SOMETHING OF MYSELF

There is something very sobering about sitting down to write a biographical sketch to go with an honor like the Warnier Prize. The details of your life are expected to provide some answer to the questions in the reader's mind: What was it, after all, that this fellow really accomplished? How come he gets to lord it over the rest of us? What did he ever do to deserve all the fuss?

It helps to be to have been born a long time ago (1940, in my case). Hanging around for years and years is a prerequisite to almost any kind of recognition. When you're young and doing your best work, your peers will seldom notice. If they do notice, it's because you've chosen some different approach. In that case, they patiently set you straight and urge you not to deviate again from the wisdom of accepted practice. But when you're old and gray-haired and have the look of one who's resting on his laurels, people begin to suspect you may have accomplished something along the way.

A second important point on the path to any success is to arrange your early years so that you work under wonderful managers. I say this facetiously because the only way you can arrange this is to be damn lucky. It was my great good fortune to work under nine of the best imaginable managers, remarkable men and women who were dedicated to the development of human potential.

Among the best managers I knew were the ones that guided me in my early years at Bell Laboratories, Lee Toumenoksa, Johnny Johanesson, John Nowak, and Al Stockart. Each of these took me under his wing at one time or another and taught me the best and truest thing he could. I am forever after obliged.

As I moved on, I was lucky enough to work for Jerry Wiener (one of the inventers of the concept of time-sharing), Shelly Weinberg (now at S.R.I.), Sharon Weinberg (now president of the Codd and Date Consulting Group), Gerard Bauvin (now president of La Sligos, a Paris software think thank), and Sven-Olov Reftmark, (one of the directors of Swedish Philips).

Some time ago, a friend observed to me that there were two ways to rise in the world: "You can be a star," he said. "That's the hard way. Or you can hitch your wagon to a star—that's the easy way." As I look back over the star managers I hitched up with through my career, it's clear that I have taken the easy way as much as possible.

In addition to some of the grand personalities and good breaks that Fortune threw my way, there was a small glimmer of inspiration of my own that helped me along. I began to realize almost from the beginning that we software people weren't really "in the computer business." We said we were, and we certainly acted like members of any other hi-tech community. But the business of software building isn't really hi-tech at all. It's most of all a business of *talking to each other and writing things down*. Those who were making major contributions to the field were more likely to be its best communicators than its best technicians. The particular stars that I looked up to, the Johannesons and Bauvins and Reftmarks, were gifted and practiced communicators. They spoke eloquently and wrote clear concise text. When they presented an idea, you sometimes agreed and sometimes disagreed, but you always understood what they had said. That rare capability was something that I set out to build in myself.

The software developer who sees his role as principally technical is inclined to begrudge the time that communication takes. Spend an afternoon honing a single page of text or working up a five-minute presentation? Not likely. Communicating is viewed as an onerous adjunct to the real work. But for me, communicating was the real work. With this new perspective, I began to change my discipline of writing and oral presentation. A quick, facile writer in the 1960s, I gradually began to slow down, to concentrate more and more on the rewriting process. Today, I am so slow that it takes me nearly one thousand hours to write the portion of a book or article that the eventual reader will breeze through in one hour. This may not seem like great progress, but it has served me well.

Along with my change of discipline, I began to make a change of style, a little less declamatory and more toward the story form. This meant presenting an idea by telling its tale, moving away from the approach of the essayists and closer to that of narrative writers. One of those, W. Sommerset Maugham, described himself in this way:

> *"I don't think of myself as among the great literary artists. Rather, I am one who has carried on the tradition, begun ages ago around the campfire, of relating tales long into the night. I am a storyteller."*
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> *[from A Summing Up]*

That may seem like a modest statement, but it really isn't. Those who made great art of their writing, the likes of Fielding, Chaucer, Shakespeare, James,

Austin, Twain, and Conrad were all storytellers.   And the pre-eminence of storytellers hasn't only applied in literature. The greatest man of science of the modern age, Charles Darwin, was a natural storyteller. His "single hand that rolled back the tide of ignorance" did it with a pen. As you look through the *Diaries* or *The Origin of Species* today, you're most of all struck by the marvelous tale that the man had to tell and how well he told it.

There is always a tale to tell when you're trying to put a new idea across. I don't mean the war stories which often just get in the way. I mean the tale of the idea itself. It has a beginning, a tickler that gets the reader or listener involved. It has a middle part in which the basic themes are developed and tension is built. And finally it has a climax, the moment when (if you've succeeded) there will be a sudden flash of understanding through your audience and an almost audible "Ahah!"

At least once a year, at tax time, I struggle with the requirement of describing myself in a single word in the box marked OCCUPATION. Am I a programmer? an analyst? an engineer? an author? a lecturer? Since it's the IRS that will be reading it, I don't struggle so much over the accuracy of the label as its likely auditability. But at least on this page and for your eyes alone, I label myself as I have aspired to be:

> \- Tom DeMarco
> Storyteller

Tom DeMarco is a Principal of the Atlantic Systems Guild. From 1958 until 1965, he attended and received degrees from Cornell and Columbia Universities and the Sorbonne. He is the author of thirteen books. He lives with his wife, Sally Ogden Smyth in Camden, Maine.