



Maestro Antonino

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Many of us have memories of great teachers, older figures who enter our lives for a while and, often without knowing it, change their entire course. Chris Caruso is a seventy-six year old man with such a memory. A retired barber, he would pass for Santa Claus but for his cleanshaven face and the neat trim of his white hair. He did not meet the teacher who shaped his life in a lecture hall but in a tiny shop on the island of Sicily. He was seven years old.

My brothers in the United States, they begged my mother, "Send our brother to learn the barber trade. Over here in this country, the barbers are dressed in white. They look like doctors, and they make money inside the roof, not outside the roof. The customer comes in and brings him the little coins, and they live happy. They don't have to go in the railroad tracks to work. They don't have to do any factory work."

My mother was glad. She said, "You know your brother Charlie and your brother Tom, what they want you to do? They want you to learn the barber trade. I know the old man that used to cut the hair to my dad, and I'm gonna take you there."

I said that if this is what my brothers think would be good for me, I will go. So my mother took me hand by hand. I was nervous a little bit, but she was holding my hand. She introduced me to him. She said, "Maestro Antonino, this is my son. His name is Christopher."

"Oh, nice. *Come sta?* How are you?"

"*Sta bene.*"

My mother was telling Maestro Antonino, "My husband and my children over in the United States, they like to have this boy learn the barber business, so I'm going to give you my son to teach."

"Oh, good, good," he said. "Good, I need you." He was a nice old man. He had been a barber for many, many years. He was just like a doctor. He knew how to bleed people. He knew how to pull teeth. His wife, she was a pretty old lady too. I remember them just like I would see them today. They were a little hunched. In the wintertime they would have a little open fire outside, and when the smoke would dissipate, they would bring in the charcoal in a little stove made out of copper, with a handle. Enough to take the chill off the house. He

would light up something that would make a little smoke and he would inhale it. He must have had something like asthma, to my imagination of the poor guy.

Every day, seven days a week, I use to go and shake little pieces of cloth. Pieces of pants, pieces of shirts, pieces of junk clothes—they would cut them up and make pieces he could wipe his razor on. He put them all in one basket. I would shake the soap suds with the whiskers out and I would wash these little cloths and hang them up to dry. If he wanted to buy something or if he wanted to tell some people that he was waiting in the barbershop, I would go and do all of these little errands for him.

He would ask me to watch him. “You doing anything? Why don’t you watch me cut hair?” He showed me how to hold the comb. “You cut the hair over the comb and make sure that the scissor doesn’t slip under. You figure out how many inches you want the hair off the scalp, you get the hairs, you put them in between your fingers, you cut them all around the head on top.”

Whenever I started making the suds for lather, he would say, “Rub it real good. Rub it real hard.” The soap was in paste form. I would get a little piece of that soap, put it in the brush, dab the brush in a little warm water, and then I would start to lather up the customer’s face. And put the basin with water right under his neck so any dribbling would go in the container. You understand what I’m talking about? Then Maestro Antonino would say, “Did you rub it real good? I’m gonna see if you did.” And many times that he tried with the razor, he said, “You didn’t rub it good. I can’t even cut ’em. Give me that brush. I’m gonna do it myself and show you how you rub it.” And he would show me.

The first time I lathered somebody, I was not that tall so I had to go on top of a little stool. I put the soap in the brush and I started going around. But I was amateur. I was not perfect yet. I smeared the soap all over his eyes, in his nose. I was apologizing to him. “Oh, I didn’t mean to do that.” “That’s alright, that’s alright. You’re gonna learn. You’ll learn, you’ll be alright.” It was words of encouragement. The people were nice.

I had to learn how to strap the razor. I had to watch how he would hone it. He would put a drop of olive oil in the stone and then he would hone the razor back and forth and try it on his nail to see if it would stick. I had to keep an eye at what he was doing. “Keep on watching me and pretty soon, before you know it, you’re gonna shave people.” Later he asked me to shave, and I thought I was not yet ready. I was eight and a half years old. I said, “I don’t know. I’m afraid.” He said, “Oh, you shave now. I told you what to do. Put the razor flat. Don’t put it on an angle. Put it flat with the face and glide. It’ll shave.” By golly, it was too. The way he was teaching me was the truth.

I think the first time I shave, my father's brother came over. "How's Chris doing? Do you think he's going to be a barber or what?" "Yeah, yeah, he's going to work on you. Give your uncle a shave." And I started shaving him. I finished the cheek and then Antonino finished it up. He said, "You think he shaves all right?" My uncle said, "Well, I couldn't even feel that on my face. He's got a light hand, you know, the hand is light." Ah, light! It took time to learn.

Antonino would show me all the little things, including the bleeding. There is a way you bleed people in the back in case they have a bad cold. You put a little piece of cotton inside a glass and you light it. You put it on the skin, and the flame goes out, but it makes a vacuum and it sucks the skin a little higher so you can make a few little cuts with a sharp razor. Then you light another piece of cotton and put the glass back and it sucks the blood in, just like a leech would do, see? Only the leech would bite. This worm would bite you, but this is done professionally without the leech. If something had to be done, Antonino would say, "Get the cotton. Get the match ready." And he showed me not to cut too deep, just enough to nick the skin. He showed me how it's done and he made me do it.

One winter Antonino must have caught a bad cold, poor fellow, and he died a few days later. Maybe he had pneumonia or some heart condition. He was over ninety years old. He loved me. He and he wife too. She was so glad that I was around and that he was teaching me. They thought I was their child. Maestro Antonino didn't have any children, but he thought I was just like his own boy. He talked to me just like I belonged to him.

In the old country, a barber worked for very little money, but a lot of people had the respect because he was just like . . . they called him "professor." "Hi, *professore!*" What kind of professor was he? Some barbers, they didn't even know how to write and read. Yet they knew the trade and they were capable of giving a haircut to a man and pleasing him. My mother used to say that the person that doesn't have his hair cut by a barber, he'll have his head just like a stepladder. She said the money spent in the barbershop, it is blessed by the wife, because the wife, she is the first one to appreciate her husband's looks. And it's true today. You go in a barbershop and you get a haircut. I bet the minute you get up from that chair you feel better. I think the barber is a nice profession to follow. We have books of the barber profession, how it started, how it was done originally. The barber has been an honorable profession for a long, long time.

Notes

1. This is an excerpt from John Kotre's forthcoming book *Outliving the Self* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press).