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FOREWORD BY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KYLE IDLEMAN

6

Wise Guys

UNLOCKING HIDDEN WISDOM
FROM THE MEN AROUND YOU

KENT EVANS

with Rob Suggs

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Figure Yourself Out

Beware the Unsomething!

I was 17 when he said it, but it might as well have happened five minutes ago. His voice still reverberates in my ears nearly three decades later.

“Kent, you cannot become the *Unsomething*.”

Huh? Did I hear him right? What exactly is an “*un-something*”? That’s a Dr. Seuss character, right?

He went on to explain. And with that one statement, this man released shockwaves of change into the fabric of my life. His sage advice set me on a radically different path. It has paid amazing dividends in all that I’ve done.

Allow me to tell you how I came to be in this man’s office and to come face to face with the dreaded *Unsomething*.

In my late teen years, my parents went through a divorce. As a teenager, I didn’t quite know what to do with all the emotions surrounding this development. My mother worked for a company that offered free counseling to her family members. When it became obvious I could use a little help, I was assigned a kind and insightful family therapist, Weldon C. Fuller.

You know those old Humphrey Bogart movies that feature a detective with his name emblazoned on the frosted glass door? That’s how I remember Weldon’s office. I may have romanticized it a bit, but I’m sticking

with that version. At least I haven't started to recall it in black and white, with smoke wafting from a nearby receptionist who is holding a cigarette in that long stick thingy, so I've got that going for me. Regardless, I can still see his name emblazoned on the door, complete with the middle initial.

In our sessions, as any good counselor does, he asked lots of questions. I answered them as best I could. One thing I did not suffer from was suppressing my thoughts and feelings. I was afflicted with the opposite disease: I was a blabbermouth (a verbal condition I've yet to overcome, if you ask certain people).

As we met, I unloaded. After a few sessions, I became quite comfortable with this skilled listener. In our third session together, he had taken in my story, and it was time to provide some gentle steering and guidance. He pointed out how focused I was on my father and his role in the divorce. This is what he was hearing from me: "I won't end up in the same situation they're in!"

So Weldon gently said, "You know, Kent, life has a peculiar way of turning you into *the very thing you don't want to become*. Put another way, psychologically speaking, you cannot become the 'Unsomething.'"

He allowed that life-changer to sink in for a second, then he continued: "You'd rather not end up in this same situation? Fine, I get it. But my advice to you is this: Stop trying to *not* do this or *not* be that. Instead, find some men who have the life you want, and figure out why their situation is the way it is. Then do some thinking. What is it that makes these guys worth imitating? What do they have or embody that you want? *Learn from them and then model yourself after the parts you like.*"

I had no idea how significantly his words would affect my life. Perhaps I still don't fully grasp the total impact. He had reached into my cerebral cortex, yanked out a fistful of wires, and reconnected them in a new scheme. A mental rewiring in five words! *You cannot become the Unsomething*. This guy was good.

Can you relate to this story? Did you have trouble as a young person, and a kind helper gave you the tools you needed to overcome your situation?

Or, more to the core of the issue, did you ever say to yourself, "I won't become like _____!" And, for maybe five, 10, or 30 years, you lived in a vortex of avoidance, desperately trying to evade a destination, when you didn't even know where your ship was headed in the first place?

I suspect that on some level, many men can relate to my story. There are a few reasons I believe this.

Target Unknown

I think most people (men in particular) struggle to clearly articulate a vision for their desired mature state. Said another way, most of us don't know *who we want to be* when we grow up.

Let's use a short quiz to figure out if you are the exception to this general rule.

Grab a sheet of paper. And about that: You can do this thing in your mind, but it's much more effective in writing (decoder: more effective = more painful).

At the top of the sheet, write, "Who I want to be in five years." Then, below that, write down a half dozen

character traits you would like to embody five years from now. Avoid positional goals such as “get married” or “become vice president.” We’re looking for character traits you’d like to manifest, or skills you’d like to have.

I know what you’re thinking. I can almost see the glazed look in your eyes. Yes, I could provide examples to help you get started, but that would kind of defeat the purpose, now wouldn’t it?

Most of us wouldn’t do well on this quiz. Why? Because we have no clue. We’ve spent zero time thinking about it. But just in case you’re one of the intentional ones who just aced this part of the chapter (The List)—you’re not done yet. Here comes Part Two (The Pursuit).

Below, or next to each of the traits, write down what you’re *doing* to embody that trait or develop that skill in your life. Clarification: Not what you should be doing or might start doing someday—what you’re actually, physically, real-time, officially doing at the present. As in, now. What active steps are you taking to intentionally turn you into the man you want to be?

If you completed Parts One and Two without Googling something, congratulations! You are way ahead of the curve. In fact, I’ll tell you what. Send me your list through social media (@manhoodjourney) and I will send you something valuable. I’m not precisely sure what that might be yet—I’m not exactly stocking up—but it will be amazing! I promise.

Men, we don’t see the target! We are shooting blind—if we have any bullets at all. And even for the few who have a target in the crosshairs, most of us have no clue where we are relative to it. Are we near it already? Are we inching closer to it, or drifting farther from it? Are we cruising at high speed, or crawling at a snail’s pace?

What's our vector, Victor?

Career Focus

There's another issue. Sometimes we may have a couple of goals, but they're enmeshed with our role at work. We have replaced personal identity with career aspiration. We no longer know *who* we want to be; we only know *what we want to do*.

Allowing our identity to be driven by our careers is a dangerous game. Why? That identity is not always fully within our control. It can be stolen from us by a vindictive boss, unpredictable market forces or a new parent company that just needs to go in "another direction." For anyone who has suffered the unpredictable loss of a job, it's a major gut check.

I've been fired twice (I'll man up and admit I clearly deserved one of those boots). Placing our personal identity into our chosen line of work is like leaning back in a chair. We look cool right up to the moment someone kicks the legs out from under us.

If you're like most men, when you think of who you are, you don't have a person in mind; you have a role. We need to be absolutely sure we're making this distinction, because this distinction will be the making of us.

Men, don't trade down. Our identities are too often summarized in our job title, or fully outlined within our curriculum vitae. We are who LinkedIn says we are. Talk about identity theft! When this one gets snatched, some men never find it again.

Egotistic Individualism (a.k.a.: The pot talks to the kettle)

On to the final round.

This may be the best indicator of all, but fair warning: it might hurt a little. It hurts me even to write it.

This one comes in the form of a question:

*When is the last time you observed
another man's expertise and asked him to
help you with that skill?*

If you can recall a singular recent example, bully for you. You are the exception to the rule!

Let's say you have a neighbor with a perfectly manicured lawn. Mine is Dan (the guy is retired, so there's your explanation, or most of it anyway). You ogle this fellow's lawn jealously, with your feet planted squarely amidst the crabgrass and bare spots in your own. You know what they say about "the grass is always greener." In this case—well, it just *is*. You figure it's time to upgrade the premises.

So, what do you do? Well, if you have some money (and brains), you hire professionals. If you're on too tight a budget, you scour YouTube for videos on power seeding in the fall (men love YouTube videos: *anonymous advice seeking*, what a concept!).

Those tactics may work, but why not try something radical? Go knock on Dan's door and ask him for some help.

It goes like this:

"Dan, your lawn is amazing. I'm, well, green with envy. Got any tips?"

If we were all in a big room reading this book at the same time, right now, it would resemble one of those

chaotic British Parliament sessions we see on the news. Just suggesting this approach would have guys hollering and throwing their wigs at me. You know it and I know it.

Why do we hate this suggestion so vehemently?
Ego. That's the reason.

We see men in our lives every day who are better than we are at something. They have more financial success, leadership experience, marital bliss, fatherly wisdom, or bow tie tying skill. We don't actively learn from them because we have been conditioned not to. There's a show to put on, right? If we ask for someone's help, we take off the mask and reveal to the world that we're weak (as if there were any doubt, considering we're members of the human race). It's pride, plain and simple, and it manifests itself in two ways.

The first problem comes when our egos blind us from even *recognizing* these men and their accomplishments. We're so wrapped up in proving ourselves to the world that we don't take the time to observe the proficiency of others. We drive right by the amazing lawn, never noticing the perfectly trimmed edges. As if by just observing their proficiency we are somehow admitting our own uselessness.

Second, our ego tells us that once we've recognized their proficiency, the game is on! It's not a teachable moment—it's a battle. We have to catch up, and preferably, we'll pass them while they're sleeping so we can greet them at the self-built finish line with an arrogant smirk. We're on a personal quest to be better than almost everyone at virtually everything. The world is one big king-of-the-hill tussle, and that's pretty exhausting.

This is where my journey began. In Weldon's office. That's the place where I first learned to lift my eyes,

observe the men at the crest of the hill and reach for a hand up. It's there I began a lifelong pursuit of learning from the wisdom of others. At the end of the book, in the tradition of Paul Harvey, I will tell you "the rest of the story" regarding Weldon.

But for now, let's turn our attention to the many men who have directly affected who I am today. They have poured into my life over breakfasts, lunches, and countless phone calls and cups of coffee (You're welcome, Starbucks).

They're my mentors and role models. I've enshrined them in my personal hall of fame. They've shown me *something* to aspire to, so that I don't chase the unattainable *unsomething*.

For each man, I've listed a few lessons learned. In most cases this grossly undervalues their contributions. But I've chosen the lessons I believe will resonate with you as you read this book. Most of all, they might point you toward the mentors just on the outskirts of your life—men waiting to help your transformation to the person you're on your way to becoming.

Learn from Action

Walk This Way, Please.

There's an old story about a pastor preaching a long sermon in his big, formal, somewhat stiff church. In the midst of it, a raggedy homeless man walks into the back of the room. Then he proceeds down the aisle and sits, cross-legged, on the floor directly in front of the pulpit.

Everyone is murmuring. Which elder will step forward to show this guy the door? I mean, this kind of thing isn't done in a church where the men wear ties and the women wear fine apparel. Why, it's an affront to sacred dignity!

Then an elderly man—an elder, actually, well-dressed and reputable—steps forward, walks down to the man, and bends over. You could hear a pin drop. Then the elder, with great creaking of joints, sits down on the floor next to the raggedy man. And after a moment in which the shock settles in, the preacher continues: “What I've said here, today, few will remember. What you've seen here today, you'll all remember for the rest of your lives.”

The best lessons always come in authentic, real-world situations rather than formal teaching. It's just how things work. Take my friend Mark Hancock for example.

I first met Mark at a leadership gathering for the organization he now leads, Trail Life USA. We were in Mt.

Juliet, Tennessee, crowded into a room of folks trying to get that group up and running. About one hundred men were there to blaze that trail, so to speak. I sat back to listen to Mark, the CEO, speak to the crowd.

Public speakers come in many flavors. We all love the born communicators who wow you with their delivery: flashy and dramatic and excitable. If they happen to have a solid message, they might just put your brain on spin cycle and change the way you live. Other times, it's so much flash, smoke, and mirrors. You laugh, maybe even cry. Then, a week later, you don't even remember what was said because it was all an inch deep.

Other speakers instantly command your attention just because of their personal conviction. There's something very real in them, and you lean in and perk up your ears. Mark Hancock is this kind of presenter.

Mark was confident, assertive, and bold without being arrogant or demanding. He was magnetic, not because of showy outward behavior, but as a result of an undeniable inward conviction. With a simple and compelling delivery, he shared his heart and his passion for men leading other men, pouring into the next generation. He was unashamedly Christian and unequivocally devoted to the mission of his organization.

Over the course of the next few months, I was privileged to interact with him about a half dozen more times. From brief hallway chats to e-mail exchanges, I had the opportunity to check out Mark in action in a few different settings.

I learned about his background in directing international campaigns and evangelism projects. He was well versed in Scripture, missions, and related topics. Most of all, his character came through. I was always eager to

learn a little more about who he was and how he'd gotten there.

Mark had been on the front lines of the cultural divide, sharing his faith with non-believers. He was a godly father, his boys were fun to be around, and his style of leadership was a quietly confident one that I sought to emulate.

I co-founded a ministry that is a proud partner of Trail Life USA, and I connected with Mark and the Trail Life team at leader gatherings in several cities. Every chance I had, I would get myself close up to the Trail Life leaders because I knew that:

(a) These were men of character from whom I could learn much, and

(b) They were leading an organization after which I could model my own.

Mark was compelling enough that it wasn't just about his organization or how I could learn to lead my own. I also wanted to be a husband, a father, a board member, and an all-around guy like him. When you meet someone like that, you find yourself falling into step with him. You look for tidbits you can use in your own experience. In other words, Mark Hancock was a natural and effective leader of people.

As we develop the habit of learning from other men, our learning will come in two forms: direct and indirect. The direct learning is information we *hear* from them in the form of counsel, wisdom, and input. Indirect learning—generally so much more powerful—happens when we *observe* their behavior patterns or see them handle particular situations, and we scoop up the lessons intuitively. What people say can change us, if they say it well enough and convincingly enough. What people do *will*

change us, because we see it in the real world rather than simply in the form of rhetoric. Words dance in one ear and out the other. Actions, however, get into our minds and rearrange the furniture.

That's why we need to be proactive in making sure we go where the action is, and the right kind of action. We need to be around the right kinds of life models in their "natural habitats." We see what's genuine and what works. Then we receive deep and powerful lessons in life, sometimes on many fronts at once. Direct teaching tends to be one-dimensional. Indirect, organic teaching can be profound and multi-dimensional.

There's a principle at work in this difference. Have you ever noticed how naturally funny people would rather be funny spontaneously than on command? You grab them, haul them over to a friend, and say, "Go ahead—say something hilarious! Make my buddy laugh!" Then the comedian gives you kind of a funny look, and says, "Um, this isn't a good time." And you think, "Well, gee, what's his problem?"

It's just that some things work better when they arise naturally from life. We can't understand beauty by dissecting a butterfly.

The same thing happens when we want to learn from another man we know. "Go ahead," we could tell him. "Teach me something—blow my mind!" We could whip out a pen and paper and lean forward, only to get a deer-in-the-headlight stare.

This is why our goal should be vigilance in listening as we live, conscious of whom we should look to for life lessons. It's in the *application* that the learning comes.

Mark Hancock had no idea he was teaching me a powerful concept. He was just doing what came

naturally—and for him, what came naturally arose from true-life wisdom.

At one of the conferences, I was approached at our ministry booth by a gentleman who asked me many questions about our ministry’s doctrine and theological underpinnings. He was agreeable enough, but it was clear that he was one of those “creed and dogma” guys. There was nothing he would have loved better than for me to raise a point for tasty debate, for which I’m sure he carried an arsenal of Bible verses, theological quotations, and the like. I’m not a fan of verse skirmishes. I know some Christians enjoy the hobby of debating doctrine, but it’s not my thing.

We were meeting in a church. During a break, I came across Mark and his teenage son in the hallway. I had my own teenage son with me, so I thought maybe this was a teachable moment for both of us. I’d ask Mark a question and learn something, while my son got a chance to see that lo and behold, his dad actually sought wise counsel sometimes. The moment had potential.

I asked Mark about the theological issue my visitor had raised. I gave him a brief description of the scenario, then said, “Mark, you’re well-versed in issues like that one, and I imagine you’ve encountered all kinds of beliefs in your travels. I don’t find it valuable to get into doctrinal debates, but perhaps I simply lack the educational background. How would you handle this kind of thing?”

I knew what followed would be helpful; I just didn’t know how poignant and powerful it would be. I was about to learn a lesson on the power of humble deference to someone else present, but I learned it through the specifics of that situation and how Mark responded.

Mark smiled and said, “Well, I have some thoughts on that, of course. But first, I’d love to hear my son’s take

on your question.” And he turned to the teenager next to him.

His son had good genes! He offered a compelling perspective, just as his dad would have done, and even backed it up with a Scriptural reference. He was engaging and confident without being cocky or trying to sound “sophisticated.” The answer itself was more than helpful.

Mark, given his theological training and leadership experience, could have done what most people would have in that situation. He could have rattled off a good answer almost without thinking about it. And it would have been a great one. I would have hung on every word even as it made a positive impression on my son. Good enough.

Instead, Mark perceived an even better opportunity in the situation. He could get his son involved, make it a discipleship training moment, while still helping a friend with an important question. I would never have thought of that. It made me wonder just how many times we’re happy with bouncing a solid single through the middle of the infield, when we might have cleared the bases with a home run. Maybe good is the enemy of great at times like that. He knew he could help me, but he swung for the fences and drove home *two* runs.

When I was in college, I had a roommate who was an accomplished chess player. I enjoyed matching wits, but Eddie was a student of the game. If we played one hundred matches that year, I’m not sure of my winning percentage except that it was right around zero percent, plus or minus. During fall term, he could beat me soundly while studying for his nuclear physics exam, watching a movie, eating a snack, and talking to a girl on the phone. Or at least it seemed that way.

However, as the year wore on, our games took longer to resolve and he had to put more effort into each successive victory. When I saw him turn off the television, put a finger on his temple, and take a deep breath, trying to think more deeply, I knew I was making progress.

My roomie taught me one key lesson about chess: it's not about the move you're making, but the cascade of moves the two of you make *after* the present move. He taught me to think ahead and play for the next five to ten probable moves. That involves focus and multiple- scenario consideration.

This is what Mark was doing. Rather than make a play for the moment, he was making a play for the future, as embodied by his son. He was also teaching my son, as a matter of fact, and me—a number of lessons.

You may think the story ends there. Mark teed it up for his son who smashed it for a base hit. However, Mark went one step further and taught me a follow-up lesson.

After his son finished, Mark affirmed his son's answer, then offered an additional, *non-competing perspective* of his own.

“Great point, son,” he said after listening thoughtfully. “Kent, what I'd say from my own perspective is that I think that genuine biblical truth is often held in tension between two opposing viewpoints.” He held up his hands, visualizing a tight rope pulled between two points, and he went on to explain that the truth was often in divine balance between two perspectives, each of which were simpler and easier for us to grasp.

I found his response equally informative. He succinctly stated a memorable point. He did it with clear, non-pretentious language. He found a space in the subject matter his son hadn't covered, rather than showing up his

son by either contradicting it or restating it in a superior way. He just added a salient point that provided his own perspective.

That led to my second major observation: the power of deference. Just because you let someone else share their perspective doesn't mean that you are precluded from sharing yours. You can let others come up to bat and take their cuts. Then, if time and the situation allow, you can step up to the plate as well. In sequencing your comments in this fashion—he goes first, then I go—you even add power and emphasis to your own perspective.

People often listen to you more intently simply because you waited to share, rather than waiting for them to take a breath so you could jump in and hijack the conversation. *Deference and generosity enhance influence.*

Now let me connect this to my previous comment about direct versus indirect learning. Imagine if I'd walked up to Mark and said, "Hey Mark, can you teach me how to humbly defer to others, disciple my own son, be a gentleman, think several moves ahead, live for the future, show kindness, and wrap all that up with a great and memorable point you would like to make?"

How on earth could he have given me that lesson? Yet that's precisely what he did. It was up to me to ask the right kind of question; it was up to him to be creative and multi-dimensional in his answer. That's the formula for learning in the laboratory of daily life.

If we are to harvest lessons from other men, we must become careful situational observers. In a five-minute interchange with a godly and skilled man, we can gobble up an armload of lessons if we'll only be intentional.

What's even more amazing, this was not something Mark could see coming—no briefing or warning text in

advance. I simply bumped into him and lobbed the question at him. And not a softball of a question; I threw him a solid curve by touching on doctrinal debate. His immediate and perhaps even subconscious reaction was to humbly defer and let his son take a shot.

This not only spoke to his methods but his priorities. He was ready to disciple his son at the drop of a hat. Like a trained athlete who hones his skill so well he can execute without thinking, this man reacted swiftly to fully maximize the opportunity before him.

In reflecting on this interaction, I recalled the instructions that Paul gave to the Ephesians, as he discussed how they should walk. He said, “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15-16)

The way Mark handled that interaction brought this verse to life for me. He spotted an opportunity and he took it. A small one? Sure. But, one that now reverberates in my life and my interactions.

Questions to Consider

- When was the last time you were asked for your opinion on some issue? Did you immediately give it or did you defer to someone nearby?
- Do you see your role—as a leader or father or coach—to be to tell others what they need to know or are you there to help them discover what

they need to know? What is the practical difference between these two approaches?

- Do you make it a habit to observe how great men live their life? Can you think of a time when you observed a valuable lesson from someone even though they were not intentionally trying to provide you with instruction?

Pray Spontaneously

Operators Are Standing By

The London Hilton. May 22, 2014. I peered across a bowl of split pea soup, in the hotel restaurant—dumbfounded, convicted and impressed all at once.

In my life, I have not known many famous people, but I've had a handful of opportunities to meet with influential and deeply experienced people in their field. When I get this chance, I enter a state of hyper-observance and put my antennae sky high to pick up even the slightest hint of a lesson or tidbit that could help me.

I found myself in the heart of London meeting just such a man, a hero of the faith: Rob Parsons.

Don't feel too badly if the name rings no bells with you. For most Americans, it may not. An analogy will be helpful here. Maybe you've heard of James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family. If you were to drop James Dobson in Europe, you'd have Mr. Parsons. At the time of this writing, he's been in full time family ministry for 25 years as the Chairman of Care for the Family, based in Cardiff, Wales.

I met Mr. Parsons in a manner only God could orchestrate. Follow me on this, as there's a beautiful lesson to be learned. Will, a friend from my home town, took a job at Focus on the Family in Colorado. While there, he met Tim, a colleague from New Zealand. Will introduced me to

Tim, so Tim and I set up a Skype to get better acquainted. As I talked with Tim, I relayed how God was moving in the Manhood Journey ministry some friends and I had launched. Tim said, “You know, mate (yes, really, I love it!), you need to meet a gent in the UK, Rob Parsons.”

Tim didn’t know this at the time, but I’d just scheduled a work trip to London, about one month out. So, I leaned in and asked Tim if he could set something up. Tim gladly obliged, and the next thing I knew I was on Mr. Parsons’ calendar for lunch at the London Hilton.

I share the connection details of this meeting to underscore a few key points. First, I couldn’t have orchestrated all this. Only God could weave such a wild and far-flung tapestry of relationships.

Second, I don’t spend much time in London, so the odds of Mr. Parsons being there (two hours from his home) the same day I was are even more remote. This was no “chance” meeting, and that heightened my awareness of what God might do through it.

I fully understand that God is no respecter of persons and that Mr. Parsons, as it relates to our standing before the Lord, is not some demigod to whom I needed to crawl for just a shilling sir, if you please.

However, if you are going to get financial advice and you can get time with Warren Buffet, it sure beats asking your impoverished uncle. Let’s give honor where it’s due. Mr. Parsons was more than 20 years my senior and the leader of a large and effective ministry that had been in operation since I was a teenager. As the cofounder of a recently launched nonprofit, I had much to learn from this man.

As our comfortable conversation unfolded, I was struck by how kind yet deliberate this man was. He was

friendly and warm. He inquired about my family and the ministry project in which I was involved. I shared the general overview of our ministry, providing enough detail to prime the pump so he could give me advice and counsel.

After maybe 20 minutes of getting to know one another, I figured he probably had sufficient context to speak into our situation. I paused and said, “Okay, Rob, so what do you think? What advice do you have for me?”

What happened next was—well, uncomfortable. *Silence*. A thin smile. More silence. A sipping of the split pea soup. A bit more silence, topped off with a slightly upward glance that said, *I’m thinking*.

I’m an extrovert. I like robust, quick dialogue and maybe even a raucous exchange. In fact, to kill some time before my meeting with Rob, I’d rented a self-service street-side bicycle and pedaled across several miles of the historic town. I learned along the way (from a “helpful” Bobby) that I was not allowed to ride on the sidewalk; so I’d trekked around Hyde Park and past Westminster Abbey in the middle of the streets of London. I had no helmet, no stick-on reflectors, and truly had no clue which side of the road the cars should be on most of the time (*Whoa! That’s no turning lane!*). I’m normally high-strung, but at this point, I was Xtreme Kent, fully charged and running at breakneck speed mentally.

Therefore, even though the silence may only have been 10 seconds long, it felt like an hour. I thought I heard a clock ticking across the restaurant and the clink of a cube of ice in my drink as it melted and fell. It was difficult to wait out the response. The response eventually came—only it was no response at all. It was a prayer.

Breaking the silence, Rob said, out loud, “Father, my brother Kent here wants some advice. But, I know that

he doesn't need my advice, he needs Yours. Please give me the wisdom to share with him precisely what he needs to hear.”

I was floored. Here was a guy who had been in ministry 25 years. He had counseled with major world influencers. He had a rock solid marriage. His ministry budget was several million dollars and encompassed a staff of nearly 100 people. He had been there and done that. He had forgotten more about ministry than I had ever learned. He carried around in his head lessons, experiences, trials, examples and stories. He had every right to begin his response with, “Well, Kent, in my experience, here’s what I have seen.”

However, he chose to check it all through with God. He knew our time was short, and even at another point in our discussion reinforced this notion by suggesting that in all likelihood, this would be our only meeting this side of heaven. Knowing this, he wanted to make the most of our time together, and deep down he knew that on his own, he was insufficient for the task. He needed divine intervention to make the next 90 minutes as beneficial as possible, *for me*.

I believe I could write an entire book just unpacking the wisdom in this single lunch meeting. The list below would furnish individual chapters simply suggested by how this man handled our encounter:

- He was not self-focused.
- He was humble.
- He sought out my best.
- He was painfully honest, not sugar-coating the road that lay ahead for me.

- He gave me practical details regarding the funding of his ministry.
- He encouraged me to write this book (well, *a* book at least—I won't hold him responsible for this content!).
- He offered his ongoing help and gave me private access to his personal e-mail address.
- He treated it all with deep importance, as probably our only personal meeting.
- He asked great questions.
- He paid me several genuine compliments.
- He was transparent.
- The list goes on.

In short, I was witnessing a powerful clinic on how people should behave at all times, but rarely do. A lifetime of wisdom over a bowl of soup.

But what you're reading is only one chapter, so I have to pick a lane and stay in it. I choose Rob's decision to pray. His prayer was immediate, spontaneous, and unfettered. He didn't need to think about what to pray or the order to put things in. He didn't even need to close his eyes. He just began talking to God, as he'd do for anyone who happened to be sitting at the table—which, of course, was his stance toward God.

I don't want to suggest he was at all insensitive, but I can say this. The most important thing to him wasn't that I was sitting right in front of him. He definitely cared about me—enough that he could look past me and “see” the presence of God, and thus the importance of connecting me to *Him*. This was a one-time-meeting in which every moment was precious, and for him, the most valuable use of it was prayer. After all, time has limits but not eternity.

Rob could help me for a lunch, but God could help me for a lifetime.

This was a gentleman whose organization was called Care for the Family. And he embodied those words.

On a fairly regular basis, some leader falls short of his reputation in a very public way. It could be the politician with the secret mistress, the pastor with the fudged expense account, or the pro athlete struggling with addiction. It's not strange that we've become highly suspicious of anyone in leadership. We have swung the pendulum from idolizing leaders all the way over to assuming every last one of them is up to some hijinks. *Just you wait, the truth will come out one day. He can't possibly be all he is cracked up to be.*

In his excellent book *7 Men*, Eric Metaxas points out,

So you could say that we've gone all the way from foolishly accepting all authority to foolishly rejecting all authority. We've gone from the extreme of being naïve to the other extreme of being cynical.

I realize that if I were to spend time with Rob's wife, his personal assistant, or a long-time friend, I'd discover some clue that this guy puts on his socks one foot at a time like the rest of us. I'm sure that he has become angry, been passive, took a shortcut, or allowed cynicism to creep in. He's a human being, and that means he has sinned and fallen short just like everyone else. So it's not for me to make an idol of him or of anyone else.

However, in our few moments together, I observed an alignment between Rob’s ministry goals, his public persona, and his actual behavior—a consistent man in body, mind, and soul. I don’t believe he wears one face in public and another in private. What I saw is what I got, and what a goal that is: simply to be who you are, wherever you are, whenever it is, without mask or games or pretense. How powerful is a consistent life?

It’s a model for me to emulate.

Lessons Learned

Among the many lessons I gleaned from this experience, I will highlight three.

First, as I’ve just said, I’d love to be my own consistent self. It’s so tempting to play to the crowd—at least I know it is for me. We give the people what they want, and maybe they’ll love us a little more. That means I have this “me” for church, this “me” for the workplace, and still another “me” for hanging out with my buddies.

Whether at home with my family, alone in a hotel room, or leading a seminar, I’d like to be as aligned and square as Mr. Parsons.

Second, I’d love to think I’m as focused on whoever is before me as Rob was for me—that when I’m the guy someone approaches for advice, I can be as wholly and genuinely absorbed by their needs as he was with mine. The Bible urges us, “Honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10). Do you always feel *honored* by people who meet with you? Me neither. That’s why Rob—a guy the rest of us would honor—was so striking in how he approached things.

Third, and perhaps most impactful, I'd love to find myself checking in with God as a first reflex. I mean, we should only do something first when it's the best option, right? Checking in with God is *always* the best option if we're discussing serious matters of everyday life. My default is to blurt out my take on everything. Maybe my take would be a bit more valuable if I'd been checking in first with God all this time. Rob showed me how that works.

I have my own share of experiences, stories, mistakes, and successes from which I can pull to help others. Then there's Rob, whose mountain of wisdom and experiences makes mine look like an anthill. Then there's God, whose infinitely, unimaginatively vast wisdom blows away yours, mine, and Rob's like the morning mist. The three of us—you, Rob, and I—have access to that divine wisdom. It's a prayer away at any moment. How vain am I to hook up someone with *my* wisdom before looking up to God's? This is a lesson I'm trying to revisit every day.

Questions to Consider

- When people come to you for help, do you have their best interests at heart or are you just concerned with demonstrating your genius?
- Do you see God as one who sets divine appointments, as he did for me in this case? Do you

pray for the blessing of his guiding your relationships and opportunities?

- Who do you know who could help someone else?
Are you the initial contact who could facilitate a beneficial connection?