

MY MENTOR

(GQ, 2002)

Here are a few things I know – really know – about David Halberstam.

When I first met him, on Nantucket, in the summer of 1973, he was very tall and had a very cool Wurlitzer jukebox in the corner of his livingroom. He also, I learned, had a fishing boat. He was thirty-nine and I was eight. My father was his lawyer and because we didn't have a TV David invited our family to his house to watch the New York Giants play an exhibition game. Jerry Goldstein was the Giants quarterback and he was terrible. But David was great. He'd already won a Pulitzer for his reporting in Vietnam for the *Times* and had published *The Best and the Brightest*. Being eight years old I wasn't very impressed with his Pulitzer, but the jukebox was another story. And then there was the boat.

He took us fishing for blues and stripers. The boat was a 20-foot Mako. We headed out of Madaket Harbor early one morning, made the turn around Smith's Point, and powered east toward the Miacomet Rip, the engine opened up, sun slanting low over blue water and 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. I still do.

Another day, he took my brother and me out with some of his friends. The wind was up and the chop steady. At some point, while everyone was busy fishing, my brother got seasick. He stood at the side, green and miserable, leaning over the water. David stood with him. I remember his hand on my brother's back, almost covering it, supporting him as the boat rocked wildly on the swells.

Over the next few years I saw David every summer on Nantucket and often in Manhattan, where my family lived. It was during this period that David met and married Jean Butler (I have vivid memories of their wedding in the Cathedral of St. John the Devine on 117th Street, the two of them standing aglow in light before the Reverend William Sloan Coffin, even David appearing touchingly small beneath the height of the vaulted ceiling), and it became an expected pleasure of my life to find them regularly at our house, and occasionally to go with David to Yankees and Giants and Knicks games. (There's a photograph taken at a Knicks game, circa 1979, so sartorially embarrassing to us both that we've sealed a blood oath to keep it buried). There are some adults who treat the young children of their friends as annoying apparitions, little people who may or may not be real, but David and Jean were never like that. In their dealings with my brother and me they always offered an engaged, thoughtful regard that made us feel somehow better about ourselves, perhaps even taller; they listened to us as though what we said mattered, and in so doing encouraged the illusion that the wider adult world – which, as we would soon experience in our own family, was increasingly chaotic and beyond our control – was something within our grasp and ken.

I was fourteen and still settling in at boarding school in Connecticut when my parents called to tell me they were separating. The news was not totally unexpected – Thanksgiving vacation, just a week earlier, had offered a painful, indelible portrait of a marriage coming apart at the seams – but it still came as a shock. My mother asked if I wanted them to drive up and bring me home, and I answered no, I'd be okay. I didn't ask what she meant by "home" now. What I remember is putting down the receiver – my freshman advisor had gently suggested I take the call on his private phone – to stand there, mute and afraid, as what had been my world fell around me in pieces. Then I walked as if dazed into my advisor's livingroom, where a group of my classmates was laughing uproariously in front of the TV (my instinct, rather than my memory, tells me it was a Laurel and Hardy movie), and with my jaw set and my head as steady as I could hold it, I moved between my new friends and out to the

brightly lit hallway, and down the hallway to my room. I didn't know it then but within a year my father would shift his law practice to Los Angeles, and within two years my brother would be a freshman at Stanford, and not long after that my mother would fall in love with the poet W.S. Merwin (now my beloved stepfather) and move to Hawaii. A fractured time, then. The old certainties were over; other than school, my life was at loose ends.

Family summers became a rite of the past. The Halberstams were still on Nantucket, though, and during the summer of 1980 – the summer that their daughter Julia was born – they invited me to stay with them. In retrospect, their generosity and sensitivity astonish me; I was a teenager, after all, not the sort of animal that sane people normally welcome into their house. But David and Jean, I think, had recognized the vacuum surrounding me, and they moved to fill it. I spent almost a month in their guest cottage, and in their lives as a member of their family. That summer when I badly needed one they offered a steadying, loving hand. And something else too: an example. I was fifteen. Every morning I saw David go to his desk for the day. He went willingly, determinedly, with a fighter's eye toward some event or idea that was unfolding within him, that only he could see. It seemed at once a mystery and a certainty to me, and it was profoundly impressive. And then every evening at dinner I saw him step out of that skin for a little while, to recharge. There were often other writers around the long table at one end of the big kitchen, candles flickering in the breeze from the open doors. I saw the community they formed, thinking people sharing each other's company and laughter. A writer's life, David said to me that summer both in word and deed, was a good life.

Three years later I went to Harvard – David's alma mater. I began to read his books. David and Jean were living in Japan then, where he was doing research for *The Reckoning*, his brilliant study of the auto industry. I ended up majoring in Japanese Studies. *The Reckoning* came out during my senior year, and David agreed to come and speak to the East Asian Studies department. I introduced him, I remember. By that time I'd begun to notice a few things about David other than his height and his jukebox and his fishing boat. I'd

begun to notice his extraordinary talent for historical synthesis and his impeccable journalistic eye. I'd begun to notice the remarkable prescience of his thinking, how he seemed always ahead of the curve of the national interest, working to illuminate an essential area of knowledge -- Vietnam, the increasingly television-dependent cultures of media and sports, the growing interdependence of the global economy -- long before most other people were aware of its central place in the national debate; in fact, it was often David's books and articles that helped to put any given subject at the center of the national debate, and helped to define its terms. I'd begun to notice that his big books tended to take years to write, and that they were always about something important, and that the inherent risk in them as literary undertakings had to do in some way with their high degree of moral seriousness; that, in this way and others, David was calling upon not just his talents but upon his convictions every day, and that his professional excellence and his sense of self and his generosity as a person were all inextricably linked to this daily test, which was the writing. Curiosity and courage and loyalty and seriousness, I'd begun to realize through David, were the writer's values, and he lived by them.

The summer I graduated from college I returned to Nantucket, to a cottage owned by my aunt, to try to finish a first novel. Afternoons I hitchhiked into town to work at Mitchell's Book Corner at the top of Main Street. Mornings were supposed to be for writing. But the first part of that summer I had a lot of visitors, a lot of booze-fueled late nights, and too often the morning seemed like just a short, foggy interlude between breakfast and lunch.

It was late June when I got the first call. It was 8:30, or perhaps 9:00, and I stumbled bleary-eyed out of bed for the phone. The deep, assured voice on the other end of the line was -- and always will be -- immediately familiar to me.

"I've been writing for an hour," David said. "What have you been doing?"
I received one of those calls every morning for weeks, until he was sure.

And then a few years after that – after the publication of my first novel and a stint living in Paris and the lucky day I met the woman who eventually would become my wife and after a long struggle to write a second book – I received another call from David, asking me to meet him for lunch in town. He'd read the manuscript I'd sent him, he said gravely, and wanted to talk to me about it.

It was a perfect island day, breezy and blue; everywhere you turned, it seemed, was the ocean. I drove into town with a knot in my gut. After two and a half years and several drafts, I couldn't seem to get the second book to work. In my heart I think I knew this, but I was twenty-six and such was the corrosive panic induced by my own anticipated failure that I still intended – right up until my lunch with David – to go on trying to make it work, and, I hoped, to publish it.

David's voice that day was caring but firm. He told me that the book didn't work. The subject matter – a tangled, intense story concerning a boy's troubled relationship with his strong-willed father – while interesting, was too close to me and consequently I hadn't given it the teeth it required; it had no bite. It was, he said (and my memory of his exact words gets fuzzy here, perhaps mangling the metaphor and lending the scene a welcome retrospective note of light absurdity), as if I'd somehow taken a wrong turn at the beginning of the project and instead of going to the heart of things had ended up at the dentist, where, under massive anesthesia, my teeth had been pulled. There was certainly anger in the book – a son's still-raw hurt over a divorce already a decade in the past -- but no art in that anger, at least as it was presently expressed. In this case, David suggested, I had failed to do what any good novelist must, which was to make sense of experience by imaginatively transforming it and thus making, and shaping, something new.

Our table was outside, under an umbrella. Around us there were mothers in white and yellow and robin's egg blue, and children in tennis clothes, and, beyond, catboats tacking in the harbor. My glass of iced tea was sweating and I hadn't touched my lunch. And David said that he knew that this

was hard to hear but that the best thing for me to do now was to put this book behind me and start another one.

I went home and quietly collapsed for a few days. David kept calling to make sure I was all right. But he didn't alter by one word his judgment on my book or try to assuage the experience. Truth was truth, he was telling me, and the one thing a writer can't afford to do is lie to himself about his work. It was a lesson in mental toughness and self-respect, delivered with love, and I'll always be grateful for it.

By the end of that week I'd put the manuscript away for good. And by autumn I'd put down the first sentences of what, six years later, would be published as *Reservation Road*, my second novel which was actually my third – a book largely about two fathers struggling under difficult circumstances to do right by their sons.

I'm a novelist, not a journalist or historian. And influence, of course, is a murky arena. Writers know this as well as anyone. If you are a writer of serious intent there comes a time when you cast off the ties that have held you to a past comprised of all that you have read, and become, for better or worse, your own person. Such literary influences are by definition transient. But there is another kind too. An influence which is personal, moral, perhaps characterological; it has to do, as Walker Percy wrote forty years ago in the *The Moviegoer*, with watching how people "stick themselves into the world" over time; and yet it is the kind of influence that cannot ultimately be found in books, however good and necessary they may be, but only in people, certain people, the rare ones, if you are lucky enough to know them.

David Halberstam is one of those people.

Ask David about the most influential person in his life and he'll tell you that it was *his* father, who was born in 1897 and died in 1950 and served as a doctor in both world wars – the second tour at the age of 46. His father, as David describes him, was a man with an Old World immigrant's sense of obligation and service; an upstanding man of maximum effort who never

turned a blind eye. An Old Testament sort of man, you might say, whose moral view of the world proved to be at once timeless and timely. A description, it seems to me, that could well fit the son, whose constancy, authenticity, and sense of professional and personal obligation have made him an anachronism in this age of the twenty-minute Zeitgeist, a touchstone for several generations of morally engaged Americans, and one of the most important people in my life.

I love David Halberstam not because of his Pulitzer or his bestsellers or even his jukebox, which he sold many years ago, but because in all the years of our friendship I've never known him to act falsely or make a hollow promise. I've never seen him refrain from lending support to another writer whose work he admires. I love him because his wardrobe and haircut may have been upgraded since the old days (thank you, Jean), but the man himself remains distinct and familiar; the issues he talks about today – moral responsibility in media and government, the legacy of the civil rights movement, the craft and practice of journalism, the consequences of war, the joys and distortions of professional sports -- are immediate kin to the issues he has always talked about. I love him because he still regularly quotes Julius Erving to me (“Being a professional is doing what you love to do on the days when you don't want to do it”), and despite his worldly success his basic philosophy of work and life continues to be that (as he said to me again just this morning) “you wake up tomorrow and do it again.” I love him because he has stayed the course and still fights the good fight. More than thirty years after *The Best and the Brightest*, he recently published another, equally illuminating book about the culpability of America's foreign policy establishment – this time in the 1990s. *War in a Time of Peace* is a penetrating and at times devastating group portrait of our recent political leadership, and a moral looking-glass into our own worst (and only occasionally best) instincts as a nation. It's an important book by an important American about the times we live in; it is also, like all of David's books, about the times we come from. Anyone who wishes to count himself an informed citizen in this strange dark world should read it.

And so here we are, after all these years: David's sixty-seven and I'm thirty-six – very close to the age he was when we first met.

Wherever you are, Jerry Goldstein, thanks.

John Burnham Schwartz