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SEVEN PIECES OF WISDOM ON CONSUMER RESEARCH FROM SANDY, QUARTER, TOMMY, MATTHEW, PAUL, DAVE, AND DOLLY:
A LOVE LETTER TO ACR

Morris B. Holbrook, Columbia University

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Once a year, my wife Sally and I devote a long evening to watching the Academy Awards Ceremony, a television extravaganza viewed by literally a billion people worldwide (Levy 1990). Typically, these Oscar Awards drag on for three or four hours amidst endless introductions, special announcements, sappy acceptance speeches, and bad jokes from some famous movie or TV personality like Bob Hope, Johnny Carson, Billy Crystal, or Whoopi Goldberg. It would be hard to argue that this program represents anything other than the lowest common denominator in schlock mass-oriented low-brow pop culture. Yet invariably by the end of the night, at least once or twice, I find myself sitting there with a little tear trickling down my cheek.

Why do I find the Academy Awards so moving? Why does Hollywood's crowd-pleasing celebration of itself tap some deep well of emotion within me? The answer, I think, is that I have always dimly sensed how nice it would feel to be honored in that sort of way.

By contrast with the motion-picture industry, the teaching profession rarely inspires one's bosses, colleagues, or audiences to say "good work" or "nice going" or "thank you." So receiving the ACR Fellows Award is probably the closest I shall ever come to winning an Oscar. And this occasion has made me extremely happy, proud, and grateful.

How do I plan to demonstrate this gratitude? The answer is that I want to share seven pieces of wisdom that people have been kind enough to bestow upon me over the years. I would like to take this opportunity to pass them along to others. For the most part, these pieces of wisdom do not come from books or marketing books or consumer-research journals. Rather, they come from the common fund of experience in the world around us and are part of the folk culture in which we live. All the more reason why someone should perhaps write them down before we forget their importance and they disappear forever in the sands of time.

ONE

The first piece of wisdom I wish to mention comes from my father Sandy and takes us back about forty years to Christmas 1954 when, at age eleven, more than anything else in the world I wanted my parents to give me a chemistry set. As I recall, the one I wanted was produced by a company called Gilbert and came in an eye-catching wooden box complete with all sorts of powders in little bottles, test tubes, beakers, a mortar-and-pestle, and even a small microscope. Using this marvelous equipment, a kid could while away many happy hours doing things like combining phenolphthalein with potassium chloride and watching the resulting solution turn bright red. I believe the whole thing cost about $39.95 and could be ordered direct from the F.A.O. Schwartz catalogue.

My mom bought the chemistry set that I wanted so badly and hid it in the guest-room closet upstairs. I know this because I used to devote the first weeks of December to inspecting the Christmas gifts that she had carefully hidden in this manner. So, as the twenty-fifth of December approached, I eagerly anticipated all the fun I was going to have with my new toy.

Meanwhile, my father Sandy had other plans. Sandy was a physician in Milwaukee and was therefore intimately familiar with beakers, flasks, test tubes, mortars, pestles, microscopes, and rare powders in little bottles. Apparently, Sandy took one look at the cleverly packaged chemistry set that my mother had purchased, did a quick mental calculation, and computed that its entire contents were worth about four dollars and sixty three cents. As a trained practitioner, Sandy knew that for $39.95 he could put together a vastly superior set of beakers,
Unbeknownst to me, Sandy copied down a list of each item in the chemistry set that I wanted so much, went to the nearest drug-supply house, and purchased better versions of everything in the package. Instead of little imitation beakers and flasks, he got nice big vessels of the type that a real pharmacist would use. Instead of tiny bottles of sulfur and acid, he got big jars reminiscent of what you would find in an apothecary. Instead of the tiny little microscope supplied with the toy chemistry set, he included a powerful one that my grandfather had used in his own medical practice.Cones that I have always kept, that has become an antique, and that is probably worth hundreds of dollars today.

But when Christmas morning arrived, when I put on my navy blue bathrobe and furry slippers to join my parents for the annual present-opening ceremony, and when I found this assemblage of chemicals and other laboratory gadgets, I felt an overwhelming sense of disappointment. True, I could easily see that every single item in my father's lovingly assembled collection was superior to the corresponding item in the toy chemistry set. But Sandy had failed to notice that there was just one crucial ingredient missing: namely, an instruction book.

For the next several months, I spent countless hours in the basement of our house systematically finding out what happens if you use your magnificent mortar and pestle to mix various chemicals together in various combinations and then heat them up. Mostly what happens is that you get some truly handsome smells. Often, these mixtures catch on fire or explode. Sometimes, they form such a tough crust on the inside wall of the test tube that you have to throw it away. Also, if you put a beaker under cold water while it is still hot, it will surely shatter. And if you try to ram some glass tubing through the hole in a rubber stopper without first warming the rubber and oiling the tubing, it will break and plunge into the base of your thumb and leave a scar that will prevent you from playing tenths on the piano even forty years later.

These, I suppose, were all valuable lessons. But the most important lesson by far lay in the significance of the difference between a chemistry set put together by a toy manufacturer and a collection of authentic chemicals and real laboratory equipment assembled by a genuine physician. The point, of course, is that Cliche my father's well-intentioned but somewhat misguided Christmas present: Cnescience does not come with an instruction book.

Only toy science comes with instructions included. In real science, you must figure out the rules for yourself and you must endure a lot of bad smells, dangerous explosions, crusty messes, broken glass, and bloody fingers. But if this is true, how should we scientists proceed? This question brings me to the second piece of wisdom that I would like to offer, one that comes directly from my cat.

Two

Before he recently died of old age, Quarter the Cat shared our New York apartment for eighteen years, during which time he enlightened us on a variety of topics, one of which bears directly on the question at hand and concerns the ways in which cats differ from dogs (Holbrook 1993a). Briefly, dogs are obedient; they aim to please their masters; they want to do what we want them to do; they wish to follow the rules. In short, they are DOGmatic. If there were an instruction book for pets, dogs would gladly live by those guidelines.

By contrast, cats are independent; they aim to please nobody but themselves; they really do not care what others think; they are indifferent to the whole concept of rules and regulations. In short, from the viewpoint of the dog fancier, they are CAtastrophic. If there were an instruction book for pets, cats would insist on ignoring it completely.

Quarter the Cat exemplified this attitude to a highly refined degree. If you called his name, Quarter absolutely would not come if you scolded Quarter for eating leaves from the dracaena on Monday, he would devote all his energies to eating some more leaves as soon as you left the apartment on Tuesday. If Quarter wanted to jump out of the fifth-floor window and live to tell about it, Quarter jumped and Quarter lived: both of which he did one evening when he was just a kitten.

So Cliche all cats! Quarter followed a simple but powerful philosophy that constitutes our second piece of wisdom: Do what you want. For consumer researchers as well as cats, this tenet has an immediate corollary: Satisfy your curiosity. Explore ceaselessly. Never stop poking your nose into anything that interests you. Show some respect for the first person who had the courage to eat an artichoke.

In the absence of an instruction book for science, these strike me as good principles for the consumer researcher to live by. Do what you think is important. Investigate the issues that matter to you. Insist on setting your own priorities. As the anthropologist Joseph Campbell put it in his conversations with Bill Moyers, "Follow Your Bliss" (Campbell and Moyers 1988). Or, as urged by Lorna Catford and Mike Ray, "Do What You Love, Love What You Do" (Catford and Ray 1991, p. 67).

But this advice immediately raises another tough question: namely, if we behave in this manner, how do we know when we have got it right? And this issue brings me to a third piece of wisdom, one given to me by my old piano teacher.

Three

Tommy Sheridan is a great jazz pianist with the technique of an Oscar Peterson, the refinement of a Bill Evans, and the audience rapport of a George Shearing. But, rather than seeking the limelight and traveling extensively, he has lived happily as a devoted family man in Milwaukee and has dedicated his life to helping fortunate students like me share his boundless enthusiasm for jazz. Tommy has taught by example. And his example has conveyed the importance of finding joy in what you do. Those who delight in their work will find that a conference proceedings Beth Hirschman and I edited fifteen years ago is dedicated to Tommy Sheridan (Hirschman and Holbrook 1981).

One day, I came to Tommy with a question about an unusual chord progression I had devised that seemed to depart from the rules for harmonic substitutions he had been showing me. I played him a little passage that contained my musical discovery, mentioned how it violated the accepted doctrine on permissible chord changes, and asked him if it was okay to do something like that. Tommy cheerfully replied, "It sounds good, doesn't it?" "Yes," I said, "I guess so." "Well," Tommy said, "If it sounds right, it is right."

Thirty-five years later, I found the same thought attributed to Duke Ellington: "If it sounds good, it is good" (quoted by Feather 1956/1958, ed. 1993, p. 61). The sociologist David Sudnow (1978, ed. 1993) uses similar logic to teach novices to play the piano, claiming that "no one...needs to read music to pick out a melody" because "people can hear their own bad notes" (Miller 1993, p. 9). And during a tense scene from the movie In the Line of Fire, John Malkovich asks Clint Eastwood to "name one thing that has any meaning in your life." Clint replies, "I play the piano."

But, beyond such anecdotal support, many consumer researchers will be reassured to find comparable views enunciated by one of our favorite neopositivistic philosophers of science, namely, the late Sir Karl Popper. In his intellectual autobiography entitled Unended Quest (Popper 1976) he just after explaining the principles of falsificationism and using these to discredit Freud, Marx, and some other major thinkers as "unscientific" (p. 52) Sir Karl announces that "in all this, speculation about music played a considerable part" (p. 53). He speaks feelingly of his admiration for Schubert, Brahms, and Bruckner and of his dislike for Wagner, Richard Strauss, and Schoenberg. He then launches into
In general, Popper (1976) suggests that his experience with music shaped his ideas on "the logic of discovery" or what he calls "an objectivist epistemology" (p. 55). More specifically, C.S. playing an instrument separates an "interpretation of the difference between Bach's and Beethoven's music" (p. 60), claiming that this comparison prompted his deepest insights into the nature of an objectivist epistemology: "It was to distinguish the two distinct attitudes of Bach and Beethoven towards their compositions that I introduced...the terms 'objective' and 'subjective'" (p. 61). Behemoth followed the subjective route because he "made music an instrument of self-expression" (p. 61). But Bach operated "like a scientist" to create "objective music" (p. 64).

We might wonder in what sense music could be "objective." Popper's answer hinges on his conception of falsifiability:

According to my objectivist theory...the really interesting function of the composer's emotions is not that they are to be expressed, but that they may be used to test the success of the fittingness or the impact of the (subjective) work: the composer may use himself as a kind of test body, and he may modify and rewrite his composition...when he is dissatisfied by his own reaction to it... he will in this way make use of his own reactions.Chis own "good taste" (p. 67).

Here, clearly, Popper assumes that Bach and other composers conjecture that something will sound good, write it down, play it, listen to it, and thereby test it on themselves. If they like it, they consider it corroborated or at least not falsified. In the words of Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel, "A musician cannot move others unless he, too, is moved" (quoted by Blum 1994, p. 25).

An exception that proves the rule occurred when jazz pianist Dave Brubeck studied briefly with the famed atonal composer Arnold Schoenberg. In Brubeck's words,

I brought him a piece of music I'd written... He said, "That's very good. Now go home and don't write anything like that again until you know why everything is there. Do you know now?" he asked. I said, "Isn't it reason enough if it sounds good?" He said, "No, you have to know why." That was my last lesson with Schoenberg (quoted by Lyons 1980, pp. 208-209).

Schoenberg himself had a complex theory of how music should be constructed, no matter how bad it sounded. Those who agree with his views should be strapped to a chair and forced to listen to his excruciatingly ugly Pierrot Lunaire all the way through.

Jule StonyCa more tuneful composer who wrote the music for such memorable songs as "Bye Bye Baby," "Guess I'll Hang My Tears Out To Dry," "The Things We Did Last Summer," "If I Fall In Love Too Easily," "Just In Time," "Make Someone Happy," "The Party's Over," and "Time After Time" passed away on September 20, 1994. The New York Times reported his death as a featured story on the front page and gave him six-and-a-half feet of column space (Blau 1994), followed by a special tribute in the Arts and Leisure section two Sundays later (Holden 1994). By contrast, when Sir Karl Popper had died three days earlier at the age of ninety-two, the Times had buried this news on page 54 in a brief notice that ran only twenty-one inches. The Times quoted Sir Karl as claiming that "next to music and art, science is the greatest, most beautiful and most enlightening achievement of the human spirit" (Associated Press 1994, p. 54). Next to music and art,... indeed.

In other words, to paraphrase Sir Karl, to echo Duke Ellington, to clarify David Sudnow, to extend Clint Eastwood, to honor C. P. E. Bach, to contradict Arnold Schoenberg in favor of Dave Brubeck or Jule Styne, and to ratify Tommy Sheridanif it sounds right, it is right.

FOUR

Suppose that you happen to agree with the three pieces of wisdom proposed so far. You realize that science has no instruction book. Therefore, you decide to do what you want. And you hope that you will recognize what is good by what sounds right. Further suppose that you happen to make such a discovery. The next question is what you should do with it.

Here, I wish to draw on a fourth piece of wisdom dispensed by someone whom I shall call The Unknown Respondent. This anonymous person participated in a survey conducted by my wife Sally for her doctoral dissertation in clinical social work. At the end of Sally's questionnaire, in a space designed for open-ended comments, The Unknown Respondent wrote, "This study sounds interesting. Don't hide your light under a bushel."

Neither Sally nor I had heard this expression before, but it certainly sounded like good advice to the social scientist. Once you think you have found some truth, don't be bashful. Get out there and talk about it. Present it at a conference. Send it to a journal. Publish it.

Nonetheless, we continued to wonder where the expression came from. One day, I ran across the same figure of speech in a 1949 movie called A Letter To Three Wives. So we knew that it did exist in the vernacular, at least back in the 1940s. We therefore continued to search for its source. Indeed, I developed the habit of asking almost everybody I ran into if they had ever heard the phrase or could tell me where it originated. No one had and no one could.

Finally, one of our more religious friends suggested that it sounded like something from The Bible. This hint sent me to a colleague whose husband has a degree in theology and who ultimately provided our answer. It turns out that the expression comes from a highly reputable source: C. S. Lewis, Jesus Christ. It appears in the midst of the passage from St. Matthew (Chapter 5) that recounts the famous Sermon on the Mount. Soon after the familiar part about the poor being blessed and the meek inheriting the earth, shortly before the well-known references to committing adultery in your heart and turning the other cheek, Christ says:

14 Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.
15 Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

He then follows with words so important that they have been incorporated into Christian church services all around the world:

16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

So this strikes me as excellent advice that we have acquired on good authority. Translated into the context of my present theme, Christ himself suggests that after we have given up on finding an instruction book for science, done what we want to do, and found something that sounds right to us, we should put it on a candlestick and let this light so shine before both men and women that they may see our good work. In other words, we should show it to the world by publishing it.
Paradoxically, following the advice of Christ can get you in a whole lot of trouble. Indeed, as He Himself found out, placing an emphasis on love is a relevant concept. Unintentionally, he echoed the thoughts of many great writers through the ages from Saint Thomas Aquinas to Dante to James Joyce to John Lennon and Paul McCartney. In short: "Love is all you need."

The aforementioned Sermon on the Mount clearly anticipated the inequities all you need. The teacher viewed Dave's closing salutation as a tragic flaw in his letter, but I have always considered it the letter's crowning glory. Dave's letter, which I once proposed an answer to this question (Holbrook 1989) by suggesting that we should emulate the example of J. S. Bach in anticipating Popper's advice by writing cantata after cantata after cantata until he finally got it right in Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott or A Mighty Fortress is Our God (Cantata #80) and in Herz und Mund und Leben with its wonderful chorale movement that we call "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" (Cantata #147). Or we should follow Mickey Mantle, on damaged knees, limping to the plate again and again to try for just one more home run. But, in an ironic sort of postmodern reflexivity, my comments on Bach and Mantle were themselves declared unpublishable. Also, since then, I have recalled that Bach borrowed the theme for A Mighty Fortress from Martin Luther, who had based it on a song that German students used to sing while getting drunk in the beer halls. And, amidst great publicity, my hero Mickey Mantle has spent part of the past year trying to dry out at the Betty Ford Clinic (Brady 1994). So the old question still haunts us: After losing the instruction book, doing what we want, getting it to sound right, trying to show it to the world, and suffering the inevitable slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, where can we turn for comfort?

I believe that a partial answer comes from an experience I had in Fifth Grade when our English teacher conducted some classes on business writing. As an exercise, we all completed an assignment in which we wrote away to large corporations requesting various sorts of free materials. Our teacher selected the letter by Dave Smith (fictitious name) as the best in the class except for one minor problem near the end:

"I am a student in the fifth-grade class at the Milwaukee Country Day School and am interested in your company and in the work that you are doing in the production of automobiles."

"I would be grateful if you could please send me your annual report and any other available information describing your business, such as relevant photographs or other free materials."

"Thank you in advance for your kind consideration."

Love,

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The sixth piece of wisdom surfaces in a recent commentary by Joshua Gans and George Shepherd (1994) entitled "How Are the Mighty Fallen: Rejected Classic Articles by Leading Economists." Gans and Shepherd chronicle stories told in self-reports collected from numerous economic scholars who have won the Nobel Prize or the John Bates Clark Medal but whose most influential papers have initially been rejected with amazing regularity and apparent injustice. These rejected economic geniuses include such prominent figures as Paul Samuelson (on general equilibrium models), James Tobin (on probit regression), Franco Modigliani (on his consumption function), Gary Becker (on competition and democracy), Robert May (on chaos theory), Robert Lucas (on rational expectations), Gerard Debreu (on technological change), Kenneth Arrow (on inventories), and George Akerlof (on the market for lemons). One noteworthy expression of outrage comes from James March:

I have certainly had articles rejected.... I recall on one occasion a referee filing a two paragraph commentary...suggesting (in the first paragraph) that the key theorem involved was trivially obvious and (in the second paragraph) that it was wrong. I thought on the whole that he ought to choose (quoted by Gans and Shepherd 1994, p. 174).

The point is that even masterpieces by Nobel laureates routinely get trashed in the review process. Hence, our fifth piece of wisdom is clearly articulated by Paul Samuelson:

"Yes, journals have rejected papers of mine, some of them later regarded as "classics."... the quality of papers of mine at first rejected is not less than the quality of papers accepted at once (quoted by Gans and Shepherd 1994, pp. 165-166)."

SIX

How, one might ask, can we possibly find happiness in a world where reviewers, editors, and publishers constantly torment us with the threat of rejection? I once proposed an answer to this question (Holbrook 1989) by suggesting that we should emulate the example of J. S. Bach in anticipating Popper's advice by writing cantata after cantata after cantata until he finally got it right in Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott or A Mighty Fortress is Our God (Cantata #80) and in Herz und Mund und Leben with its wonderful chorale movement that we call "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" (Cantata #147). Or we should follow Mickey Mantle, on damaged knees, limping to the plate again and again to try for just one more home run. But, in an ironic sort of postmodern reflexivity, my comments on Bach and Mantle were themselves declared unpublishable. Also, since then, I have recalled that Bach borrowed the theme for A Mighty Fortress from Martin Luther, who had based it on a song that German students used to sing while getting drunk in the beer halls. And, amidst great publicity, my hero Mickey Mantle has spent part of the past year trying to dry out at the Betty Ford Clinic (Brady 1994). So the old question still haunts us: After losing the instruction book, doing what we want, getting it to sound right, trying to show it to the world, and suffering the inevitable slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, where can we turn for comfort?

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"Dear Sirs [remember this was 1953],

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I would be grateful if you could please send me your annual report and any other available information describing your business, such as relevant photographs or other free materials.

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The aforementioned Sermon on the Mount clearly anticipated the inequities of the review process when it emphasized this sixth piece of wisdom:

"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.

Paradoxically, following the advice of Christ can get you in a whole lot of trouble. Indeed, as He Himself found out, placing an emphasis on..."
Some people probably think that all this sounds rather sentimental. Indeed, sentiments, emotions, or feelings opposed to mere sentimentality pervade consumption experiences in ways that lie very close to my heart as a consumer researcher. For example, recent work with Robert Schindler has focused on the role of nostalgia in consumer behavior. And nostalgia depends at least partly on sentiment in the form of a bittersweet longing for the past (Holbrook 1993b; Holbrook and Schindler 1991, 1994). These intertwined themes of love, sentiment, and nostalgia return, circle-like, to the place where I began—namely, to a concern for awards ceremonies in general and for the Oscars, Emmys, Grammys, and ACR Fellows Awards in particular. Surely, we have all noticed how the phenomenon of nostalgia has surfaced in our contemporary popular culture, especially at some of the recent Grammy Award celebrations (Holbrook 1993c).

A couple of years ago, Natalie Cole revived an old song called "Unforgettable" that her father Nat had first recorded in 1951. Ms. Cole's new performances of this and other nostalgic favorites won a total of seven Grammy Awards in 1992, including the three Grammys for record, song, and album of the year (Pareles 1994).

Something similar happened again this year when Whitney Houston reached back to a song written and recorded by Dolly Parton in 1974. Ms. Houston included it in the soundtrack for her film The Bodyguard, which promptly became the best-selling movie soundtrack of all time, the most popular recording of 1993 (ten million copies sold), and winner of the 1994 Grammy Award for album of the year, with Whitney's performance of Dolly's old song also receiving Grammys for best female pop vocal and record of the year (Pareles 1994).

To conclude by returning to my opening theme and its connection with the awards ceremonies, the words of Dolly Parton's song convey my gratitude for the Fellows Award, express how I feel toward my friends at ACR, and reflect what I now offer as my seventh, final, and most personal piece of wisdom. To quote Dolly:

I hope life treats you kind.

And I hope you have all you dreamed of.

And I wish you joy and happiness.

But, above all this, I wish you love.

And...

Well, you all know the rest.

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His research has covered a wide variety of topics in marketing, consumer behavior, and related areas with a special focus on issues concerning communication in general and aesthetics, semiotics, hermeneutics, art, entertainment, music, jazz, motion pictures, nostalgia, animal companions, and stereotyping in particular.Â Introduction: The Esthetic Imperative in Consumer Research. Morris B. Holbrook. Progress and Problems in Research on Consumer Esthetics. Concepts from the Philosophy and Psychology of Art. Morris B. Holbrook and Robert B. Zirlin.Â Seven Routes to Facilitating the Semiological Interpretation of Consumption Symbolism and Marketing Imagery in Works of Art: Some Tips for Wildcats. Morris B. Holbrook, Lauren G. Block and Gavan J. Fitzsimons. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians provides us with excellent insight into the life of the early Christian Church in the middle of the first century AD. Paul's reflection on the Church as the Christian community of believers begins in First Corinthians, as he calls for harmony within the community (1:10).Â 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.