

One Comment



Michael H. Levin *January 13, 2016 at 8:51 pm* [Reply](#)

A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

Tony Lyle was special

I never met him personally. I didn't even know what he looked like, till January's Gazette arrived and I hit the web to learn he succumbed to a heart attack last October. The world's been a bit darker since.

Tony was my first editor when I started a freelance-journalism career in 1980 alongside my Washington DC day job. It didn't begin as a 'career.' It began with a one-off article cobbled from notes made in Oxford almost two decades before. I mailed it to the Gazette, expecting silence. Tony printed it virtually as-is, and we were off to the races. Only later did I understand how unique that was - for Tony in particular, let alone freelancing as a whole.

Over the next 15 years and about an equal number of Gazette pieces, we became long-distance partners in what amounted to a journalism marriage, where each party knew the other's tastes so well they meshed without thinking. Whether I queried him or sent a piece on spec, the answer was always "Yes." And often "YES!"

After the first piece he quickly agreed to a series of articles which flowed from what I planned or did anyway - articles, for example, on an archaeological dig in Boeotia near where my family planned a vacation; on the first female SEC commissioner, around the corner from my Washington office; on figures like Navy Secretary John Lehman and Senator Arlen Specter; on my Oxford college reunion, attended by Princess Margaret; on my father's death, my son's freshman move-in, our white sled-dog Sam. For a long piece on a 'roots' trip to my late father-in-law's Polish village, he apologized for not making it a cover story - and side-barr'd a chapter from my related draft novel. When I needed press credentials he promptly manufactured justifications, puffing me as "a Gazette contributing writer [who] frequently is called upon to cover Congressional hearings."

Some of these articles had tenuous connections to Penn and the usual functions of an alumni magazine. Still, Tony never rejected a piece I proposed. Instead he became a cheerleader, urging expanded scope, endorsing non-traditional topics, egging me on. When the Gazette received an angry

feminist note to the effect that my “bio-blurb,” unlike the objectionable article, “failed to enlighten this reader on the details of Mr. Levin’s physical appearance and sartorial splendor,” he suggested that perhaps I should have worn a dress to the interview. He sent the Oxford reunion piece to HRH Margaret, receiving a reply from Kensington Palace that she “was delighted to receive this.”

And for me the Gazette became a safety-net: whatever I wrote might find a home there, if the writing hummed. When he departed in the middle of the last article we worked on – a huge piece on the history, culture and palette of the plateau canyons of the American West – he not only made sure the final versions were in good hands. He accelerated Gazette graphics improvements, to accommodate it.

Which is not to say our relationship lacked pain. Tony’s standards and bluntness made pain inevitable. Draft endings often disappeared without notice between acceptance and page proofs. Several articles went through enough revisions to certify a plastic surgeon. To my shock he actually rejected one; then changed his mind, noting that “It’s a tough call but I’d like to use the piece.” Months later appeared a second note: “This is sure to be another best article of the year. . . .Thank god for your secret life – and you for exploiting it.”

When I asked for a kill fee on my first feature profile — a difficult piece — he replied with a needle, a backhand compliment, and guidance: “I wish you’d stop behaving like a lawyer. Of course we’ll take care of you if the piece doesn’t work out (as though there’s a scintilla of doubt). . . .Just be sure to get [the subject] to answer your questions about who [the subject] really is. Dig into [the subject’s] past a bit.”

Perhaps most blunt was the education in journalistic ethics Tony provided. In revisions, advice, and an occasional whoa! his lessons by example were comprehensive and durable: Subjects don’t get to see their quotes or your drafts. Without a carve-out they’re always on record. No, you can’t accept a “guest” invitation to fly off an aircraft carrier – only if that’s another piece, arranged in advance.

He taught me almost everything I know about journalism, and a lot about writing. For instance, it was OK all those endings went away – I tended to include three of them. And his instinct for the sure surgical cut, the magic title – “White Russian” for the sled-dog piece; “The Washington Senator Who Doesn’t Play Ball” for the Specter article – was unerring.

That’s one part of Tony I carry forward.

But it’s only a part.