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First Cousin, Once Removed: A Conversation with Alan Berliner

Sophia Stein · Thursday, September 19th, 2013

Edwin Honig at water's edge, First Cousin, Once Removed / Courtesy Alan Berliner

Filmmaker Alan Berliner offers us a profound exploration of memory and identity with *First Cousin Once Removed*, a lovingly rendered portrait of his cousin Edwin Honig, the noted poet, translator, and critic, who is in the grips of Alzheimer's disease. Berliner uses his unique access, which he describes as "the culmination of decades of deep friendship, mutual trust, family kinship, and artistic kinship," to grant us a window into the entirety of Honig's life, while holding up a mirror that forces us to examine our own identity and mortality. It is the third in a series of family portraits from Berliner, that includes *Intimate Stranger* (1991), which was about his grandfather Joseph Cassuto, and *Nobody's Business* (1996), which was about his father, Oscar Berliner. "*First Cousin, Once Removed* will teach a lot of people what memory means, and that's a powerful thing," suggests Berliner.

At the San Francisco International Jewish Film Festival this year, Berliner was awarded the Freedom of Expression Award for his body of highly original and compelling, personal film essays. In his acceptance speech, Berliner thanked Sheila Nevins at HBO, who financed the film and granted him absolute freedom in its making. He mentioned how his cousin Edwin had wanted to donate his brain to science, for Alzheimer's research, which for a variety of reasons, did not happen; however, Berliner expressed how he would like to think that his film "*First Cousin Once Removed* preserves Edwin's amazing mind and allows us to look at Alzheimer's disease, memory, forgetting, and life itself – in ways we never have before."

I had the good fortune and great pleasure to speak at length with Berliner (and his son Eli, who plays a key role in the film) at the Hotel Rex, when they were in town for the San Francisco International Jewish Film Festival. *First Cousin Once Removed* will have its television premiere on HBO, Monday, September 23, at 9:00 p.m.

Sophia Stein: What is your earliest memory of Edwin Honig? How did you first learn about your first cousin, once removed?

Alan Berliner: When I was growing up, there were rumors in my family of this big-shot poet, biographer of Lorca, and we had one of Edwin's books in my house. He's my mother's first cousin, and my mother really didn't know him; Edwin had basically removed himself from my side of the family. It wasn't until I got to college and saw that I was headed on a collision course with a life in the arts (and all that entailed) — that it occurred to me that I had a real-life poet-cousin in Providence, Rhode Island. So I reached out, and to my incredible surprise, Edwin was as happy to meet me, as I was to meet him. First of all, I was a bridge back to the family that he had left behind. I brought him stories and an updated genealogy, and a connection to family. Edwin looks

like his father to me. His father looked like my grandmother, and my grandmother looked like my mother. So when I looked at Edwin, I saw all these faces, all these ineffable traces of family energy. We realized, in our family, we're the two freaks (for lack of a better word), and that was fine. From there, we developed a very, very deep and warm relationship. He was not only my cousin, but he became a friend. I was seventeen at the time; given that he was thirty-six years older than me, he became my mentor. Every time I would visit Edwin, we would take long walks, and he would turn me on to poets – Fernando Passoa, Frederico García Lorca, and Philip Larkin, *This Be The Verse*. [Berliner recites the poem from memory.]

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn

By fools in old-style hats and coats,

Who half the time were soppy-stern

And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.

It deepens like a coastal shelf.

Get out as early as you can,

And don't have any kids yourself.

I remember the day that Edwin showed me that poem (which he was endorsing), and I was like, “Whoa!”

S2: Did you become a fan of Edwin's poetry?

AB: Edwin's work moves in a lot of different directions. *To Restore a Dead Child* is a nine-part poem about the experience of losing his brother, with many beautiful parts. *For An Immigrant Grandmother* is about my great-grandmother. *Conundrum* is difficult to read because it has so much wordplay. I latched onto the particular works that had meaning to me through my family connection.

S2: He wrote a poem dedicated to you?

AB: Actually, he wrote several poems for me. He gave one to me for my first marriage. He wrote another poem after seeing my film, *Nobody's Business*, that I have posted on my studio wall.

S2: His adopted son Jeremy says that you were the only one that Edwin was really proud of. Watching the film, we have the sense that Edwin was like a father to you, that you were the best son that he might have imagined. Would you say that you were closer to Edwin, than you were to your own father?

AB: I can't say 'yes,' and I can't say 'no.' I had a complicated relationship with my father. In the end credits of *Nobody's Business*, speaking paternalistically, my father laments, "Alan, with your brains, with your intelligence, you could have been a lawyer, an engineer, a doctor – anyone of the professions. You chose this?" So there was incredulity about the direction of my whole life. But Edwin was someone with whom I shared this unspoken connection. I can't underplay the family connection. It was a bridge, with scaffolding already in place. Edwin wasn't like one of my cinema professors. He was a poet, a teacher, and a writer with whom I could discuss my work. I could talk with him about the tribulations, problematics, struggles, and frustrations of being an artist.

S2: Was there any particular advice that Edwin gave you, as an artist?

AB: He told me that having a child would change my relationship to my work forever. He was

right. He was cautionary, in particular, about that subject. It was way before my son Eli was contemplated, but we would talk about that a lot.

S2: It is such a compassionate portrait — your efforts to continue to engage with Edwin and to preserve his dignity to the very end. What tactics did you employ in approaching your meetings?

AB: It was a duet. Edwin is clearly the subject of the film. Some might also say that he is the object of the film. From the very beginning, I was always open to Edwin being the co-author of the film. In our meetings, it was always a case of trying to activate the poet within, the cousin within, the friend within, the mentor within — in different proportions, in different ways, on different days, depending.

S2: Did Edwin see any cuts of the material?

AB: When I showed him footage of himself from twenty years prior, where he is reciting his resume, “Did I tell you I got a Guggenheim?” — “Who is he?” Edwin asks. “That’s the man you once were,” I remind him. He looks again, leans in and proclaims, “I’m not impressed!” Then, after the litany from his earlier self (“I went to Harvard,” etc.) finishes, Edwin says something even more telling: “He’s trying to be somebody, he’s trying to be somebody.” Which I think is one of the most profound lines in the film — because that’s what life is. Everybody is trying to be somebody. Here he was now, removed, absolved, liberated from that obligation. “What’s the best thing about getting old? That you feel younger,” he observes. He no longer cared about who was publishing his work, about who liked his poems and who didn’t. He was completely freed of all that.

S2: You said that “Making this film challenged every assumption I’ve ever had about the notion of memory.” Which assumptions?

AB: First of all, there by the grace of God, go each and every one of us, because no one is immune. We take a lot of things for granted. I am getting an award here [at the San Francisco International Jewish Film Festival]. One day, I might not remember getting the award. I might not remember having been in San Francisco. I might not even remember making the film. I might not ever even remember being a filmmaker. I reveal in the film that my father lost his memory before he died, and his father lost his memory before he passed away. My automatic response to all that is — do the math. I began to understand memory as the glue of life. Edwin was a translator. In many ways, I am translating Edwin. Memory itself, is the translator of life. It’s how we time travel. It’s how we move fluidly and effortlessly from the past to the present, toward and into an imagined, projected, hoped-for future. If you lose your memory, you lose the ability to do that. You don’t learn from the past anymore. At the beginning of the film, Edwin says, “I know that there is a past, and I know that I lived in it. I know that I gave it up to live only in the present.”

S2: We are living in a time in history that is obsessed with *The Power of Now*. I felt as if this film is an antidote for a generation who worships the now.

AB: The cumulative weight of personal history is really about the formation of identity. Edwin knows he was somebody, but he doesn’t know who that is anymore. At the beginning of the film, he looks into the lens of the camera and says, “I’m a mirror.” I say, “Mirror, mirror, on the wall,” and he responds, “You be camera, and I’ll be all.” Later on in the film, when I ask Edwin, “What do you remember about being a teacher?” he surmises, “I was the center of some kind of a game, that I was playing with life and other people. [Edwin pauses.] Right?” That took my breath away.

S2: How would you describe life as a filmmaker?

AB: I’ve been around the block enough times to say that I still love it, to say that it’s the most difficult thing that I can ever do. I want every film I make to be the most challenging, most

compelling thing I have ever tried to do. Ironically, I think that's healthy. I don't even make that many films — because I need to take a year off after each film, just to forget how hard it is, on some level. (There is an implied analogy to giving birth in there.)

S2: A labor of love?

AB: All my films are labors of love, for sure. I only make one film at a time. I am not the kind of filmmaker who has a stove with six pans — *I'm editing this, and I'm shooting that, and I'm in pre-production on this other one*. I have one stove, one plate, one pot, and I put everything that I have into that cauldron, each time. In between films, I want life to throw me around a little bit, and put me in a place where I'm situated to tackle the next most compelling, most challenging thing that I could possibly do as a human being. All my films are explorations on some level of what it means to be human, of human frailty, and of the mysterious human condition. This film in particular, I think, goes deeper than anything I've ever done before. I'm taking Edwin all the way — to a very deep place, to a point where a wordsmith doesn't even want to talk anymore. At the end of the film, he admonishes me, "You know, forget about me! For a week, a month, just forget about me!" He says, "I am here, and that is all." He has arrived at this place where he is completely in the present. It's a very pure place. He mutters those words because he can still speak, but he has no more interest in speaking. It's just this guttural whining music.

S2: Was that your final day of filming?

AB: Not necessarily. The thing about Alzheimer's, it's progressive, but it is not linear. So, you could have ten good minutes, three months from now. That is one of the reasons that I felt comfortable giving the film that cubist temporality. I was channeling a little bit of Francis Bacon, a little bit of Picasso throughout.

S2: The film is really a piece of poetry itself. I remember seeing Gunvor Nelson's *My Name Is Oona*, which is a portrait and a poem, that got me so jazzed about the power of film as poetry. Do you recall any particular cinematic influences, in regards to poetic film?

AB: I studied Avant-garde film. That's my pedigree. From Michael Snow, to Ernie Gehr, to Ken Jacobs, to Larry Gottheim, to Bruce Connors — their works are poetic in cinematic terms. They are not transliterations of poetry proper. From all those filmmakers, I learned not only the poetics of space and time, and how to look at the world differently, but also what it means to be an artist in the world, and how to speak poetically through the language of cinema. Because Edwin was a poet, one of the challenges of the film was to give the film a kind of poetics. Edwin says, "What you are doing is like writing a poem. You are taking what people are thinking, and changing it to what you want them to think." It's a slightly severe way of describing what a poet or filmmaker does, but the fact that he would make a collegial reference to me, was inspiring. It made me dig deeper to find cinematic metaphors for memory and loss, remembering and forgetting. To this day, I cannot look at trees or leaves in the same way. That's a gift from Edwin to me. Edwin is completely freed of ambition and temporality. He doesn't know what day it is. He has the good fortune of living in his home, and sitting in front of this big picture window with lots of trees and leaves outside. And so what has happened? In the absence of grounding his relationship to space and time in the routine of life, his grounding is replaced by the inexorable cycling through of nature. Edwin used to talk about the changing of the leaves like a religion. "You don't want them to change, but they change anyway. They are always changing." "They are still, but they are moving. It's a moving painting." All these aptitudes that he possessed — to understand, appreciate, and experience — are all coming together. I told him, "You have made me think about the leaves themselves as memories." "Some are all brown, and some are yellow and brown, and green turning yellow, and then the trees are empty, and then they are all on the ground." There are many other metaphors that I employ

throughout the film.

S2: I wanted to ask you about your personal sensation of aging. When were you first aware of growing older in your own life?

AB: I lost my hair, my beard got white, I tore some ligaments in my ankle a couple of years ago – but I think that the more interesting answer would be, what growing older has meant for me as an artist. This is the third portrait that I have made (my grandfather, my father, and Edwin). I start to see the whole thing as a kind-of life project. I am looking for extraordinary access to make films that are about the nexus of many different elements. My films are about memory – all of them. They are about identity. They are about family and family relationships. They are about love. They are about mortality and legacy. They are about storytelling. I also like to think that they are about cinema and cinematic language. Life and death and what it means to be human. So that's what I do. At a certain point, you realize that's the path that you are on, and there is no going back. That train has left the station. There is clarity in that. It never gets simpler, it always gets more difficult. But you also realize that you have a process. Now I trust that process; I don't doubt it anymore. I have had the good fortune to show my films around the world, to speak and teach. So part of the gift and joy of growing older, is that I am able to share what I know with students and to inspire them. Also, to remind them that I am also still learning how to do this; there is no one way of how to do this.

S2: How are you mentoring your son?

AB: I am trying to stay out of his way. Like this morning taking photographs of the interview with this camera, was his idea; I didn't suggest it. Whatever he wants to do, I just want to open his mind. Whatever he is going to do, I want him to love it because he finds it infinitely fascinating.

S2: So, if Alzheimer's is in your future – we don't know, it's a mystery – if it were, what will be your defense?

AB: The therapists advise us to keep your mind active to stave it off as long as you can. So do the crossword puzzles and the newspaper everyday. I make films, and films are multi-dimensional crossword puzzles. When I finish my film, and I have to take it to the post-production facility. I have to bring it from my computer into their super-computer. There is a process where the computer runs an analysis and determines, "Your film is composed of 5,674 pieces." It kicked out that number — 5,674. Wow, I thought, I just made a puzzle of 5,674 pieces! Who woulda thought?! There are sounds and images, and the relationships between images, and the relationships between sounds, and layers of things beyond. There are a lot of details. In a way, one could say, you have to have a good memory to be a filmmaker — particularly an associative memory, "Oh that reminds me, that could go there." I write everything down. I get an idea, I write it down; I have a dream, I write it down; I have to do something tomorrow, I write it down. If you saw my desk! I love going to hotels because they give you little pads. I have a whole side of my desk which is just different sized pads, strewn with notations. It's true with filmmaking too. Everything is written down and entered in a computer. So the question is, if you took me to a dessert island, where I didn't have access to the crutch of paper, pen or pencil, would I survive?

S2: Receiving the Freedom of Expression Award at the San Francisco International Jewish Film Festival, what does that signify for you?

AB: When you look at the list of people who have received the award in the past, it's humbling. Elliott Gould received it last year; Kirk Douglas, the year before; and Jay Rosenblatt, previously. So obviously it's implication, shifts subtlety from year to year. In drafting my acceptance speech, I am trying to reckon what exactly it means. It is an honor. I'm thrilled.

S2: As a documentary filmmaker, typically you ask the questions, how do you feel about being interviewed yourself?

AB: I love asking questions, but I also love answering them. In conjunction with a retrospective of my work, they asked me to teach a master class on interviewing at the Docaviv Film Festival in Tel Aviv earlier this year. You've asked me questions that no one has ever asked me before, which I like. I always take like a year after making a film to show it. But this kind of interview that we are doing – is part of my process. It's intrinsic to what I do. You are giving me the opportunity to reflect on who I am, what I do, and the film I've made. In answering these questions, I'm actually learning. Chiseling away, continuing to define who I am, so that I can bring that self-knowledge, to the next project I take on. So I enjoy it, actually.

S2: You asked Edwin, when did he know he wanted to be a poet; and he answered, when he was 7 years old. When do you remember first realizing that you wanted to become a filmmaker?

AB: I can honestly tell you that my approach and the work I am doing right now is exactly what I was doing when I was in fifth or sixth grade. With book reports or research reports, I was always trying to invent new ways of presenting the information to the class. I took pride in doing presentations in completely unprecedented ways. If you could talk to someone from my class back then, I wonder if they would remember that. It's storytelling. It's about trying to shape and present experiences in a way that engages people and brings a smile to their face. In high school, I suppose we were taught how to write term papers (I don't know that I paid that much attention). I just wrote term papers the way that it occurred to me. I used to write long-hand on legal pads of paper (this is before computers), and then I used to staple pages together to make a scroll. When I was ready to edit it, I would run that scroll down the longest corridor in my house, get on my hands and knees with a scissors, another pad of paper and a pen, a stapler and some scotch tape, and I would splice in or cut out sections. Proto-cinematic editing. Like a work-print, like cutting in a film — that's how I did it. You don't teach that; no one teaches that, because it's crazy, but that's how I used to do it: Scotch tape, stapler and scissors and paper. On the floor. As a scroll. So, when I was introduced to filmmaking in college, I understood that this was a chance to bring in your own images and sound. I remember where I was, in a corridor, in a basement of the lecture hall building, in Binghamton, New York, when I said to myself, I know how to do this.

S2: Is there a question that you would like to be asked that you have never been asked before?

AB: It's funny because I ask that question too. I'm going to answer with a question (that's very Jewish!): Is there a question that you're not asking me, that you would really like to ask me, that you're afraid to ask me?

First Cousin Once Removed will air on HBO, on Monday, September 23 at 9:00 pm. [Details here](#). [And here](#).

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