

30. Look Who I Look Up To

Admiration is a strange emotion. Jean Rostand said, “The only things one can admire at length are those one admires without knowing why.” Though this may be true of things, careful reflection can reveal why we admire certain people. Often they are role models for us to emulate or representatives of the best we already see in ourselves. Sometimes the people we admire highlight a weakness we would like to overcome. Whom we admire and why reveals much about ourselves. I admire three people who share similar qualities.

Marva Collins, the Chicago educator, is someone I admire, and envy somewhat, because she is a great teacher (while I may be only a good one). She teaches Homer and Emerson to “hopeless” fourth-graders. She insists upon excellence, allowing no one to take the easy way out, and not too surprisingly, her students become scholars.

I also admire Harry Truman. He had to make what was perhaps the hardest decision in history: whether to use the first atomic bomb against Japan. Though no one truly realized the horrors that would become Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Truman’s Potsdam diaries reveal how well he himself recognized the crossroads at which mankind stood. Clearly tormented by his dilemma, Truman had the “guts” to take full responsibility. “The buck stops here,” especially when it hurts.

Finally, I admire the British poet John Keats for his courage. Even though he knew he was dying, this young man wrote poetry so marvelous that it became “a thing of beauty [that] lasts forever.” Can any poem be more poignant than his lines, “when I have fears that I may cease to be . . .”? Maybe flames that burn out quickly burn more brightly?

These three people that I admire all have the courage of their convictions, an unwillingness to whine or pass the blame or curse the heavens. Perhaps it is the beauty and the power that come from staring long at one’s own choices that makes each admirable, whether in education, or politics, or literature. By assuming responsibility for those hard choices, all three have transcended their fears, resolved their problems, and gloriously met their own standards for admiration.