## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning From Real Heroes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s Not in My Job Description!</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Every Day Thanksgiving</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Do You Commit a Geragos?</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Warp</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from Everyone</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrating Our Commonality</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Your Mark, Get Set, Go!</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Comedy and Tragedy of Spontaneity</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Redeployment</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality Therapy, Part I</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality Therapy, Part II</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice from a Marketing Genius</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing to Win</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defying Historical Patterns</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario and Me</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above All, Discretion</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beware False Perceptions</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules No. 1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing With Injustice</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touching All the Bases</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Sense</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service Is a Mind-set, Part I</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service Is a Mind-set, Part II</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service Is a Mind-set, Part III</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop Worrying and Start Living</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beware the DEL Lifestyle</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing on Your Burger</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Tsunami of B.S.</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Turn in the Road</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Real Enemy</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winning Through Relentlessness</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominating Chaos</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prerequisite to Loving Your Neighbor</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junk Mail</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone Is Fair Game</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beware the PC Police</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whom to Believe?</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall-Sign Wisdom</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Magic of Repetition</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Vote for Execution</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Door to the Past</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Matter of Image</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here’s to You, Mrs. Robinson</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And the Winner Is: Dell</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Return of The Martha</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disasters Really Do Happen</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace of Mind, Part I</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace of Mind, Part II</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace of Mind, Part III</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace of Mind, Part IV</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace of Mind, Part V</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go for It!</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Special-Department Ploy</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Power of Active Visualization</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning From Real Heroes

Americans love to throw around the term “hero.” They not only ascribe the word to illiterate athletes, but to people who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, as well.

An extreme example of the latter would be the infamous Iran-hostage “crisis” that ended after 444 days on January 20, 1981. With Kim Jong Il’s best friend, Jimmy Carter, spending more than a year sucking his thumb and playing with his yo-yo, Ayatollah Khomeini had things pretty much his way.

But once Ronald Reagan was elected president, Krazy Khomeini started envisioning a nuclear cloud over Iran for the next 400 years. Which in turn motivated him to come to his senses and release the hostages. Like every other civilized person, I was happy for both the hostages and their families.

Nevertheless, when the media started portraying them as heroes and New York held a ticker-tape parade for them, I was baffled. You happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you’re hailed as a hero? I think a little perspective is called for. Heroes are people who accomplish extraordinary feats under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, like the firefighters who marched into the World Trade Center towers in an attempt to save lives while everyone else was scurrying to get out.

In this regard, I have great admiration and respect for Jessica Lynch, the American soldier who was captured and held prisoner in Iraq, and subsequently rescued in a daring raid by U.S. troops. My admiration and respect are a result of her making it clear to a national television audience that she, in fact, was not a hero.

Though The New York Times and other major publications depicted Lynch as a hero who fiercely fought the enemy in Iraq until she was finally subdued and captured,
she explained, in an interview with Diane Sawyer, that there was no truth to any of those stories.

In fact, Lynch said that not only did she not do any fighting, she was hurt so badly that she didn’t even remember what happened to her. When Diane Sawyer asked Lynch why she would volunteer such information when all those who would have been in a position to know what really happened to her had been killed in battle, she explained that she could never live with herself if she allowed people to believe that she fought heroically when, in fact, she did not.

So, even though Lynch is not a hero, her refreshing honesty and humility command enormous respect, especially in this day and age of declining Western values, a day and age in which honesty and humility have become scarce commodities.

The reason my mind hearkened back to the Iran hostage crisis is because America recently lost two genuine heroes — thirteen-year-old Mattie Stepanek, who succumbed to a severe case of muscular dystrophy, and Christopher Reeve, who passed away as a result of complications from an infection caused by a bedsore.

At the age of ten, Mattie wrote Heartsongs, a poetry book that became a New York Times #1 bestseller. He followed that remarkable feat with four more poetry books, two of which also became New York Times bestsellers. Mattie was a frequent guest on The Oprah Winfrey Show, Good Morning America, and Larry King Live. His messages were always upbeat, positive, and inspiring. Few adults have ever spoken with more wisdom and deep insight into life than Mattie.

Reeve, who became a quadriplegic after a May 1995 horse-riding accident, was beyond amazing. While his difficulty in breathing was enough to make a strong person grimace when watching him on television, Reeve found the time, energy, and determination not only to continue acting, but also to direct a film, take an active role in fighting for stem-cell research, testify before Congress, and appear on virtually every major television talk show.
Other than recognizing them as true heroes, what else can we learn from the lives of these two giants of courage?

**Heroes come in all shapes and sizes.**

It seems somewhat ironic that the joint subjects of this article are a scrawny thirteen-year-old kid and Superman. After a lifetime of observation, it’s become clear to me that size, physical strength, skin color, gender, and ethnicity, among other things, are of little significance compared to a strong will to succeed.

It’s wise to ignore vote-hungry politicians, self-anointed crusade leaders, and other social charlatans who encourage the deployment of victimization excuses. Racism, “glass ceilings,” and a prejudice against such factors as age, gender, and physical disabilities is not so much anachronistic as irrelevant.

Never lower yourself to fight for the right to be where you aren’t welcome. Instead, gravitate toward people and companies who focus on results. Think as an individualist, and don’t allow yourself to be swept up in the hysteria of group complaints. It is your mind-set and your willingness to take action that will determine your success.

**Though human beings, through the gift of free will coupled with action, are able to exercise a great deal of control over their destinies, the inevitable will always be one of man’s greatest nemeses.**

There is no question that we have the capacity to stack the odds in our favor when it comes to leading longer, healthier lives. Yet, in a head-to-head battle, we are no match for the inevitable. This, however, does not mean that a person should become a fatalist and stop trying. Such an attitude would be irrational on its face.
What it does mean is that you should always keep in mind that there is an offsetting positive to every negative. And the offsetting positive to the inevitable is that it teaches the wise person humility. Do everything possible to stack the odds in your favor, work hard at success in all areas of your life, but make certain that you don’t become so enamored with yourself that you start believing you’re omnipotent, immortal, or both.

Remember, you’re always just one bad break away from becoming a quadriplegic, incurring a terminal disease, or suffering a fatal accident.

Relativity.

It may sound trite, but you really should be grateful when you wake up every morning, especially if you have been blessed with good health. But good health does not mean that you don’t have handicaps. Given that a handicap is defined as anything that makes achievement more difficult, the reality is that each of us is burdened with many handicaps. Not necessarily physical handicaps, but handicaps just the same. Broken marriages, financial problems, lack of a track record — the list of factors that can make achievement more difficult is infinite.

Brooding over a handicap, whatever it may be, is a surefire way to increase its negative impact on your life. You brood, you lose. Whenever you feel as though the temptation to feel sorry for yourself is taking control of your emotions, refocus your thoughts on genuine heroes like Mattie Stepanek and Christopher Reeve.

When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Heroes are great teachers. They lead by example. All that is required is that you be prepared to learn.
It’s Not in My Job Description!

I recently spoke at a wealth-building convention in Delray Beach, Florida. About ten days before leaving, I contacted my publisher and told the head of the company that it would be a good idea to contact Barnes & Noble and have them sell copies of my book — Action! Nothing Happens Until Something Moves — at the event.

He agreed and said he would put his in-house PR person (“Ms. Uptite”) on it right away. Having already had one too many experiences with Ms. Uptite’s “arrogance of the ignorant” attitude, I was a bit apprehensive about her handling the matter, but my publisher assured me that everything would be fine.

Within a day, Ms. Uptite reported that she had spoken to the manager of a nearby Barnes & Noble store, and that the woman had told her she would be happy to sell my new book at the conference. She assured Ms. Uptite that she would order a large supply of the book right away.

A few days later, I checked with Ms. Uptite to confirm that Barnes & Noble had ordered the books, and she assured me that everything was “under control.” Having been through more than my share of assurances in the past that proved to be nothing more than hollow words, I called the Barnes & Noble manager two days before I left for Florida to make certain the books had arrived.

Unfortunately, all I got was a voice mail, so I left word. No return call. The day before I left, I called again. Same result. It was beginning to have the aroma of 7,238 other “under control” experiences I’ve had over the past two decades, which gave me a very uneasy feeling.

Persistently, I took the trouble to call yet again the morning I left for Florida, but again got only a voice mail on the other end of the line. After my plane landed — you guessed it — my relentless nature prompted me to call the manager of Barnes
& Noble on the way to the hotel. By this time, you already know the result. Nevertheless, I compulsively called one last time from my hotel room before going to bed. By now, I felt as though I knew the manager of Barnes & Noble just by virtue of listening to her recorded message so many times.

When I arrived at the conference the next day, there were two pieces of good news. First, the manager not only was there, but was all set up to sell books outside the room where I was going to be speaking. Second, she was pleasant, warm, friendly, and anxious to please.

Except for one problem: She didn’t have a single copy of *Action!* with her. Why? If you’re over thirty and have the slightest bit of business experience under your belt, you’ve heard it all many times before. She had given instructions to someone else in her store to place the order, but there apparently had been “some kind of mix up.” Which is a euphemism for, “The order was never placed.” I’ve heard so much of this kind of “Gee, sorry” talk over the years that it all tends to sound like “blah, blah, blah” to me.

Fortunately, the lady from Barnes & Noble did have a big supply of one of my older books on hand, and managed to sell about seventy-five copies. Though the lack of execution was on her end, I certainly wasn’t about to dress down a Barnes & Noble employee, especially one as nice as her.

However, when I returned home, I let the hierarchy at my publisher’s office know that, as usual, Ms. Uptite had failed to follow through and make certain that her instructions were carried out. Like most people who never get very far in life, Ms. Uptite doesn’t have a clue as to the importance of follow-through.

The desire and ability to follow through — to double-check, triple-check, and, in summation, *do whatever it takes to make things happen* — is one of the most glaring separators between winners and losers. Losers love to delegate, and usually do so with style and grace. But they have absolutely no idea how much more is involved in successful delegation than merely directing someone to do something. Delegating something to someone else is only half the battle.
Checking back on one’s delegation to make certain it gets done — and done correctly — is every bit as important as the initial instructions.

When her boss confronted Ms. Uptite with the fact that not only did my book not arrive in Florida on time, but it was never even ordered, she was humble, embarrassed, and apologetic, right? Are you kidding? She went ballistic! Her position was that, having told the woman at Barnes & Noble to order the books, she had done her job. To her, going the extra mile was a jogging term.

It gets worse. She then went on a tirade, making a big issue over the fact that getting books to a speech location in Florida wasn’t part of her “job description” anyway. Yikes! I felt as though I was back in New Zealand, where the socialist government long ago decreed that every employee owns his/her job! (If you think I’m kidding, check it out on the Internet.)

I guess I’m just old fashioned (meaning I still believe in the values of Western civilization). To me, everyone’s job description is to do whatever it takes to please both his employer and his employer’s customers. If this isn’t the description of your job that you hold in your mind, you’re probably not going to go very far in your organization or in life in general.

Business — and to a great extent most of life — is about giving people more than you promised, quicker than you promised, easier than you promised. The only way you’ll ever make any money with an official job description is if you manufacture toilet paper with “JOB DESCRIPTION” printed on every sheet.

It goes without saying that Ms. Uptite, in rights-oriented New York, was allowed to get away with the temper tantrum she threw in the publisher’s office, which is unfortunate for her. If my publisher had really cared about Ms. Uptite, he would have given her a spanking (better yet, a caning), then sat her down and acquainted her with the facts of life.

He would have displayed a great deal of compassion by explaining to her that if she goes through life using her official job description as a shield against creating
value for others, twenty years from now she’s going to be pretty much what she is today — a loser fixated on demanding her rights and reading her job description with the same fervor that many people display when reading a holy book.

I guess I’m just a softie at heart, Ms. Uptite, but the humanitarian side of me prompts me to pass along a bit of down-home wisdom to you that could set you on the path to success almost overnight if only you would embrace it:

*If you always do what you’ve always done,*

*You’ll always be what you’ve always been.*
Making Every Day Thanksgiving

As Thanksgiving time rolled around this year, I couldn’t help but think of Lou Gehrig’s farewell speech at Yankee Stadium on July 4, 1939. If you’re a sports fan, you’ve probably seen footage of that historic speech.

The words that most of us remember are when Gehrig said, “Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth.” What an amazing statement from a person who knew that he had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). This insidious terminal illness is now commonly referred to as “Lou Gehrig’s Disease.”

This is a good time of the year to think about Gehrig’s uplifting words. When the Pilgrims celebrated the first Thanksgiving in 1621, it wasn’t for the purpose of focusing on their hard life. It was to give thanks for the bountiful harvest reaped by the Plymouth Colony following a severe winter.

It took many years, but Abraham Lincoln eventually declared Thanksgiving a national holiday. Now, like most people, I love the festive atmosphere of Thanksgiving. The spirit of this gluttonous holiday seems to put everyone in a good mood. (Except for the turkey, of course.) But, like so many of our national holidays, I doubt that many people reflect on the purpose of this special day. How about you? Did you think about your blessings on Thanksgiving?

In this regard, I’d like to share with you something personal about myself that has become a centerpiece of my life. For many years now, I have made it a ritual to think of every day as a day of thanksgiving. I do so by beginning each morning consciously thinking about my blessings. Because everyone’s glass is both half empty as well as half full, I could just as easily choose to think about my misfortunes.

Since every negative has an offsetting positive built into it, and vice versa, you always have a choice as to whether to focus on the abundance or scarcity in your
life. My firsthand experience has convinced me beyond all doubt that if you want more negatives in your life, all you need to do is think about the negatives that already exist.

Likewise, if you want more positives in your life, you should focus on the positives you already have. You’ll be amazed at the number of new positives that will almost magically make their way into your life as a result of focusing on the positive side of the equation.

But the truth of the matter is that there is nothing magical at all about this phenomenon. On the contrary, it’s scientific. What makes it possible is the fact that (1) all atoms are connected and (2) atoms vibrate at tremendous rates of speed.

This is why when your thoughts are positive, science works its wonders and causes those vibrating atoms in your brain to draw positive forces into your life. I feel obliged to point out here that I believe science is an extension of the Universal Power Source, or what people variously refer to as God, Yahweh, Allah, Supreme Being, etc. And because you are always connected to this Universal Power Source, you have infinite power at your disposal.

But even if you’re an atheist, I think you’ll find that focusing on your blessings is a cathartic way to start each day. If you choose not to give thanks to a Universal Power Source, then just be thankful in a general way for all the “good luck” you’ve had in your lifetime.

Sometimes, I purposely think about the negative of a situation first. Then I say to myself, “BUT, here’s the offsetting positive” … and I then describe it to myself. Granted, in really grim situations, it can sometimes be difficult to find positive offsets. Rest assured, however, they are always there.
Case in point: My eldest daughter has had multiple sclerosis for about fifteen years. That is certainly a half-empty glass. However, the half-full glass is that she does not have chronic-progressive multiple sclerosis, which causes a person to deteriorate very quickly. As a result, she is not in a wheelchair, nor does she have to use a cane to walk.

Further, she is attractive, intelligent, and personable, and has been able to lead a relatively normal life, raise two children, and continue on a successful career path. She attributes the success she’s had against this crippling disease to proper diet (lots of fish!) and a positive attitude.

Case in point: As the result of a freak gun accident, I haven’t been able to straighten my left index finger for the past twenty-five years. Even so, I almost never think about it. The reason for this is because I see so many people every day, especially on television, who have much more serious physical problems than just a slightly bent finger.

For example, I recently saw three U.S. soldiers on a talk show who looked as though they were wearing Halloween masks. All of them had their faces mangled as a result of skirmishes in Iraq, and one had already had twenty-eight operations. What was so incredible about these three soldiers was their upbeat attitude — no bitterness, no hint of feeling sorry for themselves, no desire for sympathy from others. They were pleasant to a fault. And the one who had twenty-eight operations on his face was the most pleasant of all.

This was one of those rare times that I did think about my crippled finger. And what I thought about was how full my glass is. Had I accidentally been shot in the head instead of my finger, I probably wouldn’t have been around to write this article.
Case in point: My mother is ninety-four years old, and she hasn’t been doing well lately. She was vibrant and full of energy until about ninety, when she was struck down by a bad case of shingles. Amazingly, she made a 90 percent recovery.

A couple of years later, she broke her hip … then she fell again … and a few weeks ago, she suffered a minor heart attack and spent a couple of weeks in the hospital. All this makes me feel very sad. But there is a half-full-glass aspect to this situation, as well. Maybe more than half-full.

First of all, I feel fortunate to have been blessed with such a wonderful mother, especially while growing up.

Second, I am grateful that she has managed to live into her nineties.

Third, and perhaps most important, throughout most of her ninety-four years, she has enjoyed incredibly good health.

So, while my sadness is quite normal, overall I still feel blessed where my mother is concerned.

If I were to make up a list of all the blessings I’ve had during my life — including minor, medium, and major blessings — the list would be in the thousands. I don’t know you personally, but I would guess that your list would be just about as long as mine.

Listen, I’m no Pollyanna. I realize that it’s not easy to focus on your blessings when faced with such crises as medical problems, financial upheaval, or a deteriorating marital situation. Nevertheless, it’s in your best interest to make the effort do so. Remember, the more you focus on the adversities in your life, the more adversities you are likely to get.

I don’t have a double-blind study to prove it, but I can tell you from firsthand experience that being grateful for what you have every day of your life is a
powerful tonic for the mind. I’m not talking about just speaking the words. I’m talking about thinking the thoughts.

Start each day by celebrating Thanksgiving, in solitude, and it will change the way you look at life. And, as they say in quantum physics, when you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.
How Do You Commit a Geragos?

How do you commit a Geragos? To answer this question, we first need to define what a Geragos is. A Geragos is a humanoid who:

1. Possesses a piece of paper (technically referred to as a “law degree”) that gives him the right to participate in a monopoly known as the “practice of law.”

2. Passionately believes in the timeless maxim: First and foremost, feed the ego.

3. Has never met a television camera he didn’t adore.

4. Is cursed with a mouth that can outrun logic and rational thought.

5. Is shameless. (For example, willing to represent a client even after repeatedly proclaiming him to be guilty on national television.)

Perhaps the most powerful group of Geragoses ever assembled was the team of lawyers who represented O.J. Simpson. Because of the awesome job they did, all Americans now clearly understand that a trial is not a search for truth. Rather, it is a contest of cleverness.

It isn’t as easy as it looks to convert your client’s trial into a trial of the detective who found the most damning evidence against him. Yet, the O.J. team managed to do just that with style and grace, and without even a trace of a smirk on their faces.

The problem for future Geragos superstar teams is that the O.J. circus led them to believe that by being as outrageous as Johnny Cochran and Friends, they could achieve the same results. But the bar the O.J. team set was so high that without a racial component to tap into, it’s become increasingly difficult to clear.
So, how do you commit a Geragos? By becoming intoxicated by numbers two through five above. When you are devoid of shame and your ego is salivating to be fed, you jump in front of every television camera you can find. Then, once your mug is staring into the camera, you simply put your mouth on autopilot and let it drown out any hint of logic or rational thought.

In my first book, *To Be or Not to Be Intimidated?* I offered a solution to this neurotic condition. I referred to it as the Bluff Theory, which states quite simply: *The secret to bluffing is to not bluff.* In other words, never lay down an ultimatum unless you’re prepared to follow through with it, and never say anything you can’t back up. You may occasionally get away with a hollow bluff, but it’s unwise to count on it too often if you’re interested in long-term success.

In the case of Mark Geragos and his handling of Scott Peterson’s defense, all he needed to do was hammer home to the jury the theme of “reasonable doubt.” Instead, he chose to fill the courtroom and airwaves with bluffs. Scott Peterson’s telltale behavior was bad enough, but he’s not protected by the legal monopoly in this country. Geragos, however, is.

Like most people, I tend to believe that Peterson is guilty, but the reality is that his was a slim case based entirely on circumstantial evidence. If the evidence against Peterson was enough to send him to his death — or even life in prison — on a pound-for-pound evidence basis, O.J. Simpson should have been sentenced to share a cell with Charles Manson for life.

Apparently without regard for his client’s welfare, Mark Geragos committed one Geragos after another during the trial. There are far too many of them to list here, but following are three that managed to confound even his fellow criminal defense attorneys who appeared on talk shows. And all three hurt, rather than helped, Scott Peterson.

1. Geragos waved aside the notion of showing reasonable doubt, instead promising to prove Peterson’s innocence. By making this promise, he also
violated a principle taught in Negotiating 101: Never promise more than is required of you. Result: zero proof of innocence.

2. Geragos said he would produce five eyewitnesses to the crime that would support promise No. 1. Result: zero eyewitnesses.

3. Geragos said he not only would prove Peterson’s innocence, but would find the real killer or killers. This one went down the drain with his satanic-cult theory, which was his version of Johnny Cochran’s drug-dealer hit theory in the O.J. circus. Result: zero killers found.

Finally, after destroying a potentially winnable case through his ego-driven, outrageous statements, Geragos went one step further and managed to clinch a spot in the Legal Hall of Shame. To everyone’s amazement, he set up a boat display (which included a dummy portraying Laci Peterson) across from the courthouse. The idea was to demonstrate to the world that it would have been impossible for Peterson to throw his wife’s body overboard without capsizing. Some might attribute this to insanity, but I believe it was nothing more than an insatiable ego.

As a side note, I had a dream last night that a new law was passed which gave juries the choice of sending either the defendant or his attorney to prison after hearing all the evidence. Thankfully, when the jury foreman rose to read the verdict in the Scott Peterson trial, I awoke from my dream. What a relief! The thought that the jury might have let Peterson off in favor of incarcerating Geragos left me shaken. It took two cups of Chinese green tea to calm myself.

Now that you know how to commit a Geragos, my advice to you is straightforward: Don’t do it! Be vigilant about never promising more than you are required to produce. Instead, always strive to produce more than you promised, better than you promised, quicker than you promised. Regardless of your profession or circumstances, you’ll find this to be a winning formula every time.
Time Warp

College football rivalries such as Army-Navy, Texas-Oklahoma, and Ohio State-Michigan involve much more than just games. They are bigger-than-life spectacles. So it was a big deal for my teenage son when I took him to what is arguably the greatest rivalry in college football, the Ohio State-Michigan game.

Usually when I take my son to a sporting event, I don’t care all that much who wins. Being genetically programmed to be a social observer, I just enjoy the festive atmosphere and overall experience of the occasion.

For example, I never fail to be fascinated by such intellectually stimulating sights as boisterous, bare-chested fans with painted faces and purple hair. Or jerseys that display such highbrow prose as, “If you ain’t a Redskins fan, you ain’t sh--.”

Freud would have been ecstatic to have the pick of the litter at a 21st-century American sporting event.

But something happened at the OSU-Michigan game that was different. When the final gun sounded — with OSU on top — jubilant Buckeye fans rushed onto the field to celebrate. It was a mob scene. No violence — just pure, uninhibited joy. After about ten minutes, it appeared that not one of the 105,000 fans in attendance had left the stadium.

Then, the unthinkable happened. My son, who had remarked several times about how “neat” it was that thousands of fans were rushing onto the field to celebrate, asked me if we could go down and join them in their joyous antics. I didn’t take him seriously, of course. He knows me far too well to believe that I would ever do anything so rash as storm a football field with a bunch of kids. I have a major aversion to looking like an ass in front of large crowds of people — especially if the crowd is composed mostly of college students. So my answer was “no” … no” … and “no” again.
Unfortunately, my son has Ringer genes. So he asked again … and again … and again. Finally, he said the magic words: “C’mon, dad. Be daring. We’ll remember it the rest of our lives.” Such shameless, guilt-frosted words have a tendency to set off one’s Parental Guilt Button, which causes emotions to drown out logic and rational thought.

It’s all a blur to me now, but as near as I can figure, I must have gone temporarily insane. The last words I remember saying were, “What the heck. Let’s do it.” The next thing I knew, I was bolting over thirty-eight rows of seats to get to the edge of the field.

Once there, I found myself staring at a seven-foot drop over a cement wall. I gasped as my son jumped over the two-foot high railing and landed at the bottom of the wall. All I needed now was a crane and I could join him. No crane in sight. Instead, I had to rely on impulse. Feeling like a Marine pursuing insurgents in Fallujah, I climbed over the railing and made the plunge. Alert the media: I landed in one piece and was alive!

For a half-hour or so, my son and I roamed the field. Like a psychedelic movie, college kids were swarming in every direction. What was surreal about the whole thing was that I felt as though I had seen every one of their faces before. Why? Because they were the same kids who had swarmed the field forty years earlier after another Ohio State victory over the evil empire from the North. The only difference then was that I was the son and my dad was me. I felt as though I were in a time warp!

As my son reached down and pulled up a clod of grass for a souvenir, my mind began to drift back to a more innocent time … hanging out at the Town House Drive-In with the guys … playing touch football in the street … slow dancing that would have today’s MTV-bred kids perplexed and snickering.

In those days, my pals and I were — to borrow a phrase from Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities* — masters of the universe. Now, in this chaotic, back-to-the-future atmosphere, I could almost feel that naive sense of teenage immortality.
once again, that innocent self-delusion that rapidly melts away when a young person comes face to face with the scorching realities of the adult world.

My son, meanwhile, was euphoric. I fought the urge to even consider the possibility that I might actually be enjoying the madness of the crowd, but I was overtaken by every parent’s greatest weakness: seeing his child genuinely happy.

Now that I’m safely back in the new millennium, I’m really glad that I let it all hang out and took that trip in the Ohio Stadium Time Capsule. I do, however, feel compelled to leave you with one important piece of advice: Be careful about allowing your child to set off your Parental Guilt Button. I can tell you from firsthand experience that a seven-foot wall is a pretty long drop.
Learning from Everyone

I recently received a nasty e-mail from someone who implied he had read my book *Action! Nothing Happens Until Something Moves*. He lashed out at me with a vengeance, even resorting to some pretty nasty name-calling.

What was he so ticked off about? Would you believe it was because, in the first chapter of the book, I briefly discuss my belief that there is an infinite source of power in the universe that no one fully understands? When I say *no one*, that includes the most cerebral scientists on the planet. The most remarkable discovery that resulted from the launching of the Hubble Space Telescope is that not only is all matter in the universe moving away from all other matter at lightning speeds, those speeds are actually accelerating.

As the top scientists on the Hubble Telescope project explain it, what this means is that there is an invisible power in the universe that they simply do not understand. Further, they point out that this unknown power source is greater than the gravitational pull of all matter in the universe combined! So much for the collapsing-universe theory.

In *Action!* I subjectively refer to this invisible force as the Conscious Universal Power Source, but also point out that people use a variety of language-based names to describe it. These include, among others, “God,” “Allah,” “Yahweh,” “Cosmic Designer,” and “Cosmic Pilot.”

Recognizing that we live in an age where we are silenced by self-appointed censors who worship at the altar of political correctness, I went out of my way to begin this brief section of my book with the following words: “To discuss the concept of God is a precarious endeavor, at best. Since so many people have such strong views on the subject, it is guaranteed to cause a lot of anger. Let’s face it, a significant percentage of the world’s population is not rational when it comes to discussing God.”
I then devote roughly seven pages to the subject. Most of my discussion revolves around examining four possibilities with regard to the existence or nonexistence of God. These include quietism, atheistic randomness, divine fatalism, and humanistic self-determination.

Throughout those seven pages, I go to great lengths to be as evenhanded as possible. Nevertheless, my suspicion is that the angry reader who sent the venomous e-mail hadn’t taken the trouble to read past this section. If so, he missed the last 231 pages of a 262-page book. Modesty aside, I think he did himself a gross disservice.

Sadly, today those who dare to ponder important issues and speak their honest opinions are reviled. Sensitive subjects protected under the political-correctness umbrella include race, illegal aliens, gays, dwarfs, the environment, and abortion, to name but a few.

For quite sometime, however, God has been making a run at the top spot on the politically incorrect list, which is why I knew I was entering dangerous territory when I delved into this subject. I did it, albeit in a totally nonreligious way, because I felt it was necessary in order to make a crucial point: To me, the fact that there is an infinite source of power that envelopes the universe is axiomatic. Clearly, there has to be some kind of power source not only from which human beings draw their power, but from which all matter in the universe draws its power as well.

This is so self-evident to me that it’s hard to imagine anyone disagreeing with it. Notwithstanding, fairness compels me to concede that when I use the term *Conscious Universal Power Source*, I can understand why an atheist might have a problem with the word “conscious.” Which is fine. I respect everyone’s right to his opinions. I should, however, add that an in-depth discussion of what is meant by the word “conscious” might lead us to the conclusion that the question itself is one of semantics.
In fact, Viktor Frankl (Man’s Search for Meaning) once opined that at some future date he believed the differences between atheists and religionists would become indistinguishable. In his view, the only difference between an atheist and religionist is that an atheist is merely a person who, when he is talking to God, believes he is talking to himself. In fairness, I would concede that an atheist could justifiably argue that the opposite might also be true — that a religionist is merely someone who, when he is talking to himself, believes he is talking to God.

The bottom line is that an overwhelming majority of the world’s population believes there is a source of universal, infinite power to which we are all attached. Further, it seems logical and obvious to me that the best way to access this power source is through action.

Clichéd as it may sound, some of my best friends are atheists. In fact, one, in particular, is probably the most spiritual person I have ever known, and I like to kid him about it. He’s good-natured and ethical to the core. But “fundamentalist” atheists are different. As one of them put it to me years ago, “To even consider the possibility of a Higher Being would destroy the very foundation upon which I have built my entire life.” Such closed-mindedness is about as unscientific as one can get.

Which brings me to the real point of this article: If you’re interested in continually working to better your existence, you should avoid the mistake of disregarding everything a person writes or says just because you disagree with him on one or more issues. I long ago recognized that I can learn something from everyone with whom I come in contact, no matter on how many issues I disagree with him.

Even if I dislike the underlying ideology of an author, I have found very few books that didn’t teach me something of value. Adolf Hitler was not exactly one of my favorite historical characters, but I still learned a lot from Mein Kampf. Ditto the Communist Manifesto, even though I am a theoretical libertarian/practical conservative. At the very least, reading books like these educates one as to how the minds of demented people work.
Rational self-interest requires that you be a sponge when it comes to learning. I will gladly take any knowledge or useful ideas I can get from any person, book, or situation that comes my way. I especially try to learn from anyone whose unethical actions cause me damage. Why come away from a bad situation empty-handed and bitter when you can extract a great amount of knowledge from the experience to help you avoid a similar situation in the future?

To shut down your mind to information just because you don’t like someone’s point of view on one subject or another is irrational. And to get mad about it is nothing short of childish. Someday, the political-correctness monster may be slain and we might all be free to say what we really think — without being ostracized or vilified. But, in the meantime, don’t allow it to cheat you of your right to acquire all the knowledge you can get from any and all sources and situations.
Celebrating Our Commonality

This being December 25, I thought it would be appropriate to pen a few words about Christmas. For starters, Christmas is a good time to put aside our diversities and celebrate what we have in common with one another. More than 80 percent of Americans are Christians, while Jews comprise slightly more than 2 percent.

Yet, notwithstanding the disparity in numbers, Christians and Jews are forever joined at the spiritual hip as a result of their commonality. Jesus Christ was born a Jew, practiced and preached Orthodox Judaism throughout his life, and died a Jew. Further, Christians throughout history have always believed in the Old Testament (i.e., the Hebrew Bible).

Is it any wonder that we refer to our way of life as being founded on the “Judeo-Christian ethic?” For that matter, all atheists I have known base their lives on the Judeo-Christian ethic as well, though they may refrain from using the actual term.

Geraldo Rivera recently had two guests on his show, Rev. Monsignor Tom Hartman and Rabbi Marc Gellman. The discussion was about the hubbub and bickering over manger scenes in public, Christmas carols, and, indeed, any reference to the word “Christmas.”

Early in the show, Geraldo (who has a Catholic father and Jewish mother) made reference to the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center and asked Rabbi Gellman if he saw anything wrong with such a public display of Christmas. To my pleasant surprise, the rabbi responded, “Nothing is wrong with it. It’s gotten crazy.” He went on to say, “Every attempt to put a religious meaning back into the holiday — like manger scenes — should be applauded and not opposed.” This was a Jewish cleric talking!

Later in the interview, Geraldo asked Rabbi Gellman, “What should Jewish parents tell their kids about Christmas?” Without hesitation, he replied, “I think
they should tell them that it’s a gloriously wonderful holiday of our neighbors, and that we should rejoice just as we hope they rejoice in our holidays.”

The rabbi concluded his remarks by saying, “I think the truth is that we are just separated from each other far too much, and that if we understood the pain and embarrassment that this causes to our neighbors — for no good reason — that we would, those of us who are not Christians, relent.”

But the main focus of Rabbi Gellman’s and Monsignor Hartman’s remarks was not so much on our diversity, but on what we have in common. And when it comes to our neighbors wanting to celebrate their particular beliefs, we would all do well to follow the wisdom of the old adage “Live and let live.”

My compliments to Rabbi Gellman and Monsignor Hartman for their rational views and willingness to speak out and reach out to everyone. There’s nothing quite as refreshing as voices of sanity and goodwill in a world saturated with insanity and malevolence.

I believe we should use this exhilarating time of the year to ignore the all-too-familiar mischief makers we see on television every night, who labor so hard to fan the flames of diversity. Instead, we should celebrate our commonality. Above all, regardless of one’s spiritual beliefs, it’s a time when we should focus on letting family, friends, and business acquaintances know that we care about them.

So, political correctness be damned, I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely wish you a Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, and the best of Holiday Seasons. I am confident that all people of goodwill — whether Christian, Jew, atheist, or other — can clearly understand the intent of my good wishes without getting bogged down in semantics.
On Your Mark, Get Set, Go!

The New Year signals the start of a five-month period that I like to think of as the Window-of-Opportunity Sprint. If you’re serious about accomplishing great things this year, you’d be wise to come out of the starting gate fast on January 2 — and keep going at full speed through at least the end of May.

If you don’t make major strides toward achieving your goals from January through May, you’re going to be playing catch-up the remainder of the year. Once June arrives and the kids are out of school, most people go into their summer swoon. That’s when it seems as though everyone you need to talk to has left for Europe, Disneyland, or a Caribbean cruise for two or three weeks. It can be maddening for those who choose to work year round.

Much of my experience with this problem has been in the book-publishing world. I’ve long said that if I’m reincarnated, I would like to come back as a high-level publishing executive. These guys have lunch and dinner at the finest restaurants — five days a week — with agents, authors, and fellow publishers. It goes without saying that the tabs for these “business” lunches and dinners are picked up by their companies.

Then there are the sales conferences two to four times a year in such work-conducive environments as Las Vegas, Hawaii, Fort Lauderdale, and Puerto Rico. Throw in the Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany, and the package of travel perks is pretty appealing.

But summer is the biggest perk of all. Beginning in early June, higher-ups at the major publishing houses like to work from their “weekend homes” in The Hamptons … between trips to Europe, of course. Even rank-and-file book-publishing employees head for their Westchester County and Long Island homes at noon on Friday.
If you call someone at 12:01 p.m. on a Friday in June, July, or August, you’re too late. Forget about it until Monday. Unless, of course, the person you need to speak with decides to take another one of those long weekends that publishing executives are so addicted to — in which case he/she may not be back in the office until Tuesday or Wednesday.

Given all this, if you’re planning on doing business with a publisher, particularly one located in Manhattan, you’d be wise to make certain that it happens before the temperature hits 75 degrees in New York City. Otherwise, get in line with everyone else and wait patiently for the return of The Hamptonians in the Fall.

But it’s not just the publishing business. Regardless of what industry you’re in, if you fail to enter the Window-of-Opportunity Sprint from the first workday following January 1 through May 31, don’t make the mistake of joining others in a long summer’s nap. Instead, use the period of June through August to plant seeds for the Fall. It’s a great time to strategize, plan, and create new products.

Fall is the second-best time to do business, but it’s a window of opportunity that closes much more quickly than January-May. It begins the day after Labor Day and comes to a gradual halt a few days before Thanksgiving. Unfortunately, when most people return to work the Monday after Thanksgiving, their colons are so bloated with overdoses of mashed potatoes, giblet gravy, and pumpkin pie that they aren’t in much of a mood to make decisions.

Instead, they focus on clever methods for stalling their way to the mid-December slowdown for Christmas shopping. And once they reach that point, they can easily bluff their way through Christmas without having to do any meaningful work. After that, of course, everything comes to a halt again until the first workday after January, so you can forget about doing serious business with anyone until then. It’s amazing to me how many people live for the slowdown periods and fail to take advantage of the January-to-May and Labor Day-to-Thanksgiving windows of opportunity.
It’s worth repeating: If you’re serious about making major success strides this year, I strongly advise you to be prepared to come out of the starting gate fast on the first workday in January. Then, other than a slight pause for Easter, maintain your forward progress at a relentless pace and be prepared to turn on the afterburners around the first of May.

I’ve been operating this way for years, and I can tell you from firsthand experience that it pays huge dividends. My New Year’s wish to you is that you set a new personal record in the Window-of-Opportunity Sprint beginning January 2 and that you never look back.

Enough said. It’s time to get down in the starting blocks and get on with it. On your mark … get set …
The Comedy and Tragedy of Spontaneity

My approach to life is to plan carefully, then relentlessly focus on execution. I don’t mean to sound stuffy, but to me impulsiveness is a sign of irresponsible behavior. Which is why those who know me best would lay one hundred-to-one odds that I would never make a spur-of-the-moment decision to hop on a train and head for New York on New Year’s Eve. And they would have lost their shirts on that bet this year.

What they would have failed to take into consideration was a phenomenon known as “temporary insanity.” It was my wife’s birthday, plus my teenage son loves Times Square, so I impulsively blurted out, “What the heck. Let’s do it!” (Translation: “I’m game for a good refresher lesson on why impulsiveness is not a good habit.”)

The next thing I knew, my wife, my son, and I were on an Amtrak train heading for the Big Apple. We were looking forward to two events — being in Times Square when the countdown to midnight started and gorging ourselves on the Stage Delicatessen’s version of health food.

We pulled into Penn Station about 9:30 p.m. All we needed to do was go up to the street level, walk a few blocks, and we’d be in the heart of Times Square. “Hey,” I thought to myself, “this spontaneous stuff is cool.”

To our surprise, however, after walking a few blocks up Seventh Avenue, we ran smack into a barricade manned by a battalion of New York’s finest. They directed us, and thousands of other people, to head toward Eighth Avenue — the opposite direction from Times Square!

The next thing we knew, we were trudging up Eighth Avenue in a scene right out of the movie Escape from New York. Hoodlums, street people, schizophrenics — you name it — were coming and going in every direction. The thought crossed
my mind that they might be Howard Dean diehards who had not yet gotten over the fact that he himself had lost his mind some time ago.

I felt like we were drowning in a sea of tattoos and earrings … every kind of tattoo imaginable. One guy had a tattoo on his forehead that was either a serpent or Hillary Clinton, but I couldn’t tell for sure which it was.

But the earrings were even wilder. Earrings in noses … earrings in tongues … earrings in eyelids … earrings in belly buttons. I stopped at the belly buttons. I didn’t want to think about where else the earrings might be located. The only thing I was sure of was that I would never again buy my wife a pair of earrings.

We tried to go back toward Seventh Avenue and Times Square every few blocks, but at each entry point we were turned away by a bevy of police. Finally, we reached the end of the line — Central Park. No luck there, either. The barricade ran from Eighth Avenue across Central Park South to the end of the earth.

Resigning myself to the fact that we were not going to see the ball drop in Times Square at midnight, I concluded that it was time to throw in the towel and head for the Stage Deli. Once there, we could drown our disappointment in saturated fat, cholesterol, salt, and lots of sugar (disguised as strawberry cheesecake).

Only one problem: I forgot that the police had blocked off all entries to Seventh Avenue, and the Stage Deli is located on Seventh Avenue, between 53rd and 54th Streets. Not being able to celebrate New Year’s Eve in Times Square was one thing, but keeping me from my fair share of corned beef, chopped liver, dill pickles, and cheesecake was a clear violation of my civil rights. I thought about calling Jesse Jackson on my cellphone to help me form a picket line, but decided against it.

Finally, after the responsible section of my brain had taken control, we ended up at an Italian restaurant on Eighth Avenue. The food was somewhere on a par with the culinary offerings at Abu Ghraib Prison. The only thing missing was the nudity.
We left the restaurant and again wandered through the sea of tattoos and earrings on Eighth Avenue. Suddenly, at 54th Street — at about 1:00 a.m. — I saw that the police were beginning to remove the barricades. Mental flashbulb: We’ll go to the Stage Deli for cheesecake dessert! It would be a perfect ending to a less-than-perfect night.

Before you knew it, we were turning the corner at 54th Street and Seventh Avenue and marching resolutely toward the Stage Deli. Hmm … when you see through the windows that the chairs are stacked up on the tables, it’s not a good omen of things to come. Sure enough, the door was locked and the sign hanging on it was fairly easy to understand: CLOSED!

Once again, my civil rights had been violated. I had a right to that cheesecake that I was looking at through the window. After all, wasn’t it guaranteed by some constitutional amendment … something like, “Congress shall make no law prohibiting people from eating cheesecake, especially on New Year’s Eve?” I’m almost certain I read about that amendment somewhere. Come Monday, I’d have to check it out with the ACLU.

We arrived back at Penn Station in time for our 2:45 a.m. departure. Three-plus hours of trying to find a comfortable position … dozing off and on … stuffy, stifling heat … clickety-clack, clickety-clack. Mercifully, our New Year’s Eve trip to New York came to an end at around 6:00 a.m.

The only thing I love more than learning new things are refresher lessons that keep me on my toes. That’s why, as George Orwell put it in his classic 1984, the best books are those that tell you what you already know. Learning, relearning, and motivation are like eating: You have to do them every day.

For me, spontaneity is not a healthy way to fill one’s needs, but even I manage to slip every five to ten years and do something impulsive. I recognize that millions of people live by the philosophy “let it all hang out” and “live for the moment.” But what works for me is avoiding impulsive action and relying more on my intellect. I like to check and double-check the facts. I like to be in control of
events rather than allowing events to control me. I like to know when, where, and how things are going to happen.

I should point out that none of these traits detracts from my being an action-oriented person. I move pretty fast for a tortoise, but not so fast that I risk moving backward. Impulsive-based action is almost always a losing proposition.

Above all, nothing gives me a greater feeling of control than religiously following my own routine. In his book *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, Deepak Chopra lists a daily personal routine and regular work routine as two factors that retard the aging process. I believe it.

In truth, my little tale about my New Year’s Eve experience was more comedy than tragedy. But it was a good reminder for me that if one engages in a steady diet of impulsive action in either his personal or business life, he’s sure to end up with far more of the latter than the former.
Knowledge Redeployment

My first love is learning, which is why I keep my brain on autopilot when it comes to absorbing everything around me and extracting lessons from what I see and hear. It borders on an addiction.

Extracting knowledge, however, is not enough. You must be able to apply what you’ve learned to other situations — even situations that are far removed from the one where the original knowledge was acquired. I like to refer to this skill as “knowledge redeployment.”

Because time is a limiting factor in life, knowledge redeployment is a key ingredient when it comes to success. If you have to relearn the same lesson over and over again in each new situation, you’d better figure out a way to live as long as Methuselah if you hope to succeed.

If you keep your eyes and ears open and raise your level of awareness, you’ll be amazed at how many lessons you can learn from even seemingly innocuous experiences. Sometimes, you gain new knowledge; other times, it’s just a reminder of something you already know. The objective is to make mental notes of what you observe, then apply your newly acquired knowledge to other situations. I offer the following example to make my point:

A friend recently offered to give me three tickets to an upcoming Washington Wizards-Atlanta Hawks basketball game. He said he would have the tickets delivered to the Will Call Window, and all I would need to do is show my personal I.D. when I arrived.

As always, my learning antennae were on autopilot, so for me it was much more of a learning experience than a basketball game. And here are the lessons I learned (again):
Lesson No. 1: When it comes to matters of importance, don’t depend on others to follow through.

I strutted up to the Will Call Window as though I had absolutely nothing to worry about. But the truth of the matter is that it was all an act. Will Call Windows fly in the face of my modus operandi.

I’ve learned the hard way over the years not to have tickets left at Will Call, so it didn’t shock me when my friend’s tickets were missing in action. It immediately brought to mind one of my oldest rules: When the ball is on the one-yard line, never risk a fumble; carry it over yourself.

For example, when it comes to tickets, if at all possible make a special trip to pick them up. Or, if necessary, send someone (whom you can trust) in your place rather than relying on a person you have never even met to take them to the Will Call Window.

Failing that, have the tickets overnighted to you. Paying an extra $10-$15 is worth the peace of mind. Tickets are like a check that hasn’t yet cleared the bank. The only time you actually have a ticket to a game is when it’s in your hand.

But it’s important to understand that this isn’t just about tickets. “Will call” is a metaphor for an infinite number of situations in everyday life. The problem with leading a will-call life is that there are too many lazy, negligent people in the world who possess a remarkable talent for not following through. Whether it involves personal or business matters, to the extent you lead a will-call life, you relinquish control of your destiny to others.

Lesson No. 2: Assess the supply-and-demand aspects of every situation.
Knowing that the game had just started, I went outside to see if there were any scalpers around. Since the Wizards were playing the Atlanta Hawks (a team that would have trouble qualifying for the State High School Finals in Georgia), I figured tickets would be relatively cheap.

I was also aware that the Redskins and Ravens were both playing at home, so a lot of those fans were taken out of the equation. But perhaps the most important of all supply-and-demand factors was that the game had already started.

When I was in my late teens, I was in the produce business, and I learned a lot about perishable inventory. Whatever you don’t sell by the end of the day is a problem. If you’re selling strawberries, for example, you had better have a place to refrigerate them. If you do, maybe you’ll have one more day to get rid of them. But to play it safe, as the sun begins to set, it’s wise to start offering your leftover strawberries at a discount — and with each passing minute, the discount should become greater. In some situations, I actually gave produce away rather than having to bother with moldy merchandise the next day.

By redeploying this knowledge to the business of scalping tickets, I have always viewed scalpers as fruit peddlers. If a scalper still has tickets once a game begins, he’s holding perishable merchandise. You can sometimes sell questionable strawberries the next day at a discount, but not so with yesterday’s tickets. When the game is over, the tickets are over. Scalpers buy inventory in the hopes of making a profit, sometimes even a killing. But they also run the risk of taking a bath if some unforeseen factor comes into play.

**Lesson No. 3: The first offer is never the best offer.**

Once outside the lobby of the MCI Center, a scalper approached me and offered me three tickets — $75 per ticket face value — for $45 apiece. Not only did I have Lesson No. 2 firmly in mind, I also instantly recalled something my father had taught me years earlier: The first offer you hear is never the best offer!
I pleaded a shortage of cash and began to walk away from the scalper, confident he would pursue me. And, sure enough, he did — immediately. Just like that, the price dropped to $35 a ticket. It was tempting to take them off his hands at the bargain price of $35 each, but I couldn’t resist pushing the envelope a bit further. Without flinching, I told him that $25 a ticket was all I could afford, whereupon he acted insulted and started to walk away.

As he was departing, I said, “I don’t blame you for not wanting to sell those tickets for $25 each. If I were you, I’d try to find someone who would pay me closer to what they’re worth.” As those words came out of my mouth, I was, of course, cognizant of the fact that the sidewalk in front of the MCI Center was almost devoid of people.

Sure enough, within seconds the scalper chased after me and said, “Okay, I’m taking a big loss on these tickets (a line scalpers always use to evoke guilt), but you can have them for $25 apiece.” It wasn’t as good as it would have been had my friend’s free tickets showed up at the Will Call Window, but by redeploying knowledge learned from past experiences, I was able to get $225 worth of tickets for $75.

If you become really good at redeploying such negotiating skill when it comes to purchasing something as substantial as real estate, you might just end up making a fortune.

**Lesson No. 4: Most perceived bad situations are easily resolved.**

This is perhaps the most important lesson of all, especially if you have high blood pressure. Experience has taught me that most perceived problems never come to pass, which means we do an awful lot of worrying for nothing. But even those problems that do come to pass can usually be resolved much easier than expected.
THE MORAL TO ALL THIS IS TO FOCUS ON BECOMING AN INSATIABLE LEARNER and continually strive to raise your level of awareness. Then, use your heightened state of awareness to redeploy the knowledge you’ve gained through past experiences. Becoming adept at knowledge redeployment can make a huge difference in the quality of your life.
For most of my life, I was a strong believer in conventional psychology, which is based on the teachings of Sigmund Freud. Conventional psychology focuses on finding the psychological roots of an individual’s problems. The idea is that once a person’s past traumas are brought to the surface and dissected, he is able to change his attitude toward life and, in turn, alter his behavior. All this made perfect sense to me.

At the same time, I was always a staunch nonbeliever in the concept of “behavioral modification,” which is in stark conflict with conventional psychology. Behavioral modification seemed to imply synthetic change, which is why I associated it with the rah-rah slogan “Just fake it till you make it.”

Today, I am more convinced than ever that most people’s emotional problems have their roots in the past — usually in their childhood experiences. Likewise, I also remain convinced that faking change simply does not work over the long term. Nevertheless, my attitude toward both traditional psychotherapy and behavioral modification changed when I started learning about “reality therapy,” a psychotherapy method created by Dr. William Glasser.

Before discussing reality therapy, I am obliged to point out that it is a very complex subject, and one in which I claim no professional expertise. My only aim here is to simplify (professionals might argue — perhaps justifiably — oversimplify) reality therapy in an effort to share some information and insights that might be helpful to you in your quest for a better life.

With this caveat, I will begin by pointing out that the central focus of reality therapy is fulfillment of an individual’s needs. A reality therapist believes that fulfilling one’s needs is concerned only with an individual’s present life. It has nothing to do with his past, no matter how traumatic his experiences may have been. Reality therapy, however, does not deny the existence of past problems.
Rather, it just views them as unimportant when it comes to fulfilling one’s present needs.

The corollary to the above is that if you learn to fulfill your needs in the present, the past no longer matters. A perfect example of this would be an individual who has experienced a bad first marriage. The sooner such an individual can find happiness in a second marriage, the sooner his/her first marriage will become a distant memory. In fact, reality therapy believes that the most critical factor when it comes to fulfilling one’s needs is intimate involvement with another person.

To the reality therapist, then, it’s a waste of time to sit around and lament what has happened to us in the past and continue to use old traumas as an excuse for our present unhappiness. The only things you can change are your thoughts and actions of today.

So, while it’s true that you are a product of your past, the reality is that you can’t change any of the unpleasantness you may have endured earlier in life. Whatever childhood problems may have caused a person to behave the way he does today, no amount of bringing them to the surface will change his current situation.

Reality therapy teaches that the key to fulfilling our needs in the present is responsible behavior. As Dr. Glasser puts it, “Happiness occurs most often when we are willing to take responsibility for our behavior. … Responsible behavior leads to a feeling of self-worth.”

Plain and simple, Glasser believes that responsible behavior ultimately solves most of our problems. But isn’t “responsible behavior” a subjective term? This question brings to the fore the age-old relativist argument that everything in life is subjective. Millions of clueless kids bought into the lie of relativism in the sixties, only to end up dead or with shattered lives.

The truth of the matter is that every halfway intelligent, mature adult knows the difference between responsible and irresponsible behavior. I would argue that the
vile behavior extolled by millions every day on television — much of it under the protective shadow of the First Amendment — never leads to happiness.

Civilization cannot exist without a generally accepted code of conduct, and it is the code of conduct of Western culture that has made it the most civilized and prosperous civilization in the history of mankind. In other words, responsible behavior pretty much coincides with practicing the virtuous traits that are the bedrock of Western life. It is self-evident to all civilized people that responsible behavior is demonstrated through such traits as hard work, saving for the future, civility, loyalty, respect, honesty, temperance, and charity, to name but a few.

Again, we all have bad experiences in our past, especially in our childhood, that have left painful memories. There is, however, nothing we can do about them. History is written in stone. However, we do have the capacity to control how we think and act today. This capacity is known as “free will.” We are the only living creatures who have the capacity to change the nature of our existence by altering events. It is free will that makes behavioral modification possible. For example, I smoked until I was in my late twenties, but stopped — cold turkey — in one day. Based on the medical evidence, I simply faced up to the reality that smoking was an irresponsible behavior.

I was grossly overweight and out of shape until my mid thirties, but in an instant I made a commitment to change my diet, cut back on my calories by 50 percent, and start exercising. As with smoking, I made a conscious decision to acknowledge the medical evidence and face up to the reality that it was irresponsible of me to continue my abominable eating habits.

The point is that these decisions and actions were not based on my gaining a deeper understanding of my past. Through free will, I was able to modify my behavior by accepting reality and employing one of the most important of all responsible traits — self-discipline.

Whatever it is that you don’t like about your present life — business, personal, or otherwise — don’t make the mistake of sitting around and blaming it on the past.
Just as important, don’t feel that you have to get at the deeply rooted, underlying causes of your problems.

I don’t know you personally, but I’m willing to bet you can tell the difference between right and wrong. I would also wager that you can differentiate between responsible and irresponsible behavior. And I have absolutely no doubt that you, as a human being blessed with the awesome faculty of free will, have the capacity to take action — today — to do the right thing.

No matter how smart you may think that loyal pooch lying on the floor next to your chair is, the reality is that he can’t do anything to change his existence. He’d probably do anything to have your free will, but, alas, he’s doomed to serving his master all his life.

Though I recognize that you may not own a canine, I brought man’s best friend into the picture to graphically remind you of just how fortunate you are to be a human being. To not exploit the unique gift you possess to alter your life for the better is to drastically short-change yourself.

Free will is the gift that keeps on giving. The only question is whether or not the recipient chooses to use it wisely.
Reality Therapy, Part II

To briefly recap Part I of this article, reality therapists do not believe it is necessary, or even helpful, to hash over the deep-rooted causes of one’s problems. The reality therapist believes that fulfillment of an individual’s needs in the present, regardless of what traumas he may have suffered in the past, is all that matters. In other words, through the power of free will we have the capacity to modify our behavior.

I thought about this after watching a half-hour of a Larry King Live show and a segment on 60 Minutes Wednesday that immediately followed. From a reality-therapy perspective, I found the dichotomy between the two celebrities featured on these shows to be fascinating.

The first of these celebrities, on Larry King Live, was the ultimate legend, Elvis Presley. Larry King was doing a special on Elvis, with the usual Elvis cronies and girlfriends as guests. I was interested in hearing their take on “The King,” as I had seen both the before and after versions of him in Las Vegas, and the contrast between the two was shocking.

Tragically, near the end, Elvis was reduced to a stumbling, slurring shadow of his former self. From my vantage point at a front-row table, I recall commenting that the glazed look in his eyes was a dead giveaway to a drug problem. I also vividly recall Elvis at the blackjack tables on at least two occasions, both times with a beautiful (and different) young female at his side. On one occasion, I remember musing to the person I was with that another beautiful young woman by the name of Priscilla was at that very moment probably confined to her Trousdale Estates prison just above Beverly Hills.
As I continued watching Larry King’s special, my mind drifted back to an Elvis biography written by a couple of his former “Memphis Mafia” members. Like most everyone who knew him, they were fond of “The King,” but frustrated by their inability to curtail his self-destructive actions. They described his behavior in great detail, behavior so immature and irresponsible that it defied belief. On one occasion, he had an aide go out and buy a half-dozen bulldozers so he and his live-for-the-moment pals could play a rough-and-tumble version of bumper cars at Graceland.

Above all, what came across in both the book and from the guests on Larry King’s show was that Elvis didn’t really believe he deserved his fame and fortune. Throughout his short life, he purportedly asked, “Why me?” over and over again. It seems clear that, at least subconsciously, Elvis realized he was an accident of history, an accident made possible by the marketing genius of Col. Tom Parker. What Parker did was create a remarkable and marketable myth, and myths almost never fail to grow larger with the passage of time.

His fans don’t like to hear it, but the reality is that Elvis couldn’t dance (his hip-thrusting contortions being more reminiscent of someone suffering leg cramps than dancing), couldn’t play the guitar (other than strumming a few notes here and there), and certainly couldn’t act. What Elvis did bring to the table were good looks and a great voice. But I’m sure he himself was well aware that there were a lot of good-looking guys around with great voices in his era. A good start on a list of such performers would be Tom Jones, Englebert Humperdink, and Robert Goulet.

Sleeping with a thousand beautiful maidens may sound exciting to millions of men, but the reality is that sexual overactivity is really nothing more than an escape. As Viktor Frankl pointed out, the more a person seeks sexual pleasure just for the sake of proving his sexuality, the more he fails to find pleasure and the more miserable he is.
Nor were Elvis’s needs fulfilled by mountains of adulation from adoring fans and enough money to buy every imaginable adult toy. As a result, he increasingly turned to drugs and overeating, with his most well-publicized indulgence being peanut butter and banana sandwiches fried in butter. Elvis’s autopsy report suggested he had overdosed on everything from codeine to barbiturates to morphine.

I believe that the bottom line to Elvis Presley, who apparently started out as a decent, down-to-earth, momma’s boy, was that he was thrust into a world of sophistication and opulence that he was not equipped to handle. By that I mean that he didn’t have the talent, education, intellect, and, most important of all, emotional maturity to function in a super-fast-track world. I would conjecture that fame and fortune came so fast and with so little effort that Elvis never even thought about what his real needs were, let alone figure out a way to fulfill them. By all accounts, his was a life without purpose, a life of meaninglessness.

ON THAT SAD NOTE, LET’S SEGUE TO THE OTHER CELEBRITY in this reality-therapy dichotomy, Thomas Quasthoff. Quasthoff was the subject of the 60 Minutes Wednesday segment that I watched following the Larry King Live show on Elvis.

Quasthoff was born near Hanover, Germany in 1959, which makes him about six years older than Elvis was at the time of his death. He was one of the earliest thalidomide babies, born with no arms and a deformed body that would grow to only about three feet in height.

His parents, concerned that they could not properly care for him, sent him away to an institution for the disabled when he was very young. But after a few years, he returned home and was placed in a regular school.

While his classmates played soccer, Quasthoff took singing lessons. It was the start of a long journey that would bring him to where he is today — one of the
finest and most famous baritones in the world. Quasthoff now performs full-time in countries around the globe, and is adored by fans everywhere he goes.

Incredibly, Thomas Quasthoff, now rich and famous, is the epitome of self-confidence. He displays an endearing, self-deprecating sense of humor, and his smile and boisterous laughter are infectious to everyone in his presence. He even has a girlfriend, who is not disabled, whom he describes as “the best thing that has happened to me in forty-six years.”

In his interview with the late Ed Bradley on 60 Minutes Wednesday, Quasthoff described sleeping in a room with ten-to-twelve other disabled children, many of them both mentally and physically challenged. Reflectively, he said, “It was a hard experience. But, on the other side, now I say it was very good for me, because … I know how hard life can really be.”

He went on to explain, “I accept my disability as a fact. I cannot hide it, and I don’t want to hide it. I don’t want to be judged as a disabled person. I want to be judged as a singer.”

When Bradley started to ask him what he would do if he had to choose between being an able-bodied person who didn’t have his ability to sing or a disabled person with his enormous talent, Quasthoff quickly interrupted him with, “I would stay like I am.” The segment closed with Quasthoff saying, “My life is very, very fulfilled. I’m a very happy man.” With those words, he became my poster person for the reality-therapy ideal.

Through the power of free will, Thomas Quasthoff chose to forget the traumas of his past. He recognized that there was nothing he could do about his disabling thalidomide injuries. But, at the same time, he believed he could fulfill his needs through a singing career and a very active life. He refused to use the horrifically bad hand he had been dealt at birth as an excuse for failure.
Sadly, and by contrast, Elvis found only misery in wealth, fame, and revolving female companionship. Blessed with a healthy body, good looks, and a great voice, he instead chose a path of astonishingly irresponsible behavior.

The dichotomy between Elvis Presley and Thomas Quasthoff is yet another reminder that the main difference between success and failure — between happiness and unhappiness — lies in the power of choice. Responsible choices and responsible behavior lead to success and happiness. Irresponsible choices and irresponsible behavior lead to failure and unhappiness.

I will leave this tale of two men by reminding you that while it’s true that you are a product of your past, the reality is that you can’t change any of the unpleasantness you may have endured. Which is why I would urge you to be ever vigilant when it comes to fighting the temptation to look back.

When the past no longer clogs your thought processes, it paves the way for you to focus on exercising the self-discipline to act responsibly in the present. Acting responsibly today is the key to fulfilling your needs and getting where you want to be in life tomorrow.
Advice from a Marketing Genius

Following are the words of one of the greatest marketing minds of all time:

“Know how to sell your wares. It is not enough that they have intrinsic merit, for everyone does not bite the substance nor look within. Most go where there is a crowd, and go because they see that others go. Also, to offer a thing only to connoisseurs is a means to universal interest, because people either believe themselves to be such, or, if not, they find the lack incites desire.”

Believe it or not, these marketing words of wisdom came from a 17th century Jesuit priest by the name of Baltasar Gracian. If the Internet had been around in his day, he would have eaten the competition alive.

Those of you who are familiar with my works know that I continually urge people not only to read as much as possible, but to read the works of the great philosophers. Their words are as meaningful today as when they first penned them, because the fundamentals of life never change. By *fundamentals of life*, I am referring to such things as universal laws, philosophical insights, and human nature. For example, the same subjects and emotions that motivated people in the time of Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates — such as immortality, fear, greed, and romance — still motivate people today.

When my first book was rejected by twenty-three publishers, I made the decision to publish it myself. It was a bold undertaking, and it took nearly three years from the time I ran my first ad until the book made it to #1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list. But it didn’t happen by accident; every step of the way was carefully calculated. And my calculations were based on the advice of my personal direct-marketing adviser, Baltasar Gracian.

In fact, most of my strategy was based on his seventy-one words quoted at the outset of this article. That being the case, I thought it would be valuable to readers to take a closer look at those insightful words.
“Know how to sell your wares. It is not enough that they have intrinsic merit, for everyone does not bite the substance nor look within.”

This was the first time I can recall consciously thinking about the reality that it’s not enough just to have a good product. When people buy through direct mail, infomercials, or the Internet, they almost never “bite the substance or look within.” In other words, it’s not the product that sells the prospect; it’s what you tell him about the product that motivates him to buy. This was an important first step in shedding my naive belief that if I had a great book, everyone would rush out to buy it. In the event you still harbor such a naive mind-set, I strongly advise you to switch mental gears. A product selling solely on the basis of its quality is an idealistic thought, but it’s simply not reality.

I feel sorry for first-time authors when I hear them talking enthusiastically about the literary infant they have just brought into the world. You can tell by the excitement in their voices that they truly believe word will spread like wildfire about how good their book is. But when you run into them a year later, they’re usually bitter. It’s a bitterness that results from their having been through the standard, mainstream publishing routine. The routine I’m referring to is when a publisher prints 5,000 copies of a book and “shotguns” it out to a modest number of bookstores — with no advertising support and very little PR to make people aware that the book even exists.

The books of these once enthusiastic authors almost always die a swift but quiet death, and all the publisher can say is, “Maybe it’s just not the right book at the right time.” I’ve had a ton of firsthand experience with mainstream publishers, and I can tell you that my eighteen-year-old son knows more about marketing than the heads of any of their marketing or publicity departments. How is that possible? It’s a result of publishing higher-ups being brain dead after drinking too much conventional-wisdom-spiked Kool-Aid. When it comes to marketing, mainstream publishers are clueless.
“Most go where there is a crowd, and go because they see that others go.”

Baltasar Gracian’s words gave me the idea for the ad campaign I implemented to market my first book. I put a lot of thought into molding a perception that the book had created a worldwide frenzy. My objective was to make the reader of the ad feel that he was missing out on something big, something that everyone else seemed to know all about. The strategy worked better than I ever could have imagined. The common term for this phenomenon is “madness of the crowd.” It’s the same phenomenon that has fueled stock-market bubbles throughout history.

Little wonder that the most successful ad I ever ran displayed this headline: “What’s All the Commotion About?” The second sentence following the headline read: “What are the realities set forth on the pages of this myth-shattering, tradition-shaking volume that continue to fascinate profit-oriented people around the globe?”

The remarkable thing I discovered was that by creating the impression that the book was causing a frenzy, a frenzy ultimately developed. In other words, the artificially created perception became the reality. It took a lot of persistence and a great deal of time, but I found, to my delight, that most people do, in fact, go where there is a crowd.

“Also, to offer a thing only to connoisseurs is a means to universal interest, because people either believe themselves to be such, or, if not, they find the lack incites desire.”

Subtle or not so subtle, it’s always a good idea to let prospects know that your product is only for individuals who are special. The vast majority of people who read your ad see themselves as a cut above the rest of the population. But, as
Baltasar Gracian pointed out, those who feel inferior might still buy because they desire to raise themselves to a higher level. Everyone wants to be considered special.

There are many examples I could give of this paradoxical desire to be thought of as the exception while at the same time following the crowd. One of the most interesting is the reaction of attorneys to my first book, *Winning through Intimidation*. Throughout the book, I lambasted “Legalman” as the ultimate deal-killer, crediting him with being the major cause of business deals not closing. Through the years, I have received feedback from scores of attorneys who have read my book. And would you believe that in every case I can recall, they loved the book and told me that I was dead-on in my assessment of deal-killing attorneys?

Why in the world would attorneys voluntarily label themselves “deal-killers?” The answer is: They don’t! Without exception, the attorneys who have given me their positive feedback were referring to other attorneys as deal-killers, while seeing themselves as being above such dastardly deeds. Every one of these attorneys made it clear that he wasn’t “one of those deal-killing attorneys.” Each attorney saw himself as a cut above his brethren.

I could write a book — a very long book — about what I’ve learned about copywriting, deal-making, and negotiating from the great philosophers, not to mention what they’ve taught me about life in general. However, until I do, I would suggest that if you’ve thus far missed out on the treasure chest of wisdom offered by these remarkable sages, you start investigating their works today.
Playing to Win

I have often said that a National Football League game is a microcosm of life. There’s an ebb and flow to every game, with each team experiencing its share of adversity. These adversities include such things as fumbles, interceptions, bad calls by officials, injuries, and “shanked” punts.

The teams are so evenly matched that the main determinant in separating the winners from the losers is how well players and coaches handle adversity. Responding positively to adversity is a sign of character, a term talked about incessantly by coaches, players, sportscasters, and fans alike.

The flip side of dealing effectively with adversity is how well players and coaches take advantage of opportunities. The great teams throughout history — the Packers in the sixties, Steelers in the seventies, and Forty Niners in the eighties — had a knack for converting opponents’ mistakes into scores, usually touchdowns.

But, most important of all, great teams play to win, while also-rans play not to lose. You can almost feel the fear of a team that doesn’t really believe it can win in the clutch — when it has the lead and the clock is winding down. The great coaches and quarterbacks throughout history have defied conventional wisdom, just as the most successful businesspeople defy conventional wisdom in the business world. Those who go against the grain of conventional wisdom demonstrate that they are playing to win rather than not to lose.

The legendary Johnny Unitas, thought by many to be the greatest quarterback in the history of the NFL, once said that he didn’t believe in the conventional wisdom that you have to establish the run in order to open up the passing game. He believed that you should establish the passing game first, which, in turn, opens up the running game. Such a bold, aggressive approach to football is enough to cause conservative coaches to develop shingles.
As I said, pro football is a microcosm of life. If you approach the game of business — or the bigger game of life — with the mind-set of just trying not to lose, you probably are going to lose. But if you play to win, the odds of winning shift in your favor.

What happens if you take a bold approach to life and end up losing? You get hurt, of course. But, hey … that’s “life.” If there were no risks involved, everyone would be bold. When you think big and bold, you’re telling the world that you believe in yourself so much that you’re not afraid to take risks.

Fortunately, when you lose, there’s a marvelous antidote that’s been around for thousands of years: Simply pick yourself up, brush yourself off, and start over again. It’s true in football; it’s true in business; it’s true in every aspect of life.

Robert Kiyosaki, author of *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, put it well when he said, “Winners are not afraid of losing. But losers are. Failure is part of the process of success. People who avoid failure also avoid success.”

The irony is that the more you play not to lose, the better your chances of losing. That’s because playing not to lose — timidity — puts you on the defensive. Playing not to lose is not much different than playing to lose.

I recall seeing film producer David Brown on a talk show many years ago, after he had produced some of Hollywood’s biggest blockbusters with partner Richard Zanuck. These included such films as *The Sting, Jaws, Cocoon, The Verdict, Driving Miss Daisy*, and *The Sugarland Express*.

But life wasn’t always so good for Brown. He explained to the audience that he had been fired from his job at one of the studios when he was in his fifties, which left him at the bottom financially. So what did he do? The day he was fired, he went home and put on his finest suit, neatly placed an expensive silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, then dined at one of Hollywood’s power restaurants — with a beautiful woman, of course.
Brown’s point was to emphasize how important it is to be bold and to take the offensive when you’re down. At the time of this particular television interview, he was seventy-five years old and had already begun three new careers — including producing his first Broadway play.

One final note: It’s important to recognize that playing to win is the path to greatness, not love. On the contrary, being proactive and taking risks is guaranteed to make a lot of people dislike you. But, as the saying goes, if you want to be loved, get a dog.
Defying Historical Patterns

Life is filled with paradoxes …

Example: You spend decades learning the rules of the game. Then, just about the time you’ve managed to accumulate some meaningful wisdom, the game ends.

Example: Children are one of the greatest joys in life. But raising children takes more time and effort, and brings more grief, than perhaps any other undertaking. Worst of all, as every parent knows, it’s the ultimate thankless job.

Example: Any mature, rational adult recognizes that the best things in life are free. But the reality — which many people resist — is that in order to be able to spend quality time with your family, in order to smell the flowers and engage in relaxing activities, you have to spend most of your time working and making money.

And so it goes. The paradoxes of life are endless. But the paradox I want to zero in on in this article is one that has been extremely important to my success. It has to do with the past as an indicator of the future. A rational approach to life is to always consider the past when it comes to planning for the future. But even though the past is an indicator of the future, it does not dictate the future.

We see this over and over again is sports. In its first eighty-plus years of existence, the Green Bay Packers never lost a playoff game at home. Based on this ominous historical note, the ho-hum Atlanta Falcons shouldn’t have bothered to show up for their playoff game at Lambeau Field back on January 4, 2003.

But, unfortunately for Green Bay, they did. As a result, the Packers’ eighty-year, thirteen-game winning streak in home playoff games ended when the Falcons beat them 27-7. If the Atlanta coaches and players had allowed decades of history to
intimidate them, Green Bay’s home winning streak in the playoffs might still be intact.

In more than 130 years of major league baseball, no team had ever come back from a 3-0 deficit to win a playoff series. Nevertheless, the Boston Red Sox had the impudence — in the face of the Curse of the Bambino, no less — to play out the string against the hated New York Yankees.

As a result, they not only became the first team in history to win four straight games after being down 3-0, they also became the first team ever to win eight straight playoff games when they went on to beat the St. Louis Cardinals four games to none in the 2004 World Series. To paraphrase one of the great intellectual giants of our time, John Madden, it’s why they play the game.

This same disregard for the past is just as prevalent in politics as it is in sports. History makes it clear that a large voter turnout always favors Democrats. So what happened in the 2004 presidential election? More people voted than in any presidential election in history, but the Republicans forgot to lose.

You can even mix sports and politics together to shatter historical myths. For example, no incumbent party had ever won a presidential election when the Washington Redskins lost their last home game prior to the election. The Sunday before the 2004 presidential election, the Redskins lost to the Green Bay Packers 28-14, but those stubborn Republicans still forgot to lose.

How about war? For more than two centuries, the United States never had to concern itself with protecting its mainland from foreign invasion. The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was an aberration in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and the Japanese attack was on a military target.

Yet, more than fifty years after Peal Harbor, one man from a Stone Age country halfway around the world somehow managed to direct a catastrophic attack on the two most important cities in America — New York and Washington, D.C. The
result was a horrific death for nearly three thousand people and the complete destruction of the two tallest buildings in New York.

Likewise, business examples of false predictors of the future are endless. My personal favorite is the voodoo science known as stock market “charting.” Notwithstanding mountains of evidence to the contrary, investors still delude themselves into believing that charting the past movement of stocks is a sound way to predict the future. When you watch a panel of chartists on one of the financial news shows on television, it’s hard to believe they’re serious. It is to their good fortune that there are always millions of people who are continually searching for an easy way to make money.

If you think about it, you can probably come up with a quick list of twenty or thirty more examples of past history being ignored by future events. The lesson to take away from this, in both your business and personal life, is that it’s important to recognize that whatever happened in the past does not guarantee that the future will follow suit. There is no question that it’s prudent to study the past and learn all you can from it, but never make the mistake of confusing the past with the future.

The biggest problem with relying too much on past history as an indicator of the future is that it can become an invisible barrier that prevents you from coming up with the new ideas and concepts you need to create your own history.

Be careful about placing too much weight on historical patterns, because you can always find patterns in any collection of data. And, more often than not, such patterns are nothing more than coincidences — coincidences upon which myths and superstitions are built.

A prerequisite to determining your future destiny is to refuse to allow history to constrain your actions of today.
Mario and Me

I happened to be going through some old files the other day, and came across an article about blockbuster bestsellers. The reason I saved the article was that it included a list of “Mario Puzo’s Godfatherly Rules for Writing a Bestselling Novel.”

Puzo, who passed away in 1999, wrote a number of bestselling novels, including *The Godfather, Fools Die, and The Last Don*. But what I really liked about Puzo was his legendary tongue-in-cheek interviews. One of my favorite Puzo comments was when he warned aspiring scriptwriters that the only way to get a fair deal in Hollywood is to go into the studio with a mask and gun.

I was amazed at how many of Puzo’s rules apply not only to fiction, but to nonfiction books as well. And even more amazed at how much they apply to life in general. Following are five of Puzo’s rules that I believe can be of great benefit to you if you apply them to your daily life.

**Puzo Rule No. 1: “Never show your stuff to anybody. You can get inhibited.”**

Anyone who is serious about writing — whether it’s fiction, nonfiction, or copywriting — should take this advice seriously. The most dynamic writing is from the heart.

While my first two books, from a writing standpoint, were not up to par with my more recent books, they grabbed people in a way that publishers are incapable of understanding. There is no question in my mind that the reason people have been so zealous about these books over the years is because I “let it all hang out” in my storytelling.
In other words, volunteering my own mistakes and shortcomings in writing makes it easy for readers to relate to me. Yet, on those few occasions when I showed my manuscript to others, they often suggested that I remove certain material which they felt was too “disrobing.”

Be careful about who you show your work to, no matter what business you’re in. When you become inhibited, your creativity and genius become suffocated in the process.

**Puzo Rule No. 2: “Rewriting is the whole secret to writing.”**

Actually, I first learned this secret from the late Ayn Rand, who pointed out that there’s no such thing as writing; there’s only rewriting. I’ve based my whole career on this principle.

I once asked an elderly friend of mine, who was Bob Hope’s executive producer for twenty-five years, if it was difficult to write a joke. He replied, “It’s no more difficult than writing a postcard, and to write a postcard is easy … but to write a good postcard is very difficult.”

I recall someone once saying to me, “It must be nice to be able to knock out a book as quickly as you do.” Whereupon I asked what made him think I could “knock out” a book quickly. He responded, “Because your books are written so simply, it’s obvious that you don’t put a lot of time into them.” Fortunately, I was able to control my emotions by reminding myself that capital punishment had been reinstated for murder. So, in lieu of going the homicide route, I smiled and said, “I guess you’re right. I’m lucky to have such an easy job.” I then calmly walked away, quietly gnashing my teeth.

All quality products — not just books — are easy for the consumer for only one reason: The people who create them put a ton of work into making them easy. In my case, I do about twenty-five drafts of every book I write. And the main
purpose of doing all those rewrites is to make it as clear and easy as possible for
the reader to understand my message.

Perhaps advertising pioneer Claude Hopkins put it best when he said, “Genius is
the art of taking pains.” Repetition, polishing, relentlessly striving to make your
product the best it can be is what lifts you above the competition.

Puzo Rule No. 3: “Never sell your book to the movies until after it is
published.”

I’ve employed the essence of this strategy for more than two decades, and one of
the things I’ve found is that it’s also a great mistake — at least for a first-time
author — to try to make a publishing deal on the basis of an outline. And it’s just
as true of any other industry when it comes to making a deal on the basis of a
business plan alone.

Why? Because people either can’t, or won’t, stretch their imaginations enough to
share your vision. That being the case, be sure to have something concrete to
show the other person if you’re trying to raise money — regardless of the business
you’re in.

I attribute much of my early success as an author to the fact that I not only wrote
my books before showing them to a paperback publisher, but promoted the
hardcover editions into bestsellers first. Once a book was a success in hardcover, I
was then able to command a large advance from a paperback publisher.

Puzo Rule No. 4: “Never let a domestic quarrel ruin a day’s writing. If you
can’t start the next day fresh, get rid of your wife.”

Happens Until Something Moves, I similarly advise readers:
“A spouse who continually berates you for pursuing your dreams is a classic example of someone close to you who can derail your best-laid plans. It still amazes me how many letters I’ve received over the years from people who have told me they parted ways with a spouse or domestic partner after reading one of my books — which almost always resulted in a better life. This used to make me feel uncomfortable, but after rechecking my premises I began to feel good about the fact that I had helped so many people find happier, more fulfilling lives. Don’t for a second think that I’m making light of divorce, but spending a lifetime with a person who makes every minute of your existence unpleasant is a far worse alternative than enduring the pain of a divorce.”

Unlike Puzo, for the sake of political correctness I have used the word “spouse” in this article rather than “wife.” As a matter of fact, most of the letters I’ve received from people who got rid of their spouses have been from women.

**Puzo Rule No. 5: “Never trust anybody but yourself. That includes critics, friends, and especially publishers.”**

This is closely related to Rule No. 1, but it goes beyond the problem of inhibition. It gets at the very heart of creating work that represents your own skills and beliefs rather than what someone else thinks your work should be.

When it comes to writing, the late essayist E.B. White summed it up perfectly when he wrote, “The whole duty of a writer is to please and satisfy himself, and the true writer always plays to an audience of one.” This can sometimes create a sticky situation between an author and an editor. So-called line editing, or proofreading, is one thing, but content editing is quite another. Though editors, on the whole, tend to be very bright people with excellent technical skills, it takes a special kind of editor not to overreach.

In any event, editors are professionals. What’s alarming is how easily many would-be authors are influenced by the input of their nonprofessional friends and
associates. If you don’t have enough confidence in your own writing — or whatever it is you do for a living — to follow your own instincts, you probably should consider changing professions.

Note that Puzo also stated “especially publishers.” Non-authors and first-time authors tend to believe that publishers are omniscient. In truth, however, Puzo was right — publishers are the worst possible judges of your material. Which makes it kind of difficult, since most writers are looking to those very publishers to anoint their work and publish it.

But, the truth be known, the easiest way to find out if your book has potential is to ask a major publisher to evaluate it — but not for the reasons you might assume. Experience has taught me that if a mainstream publisher says your book is a surefire bestseller, you’ve probably got a dog on your hands. By the same token, if the publisher gives it a “thumbs down,” it’s an excellent sign that you’ve written a great book.

How can publishers — as well as experts in most other fields — be so consistently wrong? To oversimplify my answer, I am convinced that it’s because publishing is such an incestuous industry that those on the inside become hopelessly myopic. To paraphrase Viktor Frankl, an expert is nothing more than a person who no longer sees the forest of truth for the trees of facts.

Finally, a parting Mario Puzo bonus for you, straight out of The Godfather: “He made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.”

Now, I’m not suggesting that you start putting horse heads in people’s beds when things don’t go your way. (Though I might have enjoyed doing just that to the guy who told me how easy my job was.) What I am suggesting is that when it comes to deal making, your mind-set should be to make the offer so good that the other person can’t resist taking you up on it. This is also a great approach to writing ad copy. The perfect ad is one in which the prospect feels that he literally can’t refuse the offer.
Do yourself a favor and make it a point to abide by Mario Puzo’s rules. If you fail to do so, don’t be surprised if … one fine day … some of the goodfellas drop around to pay you a visit. And if that should happen, just remember that I tried to warn you.
Above All, Discretion

There’s no question that some people feel cheated by the likelihood that the home-run boom of the past decade in Major League Baseball has been, at least to some extent, a result of players using performance-enhancing substances. It appears, however, that such purist fans are in the minority when it comes to baseball’s latest in a long series of suicide attempts.

The evidence seems to clearly suggest that most fans don’t really care all that much about steroid usage. At the very least, they’re willing to forgive and forget. I think my teenage son’s attitude is typical: “I don’t care if players use steroids. I just like seeing home runs.”

It kind of reminds me of a newspaper article I read back in the late 1970s when rational adults were concerned about the double-digit inflation that was driving real estate prices through the roof. The article mentioned an eighteen-year-old kid in Los Angeles who was making buckets of money buying and selling properties. It even quoted this prodigal investment genius as saying, “I don’t think inflation is a bad thing. I think it’s a good thing. I don’t want inflation brought under control.” (Though I can’t confirm it, I heard a rumor that after the Southern California real estate collapse in the early eighties, he declared bankruptcy, got a job at McDonald’s salting French fries, then — later, of course — was invited to be a guest lecturer on economics at UC Berkeley.)

Yet, Major League Baseball’s steroid problem does present some interesting issues. The foremost question, of course, is the illegality of using steroids in sports. As usual, the government is involved. And, as usual, I don’t see why it’s any of the government’s business.

But Major League Baseball’s involvement is another story. Baseball is a business, and if it wants to allow players to use performance-enhancing substances, it certainly has a right to do so. Whether it will hurt attendance over the long term
remains to be seen. If fans don’t believe that what they’re witnessing is an
athlete’s true ability, they might begin to think of baseball in much the same light
as pro wrestling. Or perhaps as a freak show, sort of like baseball’s version of
Ripley’s Believe It or Not.

The second issue is whether an athlete should be considered sane if he is willing to
risk his long-term health in order to compile mega-statistics. This kind of thinking
is foreign to me, because I can’t imagine voluntarily putting anything into my
body that has the potential to cause damage.

Third is the issue of out-and-out cheating. Rather than looking the other way all
those years, Major League Baseball would have been better off if it had just made
steroids legal. Then fans and sports reporters wouldn’t be faced with the question
of whether or not asterisks should be placed next to modern-day records — and, if
so, which records?

But to me, the most important issue is that of integrity. Integrity is adherence to
one’s code of moral values. A person who consistently acts in accordance with a
generally accepted moral code is ethical. Someone who preaches a high standard
of morality but selectively acts otherwise is hypocritical. Violating the rules of
any game is unethical. Deceiving people who are paying money to see you
perform is unethical.

But even more unethical is when a person divulges confidential information about
a friend, especially if it’s done for financial gain. For example, while even
Democrats agree that Bill Clinton’s sexual misconduct and lying were beyond the
pale, that didn’t give Linda Tripp a moral justification to record intimate
conversations with her supposed friend, Monica Lewinsky. Tripp’s sob story that
she only did it to protect herself didn’t even come close to passing the giggle test.
Can you imagine a “good friend” taping your conversation when you’re telling her
the most intimate details of your life?

Unfortunately, it goes on all the time. Remember when Doug Wead, a long-time,
close friend of President Bush, revealed that he had taped telephone conversations
with the president? He said the reason he recorded their conversations was that he “viewed Bush as a historic figure.” Sure, Doug.

And then there’s Jose Canseco, the former baseball superstar who wrote a tell-all book about drug use in Major League Baseball. Even if most of what Canseco said in his book was true, what was his point? Does he really feel a choirboy’s moral obligation to step forward with the truth and clean up the sport that he now says he wants nothing to do with?

I would have been much more impressed had he spoken up during the height of his career — when he had a lot on the line financially — because he had a sincere conviction that it was wrong for players to deceive fans. If he had just admitted that he wrote his book for money, I might have respected him for at least being honest.

In any event, like most fans, I can’t get too excited about steroid usage in sports. After all, poll after poll has shown that many people in our society not only lie and cheat, but see nothing wrong with it. And since I don’t have the power to change how others think or act, I would rather focus on the more important point — being discreet about what you say and who you say it to.

In that regard, a good motto to live by is: Live every moment as though the whole world were watching and listening. This is especially true when it comes to telephone conversations and e-mail. Even Microsoft had its e-mails used against it by the Justice Department in that agency’s antitrust suit against Gates & Co. With that in mind, the challenge for each of us is to be vigilant about not saying anything on the telephone or putting anything in an e-mail that could come back to haunt us.

Above all, remember that friends have an amazing capacity to morph into enemies at the worst possible times. And when and if that happens, if your phone calls, e-mails, and hands are clean, you won’t have to worry if a Linda Tripp or Jose Canseco happens to be on the other end of the line. Discretion is the better part of valor — for more than just one reason.
Beware False Perceptions

Recovered memory syndrome (RMS) is a phenomenon whereby a questioner “helps” someone remember events that may be fictional by asking leading questions. The reason such questioning works — in bogus molestation cases, for example — is because the mind is very susceptible to suggestion.

But RMS is just one aspect of a much broader problem — the consequences that tend to flow from any kind of false perception of reality, no matter what the cause may be. False perceptions brought about by RMS are the result of what we commonly refer to as “brainwashing” or “the power of suggestion.” Interestingly, good advertising and good salesmanship use this tool to try to guide consumers’ perception of reality. If successful, it can result in sales, to be sure. But it also can result in dissatisfied customers if such customers later believe they were misled.

Action is the starting point of all progress, but an accurate perception of reality is the foundation upon which a successful person bases his actions. A false perception of reality leads to false premises, which in turn leads to false assumptions, which in turn leads to false conclusions, which, ultimately, leads to negative results.

If a batter perceives that the pitcher has just released a fastball, but in fact the pitch is a curve, there’s a high probability he’s going to swing and miss. If a woman perceives that her boyfriend is the perfect mate, but he turns out to be Scott Peterson or O.J. Simpson, her false perception can be fatal. The point is that the roots of success are planted in one’s perception of the world.

The late conservative economist Henry Hazlitt once wrote that an entrepreneur’s success is to a great degree dependent upon how accurately he can predict the future. And, though the entrepreneur may not consciously think about it, those predictions are based on his perception of reality.
For example, I’ve seen one case after another of a person having a warped perception of what he brings to the negotiating table, which usually results in his walking away empty-handed. Homeowners are often guilty of this kind of self-delusion when they harbor an inflated perception of the value of their houses.

False perceptions also run rampant in the publishing business. First-time authors usually believe that a publisher will heavily promote their books. Unfortunately, such a perception is pure fantasy. On the other side of the coin, most first-time authors also tend to believe that they’ve written *War and Peace* and that their masterpiece will sell quickly through word of mouth. Again, such perceptions are pure fantasy.

The kinds of inaccurate perceptions one can harbor in business dealings are literally infinite. But there is one perception that is probably more costly than any other. The faulty perception I am referring to occurs when you become involved in a business deal with someone who is clearly unethical.

One business acquaintance of mine had an uncanny knack for becoming entangled with dishonest people. His problem was that he was a romantic. He simply couldn’t stop himself from becoming enamored with every guy who crossed his path wearing a fake Rolex. And the more such an all-show-and-no-dough person boasted about his accomplishments, the more mesmerized he became. As you might have guessed, he spent more time in court than he did working on his business.

I can’t give you a surefire formula for being able to differentiate between honorable and dishonorable people, because I myself still manage to get my body parts caught in the wrong place from time to time. Happily, however, I have noticed two changes in my life with regard to this problem.

First, it happens to me much less frequently. And that tells me that I’ve improved my perception of people. Second, when I do find myself involved with someone who bears a moral likeness to Hugo Chavez, I make it a point to exit quickly — even if I have to do so at a loss.
While I said that I can’t give you a surefire formula for being able to differentiate between honorable and dishonorable people, I can tell you how you can increase your odds of becoming involved with an unethical person. To accomplish this, you need only to confuse your wishes with reality. This emotional mistake happens most often when your desire to do a deal is so great that you ignore the neon sign on the other person’s forehead that reads: “LSCD” — as in, *Lie, Steal, Cheat, Deceive*. The only antidote I know for avoiding this mistake is to be relentlessly vigilant when it comes to not allowing your desires to override what your eyes, ears, and gut tell you.

All this may seem far removed from the phenomenon of recovered memory syndrome, but it’s not. RMS is often nothing more than a false perception of reality brought about by the power of suggestion. And that same power of suggestion, whether it comes from someone else or is self-administered, can lead to false perceptions in any area of life.

Which is why it is incumbent upon you to become adept at distinguishing between reality and illusion. A false perception of reality — regardless of the cause — almost always leads to failure. An accurate perception of reality doesn’t guarantee success, but it’s an excellent first step in the right direction.

You can’t put too much conscious effort into sharpening your perception of reality. It’s mentally hard work, but everything worthwhile is hard. The more you’re willing to pay the price of vigilance in this area, the more often you’ll find yourself enjoying the benefits.
Rules No. 1 & 2

In a radio interview some years ago, the host started out by asking me, “In order of importance, what would you say are the three most essential rules when it comes to making money?” Without hesitation, I blurted out: “Rule No. 1: Stay alive. Rule No. 2: Stay healthy. Rule No. 3: Stop losing money.” The phones rang off the hook for a full hour.

I believe that the reason those words jumped out of my mouth, without my even taking a few seconds to ponder the question, was because of my belief that most people tend to ignore or skim over the basics. By basics, I am referring to things that are often so obvious that people simply don’t bother to give them much thought. Which is unfortunate, because the basics are the building blocks of success.

Rules No. 1 and 2 are as basic as you can get. Why? Because unhealthy people tend to perform at a sub-par level, and low-level performance does not lead to success. As to staying alive, dead people don’t perform at all. Just think of James Dean, Elvis, Andy Gibb, John Belushi, Freddy Prinze — the list of celebrities who died at a young, or relatively young, age goes on and on. And most of those early deaths could have been avoided.

For example, a lot of famous people have died as a result of drug overdoses. I don’t like the odds against living a long and healthy life when you put abusive substances into your body, so I choose to pass on drugs. Drugs are a result of choice.

John Denver, John F. Kennedy, Jr., Jim Croce, Ricky Nelson, Buddy Holly, and undefeated world heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano all died in private-plane crashes. I realize that weekend pilots reading this article will take issue with my assessment, but, plain and simple, I don’t like the odds of flying in a small plane, either.
But of all the things that can kill you, the one that poses the greatest danger is obesity (primarily through heart attack, stroke, and diabetes). Since obesity is a subjective term, perhaps it would be more appropriate just to say that eating too much food and/or eating unhealthy food is an irresponsible behavior that can lead to illness and death. The reason this subject is so dear to my heart (hmm ... maybe not such a good word choice) is because I had a severe weight problem for many years. As a result, I have a great deal of empathy for the tens of millions of people in America who are overweight.

We’ve all heard the age-old theme: If I can do it, anyone can. This theme applies to me in spades when it comes to taking off weight, because I inherently “think fat.” When I say I “think fat,” I mean I can relate to Dom DeLuise and his chubby pals in the movie Fatso when they chanted in unison, “Get the honey!” … then proceeded to rip off the kitchen-cabinet doors.

Like most overweight people, my dinosauric eating habits developed at a very young age. I ate anything and everything I could get my hands on. When I was at my peak, alert people would guard their food as I approached. But I practiced a double standard: No one would even dare think about asking me for a taste of my food. They knew that I wasn’t into sharing. We’re talking extra-large pizzas ... two double-cheeseburgers, two orders of fries, and two extra-thick shakes at one sitting ... and a whole salami and a loaf of white bread for a nightcap. Homer Simpson eats like an anorexic compared to me in my heyday.

During my teen years, my habit of vacuuming in any stray food within arm’s length didn’t cause me a weight problem, because I played sports for hours on end. Then, a funny thing happened on the way to growing up. My endless hours of exercise dwindled, but my caloric intake stayed the same. As a result, I soon became grossly overweight and shockingly out of shape.

For years, I felt lousy, and the quality and quantity of my work output was in a downward spiral. What changed everything for me was when I came to realize that even though I loved food, overeating is not an addiction; it’s a state of mind.
In other words, my problem was that I thought like a fat person. Meaning that even if I wasn’t hungry, I would eat, because that’s what a fat person is supposed to do. In this respect, it was a self-image issue.

The reason I decided to tell on myself is that in the event you are one of the millions of people in this country who are overweight, I suggest you attack the problem with your gray matter. A responsible-behavior mind-set is a hundred times more effective than the greatest diet book ever written. Specifically, this means declaring war on that part of your brain that thinks fat — and understanding that it’s a lifetime war. Today, people constantly comment about how thin I am. Little do they know that I’m really a closet fat person, because to this day I think fat.

Believe it or not, I still periodically go on a binge and eat ice cream (straight from the container, of course) four or five nights in a row. On rare, out-of-control occasions, I’ve even been known to go for the jar of gourmet hydrogenated fat (a.k.a. peanut butter).

But what’s been different about the past twenty-five years when it comes to my personal Battle of the Bulge is that my responsible-behavior brain cells never fail to come to my rescue and overwhelm my think-fat brain cells. I’ve had some close calls, but the responsible cells always manage to win. Because weight is quantifiable, the tool I use to help them win is my bathroom scale. I monitor the situation every morning and every night so there’s no room for self-delusion.

The result is that even though I still think fat, I manage to eat thin — at least most of the time — because I’ve learned to intellectualize the problem of unhealthy eating habits. To intellectualize means “to give something a rational structure,” and giving something a rational structure leads to responsible behavior.

In other words, it’s 100 percent mental — mind over calories. I focus on ingesting fruits, vegetables, and whole grains before the eating machine within me tempts me to start reaching for the saturated fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar.
So, if you’re one of my think-fat soul mates, take heart (hmm … there’s that word again). I’m willing to bet that I love food more than you do. Modesty aside, I’m also willing to bet I can out eat you blindfolded. Having said that, what’s more important is that I choose not to.

Yes, definitely, if I can do it, anyone can. Someday, I’ll probably write an article about another important component of staying alive and healthy: exercise. And if you want to be around to read that article, you would do well to heed Rules No. 1 & 2.

In the meantime, don’t make the mistake of ignoring or waving aside these fundamental rules just because they are so obvious.
Dealing With Injustice

Prominently displayed in the main hallway of my son’s school is a large sign that lists “Life’s Rational Rules of the World.” There are twelve altogether, and the first rule on the list reads: “The world is not always fair.”

From the first time I saw that sign, I was impressed with the school. What a great truism to emphasize to children, because throughout their lives, they will continually be confronted by injustice.

I thought about this basic reality of life recently when two major legal verdicts were handed down. I found it to be a fascinating coincidence that on the same day that Scott Peterson was sentenced to death for the murder of his wife, Laci, Robert Blake was acquitted of charges that he murdered his wife, Bonny Lee Bakley. What crossed my mind was how many people were directly affected by these two cases and their verdicts. I can only imagine how unfair the world must seem to many of them.

For starters, let’s not dismiss Scott Peterson’s plight out of hand. As I’ve stated in the past, based on what I know about the case, I believe that Peterson is guilty. Nevertheless, even though I’m a strong advocate of the death penalty and a harsh critic of soft-on-crime judges, I am compelled to say that I don’t believe the evidence in Peterson’s case came close to proving his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

If the truth be known, I believe Peterson convicted himself with his abhorrent — and ignorant — behavior before, during, and after his trial. Though jurors probably would never admit it — even to themselves — I believe they condemned Peterson to death for being a lying, cheating, vile human being. Like it or not, however, that does not qualify a person for capital punishment.
But let’s stretch our imaginations a bit. What if Peterson really didn’t kill his wife? In that unlikely event, if you were Peterson, do you think you might feel that life is a bit unfair? Imagine facing twenty-plus years on death row and eventual execution for a murder you didn’t commit.

Even if Peterson did commit first-degree murder, he must surely be comparing his outcome to that of O.J. Simpson. According to most law-enforcement officials, O.J. had far more evidence against him than the majority of people who have been put to death after being convicted of murder, yet he walked away from his sham trial into a life of golf and financial freedom.

Even worse for Peterson was the fact that he received his death sentence on the same day Robert Blake was acquitted. Worse because, in Blake’s case, it was commonly known that he hated his wife and wanted to get rid of her. In fact, two different people testified that Blake had approached them about killing his wife. My best guess is that he actually did hire someone else to do it, which is probably why there is no hard evidence pointing to him.

But, Peterson and Blake aside, let’s take a look at the victims in these two high-profile murder cases. Laci Peterson, the beautiful young lady with the affidavit smile, ended up with her mutilated body, along with that of her soon-to-be-born baby, in San Francisco Bay. Life certainly wasn’t fair to them.

And what about Laci’s parents, who must now live their remaining days thinking about how their daughter’s life came to such a brutal end. To further their pain, they also lost a grandson whom they never even got to see.

Finally, there’s Scott Peterson’s parents. Even if Peterson is guilty, you can be certain that his parents don’t believe it. Which means they are destined to spend every day of their lives with the thought that their son is on death row, awaiting execution for a murder he didn’t commit. The world must seem like a very unfair place to them right now.
We see these kinds of tragedies play out on television day in and day out, so much so that both the victims and perpetrators become old news very quickly. When is the last time you heard anyone talk about Chandra Levy, who, like Laci Peterson, ended up a mutilated corpse? Gary Condit did lose his seat in Congress over that one, along with his Washington, D.C. love nest, but he was never even indicted. Not a shred of evidence ... but a little too much of a coincidence for my taste. As with Laci Peterson, Chandra Levy left behind a grieving family destined to live out their lives in an unfair world.

On the other side of the coin, what about the lucky ones who somehow managed to cheat death when it appeared to be imminent? When Elizabeth Smart was found alive, it seemed to all the world to be a miracle. Yet, could you blame the families of Chandra Levy, Nicole Simpson, or Laci Peterson for asking themselves, “Why couldn’t my daughter have been the lucky one?”

Or Ashley Smith, who was held hostage by Brian Nichols, the murderer with a conscience who killed Superior Court Judge Rowland Barnes in an Atlanta courtroom? Why did the fates allow her to escape certain death, while tens of thousands of other people are killed by everything from a tidal wave in Southeast Asia to a hurricane in Florida to a mudslide in California?

There can be only one answer to these questions: Life simply isn’t fair. Worse, none of us will ever know why. We have free will, but we can never hope to understand the inevitable. The reason it’s important to intellectualize all this is because unfairness is such an integral part of life. A person in search of a fair world has little chance of finding happiness.

For life to be worth living, you have to be committed to a meaningful purpose and live every day as responsibly as you can. You have to move steadily toward your goals, day in and day out, in spite of the treacherous blows periodically meted out by life.

The airlines remind passengers to put their own oxygen masks on first, before helping their children. This is a sound principle to apply to the unfairness of life.
as well. By this I mean that it’s important for you to accept the reality that the world isn’t fair and move forward with your life in spite of the injustices that often confront you. Leading by example puts you in a much better position to teach this painful truism to your children.

When something goes wrong in my eighteen-year-old son’s world, he often says, “It’s not fair. To which I usually respond, “Life isn’t supposed to be fair.” Just as important, I tell him that anyone who is alive and healthy doesn’t have all that much to complain about.

Accepting the reality of an unfair world and learning how to deal with it is a lifetime project, so the earlier you begin explaining it to your child, the better off he or she will be.
“Touching all the bases” is an appropriate metaphor that may well have its roots in the tragic tale of Fred Merkle’s “bonehead” play nearly a century ago. At the time, Merkle was only nineteen years old and in his second major league season with the New York Giants.

Merkle’s infamous mental lapse took place on September 23, 1908, in the last half of the ninth inning against the Chicago Cubs. With the score tied and two outs, the Giants had runners on first (Merkle) and third (Moose McCormick), when Al Bridwell singled to centerfield.

On the hit, Merkle was still on his way to second base when McCormick crossed home plate with what appeared to be the winning run. But when Merkle saw McCormick score, he thought the game was over and didn’t bother to go all the way to second base. Instead, he headed straight for the clubhouse.

Unlike Fred Merkle, however, the Cubs’ Johnny Evers was alert to what was going on. He immediately realized that even though the runner had already crossed home plate, the run wouldn’t count if a forced runner (Merkle) was thrown out at second. He yelled to the Cubs’ centerfielder “Solly” Hofman to throw him the ball. By at least by one account of the chaotic scenario, the ball went over Evers’ head, and Cubs third-base coach Joe McGinnity scooped it up. Realizing what was about to happen, McGinnity threw the ball into the stands.

Relentlessly, Evers climbed into the stands and retrieved the ball (or, according to some accounts, “a” ball), called to one of the umpires that there was a force play at second base, and touched the bag. The umpire, who also had been alert enough to note that Merkle had not bothered to touch second base, called him out. Because of the ensuing chaos, and with darkness setting in, the game was ruled a tie. The Giants disputed the tie ruling, but the National League office upheld the umpire’s decision.

77
After that historic game, the Giants, who had been in first place prior to the game, fell apart in the last two weeks of the season. Further, to rub insult into injury, the Cubs won the pennant. (Little did Cub fans realize, of course, that it would be their last pennant of the century.)

Today, ninety-seven years after the fact, this historic moment is still referred to in baseball lore as “Merkle’s Bonehead Play.” And Fred Merkle became forever labeled “Bonehead Merkle” for his infamous mental lapse.

Poor Fred Merkle. He got labeled a dunce for making the same kind of mistake most of us make many times throughout our lives. Everyone forgets to “touch all the bases” at one time or another. In sports, while Merkle’s blunder is the one best remembered by sports aficionados, the fact is that mental lapses occur much more frequently than most fans realize.

I can recall watching Leon Lett, standout defensive end of the Dallas Cowboys, recover a fumble in Super Bowl XXVII against Buffalo and lumber sixty-four yards to within inches of Buffalo’s goal line. About ten yards from the end zone, however, Lett started to slow down. Holding the ball in one hand, he went into a subtle showboat mode, which allowed Buffalo’s Don Beebe to catch him from behind and knock the ball out of his hand ... just before he crossed the goal line. Buffalo recovered the fumble and, like Merkle, the unmerciful sports world has never allowed Leon Lett to forget his blunder.

And it’s not just individual athletes who fail to follow through and finish the job. Every year in every sport, there are many teams that start off with a bang, only to run short of breath near the end of the season. In the 2004 American League Championship Series, the Yankees crushed the Red Sox 19-8 in game three to go up three games to none on Boston. On top of that, the Yankees were ahead going into the ninth inning of game four.

What a great situation for Yankee fans — except for one thing: The Yankees forgot to finish the job. The Red Sox tied the game in the bottom of the ninth inning, then won it in the twelfth on David Ortiz’s home run. Just like that, the
Curse of the Bambino and eighty-six years of frustration was on its way to being
over. The Red Sox went on to become the first team in baseball history to come
back from a 3-0 deficit in postseason play and win four straight games.

In politics, we see this same lack of follow-through occur all the time. Most of us
are not old enough to remember Harry Truman’s upset of New York Governor
Thomas Dewey in the presidential election of 1948, but we’ve read about it and
seen it on television many times. While Truman traveled the country and “gave
’em hell” from the back of his campaign train, Dewey coasted. He was focused on
prematurely celebrating rather than on touching all the bases and making certain
that Truman wouldn’t rise from the dead. Not only was Dewey an odds-on
favorite to beat Truman, the failed haberdasher from Missouri, but some headlines
the morning after the election actually declared Dewey the winner.

More recently, we witnessed the total collapse of Howard Dean in the 2004
Democratic primaries. Until he inexplicably went insane, he was all but anointed
his party’s presidential nominee. Instead, Ho Chi Minh’s most enthusiastic
Western supporter, John Heinz … er, I mean, Kerry … seized the moment and
won the nomination.

Of course, nowhere is a lack of follow-through seen more frequently than in the
business world. I remember an acquaintance of mine who, in the mid-eighties,
won the FCC lottery for the cellular license to Puerto Rico. However, the FCC
refused to award him the license when it was discovered that he had forgotten to
sign his application. What a price to pay for not following through.

Remember: You’re not through until you’ve crossed all the t’s, dotted all the i’s,
and the check has cleared the bank!

As an author, I can assure you from firsthand experience that writing a book is all
about follow-through and touching every base. For each book I write, I have a
checklist of over one hundred items that I painstakingly address after I work my
way through twenty to twenty-five drafts. If an author’s aim is quality, he has to
be willing to invest an enormous amount of time and effort in making certain that no important steps are missed.

Finally, and most important of all, there’s life itself. You shortchange yourself if you fail to touch all the bases during your short stay on the conscious side of this planet. Reading, for example, is an activity you would do well to embrace. The last thing in the world you want to do is miss the one book that might have had a major impact on how you lived your life.

Likewise, make the effort to get up out of your chair, walk over and pick up the camera, and take a picture of that special moment in time that will otherwise be lost forever. Take the time to listen to your kids … play sports with them … laugh with them … communicate with your spouse … exercise … listen to good music … be active. Make a conscious effort to touch all the bases while you’re here, because you have no way of knowing if you’re ever going to pass this way again.
Creativity

Creativity is a trait we all admire. Original thoughts and ideas are valued highly in the marketplace. We watch in awe as a Steven Spielberg creates one masterpiece after another.

Most people believe that such creativity is an inborn trait and is beyond their reach. They’re right about the former, but wrong about the latter. It goes without saying that some people are more naturally creative than others, but the same can be said of any human trait. A person with a high IQ might breeze through school with a “B” average, but a person with an average IQ can become an “A” student if he’s willing to invest enough time and effort in his studies.

The same is true of athletes. There are great athletes in every major sport who never rise above mediocrity, while guys like Larry Bird (slow and no jumping ability) and Emmett Smith (small and not particularly fast) become legends.

And so it is with creativity. What it gets down to is price-paying. If you want to become more creative, you have to be willing to put forth the necessary effort to do those things that lead to increased creativity.

One of the most encouraging facts about the brain that researchers have discovered is that intelligence is not a prerequisite to creativity. IQ tests focus on convergent thinking, which views a problem as having only one solution. There is no creativity involved in this process. To be creative, you have to think divergently, which entails considering many solutions. And that, in turn, requires you to disregard conventional wisdom and consider far-ranging possibilities.

Studies have demonstrated that the left hemisphere of the brain is responsible for convergent thinking, while the right hemisphere is the home of divergent thinking. Thus, a person with severe left-brain damage can still be creative.
Anyone who has ever watched young children at play knows that they tend to be very creative. However, their creativity becomes suppressed by a school system that values conformity and specific answers to specific questions.

Further conformity is demanded, or at least encouraged, on job applications and in the workplace. The cerebral risk-taker who dares to go against conventional wisdom does so at his own peril. If his unconventional idea is adopted and proves to be a winner, he may very well be on his way to the presidency of the company. But if he’s wrong, he may be looking for a new job.

Of course, those who are self-employed don’t have to worry about getting fired — but they do have to worry about going broke. Thus, one of the prerequisites for creativity is having a well-endowed lower anatomy.

Knowledge is another factor that is critical to creative thinking, in at least two ways. First, because the left brain is the cerebral filing cabinet for specific knowledge, it keeps the creative right brain from running wild. We’ve all known people who come up with an idea a minute, but most of their ideas either fail or never get off the ground. Usually, it’s a result of their lacking enough specific knowledge in their left brain to silence their creative right brain and tell it to move on to the next idea.

Second, and even more important, if your left brain is overflowing with knowledge, your right brain has access to the material it needs to be creative. Good ideas and concepts are only as good as the knowledge upon which they are based.

What comes into play here is the Schlock Blocker, which states: For every hour spent watching schlock TV — e.g., Survivor, The Bachelor, Extreme Makeover, The Apprentice — the left brain is deprived of an hour’s worth of valuable knowledge that could be gained by reading a serious book or at least watching educational television such as The History Channel or PBS.
But it gets even trickier. There is convincing evidence that too much specialized knowledge can actually inhibit creativity. When it comes to the arts, in particular, too much knowledge can be detrimental to creativity. Researchers have discovered that people who experience severe left-brain damage become less inhibited and more creative in such skills as drawing and painting.

This is because the left brain organizes our social skills and tends to repress “eccentricity” and nonconformity. There is a strong suspicion that Vincent van Gogh’s wackiness was a result of left-hemisphere brain damage, which in turn gave him the freedom to be totally uninhibited in his right-brain artwork.

Today, Hollywood is overflowing with artistically creative people who talk as though they’ve had group left-brain lobotomies. If one gives them the benefit of the doubt and assumes they are well-meaning, one is also forced to conclude that their clueless babbling on such topics as politics, world peace, and the environment stems from a lack of knowledge. But this lack of knowledge does not get in the way of their artistic creativity.

Finally, it is much easier to be creative when you’re not under pressure. That’s why it’s a good idea to get away from your office periodically and relax. Some of my best ideas have come to me while cruising at thirty thousand feet — no telephone, no e-mails, no projects piling up all around me. Vacations, ball games, attending conferences, and just going for long walks all serve the same purpose.

Above all, develop the habit of grabbing hold of random, creative thoughts and quickly getting them down on paper. Nothing frustrates me more than realizing that a great idea I came up with yesterday is gone because I was so certain that I’d remember it that I didn’t take the time to write it down. To discourage this lazy habit, I keep pads and pens everywhere — throughout the house, in my car, and next to my bed. Be rigidly self-disciplined when it comes to writing down your ideas, especially those that are the most extreme or that you’re positive you’ll remember.
It’s also a good idea to always have a blank tape in the video recorder (or to have and know how to use a TIVO or DVR), because you never know when some great tidbit is going to make its way in between the standard schlock programming and appear on your television screen — provided you watch the right channels, of course.

Lastly, and most important, I believe that creativity flows from action. Action stimulates your brain cells and gets your creative juices flowing. What actually happens is that when you take action, the atoms in your brain increase the speed of their vibrations, which causes your “mental paradigm” to expand. And when that occurs, you begin to see new ideas, new concepts, and new possibilities that you may not have previously considered.

That’s why you can’t afford to wait until you become motivated to take action. Instead, you have to employ your free will and *force* yourself to take action. And when you do, motivation is almost sure to follow. In other words, don’t make the mistake of waiting for something to happen; make it happen!

To be successful in business, the three most important areas you have to focus on are strategizing, innovating, and marketing. And since all three require creative thinking, it’s imperative to your success that you constantly hone this remarkable human trait.
Awhile back, I heard Oprah’s grandest creation, Dr. Phil, say something that really struck a bell with me. The interviewer asked Dr. Phil if it bothered him that so many critics accused him of oversimplification. He responded that it didn’t bother him at all. He even volunteered that one fellow had recently accused him of saying things that were really nothing more than common sense — to which Dr. Phil responded, “Golly, that’s great. Do you mind if I use it as a testimonial?”

It was a very clever way of turning a negative into a positive. And the nice thing about it is that it was true. The greatest teachers have a knack for demystifying complex issues by applying common sense to them.

A good technical definition of common sense is “sound judgment not based on specialized knowledge.” In other words, you don’t need to be a Ph.D. to exercise common sense. It’s a trait you develop through purposeful awareness and habit. Common sense equates to wisdom, whereas an academic understanding of specific areas of life equates to knowledge. In simpler terms, what common sense boils down to is a sound understanding of how life works.

I believe most people have a reasonably good understanding of the right thing to do in most situations. In other words, they know the difference between responsible and irresponsible actions. The problem, however, is that too many of these same people — at the moment of truth — have a habit of ignoring their intellect and instead acting on emotion. Children — especially teenagers — have a tendency to make this mistake more often than adults.

But teenagers have an excuse: They’re short on experience. With each passing year, an adult has more and more experience under his belt, and thus less and less justification for acting on impulse. In fact, a good definition of maturity is the willingness to forego instant gratification. At some point in time, an adult — to be
successful — must learn through his experiences or be willing to live a Wile E. Coyote kind of life (as in, “Beep, beep!”).

When I watch the daily news, it amazes me how many sad, even tragic, stories are a result of people’s common sense taking a leave of absence when they most need it. I always try to focus on the common-sense angle of these stories and file away the lessons I learn in my subconscious filing cabinet. My hope is that by doing so I will be able to avoid similar lack-of-common-sense mistakes in my own life. As a result, I often find myself thinking of these mistakes at critical moments.

Take, for example, the bizarre child-molestation trial of Michael Jackson in 2005. Let’s assume that Jackson was completely innocent — that he never molested a child in his life. Even so, if a lack of common sense were a felony, he almost certainly would have been sentenced to life in prison. A normal person’s common sense would tell him that it’s not a real good idea to have young boys sleep in your bed. Common sense would tell him that it’s an even worse idea to say, in a worldwide television interview, that one of the most loving things you can do is share your bed with a child.

Unfortunately, Jackson’s common sense deteriorated even more after his indictment. Being forty-five minutes late for his first day in court was not a great way to win over the judge. Neither was his having a photo op while standing atop an SUV and waving to his fans outside the courthouse.

And shouldn’t his common sense have told him that jurors were not likely to be favorably impressed with his bodyguards? Or by his calling into Jesse Jackson’s radio show to complain about being the victim of racism before his trial had even begun? Michael Jackson is, indeed, very fortunate that he isn’t on trial for exhibiting a lack of common sense.

Another excellent example of a lack of common sense is to be found in the Major League Baseball steroid scandal. What ballplayer would knowingly inject a dangerous drug into his body and, to boot, do so with the knowledge that he’s cheating? Further, as part of the fallout from the steroid scandal, how about living
legend Mark McGwire’s destroying his Paul Bunyan image by essentially invoking the Fifth Amendment before Congress? Had his common sense overridden his attorney’s bad advice, he may very well have kept his hero status intact and not been rejected by sportswriters when he became eligible for the Hall of Fame.

One of the reasons I became so enamored with Albert Einstein’s quote “Nothing happens until something moves” is because it is the epitome of profound common sense. Tens of millions of people seem to be waiting around for something good to happen in their lives, while expending enormous amounts of energy complaining about their “bad luck.”

Most people tend to miss the most obvious things when it comes to success in any area of life. While in search of the magic formula for success, they mistakenly overlook the importance of something as simple as common sense. Demonstrating this trait on a consistent basis doesn’t guarantee success, but a lack of it can come pretty close to guaranteeing failure. Deferring to common sense before making decisions is nothing more than a habit — and, fortunately, all habits can be learned by anyone who brings willingness to the table.
Customer Service Is a Mind-set, Part I

When I was a kid, telephones and telephone service were synonymous with AT&T. In fact, it was against the law for someone to install his own phone jacks or even use a telephone not sold by AT&T. Aside and apart from the immorality of government-created monopolies, such monopolies breed arrogance and indifference toward customers.

After decades of having everything its way, AT&T was finally forced to compete. Unfortunately, the company’s “You’re lucky to have us as your service provider” attitude was firmly entrenched at every level of the telecommunications giant.

A few years ago, I can remember spending more than an hour on the phone, on at least two different occasions, trying to get through to someone at AT&T who could answer a simple question. I normally don’t allow myself to become involved in such nonproductive detail, but in these two instances it became something of an obsessive challenge — kind of a voice-mail-hell version of road rage.

I couldn’t believe that there was no way to get through to a live person to answer my question. I became stubbornly intent on proving that I could figure out the maze of options ... and more options ... and still more options that AT&T techies had sadistically placed in my path. And that I could succeed in deciphering the secret code that would lead to an AT&T human being surfacing on the other end of the line.

When I need information, I don’t appreciate being led by the nose from one voice-mail maze to another by some robotic voice. Nor do I have the time or patience to listen to a recorded list of “frequently asked questions” (especially since I have never once heard a voice mail state, let alone answer, my specific question).
Above all, I don’t want that presumptuous robot on the other end of the line to continually encourage me to go to the company’s website to search for my answer. If I had the time or masochistic desire to click around on its website for an answer, I wouldn’t have called the company in the first place. The websites of some of America’s biggest corporation’s are so confusing and user-unfriendly that it makes you wonder if they weren’t designed by chimpanzees.

Believe it or not, I finally succeeded in getting someone on the line at AT&T, a very nice lady who wasn’t shy about explaining why I had had so much trouble getting through to a customer-service rep. After listening to my homily on why all high-level executives at AT&T should be executed without trial, she told me that the company was in the process of phasing out most of its employees. She further explained that she herself expected to be terminated soon, and that AT&T’s near-term goal was to save billions of dollars in salaries by forcing its customers to talk only to recorded messages.

Everything that goes around does, indeed, come around. Consciously or unconsciously, AT&T’s top brass made the pennywise, dollar-foolish decision to treat their customers with rude indifference. It saved the company untold millions in salaries, but, as a result, it also lost AT&T millions of customers.

Like all people, I have a natural tendency to resist change. IBM ... Xerox ... AT&T ... I grew up believing that people of substance dealt only with old-line companies. I was loyal to a fault. The problem was that none of those old-line companies felt any loyalty toward me. Not in the least. They had not the slightest interest in my wants, my needs, or my problems.

As AT&T’s customer service continued to devolve from hard to deal with ... to nearly impossible to deal with ... to completely impossible to deal with ... to an arrogant refusal to even allow a customer to speak with a live AT&T representative, I finally decided it was time to part ways and switch to another carrier. In the end, I was no different than any other consumer. We all want to
know only one thing: Which company will give us the best quality and service at the lowest price?

Every company has a mind-set toward its customers. The mind-set of many businesses is: “This is our policy. Take it or leave it.” When it comes to dealing with companies that harbor such an attitude, unless there’s a compelling reason to do otherwise, I almost always opt to leave it.

By contrast, the mind-set of companies that are winning the hearts and minds of both old and new customers is: “This is our normal policy, but we’ll find a way to work around it so we can satisfy your needs.” It’s amazing to me that so many companies still don’t get it when it comes to giving customer satisfaction a higher priority than company “policy.”

This is not just a phenomenon associated with giant corporations. It applies to small businesses and independent entrepreneurs as well. In Part II of this article, I’ll share a couple of examples with you in this genre — examples that I suspect will remind you of a number of similar experiences you have endured.
Customer Service Is a Mind-set, Part II

Some time ago, I was having lunch with a business associate at a fine restaurant. The food was superb, but when you pay eighty bucks for lunch for two people, you also expect great service. When the waitress brought our appetizers, I asked her to please give me some cracked pepper on my salad. Though she was pleasant, she responded with, “The cracked pepper is on the table.”

Being the peaceful, gentle soul I am, I let it go at that. But what I really felt like saying to her was, “What I meant was that I wanted you to put some cracked pepper on my salad. I don’t like to work for my food, especially when I’m paying $80 for it.”

About a month later, I checked into a fairly high-priced hotel in Los Angeles. Because I’m an ex-artillery man, wherever I go I tend to set things up as though I were going to be there for a long period of time. And when it comes to hotels, the first thing I do is call housekeeping and read off my standard list of requests.

One of those standards is two extra boxes of Kleenex. Being an efficiency aficionado, I always put one box on the nightstand next to my bed and another box on the desk. Why walk into the bathroom every time you want to blow your nose? Okay, so I’m strange. But so was Howard Hughes. (Hmm ... maybe not such a good example.)

No matter how much traveling you do, every trip brings with it one or more surprises that you’ve never had to deal with before. And so it was that when I called housekeeping and related my list of requests to the lady on the other end of the line, she responded with, “I can only give you one box of Kleenex.”

Out of morbid fascination, I asked her why. She explained that it was simply the hotel’s policy. She added, however, that after I used up the extra box of Kleenex,
she would be happy to have another box delivered to my room to replace it. How
kind of her. It was beginning to sound like a *Saturday Night Live* skit.

In truth, however, her absurd statements were a result of a contagious employee
disease known as “Make Up the Policy as You Go Along.” Trust me, there is no
hotel in the world that has a policy which states: “If a guest asks for two extra
boxes of Kleenex, tell him he can only have one at a time.”

I didn’t want to make Ms. Housekeeper’s illness any more serious than it already
was, so I simply said to her, “Not a problem. Just put your supervisor on the line
and I’ll place the order with her.” Remarkably, she immediately opted to change
her One-Extra-Box-of-Kleenex-Per-Guest Policy and leave her supervisor out of
our fascinating discussion.

“Offering” to speak with a supervisor about some petty issue is something that is
very easy to do and that produces quick results. However, in the final installment
of this article I’m going to explain why I am generally reluctant to fulfill what I
consider to be my moral obligation to tell business owners when I believe they
have a personnel or customer-service problem on their hands.

Hopefully, you aren’t the kind of business owner I will be referring to in the next
article. If you are, you may want to rethink your strategy when it comes to loyalty
to your employees versus loyalty to your customers.
Customer Service Is a Mind-set, Part III

For many years, I felt a moral obligation to inform business owners whenever I thought they had a personnel or customer-service problem on their hands. I say moral obligation, because I have always been grateful to customers — or anyone, for that matter — who have taken the time to clue me in on any aspect of my business which they felt was not up to par.

I use the past tense here because, sadly, I rarely volunteer my observations anymore. The inherent urge to be of help to a fellow entrepreneur or business owner still resides within me. The problem, however, is that too many business owners have demonstrated that they are neither interested in, nor serious about, receiving such feedback.

A few years ago, I was doing business with a public relations firm that assigned a seemingly intelligent young lady (“Ms. Snit”) to my account. Subsequent events showed that she had it all — negligence, laziness, incompetence, and a huge chip on her shoulder. Her purported job was public relations, but her entitlement mentality caused her to focus on her technical “duties” rather than on pleasing her company’s customers.

After enduring one abysmal experience after another with her, I finally decided to go to the trouble of writing a letter to the CEO of the company, a letter in which I detailed Ms. Snit’s myriad deficiencies and belligerent attitude. I subsequently spoke to him on the phone and emphasized that I would prefer he handle the matter in a general sort of way in order to avoid hard feelings. I specifically requested that he leave my name out of his discussion with her, given that I have an aversion to meat axes.

I suggested that he simply point out some areas of weakness where he felt Ms. Snit needed some improvement. He assured me that he wouldn’t even mention my name and that he would handle things “gingerly.” I guess we had differing
definitions of the word *gingerly*, because he not only told her straight out what I had said about her, he actually showed her my letter!

A short time later, I called Ms. Snit to inquire about an unrelated matter, whereupon she went into a tirade about how I had “defamed” her. In rare form, she demonstrated an uncanny knack for coming up with four-letter words that I didn’t even know existed. (It was okay, of course, because she did it gingerly.)

Needless to say, from that point on she went out of her way to make things difficult for me. Worse, having been allowed to get away with her outrageous behavior, it was a green light for her to continue to treat her company’s most valued assets (its customers) with glaring contempt.

About a year later, I hired an audio/video company to do some extensive work for me, and dealt primarily with the vice president of new business development. Notwithstanding his impressive title, he never once delivered work when he promised it to me. Worse, he was unresponsive to an extreme.

I finally got so fed up with the bad service I was getting that I thought I should let the owner know about it. Since he had been the one to personally solicit my business, I knew he would be concerned about the lack of follow-through on the part of one of his top people. Here again I emphasized to him that he should handle the problem gently (“gingerly” had been crossed off my list) since we were only about half way through my project and I had a lot of money invested in it.

Apparently, there was a wide disparity between our definitions of “gently.” Wham! Immediately after the owner of the company talked to him, the vice president of new business development called to let me know, in very harsh terms, that he didn’t appreciate my “going behind his back” to complain to his boss. I didn’t bother to remind him that on numerous occasions I had expressed my dissatisfaction directly to him, but it seemed not have had had any effect. Needless to say, working through the remainder of the project was a very uncomfortable undertaking for me.
Advice: If you’re a business owner, when a customer does you a favor by pointing out that one of your employees is not doing his job properly, don’t make the mistake of creating an employee-versus-customer battle. Be grateful to the customer, thank him for taking the time and trouble to tell you about his dissatisfaction, then approach the employee gingerly.

Meaning, tactfully point out the area or areas where you feel he needs some improvement, but leave the specific customer out of it. Why? For at least two reasons. First, because you can count on the employee’s having his own version of the story, and that version is almost certain to cast him as an innocent victim. Which means you then have a customer-employee debacle on your hands. Second, if you intend to have an ongoing relationship with the customer, the offending employee is likely to act in ways that will drive him away from you by exacting retribution for his “tattling” on him.

I believe that one of the reasons so many employers make this mistake is that they tend to be naive. By and large, anyone ambitious enough to go into business for himself is usually conscientious, competent, reliable, hardworking, and customer-oriented. Where the naivety comes into play is that such business owners also tend to assume, at least subconsciously, that their employees possess the same traits.

And, fortunately, many employees do — at least the ones who are focused on getting ahead in life. However, the employees who treat customers disrespectfully are most likely the same employees who excel at kissing up to their bosses. How do some employees manage to get away with this kind of charade throughout their careers? Sadly, I believe the egos of many business owners simply can’t resist the gushy verbiage of professional sycophants on their payroll. It makes them feel secure to know they are surrounded by a cadre of pit bulls who make great theater of protecting their bosses.

In fact, many bosses are addicted to the fabricated adulation of their employees. The unspoken understanding is that in exchange for treating the boss as if he were
the Pope, they can count on him to stand up for the guys and gals on “his team” at all costs. All of which sounds very noble, except for the reality that it’s simply not good business. An owner cannot serve his customers effectively if he is focused on not offending his employees.

I want to emphasize that making certain your employees are treating your customers with tender loving care does not prevent you from being respectful and loyal to those same employees. But your relationship with an employee should be based on how well he treats your most precious asset — your customers — rather than how well he treats you.

The corollary to this is that if you happen to be an employee, you should skip the sycophantism and focus your efforts on pleasing your company’s customers. You’ll get ahead much more quickly (provided you are in the right kind of company) by having customers tell your boss how great you are rather than by your continually telling the boss how great he is.

Finally, if you’re an independent entrepreneur, everything is in your lap, because you are both the employee and the employer. Without customers, you have nothing. Treat them like the valuable assets they are. The only rigid policy you should have is that the customer must be satisfied at any cost.

In fact, you should look at every customer complaint as an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with that customer. I’ve done this a thousand times in my career by not only apologizing and thanking the customer for letting me know about his dissatisfaction, but also by doing something special for him. Almost without fail, it results in your ending up with a more loyal customer than one who has never registered a complaint. In other words, view a customer’s complaint as an opportunity rather than a problem.

One last piece of advice that I feel is critical: Don’t ask customers to fill out evaluation forms unless you, personally, are prepared to read them. On at least two occasions that I can think of, I was about to fill out one of those “tell us how we’re doing” forms, because I thought the owner of the company would appreciate
knowing that someone in his organization was not performing up to par. The problem? In both cases, the form was to be returned to the very person I was having a problem with! As I said, many business owners are very naive.

If you own a business, or plan to own one some day, never — ever — make this mistake. If having your customers evaluate your products and services is really important to you, make sure that customer evaluation forms are sent directly to you. Otherwise, you’re tempting the employee who reads the forms to shred the ones that don’t please him.
Stop Worrying and Start Living

More than fifty years ago, the legendary Dale Carnegie wrote one of the biggest-selling motivational books of all time, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*. The book is a bit dated now, both in writing style and content, but many of the points Carnegie made are still applicable.

Carnegie focused a great deal on the acceptance of the inevitable as a key to eliminating stress and worry. Though I agree with him on this point to some extent, it’s a bit more complicated than he made it sound. The reason I say this is because what some people think of as inevitable, others see as a challenge that can be overcome.

For example, a person might believe that failure is inevitable for him and thus resign himself to an unsuccessful life. Unfortunately, this is precisely what millions of people do. Yet, the reality is that failure is not inevitable in anyone’s life, so it’s a terrible mistake to resign oneself to such a fate.

But what about things that really can’t be changed, such as blindness or quadriplegia? Ray Charles may have accepted his blindness, but he was able to overcome it and lead a meaningful, fulfilling life. In fact, he liked to say that he could “see” better than 99 percent of the people who aren’t blind. Ditto Christopher Reeve, Mattie Stepanek, and the thousands of others who have endured major physical handicaps, yet found the mental and physical strength to accomplish great things. In cases such as these, I believe Carnegie was absolutely right. By accepting the reality of their physical handicaps, these people were able to move on with their lives.

But this is where it gets tricky. While Christopher Reeve accepted the reality of his handicap, he never accepted it as a long-term (i.e., permanent) condition. He repeatedly made it clear that he believed he would ultimately walk again. Like
most people, I was rooting for him, but I didn’t believe it would ever happen. Unfortunately, stem-cell research had, and still has, a long way to go.

The challenge, then, is for us to be able to determine what is and is not inevitable. When I use the word inevitable, I think of it in the future tense — as something that has not yet happened. Carnegie, however, seemed to be referring to the inevitable in the present tense. (It’s already a fact of life, so learn to accept it.) Thus, I believe his oversimplification of the subject was a result of semantics.

Technically speaking, the only thing that is 100 percent certain to occur in the future is death. Frank Sinatra expressed his view of this certainty with typical candor when said, “You better enjoy livin’ baby, ’cause dying is a pain in the ass.” I wouldn’t compare Sinatra to Shakespeare from a linguistic standpoint, but in reality he summed up perfectly the solution to dealing with the inevitability of death: Become so focused on life that you don’t have time to think about what’s coming next. When you direct your energy away from the inevitability of death, it paves the way for focusing on constructive living. The least expensive medication for worry and stress is activity.

While death stands alone as the one fact of life that is truly inevitable, many other things are … shall we say … virtually inevitable. These include such things as taxes, future terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, and the periodic collapse of the real estate and stock markets. Yet, none of these “inevitabilities” deserve your stress or worry.

Take taxes, for example. Instead of worrying about them, you should do everything you can to legally keep your taxes to a minimum, file your tax returns in a timely fashion, and focus your mental and physical energy on making as much money as possible. You may not like being partners with the government, but the fact remains that the more money you make, the more money you net in absolute terms. Thus, worry and stress only detract from doing the things you need to do to help offset the inevitability of taxes.
Future terrorist attacks on U.S. soil? It’s a nasty fact of life and a legitimate concern. By all means, be prepared and take reasonable precautions to protect your family. Unlike taxes, however, it’s not just that worrying won’t help — rather, the chief aim of deranged Islamists is to make you worry and increase your stress.

A better idea is to go about living your life, just as the Israelis have learned to do in the face of the inevitability of homicide bombings. It also helps to keep terrorism in perspective. Remember, as horrific as 9/11 was, nearly fifteen times as many people die in automobile accidents every year than died in the four terrorist attacks on that fateful day.

As to real estate and stock-market crashes, the reality is that with or without government interference, they both occur periodically. They are necessary ingredients of capitalism, because they bring prices in line with reality. (With communism, of course, all markets are in a permanent state of collapse.) If you’re going to worry about your investments, don’t invest. Put your savings in tax-free bonds or hide your money under the mattress (unless you have a housekeeper, in which case you might want to bury it in the backyard).

So, yes, Dale Carnegie was right when he preached resignation of the inevitable — but just make certain you can differentiate between what’s inevitable and what is not. The reality is that most things can be overcome through a combination of (1) relentlessness, (2) an “expansive mental paradigm” that is open to new possibilities that people with a low level of awareness are not able to see, (3) the law of averages, and, above all, (4) being conscious of your connection to the Universal Power Source.

Number four is especially important, because, when you think about it, one cannot simultaneously be stressed and believe that he’s connected to an infinite source of power. Christians use the word “God” to refer to this infinite source of power; Muslims refer to it as “Allah”; Jews refer to it as “Elohim,” “Yahweh,” or “Jehovah”; and so on.
But what about an atheist? I agree with Viktor Frankl that there is not as much difference between an atheist and a religionist as we have been led to believe. Rational atheists agree that there is an infinite source of power that envelopes the universe. Actually, they have no choice, because the Hubble telescope project has scientifically proven that there is an invisible source of power in the universe greater than the gravitational pull of all matter in the universe combined. It’s just that an atheist doesn’t believe this source of power is conscious (i.e., that it intervenes in either earthly or universal events).

So, what it boils down to for an atheist is whether or not he believes he has the capacity to tap into this seemingly infinite power source and employ it to overcome obstacles and adversities in his life. If he believes he has this capacity, to worry over perceived problems is a contradiction. Stress is a clear indicator that a person is disconnected from the universe’s infinite source of power.

Any way you slice it, and whatever your spiritual beliefs may be, what it all boils down to is focusing on constructive thoughts that will better your existence and the existence of your loved ones. It’s okay to plan for the future, but worrying about the future gets in the way of sound planning.

And, above all, exerting mental energy to worry about the inevitable is illogical. If something is truly inevitable, there’s nothing you can do about it … and if there’s nothing you can do about it, what’s the point in worrying?

Just make certain that you don’t cavalierly apply the term inevitable to a situation that doesn’t warrant it. As I pointed out, very few things in life are inevitable, and only one — death — is 100 percent certain. And since, as Sinatra put it, death is “a pain in the ass,” who wants to spend time thinking about it?

A better idea is to invest your mental and physical energy in thinking about how to be the best parent you can possibly be, the best son or daughter you can possibly be, the best sibling you can possibly be, the best friend you can possibly be, the best employee or employer you can possibly be, and the best overall person you can possibly be. Which is a very tall order. But to the extent we fill that order on
a daily basis, that other little issue we worry so much about — financial success — somehow works itself out without our having to fret and stew about it.
Beware the DEL Lifestyle

_Time_ recently did another cover story on Bill Gates/Microsoft, but it wasn’t about the ongoing saga of the next version of Windows or some sexy new Microsoft acquisition. Rather, it was focused on the Microsoft monster that plans to devour not only your kids, but you. What I am referring to is the dreaded Xbox 360.

Dreaded by who? By Sony, maker of PlayStation 2, which presently controls 68 percent of the worldwide video-game market. And by Nintendo, maker of GameCube, which has dropped to third place with 15 percent of the global market. (Microsoft has already managed to grab a 17 percent share of this $25 billion global pie.)

But, most of all, the Xbox 360 should be dreaded by every parent who isn’t on crystal meth or groggy from watching too many episodes of _The Apprentice_ or _Desperate Housewives_. The Xbox 360 is the worst nightmare of every person who yearns for the good old days when people read serious books, engaged in meaningful dialog with informed individuals, and grew up playing outdoors all summer long.

The Xbox 360 is not a mere video-game machine, though it takes that world to a whole new level with high definition and Dolby 5.1 surround-sound. Microsoft is thinking way beyond video games. Xbox is a “multitalented, multitasking, multimedia machine.” Among other things, Xbox allows you to display pictures from your digital camera, cellphone, or computer.

The Xbox 360 is also a CD player and can play tunes from your iPod — plus, you can watch DVD movies on your Xbox 360. And through Microsoft’s video-gaming service, you can play games against other users via the Internet, talk to them using a headset, share music and photographs, send text and video messages, and video-conference with others.
Gates & Co.’s aim is not at all subtle. It is to take electronic control of the family room of every home in the civilized world. It doesn’t want to eat your lunch. As *Time* puts it, it wants to eat your CD player, your DVD player, and your telephone. It wants to talk to your iPod, your digital camera, your TV, your stereo, your PC, your credit card, and the Internet.

This strange new world that millions of people are entering is what Microsoft euphemistically refers to as “Digital Entertainment Lifestyle” (DEL). It’s the new millennium version of the “somas” Aldous Huxley described so vividly in his classic novel *Brave New World*. Huxley’s somas were the perfect drug, used by the carload not only to keep people in line, but to make them docile and happy in the process.

I can only imagine the lure of the DEL, because I’m one of those people who is very much imprisoned by that now mundane piece of equipment known as a personal computer. Thankfully, I use mine primarily for business purposes. I’ve never played a game on my computer, never entered a chat room, and wouldn’t think of downloading free gimmick software that brings along with it two terminal diseases, spyware and adware.

But even if you yourself are able to avoid the temptation of the DEL, the bigger challenge is how to keep your kids from becoming addicted to it. Preventing them from overdosing on this insidious designer soma is a battle you’re going to have to fight day in and day out lest your children lose all touch with reality.

I have a friend named Bert, a scientist/businessman who has secured about sixty patents and patents pending in the field of radio frequency. He’s one of the most brilliant, hi-tech people I have ever known. A few years ago, Bert started a company that specializes in automated meter reading (AMR), which involves a science known as telemetry. His technology allows a utility company to read and manipulate a customer’s meter from its offices. (By *manipulate*, I mean performing such tasks as turning the meter off if the customer doesn’t pay his bill.)
The reason I mention Bert here is that, notwithstanding his high-level wireless expertise, he considers it to be a colossal waste of time to surrender his energy to fiddling around with electronic gadgets. He’s not into DVD players or video games, he uses a small notebook and pen in lieu of a Blackberry to keep track of names and addresses, and he spends as little time as possible talking on his cellphone. And this is a man who makes his living in the world of wireless technology!

So why does Bert avoid the endless stream of wireless gadgets on the market? Because he sees them as time-wasting nuisances — distractions from the more important things in life. He also feels that, contrary to popular belief, most electronic gadgetry tends not only to make one’s life more complicated, but also less efficient.

The temptation of the DEL soma can become irresistible once you enter its lair, so think long and hard before doing so. You can manually control a television set, a DVD player, and a digital camera with no problem. But once you allow a video-game console to take control of such space-age devices, it’s only a matter of time until that same console takes control of you and your family as well.

If you’re like most people, your computer gotcha, your cellphone gotcha, your Blackberry gotcha, and your television set gotcha a long, long time ago. Can you really afford the time to be captive to an entire digital entertainment lifestyle? I doubt it. My advice to you is to tread lightly as the Xbox 360, along with its eat-all machine rivals from Sony and Nintendo, becomes a way of life for most lobotomized people.

The way I see it, every minute spent imprisoned in your DEL room is a minute not being spent on improving your mind, your body, your spirit, and your financial well-being. Digital gadgetry will never replace a good book, a good conversation, or a good physical workout. And it certainly will never replace a good, stable family life.
Focusing on Your Burger

Ray Kroc, founder of McDonald’s, never grew tired of preaching to his executives that McDonald’s was, first and foremost, in the hamburger business. While it was somewhat of a necessity for the company to expand its menu to include non-hamburger sandwiches and other items such as salads and ice cream, Kroc intuitively understood that a company should never lose sight of its main business.

Which brings me to Microsoft and the Digital Entertainment Lifestyle (DEL) wars that I recently wrote about. The combination of Microsoft’s $34 billion in excess cash coupled with Bill Gates’ brain, business acumen, marketing genius, and killer instinct makes it hard to bet against the company, even if it decided to go into the hot dog business. But the problem with Microsoft’s participation in the video-game wars is that it appears that Gates’ skills are being bypassed.

Shockingly, he has turned the project over to a younger generation of executives who seem to have somehow convinced Gates that he isn’t hip enough to be closely involved in the Xbox 360 project. If they’re right — and I seriously doubt they are — Gates should pull Microsoft out of the video-game business rather than allow others to call the shots. I recall Donald Trump once saying that the day he’s not interested or motivated enough to carefully review and challenge a $10,000 invoice, he’ll get out of the real estate business.

Apparently, a group of video-game whiz-kid executives at Microsoft has sold Gates on the notion that he’s simply too old to understand the dynamics of the video-game business. And certainly not tuned in enough to be able to understand their larger vision of the DEL. If so, then there’s a real question as to whether Microsoft should even be involved in this strange new digital world.

It all gets back to Ray Kroc’s focus on making the best hamburger you can possibly make. While Microsoft has a bundle tied up in its Xbox venture, its core
business is being attacked by a whole new wave of hi-tech upstarts, particularly an enigmatic new force known to all as “Google.”

Microsoft has never been known for its innovation. Gates’ philosophy has always been that it’s cheaper to buy than to innovate. It’s even cheaper to crush your competitors, and many industry observers believe that the real key to Microsoft’s success is that it has mastered the art of doing just that. Either way, we’ve all watched in awe as Microsoft surpassed (and virtually destroyed) Lotus 1-2-3 with Excel, WordPerfect with Word, and Netscape with Internet Explorer.

So, it would appear that the next logical step for Microsoft is the search-engine business, which these days is pretty much synonymous with Google. Google, however, presents a very different challenge than any of the companies Microsoft has previously annihilated. It seems like only a few months ago that Steve Ballmer, CEO of Microsoft, was predicting that his Darth Vader staff would catch, then surpass, Google in the search-engine race. Now it’s beginning to resemble a game of Pac-Man, with Google showing ominous and accelerating signs of going after Microsoft’s key business — software.

At present, of course, Google’s most famous piece of software is its search engine, which allows a user to not only search the Internet, but his desktop as well. Google’s e-mail software, Gmail, allows a user to store two gigabytes of e-mail (versus Microsoft’s Hotmail with only 250 megabytes of storage).

Further, Google’s Picassa photo software gives users the capacity to manage, edit, and send digital photographs. And Google’s blogger is perhaps the most threatening, because it allows a user to create, place on the Internet, and print formatted documents without using any Microsoft software — virtual heresy in Microsoft’s monopolistic view of the world.

Gates, who is a big believer in the efficacy of paranoia, is concerned that Google is gaining the knowledge to produce its own operating-system platform as an alternative to Windows. In fact, he is quoted as saying, “…they are more like us than anyone else we have ever competed with.”
Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page deny any intent to develop an operating system, but Gates remains concerned. The exodus of top talent from Microsoft to Google is one very good reason why Microsoft shouldn’t be fooling around in the video-game business. Instead, it should be sharply focused on improving its main line of products.

You don’t need to lose sleep worrying about the competition if your products are clearly superior. Which gets to the very heart of Microsoft’s problem. Most industry sources agree that the majority of Microsoft’s key products are not, and never have been, superior to those of its competitors. As much as I admire Microsoft as a company, my complaints about its software are many. As a proficient Microsoft Word user, I could easily come up with a long list of annoying items in this all-important program that should have been fixed years ago.

If Gates himself took charge of the DEL project, it would be hard to bet against him. But at what cost victory — Microsoft’s losing its operating-system monopoly and the commanding market shares that its other key software products enjoy?

I don’t expect Gates to take my advice, but .. hey … he has a fairly decent track record without any input from me. On the other hand — no offense meant — but I seriously doubt that you have Gates’ brainpower, money, talent, or killer instinct. That being the case, allow me to suggest that your odds of long-term success are much better if you place your bet on Ray Kroc’s philosophy of focusing on your primary business. Never lose sight of what your main product is, because that is your hamburger. It’s what people think of when they see your name.

Take your eye off your hamburger, and you’re inviting the competition to eat it — for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And if that’s doesn’t satisfy them, they may just have it for a late snack as well.
A Tsunami of B.S.

Are you ever irritated by what people say and do? By things you see and hear on television? By unpleasant situations you have to put with on a daily basis?

Guess what? You have a lot of company. In fact, a number of books have been written on the subject, including a little sixty-seven pager titled *On Bullshit*, written by Harry Frankfurt, a former philosophy professor at Princeton University. Another popular tome on this all-too-familiar topic is titled *Your Call Is Important to Us: The Truth about Bullshit*, by Laura Penny.

Professor Frankfurt’s book is not meant to be a spoof. Though it contains some humor, he is deadly serious about his viewpoint on the cultural phenomenon people fondly refer to as “bullshit.” Frankfurt explains that the person who engages in this national pastime “does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.”

But enough of this vulgarity. In the name of civility, from this point on I will use the more respectable term “B.S.” It doesn’t have quite the same laser-like clarity as the longer version, but it goes down much easier. (There I go again with my bad word choices.)

Even mainstream *60 Minutes* recently did a show on B.S. in which Morley Safer interviewed none other than Professor Frankfurt. Many examples of blatant B.S. were presented to the viewer. Two of the better ones were Bill Clinton’s looking into the camera and spewing out those now classic zingers, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman” and “That depends upon what the meaning of *is* is.”

But let’s be fair and balanced here. Remember Richard Nixon looking into the camera and saying, “I’m no crook”? What a refreshing revelation to hear from the president of the United States. I’ve never been able to figure out why he chose to
use the very word that everyone was already thinking. He should have put it in a more positive light and said something like, “I’m an honorable man.” Which still would have been B.S., but if you’re going to B.S., why not do it in a positive way?

B.S. is certainly not restricted to politicians. In fact, most of what you see on television is B.S. Take Oprah, for example — please, take her! To suggest that Oprah is not on a par with Mother Teresa is considered heresy … even unpatriotic. Oprah gives new meaning to the term sacred cow.

And how about Paris Hilton, who has become rich(er) and famous just for being a bimbo with chutzpah? Or O.J. Simpson’s acquittal? Or the droning acceptance speeches at the Oscars? Then, of course, there’s television advertising, 99 percent (make that 99.99 percent) of which is B.S. Unlike beer and car commercials, the hard-sell pitches of QVC and Home Shopping Network actually get results, but they are based primarily on large doses of B.S.

Of course, if you didn’t already know everything I’ve just said about television, you probably think Katie Couric is a sweet young lady, The Apprentice is real life, and David Letterman is a comedic genius.

What about sports? Where do I begin? Clowns like Terrell Owens who strut around like turkeys on cocaine after achieving the incredible feat of catching a first-down pass … Tom Jackson slobbering all over Chris Berman as he obligatorily refers to him as “Boomer” … Mark McGwire doing his version of “That depends upon what the meaning of is is” when testifying before Congress … the Mike Tyson soap opera that is almost certain to continue even after he really does fight his last fight … and on and on goes the never-ending wave of B.S.

But it’s the B.S. in our own little worlds that is the most annoying and most difficult to ignore. For example, I’ve personally had dealings with three people over the years who used the title “Dr.” in front of their names, yet none of them ever graduated from college. In fact, two of them never even attended college!
One died at the age of eighty-five before the general public discovered that the
doctorate he had carried through life was nothing more than B.S. Another was
found out only as a result of his multimillion-dollar company’s bankruptcy.
Amazingly, he was never even indicted, let alone convicted. Apparently numbed
by a lifetime of dealing with B.S., the judge in his bankruptcy case, his creditors,
and the prosecuting attorney seemed perfectly willing to dismiss his fraudulent
title as “business as usual.”

The third “Dr.,” however, wins the prize. After nearly forty years, not only is he
still “practicing,” he is widely admired as a world-renowned psychologist.
Incredible as it may sound, from time to time he still appears on radio and
television shows to offer his “expert” opinion on psychological matters. The
reason I know for a fact that this charlatan has never received a degree in
psychology is because many years ago I had a business reason for having him
thoroughly checked out. A short summary of the report that came back was that
his doctorate degree, his reputation for being on the cutting edge of great
breakthroughs in the field of psychology, and his fame were all pure,
unaltered B.S.

And what about the mundane, day-in-day-out B.S. that everyone has to put up
with — airport security personnel who take fifteen minutes to search an eighty-
year-old woman’s purse, apparently believing she fits the classic profile of a
terrorist … six kids behind an ice cream counter, gabbing with each other while
ignoring a line of twenty-five customers who are growing increasingly irate …
voice mail options that large companies put you through when all you want is a
quick answer to a simple question.

Then there’s the business world, where B.S. is perpetually out of control. I hear
enough B.S. from people I come in contact with every week to last a lifetime.
Most of the people you deal with promise short and deliver long. They overstate
their figures. They spin the facts.
But perhaps the biggest business B.S. of all is the guy who finally gets around to calling you back three weeks (or months!) after you’ve left two messages for him, and opens by saying, “I apologize for not returning your call sooner, but I’ve been up to my ears in work.” He’s so mesmerized by his own B.S. that he doesn’t realize his words are an insult to you. The implied assumption is that you aren’t busy, and that you have nothing better to do than lounge around and wait for his call. B.S.

So the question is, how do we protect ourselves from drowning in the tsunami of B.S. that relentlessly comes at us each day? I believe the first step is to make a sincere and ongoing effort to curb your own B.S. Knowingly or unknowingly, we’re all guilty of slinging a bit of B.S. from time to time, but that doesn’t mean you have to make a religion out of it.

Second, be vigilant about steering clear of those people who demonstrate they have mastered the art of B.S. Pay more attention to what people do and less attention to what they say. Sycophants, in particular, are people who excel at B.S. Simple observation makes it fairly easy to discover that there is often a wide disparity between a sycophant’s flowery words and his anemic follow-through.

Third, learn to translate. In Hollywood, people love to say things like, “Let’s do lunch.” Which usually means, “Don’t call me, I’ll call you.” Or the seller who tells a real estate broker, “Trust me. I’ll take care of you.” (If you’ve read To Be or Not to Be Intimidated? you know all about this one.) Or Legalman’s assuring you, “I’m not one of those deal-killing attorneys, so you can relax.” To borrow from Mario Puzo, this is your cue to go in with a gun and mask to make sure you get what’s coming to you.

And, of course, there’s the B.S. line that has become part of the lexicon of the comedic world: “The check is in the mail.” All too often, what this really means is, “I’m going to mail your check today.” Or, worse, it may just be the person’s way of saying, “Get lost.”
Finally, if you really want to protect yourself from the ravaging effects of the B.S. tsunami that perpetually threatens to drown you, depend on no one … and on no one particular deal. The best way to accomplish this is to strive to become as independent as possible. Recognize that the best answer to your problems is in the mirror. Which means taking matters into your own hands and not expecting anything of anyone. And the only way that can happen is if you refuse to allow the guy in the mirror to B.S. you.

Oh … and one last word of caution: As you walk away from your mirror, be very careful not to accidentally step in anything.
A Turn in the Road

I believe in free will and in man’s capacity to rise above adversity. I believe in accountability. I believe in the basic virtues upon which Western civilization has been built.

But I also believe that people sometimes take a wrong turn in the road — perhaps inadvertently or maybe as a result of an ill-advised impulse — then discover that they can’t find their way back. There can be many causes for making that wrong turn — teenage pregnancy, the loss of a loved one, disappointment over not landing an anticipated promotion, lack of social acceptance, or failure in an area such as sports, academics, or family.

Whatever the cause may be, we know that some people give up on life and turn to alcohol and drugs, become bitter recluses, or even resort to suicide. Then there are others who, after experiencing everything from a poverty-stricken background to racism … to the loss of an entire family … to financial catastrophe, fight back and succeed against all odds.

What we don’t know is why one person is motivated to take a turn in the road that leads to a happy, fulfilling life, while another chooses a turn that leads to self-destruction and misery. Is it genetics over which we have no control? Is it inevitability dictated by a Universal Power Source (“God,” “Allah,” “Supreme Being,” etc.) or a random universe?

The truth of the matter is that we simply don’t know. Years ago at a seminar in Sydney, Australia, Jim Rohn, in talking about how easy it is to become irritated by individuals who are nasty to you, suggested that you have to learn to “meet people in the hurt.” Everyone who has children can relate to this, because kids experience so much pain growing up. What they have to go through as adolescents and teenagers borders on cruel and unusual punishment.
The good news is that most of them survive and go on to lead normal lives. The bad news is that millions of them never find their way back to the main road and end up on drugs, alcohol, or both. They end up in abusive marriages. They end up homeless. And, yes, many end up dead at an early age.

Whenever I cross paths with a street beggar, I find myself wondering what happened in this person’s life that brought him to such a wretched state? What was the wrong turn he took, why did he take it, and when? I began giving money to street beggars at a relatively young age. I especially made it a point to give to them when I was struggling in my own life, because I would think to myself (and still do), “There but for the grace of God go I.”

People have often chastised me for giving money to “human blight” who appear unwilling to try to help themselves. But I am motivated to do so by the lingering question: “What is it that happened in this person’s life that brought him to the point where he has lost the sinew to fight for his existence?”

It’s easy to say that a person should stand up and do whatever it takes to overcome his plight. But that begs the question, Why doesn’t he do it? Is it a genetic issue? Is it willed by a Higher Being for reasons we do not understand? If he’s “lazy,” why is he lazy? Is there not something mentally wrong (by “normal” standards) with both a schizophrenic and a person who cannot muster the energy to fight for his life? If a person’s brain does not work in such a way that he is determined to rise above his dismal circumstances, is he not just as “crazy” as a schizophrenic?

Let me make it clear that I’m not on a crusade to help the poor. On the contrary, I am a staunch believer that people who rail on endlessly about the injustice of the growing gap between the rich and poor almost always do more harm than good. As Nobel Prize novelist and poet Anatole France so rightly pointed out, “Those who have given themselves the most concern about the happiness of peoples have made their neighbors very miserable.”

Having said this, let’s take a look at the other side of society — the high end. Every time I see Michael Jackson on television, I wonder to myself, “What has
made this man-child so miserable?” As late as the mid eighties, he was a very handsome young man with talent unlike anything anyone had ever before witnessed. Yet, he made a conscious choice to destroy his incredibly good looks and turn himself into a freak. Why did he choose to start dressing like a clown and talking like a little girl?

When I look at Michael Jackson, I see nothing but pain behind the choreographed scene of bodyguards, umbrellas, victory signs to his fans, and jaw-dropping babble about cookies and milk. Whether Jackson is eventually successful in resurrecting his career in Europe and Asia, it won’t matter. He will still be miserable. You can bank on that. In fact, I would guess that his acquittal on child molestation charges only emboldened him to take his attention-getting weirdness to a new level.

I feel the same way whenever I see Liza Minnelli on television, making yet another slurring announcement that she is now clean of alcohol and drugs. Or that she has finally found the love of her life, and they are going to live happily ever after. Of course, any casual Hollywood observer simply translates this to mean that her new marriage is going to last three-to-twelve months. But even professional Hollywood watchers would never have guessed that the most recent love of her life would end up suing her for spousal abuse.

The really sad thing is that I can remember Liza’s mom, Judy Garland, in her last appearance on *The Tonight Show*. It didn’t take a doctor to figure out that Garland was either dead drunk, on hard drugs, or both. With all her fame and money, I recall feeling genuinely embarrassed for this multitalented woman. All her singing, dancing, and acting ability seemed to yield nothing but misery for her. With such a role model, it would have been a miracle if Liza Minnelli had grown up to be normal.

But when I think about meeting people in the hurt, Mike Tyson is the celebrity who most often comes to mind. Many people have a strong dislike for this hoodlum-turned-famous centimillionaire … turned felon … turned bankrupt … turned all-around broken man. But if you listen carefully to Tyson’s words, you
can feel the pain radiating from him. As a youngster growing up in Brooklyn, he knew no other life but that of a street thug. His wrong turn came at a very young age.

What Tyson has in common with untold millions of street people, drug addicts, the depressed, and individuals who just can’t seem to win their battles against depression and misery is that he made a wrong turn in the road very early in life. But what’s interesting is that, unlike a George Foreman, subsequent fame and fortune couldn’t seem to turn him in the right direction.

Tyson also has something in common with the Michael Jacksons, Liza Minnells, Elizabeth Taylors, Angelina Jolies, and other loose-screw celebrities whose lives have become too-good-to-pass-up monologue material for the likes of Jay Leno, David Letterman, and other late-night talk-show hosts. The nonmedical term for this problem is: too much money, too fast, too easy.

Richard Bach poetically summed it up in The Bridge Across Forever when he warned, “To be handed a lot of money is to be handed a glass sword, blade-first. Best handle it very carefully, sir, very slowly while you puzzle what it’s for.” The truth of his statement has been evident throughout history, which has repeatedly demonstrated that captains and kings can be as miserable as the most poverty-stricken among us. A good lesson to draw from all this is that it’s a mistake to spend your life yearning only for money. It’s far better to seek the path leading to personal improvement and a meaningful, fulfilling life.

I have neither admiration nor respect for any of the people I’ve mentioned in this article, but I do feel their pain when I see them on television or read about them. I’m no Mother Teresa, so I do not have the desire to help them. In fact, if they even knew I existed, they would scoff at the idea that I have sympathy for them.

But with a guy sitting on a sidewalk and begging for a few coins, it’s different. He wants my help; he wants your help. Not help in getting sober, cleaning himself up, landing a job, or bettering his life. Forget all that. It’s not going to happen —
not with my help, not with your help, not with the help of professional do-gooders, and certainly not with government help.

Nevertheless, I feel a compulsion to meet that street person in the hurt, which is why I usually go out of my way to give him a dollar or so. I know he’s going to spend it on cheap wine or drugs, but I don’t care. What I care about is that the meager sum I hand him will give him some instant gratification, something that I fight against with a passion in my own life. The difference is that the street person has no life. When someone is dying of cancer, you give him instant gratification in the form of morphine. It’s the same with a street person and his desire for drugs and alcohol.

I don’t give out of guilt. I give because I know that this person is going to live out the remainder of his relatively short lifespan enduring a kind of pain that is incomprehensible to you and me. I give because I know that but for the grace of God, there go I. Something human inside me senses this and makes me want to meet him in the hurt, if only for a moment.

I know that something, somewhere along the line, caused this pitiful soul to take a wrong turn in the road. And something genetic or environmental has kept him from rising up and fighting the good fight. Something has totally defeated him, something that will forever remain a mystery to the thousands of people who pass by him each day.

What I have said in this article is not an appeal for you to follow my lead. What you do in your life, and with your life, is strictly your business. But what I do hope you take away from this article is an increased capacity to keep your own problems in perspective — and to recognize just how fortunate you are that you haven’t taken that wrong turn in the road. Whenever I come across a street beggar, it’s a reminder to me of how minor my problems are compared to the problems of those who have permanently lost their way on this side of the secular/nonsecular divide.
Above all, I hope my words remind you just how important it is to make the effort to at least meet your friends and loved ones in the hurt, particularly your children. Love and understanding could very well be the difference between a child’s becoming an honor student and going on to a stellar career at a top university and beyond ... or evolving into an angry kid in a black trench coat whose life ends in tragedy.
The Real Enemy

The worldwide medical establishment has long been known for its vigilance in defending the status quo against maverick truth messengers. One of the earliest truth messengers to feel the sting of the American Medical Association’s (AMA) attacks was Dr. Max Gerson. Gerson attended the Universities of Breslau, Wurzburg, Berlin, and Freiburg from 1901 to 1906. He then served as an intern at a number of hospitals and clinics throughout Germany.

In 1910, Dr. Gerson, who had suffered from severe migraine headaches for years, came across a book written by an Italian doctor who claimed that some migraine headaches could be relieved by a milk diet, while others could be relieved by a fresh-fruit-and-vegetable diet. Gerson first tried the milk diet, but without success. He then put himself on the fruit-and-vegetable diet, with an emphasis on apples, both raw and cooked. In a short period of time, his migraines disappeared. He further experimented by adding salt and a variety of other substances to the fruits and vegetables, only to find that his migraines returned very quickly, sometimes within a half-hour.

After serving in World War I, Dr. Gerson set up practice in Bielefeld, Germany as an internist and specialist in nervous diseases. Expanding his experimentation with diet, he claimed to be successful in curing 446 out of 450 supposedly incurable cases of lupus (an autoimmune disorder characterized by skin lesions).

For his work in this area, Dr. Gerson was hopeful that he might earn the Nobel Prize for Medicine. To his disbelief, instead he was challenged by the German medical establishment and hauled into court. The charge was that he was not a specialist in skin disorders, and therefore his work in this area was in violation of the German medical code.

After having similar success with “incurable” tuberculosis, he again was challenged by the establishment medical community. Unfortunately, before he
was able to prove that his natural diet therapy did, in fact, cure tuberculosis, Dr. Gerson, who was Jewish, had to flee his homeland because of the increasingly dangerous political situation.

After his escape from Germany, Dr. Gerson lived in Vienna and then moved to Ville d’Avray near Paris to become chief of staff of a sanatorium. Finally, after a short stay in England, he emigrated to the United States. In New York, at age fifty-five, Dr. Gerson had to go to school with first and second graders to learn how to speak English, a prerequisite for his earning a medical license.

He finally received his license to practice medicine in January 1936 after passing the New York State Board examination. After setting up practice in New York City, he continued his diet experiments with incurable arthritis and cancer patients. His success rate was astonishing even to him, but it made the medical establishment very uneasy.

On July 3, 1946, Dr. Gerson demonstrated his healing techniques before a U.S. Senate subcommittee headed by Senator Claude Pepper, bringing with him five cancer patients whom he had cured with his organic fruit-and-vegetable therapy. To put it mildly, the AMA went berserk.

In its November 16, 1946 edition, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* stated, “Fortunately for the American people, this presentation received little, if any, newspaper publicity.” Later, in its January 8, 1949 edition, the same publication declared, “There is no scientific evidence whatsoever to indicate that modifications in the dietary intake of food or other nutritional essentials are of any specific value in the control of cancer.”

The AMA pressured hospitals, laboratories, and other doctors not to do business with Dr. Gerson. This made it difficult for him to document his work, because he was prevented from bringing his patients to established medical facilities for testing.
The final blow, however, was when Dr. Gerson was invited to be a guest on a radio talk show hosted by the popular Long John Nebel. The show lasted for several hours, and the public’s response was overwhelming. The result? The radio network was threatened by the AMA, and Nebel was fired the next day.

Finally, on March 8, 1959, after years of harassment from the AMA and other segments of the establishment medical community, Dr. Max Gerson, the ultimate medical messenger, died of pneumonia. In reflecting on Dr. Gerson’s work, Albert Schweitzer, the renowned doctor and humanitarian who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 (and whose wife Gerson had cured of tuberculosis) said, “I see in him one of the most eminent medical geniuses in the history of medicine. ... Unfortunately, he could not engage in scientific research or teach; and he was greatly impeded by adverse political conditions.

“In ordinary times he would have been able to expound his ideas for many years as a professor at one of the important German universities; would have taught pupils who could carry on his research and teachings; would have found recognition and encouragement. ... All this was denied him.

“His was the hard lot of searching and working as an uprooted immigrant, to be challenged and stand as a fighter. We who knew and understood him admired him for working his way out of discouragement again and again, and for undertaking to conquer the obstacles.”

Dr. Gerson was the most hated kind of messenger, because the message he delivered threatened not only the incomes of doctors, but also of hospitals, clinics, and those involved in the manufacture and sale of pharmaceuticals and surgical equipment. After all, if people could stay healthy by eating the right foods, where would the medical community get its patients? Which is why, long after the silencing of Dr. Gerson, corporate giants in the dairy, beef, tobacco, and pharmaceutical industries, along with the American Medical Association, continued to shoot down one medical messenger after another in an effort to repress the hated, profit-killing truth.
Today, of course, every halfway intelligent, rational person recognizes that alcohol, drugs, and foods loaded with saturated fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar are the very things that lead to diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and cancer. The importance of a natural diet for the prevention, and even cure, of most diseases is now pretty well accepted, thanks to modern medical messengers such as Dr. Andrew Weil and Dr. Roy Walford, who have the luxury of being able to stand on the shoulders of giants like Dr. Gerson.

Thus, the problem is no longer a lack of knowledge. The relationship between what a person eats and his health and longevity is well known to all. The real problem, particularly in America, is the renunciation of self-discipline and the addiction to instant gratification on the part of the general public.

This is graphically demonstrated every time another obese woman appears on television, sobbing and telling the world that it’s not her fault that she vacuums down two Big Macs, a large order of fries, and a milkshake every morning at 10:00 a.m. It’s because “McDonald’s makes it look so good in its ads.” In other words, the devil (or the clown?) made her do it.

The reality, of course, is that the only thing the devil made her do was file a frivolous lawsuit, and the devil I’m referring to is usually sitting right next to her on the talk show where she’s venting and lamenting. And that devil isn’t Ronald McDonald. He’s a money-grubbing humanoid we have all come to lovingly refer to as “personal injury attorney.”

Of course, all these frivolous lawsuits will ultimately be lost, because lethal food doesn’t kill people any more than guns do. Sorry, gun-control advocates, but the reality is that it’s people who kill people (and sometimes themselves). And they sometimes do it with ropes, knives, lead pipes, and even their own hands.

And it’s the same with food. Fast-food can’t kill you unless you choose to eat it. If the object is to kill as many Americans as possible, Al Qaeda is not the enemy we need to worry about. Nor is it the fast-food killing machines that try to make deep-fried food look so delectable. The real enemy is our own lack of self-
discipline, which, along with self-delusion, is the number-one killer on earth. These two culprits are not only killers in the absolute sense, they can also kill a person, figuratively speaking, in many other ways — including financially, spiritually, and emotionally.

To end on a high note, the good news is that, as a human being, you have the capacity to choose to employ self-discipline and think and act in a rational manner. And you can be certain that the results of self-discipline and rational action are a lot more fun than crying, playing the role of victim, and disrobing yourself in front of millions of people on Oprah.
“Time is money” has become something of an axiom. And though I believe virtually everyone agrees that it’s a truism, I’m also convinced that most people pay only lip service to it. If you’re really serious about the proposition that time is money, you need to come to grips with the reality that the key ingredient for converting time into money is self-discipline.

As an author, I’ve evolved into such a self-discipline addict that for years I’ve actually worked on trying to ease up a bit and move more toward the center. I took self-discipline to such an extreme that I actually reached a point of diminishing returns.

If you feel you have problems with your self-discipline, I’ll share something with you that will give you hope. Throughout my teen years and most of my twenties, I was instant-gratification oriented to an extreme. I was self-disciplined in some areas, such as my career as a real estate broker, and I relentlessly followed through on deals until they were closed. But in most other areas of my life, I displayed a shameful lack of self-discipline.

I believe the greatest catalyst for an undisciplined person is pain, which comes in a wide variety of packages. The most obvious example is physical pain, which can be the catalyst for becoming self-disciplined when it comes to exercise and healthy eating. Financial pain can be the catalyst for having the self-discipline to work when you’re tired or sick, or when you’d rather be out having fun with everyone else. And then there’s the pain that comes from a lost love, which can be the catalyst that gives you the self-discipline to put forth the effort to be a better partner when love comes your way again.

If pain does not motivate a person to become more self-disciplined, the outlook for his future is grim, at best. In the most extreme cases, a lack of self-discipline can lead to homelessness and/or premature death.
Years ago, when I was still single, I became good friends with a professional football player (“Bill”) who had gained a good deal of national prominence for his stellar play in the National Football League. He not only was a phenomenal athlete, he was handsome, had great verbal skills, and possessed extraordinary talents in many other areas outside of sports. Above all, he was extremely intelligent.

My friendship with Bill began when he approached me at the health club we both belonged to and introduced himself. He told me that my first book, *Winning through Intimidation*, had become his “bible,” and expressed how much he admired me. Obviously, I was flattered.

Early in our friendship, I learned that Bill had been working on a novel for a couple of years, but was having trouble completing it. And as I got to know him over the next three years, the reason for this became transparent. Notwithstanding everything he had going for him, he was totally lacking in one important area of success: self-discipline. While I admit that this was a stage in my life when I was attracted to the proposition of having a good time, I never allowed that attraction to get in the way of my work.

I would normally go to bed between 8:30 and 9:00 p.m., get up around 4:30 a.m., jog a few miles (sometimes starting out in the dark), and be at my Selectric typewriter by 8:00 a.m. or so. As a result, over the three-year period that I was friends with Bill, I managed to write two more books, both of them bestsellers.

Under tremendous time pressure, I did about twenty-five drafts of each book, and always succeeded in meeting my deadlines. In addition, I undertook a number of speaking engagements and traveled nationwide as a frequent guest on radio and television shows.

Through it all, Bill was constantly urging me to go to one party or another or go out on the town with him and “live it up.” And I was constantly telling him I had to work. As a result, he often chided me with such statements as, “C’mon, don’t be a party pooper. Lighten up. You’ve got to let it all hang out sometimes.”
The result was that during this three-year period, while I was finishing two more books that laid the foundation for my career, Bill spent his non-partying time moaning and groaning about changing the plot of his novel, endlessly reorganizing his material, and tinkering with — of all things — the title. To me, these appeared to be nothing more than self-delusive stalling tactics to avoid the gut-wrenching work of following through and actually bringing his book to completion.

Which means he missed his window of opportunity, because, as everyone knows, fame is fleeting. While he was playing in the NFL, it would have been the easiest thing in the world for him to find a major publisher for his book. When you get your shot in life, you have to take it. The door closes very quickly once you’re out of the limelight.

When I look back on my relationship with Bill, there were two defining moments for me. The first occurred during my stretch drive for one of my books, when I was putting in fourteen-to-sixteen-hour workdays, seven days a week. I vividly recall Bill looking very frustrated after one of my refusals to party with him, and saying to me, in a discouraged tone, “How could I ever compete with someone as self-disciplined as you? You would just wear me down through attrition, because you’re so damn relentless.” It was almost as though he were saying, “It’s not fair.”

It struck me how bizarre it was that this famous, brilliant, multitalented person was telling me that he couldn’t compete with me. Ridiculous, of course. The truth of the matter is that he could have written two or three bestselling novels in the time that I knew him. In fact, with 100 percent effort, he could have beaten me at just about anything.

In addition, with the slightest bit of initiative and persistence, he would have had a good shot at an acting or broadcasting career. Doors were open to him that certainly were not open to me. But the fact is that he made a choice. Specifically, he chose instant, daily, and (worse) nightly gratification over huge benefits down the road. (Interestingly, before, during, and after this three-year period, I found
the time to vacation in Hawaii for periods ranging from ten days to several weeks — but I never went until the major project I was working on was 100 percent completed.)

Maybe Bill was just lazy, right? Sorry, not a valid excuse, because the truth of the matter is that most of us are lazy at heart. In fact, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that most successful people are lazy and become self-disciplined out of necessity (as in pain avoidance).

The second defining moment in my relationship with Bill was when he told me that he had developed a great ability for bluffing his way through practice after a hard night out on the town. He said he had mastered the art of going through the motions in such a way that it appeared to the coaches that he was practicing at full throttle.

Unfortunately, Bill carried that same attitude into his aborted writing career and life beyond football. In my view, it’s the primary reason he’s not ensconced in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, where others with less talent but far more self-discipline will be forever on display.

Self-discipline is about restraining, or regulating, one’s actions — repressing the instinct to act impulsively in favor of taking rational actions that are long-term oriented. My short-lived friendship with Bill was immensely beneficial to me, because it made me realize that self-discipline — a single trait that every human being has the capacity to develop — gave me the power to outperform people who are far more intelligent and talented than I am.
Will Durant is best known for his eleven-volume masterpiece *The Story of Civilization*, which took an unfathomable fifty years to complete. The last several volumes of this immense project were done in collaboration with his wife Ariel. But throughout his long life, Durant somehow found the time to write a number of other, shorter books, including his first literary work, *The Story of Philosophy*, published in 1926.

Durant died in 1981 at age ninety-six. But John Little, founder and director of Will Durant On-Line, produced yet another Durant book more than twenty years after Durant’s death. Just over a hundred pages in length, the title of this little gem is *The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time*. Though compiled and edited by Little, the words are Durant’s. The enormous amount of information condensed into so few pages is a remarkable feat.

For purposes of this article, my focus will be on just one of Durant’s subjects — progress — which is discussed in Chapter 5, “The Ten ‘Peaks’ of Human Progress.” What, exactly, is progress? After a great deal of written reflection, Durant defined it as “increasing control of the environment by life.” He also referred to progress as “the domination of chaos by mind and purpose, of matter by form or will.”

Durant listed, in the following order, what he believed to be the most important developments of man’s “climb from savage to scientist,” which I would refer to as “macro progress.”

1. **Speech.** Without words, noted Durant, there would be no philosophy, poetry, history, or prose. Indeed, thought, at its highest level, would not exist.
2. **Fire.** Fire is the phenomenon that made tool-making possible, as well as cooking, the ability to see clearly at night, and protection from climatic conditions.

3. **The conquest of animals.** Durant reminded us that even though “animals are now our playthings (as in Fido and Seabiscuit) and our helpless food (as in red meat and dairy products),” there was a time when odds makers would not have been all that certain that man’s brain would ultimately triumph over the brawn of beasts. I guess we’re fortunate that our little home here in the Milky Way Galaxy goes by the name “Planet Earth” rather than “Planet of the Apes.”

4. **Agriculture.** Civilization was not possible so long as men wandered as hunters. The archeological evidence is clear that women were primarily responsible for the development of agriculture, which brought with it the idea of a permanent home. Invoking his classic wit, Durant pointed out that “Man is woman’s last domestic animal, and perhaps he is the last creature that will be civilized by woman.” (My note: Judging from my own business experiences with men, women still have a long way to go to complete this task.)

5. **Social Organization.** This is the essence of the replacement of chaos with order. Unfortunately, by necessity, social organization also brought us government, politicians, and a legal system that no longer works very well. One of the great paradoxes of social organization is that in order to preserve freedom, certain freedoms must be restricted.

6. **Morality.** Durant believed that in many important respects man’s character has probably retrogressed. Yet, he felt compelled to point out that “we are a slightly gentler species than we were: capable of greater kindness, and of generosity even to alien or recently hostile peoples whom we have never seen.” This is definitely true of Western societies, but Durant didn’t live to see the antics of modern religious lunatics in the new millennium.
7. **Tools.** As mentioned above, tools were made possible by the discovery of fire. For centuries, the clueless idealists among us have fought man’s embrace of machines. But even the brilliant Durant, who had an obvious left-leaning view of the world, said, “It is not revolution but invention that will liberate the slave.” Given today’s middle- and lower-class comforts, this was a remarkable insight into the future by one of the greatest minds of the 20th century.

8. **Science.** Durant referred to science as “victory of man over matter,” but noted that it “has not yet been matched with any kindred victory of man over himself.”

9. **Education.** Education, made possible by civilization, dramatically changed the notion of class by virtue of birth. Over the past fifty years or so, the spread of mass education has moved at an accelerating pace, which in turn has changed the makeup of civilizations even more rapidly. Unfortunately, it has also made chaos easier for man to create and thus more prevalent.

10. **Writing and print.** Today, it is incomprehensible to try to imagine a world where all knowledge, ideas, tragedies, atrocities, and brilliant thoughts were transmitted only by word of mouth. Though there is evidence of crude forms of printing in Germany and China more than a thousand years ago, the forerunner of the modern printing press was not invented by Johannes Gutenberg until the year 1454.

All of the above relate to the big picture of man’s progress. But what about micro progress — the progress you make in your day-to-day life? Are you “increasingly gaining control of your environment?” Through your thinking and actions, are you able to rise above a world that has become chaotic beyond what anyone could have imagined just a few decades ago?

No one can be certain of the true purpose of life, but thousands of years of human history make it apparent that man is programmed to move forward — to make
progress. Unfortunately, as with all things, only a small percentage of the world’s population makes the greatest amount of progress.

It’s unlikely that you can do much to retard the progress of war, hunger, terrorism, or religious fanaticism, to name but a few of the most common ailments of our global village. But you do have the capacity to make a great deal of progress in your own life. To do so, however, it is necessary for you to consciously focus on making personal progress.

Progress toward what? Consciously or unconsciously, I believe that what most people want above all else is happiness, and everything they do is merely a means toward that end. Some of the more obvious facets of life that lead to happiness are good health, purpose, love, and wealth. It therefore seems to me that a life worth living is one in which you make a conscious effort, day in and day out, to make progress in areas such as these — and possibly one or two others that you may feel are of critical importance to you.

I purposely listed health first, because without good health, everything else is a moot point. No matter what your current health status is, you should make a conscious effort to do something every day to improve it. That may mean not eating that peanut butter sandwich or hot fudge sundae you are so fond of. It may mean doing thirty minutes of exercise when you can’t afford the time. It may mean conjuring up the self-discipline to miss a big sporting event on television in favor of getting to bed early. But, whatever it is, make it a point to do something every day of your life to make progress toward improving your health.

As to purpose, the only way you can be certain you have a meaningful purpose in life is if you can’t wait to get out of bed in the morning and greet the rising sun. Each and every day, think about what your purpose is and make periodic adjustments to sharpen your focus on what is truly important to you. Love is an obvious example. We all want to be loved. And everyone knows that to receive love, you have to give love. The danger here is in taking people for granted.
When it comes to family and those closest to you, it should be a priority to make continual progress in showing your love in bigger and better ways.

Financial success is another important area. There are idealists who don’t like to admit it, but the reality is that progress in wealth building makes progress in the other areas of your life much easier. Millions of words have been written about the subject of financial success, so it’s not necessary to go into any kind of detail here. I would say only that when it comes to wealth building, you should, above all else, focus on making progress in achieving more output from less input. To do this, you have to constantly focus on converting time into money. Relentless progress in this skill leads to wealth.

To make consistent progress in areas such as those mentioned above, you have to become adept at “dominating chaos.” In today’s world, chaos comes in many forms: e-mail, telephones, voice-mail runarounds, cellphones, meetings, and sensational kidnappings, rapes, murders, acts of terrorism, and natural disasters that saturate your television screen. The challenge is for you to progress more rapidly as a healthy, loving, wealthy, focused human being than the chaos around you progresses.

If you are not vigilant about shutting out as much chaos as possible from your life, chaos will dominate you. In laymen’s terms, dominating chaos means being in control of your environment. And to accomplish this, you cannot allow the chaotic world around you to distract you. Remember, the harsh reality is that your bemoaning of tragic events throughout the world or, worse, becoming involved in any of an endless array of “causes” is unlikely to alter the course of such events one iota.

Your time here on earth is limited. Use it wisely by focusing on making consistent progress in such areas as health, purpose, love, and wealth. If you do well in these areas, you can feel proud in the knowledge that you are among those individuals on this planet who are not adding to its problems.
Whether you’re thirty, fifty, or seventy years old, you should seek to grow every day of your life. Make no mistake about it, progress is your destiny — and you owe it to yourself to fulfill your destiny.
Prerequisite to Loving Your Neighbor

From Charles Manson (who orchestrated the brutal and bloody murders of actress Sharon Tate and her friends in 1969) to John Wayne Gacy (neighborhood clown who murdered, then sexually assaulted thirty-three mostly teenage boys) …

From Jeffrey Dahmer (serial killer and cannibal) to Ted Bundy (smooth-talking, preppy-looking young man who murdered at least thirty women in four different states) …

From Dennis Rader (the infamous BTK serial killer) to Joseph Edward Duncan (vile predator who kidnapped and raped eight-year-old Shasta Groene and killed her nine-year-old brother, Dylan) …

Psychologists are pretty much in agreement that all of these less-than-human creatures had, or have, two things in common: a lack of self-respect and an abundance of self-hatred. It seems clear that the inner conflicts and self-hatred of such heinous murderers comprise a significant part of their motivation to wreak vengeance on others.

I bring up this distasteful subject because I see a great deal of self-contempt and lack of self-respect in many people I encounter. It isn’t necessary for a person to tell me he lacks self-respect. You can see it in his facial expressions and body language; you can hear it in his words and in the tone of his voice.

People who lack self-respect leave clues. Territorial people, for example — who saturate the workplace — always lack self-respect. There are no exceptions to this. The same is true of people who defile their bodies (e.g., facial tattoos, piercings adorning inappropriate body parts, and pink/purple hair) in order to attract attention. School bullies — a group I have studied in some detail — are also notorious for a lack of self-respect.
If a person dislikes himself and has a low regard for his own abilities, he is unlikely to respect others. He may not kill them, but, in all too many cases, such a person harbors resentment — even hatred — for people in whom he identifies his own intolerable flaws.

This is why self-love (not narcissism) is the foundation of a peaceful society. If you don’t love yourself, how can you “love thy neighbor as thyself?” As Joshua Liebman phrased it, “We must have good domestic relations with ourselves before we can have good foreign relations with others.”

How do you learn to overcome feelings of inadequacy and perhaps even a dislike for yourself? Philosophers and psychologists have been dealing with this question for centuries. In truth, there is no simple answer to this question and certainly no one single answer. But I do believe there are certain ingredients that are guaranteed to bolster a person’s self-respect. For example:

**Ingredient No. 1:** Rid yourself of the delusion that people of great wealth and/or fame are superior to you. I’ve known my share of rich and famous people, and have found them, as a group, to be more insecure than the average person.

Which is why you should never allow yourself to become overly impressed by the fame and fortune of others, and never sell yourself short because of someone else’s success. You are a unique human being, and, without even meeting you, I’m certain that you have a number of unique talents. Why? Because the universe is not a cookie-cutter factory. No two stars are alike, no two snowflakes are alike, and no two human beings are alike.

**Ingredient No. 2:** A second factor in possessing self-respect is showing respect for others. You don’t have to respect a person’s behavior, but you are morally obliged
to respect his time. Which means, first and foremost, being on time when it comes to phone calls, meetings, and other commitments.

When I was just starting out in business, I was notoriously late for appointments. What I recall most about arriving late was that it made me feel inferior. I felt like I was on the defensive before I even entered the room.

On a couple of occasions, when the person with whom I was to meet refused to see me because of my tardiness, I felt like a bug. Thankfully, the pain ultimately became great enough to motivate me to become obsessed with being early for meetings, telephone appointments, travel, and all other types of commitments.

Today, I usually show up for appointments fifteen-to-thirty minutes early … sometimes even an hour early if traffic turns out to be much lighter than I expected. I still miscalculate now and then, but it’s rare. And since I usually have a good book or other important reading material with me, being early is never a waste of my time.

**Ingredient No. 3:** If someone doesn’t return your phone calls, it’s the height of rudeness. But from your viewpoint, the important thing to understand is that he is sending you a message that you are a low priority on his “To Do” list. To maintain self-respect, it’s important to deal only with people who demonstrate — through their actions — that they are anxious to deal with you.

Even worse is when you allow yourself to get maneuvered into a position of having to justify your existence. If you ever find yourself in such a situation, make it clear to the other party that you don’t have time to be interrogated — then make your exit. As an alternative, skip the explanation and just exit immediately. The most important self-respect builder you will ever find is the word “Next!” When you possess self-respect, you recognize that you don’t need any one person or any one deal. You know you’re independent when you deal with whom you want, when you want, and, to the extent possible, on your terms.
Ingredient No. 4: Strive to lead a concentric life. By this I mean making certain that your actions align with what you know, in both your mind and heart, to be right. Pretension and hypocrisy are among the most vile human traits, so be vigilant about always displaying the real you.

This often means renouncing childish behavior and accepting adult responsibilities such as marriage, family, and a profession. It means understanding that your actions affect those around you in myriad ways that are not always obvious on the surface. It’s much like throwing a pebble into a pond and watching increasingly larger ripples form. Every action you take causes ripples that affect many other lives, including those of people you may never even meet.

Remember, self-respect comes from within. You do not have the right to demand respect from others, but you do possess the right to refuse to deal with people who do not show you respect. As a general rule, however, the more you demonstrate that you respect yourself, the more likely others are to respect you.
Junk Mail

Following are some words that Andy Rooney says cause him to toss envelopes in the wastebasket without opening them:

- “Important.” Rooney says that if an envelope contains the word *important*, you can be sure it isn’t.
- “Urgent.” Not!
- “Do Not Discard.” Intimidating ploy.
- “Open Immediately.” This tells you that you need not be in a hurry to open it … that is, if you should choose not to throw it away.
- “Time-Sensitive Material Enclosed.” Same as above.
- “Current Occupant.” How dumb would someone have to be to open an envelope that has “current occupant” printed on it?

Finally, Rooney says that he throws out any envelope that’s from a real estate agent — especially if it has the agent’s picture on it.

Most junk mail is written by great copywriters, so it’s no wonder that the writing on the outside of an envelope often tempts people to open it. The issue isn’t whether or not there might be something of interest, or even of value, inside an envelope you’re tempted to open. We see a lot of interesting and valuable things all around us every day, all day long.

The real issue is *time*. Your working hours should be spent primarily on projects that produce cash flow. As human beings, we all have unlimited options (even if some of us don’t realize it) but very limited time. Because of this reality, a huge part of success is a result of making choices about what to spend your time on.
About the only thing you can do that is worse than opening a piece of junk mail on the spot and immediately reading it is to put it aside to be read at some later date.

Experience has taught me that the future never quite arrives when it comes to having the time to read junk mail, the result being that it tends to pile up. Which not only causes subconscious stress when you see the piles of unread mail lying around your office, but also causes important documents to get lost (i.e., become hidden under piles of junk mail).

The one exception I would make to all this is if you have a serious interest in the science of marketing, and especially if you’re a copywriter. In that case, you would be justified in opening, on a discriminating basis, the junk mail that looks most intriguing to you. But this should not be done in a casual manner. For example, if you’re a copywriter, studying other people’s copywriting ideas should be viewed as a serious and integral part of your business. Thus, you should take the time to carefully read and study the contents of those envelopes — and only those envelopes — that you deem worthy of opening.

Having said this, I often find that after I’ve read a paragraph or two, the mailpiece isn’t really that good. Whenever you make such a discovery, don’t feel an obligation to read the material all the way through to completion. Come to an abrupt stop, toss the mailpiece in the wastebasket, and get on with whatever projects you believe have the best chance of producing cash flow.

And, when in doubt, demonstrate the self-discipline to err on the side of not opening a piece of junk mail at all. There, now I’ve gone and done it — made Andy Rooney into a legitimate time-management consultant.
Everyone Is Fair Game

Following are some miscellaneous excerpts from mostly one-star reviews (the worst rating possible) on Amazon.com that I extracted for this article.

Reviewer #1:

“Seven Ways to Waste a Day. There is not a single new idea in the whole book. If you don’t know already what is in this book, you are too stupid to understand it. The whole Covey program is an overpriced waste of time.”

Obviously referring to a book that didn’t make it in the marketplace, right? Not quite. How about the biggest-selling motivational book of all time, according to The New York Times! That’s right, it’s Steven Covey’s The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. Covey not only has built a career on this book, but a huge company to boot.

Reviewer #2:

“The only good news is the book has so little substance it took me only an hour to read it.”

Another loser, right? Hardly. The reviewer is referring to Swim with the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive, listed by The New York Times as one of the biggest-selling motivational books of all time. Since writing this book, Harvey Mackay has written many other bestsellers and has gone on to become one of the highest-paid, in-demand speakers in the world.
Reviewer #3:

“At times, Kiyosaki himself reminds me of a presenter from Amway, Primerica, or some other MLM pyramid scheme. ... With the constant plugging of his other products, Kiyosaki tries to hook readers into thinking that he knows the ‘secret’ of being rich, and if you keep buying his stuff, eventually you’ll ‘discover’ it.”

You guessed it — it’s the landmark book *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, which has sold millions of copies worldwide. Kiyosaki’s book is loaded with great ideas and, as a bonus, is cleverly written and enjoyable to read.

And on and on it goes … you can find negative reader reviews for Will Durant, Eric Hoffer, and many other literary giants. And, as much as I know this will shock you, you can even find negative reader reviews for books written by (sigh) yours truly.

My favorite bad review for one of my books (can’t remember which one it was) was from a guy who said that what bothered him most was that I was using my book as a platform for my own opinions. I’m not kidding … someone actually wrote that. Duh ... helloooo … the whole purpose of writing a self-development book is for the author to convey his opinions to the reader!

Don’t get me wrong. People have an absolute right to give their honest opinions about the books they read. I’ve certainly read many bestsellers that I didn’t like. It’s just a reminder that you can’t please everyone.

The small sampling of reviews I’ve shared with you graphically illustrate that even the most successful among us not only get criticized, but are often disliked by huge numbers of people. Just imagine how hated super-successful people such as Bill Clinton, George Bush, Bill O’Reilly, and Rush Limbaugh are. If you look at how they made it to the top, I think it’s fair to say that none of them would be there if they weren’t hated by millions of people.
Why so? Because the other side of the hate coin is that there are millions of people who also love them. The only way I know to avoid negative opinions is to say nothing, do nothing, and be nothing.

All this should be comforting to you, because it’s a reminder that the criticism people aim your way — which can sometimes include slanderous and defamatory remarks — is part and parcel to the game of success. And, I would argue, to the broader game of life. Making it to the top doesn’t make you less vulnerable to criticism; it makes you more so.

Remember, you cannot force people to like you or your work. You cannot even force them to stop saying bad things about you — unless you want to spend the rest of your life involved in lawsuits that require you to prove damages.

The sad reality is that human beings, to one extent or another, tend to be jealous of the success of others. Accept that reality and simply write it off as a fact of life. The only thing you have the power to change is how you react to criticism. When someone tries to twist your words, change your meanings, or restate your intentions, you may instinctively feel like lashing out and defending yourself. There’s a natural inclination to want to prove to the world that what has been said about you is false. Unfortunately, once your emotions reach that point, the slanderer has won.

There is a great deal of bitterness in our world due to feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and failure, and the neurotic individual often feels that he can vent his frustration only by tearing down others. Don’t take the bait. It is within your power to ignore the criticism and ugly remarks of others. If you want to drive your detractors crazy, simply ignore them. I find that the less you talk about someone’s criticisms, lies, or slanderous comments, the more quickly they tend to fade away.

Barry Bonds didn’t get this. Instead, he chose to carry a sour-grapes attitude and shift the blame (for his “unaware” use of steroids) to the media. Which is a total turnoff to sports fans and — as with Mark McGwire — will likely keep him out of the Hall of Fame, at least on the first ballot.
By contrast, I will never forget how impressed I was when tabloid headlines were screaming that New York Mets catcher Mike Piazza was gay. Piazza did only one interview, and said to the interviewer in a calm, straightforward manner, “I’m not gay.” No anger, no hysteria, no scowl. As a result, the story died in a matter of days.

The reality is that you are going to be criticized — and sometimes slandered and lied about — so best you learn not to allow it to throw you into a state of emotional turmoil when it occurs. Take heart by reminding yourself that it happens to high-profile people all the time. The impact of a negative remark aimed at you will very much depend on how you handle it. The perfect mind-set is: “It’s no big deal — just a part of life.” All you need to do is make certain it doesn’t become a major part of your life.
Beware the PC Police

If being a contrarian is conducive to success, you can learn something valuable from the Politically Correct Dark Ages that has all but swallowed the remnants of Western civilization. It used to be that everyone knew there were just a handful of subjects you simply avoided and opinions that were best kept to yourself.

But today, as a society, we’ve come a long way from the good old days when, for the most part, people could say whatever was on their minds. It was a time when individuals could have a civilized discourse about subjects on which they disagreed. We long ago became a nation where people cannot voice their honest opinions without igniting a hysterical backlash. We can no longer have serious, mature discussions about topics we have every right to discuss and that need to be discussed.

Gerry Spence, whose ideology makes my hair stand on end (Not an easy trick, even for him.), also happens to be, in my opinion, one of the most brilliant writers of our time. In fact, he’s the only writer I’ve ever known who can totally captivate me while writing something with which I totally disagree. His phraseology is that of a master craftsman.

In his book *Seven Simple Steps to Personal Freedom*, Spence alludes to political correctness as follows:

“Today most of us are starched up stiff in the high, white collar of political correctness. What is deemed politically correct is as likely to enslave us as our prejudices. ... We are not all alike, but we are no longer permitted to celebrate our differences. Political correctness functions to silence us. It eliminates our right to ponder the issues important to our lives and to think for ourselves. In an allegedly free society it has become society’s censor. ... Political correctness is the hollow voice of power exhorting the slaves to let the master think for them. It is often no
more than the dictates of a group of self-appointed censors foisting their doctrine on us.”

These words are so poetically stated, and so true, that it almost makes me want to forgive Spence for his shameless nightly defenses of O.J. Simpson back in 1995 on Larry King Live. His words motivated me to take a crack at writing down all of the issues, opinions, and people I could think of that are now off limits to discuss. It didn’t take long for me to realize that I was looking at an all-day job if I kept going, so I cut the list short and went on to more productive matters. In just a few minutes, here are some of the items I came up with:

Any statement that acknowledges God or any religion ... reminding people that Darwin’s Theory of Evolution is not fact, but theory ... being for or against abortion ... being for or against gay marriage ... the stereotyping of any religious or ethnic group ... profiling as a weapon to fight terrorism ... being against gun control ... favoring the legalization of marijuana ... questioning whether taxpayers should be forced to pay for the damaged homes of people who choose to live in disaster-prone areas ... being for or against the Iraq War ... being for or against euthanasia ... or saying anything that even hints at negativity toward sacred cows such as Martin Luther King Jr., Jimmy Carter, or Oprah.

Regardless of where you stand on any of the above people or issues, your opinion, of and by itself, does not pose a problem. The problem Western culture faces today is that honest opinions are not tolerated, let alone respected. Don Rickles made a career out of poking fun at stereotypes, and his diverse audiences loved it. It’s okay to laugh at ourselves. As Gerry Spence said, “We are not all alike, but we are no longer permitted to celebrate our differences.”

In the seventies, I said a lot of things in my books that were pretty bold by present standards, but it was a much different time than today. I was considerably younger and quite irreverent, and I don’t believe I had even heard the term “political correctness.”
The power of the Internet has emboldened the political-correctness police. If you’re unhappy because someone makes what you perceive to be a racist or sexist remark, you need only jump on the Internet, use your keyboard to vent to your heart’s content, and press the “Send” button. It still amazes me — no typing up an envelope, no stamp, no going to a mailbox. All you need to do is press that magic Send button. It’s the high-tech equivalent of a bow and arrow with a poisoned tip. What a great tool for a person who enjoys venting as much as some people enjoy fishing or jogging.

In one of my articles, I made a passing comment about gun control. I merely pointed out the reality that it’s people, not guns, that kill other people. Further, the daily news reminds us that thousands of people favor knives, ropes, blunt objects, and even bare hands as their weapons of choice. Yet, one reader — who opened by saying that he had been a fan of my books for years — took offense and sent me a nasty e-mail that stated, in part: “If you cannot see the difference in someone attacking you with a lead pipe or knife and a gun, then you are so stupid or, to [use] your word, idiotic that I cannot take your advice on anything seriously now.”

I guess I’m stupid, because the only difference I can see between being killed by a gun as opposed to a lead pipe or knife is that a gun would be a lot less painful. My long-time reader then went on to call me some very nasty names, which went a long way to reinforce his superior intellect on this politically incorrect issue. Another fan lost to the PC monster … such is life.

I want to make a clear distinction here. Political correctness is a totally different animal than criticism. What I am referring to is the nasty, often hysterical reaction of some people to a seemingly endless array of subjects that come under the protection of the political-correctness umbrella.

It seems to me that it takes a serious lack of intelligence and/or enlightenment — or perhaps just a great deal of arrogance — for a person to act as though he has a monopoly on truth. It’s a good idea for us to remember how many opinions we
have outgrown that we once held firm in our minds. It has been said that our opinions become fixed at the point where we stop thinking.

The truth is that the more certain a person is about his opinions, the more willing he should be to allow others to express theirs. The more a person tries to pressure me into his way of thinking, the more I doubt the soundness of his beliefs.

As a society, I hope we haven’t strayed so far off the civilized path that there is no way back. The vitriol has truly gotten out of hand. We would all do well to heed the wisdom of these famous words (commonly, though perhaps incorrectly, attributed to Voltaire): “I do not agree with a word that you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

Like most “evils” in the world, you can’t do much to help turn the tide and bring Western culture out of the Politically Correct Dark Ages in which it is now entrapped. But you certainly can do a lot to bring yourself into the sunshine of life by allowing others to voice their honest opinions about anything and everything — and by doing so without getting angry, demanding retractions, or, worse, becoming hysterical. It’s in your best interest to hear people out, because it doesn’t cost anything. You are free to pick and choose whatever sounds good to you, and simply leave the rest.

Being a member of the all-volunteer political-correctness police should be beneath you. Individualism and political correctness are mutually exclusive objectives, because a true individualist keeps an open mind when it comes to knowledge. And even if a person’s ideas are repugnant to you, you should still heed Ringer Success Rule No. 371: Learn from your enemies! And you can’t do that if you try to silence them.

No matter what color, religion, or nationality you are, no matter what your sexual preference may be, if you want to get ahead in this world — and enjoy life in the process — a good first step is to opt out of the political-correctness game.
Whom to Believe?

When the then-unknown snipers (John Muhammad and John Lee Malvo) were terrorizing residents in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Northern Virginia, my son said to me, “I just found out today that the sniper is in our area.” I responded, “I doubt that. I don’t think anyone has a clue as to where he is from day to day.”

To which my adolescent son vigorously retorted, “I know for a fact that he’s in our area.” Masochistically, I took the bait and asked him how so. “Because all the kids in school were talking about it,” he replied with a certainty in his voice.

A classic father-adolescent discussion then ensued. My son’s position was that if all the kids in school were saying it was true, that proved it was true. Which meant that I was confronted with the frustrating task of trying to make him understand that adolescent chatter has no relationship whatsoever to the subject of proof.

If you have, or have had, teenagers in your household, you’re probably smiling right now and shaking your head up and down. But it’s not all that funny when you stop to think about how many unsubstantiated things even we, as adults, believe.

When I was in my early twenties, a doctor diagnosed a malignant tumor in my left sinus. Without taking the trouble to get a second opinion, I quickly found myself on an operating table. Fortunately for me, the story had a happy ending: The doctor’s diagnosis was wrong. How wrong? Well, not only was the “tumor” not malignant, it wasn’t even a tumor. Rather, it was nothing more than a harmless clump of polyp that could have remained in my sinus forever without causing a problem.

Sometime after the operation, I went to another doctor for a checkup. After looking at my x-rays, he said he would never have operated on me. He explained
that it was obvious to him from the x-rays that the mass in question was nothing more than polyp. (What a great time to get a second opinion!)

It took at least six months for me to fully recover from the operation, and the pain in the early going was excruciating. Then there was the loss of valuable work time and quality time with my family. The stress and fear I endured were free of charge, of course.

It was a pretty big price to pay for assuming that a doctor’s diagnosis was correct. As a result, I now ask a torrent of questions whenever I visit a doctor’s office, which usually results in his/her harboring an intense dislike for me. And that, in turn, often results in my saying my goodbyes early and finding another doctor who is more willing to answer my questions.

Now, here’s the sticky part. The reality is that most of the actions you take are based on information and assumptions you have never verified. If you’re a control freak, you may find that hard to accept. But just think about it for a second. When you get on an airplane, how do you know one of the pilots isn’t inebriated? The fact is, they sometimes are. As you may recall, one pilot — I believe he worked for Northwest Airlines — was arrested by the FBI some years ago when he landed in Minneapolis. The FBI had gotten a tip from someone that he had been drinking heavily the night before.

I’m much more rigid than most people when it comes to taking everything with a proverbial grain of salt. My motto is: Assume nothing. If your mother says she loves you, check it out! Nevertheless, on occasion I still find myself assuming things that I have no sound reason for assuming.

For example, I occasionally take my wife and son to a Washington Nationals game at (ugh) RFK Stadium. We’re talking old here. RFK Stadium makes the Colosseum in Rome look like a state-of-the-art structure. If you’ve never had the pleasure of watching a game in this ancient relic, the best way to describe it is that you don’t need to ask anyone where the nearest toilet is. RFK Stadium is the toilet!
But, other than the filth and the irritating fact that people insist on calling the Senators the Nationals, going to a game at RFK can be an enjoyable experience ... sort of. For one particular game, we arrived early, because we didn’t have tickets. When we got to the ticket windows, we were surprised to find that there were about a dozen lines, each about fifty people deep. Suddenly, a man in a uniform (always a bad sign) said to the people at the back end of the lines, “If you go right around the corner to Gate F, there are more ticket windows and no waiting.”

Totally disregarding Ringer Rule No. 228 about never believing anyone in a uniform, I quickly hurried off to Gate F with my wife and son tagging behind. I felt like Lawrence of Arabia making his way through the Sahara Desert — humid, 95-degree heat and desperate for something to drink. But, hey, what’s the big deal about a few hundred feet or so? I’ll tell you what the big deal is: The few hundred feet turned out to be all the way around to the other side of the stadium — which, in the heat and humidity, made it feel as though we were walking to Baltimore! And all because I assumed that the guy in the uniform knew what he was talking about.

I’m sure by now you’ve guessed the Homer Simpson ending to this little tale. The lines at Gate F were longer than they had been at the main ticket windows. At this point, I was ready to start digging a water well with my bare hands.

My stint as Lawrence of Arabia stumbling around outside RFK Stadium got me to thinking about just how many things even the most anti-assumptive among us take on faith. It also reminded me of a reader who had recently sent me an e-mail that stated, in part:

“I’m a fan of your column. Your recent rant about the tidal wave of B.S. with which we are flooded was a good one, to say the least. However, you can’t sling B.S. about famous psychologists who claim to, but don’t actually have, doctorate degrees without naming names. ... So, come on, who are you writing about?”

It was a nice letter and, I had to admit, a reasonable question. In part, I responded with, “I would never reveal the name of someone in a situation like this, for
obvious reasons. Since the person (the ‘psychologist’ with no degree in psychology) is in his seventies and hasn’t written a book in more than twenty years, I doubt you would ever have reason to read anything written by him.” I guess what I was really telling the reader was that he would have to take my word for it.

Which brings me back to my son, who, two years after his “the sniper is in our area” statement, had matured to the point of asking me (in response to someone whom I had quoted to him), “How can you be sure that he’s right about that?” I’m glad he asked the question, because it reminded me that whenever I read or hear something, the weight I give it is a personal judgment based on my confidence in the person who is conveying the information.

For example, when John Stossel reported that, contrary to popular belief, the rubber tires on your car do not protect you from being struck by lightning, I believed him. Why? Because, having listened to Stossel for years, I am confident that his research is thorough. He has exploded hundreds of myths that have made him a target of hate from both the left and right, from environmental and conservation groups to corporate America. Which, of and by itself, gives him great credibility.

As I’m sure is the case with you, I have a long list of authors who are on my credibility list — Eric Hoffer, Will Durant, Harry Browne, and Henry Hazlitt, to name but a few. Though our opinions may differ on occasion, I tend to accept most of what they say as fact. No one has the time to do so-called original research on every piece of information he requires before taking action. The skill is in picking the right sources for your information.

When you’re young and inexperienced, you are more inclined to believe people who tell you what you want to hear. In my twenties, I probably would have bought a used car from Bill Clinton. I can just hear him saying, “I can guarantee that I did not have sexual relations with that car.” And, just like that, I probably would have driven off the lot with a pregnant Chevy.
But when you have a little experience behind you, you become pretty good at knowing whom you can believe and whom to distrust. Experience is important, because most of the information you act on is based on your faith in the provider of that information.

Authors, in particular, are in the business of offering information and opinions. After enough experience with a writer, you come to have either more or less faith in what he has to say. It’s the same with everyone you deal with.

And, remember, you don’t have to agree with everything an author or anyone else says in order to learn something valuable from him or her. Take what you feel sounds right … and simply leave the rest. You might liken the millions of words that appear every day in newspapers, magazines, books, and on the Internet to a giant information buffet from which you can pick and choose as you please. The trick, of course, is to choose wisely.
I recently ran across some heirloom, handwritten signs that I had pinned on my wall in my early days as a writer. I had them positioned so that whenever I looked up from my Selectric typewriter, they were staring me in the face. Had it not been for my internalizing the words on those signs, I doubt I would have become a successful author.

Today, I would like to share these signs with you, because I believe that the rules they convey apply to any and all professions.

**Sign No. 1: Force yourself to write; once you get going, don’t stop to congratulate yourself.**

Most wannabe writers make both of these mistakes. They wait to become motivated before they begin writing, which is why they remain wannabes. After more than two decades of experience, trust me: You will rarely be motivated to write.

What separates most writers from non-writers is that true writers take action and start putting words on the computer regardless of whether or not they are motivated. In my experience, after I force myself to start writing, I find that a seamless transition takes place and I become motivated.

There is no mystery in this. What I believe happens is that once you begin writing, it stimulates your brain and body cells and gets your creative juices flowing. Which, in turn, revs up your motivation. I learned this through experience while writing my first book. I felt it was such an important point that I made up a sign, tacked it on my wall, and read it every morning before I had a
chance to start piddling around with procrastination projects. Writing is not about
the future; writing is about putting your hands on the keyboard now.

As to the second part of the sign — once you get going, don’t stop to congratulate
yourself — I added these words because I found that I had a tendency to stop and
admire my work every time I got on a roll. While it may have appeared to be self-
adulation, the truth of the matter is that I just possessed an ingenious knack for
coming up with excuses for procrastinating.

One of my lucky genetic traits is that I have always had a penchant for honest self-
analysis, and it is this trait that made it possible for me to face up to the reality that
I had mastered the art of procrastination. But it wasn’t until years later that it
occurred to me that the words on this sign applied to all professions.

For example, if you’re in sales — which, to one extent or another, just about
everyone is — you have to force yourself to make contact with potential buyers.
Every salesperson knows that the most important determinant when it comes to
achieving consistent results is his willingness to apply massive amounts of action
to a powerful universal principle known as the law of averages. If you want
results, the law of averages literally guarantees to deliver them to you, provided
you supply the action.

Likewise, salespeople have to avoid falling into the trap of congratulating
themselves after every sale. One of the reasons I achieved such great success as a
real estate broker years before I became an author is that I literally flew from one
deal to the next as soon as a closing occurred. As you know if you’ve read To Be
or Not to Be Intimidated? I operated on a nationwide scale, with licenses in twelve
states, and dealt primarily in large apartment developments. As soon as I got a
check in my hand, no matter how big it was, I was off to the airport to move on to
the next deal in the next city.

Regardless of the business you’re in, don’t coddle yourself. Celebrating deal
closings is for amateurs. If you want to celebrate, do it by quickly moving on to
the next deal.
Sign No. 2: Simplicity is crucial. Can the reader quickly and clearly understand what you are trying to say? Eliminate verbal furniture.

I learned this little gem from William Strunk’s timeless classic *The Elements of Style*. This book is so old I’m tempted to believe rumors that Strunk wrote his masterpiece before the Dead Sea Scrolls were penned. Even so, everything Strunk says in this work still holds true today, especially the jewel that follows:

“Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.”

There is no doubt that simplicity is a crucial aspect of quality writing. I constantly remind would-be writers that *the power of the understatement is enormous*. Most people can’t understand why I do so many drafts of everything I write, including important letters. Verbal furniture isn’t the only culprit, but it’s one of the main ones. I’m always amazed at how many extraneous words and sentences I find in draft after draft of everything I write. I’m even more amazed by how many extraneous words and sentences people leave in their finished literary offerings — from books to e-mails. Day in and day out, I read words and sentences that actually detract from the main point that the writer appears to be attempting to make.

Each of the three sentences on Sign No. 2 applies to your business, as well, whatever it may be. For example, when you present a deal to someone, simplicity is crucial. Don’t clutter up your presentation with verbal furniture. If you add unnecessary words or sentences, all you accomplish is making it more difficult for the prospect to understand your main point or points. Which in turn makes it more difficult for him to make a decision.
Thus, when making a presentation, remember that you’re not there to give a speech or impress the other person with your knowledge. Your sole focus should be on closing the deal. This is especially true when you’re trying to raise money. In a money-raising situation, (1) tell the person exactly what you want from him, (2) tell him precisely what you intend to do with the money, and then (3) tell him what’s in it for him if things work out precisely as you have projected (which, of course, they never do). Everything else is fluff.

Sign No. 3: Don’t try to be all things to all people. Go after a specific market, and don’t make apologies to those who aren’t part of that market.

This is a really tough one to adhere to. My editor taught it to me, and I still have to constantly remind myself how critically important it is. As I’ve pointed out many times in the past, if millions of people didn’t hate Anne Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, and Bill O’Reilly, they wouldn’t be where they are today — because the other side of the hate coin is love.

Authors are just like anyone else — they want to be loved. Or at least admired and respected. But love is a human need that can be fatal to a writer. If you try to please everyone — or, the corollary, try not to offend anyone — you become a “mushy” writer. By mushy, I mean someone whose message is not clear-cut. If you’re an author, you don’t want to sell ten thousand books to sleepwalking people who see you as a politically correct Boy Scout who preaches conventional wisdom. The idea is to sell a million books to a market of people who see you as different from other writers in your genre who are all preaching the same sermon.

If you accomplish the latter, there will be a boatload of people who will not like your work, and some who will even hate it. Which is okay. It’s a big marketplace out there. I first started thinking about this when my then graphic artist told me, clear back in the seventies, that he couldn’t stand Neil Diamond. Since I used to play Neil Diamond for hours on end and have seen him in concert many times in both the U.S. and Australia, I inquired as to why.
He replied, “His songs are trite, corny, and stupid.” A dagger through my heart! I mean, we’re talking “Sweet Caroline,” “Song Sung Blue,” and “Red, Red Wine.” What’s not to like?

He then went on to tell me that he thought Bob Dylan was the greatest songwriter of all time. Are you kidding me? When I hear the name Bob Dylan, I think of little Bobby Zimmerman (his real name) who grew up in Hibbing, Minnesota and got laughed off the stage when he performed in his high school auditorium. To me, he’s another one of those accidents of history that I just don’t get. Dylan claims that he wrote his most famous song (I forget which one it was) in fifteen minutes. That sounded about right, because to me all of his songs sound as though they were written in fifteen minutes.

And guess what? Now that I’ve dared to express my opinion, I’ve probably gotten a whole bunch of Bob Dylan fans mad at me. But my suggestion is that you forget the mad and, instead, focus on the key point here. Bob Dylan has made hundreds of millions of dollars without pleasing me and millions of others who share my view of his work. Likewise, Neil Diamond has made a fortune in spite of the fact that my graphic artist and probably millions of other people think his material is trite, corny, and stupid. Both Diamond and Dylan, like all performers, perform for their markets.

The moral is that if you try to be all things to all people, you’re likely to end up without an enthusiastic, loyal group of customers. Go after a specific market, and don’t make apologies to those who badmouth your product or service. People who don’t like what you’re selling haven’t committed a crime. They’ve just voted with their pocketbooks, and they voted against you. They simply aren’t part of your market. Forget about them.

Instead, take all that disappointment, all those hurt feelings, and all that desire to please everyone and convert it into energy aimed at improving the products and services you sell to your market. Those are the people who deserve your time and
attention. At a minimum, a relatively small but loyal following can provide you and your family with a very nice lifestyle.
The Magic of Repetition

People who can never seem to grab the brass ring are often guilty of nothing more than overlooking the basics. By basics, I’m talking about fundamental skills and activities such as time management, reading, organization, and developing an accurate perception of reality ... the list goes on and on.

But perhaps the most consistently overlooked basic of all is an innocuous little item called “repetition.” In the Introduction to Million Dollar Habits I write, “Success is a matter of understanding and religiously practicing specific, simple habits that always lead to success.”

Interestingly, however, when I searched my book for the word repetition, I was surprised to find that I had used it only twice. And neither use was in conjunction with developing success habits. In other words, I never actually explained how to go about forming those habits. It’s been seventeen years since I wrote Million Dollar Habits, so it’s difficult to recall precisely what was on my mind at the time. In hindsight, however, it appears that I simply assumed the reader would understand that habits are formed through repetition.

Every sports fan knows the story of Larry Bird — practicing on a rickety old basket in French Lick, Indiana eight to ten hours a day. Even though Bird was not a great natural athlete, through the sheer power of repetition he became a Hall of Fame legend. Today, of course, there are millions of basketball players, from middle school to the pros, who are great shooters. And they all acquired their skill the exact same way — through repetition. There is no shortcut.

Repetition is how you become good at any sport, artistic endeavor, math, writing ... just about any activity one can think of. We’ve all heard, many times over, the truism that “practice makes perfect.” Which is precisely how I became a Microsoft Word expert. I’m no computer whiz by any stretch of the imagination, but I spent a year and a half learning, then repeating, every Microsoft Word
function known to man. As a result of all that repetition, today I can perform most functions automatically, at lightning speed, because I don’t even have to think about what I’m doing.

It’s the same with writing. I’d like to think I’ve improved a great deal as a writer over the past twenty-five years, and I attribute that improvement to having written millions of words during that period of time. In this regard, I often quote Mario Puzo, who summed it up nicely when he said, “Rewriting is the whole secret to writing.”

An interesting paradox of repetition is that if you practice something slowly, you’ll actually learn it more quickly. I can think of many instances in my life where this was obvious to me. One in particular that comes to mind is when I was in my teens. Though I wasn’t a great athlete, I loved basketball and practiced it hours on end.

Like most right-handed kids, I couldn’t shoot a left-handed lay-up worth beans. I was having a terrible time not only shooting the ball with my left hand, but also trying to figure out how to push off with my right foot. If you’ve played basketball, you know how awkward this maneuver can be.

I vividly recall practicing the correct technique hours on end in my backyard, where my dad had installed a basket for me. (This was long before the days of Huffy, so it was a big deal to have your own backboard and basket setup.) I would walk through my approach to the basket, literally thousands of times, making certain I ended up on my right foot just as I was about to lay the ball up with my left hand. Little by little, I increased my speed, until I finally was able to make left-handed lay-ups at full throttle.

As a result of having the technique ingrained in my head, I ultimately was able to make left-handed lay-ups in the heat of games, even if a defender was breathing down my neck. The reason I was able to perform under game conditions was because I didn’t have to think about it. I had done all my thinking thousands of times in practice, which allowed my brain to go on autopilot once a game began.
I have since found that this same strategy produces results in just about any area of adult life. For example, any professional speaker will tell you that repetition is the key to becoming a good speaker. A professional speaker is well aware of the importance of practicing his lines slowly until they become indelibly stamped on his forebrain. From time to time, every speaker comes across a sentence — or even a whole story — that causes his tongue and brain to become tangled. The best solution to this obstacle is to practice the material slowly — a hundred times or more, if necessary — until you get it right. Then, it’s like riding a bicycle: You never forget it.

In practical terms, what all this means is that virtually anyone with average intelligence can become an expert at just about anything by employing repetition. It’s one of those basics that are so essential to success, yet so often overlooked. When all else fails, make sure you’re not forgetting the importance of repetition in your business- and personal-life strategies. More often than not, so-called overnight successes are really just people who have endlessly repeated the same actions — over a period of many years — usually very slowly in the early going and increasing their speed as they progress.

As advertising legend Claude Hopkins put it nearly one hundred years ago, “Genius is the art of taking pains.”
A Vote for Execution

A quote that ranks right up there with the best of Voltaire and Montaigne is the late Coach John McKay’s famous response when a reporter asked him, after another Tampa Bay Buccaneer loss, what he thought of his team’s execution. Said McKay, with a straight face, “I think it’s a good idea.”

Of course, when McKay spoke those now-famous words, his team was in the midst of the longest losing streak in NFL history. I’ve never suffered through twenty-six straight losses at anything, but I must admit that I have long favored execution for those who fail to execute. Why would such a kind, compassionate, understanding soul like me be so harsh when it comes to people who fail to execute? Call it a pet peeve ... or a fetish ... or just a lack of tolerance. All I know is that for anyone who actually cares about his/her work, the most unpleasant aspect of daily business is dealing with people who act as though they’re sleepwalking.

Let me be clear here about what I mean by “execution.” For me, execution involves three distinct areas:

1. A sense of urgency.
2. Attention to detail.
3. Follow-through.

1. Sense of Urgency

Nothing bugs me more than the use of the future tense when it comes to executing. It seems as though everyone is always going to do something. Whatever happened to the present tense? Or, even better, the past tense?
I’ve come to begrudgingly accept the reality that most people have no sense of urgency. Which is why, in today’s world, the individual who does display a sense of urgency stands out like a thinking person at a Howard Dean rally. In fact, I believe that one of the signs of a true entrepreneur is an ever-present sense of urgency.

A lot of people take umbrage with this, because it gets in the way of their evening sitcoms and weekend barbeques. People who want things done sooner rather than later irritate them no end. Why is sooner rather than later so important? Because each of us has to deal with an irreplaceable, finite commodity known as time. The entrepreneurial mind gets it; most others don’t.

I can’t tell you how many deals I’ve closed, how many ads that were successful, how many projects that made it through the open window because I took action one month sooner, one week sooner, or one day sooner. Even an hour — sometimes a minute — sooner can be the difference between success and failure.

On the other side of the coin, I’ve seen hundreds of deals and projects go up in smoke because one or more people involved had no sense of urgency. In To Be or Not to Be Intimidated? I refer to this as the Fiddle Theory, which states: The longer you fiddle around with a deal, the greater the odds that it will never close.

As a young real estate broker, experience taught me that it was critical to get the buyer to personally inspect the property at the earliest possible date, because time is always against the person who is highly motivated to close the deal. The Fiddle Theory is, of course, named for the famous reference to Nero’s fiddling while Rome burned. Unfortunately, too many salespeople and entrepreneurs repeat Nero’s mistake as they watch one deal after another go up in smoke, never seeming to understand why.

Never forget that time is your enemy when it comes to closing deals, mainly because circumstances constantly change. In a real estate deal, for example, the mortgage lender may declare an interest-rate increase, a partner may become embroiled in an argument over the split of proceeds, or the buyer may simply
change his mind and back out. A sense of urgency is your best line of defense against such unforeseen happenstances.

2. **Attention to Detail**

One of the most frustrating things imaginable is to care deeply about accuracy when those around you don’t. Accuracy doesn’t happen by accident. It’s a direct result of caring enough to carefully check your work ... then double-check it ... and, if necessary, triple-check it ... and continue to check it until it’s right.

People who can’t comprehend double- and triple-checking often get in a huff when they are called to task on something that is incorrect. Their attitude, often verbalized with anger, is: “How many times do I have to do this ! %?*!# thing?” The answer, of course, is: “Until you get it right!” The objective is not to finish the project; the objective is to finish the project *correctly* and *on time*.

Never use the excuse that you were too tired or, worse, too busy to check your work. Through considerable experience I have found that no one has a great deal of interest in how tired or busy I am. What they are interested in is my giving them what I promised, giving it to them correctly, and giving it to them on time. There’s a name for this in motivational parlance: *Whatever it takes!*  

3. **Follow-through**

Follow-through means seeing things through to completion and doing so on time. *Not near* to completion — *completion*. Clearly, most people do not seem to know the difference between the two.

Recently, I visited a new UPS Store to rent a mailbox. The manager (Ted) was a cherubic young man, appearing to be no more than twenty-one years of age. He greeted my wife and me with a big smile and an infectious enthusiasm in his
voice. He was unbelievably accommodating, to the point where he insisted on showing us several different mailboxes and explaining the pros and cons of the size and location of each. When he walked away for a moment to tend to a problem that one of the employees was having with the cash register, I whispered to my wife, “This kid will probably be the CEO of the whole company some day.”

Unfortunately, the cash register malfunction couldn’t be fixed right away. The employee had pressed the wrong button and accidentally “closed out the register for the day” (whatever that’s supposed to mean). It was Saturday, it was 3:30 p.m., and the store was scheduled to close at 5:00 p.m. Ted apologized profusely for the inconvenience, but said that if we could come back before 5:00 p.m., he would have the problem fixed and would be able to finish our transaction. He gave us his business card, and I told him I would call and let him know if we could make it by closing time. Since the UPS Store was a long distance from our home, I told him that if we couldn’t make it back by 5:00 p.m., it might be a week or two before we could finish renting the box.

With that, my wife and I departed and ran some other errands. The time slipped by without our noticing, and when I finally looked at my watch, it was 5:01 p.m. I figured it was worth a try to call the manager of the store, but assumed I wouldn’t get an answer because it was past closing time. Surprise — Ted answered the phone. I asked him if it was too late for us to come back and complete the mailbox-rental transaction. In his now-familiar cheerful voice, he responded, “Not at all. Just come on over. I’ll be happy to wait for you.”

We arrived at the UPS Store at about 5:25 p.m., and, sure enough, Ted was still there. He unlocked the door and greeted us with his affidavit smile — which makes him one of about fifteen retail employees left on the planet who don’t slam the door in your face if you arrive thirty seconds past closing time. Ted welcomed us back into the store, apologized for his subordinate’s careless mistake, and finished signing us up for a mailbox.
What this young man with the “How can I be of service to you?” attitude clearly understood was the importance of following through and closing the deal. He had an obvious sense of urgency, which goes hand in hand with follow-through. In other words, he cared enough not to follow through in a week or two, but now.

There’s another mailbox store just across the street from the one Ted manages. Had he told me it was too late to come in because it was past closing time, I might very well have ended up renting a mailbox from his competitor. Losing customers is about the best reason I can think of for having a sense of urgency, doing things right, and following through and getting the deal closed now.

One final word about follow-through. I’m amazed by how many people confuse the act of delegation with mission completed. Delegation is a powerful leveraging tool, and everyone, no matter where he/she is on the food chain, should avail themselves of this tool to one extent or another. But delegation is not execution.

All too often, when someone tells me, “I’ve taken care of that,” what he really means is that he told someone else to take care of it. I’ve seen days, sometimes even weeks, lost because people don’t understand that a key component of delegation is to have a system for checking to see if their delegation instructions have been properly carried out.

The only thing worse than failing to check on one’s delegation is when a person misstates the facts by proclaiming that something is done, then blames its non-completion on the person to whom he delegated the project. To put it bluntly, I don’t want to hear about someone’s delegation problems, and neither should you. If the person with whom you are dealing delegates the matter to someone else, that someone else is answerable to him. But he (the person to whom you gave the project) is answerable to you.

You’ll be happy to know that if you manage to become a master at execution, a free membership in the Oyster Club goes along with it — as in, the world is your oyster. But be forewarned that it’s a very small club, and being a member tends to
lead to a lonely existence. That said, allow me to close with another quote from the late John McKay: “You don’t beat people with surprises, but with execution.”
The Door to the Past

If you’re up to some very deep, often difficult to understand, reading, try tackling Loren Eiseley’s *The Immense Journey*. Eiseley wrote many brilliant essays and books during his lifetime that deal with the history of civilization and our relationship with the natural world. Published in 1946, *The Immense Journey* was his first and perhaps best work, bringing him national prominence along with it.

Though I disagree with many of his conclusions, Eiseley’s writing style is deep, poetic, and unique in every way. My favorite line from *The Immense Journey* is: “The door to the past is a strange door. It swings open and things pass through it, but they pass in one direction only.” There are many ways to interpret these profound words, but, for my purposes, I use them to remind myself that you can’t go backward in life. The past is the past, and you have only two choices: Move forward or perish.

On rare occasions when I’ve made the mistake of trying to get the door to the past to swing in the other direction, it didn’t work out. The reason is obvious. The world, like the universe, is in a constant state of change.

The only rational way to live one’s life is to forget about the past and keep opening new doors to the future. Intelligent action is the human tool that gives you the capacity to continually do this. Unlike the door to the past, the door to the future swings open quite easily. And, for the most part, you are always free to walk through it.
A Matter of Image

I’ve had a surprising number of people tell me over the years that they don’t carry an American Express card, because there are too many businesses that won’t accept it. The reason, of course, is that Amex charges retail establishments an average fee of 2.5 percent of the total purchase for the privilege of accepting its card.

The result of this is that a whopping 36 percent of American Express’s $28 billion in net revenue last year came from card fees. By contrast, MBNA, a giant MasterCard and Visa issuer, earned only 9 percent of its net revenues from fees.

So, how does the Amex card manage to not only stay in business but thrive? One word: Image. Amex cardholders tend to be much bigger spenders than MasterCard and Visa cardholders. According to Amex, its cardholders charge an average of $9,500 a year, or about four times the amount charged by the average MasterCard or Visa user. Because of this inescapable fact, large retailers can’t afford not to accept the Amex card.

While rapidly changing credit-card laws may force fees down in the not-too-distant future, Amex has successfully weathered the price-competition storm for decades. Call it posture, call it image, call it perception, but year after year American Express manages to pull it off.

Whatever your product or service may be, you would be wise to take a cue from American Express when it comes to pricing. One of the chief reasons why small businesses fail is that they don’t charge enough for their products and services.

In addition, there’s an important marketing reason for keeping your prices at a higher level than those of your competitors. Study after study has shown that many people (like me, for example), when given a choice of comparable products, will choose the more expensive one. I’m a salesman at heart, so I’m easily sold. I
tend to believe that if the price is higher, the product must be better. As long as there are guys like me out there waiting to give you top dollar, don’t be shy about raising your prices.

This is especially true in the information business. As Joe Karbo (*The Lazy Man’s Way to Riches*) used to point out, you’re not selling paper and ink, you’re selling information. If that information is valuable, you should charge your customers accordingly. For example, a CD or book could be worth nothing to you or it could be worth a million dollars. Too many people make the mistake of perceiving value by product category rather than content — i.e., a book is worth this much, a CD is worth that much, and so on. They are dead wrong.

The Posture Theory states: *It’s not what you say or do that counts, but what your posture is when you say or do it.* Amex made a lot money by heeding the Posture Theory long before I created it in my first book. Through good times and bad, Amex has always managed to position itself above the pack, and will likely continue to do so no matter how hard government regulators try to change the grade of the playing field.
Here’s to You, Mrs. Robinson

Regardless of your age, you’ve probably seen what is arguably the best and most successful cult film of all time, The Graduate. Today, with oversexed, deranged female teachers playing out the role of Mrs. Robinson with increasing frequency, it can’t help but bring back memories of the film that launched Dustin Hoffman’s career back in 1967.

The Graduate was the surprise hit of the year, with Mike Nichols winning an Oscar for best director. In addition, the movie was nominated for best picture, and Dustin Hoffman, Katharine Ross, and Anne Bancroft all earned Oscar nominations as well. And who can forget Simon and Garfunkel’s time-defying musical score, particularly the memorable song that defined the movie. Is there anyone in the civilized world who hasn’t heard the words:

*And here’s to you, Mrs. Robinson,*
*Jesus loves you more than you will know,*
*Wo wo wo.*
*God bless you, please, Mrs. Robinson,*
*Heaven holds a place for those who pray,*
*Hey hey hey, hey hey hey.*

As I recall, Hoffman received $5,000 for his starring role in The Graduate — the last time he would have to perform for chump change. Of course, some might argue that getting paid $5,000 to be romantically involved with Katharine Ross and sexually involved with her movie mother, the late Anne Bancroft, was the Hollywood deal of the century. The modern-day Mrs. Robinsons turned out by America’s teachers’ unions would have a tough time topping The Graduate when it comes to appealing to the fantasies of teenage boys.

Preceding the movie was the original novel, written by Charles Webb, first published in 1963. At the time, Webb was a young, privileged suburbanite who
based his famous novel on what he saw as the valueless, hypocritical life of his parents and their country club friends.

In the movie, Hoffman’s character, Ben Braddock, is a young man just out of college who has no ambition or sense of adult responsibility. Clearly, Webb was depicting himself in the main character, but his own life has played out even more movie-like than Ben’s.

One would assume that the author of such a great American novel would normally move on to ever more fame and fortune. But not so with Charles Webb, who is now more than forty years removed from the year in which his famous novel was first published. Though Webb did write a few more forgettable novels, he dropped out of the limelight by choice, rejecting mainstream society. *The Graduate* has made buckets of money for publishers and producers, but not for Webb. Why? Because — hold onto your hat — he and his wife signed away the book’s copyright to charity.

Further, they renounced a materialistic life and consumerism and refused to accept their wealthy families’ money, choosing instead to move to England and live the life of classic Bohemians. Early in their relationship, they lived like vagabonds, doing everything from picking fruit to running nudist camps. Most bizarre of all, Webb’s wife of 45 years, Eve, shaved her head and changed her name to Fred (with no legal last name) in a show of support “for men named Fred who have low self-esteem.” On reading this, my first thought was to call the ACLU and file a discrimination suit against Fred for failing to show support for men named Robert.

The last I heard, Charles Webb and Fred were residing in a seaside resort in Brighton, England. At the time (2001), they were living in a one-bedroom apartment with no TV and just a few pieces of furniture.

Webb likes to point out that when *The Graduate* was first published and became a modest success, his family (whose lifestyle it derided) hated it. But when the movie became such a huge success that it catapulted the book into an equally huge
bestseller, his family decided they loved it. As he puts it, “Success is what they related to.”

One of the reasons I find Charles Webb and Fred so fascinating is because, unlike most dropouts, they aren’t crusaders trying to save the world, and they at least claim they don’t begrudge the materialistic worship mentality of most of the other six billion people on our planet. In fact, The Wall Street Journal quoted Webb as saying, “There’s nothing wrong with wealth — it just didn’t work for us.”

Whenever I read unusual life stories, I try to draw meaningful lessons from them. But I had a hard time with this one. When I first read it years ago, it absolutely fascinated me, but I was cautious about drawing conclusions from the weird tale of Charles and Fred.

Because they don’t go around preaching revolution, harassing fishermen in an effort to save whales, or burning down houses to preserve the habitat of wild beasts, I have to respect their implied philosophy: Don’t tell us how to live, and we won’t tell you how to live. Hey, in America and the U.K., that’s a perfectly legitimate position to take.

But I also believe that what you don’t know can hurt you. It’s easy to say that Charles and Fred are doing what makes them happy, but I have to admit that when I first read about their strange travails, it saddened me. One part of me liked them because they were acting on their convictions, weren’t entrapped by the material world, and, above all, weren’t crusading to persuade others to give up their materialistic lifestyle.

I agree with them that Burbs Disease ... rampant consumerism ... keeping up with the corporate executive next door ... whatever you want to call it, is an equally sad way to live. I believe Buddha was right when he said, “All unhappiness is caused by attachment.” And attachment to material things is the worst possible kind of attachment.
But completely dropping out of life — having no discernable purpose — seems like a gigantic waste of human resources. To live in the real world doesn’t mean you have to stay in step with everyone else. It doesn’t mean you have to be hypocritical. And it doesn’t mean you have to worship money or material things. You can be real, act real, and live real in the real world.

I hadn’t thought about Charles Webb and Fred for several years, but when a friend recently sent me an e-mail with the following words, these two rebels without a cause came to mind: “Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming ... ‘Wow! What a ride!'”

Life is meant to be lived, and I don’t believe it is possible to achieve one’s true potential by renouncing “mainstream” life in its entirety. Mainstream life is the ballpark. The players within that ballpark can be intense, goal-driven, and action-oriented or they can be dull, negative, and sedentary. But whatever kind of player you choose to be, you have to be inside the ballpark to play the game. If you want to be the ultimate risk-taker and break all the rules, fine. Just don’t leave the park. Those who have done so tend to become increasingly out of touch with reality.
And the Winner Is: Dell

As a long-time Hewlett-Packard user, I was skeptical whenever anyone suggested I should switch to Dell. However, after considerable urging on the part of my editor, I finally relented and decided to give Dell a try when I needed to replace one of my older HPs.

Unfortunately, shortly after I bought my marvelous made-in-China Dell machine, it refused to boot up. Not to worry, right? After all, I paid extra for “on-site, 24-hour repair service,” so I figured all I had to do was give Dell a ring and have the technical-support department send a technician out to fire up my computer.

Which is where this sad tale begins. Following are bits and pieces of my seventeen phone calls to Dell during a week-long telephone holocaust.

“Welcome to Dell. Your call may be recorded.”

“To dial an extension, please press 1.” (This leads you into a new menu, with more prompts, and almost never to the rep whose extension you dialed.)

“To make a purchase, get pricing information, or complete an online order, press 2.”

“For technical support or for software and technical questions, press 3.”

“For all other issues related to a purchase already made, press 4.”

“To repeat a menu at any time, press 7.” (Translation: “If none of these items are what you’re calling about, tough luck.”) Most companies, as you are undoubtedly and painfully aware, no longer have an option that says, “Or just stay on the line and a representative will answer your call.” And if that option does exist, it’s usually so well hidden in the depths of a sub-sub menu that very few callers ever
succeed in finding it. My recollection is that I pressed 3, and the game started all
over again.)

“If you are calling regarding a business ... blah, blah, blah ...”

“Let me ask you a few questions.” (I didn’t call for you to ask me questions. I
called to ask you questions!)

“If you get stuck, just say ‘Help.’” (Help!)

“Let me confirm that. You said [unintelligible]?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t understand what you said.” (That’s because you’re a !@#$!
robot. If you were a real person, you’d understand.)

“For better service, go to our website.” (Translation: “You don’t fit into one of
our automated cookie-cutter slots, so get stuffed!”)

“Did you know that most of the information our technical people provide you with
is available on the Web?” (Translation: “What we’re trying to tell you, pest, is
that we’re busy — so figure out the solution to your problem yourself.”)

About a half-hour into the call, the robot said: “To help expedite your call, please
have your Dell Service Tag or Dell Express Service Code available.”
(Translation: “Heh, heh, heh ... that’ll discourage a lot of those pesky customers
who haven’t a clue what their Dell Service Tag or Dell Express Service Code is.”)

“Our technicians are aware of your call, and are working very quickly to get to
you.” (This is the mother of all big lies — total B.S.)

“Thank you for waiting. A Dell technician will be with you shortly.” (The
grandmother of all big lies.)

“We apologize for the wait, but we are experiencing an unusually high volume of
calls. (The great-grandmother of all big lies.)
“If you still wish to speak with a technical support representative, stay on the line.” (You idiot, I’ve already been on the line for a half-hour waiting for that to happen.)

“If you want, you can e-mail your questions directly to our support staff.” (Translation: “Please ... PLEASE go away and leave us alone.”)

“Once again, we thank you for your patience.” (Translation: “We should just about have this turkey discouraged enough to hang up and leave us alone ... heh, heh, heh.”)

After seventeen calls similar to the one above, all ranging in length from a half-hour to an hour-and-a-half, I actually managed to trap a human being on the phone who agreed to live up to the company’s service contract and send a technician out with a new hard drive.

When the Dell technician finally arrived, he took one look at my computer and immediately told me that my three-month-old hard drive had failed. He then proceeded to install a new one. But, alas, it was a dead-end. He said he couldn’t install the Windows operating system, because Dell, in its relentless efforts to cut costs, no longer included the operating-system disk that the customer paid for! Instead, Dell encloses a cardboard disk that tells you to contact the company if you ever need the real CD, in which case it will (reluctantly) send it to you. How generous of them. It took another three calls just to connect with a human being in India who finally agreed to send me the disk.

The bottom line is that the Dell technician left me with a new hard drive installed in a still-dead computer. It cost me $1,500 to have a technician come out and reconfigure my computer, properly reinstall all my applications, and tweak all the other nuances of my somewhat complex setup. The story is far worse than the bits and pieces I’ve given you here, but I shall refrain from going into it in any more detail. Let’s just say that I’m not a real good candidate for a Dell testimonial.
I once believed that Dell was on the verge of securing a monopoly in the computer industry, but I now know better. It’s not going to happen, because the company has made the mistake of selling out to the “discourage the customer from bothering us” philosophy in an effort to continually shave overhead and other operating costs. In fact, I am told that Dell’s stated goal is to drive every customer totally insane in the hopes of eliminating all complaints, which will ultimately lead to the elimination of its customer-service department.

Comcast and Verizon were worthy competitors, but the landslide winner of this year’s *We-Hate-Our-Customers Award* is — sound the trumpets — Dell Computer.

Oh … one last item. My editor, who persuaded me to purchase my Dell in the first place, was a really nice young woman … which is why I’m happy that I will always have her close to me. I buried her under my basement floor a short time after my last phone call to Dell. It goes without saying that I would prefer you not say anything about this to anyone.
I cannot tell you how relieved I was when they locked up Martha Stewart for her dastardly crimes. Ditto when they made her wear an ankle bracelet to monitor her whereabouts after her release from the Alderson, West Virginia federal prison. Hundreds of thousands of rapists, pedophiles, and murderers are running wild in our streets, but, by golly, the legal system protected us from that heinous serial cooker and flower planter, Martha Stewart.

Now, don’t get me wrong, I’m not a Martha Stewart fan. In fact, I barely knew who she was until a few years ago. And when I first laid eyes on her, I thought to myself, “That’s one tough lady. I sure wouldn’t want to slow dance with her.” Had I been her ex-husband (who left her while having an affair with their babysitter), I would have gotten myself into the witness-protection program, post haste.

Nevertheless, I can still be objective about Martha’s amazing resiliency. She could have rolled over and hung herself out to dry, like so many other high-profile “law breakers” before her. But she obviously made a choice — and it was a choice — to spoil her detractors’ celebration party midstream.

Martha isn’t reinventing herself. She’s just coming back bigger, better, stronger, and more aggressive than ever. For starters, she now has her own version of the reality TV show The Apprentice. In addition, she has a daily show on lifestyle, which is aired nationwide. Having never met a camera or microphone she didn’t like, she also is going to be hosting a satellite radio show on Sirius.

On top of all this, coming soon to a retailer near you will be Martha Stewart DVDs and her new book, The Martha Rules. The new Martha is making the old Martha seem like a Laura Bush by comparison.
I have no idea how the long term is going to play out for Martha’s company, but that’s almost secondary. Whatever flaws one may find in her personality, she has emerged as the ultimate role model for resiliency. Martha Stewart didn’t just pick herself up, brush herself off, and start resurrecting her career. She actually started that process while she was behind bars.

I still wouldn’t want to slow dance with her, but I do feel compelled to at least tip my hat to The Martha.
Disasters Really Do Happen

If I’ve learned anything at all about life, it’s that disasters really do happen. I’ve always been amazed at how most people live their lives on the assumption that worst-case scenarios haven’t yet been invented.

Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 are obvious examples of what I’m talking about. But Murphy’s Law did not come into existence just on the basis of an occasional natural disaster. Houses burn down every day, people die without their loved ones knowing where important documents are located, and viruses regularly wipe out computers. We live in a complex world where the loss of valuable documents and other items can change a person’s life — overnight and forever — for the worst. Many documents, both hard copy and digital, are like a gun: You may not need them often, but when you do, you need them badly and you need them fast.

One of the few good things that can come out of the wind-and-flood debacles that hit Mississippi and Louisiana is that perhaps more people will begin thinking seriously about their important hard-copy documents as well as their digital files. It’s hard for me to fathom, but surveys show that less than 25 percent of computer users back up their computers on a weekly basis.

I have tens of thousands of documents, folders, graphics, e-mails, e-mail addresses, macros, AutoTexts, AutoCorrects, templates, spreadsheets, and other files stored in digital format. Every evening, I back all of them up on an external hard drive. The backup, external hard drive has allowed me, in emergencies, to continue working on another computer for as long as two weeks.

Note that I said external hard drive. If you try to back up to a second hard drive that is internal, it’s like sawing the branch off a tree while you’re sitting on the end of it. In other words, if your computer is stolen or wiped out in a fire, flood, or by a killer virus, you still lose everything that’s on the internal backup hard drive.
Now, understand that I’m not one of the 20+ percent of computer users who back up their hard drives once a week. Not even close. I back up my hard drive every day! I have fourteen separate backup folders on my external hard drive, and each night I assign a new date to the folder I’m using for the backup. That way, I always have a complete backup for each of the last fourteen days.

If you’re chuckling and thinking “anal retention,” you either don’t know much about computers, don’t use a computer to any serious extent, or have never experienced a computer disaster. If it’s the latter, congratulations on your good fortune. But, trust me, it won’t last. No one makes it through this computerized world of ours without experiencing a computer disaster. Whether you like it or not, it’s coming. It’s only a question of whether you’ll be ready for it.

In addition to the external-hard-drive solution I’ve mentioned, serious computer users would be wise to look into offsite backup as well. I emphasize that this is not in lieu of backing up to an external hard drive, but in addition to it. Pro Softnet Corp.’s IBackup and America Online’s Xdrive are two good sources for this service. They charge only $10 per month for five gigabytes of storage and $100 per month for twenty-five gigabytes.

To put this in proper perspective, think about how many people in New Orleans probably paid hundreds of dollars for Saints and LSU tickets on many occasions, yet could have saved all the data on their computers (including important hard-copy documents stored in digital format) for a fraction of what those tickets cost over the years. While everyone’s heart goes out to the victims of Katrina, it’s important to learn from such a tragic event. If nothing else, what the Katrina catastrophe should have taught everyone is how important it is to get serious about backing up their computers.

When I say serious, I mean adopting an extreme philosophy toward backing up. No matter how overboard you go to protect your files, the costs involved are relatively small, especially when compared to the high cost of regret. And, as a bonus, you won’t have to take a sleeping pill every night before bedtime.
Peace of Mind, Part I

Some months ago, following a keynote address I had given, a middle-aged lady approached me and asked if she could speak with me for a few minutes. I told her I’d be more than happy to speak with her, whereupon she began to share with me the difficulty she was experiencing in trying to cope with stress.

Her demeanor was hyper — talking very fast, highly animated, and tending to offer answers to her own questions. We spoke for about ten minutes, and during that short period of time her cellphone not only rang three times, but with each ring she interrupted our discussion to answer it. While I was taken aback by her cellphone compulsion, I didn’t take it personally. I felt pretty certain it was a way of life for her.

The woman explained that she was a single mother with two boys, ages eleven and thirteen. Her husband had left her several years ago for another woman, and, though she had a full-time job, she was having a very difficult time making ends meet. In a frustrated tone, she told me that her apartment was always “a mess,” because between her job obligations, commuting back and forth to work, grocery shopping, cooking, endlessly chauffeuring her boys, and more, she didn’t have time to straighten it let alone clean it. She was talking at such a rapid pace that it appeared she was afraid she would not get in everything that she wanted to say.

Obviously, I wasn’t able to give this woman much concrete advice in just ten minutes, but I did emphasize one important point to her. I told her that in relating her situation to me, she could have been describing any one of millions of women who find themselves in pretty much the same circumstances day in and day out. Or, for that matter, men. Most men are overloaded with work and obligations that often push them to the brink. The majority of men I talk to are stressed and frustrated by a lack of that ever-dwindling commodity — time.
Since my brief chat with that frazzled woman, I’ve given a lot of thought to the widespread problem of stress. It’s a menace that knows no racial, ethnic, religious, or gender boundaries. Clearly, it is endemic in modern Western culture. However, I’ve come to the conclusion that children, job, lack of time, and other frazzling issues that most of us have to deal with are not the underlying causes of stress. Rather, I am convinced that stress is a self-imposed mental state.

Stress is the antithesis of serenity, peace of mind, and tranquility. Which is why an important factor in reducing stress is to strive for peace of mind. You cannot simultaneously experience tranquility and stress.

So, how do you capture that elusive mental state known as *peace of mind*? A good place to start is to recognize that true peace of mind does not shift with changing circumstances. If you have peace of mind, you can handle both adversity and good fortune with calm confidence. In other words, true peace of mind gives you the strength to stay on course in the face of adversity. What I’m saying here is that you live within your mind. It is not events that shape your world. It’s your thought processes.

To paraphrase something Dale Carnegie said more than fifty years ago, as you and I pass through the decades of life, sadness and misfortune will cross our paths. This is a truism that would be difficult to argue against. Fear, loneliness, rejection, illness, death, financial failure, and loss of love are just a few examples of the kinds of sadness and misfortune we all have to deal with from time to time. Where we differ is how each of us handles such traumas. This, in turn, goes a long way toward determining whether our lives will be tranquil or stressful.

In Part II of this article, I’ll be discussing the importance of “living right” as a key factor in reducing the amount of stress in your life.
Peace of Mind, Part II

The foundation for handling sadness and misfortune, and thus for leading a low-stress life, is what I like to refer to as “living right.” What I mean by this term is consistently being conscious of, and vigilant about, trying to make good choices.

Please, no relativism copout here when it comes to deciding what “living right” and “good choices” mean. I’d be willing to bet that you’ve had more experiences than you can count where you did something that, in your gut, didn’t feel right. And just as many experiences where you did not do something that you knew, deep down inside, you should have done.

In fact, you can apply the “feels right/feels wrong” barometer to virtually any aspect of life. Whenever a person who’s a hundred pounds overweight walks by me at a ballpark — beer in one hand and container of gooey, cheese-covered nachos in the other — I think to myself, “Surely this gal knows that what she’s doing is not in her best interest.” Specifically, she knows that it’s wrong for her health and longevity, not to mention her energy level and capacity for enjoying life. In reality, of course, she doesn’t think about it in such specific terms. Her stress level simply rises and brings with it a higher level of unhappiness.

Another example is when you allow a sales clerk, customer rep, or maintenance person to intimidate you into accepting a less than satisfactory solution to your problem. How many times have you felt stressed and inwardly angry for allowing yourself to be intimidated in such situations?

Or how about when you do something that, at the deepest level of your moral foundation, doesn’t feel honest? In such a situation, if you’re basically an honorable person, your conscience won’t let you get away with it. This often brings the Guilt Fairy into your life, and along with her enough stress to take your mind off other important matters.
And, of course, there’s being late for appointments, particularly if it becomes a way of life. Being late is not just a blatant display of rudeness, it also makes you look weak in the eyes of others. Worse, it causes you to feel weak.

We all desire love, understanding, and recognition, but none of these is foundational to serenity. Nor is alcohol, pills, sexual pleasure, fame, or wealth the antidote to stress. Millions have tried all of these without conquering their stress, and all too many have lived unnecessarily short lives as a result.

The real key to conquering stress is self-examination — continual, honest self-examination regarding the harmony and disharmony in your life. Inner conflict causes stress. By contrast, leading a concentric life (i.e., one in which what you do matches up closely with what you believe in and what you say) brings harmony into your world. Harmony is directly related to how often you follow through and do what you know is right. Likewise, harmony is related to how often you demonstrate the self-discipline to refrain from doing that which you know is wrong.

Finally, if you’re a religionist, stress is a signal that you are disconnected from God. How can you be stressed if you are connected to an infinite source of power that is presumed to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipotent? Similarly, if you’re an atheist, stress is a signal that you are disconnected from the infinite power of the universe, whatever the ultimate scientific explanation of that power may be. In this respect, I agree with Viktor Frankl’s view that there is much less difference between a religionist and an atheist than most people might suspect. The more I examine this issue, the more convinced I am that it’s very much an issue of semantics.

In Part III of this article, I’m going to suggest some specific actions you can take to lower your stress level and bring more serenity, peace of mind, and tranquility into your life.
Peace of Mind, Part III

In Parts I and II of this article, I emphasized that stress is a self-imposed mental state. In today’s Part III, as well as in Parts IV and V, I’m going to suggest some healthy thoughts that I believe will help you to overcome a stressful mind-set. Toward that end, I strongly encourage you to employ the two mental tools described below.

**Shake the habit of fretting and stewing about problems that don’t exist.**

It’s amazing how many people live in a “what if” world. Projecting medical problems is an excellent and all-too-common example of this. My doctor once told me that medical students are notorious for imagining that they’ve contracted some terrible disease. The reason, of course, is that they study diseases on a daily basis. Because they are trained to be constantly on the lookout for the life-threatening symptoms they are learning about, it’s understandable that they would sometimes imagine they have some of those same symptoms.

Can there be a better definition of joy than the feeling you have when the results of your prostate exam, colonoscopy, pap smear, or mammogram come back negative? Until you get that thumbs-up feedback from your doctor or lab, it’s very easy for your mind to play tricks on you and stress you to the limit. It’s a classic example of being stressed over a problem that doesn’t exist. The problem becomes real only if, and when, the results come back positive.

This is precisely what happened to me in 1997 when I was told that my PSA reading was slightly on the high side. I had recently watched a couple of shows on television about prostate cancer, and a 20/20 segment by Hugh Downs put me over the top. To make a long story short, I began sweating heavily at night, my left leg was tingling, and I lost my appetite. I found myself lying in bed and thinking
about what a prostate operation would be like, how much pain would be involved, how much recuperation time would be required — and if I would even survive.

Guess what? My symptoms were 100 percent self-induced. When I visited a second urologist, everything checked out perfectly — including a PSA reading on the low side.

On reflection, though, I’m glad I had that experience, because it taught me how easy it is to induce stress — and even medical symptoms — through the power of the mind. If you excessively dwell on bad things that might happen in your life — medical or otherwise — you only succeed in increasing the chances of their actually happening.

In the words of Thomas Carlyle, “Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand.” In other words, focus on today’s problems, because, in most cases, that’s a full-time job.

**Recognize that for every negative, there’s an offsetting positive.**

In *Million Dollar Habits*, I discuss a principle that I refer to as the Natural Law of Balance. In pointing out that the universe is in balance, I use such examples as electrons and protons, night and day, male and female, hot and cold, and life and death. The reality is that for every positive, there’s an offsetting negative, and for every negative, there’s an offsetting positive. Balance is the natural order of the universe.

The nice thing about it is that when you understand and believe in universal balance, it gives you the mind-set to look quickly and automatically for the offsetting positive in every negative situation. Put another way, think of every negative occurrence as nothing more than an illusion hiding something of value to you. As Richard Bach so eloquently put it in his book *Illusion*, “What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the Master calls a butterfly.”
In Part IV of this article, I’ll be covering three additional thought processes that are sure to reduce the amount of stress in your life and bring about peace of mind.
Peace of Mind, Part IV

In Part III of this article, I discussed two important mind techniques for reducing stress: (1) breaking the habit of fretting and stewing about problems that don’t exist, and (2) recognizing that for every negative, there’s an offsetting positive. Continuing with this mental approach in today’s Part IV, I’m going to discuss three more tools that I believe you’ll find to be particularly effective.

Accept the inevitable.

Notwithstanding the Natural Law of Balance, there are some things you simply can’t do anything about. However, it’s important to be able to discern the difference between inevitable and difficult. For example, success can be difficult, but, regardless of one’s circumstances, failure is not inevitable. Accepting the inevitable is not being negative, it’s actually positive. What’s negative is not being able to ignore the inevitable and move on with your life.

As Charles Swindoll put it, “We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. ... I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react to it.”

Accepting the inevitable and focusing on opportunities in your life is virtually guaranteed to lower your stress level.

Refuse to react to the lies and negative remarks disseminated by others.

There is no person on this planet who cannot relate to this issue, especially those who have high public profiles. Can you imagine enduring the hatred, slander, and defamation that people such as Donald Trump, Martha Stewart, George Bush, and
Bill Clinton have had to put up with over the years? I am convinced that what keeps these people going is a powerful capacity to ignore the vile accusations directed at them. Even if they hear something that bothers them, they are usually able to control themselves.

In my early years as an author, I allowed the media to get to me. It seemed as though every other sentence written about me was a total fabrication. When I complained to my attorney, he explained three things to me that had a dramatic impact on how I handled the media fiction machines from that point on.

First, he told me to forget about filing lawsuits. He said that after spending an enormous amount of time and money, I’d still lose ... even if I won the case. Why? Because in libel suits, you have to prove damages, which is a near-impossible task.

Second, the more you complain about being defamed or slandered, the more attention you draw to the defamatory or slanderous remarks. When we read or hear something negative about ourselves, we tend to blow it way out of proportion. On more than one occasion when I mentioned a negative article about myself to someone, that person would respond with something like, ‘Gee, I read that article, and I thought it was pretty good.’ In other words, what I was reading into the article, through my own sensitive eyes, was very different from the interpretation of others who had read the same article.

Third, it makes you appear to be above the fray when you ignore the mudslinging, step back, and let your supporters defend you. I’ve been doing that for years, and it’s always a great feeling when a reader sends me a copy of a letter he sent to a publication, blasting it for something it printed about me that was untrue. In most cases, those who admire and respect you — especially if they know you well — will defend you when you’re attacked. Just don’t make the naive mistake of expecting everyone to love you, because they won’t. Remember, even Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated.
Intellectualize the reality that life isn’t perfect.

I say intellectualize, because just about everyone claims to understand this reality, but I don’t believe most people take the trouble to analyze what it really means. In *The Road Less Traveled*, Dr. M. Scott Peck pointed out that one of the most traumatic moments of a child’s life is when he discovers that his parents aren’t perfect. Likewise, I believe that one of the most traumatic moments of a parent’s life is when he/she discovers that his/her child isn’t perfect. You can reduce your stress many times over by accepting the reality that there is no perfect child, parent, spouse, home, city, or job.

Learn to take life one wave at a time. Focusing on the Natural Law of Balance will bring an abundance of peace and tranquility into your life.

In the fifth and final installment of this article, I’ll be covering the final two mind techniques for reducing stress: (1) not trying to make the world bend to your will, and (2) controlling anger and bitterness. I consider these to be absolutely essential components of achieving peace of mind.
Peace of Mind, Part V

In this, the final installment of my five-part article on peace of mind, I’m going to share with you two anti-stress techniques that can be very difficult to master. Even so, I can assure you that it will be worth your while to try, because I don’t believe a low stress level and peace of mind are possible without them.

Don’t try to make the world bend to your will.

Trying to get everyone to do things your way goes beyond stress. It’s a frustrating, hopeless exercise that can drive a person mad. I know one wealthy individual, in particular, who long ago lost his ability to think rationally because of his frustration over not being able to force everyone around him to conform to his wishes.

One of the rules of a good delegator is to tell people precisely what you want them to do, then let them do it their way. President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said that the mark of a good executive is when someone hands him a letter that he knows he could have written better, he signs it anyway.

This is an area where you have to be careful, even when dealing with your own children. While it’s a parent’s responsibility to teach and guide his/her children, the wise parent learns early on that they cannot and will not do everything exactly as their parents want them to. The reality is that your children are different human beings than you, so it would be unnatural for them to mirror you 100 percent of the time.

Control anger and bitterness.
It’s worth repeating Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famous words: “For every minute you are angry, you lose sixty seconds of happiness.” The late Jim Blanchard was a great teacher for me in this respect. Jim was one of the most remarkable people I’ve ever known. A paraplegic from the age of eighteen, he not only built a fortune while working from a wheelchair, he traveled the world extensively and did almost everything “normal” people do — and more.

I remember Jim once telling me about a guy who had shafted him out of a lot of money. I asked how he could be so calm about it, and I’ll never forget his response: “I’ve found that it’s disarming to just smile, be polite, and act as though nothing is wrong. Not only do you avoid making enemies by handling things in this manner, you also save yourself a ton of aggravation. All you need to do is avoid having business dealings with that person in the future. And to the extent you are cordial, he’ll probably even sing your praises to everyone — which means you win all the way around.”

I admit that Jim was special when it came to handling people, but his words help me to this day. Whenever I become angry, I give myself time to cool off before saying or doing something that I might be sorry for later. For example, if I impulsively write a quick letter in a heated state of mind, I let it sit for a day or two before mailing it. It’s amazing how much of the angry edge you can take off a letter by editing it a couple of days after you wrote it.

One last thing worth thinking about when it comes to achieving peace of mind. In his book *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, Deepak Chopra says that worrying about stress is more damaging than stress itself. Which brings me back to something I said in Part I of this article: It is not events that shape your world, it is your thought processes. Remember, no matter how long a list of stress inhibitors you compile, your mental state will always be the most important factor when it comes to achieving peace of mind.
Go for It!

It’s a serious mistake to allow yourself to get caught up in the “what-if” and “how-to” trap — attempting to project all problems and solutions in advance of taking action. The reality is that no one can ever hope to know all the problems in advance, let alone all the solutions.

Further, most of the things people worry about never even come to pass. Or, if they do, they end up being not nearly as bad as envisioned. Even better, some of the most ominous circumstances often turn out to be nothing more than disguises for great opportunities.

All this has reinforced my belief that, all other things being equal, taking bold action is almost always a good idea. I thought about this a few months ago when my son asked me if I would take him to a University of Maryland football game on a perfect-weather Saturday.

It was quite a request, considering (1) I had never been to Maryland’s Byrd Stadium, and was not certain how to get there; (2) I estimated that the University of Maryland campus was at least an hour away in modest traffic; (3) it would take us about an hour to get ready to leave the house; (4) it was 10:00 a.m. — two hours before kickoff; and (5) we had no tickets.

Nevertheless, seeing an opportunity to be anointed Father of the Week, I replied, without hesitation, “Sure, let’s do it.” Some might call this impulsive; others might refer to it as abject stupidity. However, I would argue that a fair and enlightened individual would recognize it as nothing more than temporary insanity.

But something about it felt right. It was a beautiful, sunny day; I felt like I could run a marathon backwards; and I saw it as one of those great Steve Martin-type bonding opportunities (as in Father of the Bride).
We pulled out of the driveway at 11:00 a.m., an hour before game time. Surprisingly, traffic was unusually light, even as we began to near the University of Maryland campus. Even more surprising, the stadium came into view about forty minutes after we left the house. I still haven’t figured out how that was mathematically possible.

Now for the not-so-small matter of parking. Cars were jammed into every square inch of space on the side of every road anywhere within sight of the stadium, so I frantically looked for a parking garage. But before I could locate one, would you believe that a single parking space on the side of the road suddenly appeared — amidst thousands of parked cars — about five minutes’ walking time from the stadium?

After I parked the car, my son and I jumped out and began following the crowd toward Byrd Stadium. At this point, I was thinking what a shame it would be if it was a sellout and we’d have to turn around and go home.

Amazingly, however, as we approached the front gate, two men were standing right in front of us, one holding up a pair of tickets. He said they were his season tickets, but that he was going to be sitting elsewhere with his friend that day, so he just wanted to “get rid of them.” He told me they were on the fifty-yard line and that he had paid $40 apiece for them. I braced myself for his asking price — $75? $100? $150? Another surprise: In an almost apologetic tone, he asked if $20 a ticket sounded reasonable to me. I refrained from hugging him, and quickly peeled off two $20 bills from the cash stash in my pocket.

Thus far, I had been wrong about every dire thought that had crossed my mind before agreeing to take my son to the game, but I felt certain I would be right about one thing: I wasn’t holding 50-yard-line seats in my hand. Scalpers are hardworking entrepreneurs, but they have been known to sometimes shade the truth a bit. Surprise again: Our seats were, indeed, smack-dab on the fifty!

At halftime, since I hadn’t eaten anything before leaving the house, I needed a substitute for the apple, banana, and green tea I normally consume for breakfast.
Perusing the menu board at a garbage … er, concession … stand, it became evident that my substitute breakfast was going to be two hotdogs, an ice cream sandwich, and a Pepsi.

To avoid apoplexy, I reminded myself that what I was about to eat was at least healthier than cyanide-laced Kool-Aid … though not by much. Besides, the dogs were only $2.50 apiece, which wouldn’t even buy a bun at Orioles Stadium.

After we finished “breakfast,” we stopped by one of the restrooms for a little relief. How pleasant. It made the rest rooms at RFK Stadium look like the Ritz-Carlton. Shows how easy it is to please college kids. Good thing they think it’s noble to suffer with the masses — because they definitely were suffering.

The bottom line is that it was a great day, a day when everything that seemed like a problem ended up being a plus. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that things turned out so well, because I’ve witnessed the playing out of this type of scenario so often over the years.

The moral is that when you really want to do something but are apprehensive because you see so many “problems” on the horizon, try something novel: Do it anyway! You won’t bat a thousand, but if you continually fail to take action, you’re guaranteed to bat zero.

And even if things don’t work out as you envisioned, you’ll find that in a vast majority of cases the fallout is not nearly as bad as you imagined. More than offsetting any pain you might endure from your missteps are the many wonderful, unexpected things that will often come into your life as a result of taking action.
The Special-Department Ploy

Following my recent move, I called Pitney Bowes to have them change the zip code in the postage meter I have in my home office. Using a series of subtle ploys (like hitting the zero key on the telephone twenty times), I finally got through to a customer-support rep who told me that Pitney had a special department that handles the changing of post office addresses in its meters. She made it clear that no one outside that special department could do it for me.

This puzzled me, but before I could question the Pitney rep, she transferred my call to the highly “specialized” department she had referred to. Once in the cue, the robot didn’t even make a pretense of wanting to hear my request. Instead, it directed me to leave my telephone number, saying that a “dedicated representative” would call me back in the order in which my call was received. Hmm … wonder why I didn’t believe that.

A week passed … no call … so I started over. I called the main customer-service number, was again transferred, again got the we’ll-call-you-back message, and again no one called me back. All told, I did this four times in four weeks.

I finally conjured up the persistence to call Pitney Bowes again, and when I got through to a rep, I immediately told him that I wanted to speak to his supervisor. To my considerable irritation, he kept questioning me as to why. In response, I repeatedly told him that I wasn’t interested in answering his questions, that I was calling so that I could ask the questions, and that my questions would be directed not to him, but to his supervisor.

After his third try at stubbornly asking me questions, I said, “Look, just give me your full name and company ID number. I want to report your refusal to allow me to speak to a supervisor to the head of your department.” Voila! For some strange reason, he immediately told me to hold the line while he fetched a supervisor.
As soon his supervisor came to the line, I explained to her that I was calling about a simple issue — changing the zip code in my postage meter. I asked her if she could handle it herself without shifting me to a department that was not staffed by humanoids. Without hesitation, she replied, “Sure, that’s not a problem. I can do it right now. It will only take a minute or two.” And she did!

I find it utterly fascinating that (1) the first customer-service rep told me that my request could only be handled by a “special department” and (2) that when I was transferred to that department, I couldn’t get anyone to call me back in more than a month. Then, as quick as you could say Barack Obama, a supervisor took care of the matter. The moral: Don’t waste your time talking to nine-to-five customer-service reps.

It’s not so much that they’re ignorant or incompetent. That would be painting all of them with too broad a brush. The reality is that most of them simply don’t care — about you, about your questions, or even about their own company’s reputation. And that I blame solely on the companies who employ and “train” them.

The next time you call a customer-service or technical-support department, try asking for a supervisor right off the bat. That is, unless you’re a full-fledged masochist, in which case I would suggest you stick with the rank-and-file customer-service reps who know nothing, do nothing, and answer nothing … especially the ones who read from a script in the customer-service pools in Bombay and Bangalore. Isn’t this global-village thing great?
The Power of Active Visualization

I use the term “active visualization” to describe the conscious attempt to influence the outcome of events by vividly picturing those outcomes in advance. This is a very powerful concept that can produce truly amazing results for the person who is willing to concentrate with intensity.

As a teenager, my second most favorite sport (after basketball) was fast-pitch softball. I was a catcher, slow afoot but determined. If you’ve ever played fast-pitch softball, you know that the ball is on top of you so quickly after leaving the pitcher’s hand that you can’t afford to blink. Which is why I almost never hit the ball out of the infield the first year I played in an organized league.

When I came to bat during one particular game, the second baseman for the other team yelled to the outfielders, “Move in. This guy’s an infield hitter.” Sure enough, I hit a dribbler to the right side of the mound.

But the second baseman’s remark really ticked me off — so much so that it made me determined to do something about my meek infield hitting. I began by spending hours visualizing and intellectualizing my hitting stance and how I swung the bat.

The first mistake I realized I was making was that I was putting my left foot “in the bucket” — stepping toward third base instead of the pitcher. When your first step is away from the mound, it gives you a head start on getting out of the way if the pitch ends up coming straight at you. Unfortunately, it’s not possible to hit with power when your pivot foot is preparing to head for the hills.

Second, I realized that I wasn’t swinging the bat with authority. Experienced Major League scouts often categorize players as having a “quick bat” or “slow bat.”
Third, I was making the mistake of taking my eye off the ball, a result of focusing on getting out of the way.

Fourth, I was hitting the ball with a stiff swing — i.e., I wasn’t “breaking my wrists” at the moment of impact.

These four steps are a lot to concentrate on when the ball is coming at you, from fifty feet away, at breakneck speed. But I was determined to become a good hitter, so I started practicing them in my backyard every evening.

In step one, I got down in my batting crouch hundreds of times during each session and, with intense concentration, visualized the pitcher going through his windup and letting go of the ball. As I pictured the windup, I focused on stepping directly toward the pitcher with my left foot, which was a bold psychological statement that I intended to meet the pitch head on.

In step two, I swung the bat as hard as I could — initially in slow motion, then working up to full speed. For the first time, I was attacking the pitcher.

In step three, I practiced keeping my eyes glued to the end of the bat and visualized it making contact with the ball.

Finally, in step four, I sharply broke my wrists at the moment of contact.

Each evening, after practicing these four steps hundreds of times in slow motion, I would begin to gradually increase my speed until I was swinging at full throttle. But whether fast or slow, I would mentally count the steps — one, two, three, four — in order to give myself a rhythm.

I still remember the first game in which my 1-2-3-4 visualization practice produced results. The other team had a very fast left-handed pitcher who was pretty wild — the kind of pitcher that would have scared me to death prior to my visualization exercises.
I don’t know exactly how to express what I felt the first time I came to bat, but I distinctly remember there being no doubt in my mind that I was going to hit the ball hard to the outfield. I had visualized and practiced it so many times that I almost felt as though I had an unfair advantage.

In fact, I played a mental game with myself and pretended I was practicing in my backyard. When the pitcher went into his familiar windmill windup, I knew the instant I stepped directly toward him that I was going to make solid contact with the ball. And I did — a cannon shot that almost took his ear off.

I went three for three that day, all line drives to the outfield. After four straight games of great hitting, the manager installed me as the cleanup hitter, and I remained there the rest of the season. Instead of meekly dribbling the ball to the right side of the infield, I now pulled everything to the left, because I was always way out in front of the pitch. So much so that I hit a lot of line drives down the left-field line that went foul, and teams actually starting shifting both their infields and outfields toward the left side of the diamond when I came to bat.

Little did I realize at the time that my successful experiment with the power of visualization would be one of the most important tools I would frequently employ years later in the business world. For example, before business meetings, I would play out in my mind every possible objection, question, and scenario I could think of. And I would think through and practice how I would handle just about any obstacle that was placed in my path.

Preparation through visualization takes an excruciating amount of mental effort, but once you begin reaping the benefits of that effort, you’ll find that the results are more than worth it. What it gets down to is paying the price out front ... and enjoying the benefits down the road.
Robert Ringer is an American icon whose insights into life have helped millions of people worldwide achieve their personal and professional goals. He is the author of eight books, including three #1 bestsellers, two of which have been listed by *The New York Times* among the 15 bestselling motivational books of all time.

Ringer has appeared on numerous national talk shows, including *The Tonight Show*, *Today*, *Good Morning America*, *The Montel Williams Show*, *ABC News Nightline*, and *The Charlie Rose Show*. In addition, he has been the subject of feature articles in such major publications as *Time*, *People*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Barron’s*, and *The New York Times*.

Robert Ringer is an American icon whose insights into life have helped millions of people worldwide achieve their personal and professional goals. He is the author of eight books, including three #1 bestsellers, two of which have been listed by The New York Times among the 15 bestselling motivational books of all time.

Ringer has appeared on numerous national talk shows, including The Tonight Show, Today, Good Morning America, The Montel Williams Show, ABC News Nightline, and The Charlie Rose Show. In addition, he has been the subject of feature articles in such major publications as Time, People, The Wall Street Journal, Fortune, Barron’s, and The New York Times.

Robert Ringer is
A Voice of Sanity in an Insane World

www.tortoisepressinc.com - www.tortoisepress.net