

Commentaries

Ev Rogers's Gifts

In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick, remarks that "personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures." By this, Nick meant that a person's character is best revealed through small acts, consistently pursued, rather than by loud pronouncements or watershed events.

This principle of biographical insight seems apt, to me, in the case of Ev Rogers. He and I were colleagues at two universities and spent time with each other as friends or collaborators across nearly 40 years. To shed light on his personality, or "gifts," as I prefer, I'd like to share four successful gestures. Each occupied a microscopic interlude in Ev's unfolding narrative, though the occasions loomed more significant to those affected at the time. Each gesture was part of its own unbroken series.

In 1973, Gerry Kline and I lured Ev from his post at Michigan State University, drawing him 52 miles southeast to Ann Arbor and a joint appointment in Public Health and in Journalism. Before long, Ev became a valued consultant to many projects in those two academic units and beyond. I had received a grant from the National Science Foundation to study applications of interactive cable television to managing public institutions and begged Ev to travel with me to Pennsylvania for discussions with my colleagues at Lehigh University and officials who would be traveling there from Foundation offices in Washington, DC.

I was hoping for more than Ev's instincts at formulating great research ideas, though I benefitted a lot from those. I was betting, as well, that his lucid, gentle style and obvious intelligence would rub off on impressions that others formed about me. By bringing Ev along I was shamelessly basking in his aura.

We arrived in spitting snow, I recall, and huddled most of the day in meetings. These broke up on a successful note, and Ev and I headed toward the airport in winter's fading afternoon light. As we bumped along in the rental car, we passed a shabby diner in the shadows of the Mack Truck plant in Allentown's soot-stained industrial district. A sputtering neon sign promised Pabst Blue Ribbon. A crimson glow spilled through the café's windows onto the cracked sidewalk outside. Vulcan's kitchen came to mind.

"Stop. Let's go back!" Ev cried. "We have time to eat before our flight." I groaned inwardly. But considering all that Ev had graciously conferred on my slight reputation that day, I was in no position to resist a plate of greasy food chased by a glass of undistinguished suds.

The counterman, dressed in a combination of industrial overalls and apron, looked like he might have sauntered over after his day shift at Mack. Undeterred, Ev ordered. "Huevos Ranchero," he announced, "with cheddar cheese, extra jalapeno, and easy on the corn." My jaw dropped. I trembled. A classic Mexican dish in Allentown, Pennsylvania, I wondered? Even though it's listed, you've got to be kidding. But, what the hell. I asked for the same and we added two glasses of Pabst.

Miraculously, our meals were delicious, even memorable. On top of that, the counterman, in a burst of pride for the menu he represented, brought Heinekens

instead of the Pabst. We ordered seconds. On the plane home, I sleepily jumped to a superficial conclusion that Ev sure knew his restaurants. In time, I came to understand his deeper quality. Ev's antennae reached past surface appearances to sense features unseen by others, including me.

Click the fast-forward button to Los Angeles and the University of Southern California's Annenberg School. On October 17, 1989, at 5:04 p.m., geologic formations heaved 17 kilometers deep in the earth, beneath the path of the San Andreas Fault, and California's Loma Prieta quake was born. The tumbler would eventually claim 63 lives, injure nearly 4,000 more, wreak \$5.9 billion in damage, and be recorded as the nation's costliest natural disaster to date. Immediately that Tuesday afternoon, Ev began thinking about interviews and a sampling plan that would capture how news media covered the event, helping people adapt to devastation and come to one another's aid. Approximately 100 minutes after the Santa Cruz Mountains shook, Ev greeted his master's class with news that I knew, as dean of Annenberg, he rarely delivered: He would not meet with them that evening. He and student assistants were plunging off to the Bay Area to conduct "fire house" studies. He slung a backpack over his shoulder and flew north later that evening.

Ev was back in class the next week, exhausted but delighted with the information his team had been collecting. Students clamored to learn results. They were thrilled at witnessing early fruits from such dedication to knowledge. Ev's passion was scholarship, the hunt for understanding. And he told riveting stories about his quest.

This appetite for learning reached an even higher peak a few years later. Early in the 1990s Sonny Fox, chair of Population Communication International's (PCI) Board, met with Ev and me for lunch at USC's Faculty Center to talk about an opportunity for improving public health just then emerging in Tanzania. PCI was creating a radio drama called *Twende na Wakati* (*Let's Go With the Times*). Scripts would apply social learning theory to the soap opera format, promoting family planning and dramatizing ways that listeners could escape the scourge of HIV/AIDS, boosting their self-efficacy for practicing safe sex. The system of radio transmission in Tanzania might offer the chance to separate broadcast areas, treating some stations as control sites and others as experimental places airing the innovative series. Perhaps a lagged control group design would be feasible. "Would Ev conduct evaluation studies?" Sonny asked.

Ev could be forgiven if he had passed on this project. Research funding, Sonny revealed, would be hard to raise and would barely cover field work. What if the university could not be compensated for time away from courses and other duties? Work would extend across several years and require exhausting travel. Wasn't it time in Ev's career to write overarching "think pieces" instead of rooting about the world collecting primary data? Political or economic upheavals in-country could easily derail the project before publishable data emerged. Wasn't this venture a risky wager of time and effort?

Between forkfuls of taco salad, Ev and I glanced quickly at each other and reached the same conclusion: This gamble was too important to cast aside. Ev would inherit yet another heap of obligations.

Midstride in the work, Ev departed USC for the University of New Mexico. There, several years later, he began to publish his stunning results. Skillful joining of education and entertainment in the media could lift the quality of a nation's

health dramatically. The Tanzania study became a gleaming jewel among Ev's many path-breaking studies into links between communication and national development.

Although such rewarding outcomes may seem inevitable today, I remember this study's dawning chapter with its promise of skimpy resources and forbidding challenges.

My final reminiscence springs from a plea that Susan Evans and I took to Ev in late 2000. We had been developing fresh food recovery programs nationwide for a decade, boosting access by low-income people to nutritious items they can seldom afford. This work had gone well: Nearly 150 projects established in 43 states, and a growing stream of healthy and free food reaching people near or below the poverty line. The yearly flow of fresh fruits and vegetables was approaching 300 million pounds, up from near zero.

With the supply-side improving, we had turned to barriers in demand. Many potential recipients of nutritious commodities simply did not know how to prepare simple and appealing servings. We needed to document why people who depended on community pantries underaccepted some foods and often allowed items they took home to spoil. We needed to test our ideas about defeating or circumventing these barriers to consumption, ideas that eventually grew into our web-based, tailored messaging system, Quick! Help for Meals. Food banks in New Mexico, with whom we had worked for several years, agreed to help us learn more, but we needed to find a culturally alert and mature interviewer. Our sights were set on both Anglo and Hispanic clients of philanthropic food giveaways.

Ev sprang to our aid with his customary enthusiasm and generosity. He introduced us to his student Una Medina, a remarkable woman whose background and capabilities deserve a chapter of their own. Ev became, in effect, our coinvestigator. He never asked, "What's in this for me?" He leapt, instead, to the problem at hand: Widespread ignorance about the difficulties needy people face when coping with unpredictable ebbs and flows in their food supply. Corinne Shefner-Rogers, Ev's wife and a talented researcher herself, pitched in too, training field staff, interviewing, coding data, and helping interpret results. Susan and I moved forward with their wind in our sails.

What testimony do these four stories offer about Ev's personality, including his exceptional talents for scholarship? Here is what I think. When Ev sensed a great kitchen in Allentown, Pennsylvania, he was demonstrating his attention to clues that elude others. Ev was intuitively top rate at pattern recognition, I gradually came to understand. And that also made him sensitive to any detail that departed from a pattern. I had seen just a dingy café in an unpromising neighborhood with a frightful light inside. But Ev had noticed, as we scooted past, several people converging on the establishment. That scrap of evidence for popularity collided with outward appearances, and Ev's gut said, "Give this place a chance."

When Ev gathered his assistants and dashed to the Loma Prieta quake minutes after it had subsided, he demonstrated a second gift: Zest for collecting and interpreting data. Ev was an irrepressible student, in the literal sense: He couldn't resist studying things. No wonder he published some 400 works, including 36 books during his career. His landmark, *Diffusion of Innovations*, first appeared in 1962 and is cited constantly today. He even wrote a book during his final months of illness.

Ev's conviction that he must go to Tanzania reflected an eye for research questions whose answers might transform people's understanding of an issue. Fortunately, effects from the radio soap were robust. But equally important, Ev and

his colleagues coordinated different theories of communication processes so that the motivational power of the soap's emotional messages showed brightly in results. Listeners began talking about family planning and safe sex, and people's ignorance about how others felt about these sensitive topics crumbled. The talents of script writers, actors, and producers in telling stories that transported the audience received empirical validation.

The final disclosure about Ev that my stories impart concerns the rewards that his generosity showered on anyone who brought him an interesting research problem. Ev stood tall against NIH, or the Not-Invented-Here bias. He became genuinely engaged by an issue, whether he had discovered it first or later. He improved, as well as originated things. He enlisted in diffusion processes as well as studying them.

Any scholar could envy this quartet of gifts: a keen sensitivity to relationships among clues, or pattern recognition; a yawning appetite for collecting and interpreting data; an eye for transformational questions; and a welcoming attitude toward the research priorities of others. These aspects of Ev's character rubbed off on many of the hundreds of students and colleagues who worked with him across a rich career. We grew into stronger people because of that experience, and owe this son of Iowa's loamy soil a deep debt of gratitude.

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Ev Rogers and the *Journal of Health Communication*

Clearly, this issue of the *Journal* has impassioned views and tributes to a man who has made a difference in so many people's lives. Equally important is the difference he has made to the lives of people who never knew him personally, but benefited from the work he inspired or in which he directly engaged.

The *Journal of Health Communication* and related activities in the field would not be here today had it not been for Ev Rogers. I consulted with Ev upon my initial foray into the field as a young academic in Boston. His support, editorial acumen, and integrity helped move the *Journal* into the top tier of the field of communication.

Ev Rogers's mark on the communication field with the *Diffusion of Innovations* began the year I was born. His applied work in health communication in the 1970s at Stanford also was of great significance, marking a beginning of a new discipline. His forward thinking to support the field is not only evident in his chapter in the *American Behavioral Scientist* special edition I edited in 1994 ("Health Communication: Challenges for the 21st Century"), but also in his assistance as I developed the first graduate degree in health communication between a medical school and a school of communication (Tufts and Emerson).

The *Journal's* first issue began in 1996 with an article from Dr. Rogers, "The Field of Health Communication Today: An Up-to-Date Report." Now, nearly a decade later, with more than 4,000 pages of articles by hundreds of scholars, the field is as established as Ev imagined and supported.

It is difficult for me to add many rich personal stories that other colleagues recall of Ev, as my experience with him was presenting papers or working on speeches at conferences, plus some personal events, such as his attendance at my wedding in Washington. Yet, his personal support and activities with the *Journal*, links with key luminaries in the field, and honest advice form the basis of the vision we have developed with the *Journal of Health Communication*.

In February 2004 we were fortunate to publish a special issue of the *Journal of Health Communication* (edited by Muhiddin Haider) on the diffusion of innovation model. This followed a conference the prior year at George Washington University in Washington, DC, where Ev was personally heralded, commemorating his influential theory that brought valuable social change. The special issue is now used as a reference tool by public health and medical professionals, students, and social researchers, celebrating 40 years of diffusion of innovation theory's application—and its new applications to meet the emerging challenges of the twenty-first century, from chronic health conditions to emerging infectious diseases, as well as to bioterrorism.

I hope that this *Journal* special tribute, edited by Tom Backer, fills a place in history as we continue to be influenced by Ev, whether he was a mentor, teacher, friend, colleague, or just someone we just knew who made a difference because of his groundbreaking ideas.

This may be the final opportunity to offer a specialty focus to memorialize Ev with this *Journal*, yet it is only another chapter in the influence this man has had on so many. I can only hope that my activities and the reach of our *Journal* “makes a difference” for others with the same reach and valor as that of Everett M. Rogers. Everett Rogers's legacy in health communication is only one chapter in a rich life, but like those other chapters, it lives on with his great spirit.

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Everett Rogers—A Tribute

Some people go through life searching for a friend who is always there when he is needed and is trustworthy, supportive, and honest—even at times when the truth may hurt. They look for an ally who wishes for their success yet isn't the least bit intimidated by it. Better yet, they seek someone who will go as far as to take on extra responsibilities to help make their lives a little easier. Most people never find that person, but I've been blessed. Everett Rogers was a role model and a leader, an academic and an activist, a humanitarian, and most importantly, my close friend. Throughout my graduate studies, I worked closely with Dr. Rogers, who gave me guidance and knowledge and inspired both my personal and professional development.

Dr. Rogers will be remembered as a visionary and an inspiration for behavior change in his communications theory. His extensive work on the development of communications serves as a model that others should follow. He was detail oriented, a master of his work, and a brilliant architect of the diffusion of innovations theory. Like any good architect, he understood the necessity of recognizing the space within

which communications programs need to be built, and how that space interacts with the forms and orders of individual characteristics and social systems.

Everyone who knows of Dr. Rogers's work in communications would agree that his diffusion of innovations theory is a huge contribution to the field, but what many people may not know is that his compassion was not limited to his work. Everett Rogers exhibited incredible devotion and a deep commitment to his students. He was generous in spirit as well as with his time, and often went above and beyond what was expected of him in order to help colleagues and friends in need. Dr. Everett Rogers made such a significant impact on my life that I even named my son, Maruf Everett Haider, after him. In fact, when my preliminary PhD examination almost coincided with Maruf's birth, Dr. Rogers offered to take Ruby to the hospital.

Dr. Rogers taught me about the "strength of weak ties," which underlines an important communications concept: What matters most is not the quantity of branches in a network, but, rather, the strength of the network; in this way, the influential power of communication is increased. Dr. Rogers practiced the "weak ties" ethic in his daily life, creating strong bonds that made everyone who knew him feel greatly valued. He never saw himself as any more important to anyone else than they were to him. I will always remember one Fall when we walked into orientation together at Michigan and he introduced me to everyone as himself and introduced himself as me.

Even 2 months after Professor Rogers' passing, I find myself picking up the phone to call him and expecting him to greet me by name at the first ring. I still feel as if he's only a phone call away when I need advice or reassurance.

It is with great sadness that I say goodbye to my mentor, my teacher, my inspiration, and my good friend, Everett Rogers. I can only hope to be one day as influential to others as he was to me. The memory of Everett Rogers will continue on through the legacy of his communications' work, but, more importantly, in those of us who were fortunate enough to be touched by his great spirit. I always think of Dr. Rogers when I read a certain poem by the great Rabindranath Tagore, which to me perfectly describes the world he envisioned and his theories are still helping to bring about:

Where the mind is without fear
and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken
up into fragments by narrow domestic walls.

Farewell, Dr. Everett Rogers. You will be greatly missed.

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