

MY MENTORS

(READ ALOUD ON CBC RADIO, MARCH 1987)

I have been influenced by three people so heavily that I consider each to be a "mentor," in the precise meaning of "one who teaches how to think." The first two are gone, now; only the third is in shape to play football. All three, however, are immortal.

I was born, physically, in 1948. But I was born as a thinking being in early 1955, at age 6, when a librarian whose name I do not know gave me the first book I ever read all by myself, with no pictures in it. It was called *Rocketship Galileo*, the first of the books written especially for young people by the already leg-endary Robert Anson Heinlein, the first Grand-Master of Science Fiction.

I don't think it's possible to overstate the influence that book had on my life and work. It was about three teenaged boys whose Uncle Don took them along on the first-ever flight to the Moon, where they found diehard Nazis plotting a Fourth Reich, and outsmarted them. I was entranced. When I had finished it I went back to the library and asked if they had any more by this guy. They took me to a section where all the books had the same sticker on the spine, showing a V-2 impaling an oxygen atom, and my life began. Valentine Michael Smith, the Man from Mars; Lazarus Long, the wise and ornery immortal; the nameless man who, thanks to a time machine and a sex change, was both of his own parents and his only child, a closed loop in time ... When I had worked my way through all the Heinlein titles, enjoying them hugely, I tried some of the ones filed on either side ... and while they weren't *quite* as good, they were all superior to anything else I could find in the building. (This was back when any sf novel which had been both published in hardcover and purchased by a library had to be *terrific*.)

It wasn't just the thrilling adventure, or even the far-out ideas—you could find those in comic books but the meticulous care and thought with which the ideas were worked out and made plausible, related to the known facts of science. Almost incidentally, seemingly accidentally, Heinlein's sf taught me facts of science, and the love of science—taught me that in science could lie adventure and excitement and hope. I still remember my confusion and dismay at the way all my schoolteachers conspired to make science seem dry and dull and impenetrable. It was my first science teacher who told me flatly that manned spaceflight was nonsense. How many young minds did he ruin?

Three years ago I visited my cousin Clare at her office in New York. As we chatted, my eyes kept inexplicably slipping from her, irresistibly drawn to a shelf at the edge of my peripheral vision. Finally they focused, and I understood. Clare is the children's book editor at Scribner's. I began to explain my rude inattention, and she cut me off. "I know," she said, "the Heinlein juveniles; happens all the time." Sure enough, there they were, the building blocks of my reason, arrayed in the same order they'd had on the shelf of the Plainview Public Library, all those years ago.

That Clare understood my problem at once suggests just how much influence Heinlein has had on the world, since he began writing in 1939. You can't copyright ideas, only arrangements of words ... but if you *could* copyright ideas, every sf

writer in the world would owe Heinlein a bundle. There can't be more than a handful of sf stories published in the last forty years that do not show his influence one way or another. He opened up most of science fiction's frontiers, wrote a great many definitive treat-ments of its classic themes, and in his spare time he helped design the spacesuit used by NASA, and invented the waterbed and the waldo (if you don't know what a waldo is, ask anyone who has to manipulate radioactives or other deadly substances).

But what I admire most about Heinlein is what he chose to teach me and other children in his famous sf juvenile novels: first, to make up my own mind, always; second, to think it through *before* making up my mind; and finally, to get as many facts as possible *before* thinking. Here are some brief quotes from his book *Time Enough for Love*, short extracts from the note-books of a 2,500-year-old man:

God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent— it says so right here on the label. If you have a mind capable of believing all three of these divine attributes simultaneously, I have a wonderful bargain for you. No checks, please. Cash and in small bills. (and:)

If it can't be expressed in figures, it is not science; it is opinion. (and:)

Democracy is based on the assumption that a million men are wiser than one man. How's that again? I missed something.

Autocracy is based on the assumption that one man is wiser than a million men. Let's play that over again, too. Who decides? (and:)

It's amazing how much mature wisdom resembles being too tired. (And my own personal favorite:)

Writing is not necessarily something to be ashamed of—but do it in private, and wash your hands afterwards.

Just as Robert Heinlein used love of adven-ture to teach me the love of reason and science, Theodore Sturgeon used love of words, the beauty that could be found in words and their thoughtful esthetic arrangement, to teach me the love of ... well, of love.

Not the kind of love found in Harlequin romances or bad movies, but the love which is the basis of courage, of hope, of simple human persistence. When I was sixteen—barely in time—I read a story of his called "A Saucer Full of Loneliness," and decided not to kill myself after all. Ten years later I read another Sturgeon story called "Suicide" aloud to a friend of mine who had made five progressively more serious attempts at self destruction, and she did not make a sixth. (Should you know anyone who needs them, the former appears in the collec-tion *E Pluribus Unicorn*, and the latter in *Sturgeon is Alive and Well*.)

It has become something of a cliché to say that all of Ted's work was about love; he himself did not care for the description, perhaps because the word "love" begs too many ques-tions. I know, because he told me once, that he accepted Robert Heinlein's limiting definition of love: "the condition in which the welfare of another becomes essential to your own." Ted wrote about that state, but about much more as well; about all the things which fuzzy-minded people *confuse* with love, but about much more than those things too. I think that if he must be distilled to some essential juice, it would per-haps be least inaccurate to say that he wrote about need, about all

the different kinds of human need and the incredible things they drive us to, about *new* kinds of need that might come in the future and what *those* might make us do; about unsuspected needs we might have *now* and what previously inexplicable things about human nature they might account for.

Or maybe what Ted wrote about was good-ness, human goodness, and how often it turns out to derive, paradoxically, from need. I envision a mental equation with which I think he would have agreed: Need + Fear = Evil, and Need + Courage = Goodness.

One of Ted's finest stories, included in the collection *Beyond* and in my own anthology *The Best of All Possible Worlds*, is actually called "Need." It introduces one of the most bizarre and memorable characters in the history of literature, a nasty saint named Gorwing. How can a surly rat-faced runt with a streak of cruelty, a broad stripe of selfishness and a total absence of compassion be a saint? Because of an unusual form of limited telepathy. Gorwing perceives other people's needs, any sort of need, as an earsplitting roar inside his own skull, and does whatever is necessary to make the racket stop. Other people's pain hurts him, and so for utterly selfish reasons, he does things so saintly that even those few who understand why love him, and jump to do his bidding. Whenever possible Gorwing charges for his services, as high as the traffic will bear—because so many needs are expensive to fix, and so many folks *can't* pay—and he always drops people the moment their needs are met. Marvelous!

Ted's own worst need, I think, was to persuade me and others of the post-Hiroshima generation that there is a tomorrow, that there is a point to existence, a reason to keep struggling, that all of this comic confusion is *going* somewhere, *progressing toward* something—and although he believed in his heart that this something was literally unimaginable, he never stopped trying to imagine it, and with mere words to make it seem irresistibly beautiful. He persisted in trying to create a new code of survival for post-Theistic man, "a code," as he said, "which requires belief rather than obedience. It is called ethos . . . what it is really is a reverence for your sources and your posterity, a study of the main current which created you, and in which you will create still a greater thing when the time comes, reverencing those who bore you and the ones who bore them, back and back to the first wild creature who was different because his heart leaped when he saw a star."

Let me quote the closing paragraph of Ted's "The Man Who Lost The Sea," about a man who, as a boy, nearly died learning the lesson that you *always* spearfish with a buddy, even if you wanted the fish all to yourself—that "I" don't shoot a fish, "we" do. Now the sea sound he seems to hear is really earphone static from the spilled uranium which is killing him:

The sick man looks at the line of his own footprints, which testify that he is alone, and at the wreckage below, which states that there is no way back, and at the white east and the mottled west and the paling flecklike satellite above. Surf sounds in his ears. He hears his pumps. He hears what is left of his breathing.

The cold clamps down and folds him round past measuring, past all limit.

Then he speaks, cries out: then with joy he takes his triumph at the other side of death, as one takes a great fish, as one completes a skilled and mighty task,

rebalances at the end of some great daring leap; and as he used to say "we shot a fish," he uses no "I":

"God," he cries, dying on Mars, "God, we made it!"

When the Halifax science fiction convention, Halcon, asked me to be their Guest of Honour, I agreed on the condition that they fly Ted Sturgeon in to be the Toastmaster, for I had long yearned to meet him. I will spare you the now-legendary story of the horrid duel of puns which Ted and I waged across the port city of Halifax (and the starboard city of Dartmouth), but I must tell of the Two Kinds of Hug.

A fan approached him and asked if she could give him a hug; he agreed. "Ah," he said gen-tly as they disengaged, "that was a Letter A." "What do you mean?" I asked. "You hug me," he ordered, and I did. "Now that," he said, "was a Number One." A crowd had begun to form, as they so often did around Ted. He had vari-ous people hug, adjudging each hug as either a Letter A or a Number One.

At last we began to get it. Some of us hugged touching at the top, joined at the middle, and spread apart at the bottom, like a capital A. Others, unafraid to rub bellies, hugged so as to form a Number One. "There is really only one sense," Ted told us, "and that is touch; all the other senses are only other ways of touching. But if you can't touch with touch, you can't touch with much."

There came a time in my life when, for rea-sons too complicated to go into, I needed to make some money without working for it. Hein-lein had taught me how to think; Sturgeon had taught me how to feel; but there was not much call for either of those skills. My schooling had taught me very little, and much of that was turning out to be false or worthless. My only assets were a vast collection of tattered sf paperbacks which I was unwilling to sell.

Suddenly I made the mental leap: perhaps I could write tattered sf paperbacks!

Well, the idea couldn't have been all bad: the first story I attempted sold, on first submission, to the highest paying market in sf, *Analog Sci-ence Fact/Science Fiction*. I quit my regular job and went freelance on the strength of that \$300 check.

But everything I wrote *after* that bounced, not only at *Analog* but everywhere. A year after I went freelance I had a superb library of first-edition rejection slips, equalled only by my collection of Absolutely Final Notices from credi-tors.

What saved me from a life as a civil servant, or some other form of welfare, was the fact that the editor of *Analog* at the time (and subse-quently of *Omni*) was Ben Bova.

Many editors regard writers as regrettably unavoidable nuisances, and new writers as avoidable ones. The slush pile, as the heap of unso-licited manuscripts is called, is often seen as a source of comic relief for idle moments in the editorial day. But Ben always treated it as a treasure trove. He read every manuscript that came in the door—and when he found new writers he felt displayed promise, he cultivated them carefully.

Ben cultivated me in several ways. The first, of course, was to send me a check. But with the check came a letter inviting me to lunch at my convenience. (This is not as altruistic as it seems: when an editor dines alone, he pays for it; when he dines

with the newest and greenest of writers, the publisher pays.) Over lunch he answered hundreds of my beginner's questions: how to prepare my manuscripts more professionally, why I didn't need an agent until I was ready to try a novel, how to join the Science Fiction Writers of America so my manuscripts wouldn't land in the slush pile, what a con was and how it could affect my income, what Heinlein *and* Sturgeon were like as people, the basics of plotting commercial fiction, hundreds of things I desperately yearned to know. I took pages of notes. He also stroked my ego, and demanded more stories.

So I went home and wrote more stories, and as I've said, Ben—and every other editor—bounced them all. But Ben didn't send rejection slips, he sent rejection *letters*. Brief ones, rarely more than two or three sentences explaining what specific errors made this story unpublishable . . . but those few sentences amounted to a condensed correspondence course in writing commercial fiction. "You're writing too many stories at once here, Spider." Or, "I don't give a damn about your hero." Or, "Nothing *happens* here; no problem gets solved, nobody learns anything." Things like that.

Most of these nuggets of wisdom horrified or infuriated me. Say, for example, that I had sweated blood for weeks, produced a 20,000-word masterpiece of adventure and irony, and gotten it back from Ben with the single sentence, "Cut it to 6,000 words." I would scream. Then I would examine my dwindling bank balance and try to cut the story, at least a little. Then I'd call Ben. "I *can't* cut 14,000 words, Ben, there isn't a spare word in there." "I know," he would say. "They're all gems. But just as an exercise, pretend that someone is going to give you a dime for every word you cut." I would thank him glumly and hang up, and then ignore his advice and send the manuscript to his competitors. When they had all bounced it, with form rejection slips, I'd shelve it.

After a year of this, I was desperate. So I'd dig out the dusty manuscript, look at it mournfully and, just as an exercise, see how much flesh I *could* slice from my baby before I cut into its spine. Howls of pain! A few days later I would call him again. "Ben, remember that story about the malfunctioning time machine? I've got it down to 10,000 words, and there's just nothing else I can cut, and I've already cut some terrific stuff."

"I know," he'd say. "But just as an exercise, pretend that a large man is going to come around with a maul and break one limb for every thousand words above six."

Cursing the Bova clan root and branch, weeping with fury, I would amputate a few more of my child's appendages, and when I had it down to 6,000 words I'd dry my eyes and reread it

-and discover to my horror that it was now a much better story

-and send it to Ben and get a check.

In addition to tutoring me, Ben made a point of introducing me to other writers, to artists and editors and other professionals, to influential fans. And when I had sold a half dozen stories, he sat me down at a convention and said, "It's time you started a novel and got an agent." Meanwhile, down the hall, a mutual friend was, at Ben's instigation, telling one of the best agents in the business that it was time he took on a few new clients—this guy Robinson, for instance. When I complained once that I couldn't think of any story ideas, Ben showed me an entire drawer full of ideas and

invited me to help myself. On one memorable occasion, he returned a story I had submitted, saying, "This is *too good* for me to buy; *Playboy* will pay you three times as much as I can." (One of his few failures as a prophet, drat the luck. He bought the story two months later.)

But of all the things Ben did for me, one in particular stands out in my mind. During the year of apprenticeship I mentioned earlier, during which I sold no stories, it eventually became necessary to get a job. Luck was with me; I found employment as a journalist, and so continued to avoid honest work. I spent a year as Real Estate Editor for a Long Island newspaper: during the day I typed lies purporting to be the truth, while at night I tried to teach myself how to write truths purporting to be fiction for Ben. The newspaper job was dull, dishonest and demeaning—and quite lucrative: I had never made so much money in my life. At the end of my year of trial, I still had only the one original story sale under my belt ... and then a horrid thing happened.

The publisher of the newspaper called me into his office and told me that he knew I was doing my job with half my attention—and doing it well; he was not complaining. But he offered to double my already high salary if I would give up this fiction nonsense and throw my full attention into the world of real estate, become an insider, socialize with realtors and join their clubs. Or, I could quit. He gave me a week to decide.

I called my friends for advice. But Ben was the only friend I had who was earning a good salary—in fact, the only one who was not on unemployment—and the only one who did not give me an immediate, knee-jerk answer. The night before I had to give my decision, he called me back. "I've been thinking all week about your problem," he said. "Spider, no one can pay you enough money to do what you don't want to do."

I thanked him and quit my job. A week later, I sold my second story (to another editor), and a few months after that I won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and by the end of the year I was selling regularly and had been nominated for my first Hugo Award. And because I had to live on a writer's income, I moved to the woods of Nova Scotia, where I met my wife Jeanne.

And so in a sense it could be said that I owe everything I have in the world to Ben Bova.

Mind you, nobody's perfect. It was Ben who encouraged me to put puns in my stories. He is himself an excellent and accomplished writer, who once wrote about a robot policeman named "Brillo."

Metal fuzz ...

These, then, are my three mentors: Robert Anson Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, and Ben Bova. All great writers, all great teachers. Generalizations are a nasty habit, but perhaps it would be least inaccurate to say that Robert taught me how to think, Ted taught me how to feel, and Ben taught me how to survive as a writer. I owe all three a debt I will never be able to repay.