

19 IT'S ALL OF A PIECE

As I put together “my story” it occurred to me that it is like the resumes we prepared when looking for a job: telling the reader, the potential employer, about our education and work experience, but in one or two pages. And then it occurred to me, as my stream of consciousness kept flowing, they are also like the blurbs we wrote for our high school and college yearbooks.

At that time, we were limited to listing membership in student academic, social or athletic organizations, offices held, and awards. For the Indicator, Stuyvesant High School’s yearbook, the blurb began with your name in caps and ended with the college you hoped to attend, and the career you hoped to pursue. For Microcosm, the CCNY yearbook, alongside your name, in caps, was your address and your major, followed by the blurb.

In both cases, there were three categories of response on the part of the graduating seniors. For the BMOCs (the big men—and/or women—on campus) a lengthy listing filling every inch of space alongside their photograph. For the average student, the listing was more modest. And the graduates I really admired were those who submitted nothing. I never was sure if their non-submission was a protest against materialism, capitalism and self-promotion, or a result of procrastination, just not getting the form in on time. I confess that though I was not a BMOC, I tried to look like one. My blurbs ran a respectable four lines in high school, and three lines in college.

While in college, I was also taught the value of an impressive resume. Many years later, I heard people referring to a “CV” and had no idea what they were talking about. It was mentioned in connection with a job application, so I figured they were talking about resumes. I asked what a CV was and was told a curriculum vitae. Oh, of course! (Ask someone what tefillin are and you will be told phylacteries. Big help for someone who knows neither.) I looked up curriculum vitae in my American Heritage dictionary and discovered it really does mean resume, but is literally “the race of life.” And how about a new term “CRV” for curriculum rattus vitae for “the rat race of life.” But I digress.

My earliest resumes listed my part time jobs in high school and college: 1942-1945 Page, Newspaper Division, New York Public Library; 1945-1949 Clerk, Reich and Schrift Commercial Stationers; and my summer jobs: junior draftsman (GS-2) at the Brooklyn Navy Yard (1945), camper waiter (1946), hotel busboy (1947) and camp counselor (1949). I dropped them with some reluctance some years after college, realizing that they were no longer relevant.

When I worked for the Federal government, we had to fill in an application known as Standard Form 57, your Personal Qualifications Statement. This was the resume you submitted for any government job for which you were applying. In 1979, it was revised and became SF 171. I am sure it has been revised many more times since. Looking through my old resumes, I was overcome with nostalgia as I relived my old jobs, and got a kick out of seeing what I emphasized and what I downplayed as I tailored resumes for different positions.

And still another thought occurred to me: that our obituary is our final resume. (I should begin to think about what I would like emphasized, and what I would like downplayed.)

And then I remembered one of the most important lessons I learned in connection with resumes and job applications: references. In December 1949, I applied for admission to the newly created ILGWU Training Institute which was to begin in May 1950, and, after a year's training, would lead to a job with the union. I was still at CCNY going for a Master's in Education and working occasionally as a substitute teacher. The Training Institute application asked for three references. I came up with the bright idea of listing the manager of my mother's ILGWU local, Louis Hyman. That should impress them. I had met him a few times when I went to the union to pay my mother's dues. In March, I was called for an interview, and thought I did very well. In April, I was notified that I was an alternate. They had selected 40 applicants and 10 alternates out of over 1400 candidates. Close, but no cigar. I continued my classes at CCNY.

I was writing a paper about the union's educational program, and had scheduled a meeting with Education Director Mark Starr for the second week of May. (The Training Institute Director was Dr. Arthur Elder.) Both offices were on the same floor. When I arrived, I saw someone I knew from CCNY who was in the training program and asked him about the program and the make-up of the group. He mentioned that there were about 35 students. They were supposed to have 40, and I was an alternate. I went into Dr. Elder's office and asked why I had not been called, since I was an alternate. (This is known as "chutzpah.") Dr. Elder pulled my application, looked it over, and told me he had to talk to Vice President Julius Hochman who chaired the union's Education Committee, and to call him in the afternoon. I called him and he told me that I could start the next day. Several weeks later, I asked Dr. Elder why I hadn't been selected. He said they were impressed with me, but when they checked my references, Louis Hyman told them he never heard of me. From this, I learned a lesson I have never forgotten: If you give someone as a reference, let that person know.

I also learned another lesson. If I had not gone to the ILGWU to meet with Mark Starr, I would not have met my friend who told me about the class. Was it fate, or was it luck? Was it being in the right place at the right time? It certainly changed the direction of my life.

And talking about lessons which I learned from that experience, and reinforced in every job that I have had since: It is not what you know, but who you know. Which brings us back to references...

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