

REMARKS FOR DAVID HALBERSTAM'S MEMORIAL SERVICE

(June, 2007)

It's hard to begin – so I'm just going to begin.

When I first met David, on Nantucket in the summer of 1973, he was very tall and had a very cool Wurlitzer jukebox in the corner of his living room. He also, I learned, had a fishing boat. He was thirty-nine and I was eight. He had invited my family to his house to watch the New York Giants play an exhibition game. He'd already won a Pulitzer for his reporting in Vietnam, and he'd published *The Best and the Brightest*. Being eight years old, I wasn't all that impressed with his Pulitzer, but the jukebox was really cool.

The fishing boat was a 20-foot Mako. Early one morning, not long after we met, we headed out of Madaket Harbor and powered east toward the Miacomet Rip, the boat skimming across the ocean chop. I'd never been on a boat like that. David was at the wheel – big, generous, wanting everybody to have a good time. He showed me how to bend my knees to absorb the impact of the boat hitting the water. I watched how he did it, and then I did it, too. That was the first of the many things he taught me.

I was a freshman at boarding school when my parents' marriage ended. In no time at all, it seemed, everyone moved away. I'd always seen quite a lot of David – Yankees and Knicks games, fishing outings, tennis games (the image of him prowling the net and occasionally shouting, like a caveman on steroids, still makes me laugh) – but in those dislocated years I more or less moved in with him and Jean during the summers. I remember when Julia came home from the hospital in a basket. I remember the day, about a year later, when she took her first steps toward me, as I held a children's book just out of her reach. That was a story that David loved; I must have heard him tell it literally dozens of times in the succeeding years, as we all got older, and Julia grew up, and, eventually, as I passed the age that David was when we'd first met. And the way

that David would tell that particular story was exactly like him: he tended to make me better than I really was.

When David found a story that he liked – almost always a story taken from real life, some account that moved him for the simple but deep bonds that it suggested – between two people; between an athlete and his talent, a fan and his team, a writer and his subject; between, say, a man and his country or his conscience – he’d tell that story again and again. Some of these stories were more domestic than others. One such tale involved the early morning phone calls he used to badger me with after my graduation from college, when I was sleeping off hangovers instead of working on my first novel. “I’ve been writing for an hour,” David’s familiar, godlike voice boomed in my ear, morning after morning. “What the hell have you been doing?” He kept calling for weeks, until he was sure that I’d put a certain kind of childish behavior behind me, because I was no longer a child. And when, over time, David began telling that story, too, with the warmth and affection that I never knew to be absent in him, I emerged as a figure a little better than I really was. Which made me want to be better than I really was.

Last summer, I was lucky enough to spend a lot of time with him. Our 8-month-old baby was making our Nantucket cottage a bit too noisy for writing, so David offered me work space in his and Jean’s living room. (It was very like him to do that; just as it was very like him to be convinced that our son Garrick loved his singing voice.) Every morning, I showed up with my laptop, and, after having coffee together and talking through the sports pages and the latest grim news from Iraq, we’d settle down to work in our respective rooms. He was finishing The Coldest Winter, and proud of it, doing what he loved to do, and every day I could feel the contentment coming off him like a warm glow. He’d come in to check on me every so often, or just to chat, or we’d meet for a coffee in the kitchen (David was quite proud of his skills with the cappuccino maker – though, to be honest, I usually kept my distance whenever he worked with small machinery). One day, I found him scribbling something on a note card and laughing mischievously to himself – and I had to laugh, too, when he presented me with a signed “bill” for my summer writing residency.

Yeah, he thought that was pretty funny.

And so we had ourselves another story to tell.

This is what it was like to grow up with David; to feel his constant, loving advocacy and support from the time I was eight years old; to know that he would always call; that he would never not be there; that the timbre of his voice would never change; that he would always take it upon himself to tell the stories that became the map of where we, together, had been. He was an extraordinary father and friend. He had a profound gift for human connection, and a surprising gift for intimacy. What he gave was what he lived; there wasn't a false or lazy bone in his body. He gave, and taught, and loved by doing – which was to say, by being himself, by working and living as he did. And one of the rewards he allowed himself for all that hard work was the telling of the stories, however small or unheroic, that were important to him; and, because they were important to him, and true in their meanings, those stories made him deeply happy.

David made me better than I was. That's simply the truth. A better citizen; a better friend; a better writer; a better husband; a better son; a better father. His stories became our stories, and I carry them still.

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