

Old Friends, A Reminiscence of Arthur Singer

Old Friends (1981), lyrics and music by Stephen Sondheim

Hey, old friend
Are you okay, old friend?
What do you say, old friend?
Are we or are we unique?

Time goes by
Everything else keeps changing
You and I
We get continued next week

Most friends fade
Or they don't make the grade
New ones are quickly made
And in a pinch, sure, they'll do

But us, old friend
What's to discuss, old friend?
Here's to us
Who's like us?
Damn few

So, old friend
Fill me in slow, old friend
Start from hello, old friend
I want the when, where, and how
Old friends
Do tend to become old habit
Never knew
How much I missed you till now

Most friends fade
Or they don't make the grade
New ones are quickly made
Some of them worth something, too
But us, old friends
What's to discuss, old friends

Tell you something
Good friends point out your lies
Whereas old friends live and let live
Good friends like and advise
Whereas old friends love and forgive
And old friends let you go your own way
Let you find your own way

New friends pour
Through the revolving door
Maybe there's one that's more
If you find one, that'll do
But us, old friends
What's to discuss, old friends?

Most friends fade
Or they don't make the grade
New ones are quickly made
Perfect as long as they're new

But us, old friends
What's to discuss, old friends?
Here's to us
Who's like us?
Damn few

Arthur Louis Singer, Jr. attended Williams College with the composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, a most rewarding fact of Art's life. Art appreciated Sondheim early and grew to venerate him for his music and insights into relationships, cultures, and the creative process. Art lived and thrived inside a club he created of people whom he admired and liked, and these people were given life membership. They were Old Friends. Art's world consisted of these friends, his family, and then the rest of the world. Absorbed by his friends and family, the rest of the world mattered mainly when news reached him about which he felt he might do something. Art tagged many people in the wide world as "ciphers," meaning a zero. These others weren't less than zero, simply zero, another hundred people who got off of the train.

A college basketball player and a big sports fan, Art himself easily belonged as a team or club member. But he did not much like organizations larger than a football team. Above thirty to forty people, camaraderie becomes scripted. Not symphony orchestras but jazz bands, both virtuoso and flexible, provided the Singer model for human organization. He played in a jazz band. He loved the plays of his Old Friend A.R. "Pete" Gurney, distinguished by small casts.

Art wanted friendship to be transitive. If Art as person B also liked person A and person C, then A and C should like each other, and he often experimented with connections but also realized that friendship is often intransitive and comfortably kept his own memberships in distinct clubs concerned, for example, with public understanding of science and technology, race relations, and American history.

A club Art especially liked was the New York Giants baseball team, later San Francisco. Bobby Thomson's 1951 Shot Heard Round the World that caused the Giants to win the pennant over the Brooklyn Dodgers topped Art's list of the great moments of the 20th century. Perhaps the Giants' progressive attitude toward race and their integrated fan base contributed to his loyalty to the team. After the ecstasy of the World Series sweep of the Cleveland Indians in 1954 came the frustrating losses in 1962, 1989, and 2002. Fortunately, longevity brought the trio of victories in 2010, 2012, and 2014. Art found reasons to travel to San Francisco during the baseball season.

And to Arizona for spring training, where his Old Friend, novelist Mark Harris lived the last twenty or so years of his life. Mark authored *Bang the Drum Slowly* and other excellent novels about baseball. Mark died of Alzheimer's as did Art's closest of all the Old Friends, Stephen White. Steve died in 1993, and I cannot count the number of times Art told me he wished I had gotten to know Steve. Steve's own friends included Groucho Marx. Steve managed to get Groucho to visit the offices in Rockefeller Center of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, whose checkbook Art used to improve the fortunes of worthy people and projects from 1969 to 1994, and Art regarded this as akin to a Papal visit, and an ineffable loss when the Foundation moved in 2012. Art had also inherited the actual desk of Alfred P. Sloan and used that cheerfully during his tenure. I think the desk was discarded in 2012.

Channeling Art, Steve authored a "Deadly Serious Guide for Foundation Officers" which successfully reduces philanthropy to a dozen double-spaced pages. Art would share this with the few other foundation officers whom he thought worthy of Steve's writing.

Usually cheerful, Art became a manic master-of-the-Universe when on a major quest, the last of which was to launch a MacArthur Foundation program on neuroscience and the law, addressing questions such as the mentally ill behind bars and how to use brain scans as evidence in courtrooms. Art had no tolerance for bureaucracy and administration. He had high confidence in his own judgment, bolstered by the opinions of a few Old Friends, who often had good credentials too, as Nobel Prize winners or presidents of prestigious universities. The credentials did not cause but may have followed from election as an Old Friend.

Notwithstanding fruitful associations with MIT, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Sloan, and others, Art was not an institution builder. While he respected the institutions in which the people he supported and cheered worked, his interest was the individual, not the university or think-tank or publishing house or magazine. These institutions sensibly employed his Old Friends, whose networks made the institutions, not vice versa. Great teams are inherently ephemeral.

Art liked to circumvent procedures and act quicker than apparently possible. He lacked patience for governance and administration and so did not sustain work as an executive or manager. The yin to Art's yang was his Old Friend Jonathan Fanton, who could methodically operate The System, and with whom Art formed an effective doubles team numerous times. Art made quick judgments, about writing (he loved to read) and also visually (he was an accomplished photographer). The vignettes that form his short 2010 memoir, *So Easy to Forget, So Hard to Remember* capture the joys of being an impulsive man-in-full.

While I had benefited from a couple of Sloan grants that Art arranged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we first met at a workshop of the US National Academy of Engineering in Woods Hole in the summer of 1986. In 1980 Art and Steve White incubated a program called the New Liberal Arts in which they argued that the tools of technology--computing, quantitative reasoning, and applied mathematics--deserve a central place in liberal education, and supported more than 20 liberal arts colleges to experiment in this direction. Art reported on the meager progress. Now we see in such colleges a flourishing, for example, of "digital humanities."

In 1989 my main place of work shifted from Washington DC to The Rockefeller University in New York City, where Art and I had (merely) good friends in common. I needed funds to grow my Program for the Human Environment and was naturally glad to know a VP of the Sloan Foundation. We started having

lunches early in 1994, and the topics more often were Sondheim and baseball than environmental science and technology. Instead of becoming a grantee, I became an Old Friend (Steve White had left a big gap). Art with Sloan President Ralph Gomory then recruited me to help manage some Sloan basic science programs, which I did through 2011. For several years Art, who retired at the end of 1994 but continued to advise, and I shared a small 25th floor office with a perfect view of the Rockefeller Center skating rink. Preferring to enter Sloan through a side door, he would appear suddenly and always had good air about him. He was literally debonair.

As I came to know Art better, I saw that the manic periods were offset by periods of sadness, sometimes related to the health of his children, but perhaps inevitable in someone with sustained highs. Thousands of grateful people he had helped through philanthropy and other means, the objective legacies of public broadcasting and prize-winning books and tv programs, and even the assurances of Old Friends never fully convinced him. As Groucho Marx wrote in his letter of resignation to the Friars' Club: "I don't want to belong to any club that would accept me as one of its members." Maybe many altar boys who do not become priests feel this way. Of course, Steve White's Deadly Serious Guide cautions foundation officers to trust no one – except Old Friends.

Apart from a taste for first-class hotels in San Francisco and Miami Beach, Art lived modestly. While he had traveled to Cuba, India, and Europe early in his career, America interested him most, its news and cultures and landscapes, especially a leafy autumn weekend in Vermont. He cared little about food, was not acquisitive, and for decades contentedly rode the commuter railway an hour each day each way to Westport CT accompanied by books and newspapers. He liked the view of the water of Long Island Sound from a comfortable chair in his living room and the infinite security afforded by his wife Cris.

Art's creativity and fidelity spanned Willie Mays and Johnny Antonelli in 1954 to Buster Posey and Tim Lincecum in 2010 and beyond. That merits the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, or wherever Old Friends win honors.