

Who's On Your Fridge?

by Peter Bregman

□ I was lifting weights at my gym, a community center in New York City, when he caught my attention.

□ His name, I later found out, was Marvin Moster. He stood a few inches over five feet, mostly bald with some white hair on the sides of his head, sporting a mustache, and wearing a light blue shirt and dark blue shorts. In the obvious ways, he was unremarkable. And yet, I couldn't help noticing him.

□ He was older — I guessed in his seventies — and he was boxing with a trainer, punching in a rhythm they had obviously practiced before, ducking his head whenever the trainer threw a hook. Two things struck me: he was in excellent shape — evidenced by his balance, his rhythm, and how vigorously he was punching — and he was having fun.

□ "How old are you?" I asked him when he took a break.

□ "77," he told me with a smile.

□ "I want to be like you when I'm 77," I said.

□ His smile broadened. "And I want to be like you now."

□ His laugh was infectious. It made me feel good just being around his energy, soaking in his enthusiasm. At least in that moment, he seemed delighted to be himself. That's when the thought occurred to me.

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□ "Can I take your picture?" I asked him.

□ "Sure," he said, "What for?"

□ I pulled out my camera phone as he posed with his boxing gloves raised.

□ "I want you on my fridge," I told him.

□ I don't know Marvin. I don't know whether he's healthy or sick, wealthy or poor, happily married, unhappily married, single, divorced, or widowed. I don't know his politics or what his friendships are like or whether he's gay or straight or what he does besides go to the gym. I don't even know if he's a nice person.

□But I do know that I wanted a little bit of what I perceived in Marvin — his energy, what appeared to be his sunny outlook — in me. So I took his picture.

□Which got me thinking: Why not start a collection?

□A collection of pictures of ordinary people, about whom I know very little, but who inspire me with some quality I want to nurture in myself.

□Like the bus driver in Paris who, after I asked him which stop to get off for my hotel, asked me for the exact address and then pulled out his iPhone at a red light to check the map and suggest the closest stop.

□Or the taxi driver who declined to take me to the airport because she was finishing her shift but pulled over, got out of her cab, and waited with me to make sure I got another taxi before leaving.

□These are ordinary people in ordinary situations who surprised and inspired me. I want that to rub off on me.

□But wait a second. I've written about high-profile leaders in this blog. People like the late Dr. Allan Rosenfield, the public health trailblazer whose work saved the lives of millions of people in developing countries. Or Jim Wolfensohn, the former President of the World Bank who fought courageously against corruption. Shouldn't they be on my fridge instead of a moderately helpful bus driver?

□Maybe. But being reminded about the bus driver can change my behavior today. I can look at his picture and be a little more helpful to others. He reminds me of something simple I want to nurture in myself. Same with Marvin.

□I am not saying these people should inspire everyone; that everyone put a picture of Marvin on their fridge. I'm not suggesting we build a leadership model based on their examples.

□I am suggesting you keep your eye out for your own Marvin. And when you find him or her, you take a picture.

□This idea may seem simplistic. People are complex. If I really knew any of these people, I might not want them on my fridge. I don't know why Marvin is boxing; maybe he spent four years in prison for some heinous crime and he wants to stay in shape because he's planning another one? Most likely, I'm just projecting characteristics I like onto other people. I can't honestly say that the inspiration isn't more about me than it is about them.

□But here's the thing: we're always projecting things onto other people. We just often choose to be critical more readily than we choose to be inspired — to project more negative things onto people than positive.

□In fact, we seem to rarely miss an opportunity to be disappointed. We focus on what people are doing wrong, on their weaknesses and shortcomings. We gossip and complain. We get frustrated and passive aggressive. We find ourselves constantly surprised by the flaws of our colleagues: How could he/she/they do that?

□What if, instead — or at least in addition — we chose not to miss an opportunity to be inspired? If we gossiped about things people did that energized us without fixating on the

things that disappointed us? If we looked for sparks that ignited our enthusiasm and incited our goodwill? And if we allowed those sparks to light our fires of passion?

□If nothing else, we'd feel better about the people around us, the world we live in, and ourselves. Maybe just for a moment.

□And maybe, after a few weeks or months, we'd end up with refrigerator doors filled with reminders of people who inspire us — not for lives thoroughly well lived — that's probably too high a bar, too easy to fall off — but for drops of inspiration.

□Every time I look at that picture of Marvin, it makes me smile. And it encourages me to eat a little better and exercise a little more.

□So, who's on your fridge?