

## Pains & Fears, Lessons & Gifts

Written by Alex Baer  
Sunday, 25 May 2014 17:53

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The thing about unexpected lessons is that you never know what it is you'll learn, or that you had anything at all to learn in the first place.

In a *quintzillion* years, I never thought I would say this, but Donald Rumsfeld had a point, albeit a circuitous one, when he reeled off his screed about *known knowns* and *unknown unknowns*, and so forth, through every last permutation, down to the *potentially uncertain but likely quite improbably unknown, but still completely possible, percentagewise, knowns*. Or something.

Lessons are difficult, even if you're open and ready for them, and they involve small-beans issues like going to a different movie than you'd planned, or having to break down and order an alien beer or pop when your fav has been pumped dry at Drac's Stake-N-Steak or Burger Queen or Pasta Palace or whatever.

Much, *much* more seriously now: If you think such *teaching moments* and *learning opportunities* -- as we currently call Big Windows of Life To Go Look Out Of And See Something New -- are tough, imagine what the lessons are like when they rip your heart out.

Case in point: Richard Martinez, who lost his son in the Isla Vista shooting spree on Friday. At the sharp point of grief and despair, he blamed cowardly, irresponsible politicians and the NRA for the shooting orgy.

If you are at all human, of course, your heart goes out to this man, to this parent. And *then* what do you do?

[ very, very long pause ]

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Whatever we decide as a people, as a country, as a species, it simply has to be something that we are not now doing. **Period.**

Clearly, what we are doing -- *and not doing* -- is simply not working. **Period.**

Logic can be so damned inconvenient, but it has **clarity** going for it. These days, unfortunately, Logic is also the last resort for most people, not the mandatory first port of call.

- It is said, *If you want something you have never before had, you must do something never before done*

\* \* \* \* \*

Once a rare event, it's now boring and trite to so frequently note how much Americans could learn from people in other countries. At first, we were busy reinventing and pioneering, and teaching ourselves, and then the world, how this new, post-world-war life might work.

Then, we got lazy, started making poor decisions, started bleeding off R & D money into unproductive pockets and channels, shipped real-wealth manufacturing jobs overseas, and became obsessed with big foam hands that insisted *We're Number One!*

... even though we routinely place in the middle ranks, and lower, in an alarming number of categories -- or what *should* be alarming, based on who we used to be.

So, yes -- Australia, for one, could show us a thing or two about gun reforms. Australia went through some massacres before *their* conservative party took steps to try to end such tragedies. You should have heard the uproar, of course: the howl of gun lovers, the blasts of *jargon-eering*

, the tornadic blasts of *fearmongered gun gibberish*

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The road to sane, sensible, and legitimate restraints is not an easy one, but Australians who were vehemently opposed to change, before the changes went through, now calmly admit the regulations are not so bad, make sense, and are easy to live with. Former gun reform foes would probably admit, over a foamy beer, that their fearful, earnest protests about *diabolical losses of freedom* were just that: fears bubbling up to the surface and popping off like knee-jerked scatterguns.

When you're a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is difficult to trace where it is that the elements of our personalities originate, how they start, and why. There's nurture. And nature. And fight and flight and preference and DNA and talent and trial and error and on and on.

Usually. However, I have been granted the lucky gift and very good fortune of knowing where one small piece of my own self originated. It is the piece responsible for trying to find the winning scenario for all players in any and every scenario of life that I encounter.

If I hadn't been a busboy in my early teens, I would never have considered anything at all like this, I'm pretty sure -- at least, it would not have happened that early in life.

It was a lesson I had no idea I would be taught. It was information I had no idea would be valuable, or had any awareness that I'd been missing beforehand. The information came as a gift from *waitresses*.

(It was some time ago, this lesson, *before* waiters and waitresses were promoted, or neutered, into *servers*, just as *airline stewardesses* morphed into *flight attendants*)

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. Off the subject, I know, but it is interesting to note Hollywood still retains the old-fashioned *actor-actress* nomenclatures. Tom Cruise and Cate Blanchett, for example, have not become *fantasy specialists* -- although Tom's link with sci-fi writer L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology might qualify him for placement as such.)

No matter. Back to my lesson, my gift from the waitresses. As a 14-year-old busboy, I considered it my sworn duty to clear the dirty dishes from booths and lunch counters, clean up any messes, and hustle the plastic tubs of used tableware into the back, for sorting and washing. (Good thing the place had plenty of tubs. By the time the lunchtime melee settled down, I had 20 or so tubs heaped up with work to catch up on.)

*Clear-n-Clean*, just part of the gig. Except that somewhere, somehow, that sworn duty became something like a sacred mission. There was nothing about becoming an adult in that lesson, and there was nothing about the marvels of the supposedly free enterprise system and its supposedly flat playing field. Being a busboy was just something I did to provide myself some fun money.

I was simply trying to do a good job for the waitresses -- not the company. At 14, who relates to a company, to an invisible, nebulous, legalistic whimsy like a company? (Anyone able to do so may want to rethink one's own life's lessons to date.)

It was important to the waitresses, this whole *clear-the-table* thing, so I made it be important to me, too. At the time, there was no understanding in my head that my clearing tables faster meant an improved ability of the waitresses to serve more people, and thereby earn more tip money.

But it did mean exactly that. The waitresses must have figured this out way before I did, because they did something that had never been done before: They shared their tip money with me. It was a point of pride then, and it's a point of pride even now.

I hadn't busted my chops in the hopes of getting more money. I had been raised with the now-quaint notion that one should work as best one can, and rewards would automatically

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follow. Like seeking happiness, I had not sought happiness, but found it nonetheless -- perhaps *because* I had not sought it out.

I had not sought out money -- it was not the motivator -- but it found me anyway. At 14, it is difficult to be profound. But, slowly, I came to realize that it was possible to take a situation, look at it from the vantage point of others, then analyze where it is you, yourself, fit into the picture, and make adjustments accordingly, so that all the players might win -- not just a select few.

Of course, the waitresses had to be playing that same game, too, at some level. They were not like Wall Street CEOs, who were content to fire 10% of the work force, causing the bottom line to shoot up artificially, but just enough, to justify a higher short-term profit for the company, and an immediately higher paycheck and bonus for themselves.

No, the waitresses were playing share-the-wealth too. They were playing by the rules which made it possible for everyone playing the clear-the-table game to win.

I have some theories: People who soldiered through the hard years of the Great Depression, and World War Two, gained strength from acting as a group, as a community, to act as one. They needed each other to struggle through. They developed the ability and desire to care, and to share. This trait, they passed on to those around them, and, if fortunate, to their children and grandchildren as well.

This leads me to another pet theory: If you don't have hands-on experience in an area of life, you won't have any empathy for anyone else in that same area of life.

Without empathy, there is not only no *desire* to change, there is no *ability* to even *fathom* another way is even *possible*

-- that it could *ever*

exist. Experience is the catalyst that allows empathy to occur, take root, and grow -- should one care to pay attention, keep an open mind, and provide space for such things, for such new lessons.

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Without the waitresses, I would have never learned such things -- and not just the things themselves, but how they tended to spring and grow. I had no idea I would learn such things. I thought I was just going to learn how to work the big, dangerous-looking, *steampunked* dishwashing machine. But there was an entirely new world for my 14-year-old mind to grasp, a whole new way of doing things was at hand.

That's what being a busboy taught me: through sharing, it is not only possible to learn, it is possible to find solutions in which everyone benefits. Very old fashioned notions, I know. It is why I cannot relate to *I've got mine so screw you*.

Being a busboy taught me very little about hardcore adult philosophies and rationalizations of *If you don't work, you don't eat*, or the value of a dollar, or any of a number of other cliched lessons parents hope a part-time summer job might help their children gain.

It's a different era, I know. Somehow, I've never forgotten those lessons -- lessons I never would have thought I would learn, or even existed, or ever thought would still be with me long after I put away my soaked, stained, smeary busboy's apron, and shut off the imposing dishwasher for the last time.

\* \* \* \* \*

There is no way I can know what that man is going through, the man who lost his son to such overwhelming senselessness, to another round of massacres, American style.

My fear is that we will all of us -- every single American, no matter how young or how old -- will *NEED* to go through this same baptism of fire as this man, this same kind of ripping, gutting, crushing loss *in order to learn our own lessons*.

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My fear is that until then, politics and profits will continue to trump sanity and safety.

My fear is we're not Australian enough.

My fear is that there aren't enough jobs for busboys these days, and that there hasn't been enough, not for many, many years.

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Rummy's hypothesis: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There\\_are\\_known\\_knowns](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There_are_known_knowns)

A father's wrenching take:

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/24/ucsb-shooting-guns-nra\\_n\\_5386873.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/24/ucsb-shooting-guns-nra_n_5386873.html)

NRA, the enabler: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/24/the-nra-s-all-out-assault-on-accurate-information-about-gun-deaths.html>

Gun control down under: <http://world.time.com/2012/12/17/when-massacres-force-change-lessons-from-the-u-k-and-australia/>

### **Today's Bonuses:**

**The Daily Show's John Oliver's important, serio-comic take on Australian gun control:**

Part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pOiOhxuj5E>

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Part 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYbY45rHj8w>

(You may need to search online for Part 3.)

and, a Distillation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVuspKSjfgA>

**The proper way to doublespeak your gibberish** -- baseball gibberish, though:  
<http://www.wimp.com/abbottcostello/>