

Small choices produce big consequences

Curtis Seltzer

**BLUE GRASS, Va.**—Philip Roth has stopped writing after more than 30 books over more than 50 years. The dour, reclusive Pulitzer-Prize-winning author of Goodbye, Columbus quoted boxer Joe Louis: ““I did the best I could with what I had.””

Even in his 60s and 70s, Roth’s writing was prolific and strong.

Roth, I think, either works for you or doesn’t. Feminists dislike him, because he writes about sex from a particular male perspective. Some critics argue that all of his books saddle the same pony he rode out of Newark’s Weequahic High School in 1950. Most fiction writers consider him among the two or three best of his generation, perhaps the best.

On Friday, March 29<sup>th</sup>, PBS’s American Masters will feature “Philip Roth: Unmasked.”

I read Indignation this weekend, one of his last novels. The lesson of its protagonist’s short life, he wrote, was the one that his “...uneducated father had been trying so hard to teach him all along: of the terrible, the incomprehensible way one’s most banal, incidental, even comical choices achieve the most disproportionate result.”

I have found this observation to be disturbingly true on our farm and painfully true in other areas.

When I choose to ignore a small chore around here, it grows steroidally. Like every hole in every roof, it increases in size. Remedy becomes more complex, costly, difficult and time-consuming. Fortunately, these factors combine to provide overwhelmingly persuasive reasons to never begin doing it.

Take bridge repair. Postpone replacing one girder, and, in time, a loaded cattle truck will fall through. I will then have to replace the girder, the bridge, the truck and the cattle. My insurance premium will rise, the local paper will run a picture of me looking like a dope and the resident scold in my brain will dance around with both hands waving free chanting “I told you.”

More than once, I have chosen a quick, offhand word that has troubled a friendship for years. I try to guard against inadvertent blurted comments, but my defense is not as good as my offense.

When the admissions dean at Yale Law School interviewed me in the late summer of 1966, I asked at the end of the interview: “Is law school any fun?” The question indicated how little I knew about the experience he patrolled.

“No,” he replied. “Most of our students would not use the adjective you chose. Perhaps you should consider other more suitable careers.”

My innocent question might have been asked by one of Roth’s fictional alter egos...with similar consequences. I decided not to go to law school.

My roommate in New York City in the summer of 1968 was the late Stanley S. Herr, graduate of Yale and later Yale Law School who also held a Ph.D. from Oxford.

Stan won landmark suits that guaranteed appropriate educational opportunities for children with intellectual disabilities and closed abusive institutions that warehoused them, such as Staten Island’s Willowbrook Developmental Center. The U.S. Supreme Court cited his brief in the case that abolished the death penalty for the mentally disabled. He taught at the University of Maryland’s law school and wrote five books and more than 100 articles. He died of adrenal cancer at the age of 54 in 2001, leaving his wife and three children.

Stan grew up in the same socio-religious, Newark milieu that both fed and alienated Philip Roth who was 12 years older. Roth made his name and living by exploring the dimensions of his outsidersness. Stan made his name and living by seeking to fit the system with corrective, legal orthopedics.

During those four months when we were 23 and working summer jobs, we played basketball, jogged, ate many meals together, dated around and talked during late-night drives in his Triumph back and forth to New Haven. He showed me around Newark, a big city in major meltdown on all burners.

That summer, I was wearing a tuxedo and monogrammed cufflinks as a member of a friend’s wedding party. The reception was held at the Yale Faculty Club. To my surprise, Stan also knew the groom and showed up with a date from Pittsburgh, my hometown.

Celebratory champagne, as most of us know, has certain levitational properties associated with carbon-dioxide buildup in the lower atmospheres.

These ethers led me to execute an agile, one-handed vault over a chintz chair into a perfect full-frontal layout onto a somewhat saggy leather couch.

The faculty present twittered in the original meaning of the word. Except for the law school's dean of admissions who, by the look on his face, remembered me. He seemed relieved.

Stan's companion -- an incoming Yale law student who would have little fun for three years -- thought my acrobatics warranted further investigation. Some years later we married.

Had I not chosen Stan as a roommate that summer, had we not known the groom independently, had he not chosen this particular date of the many available to him and had not she and I had friends and interests in common, my first wife and I would have spared each other a not-fun experience of our own making.

Very small choices in seemingly inconsequential circumstances had large repercussions.

The thing is this: You never know at the time which "banal, incidental, even comical choices" will matter and which won't.

Roth's choice to stop writing is a big one. Maybe he has no more to say. Maybe saying anything has become too hard. Maybe he wants to write for himself and not for publication. Maybe writing, which he described as his "fanatical habit," has let go of him.

Or, perhaps, he's fixed his bridge and is ready to use it.

I will miss Philip Roth's stories, because they made me laugh and wince.

And I miss Stan Herr who took some of the wince out of the things he saw.

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