

Old Man River

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One trait I share with many of my friends is the troublesome tendency to repeat a song over and over in my head until it long passes the tiresome stage. Once a song gets there, it stays for days at a time, often only to be replaced by some other no less catchy tune taking up semipermanent residence in the cavities of my brain. Who can resist *It's a Small, Small World*, or *My Darling Clementine* ? At least my rapacious repertoire extends to more than just these two ditties. The trouble is that they play constantly in the background of my thoughts during both day and night, and stay there long after they have worn out their welcome.

I recently suffered a bout of *Ol' Man River*-it is. Against my will, or completely independent of my will, this poignant lament reminded me ceaselessly about the distress of daily living. Every now and then, when the song worked its way into the foreground of my mind, and I was forced to pay it some attention, it occurred to me that there is more than just a song here; there are thoughts and lessons about modern day work.

Ol' man river; Dat ol' man river ... He keeps on rollin' along. I remember the passion and enthusiasm that drove my early work. It was so easy then to jump out of bed in the morning and do what it was that needed to be done that day, because it was all so exciting. It was all so important. It was all so good. All I had to do to reach the promised land and snatch the holy grail was to get there, and getting there was fun.

Passion is probably the one emotion that separates the young from the old. I can see the passion and enthusiasm in the eyes of my students. They want to save the world, or at least some part of it, and they have the energy and determination to try. Just to be in the presence of this youthful energy is one of the real pleasures of teaching.

It is so easy to lose the enthusiasm of youth and trade it for the ennui of middle age. Passion and fire are hard to sustain, and few of us are able to maintain a high level of adrenaline for long periods of time. Perhaps if we did, it would kill us. *But Ol' Man River, he jes' keeps rollin' along.*

He don' plant taters; he don' plant cotton; An' dem dat plants 'em; is soon forgotten. It is so easy to become lost in the day-to-day activities of bioengineering. Even as faculty members, in an occupation that is sprinkled with variety, there are tests to compose, papers to grade, students to advise, and proposals to write. Ah, the proposals ... so much depends on them ... support for grad students, postdocs, summer salary, and even promotion. And yet we cannot stop there because we must always look forward to the next proposal or project. And in the end, when our careers conclude, we may look back and wonder where we were going, where we had been, and why all those things were so

darned important. Planting taters and cotton might be necessary to sustain ourselves, but they may not mean much in the end.

Tote dat barge; Lij' dat bale! Git a little drunk an' you land in jail. It is so easy to be distracted by the details that come in the course of a day: the reports to write, committees on which to serve, and tests to monitor. An organization does not run by itself; there are maintenance activities that require so much time to be taken from the quest for our lifetime goals. Others depend on us, and we on others, to share the overhead demanded by our institutions to keep them running smoothly. It can be drudgery, grunt work, but it must be done. Avoid these responsibilities, and the burden falls on the shoulders of others. We don't land in jail, but we can provoke resentment.

Dat ol' man river; He mus' know sumpin'; But don't say nothin'; He jes' keeps on rollin' along. Here is where we diverge from Old man River. We can take our year's work, package it neatly into a 20 minute presentation, go to a meeting, talk and be talked to, and return to our work with renewed enthusiasm. What we have done was important to others, and we can revel in the reflection of our yearly progress. We can be encouraged to keep going, and perhaps have found new ideas and collaborations to sustain us. With new perspectives, and with refreshed confidence, we can be inspired to renew our efforts. We were pumped.

This is the way to rekindle the fire. This is how we sustain our efforts for the next year and beyond. This is renewal. Let Old Man River keep his thoughts to himself; let him roll silently along. What we do is important, gives meaning to our work, and reignites the spark of passion that had so many times been nearly extinguished by the grind of everyday existence.

Now if I could only stop humming that song ...