

From Once Upon a Time to Happily Ever After: The Fable of A Man We Call "Ernst"
As told by Alan M. Webber

Once upon a time in a far and distant land, there lived a remarkable fellow. (And still lives to this day, happily!) We will call our hero, this remarkable one-of-a-kind fellow "Ernst."

Although this may not be the best choice of a name for our hero.

Because among the many things that were remarkable about Ernst—and there were many remarkable things, things both wonderful and strange, things ingenious and delightful, things plain and complicated, things beautiful and ordinary, things that made Ernst larger than life, certainly larger than the ordinary life lived by ordinary people—one of the odder ones was this: his name.

Ernst.

Of all the things Ernst was, earnest is not one of them.

When you think of earnest you think of dull. Too serious. Almost painful sincerity.

Earnest was what Ernst wasn't. What Ernst wasn't was earnest.

He was delightful to be around. He had a wonderful sense of humor and play. He loved to laugh. He loved to joke. He loved it when others laughed and joked—even if the jokes came at his expense. *Especially if the jokes came at his expense.* When that happened he laughed all the harder, because he enjoyed laughing in general, and there was never anything funnier than laughing at himself. And that made him far from earnest.

Another knack he had that made him far from earnest: a gift for making other people feel comfortable around him, and with each other. So-and-so doesn't know so-and-so? No problem! Our un-earnest Ernst would introduce them to each other, explain why each would enjoy the other's company and then provide the food and wine and entertainment and surroundings to make sure that the experience was so delightful that everyone left, when it came time to leave, feeling that, in fact, they couldn't remember ever having met or spent time with such delightful new friends! And that fellow who put it all together, who orchestrated the whole thing? What was his name again? Oh, yes! Ernst. Ernst who is not earnest.

Which is not to say that our hero was not serious. Serious, but not somber. Serious, but not solemn. Serious, but not boring!

Serious in a way that was always thoughtful, considered, concerned. And with a twinkle in his eye, as if to say, "We can agree, can't we, about this thing called life? There is a lot we can do to make it better, a lot that needs doing, yes? And there is a lot we can't do, no matter how hard we try, no? So, since that's the way it is, let's agree to do what we can, and do our best, and do some good and have some fun along the way. Yes!"

In fact, our hero Ernst, this remarkable fellow, has to be understood, if one can understand a hero of these proportions, as a study in contradictions. Of, if not contradictions, at least juxtapositions—a brilliant combination of traits and qualities that most often are found in nature in direct opposition.

And yet in our Ernst, they come together as a harmony of opposites, a perfect recipe (almost like soup!) of tastes and flavors, colors and seasonings that, at first you might think would be impossible to combine!

How could this ever go with that? No way! This is dissonance, not harmony!
Where is Mozart when we need him?

But who needs Mozart when you've got Ernst!

Because with Ernst, in his own effortless way, these impossible components turn into their own miraculous dynamic, a living expression of the dimensions of a man whose creative synthesis defies easy measurement.

Consider:

The land where our hero lives has had a difficult history of religious conflict, where what faith you professed, what God you prayed to, could have lethal implications. What does our hero believe about faith and God, religion and the soul? Was he a Catholic? Yes! Was he a Jew? Yes! Does he understand both, see into each, make room for all? Of course! Why be one thing, when you can be two at least! Why live so small a life constrained by radical fundamentalism, when you can construct a world view big enough to contain multitudes!

What about the world of business, the affairs of men where money rules and wealth is the default metric of a man's achievement? Our hero Ernst, he is no slouch in this department, either. In the course of a busy life of striving—and remember, man will err as long as he strives!—our talented fellow has made a lot of money. A lot of money. And lost a lot of money. And made a lot of money. And lost a lot of money. Up, down, up, down! A lesser man would get dizzy! Truth be told, our rascal of a hero Ernst is a bit of a risk-taker. And, truth be told, he has no choice! After all, what is life, if not a giant risk? When you start out with nothing, as a foundling—think of Moses in the bull-rushes!—then how do you compare risks after that?

And money itself—to get at the root of all evil—what is it for? It could buy things: cars, of course. And art. Wine. Even something exotic, like a ranch in a land far and distant from Ernst's own. But what of all that? Is that the measure of a man? Far better to use money, not as a metric, but as a tool. To make life better. To make things better. To find enjoyment. To find fulfillment. To find expression. To make a contribution. To help.

And not just for himself. But for others. What if the purpose of money is to make the world a better place? How do you measure money and its use then?

This fellow keeps getting more and more interesting, no?

Let's go on, then!

How about work? Here, our hero is a human dynamo! He can carry the work of the world on his broad shoulders—why man, he doth bestride the earth like a colossus! (Did I mention our hero's early career: this rogue was an actor! Can you imagine an actor who is so natural in his own skin that the best part he could ever play would be . . . himself!) His capacity for hard work, for applied effort, his appetite for doing difficult things is immense. But what about family? Friends? Community?

Ah, here, once again, we see the genius of juxtaposition! Family? There is his family, which occupies the heart of his heart. (The lovely Andrea! What hero wouldn't have such a perfect heroine by his side? Perfect!) And there is his extended family, which includes, it seems, the family of man! Who is not in Ernst's family? Here is a hero who could love with all his heart his own wife, his children, their children—and have a heart large enough to love his friends and their children, and their children's children!

And then there is the strange and wonderful public-private bifurcation of our hero, this man we call Ernst. Here is a hero who has mastered the art of public communication. And it is an art! How to read the minds of his fellow men and

women, and then craft a message that will find its target with the lightening quickness of an arrow flying straight to the bulls-eye, and with the gentle delicacy of a bird landing lightly on a limb. How does he always know what needs to be said? How does he ghostwrite speeches, craft messages for leaders who lack the craft to deliver them? How does he sponsor brilliant public events? And how, you ask, does he do all this, and never appear himself. Never let his name appear? Never let his fingerprints appear, even on the margins of the pages of the program? How does this master of the public act keep himself so private?

How is this possible, you ask?

How can our hero be so much larger-than-life?

And here is the secret: *he isn't larger-than-life! He is exactly as big as life can be!*

Our hero Ernst, you see, has his own secrets.

He is a man like all men—only more so.

He is a man who delights in the company of others.

And a man who has spent time alone, reflecting on what really matters in life.

He is a man who has thought long and hard about the human condition.

About the human heart. About the true nature of happiness, about the well-spring of joy and the tap-root of meaning.

And who concluded after much thought that a few things really mattered.

Love and family. Helping others. Giving more than keeping. Laughing more than crying. Creating. Sharing. Caring. Leaving things better than you found them.

And because he has never been afraid to look the truth of human life in the eye—what was there to be afraid of? why blink at the raw truth of existence?—he sees into the hearts of others.

He sees how he can give away ideas to others the way some people give away spare change or extra clothes. Why hoard an idea, Ernst thinks. If you give it away, it makes more ideas! Creativity begets more creativity!

He sees how he can take people places they could never go on their own. Places in their minds, places in their heart, places in their lives. "Don't be scared," he seems to say. "I'll be with you! What could possibly happen to us when we're together? We can laugh, we can cry, and we'll come through it all right! The enemy? Fear is the enemy, my friend! Fear and small-mindedness, timidity of the mind and timidity of the soul! Look! The world is an amazing place," our hero Ernst seems to say. "Let's partake! The bitter with the sweet, the sad with the joyous, the difficult with the easy! It's all there, spread out for us like a wonderful banquet! (Or a variety of soups, each for the tasting!) Enough for all—enough for everyone, if we care about each other and we see things the right way."

And because he doesn't think or live or experience life in little categories and constrained compartments, he sees how the pieces fit together. How something good could be made even better, if only you allow yourself to see outside the confines of narrow thinking. How unusual questions lead to better answers—and Ernst, our brilliant, thoughtful, but not earnest hero loves questions! Good questions need protection, he thinks, like living things need care and feeding—once you admit that a scary question isn't all that scary! How people from different walks of life can mix their traditions and heritages, and blend together something new and fresh and better than any of them could have done by themselves.

And at the end of the day? (Hmmm. Where did that phrase come from? Perhaps from Ernst himself!)

At the end of the day how does our hero Ernst fare?

Does he get to live happily ever after?

Happily, we haven't reached the end of the day where Ernst is concerned! Our hero continues on! (What's the right verb here? Soldiers on? Plays on? Drives on? Loves on? It's impossible! There is too much of him to pick one verb!)

But for those of you who want to know how this story ends, we can tell you that we have peeked ahead. (And yes, it's fair to say, this remarkable fellow does, in fact, live happily ever after!)

But, of course, if you ask the amazing but not-earnest Ernst how he thinks the story ends, he will say, "Everyone lives happily ever after—don't you see, that's why I'm here, to help us all get there!"

Which, after all, is why he's our hero.