

A Trip down the Styx

“This is what the river Styx must look like”, I ruminates, considering the pool. On a first glance, the casual onlooker wouldn’t detect anything unusual. Bright, blinding sunshine reflecting off of soft swirls of water, its tiny droplets curving their path down sun-burnt, slightly saggy skin. Palm trees swaying. Quintessentially Floridian. I’ve been in this guarded community for a week now, fleeing colder weather and my responsibilities as a lecturer at university. It was spring break after all, and I had followed the long-standing tradition of snowbirds and went south. This safe haven of retirees relishing sunlight, strawberry sundaes and life at the shore was a perfect fit for both a mental and physical reboot. I close my eyes and feel the heat of the afternoon sun basking on my skin, its light painting kaleidoscopic, orange-tinged images on the insides of my eyelids. Slowly, my consciousness drifts off.

I had always imagined the main river of the underworld to be horribly polluted, swirling with broken toys, soggy diplomas, defunct sporting gear. For eons, mankind had used it as a liquid landfill, throwing away their broken dreams. No one needs extra baggage when crossing the river: hopes, dreams, wishes. All of which never came true. There’s no room on the ferry for lofty ideals. This corruption had always seemed incredibly sad to me. People, reduced to shadows, their life goals shattered.

The pool in my pretty Florida hideout bears overwhelming similarities to said mythical body of water. Here too, were shadows of people, enjoying themselves in the glorious surroundings, mind you, but all they seemed to want to talk about were their own lost dreams. Their ‘could haves’ and ‘what ifs’.

There’s Jack, a deeply tanned, cigar-smoking, retired electrician, who always wanted to be a painter but was afraid of not being able to provide for his wife Eva and their newborn child. His

watercolors are nothing short of miraculous. Full of live and love. His passion. Next to him, his drinking buddy Craig, who spent his career as an insurance investigator whilst reading up on every book about military history he could lay his hands on. And then there is Brigitte, a youthful, energetic woman, whose dreams of becoming a yogi, a feng-shui consultant, anything spiritual really, were shattered by a conservative and over-bearing father sending her to beauty school instead. Trading inner enlightening for high-lights, hair-dos and hyaluronic acid. Here they all were: Gin and Tonic in hand, the ice cubes dissolving in the Florida heat just as fast as their dreams once did.

All these stories have me thinking about my students back home, about their slowly unfurling life stories. Their intact dreams of sand castles and Forbes 30 under 30 lists. Where would they end up in 50-odd years? Where would I?

I had always been a firm believer in loving what you do. In intrinsic motivation and excitement being the source of excellent work. A quality mark of sorts. This was the main reason I got into teaching in the first place: I wanted to light a spark in students in the first semester and leave them with a roaring fire at graduation, ready to follow their passion. But what if life got in the way, as it so often has a habit of doing? Mentally skipping through my rolodex of inspiring people to draw inspiration from I stop at the flash card of Peter Drucker: Renaissance Man. Mind extraordinaire. Writer, thinker, and, above all, searcher. I've always been captivated by his approach, his mindset really. So what is it, that set this man apart? How does one capture the essence of greatness? Of immaculate success? Of wisdom, stardom? First of all, I seem to recall, that Drucker was no god, not flawless and not beyond making mistakes. Drucker was a human, a hero alright, but with flaws and errors and stories of loss paralleling the stories of success. However, the questions still stands:

how does one distill the Drucker recipe for quintessentially being a great manager within the tradition of liber arts, a paradoxon in itself?

My mind starts spinning and drifting away simultaneously, conjuring visions of an ancient alchemist, grey hair standing on edge, in a 17th century laboratory. Flames are happily crackling and roaring under a soot stained cauldron, a charred wooden table holding finest Venetian glassware. Beakers, vials, bottles and tubes full of different liquids, all labelled in a neat italic script: ‘practical wisdom’, ‘historical knowledge’, ‘medicinal insights’, ‘managerial know how’, ‘love for the fine arts’, ‘life experience’. They’re all there. Some shimmering and sparkling in the dusty light filtering through the stained-glass window high up in the roughly hewn stone wall. Some dull and swirling with particles of unknown origin. My eyes continue to wander along the containers: ‘desire to read’ one says, ‘hunger to learn’ another. An elaborately carved wooden shelf in the back of the room is filled with numerous leather-bound tomes. Some seemingly antique and time-worn, others brand new and decorated with the finest gold-leaf. The rack above holds canteens filled with blue liquids. French ultramarine, winsor, cerulean, manganese, cobalt, prussian. Affixed above them is a sign declaring these essences and potions to be for ‘word alchemy. “Ah”, my mind goes, “they’re inks”. This makes sense inasmuch as Drucker declared himself a writer first and foremost, explaining why this alchemical lab has so many different shades of ink available.

The high-pitched cry of a seagull tears me from my daydreams and brings me back from 17th century cold England to the sunny coast of Florida. The image of the laboratory remaining embedded into my memory, almost like a mirage of light, barely palpable, but present, behind closed eyelids.

Motivated I set to work: I came here, to this secluded place of both, forgetting and remembering, to recharge my emptied batteries. Years of teaching in higher education had left me feeling drained and uninspired. The rapid advance of technology, the pressure on the shoulders of my millennial students, overbearing parents, the school system. There was much in the way of energized, encouraged and engaged scholarship nowadays and all the talks with the retirees at my resident pool had pointed me to another, age old problem: dreams and desires fighting with real life and real pressure. When it came to my new year at university I was determined to be the change I wanted to see in the world. My world, the world of academia. The world of my students. I was going to be the teacher I always wished I had and maybe, I contemplated, maybe we all need to find our inner Drucker and apply what makes us happy, what defines our passion, our heartbeat, to what we do within the corporate world.

So in the true spirit of creativity and cross category thinking to the drawing board I went. Invoking, once again, the spirits of Peter F. Drucker and my alchemical laboratory. This particular image seemed befitting my quest insomuch as alchemical practice celebrated its heyday simultaneously with the initial renaissance. In the years in which Boyle, Newton and the heretic Galileo published their gravity-defying and solar-system ransacking pieces of work, alchemical books were in high demand and circulation as well (Kaiser, 2010). During these same defining times, a particular group of polymaths, later coined 'renaissance men' were a beacon of light for the arts. Polymaths, derived from the Greek πολυμαθής, polumathēs, "having learned much"; thus referring to people whose knowledge spans a variety of different subject areas and who are able to draw upon this complex network of expertise in order to solve specific questions or dilemmas. This sounds exactly like Peter Drucker! And this was precisely what the doctor ordered for my bored-out students. THIS, I realize excitedly, this is what might clean up the Styx! In my imaginary laboratory I now

set to work to cook up the potion that will help me understand Drucker's mindset, the mindset of a renaissance [wo]man, in order to approach the issue underlying this quest: people in every stage of their life, be it at school, in higher education, during their careers, or even in retirement dreaming of the 'what ifs'. The potions I am about to cook up should spark intrinsic motivation, a thirst for knowledge, the ability to apply expertise across various fields, and a deep love for words, both spoken and written.

"Double, double toil and trouble, fire burn, and cauldron bubble!"¹

The ingredients seem simple at first and are drawn from what Drucker himself wrote as well as from what was written about him. Two crucial parts of what Drucker believed in, his mission really, I want to make available for everyone to apply, to enjoy, to implement, strongly believing that this might, just might, be a successful approach to cleaning up the river Styx. As Drucker once said: "[I want] To help other people achieve their goals—assuming that they are not immoral or unethical!"². Loving what you do and finding love in what you do are two different things, both of which need to be applied to the potion. Next I add a spark into the cauldron, used to inspire others, 'intrinsic motivation' the powder is called. A heaping spoon full of curiosity rounds up the mix. This concoction, together with all the aforementioned traits such as a healthy dose of practical wisdom finish my first draught. The second liquid is my attempt at an Ink: in the true spirit of Drucker's love for miscellaneous lists I write out the recipe with the finalized product:

One part Instructiveness, two parts calm and objectiveness each, a pinch of haywire to offset the chance that calm doesn't get the desired results, one part of elegance, one part of wordplay and figures of speech, one part metaphors mixed with examples, all dissolved in a solution of education through enjoyment. The ink is done and corked for anyone to use should they feel the need to.

¹ (Shakespeare, 1997, *Machbeth*:. Act 4, Scene 1)

² (Goldsmith, 2018)

Drucker, who published 29 books in his lifetime³, knew about the necessity, the beauty, the magic of properly chosen words. Soft and careful one time, charging with brute-force another. This skill is crucial for everyone, regardless of their status, age or profession seeing as communication is what binds the world together. And what sets it apart. Contracts, love letters, declarations of independence, elevator pitches, inaugural speeches, all rely on the magic of words and the ability to chose each and every one of them carefully, then to arrange them into a successful chain. Every educational step, from pre-school, where the first ABC's are sung, to middle-school, where baby-steps are taken towards essay writing, to higher education, where publishing an article depends not only on research quality but on the ability to properly convey its underlying implications, should cover writing. Its proper etiquette can be, must be, implemented into classes regardless of subject matter or genre. We live in a world relying on communication skills, thus every member of this world, but especially those who find themselves in leadership positions, need to command an army of words, needs to be able to send them to battle and to wage war, if need be, in order to get a certain message across. This is the one aspect of Drucker which needs to be implemented into education. The second half being the ability to curiously ask questions, collect exciting answers and lastly connect knowledge into a network of out of the box solutions. This feat would be harder to implement into every aspect of education but there were ways.

In the true spirit of Nicholas Flamel, famed French alchemist during the renaissance I decided to visualize the outcome of the two potions into an alchemical seal, a sigil of sorts.

³ (Beatty, 1998)



Now how to transfer this chaotic good, this new circle of ancient tradition into palpable action?

I had often thought universities somewhat contain the last shadows of the medieval guild systems: masters take on apprentices and gradually through transferring knowledge as well as through tests and rites of passage, the apprentice is introduced into the mysteries of the trade. The apprentice transforms towards mastery. There are several well-read philosophers who strongly advocate against the guild system: Adam Smith⁴ and Karl Marx⁵ being two of them. Both for the same

⁴ (Smith, 1795)

⁵ (Tucker, 1978)

reason: its limitations when it comes to free technology and knowledge transfer. Now during the rare occasion that Smith and Marx agree on something one should tread carefully. However, from the vantage point of businesses, management, and leadership, students, through participating in their respective courses and projects, are turning into members of their targeted professional community, similar to the medieval guild system, through acquiring its respective technical skills, competencies, behavioral norms, professional code of conduct, and language and technical terms, in short they are learning the tools of the trade, needed to face all potential challenges of the workplace in the new knowledge economy of the twenty-first century⁶. Thus, if learning in these fields is interlinked with the desire to become a member of a professional guild, then the student has to fully immerse himself, identity, mentality and developing biography, into engaging with what it means to become a part of said professional community⁷.

What if we had a professional community, a guild of sorts, advocating the values of Peter Drucker, the essence of the two earlier concocted potions, towards students in every stage of learning? Ambassadors of the power of words, the need for curiosity and searchers for the spark of joy and motivation in even the utmost mundane of tasks?

After all, Drucker himself recommended a thirst for new knowledge as a way of personal renewal.⁸ That's when the thought of the Peter F. Drucker Guild began to hatch. I wanted to unite like-minded educators and scholars teaching the core values of Drucker. "Creative Writing for Managers", "George S. Patton's Leadership Approach", "The Lessons of Fine Art in Leadership", "The ancient tradition of Zen applied to today's Business World". Classes like these were the ones where Drucker would thrive. Classes like these would have, could have, taught the folks at my

⁶ (Colley, James, Diment, & Tedder, 2007)

⁷ (Longmore, Grant, & Golnaragh, 2018)

⁸ (Beatty, 1998)

pool in Florida to synthesize knowledge. And to let go of 'what ifs'. Classes where synergies were created. Networks of knowledge forged. Where one could actively take part in ensuring that students were empowered to implement whatever excites them into their field of studies. A place for students to trust their obsessions because someday, somehow, they will sneak into their corporate life through the back door with the power to create something great. Similar to Drucker co-authoring a book about Japanese Art.

In order to pitch my idea to the esteemed ladies and gentlemen of the Peter Drucker Forum, a place I deemed perfect for this endeavor, I formulated vague and lofty ideas into a concrete call for action.

When it comes to the set-up of the Peter Drucker Guild, it can be integrated into the Drucker Forum, gathering educators and scholars who fit the description in a similar way as we now celebrate essays in the Drucker Challenge. After all, I thought, isn't this what it was all about? Not letting your name die, like the ancient Greek heroes. Participating through ensuring that the teachings of Peter Drucker live on to inspire another generation of leaders, of managers, of business men and women, of anyone.

"...and thus, I strongly, truly, and irrevocably believe that the Peter F. Drucker Guild can actively shape the future of generations. We need word-smiths, word-alchemists and strong communicators. But we also need students to find beacons of light in anything they do, to trust their obsessions. Our role as educators is to equip our students in their quests for the philosopher's stone. Their curious search for what sparks a light in them. As the Drucker Guild we celebrate desire, intrinsic motivation and curiosity and it is our mission, as it was Peter F. Drucker's, to help other people achieve their goals, whatever they may be. Let's make magic happen Ladies and Gentlemen!"

Content with my first draft of the pitch I'm going to give when presenting the Peter F. Drucker Guild I close my laptop and sigh. This is going to be a long road, but I have found my philosopher's stone, my passion, my own quest. "The greatest wisdom not applied to action and behavior is meaningless data"⁹, so here I am, doing my part. Working towards turning future lead(ers) into gold. Shimmering and sparkling and inspiring. Also, highly valuable.

And as I catch the last glimpses of the Gulf of Mexico from my tiny airplane window I'm full of hope. The greatest glory for all the Greek heroes and heroines always has been to be remembered through history. Their names living forever. Eternal life – just like the philosopher's stone promises. Peter Drucker has achieved this feat through being extraordinary. Out of the ordinary. Different. Everyone who lives by his words, reads his texts, acts upon his suggestions or even conversely discusses his work contributes to remembering the important messages of the man who thought management should be seen as liberal art.

In a few decades, when it was my turn to meet the ferry-man Charon and cross the river Styx I might meet Peter Ferdinand. And hopefully, the riverbed will be clean once more.

⁹ (Goldsmith, 2018)

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