

HOW I HAVE BEEN OUTSMARTING EVERYBODY

Some time ago, I wrote a piece that I called “We Are Outliving Our Bodies.” I have been thinking about a similar piece, but a confessional, about how I have been outsmarting everybody. This is not a new thought. Perhaps it suggests a low opinion of myself, and a feeling that I have gone through life fooling people.

I have been successful at almost everything I have done, with a few exceptions (which must have been when I failed to fool someone.) As is my wont (what a phony phrase), I shall begin at the beginning, or at least my first memories of outsmarting folks.

School: From elementary school on, I saw it as a contest between the teacher and me--the class struggle. The teacher was the boss and I was the worker. She (it was almost always she) gave us homework, which we had to do. I tried to do it as quickly as possible, listening to the radio at the same time. I turned in the homework, and most of the time I outsmarted the teacher, making her think I really learned the material. At the end of the term, I crammed and passed the final exams. I called it legitimate cheating. Of course, I listened, and participated in class, fooling everybody, including myself. There were subjects I liked, and teachers I liked, but I would never admit it. If I did, I would have been a traitor to my class (economic, not academic). This changed toward the end of high school.

In my senior year, it seemed that Stuyvesant was colluding with us, helping us prepare for the Regents Scholarship Exam. Exams are supposed to be a test of what you know. We were given lectures and material on lots of stuff we did not know, and engaged in cramming (legitimate cheating) to outsmart the exam. We were taught tricks on how to move through a multiple choice exam, which gave us an edge. I vividly remember handouts about literature. I learned about books I never read, but I was able to answer correctly questions about them as if I had read them. I was being taught “How to Outsmart Everybody” including the Regents Scholarship Exam.

My marks (not Marx) got me into CCNY, and I applied the lessons learned about outsmarting, over the next four years. Sure, I was smart. So was everyone else I knew. I had to be a little smarter to get a better grade, and I had to do it without cheating and without “brown-nosing.” So I did not make Magna or Summa. But I did get into the ILGWU Training Institute by outsmarting the Selection Committee, though I almost outsmarted myself. And I did get A in 29 credits out of 31, going for a Master’s in Education at CCNY while attending the Training Institute. By this time, I no longer saw the teacher as the boss. He (it was almost always a he) was also a worker, and was aware that I was carrying a double load. I actually missed class when I was out of state, organizing, and was given make-up assignments. I did not have to outsmart anyone.

Work. I feel as if I have been outsmarting people throughout my work life; as if I never was who I appeared to be. The years I spent with the ILGWU started in a yearlong class which was meant to turn us into the garment workers we were to organize and represent.

True, the '50s were not the '20s and '30s, when the leaders and union staff rose up from the ranks. I was a college graduate, not a garment worker.

When I went to work for the Jewish Labor Committee, founded by Jewish, East European-born union leaders, I "outsmarted" my new employers into thinking I was "one of them." Since I had worked for the ILGWU, and since the President of the ILGWU was David Dubinsky, who was the Treasurer of the JLC, I must be OK. I assume they assumed I was a YPSL, a member of the Young People's Socialist League. I was not.

I learned "on the job." I learned about the other "Jewish unions" and about the role the JLC played in rescuing Jews and Socialist labor leaders from the Holocaust. I became an authority on Jewish community relations, in the fight for equal rights and the role of minorities in unions. I fooled a lot of people. I edited the JLC's publications, and represented the JLC at union conventions, outsmarting more people.

In my next job with the laundry workers, I outsmarted my new employer into thinking I was an expert in labor education. I even outsmarted myself. I continued to work with him in his role as chairman of the NY AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee, but I also created classes for laundry workers and retirees, edited their newspaper and other publications, taught summer school programs, developed a scholarship program for children of laundry workers etc.

All this led to me being offered a job as Education Director of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Workers, by their new president, Jerry Wurf. I accepted, we moved to Washington DC, and within a year that job ended. Seems I wasn't able to outsmart Jerry. As with everything I have already written and will still write, nothing is as simple as I make it sound, but it comes close.

With the help of a friend, I outsmarted the US Commission on Civil Rights, and managed to work for them for the next 21 years. One couldn't ask for more job security than with a Federal job. Still, I managed to form a union among my fellow workers, perhaps outsmarting them into believing they needed a union to represent them. When the Commission decided to open a New England regional office, I outsmarted the agency's director to appoint me to the position.

When our office was closed as a result of a major budget cut, I even outsmarted Governor Dukakis of Massachusetts (again, with the help of a friend) to appoint me to the Board of Review of the Department of Employment Security. I was not able to outsmart the new Governor (William Weld, a Republican). But for my final act of fooling people, I even outsmarted Attorney General Scott Harshbarger (or rather, his assistant) in hiring me as an Inspector in the Fair Labor and Business Practices Division, from which I retired, outsmarting the Commonwealth's Retirement Board into providing me with a small pension.

Do I dare discuss my personal life? Was it a case of “outsmarting” Sylvia that led to our marriage, and did she finally figure me out, after 20 years, and decide that she will no longer be outsmarted? As I already said, nothing is as simple as I am making it.

Did I outsmart Fran, until fate outsmarted both of us? That is all I am going to say about my personal life. The wonderful thing about these pieces is that I can pick and choose what I want to reveal. Still, I maintain the premise: I have gone through life outsmarting most everybody.

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