

The Guy with the Suspenders

In keeping with the 2009 20th anniversary theme, the Anthony Byrne Education Chair offers some thoughts on one of Pinnacle's Originals.

The guy with the suspenders. That's the enduring image and most common response when I ask someone what they remember about Tony Byrne. Not the bogus twenty dollar clip-on suspenders. The real deal, braced by buttons inside the trousers, and a crisp white shirt that tapered down so precisely there was none of the billowing at the waist so common in the mid 80's, when everyone this side of Gordon Gecko sported suspenders, but left out the custom tailoring. On the sleeves of the French cuffs, set off by shiny silver cufflinks, were the letters ARB. He signed everything "ARB", and I think he preferred Anthony, but the first "speaker's" lesson I learned from him was that recruiters will decide what they will take from you and what they will not, what is true and what is false, what they will give and what they will withhold as an audience, and they reserve the right to call you what they will, and to a generation of recruiters, he was Tony.


His look was important. It matched his message, it sprang from the marrow of his being, a frenetic energy. It was only right for this whirling dervish to be lean, for his thick black hair to be impervious to elements like wind or heat. His clothes bespoke money. At the time, before business casual, he was wearing suits that cost three times what his competitors wore, and I got the message loud and clear. "There is money to be made. I will show you how. That is why I look better than you, I am sharper than you. Follow me." As a theatre major, it always drove me crazy how every other speaker would stand at a podium, read from notes, and only occasionally have the courage to veer from the script and move toward the audience. When they did, they held the microphone like a bad lounge act, and kept looking behind them to see where the long black cord was so they wouldn't fall and really embarrass themselves. Tony's vibe could not be contained. He was the first to use a wireless lavalier, he would prowl around the stage, he would ask you questions by pointing to you, and if you waited a millisecond he would move off of you to someone one else, but somehow did it without making you feel bad. He just couldn't wait. While I always thought there were a whole lot more than "30 steps to a placement" (his ground breaking video series), I was astonished at his economy of speech, his sense of urgency in a session. There was only room for substance!! The rest is conversation! Many speakers I have heard have great substance, others are wildly entertaining, but Tony had a quality very rare: he made you want to be better. You felt guilty about being tired when you heard him. Some speakers talk down to their audience. Tony was on a mission to lift them up.

Danny Cahill
Tony Byrne Chair



I never knew Tony. I had several meals with him and chatted with him at a dozen rubber chicken affairs, but he shared very little about himself. We started badly. I wasn't quite 30 when we first did a panel together at the New England conference. The panel took questions from the audience and we were asked, "You know when you're a kid and you find out there's no Santa? How do you know when to tell a client there is no way you can fill the job?" Tony and Ginger Thaxton gave detailed and expansive answers, and then I was handed the mike and I said, "Wait, go back, what do you mean there's no Santa?," and everyone laughed, and I noticed Tony close his eyes for a second, almost recoiling at my lack of professionalism. And as is so often the case with those who influence us, at first we want to be like them, and then later, they give us a greater gift: we learn from them what we don't want to be, we form our own styles. Tony was by no means a dour guy, and he had wit, but he wasn't funny, and he didn't care to be

funny on stage. I felt people learned more when they were entertained. I wanted to match Tony's energy but saw no point in seminars without humor. (I'm not sure I succeeded, but I knew I was making progress when the great Richie Harris, one of the planet's funniest people, said to me after a seminar, "How can you be funny without swearing? I don't get it!") Beyond stylistic concerns about being funny, Tony kept a distance from his audience. When he passed at far too young an age, despite having heard all his tapes and having heard him at conferences and manager retreats, I had no idea whether he was married or not, whether or not he had children, where he lived, how he spent his down time. No clue. This was remarkable, since the opposite approach seemed natural to me. Speaking, like writing, was cathartic to me, and comparing my latest divorce to a fall out, telling a crowd about my negotiation with my Mom on her deathbed, or in general talking about my real family, and my recruiters, by name and adventure, was the only way I could stay interested in talking about a business process that frankly is not rocket science. Maybe Tony understood this could backfire on me. Before the slow deathmarch of my last marriage, I went around the country telling my audiences how my wife and I were trying to have a baby. I had some very funny material comparing trying to make placements to trying to conceive ("when it doubt, send them out, something will stick!"), I never thought of the pain I would feel when I would come back to that town and that audience after getting divorced and having someone say to me, "So, did you guys have a baby?" Tony would have thought I was an alien to share such things. But he was always friendly to me and encouraged me. He had none of the "backbiting" DNA so common among speakers. If you were good and audiences liked you, he showed you respect.

ne of the lessons Tony taught me is one I keep working on. Late in his career, late in his life, Tony scared me. I was speaking after him at a conference, hadn't seen him in a few years, and ducked in to watch the first few minutes of his gig. He was gaunt, thinner than I had ever seen him. He had taken to wearing reading glasses that hung from his nose in a professorial way. And he looked exhausted in the way, as I now know too well, only travel can exhaust you. Until you have crisscrossed the country, arrived late, missed a meal, been unable to sleep and awakened to do the exact same eight-hour presentation you have done for four consecutive days, and are expected to be the brightest and happiest guy in the room, you'll never know this kind of tired. He performed well enough, such was his willpower, but something fundamental was missing, something had been extinguished. I wanted to call a time out, walk up to him, put my arm around him, get him out of there, get him a meal and a few day's rest, help him somehow. But it was not my place.

Tony's last gift to me has been a hard one to accept, but it has helped immensely. I think its fair to say I used to take myself too seriously. My impact, my legacy...oh come on. Puh leeze! Tony was as big as they got. He changed the way speakers perform, he helped found Pinnacle, he revamped how speakers sell product, and a decade before Recruiter Earth, he had video "bites" of pinnacle recruiters sharing their techniques. And yet, outside of the rarefied air of Pinnacle, most of this is lost. I used to get mad when some friend would tell me they were at a conference where some story or script or idea of mine was used without attribution. My own recruiters can sometimes come back from a Pinnacle meeting and tell me they heard something wise from a member, and I rub my eyes and show them the tape I made years ago. When I quote another speaker, be it Jen Lambert or Peter Leffkowitz or a writer like Malcom Gladwell, I always give attribution, but I have learned now that, oftentimes, if your impact was real, they don't remember who said it; it has become part of their internal lexicon. That's great!! But when I quote Tony outside of Pinnacle, hardly anyone in the audience remembers him. Tony's gift is that I know now that in the end what matters is who you love, how you treat people, and the track record of kindness you show. That is the only true and lasting legacy.

Just two days ago, I hired Scott. 24 years old. Raring to go. A gangly puppy. He had done his research on me and had already decided he wanted to be a recruiter. When I came out into the lobby to greet him, his palms were sweaty, his voice quivering. "I just want you to know," he started, having no doubt rehearsed this in the car all the way to the office, "I plan on being the next Danny Cahill."

Without the influence of Tony Byrne, I might have been angered. I might have pointed out that the last Danny Cahill was still very much in play, young man. But I smiled ruefully.

"It's about damn time." ▲
