



Smashing All the Stereotypes: Hill Harper

[By Mary Waldron]

In keeping with his life motto, “You only live life once, and if you do it right, once is all you need,” Hill Harper seems to have found the key to conquering the worlds of law, business, writing, and acting.

With an extensive education from Brown University and Harvard University, Harper has gone on to work in some of the largest law firms, act in hit TV shows and movies, launch popular hotels and restaurants, and reach out to young people by writing the book *Letters to a Young Brother: MANifest Your Destiny*, which was recently re-released in April 2007 as a hardcover edition.

With parents who were both successful physicians, Harper was always encouraged to excel in school and other intellectual pursuits. Once he completed his undergraduate work at Brown University in 1988, graduating magna cum laude and as valedictorian, Harper went on to Harvard University. Although he was also accepted to Yale University, he chose to attend Harvard because of its selection of performance opportunities throughout Boston. It was there that he earned his J.D. as well as his M.A. in Public Administration.

When Harper entered graduate school, he had no specific long-term career plans lined up. Instead, he approached school as an “exploration” of different fields, which would eventually guide him to his destined career path.

“That’s what law school was for me: exploration,” he said. “That’s what I think all school is for us.”

Prior to graduate school, Harper had studied theater at Brown University, participating in

many plays on campus. This encouraged him to continue acting during and after graduate school, particularly with the renowned Black Folks’ Theatre Company in Boston, one of the nation’s most lauded African-American theater groups. This opportunity allowed Harper to travel and perform throughout New England while he was studying law and public administration. The group tended to present contemporary, edgy plays that were smaller and more manageable for travel, like David Mamet’s classic *American Buffalo* and *The Meeting*, a play about a fictional meeting between Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and *Malcolm X*.



Harper got a taste of legal practice during his summers in law school as a paid summer associate at various firms, such as Davis, Polk & Wardwell, Sullivan & Cronin, and Chadbourne & Parke in New York. He also worked for Rosenfeld, Meyer & Sussman in California.

In addition to raking in some extra cash for tuition and books, Harper also was able to dabble in many areas of law to see if any sparked his interest. Eventually, he found that he did not have a passion to practice, although he was more inclined toward the educational side.

“I just found that working as a lawyer was not for me, but legal education was great,” he said.

Harper also started to pave his way to film and television during this time, frequently trekking to New York to audition for various projects. He did some work for MTV, and he also was an extra in Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*. Little did Harper know he would go on to star in two of Lee’s films just a few years later.

“Change can happen quickly, and relationships you develop can also happen quite quickly. My journey reaffirms that, and I truly believe that,” he said.



During his last year of graduate school, Harper stretched his creative wings a bit more by writing a short film called *One Red Rose*. Lucky for him, Harper’s cousin was an aspiring director living in Los Angeles and working as Robert Townsend’s assistant. The duo decided to collaborate and shoot the film while Harper was on leave from school to work on his thesis.

Starting in 1993, Harper really began to make a name for himself in television. Many know him for his role as Aaron, Al Bundy’s fellow shoe salesman, on *Married with Children*. After appearing in a series of TV shows and small films, Harper landed



a starring role in Lee's *Get on the Bus* in 1996. From there, his career skyrocketed with starring roles in *He Got Game* and *The Skulls*. Harper is now most notorious for his current series-regular role on *CSI: NY* as Dr. Sheldon Hawkes.

Adding to his diversity even more, Harper is also an owner of International House, a sleek and modern hotel near the French Quarter in New Orleans, and The Lodge, an ultra-hip steakhouse in Beverly Hills.

Now, many people may ask, "Is Harper a lawyer trying to act or an actor who tried to be a lawyer?" Well, he is neither. Harper believes that all people, not just lawyers, should embrace other interests and career paths that attract them.

"It's a shame that our culture and society tend to limit us in terms of 'well, you have to focus on one thing to be good at one thing,' and I just think that we're all multifaceted," he said. "We all can do many things great. That old saying 'jack of all trades, master of none' I think is ridiculous. It's limiting. I think you can be a master of many things."

"Interest in law education and government are some things that are just a part of who I am, as well as being an artist and investing in businesses and owning hotels. They all work in concert. They're not mutually exclusive," he added.



Although Harper has not directly used his graduate degrees in his career yet, the valuable skills he developed during school are priceless and have indirectly benefited him and his success.

"The beautiful thing about a legal education is that it helps you to develop critical-thinking skills, writing skills, and the ability to communicate clearly and concisely. I think that that serves you in whatever you choose to do," he said.

"I know some incredible lawyers who I went to law school with and many people I went to law school with who aren't lawyers anymore, and their legal background is essential to their success today."

Naturally, Harper draws from his education and experience in his acting and aims to use his background to break stereotypes.

"I love to play characters that are intelligent—that have ideas and thoughts and fears—that break the stereotypical image of the African-American male and what greater society seems to see through a number of other media outlets, including music videos and music, etc.," he said. "I love playing characters that tend to bust through that image. We don't have to live in extremes; you don't have to be either the gangster thug or Steve Urkel. You can live somewhere in between. Those are types of characters that I try to play."

"Just because you are educated doesn't mean that you are a 'nerd.' You can be cool and interesting and educated," he said. "Most of the people that I spent time with at Harvard, in whatever graduate discipline they were in, were all, for the most part, very interesting and well-rounded individuals."

In the early 2000s, Harper began receiving invitations to speak at various schools throughout the country because of his education and background. At these presentations, Harper found himself repeatedly answering the same questions that young people had for him. In 2006, looking around at the sea of blossoming young adults who were in need of guidance, Harper decided to write a book to answer

those questions for all young people. The format of the book is a series of motivational and advice-driven letters to a fictional young man written by real successful professionals and other great people. Its title, *Letters to a Young Brother: MANifest Your Destiny*, was influenced by a life-changing book that Harper read as a young man called *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke.



Many of Harper's inspiring friends, colleagues, and mentors—including powerhouse producer Jerry Bruckheimer, 2008 presidential candidate and former law school classmate Barack Obama, and friend and actress Gabrielle Union—contributed to the book.

Also a contributor to the book was one of Harper's most influential life mentors, Professor Charles Ogletree, a law professor from Harvard who changed Harper's outlook toward life and his career ambitions.

"He's one of the best legal professors, I believe, in the country," he said.

Martin Martel, a sociology professor who taught Harper in his undergraduate years, has also been memorable for his persistence and passion for pushing his students to achieve the best.

"I've been really lucky and blessed to have people like Professor Ogletree and Professor Martel in life that really would nurture my talents, but at the same time, demand excellence and the best of me to help me become better. They really have made my education process better and ultimately made me a better person," he said.



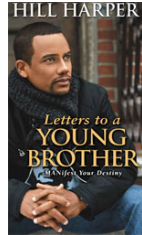
Harper advises young people, as well as young professionals and lawyers, to think about life and goals for the long-term rather than getting caught in instant-gratification traps.

"I think many of the problems that we see today come from the idea of instant gratification-and that's on every level. You see it happening with cheating in corporate America. You see this happen in every facet, no matter what wealth level or socioeconomic level or even gender. One thing that was reinforced to me as a very young person was the idea of 'forget about instant gratification; think about long-term gratification,' and that's really held steady for me throughout my life," he said.

Harper believes that young professionals can achieve almost anything, as long as success starts with the right attitude. Having a positive outlook in life can make a world of difference.

"Much like all areas of life, there's not one way to do it right. There's no secret, except

for, if you do set your mind to it, whatever it is, good or bad, you will attract it into your life. If you're always fearful and doubtful, you'll attract more of the same. But if you have ideas about being fearless and dynamic and brilliant, I believe all of us can do it."



Above all, Harper advises all law students and young professionals to discover the ambitions and projects that make them tick, even if they lie outside of law.

"Find your passion. And when I say 'find your passion,' I want there to be an 'S' at the end- 'find your passions'-because I believe that many of us want to do many different things, but oftentimes we push it down because of fear," he said.

"If you have an intuition to do something, you should do it. Take that path. You're already

on a great track; this legal-education track is fantastic, and if you have the opportunity to work in a legal career, that's great as well, but there's other things that you can do and you should do because you'll be a better lawyer, if that's what you want to be, if you're doing more and different things. I believe that variety and passionate pursuits are what make you a fully well-rounded, whole individual."

ON THE NET

Hill Harper's IMDb page
www.imdb.com/name/nm0004991

Letters to a Young Brother: MANifest Your Destiny
www.amazon.com/Letters-Young-Brother-MANifest-Destiny/dp/1592402003

CSI: NY
www.cbs.com/primetime/csi_ny