

On Unimpressives
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I'm reading a new biography of Dwight Eisenhower.* One of the things that is coming up for me reading the book is how impressive Eisenhower's résumé is. Get this: He was a Five-Star General in the army, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II, European Commander of NATO, President of Columbia University, twice elected President of the United States, and his likeness is on the silver dollar. Impressive, right?

Paying attention to résumés is far from new with me. Over the years, I've taken special note of people that I thought had particularly strong ones. Thomas Jefferson is an example that comes to mind. Among other things, Jefferson was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, Governor of Virginia, Representative from Virginia to the Congress of the Confederation, Secretary of State, Minister to France, Vice-President of the United States, and President of the United States. That impresses me in a major way.

The first time I can remember thinking about résumés was when I was in my late twenties and went to work at the University of Minnesota as an instructor in the College of Education while I was doing my doctoral work. My advisor in both my masters and doctoral programs was Dr. William Gardner. While I was his advisee, just a few years, these are all promotions, Bill, as we all called him, went from assistant professor to associate professor to full professor to department chairman to associate dean of the college to dean of the college, and then he was elected the president of the national organization of colleges of teacher education, and then the Democratic Party recruited him to run for the U.S. House of Representatives, although he turned that down. To say the least, I was highly impressed by that.

As the years went along, I came to realize that it wasn't so much the résumé itself, the accomplishments, that interested me; it was how impressed people are with certain people. Or not impressed: I made note of instances where I thought someone was getting something quite remarkable done and yet nobody seemed to think it was all that much, if anything. On the impressive side of the ledger, there was the President, I guess that was her title, of a

nearby Catholic college, a nun. I've blanked on her name; this was a lot of years ago. Anyway, people were impressed to the skies with her. The mere mention of her name brought a torrent of praise and affirmation; all the marvelous things she was doing. I hold out the distinct possibility I was missing things that other people were picking up on about her, but in any case while I thought she was fine and all I couldn't figure out what all the adulation was about. There was something about her beyond her accomplishments, I speculated, and I couldn't discern exactly what it was--a look about her? a personality trait? a way of affirming people that prompted them to project things onto her that weren't there?--that triggered people to be extremely impressed with her. Another example, there was one particular faculty colleague--I'm a university professor--who really, I mean really, impressed students, and the truth of it was I couldn't quite figure out what it was about him that warranted it. And there are many others that come to mind as I write this that I won't take the space to get into here.

I wasn't as clear in years past as I am now about why I was so intrigued by the topic of impressiveness--we are talking about a span of over forty years. It was because, beginning with my parents and down to right now (it's 1:30 in the afternoon of March 26, 2012), I've never impressed anybody about anything. It's not that people have considered me completely without talent or accomplishment; rather, they were and are sincerely unimpressed with me personally as well as with anything I get done (including this web site, by the way). Ho hum, you know? I'm nobody special, I'm not on the radar screen, who's he? That's the way it has always been for me no matter what I have managed to develop in myself or achieve. There are no exceptions that I can think of in over seven decades of existence on this earth: family, friendships, social connections, love interests, school, the army, college, marriage, children, colleagues, administrators, teaching, scholarship, service involvements, avocations, you name it: no big failures, some successes, but nothing remotely impressive to anybody. If I leave the room nobody notices I'm gone--do you know what I'm getting at?

With what I've just written as a backdrop, I'll set out a construct and work with it some. It is a category of human being: the Unimpressive. Note the capital U. I want to distinguish the people

I'm writing about here from those who are unimpressive because they simply are nothing and do nothing worth anybody being impressed about. I can understand that phenomenon; some people are simply losers and it's no surprise that they don't impress anybody. What's tougher to understand, and what intrigues me and hits closer to home personally, is the person I'm calling the Unimpressive.

There are two requisite characteristics Unimpressives possess:

1) They are something and/or are doing something that arguably deserves people being impressed with it. What they are doing doesn't have to be in the league with winning the Nobel Prize or an event in the Olympics Games, but by reasonable, everyday standards of capability and achievement they deserve to be considered impressive.

2) There is absolutely nothing they can become or do that will impress anybody. And I mean nothing. Walk on water? Not impressive if these people do it.

I've decided very late in life that I am, yes, an Unimpressive.

What can we say about Unimpressives? We can say they create problems for themselves in four major ways:

1) They sometimes *get discouraged and quit*. They see that that nothing they are or do impresses anybody and they lower their sights in life. That's not a ticket to being happy, plus the world doesn't get the good things it would have gotten if they hadn't rolled up into a ball and played dead.

2) They a lot of times *chase after impressiveness*. They do this and that and the other thing and in effect, or literally, say: "How about that?" "Was that good enough?" "Was I nice enough?" "Did I entertain you?" "Did I make you feel good about yourself?" "Are you impressed with me now?" Of course, the answer is, "No, I'm not impressed with you, and will you please excuse me, I have to be someplace, and while I'm gone you can finish shining my shoes." A few years or few decades of chasing will frustrate and exhaust them, drive them to Snickers' bars, cheap wine, weed, and despair, and distract them from what they ought to be doing with their lives, which, whatever it is, most certainly is not chasing futilely after the unimpressed.

3) Unimpressives can *get into lapping up crumbs*. It's kind of the opposite of the late humorist Groucho Marx's remark that he wouldn't join any organization that would accept him as a member.

The problem with Unimpressives is they *will* join any organization that will deign to accept them as a member. I use organization loosely to include any setting, any person or group of people, which will allow them to be around. These people are busy with more important things to do than give energy to the Unimpressives, but they'll grudgingly, or is it dutifully, toss a few crumbs their way when the mood strikes them.

4) Unimpressives *take crap*. Unimpressives can get the irrational idea that because other people are singularly unimpressed with them these other people have the right not to take them into proper account, be unfair to them, and be hurtful and cruel to them.

Unimpressives have to be in their heads enough not to fall into those four traps.

What can Unimpressives do about their status as Unimpressives?

1) They can realize that *something is what it really is and not what other people think it is*. Because the buying public wasn't impressed with Van Gogh's paintings (he sold one painting in his life, to his brother), that didn't mean he wasn't any good as a painter. People are what they are and produce what they do, whatever that is, and not what others, for whatever reason, including their own issues, say it is.

2) They can *test whether their audience is the problem and they aren't a true Unimpressive*. No matter what he might have done, Sigmund Freud would not have gone over big with Adolf Hitler and the other National Socialists. Sigmund had to find people to play his life to that would be impressed with his work. Though remember, for true Unimpressives, no audience will be impressed with them; none, zero, nada, zilch, nobody anywhere, any time, never.

3) They can *embrace their identity as Unimpressives*. They can accept that, indeed, they are Unimpressives. They can quit fighting it. They can cease trying to overcome it. They can relax and let go and just be full-blown Unimpressives. They can love it, and themselves for being it. They can cheer up. They can be happy in their Unimpressiveness. They can laugh! Ha, ha, ha, ha, HAH! "We are Unimpressives!" It's a kind of an existential choice, to acknowledge the reality of your social self. I think I've done this

recently and I can attest that doing it takes a load off your back and is remarkably freeing.

If people accept, with the whole of their beings, that, indeed, they are Unimpressives and that is going to be just fine with them from now on until something changes it, and that doesn't ever need to happen, there are a couple of tacks they can take:

- They can *do a Steve Ditko*. "On Steve Ditko" is one of my favorite thoughts on this site. Ditko was a prominent cartoonist in decades past (he created Spiderman among other characters). Now in his eighties, he gets up every day and draws whatever he is truly inspired to draw and self-publishes it. He does his work to do it, it is an end in itself, and he does it the very best he can. While he goes public with it, he has no concern for how it is received. He is responsible to himself and to the work and to being honorable and honest, that's it. If you are impressed with his work, fine, and if not, fine, that's your business. Steve Ditko's business, and it is the only business he attends to, is moment to moment, day to day, manifesting the best possible version of the one and only Steve Ditko. I read the Steve Ditko thought time and again and am always inspired by it.

- They can *shut down the show*. They can stop tap dancing. They can stop climbing the mountain, whatever the best metaphor. They can simply do as they damn please. They can get up in the morning and do whatever strikes them as a good idea from then through the rest of the day, good, bad, or indifferent, and do that again the next day and every morning and rest of the day until they die unless something happens to change things, which it undoubtedly won't. Even if they have Visa cards to pay off, for true Unimpressives there's a decent chance nothing bad will come of it, because people aren't prone to giving them enough notice to respond in any big way to whatever they do. And even if Unimpressives get canned from their jobs or thrown out of the house, whatever it is, it could very well result in a better life for them. It might spur them to do what they should have done much earlier: wait tables in the Bahamas. I mention the Bahamas because one time, so many years ago now, when I was trying unsuccessfully to get a secondary school teaching position amid vast indifference to my presence on this planet, my dear much-older sister Marilyn--she was killed in a car accident soon after this--said to me, "You know, if

you don't get a teaching job you could go be a waiter in the Bahamas, and that might be pretty good."

It still might.

* Jean Edward Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace* (Random House: 2012).