

Gentlemen Are Slowly Made, Not Born

My grandfather - maybe yours as well - used to say, "Any day I don't read my name in the obituaries is a good one." He (George Frohwein) had that opportunity in 1993, when his passing was front-page news in the Press-Citizen. He was a remarkable "gentleman" back in the day.

Last week, someone I hadn't thought about in years passed away in Arkansas, and I found myself writing in his online guest book, "What a great guy!" It started me thinking about – or fearing - what I might expect others to write about me after I have the opportunity to read my own name in the obits.

I'm probably the least-objective judge about how others may regard me, but in general I think I deserve a passing grade. On the other hand, my life to date has arguably been one of continuous self-indulgence, as if it's all some vast contest about who has done the most stuff and/or dies with the most toys.

In brief [Begin Bloviation Alert], I have visited over 30 countries, scuba dived over 150 times, ride motorcycles, descended to 1000 feet in a submarine, sang in a choir onstage at Lincoln Center, ran "hot laps" on a race course in a BMW, downhill skied over 40 resorts, wrote over 200 columns for the Press-Citizen, won intercollegiate sailboat races as a UI student, performed in a band on the main stage of the IC Jazz Festival and currently play four different instruments in six different bands requiring seven rehearsals each week.

I have fun (if not spare time), but despite serving on a number of nonprofit boards, as a member of community service organizations and as an elected official, I fear I'm not scoring very highly where it really counts - in the cosmic tally book.

Especially in today's world of Powerful Men Behaving Badly, it seems like we could all use a moral yardstick – something a little more tangible with which we can measure our worthiness. I'm not the first to note that gentlemanly behavior seemingly has all but disappeared.

John Walter Wayland probably said it best: "The True Gentleman is the man whose conduct proceeds from good will and an acute sense of propriety, and

whose self-control is equal to all emergencies; who does not make the poor man conscious of his poverty, the obscure man of his obscurity, or any man of his inferiority or deformity; who is himself humbled if necessity compels him to humble another; who does not flatter wealth, cringe before power, or boast of his own possessions or achievements; who speaks with frankness but always with sincerity and sympathy; whose deed follows his word; who thinks of the rights and feelings of others, rather than his own; and who appears well in any company, a man with whom honor is sacred and virtue safe.”

I can tick off a fair number of those boxes but I still have some distance to go, especially regarding boasting about possessions and achievements (insert sad emoji here).

Fortunately, this is not an all-or-nothing designation – we males all lie somewhere on the gentlemanly ranking continuum but can always improve. You women out there may have a similar interest in the journey toward becoming “ladies,” the closest equivalent female designation.

Recent years have marked the worldly departures of my father and many others of his generation. Three men I happened to know fairly well who would undoubtedly have qualified are Dr. William Olin, Rev. George Paterson and Dr. Robert Soper. I could add a number of others (including my father and the fathers of many of my friends) who would rank highly, and I’m sure you-all had other names leap immediately to mind.

So, I have a goal. I’d feel better about my chances of eventually being near the top of someone else’s “gentleman” list if could stop being a jerk quite as often as seems to be the case. At one time or another I exhibit all of the required traits, but still have notable lapses with alarming regularity. I’m cautiously optimistic these will lessen as I grow older and (hopefully) smarter.

Writer’s Group member Dave Parsons was also indirectly the Press-Citizen’s “Person of the Year” in 2000 as a member of the Englert Theatre Board of Directors, but he doubts he’s getting any extra points for that [End Bloviation Alert].