

I was given a new perspective at Memorial Auditorium, at a kitschy heavy metal concert of all places. My seat way up high with a godlike vantage point offered a view of those women in cages of their own choosing and of me in the cage of my choosing.

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Know Thyself: Death of a Salesman

A man is ever apt to contemplate himself out of all proportion to his surroundings.

—Christina Rossetti

I was finally here.

I had been anticipating college since the first time I heard about it. I think that was when I was about seven and my family hosted some young women from a travelling singing group visiting our church. The young women were college students, and I was fascinated by them. Not by what they were doing in their choir—travelling around from church to church, singing and whatnot—but by the idea of being a college student. I wasn't even sure what college was, exactly, but it enchanted me. Neither of my parents had gone to college, but my dad's two younger siblings had gone to college, including Uncle Bobby who had lived in our basement and was the coolest old person I knew.

Here I was. Everything was fresh and strange—but also, somehow, just as I had always expected it to be. It never crossed my mind that I would go on to become a professor and never, ever leave college once I'd begun. All I knew at this point was that if school had been a crush, college was a full-blown affair.

The excitement helped lessen, if only a little, the pain of my breakup with Randy. The drama had taken place just a couple of weeks before the start of school, amidst the chaos of my parents moving out-of-state. My father had the chance to take an early retirement from the international corporation where he'd worked for 25 years, and I moved in with my Uncle Bobby at the last minute. I could stick to my college plans, and I didn't have to be separated from Randy. I'm not sure how many more dramatic life

changes might possibly have been crammed into those few weeks in the life of an eighteen-year-old. I'm sure plenty have gone through a great deal more, but I hadn't. And plenty more have gone through a painful breakup, too, but I hadn't done that either. Besides, no one's breakup is as bad as your own.

Randy had been growing steadily distant over the summer, although he kept insisting nothing was wrong, and I chose to believe him. Perhaps I was too distracted by all the other changes going on. One night, the last night I was supposed to spend at my parents' house, now nearly empty except for boxes and a few large pieces of furniture, Randy called from work to cancel our plans because he would have to work late. Something told me this was problematic. After a while, I drove to the steakhouse where he had started as a bus boy. I wasn't sure why I headed there at one in the morning or what I expected to find, but I know I didn't expect to find him sitting in his car in the parking lot with the assistant manager. I'd met this assistant manager before and knew she was a few years older than us, recently divorced, rather pretty, and extremely well, outgoing. I'm not sure what they were doing before I pulled up next to them in his car, but he certainly wasn't working as he told me he would be.

It was the moment of crisis—not quite the one I thought it was at the time, but one I see clearly now. All of my life up to this point had been a tug-of-war within myself between two competing forces: acceptance by others and acceptance of myself.

That night, I won.

I stayed long enough to hear him offer a tepid excuse and a slightly more passionate appeal for me not to leave. But I left. While I may have been a fool for him, I wasn't an idiot. I got back into my car and left the two of them in the otherwise deserted parking lot and headed to my last night at home.

I'd never been on this road at this time of night. At around two a.m., not a person or vehicle was in sight. I'd never seen the city look so empty. I drove down the middle of a six-lane swath of silent discount stores and fast food joints rising up from a bog of empty parking lots. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. A canopy of hazy yellow light arced overhead, enveloping

me in an orb of silence. It was like being inside a snow globe: my world had been shaken, but instead of glittery snow, a sickly yellow fluorescent glow fell down around me, suffocating and choking me.

Suddenly, the eerie yellow light flashed red. I'd been driving slowly, too slowly, my eyesight dimmed by tears, and weaving suspiciously, too. The officer asked how much I'd been drinking and I told him nothing. He looked at me incredulously, and I blubbered out the whole story. He let me go with a warning.

Still in a daze, I started college just a few days later. I had looked forward to this moment for most of my life—this was not at all what I had hoped it would be like. But I had been dreaming about going to college a lot longer than I'd been with Randy, I reminded myself, so I tried to focus on the things I had anticipated for years: the comforting weight of thick books, the rainbow colors of highlighters and pens for marking textbooks that belonged to me (unlike the loaners given out in high school), the crack of a tight textbook spine when I opened it the first time, the crispness of the college-ruled paper I'd use to take notes, and especially the literature anthology that seemed to me to be a sacred text with its tissue thin pages and tiny print in double columns. I was looking forward most to my English class.

Randy had been very possessive, so I was eager to make up for lost time. I made friends with anyone and everyone. By the end of my first semester, I was seeing three guys: a banker, an Ivy League frat boy, and a guitarist in a band. I gloried in the absence of the cliques that so shaped life in junior high and high school. Here people of various ages and backgrounds met simply one on one rather than within the context of a clique, club, or an artificial grouping based on year of birth.

For the first time in my life, I was on my own, really on my own: no parents, no boyfriend, no best friend to influence my choices. So I imagined, more freely than ever before, what I really wanted for my life. Of all the subjects I took and loved in college, the subject of myself turned out to be the most important one. But when I speak of the subject of myself, I do not mean the sort of navel-gazing that turns the eyes of the soul inward. Rather I

mean the study of myself in my rightful place within the vast universe, the same universe that opened up before me among the array of far worthier subjects I encountered in college. High school was too full of easy work and easy distractions, but in college I learned to take wonder in the world around me. In focusing my attention on things much bigger than myself, ironically, I learned who I was. It's the lesson, once again, that beholding is becoming.

As far back as the ancient Greeks, wisdom has dictated, "Know thyself." But this is not so easy. Which is probably why so many stories, old and new, center on this quest.

A popular movie from a few years ago stars Julia Roberts as a woman named Maggie who repeatedly gets cold feet and ditches a succession of grooms at the altar. A reporter (played by Richard Gere) hears about the infamous "runaway bride" (the title of the movie) and publishes a story about her. When he gets a number of facts wrong, he has to follow up with a more detailed investigation. In interviewing the men this woman, Maggie, has left behind, the reporter (who, predictably—spoiler alert—ends up with the bride by the end of the movie), accidentally stumbles upon an interesting and telling tidbit about Maggie: all the men Maggie has jilted tell him that Maggie likes her eggs prepared exactly the way each of them likes their eggs. The problem is each of these men likes his eggs a different way. Upon further investigation, the reporter finds that in each of her relationships, Maggie has taken on not only the man's taste in eggs, but his interests, hobbies, lifestyle and his very identity as her own—leaving, of course, no identity of her own. In each relationship, rather than being herself, Maggie becomes merely a female version of each of these very different men. She doesn't do this knowingly, of course, but nevertheless there it is: the runaway bride hasn't been running from these men all this time—she's been running away from herself.

In many areas of life, self-knowledge is crucially important to making wise choices, the sort of choices that lead to a fulfilling life. For what would be the wise choice for you, might not be the wise choice for your neighbor. Of course, in making choices between right and wrong, right is always the wise choice, but many,

if not most, of our daily choices deal not with right or wrong, but with shades of right. Probably the most significant area in which this is true is in our choice of daily work, and it is in the area of work that Willy in Arthur Miller's 1949 *Death of a Salesman* experiences the tragic consequences of failing to know who he is.

Another spoiler alert: the salesman dies. But what makes this death tragic—in the classical sense—is that death could have been avoided. Arthur Miller purposely emulated the classical tragedy model in writing his modern tragedy of the "common man." In this case, the fatal error of the tragic hero, the salesman Willy Loman, is combined with the force of fate manifest in the social context of the hyper-capitalist, consumer culture of mid-1950s America. As in classical tragedy, all is not entirely lost, for illumination is gained, arguably, for Willy, and even more clearly for his son, Biff.

This social context that Willy finds himself in—the consumer-driven, appearance-obsessed culture of modern America, takes the place fate holds in ancient tragedies. However, in the classical model, the tragic end is not brought about by fate alone, but in combination with the tragic hero's actions, actions rooted in some tragic flaw. For many a tragic hero, that tragic flaw is pride. Willy's pride is revealed in various ways in his downward spiral. Willy is too proud to ask his grown sons for financial help when he desperately needs it (though they are pretty much worthless anyway), and too proud to resist buying for his wife and home things he can't afford, and too proud to be honest with his wife—or even to be honest with himself—about his failings. This lack of honesty with himself is what gets us closer to the real tragic flaw in this tragic hero: Willy's failure to know himself.

One of the first people I met in college was Dee Dee, who was in my Psych 101 class. Dee Dee was a yahoo. She was from the south side, one of the roughest parts of the city. One Friday, I went home with Dee Dee to spend the night at her house. She lived in an old rambling Victorian, but not the kind that had been renovated by yuppies. This one had peeling paint on the outside and scarred wooden floors and wallpaper grayed by cigarette smoke on the inside. Dee Dee's mother and uncounted siblings

lived here. We left the house at an hour when most people were going to bed and crawled around the streets of her neighborhood all night, making stops at the corner bars. I'd lived in two states and half a dozen towns in my eighteen years of life. That so many people's ancestral roots were planted in a single neighborhood for generations was strange to me. I was fascinated, but I felt far from home. At some point, in the wee hours, I lost track of Dee Dee and had to be directed to her home by someone in one of the ubiquitous corner bars, which didn't close until five a.m. It wasn't until about that time when I crept back into Dee Dee's house and found an unoccupied bed that had blankets but no sheets and crawled in to sleep as best I could. Dee Dee didn't show up for class that Monday, and she missed a lot more classes after that. She didn't return to school the next semester. I never even tried to contact her.

Joyce, who was in my Philosophy class, had transferred from another school where she'd been a sorority sister. She hinted about needing to change schools after some kind of sexual assault involving a sorority event, but I didn't pry further. Joyce lived with her divorced mother in an elegant apartment in North Buffalo and played piano. We went out one night to an upscale dance club and she drank coffee liqueurs—which seemed to me a bit like drinking dessert all night, a bit too quaint for a rum-and-Coke girl like me. Why Joyce wanted to be friends with me was a mystery. Where I was Cyndi Lauper rock-chick-ish, she was polo-shirt preppy girl-ish. I wore stone-washed jeans, and she wore pearls. She cut her dark hair in a classic bob, and my hair always ran wild. I realized that she must have had even less a sense of herself than I had ever had, and seeing that helped me to see myself even more clearly. Maybe she had just developed an avoidance reflex to the sorority type because of her bad experience at her other school. I don't know. She persisted in trying to make plans with me, and I consented a few times, but did my best to nudge on a natural parting of the ways.

Somewhere between these two extremes—the skanky party girl and the prissy sorority drop out—was there a good friend for me? I hadn't made many new friends when I'd moved to this city

a year and a half prior and left my best friend Rachael behind, because I had hooked up with Randy so quickly and had stupidly centered my whole life on him. How could I ever find real friends until I knew who I was?

I had spent eighteen years trying to become myself, but I was just now learning who it was that I was becoming. And who I was becoming was not necessarily the person I had in mind. Perhaps that person was born the night I drove away from that restaurant parking lot and refused to be either a doormat or a fool.

I had declared my major as social work when I applied to college. I had even made my final choice for college based on its social work program. I had decided to pursue this field because of my interest in psychiatry which I had discovered, naturally, by reading a book, *Sybil*, about a woman with multiple personality disorder. Many years later, the whole story—which, like *Go Ask Alice*, was supposed to be true—was exposed as a sham. But I had read lots of similar books and as a result thought I wanted to help people.

But a funny thing happened. I discovered the study of English literature. Of course, I had known about English before. I'd been reading my entire life. In school, English was one of those subjects required of every student every year. I had always loved it and done well in it. But besides Mrs. Lovejoy, I had never met anyone who took English seriously. Most of my high school English teachers were either tired or hankering to go back to Woodstock or both. I don't think I even knew until I got to college that you could actually major in English. That sounded to me, at first, like catching frogs: something you do for fun but not something you work at seriously.

On my first day of freshman composition that first semester of college, the professor gave us an in-class writing assignment: describe your life ten years from now. That would be easy.

But as I started to write, I realized it was going to be hard.

As I've already said, I was planning to be a social worker. I'd planned to marry Randy, too. That wasn't going to happen. Everything seemed upside down. I thought about the snow globe again, and how shaken my world was. I looked at my left hand holding one of my new pens and noticed the nakedness of my

ring finger where I had, until just days ago, worn a promise ring; a blue stone wrapped by a gold band that formed, romantically, into the shape of a heart on either side of the stone. I looked up from my hand and stared out the window at the leaves, deceptively green on this late August day, as they shimmied in the breeze. A big piece of my vision for my life ten years from now was hazy. But, slowly, other parts came into focus. I sat and stared at the fading summer outside the classroom window and finally wrote. I kept writing until the class was over, and the professor collected the essays. For both of these things—the uncertainty at first, and the clarity that grew as I wrote—I remember this essay vividly.

Because of that writing assignment, I had a new plan.

Looking back, I count it as a kind of divine grace that I entered college with no boyfriend in tow. I was free to get to know myself by beholding the larger world unfurling around me in all its wonder.

It is exactly this knowledge of self that the runaway bride—who doesn't even know what kind of eggs she likes—lacks. I can see that it's the kind of knowledge I lacked, too, in losing myself in the object of my first love. I can see this lack in the real world all around me. I see it in the marriage breakups between people who come to see themselves differently than they once did. How much of this "difference" is owing to change (which certainly does occur as the self in an evolving entity of sorts) and how much of it to simply knowing oneself better? Similarly, a friend of mine has struggled with an eating disorder since she was a pre-teen. When she finally embarked on the long, winding road to recovery in her twenties, she found herself in a veritable state of adolescence. Having denied herself so much of what life offers for so long, she had to set out to discover many of her likes and dislikes for the very first time—from what flavor of ice cream she liked, to what kind of man she was attracted to, to what kind of work she wanted to do. Denying oneself the pleasures of food is just the most obvious symptom of a greater problem of denying oneself the pleasures of life in general. That is a lot to catch up on when most people of that age are getting settled into marriage, career, and raising a family.

Knowing oneself has tremendous importance for all of the major life decisions one might make. Making life choices that are in line with who one is—who one was created to be—leads to a more fulfilling life. I know that "self-fulfillment" has become a dirty word for those who rightly understand that life is not "all about me," but about a greater purpose. This is true. At the same time, each of us is created as a unique individual with unique gifts, talents, and callings that were designed for a purpose. Self-fulfillment doesn't necessarily mean selfish fulfillment. It can mean fulfillment of all that one was created to be. The satisfaction one feels at having achieved one's rightful desires is no more selfish or wrong a thing than the satisfaction of the apple tree in bringing forth the fruit it was designed to bear.

But sometimes we mistake other people's desires as our own. It is easy to confuse our love or admiration for another person with a desire for the things that person loves or admires. But just because we like another person, we don't necessarily have to like the things that person likes. What makes one person happy isn't going to make the next person happy. A student I once had told her friends that someday she wanted to live in an old farmhouse with lots of dogs, just like I do. The trouble is that she didn't seem to even like dogs, let alone farm animals. She was mistaking her fondness for me for a fondness for the things I love. Such transferences of affection can occur, to be sure—as my love for the things Mrs. Lovejoy loved shows. But the love of a person must be distinguished from a love of those things loved by the person we love, just as we learn to distinguish ourselves from others.

In college, I discovered more in this world to love than I had ever known before. I loved studying and writing papers. I loved class discussions. I loved English. I did not love social work or its required classes like statistics. I hated statistics so much that I had to take the slow class, held over two semesters rather than one. But I loved English. These were the things pointing me toward my true vocation. Thomas Merton says, "Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice out there calling me to be

something I am not. It comes from a voice in here calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God." In college, I was discovering that treasure of true self I already possessed. I was discovering my calling.

Willy Loman, on the other hand, never heeded his calling. He never fulfilled his true vocation. For, he was never meant to be a salesman. And that is the heart of the tragedy.

When the play opens, Willy is old. His memory is failing. He is weary. But his profession, sales, by its very nature, is based on the new and improved, not the old and outdated. Interestingly, the play never reveals what it is that Willy and his company sell. In the modern age of the disinterested middleman (such as Willy), this doesn't matter: sales is sales. And sales—regardless of the product being sold—are driven by appearance, and Willy's appearances are failing in every respect. Willy constantly tells his sons that the key to success in life is being "well-liked." But as his appearances decline and his old contracts disappear, Willy's sales, naturally, diminish. As Willy feels more and more like a failure, these feelings put into motion a self-fulfilling prophecy, and his failures increase until he is fired and his world crashes.

The title of the work has two references in the play, and they are inextricably linked: the first is the ending, already discussed, which leaves the salesman Willy Loman dead; the other reference is found in passing in the play, in a story Willy tells his boss just before his boss fires him. That story is of another salesman, Dave Singleman whom Willy met years before when Dave was 84 years old. Dave, Willy says, would "put on his green velvet slippers ... and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, he made his living." At that moment, seeing Dave's success, Willy decided that "selling was the greatest career a man could want." "What could be more satisfying?" he asks. And when Dave Singleman died all those years ago, Willy tells his boss, he "died the death of a salesman. In his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford, going into Boston—when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral." At this turning point in his life, long before the play opens, Willy abandoned the plans he had made to follow his father

to Alaska in pursuit of an "adventurous" and "self-reliant" life and instead turned to a career in sales. This is his tragic error.

Willy has mistaken the means of success for one person as the means for himself. He even has a mistaken notion of success itself. In fact, *Death of a Salesman* is as much about the true meaning of success, more specifically, the American Dream, as it is about the death of Willy Loman.

After Willy's death, immediately following his funeral, Willy's son Biff recognizes his father's fatal error and says of Willy, in the play's Requiem, "He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong," Biff tells his mother and their neighbor Charley as they look at Willy's grave. "He never knew who he was," Biff continues. "The man didn't know who he was."

And Biff is right, as ample evidence in the play shows. In adopting Dave Singleman's dream as his own, Willy makes the very error that *Jane Eyre* is tempted to make: he follows someone else's dream instead of his own. Willy makes the mistake of seeing the means of someone else's happiness and success as a means for his own happiness and success. But, the ingredients for success—skills, drive, circumstances and, yes, a certain amount of luck—aren't the same from person to person. It is a grave mistake to look at someone else's source of satisfaction and see it as the means to one's own. But this is exactly what Willy does in observing the success of Dave Singleman in being a salesman and believing it could be the means of his own success. The results of Willy's mistake are far from successful, for in assuming that someone else's dream could serve as his own, Willy's true failure is in failing to know himself.

In his book, *God at Work*, Gene Edward Veith discusses the idea of vocation and, in particular, the working out of that view in the Protestant tradition, beginning with Martin Luther's teachings on the subject. As Veith points out, it is significant that God created both man and woman to work and called them to do so before the fall. It is part of God's original design to work, not because our work saves us, but because work meets the needs of our neighbors. Through our work, we serve others.

Not only did God design mankind in a general way to work,

but he also designed and equipped individuals toward specific kinds of work. Veith writes, “Even your wants—your desires, your dreams, your choices—are a function of who you are . . . The doctrine of vocation has to do with the mystery of individuality, how God creates each human being to be different from all the rest and gives each a unique calling in every stage of life.” God calls people to fulfill the roles for which he has designed them. In other words, according to Veith, “Our vocation is not something we choose for ourselves. It is something to which we are called.”

As I am writing this—in bed with my laptop on a late evening—one of my three dogs approaches, wanting to climb up and snuggle with me. She’s a German Shorthaired Pointer, a bird dog. But she’s never been hunting. In fact, when my husband target practices or sights in his gun, she jumps into the bathtub to hide in the darkness behind the shower curtain. Yet she cannot entirely escape her breeding. This breed of dog was developed primarily to point birds for the hunter and then retrieve the birds once they have been brought down. Generations of cultivation of certain qualities, of instincts, cannot be denied. Lucy may not hunt, but she will point squirrels all day long and pick up and carry with a soft mouth any shoe left lying on the floor—she will bring it to you as with as much pride as if she were retrieving a delicate quail from a dense thicket on the edge of a wood. Seeing her gently and proudly carry a shoe or slipper in her mouth—she never chews, only gently holds, just as she would correctly do with a bird—makes me think even more about our calling, about the things we were created to do, and how it is so difficult to escape that, though many of us do, whether out of ignorance, necessity, tragedy, or fear.

In a way, the classical view of tragedy (as we saw in *Ters of the D’Urbervilles*) parallels a Christian understanding, for in tragedy there is always an outside force—whether it is understood as fate, prophecy, or the intervention of the gods—that plays a part in the outcome of events for the hero. In a similar way, vocation is “out of our control,” Veith says. It is, at least in part, “a function of the particular gifts God has given us, but we cannot know our vocation purely by looking inside ourselves.” By beholding the

world around us, our rightful place in the world is revealed. We can’t simply decide apart from an understanding of the world we find ourselves in that we want to be a brain surgeon or a concert pianist and then do it. A number of factors in the areas of both nature (our inborn abilities) and nurture (our upbringing and opportunities) must be present in order to pursue a vocation successfully. This is why it is so essential for one to “know thyself,” so as to set out on a path that will be successful in the most important sense of that word. One must know not only one’s particular gifts and talents, but one’s passions, too, for all of these contribute to success.

It’s hard to tell real passion from passing fancy, though. Like most children, I had many interests. But from the get-go, I ruled out two professions: teaching and nursing. I’m not sure why, exactly. Probably simply because they seemed too typical for girls, and the rebel in me resisted.

It’s hard to find the best way to fulfill a passion, too. In my pre-teen and early teen years, I wanted to be a veterinarian and even set up a sort of informal internship with my horse vet when I was in Junior High. But a love for animals—even a lifelong love as mine has turned out to be—does not automatically translate into a love of cutting and stitching and medicating animals—or the kind of studies required beforehand. Then I read *Sybil* and became fascinated with multiple personalities and victims of child abuse. I decided I wanted to become a psychiatrist. This goal stuck for a few years, but by the time I was heading off to college, my earlier love of school had fizzled out from lackluster classes and bleary-eyed teachers. My academic ambitions likewise were watered down to the more practical goal of becoming a social worker. The degrees required for becoming a psychiatrist would require at least five years of study; those for a social worker would require no more than five.

Clearly, I had yet to know myself. For one thing, I ended up spending more than eight years on my Ph.D. Even more importantly—and it wasn’t until years after I had abandoned the goal of becoming a social worker that I came to understand this—I am a person rather lacking in some of the most essential qualities for

such a calling: namely, certain forms of kindness, compassion, patience, and at least a reasonable tolerance for government red tape. Fortunately, even before I knew myself well enough to see these shortcomings, I had discovered that literature was not only an enjoyable pastime but also, *lo and behold!* a legitimate academic pursuit. It took several more years for me to discover (quite serendipitously) that teaching was what I was created to do. But that's another story.

Death of a Salesman provides hints about who Willy really is, though he doesn't see it himself. The play begins as Willy's life—and his dream of success—are rapidly unraveling. As his life begins to deteriorate, so does Willy's mind. He can no longer distinguish between reality and illusion. These are the fitting consequences of living an entire life based on the delusion of a false dream. And why did Willy's life as a salesman constitute the pursuit of a false dream? Because, as the play makes clear, Willy suppressed his real nature and sold himself out to become something he wasn't called to be. As we learn from various revelations in the play, it wasn't making sales that made Willy happy; it was making things with his hands. Reflecting upon Willy's self-inflicted death, his son Biff remarks,

"There were a lot of nice days. When he'd come home from a trip; or on Sundays, making the stoop; finishing the cellar; putting on the new porch; when he built the bedroom; and put up the garage. You know something, Charley, there's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he made."

To which Charley responds, "Yeah. He was a happy man with a batch of cement." Other clues point to Willy's calling as an outdoorsman who works with his hands: in one of his frequent reveries he tells his older brother Ben that he moved to Brooklyn—before it was built up—because it had "snakes and rabbits." Later Willy complains to his wife Linda about the closing in of their neighborhood: "The grass don't grow anymore, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard. They should've had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?" Working with his hands was even part of his natural inheritance,

for we learn that Willy's father, "a very great and wild-hearted man," was a salesman, but the products he sold, flutes, were those he made with his own hands—and played, too.

But Willy's error is twice over. For not only does he reject his true calling, he derides the outdoorsy, manual work he was called to do. When he overhears his son Biff lament the family's urban life, saying, "We should be mixing cement on some open plain, or—or carpenters. A carpenter is allowed to whistle!" Willy responds scoffingly, "Your grandfather was better than a carpenter." Indeed the deep rift between Willy and his elder son is rooted in Willy's insistence on false values, values that betray his rightful inheritance and his true self. These false values that have become the vortex by which Willy's life is spiraling out of control are captured by the whipped American cheese that Linda offers Willy in Act 1 when he returns home, tired and defeated, from an unsuccessful sales trip. In a rare moment of authenticity, Willy, who likes Swiss cheese—an aged, real cheese, not a simulation—wonders aloud, "How can they whip cheese?" Despite his surface-level adherence to the materialistic values of the modern middle class, Willy's soul recoils at everything represented in a cheese product twice removed from the real thing.

Caught between these two opposing forces—the false consumer values Willy has raised his sons with and the pull of the traditional values of the preceding generation—both of Willy's sons embody the results of these mixed messages, each in his own way. Happy, as his name implies, is in blissful denial about his father's failures—and his own. Biff, meanwhile, teeters precariously between rejecting his father in pursuit of his authentic identity on one hand, and trying to fulfill the natural desire for a father's unconditional love and acceptance on the other. In two poignant scenes toward the play's end when events are spiraling toward their tragic outcome, both Biff and Willy seem to gain illumination into this defining aspect of their condition.

First, near the end of the play, Willy emerges from one of his reveries into the past with the sudden realization that "nothing's planted." He says, "I don't have a thing in the ground." He rushes off to get some seeds. Biff finds him later outside, late at night,

planting the seeds. Of course, the action is emblematic: it's not literal seeds that Willy has neglected to plant, but the seeds of enduring, real values that he realizes only now he has failed to implant in his sons. He has left them no legacy, nothing by which they can bear fruit or make their lives better. The essence of the American Dream has been, since America's founding, after all, the dream of building a foundation from which one's children can build a better life. Willy realizes at this point in the play, if only at a subconscious level, that his children are failures because he has failed to give them a foundation for real success.

Despite this realization, Willy still doesn't quite get it. But Biff does. He says to his brother Happy about their father, "The man don't know who we are!" Then Biff confronts Willy while Willy is outside, madly planting seeds. Biff says to Willy, "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!" Biff goes on to tell Willy that Willy had so blown Biff full of "hot air" while he was growing up—the hot air of unrealistic expectations and false illusions—that Biff never understood what was required in order to achieve real success. But now, at last, Biff realizes who he is—and who he is not—and that "all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am!"

Biff's enlightenment is a good argument that it is he—not Willy—who is the play's tragic hero. Biff has suffered loss—his father, for one—but he has, in accordance with the classical definition of the tragic hero, experienced illumination, too. He recognizes his father's fatal error: following someone else's calling instead of his own.

Unlike Biff's, my own father provided a fitting model for the pursuit of calling. Although I inherited my small mouth and apple shape, my love of books and animals, and the gift of teaching from my mother, everything else came from my father: my nose, my fair complexion, my love of coffee and newspapers, my quick judgments and analytical thinking, and my tendency to double-check everything.

Just before my family was readying for our move from Maine for my father's job, and I was facing leaving my beloved Monmouth Academy and my best and beloved friend Rachael, my fa-

ther took me out for lunch at Leone's Pizzeria. My mom had never learned to like pizza or any dishes she hadn't been raised with on the farm, but a more adventurous palate is something else I got from my father. The pizzeria, one of only two eating establishments in our town, had just three booths. Dad and I sat in the middle one next to the window, and over our slices of pepperoni pizza, he asked me how I was coping with the upcoming changes. I don't recall what I answered, but it must have been reassuring because of what he said. My father told me that he thought my oldest brother tended not to take things seriously enough, my other brother tended to take things too seriously, and that I took things just right. These words went a long way for me. I had felt many times in my life like I took things too seriously. But here was the man whose judgment and character I trusted more than anyone I knew saying I had it "just right." And when I knew I was erring in other ways, I carried with me the assurance that I could face the world and shoulder whatever might come. These were freeing, empowering words. Unlike Biff's father Willy, my father was planting the seeds of success in my life.

For 25 years my father worked in middle management for a large industrial textile company. When I was little, he took me to his office on occasion. I would sit in the sparse windowless space with striped brown carpeting, and I would color, wondering what was in all those metal filing cabinets that lined one wall and what exactly was being made in the huge factory at the other end of the building. Once my father took me to visit the company's owner in his big office on the top floor of the plant.

This office was very big with a large picture window looking out over the city. The office smelled like wood and cigars.

One time the boss came to our house for dinner. A few days later, my father brought home a small paper bag, saying it was for me, from the boss. He wanted me to guess what was inside the bag by smelling it, so I sniffed inside.

"It smells like cigars," I announced. But it wasn't cigars. It was a big box of brand new crayons. I put my nose in the bag again. They smelled good.

I never really understood what it was my father did, although

he said it was called "customer service." To me he was a business man, and the image I had of him when I was a child was all wrapped up in the suit and tie he wore to work every day. Whatever it was that he was doing, he seemed to take it seriously and to do it well. Once when the company psychiatrist came and interviewed all the managers, my mother told me afterward about how the psychiatrist couldn't understand why my father showed no wish to climb up the corporate ladder. It seemed my father was not only good at what he was doing, but he was content, too, something the company shrink couldn't quite figure out. My dad told my mom not long ago, after he'd retired for good, that all he'd ever wanted in life was a good job and a woman to love—and he'd found both. In so doing, he fulfilled his calling. And taught me about finding and fulfilling mine.

Yet, my father had more to teach me. After he retired from the corporation and moved with my mother to Florida, with a number of solid working years ahead of him, he sought out a second career. He chose to work in a tool shop. No more suit and tie. And, surprisingly to me alone, that seemed to fit him just fine. I had thought the jacket and tie were as much a part of who he is as his curly red hair and his need to read the newspaper every evening.

My father's career change took place soon after I had started college. After I had completed three semesters as a social work major, I walked into the office of the English Department Chair with a form that required his signature permitting me to change my major to English. I had had Dr. Miner for an American Literature survey class during my second semester. He had urged me then to think about majoring in English, but I had told him I would never be an English major because I didn't take English that seriously.

Three semesters, two statistics courses, several sociology and psychology courses (even some extras taken during the summer session), I decided in the middle of exam week, almost on a whim, to drop my social work major and switch to English. It was a serious decision, but not that serious. I had no better reason than simply that in studying books, I felt at home.

When I handed Dr. Miner the form and asked him to sign it there in his small office, smaller even than my father's had been at the company, he reminded me, with a sly smile from behind the stacks of books on his desk, of what I had said about never being an English major. I gladly ate the little slice of humble pie Dr. Miner served me that day, telling him sheepishly that I had changed my mind. What I didn't tell him was that I was pretty certain I had finally discovered who I wasn't—and maybe who I was.