

On the Origins of Inspiration

by PETER H. SMITH | Kalman Silvert Awardee for 2013

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Good morning! My thanks to you, Maria Hermínia, to members of the selection committee . . . and to whatever they were smokin' at the time. Abrazos to the panelists for thoughtful and gracious presentations. And greetings to all of you. I very much appreciate your being here.

I am honored, humbled, and profoundly grateful. I feel like a little kid who's just snuck into a roomful of serious thinkers, brilliant minds, and inspiring teachers, among them Kalman Silvert himself. On my very first job, at Dartmouth College, still in my twenties, I became Kal's junior-junior-junior colleague. He was a formidable senior member of our profession, forceful and decisive. He was also generous to a fault. He read my doctoral dissertation word for word and offered sage advice. He permitted me to audit his college class and observe his lecture style. He urged me to gain command of quantitative methodology. At some conference or other it was my turn to speak while Kal was in the audience. An incredulous student came up to me later to say, "Did you see that? He was taking notes *on you!*" My stock soared throughout the Dartmouth community.

It wasn't always as easy as that. As a rite of passage, my dissertation adviser, Lewis Hanke, urged me to circulate my thesis proposal on the political economy of Argentina among leading scholars in the field. I did so with apprehension, politely asking a select group of luminaries if they thought my topic was "manageable and worthwhile." My first reply came by return mail, with one word scrawled in the right-hand margin alongside my query: No. This left me with a stark choice: either pitch myself off the nearest rooftop, or grit my teeth and muddle through. As you can gather from my presence here, I chose the latter course.

In subsequent work on Argentina, I proposed to examine roll-call voting patterns in the national Chamber of Deputies during the first half of the twentieth century. This would have the inestimable advantage of allowing me to display newly acquired statistical skills. I explained the plan to one learned colleague, who replied that he had already perused the legislative records of all those years and found that they contained no more than a dozen votes by name, known as *votaciones nominales*. Undeterred by this discouragement, I plunged ahead with my dubious enterprise and came up with more than 1,700 name-by-name votes. Being stubborn is a virtue in our profession.

Book reviews have been mostly merciful over the years. One glaring exception was a withering denunciation of my book *Talons of the Eagle* in the *Wall Street Journal*. In dismay I called my older brother, a journalist at the *Washington Post*, and described this unseemly development. "Congratulations," he replied, "you wouldn't have wanted a positive review from them, now would you?" You can define yourself by the enemies you make.

So there have been bumps along the road. I have also encountered innumerable and random acts of kindness and senseless generosity, especially as I was starting out on my career:

- José Molina, an up-and-coming agronomist at the University of Buenos Aires, went out of his way to critique key chapters of my dissertation-in-progress and invite me to join expeditions with his students to nearby estancias.
- At a later point I was seeking district-by-district results for the Argentina elections of 1973; a sympathetic bureaucrat said he



would see what he could do. Repeated visits to his office came up empty. On my last night in Buenos Aires, the front desk at the hotel called my room to announce the arrival of a package in my name. There, in a plain brown wrapping, were the official election results. No one would ever have to know.

- My research interests later turned to Mexico, where I had the great good fortune to meet with Mario Ojeda at El Colegio de México. After a while he referred me directly to don Víctor Urquidí (a Silvert awardee), who met me that same day and offered me an appointment as a visiting researcher. That opened up the world for me in that fascinating country.
- A central element of my research project on Mexico required biographical information on a large number of political officeholders. Eventually I went to the national congress and requested access to semiofficial profiles on then current legislators. The custodian politely explained that no such records existed. Days later I happened to have coffee with his superior, who not only said I could have the data but volunteered to accompany me over to the archives. Neither the custodian nor I blinked. Saving face can be an important part of the bargain.
- Soledad Loaeza, a prominent scholar and colleague, shared with me on many occasions her unique and firsthand knowledge of politics and personalities in Mexico. These insights greatly enriched

my understanding of the one-party regime. She not only supported my efforts; she also oversaw the translation of my resulting book into Spanish for publication by El Colegio de México.

So it has been. None of these people had to do the things they did for me. I have received invaluable help, guidance, and intellectual sustenance at every stage of my not-quite-finished career. I could never have succeeded without them, or, for that matter, without all of you.

Now I am going to take a bit of poetic license. I want to address my family: my sons, daughters, and daughters-in-law, all of whom are present. It is a special occasion to have them together in one place and listening to me. I intend to seize this opportunity. In so doing I will purport to speak on behalf of colleagues here assembled, in hopes that you will forgive my intentional slippages between singular and plural first-person pronouns.

Now then . . . children. You must wonder what I do. You see me working away at the computer, producing arcane documents, getting on airplanes, heading off to mysterious places, coming back home, and going back to the computer. You know I teach university students and I suspect you sometimes commiserate with them. Scribble, scribble, scribble, talk, talk, talk—what does the old man really do?

Let me explain. My colleagues and I are fascinated by the tenor and tones of life in Latin America. It is a land of paradox, and it stimulates our curiosity. Once we identify a puzzle, we become determined to solve it. Once we locate a trail of evidence, we are enthralled by the thrill of the chase. We are a band of hunters.

But there is more to it than that. As we learn about the region, we have been profoundly moved by things we have witnessed or observed. My personal experiences include riveting scenes:

- the resolute dignity of poverty-stricken indigenous women kneeling on the sidewalks of Mexico City, eyes downcast and hands outstretched, pleading for gestures of human charity;
- the passionate fury of a fashionably dressed young woman in Buenos Aires who, during a student protest against the 1965 U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic, climbed aboard a police jeep and used her handbag to club an armed policeman;
- the unrelenting courage of countless colleagues who confronted military and other authoritarian regimes by continuing to do their work, and risked life and limb in the process;
- the fate of a Jesuit priest from El Salvador who gave a stunning lecture to one of my university classes and was thereafter murdered in his homeland by a gang of military thugs;
- the callous destruction in 1989 of lives and property in Panama (aka “collateral damage”) by U.S. military forces in pursuit of just one individual, Manuel Antonio Noriega;
- the superhuman bravery of a grieving grandmother of the Plaza de Mayo, who expressed relief to learn that her adult daughter was dead and could no longer be subjected to torture.

These are matters of the heart, not the head. My colleagues and I cannot but empathize. In a world of unequal power,

we align ourselves with underdogs, with people who suffer within Latin America, and with Latin American nations that have sometimes suffered at the hands of the United States.

We ask ourselves what we can do. Our answer is: Seek truth. (We know, of course, that there is no such thing as absolute truth, that it is a relative notion, but we want to get as close as possible. This is a noble quest, even if results are fallible.)

Truth brings enlightenment. It provides perspective and enlarges our awareness. It takes away our blinders and it sets us free.

Truth enhances understanding. Many of us tell stories that have never been told. We try to explore the lives and struggles of the weak and disadvantaged, to emphasize their dignity and sense of purpose. This underlines realities of our common destiny.

Truth offers a path toward empowerment. In many times and places, the rich and powerful have invented stories explaining why they (and not others) should be rich and powerful. Occasionally these stories contain grains of partial truth; often they consist of gross exaggerations; and all too frequently they are based on blatant lies. On the whole, our work provides a corrective to these tales.

Truth unravels fabrication; it undermines mendacity. We thus unmask the instruments of domination and control. We speak truth to power, or at least we make it possible for others to speak truth to power.

We try not only to discover truth. We also want to spread the word. That is why we write, write some more, give papers, attend conferences, offer lectures, teach students, teach some more, and talk and talk and

talk. Some of us are pretty shy, but as a group we form a community of conversationalists.

For North Americans like me, it is especially imperative to have our studies published in Spanish or Portuguese translation, so they will be available to people who can put our findings to practical use.

Our work resembles that of journalists, especially print journalists, many of whom I greatly admire (like my older brother). But there are significant differences. First, we scholars are profoundly concerned with questions of theory and method, with the importance of explaining *how* we carry out our research and analysis. We hold ourselves, and each other, to very high standards. Second, we don't usually have fixed time deadlines. We work on projects until they are done. Articles take months and years. Books take years and decades. Scholarship requires discipline and patience, qualities aptly captured in the German term *sitzfleisch*—which, in literal translation, means “the ability to sit still for extended periods of time.”

We have yet another motivation. While we often deal with difficult and painful issues, the work itself is usually enjoyable. Much of it is just plain fun. I have been able to travel to many parts of the world, meet thousands of fascinating people, serve as president of LASA, see my name in print, and watch myself on television. My swelling ego has been gratified in unexpected ways.

One such instance occurred many years ago, right after the publication of my dissertation as a book. While visiting a major university I went to the library to see if my opus was there. I scanned the card catalogue eagerly. Yes! It was there! But

wait! It was listed as “missing from shelf.” I was crestfallen. Then I came upon a thoroughly satisfactory explanation: some enchanted reader had stolen my book! That's right. Stolen my book! My chest was bursting with pride as I skipped back out to the campus. And as fanciful as this reconstruction of events might seem in retrospect, it remains the preferred interpretation.

I have loved this work. I am profoundly grateful for my abundant opportunities and for this glorious award. I owe special thanks to my children—for tolerating my absences (and absentmindedness), for embracing my ideals, for traveling with me to distant lands, and for being here on this occasion. All this makes me a very lucky guy. Quoting Maya Angelou once more, “Wouldn't take nothing for my journey now.” Thank you very much. ■