

# The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



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My Sicilian grandfather's best friend was a fig tree that he buried in his garden every fall. In preparation for the often mild but sometimes cold New Jersey winters, he would uproot his beloved fruit-bearing *Ficus carica*, dig it out carefully, lay it flat, and wrap it in a heavily insulated packaging of varied materials: roofing paper and towels or old cloth and newspaper. It was a peculiar ritual to many of us, especially the children, but I learned later in life that this was a common practice, especially among southern Italian and Sicilian immigrants who landed in America and called New Jersey their home.

The fig tree stood proudly, growing gradually taller, bearing flower and fruit. Among those of us who actually liked the taste of a sweet, pulpy, and red-fleshed fig, we shared in its bounty. The tree went through its cycles, standing quietly through the spring and summer, there by my grandfather's side as he hosted friends, extended family, and neighbors. It stood there as he grilled green and yellow peppers or burnt hamburgers, while captivating his guests in ardent, impassioned debates punctuated by gesticulated clarity. And when nobody was around, the tree was still his quiet companion, waiting for the cooler autumn temperatures to prompt my grandfather into action and prepare it for another round of wrapping and burial.

It gave him comfort, like the predictable nature of a well-tended garden or orderly household. He scorned fireplaces, unlocked doors, open windows, troublesome pets, or anything that would seemingly waste money or imperil his

family. He liked fences, concrete pavement, short-cut lawns, and over-clipped hedges—as if the *arborvitae* and *thuja* bushes were the head of some marine recruit he liked to buzz. He preferred steadiness and fairness; he wanted people to get along and have consistency, even while his own inclinations could be roused by neighborly misunderstandings, local political slights, or anything that disordered the universe of an orderly mind.



*Grandpa* was most happy when he worked with his hands and had been a carpenter back in his hometown. A man of modest height and stature, whose family had for generations worked the dry earth of southern Sicily, he found the postwar economy of America to be far more promising. He braved a trek north across the rocky Sicilian landscape to Palermo, where he departed for a two-week passage on the ocean liner *Vulcania* via Cannes, Barcelona (photo above), and Halifax, before landing in New York. Taking only one child—my father—he left his wife and younger son back in Sicily, waiting two years to save up enough to pay for their passage. They came on the *Saturnia*, the sister ship among a fleet of immigrant vessels that included the *Andrea Doria*, which sank only months after my uncle and grandmother arrived in New York.

Back in Sicily, my grandfather had learned how to be *un falegname* or joiner from his older brother in the small town of Santa Croce Camerina di Ragusa, on the southern coast of the island. His own skills grew and his talents attracted the notable and commoner alike. He

built tables, chairs, cabinets, and wooden frames; carved pews, church doors, and caskets; and created everything from foot stools to axe handles. He even fashioned his own tools and worked for the local nuns and priests building whatever they needed. Among the last things he made before leaving Sicily were two suitcases—sturdy, wooden, and heavy—that he painted a light green, and used to carry his belongings when he emigrated to the United States.

When he came to America with my 11-year-old father in tow, my grandfather scolded him for wanting “dirty water” (it was in fact a Coke, the first he’d ever seen). He started work immediately in a cabinet factory near Paterson, NJ employing his skills as a carpenter, but soon found that the tasks were not the same as what he had done back in Sicily. Indeed, the anonymous labors of an American factory in the 1950s didn’t equate to carving church doors or building fine furniture for his friends and neighbors back home. He turned to work in a dye factory, where he’d spend hours on end stretching thousands of yards of dyed fabric across natural gas drying troughs, which sprayed the gaseous poisons into an unventilated work hall, causing him and the other workers to become regularly ill. He moved on again, bought a home, and took a job in facilities at a nearby public school. My grandmother also held various jobs, taking breaks to raise my aunt and uncle and run a tight ship around the house. In her later years, she had mistakenly retired a few months shy of being able to collect a full pension, due to some misinformation and union politics. Despite this she had a boundless spirit of giving to all of us in her home. Both of my grandparents worked harder than anyone I’ve ever known, but often struggled within a system that was not always clear, and not always fair—especially to immigrants.

When my grandfather finally retired, he retreated to the comfort of the familial spaces he knew best, where he would spend the next

two decades reclining in his TV room lounge chair watching reruns of *Archie Bunker*, or presiding at the family dinner table feasting on spaghetti and lamb pies, or wandering in his back yard, admiring his vegetable garden and intermittently resting in the shade of a sycamore tree. He would water his tomatoes, peppers, and basil, while reminiscing about life in the old country, doling out pearls of grandfatherly wisdom, or contending with problems he faced with his extended family and friends. His brothers and sisters and confidantes, who regularly shared in his banter, all seemed to die off before him—they had names like *Nino*, *Giuseppe*, and *Ralph*, but were more often called by their occupations: *the barber*, *the shoemaker*, *the baker*. Yet, while his visitors dwindled and he had fewer people to share in the memories of old, his fig tree remained, unmoved—except in winter.

Giovanni—or John, as his Anglo and Serbian neighbors alike called him—was an earnest, no nonsense man, often a tyrannical spirit, who showed moments of warmth and care amid his nervous tempestuousness. He locked doors with two latches and three bolts, not knowing who was in the neighborhood at night. He cautioned us not to walk or ride bikes beyond the nearest curb. And he reprimanded us for wasting money, while generously handing out a \$5 or \$10 bill if we behaved well. He was kind and thoughtful and purposeful with his advice and paternal instinct to maintain a certain order in a world that was still quite foreign to the Sicily he grew up in during Mussolini’s reign. I still remember going to the local Sicilian club in his neighborhood and meeting men who were recruits in Italy’s military back in the 1920s and 30s. At one dinner, an old man said to an older man: “Hey, Giuseppe!—that’s you in the *black shirt*?” (referring to members of the *fascisti* gendarmerie) to which the older man retorted, hands askew: “Like I had a choice!” America in the 1980s was a distant and paradoxical place in contrast to the memories of that earlier time.

Decades later, I now look upon my grandfather's retirement, his later years, and especially his attention to his home, garden, and fig tree as a blend of social, cultural, and even political ritual—the last of these, I'm sure he'd vehemently deny, because he hated politics with a Mediterranean passion, yet lived every day in the politics of home, street, village, county, state, and country. Our surroundings demand our political-ness, because where there is one other person, there is politics. More than any other saying, he repeated to us “stay out of politics.” He would have known best—he lived through the riotous days of the First World War as a child; of relatives going off to fight in Ethiopia (“Abyssinia”) for Italian conquests; of mandatory military enlistment and service; of the stress and tumult of a Fascist government; of his own town being occupied by the Germans, bombed by the Allies, and then overrun by tanks the same year he was married. Those things stick in a person's memory long after they happen. And yet the slightest activities or deviations from normalcy in a new land could penetrate the subtle, greying remembrances of disruption in ways that most of us today cannot imagine. Who really knows what went through his mind on those quiet, solitary afternoons, while he sat next to his fig tree?

Today we live in our own worlds of imagination and conflict; our own spaces of quiet and noise; our own territories of safety and fear. We are beset with contradictions brought on by both the pandemic *and* the uncertain and often incendiary narratives that circulate in cyberspace and the media. These create vague senses of self and society, where notions of community-mindedness and collaborative hope seem all but dim lights in the arsenal of collective human repair. It's hard even to wonder if we can compare today with a century ago, or even half a century ago, since the world feels like it has changed so



dramatically. And yet, we seek in our own familial ways the connections to our ancestors, our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, to find meaning in the similarities of times past. Whether this is possible or not is less of a matter, but if it actually gives us solace and even-temperedness, then perhaps it is worth having a respite and grounding in the meanings of our own lives for today, tomorrow, and the future. The exercise of remembering may be the balm our souls need.

I have a vague memory of being anxious or fearful of my summer sojourns to grandpa's house for those two weeks each year. It was about a hundred miles south of my hometown and the comfort of my parents' embrace. My grandfather's home was rule-laden and restrictive. Yet there were surprising moments of joy and freedom like being able to work beside him in his garage. He often puttered around fixing one broken latch or loose hinge or door panel with his tools, cutting wood or sanding a board for a shelf. While toiling at his own pace, he gave me a bucket of wood scraps, nails, and a hammer to build what I wanted. And invariably it was a matchbox car ramp, racetrack, or garage—play things that were easily bought in a *Kay-Bee's* or local mall. But building such creations had far greater value than anything I could have acquired in a fancy toyshop. Buying some plastic junk was no surrogate for challenging my imagination into creating things with my own hands out of mismatched surplus wood or giving me the satisfaction of having spent an afternoon with my old grandfather. I admired my handiwork for the rest of the summer, proudly showing my parents the fruits of my labor upon returning home. A memory like this is one I'll always cherish and a memory I wouldn't exchange for a million dollars. (Photo: the author and his younger brother with their grandfather in New Jersey, 1979).

Grandpa taught me many things—like looking at the limitations of circumstances and considering how to be creative and balanced within those spaces of limitation. He taught me patience and level-headedness, even while our own nature fueled deeply held passions that made us burn hot toward personal injustices one moment, while embracing and showing profound love and affection an instant later. These tempers surely reside in the same cerebral and cardiac territories. He taught me that if you work hard, get along, and focus, stay steady and consistent with resolve, you can get ahead and do well for yourself and your family. He also taught me that even when you think you can control things within your immediate environments, you really can't control everything. The world, like your family, friends, and neighbors, will constantly surprise you, as much as you think you know them and your surroundings. This is both a blessing and a curse. But I also think there was a subtle message in his own way of doing things, in those rituals of sameness and constancy, which provided normalcy and comfort to him. When he went to the Catholic Church or made regular visits to the mausoleum, these were consistencies of his spirit that kept him grounded amid those things he could not control. When he made the rounds to see the dozens of friends and families he had lost, pausing and kissing his hand and placing that palm upon the marble face of each crypt, he saw this ritual as part of his duty, a commission from his upbringing to demonstrate respect to others until the day you die.

It was captivating as a child, a curiosity that we would snicker at and clearly misunderstand. But today, we barely have such rituals, and I can't say I've ever seen similar behaviors in my adulthood anywhere since in the United States. At any moment we can look around and see countless heads bent down in the prayerless devotions to limitless screen times, self-absorbed sycophancy, and reclusive solipsism.

We fret over digital isolation, peer pressure, FOMO (aka "Fear of Missing Out"), and other symptoms of the postmodern techno-verse. We don't think as often of our friends or family, living or dead, because we are so busy and often overwhelmed. Indeed, our gardens are empty. Our fig trees are gone. Perhaps the new ritual is chaos. We do as we wish, we focus more on ourselves than our communities, we take and leave jobs at the drop of a hat, we move across country on whims, we reinvent ourselves to the stare of social media feeds. These may not be all *bad* things, but they are complexities that cause rifts among the generations, anxiety among young and old alike, and uncertainty across borders and continents. The immediacy of technology, communication, and media today are light years ahead of what we knew and experienced in the 1990s, when my grandfather died. The locks that secured his home then are useless against the countless uncertain challenges, misinformation, and threats that exist in our world today.

Yet, perhaps we ought to pause now and again to think what is in our real or metaphorical gardens? What is our constant companion of resolve and strength? What keeps us going amid conflict and uncertainty? The world feels far smaller, faster, and more hectic today, and because of this, we tend to not be able to discern our limits or know when to breathe and find a grounded consistency that keeps us centered. We all should have something—our own personal fig tree—to give us our bearing, to help stay the course, and to give comfort in finding hope among the weeds. Maybe today is the day to plant our own fig tree.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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