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The Marvelous Life of Paul Steven Miller

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When I was hired by the University of Washington School of Law in the spring of 2004, I skimmed all of my new colleagues’ biographies, including Paul Steven Miller’s. I don’t remember Paul Steven Miller’s standing out. The biography was short and listed mostly professional positions and publications. It made clear that he had had an important career, but it did not make clear how revolutionary a figure he was.

It did not mention that Paul was a dwarf. It did not explain the seminal role he had played at a young age in devising and selling to a skeptical Congress the revolutionary American with Disabilities Act (ADA). It did not make clear that Paul’s subsequent career as a highly effective government official had itself demonstrated the wisdom of giving disabled people an opportunity to be hired and had showed what they could do. It did not of course say that he would take me to lunch on my first day at work. It did not prepare me for a friendship that I cherished and changed me and ended far too soon.

I moved to Seattle from New York in July 2004. The day after my arrival, I came for the first time to my new office at the law school. It being the summer, no faculty seemed to be in the building. About an hour after I had sat down at my new computer, the phone rang. I picked it up. An unfamiliar, but enthusiastic voice said, “Hey! It’s Miller!”

“Who’s Miller?” I thought.

“I will be down in a minute. Maybe we can get coffee or lunch.” My mysterious caller then hung up.

Figuring I would find out who “Miller” was soon enough, I went back to my e-mail. I was halfway through a long, boring e-mail to some old colleagues when I heard what I thought was a tap at my closed door. Our doors have windows starting about four feet up. I turned around to see if the mysterious “Miller” had arrived. No face was there, so I went back to typing. A few minutes later, I heard what definitely sounded like a knock. I turned again and to my surprise there was no face looking through the window. A bit unnerved by the spooky goings-on in this building, I set about trying to finish the e-mail. As I was reaching the very end, I was startled by a crashing and banging as if someone was trying to batter down my door. I went up and opened that door . . . and

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saw a bearded dwarf with an impeccably tailored dark suit, a bow tie, and a cane smiling at me, his head stopping just before the spot where the window on the door began.

“That took forever!” he barked. “I hope you don’t think your e-mail is more interesting than a lunch with me.”

And thus began a regular lunchtime ritual.

Paul had to overcome obstacles every day. Even our door seemed designed to hide him from view. But Paul found a way past most obstacles, and he never let anything prevent you from hearing what he had to say. He always started by knocking gently and then if someone didn’t hear him, he started knocking louder, and if no one noticed (and if what he wanted was important) he just started hammering with his cane.

I think it endearing that among the things that Paul thought really important was having lunch (and, ideally, a good laugh) with a new colleague. And those lunches came at a cost for him. Walking the two blocks to University Avenue for lunch with him took four times as long as it did when I walked alone. The walk was sometimes physically painful for him. But he loved having lunch with friends, and we went about twice a week, often chuckling the whole, slow way across the street and down to University Avenue.

The pleasure that Paul took in all the quotidian rituals of friendship was genuine. Among the many things that Paul struggled for—for himself and for other people with disabilities—was the opportunity to enjoy a “normal” life. Until I began spending so much time with Paul, I had never realized how much I take for granted as I live my daily life: The opportunity to have physical access to places where jobs are done or learning happens; the physical ability to enter a restaurant where I can fraternize with my colleagues; the ability to buy a car where my feet reach the pedals so that I can function in a city where everyone drives. He demanded the opportunity to have these things, sometimes banging on doors to get them.

More heroically, he demanded them for others. Paul’s life was devoted to ensuring that all who were disabled would automatically have available many of the opportunities that Paul himself had to fight for relentlessly. He wanted everyone to have the opportunity to be considered for places in universities and for jobs where they could demonstrate how much they had to offer. He wanted to increase the number of people who would have access to the lunchrooms and restaurants of the world where they could chat with their colleagues. With those opportunities, as far as he was concerned, people could make of themselves what they would.

Some found it strange that Paul could sometimes be hard on people.
He was funny and generous, but not soft and cuddly. He did not suffer fools gladly, no matter what color, size, shape, or form they came in. Perhaps most surprising, he could be quite skeptical of some requests for ADA accommodation. But Paul’s God was one of justice, not charity. Paul never expected anyone to be impressed automatically by a person with a disability. He simply expected everyone to be impressed by an impressive person with a disability. He was angry that the world had conspired to hide such people—putting the door too high, as it were, for them to be seen. It was a matter of both justice and pragmatics that the window be lowered. But conversely, everyone had a duty to contribute everything they could and everyone was to be judged, at least in part, by what they made of their opportunities.

Given that philosophy, it was not surprising that Paul drove himself harder than anyone else I knew. Paul tried to model both the act of working harder than anyone else and, happily, of savoring the joys of success. Among Paul’s disabilities was not only dwarfism, but, apparently, a susceptibility to cancer. When I first met him, he had survived one bout with cancer and knew somewhere in his heart that his time on stage would probably be shorter than others’. Shortly after the election of Barack Obama, he was offered a job as a special aide to the President helping to arrange the transition. Within weeks of getting this offer, Paul was diagnosed with a recurrence of cancer. To the shock of many, Paul decided to take the job, loved the job, and excelled at it.

Paul arranged with his bewildered doctors in Seattle a chemotherapy schedule that would allow him to do his chemotherapy primarily on three or four day weekends away from Washington, D.C. I used to pick him up at the airport on his chemotherapy runs. I was always amazed both by how tired he was and by his good cheer. Why fixate on the bad luck of having to do this trip? He was lucky that his boss, the President of the United States, was flexible enough to let him schedule his work around his chemotherapy. I used to watch him exasperate his nurses in Seattle by moving his arm while they were fixing his IVs—because he was texting so furiously.

While he was working at the White House his cancer spread and one of his arms had to be amputated. He continued to work at the White House, buying slip-on dress shoes because he could no longer tie shoes and learning to text with one hand. He completed the task assigned him during the transition, making sure in the process that he took any friends who visited him in Washington to the White House Mess. He returned to Seattle with one year to live.

During that last year, his good cheer sometimes wavered. But it always returned, in ways that I found deeply moving.
About a week before he passed away, I spent an afternoon with Paul at his house. We chatted about many things. He had been deeply touched by a letter that he had just received from old colleagues—one that told him what he meant to them, what lessons they had learned from him. I asked him what he meant to himself. What was he proudest of? He hemmed and hawed at that question. I then asked him what he would want his kids to know. What lessons should they learn from his life? He grew silent and the sound of the machinery of sickness became overwhelming—the buzz of the air purifiers in his room, the wheeze of the portable IV pump. He thought for a long time and when he answered it was in a more subdued but powerful tone than I had heard in a while.

“You know, Clark” he said. “When I was born, I know my parents were scared. They looked down at this little shriveled child, and they wondered what my life would be like. Would I play ball? Would I have friends? Would I be able to do the things they dreamed that their son would do? . . . And I have played ball a bit. I have always had fantastic friends. I have had good jobs, and I have done a good job at them. Along the way, I have helped other people. I have a lovely wife and two beautiful daughters. I have had a marvelous life. And I just want my girls to know that everyone can, and must, live a marvelous life.”