

Leap... and the Net Will Appear
A Tribute to Bernie Kleiman

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I asked Leo if I could say a few words about Bernie today and he agreed so let me start by thanking him for that.

Bernie Kleiman is the reason that I am a Steelworker - it was his inspiration, starting in 1985 that caused me to make the Steelworker's Union the focus my work as an outside financial advisor and eventually to come to work here.

Now I know that for some, perhaps many, that blemishes Bernie's otherwise perfect record. But on my side, it has afforded me more pleasure and purpose than anything else I could have imagined doing.

Over the last week we all have struggled to come to terms with Bernie's sudden departure. I suspect that most of us still expect him to come sauntering in with that long easy stride - it's now past noon, so we can safely assume that after staying up most of the night bargaining, Bernie got a few hours sleep and is now on his way to the office. He will arrive carrying his omnipresent legal case, overstuffed with notes from every bargaining session that he ever attended and a few that he didn't. He is also bringing a long hand-written letter explaining to the good liberals of Squirrel Hill why they should support the Steelworker's candidate for office. It is written in a handwriting that only Roseanne and Shirley can read and when it is done, he and Gloria will once again deliver Squirrel Hill for labor.

Starting with the funeral, many have tried to express what Bernie meant to them and to the Union. All have been right and the eloquence of many has been nothing short of inspiring. Now those of you who know me, know that I never disagree with Leo so let me start by stealing Leo's simple description of Bernie, which I think best summarizes his contribution to our Union. Bernie Kleiman was the single most important person in the history of the Steelworkers Union. Or, as Tina Turner said - now that's a great thought - a Leo Gerard - Tina Turner duet - he was simply the best.

But being one who can never leave well enough alone, I have tried in the last few days to ask myself why? Why was Bernie so good, what was it about him that allowed this man to play such a central role in our Union for so long? We need to at least try to figure this out as part of our responsibility to honor his life. In fact, at least for me, Bernie's death imposes three obligations on those of us who loved him.

First we must mourn. We must mourn because when you lose someone so precious, someone whose presence in your life filled you with so much happiness and joy, someone who made so many lives so much better, you must take a moment to curse the fates and to cry.

Second, we must celebrate. We must celebrate Bernie's life, his extraordinary accomplishments, his warmth and generosity, his kindness and good humor and his exceptional wisdom. And we must be eternally grateful that Bernie did what he did and allowed us to know him and to love him.

But finally, the truest way to acknowledge this amazing man, this one-of-a-kind most important person in the history of the Union, is to ask ourselves what made Bernie so special so that we can learn from his life and together, try to carry on his work.

Now of course none of us will ever be a Bernie Kleiman, none of us will ever touch that many lives in that profound a way. But all of us owe it to Bernie to try. All of us owe it to Bernie to, each in our own way, ask ourselves why Bernie was so good and by learning from his life and his work, do a better job at what we do.

Joe Hill said, don't mourn - organize, asking people to honor his life by going out and building a better Union. I would amend that slightly - mourn, celebrate and organize.

And so let me contribute a few thoughts to that vexing question - what made Bernie Kleiman simply the best?

First, Bernie believed. He believed in the mission of this Union in the most profound and unwavering way imaginable. It was not blind devotion - Bernie could and often did criticize both his own work and the overall job that the Union did for our members. No, his devotion was much better and more useful than that. His was a devotion rooted in an unshakable knowledge that what we do sits at the very core of making the world a better place for ourselves and our children and while the Union often does not get it right, that only makes our mission and our work all the more important.

Bernie's ability to believe gave him some important advantages in doing the work he did. Let me give you an example.

In 1985, Bernie, with the critical assistance of Carl Frankel, literally stood the principle of contracting out in the steel industry on its head. While the clause that he negotiated gave the company some important exceptions, Bernie established the principle that our members have the first priority for all work in steel mills that they are capable of performing.

For those who know something about the structure of labor agreements, this was truly revolutionary. Bernie had established the primacy of our members' right to work over what is everywhere else a management prerogative.

Inventing this proposal took creativity but it mostly just involved taking everything we ever dreamed of and writing it up. And negotiating it took all of Bernie's incredible mastery of the fine art of collective bargaining, as he persuaded LTV Steel to sign up to it.

But the truly astounding part - where Bernie's ability to believe was absolutely essential, was when he asserted, with a completely straight face - that the company giving away this right was in fact good for them - that this proposal was so good for the company that if the company were really smart, they would be proposing it themselves.

Now on more than one occasion I watched in absolute awe as Bernie made his impassioned plea for the Company to save itself by handing the Union back its management rights clause. My challenge, which, if I may so, was not insubstantial, was to keep a straight face while Bernie made his pitch.

I have thought about that a lot over the last few days and my conclusion is that the only explanation for why Bernie could do what he did was that he actually believed it. Bernie had a belief in the rightness of our cause that existed at a level that the rest of us simply could not understand. It was truly a thing of beauty and as the saying goes, a joy forever.

Second, and I know this sounds corny but I don't know how else to put it, Bernie was pure of heart.

His beliefs and his actions were in as perfect alignment as those of anyone I have ever met. To be sure, Bernie was not above, in fact he was an absolute master, at the fine art of answering only the question asked, telling only that part of the truth that served his objective. But he never lied and he always spoke from a deeper truth about the Union and its importance as an enduring and meaningful institution.

In our cynical age, where laughing at people's frailties and failures is a national sport, where selfishness is worn as a badge of honor, Bernie stood out as someone who truly had no interest and in fact literally could not comprehend such attitudes.

At first, it was easy to assume that he was putting on an act - that no one really was that nice. Again, let me be clear - Bernie had a wonderful and at times quite devilish sense of humor. He certainly knew how to laugh at himself and if the task was deflating the self-important, he was a master. But he simply took no joy and would have no part of hurting those who had for one reason or another slipped and fallen on life's path. And he had no tolerance for those who did.

Third, Bernie was an optimist and dare I say it, probably a foolish one at that.

Bernie simply refused to allow the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" to shake his conviction that we were somehow going to find a way to prevail. For many people, life eventually does wear us down, making us cynical about people and possibility. Yet Bernie, after doing this for fifty years, remained almost child-like in his insistence that the Union could and would continue to play an important role in making the world a better place. Bernie was like a pearl - the more people tried to grind him down, the more beautiful he became.

And finally, and where I come from this is in fact the highest praise - Bernie Kleiman was a mensch. For those not familiar with this word, mensch is Yiddish - Yiddish being an amalgam of German and Hebrew, born in the Jewish ghettos of Eastern and Central Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries and taken with the Jews when they came to North America and elsewhere in the 20th. It is a wonderfully expressive language and there is probably no better word than mensch to showcase Yiddish, although schmuck, schlimeil and shlamazal, while not relevant to Bernie, at least deserve a mention.

According to a famous Yiddish writer, “A Mensch is someone to admire and emulate, someone of a noble character. The key to being a real mensch is nothing less than character, rectitude, dignity and a sense of what is right.”

Another Yiddish scholar remarked that a mensch is someone who: helps people who cannot help you; who helps without expectation of return; who helps many people; and who does the right thing the right way.

Bernie Kleiman was a mensch.

Webster's defines work as “exertion or effort directed to produce or accomplish something; labor; or toil.”

If that is the definition of work then Bernie never worked. Certainly he accomplished much, more in fact than any other single person in the history of our Union, but where was the “exertion or effort?” At least to those of us watching, the beauty of Bernie's work was that it looked effortless. Like any great performer, Bernie made it look easy. For Bernie, what he did just flowed out of him. It was never forced. There were no false steps. It was a pure and graceful expression of self that left the rest of us standing flatfooted.

For Bernie, work wasn't work. We think of work as something you have to do - Bernie tried to teach us that to work for the Union was something we should want to do. And in recent months he quite literally put his money, or rather lack thereof, where his mouth was. At the age of 78, Bernie forced the Union to violate the Fair Labor Standards Act, working his usual 60 hour weeks for no pay at all.

Webster's defines play as “exercise or activity for amusement or recreation.”

For Bernie work was play. And I while I would suspect that management may not have always found Bernie's work terribly amusing, I know that those of us on his side of the bargaining table surely did.

Bernie certainly knew how to play in the traditional sense of the word. Anyone lucky enough to have spent social time with Bernie knew him as an entertaining storyteller, a great listener and a person of wide and diverse interests.

But for Bernie, the fun did not stop when work began. For Bernie, precisely because what he did was so important to him, he insisted on having fun doing it. And so he brought his warm and generous spirit, his foolish optimism into his work and had more fun at work than many of us have at play.

There is a saying I have come across recently that I think wonderfully applies to Bernie's approach to collective bargaining and in fact to life in general. Leap, the saying goes, and the net will appear.

Supremely comfortable with who he was, secure in the knowledge that what he was doing was important and just, confident without even a trace of hubris, Bernie just knew that in the end the Union would always find a way. And so time after time, for fifty years, Bernie leaped. And time after time, the net appeared.

Bernie used to say that every so often the Union should go broke, so we could remind ourselves that our greatest gains were made when we had nothing to lose. And while I think he mostly meant it metaphorically, quite frankly I am not sure and I at least like it that way.

And so for Bernie Kleiman - a believer, pure of heart, a foolish optimist and a mensch who knew how to work and to play - let's all try it - leap... and the net will appear.

Thank you.