

The Opposite of Regret

After so many years of false starts – or false start-ups – it looked like my luck was about to change. I listened to the phone message again. “Hey Jim! Andy here. Listen, I gave your number to Dave Winslow. I've done some work with him in the past. He's a really good guy. He's starting a company a lot like the one you pitched to me. I think you'd be a good fit.”

The voicemail continued with a phone number and strong encouragement to call. Yay, Andy! Lookin' out for me! I was so ready to be done with this construction gig – an “interim” solution that had lasted since the “dot.bust” of 2001. I wanted to work with some capable and creative people; would this be that chance? I checked email. There it was: a message from Dave. After playing email ping-pong, we scheduled a lunch for the following week.

I met him at *Chow* in Danville. An amiable fellow, Dave was unassuming for the experience that Andy had described. We fell into easy conversation about some common background in maps, as Dave had led an Auto Association and I had just closed a map publishing business. We both knew where paper maps stood in a digital age.

Dave began his pitch: “It's a new area for a very real problem.” Dave described a website to help people get everything together before they died so the chores did not fall on the grieving family. The concept went further than a vault for wills, documents, medical directives and the like. He foresaw cooperative conversations between parents and children to get the important things done. “This should be viewed as a 'project' with lots of actors and contributors.”

Despite my eagerness to tell of my own work in the area, I kept quiet, letting Dave talk. It was,

after all, his show. Ten minutes in, I interjected, “Let me ask you a question: Do you have a will?”

I wanted to see when he'd last updated it, because my own was almost twenty years old and the executor was no longer living. Yet Dave's answer surprised me: “No.”

“That's one of the key challenges here,” I said. “Everybody knows they need to do these things, but most of them – even us – put it off. Your website says these tasks will be easy and even 'fun.' But how do we do that? How do you make the subject of one's death entertaining, or at least compelling?”

Dave acknowledged the problem and talked about some ideas of staging “parties” and shared projects where other “contributors” were brought in to help, whether family members or counselors. Still, I was concerned about the focus on the single event of dying. This fell far short of my own plan that enabled an everlasting presence one could create – a “virtual extension” of life, and a way to stay in the lives of the people we loved.

Dave finished up. “So, do you want to take a couple of days and let me know what you think?”

“Can I tell you now?” I suggested. Surprised but smiling, Dave nodded.

I reached for my pitch binder, created two years earlier. I had thought about it a lot since my beloved, younger “Sister Dear” had died of cancer. We were the two crazy ones in our family of five siblings, daring to do what others considered too whacky, dangerous, or just embarrassing. We not only had fun together: we supported and reinforced each other against the forces of normalcy!

Traveling to see her a week beforehand, I had wondered how to keep her in my life, in the lives of my children. Everyone knew her time was limited to some number of months; but together we two could write cards for her anniversary, for birthdays, for my daughter's upcoming graduation. Maybe we could record her words or make a few videos that I could play back at an appropriate time. Ames could stay with us a little longer, be there for a few more family events, in a more present way than our fading memories would allow.

She had been too sick to pursue that idea. In Denver, I found her in an intensive care room, a colorful cap covering her bald head, trying to smile as she fought the pain. I showed her the Alumni bulletin in which I appeared, also bald, talking about my brave sister and her valiant struggle with cancer. We shared the days until I had to leave to help our mother move into assisted living. There was one more research program she might qualify for – another drug cocktail of promise.

Once in Minnesota, I got the last call. Finally, with no more drug trials to join and abdominal pain that gave her no respite, she gave up the fight. I remember hearing her words over my tears: “It'll be okay, Jimmi. I'll be fine, and I won't have all this pain!” The average life expectancy for ovarian cancer is 18-24 months. For five years, she had endured the surgeries, the chemo, the radiation and the pain – not for herself, but for those she loved. She'd had enough.

I summarized this as an intro for Dave and ran him through the presentation. For the most part, all Dave said was “yup, yup, ... yup,” nodding in agreement. I pointed out key challenges and how I envisioned the site working, the technology to schedule and deliver, the partnerships to help with wills, life stories and video messages. The emotional side of this exchange far

surpassed the administrative details of wills and accounts.

It seemed he understood all this, so I decided to divulge what I had planned to hold back for a subsequent meeting. Excitedly, I told him of the brave new world of gifting e-commerce that my “immortals” could initiate beforehand, while they had the cognizance to make such decisions. An entire ecosystem of assisting vendors and advisers would arise to serve this growing market in afterlife transactions. *Be Here Then*: a way to stay present in the lives of the ones you love.

To be sure, people were hesitant to consider their own demise. To enlist a wide audience, the tools had to be useful now as well as then. I wanted to get people using them without thinking about death – using them for all the usual birthday presents and reminders in a busy life. So an adjunct would be a sister site entitled *Be Here Now*. How many people would make the connection to the Seventies book of that name, I wondered? At some point, they would see the advantage in storing important information for others and for calendaring beyond next year, into the next decade, even the next life: *Be Here Then*.

Dave was enthusiastic. “I like it. I like that you've thought so much about this. So, what do you want to do?” He shrugged in an open gesture, and waited.

“Let's find a time to sit down together and do a jam session! Think through some of these things, figure the core set of features we'd need to start. We can see how we work together.”

“Someplace with a whiteboard,” Dave said. “I can arrange it. I'll send you the pitch documents and let you know where we can meet.”

I finished with a personal summation. “I've been doing small things, Dave, mostly by myself.

As a publisher, I had a cartographer, a GIS guy, a sales guy helping out. That's it. But I want to do something great, something with real impact, and with a great group of people. This could be it.”

An excellent first meeting. I hoped the second would go even better. A week later as I parked my old pickup in the back lot of the executive rental suite where Dave had booked a room, I laughed at a memory. I used to do the same thing with my Camry when I met VCs at parties or for lunch during the first internet wave. I was swept along in that current, eventually leaving a corporate investment position for a promising start-up – that crashed with everything else in the dot bust of '01, just before 9/11. I'd never gotten back into corporate life: just picked up my carpenter's belt, bought an old truck and did the trade. A few years later, on a promised revenue stream of steady customers and credit card cash advances, I'd bought a map publishing company focused on residential and commercial Realtors. Google Maps and Earth were making people more geographically aware, and the Realtor focus offered a solid client base. I was back in the saddle, CEO and Publisher of my own gig! Only, real estate did not rebound; then the next recession hit. MLS areas boundaries and a loyal base did not insulate me from the inevitable, unstoppable onslaught of GPS and live digital mapping. So it was back to construction and the back of the parking lot.

As in our first encounter, I let Dave take the lead. He had raised half a million with a million as the total target for seed. They were developing the blueprint for MVP – minimum viable product – so they could do test roll-outs and show investors some traction, a viable customer demand. Dave drew the concept of the main screen interface on the whiteboard.

Sooner than at first, I was up, sketching in details to the notes on the board, bringing up new points, working with Dave to narrow down the primary issues. We talked about the partnerships needed with providers of related services – law firms, accountancies and the like – and also with those on the demand side who could bring in customers – insurance companies like Blue Shield, health care providers like Kaiser, HR departments of major employers.

I was worried about the company name though: *When I'm Gone*. It focused too much on death, on the single time of departure. In my own prospectus, I had noted the competition's focus on that too: a will, a funeral, a disposition of assets one time and then everyone forgets – the trust dissolves, the attorneys go away, family moves on with their lives. It's over. *When I'm Gone* not only had the same narrow focus, it would remind a person of his imminent death every time he logged on. Who wants to come to a place that's such a stark reminder of mortality?

“I've been getting some feedback that the name isn't going to work,” Dave said.

“Whew!” I exhaled before Dave could continue. “I was worried how to tell you that.”

“Yea,” he said. “The feedback was pretty consistent. We need a new name. IDEO has been working on that.”

He continued to lay out the progress to date, describing the three founders and a lot of people pitching in; but so far, he was the only employee as CEO. IDEO in San Francisco was doing the product design; he had two code shops – Spin Labs and Carbonite -- to do the tech work. A marketing consultant was engaged to start the online buzz. The real hole he had to fill was Business Development to address all the partnerships. “I hate doing that,” he said. “I like

hearing about it, but I hate doing all the follow-up and management.”

I couldn't believe it. “That's what I do best! I can do marketing, but you get so caught up in chasing a tasklist you can't come up for air to be strategic. Biz Dev gives me the focus to be strategic, and to use my interpersonal skills. That is just perfect for me!”

After two hours, Dave paused. Turning toward me, he said, “What would incentivize you to join us? Take a couple of days to think about it and send me something that would work for you.”

This sounded good; but I had to get clarity on one issue – a possible deal breaker for a start-up. “This map business I bought really wiped me out. I'm not going to be able to put any money into the venture. As a matter of fact, I'm going to need something to pay my mortgage, if you want me to go 100% into this. And you know, in a start-up with so much ground to cover, it's going to be 110.”

“It shouldn't be a problem getting some money in your direction. And yes, I'd like you to be committed full time.” Dave seemed to have reached a decision and started to gather his things.

“Wait a minute. We have a conference room; we're both here. Let's keep going! Do you have a hard stop?” Not until later in the afternoon, Dave said. So we worked on. I couldn't believe what a good fit this was. Even my writing was valuable. “I write short stories,” I said. “I believe we understand things through stories. People want to tell about their lives as a story; but also, you're presenting this concept as one. Look at your paragraphs where you have examples. 'A parent and his child could work together to create a plan.' See how much more effective it can be if you reference it like a personal story: 'John and his son Mark work together to create... .’”

“Yup, yup.” We continued addressing issues and jamming on ideas for another two hours before Dave had to leave.

I pondered the situation. I had to come up with a proposal, sounding reasonable enough without selling myself short. I felt like a founder, contributing to the concept and early rollout. Unsure, I called Andy for advice. Andy listened to my rationale about being a “parallel founder” and said, “Jim, you're not a founder. Stop using that word.” I knew I wasn't a founder of this venture, but I had conceived and initiated a similar, stronger venture two years earlier. It was a parallel path, and I had all the perspective and creativity of a founder. But fair enough: I hadn't been able to get funding or people, and these guys were doing so. It was their show.

“So what do you think is a reasonable percentage to ask for? Dave said this was not a post-Series-A hire where a person would get 2%. I'm the first guy he's bringing on and they're still in seed stage. I'll get diluted down to 2% later, but I have to start north of there.”

“Really? He said that? 2%?”

“Yeah. I was thinking 5%, but I could be leaving too much on the table. Maybe it's 10%, or 12. I'm bringing the capability and creativity of a founder, even though I'm not. But ... I'm taking some money out too.”

“Jim, it's not 10%. I don't know what it is. It's not ten. I don't know what to tell you. Usually they make you an offer and give you a number.”

“I know. But that's a good sign, right?”

Within two days, I'd written the proposal, loaded it with enthusiasm, touched up my resume and

included my entire presentation pitch from *Be Here Then*. I hit “Send” and hoped.

The next day I and Annie went out to the beach for a relaxing birthday. Reaching Half Moon Bay, we headed south until passing Pigeon Point Lighthouse. The dunes were still classic northern California and the sun scattered sparkles on the water. Waves sent white rolls tumbling toward the shore. I watched a lone pelican riding the updraft along the dunes in its prehistoric glory. Sixty-three: would that disqualify me from this job, from opportunities like it? I looked younger, but clearly not thirty-something, or forty-something -- the ages of all the people I'd met in San Francisco start-up offices, meet-ups, and entrepreneurial events as I networked my way to nowhere, year after year. There had been a few older people in the TransMedia start-up Weekend I attended in San Francisco, but the bias – or at least statistical observation – was clear: I was an outlier.

Dave was somewhere in his early fifties. While I had been screwing around with carpentry and a small publishing business, Dave had been running operations for major retailers and insurance companies. He'd even founded and sold a couple of software firms during his career. He had cred – credibility that would immunize him from age discrimination. I had no such vaccine.

I'd avoided email during the day, but relented when we got home. Dave had responded that he would look over the materials on his travels during the week and asked me to join his meeting with IDEO in San Francisco. Friday was their presentation on the website and product design.

Landscape lighting filled most of the week. One afternoon I stopped at Kaiser for an appointment. While there, I walked into the Healthy Living center and asked about medical directives and palliative care. How much was member procrastination on this costing them in

futile, end of life care? I left with information on programs and packets with health care directives for Annie and myself. I texted Dave to describe what I had found. Later I remembered some automated programs that took input from a story and made a visual design out of it. We would need more of these automated aids to help people tell their stories and populate their sites. I sent Dave a sample.

On Friday – the day of the IDEO meeting – I had an appointment with an irrigation supplier. I might have been able to keep it if I rose at 5, hit the roads and bridge by 6, then scrambled to San Francisco for the meeting at 1:30. How stupid was that? Why compromise my ability to perform at such an important event? I had to be sharp if I were going to impress in front of one of the premiere design firms in the world. It made no sense to go in half asleep. I rescheduled.

Arriving early – an unusual event for me – I parked at a meter across from Red's Java House and reflected on the changes. Ten years earlier, Red's was just a dive of a coffee house amidst the old, abandoned piers. Now it was a hoppin' place near piers re-purposed to suit the tech influx. In the first wave of the internet, companies left the City to be closer to engineers in the southern Peninsula. Now the tide had changed. The young people that companies were trying to court were themselves attracted to the hip life in SF. This seemed fitting to me, as I had always liked the City best. San Francisco was a place of ideas, of people yearning and dreaming. The dreams didn't always – or even often – work out; but dreamers made for a lively crowd.

It was a lovely day in a city often covered in summer fog. I sat on a bench overlooking the water and tried to relax. What would I find in Pier 28? About a year ago, a friend had suggested I apply to IDEO. After researching the company, I agreed it would be a great fit. Beyond the

marketing, business development and venture investment of my career roles, I was at best an “idea guy.” I could come up with perspectives and possibilities that were just not part of any training or analysis favored by consultancies and business schools. Countless times I had stunned my peers and bosses with suggestions they never saw coming. I'd never seen it as a job title, but being an “idea guy” would be creative fun and a high use of my skills. Excited, I sent in a resume, adding a sheet of “firsts” – ideas I came up with years before the market followed suit. Just another black hole: I never heard back.

There was no time to meditate. Slowly, I breathed in the moist air. With Yerba Buena Island and the Bay Bridge in the background, seagulls and pilings in the fore, it came to me: all I had to do was be *james derwin chandler*. Just be myself – maybe toned down a bit to a sub-orbital, professional level. That would be enough. Reassured, I headed into IDEO.

A young woman at the reception desk was pouring gummy bears into a dish. “Are those the kind with vitamins, or just sugar?” I asked. Maybe they stoked their people with energy supplements.

“Nope, just the candy kind!” As I was early for the meeting, she asked me to wait. I looked around at the open layout, a veritable garden of desks and project walls, posters of people clustered in 3 by 5 photo arrangements.

“Can I wander a bit while I wait?” She informed me I had to stay on the near side of a green line separating the desk area, running down the middle of a hallway. I followed the other half toward the water to a kitchen area with windows open to the fresh, outdoor breezes. What a place to work! It was a far cry from the cubicles of my own San Francisco experiences decades earlier.

Before I could wander further, my charge appeared. “Hello Jim! Glad you could make it.”

Jennifer led me to the conference room. On one side ten feet away was the water lapping against the pier; on the other, a wall with three boards – each with a different direction. Dave had told me of this narrowing to three but could only remember two: Memo and Tapestry.

I liked the latter, as it indicated an opus one was making with his life, weaving threads of different colors together to make an overall creation. It was a bit bland for a name, but it fit. I had researched domains. Of course, Tapestry.com was taken, as was lifetapestry. But Dave and I had talked about the use of the word “my.”

“I've gotten very tired of file systems using My Photos, My Videos, My Files, because everything just gets bunched up under M with no useful distinction. Photos should be under P. But here, 'My' makes it very personal, very unique, tied to one individual. For our purposes, 'My' works.” Dave had agreed.

So I'd checked mylifetapestry.com. It was a bit long but still open. The domain hoarders were selling lifetapestry for \$12,000; myshow.com was asking \$5 million! For twelve bucks, I could buy an insurance policy for a name. I placed the order and had immediately become its proud owner.

Memo, I didn't get. Well, they would soon be explaining it. The third panel was titled Bon Voyage. Ooh – not! I understood the upside of making it light, like a party sendoff. But it still brought the focus to the point of departure: one's own death. Not really all that festive as far as party themes go.

While we waited, I asked Jennifer, “What are your objectives for the presentation today? I ask, because I have a tendency to take ideas and run with them; that may not fit your purposes or timing.”

“I’ll summarize when everyone is here.” A few more people filed in. When Dave arrived, Jennifer got the show on the road. She encouraged questions at any time. I decided not to take that at face value; we only had an hour and a half!

“I like the color scheme of Bon Voyage, but the name ... ,” Dave’s voice trailed off. Tapestry went over better. One of the supporting elements was intriguing: a large, candle like object to hold memories. It was not specified how these would be held or displayed – perhaps some memory chips and a link to a PC or internet TV. I liked how the IDEO folks projected the idea without the constraint of the technical reality. This was a good place for basic ideation.

“The candle reminds me of something,” I said. “In my dresser, I have a bottle of Sea & Ski – a sunscreen lotion. They don’t make it anymore, but I keep it because when I take a whiff, it takes me back to skiing in my teens.”

“If we could get smells, that would be it!” said Dave.

“For me, it’s Coppertone at the beach in the ‘80s!” said one of the IDEO people behind me.

Comments percolated for a minute. In a short lull, I added, “You know, if you put a wireless device in that, and a back-lit display of some kind, you could have images, messages – it would be about as close to a crystal ball as you’re gonna get.”

No one said anything. That was kind of cool, I thought: a wirelessly connected crystal ball, with

memories for review while alive and messages to deliver later from the Great Beyond. They were still quiet. Bored? Stunned? Jennifer moved on to the next subject.

The discussion continued as we approached the 3:00 end time. “We can go longer,” said Dave. “Does anyone have a hard stop?” I was hoping we could run long and had added extra time to the parking meter in anticipation. “Hard stop.” That sounded familiar.

We went through Memo and then got into summarizing thoughts. Dave brought up one thing that he wanted the work to capture. “I’ve been talking to a lot of people about their experiences at the passing of loved ones. The thing that most often comes up is regret. I want us to address that. I don’t know what the opposite of regret is, but we need to provide it.”

There was silence as we all considered his words. I thought about it, then queried aloud, “So, is the opposite of regret ... satisfaction, or fulfillment?”

“It’s not satisfaction. It’s not that. I think it’s fulfillment. It’s a longer lasting thing, tied more to meaning,” Dave answered.

After a few seconds, Jennifer spoke. “We’ve been calling it satisfaction; but I think it actually is fulfillment.”

As we concluded, Dave asked everyone for their opinion on the three. He liked the color scheme of Bon Voyage, but not the name. And he liked elements of the other two. A couple more comments were made in agreement, and one supported Memo’s icon. I added, “The layout of Bon Voyage is good, but I like the thematic aspect of Tapestry. It would be an interesting challenge to see if some kind of warp and weave in the Tapestry theme could do as well as the

Bon Voyage colors. But mostly, I like that – with all the elements presented – we're able to create competitive distinction beyond a death list.”

“Absolutely!” said Dave. “Let's hear it for the IDEO team!” He began clapping and we all joined in. I appreciated the way Dave was supporting his team, even his temporary hired help. He would be a good person to work with.

We finished up and Dave dashed off, saying he'd get back to me in a few days. Jennifer was talking with a couple of IDEO people when I walked over. She gave me her attention.

“Have you looked into TransMedia for this project?” I asked.

Hesitating, she said, “I'm not sure what that means.”

“It's a way of storytelling that involves multiple media, like text, photos, blogs, even physical objects. Some of the ad agencies are using it to develop branding.”

“We call that 360.”

She'd not heard of TransMedia; I'd not heard of 360. “Okay. But I was thinking there might be something to learn from it, to apply to our process. There's software to manage the different elements, both digital and tangible. We may not need that, but we can draw some ideas from the design. After all, we're helping people tell their stories.”

I thanked her and left. Perhaps she'd look into it, if only for the curiosity. Outside the day was still warm and clear. As I headed to the car, I felt a smile grow on my face. I'd done what was required: I'd been *james derwin chandler*.

Dave had asked everyone for comments at the close of the meeting, so I typed up my take and sent it along. Dave's response a few days later was to summarize everyone's view. He also added a comment that a core essence was missing to engage the customer.

Dave had a point. We had many very cool individual elements, but no central grabber to hold a customer's attention and guide him along. It was still a hodge-podge, and for sure, people were going to need a lot of guidance and nudging to finish gathering up their necessary documents, not to mention summarize their lives. What could guide them in a cohesive effort?

I thought of personalizing the whole project, rather like scrap-booking, with articles and letters here, photos and flower petals there, all squashed together in a book. A journal, rather than a scrapbook, the latter sounding too trivial for the subject of someone's life.

The problem was, I myself had so many journals, it would be like a scrapbook of journals to put them all together. But the idea was there. Tear a few pages from this one, add some comments to that one and bring it too. Scotch tape in a few photos and a memento, doing this all digitally. It would start to be a good review of one's life.

We could ask new customers to take a journey with us and document it in a journal – a way of recording everything. That could be the task binding people to the site – a task limited by a timeframe – one that could be adjusted but still move them along. A one year journey; their journey; the journey of a lifetime. I sent these thoughts along to Dave.

A week passed. Dave had said he'd be traveling and talking with investors before he could get back to me. Annie and I had a family celebration for Mother's Day. Monday, still nothing.

Tuesday, I emailed Dave: “Checking in to see where we are. Any update? Anything I can do to further progress?” I wondered about the mystery investors behind the scenes. Maybe it was time for me to get introduced. “Seems it would be useful to meet your other founders sometime,” I added. “Hope your meetings have gone well.”

Dave responded. “Hey Jim – sorry I’ve gotten a bit swamped and am trying to make a few puzzle pieces align. I will be underwater most of this week. I will try to connect with you live Friday PM.”

I wondered my way through the rest of the week. How could Dave not offer me the position? I'd never handled an interview process so well! At the first meeting I'd taken Dave well past his expectation, even suggesting the next step. At the jam session, I was on target, stretching Dave's thinking and showing my alignment. We worked well together, demonstrating one's vulnerability as the other's strength. On the third, it seemed I had impressed not only Dave but the IDEO people. What was left? What more could I do to prove myself?

No one in this group knew more about the domain than I: I'd lived it. I'd developed my own concept, own business plan, own pitch. It extended far beyond where Dave and his competitors were at prepping for death, more meaningful than sparing loved ones some administrative hassle. And I'd kept up with ideas, sending him bits, thoughts, data, directions. Dave absolutely needed me to flush this out. Still, I held back. It was not yet time to swap the truck for a newer car or to announce to family and friends that, at long last, I had a white-collar position again. Not until papers were signed.

At 4:00 pm on Friday, Dave called. We exchanged pleasantries. Then he said, “Jim, we're not

going to be able to bring you on board at this time.”

Are you kidding? “At this time?” This is the time for me to do the creative work. What could have gone wrong? I reeled.

“I've talked with many of our investors over the past week or so. They all tell me that our first four or five hires have to be independently bankable.”

So that was it? I'd impressed everyone I'd met who was working on the project. The people I hadn't met – the moneylenders behind the scenes – were executing me.

“Bankable?” They wanted people who'd started companies and convinced investors before, or run a company up to a liquidation event – a sale or IPO. No, I'd not done that. Still, I was more knowledgeable about this venture than anyone else they could find. Some might look better on paper to a risk-averse investor; but in terms of developing a successful business, no one was going to do that better. Besides, the founders had brought to sale or acquisition about ten companies between them. Wasn't that enough? What more did they want? Couldn't the backers make exception for a guy who knew the domain, who was filled with ideas, who could make the concept work?

As I talked with Dave, I basically ran the status past myself. “I'm hugely disappointed. I see you're stuck with this decision. The first four or five hires? By the time you fill those slots, there will be nothing left for me. And by then, all the creative work and positioning will be done.

That's where I can help the most! What would I be left with in a year? Project Manager? Dave, I've been captain of my own ship; I feel like a co-navigator on yours. I can't go down to gunner's

mate.”

“I know. I hear you. Look, I'm not very good at delivering bad news; but that's where we are.”

He said goodbye and clicked off.

The friggin' investors! I was furious – sick of cocky I-bankers coming into the VC trade as if they could determine a good market or a start-up group worthy of investment. Most didn't know business, just investment. They were good at partying, jetting around with pre-IPO companies to the standard list of institutional investors, and taking all the extra shares for themselves, friends and business executives they were courting for the next roadshow. How many conferences had I been to where they were the ones with eyes glazed over in the afternoon, wondering what the tech presenters were talking about?

So here I was again, with the financial overlords countermanding the operational manager. Shit! Was I ever going to get anywhere on the basis of talent, of performance, of capability? Or was it just an old boy network of risk-averse money men? Shit!

Then I realized just how screwed I was. It wasn't just this job: it was any job! The HR departments were looking for the safe bet: people who had done a particular job for the last three years, preferably for competitors. For the last three years I'd been publishing maps and running construction crews in Spanish. It was creative problem solving and leadership, for sure; but not the type they would be looking for. I'd been shot down with every resume I sent.

My only hope had been to meet people in working environments, show them what I could do. At a Founders group in the City, fellow entrepreneurs were given the competitive challenge of

building the highest tower in the room. The winners had exploited the small eighth-inch gap between tiles. “But there are lots of ways to approach this,” I said in the post-discussion. “Look! Here's one we all missed!” I pointed out the gap alongside a recessed florescent light. “Another inch and a half – ten times the winning margin. And who says that earlier gap was actually higher? This ceiling is just suspended by wires from the concrete floor above. I want an altitude measurement. And if we went beyond this room to the lobby, we've got fifty feet of free space to work with!”

At a Start-up Weekend event, I was a solid contributor to my group. When it came time to test our concept regarding a youthful audience, I provided a research subject in the form of my grandson. But my greatest value lay in synthesizing across disciplines in creative ways, even when I had no expertise in one of them. Recently I'd attended a local lecture well outside my field and heard the presenting MD describe her frustration in developing antibiotics. “For every promising drug we get through the years of R&D and government approvals, bacteria morphs to negate the advances. We never catch up.”

I'd never taken high school biology and my professional experience had been in publishing and tech. But the thing about computing is the tremendous leverage that software programs offer. One can start a process, increment variables by one, and run it again – thousands of times a second. If she could utilize this iterative technique in her biology, she could test thousands of variants in much shorter periods of time. She needed a way to expedite, a significant change in her method of exploration for new antibiotics.

“Way to think outside the box!” she responded. “I'll have to think about that! I don't know

anyone who's doing it that way. Wait, there is one researcher at Harvard who's done something like it. I'll have to look into this some more.”

None of this mattered, I now realized. If my background was insufficient, or at least not current, and my creative intelligence was not appreciated, where did that leave me? Up creek, no paddle. S-O-L. Absolutely, unequivocally, fucked.

Practically vibrating, I needed to find some calm. I walked out to the deck and sat, meditating as best I could. Emotion overwhelmed and I couldn't focus. I breathed slowly, letting the tension exhale from my body. I looked at this again. What was the other side? What was their perspective?

They were the money men, the investors, the gamblers. They didn't do the work; they hired others to do it. Their job was to minimize risk. Doing this entailed hiring someone who'd already done the task. Sure, I could see that. But this was new ground: nobody had done it! Exploring unknown areas was my strong suit. I had the ideas and the vision that other, more operationally minded managers lacked. I was the idea guy!

Minimizing risk was all about operations, though. They would look for managers who had taken an idea and run with it – all the way through a public or private offering, returning a 10X multiple on the cash invested. They didn't invest in ideas; they invested in people – preferably well-proven people. They chased serial entrepreneurs or established senior managers. That, I was not.

I never claimed to be! Dave and the other founders were those guys, building the operational

side. But they needed good ideas to execute on. They needed visionaries to divine future directions. Dave knew this and wanted me on the team. Apparently, he wasn't calling the shots. The money men wanted everyone on the crew to be A-list entrepreneurs. I'd been an entrepreneur since childhood, but never succeeded to the A-list level. I did things myself, un-leveraged. What I'd always lacked was a team. No entrepreneurs reached success alone.

Alone, neither had I. In Biz School, I expanded my major from Marketing to include General Management as well – the closest thing Berkeley had for Entrepreneurship at the time. Maybe I should have added Finance. No, I should have added a Finance classmate to my start-up. I should have spent more time hanging out with classmates to form an interdisciplinary team. Too independent and cashless, I tried to do all things myself. That made me not just an entrepreneur, but an unsuccessful one.

I thought of the list of “Firsts” I had made for the IDEO job application: first to send an electronic greeting card over a network – the telephone network before the Internet; audiocasting over a network years before podcasts arrived; skiing with portable music years before the Walkman; installing car headphones in my VW van before cassettes and CDs. My list went on – too long, I realized. Every item demonstrated not only my creativity but, more importantly, my inability to manifest these ideas into businesses or salable products. It was a list of brilliant failures, every fuckin' one.

I might have had better luck if Dave had trotted me out to the investors after he'd hired one or two guys – guys with IPO experience to assuage the investor concerns, allowing me to come in and get the development work done. But the first person he hired would likely have been the VP

of BizDev. Who needs Sales before a product is available? Even Engineering has to have guidelines spec'd out. Maybe a VP of Marketing would have been valuable to do product and customer research.

I wasn't angry at Dave. He wanted me on board. Come to think of it, he probably took a hit for putting me up as his first candidate. It was my bad for not having the patience and willingness to conform, to climb the corporate ladders with titles like VP and headcounts in the hundreds. My mother's advice had once again been confirmed: "Get a good job with a big company for five years." Instead, I launched out of grad school with a business plan for romantic greeting cards and a budget of zero. Crash, bang, repeat! At 63, I wasn't up for this anymore. I was, quite simply, fucked.

Options were limited. I sent an email to the IDEO contact, thinking that I had performed well and might have impressed that crowd. Within a few hours, Jennifer responded enthusiastically to my suggestion to discuss a proposal. "So intriguing!" She said she'd get her boss lined up and we could all talk together. With others in the mix, I felt obliged to send another email clarifying that my proposal was to work with them, rather than hire them. I never heard back: no explanation, no excuse – just the silence of abandonment.

I had long ago accepted the uncertainty of how people respond. One person in a room could appreciate the creativity; another could be threatened by it. Maybe it was just too weird for thirty-somethings to work side by side with an older contributor. I'd never know.

Option Two was to keep in good stead with Dave. I sent him an email: "enjoyed working with you; it was a good shot; thought the cred you founders had would have been enough for the

investors.” I also offered an idea I'd had while pondering it all in a coffeehouse. On the wall of Peet's in Los Altos was a tapestry with a repeating pattern. I could envision our customers choosing a design they liked, slowly seeing it filled in as they completed the necessary tasks to get things in order. The tapestry would blossom as a motivation and reward. I also told him of the mylifetapestry.com name I had registered, and offered it if needed. I wished him well.

I could understand reasons why he never responded: cutting ties so it didn't look like he was accepting valuable input from someone they hadn't treated well; not appearing to go against commandments of his investors; or just staying focused on moving ahead. Still, in the realm of distant possibilities, I was hoping for a “fun to work with you, good luck, and sorry it didn't turn out.”

The Third Option was joining the competition. I felt a little odd about this, but I had no further allegiance to Dave's company. I researched the two competitors from Andy's assessment. They could definitely use my input and skills. I wouldn't have to say much about Dave's effort.

Frankly, Dave had everything I'd brought to the party; so we were starting even. I knew one company was in New York but thought the other was in San Francisco. Not: both in New York. Not gonna work for me, for Annie, for the family.

Cue the music: “One, two, three strikes you're out at the old ball game.” Guess it's back to the trade and the truck, hammers and nails, ladders and ditches. My last run of working years was not looking so impactful, creative, or lucrative. The best shot I could ever have imagined had just vanished, or been erased.

I'd never pass muster for the job applications that asked, “Have you been doing exactly what we

need with proven success and increasing responsibility for the last three years at one of our competitors?” A new set of questions now became relevant. How many miles past 214,000 will your truck go? How long can you balance safely atop a twenty foot ladder? If social security will give you X, your retirement of Y got wiped out in a layoff and two recessions, the value of your house was ($Z - \text{first loan} - \text{second loan} - \text{selling costs} = 0$), then where can you afford to live that's not five feet from neighbors in all directions or the middle of the Nevada desert?

Out on the deck, I looked beyond the pitosporum trees, across the valley toward the Bay. I'd always liked “stretching my eyes” with a view. I considered the shake out. What if they were right? What if I couldn't perform? I didn't believe that, but it was fair to look from the investors' point of view. They wanted a go-getter entrepreneur, someone so driven to succeed that he had pushed everything aside and done it already. Someone who had demonstrated the capabilities – not just of initiating a brilliant idea – but also of executing the plan to make that idea into reality, a profitable reality.

Why hadn't I done that? I had the capability; but the drive? Could I keep that energy focused on one goal for as long as it took to get there? If I had the resources and the crew, I believed yes, I could. It was drumming up money and people I'd never achieved. I was an independent actor, in projects, small business, and even large business. In corporate settings, I'd preferred addressing problems and challenges while others strategically maneuvered for management positions that controlled headcounts. I found myself in roles with horizontal connections to other departments, outside vendors, partners, and customers. The vertical rise that would have impressed – and indeed would have given me experience in managing people and projects – was something I hadn't pursued.

Perhaps ambition was one of those necessary traits for entrepreneurs. I was a leader without ambition. I had been elected to positions – class president, student body president, MC for corporate events, representative for the company – without actually pursuing them. In small groups, I took a prominent role – because the effort required organization, momentum, and direction. But I did not herald my contributions to upper management nor seek to rise in the ranks. I just did what was required. And rise, I did not.

Despite their reputation, VCs were risk-averse. When co-investing with them in the first internet run, I had learned this: risk-tolerant, yes; risk-seeking, no. The more risk they could remove from an investment, the better. So they squeezed entrepreneurs to hit more milestones, running them lower on cash and more desperate in negotiations. I could make a case that domain expertise and the skills of scouting uncharted waters were essential in a new endeavor such as this. But in the end, it was their money; they were allowed to hedge their bets as they wished.

So where did that leave me? It felt like “same ol' same 'ol,” a repeating pattern of great ideas that never got off the ground. This one, however, I couldn't let go. It had been different: grounded in real experience, serving a real need, paving the way into an entirely new commercial and social dimension. Yes, revenues would be slow to start as people grappled with an emotionally difficult and radically new concept. But revenue would come in direct and also indirect ways: not just subscriptions and advertising, but transaction fees, commissions, statistical research and more – ways I couldn't even think of yet. Ways I wasn't going to be a part of. Damn! Ugh. Whether I was qualified was fast becoming moot.

So be it. Let them run. Maybe they'd do a decent job of it; maybe they'd stop at a convenient to-

do list for the considerate departee. It would take a lot of thought to figure out how to expand beyond that, to help people create snapshots of their lives and to look forward, discovering how they could help loved ones in ways that endured.

If I couldn't create the company that led this, I could do as I've always done: go straight in, solo, and figure it out. I could create my own legacy, write my own stories, share my own tender moments, send my own wishes of love and advice. I could look through my proverbial box of old photos and knickknacks, digitizing memories I wished to share. Not just of my deeds and misdeeds, adventures and catastrophes, but those proud actions and loving expressions by my daughters. The “first flowers” I presented to my youngest, Chelsea, before the Father-Daughter dance – important mostly for that look of adoration in her eyes. I had no camera, but could capture the moment in words uploaded. The photo of my little Ashley in the Colorado stream, all fancied up in the pretty dress Annie had made, venturing into the current as her father would do – a beautiful blending of her mother and me. My eldest, Michelle, in cap and gown, feeling the pride of accomplishment, thankful for the love and support of her parents. I would gather them all up and send them back with gratitude, congratulations and love.

Notes from a journal would tell my children of my wildish younger days – tell their children too about Gramps and all the crazy things he did. With a video camcorder, I'd record some private messages to my lovely girls, my wife and daughters: reinforcing, encouraging, entertaining, revealing. I could do this from places sacred to me, like the Sierras, or special to them: “Log World” where we first went camping, the low water level creating a network of fallen, traversible trunks; the beach at Half Moon Bay where we played in the sand and ran through water, laughing under the sun.

Private things that they would find embarrassing in youth, understandable in a time of parenting, touching and human with the experience of age. The stumbling quest for sexual identity of adolescence, the overwhelming fear of responsibility for a newborn, the review of failures, the satisfaction of successes, the regrets for roads untaken. Maybe I'd even share the stories of their conceptions: romantic, passionate, hopeful, so well rewarded.

Not just what I wanted to tell at the appropriate times; also and more importantly, what they needed to hear. My struggles with identity, peer pressure, career, loneliness, relationships, fallibility – they would have their own bouts with these. Perhaps, and very likely, they could learn from my bumbings and victories – as they had always done! Their whole lives they watched Dad, seeing what not to do as much as what worked, feeling that they could do something if Dad had tried. So why not keep that going, to different levels of learning, times requiring a different spin and interpretation?

My own legacy. After all, I've lived in interesting times: the upheaval of the Sixties with the conflicts and freedoms demonstrated in the streets; the Aquarian exploration of the Seventies with love, astrology, mysticism, and meditation; the Apples, Commodores and IBM PCs that brought computing to the masses in the Eighties; the networking of the Nineties and the dot-boom; the dot-bust reality of the new millennium; and the financial trials of the Ought decade, with unemployment, recession, under-employment, and economic collapse. There were stories here, of bravery and cowardice, of heroism and greed. Why should my family wait for PBS specials or someone's Hollywood re-enactment? I wanted to tell these tales to my girls. If others could benefit from them – hey, great.

This felt better. I had a path. Not all was lost with this catastrophe; I could cull something valuable from it, something actionable. If I could pull this off – my own legacy to share with my children, their children, and who knows who else – I would gain a sense of accomplishment, of purpose, of meaning communicated.

Sitting on the deck, I relaxed as I watched a Southwest jet bank toward its approach into Oakland. People coming and going; life continuing on. I felt the sense of loss begin to subside. Yes, it would have been better to have ridden this start-up with people and funding. But not all was lost. I would live what I preached, leaving behind the regret of missed opportunities. I would craft a legacy, summarizing my knowledge, my insight, my experience; suggesting, recommending, encouraging others to go boldly. In so doing, I would conquer my own regrets, create my own fulfillment – my own life tapestry.