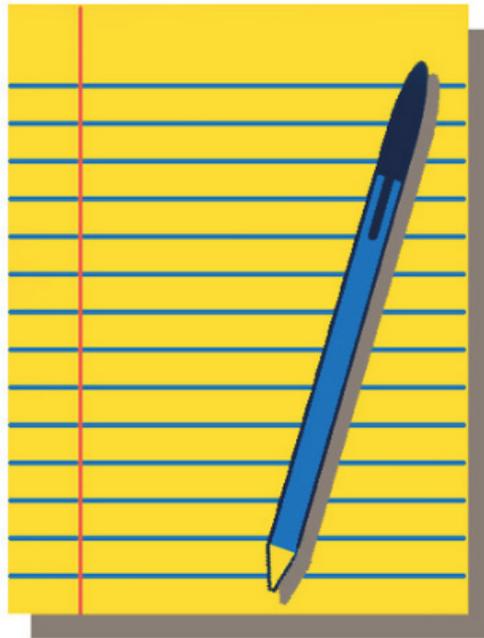


# Parable #6 - Networking



## Advocacy Club Parable #6: Networking in a Pandemic

by John Hollander, 1,350 words

*Practice by Zoom may enable interaction, but it's paper-thin. How do we meet peers or other practitioners when just the act of shaking hands can lead to infection? Most people are social animals. Our radar is tuned to facial and body expressions, tone of voice, and shared experience. Our online experience differs from our counterparties. We don't know what's happening in the other rooms or even who else may be present. At least until the cat creeps into the picture.*

*Greenville, July 2020*

Paul Freund had never felt so alone in his life. Two years into his career as a corporate lawyer, he had been recruited and then dumped on his head by Dalziel & Owens, the midsized law firm that imploded at the outset of the COVID pandemic. He followed the senior D&O partner to join Monroe & Monroe, the largest firm in South Park, but there was no enthusiasm for the relationship. Hardly a budding romance. His onboarding with Monroe consisted of a PDF sent to him by email along with his employment forms and encouragement to work from home. For Paul, this meant his parents' house in Greenville, a two-hour drive away. He had yet to meet a single colleague, much less a peer his age, and he was already several months into his new position. Effectively, his career plan was inertia.

Paul felt a deep malaise while staring at the drawn, pallid face in the bathroom mirror. Something wasn't right, and he knew what it was. He was on hold. His friends were in South Park, afraid of catching the virus from him and each other. His boyfriend, Mort, and he had parted ways. Both were relieved to use

the pandemic as an excuse to wind up a relationship that wasn't going anywhere, much like his career.

Mort kept the apartment while Paul left for Greenville. His office was now a kitchen table in a house he couldn't call his own and hadn't occupied, except briefly, since leaving for university almost ten years before. His social interactions all took place on Zoom. This forced isolation drained Paul's energy, ambition, and skills into a deep, dark hole. With no end in sight.

A text message popped up on Paul's iPhone. A classmate in South Park, Iain Rohan, proposed to set up a social event at some park benches near the river running through the state recreation area that gave South Park its name. Scheduled for the coming weekend, five days hence. Paul consulted his Outlook Calendar out of habit. What did he have planned for any day in the next month? Work. Drive his father to medical appointments. Work. Dinner with his parents. Work. A glass of cold Italian grappa. Sleep. Repeat.

No, a two-hour drive to spend a few hours drinking beer with a bunch of lawyers didn't sound like much fun. What excuse should he use? Too much work? True, he worked most weekends, but that was as much from boredom as it was for the goal of retiring the rest of his student loan. Monroe was generous with everything material – compensation for overtime being just one of the many perks. It would cost him hundreds of dollars in lost OT to attend the event. And then he'd need a place to stay, so he'd have to ask Mort, who had probably found a replacement for Paul already. Sigh. Why was everything so complicated?

Paul heard the sound of his voice asking that last question. Was he talking to himself? Could his parents overhear? He texted back, "No, but thanks, Iain.

Working OT this weekend. KIT.” He resisted the desire to insert a happy face emoji. He didn’t feel up to it, so he sighed instead.

A few minutes of staring into his computer screen did nothing to improve his mood. He rose and walked to the sitting room where his parents occupied easy chairs, reading in the sunlight. His mother looked up at him, “Hi, Paul. Taking a break from work? Can I make you some tea?”

“No, but thanks, Mom. I need some advice.” His father glanced up from his magazine. Field and Stream, Paul noticed. A magazine that went out of print years ago.

Paul’s mother said, “That’s a nice change. What’s bothering you?”

“I was just invited to meet some old law school classmates for a get-together in South Park. Outside. Social distancing, masks, and all that. I said ‘no, but that bothered me.’”

“I’m not surprised. You mope around here like there’s a black cloud over your head. We love having you here, but ...”

Paul knew she never, ever, said “I love you but”, insisting on the form, “I love you and” in its place. This must be serious. He waited for her to continue and was rewarded for his patience.

“We were sad to hear that Mort and you broke up. And you don’t know a soul your age here in Greenville. South Park’s not that far away. And you could use the visit as a chance to network.”

“I’m so close to paying off my student loan, and my boss has a big reorganization, and I have a deadline to meet, and ...”

His mother raised her hand to interrupt his outpouring. “It’s time you took charge of your career and your life, dear. This little social may get you back in gear. You surely need something more than that laptop for companionship. And don’t worry about the loan. What’s the difference between whether you pay it back this summer or next? Compared to your sanity?”

His father nodded his agreement. Paul sighed, but differently than before. It was decision time. It was time to *carpe some diem*.

Returning to the kitchen table, Paul sent a message to Iain. “Changed my mind. I’ll be there. What can I bring?”

Then he called Mort before he second-thought himself to a standstill. The sound of Mort’s voice was soothing, familiar. “Hi, Paul. I was hoping you’d call.”

“Hey, Mort, I’m coming to South Park this weekend to attend a party. Can I use the couch? I’m not sick or anything, and I’ll wear a mask.”

“Sure thing, Paul. Would you have any time for me?”

“Yes, if you’d like that. I’m asking a favor here and don’t want to presume.”

“We have a lot to discuss. I’ve missed you.”

“The event is Saturday afternoon. If I arrive in the morning, you can make me your eggs benny with those chorizo sausages I like so much.”

“The hot sauce will be waiting for you.”

~

Friday afternoon, Paul packed an overnight bag to drive to South Park that evening. Mort and he had chatted each night since the first call. They agreed Paul should spend Friday night there. As he stuffed another pair of shorts into his

carryall bag, his iPhone alerted him to a text. He glanced at it to see that Iain wanted to chat. “R U free?”

Paul hit the icon to connect to Iain using Facetime. The call went through smoothly.

“Hi, Paul. Happy you can make it tomorrow. It’ll be a blast. But that’s not why I want to chat.”

“What’s up, Iain? I’ll be in town tonight and plan to stay over until Sunday.”

“It’s no secret that you’re not happy at Monroe. I want to set you up to meet with Suzanne Lapointe. There might be a position for you there – either now or soon.”

“Yep. We’ve been in touch. She had me work on a small project but said nothing about a job opening. I’d jump at the chance for a move, Iain.”

“Well, maybe you know that Rebekah Khalil and I are seeing each other again? Suzanne lives at Rebekah’s with Jake and Saul. Bek will be at the shindig tomorrow, so maybe you can do some scouting then. Sound like a plan?”

“Yep. I’m keen!”

After he ended the call, Paul looked into his bathroom mirror. *This isn’t a sure thing, but at least it’s action with possibilities. One step can lead to another. With a first step, inertia can become momentum.*