d ever written any more than 25 words. And seven of those were: “Thank you for the new fountain pen.”

I remember being personally presented with a check for \$25 from the then-mayor of Chicago, Mayor Edward J. Kelly, the only money I’m certain his sticky fingers ever let go of in his entire life.

Over six decades ago, after hundreds of thousands of words and more than my fair share of awards later, the memory of that first honor still rests amiably on my mind—the memory that someone, someone other than my immigrant parents, who had precious little time to write any thank you notes to the Czar for throwing such a lovely pogrom—someone thought that I could actually write something of value!

Which brings me back to this moment and my gratitude once more to the higher powers that be at Humanitas for this improbable—but no less treasured—treasure.

My congratulations, too, to the winners and all of the candidates for their work, each a prize in itself. Your efforts redound to the credit of us all. And how nice to not have those credits roll by here today at a pace suggesting a speed-reading course, one that’s using a Lilliputian optometrist’s eye chart.

Receiving the amazing Bud Kieser Award, I am mindful yet again of my eternal debt to my parents, who, from the beginning, always treated me as though I were a gifted child. Just as my kids, and now my kids’ kids continue to.

Pride of place, though, goes—as always—to my wife, Pat. Pat, who for over half a century, has shared the pain, but never the podium. Pat, which is surely short for “patience,” while conversely being long on encouragement. Without her own, quite maddening standard, I might well have wound up a proofreader in a fortune cookie factory.

Just a last word about that atheism. As one who’s approaching the intersection where Sunset runs into Eternity, the truth is, I may just be discovering a brand new interest in faith; a certain amount of cuddling up to the Creator, so to speak. If there is even the slightest possibility of any future meeting with the Almighty, I would really like for it not to be a blind date.

Thank You.