

A Giant Passes

by Jim Thompson

There is a scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird* in which Scout is told to stand when her father, Atticus Finch, passes by. She doesn't yet realize the impact her father is having on their community, so she has to be prompted to rise.

John Gardner, who died in February, was a hero in the mold of Atticus Finch. He played a major role on the national scene as the head of the Carnegie Corporation and the Urban League, the founder of Independent Sector, Common Cause, and the White House Fellows Program, and the author of seminal works such as *On Leadership*, *Self-Renewal*, and *Excellence*.

I first heard of John Gardner in high school. I competed in extemporaneous speaking in which orators are given a current events topic and 30 minutes to prepare a speech. Looking for a snappy ending once for a speech about Indira Gandhi, I found John's *Time* magazine quote: "What we have before us are some breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems." After that I ended every speech with it!

Why was John a hero? He was a person of principle. He resigned his cabinet post in the Johnson Administration because he opposed the Vietnam War.

He didn't shrink from hard tasks. Once when I moaned about a hard decision, he told me of having to fire a senior staff person. He complained to his board chairman who said, "You like your job, don't you, John?" (Yes.) "You get a lot of satisfaction from it, don't you?" (Yes.) "You're paid pretty well, aren't you?" (Yes.) "Well, this is where you earn your pay." (Oh.) After this I found it easier to move more quickly out of self-pity and embrace hard decisions.

John was not seduced by status. Jim Collins, in *Good to Great*, notes that great organizations maintain "don't-do lists," which are as important as to-do lists. Governor Nelson Rockefeller offered to appoint John to the U.S. Senate after Bobby Kennedy was assassinated, but he declined.

He refused the presidency of Stanford University. Many people could be U.S. Senator or university president. Who else could create a new force for good government like Common Cause or Independent Sector to speak for the nonprofit world in the corridors of power? John had a sense of where he could impact the world and was not tempted by prestigious jobs that would have used up his creative energy.

He once suggested a "Committee of Committees" to monitor the world's problems. When a problem received insufficient attention, this Committee would be a catalyst to assemble the resources to address it.

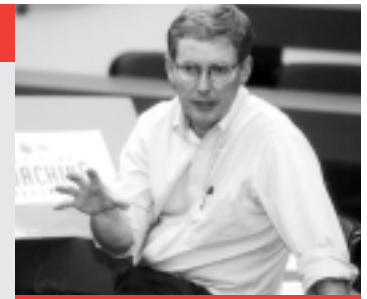


John W. Gardner

I was reminded of this after the third annual "Against the Grain" forum of youth sports leaders at Stanford on March 13-14. Perhaps it needs to be the Committee of Committees for youth sports.

When I joined the Stanford Graduate School of Business in 1987, I met with John in Washington, D.C. after Stanford President Don Kennedy empowered me to offer John a position at Stanford.

He didn't want to leave D.C. until his grandson finished high school, but he agreed to spend a week each quarter at Stanford in the interim. During those weeks, I accompanied John when he spoke to various groups. Although I sometimes heard him give the same speech three times in the same week, I was never bored because every time I heard something new.



Jim Thompson, PCA Director

John was involved with PCA from before the beginning. He wrote the foreword to my first book, *Positive Coaching*. He helped me get appointed to a national task force on character in sports that primed me to starting PCA as a national movement. He introduced me to Joel Fleishman and Jim Spencer of The Atlantic Philanthropies, which became one of the earliest supporters of PCA.

John always found time for me on short notice. I would call and within a day, I was sitting in his office glowing in his attention to my problems and possibilities. As much as I treasured those moments at the time, I now realize I didn't treasure them nearly enough.

Last fall Rick Stamberger's film, *John Gardner: Uncommon American*, ran on Public Television. There was a five-minute segment about PCA that was created for the film but not used. In it John says this about why he supported PCA:

"Jim was very troubled by some of the coaching that he saw, particularly in the little leagues. He felt that far from helping these kids, some of the coaches were diminishing their self-esteem. From our first conversation, I was just back of him wholeheartedly because the more you see of young people, the more you're struck with their search for something that will make them feel that they're worthy members of the human race."

Each of us who cares about helping children feel they're worthy members of the human race should rise. A great man has passed our way. ■

PCA's interview with John Gardner that appeared in the Fall 2001 issue of Momentum is available at www.positivecoach.org/momentum/gardner.html.