

## CHAPTER 8

It felt like any other Tuesday morning, only a bit colder. Maybe it was because Mercury was the ruling planet on that particular day, or maybe it was just the routine of it all. Who knew? Did it really matter?

On the way to work that morning, I ran into an old friend, Mr. Marino. He was late for work and seemed panicked over it.

“What’s the good word, Mr. Marino?”

“You know, all the same. Nothing new to report.”

“Romance?”

“Nope.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“Getting laid?”

“I told you. Nothing.”

“Any prospects?”

“Well none so far. At least not until they graduate.”

The poor bastard had it worse than I did. While I had to deal with the temptation of juniors and seniors—university types—he had to deal with sixteen-year-old sirens. Teaching high school was no joke. Much like my university students, his had no real interest in the subject matter. Unlike my own, though, his had to attend class by state law. Dressed as thinly as my own students, his were just as fresh of flesh and just as dangerous, only maybe more so, due to “underage” limitations.

“Well, keep your pants on,” I said. “Don’t get in trouble.”

“You, too, Dr. Benjamin Wise, you son of a bitch. I know you’re laying at least one of those beautiful college girls. Why don’t you just admit it?”

“Not a single one,” I replied.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“Not even one?”

“Not a soul.”

“You son of a bitch.”

To the scrutiny of his middle finger, I bid him goodbye.

My office door was jammed. I forcefully pushed it open, like a West Bank soldier, only without the balls. These damn students kept on leaving assignments under my office door. They turned into accidental doorstops.

On my computer screen, I inspected the very PowerPoint slides that I had half-assed last semester. I could foresee another one of those long fifty-minute sessions that would surely put not only my students into a deep coma, but potentially drag me down, as well. What was the point anyways? They'll write the shit down, memorize it, only to forget it all a day after the exam. I was an overeducated babysitter. I was one of those men playing Japanese guitar on the subway platform for the entertainment of people waiting for the train. Maybe one of them would buy a CD, or drop a dollar in the music case, but for most of them I was just a random form of short-term amusement before graduation.

There had to be more. My disillusionment reminded me of an old story I once heard:

There was a great Rabbi who lived in the old Jewish neighborhood of Alexandria back in the day. This man was considered to be the greatest teacher of them all. One day, a novice student asked him the following question: "Rabbi, what's the greatest wish that you ever prayed for?"

"When I was younger in my days," the Rabbi answered, "I prayed to the Lord and asked him for the power to change the world. Soon after, I realized that such a task was greater than my abilities and therefore prayed for the power to change my surroundings."

"And that you have accomplished, Rabbi. After all, your reputation is well established all around these parts of the world. You are admired not only by your students, but also by the community. You have made your mark on us all."

"Yes," answered the Rabbi. "But it is only now in my older years that I fully realize what I should have prayed for all along: the power to change myself."

Was I to deduce the same outcome? Was my attempt to inspire my students futile? Was my desire to give them an education of no value? Was their apathy a function of age that could not be overcome? Should I refocus my efforts towards improving myself and let these soon-to-be-corporate figures figure it all out for themselves?

As tempting as it was, I could not capitulate. If we abandoned our students and just focused on our own research, what the hell was the point of the university system as a whole? I wasn't that stupid, and I knew that it was research rather than teaching that would get me ahead in my career. But hey, we all have to care about something. Unfortunately, I was naïve enough to care about my students. I would likely fail third-year review anyways, so I might as well try to make a difference.

Ten minutes before class started, I was transformed from a modern university jerk into an old-school Hebrew prophet, the biblical fool who would urge the sinners of Sodom to abandon town before it was all too late.

I didn't have anything of this kind prepared on paper, nor would I consider employing the power of PowerPoint for the task of inspiration.

Armed with the intoxicated thought of a dimwit and a few barely memorized Paulo Coelho passages, I walked into the classroom ready to face my students.

“If you’ll take out your syllabus, you’ll see that today we are supposed to talk about syndicated research and audience measurement. We were supposed to study the appropriate methods for analyzing the SMRB index along with the category development index. Believe me when I tell you that such knowledge is paramount for success in the professional world. However, today I would like to talk about something even more significant than job preparation or corporate success. Today we will talk about the most important concept of all—your happiness.” The students seemed surprised, perhaps even slightly shocked. But I continued.

“Here we are in a leading institution of higher education. We sit here in an upper-division capstone course in a journalism college that was included in the university’s flagship agenda. You are all the best and the brightest that America has to offer. You, my dear students, are the future of this nation. But let me ask you all a simple question: Why is it that you chose to become ‘mass communication’ students? What was it that drove you all to pursue careers in advertising agencies and public relations firms? What was it about the world of marketing and corporate journalism that motivated you to spend over twenty thousand dollars a year on an education for a profession that would likely pay you no more than forty thousand dollars upon graduation?”

“I want you all to answer the following question: How many of you chose your major based on the recommendations of your parents or a guidance counselor?”

About half dozen students raised their hands. The rest just looked at me pointlessly.

“I see. Well, let me ask the rest of you. Why was it that you chose your major? How many of you are absolutely passionate about the kind of stuff you learn here in our college?”

A single student raised her hand. Was it time to give up? Not yet—I was determined to inspire. I wanted to do for them what no other professor would do: tell them the truth.

“Come on, guys. I’m trying to have a conversation with you about life. You will not get in trouble, and there are no right or wrong answers to my questions. I’m simply trying to understand the way you think. I want to make sure that you’re all getting into this media business for the right reasons. Let me ask you, why is it that you want to go into the media game?”

Finally, after two minutes of silence, one student raised her hand.

“I want to go into public relations because I like people and I want to throw parties for clients.”

Another girl followed: “I want to go into marketing because I like watching commercials on television.”

Those poor bastards. They knew nothing about the world they were about to go into. How would they react when they landed their first public relations job, only to write press releases all day long for minimum-wage salaries? What would they do when they discover that the world of advertising was more about research than it was about creativity? The truth of the matter was that an undergraduate degree in media studies was as useful as fresh breath: enough to get you through the front door, but not good for much beyond it. The corporate agencies didn’t really care about grade point averages or analytical thinking; all they wanted was a

person who would fit well into their well-oiled corporate machine.

“And you guys think that you’ll be happy working in an advertising agency or a marketing firm? Is that ultimately the thing that’ll make you all happy?”

They remained silent. For years, they had been trained by my colleagues to sit inaudibly and take notes of everything they heard in class. I had a feeling that the mere exchange of ideas with a professor seemed out of line, or at least was something they had not often experienced. The Socratic method was long ago abandoned in favor of easily graded Scantron sheets. My students didn’t know how to think out side of the box, and in fact, I didn’t think they were even trained to think inside of it. After all, the people on Madison Avenue didn’t want us to produce thinkers—they wanted obedient workers.

I had clearly failed in my efforts to inspire. Maybe it was my accent that got in the way. After all, despite living in the States for decades, English was still my second language.

I decided that a change of tactics was in order. If they wanted specific directions from their boss on inspiration, then I would order them to be inspired.

“By the end of the semester, I expect every single one of you to turn a wish list into my office.”

They all took out their notebooks and started taking notes in their typically frantic ways.

I didn’t mind. “In this wish list, I want you to include ten dreams or goals that you would like to achieve by your thirtieth birthdays. This list cannot include such goals as being happy, rich, or married. You must list specifics and provide detail as to why it is you identified an item as a dream and ‘because it will make me happy’ is not a valid reason. Our dreams are worthless unless we understand why it is that we want to pursue them.”

I took a short sip of coffee and then went back to my overenthusiastic sermon. “From now on, all decisions taken in your life and careers should be guided by your dreams. This is an exercise in identifying who you are. This is an exercise in defining what it is you want out of life.”

Their stoic expressions would not take the winds out of my sails. For once, I was determined to get through to them; for once, I cared passionately about the outcome of the day’s lecture. Even if they did not.

Recognizing the failure of the Socratic method, I turned to quotations. Perhaps this generation, made brain-dead by worthless reality programming, would respond to some old-time wisdom?

Would Gandhi’s “Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever” work? Not likely. They were too young to worry about death and too apathetic to care about learning.

Perhaps Anais Nin’s “Dreams pass into the reality of action. From the actions stems the dream again; and this interdependence produces the highest form of living.” No, that one wouldn’t likely work either. It required too much logical calculus from a generation that used the digital calculator.

Perhaps I should have shared the words of the great Elie Wiesel: “The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it’s indifference. The opposite of

faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference". I always found that quote to be significant, but they would likely be, of course, indifferent—as they usually were to most things their professors said.

Ready to throw in the white towel, I decided to employ the technique of storytelling. I would tell a story I had once read in the pages of the talented Robin Sharma. If inspiration was my goal, it made sense to use the words of an author who mass marketed inspiration to over two million people around the world. In his words, readers found a temporary escape from their mundane lives. Two weeks later, of course, everything returned back to normal; such was the problem with inspiration—much like milk, it didn't have a very long shelf life.

"Today, my dear students, I would like to talk to you about life and our dreams. Those very same elements that determine our identities. I want to talk to you all about fighting the good fight. Allow me to tell you the following story—a story about the nature of the human heart.

"Thousands of years ago, humans reigned supreme upon the earth, having miraculous abilities beyond belief. Undermined by their nature, most people took these unlimited powers for granted and often misused them. Therefore, God decided to take those powers away. Then there was the question of where he should hide these divine powers once held by man, these powers of inspiration of greatness. God summoned three advisers. The first suggested that God dig a great hole deep in the earth where the powers could be hidden. 'No,' said the Lord. 'One day, someone may dig a hole just as deep and discover it.' A second adviser suggested that the powers could be hidden upon the rooftops of the tallest mountain, but the Lord recognized that the voracious nature of men might lead them to high elevations. The Lord thought to himself and then decreed, 'I shall hide the great powers of knowledge, strength, and ease of mind in the one place where no man would ever bother to look, within the human heart.'

"You see, my dear students, it is within our very hearts where our internal powers lie. Those of you who will bother to search within yourselves will find the answer to all questions that may trouble you. It is only through self-knowledge that you will ever reach your potential."

Finally, I thought, my academic quest was over. My mission had been accomplished. Following endless mindless lectures about God knows what, I have finally reconnected with the very purpose of higher education: teaching, knowledge, and inspiration.

My students remained silent. I could hear the air creeping through the ventilation system of the building. From the back of the room, I saw one raise her hand. That face I would never forget. She couldn't have been older than nineteen years of age.

"Dr. Wise," she asked, "is this all going to be on the exam?"