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Stations in Life

by Darryl W. Hewitt

At 7:50 p.m. sharp, The Long Island Rail Road would rumble into Long Beach from Penn Station. The windows were caked with grime from its daily runs into Midtown Manhattan and the passenger cars showed years of "deferred maintenance." As it inched closer to the concrete barrier, the train would rock back and forth as it slowed in its momentum. Metal wheels screeched, hurling sparks beneath the train's undercarriage and onto the track bed, and the unnerving high pitched squeal of metal on metal sent chills down my spine. As the train crept to a complete stop, I was reminded to retrieve my handcart to unload the printed cargo. Within moments, the train conductor appeared at the elevated stairwell and offering a feigned wave, tossed several bundled sections of newspapers to the pavement.

In the November evening, the ground was bone dry, there's no precipitation, and the outdoor thermometer read a brisk 25 degrees Fahrenheit. A not-so-surprising gust of wind lifted the inner lining of my navy pea jacket, like opening the heavy insulated door to a meat freezer, and chilled me to the bone. I made haste; fastening my top two jacket buttons, loading the papers and wheeling the handcart into the station. Lennie, my best buddy, had already set up four, finished, wooden planks between four sawhorses there. I slipped my wire cutters between the metal straps holding the paper stacks together and began to tease each section apart.

The paper's innards -- sports, lifestyle, cartoons and more -- were bundled long before we inserted the main sections. Our job was to collate the various sections of the Sunday newspapers; The New York Times, New York Post, Daily Mirror, and the Newsday. After 9:30 p.m., the "regulars" would rush down to get a jump on their Sunday reading. The Station was the only place open to buy a Sunday paper at that late hour.

Pre-dating the convenience of 7-Eleven, "The Station" was like the neighborhood "candy store" of the era. It sold books, papers, magazines, cigarettes, and chocolate egg creams from the fountain,

in addition to candy. In New York, patrons could treat themselves to a combination plate from the grill - burger, fries and a Coke -- while skimming the latest news. The countertops were a buffed red Formica bordered with raised metallic silver and outfitted with fire engine red bar stools. The Station offered a reprieve from the commuter's daily grind; no tables, no frills, no drive-thrus, and no "happy-meals." Patrons would browse and nibble -- without interruptions from nagging wives and screaming kids -- just them and their papers.

At first, I couldn't imagine how much I'd relish this job. Of all my minimum wage jobs, most required me to use all 600 muscles below my neck, but not this one. For every hour paid, we worked just half of it. Our biggest task was retrieving and assembling the Sunday newspapers on Saturday night. We would monitor the train arrivals, gathering bundles from the platforms, and insert them into each of the major dailies. From 7 p.m. until after midnight, depending on the speed at which publishers pumped out black print on white paper, the Station was our haunt.

For us, this gig, a no-brainer, made all of the sense in the world: a part-time assignment which brought us pocket money, a free-meal offered as an added incentive, and it came with all the books, magazines, and newspapers my eyes could absorb. With the exception of sneaking a peek at the latest Playboy model, Rube, the owner, gave us free run of the place.

Rube epitomized a hardened newspaperman. With a strong likeness to U.S. Senator John McCain (R. - Arizona), Rube evoked toughness. A 60-ish man with a shock of white hair, he knew his place in the world, and ran his business with unflinching certainty. Long before equal opportunity and affirmative action skulked into America's consciousness, Rube hired Blacks and Puerto Ricans. With no provocation from a higher authority, he knew the right

Do you ever wonder if you are all you can really be?

How "fixed" are you in your identity?

In "Stations in Life," I recount how a job at a Long Island newsstand, during the socially turbulent 1960s, became a flash point for the first major transformation of my social identity -- as well as that of my best friend's -- from being teenaged, Negro boys, to being young, Black men. The memoir reviews some of the events that lead up to and shaped our individual and collective conversions during that time. It also speaks to some of the unique problems Black people face in the formation of their "Identity," and in experiencing the fullness of their humanity.

Identity, that true knowledge of one's complete and diverse self, is a prickly enigma, and one that many Blacks grapple with in the face of being seen as a racial identity. It begs the question, "Just who are you, really?" without the label of this socially constructed identity. Until you "know" yourself, and gain mastery over your identity, you run the risk of allowing circumstances to define you.

As you read my story, I hope you will be reminded of your own "flash points" in growth and be inspired to pursue a deeper definition of your own sense of identity, and its meaning and effects in your life right now. At the end of the memoir, I've included some questions and practices to guide you in your investigation of "you."

Are you complete in your relationship with loved ones?**What would give you access to being complete?**

In the "Last Laugh", I reflect on completing a lifelong relationship with my Mother, just weeks before her death. It describes my emotional turmoil over the doctor's prognosis, my fear of losing her, the incomplete feelings that lingered from my dad's death, and the freeing-nature of laughter. We often treat death as if it shall never cast a dark shadow at our doorstep. Eventually it does and we're often unprepared. I'm sure I wasn't.

Mom's protracted illness granted me the gift of time to complete our relationship, and accept her passing with no regret. She faced her mortality with courage, dignity and peace. Her grace for and presence to life inspired me to express myself, fully, as well as let her know how grateful I was for all she stood for in my life. So, at

her passing, I was left with no "incompletions" in our lives – no feeling that "If only I could've said this or done that" while she was still alive.

Instead, the memoir reveals a symbolic defining moment of what made up our routine lives – off-colored humor and fertile neighborhood gossip. A local character reminded us of the playful way that we were with each other over the course of a lifetime, even in the face of her death. I couldn't have asked for more in the completion of our loving relationship.

As you look over this memoir, consider your loved ones. It could be a spouse, partner, relative, friend, or co-worker. If faced with their mortality, what would it take from you to complete a relationship with them?

At the end of the memoir, I've included some questions and practices to guide you in your exploration of completing a relationship.

The Last Laugh

by Darryl W. Hewitt

Every year at this time I'm reminded; golden colored leaves drop to the ground, a chill fills the air, and dusk arrives before dinner. With the holidays almost here, Thanksgiving marks a decade since Mom's passing.

My mother's friend, Fran, had called me late that night, jostling me from deep sleep. Groggy I quickly became fully awake as I heard, "Your Mom's in the hospital. Get home fast!" Fully awake then, I phoned the airlines, reserved a seat on Continental, and boarded the next morning's flight to Newark from SFO.

At 35,000 feet, my mind was racing like an Indy 500 driver with the pedal to the metal. Anxiety surged through every part of my body. Stuck between the cramped seats, oversized bodies, and foreboding thoughts, I searched for peace in the compressed space, but found none.

Random, unthinkable thoughts of loss continued to assault me. At the best of times, flying at that altitude made my stomach jitter but combined with my thoughts of worry, flying was just feeding my growing discomfort. My concern wasn't limited to my mother alone; it engulfed me too. To even imagine what life would be like without my Mother was painful. I knew a day like would come eventually, but certainly not now. I was unprepared for this. But who of us ever is?

From the gate, I telephoned her doctor. His diagnosis cited chronic heart disease as the source of the current crisis. Careful and measured, his remarks neither offered hope nor allayed fear. "Your Mother's strong as a horse," he said, "It's her heart that's losing the battle." He added, "It could be as short as three or as many as a twelve months." Afterwards, he said little more. I was frozen by his words. At this stage, his black bag of cures contained few antidotes, miracle drugs or homeopathic alternatives to extend life. I hung up and an unspecific emptiness, just beneath the level of feelings, bubbled in my gut. It was almost like feeling light-headed.

Though her condition was stable, hearing the prognosis was like seeing a bright red plume of warning shoot up against death's dark night. Over the previous few years, Mom's faulty ticker had already confined her mobility to the house, robbing her of the independence to live fully human. And Fran's call meant she was in trouble. Just as an old tire is prone to slow leaks, Mom's heart had developed one. Knowing her, she would have kept this secret from us, just to avoid being a burden. Underneath, she'd probably prayed to keep us from knowing, so we wouldn't worry. We would worry anyway -- that's what it means to be human and part of a family.

Within her circle of friends, Fran was Mom's best friend, but her capacity was limited as a caregiver. While not much older than I, Fran possessed an incredible reservoir of patience, generosity and compassion. For her to be mom's best friend, it called forth the compassion and virtues of a Buddhist Monk.

Once settled inside my Mom's apartment, I let Fran know I was there. Before trekking off to the hospital, I freshened up, and took the elevator back to the street. I contemplated taking her something. What could I bring her? Flowers? No. She hated anything that would remind her of death's morbid paraphernalia. Still, no matter what you'd bring, she was always appreciative. But, what I think she'd like most -- being at home for the holidays -- wouldn't be found at the florist or five-and-dime store.

After almost three decades of absence, I experienced my hometown through fresh eyes. The faded storefront facades cast a shadowy familiarity, but I saw where new businesses had replaced the old ones that I once knew. Gone were the Meadowbrook Bank, Leone's Bowling Alley, Tilden's Record Store, and others. Gone too were the faces of my father, uncles, aunts, cousins and many childhood friends. Their memories remain, like wispy clouds, viewed at a high altitude. Memories of days gone by, of another time, recalled but now distant and faint. And, neither this place nor the faces I did see remind me of the home where I grew up. I was once of this place, but now, not of this time. I felt displaced, and my eyes welled with tears as a wave of sadness washed over me. It just hit me. Mom's time left was short. Whatever needed saying, needed to be said now.

I remained preoccupied with my flashbacks, until I came nose-to-nose with a fella from the neighborhood. It was Bobby Black. Back in high school, the locals had un-affectionately anointed

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thing to do. Being Jewish seemed reminder enough for him of America's history of discrimination; its impact, and its consequences.

He was often gentle at heart and easy-going, but if you crossed Rube's imaginary line drawn in the dirt, you'd find you had opened a Pandora's Box better left sealed. In a foxhole, when the battle comes, you'd have wanted Rube next to you, but idle chatter meant little to him; it violated his code of professional conduct, which to him was a simple, "Just do your job." From years of persistent cigar smoking, unlike the soft, timbre of Senator McCain's voice, Rube's sounded gruff and was often inaudible. To me, he was the perfect characterization of a resilient New Yorker. Like a walnut, he was tough on the outside, but soft on the inside.

After week one, we began rummaging through magazine racks, newspaper stacks, and bookshelves to kill time. Reading became our diversion, like "Play-Station" is for today's teens. In junior high school, I had read only what was assigned. But soon, sports history and strange scientific facts, like those from the "Guinness Book of World Records," began to fuel my lukewarm reading habits and provided relaxation.

By week two, I'd become acquainted with every publication. To my surprise, a new release, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," hit the shelves. Intrigued, especially with his recent and well-publicized murder, I skimmed the first few pages and found myself catapulted into a new world, his world. Through Malcolm's life experience authored by Alex Haley's pen, (Haley, also the author of "Roots" and the subsequent TV mini-series), Malcolm's story, in paperback, de-layered my world.

In American History class, when the subjects of slavery, Jim Crow and discrimination came up, I would slump deep into the well of my seat. Devoid of positive black images in U.S. History, the class lectures left me feeling empty, embarrassed, and angry. I sensed something off balance, knowing the distorted caricatures in the textbook were of me, and that I was "them." Outside class, my black classmates expressed similar frustrations. In class, my fairer-complexioned friends' energetic dialogue would lose its usual electricity, except for

"You have to make your own definition of yourself. That's crucial. When I do interviews, I am expected to become some sociologist. I have to speak to the condition of black America. My preference would be: Let's talk about theater. Let's talk about art. The fact that I am black is self-evident."

-- August Wilson

circumspect glances in my direction. Unlike other topics, where my classmates savored free-form discussions and posed engaging questions, this topic froze them into silent glacial iceboxes. Everybody seemed to sense this subject was a train wreck waiting to happen.

Feeling uneasy, I thought little value would come from this. And being the only Black in class, with no one else like me to share this experience, compounded matters. I'd grown accustomed to suppressing myself during these prickly history lessons. Once the lecture was over, like a locomotive steam engine belches hot air to relieve pressure, I got back to being myself, feeling like my classmates, who were already enjoying the unacknowledged luxury of being.

Mind you, the year was 1964, and we were at the apex of the Civil Rights movement. Even figuring out what to call ourselves – Colored, Negro, or Black – was under intense debate. Black authors, absent from our English Lit. reading list, appeared on the shelves, racks and stacks, including such notables as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Lerone Bennett, Martin Luther King, and more. No one pointed out these social and literary giants. It was their cover pages, striking with familiar images, which sparked our curiosity. The lunch counter became our study hall; the shelves, stacks and racks our library. That year alone, between 1964 and into

1965, I consumed hundreds of pages on the conflicted identity of being a Negro, of being Black in America. Some of this I already knew, but the poignant details of these distinctions that these writers shared from their own experience, now fed my imagination.

Hungry to understand this new identity, I could be found, between train whistles, flipping pages at the lunch counter. Like a shrewd detective unearths clues in a murder mystery on the Orient Express, I was tracking down this identity to find out what it meant for me. Unlike in class, my heart now welled over with a sense of clarity, vitality and pride. My consciousness shifted.

Over a year of Saturday nights, something gripped Lennie and I. The young men Rube knew when we started – reserved, understated, and compliant – bubbled to life, changing from one-man rail cars to runaway freight trains. From being Negro to being Black re-framed a renewed sense of self for us, one without shame or apology. Our readings uncovered a distinct, complex, and unseen side of ourselves. And, with this discovery, our relationship with Rube digressed, from cooperative to testy, calm to edgy, and from naive to aware. Especially after pushing our confidence to ask for a raise, our relationship seemed headed for the railroad scrap yard.

Along with the newly found identity, civil rights demonstrations in Harlem, several other Northern cities, and a handful of places in the Jim Crow South, also stoked our awareness and fanned a fire, that was likely already there. Our struggle to find comfort, inside this identity, burned a hole in the relationship with Rube. But even as it altered the one relationship, it also brought a new expression of life. To paraphrase James Baldwin, "People are trapped in history and it inside them." Where once we perceived Rube as someone who offered us work, treated us well, and kept us off of Saturday night's mean streets, we now saw him as part of an establishment that had been blowing hot, gray smoke in our faces.

Deep down, I knew something had changed inside of us. Our newly found identity had forever altered our

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him, "The Dipper," or "The Big Dipper." His elongated arms and legs and barrel-shaped upper-torso were accentuated by a rhythmic, syncopated gait. Watching him ambulate down the street reminded one of the local amusement park ride that seemed to have provided his moniker.

As I quickly recast my face, he still seemed to sense my pain. He asked, "How ya' doing?" And to mask my grief, I quickly shot back, "All right." As youths, we had battled on the local basketball courts. At a year younger than me, he graduated right behind my class. Other than on the hard wood floors or asphalt courts, we had shared little time together. Our relationship had stayed inside the paint.

Within our small black community, word of my mother's hospitalization had already spread. Bobby was aware of her condition and politely offered wishes for her fast recovery. After the pleasantries, he promised to come by and see her. Of course, I didn't really expect him to, nor would I have held him to it. All of us had busy lives. We embraced each other with a "black power handshake," and offered each other seemingly empty plans to reconnect. We retraced our steps and resumed our separate paths up the avenue.

Being home allowed unfinished memories of my Dad's death to resurface. Never having fully shared my love, never having told him my feelings, and never really saying goodbye had left me filled with a cabinet full of guilt. Of course, Dad knew my feelings, but the knowing without the saying offered me little solace. I felt like a sentry who had fallen asleep on guard duty while death slipped away with the king. My heart was still heavy with things left unsaid. With Mom, I hoped to avoid a similar fate, one of living with regrets and incomplete good-byes. I wanted to let go, and say whatever needed to be said.

On the avenue, I darted in and out of shops, looking for goodies to fill Mom's bag. A brisk breeze cleared my head and the tasks at hand allowed me time for reflection. During my walk to the hospital, I recalled the dreaded anxiousness that had accompanied seeing my dad in the hospital during his

last days and felt my pace vacillate. With him, I had been unprepared for his rapid deterioration and his inability to communicate. Even when he was lucid, I had struggled with saying goodbye, with letting go. I wanted to see my mother, but I didn't want to see her go! Not like this. I braced myself against turmoil, whipped about by an internal emotional storm.

At the visitor's desk, I signed in, my anxiety rising faster than the elevators speeding to the third floor. Two doors past the nursing station I walked into her room. Her bed, nearest the window, was angled at 45 degrees. Her roommate gazed up at me, as if she knew me. Though it's been a quarter of a century, my mother's face still holds the likeness of the strong woman who raised me.

Five feet from her bed, I called softly, "Mom?" and she raised her head off the pillow, and pushed out her best, "Hi Honey!" I felt her effort and realized she's in the fight of her life inside her own body. Coming closer, I kissed her cheek and pause to gather myself while holding her hand.

In less than a split second, my loving eyes have taken in the physical changes. Slight and frail, she seemed smaller than the commanding physical presence I remember growing up with. The quintessential strong black woman, Mom worked hard to conceal any weakness. As the alpha female in a family of nine, I imagined her having to be the strongest for everybody, herself and younger siblings alike. Her once bright light was flickering, like a candle waning at midnight, melting into obscurity. For years, I'd worked hard to be master and commander of my emotions, but seeing her like this has cut me deeply. Underneath my shield, I wept.

We started small, like reading the "Chit Chat" columns in "Jet Magazine." Then Mom updated me on the latest news flashes from the Black community; who got married, divorced, born, died, convicted and more. The locals, most of whom I've long forgotten, the colorful characters from our "hood," made up our prime time, feature stories. This was our way of checking in; poking fun at, and taking jabs at our community. The conversation became an "In Living Color

"Life is pleasant.
Death is peaceful.
It's the transition that's
troublesome."

-- Isaac Asimov

review of human pretenses and failings. No person, subject or thing -- except ourselves -- remained sacred or unscathed. It was our own unscripted way to both distract us from and connect us in the moment, and from the inevitable. Although unspoken, what was really important was just spending this precious time together.

I'd been so scattered over the previous 18 hours that I left Mom's robe and house slippers in the apartment instead of bringing them to the hospital. I promised to double back with them in less than two hours. On my return, I bumped into "The Big Dipper" again. "I must have just missed you," he said. "I went by the hospital to see a friend and I also checked in on your Mother. Sleeping peacefully," he said, "I didn't want to disturb her." Grateful for his thoughtfulness, I thanked him and proposed getting together again before I left town and he agreed.

Once back in the hospital room, Mom and I resumed our conversation of the good old times. I let her know that I ran into Bobbie on the way over and asked if she knew he had come by? Mom said, "No, I hadn't." I was curious, but not too surprised. Mom had been certified as legally blind, and could easily have missed him.

No sooner than the words had rolled off Mom's tongue, than her roommate piped up with, "Excuse me, is that Bobbie, Bobbie Black you're talking about?" Taken by her question, we both responded, "Yes." Mom's roommate shook her head sideways and released a deep sigh. A look of disgust spilled across her face and she huffed back, "Bobbie Black ain't been in this room! I've been awake for hours. No chance that he's been by here, not today."

I thought she must know him or, at

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relationship. If asked now, we'd blame money as the culprit for the derailment. But unknowingly, we were chasing something else, something bigger. Neither of us was clued in, at first. We couldn't have imagined that unloading those trainloads of newspapers would be the first step in our own journey, one that uncovered a renewed sense of self, and a new identity, without ever leaving the station.

***30- Day Practice Questions:**

**Adapted from New Ventures West Coaching Practices*

By yourself, who are you? In dominant cultural spaces, who are you? In ethnic cultural or specific spaces, who are you?

Name the "I's" you are being during

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minimum, know of him. In any case, she demonstrated what seemed like an irrational dislike of him. Maybe her daughter had dated him, fueling some bitterness towards him. She followed with, "Honey, don't you know that Bobbie has a reputation as being the biggest liar in town?" Stunned by her accusation, I was initially irritated but then, Mom laughed. As it turned out, Mom knew of his reputation. Her roommate then detailed times, dates and events of his preposterous fibs. To them, it was common knowledge; but to me, it was all brand new. All along I'd thought his nickname was a tribute to his distinctive gait and appearance. Apparently, his standing in the community as "The Big Dipper" had a wider meaning than I had been aware of.

A week later, the doctor released Mom from the hospital. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, some eight months later, Mom passed away in her sleep. In the time between, we spoke daily of our storied lives and I was able to let her know how much I loved her, how much she meant to me, and how much I would miss her. During that time, not only did I complete my relationship with her, but also I put to rest my guilt over my Dad's passing, and the things I had left unsaid. I reminded myself that Dad would have forgiven me, and it was now time for me to do the same.

different parts of the day (i.e., at home, at work, at play)? See how many "I's" you can discern – Such as "I am an American," or "I am a friend," or "I am an African American."

Give each identity, each "I" you discover, a name. Begin or continue a practice of keeping a journal. In your journal note daily which identities you observed in yourself that day. Describe each "I" in as much detail as you can.

If you find the practice questions of interest, and would like to explore your questions on identity further, I invite you to take a personality style inventory on my web site at www.dwhconsulting.com/survey.html

E-mail the results to me and indicate your

In those last weeks, Mom and I recounted the story of "The Big Dipper" - - his supposed visit and my confusion over his nick-name, the revelation of his flawed stories of vanity, self-indulgence and desire -- daily we revived the laughter we shared then.

30- Day Practice Questions

What are your views around death and dying?

What are your views around this loved one?

Where is your relationship incomplete with this loved one?

What would it take to be complete?

How would you know that your relationship is complete? What would be the evidence be?

What's holding you hostage in completing your relationship with them?

If you find the practice questions of interest, and would like to explore your questions on "completion" and "death" further, I invite you to take a personality style inventory on my web site at www.dwhconsulting.com/survey.html

E-mail the results to me and indicate your wishes to schedule a complimentary 15-minute consultation on the results of this test and/or your own perceptions, defined through the questions and practices, and I will contact you.

wishes to schedule a complimentary 15-minute consultation on the results of this test and/or your own perceptions, defined through the questions and practices, and I will contact you.

In exploring "Identity" through coaching you can:

- Become acquainted with who you really are -- for yourself and others -- and how these perceptions can influence your life.
- Acknowledge all of the "identities" you know yourself to be.
- Evoke a quality to ground yourself in -- who you really are. By "grounding" yourself, you can venture beyond your comfort zones.
- Embrace and love yourself for who you really are.

In exploring "completion" and "death" through coaching you can:

- Become acquainted with your judgments.
- Cultivate a practice of forgiveness.
- Sit in the space of loving-kindness.
- Learn to be with the inevitable.



Quarterly

For Information on the topics in this newsletter, or to arrange for training or speakers in the areas it discusses, please contact at us:

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