

“ THE STEP NOT TAKEN”

Read "The Step Not Taken" by Paul D'Angelo and MENTALLY answer the questions which follow. The answers have been provided for you to compare your responses.

Paul D'Angelo's usual idea of writing is to tell stories, and he admits that his, like most, will stretch the truth. But one day the humour columnist for *Canadian Sport Fishing* stepped into a Toronto elevator and lived the true and sobering story that follows. When it appeared in *The Globe and Mail* of April 3, 1995, it struck a deep chord: dozens of readers sent replies, one of them 5000 words long. Several recounted tragic experiences they had just had themselves, and told how D'Angelo's confession had helped them face their own trials. The author of this thought-provoking essay has an unusual background for a writer. Born in Toronto, Paul D'Angelo never went to university but always read a lot, an activity that gave him a way with words. After high school he left for Europe and Africa, where he spent seven years travelling, working here and there, and just living life. In the meantime, on a visit home he launched a seasonal greeting card business, which still left him seven months a year to roam. For some years now, he and his family have lived in Toronto, where he thinks of himself mostly as an entrepreneur, but goes north to fish pike and bass for fun, and then writes about it in several columns a year. "Write what you live!" he says. Though D'Angelo finds most writing slow and tough, he felt this episode so strongly that he just wrote it right off, to "get it off his chest, " and the *Globe* changed only one word. Though he "felt better," his hope that the young man in the elevator would see the article and respond never came true.

1 A few weeks ago I was followed into an office-building elevator by a well-dressed young man carrying a briefcase. He looked very sharp. Very buttoned-down. Wearing gold wire-frame glasses, he was of medium height and build with neatly trimmed brown hair and, I would guess, in his mid-20s. Typical junior executive material. There was nothing about him that seemed unusual. Nothing at all to indicate what was about to take place.

2 The elevator had only one control panel, and I excused myself as I leaned over to his side of the car and pushed the button for the 10th floor. He pushed the button for the 15th. The doors of the elevator closed and we began to ascend. Employing typical Toronto elevator etiquette, I stood staring up at the row of floor numbers above the doors while purposely ignoring my fellow passenger. Then it happened. A sudden strained gasp. Turning toward the noise, I was astonished to see the young man drop his briefcase and burst into tears. Our eyes met for a split second and, as if slapped, he averted his face from me, leaned his head against the wood-panelled wall of the elevator and continued to weep.

3 And what I did next still shames me.

4 The elevator stopped at the 10th floor and, without looking back, I stepped out. I stood in the hallway, a bundle of mixed emotions, wondering what to do. A combination of guilt and uncertainty washed over me. Should I go up to the 15th floor and make sure he's okay? Should I search him out from office to office? Should I risk the embarrassment it might cause him? Is he mentally disturbed? A manic depressive, perhaps? Is he a suicide just waiting to happen?

5 I didn't know what to do. So I did nothing.

6 And now he haunts me. Not with fear, of course, but with a sense of regret. I see his face crumbling before he turns to the wall. I see his shoulders heave as he sobs in a combination of sorrow and shame. I wonder now what brought him to that moment in time. How long had he been holding his pain inside before he could no longer contain it? What could possibly have overwhelmed him to such an extent that he was unable to keep from crying out?

7 Had he just visited the doctor and been told that he had an incurable disease? Was he having marital problems? Was his wife ill? His child? Had someone dear recently died? Was he being laid off? Was he looking for a job and meeting with no success? Was he having financial woes? Was he without friends in the city and crushed by loneliness?

8 The sorrows of this world are endless.

9 The few people I have told about the incident all say I did the proper thing, the best thing, by leaving the young man alone.

10 But they are wrong.

11 Like so many things in life, I know now what I should have done then. I should have thrown caution to the winds and done the right thing. Not the big-city thing. The right thing. The human thing. The thing I would want someone to do if they ever found my son crying in an elevator. I should have given him the opportunity to unload his sadness onto my shoulders. I should have reached out a hand and patted him on the back. I should have said something like, "Why don't you let me buy you a cup of coffee and you can tell me all your problems. There's no reason to feel self-conscious. I'll listen for as long as you want to talk."

12 What would his reaction have been to that? Would he have turned even further to the wall? Or would he have turned on me? Cursing me? Telling me to mind my own damned business? Would he have lashed out at me? Sorrow and insecurity turning to rage? Would he have physically attacked me? Or would he have gone with me for that cup of coffee?

13 I don't know. I'll never know. All I can be certain of is that I left him in that elevator with tears streaming down his face. And that he was alone. All alone.

14 I hope that somehow he gets to read these words, because I want him to know that I'm pulling for him. That I hope things are looking up for him. That I hope his sorrow is in the past. That I hope he is never again burdened with such awful despair. That I am thinking of him. That I said a prayer for him. That I was wrong, dreadfully wrong, not to step forward in his time of need.

15 That I'm sorry.

1. D'Angelo begins with an ANECDOTE. Is this a good technique? Do you see it often? How well does this one work as an introduction?

Using an anecdote is one of the most common of introductory techniques, both for essays and speeches. Everyone likes a story, and everyone is better prepared for the argument when a story leads naturally into it.

2. In paragraph 1, D'Angelo refers to "what was about to take place"; in paragraph 2 he says "Then it happened"; and in paragraph 3 he says "And what I did next still shames me." Why does he keep building suspense? What does this do for his AUDIENCE?

Clearly D'Angelo is building reader interest with these phrases; he is milking the narrative of the elevator encounter for all its dramatic interest. The results can hardly hurt the experience of the reader, whose motivation for continuing is increased by suspense.

3. Identify D'Angelo's THESIS STATEMENT.

D'Angelo's thesis statement is probably paragraph 3.

4. Tell how paragraph 10 works as a TRANSITION between parts. Why is it only one sentence long?

Paragraph 10, "But they are wrong, " channels the introductory anecdote into D'Angelo's own typically urban response of disengagement, then into his realization of his own failure to reach out with human contact. The extreme brevity of this paragraph of transition builds emphasis.

5. Where does D'Angelo ask himself "why?" Where does he ask "what if?" What causes does he imagine? What effects? And how important are these to the essay?

D'Angelo ponders a whole series of "whys", as in paragraphs 4 through 8 he seeks to understand what has brought the young man to the point of crying on the elevator. Then he ponders a whole series of "what ifs", as in paragraphs 9 through 15 he considers what else he might have done and how the young man might have reacted. The whole essay is strongly based on cause and effect, with the causes first and then the imagined effects.

6. How CONCISE is this selection? Can you find any wasted words at all?

"The Step Not Taken" is one of the most concise selections one will find; it would be a real challenge to find waste here.

7. Read paragraphs 14 and 15 aloud. Why has D'Angelo given us a series of partial sentences? Why do most begin with "That..."? Is this repetition accidental or deliberate? What effect does it achieve?

Paragraphs 14 and 15 carry a heavy load of emotion; the series of partial sentences and the series of phrases all beginning with "That" build through their chant-like quality to a climax of deliberate repetition.

8. Why does D'Angelo's last paragraph contain only three words?

D'Angelo's eloquent closing paragraph of three words, "That I'm sorry," crystallizes his whole series of reactions into one unifying thought, thus bringing all the emotion of his argument to a climax in the last word. This technique almost always adds power to an arguments: putting a key word or key phrase last (whether on the scale of paragraphs or of the essay as a whole).