



The Simple Lesson Of An Apple

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I have met a lot of smart people in my time. Some have even told me so. Unfortunately I have witnessed others “belittled” because of their lack of understanding of a subject, their inability to grasp the nuances of a topic, or sometimes, in the case of a student-athlete, to perpetuate a false stereotype.

Not long ago I happened to interact with a hospital resident – one of the best and brightest of our younger population. I had a question that I was not sure was in her area of expertise and thought maybe I should wait until I saw the doctor who had unexpectedly been delayed. “Go ahead and ask me your question. . . you know I am pretty smart.” I guess that kind of self-assuredness can be refreshing. In this case maybe more for her than for me. I lean more toward the “imaginary” medical doctor in the Norman Rockwell painting who seemed more patient-concerned than in their own self-aggrandizement.

Ah, the smartest person. Throughout history some have debated that reference and even identified some possible candidates. The short list – Albert Einstein, Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking. But personally that identification has never seemed the least bit interesting to me. Maybe it is because I am not that smart a guy – trust me I can find a lot of folks who agree with that perception. But I sense it was a lesson learned a long time ago on a country road, in an orchard, eating an apple.

It happened many, many years ago. And even though I was not more than five or six years old at the time, it has never left me. As it happened, my grandfather was driving the car with me in the front seat and two of my older cousins in the back. They were five or six years older. I loved to be outside and the chance to ride in a car and see even more countryside was exhilarating. There were no seatbelts, no padded dash, not even a radio. Even though I was always tall, I must have been sitting with my legs bent to see out the large windows.

We pulled into an area of trees which I learned years later was an orchard my Grandfather’s friend wanted to buy. I don’t know the farmer’s name but for purposes of the story, let’s call him “Farmer Jones.” Well as the three of us cousins ran around my Grandfather examined a document, made some changes and then said it was “ok” to sign. Farmer Jones then put his mark on the document. You see, he could not read and had asked his friend my Grandfather to look at the document to see if it was fair and met his

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understanding. No lawyers, no “charge” for the review, just two friends doing what friends do for each other. It was a simpler time.

Anyway we climbed back into the car, I being rewarded with an apple I am sure I could not have reached, or cleaned properly, and we assumed our aforementioned spots. However, it was not long before my two cousins started talking loudly and making fun of Farmer Jones. When we passed a speed limit sign they might say, “I wonder if Farmer Jones knows how fast to go?” There were other childish things like: “A, B, C. . . does Mr. Jones know the next letter?” My Grandfather said nothing.

However at one point he pulled the car over to the shoulder of the road and there to our right was an expansive piece of land. He then asked matter of factly the following questions: “Do you know what is growing in that field?” My cousins either said no or shook their head. “How about what kind of tree that is growing?” Again nothing. “And that farm machinery over there. . . do you know what it does or the crops it cultivates?” And then the lesson, after a short, effective pause, “Farmer Jones does? He knows what is growing and how to grow it. He knows when to harvest it and when to fertilize it. He knows how to work that machinery and what fruit grows on that tree.”

Nothing else was said. My Grandfather started the car and I sat perfectly quiet in the front seat eating a crisp fall apple and my two cousins sat quietly in the backseat. He came from a different generation – spoke little and took care of friends and family. There were no “unimportant” people.

I am not sure why that incident has stayed with me so many years – maybe the poignancy of the moment, maybe because my own father only completed the sixth grade, or maybe it was a lesson for my future in working in Universities and maybe meeting a resident or two along the way.

The smartest person in the world. Maybe. . . just maybe, we might be looking for the wrong person. Maybe the search should be for the kindest person. And in the end, that reward will last a lot longer than an apple.