



Finding Wisdom in the Life of a Humble Man: Lessons Learned from My Father

Patricia A. Alexander



In truth, it feels rather pretentious of me to consider my life to be a meaningful source of wisdom that might guide future scholars. Perhaps that is why I have chosen to draw on the life of my father, William Cecil Mullins, as the inspiration for the guidance I proffer here. I rarely speak about this good man and only few of my friends and colleagues ever had the pleasure of meeting him while he was alive. Yet, forever etched in my memory are his stories about growing up in the hills of Southwestern Virginia during the Great Depression, the survival instincts that those years instilled in him, and the abiding love he had for his mother, eight siblings, and for those hills he called home.

Because I spring from such humble roots, I have always felt different from those

I regarded as born to a career in the academy. Indeed, I see the fabric of my life as more akin to the quilts that my paternal grandmother, Creecy Lou, made from feed sacks and the remnants of tattered garments rather than to the rich tapestries I have seen adorning the halls of academia. That is not to disparage my upbringing or my grandmother's quilts. In fact, the one quilt I have of hers that has survived all these passing years remains among my most cherished possessions. Every faded or worn piece carries memories and feelings that are truly precious to me. Like that quilt, my life is a patchwork that is not easily stitched together to form a clear or coherent tale of academic success that others might wish to emulate. Yet, I have achieved success. That I must admit. I also do not believe that my success came *in spite of* my humble roots. Instead, if I merit the right to stand among renowned scholars in education research contributing their acquired wisdoms, it is *because* of those roots and the insights they have afforded me.

With that backdrop in place, let me share several basic "truths" that I have stitched together from my father's words and deeds. These patchworked lessons have been instrumental to my academic success. Perhaps these lessons might inspire others seeking guidance. Whether these lessons represent "wisdom," I cannot say. Yet, as with my grandmother's quilt, I am confident in their practical value.

True success must be earned.

It goes without saying that life in the Appalachian Mountains for my father's people was a constant struggle, marked by hard labor and few rewards. Thankfully, for the Scotch-Irish who settled in that region

of the country, hard work was a prized character trait. Although my father never returned to the hills after World War II—a consequence of marrying my Italian mother—he never lost his Scotch-Irish work ethic. He was a man who never missed a day of work in his four decades as an auto mechanic. He found dignity in manual labor. It is a fact that my father never really understood what it meant to be an academic or understood what labors my chosen profession entailed. Nonetheless, he admired how hard I worked at my job and recognized the pride I took in what I accomplished. It seems that I inherited my father's work ethic, as well as his belief that any job worth doing was worth doing to the best of one's ability.

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Hard work remains a badge of honor that I wear proudly. I have said on many occasions that there will almost inevitably be more intelligent people than me in the room. I take no umbrage in that. However, there will be few in that room who work harder than I do. Even if I cannot control my intellectual ability, I do have control over the level of effort I put forth to accomplish a desired end. Of course, as an academic, my labors compared to those of my father are more mental than manual. But they are no less real. What is also true about my work, in contrast to my father's, is that it is within a realm of personal interest and often undertaken out of choice rather than necessity. As Dewey would argue, that makes my labors seem less effortful; less like work. I agree. Nonetheless, I believe that any status I might merit within the academy has come neither by chance or by privilege, but as a consequence of hard work and dedication to my goals. Thus, if one aspires to success in academia, that aspiration must be coupled with a pride in that career and

with an unwavering commitment to hard work. No level of intellectual ability, no academic pedigree, and no aspirational beliefs can overshadow the power of a strong work ethic.

Find joy in the everyday.

One might assume that the life my father knew as a boy and young man was filled only with toil and hardship. As a child of the Depression, raised in the poverty that still grips much of Appalachia, he certainly had his share of both. Yet, what I came to understand from his many stories and our annual trips to his home—the only vacations we ever took as a family—was that there was also laughter, music, and joy in his life. It was common for the five brothers to gather on the porch around supper time to harmonize to spirituals or folk music. These impromptu gatherings typically involved storytelling as well, and those “stories” were often embellishments and exaggerations of the day's events.

What I came to appreciate from watching my father and his family in those moments was that joy could be found in the ordinary or routine. Joy does not need extravagant or lavish surroundings to exist. Joy can thrive in the small and quiet spaces of our lives. One just needs to seek it out and acknowledge its presence. But you may wonder what this lesson on joy has to do with my success in academia or that of others? To that question, I would answer, “Plenty.” You see, there is no way to sustain the effort required to become “accomplished” as an academic, or to maintain that level of achievement *unless* those individuals can find the joy in the ordinary or everyday aspects of their professional lives.

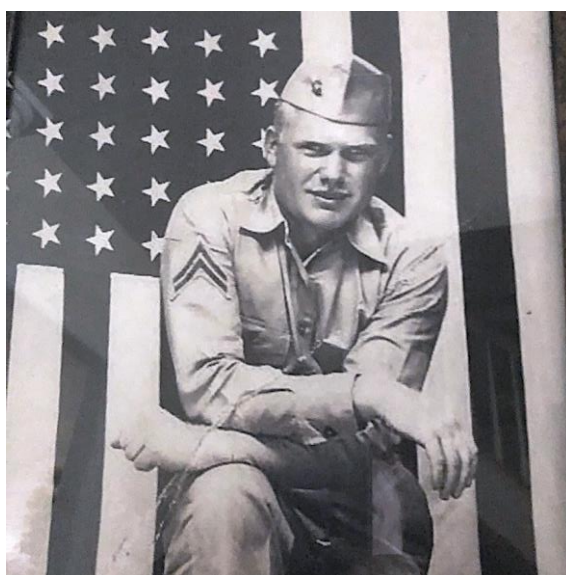
The more public and grand moments in academic careers, such as tenure, promotion, honors, or awards, are few in number. This is true even for well-known scholars. To live for such instances would likely doom a person to extended periods of unhappiness, depression, or gloom. That is why the smaller and quieter triumphs must

also be celebrated. Completing a manuscript, presenting a great lesson, or the acceptance of a conference proposal—these should be occasions for joy. Further, these feelings of joy should extend to the accomplishments of our students and colleagues, as well. These moments of joy found within the everyday will help to revitalize the spirit and sustain the energy needed to continue the journey.

Be resourceful, resilient, and resolute.

For people like my father, who grew up in the hills and hollers of the Blue Ridge Mountains, survival required resourcefulness, tenacity, and perseverance. One had to learn to live off the land by hunting, fishing, farming, and preserving food so the family could make it through often harsh winters. My father was known to be a skilled hunter and often preferred to use a bow and arrow instead of a rifle—he felt it gave the animals a fairer chance. Even into my adolescence, when the urgency of providing food for the family had long passed, I watched my father head off during hunting season armed with his bow and arrow. It seems that the habits forged in his youth could not be easily displaced. Also, doctors were few and far between in the hills and hollers. Thus, when the itinerant doctor was not to be had, care was often provided by the town barber, a local healer, or a midwife. My grandmother was the midwife summoned by families along the ridge and in the valley below.

Although few academics will face hardships like my forebearers, they still must be resourceful, resilient, and resolute if they are to thrive in higher education. That is because no journey that culminates in academic success will be uncomplicated or straightforward.



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Instead, that journey will be marked by twists and turns, ups and downs, and moments of triumph and tribulation. Everyone will stumble and fall at some point—it is inevitable. Yet, as I heard my father say many times, the real measure of individuals is not how many times they stumble or fall, but how many times they pick themselves up and try again. The only elaboration I would make to my father's sage advice is that I would recommend that resilient and resolute individuals take some time to analyze the circumstances that contributed to the undesirable turn of events before they dust themselves off and give it another try. Repeating the same mistake time and again does not seem wise to me.

Be independent in thought but communal in relations.

I already described my father's work ethic and resilience—traits that have been ascribed to the Scotch-Irish who settled in the Appalachians in the mid-18th century. These "mountain folk" were also known for their fierce independence and single-mindedness. I certainly witnessed those attributes in my father. For him, being fiercely independent manifested as the

conviction that he could tackle most challenges without having to rely on others outside the family. He also had no qualms in coming to a decision or taking a stand that set him apart. He never manifested this independence boldly or in a confrontational manner—but you would know where he stood on an issue and you could agree or not. What stood in sharp contrast to this

independent streak was my father's close relations to family and friends. I came to believe that the independence and self-sufficiency he showed in his actions and his thoughts were possible because my father could also count on the strong bonds with family and friends. In a way, those close relations meant he was never really alone even if his views set him apart.

What does this story, distilled from my father's life, have to do with becoming a successful scholar? More than you might imagine. I do not know that I would categorize myself as fiercely independent, but I have never been overly concerned about being different from my peers or thinking differently than others. I am not contentious by nature, nor do I set out to dispute or provoke. However, I often find that what I hear or read sends me off in a direction that is unanticipated. It has been that way for as long as I can remember. While others see the forest *or* the trees, I am fixated on a single branch or the entire ecosystem. Rather than doubting or questioning this unique perception, I have learned to harness it in my research. It has afforded me the ability to see the ordinary in a new light, or to notice relations among objects, concepts, or experiences that others take for granted. Luckily, unique perspectives are prized in the academy, as long as there is solid evidence and reasoning that accompany those alternative viewpoints.

Yet, as I acknowledged recently, when I was named a Distinguished University Professor, "no one travels the road to success alone." Just as my father had those strong ties to his family and friends that allowed him to feel secure in his independence, those who wish to thrive within the academy must have others with whom they feel a bond. They need those "significant others" in and out of the university with whom they can communicate their thoughts and feelings; those whose responses and reactions matter; and, who make the arduous journey toward fulfillment worth the effort.

Success must be individually determined.

The final lesson that I learned from my father is that the measure of success is not fixed. It is unique to each of us and is molded to fit the lives we lead and the values we hold dear. As I stated at the outset, William Cecil Mullins was a humble man born at a time and place that was not of his making. To the outside world, he was a simple man who lived a good but unremarkable life. That life would pass unnoticed and unheralded by those not his kith or kin; his accomplishments would merit no national honors or awards; there would be no flags lowered to half-mast upon his passing. Yet, by the measures that counted most to him—working hard, caring for loved ones, being just, fair, and true to his ideals—he was a success.

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What this humble man can teach us all is that the ultimate measure of success must come from one's own goals and values. They cannot be dictated by others. Of course, there are professional milestones that have been placed by others, such as tenure and promotion, that you are expected to reach. Yet, the milestones that likely will matter the most on this long journey to academic success are those that you place yourself. Such a personal marker of accomplishment for me would be any words, theoretical ideas, or guidance I have planted over the years that have taken root and that will endure after I am gone. Still, the most important milestone I have chosen to put in place does not reflect my own accomplishments. Rather, it marks the success of the academic family I leave behind; whether that family continues to flourish and whether its members make significant contributions to educational theory, research, and practice. No one could ask for more.



About Acquired Wisdom

This collection began with an invitation to one of the editors, Sigmund Tobias, from Norman Shapiro a former colleague at the City College of New York (CCNY). Shapiro invited retired CCNY faculty members to prepare manuscripts describing what they learned during their College careers that could be of value to new appointees and former colleagues. It seemed to us that a project describing the experiences of internationally known and distinguished researchers in Educational Psychology and Educational Research would be of benefit to many colleagues, especially younger ones entering those disciplines. We decided to include senior scholars in the fields of adult learning and training because, although often neglected by educational researchers, their work is quite relevant to our fields and graduate students could find productive and gainful positions in that area.

Junior faculty and grad students in Educational Psychology, Educational Research, and related disciplines, could learn much from the experiences of senior researchers. Doctoral students are exposed to courses or seminars about history of the discipline as well as the field's overarching purposes and its important contributors. .

A second audience for this project include the practitioners and researchers in disciplines represented by the chapter authors. This audience could learn from the experiences of eminent researchers – how their experiences shaped their work, and what they see as their major contributions – and readers might relate their own work to that of the scholars. Authors were advised that they were free to organize their chapters as they saw fit, provided that their manuscripts contained these elements: 1) their perceived major contributions to the discipline, 2) major lessons learned during their careers, 3) their opinions about the personal and 4) situational factors (institutions and other affiliations, colleagues, advisors, and advisees) that stimulated their significant work.

We hope that the contributions of distinguished researchers receive the wide readership they deserve and serves as a resource to the future practitioners and researchers in these fields.



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