

LEARNING THE HARD WAY

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Several years ago, I was invited to speak to the graduating senior advertising majors, and their parents, at the University of Georgia's School of Journalism. The speech that I gave was different than what they were expecting. Since giving this speech, I have had occasion to share it with friends in business, all of whom claimed to have gotten something important out of it. Here is what I said to those kids, with some minor changes along the way.

The usual topic on occasions like this is career advice: how to find a job; what to expect in the business world; the things you didn't learn in school; etc. I'm not going to talk about any of those things tonight for two reasons: first of all, I know those subjects have been well covered here at Georgia, because you were fortunate enough to attend one of the finest Journalism Schools in the country. Secondly, I'm not going to talk about your future careers because there is a more important topic on my mind: your future lives.

Let me start by putting things into the proper context as far as my personal experience is concerned. After stints with advertising agencies in Pittsburgh, New York and Atlanta, I wound up buying an interest in Burton-Campbell. At the time, we employed 12 people and billed about \$2 million. A group of us set out to build a new agency inside of the old one. We had some rough sledding in the beginning, but we made steady progress. After five years, we had grown from \$2 to \$10 million, and we were beginning to become known as the "hot agency" in town. About that time, Gabe Massimi , a world class creative director, came over from McDonald & Little and we were on our way. Our philosophy was simple: attract the best people and provide an environment that would keep them happy. Good people at a good place to work. Seemingly simple, but tough to execute. We did it.

We attracted the best people at every position. We rewarded them financially with relatively high salaries, as well as bonuses and profit sharing at a time when agencies were moving away from such things. We also had all types of unusual perks like extensive professional training programs; self improvement programs on everything from self-defense to stop smoking; our own gourmet kitchen with take-home gourmet meals; even confidential free cab service if they ever had a problem in the evening. We worked to build a nurturing environment, our own culture.

Burton-Campbell became more than a place to work; it was like a private society. People who were a part of it were extremely proud because they were working in the most desirable place in town. Outsiders grew envious.

We attracted the choice people, and the choice clients followed. We built a client list that was the envy of every agency in town. It included the new BellSouth Corporate account, Sunbeam appliances, the Vail ski resort, American Medical, First Union Bank, West Point Pepperell, Blue Cross of Florida, True Temper hardware, Wilkinson Sword, Scripto, Allegheny International, and, the biggest of all, Ryder Truck Rental.

We grew to \$68 million in billings with 138 employees and offices in Miami and Charlotte, in addition to the growing headquarters in Atlanta. We also diversified into public relations, graphic design, direct response and typography. Other agencies followed suit. We even became partners in a new office building in Atlanta, a move that was planned to be highly rewarding for 10 of our key people.

I was honestly intoxicated by the success of the agency. Year after year, we couldn't seem to do anything wrong. We were drawing national attention. There were regular business trips to Europe. We flew on the Concorde for London meetings on our international business, had board meetings at Vail, drove exotic cars and started to map plans to become Atlanta's first \$100 million agency. Then, after 12 years of incredible success, things started to change.

We went through the most incredible sequence of setbacks that could be imagined:

1. First we encountered a new vp of marketing at First Union who was making our lives difficult and threatening to have an agency review. We decided to beat him to the punch by resigning the account. We would simply get another bank, or so we thought.
2. The Vail ski resort was sold to TV mogul George Gillette. He decided to replace the president and vp of marketing, wonderful clients who actually sent the agency fan mail. Gillette then decided he no longer needed an agency.
3. American Medical sold the division that we handled, Brookwood Recovery Centers, to the Lutheran Church in Chicago. They took the account into their house agency (yes, the Lutheran Church has a house agency) even though we had been extraordinarily successful on their behalf, having won major creative awards and a national Gold Effie from the American Marketing Association.
4. Scripto was sold by Allegheny International to the Japanese manufacturing company Tokai Seiki. We were asked to compete with Tokai's Japanese agency, and we won. What a coup. We beat out a Japanese agency for a Japanese account. But the victory was short lived because the Scripto headquarters were moved to LA a short time later, and a new agency was appointed. Scratch another client for whom we had won a Gold Effie.
5. Allegheny also sold True Temper to a Maryland corporation. The account went to the corporate agency.

6. The carpeting division of West Point Pepperell, best known for their Cabin Crafts brand, informed us that they would no longer be needing our services because they were going to stop advertising. The fiber makers like DuPont and Monsanto were taking over branding in the consumer's mind. There hasn't been a Cabin Crafts consumer ad since.

7. Then came the first of the two major blows: the Chairman of Allegheny International, Bob Buckley, who had been the Medici of Burton-Campbell, resigned under pressure from the board following a highly critical cover story in Business Week. Yes, a cover story.

8. The worst blow of all was learning that Ryder Truck Rental was planning to have a review. We had done the best work in our history for Ryder, having won the account in three rounds of competition with the New York office of JWT. Our work, according to the Ryder people in the field, was the most effective advertising that had ever been done for Ryder. Then we were told that the chairman thought it was inappropriate for a large corporation like Ryder to be dealing with a relatively small Atlanta agency. Supposedly, some Wall Street friends had guided his thinking on the subject. We competed with a group of mega agencies from New York. The New York office of Ogilvy & Mather won.

We lost \$22 million in Ryder billings, and despite strong assurances from Ryder that we would still be one of their agencies, we wound up with nothing.

There you have it. In approximately one year's time, we lost well over half of our business, going from a high of \$68 million to less than \$30 million.. We had a massive layoff, with 27 people being let go. (In the previous 12 years we had never had a down year in billings, nor had we ever laid anyone off.) The offices in Charlotte and Miami were closed at considerable losses. We also had to abandon our new building plans.

Our difficulties became big news simply because we had never had difficulties before. The trade press put us under a magnifying glass, reporting every negative development as front page news. When we complained about the prominent news treatment given to relatively minor items, we were told these items were big news because they were happening to Burton-Campbell.

We were insulated from immediate financial disaster by strong cash reserves that had been built up over the years, but we knew that our long term survival depended upon a merger. We aggressively sought a partner locally, in New York and even in London. Several deals came close, but then didn't materialize, mostly because of conflicts, often involving our largest remaining account BellSouth. Eventually, we got together with Earle Palmer Brown out of Washington.

That's the business side of what happened, but that's not what I want you to remember. What I want you to take with you is the personal side of this nightmarish experience, It's this side of the story that I hope will have lasting value for you.

I spoke earlier of my intoxication from my work. It is hard now to describe the highs that I felt during those times . I once read that people who enjoy great success in business are said to have discovered a secret money stream known only to themselves. I came to believe that I had become a member of this elite group. Having had such a high batting average for so long, I developed great confidence in my intuitive powers. It was as though I was anointed with a special gift. I had moved beyond being intoxicated by success. I was addicted to it. My work had become my life.

There were early danger signs to which I was oblivious, the worst of which was damage to my marriage. My marriage therapist , said that my priorities were confused. I said he didn't understand me and the demands placed upon someone at my level of achievement. Ongoing difficulties and a trial separation followed, while I pursued still greater successes. I also started spending less time with old friends as I unconsciously gave top priority to my work.

Then it happened. My compulsion with my work led to my just dessert. My infallibility of 12 years suddenly turned to an endless string of setbacks that I came to regard as personal failures. At first, the decline in the agency's fortunes was like a terminal illness in a loved one, then it became

an illness within me. The stress became unbearable, and I began to exhibit the classic symptoms of stress: weight loss, insomnia, irritability and a growing desire to avoid contact with others. Even though I had run in three marathons, I suddenly lost my desire to exercise. Most worrisome of all to me was my inability to right myself. All of my life, I had been able to deal with adversity effectively. I had always taken pride in my ability to counterpunch, to hit harder than I had been hit. My special power was gone, and I knew that I needed help.

I saw a therapist who helped me out of the abyss. I learned that I was suffering from depression brought on by my business problems. The downturn of my business had become a downturn in my self. Because I was one with my work, I suffered when my work suffered. As someone once said: "If you are what you do, when you no longer do it you aren't." The suffering was two fold: once when a setback actually occurred and a second time when it appeared on the front page of Adweek magazine. The steady stream of this was like a personal punishment from which there was no relief.

I learned that I could recover only by separating myself from my work, but it seemed to be an impossible task. A lifetime of oneness with my work would not be overcome easily.

I could understand the problem intellectually, but I could not make the break emotionally. It was as though I was locked in a battle with an overwhelming foe. Wining would not be easy. It would be a process, and I would need help.

Thankfully, I had a refuge available to me in this time of need: my family. From this refuge, I came to understand that the things that had gone wrong were not my fault. I didn't cause accounts to be sold away from the agency, or to stop advertising, or to go to New York for the wrong reasons. I could do nothing about Bob Buckley being fired by the board of Allegheny. My sons and daughter took an ongoing active interest in my problems. Their love and support also grew stronger during my time of need. After many years of my helping them with their problems, the tables had turned and they were helping me. And I heard from my good friends, fewer in number than I had counted during the agency's peak, but steadfastly loyal and genuinely concerned.

So, with the support of family and friends, I worked my way out of my depression. I got to the point where I wanted to know more about this strange feeling that had gripped me, and I began to read books on the subject. The more I learned, the better I felt.

Eventually, I came to recognize that I could separate myself from my work. I also learned that the misfortunes of Burton-Campbell would require a legitimate grieving process., just as one might experience over the loss of a loved one.

From my new perspective, I saw that Burton-Campbell was an extraordinary group of people who enjoyed unparalleled success together, but that was over. Now, we are each off on new pursuits, some with

Earle Palmer Brown and a number with their own businesses., or with other agencies

Burton-Campbell at its prime was not as much an office of people as it was like the cast of a successful television series, like MASH or Hill Street Blues. The only problem was that we ran one season too long.

Having survived this roller coaster experience, I can now claim the right to offer words of wisdom to the world. Here are the gems that I want to leave with you, and if one or two of them is someday remembered by one of you, I will be a very grateful man:

1. Keep your priorities straight. Try to emulate the Europeans who work to live rather than the over achievers in our society who live to work. Having had things backwards for some time, I know that the Europeans have the right idea. The problem is that we are conditioned by our society to confuse our selves with our work. We typically ask "...and what do you do?" of someone within seconds of meeting them. It is tough to do, but you have to distinguish who you are from what you do.

Now I'm not suggesting that you abandon your career plans and go live in the woods and eat berries. You should have a good career plan and work damned hard to get ahead. Have rewarding and fun-filled careers. Just keep your priorities straight in the process.

2. Make a life plan, not a career plan. Decide what you want to do with your life before you are concerned with where you are working. There is an acid test that you might apply to yourself every so often: ask yourself what you want to be remembered for . That helps you determine the relative importance of life goals versus career goals.

Wining Addys, Clios, Effies and share points are fine as career goals, but not as life goals. As corny as this may sound to you right now, you would rather be remembered in the end based upon what you accomplished as a husband, a wife, a father, a mother, a friend.

Here's a short story to illustrate this point. Not too long ago, while on a family vacation in Key West, I met a charter fisherman. As we were preparing for a trip in his boat, which was conveniently located right behind his house, it was obvious that he was a man who was enjoying himself.. I commented that he must be the envy of his customers, who can experience his lifestyle only one or two days a year, before they return to the confines of their offices. He said, "yeah, they all say that. I tell them all the same thing: it's all in how you keep score. They keep score according to how much money they make. I keep score according to how much I'm enjoying my life." Profound words from the fisherman. I didn't catch any fish that day, but the fisherman's simple philosophy on life has stayed with me.

3. Protect your vital relationships. While I dropped the ball at times, I am thankful that I never irreparably damaged my vital family relationships with my children. While I did wind up getting divorced, for reasons not really related to my work, I have close relationships with my children. I attribute this to my Italian-American heritage to which I will return in a minute.

You will know when your work is taking its toll on your relationships. When you hear telltale comments like: " You have to work late again?"; " We don't seem to have much time together"; or "We don't have much in common anymore", you are headed for trouble. Too many put careers ahead of relationships and wind up getting divorced and losing your families. I've seen it happen to lots of people, most of whom suffer as a result.

4. Be alert to the signs of stress and respond appropriately when you see them. Achieving success in your work doesn't assure happiness in your life. In fact, a recent research study suggests that success and happiness may actually work at cross purposes. Dr. Kenneth Pelletier of USC studied executives at 14 major corporations for 5 years and drew some frightening conclusions: only 7% of successful people truly lead the "good life" that success is expected to provide. The other 93% gave up important aspects of their lives to get to the top. They suffered from ill health and broken relationships. The result was a set of circumstances that made it virtually impossible to enjoy their professional success. The only good news out

of the study was that the problem characteristics in the stressed out achievers were acquired rather than inherited.

Our society is probably the most stressful society in the world. Stress is now seen as a major cause of illness. It is the principle cause of strokes and heart disease as well as ulcers and other ailments. (Bypass surgery now seems to be as common as tonsillectomies.) And this stress is largely the result of pressures in our workplace: the nature of the work, unreasonable superiors or sometimes just our perception of our performance.

Newsweek did a cover story on stress, and Connie Chung recently hosted a network special on the subject. She presented a number of "before and after" stories about people who had been in life-threatening situations before they recognized the effects of stress upon their health. Most of them, including Martin Sheen, the actor, had suffered heart attacks and had bypass surgery. Sheen, a changed man with newfound priorities in life, was asked what his experience had taught him. He laughed and said that he still couldn't get over what an "asshole" he had been when he was so obsessed with himself and his career. He spoke with wisdom and great assurance about the quality of life that he had found the hard way. And so did the others. They were all relaxed and insightful about their lives. But it took a brush with death to gain those perspectives. They all learned the hard way, as did I.

5. My final advice is to follow your bliss. This advice comes from Joseph Campbell, a scholar, professor and philosopher who gained broad exposure through a series of interviews conducted by Bill Moyers on PBS. These interviews are contained in a wonderful book entitled *The Power of Myth*.

Campbell defines bliss as the experience that taps something deep within you and gives you a keen sense of satisfaction and a feeling of well being. The odds are that your true bliss may relate to something other than your work, but it wouldn't necessarily exclude your work. And the odds are that it really has nothing to do with material gains, which reminds me of another celebrity story. Barbara Walters was wrapping up an interview with Sylvester Stallone. They were sitting in the middle of his huge personal gallery, surrounded by priceless works of art. Having just talked about Stallone's incredible, world-wide box office appeal, Barbara asked one more question: "If I were to come back in one year to see you again, what would you like to be different about yourself?" His eyes welled with tears and he said: "I'd want to be happy."

Campbell maintains that when you are following your bliss it's as though you are being helped or guided by hidden hands. It feels good, and you know it. It's as though you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while waiting for you. And the life you ought to be living is the life you are living. He says: "Follow your bliss and don't be afraid...doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be."

Looking at marriage and bliss, Campbell maintains that we can enjoy bliss in a relationship only if we are committed to the one thing that two become. Your spouse is literally your other half, and your spouse is your life commitment, your prime concern, more important than anything else, including your career. Campbell says flatly "If your marriage is not your prime concern, you're not married."

Many a marriage has suffered from confused priorities. Actually, my marriage of 25 years ended because my ex-wife and I never did achieve that true and blissful unity. Our careers and family priorities concealed the fault for many years. With the departure of our grown children, the fault became painfully evident. Thankfully, I still have strong relationships with my children

You have the chance to avoid the mistakes made by seemingly successful people. Set your career goals, but live your life while you are getting there.

You will learn that life is not leap frogging from goal to goal, rather it is a constant journey to be experienced continuously. What you are doing between the new jobs, the promotions, and the salary increases is actually the most important part of your life. A perspective on this point was well stated by Gloria Steinem in a commencement address: " In the final analysis what really matters is right now with the people you love.", a weighty comment when you consider Ms. Steinem's career accomplishments.

In closing, I am going to ask you to make a pledge to keep your priorities straight as you embark upon your careers. Actually, it's a pledge in the form of a toast, a toast that you may have seen in the movie "Moonstruck". (This is going to be a semi-theatrical closing.)

How many of you saw "Moonstruck"? It's a wonderful, humorous film about the resilience of an Italian-American family under incredible pressures that would easily have destroyed your average family unit. There is a memorable closing scene in which each member of the family, complete with his or her emotional baggage, finds refuge in the strength of the family. The message is one that I remember from childhood: nothing is more important than the sanctity of family. Your personal problems can always be overcome by drawing upon the strength of the family.

At the end of "Moonstruck," they make a toast to the family. I want you to make that toast with me tonight. And I urge you to repeat this toast as often as you can in celebration of your vital relationships, whether they are with just one "significant other" or with an entire family. If you don't want to do it on a regular basis, then do it when you sense that your work and family priorities are becoming confused. Call time out and reaffirm the priority of the family. You can do it with this simple toast.

How many of you speak Italian? That's OK, I don't either, and this toast is remarkably simple. Say "A". Good. Now say "La" . Good. Now say "Famiglia". Now put them together: "A la famiglia". Good. That means "to the family." After tonight, you can say it in English, or shorten it by saying

"to us", but I want you to remember it. Maybe saying it in Italian tonight will help to do that.

Ready for the toast? Let's say it once for practice: "A la Famiglia." Please stand. Now, with gusto, and, to make it official, raise a glass of whatever beverage you may have: "A LA FAMIGLIA'.

Thank you, and good luck with your lives and your careers.