

MY FINAL LECTURE EXPLAINED

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After many years on the job, the author ended his official teaching career in 2009. In this narrative, we are presented with some of the most prescient ideas on the mission of the profession of social work, as well as the responsibilities of the social work practitioner and educator. At the same time, the author shares some of the experiences and persons that shaped and influenced his life and beliefs.

In May 2009, I decided that I would stop teaching in the University, not for any other reason than 38 years in Academia is quite enough. I wished to leave in my prime and not to linger as some colleagues do after the waning of their energy and creativity. Having limited financial resources and a family, I was unable to afford a sabbatical leave at any point in my career; this gave retirement an added allure. I had received many honors and rewards for teaching and felt that I had nothing further to prove. I longed to engage in independent scholarship and in free unencumbered community service; but upper most in my mind was the opportunity to spend time with family and friends. I joked with my friends that I wanted my final epitaph to be "Enough Already!"

Yet to bid farewell to a major activity that defined me to others and to myself could not be taken lightly. I felt that I needed some private ritual to commemorate this significant life transition. By chance, I was asked to give a concluding lecture "On Representing the Profession" in a class for first year M.S.W. students that was taught collaboratively by colleagues. When I realized that this would be my final lecture, I decided to tell my students of my complete retirement at the conclusion of the presentation. Little did I know that this was the title of a popular book written by a young, gifted professor who discovered that he was dying of a fatal disease (Pauch & Zaslow, 2008). Although to the best of my knowledge, my death was not imminent; this lecture could be construed as a final testament to what I believed as a Social Worker. It was my hope that this might be of interest to

students as they enter the profession. I would risk this presumption in doing my presentation.

Many years ago, in looking at the life review process of the elderly, I was fascinated to discover the Jewish tradition of composing ethical wills before death that are statements which do not deal with distribution of material possessions, but instead are spiritual statements to the younger generation. Typically, they contain principles of conduct and espoused values for living an ethical life (Abrahams, 1926). The oldest ethical wills were written in Medieval Europe, and the practice has continued to this day among observant Jews. Some exquisite Biblical models for this custom are Moses' final song to Israelites after he is told by God that he cannot lead them to the Promised Land (Holy Bible, Deuteronomy: 34:1-12), and King David's final statement to his children with his late life recognition of glaring human flaws as well as achievements (Holy Bible, Kings: 2:1-10). These Biblical examples are efforts to confront human finitude and represent symbolic thrusts at intergenerational immortality.

The writing of a testament to a younger generation must be carefully undertaken so as not to be scolding or overly sentimental. What I write must reflect the assumption that



the students before me are decent human beings who share a belief that they can contribute to the making of a better world.

What to Write?

For maximum effect, I knew that my lecture must be short and touch on what matters to the students. I believe the current economic crisis and uncertain times cannot be far from their minds as they contemplate a profession that deals with a multiplicity of social problems. I imagine they are rightfully concerned about the availability of jobs and their capacity to succeed after leaving graduate school. Cheap platitudes and shallow statements of uplift must be avoided. I know the tendency is to put a shine on the apple when discussing the profession. I decided to avoid this at all costs and share my strong belief that we are a *Pariah Profession* despite all efforts to avoid this painful recognition. At best we are disregarded and at worst we are disliked or hated by segments of the public for the work we do and especially our association with the poor and persistent issues like homelessness, mental illness, domestic violence, addiction and other disturbing societal blights.

I have written that the motivation to be a social worker realistically cannot be based on remuneration or societal acceptance, and have argued that we are *another worldly vocation* motivated by a peculiar sense of altruism and a *calling* that is not dissimilar from the historic role of the religious ministry (Getzel, 1983). I have long been persuaded by Halmos's argument that Social Work and counseling has grown, as religious faith and its institution have declined in England, the United States and elsewhere (Halmos, 1970). It is my belief that what is most unique of Anglo-American social work is a particular set of beliefs about the reciprocity of human beings and society that has had grudging acceptance by society. In short, we are a *reluctant welfare state* expressed powerfully in the ebb and flow of our national history.

In some respects the profession is a microcosm of this struggle of ideals. The perennial debate whether social work should address the root causes of social ills or primarily

treat the victims of societal failure just does not go away. Also, social workers are deeply preoccupied with issues of credentialing and acceptance as a mental health profession worthy of third party reimbursement from private insurers and the government. Concern with social change, while deemed worthy, often takes a back seat to clinical matters. The current vogue of evidence-based clinical practice in health and human services exacerbates the historic dualism of social work's obligation to address the cause of social ills versus working as a functional entity of society to assist individuals adaptation to crises or manage acute personal needs.

One of the luminous figures in my development as a social worker was the late William Schwartz who, although not my formal teacher at Columbia University School of Social Work, became a good friend as we worked together during a student strike protesting the Vietnam War. I was impressed by Bill's ideas in his articles on group work practice and the notion of the organismic nature of the small group, which in turn is a reflection of and the nexus into all social relations. These concepts captured my own intuition about the reciprocity that abounds in work with people who function in different social systems (Schwartz: 1961). His Organismic Model—later called the Reciprocal or Interactionist Approach—represented an innovative framework to reconcile the needs of individuals, while simultaneously effecting change in the small group and larger social systems. Schwartz (1969) developed this idea in a seminal article entitled "Private Troubles and Public Issues: One Task or Two?" Bill was in an argument with my friend and beloved teacher, George Brager, at Columbia who insisted that social change was the core mission of the profession (Specht & Courtney, 1994). Those were heady times, with debates about practice conducted by first right thinkers at Columbia University and elsewhere.

Reciprocity is a core idea undergirding my thoughts on the human condition and function of social work. Schwartz (1961) described reciprocity as the universal human striving for connection or union required for health, growth, and change, and to counter isolation and

despair. Simply put, the assignment of the social worker is to abet a process with people to create new and more fruitful need-meeting arrangements. I believe this approach allows for the reconciliation of the private problems of persons with the public issues embedded in the environment that are the sources of much human misery and harm. The so-called "helping process" is not linear, authoritative, and impersonal, but reciprocally circular, participatory and personally engaging. When you read my Last Lecture, this message of reciprocity permeates my thinking.

I believe the conceptual and the personal are wedded in the practice of social work, whether you are working with individuals, groups, communities, and organizations, or engaged in social policy development, research, or professional education. In this vein, permit me to be selectively self-revealing. In doing social work, this faith in reciprocity and the sister notion of mutual aid opened new unimaginable worlds of experience.

I grew up in an impoverished working class Jewish family that was disordered with a psychotically depressed mother and infantile father who showed little interest in my brother or me. My mother's depression affected my fetal development, because I—a child of New York City and not Appalachia—was born with congenital Rickets from her failure to eat foods with Vitamin D and absorb sunlight. Deformed legs and soft bones did not allow me to begin walking until after the age of two. I could not keep up with other children, and was prone to falling over my own feet for years.

Beginning at the age of five, I was physically beaten daily by my mother for not being a "good boy" based on her delusional ideas and suspicions of disobedience. I routinely anticipated being hit and hoped it would be not as severe as the prior day. It sounds gruesome, and it was. But when I was nine years old, after living in a tiny studio apartment in an isolated part of the East Bronx, our family of four moved into a one bedroom apartment in the West Bronx. A profound introduction to the experience of health-giving reciprocity occurred on the street outside our walk-up apartment building. I found five boys my own age with whom I played games in the

street and experienced the rich urban culture kids' play. I could stay out late with my buddies and avoid some of my mother's violence. The succor of peers was a revelation; they were mostly very kind and more uninhibited in their language and behaviors. I felt that I was in heaven. I now believe this first conscious experience of reciprocity gave me a faith that human beings need each other, and without others they will fail to have happiness and experience their potential. I developed a bashful but persistent interest in new and different persons. I somehow acquired the faith that different people offered the possibility of learning something new about myself. My experience with disability made me particularly interested in people who might be construed as outsiders by their ethnicity, race, appearance, or odd behaviors. I wanted them to be as happy as I hoped to become, and somehow I felt that was now possible.

Profess and Confess



I will soon be 68 years old, and with longevity comes a special kind of tenure to say what you please. At worst, you will be called demented or, by wearing the stigmata of white hair and creased skin, dismissed as an irrelevant pariah with nothing worthwhile to say or contribute. So throwing caution to the wind, I am ready to profess my vital value commitments as a social worker. By forthrightly professing these ideas and beliefs, I am also revealing what matters to me as a breathing, feeling, and thinking being; what gives me joy and sometimes breaks my heart. I have, in published works, expressed these core values as they animated my practice with the aging (Getzel, 1983), people living with HIV/AIDS (Getzel, 1991), and homicide survivors (Getzel & Masters, 1984). I long felt

an obligation as a practitioner and educator to leave the protected confines of the ivory tower and enter the hurly-burly of the community to experience emerging developments faced by social workers in the field. These so-called “external activities” were an antidote and escape from the clawing, competitive environment of Academia, which belies the myth of a community of supportive scholars sharing common interests. Far too often, Academia incorporates the spirit of the times with its own special forms of venality, opportunism, gratuitous cruelty, and pettiness.

A central challenge of being a social worker is how to enter into the world of people seemingly different from yourself who might conventionally incur pity, fear, anger, revulsion, or any combination of like emotions. During times of stress, social workers may say to themselves or out loud to others, “Why am I doing this work? I could be making a lot more money and benefits working at something else, as many of my family members and friends are too quick to remind me.”

I guess by calling yourself a social worker serving the poor, the oppressed and the excluded, you are in effect eschewing lots of money, celebrity and influence; thus, you may feel you are out of synch with the general value drift of contemporary society. Oh well.

It is then reasonable to ask: What do I receive as recompense for the deprivations that I have elected by becoming a social worker? The rewards are non-material ones, for sure. Such as making a difference in peoples’ lives that are fraught with pain, trauma and hopelessness, often invisible to the rest of humankind: the homebound elderly man who has out-lived his family and age cohort becomes your vital concern, as does the transgender youth suicidal after finding out she is HIV positive. The neighborhood of immigrants about to lose its firehouse and library because of a local government’s budget crisis becomes your central interest. You see the injustice and the tragic human consequences that follow, if the powers that be have their way. Your engagement of people in each of these instances can result in concrete and beneficial consequences or failures.

Social work is all about entering into the life of the *other* and into your own inner life mediated by current and past experiences. The rewards of such encounters and self-examination are intellectually and emotionally challenging. It involves the courage to open yourself to personal and cultural diversity.

I remember in 1972 when Michael, a student in my group work class, entered my office looking very distressed. He told me he was gay and that life at Hunter College was hell for him, because he sensed that revealing his sexual identity would be lethal. Michael said he was not alone in feeling this way. He shared instances when a faculty member’s comments were, on the face of it, highly homophobic, abetted by the Freudian concept of homosexuality as an abnormal developmental condition. I explored with him why he reached out to me and not other faculty. We discussed strategies on how he might safely engage faculty and students, while presenting his Gay-affirmative ideas and supporting theory. Michael was one of the founders of Identity House, a self-help program to assist gay men and lesbians develop a positive sense of themselves in a very homophobic environment, even in New York City. Michael continued his battle for human rights and understanding until his death from complications from HIV/AIDS some twenty years after graduation.

Michael and so many other valiant souls—clients and students—have allowed me to enter into their lives as a social worker for which I am very grateful. The fearsome challenge of meeting and understanding people seemingly different from you has been one of the most significant rewards of the work. Bill Schwartz emphasized the innate drive for symbiosis or union of all living things, human beings no less. Schwartz (1961) wrote about the need to overcome the barriers from within and without that block people from making-life affirming connections to each other. To the extent that I could give ideas, data, and value messages to people in need that allowed them to connect to me and others, I succeeded. Together with people, over time, new visions of a better life appeared. The student recovering from a bipolar condition sees the possibility of being a

social worker, despite a brief hospitalization prompted by not taking medication. The group of gay men living with HIV/AIDS, while mourning the youngest member's death, start a conversation about how they wish to live with a renewed sense of meaning in the time that remains; and I do not escape self-examination and reflection a bit later, when group members ask me how it felt knowing they will be all dead and I alive? After a pause and some tears, I say that I will miss and never forget them; this is my burden and gift. Now more than 20 years later I still love and miss them. I guess those connections will end with my death.

Concluding Thoughts and Resolutions

I was born at the beginning of World War II in the Bronx, separated by the Atlantic Ocean from the destruction of European Jewry. My grandparents' kin and culture was destroyed in the furnaces of the Third Reich. Because of my grandparents' desperate efforts to escape persecution and make a better of life for their children in America, I am here at this moment and not bone meal at Auschwitz. History always lurks as an explanation of our condition.

I feel peculiarly fortunate to be a witness to the second half of the Twentieth Century. I experienced some of the crudest forms of anti-Semitism growing up from the police and bus drivers. I was refused service in a German restaurant in the Catskills. My physiognomy was a certain indicator of my Jewishness. I was told, in matter-of-fact ways, that Jews should not bother working for the phone company, commercial banks, or insurance companies because they had Jewish quotas, as did certain private universities. All of this was the received belief and knowledge of my household and neighborhood. Enough examples of prejudices against Jews in daily life reinforced these sad and troubling ideas of oppression.

Growing up in the shadow of Yankee Stadium, a childhood preoccupation for me were professional baseball players who were Jewish. Although we were ardent Yankee fans, our team was among the last to have a black player and a Jewish one. Hank Greenberg—

formerly of the Bronx and a Cleveland Indian player, was a demigod—particularly as he had 58 home runs one year, nearly equally the immortal Babe Ruth. Our parents frequently discussed all the movie stars with Anglo-Saxon names who did not look Jewish, but were.

Despite the disorder and dysfunction of my family, my parents were adamantly opposed to the use of racial and ethnic epithets by my brother and by me. There was sympathy for black people explicit in the oft-repeated statement of the time: "Do you think Jews have it bad? Look how Negroes are treated." This all seemed very real when I witnessed Moe, the black laborer who stoked the furnace of our apartment building, insulted and ridiculed by the white caretaker and his wife. Moe taught my friends and me how to carve wood sculpture out of sticks when his boss was not around.

These experiences at the social base made the public school introduction to the Preamble to the Constitution spine-tickling and elevating: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident that all Men are created equal." Years later, I had a similar gut response to the International Declaration of Human Rights by the valiant efforts of Eleanor Roosevelt, an early idol (Glendon, 2001).

I am grateful to social work for availing me exposure to the rainbow of humankind, and with this the recognition that all human being have basic human needs. The privations of others with whom we work make the notion of human needs that more poignant and powerful. Schwartz's notion of symbiotic striving for union and wholeness was expressed by Martin Buber (1970), the great religious philosopher, as the I/Thou experience. To know *the other* is to know *thyself*. We may fight the feelings of connectedness and union girded by our individualism, intolerance, and insecurity, but the gift of loving connection is not to be spurned.

The Buddhist notion of compassion for all sentient life affirms that connection and enlightenment arise from the recognition of suffering in the world and its causes. This perspective has strong intellectual and practical utility for me in so many ways.

Stephen Bachelor (1997) describes the Buddhist experience of compassion:

...I inhabit a world where all living things are united by their yearning to survive and be unharmed. I recognize the anguish of others not as theirs but as ours. It is as though the whole of life has been revealed as a single organism...(p. 87)

I am most fortunate to have been witness to important human rights movements that have changed received belief and knowledge in amazing and radical ways. The extraordinary civil rights movement associated with such pioneers as A. Philip Randolph (Bynum, 2010), W.E.B. Dubois (1968), Rosa Parks (Brinkley, 2005), and Martin Luther King (2000) created inconceivable changes in my lifetime. The struggles were accomplished through non-violent actions inspired by the ideas Jesus, Henry David Thoreau (Lawrence & Lee, 2001), Leo Tolstoy (1984), and Gandhi (1983). The movement for equal rights and the participation of black Americans gave impetus for similar efforts by women, farm workers, Native Americans, people living with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people, and others. The fight for full human rights continues and unfolds in often expected ways.

I have found comfort and personal validation in the late life writings of Leo Tolstoy, who believed that the words of Jesus (Tolstoy, 1994b) are an argument for active nonviolent resistance to overcome human oppression and other forms violence (Tolstoy, 1984). The list includes war, the death penalty, colonialism, and a myriad of conditions which deny human dignity to the oppressed and the oppressor. Tolstoy was a direct inspiration for Gandhi's (1983) nonviolent efforts to free India from British colonialism and later Martin Luther King (2000) in the United States.

Tolstoy (1991a) wrote resistance to malignant evil involves the simple recognition:

In order to have a good life, you should not be afraid of any good

deeds. You should have no less power or strength for small acts than for the biggest or great good deed. (p.191)

The social construction of human identity which seemed so fixed in my childhood was shattered through the decades following World War II beginning with President Truman's desegregation of the United States military forces in 1948. In my ethnic Bronx neighborhood in the 1940's and 1950's, it was a scandal if a woman worked instead of being a full time mother or, for that matter, if she wore slacks or cut her hair short. Divorce, like cancer, was not spoken about out loud. Persons who might now be called gay met covert pity and condescension; and elsewhere, derision and violence.

Allow me to share one extraordinary experience I had as a teacher. In the 1980's, a charming and charismatic young student named Scott was admitted to the school. He was confined to a motorized wheel chair and spoke with the assistance of a microphone. Scott's legs and arms were disabled from birth by neurological damage, which also interfered with his speech when he became stressed. He was an intellectually gifted student whose joy of learning and enthusiasm was astonishing to his peers. Some faculty were discomfited by his presence and questioned his mental capacity to be in graduate school. He did well in classes when teachers were welcoming and imaginatively engaged him. Scott would invite discussion of his disability and felt that he had role in helping others understand the plight of person like himself. In stark contrast to classes that were inviting, Scott would become anxious when he sensed his presence was creating discomfort, readily picking up nonverbal signs of strong discomfort when he tried to speak to an instructor. In some cases, his efforts to speak were disregarded. Scott said that he was made to feel invisible.

I will never forget a session that Scott attended during the first semester of our class together. Traditionally, I used simple children's games to give an *in vivo* experience of group consciousness and sentiment growing through shared activity and interaction. I decided that

Scott and the rest of the class would do these activities despite the inescapable presence of a motorized wheelchair. I will never forget Scott doing the simple line dance "The Noble Duke of York" with the other students. My eyes welled with emotions watching the students imaginatively incorporate Scott into the dance with joy and laughter. After these activities, the students had a profoundly moving discussion of their reactions to Scott and the challenge they mastered in supporting normal activity for him and themselves. Some students said they would never forget the experience, nor would they ever see persons living with disabilities in the same way.

Despite progressive federal, state, and local laws, the struggle for human rights does not disappear. We are daily confronted by the condition of people who face massive discrimination, and subtle and not-so-subtle forms of oppression. I am so fortunate to have known social workers who fought against de facto segregation in social service organizations, schools, and housing, subjecting themselves to threats of bodily harm, job loss, and social ostracism. These social work role models in the past, and my students with their own advanced sensibility about social injustices, have served as internal guides throughout my professional life.

Innovation and social change are not possible unless we defend the free expression of thought and ideas. The defense of civil liberties, which is far too often taken for granted, must receive the highest priority. I have always trafficked in controversial ideas. I guess if you want to make a small difference in the world, you are likely to turn peoples' heads and annoy someone. My heroes are the likes of Jane Addams (1930) and Lillian Wald (1934)—pioneer social workers and founders of early settlement houses in Chicago and New York City respectively—who questioned the idiocy of World War I; and Margaret Sanger (2004), the inspiration for Planned Parenthood, who was imprisoned for advocating a woman's right to birth control by distributing contraceptives.

The artistry of social work practice with people must be passed down to a younger generation, if it is to survive. I am fortunate to

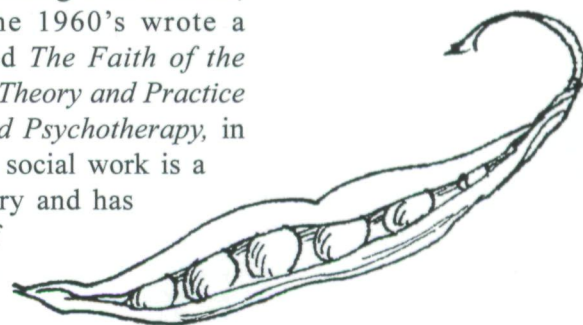
be beneficiary of some extraordinary educators and practitioners in the field. By teaching students, we continue the genealogy of practice that preceded us. My *Final Lecture* is also in thanksgiving statement to my teachers, living and dead, for their kindness, wisdom, and courage. I celebrate this legacy today and everyday.

George Getzel's Last Lecture:

May 2009

Representing the Profession

My brief talk will focus on the tasks and obligations of all social workers to represent the profession. To get down and ugly, let me ask the question: Why am I still a social worker after nearly 50 years? Masochism alone does not explain why I continue to identify with this often maligned profession. Perversely, I seem to wear the mantle of social work proudly. What is wrong with me? My job, if I succeed, is to convince you that I do not occupy a new diagnostic category in the soon to be released DSMV. The argument that I will make for many of my colleagues and myself is that we are not crazy, but we have found a home for the values we cherish through a vocation that makes them public and of use in the world. In some way, by calling yourself a professional social worker, it becomes incumbent upon you to represent the profession. This does not occur by calling yourself a therapist or passively being a role model for others. I contend that representing yourself as a professional is related to the more arduous challenge of standing for the core values of this historic profession, even if society does not understand or value them. If you look at the etymology of the word professional, it comes from the Latin to bear witness or publicly state. Since clergy are one of the earliest professions, it fits rather well with that religious calling. Paul Halmos, an Englishman, in the 1960's wrote a fascinating book called *The Faith of the Counselors: A Study in Theory and Practice of Social Casework and Psychotherapy*, in which he suggests that social work is a form of secular ministry and has grown with the decline of traditional clergymen in Britain. Don't we



minister to folks, hear confessions, and bear witness to what we believe? In this class, we have given heavy attention to knowledge, ethics and skills; all necessary to prepare you to weather the challenges that you will face as a social worker.

By way of ending this year together, let's look at the underlying faith or core values which undergird this wonderful, crazy profession. To abet this process, I took a personal inventory. In this, our final class together, let me share six of my personal core values as a social worker. You are welcome to steal them. I, as social worker, profess that: (1) The well-being of all human beings and their environment is the highest priority, more important than wealth, celebrity, individual advantage, private interest, or any other prize that comes in the way of humankind's health and potentiality. (2) Cultural and personal diversity are an intrinsic aspects of working with people. I wish to be open to the rich varieties of humankind and the attendant challenges and conflicts. No person should be excluded from my concern. (3) Human experience and received beliefs should be subject to critical scrutiny and the needs of people must be explored with empathy and respect. (4) The basic needs of people must be regarded with equal concern regardless of an individual's station, condition, or situation in life. (5) Violence or any other form of oppression does not represent the solution to human problems, but only contributes to their creation. Long term solutions to human misery should be addressed through non-violent action and mutual aid. (6) The free expression of ideas and beliefs creates the conditions by which comity, cooperation and communication among human beings occur. Such expression is the building block of all social institutions that meet basic human needs. Assisting others to have voice in human affairs is the highest calling.

In practical terms, the professing of these values will motivate the following resolutions: I will write and think about the work I do with people after I graduate. I will write not just to meet bureaucratic requirements, but to deepen my practice. This is no one else's responsibility but my own. I will seek out the counsel of caring supervisors and peers to discuss my

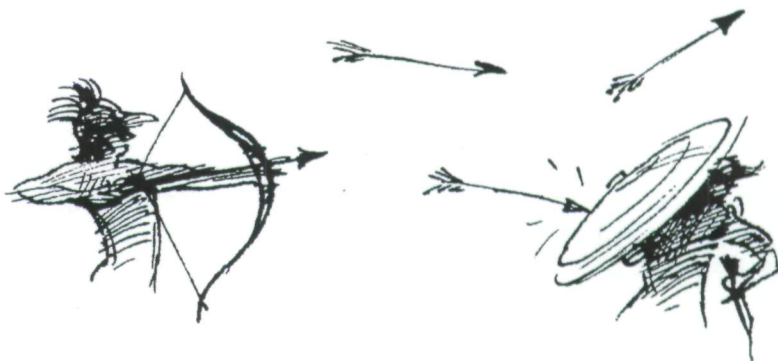
work; it is the only way I can succeed and grow as a sensitive, reflective practitioner. I will think about the cumulative misery and strengths I see when working with people and consider how environments and policies thwart human development and must be changed. I will join with colleagues and communities to create vital social change. I will seek out public forums, be they governmental entities, agencies or professional gatherings, to share my insights in solidarity with others. I will challenge unethical conduct that weakens service to people in need. I will seek professional education as a lifelong process, and persistently search for intellectual and ethical guidance. I will succeed and I will fail. I will be wounded. I will lick my wounds. I will come back with the force of my convictions. And the next time I return, there will be more people at my side.

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