99/04/09

I've said many times that Andrew Galambos was the greatest teacher I ever had. Recently, though, I've thought some about a part of his theory he called The Law of Logarithmic Stimulation, which says that the response you have today to any stimulus from your past falls off exponentially with the intervening period of time. Galambos gave this example: A paper cut you experienced this morning, while medically trivial, will absorb a vastly greater portion of your attention *at this moment* than a life-threatening illness you had a decade ago but from which you recovered. He called the effect "remoteness dilution." Rearranging the perspective, if there are two stimuli that elicit comparable responses in you *today*, but one of them happened long ago while the other was relatively recent, then it's correct to say that your present response to the *older* stimulus is by far the greater, even though at the moment they seem the same. So for me, while I still consider Galambos my greatest teacher, by virtue of his own theory he has some competition.

Dale Alan Kessler was blind from multiple sclerosis. Since we were new to the area when I started seventh grade and landed in Mr. Kessler's history class, I had no idea who he was. But a *blind* teacher was a remarkable, and to me, wholly unexpected and fascinating thing.

The kids whose older siblings had had him in previous years knew that he used to teach, then was away for a while, then came back and was blind. They repeated the legends their brothers and sisters had told them: "He's psychic…he can read your mind…!" "He's blind, but he can still see…!" "He never forgets the name that goes with a voice, even years later…!"

Kessler's personality dominated the classroom. He held our attention like a hypnotist and taught what he called a "conceptual" approach to history. Not just names, dates, and all the boring stuff, but what did historical events really *mean*? He'd write phrases on the board, substituting a single letter with a blank underline for each of several key words. We had to complete the phrases, and in so doing, our pitiful adolescent minds actually had to do a bit of thinking.

He began each new semester with a firm and explicit requirement that each student should keep what he called a "journal." This wasn't a journal in the sense of a diary, but a notebook in which the student kept all his work; class notes, quizzes, exams, term papers, handouts, etc. Kessler insisted you accumulate all of these things in the order they were created and date each item. This distinguished the "journal" from how you might keep notes in other classes, for example, by arranging separate notebook sections for different types of things. It was, he said, to make us experience the concept of chronological record keeping, which was after all the essential thing you needed in order to study history. The really unusual thing he required was that when the term ended you would turn your journal in to him, and he would keep it. Strange, a little weird, but what the heck, with a blind teacher we were already well off the beaten path.

Dale Kessler was a puzzle fiend. Word puzzles, logic puzzles, conundrums of every kind. He sponsored the after-school puzzle club, and it was de rigueur that you just could

not be one of the really *smart* kids if you weren't in the club. To be sure, this was not elitism on Kessler's part—he barred no one from participating—it's just that it's in the nature of seventh and eighth graders is to be snobs, hence the prestige image that went with joining the puzzle club. Sarcastic as he could be, Dale Kessler would never have done anything to squash the faintest glimmer of curiosity in any student. For him, besides being a passion, puzzles were part of the sublime repertoire he brought to bear on the near-hopeless task of inspiring near-hopelessly-muddled young minds.

The business about remembering names was absolutely true. No one could fail to observe that whenever a Kessler alumnus showed up unannounced and said, "Hello, Mr. Kessler.", the man would pause just long enough to frown in concentration and then brighten with a "Tommy! How are you?" On rare occasions he'd say, "Don't tell me your name…just a minute…," but he would always retrieve the name within a few moments at most. I say no one could fail to observe this because it happened *all the time*. It was as though there were a special rule at the high school—no cutting class *unless* you're going over to say hello to Mr. Kessler.

Eventually, I too became one of Dale Kessler's prodigal alumni. The last time I saw him, seven years after having been his pupil, he remembered my name and who I was *just* from the sound of my voice. (There's more to that story, but at the moment, I digress…).

Watching him move about, if you didn't know better, you'd swear he was sighted. He carried a cane, but he didn't use it in class since it actually would have slowed him down. Instead, the classroom was laid out like a drill sergeant's dream, and he charged about, relying on his spatial memory (a truly mystical sense it was) so as not to collide with a desk that wasn't where it was supposed to be.

He once tripped over a pile of books left carelessly in the aisle instead of being placed under the seat as we'd been instructed. He went straight down on his face, cane and arms flailing. An instant later, having recovered like a gymnast, he stared (figuratively) down at his neglectful assailant and barked the sardonic phrase that was his unforgettable trademark, "You *duck*!!" I really think that for Dale Kessler blindness was not so much a handicap as a big, bloody, insufferable nuisance!

Kessler would lecture at the front of the room and would use his forearm as a yardstick to keep track of where he was on the blackboard. He'd start with his left elbow as high as he could reach on the left edge of the board, forearm laid horizontal as a ruler, and chalk with his right hand in a somewhat wobbly, though perfectly legible script. He would turn to emphasize some point, then face the blackboard again, starting in the same upper left corner and work his way across, one…two…three forearm lengths, and pick up writing exactly where he'd left off (this had to be the only practical use made of cubits since Noah built an ark). When he reached the right edge of the board, he'd go back to the left, use his splayed right hand as a vertical ruler, and for all the world like a typewriter when the typist slaps the carriage return, start a new line. It was uncanny. He never missed, even when going back to the *middle* of a line to fill in a blank word one of us had deduced. At the end of the period he'd erase the board with the same economy he'd used to fill it. So it was in part that our notebooks, our "journals", regularly swelled with the outflow from his teaching style.

There was a no-gum-chewing-in-class rule at good ol' General Anthony Wayne Junior High School. One day I was seated near the back of the room and happened to glance over my shoulder. A girl (I can't recall her name—let's just call her Alice) was in the last seat in the row against the side wall of the room. She was chewing gum. Her attention was focused on Mr. Kessler and his lecture, but she was as far from him physically as was possible and still be in the room. Her jaw moved up and down with quiet regularity and she never parted her lips. She obviously had arranged things so she could chew gum with no risk whatsoever of being caught—all the other kids were seated in front of her, she made no noise at all, and most important, the teacher was *blind*. I don't recall what attracted my attention to her illicit behavior, but I do recall feeling, on the one hand, a minor outrage that she should take such flagrant advantage of Mr. Kessler's blindness, and on the other, a sort of naïve admiration for her cleverness.

I turned my attention back to the lecture and probably would have forgotten the crime had ever occurred but for what happened next. In mid sentence, mid word, in a single motion that would have given a Kung Fu master a heart attack, Kessler spun toward the opposite corner of the room, lunged forward and brought his arm up like an air-to-air missile about to fire, his index finger a heat-seeking warhead locked onto a doomed target, and yelled, "ALICE!! You're chewing gum, AREN'T YOU!!" The force of the accusation was such that the question mark which would have been the proper grammatical end to his statement stood straight up and became an exclamation point (two of them, in fact). Talk about your pregnant pauses. There wasn't a breath. The force that altered grammar carried every eye in the room with it, adding to the actinic glare that pinned the now helpless victim. Like a deer caught in headlights, you may ask? She should have been so lucky.

Alice's eyes were about to pop from her head and her jaw stretched so far down that it dragged her cheeks out of line (her mouth was still closed, though). With a single, solitary exception, not one person in the room moved. As though an inner gear of some smooth running machine had suddenly jammed and transferred its momentum to the machine as a whole, Alice's head bobbed up and down with the same slow undulation of her silent chewing a moment ago. The absurdity of answering a blind man's question with a nod did not occur to me until some time later.

Kessler took that dramatic pause wielded so skillfully by the greatest of teachers, timed so as to beat the inevitable deflation of tension to the punch. Pat Morita in the movie "The Karate Kid", about to deliver a lethal blow and then tweaking a nose, couldn't hold a candle. Kessler dropped his arm, straightened his stance, and made an exaggerated sniff so obvious they must have heard it across the hall. "It's tutti-frutti, isn't it?" he asked, and turned back to his lecture, careful now not traumatize any more punctuation marks.

What happened to Alice's gum? I think she swallowed it.

Since I already started it, here's the story of the last time I saw Dale Kessler.

In the fullness of time, I departed from Mr. Kessler's tutelage. Throughout high school, I too, like legions before me, went to the junior high once or twice a year to see

Mr. Kessler. Each successive visit was spiced with butterfly anticipation, "Will he remember my name…?" The tradition was that you never said something like, "Hi, Mr. Kessler. Remember me? It's Jim Gafford."—you always halted after the greeting. Kessler might be in the middle of a lecture, but the interruption never damaged his delivery, nor harmed his current crop of students. Watching him suddenly pounce on the task of recalling the returnee's name, *do* it, say "Jim Gafford, you duck! How are you?", waste a moment or two on warm benedictions, then say something like, "Now get outta here—I'm teaching a class!", only reinforced the mythical image he commanded.

After high school I attended the U. S. Naval Academy. In my sophomore year I spent Thanksgiving break with family friends in the town where I'd been Kessler's student. Mrs. Glenna Geiger had worked for some years for the school district. One evening during this particular visit, I somehow started thinking of Dale Kessler and asked her, "Do you know what ever became of him?" She replied, "Well, he hasn't been teaching for some time, but I think he still lives in the area. Why don't you check the phone book?"

Every now and then a thing will occur where the words you say, the gestures you make, the sights and sounds you gather all begin to blur very slightly into a weird sort of haze. It's by no means a pronounced thing, but it's there, noticeable, and you can't avoid the feeling that something a bit fatalistic is happening. I looked in the book and sure enough, there it was: Kessler, D., a nearby street address, and a number. I dialed. The phone rang a few times and picked up. A haggard voice said, "Hello?"

Struggling a bit, I asked, "Mr. Kessler?"

"Yes?"

"Uhhh…sir, I'm not sure if you remember me, but I used to be a student of yours."

"Oh!" The energy uptick was palpable.

"Uh, I don't want to be rude, but I'm not sure if you want me to say my na…"

"No no!" he interrupted. "Just a minute…just a minute…don't tell me…wait, wait…I know your voice…"

There was a pause. I stammered, "Uh, sir, I was wondering, maybe…well, if I'm not imposing, could I…well, could I come by and pay you a visit?"

"Let me think. Let me think…I've almost got it…Darn!" A beat. "Yes! Yes! By all means, do come over. Do you know where I live?"

"I have your address from the phone book."

"Great! Come on over. I'll put the front light on. By the time you get here, I'll remember your name!" I was off the phone and in the car on my way before it dawned on me, in a manner like that of so many previous similar occurrences, that, of course, having a porch light already *on*, like the rest of us manage habitually when the sun sets, would not be automatic for a blind man.

I pulled into the drive, got out, and went to the entry. The light was on. I rang the bell, and an energetic voice, only slightly muffled by the door, called out, "Is that you, Jim?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed.

The door opened and for the life of me it was all I could do to say "Hello, Mr. Kessler!", so wide was my grin. Here was a man I'd known closely for a time that had ended years earlier, a man who had so impressed and inspired me that the thought I might ever forget him never occurred (despite the fact that I would most likely never see him again), a man who since knowing me had had a parade of students through his classroom longer than the one sponsored by Macy's, and yet he greeted me and shook my hand as though I were his own prodigal son, joyously home.

He was in a wheelchair. He looked frail, but his energy stood up to all my old memories of him. More recently, I've had first hand knowledge of the effects of progressive debilitating illness, but even then, lacking the experience, the toll multiple sclerosis had extracted from him over the years was obvious.

He brought me in and sat me on a couch. He was alone in the house, he said, but had a housekeeper who came in during the days, cooked, did chores, read him his mail, and so on. He was genuinely thrilled to see me (forget the literal verb usage). He told me things about what he was doing, and inquired with his inimitable penetration as to how I was getting along at the academy, what plans I had, and so forth. The significance of the porch light having already dawned on me, I noted consciously the fact that there were several lights on in his living room.

At one point he said, "I want to show you something." He rolled his chair to a spot where two canes leaned against a wall—these were walking canes, not a blind man's navigational aids. He locked the chair's wheels, took a cane in each hand, and leaned forward. If anticipation were a hallucinogen, at this point I think I would have made Timothy Leary jealous.

With as titanic an effort as I've seen, he struggled, wobbled, groaned, stretched, and like an Olympic weightlifter setting a new world record, stood to his feet, with his arms and the canes acting as forelegs. He held the pose, then relaxed, sighed, and collapsed back into the wheelchair. He turned to me and said, "I *just* managed to be able to do that a couple of days ago!" I couldn't speak. The memory of him moving about the classroom like he owned it (he did, actually), cast against what I'd just seen and the thought of him straining every fiber of his being just so once again he could *stand*, brought tears welling up in my eyes. As I write this, the memory of Alice's clandestine gum-chewing also comes to mind—I hope his sense of smell wasn't acute enough to detect salt water across the room, since I'd hate to think he might have mistaken my simultaneous grief and joy for pity. If he did notice, he said nothing so as not to embarrass me, I'm sure.

I really don't recall the specifics of much I said that evening. When I did speak, though, it was in complete harmony with his warmth and hospitality. Finally he asked, "Do you know how it is I remembered your name?" Confounded, the best I could mumble was something like, "Well, I've always been amazed by your ability to do that, but frankly, seeing how long it's been since I last saw you, I'm not sure."

He grinned. After standing, he'd moved his chair back over by the couch, and next to him on the floor was a cardboard file box that I only just then noticed. He said, "It's been

awhile since I could teach, and lately my housekeeper has been helping me sort through and toss out old stuff I don't really want to hang on to. You remember how I kept all of your student journals? I collected *hundreds* of them over the years. We were going through the boxes of them a few days ago and I had her read me the names. Most of them I told her to throw out, but there were a few I decided to keep."[1]

He reached into the box, and over the flap I could see a loose assemblage of worn paper folders. He pulled out a pale blue one, obviously able to pick it from among the others by sense of touch alone. As he handed it to me slowly he said, "I heard your name again recently, and that's how I connected it up with your voice. You see, The only journals I kept were the ones of those students I thought might amount to something someday."

His own son come home? Perhaps so.

When I departed from what was, as it turned out, my last visit with Dale Alan Kessler, I'm not sure how I managed to make it back to the Geiger's, so caught up was I in the emotions of the moment. But if you wonder the slightest how I can speak of the man with such *undiluted* feeling, precisely as Galambos uses the word in his phrase "remoteness *dilution*", then you really haven't been paying attention.[2]

[1] I know, I know I'm telegraphing it, but so what? The memory of this still gives me goose bumps.

[2] I read all this to my mother, Mrs. Marnelle H. Gafford, during a phone conversation on April 10, and she made this comment: "You know what the writing-it-all-down does, don't you? It halts the dilution." Once again, I'm speechless.