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First Among Peers

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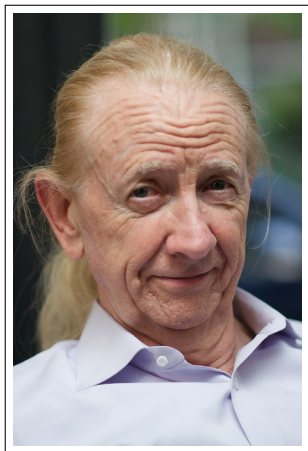
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First Among Peers

by Art Sullivan
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ATTAVIANO had been successful in many businesses. His first success was quitting an order of Catholic monks and marrying the daughter of a Fortune 500 CEO. Attaviano retold the story with relish, as he had so many times. Poor Italian kid from the Bronx. Neither set of parents happy about it.

Herb and I both worked for Attaviano, so we listened. He routinely punctuated business meetings with these same tales, and I saw that the tactic was effective for him, though the repetition bored me. Many thought his age made him forgetful and repetitive and I watched them listen politely waiting for the business thread to resume, all the while not noticing the smooth segue

past an undesired topic or direction.

I wished he would stop the stories. Although I have much to learn in business, I already appreciated his technique and knew it was not one I could use. I didn't want to, anyway. But I stayed patient. Herb was less patient, and soon enough, in any meeting, he had had enough.

Niccolao, the youngest of his four children, told him at dinner one evening that he had never been a good father, Attaviano recounted. "You were always away on business. Not like a real father." "Are you paying off student loans for your college degree or Harvard law degree like the some of those good fathers' kids?" Attaviano asked him, as we knew so well. An oft told tale.

I waited expectantly, as I do each time he tells the story, to see whether the tale would serve only to redirect the meeting, or if I would see Attaviano, one day, process the content.

Attaviano was first among vice presidents, having the superannuated founder-president's unwavering support in every decision and initiative. He had earned it. He came to the company 10 years ago and within the first five had turned a losing division into a 30 million dollar a year gross revenue producer. Their relationship had become personal and strong, able to bridge the gap between Christian ex-monk and Orthodox Jew and make them inseparable, to a point.

For some years Attaviano ran the American branch of a Belgian manufacturing company, and my reverie is interrupted as he sits back in his chair and transforms from vice president to autobiographical raconteur. The tractors, he reports, did

not sell well in the US until he renamed the branch “American Tractors.” He smiles, recalling, relishing, retelling, redirecting.

Maria is dying and Attaviano knows it. Their relationship doesn’t seem close. He’s not tired of her, and it doesn’t seem they’ve “grown apart” over 50 plus years together. He dines with her at a fine restaurant every night, when she feels up to it now, as he has for many years. It is probably with her as it is with the children. Attaviano travelled incessantly for business, and so was a valuable and excellent provider. He loves his grandkids, Attaviano tells, and loves it when they come over. But his days are long and full, and as he sits on the couch he drifts to sleep at 9, up early next morning and into New York City to his office before the traffic. And conducts many more meetings like this one.

Attaviano leans back again. “One more story to tell you before you go,” he says, smiling. When his eldest son got his law degree, his first job paid him 945 thousand dollars a year. He and his wife bring Attaviano’s grandchild by the house to see him, and Attaviano wonders at the girl, surprised and delighted by moments parents know and love. He sees them not anew, but for the first time, and his delight is palpable in the dozens of tellings of the tales. He brings up a point that needs to be addressed in the current matter at hand.

The rhetoricians of old caution of *taedium vitae*, and I wonder if the structure of routine defends effectively against depression and despair. But these thoughts are mine, and not his. He cannot appreciate a loss of what was, but seems to have remained outside his grasp. Now this shields him somewhat, perhaps, from part of the experience of final chapters.

The new president was appointed after the recent death of the founder. He is hostile to Attaviano, managing business in a style which pressures Attaviano for results in areas where he has no control. I don’t think this president would let him turn another losing division around, even if Attaviano still has the energy to do it, or the receptive marketplace to do it in.

“When I was director of testing at the New York City Board of Education during the days when William Kunstler was a renowned and feared lawyer-activist”, Attaviano begins, having announced that this is the last tale he has time for today. His face relaxes, and he smiles as he settles into the familiar and well worn grooves of a tale of unwelcome risk and anxiety and vindication. I watch his listeners settle into the familiar comfort of the leather office chairs, I watch Attaviano wrap up the meeting, and I think about the long day waning, and the lights beginning to twinkle from the rocks.

Art teaches psychology in New York and loves Paris.