

Forward

By Mark Medoff

Mark Medoff received a Tony Award for CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD. He was nominated for an Academy Award for the film script of CHILDREN and for a Cable ACE Award for his HBO Premiere movie, APOLOGY. He received an OBIE Award for WHEN YOU COMIN BACK, RED RYDER. In 2005, he received The Kennedy Center Medallion for Excellence in Education and Artistic Achievement.

I've known Frank Pickard since 1971, when he was my student. I urged him to apply for the job to replace me as Department Head of Theatre Arts at New Mexico State University in 1990 when he was grown up with a family, a Master of Fine Arts and Doctor of Philosophy degrees. He applied, he got the job, he came to serve for a decade. We've been friends and colleagues for a long time.

It's my pleasure to write this introduction to you, students and teachers, who will use Frank's book. I'm going to do it this way:

I am driving Dixie Highway in Miami, Florida, in September of 1958, eighteen years old and distancing myself from the childhood of high school I exit three months earlier as fast as I can. As I barrel toward the extraordinary adventure of college in my '56 Chevy convert, I am the amalgamation incarnate of Doctors Pasteur, Freud, and Ben Casey (would have been Dr. McDreamy today).

I arrive at the University of Miami as a pre-med student, a proponent of my father's dreams for me: The two of us some years hence sharing his office on Biscayne Boulevard, him bequeathing, me earning my fair share of the adulation I have seen heaped on him since my earliest memories. He, the internist, will minister to the bodies; I, the psychiatrist, to the mind. Together, *Healers*. Medoff and Medoff. Rounds at the hospital ("*Dr. Medoff to Three West, Dr. Medoff to Three West*"); house calls marked by an endless assortment of graciously offered baked goods ("*We don't have the money right now, Doc, but would ten thousand oatmeal cookies help at all?*"); dramatic middle of the night cries for help (The Miami Herald assigns a reporter to follow me everywhere and discovers that I engage only in missions of mercy); tennis on Wednesday afternoons ("*That's Dr. Medoff on Court One, he could be ranked nationally if he weren't obsessed with serving others*"). But it won't be all philanthropy; there'll be the six figure income, the tailored lab coats, those unattractive but oh-so-comfortable-orthopedic shoes. And always and ever, that prefix before my name: *Doctor*.

But then, like a recurring nightmare, comes inorganic chemistry. My partner and I, a young lady from Scarsdale, as out of her element (or

elements, if you'll pardon the pun) as I, almost blow the lab into the stratosphere one afternoon. *What did you do?*" My professor wants to know. "*Beats the hell outta me,*" I tell him. "*Mixed a little of that with a little of this and got combustion.*" I thought that was a memorable exit line, for in fact the Dr. Medoff dreams, my father's and mine, are over.

A Ph. D. in Psychology, now there's the ticket! Pretty much the same rights as a psychiatrist—maybe not as nice an automobile—but only *three* years post-grad instead of four, less science, and no cadaver. But something's wrong. I begin to vacillate. Who wants to listen to a bunch of neurotics tell me their problems for the next forty, fifty years? And what do I need them for if I'm looking for neuroses—I live with me.

How 'bout an M. A. in Social Work? There we go! Into the streets, the ghettos. Kids, the homeless, the impoverished, the abused. *Help* someone. Sacrifice myself to the betterment of those less privileged than I. Is it possible that some combination of practicality and compassion are beginning to replace my frivolous dreams of immortality? Is this what maturity is about?

Evidently not. Because it's on to pre-law! Now we're rolling! Perry Mason, Clarence Darrow, F. Lee Bailey! Defending the innocent, prosecuting the guilty, upholding the Constitution, quirky double-breasted suits, Gucci loafers, courtroom histrionics. Yeah—now we're talking practicality, compassion, *and* making a dumpster fulla bucks . . . and we *still* have a shot at immortality to boot!

But we're growing weary, and we're getting frightened, and we're becoming aware that we're kidding ourselves and though we are not going to *be* a psychologist, we're going to *see* one. I don't want to be a lawyer. I don't know *what* I want to be when I grow up and the growing, at least chronologically if not emotionally and intellectually, is taking place inexorably.

Pre-med to Psychology to Social Work to Pre-law—all in the first semester of my freshman year.

And so, in an explosion of intestinal fortitude, I chose to chase my *own* dream instead of my father's. I became an English major and set out to become a writer.

Why? Well, in good part because into various rooms where I sat in a school desk or lecture hall seat, fate conspired to place into my life a half dozen teachers who could see in me what I did not.

Thanks in good part to these teachers, I became a writer and a teacher.

Today, I am the author of over two dozen plays, a dozen movies, a novel, a lot of non-fiction pieces for various magazines and newspapers, a former actor (memory problems starting at age 52), a theater and film director, and stage parent.

In one of my plays, THE HANDS OF ITS ENEMY, a play about the doing of a play, one of the characters says (or used to say, as I cut the line a few days before opening): "*The thing I love about the theater is the collaboration of separate spirits who share the responsibility of a play's fate.*" The line got cut, but the sentiment is the purest one I have about my feelings for the living theater.

As a kid, I am attracted to individual sports—boxing, tennis, golf. For many years I write prose—a totally isolated enterprise—thinking it is

precisely what I crave, only to discover an incredible relief in walking into a theater one day in my mid-20s with a play in hand and being embraced by a community of others whose sole purpose is to share the responsibility of my play's fate.

And movies are great, but there is nothing like the live theater where the actors and everyone who helped put them on that stage are sending all their energy one way and a live audience is sending their energy back. It is a form of communion.

I've seen students come into universities with an almost fanatical lack of interest in artistic expression and the arts in general. They come hell bent on hurtling through to that engineering or business degree so they can eject themselves into graduate school so they can be catapulted headlong into the supposed comfort and glory of the rest of their lives, their adult lives, that *important* part of life that parents expend so much time and energy aiming their children at so that . . . *what?* So they can be as nearly as possible like their satisfied and fulfilled parents.

I see many 18–22 year olds pressed not to waste time dreaming and not dreaming translates literally to staying away from “closed” fields, “indulgent” fields—fields in the arts: writing, sculpture, painting, music, film, animation, gaming.

If the class you're about to take and the book you're about to read inspire you to taste the arts, fabulous; if they inspire you to pursue the arts, I wish you the courage of your convictions, for you'll receive many more blows than strokes.

As a parent and a teacher, I try to remind myself often to promote, encourage, support the opportunities children have to divert and ventilate the frustration and rage and craving to touch the outer edges of beauty and understanding that can come only from within; remind myself to not ever fail to support those enterprises that encourage what's within to come out, get out, to sooth the beast that roams in all of us.

But you can't fully succeed until you're willing to face the possibility of catastrophic failure. As a teacher, I challenge my students to risk everything in our work together. The worst that can happen, I tell them, is that you'll be humiliated for life. *But that's all!* I tell them it seems to me that I humiliate myself at least a couple of times a day. So what! Much better than to awaken after we've parted, or months or even years from now and have to suffer the regret of knowing you held back, protected yourself, condemned yourself to having to be one of that multitude of people who spend their lives making the excuse that goes more or less like this: I could have been what I wanted to be but (Fill in the blank): I stubbed my toe, it's a deterministic world, I'm the wrong color, gender, temperament, shape. You're young, I tell them. You have the right, maybe even the obligation, to go after your dreams. Dreams of lost opportunities in later life are called nightmares.

Theater hopes to achieve verisimilitude (I'll let you look it up) and to remind us that everything you will ever know, everything you will ever pass on, is an inseparable part of an ongoing legacy of our shared frailty and curiosity and fear—of our shared wonder at the peculiar predicament in which we find ourselves, of our infernal and eternal hope that we can, must, make ourselves better.