



## Giving as Leadership

When I graduated from high school in the Spring of 1993, my junior chemistry teacher, Ms. Dedi Williamson gave me a copy of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Even though she no longer taught at my school, she had returned to see us all graduate. She was a student favorite, the coach of the girls' soccer team, and known for being there for anyone who needed advice. In what would now likely be a case of inappropriate overshare, she would often tell us romantic stories of how she and her husband met, her preferred method of birth control, and what she thought of everyone's dating life. In my recollection she was in her mid-twenties at the time and so hovered somewhere between authority figure and antiestablishmentarian big sister, eliciting feelings of wonder and admiration akin to what the protagonist feels in the Dar Williams song, "[The Babysitter's Here](#)." She was a role model to me not only as a teacher but as a long-distance runner. She used to beam whenever she talked about getting up at sunrise and running around the neighborhood through sprinkler systems. Even though it would be over a decade before I took up distance running in earnest, I had always kept her example in mind and I give her a significant amount of credit for the fact that I have now run fifteen marathons.

So, it made me feel very special that Ms. Williamson said that of all the students she knew, I was the one she thought would be able to read and appreciate a nearly 1,110 pp. book--still one of the longest books I've ever read. It made me feel doubly special that she gave me this book in front of my AP Chemistry teacher, Ms. Joyce McMichael, who agreed I would get a lot out of it. Chemistry had been my favorite subject in high school (physics was), but these had been two of my very favorite teachers. I'm sure it was their endorsement of *me* as someone mature enough for this epic book, as much as their endorsement of the

book itself, that convinced me to read it that summer. Then I read *The Fountainhead* and began reading Rand's non-fiction works. By the fall of my freshman year in college I had a rudimentary understanding of the history of philosophy (at least from Rand's perspective), beginning with Plato and Aristotle. It was even an undeclared major for a time and my first foothold on the ancient world. Though I would eventually come to see Rand's views of the world as woefully naive and simplistic, and I would come to see my interest in them embarrassingly grandiose, I remain immensely grateful for the gift that helped me get to the place I am at today, both intellectually and professionally. It was the right gift, given at the right time in my life, on the right occasion, in front of the right audience, by the right person, in the right way (encouraging, spirited, smiling widely), so as to make me feel very special in receiving it. I had received awards and accolades in public settings to nods and applause before; but I don't believe any affected me as much as this gift.

I still have the book that Ms. Williamson gave me (it cost only \$6.99!), including the dedication:

Norman,

Thanks for all the wisdom you shared with me. This book was one of the greatest gifts Edwin [her husband] ever gave. I want to share this with you. You'll always be in my heart. You'll always have a friend in me.

Love, Dedi

This dedication obviously adds the element of inclusion, intimacy, and lasting friendship to an act of giving that was an act of leadership. It told me that I was receiving something that the giver herself cherished.

As I reflect on this sketch, I want to be better about giving things that will make people better and not merely conform to social expectations. We are expected to

give so often, on so many occasions, that it has come to feel very impersonal to me. This may mean that I should give less often, but more thoughtfully of the needs of those I'm giving to. I will begin by thinking about those in my life who could truly use a gift right now.

Norman B. Sandridge

July 12, 2020

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