

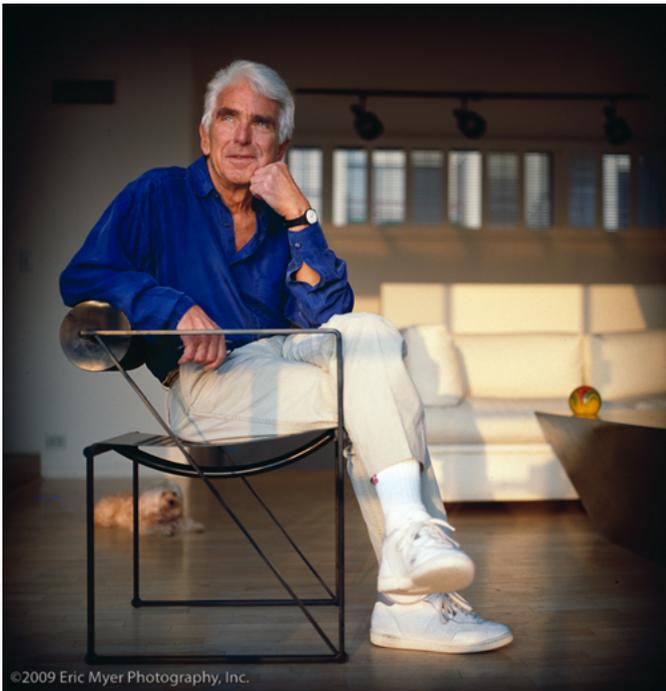


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The Secret of Warren Bennis's Success



By Marty Kaplan



Though the size of Warren Bennis's obituary in the *New York Times* was epic — all six columns across, filling most of the space above the fold on the back page of the A section — its text made no mention of something about him I always thought inextricable from who he was and the success he achieved.

There was room in the obit to note some of the top business executives he had mentored, and the four U.S. presidents who sought his advice. There was space to call him the father of leadership studies, with an influence comparable to Peter Drucker's on management. There were generous quotes from his books, articles and interviews, and there were telling details about his own leadership, like this: At age 19, when he was shipped off to Europe toward the end of the Battle of the Bulge, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant and was one of the youngest platoon leaders in the Army.

But there was one word — one outstanding quality he possessed — that apparently dared not be spoken in the obit of record.

Was it too shallow to acknowledge? A couple of weeks earlier, in James Garner's *Times* obituary, the word was right up there in the headline. If it could be said about an actor, why not also say it about an academic?

The word is handsome. Warren Bennis was one handsome dude.

I guess there's a taboo about admitting that this matters for a man unless his profession involves paying to look at him or running for office. Fortunately, the *Times* obit included two recent pictures of Warren. Until the very end, age didn't take away his dash.

When I visited Warren a couple of weeks before he died, at 89, he was busy planning. What he most wanted to talk about was a book he was going to write — not his next book, but the book after that, which would be his 37th — about political courage. His body was clearly failing. I knew this was likely to be the last time I'd see him, and I think he knew it, too, yet our conversation contained no goodbyes. I know: Men are stupid about feelings. But both of us were less afraid to talk about one kind of courage than another.

He told me how bothersome it was that he'd fallen behind on his three-newspapers-a-day regime, but I still found him as current on Washington as anyone. He played with the idea that President Obama's troubles with Congress originated in his life as a young man, which he thought might make a good case study for the book. He confided that he was thinking about retiring from his professorship at the University of Southern California when he turned 90 next March, and cutting back a bit then on his calendar, but he said that wouldn't preclude him from spending a couple of days a week on campus with students. He asked me to consider writing the book with him, and co-teaching a course based on it. I didn't have to answer on the spot — it was just something to tuck away.

The reason all this talk about the future didn't break my heart was Warren's undiminished charm, and his coltish take on the topic, and the autumnal persistence of a matinee-idol handsomeness that disarmed any reservations about his powers. Over the 40 years I'd known him, his looks had made him pop out of every picture and room he appeared in. I knew this from personal experience. When I met him, I was a Stanford graduate student spending the summer interning at the Aspen Institute in Colorado, and he was president of the University of Cincinnati. The first time I laid eyes on him, his white hair and blue eyes were set off by a deep tan (we didn't know any better then), and the tennis whites and gleaming smile he wore made him almost impossibly dazzling.

He appreciated, and wore well, subtly beautiful clothes. He knew what a good blue shirt could do for him. Warren was the only man who ever looked me up and down, appraising my wardrobe and grooming, neither of which much interested me back then, but a couple of decades later, when he was still grading me on how I was turned out, it finally dawned on me that he was patiently trying to teach me that a dollop of vanity could help anyone go a long way.

Warren knew how good he looked, which I loved him for, and he understood the authority it lent to his own leadership. Men and women alike wanted him to notice them, befriend them, to bask in his vitality. Movie stars can make people a little crazy like that. But it never went to Warren's head. He was warm and kind, and he had an enduring empathy for — as Philo of Alexandria, whom he loved to cite, put it — the great drama going on within every person we meet on our journey.

Fifteen years after I met him, Warren floored me by turning my career transition from Washington to Hollywood into a case study in what became his best-selling and still classic work, *On Becoming a Leader*. To this day, if someone I meet says they know who I am, chances are it's from that. I never did get to collaborate with him on a book or a course, but three years ago, I interviewed him for an hour on the topic of creativity and collaboration in front of a packed house at USC. I was sometimes challenged to keep him on topic — in his ninth decade, his anecdotes could be discursive, and nested like the tales of Sheherazade — but I needn't have worried about holding the audience. What he said about everyone from Stephen Sondheim to Steve Jobs held the audience rapt, but as an insurance policy he'd also worn some awesome striped cashmere socks that kept any listener's attention from wandering.

His daughter Kate told me that after he died, she sat at his desk, surrounded by his stuff, looking through his glasses, wrapping herself in his cardigan, trying to imagine being him. She saw that his calendar was open to July, and it was packed with appointments, visitors, reminders and deadlines. One of those visits was mine, when all he wanted to talk about was the future. He died on July 31. When she turned the page to August, it was blank.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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