

By [BEN STEIN](#)

Published: July 15, 2007

To begin, I am lying in a lavish sleeper bed in first class on a wonderful British Airways [Boeing 777](#), heading from Heathrow to Dulles. I am the only person in first class who isn't asleep. Even my night owl wife-for-life is fast asleep on the bed next to me.

[Weekend Business](#)

I am happy because I just finished a pleasant two-week stay in Frankfurt, Berlin and London, working on a movie, staying in great hotels and eating amazing filet of sole. And I hardly had to pay for a penny of it. That was a big part of why I enjoyed it so much.

I can't sleep, though, so I close my eyes and think about something soothing and reassuring — namely, my late father, Herbert Stein. I think about him for a long time, and what comes to me is this: Almost everything I have I can trace back to my father and mother. To their efforts, to who they were, to their character.

For example — and the list could go on forever — here I am writing this column about economics and finance. But how do I know a tiny bit about them? Because my father was a learned economist who talked about it around the dinner table, along with my mother, who was also a highly educated economist.

Because my father and mother's close friend from grad school at the [University of Chicago](#), C. Lowell Harriss, was my teacher for three economics classes at [Columbia University](#) and was especially kind to me, often walking with me for a long time after class to elaborate on what he had just been teaching. Because another great economics teacher at [Barnard College](#), Robert Lekachman, was also a family friend and took extra time with me.

And because I had grown up around economics, I just assumed that I could learn it and assimilate it, and so I had confidence in my abilities in the field. This led to my getting good grades and helped me get into [Yale](#) Law School and Yale's graduate school, where I studied with still more friends of my parents, like Henry Wallich and James Tobin.

And how did I get started as a writer? Because I had written an essay about [Richard Nixon](#) and pop culture and did not have a clue about where to sell it. My mother and father were friends with the powers that be at the editorial page of The Wall Street Journal, and that greased the skids there, during and after my time writing speeches about economics for Mr. Nixon and Gerald Ford at the White House.

And of course, I got my first full-time writing job there in good measure because my father was chairman of the [Council of Economic Advisers](#) for President Nixon from 1972 to 1974.

From then on, I've been writing about economics, especially how it affects individuals.

And what about my wife, the world's most nearly perfect human? Well, we met at the Junior Foreign Service Officers' Ball at the State Department on July 4, 1966. I was there because my father had gotten me some consideration as a summer intern at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, now defunct, at the State Department. If I had not gotten that job, who knows?

How did I get my start as a performer in front of the camera? Well, here we go again. It was from a chain of connections I made starting in 1973 at a Yom Kippur breaking of the fast at the home of William Safire, then a Nixon speech writer and fast friend — and later pallbearer — of my father's. His wife, Helene, was a close friend of my mother's.

So all of it can be traced back to the help of my father and mother: the first-class seat, the wife next to me, the fact that I am writing this at all.

Now, there's a point to all this. I write mostly about investments, and they are important. But for most people everywhere, their livelihood comes primarily from working. Their success depends largely on a combination of education, ability, work habits and connections. If you are like me and a great many other people who fly first class, you started out with some connections and made the most of them, or at least made something of them.

When I consider my friends who are extremely successful (much more successful than I am), many of them were given a big push in their education and career from family members.

But what if you don't have a well-connected father? What if you don't have a well-connected mother? What if you don't have a father at all? What if you are an immigrant without any connections, with parents who barely speak English, if at all? What do you do?

What if you are a young man or woman who has some talent and ambition but little or no idea of how to get onto the ladder? To tell you the truth, I am not at all sure what you do.

But I do know that there is a large class of baby boomers who have done well in their financial lives. They are retiring now and looking for things to do to help the community that gave so much to them.

I KNOW that I have beaten this drum before, but let me beat it again. I wonder whether there is some well-organized human being in the government or private sector who could create an organization that would go into schools on a continuing basis and teach people how careers are made. I wonder whether there could be some link with teachers in schools in nonrich neighborhoods who could tell helpful men and women about boys and girls who need mentors to get them going into higher education and entry-level jobs, and then to counsel them about how to behave on the job and in school.

I keep thinking that if the big hedge funds and investment banks and private investment firms deployed even a tiny fraction of their ability to help boys and girls, and if they really are as effective as they seem to be, and if they worked with retired boomers looking to make a difference, they could do a lot.

There is an immense problem of inequality in this country. It is getting worse, not better. It cannot be solved entirely by tax policy. And it certainly cannot be solved by monetary policy. But we could take a stab at it, even if it's a small stab, by sharing the skills and connections that some of us have — and were born with — with those young people who have what it takes in the cerebral cortex but need an outside connection.

My father was one of those kids. His mentor was a professor at Williams College named F. Taylor Ostrander. His friendship and support of my pop changed his life. What if there were a league of Taylor Ostrandors out there? It would not change everything for everyone, but it would change life for some, and that's a good day's work.

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