



Taking It Personally

The Year of Ayn Rand got off to one amazing start as an endless stream of cybermagazines, blogs, and print periodicals marked the centenary with essays of reflection.

Every publication from *Reason*, *The Free Radical*, and *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* to the *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *New York Times* featured something of significance in its pages. There were sponsored parties and panel discussions from California to New York to the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C.

I, myself, must have written nearly a dozen pieces for the Ayn Rand Centenary. I must have sat for a half-dozen interviews too. I'd covered everything from Rand's cultural impact to the growth in Rand scholarship. And yet, just when I thought I didn't have anything else to say, it occurred to me: I never had the opportunity to express just what the discovery of Ayn Rand's work meant to me, *personally*.

I had been an outspoken political type in high school, involved in some rather contentious battles with the Young Socialists of America who had plastered the school's hallways with their obscene propaganda. I had begun writing for *Gadfly*, the social studies newspaper, and had taken to quoting Ronald Reagan on the perils of central planning. I knew that I had "arrived" as a political commentator when I walked into a school bathroom one afternoon to find a copy of one of my anti-socialist articles—sitting, rather wet, in the urinal. Though I'd heard of "yellow journalism," the article seemed to have been saved from discoloration because it had already been printed on goldenrod mimeograph paper. A small victory, that.

My sister-in-law had been reading *Atlas Shrugged*, and she kept telling me that everything I was saying sounded just like this novelist, Ayn Rand. "I think you ought to read this woman; you'll find some similarities between what you're saying and what she advocates," she kept telling me. But when I took a look at the size of the novel, I just threw my hands up in surrender. I wasn't a big fiction reader at the time—who had any time for stuff like that when I was involved in tons of extracurricular activities, taking advanced placement American history

classes, and earning my reputation as a general troublemaker? But I took a look at the back pages of *Atlas* and saw an ad for *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*. And finding it to be a slimmer volume, I decided to start with that.

To say I was ecstatic is an understatement. I had found just the kind of intellectual ammunition I needed to rebut the claims of the commies in my American history class. And Rand introduced me to a whole universe of Austrian and libertarian literature that broadened my horizons exponentially. Bringing that material into the classroom sure made for some colorful discussions in that course—and quite a few others.

From the time of my senior year in high school to my freshman year in college, I had devoured every nonfiction book Rand ever wrote, and then every work of fiction.

Before I'd even discovered Rand, however, I'd already lived a lifetime of difficult experience. I had been born with an intestinal condition that had required life-saving by-pass surgery in my teens. I still live with the severe long-term consequences of that initial condition and its post-operative complications. One might say, however, that this condition sharpened my focus from the earliest moments of my awareness of it: I had learned about that fundamental alternative of life and death. I had learned about the necessity to accept those realities I could not change, and to work feverishly to change all those things that were within my power. I had learned, from a loving, supportive family, to trust in the judgment of my own mind. I had learned to be honest—first with myself, and by natural extension, with others. I had learned to accept myself and to fight for everything I believed in—everything from my ideals to my budding sexuality.

It would have been very easy to focus *just* on my limitations. And there were times, growing up, that I cried because I was so sick, and couldn't do certain things. It wasn't merely feeling sorry for myself—something that can come very easily to any person

facing a "handicap" or a "disability." It's that the limitations were—and remain—all too real.

But every human being on the planet, every entity in the universe, is something particular, something definite, something with a certain *finite, limited* nature. That which *is* helps us to understand that which *might be*. The *actual* sets the terms, the conditions, for the *potential*. So, I reasoned—in early personal journals that I started keeping at age 11 (a practice I've continued virtually every year since): Maybe I was restricted by the limitations of personal health. But there was truth in that old adage: With every closed door, a window opens. Sometimes you have to push that window open with your own effort. And so I learned to think of myself not in terms of what I couldn't do, but of what I could do. That was one root that made possible the flowering of my self-esteem: the esteem of a self that was everything it could be, in spite of serious illness. And of all my achievements—written and unwritten—there is none of which I am more proud.

I had found purpose, passion, and pleasure in my studies and my writing, in my friendships, in love, music, movies, and even my New York Yankees.

But it took the books of Ayn Rand to help me articulate the supremely ethical principle at work in fighting *literally* for my life and my love of it. Here was a woman who wrote about the *heroic* individual, a woman who had crafted a philosophy that celebrated the creative and productive translation of human potential into human accomplishment. It's not that she gave me the strength to triumph over the occasional self-pity I felt as a youngster. It's that she provided me with the kind of *philosophical* justification that told me it was *my right—to be and to flourish*.

I have spoken of Rand's cultural impact, political influence, and radical legacy. But it is ultimately a *personal* liberation that Rand's philosophy offered me, making all those other liberations of culture and politics possible.

I haven't had the opportunity to say it in any of my previous centenary tributes: Thank you, Ayn Rand, for that gift.