

Ray Bradbury: Creativity and Humility (1920-2012)

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I was truly saddened to hear that literary legend, Ray Bradbury, had passed away yesterday. I have very few heroes; Bradbury was one of them, both as a creative inspiration and as a model of humanity. Although he had lived a full life (he was 91 years old), many of us took it for granted that he would live for many more years, maybe until he was a century old. ☺ And I think this hope was not only due to his phenomenal literary pedigree, but also his infinite, bubbly eruptions of optimistic energy and enthusiasm about literature, science, and especially humanity's potential for good. From a writer's standpoint, he was a primary inspiration for my own work. But it's his sense of humility about his talent that touched my soul in more ways in one.

Throughout my brief 43 years, I have discovered that pride has two faces. On the one side, we have the kind of pride that basically possesses elements of arrogance, envy, bitterness, and avarice. The mentality is, "Yeah, I'm the best. I know I am the best. Everyone else is a peon who doesn't deserve my attention, and the gifts that I possess are only for my benefit, not anyone else's. You can only give me your awe and devotion and screw you if you don't like it." This is not the good pride; this is what we Catholics call one of the deadly sins (out of all The Seven Deadly Sins, pride is the most dangerous). Sadly, many artists---actors, singers, painters, and especially writers---follow this frame of mind, which not only results in the detriment of their own skills (and trust me, their work is diminished by their pride), but also causes considerable damage to those who admire their work. I go into more detail about this in four articles that are connected with my second book, *IN OUR HOUSE*

(<http://www.peterabalaskas.com/books.html>), most notably in *Speak Without Interruption*:

<http://www.speakwithoutinterruption.com/site/2011/11/interview-with-author-peter-a-balaskas/>

But now we come to the flip-side of pride (an unintentional rhyme, I assure you). ☺ I'm talking about pride in accomplishing a goal that not only makes the creator feel a sense of worth, but also impacts others in many benevolent ways. Whenever a work of mine is published, I want to spread the word to everyone I know about it for two reasons: 1) I'm proud of my creation and I want to share this accomplishment with my dearest friends who support my work and my goals, just like I support *their* accomplishments and goals; and 2) As a writer who has no agent or PR representative, I have to market my own work aggressively so I can not only increase my exposure as a writer, but also boost sales for my publisher. Speaking for myself, as well as other writers I have spoken to who show humility about their

talents, the frame of mind has been (after we complete the work): “Wow, I actually created this work. It feels damn good. Let’s celebrate with friends and family. But, afterwards, here’s a reality check: I know I can do better. Let’s see where the next project leads me. Hopefully, I will do better. And, most importantly, other people will like it as well.” I am grateful for the talents God has given me, and I pray to creatively and personally evolve with these talents, never letting the sin of pride destroy them. And to those of you who are fellow writers, you are in this category. If you were in the first section, we wouldn’t be connected in the first place. And for this, my fellow writers and friends, I thank you. 😊

Ray Bradbury’s humility in his own work has established this divine foundation within me. I saw him personally five times. But I had the opportunity to speak with him once. This was a story I told to a very few. But with him passing, it seems right to talk about it now.

It was 2002. I was still working on *PASSIONS*. A cast member, Alan Oppenheimer, was starring in a Ray Bradbury Theatrical production of “To the Chicago Abyss” at Theatre West in Hollywood. It was by far one of the best theatrical productions I have ever seen, and Bradbury was there. Afterwards, audience members were given the opportunity to buy a Bradbury book, get it signed, and actually have a conversation with him. I just had enough money (\$20) to buy a hard cover copy of *FARENHEIT 451*. I was in line but before I was about to buy a copy, the person in front of me, an old woman, said her husband was going to their car to get money to buy a copy of the book (she didn’t have any money on her) and she didn’t want to miss out. I already had a signed copy of another Bradbury book from a long time ago. So, I lent her my \$20, as long as she paid me back afterwards. She was sooo touched. She bought her book, which, unfortunately, was the last copy they had. 😞

Although I was paid afterwards, I was bummed that I missed out on the opportunity to speak with Bradbury. One of Bradbury’s PR people saw what happened and he told me he liked what I did for that old woman. He smiled and he asked me to follow him to the front of the theatre, where he had an extra hidden copy of 451. He said to me, “Buy the book and talk to the man.”

Which I did. When I sat beside him, I felt an incredible sense of peace and grace that composed this wonderful man (another writer I met soon after who had those same qualities was Louise Erdrich). After signing the book, I told him I was a friend of Alan’s, and Bradbury beamed with child-like joy. He loved Alan like a member of the family. I told him I was a writer and his works inspired me greatly, even though I hadn’t been published. He was so flattered and he told me not to give up and that I *will* find success that will satisfy my soul (and money has nothing to do with it, he emphasized). We talked a little more and then, out of the blue, he placed his hand on my cheek and looked my directly into my eyes, as though he were watching my soul. This went on for only 5-7 seconds, but it felt like an eternity. I felt

a huge warm electrical sensation throughout my body. He then smiled, nodded his head, and said God bless. Although it would be wrong for me to say that I felt as though I was touched by God, something divine had truly happened that moment. Maybe Bradbury was the conduit for some “providential wellspring” that author James Lee Burke once described as the source of his creativity. I don’t know. But I do know that I was walking on clouds ever since that meeting. And it was by far the best encounter I ever had in my life from any established author I met because it not only inspired me to grow creatively, but it also generated a sense of humility regarding my gifts so it can benefit my fellow human beings.

Cynics and elitist literary snobs call his work “saccharine” and “overly sentimental” (they obviously didn’t pay close attention to *FARENHEIT 451*, *MARTIAN CHRONICLES*, and the copious amount of disturbing horror short stories that show the darker side of human nature, especially the chilling “Skeleton.”) But these critics are inflicted with a type of short-sighted blindness that is a reflection on their own literary bigotry. What they consider “overly sentimental,” the rest of the world would call hopeful. Quoting Gene Wilder from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, “So shines a good deed in a weary world.” And to say the least, Bradbury did many good deeds for this weary world during his lifetime that will establish his immortality for literature and humanity as time goes on.

Deo gratias.

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