

UP

One Man's Journey to Feminism

Peter W. Pruyn

he / him / his*

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Cover photo: 7,500 feet over Galveston Bay early on a Saturday morning. ©2020 Peter W. Pruyne.

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Content warning:
Contains descriptions of physical and emotional violence

* Pronounced “prine”. He/him/his: This is the set of pronouns I ask others to use when referring to me. People who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming may use pronouns that do not conform to binary male/female gender categorizations, such as “they, them, theirs.”

12: Gratitude

*“Who is wise? The person who learns from all people.
Who is mighty? The person who exercises self-control.
Who is wealthy? The person who rejoices in his or her portion.”*
— Pirkei Avot, the Talmud

After I’d turned 50—a year before beginning this memoir—I made a commitment to write letters of gratitude to those who had helped me along the way. Here I will share five of those letters.

Letter to Doug

November 23, 2014

Dear Doug,

I’m guessing that my name might have caused a double-take, so allow me to remind you: I was a freshman member of your Bravo Flight at Cornell in the fall of 1985. Since leaving Cornell (like you, I majored in C.S.), my life has taken me many places (I did not continue in AFROTC after my sophomore year). But the end result is that I am now a psychotherapist living in Cambridge, MA.

I am writing because something I’m working on recently made me realize the significance of a seemingly small act of kindness that you once extended to me.

The scene was Detachment skit day, and I took it upon myself to provide an over-the-top impersonation of the cocky National Guard A-10 pilot from Syracuse who was our guest speaker earlier that year. I don’t remember much of what I said, but I think I used a cowboy hat and an exaggerated southern accent. What I do remember is that, much to my surprise, I brought down the house. And I remember something else, too. After the skits were over and the audience was milling about, you came down to the front of the auditorium where I was still in costume, walked directly up to me, extended your hand, and said in your memorable accent, “Good jawb, Petuh!”

The thing that I am currently working on that prompted me to reflect on this moment is...myself. As I would only be able to name twenty years after that moment, I am a child of an alcoholic. Like many so-called “adult children,” my father was not equipped to provide me the role-modeling and coaching that I needed. To compensate, over my life I tried to fill that void with other male voices. I am writing you today to let you know that your brief affirmation so many years ago has been my go-to self-coaching mantra *my entire life*. To this day, when I finish my 3-mile run Sunday mornings, I say to myself, “Good jawb, Petuh!” When I leave a job interview in which I feel I did well, I whisper to myself, “Good jawb, Petuh!” When I find a creative mechanical fix for my bicycle, I say, “Good jawb, Petuh!”

These reflections have prompted me to realize how you never know how just the right affirmation at just the right moment can make a permanent difference in someone else's life. It was then that it occurred to me that there was no reason that you couldn't know.

In the course of finding out where you currently live, I found out something else. I couldn't help but notice from your LinkedIn profile what appears to be a personal choice on your part to do for others what you did for me. It appears that, having had your fill of a highly successful technical career, you have chosen to create a second chapter in your professional life by making a difference in the lives of kids who need such a difference as a math teacher. No doubt you will succeed in supporting them as you did me. But as someone who was also once a teacher, I feel in a place to be able to take some of the pressure off you to make a difference by simply saying: you already have.

I can't think of a more fitting way to say thank you than by now being in a position to say, "Good jawb, Doug!"

With gratitude and respect,

From: Doug [REDACTED]
Date: December 10, 2014 9:57:31 PM EST
To: Peter Pruyn
Subject: Good lettah, Petuh!

Peter,

I got your letter last week. The school secretary had to call my attention to it, as I rarely get any mail at school. When I quickly glanced at the envelope, I thought it might be someone looking for a job opportunity or needing a networking contact.

You really took me back when I read it!

Your writing refreshed my memory of the A-10 pilot visiting. And I do now remember him as being kind of cocky. I only have a vague recollection of your skit, and to be honest, I don't remember congratulating you on your performance. But I guess my recollection of it is not the point. It's that my congratulations made an impression on you and has served you all these years.

You hit the nail on the head when you wrote about my teaching. I did leave a successful career in IT. I made it to the CIO position of a very successful tech company. But after 20 years of tech, I didn't feel the passion anymore. Through my Junior Achievement volunteering on the side, I discovered my love of teaching. So I "retired" and went back to school to get my teaching credentials. I teach in a great school that attracts kids who have had it with traditional schooling. So we get lots of beat-down, frustrated and scarred kids. I have learned that teachers, in general, and definitely in my school, need to appreciate delayed gratification in order to last. It's usually a year or so later when a former student will come back and tell me how 'great' I was. ("Wait, weren't you the kid who told me over and over that you hated math and hated me?")

Going from top executive to seemingly-taken-for-granted high school teacher has been quite the lesson in humility!

But your thoughtful letter is a great gift to me. You've again reminded me that sometimes the smallest, kind outreach can have a significant impact on someone. It makes me happy to know that my distinctive, (but now fading) Boston-accented compliment has served you as your self-affirmation. I think 30 years is the longest delay of gratification I have gotten to date!

So thanks for taking the time and effort to reach out. Youah lettah is a keepah, Petuh!

And just to make us realize how old we are getting - my son is taking his first freshman final exam at Cornell tonight.

If you ever come to the area, give me a shout.

- Doug

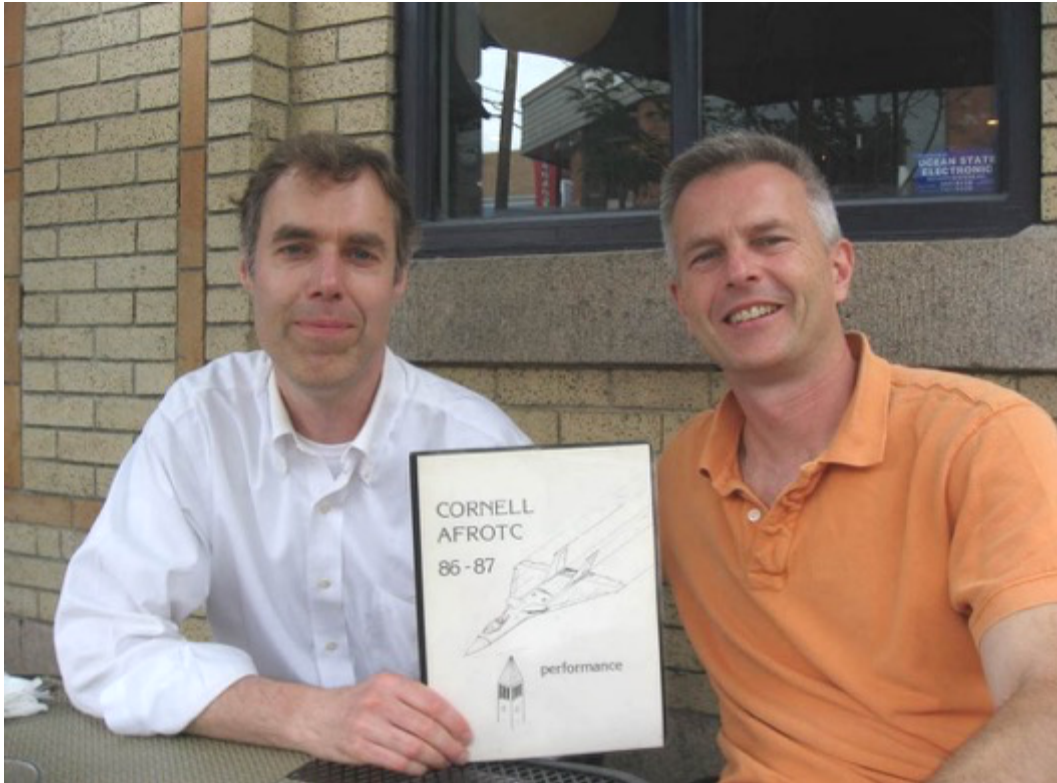


Figure 67: Thirty years later: reunion with Doug, July, 2016, Providence, Rhode Island. I'm holding a copy of our AFROTC yearbook from which some of the photos of ROTC in Chapter 2 were taken.

Letter to Astronaut Piers Sellers' Mother

Piers Sellers was one of those people who I had meant to write for many years. It was only when I looked up his mailing address two years ago that I discovered that I was six months too late: tragically, he had died of pancreatic cancer in December of 2016 at age 61. While processing my grief, I resolved to write his family instead. Note that it wasn't until I'd started writing this memoir a year later that I remembered how I'd initially met Piers: from Camilo's wish.

July 24, 2017

Dear Mrs. Sellers,

From 2000 to 2004, I was a Space Shuttle Guidance, Flight Control and Propulsion Instructor at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. It was there that I met your son.

Becoming an astronaut has been a life-long dream of mine. As a child I diligently collected all the NASA-related *National Geographic* magazines from our local second-hand shop, read every astronaut autobiography I could get my hands on, and threw myself into model rocketry. Then, as an adult, every professional milestone I achieved was designed to further my astronaut application. This included pursuing technical degrees, becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer, scuba training, earning an Airline Transport Pilot pilot's license, working as a professional pilot in Alaska, the Grand Canyon and Los Angeles, and eventually coming to work at NASA. Becoming a space shuttle instructor was the most tangible step I'd taken towards my dream, and I was thrilled.

And then the space shuttle *Columbia* accident happened.

In the aftermath, for the first time I became more of student of NASA as an organization than of the application process to become an astronaut. And what I learned about NASA's shortcomings was hard to square with my dream.

Then one day I met Piers. I honestly can't remember the circumstances; it was probably in one of our many systems refresher classes we taught in cockpit procedure trainers known as Single System Trainers or SSTs. I immediately appreciated his down-to-earth, approachable manner and easy-going sense of humor. I also can't remember how I then came up with the idea to speak with him privately about my dilemma, but I suppose it was partly because he seemed like someone with whom I would feel comfortable being vulnerable. He graciously agreed to make time in his busy schedule to meet.

I'll never forget our conversation held in one of the many window-less conference rooms on the floor of the astronaut offices. When I told him my story, unfolding interests, and dilemma, he seemed to intuitively know what I needed most in that moment. He proceeded to describe some of the current work he was doing on space suits and allowed as to how it was interesting but not fascinating, as his previous scientific work had been. This was a novel and compelling distinction for me. He then elaborated on how the job of scientist had far more freedom in it because you get to pursue your own research agenda. As if on-cue, one of his crew-mates knocked on the door letting him know it was time to go to his next meeting. He looked at me with a smile and said, "You see? I'm not in control."

I left with an odd mixture of appreciation and confusion. As the week went on, I realized that he was the first astronaut I'd met who had had the courage to go beyond the P.R. script and tell me a greater truth about his job, as unique as it was.

I suppose most letters like this are written to thank someone for encouraging them to fulfill a dream. But today I can see that what Piers did for me that day was to give me permission to let go of a dream. While that certainly had its measure of pain, what I couldn't know at the time was that that was also the day he planted a seed for a new dream. None of my efforts were wasted.

I won't go into the 15 years of twists and turns of my professional life since that meeting, but the short version would be that my interest in how organizations work (or don't work) gradually evolved into the more intimate task of supporting human development at the level of the individual: I am now a psychotherapist who specializes in trauma recovery.

This year I turned 50. Such a milestone gives one pause. One consequence was to commit to expressing my gratitude to those who helped along the way. It was today that I chose to write Piers—only to discover that I was too late. After the shock dissipated, I realized that it was even more important that I write this letter to someone who knew him.

Exploring inner space is more fulfilling than outer space. Of the many, many people who were links in the chain of that discovery, Piers is singular.

Today I am grateful I have the opportunity to write this letter to you so that I can say: thank you for your son.

Respectfully,

Peter W. Pruyn

Letter to Professor Juris Hartmanis

Juris Hartmanis was the Chair of Cornell's Computer Science Department when I left Cornell. What I didn't know then was that he was originally from Latvia. During the Soviet occupation during World War II, his father died in a Soviet prison. His family left Latvia after the war was over. Once again, I can't help but think that suffering is a gateway to compassion.

June 23, 2018

Dear Professor Hartmanis,

I was a computer science major at Cornell in the late 1980s. I took your CS481 Theory of Computing class in the fall of 1988.

In 1992, I wrote an essay about my undergraduate experience as a computer science major that I shared with various administrators, including President Rhodes and you. I have attached a PDF copy that includes your thoughtful response. The personal nature of your reply always meant a great deal to me, in contrast to the other more systemic responses I received, which I've also included.

What I could not have known at the time, was that a contributing factor to my response to Cornell's undergraduate experience was that my father was a functional alcoholic. This affected me in a multitude of ways, but one way was feeling an absence of healthy male role models in my life.

What was missing from my missive was that you were one of the teachers I had at Cornell who I felt really did care. When I went to your office hours, I felt treated like a person, not a nuisance. This gesture of humanity made a profound difference in my remaining semesters at Cornell.

I won't go into the full journey of my life since Cornell, but the headline would be: ever since I have inched closer and closer to the more human side of who I am. Graduating undergrad, I stayed for a Masters in computer graphics with Don Greenberg, focusing on human factors. I was then a computer teacher in the Peace Corps with my favorite role being facilitating cross-cultural training with other volunteers. I then spent many years working in organizational development and training, eventually doing another Masters in education and then counseling psychology.

I am now a psychotherapist in private practice specializing in trauma. This work and role are the most fulfilling of my life. Being in Cambridge, MA, many of my clients are graduate students. Sitting with them is easier knowing that the larger part of what I have to do is simply offer them a space where they know that someone cares about them, as you did for me.

Thank you for being one of the links in the chain of kindness that sustained me along the way.

With gratitude and respect,

Letter to Colonel Robert Sample's Widow

My letter for Colonel Sample was merely three months too late. He had died in March, 2018 at age 78. I resolved to write his widow.

July 4, 2018

[Redacted Address]

Dear Mrs. Sample,

I was in AFROTC in the late 1980s when Bob was assigned to Cornell's Detachment. My relationship with him meant a great deal to me, and recently I decided to write him a letter expressing that. It was only yesterday that I discovered, with profound regret, that I was a few precious weeks too late.

It then occurred to me that it would still be meaningful to write the letter and share it with his family, which I have attached.

With sympathy for your and your family's loss,

Respectfully,

Peter W. Pruyn

July 4, 2018

Dear Colonel Sample,

As you may remember, I was in AFROTC at Cornell for my freshman and sophomore years, from 1985 - 1987. We began to get to know each other at the end of my sophomore year, when I had been chosen to be a part of the training cadre for Freshman Orientation along with all of my closest friends. Then, during my sophomore year, I struggled academically and changed my major, nullifying my ROTC technical major slot for my junior and senior years. You were the one who gave me the bad news in your office that since I was no longer in the program, you could not allow me to be a part of Freshman Orientation.

At the time, this was a major disappointment for me. AFROTC was the first arena in which I learned about teamwork and group dynamics in a meaningful way, and I loved every minute of it. With this decision, I felt like I was losing my family. Yet, at the same time, I understood and respected why you needed to do what you did.

So it meant a great deal that you kept your door open to me over the years, being a sounding board and support for my on-going life choices. I would end up staying at Cornell for a Master's in Computer Graphics, and I remember valuing your input on my thesis using three-dimensional computer graphics to visualize navigation information for pilots. I recall you being candid with me about your own retirement from the Air Force, clarifying your expectations for yourself by saying, "I'm looking for a job, not a career." As someone who had had a career I deeply admired, I never forgot the humility this statement represented.

I then went into the Peace Corps and sent newsletters home to friends and family about my experiences. Sometime after coming home in the mid-1990s, I happened to be driving from New York to D.C. and was able to stop by your office at the University of Delaware. I appreciated your enthusiasm for my writing and experiences. I had the impression that you were doing for many students there what you had done for me.

What I could not have known at the time was that there was another deeper layer of meaning at work in our relationship. It would take more than a decade more for me to understand that my father was a functional alcoholic. This fact impacted me in a myriad of ways, but the most important one was a lack of healthy male role models in my life. Without either of us knowing it, you were providing that for me.

I won't go into the full details of my path since meeting you in Delaware, but the short version would be: I spent a number of years in aviation, flying mostly in Alaska, the Grand Canyon and Seal Beach, California. (Whenever I saw a C-5A land at Los Alamitos, I thought of you.) Following a life-long dream to be a part of the space program, I then spent four years working as an astronaut instructor at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, teaching astronauts NASA's version of CRM. After the space shuttle *Columbia* accident, I saw the need to apply these ideas within organizations. This path led me to be curious about individual human development. After doing a Master's in education, I was inspired to take the clinical route and did another Masters in counseling psychology. I am now a psychotherapist in private practice specializing in trauma. This role and work is the most fulfilling of my life.

It is now 31 years since that eventful conversation in your office in Barton Hall. That's how long it's taken for me to see the role that knowing you has played in my life. In spite of shepherding me through one of my most painful moments as an undergrad, you stayed in relationship with me for so many years afterwards. It is only now that I can see the profound lesson of this gesture: that I was worth more than my uniform and affiliations. In short, you related to me as a person, and, by so doing,

helped me do the same for myself, something that has helped immeasurably along the unconventional path I have taken.

And for that I will be eternally grateful.

With gratitude and respect,

Peter W. Pruyn

Letter to Astronaut Janice Voss' Parents

While writing this memoir, I rediscovered the letter Janice Voss had written me in 1997. With the hindsight of the present, I acknowledged its wisdom. When I made an attempt to write and tell her, I discovered that she, too, had died of cancer in 2012 at the age of 55. As with Piers and Colonel Sample, I resolved to write her family to express my gratitude.

October 21, 2018

Dr. and Mrs. Janice Voss
Houston, TX
Texas 77058

Dear Dr. and Mrs. Voss,

From 2000 to 2004 I was a space shuttle Guidance, Flight Control and Propulsion Instructor at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. Since childhood I had wanted to be an astronaut, and becoming an astronaut instructor was the closest I had come, to-date, to achieving that dream.

Over a number of years I submitted annual updates to my astronaut application and participated in an email listserv for those who were interested in the astronaut selection process. It was during this time that your daughter reached out to members of the listserv to let them know that she was listening and available to answer their questions. Given how perpetually busy astronauts are, I was struck by this act of generosity. After Janice flew on STS-83, I wrote her the enclosed letter. It meant a lot to me to receive her reply very shortly thereafter, which I have also enclosed.

While working at JSC I had the pleasure of meeting Janice several times during training sessions, and she was kind enough to have lunch with me one day.

Then, in the aftermath of the *Columbia* accident, I became interested in the organizational causes of such accidents and barriers to how organizations learn. Inspired by these questions, I moved to Cambridge to explore the field of organizational learning. Eventually this interest further evolved into working with individuals. I am now a psychotherapist in private practice specializing in supporting trauma survivors. It is the most meaningful work of my life.

I am currently in the middle of writing a memoir and remembered Janice's letter and the wisdom she generously passed on to me. It is only now that I can see her words have come true in my own life more profoundly than I ever could have imagined. My dream to be an astronaut was a bridge to a truer path.

With this realization, I was moved to write Janice and let her know. In most other circumstances in my life, I would have been anxious telling a role model that I had taken a different path. But in this case, I looked forward to doing so because I knew Janice would be more supportive of my becoming more 'me' than becoming an astronaut.

It was only then that I discovered, sadly, that I was too late. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that I would still very much want you to know how much your daughter's kindness continues to mean to me, even all these years later.

I now see my work as ensuring that others benefit from her wisdom as I did.

With gratitude and respect,

Peter W. Pruyne



Figure 68: This photo of the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge in New York City was taken at sunrise by my father, c.1960. The view is from the Staten Island side early in construction when only the cables had been strung between the two towers.

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