

LIFE TEACHERS: STANLEY TENNENBAUM

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When I think back on people who affected me in a big way, they are few but those few had a most powerful effect. Let's see, the first has to be Peggy Dodge, an artist and friend of my mother, who lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where I was born. Dodge lived out in the country on a place with a pond, meadows, and trees. Mom would meet at the Dodge farm with other fine-arts painters, and sometimes she would take me along. I was six years old.

It was Peggy Dodge who first sparked my interest in nature and all things natural, and at that young age I became a naturalist, and a serious one at that. I did little else but study nature until I was around the age of eighteen, but that is another story. I want to tell you about the next person who greatly affected me, and that was Stanley Tennenbaum.

One day, when I was 19 years old (this had to be early in 1961), I was hitchhiking out on Huron Street, near my parent's home on the west side (305 Wildwood) of Ann Arbor, trying to get downtown. It was only perhaps a mile, but I didn't want to walk. I was used to hitchhiking and had already hitched to California and back, not to mention around five round trips to New York City.

Anyway, I was picked up by a somewhat strange character. This guy was immediately friendly, and he explained as we drove along that his name was Stanley Tennenbaum and that he had a research scholarship at the University of Michigan Department of Mathematics in the foundation of mathematics. In short, he was paid just to think and work with his own mind in the realm of math. I liked that idea. Later I would find out that Stan Tennenbaum was quite famous in the world of mathematics for work he did on the a proof by the great mathematician Gödel. Stanley was interested in what are called recursive functions and other very abstract forms of mathematics. I didn't know what to think of him.

For one, Stanley had all the earmarks of the eccentric genius: long hair, thick glasses, and a wild and crazy (and I mean crazy) look in his eye. During that ride into town, Stan, who was very interested in education, couldn't resist striking up a conversation with me. He was very direct, and became friendly and personal with me at once. At first I thought this guy has to be gay, but he was not. Who else would be interested me, a 19-year kid who was a nobody. So we talked.

In that very short ride of probably only a mile or two, he managed to find out that I had dropped out of high school and was casting around for some direction in life. For reasons of which I have no idea, he fixed on me as someone that he could help and immediately (on the spot!) invited me to come and live with himself and his family out on a farm near Chelsea, Michigan for that spring. Do I have to tell you that this was odd? Even so, I was totally intrigued that anyone would have an interest in me at all. I had nothing going for me other than just being myself. But

this guy was fascinating and sincere, so I accepted his offer and before I knew it I was, living in Stan's attic out on a farm near Chelsea.

The idea was that I would live there for free (I had no money), and Stan would give me various study projects to complete under his guidance. American history was the first on his list, as I well remember. And that is how I came to live with Stanley Tennenbaum and his family.

I will never forget the first morning I woke up on that farm. There I was, half-awake in a tiny room in the attic and feeling for sure that I was in a different place than home. Suddenly, up through the stairwell from below came this deafening sound. It was something like music, but unlike any music I had ever heard before. It was almost terrifying. As it turned out it was a Bach fugue played on the organ and at incredible volume. That was my real introduction to my sojourn with Stan, not to mention to Bach fugues.

I am sure Tennenbaum's wonderful wife and young family must have wondered what in the world I was doing living in their house, but I never heard a peep from them. I did study that book on American history. In fact I came across some handwritten notes not that long ago, carefully copied out in my indecipherable script. I did the work, but I also took in the farm that spring in 1961. I remember watching the cows in the warm barnyard sun for hours. Some of my drawings are enclosed.

As for the studying, as mentioned, I did the work, and it went OK, but I am very hard to teach. I tend to like to teach myself things, although you could not ask for a more enthusiastic teacher than Tennenbaum. Remember, I never got out of high school because I had trouble respecting teachers who were not (in my opinion) life teachers. I thirsted for life teachers, and Stanley came close. That being said, I did not always see eye to eye with Tennenbaum and he did have a bit of a temper. My own stubbornness eventually led me to leaving the farm, but it was not unfriendly. Did I mention that I am very stubborn?

All and all, I got a lot out of that experience, not so much with American history, but mostly just the fact that someone was interested in how my mind worked and thought enough of me to try and help me by offering some direction. That made a difference. I owe Stanley Tennenbaum my deepest thanks for taking the time to single me out for encouragement. It came at the right time and it really meant something to me.

Years later I found out that Tennenbaum was a kind of genius (and maverick) in mathematics, part of the great tradition that came out of the University of Chicago in the early part of the 20th Century. His papers are legendary and the anecdotes about his life are too. Some have likened him to a modern Socrates, bouncing around from math departments across the country, at times without a job and means, but engaging (at times irreverently) those he met with a mind they would not soon forget. I remember Stanley Tennenbaum and thank him for his interest in me.

In the end, however, I was (even under those circumstances) pretty much as un-teachable as

ever, and it was only some months later that I left Ann Arbor and fate found me out on the road again, hitchhiking and traveling with a then unknown songwriter by the name of Bob Dylan. This was the spring of 1961 and one of life's turning points for me. I am my own Forrest Gump.