

Chapter Nine

Share and Share Alike

When people first learn in conversation that I am a stockbroker, they either change the subject because they fear that I will try to sell them something, or they ask for free advice.

I had been at a dinner party last night and the man seated next to me, upon learning my profession, began an awful lament about the stock that he had bought at forty that went to fifteen. It seems to have all but ruined his life. His wife even pleaded with him not to go on about it once he had begun. The story was cliché for me: he had bought the stock on a tip from his broker. He bought more shares than he normally would have because it was supposed to be a short-term profit. The broker had some special insight, of course. Well, the stock dipped quickly to thirty-five, then thirty. He bought more shares to bring down his average cost. The stock drifted down to twenty-five. He claims he studied the company and then bought even more. He kept arguing that the stock should be worth a lot more. I interrupted him and asked him why he didn't just sell the stock when it dropped the first time. "What?" he blustered, "and take a loss?"

When I hear talk like that, I need to restrain myself because I could easily scold or preach. I have angered more than a few new acquaintances with my intolerance for people who don't belong in the stock market. I told him that there is nothing wrong with taking a loss if that is the right thing to do. I found myself saying that ego has no place in the markets. When I asked him his motivation for holding onto the stock--and for buying more shares, he said he had to get "back to even." Because of the shares and the lower prices, it had to go to thirty-one. Then I told him that the market did not care what he paid for it, but he started to get upset so I softened my tone a little. I explained that most people are conditioned to avoid losses. That we are brought up to think it downright un-American. Unfortunately, I said, I had done the same thing dozens of times--and paid dearly. Now, I told him, I try to do the right thing for the situation without getting my ego involved. He ranted on and on about how he had "fifty grand in this thing by now," but I was already thinking about what I had just said. I could have told this guy a story about a time--not too long ago, when my ego got involved. I nearly made a terrible mistake before I got my motivation, my heart, in the right place. It had nothing whatever to do with a stock. It had to do with a stockbroker.

Just a few weeks after a large party for his eightieth birthday, Bernie Heller, my dear friend and mentor, died of heart failure. He had been in and out of the hospital for months. Thankfully, I had made the visits each time.

At Bernie's wake, I took time to view the coffin, say a prayer, and, of course, to talk to Lorraine and his family members--of whom I knew quite a few. Then I sat in chair by myself and simply thought about him. Lorraine had asked me to say a few words at the funeral tomorrow. I was preoccupied with what I might say. He had taught me so much--and most of that by example.

I looked up and noticed Sharon Leeds there among the crowd. She had worked at Watson Brooks when I first met Bernie. I probably met him the day I was hired because the boss paraded me around and introduced me to everyone. But seeing Sharon reminded me of the first day I had any kind of conversation with Bernard. He was about sixty then. Someone suggested that he had been a stockbroker since they had tickertape. And though he was one of the top brokers there--he had his own office and a secretary--everything about him: clothes, jewelry, suggested that he was "nothing fancy" but solid, dependable. He had thick gray hair that he wore in a crew cut. And the black-rimmed glasses he wore brought to mind an actor who played the local druggist in an old movie. He was also almost universally pleasant--in fact, he whistled a lot, though people like that used to make me nervous as hell--I once heard someone say that the only person who smiles *all* the time is the village lunatic. I later learned that Bernard wasn't quite what he seemed (he drove a convertible among other things), but that he was one of those people whom you can walk around all day without ever knowing that they have more character in their fingernails than some people have in their entire family tree.

Anyhow, I was at the order window or "the cage" turning in a customer order to Sharon, who would wire it to New York. Bernard was there doing the same thing.

"What're ya buying?" I had asked him, trying to be friendly.

He had looked at me as if to study me for a second, then he said in his pleasant way, "I'm not buying anything. I'm selling." I was put off balance a little by his response and felt the need to reengage him and gain face somehow.

"Taking a profit?" I used a cheery, animated voice.

"Oh, this stock isn't doing what it was supposed to do," he said nonchalantly, "so I'm *selling* it." Sharon was listening to our conversation so Bernard directed his next comment to her.

"A lot like people, these stocks: just when you think you have 'em figured out they pull a fast one on you. Right Shari?" He must have winked at her because she smiled and said, "Right you are Bernie."

"What are you going to buy with the money?" I asked confidently. Bernard had already started back to his office but he stopped and turned to answer my question. "Oh, probably nothing right away," he said "It's nice to have some extra cash in case something interesting comes along." He held up a copy of the order and waved it before he walked back to his office. "Thank you," he said to Sharon. Though I can not remember it as a fact, he probably whistled as he walked away.

That was my first real experience with Bernie, but seeing Sharon gave me an idea about what I might say at the funeral tomorrow.

Sharon

She had overheard my attempt to shoot the bull with Bernard. "Got an order for me, Max?" She was smiling because she knew that I came up short trying to pal around with Bernard.

"Excuse me, is this the kissing booth?" I asked. "I'll take a dozen."

Though probably seven or eight years my senior, Sharon was, to me then, a very sexy and classy woman. Her father was from Spain and she had rich dark hair, green eyes, and a terrific figure. I had the terrible habit of flirting with her every chance I got. She didn't miss a beat though, even though her eyes lit up for a second.

"Aren't you going to ask how much they cost?"

"If you have to ask you can't afford it, is that it?" I had probably just heard someone use that line the day before.

"Maybe," she said coyly, then "Okay. What do you need, dear?"

I gave her the trade order, but a few weeks later, Sharon, who was in her mid-thirties then and divorced, had a few drinks at the office Christmas party (I had more than I can remember) and we wound up dancing a slow dance. It was a Friday night and while we were dancing she told me she was leaving for home in just a bit. She said that I was welcome to come by her place for a nightcap if I was up was up to it. I got her address and, about half an hour later, managed to find her apartment. She answered the door in her robe and made me a drink. We started dancing again and before I knew it we were in bed and having a pretty good romp. She called me her "lover man" and told me to slow down because we had all night. I passed out on her, but we went at it again in the morning after a couple of Bloody Marys. For some reason, she really got to me as a result of that episode. Maybe it was the melancholy air about her, a hint of the desperate beauty, the femme fatale that aroused the desire in me. I went home and slept it off, but when I woke up I could not get her off my mind. I called her and she was cordial--she called me her little lover man again, but her aloofness made me think about her even more.

I felt an unyielding need to take romantic action, to express my feelings for her. I lay down on the couch and tried to think of something to write, some words to describe my yearning. Nothing I could conjure up seemed profound enough to meet the occasion. Then I remembered a bit from my college days, back when I used to imagine that one really good poem or one exceptional piece of prose could validate an entire life. When eloquent ideas were the only reality. . .

"And just occasionally," the professor said, holding up an index finger like a magician setting up his favorite trick, "we encounter situations or conditions which seem. . . indescribable."

I had long since developed a style of attending lectures which found me scribbling or daydreaming with one ear cocked for the sudden change of tone or emphasis, the key word or phrase that suggested that the topic was of particular significance or interest, if only to me.

I lifted my head to watch and listen more closely.

"Or at least," he continued, "after we have brought to bear all our metaphorical might on the problem, we find ourselves coming up short, unable to convey the idea to our satisfaction. . ."

I never really liked this professor or his Fiction Writing Intermediate class. Though I probably learned a few things, I cannot remember anything useful that ever came from it--except perhaps what he said next.

"At this point," he announced, finally tucking his finger away into his fist, "You might consider negative description; defining things by what they are not. It's actually quite powerful because it engages the reader, makes him or her form their own images to an even greater extent." He paused for effect and to wander around a little. "But use it sparingly," he suddenly brought out the index finger again, "or your writing becomes vague." He had my attention while he went into an example.

"A particular woman's voice," he explained, "has an unusual quality. What is it? We're not sure what it is--we can't seem to describe it—is it birds singing or chimes ringing? No?." He waited for someone to smile at his rhymes. "But what isn't it? Well," he mused as he turned to write upon the board, "Her voice is (writing) Un- (writing) pretentious." He looked back over his shoulder at us.. Or it is (writing) Without (writing) a trace of caution." He put the chalk down and turned to us.

"Or perhaps her voice never sounded a dissonant note. Let's have some more," he asked. One person suggested "neither too loud nor too soft." Someone else added that the voice was not earthly, though the professor thought that this could imply that it was heavenly but also that she could be an alien. They all laughed, but I was back in my own world again, head down, writing away in my

notebook, pondering the indescribable, the ethereal: things upon which attempts at description could only act as a caustic. Some verse, a poem, was already forming.

I jumped off the couch and went into my bedroom closet, digging out boxes of old notebooks and textbooks. I had saved them that I might refer back to them one day in the course of what I had imagined would be a challenging career, but I was in search of a notebook from my junior year. It would be a page with a scribbled poem wedged between lecture notes, and it had tried to define the ethereal by what was missing, what was not there.

When I found it, I exclaimed "There you are!" aloud to myself and went back to the couch, grabbing a pen on the way. I lay down and looked at the furious scribbles and editings. I pored over it as if it had been a treasure map.

Shadows, Holes, and Silence

There are certain things which can only be described or explained in terms of that which is missing, or absent, some things that can only be defined by what they are not. Shadows, for example, are regions marked by a quantum lack of illumination. Or take Holes, spaces amid matter that suggest a vacancy of a specific kind. Then there is Silence, often given physical characteristics for its ability to describe that which is not taking place.

I had not done a lot of writing since college, but I had done a lot of reading since then. I worked on the piece for several hours, editing, adding, and adapting until I had the following; Sharon in mind, of course.

Shadows, Holes, Silence, and the Absence of You

There are some situations that can only be described by what is missing or absent,

Some things that are best explained by what they are not.

Shadows, for instance, are regions marked by a quantum lack of illumination.

Or take Holes, spaces amid surrounding matter that imply a vacancy of a specific kind.

Then there is Silence, so often given physical characteristics for its ability to demonstrate what is not taking place.

Other examples abound: Hell is a place of no hope, Heaven, one of no fear.

My favorite is Apathy, the state of not feeling.

Apathy, not hate, someone said, is the opposite of Love.

But the point of this expose' is convey my experience.

After an entire night so close to you and an entire day too far from you, I know why only the Blinded know darkness.

I understand how the greatest Silences follow churchbells and summer storms.

I am aware that the Hole is part of the ring.

There are some situations which can only be described by what is missing, or absent,

some things that are best explained by what they are not

--things likes Shadows, Holes, Silence, and the Absence of You.

In my creative euphoria, I decided it was probably good, maybe the real thing. I put in into an envelope without signing it, then drove over to Sharon's house. True to the style of the romantic, I put it under the windshield wiper of her car and sped off, elated with myself. The doubts emerged not long after I got home.

Monday at the office was a little weird. Sharon guessed that I had been the author of the mystery message and thanked me and praised it, but the rest of her demeanor told me that our affair was fun, but no big deal. I took her cue and tried to play it cool myself--until I called her late one night, blasted out of my mind. She was asleep when I called so she was crabby in the first place.

"You sound really drunk," she muttered. I tried the usual sweet talk, but she cut me off. "Max, it's very late and besides, I'm with someone."

And that punctuated the short statement that had been our affair. But as a result of it, I formed a general impression about people; it was primarily that there are a lot of people that you can come in contact with who are living lonely, almost desperate lives. You can be around them for a long time and never suspect their loneliness until they capitulate to it--and the price of some company is dearer than the price of the humiliation. I had not yet, however, formed the impression that I could ever belong to that group.

Bernard

Later, on that day of my first talk with Bernard, I stayed late at work to make some extra calls and organize my desk. Everyone else had left and it was getting dark. Just before I left for home, I wandered about the office and snooped around. Bernard's door was open and, curious about him after our encounter that morning, I turned on the light and tried to get some insight into the guy. He had pictures of children on his desk (which was clean and neat) and on the wall hung a certificate from a Financial Planning course. There was a tasteful print of an Indian/Southwestern scene and other items that were common enough. Then, on the wall behind his desk, I noticed a yellowed newspaper article, clipped and fitted into a small wooden frame. It was from the South Bend Observer and it was from 1972. From what appeared to be the Business section, it was an editorial column titled "Local Stockbroker Waxes Lyrical." At the bottom there was a short verse and even though it looked like the rest of the column had been folded underneath, the first stanza went like this:

Every stock tells a story
Of regret, gain, or glory
Buy or sell them as you might--
Share and share alike

I wouldn't have paid it very much attention except that the article began with 'Local stockbroker Bernie Heller gives stock market advice in his own unique style. ..' The columnist liked the verse so he printed it.

It sounds a little crazy, but I memorized that little verse because it seemed to make sense about the stock market--in the way that you shouldn't get emotionally involved with stocks. I remembered it for years. In fact, about four or five years later, on a Saturday morning, I had been drinking by myself at the Little Dipper, a dive bar near my apartment. When I thanked the bartender for the drink he had just bought me, all he said was "Share and share alike!" and I thought about that verse. For the first time, out of all the other times I recalled those words, it occurred to me that the last line, "share and share alike" was an old saying that you learned at the same time you learned the golden rule. Even though the verse was about stocks and it *could* have meant that you should buy or sell the shares of stocks, I wondered if Bernard meant it to have two meanings like that. I had a couple more beers, then asked the bartender for the phone book. I looked up Bernard's number and called him because by then we no longer worked at the same firm. He was home that day and I shudder to think what path my life might have taken if he had been elsewhere. When I told him who it was, he sounded genuinely pleased to hear from me. I did the usual small talk and then I brought up the verse. He was surprised that I even knew about it and even more surprised that I bothered to

remember it. When I asked him what he meant by the "share and share alike line," he did the therapist routine and asked me what I thought it meant. I told him I thought he put that in there as a *double entendre*. He knew what that meant, but he said he preferred it to be interpreted as an admonition to conduct business, but do so with virtue.

Bernie then changed the subject and asked if I had been drinking. I got defensive. He could tell I was trying to end the conversation, so he got in one last line before we rang off. He said that he hadn't had a drink in almost twenty years, and that if I ever got to where I wanted to talk about it, I should not hesitate to call him. I told him I appreciated the information and hung up.

About six months later, after a nasty binge, I got an ultimatum from my boss. After the usual disclaimer about how it wasn't personal, he said "Max, it is clear that we both have to take some action, here. My action is to tell you this: You need to get help or get out. What you do is up to you."

So I took Bernie up on his offer.

I sat in the reception area of the brokerage office. Very elegant blue carpeting, and comfortable furniture. A lot of expensive wood trim, brass fixtures, and big glass windows on all the offices. The receptionist had offered me coffee, but I was already shaking as if an earthquake were in progress beneath my feet. I asked for water instead. She brought me a glass and I did my best to take it from her, but I spilled a little anyway. I must have made quite the spectacle: puffy, jaundiced, shaky. My shirt was wrinkled and my pants had not been dry-cleaned for a month.

Bernie came out and greeted me with an encouraging smile. On the way back to his office, he whispered, "Hold my calls, please Cindy," to the receptionist. We went into his office and he closed the door.

"Have a seat," Bernie said, as he slid around behind his desk and sat down. He took a second to have a good look at me. He shook his head.

"Max, I would ask you how you're feeling but I think I know the answer."

"Oh, Man," I said, "Not fun."

Bernie hesitated again but then he said, "Oh, I know it's no fun. I have been in the exact same situation." He looked at me again, and became temporarily distracted until, finally, he asserted himself. "But I am glad you called, because if you want it to be, today can be the beginning of the end of feeling like that." Then he got me to tell him a little bit about my drinking habits. I told him how it had been getting worse the last couple of years: drinking every day--sometimes in the morning. And then I explained that on

this last binge, I stayed home from work, didn't answer the door, and drank for a week straight until Mike, my boss, knocked on the door and slipped a note underneath it. The note said that if I did not contact him the next day, I would be fired. Then I explained that I had to agree to get help for myself as well. Bernie nodded a lot as I went along, and finally he concluded that I had gone on "a real good one." He told me about his last binge in a hotel room. He told me how his friends found out where he was and broke the door down or he might have died in there. He said looking at me reminded him of that and what a hell it was. I don't remember all he said--It was difficult to concentrate very long, but he told me to call him every day for a while, and to put getting sober above everything else. "Because if you don't beat this thing," he said, "nothing else will matter. Right? Cause you'll be in a nuthouse, or God knows where, . . . or dead." Then he softened up a little and took off his glasses.

"Max," he said with those brown eyes boring a hole in me, "Things will get better. They can get a lot better. If I told you how much better they can get you would think I was trying to sell you something." The intercom suddenly broke in.

"Jack Christensen is here to see you, Bernie," He answered back that he would be out in five minutes.

"That's not the Jack Christensen from First Bank is it?" I asked meekly. I knew him from the TV commercials he did. The President of the Bank. I met him once at a Chamber event.

"Yes it is," Bernie said. "You know Jack?"

"I can go," I blurted. "Don't hold him up."

"Just sit tight." Bernie said calmly. "He can wait five minutes." He put his glasses back on. "What he and I have to talk about won't change his life much--or mine for that matter. What you and I are talking about could change everything for you—if you follow through on it. And it does me a lot of good as well, for your information." Bernie took a second to retrieve his train of thought.

"I'm going to try and make it real simple for you. Don't drink, call me, and go to a recovery meeting every day for a while. The first few days are rough, but things get better pretty quick after that." He paused to look at me some more and finally spoke.

"Ok, That's it. Think you can do that?"

I nodded. I thanked him profusely, but he downplayed it all the way.

"You might try to eat something whether you're hungry or not," he added. Then we made plans to make a meeting that night. He wrote down the address and offered to pick me up if I didn't feel like driving. We shook

hands again. I apologized that my hands were sweaty. As we were about to leave his office, I noticed the article on the wall. The one with his little poem.

"You still have your article up there," I said.

"You know, I should take that down, but I got the biggest kick out of that thing. It was supposed to be a song lyric. There was a time when I wanted to be a lyricist. I even wrote music for it. Oh, well, good thing I kept my day job." He chuckled.

As I walked out and passed through the reception area, Jack Christensen looked at me and faked a smile. I did my best to smile back, but felt like a sideshow freak looking back through the bars. I did feel better though, than when I had come in.

It would take pages to describe how Bernie helped me through those first few years: the phone calls at all hours, the time he spent with me in meetings--but he also showed me how to live in a way that made me feel better about myself. And then he showed me how to share my time and my experience with the next guy who needed a hand. "I would be one ungrateful S.O.B." Bernie used to say, "if I didn't give back some of what was given to me." He even shared with me his philosophies on investing—which made me a better stockbroker.

Suffice it to say that Bernie helped me get my life back and then some—he and a lot of others he introduced me to. Which is why I was so worried about what I might say at the funeral the following day.

I have always considered words my friends--when I had time to prepare them--and I have long since lost my fear of speaking in front of a group. But when it came to finding words to describe Bernie, to tell people what kind of person he was, I found myself coming up short, unable to convey the idea. When Sharon Leeds had walked by, however, I remembered that I had had the same problem trying to describe how I felt about her. It suddenly made sense that some things are indescribable except in terms of what is missing or absent. And Bernie was both.

I began to get a little excited when it occurred to me that I could adapt my old writing to fit this situation. It was my favorite piece, my best poem to date, and I even imagined that it was only right that I read it to honor someone who helped bring out the best things in me. I began to plan my talk. I would begin with examples of Bernie's sayings and his actions and how a person naturally wanted to imitate him. How he seemed to know innately when to be serious and when to have laughs—and he had a dry sense of humor that could leave you in stitches. . . . Then I would read the new version of "Shadows, Holes, Silence and the Absence

of You.” That would have quite an effect, I imagined. I was relieved and a little excited to have settled on a plan. I said my good-byes and left.

The next morning, a couple of hours before the funeral, I had changed a couple of lines in the poem to reflect the “time” spent with Bernie instead of the “night” spent with Sharon. I sat at my kitchen table and made some note cards for the first part of my talk. I wanted to mention that Bernie had taught me to test my motivation for my actions, to check my conscience when in doubt about what to do. I was writing *that* on a note card when I had an epiphany. It hit me so hard that I got up and paced around the kitchen a bit. Then I took a risk and called Lorraine and asked if I could drop by and pick something up before the service. She said of course I could. I said I would be right over. I almost forgot to ask her how she was.

The church was packed. Bernie had a big family, many clients, golfing pals, stockbrokers, and recovering alcoholics: he touched the lives of so many others. The service was fitting. When it came time for the eulogies, his son, his daughter, and his brother George all spoke. I was last. I said a short prayer before I walked up to the lectern. I asked to do the right thing because Bernard had told me once that if your heart is the right place you can’t do too much damage and you usually get the job done.

I explained that Bernie had been a friend and mentor for most of the twenty years I had known him, then offered the examples I mentioned earlier: How he made you want to be like him. How his approval could give you comfort, even validate you for a while. I told them that I carry him as part of my personality, as I do with my father and mother and others I love and admire. The important thing was that I tried to focus on Bernie and not how I sounded, but how I felt. It was *his* funeral after all. Which is why I had run over to Lorraine’s house at the last minute. I had decided not to read my poem. As much as I liked it and as much a part of me believes that it might have been a nice touch, it would have been wrong and selfish and most probably a source of lingering regret. I knew what I had been looking for when I got to her house—to their house. Lorraine had understood immediately.

To finish my talk, I revealed to those who had not known, that Bernie once aspired to be a lyricist. I told them that, years ago, he had even had some of his lyrics printed in the newspaper. That he kept the article framed on the wall in his office for years before he retired. And that I would like to read from it. I carefully withdrew the yellowed strip of newsprint from my breast pocket and unfolded it. I cleared my throat a little and read.

Share and Share Alike
by Bernard S. Heller

Every stock tells a story
Of regret, gain, or glory
Buy or sell them as you might
Share and share alike

All those years on the wall, there had been one more verse at the end of the article. It had been tucked behind the first part. There was another verse to the song. I told Lorraine, when she gave me the clipping, that I was surprised he had kept it hidden. She said he had not wanted to use a bigger frame. I kept reading.

Every person tells a story
Of regret, gain or glory
Like them, love them as you might
Share and share alike

Just before I said thank you and stepped down, I explained to those who hadn't known, that Bernie had had a musical bent as well and had come up with his own little melody to fit those lyrics. Lastly, I shared that--as I had just learned from Lorraine--he would even whistle that little melody from time to time. According to Lorraine, it meant he was in particularly good mood.