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Stories in life 00:52

When my grandson, Leon, was six, he and his dad intensely studied dinosaurs. Jokingly, I said to him, “Your aunt is an herbivore.” No, Opa, she’s an omnivore.” “But Leon, she’s a vegetarian.” “Oh, Opa, she CAN eat meat. She’s an omnivore.” Leon was the expert at that table. *He had a 15-minute advantage on me.* Experience, education, skills, and behavior all feed expertise. In my grandson story expertise has nothing to do with age or credentials.

My father, Ruben van Leeuwen, a Holocaust survivor, never went to college. I don’t think he graduated from high school. When he died at age 45, he was Vice President of Import Export for Hygrade, a multinational corporation. When I was 15, after his first heart attack, he and I walked together three days a week at 5 am. During one of those walks, he told me that having no credentials and asking the dumb questions was a secret to his success as an executive. He could get away with it with all the Ph.Ds. that worked for him.

When I was 16, dying to get out of high school, worried about the draft, I took a night school Civics class with Mr. Curry. Mr. Curry was an arch conservative, Korean war veteran who strained to tolerate my disruptive ant-Vietnam questioning of his take on Civics. In frustration, he offered me the opportunity of independent study about the Supreme Court rulings on free speech. Brilliant move, I learned a ton, so did Mr. Curry. When I applied for 1-O Conscientious Objector status with the Selective Service, Mr. Curry wrote me a letter of recommendation. ‘I completely disagree with Danny, but I’m 100% convinced of his sincere pacifist belief.’

I was and still am, a seriously gullible person. I will first believe you and then question, no matter how stupid your assertion. Perhaps as a counterbalance I have had the habit as a parent and grandparent to talk nonsense to my kids and grandkids. ‘That’s not right, you’re being silly, Dad or Opa’ was music to my ears – budding critical thinking.

Stories in a pandemic 03:47

Why tell you these silly, poignant, personal stories? Granted, they’re good ones. (no humility here). I’m coming up with these stories now, today, during this pandemic of mistrust, cult-like following, confusion, science bashing, and desperation? I’m obsessed now with what people believe, what they suspect, and what they know absolutely (as from God). Who do they listen to? What changes their minds? What motivates them to action? Odd that these stories come to mind as I listen to people



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fiercely defending their personal rights to my injury (mask wearing, social distancing), others choosing a strong man over democracy, and some fighting for their perceived entitlement to power and position. These scenarios trigger my feelings of powerlessness, fear, rage, and resignation. Often, all at the same time. And all I can come up with are these stories? Gosh, what is happening to my brain? Have I retreated to ridiculous mindlessness?

Wait, I'm not yet cognitively impaired. I need to trust myself. What can I learn from these stories about Leon, my Dad, Mr. Curry, and parenting?

Lessons 05:24

The lesson for me from Leon's 15-minute advantage story includes understanding that credentials, position, power, or age do not automatically translate to expert, correct, or wise. In fact, we often consult with and trust people who have only a 15-minute advantage on us. We suspect that they know more than us - a nurse in the family, our clergy. On the other hand, we often dismiss those with a 15-minute advantage. *She's just a kid, what could she possibly know?*

From my Dad, the lesson is that active listening by asking questions, dumb questions, can lead to connection, trust, good choices, and effective leadership. Also, wisdom can bridge generations. I've never forgotten that lesson in leadership from my Dad.

From Mr. Curry, I took lessons of sharing control of learning with me, trusting me to teach him something, and honoring principled choices different from his own. I felt valued, honored, mature, informed, motivated. What a gift.

From my kids and grandkids, the lesson: it's not too early to exercise critical thinking muscles. Those muscles need work, continual work. I'm 68. Critical thinking muscles can quickly weaken, just like my leg muscles if I don't get my daily steps.

OK, let's distill: 15-minute advantage, active listening, sharing control, critical thinking.

In fairness, retreating into a safe, friendly, familiar bubble with these stories doesn't make sense for everyone, all the time. It makes sense for me, because I'm not on the front-line, I'm not facing our current pandemics directly. I'm in survival mode. My Opa, told me his job in the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp was to have faith and survive. I'm not in a concentration camp, I'm in the lap of privilege, yet one of my jobs is to survive these pandemics until I'm called to more radical action. These stories help me survive.

Music in the bubble of privilege 07:55

Speaking of survival, let me share a bit about my musical journey. In my bubble of privilege, I'm playing my baritone sax about six hours a week including weekly lessons. I've reached a new level of awareness as I listen to music and play. I'm hearing more nuance, more dynamics, more phrasing, trying to relax my mouth (embouchure), to tell a story, express emotion in my playing and soloing. I'm so excited, here



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in my bubble. The music you hear behind this narrative is a recording of me. I'm as good as I am and getting better. Yeah!

Are you in survival mode? How's that going? Have you been called to more radical action? How's that going? Let me know, I'm fascinated.

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