



Envy

Are there people in your life you compare yourself to negatively? Mine is Garrison Keillor.

I used to know Garrison a bit. He worked in Rarig Center on the University of Minnesota's West Bank campus in the 1970s, at the same time I was doing a public affairs TV show called "Future Shoes." He was already a big deal even then, as the host of KSJN's "Morning Program," though he was only a few years my senior.

There was something about the guy. To begin with, that terrific voice, like a Lutheran pump organ that knows every hymn by heart. I was an occasional narrator on my little show, and it pained me to hear what I sounded like. *Wise-assed and whiny* about sum it up.

Though so expressive in his work, Garrison had little in-person personality. I rode up and down on the elevator a few times with him. After the first efforts at hello, I gave up on him. He was in the clouds, and not of this world. On his show he calls it shy, but it really did come across to me as aloof. Of course, I don't know what it felt like on the other side.

In those days I was a University media jock by day and a surrealist poet after hours. From time to time Garrison came to a poetry reading in the basement of the Unitarian Church on Mount Curve Avenue and brought some long, loping, comedic thing, very similar to his later Lake Wobegon monologues. I thought they were skilled, but lacked verbal fireworks. Later I came to see now that he was trying for emotional, not language fireworks. Where I was trying to make splendid noise, he was more like Bing Crosby, in search of the perfect modulation.

It is curious that this most unintimate man formed such an intimate vapor-seal with his audience. I know I hang on every syllable, after twenty years.

I'll bet he had no opinion of me whatsoever, even that I existed, as a fellow poet, fellow University media guy, or just a fellow face in the brute, lowing crowd. I was even a guest at his house once, in Saint Anthony Park, around 1974. I played softball in a nearby field with a team made up of his radio and music friends. I played second base and handled everything that came to me. Our team that day wore fedoras instead of ball caps. I don't know why, but it created a certain noir effect.

I came this close to having a word with him that day ("Hello again?") but it did not come to be.

Later, in 1979, I was invited out to Worthington to be news editor of the Daily Globe, and Garrison was friends (on some arcane level) with my publisher (and Garrison's former classmate in John Berryman's famous poetry proseminar) Paul Gruchow. It was Gruchow who finagled a "Prairie Home Companion" show out there, and Keillor was in great form by then, having single-handedly reestablished American music as a genre, and raising up a generation of folkie stars like Greg Brown and Peter Ostroushko.

By then I had ceased being a surrealist poet and was hankering to be a folksy country editor type of poet. I wrote a book that was never published called *Borrowing from Minneapolis to Pay St. Paul*, which I still think is a great title, but I don't think I will ever make money from.

But the world already had Garrison, and if Garrison were to fall, Gruchow would surely pick up the standard. I didn't appear anywhere in the sequence of succession.

And it was starting to dawn on me that in the great literary competition of my generation's hearts and minds, my destiny was to be a very marginal figure.

I kept trying new things, rising early every morning for thirty years and writing my ass off before the first cock crew. And Garrison kept working his thing, not altering the formula a whole lot, but maintaining an exquisite level of quality through those same three decades, him succeeding and being the darling of crowned heads, and me just mainly typing.

At one point, I was called in by *Minnesota Monthly* to do an emergency rewrite of a Keillor profile that had gone seriously a-gley by a too-worshipful New York-based writer. It was yeoman's work, dulling the knife's-edge of praise in the original, and reminding readers of Garrison's various feuds with the media (this before Gov. Ventura).

I even went into folk music for about four years, working with the Minnesota Folk Festival as volunteer and board member and even sometimes as onstage ringmaster for a couple of their events. I remember being nervous at the microphone, and feeling a couple of my impromptu, vaguely Keillor-like bits fall horribly flat.

He -- or a part of him, as I proved I am no impresario -- was what I wanted to be. A gentle, darkly humorous commentator on America, hiding behind the Lutheran bushes of Minnesota orthodoxy. So urbane, so successful.

I have a writer friend -- we will call him Dewayne -- who pooh-poohs the idea that Garrison Keillor is any kind of competition,. Which doesn't make me feel any better. He says Keillor is no heavyweight, so why should I worry about him? As if I were a heavyweight. As if I wouldn't be even more envious of, oh, Thomas Pynchon or Umberto Eco.

No. I am stuck with the Richard Corey Solution: to hope Garrison has suffered a lot in his private life, and that additional excruciating pain awaits him in the future, with his audience forswearing him.

I'll tell you, it almost came to be. A few winters ago we began attending an Episcopal church in Crocus Hill, and the very second time we attended, in came a hunched over Keillor, still woozy from (I think) heart surgery at the Mayo Clinic.

I couldn't help but peer over at him through the ceremony. Rachel and I were impressed -- Garrison Keillor, at our church of two long weeks!

And an Episcopal one, which was odd. One might have expected him to be as Lutheran in life as he is on the stories he combs from the air.

He was alone in his pew, and he doddered a bit. He lifted no prayer book, sang no hymn. He looked like a man who had recently spent time in hell, and was hoping to grab an hour's respite.

And afterward, as we filed out, Frank, our minister, was so moved by Garrison's painful grimace that he embraced him -- lightly -- in the alcove. And Garrison, who I think would have recoiled like an asp at this in any normal circumstance, had to stand there and take it like a man.

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