

## The Origins of *Wish You Well*

By David Baldacci

Writers are mostly a nostalgic lot. We pine for the past and seem to remember everything we've ever seen, heard, loved, hated or suffered through. We drink up history, both official and those juicier pieces represented by rumor and innuendo and even bald lies. And then we knead, polish, embellish and cajole these observations, musings and hyperbole into readable prose that others are willing to plunk down cash to experience.

Writers also tend to be an emotional group. We grow teary or unduly cheerful especially over events from times past as these memories take on heightened, perhaps some would say exaggerated, significance, as seen through the storyteller's skewed prism. I must confess I have these "afflictions" in severe abundance. I treasure memories, both real and imagined, from my youth. I have always been fascinated by the tortured, often schizophrenic history of my native Virginia and the South in general. I spend much time exploring the lives of my parents' families. A lost uncle here, a wandering great-grandfather there, a funny story of the paternal family from the old country, a poignant tale of my maternal family's struggles in the mountains; I get the trembles each time I unearth such priceless nuggets.

Indeed, the older I become and the more stories I write, these feelings appear to be gaining strength. It may be chiefly a function of my role as a father (now in its ninth year), and my ever-growing sense of my own mortality. I want my children to know where they came from, what their ancestors were like, how they struggled, persevered, the mistakes they made, the failures they suffered, the triumphs they achieved. Isn't that in part how the vaunted twin pillars of values and character are built? Whatever the reason or reasons, I have been looking more and more to the past in an attempt to understand what is so confusing and troublesome about current life.

We are now in a time of changes so dramatic that it rivals or surpasses perhaps anything that has come before. It is indeed different this time. At least all the stock market jocks tell us that, if only to justify billion dollar capitalizations of companies with no firm plans to even make any money other than by selling their own stock. We have just experienced one of the greatest economic booms ever with unemployment at historic lows, consumer confidence at historic highs, and welfare rolls, rightly or not, being pared down with blazing speed all across the country. We are the only remaining superpower with only the occasional rogue nation, and pesky terrorists, both foreign and home-grown, to worry about from time to time. Serious crime is down across the board. The Internet has brought us closer to being a global community than people thought possible a mere five years ago. We have more sheer information available to us than ever before at speeds faster than ever before. The world is arguably freer than it's ever been. Technology continues to make our lives more comfortable, more productive. We are living longer and with better health. All in all, it is a fairly rosy picture.

So why are we so miserable? New horrors inflicted by humans upon humans have become a daily occurrence, and we seem to grow less shocked at each new one. When acts of depravity are committed these days, their details are disseminated with lightning speed, and are often followed by acts of even greater atrocity before the ink has

dried on reports of the original event. Business rocks at the speed of the Web with machines of all kinds going twenty-four hours a day, the information flow never stops, and, apparently employers expect their employees to do the same thing: never stop working. At least that's how I interpret the weary and tense countenances I see everywhere. We are surrounded by homes with absent parents and children left to grow up without the benefit of mature hands guiding them. Who hasn't grown weary of the relentless clack of computer keys on planes, or the ubiquitous cell phone conversations?

The failures of companies, ideas, fortunes and lives occur today at astonishing speed. There is no margin of error, there is no room to be merely capable and willing. Either you are the best or you are not. Either you win or else you lose. Business leaders boast that American companies have never been leaner, meaner, stronger. And yet the clear result of all this is that there are angry, frustrated, vastly disenchanting people tramping through life at all levels. "Civility is gone" proclaim major newspapers across the land. Folks are often taken aback when someone is actually polite. Are we really that far from the following headline: TWO HUMANS ACTAULLY SEEN SMILING AT EACH OTHER ON STREET TODAY.

At certain levels we have all grown immune to this behavior if only because we feel powerless to do otherwise. Americans today are disinclined to give reprimands or pass judgment on others committing even the most boorish behavior lest they are physically attacked or, perhaps worse, sued and put at risk of losing everything in courts of justice that more and more have become courts of frivolity, conveyors of lottery-style wealth to the winner.

In case I'm not being entirely clear, I fear that we are coming apart at the seams. No doubt many will argue that American society is routinely in jeopardy of doing just that, only to be followed by a swing of the pendulum benignly the other way. We do seem to be a country of unsettling extremes. However, to me, the rending of social fabric seems more pronounced this time around. Perhaps this is because I have two small children who at some point I will be leaving behind to deal with this mess. And as a parent I find myself ill-equipped to advise them on how to do so because I really don't have a clue how to deal with it myself. But we so seem to be caring less and less about each other; people in pain seem to be objects chiefly to ignore. Perhaps it is partly the bunker mentality in response to a world if not gone completely mad, at least one that is markedly less familiar than any in recent memory. In essence, having given up trying to understand how children can gun down children, how normal citizens can become homicidal in rush-hour traffic, how babies can be left in trash cans by honor students, how rip-off scams have become so sophisticated that law enforcement officials have acknowledged that they simply can't keep up, how we can commit acts of ingenious depravity against one another and then write songs, books and produce movies about them, how the resentment and sheer hatred among the have-nots, the have-somethings, and the people who have too much are building to explosive levels. We pull the wagons in a tight circle and dare anyone to come hurt us and our very select clan of loved ones. That reaction may be understandable, yet it leaves little opportunity to reach out to others.

So, in response to what I have observed over the last few years of dizzying social and economic change, I fell back on really the only thing I am half-way proficient at: I wrote a story. It was not just any story, but a story about the past, 1940 to be precise, and set in a place my family and I know very well: the mountains of southwest Virginia.

*Wish You Well* is a tale of tragedy, hope, survival, failure, prejudice, hatred, justice and injustice, faith, love, and the tender art of living, spread among generations of family. That, of course, means it is about life, in all its swell of good and endearing moments, and in all its challenging sadness, in all its mean-spirited ways. I have no delusions that this book will, in any way, affect the problems I have discussed. Unfortunately, not that many people read books any more. A lousy movie will capture far more eyes than the greatest novel ever written. In fact, a recent news story in a prominent East Coast newspaper even suggested that with the new technologies available, we might not even need authors anymore. We can have books with sound and video clips, and the reader can rewrite a canned work any way he wants, or create it himself, however unskilled his hand may be at crafting tales. Thus, the novel, as we know it, will go the way of the horse and buggy, to be replaced with something snazzier, with more bells and whistles, if not more heart or substance. Yet the power of the book can never be underestimated, and the strength and resiliency of any writing comes from the themes dealt with in the pages and the fire sparked by its characters.

*Wish You Well* is by far the most personal story I've ever written and at the heart of it lies a connection between generations that represents a pipeline of information, knowledge and experience that I feel dwarfs anything delivered via high-speed modem or Cisco router. An important part of what makes us human, I believe, is a sense, both large and small, of where we have come from, and that means a connection to the past lives of others. This intimacy used to be delivered in many ways, some as simple as a grandfather's tales on the front porch after Sunday dinner. Or the discovery of that box in the attic filled with treasures of lives lived long ago, lives that have a direct and lasting connection to the finder. While writing *Wish You Well*, I surrounded myself with photographs of my ancestors, yellowed and curled with age. I would work from the outside in when drawing upon these pictures for inspiration. I would start with the surroundings, the jagged, tree-covered Appalachian rock, the rolling Virginia valleys, the farm buildings, the animals, and then I would wander over their shoes and their worn clothing and their sensible hats. And then I would trace their curled and leathered hands, their lean but mountain-strong torsos and then finally reach their faces. I would spend much time there, searching their faces, and then finally I would come to rest on their eyes. I would stare at them, and they would seem to stare back, over the span of a hundred years or so, and I would wonder if they ever could imagine me as I am today, see me as sharply defined before them, as I am observing them now.

Some lived long enough for me to actually know them. Many did not. Thus, I am left with stories handed down, recollections of aged relatives, family Bibles filled with loopy old-style cursive writing documenting births, marriages and deaths, old letters, personal possessions that have survived much to reach my hands, in order to fill in the gaps that mortality always inflicts.

To keep this chain of lives going is a responsibility that I find daunting yet also critical to what we refer to as our humanity. Understanding how others suffered helps us deal with our own suffering. The fact that it's our flesh and blood makes the lesson even more forceful. The same is true for happier times. When we learn of compassionate acts rendered long ago it helps us understand why we seek to help others and thus makes us more apt to do the same. When we understand that a mother or great-grandfather overcame hurdles that may dwarf the problems confronting folks today, it helps us get by.

It is all there, it has all been done before. Pain and suffering, happiness and wonder, dreams realized through hard work, passionate outcries against injustice, one person reaching out to take and hold and comfort another; these acts and desires have all been around since the first humans took their first breaths. Understanding this means that even in the worst of possible times we are alone together. We have the strong backs of family behind us, however long ago their physical forms vanished from this earth, helping us to get by.

*Wish You Well* is a novel that I look forward to reading to my children when they are older. It will tell them of how members of their family were born, grew up, worked, loved, cried, suffered, persevered and then passed on. I will show them old photographs of family members their age, long grown and dead now, and let them wonder about their lives, their dreams, their fears, to help them understand that these images are of *their* people. But that is only a start. The most it can do is whet their appetites for more knowledge of them and theirs. Yet there is no guarantee that their appetites will be so whetted by a single book or old photographs. That is too easy an answer, and easy solutions rarely solve complex problems. One can only gently but *consistently* point them in that direction and then let them cast their own decisions. It is a work-in-progress that really never ends. In the generations to come, the events of today will become the history of tomorrow. The passing down of memories and experiences, of cherished links to the past, are innately human endeavors. When we do it, we often do it well. The problem is we are doing it less often. And once the chain is truly broken repair may be impossible.

Thus it is really up to each of us to take our own journey to yesterday to make sense of today. I refuse to believe that our future is so different that the past no longer has value as a guidepost, as a touchstone. In fact, we may need the lessons and strength garnered from the past more today than ever before. A fast computer connection never made anyone more human, more socially responsible. A tech-laden stock portfolio never alone made someone nice to be around. The next deal, the next combination of powerhouse companies, the next technological breakthrough that may well have us vacationing on Mars will never make us more decent, more caring, more compassionate. There are undoubtedly numerous treasures lying ahead of us. Yet I would hope that would never persuade us that the path behind is not strewn with perhaps a deeper, more lasting wealth.

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