

John Straker

### **Practice Humility.**

Humility is not a natural human trait, like eye color. Each of us gets a set of genes at birth, but there is no humility gene. That's too bad because most people find it easy for to look down on others for one reason or another. They aren't handsome or pretty enough; they don't have enough money so they must be lazy; they can't speak well so they slacked on their education; they're too fat or too skinny or ... on and on it goes. Check yourself. How often do you find yourself in your head or even out loud judging and criticizing others?

In my experience, it takes constant practice to avoid this comparative way of thinking. That said, one of its rewards is that it makes one more available to others, who then are more likely to share solutions to problems or offer advice. I was fortunate to have a good college engineering education and after graduation I had to find a job.

So, I went to work as a plant engineer in a steel mill. It was a hot, dangerous, odorous environment. You can imagine the stereotypical perception of the blue-collar workers having a young, snooty, college kid stuck in their midst. I knew though that I had no idea how to run these huge, dangerous machines in the steel-making process. So, I'd ask the union guys and the front-line foremen about their work and their work skills; how they did this or that. And I watched them carefully..

To my surprise this endeared me to them, and I was able to gain their trust. I remember one time as I was reading the manual for one of our machines, one of the foremen I'd been talking with, one whom I'd grown to really like and respect, asked me what I was doing. I told him I was learning how use this machine--and he laughed and said that when I was through reading the manual I should throw it in the river. Then, come find him and he would show me how the plant really worked. Notice that he didn't say throw the manual away *before* reading it. His lesson was learn all you can from the "book" and then expect that the "real world" might not match up as it was in the book.

When I left the mill to get my MBA, many of the guys I had worked with said that they hoped I would come back. I was very happy that I had been able to bridge the book learning and street learning gap. It warmed my heart that they wanted me to come back. Sadly, that plant is now long-since closed.

## Live Below Your Means

I've discovered that it is important to learn to be able to distinguish between 'wants' and 'needs'. I think Ben Franklin is credited with saying: 'A lender but never a borrower be.' In particular, I think he meant never borrow for a 'want', only borrow for a basic need or to add value to a business enterprise. If you borrow for your "wants"—which can be endless—you may find yourself buried underneath a mountain of debt that you cannot afford. The debtor always comes around eventually. I see companies advertising things like "Buy Now! No payments due for two years!" It's enticing, alluring. It seems like a good deal. But what if you don't get that expected raise? What if you get injured and can't work? What if you have unexpected health problems? The debtors don't care about that—they *always* come around eventually.

This is a lesson I learned from my father both by example and experience. When I was in middle school, I really wanted a minibike, so I told my Dad that if he bought me one, I would work to pay him back. Without any hesitation, he said that he had a better idea; that I should save the money first and *then* buy the minibike myself. Hmm. Work for what you want. I thought about that and started saving. When I had enough, I bought the minibike. The sad thing is that after I'd bought the minibike, I had buyer's remorse. I thought about other things I could have spent the money on. Working and saving in advance without my knowing it gave me time to think and reflect on whether I really needed or just wanted that minibike.

My father grew up during the Great Depression. A friend's mother who also lived then had a saying, "Use it up, wear it out. Fix it up or do without!" That lesson stuck with me. Although I didn't live through the Great Depression, my parents had and they taught me the value of efficiency—a necessity when you don't have enough.

My father also was part of the Japanese occupation forces after WWII. There he saw a nation suffering its own Great Depression—war torn and in poverty. Both experiences taught him that you could make it through tough times by distinguishing between wants and needs. When you have to, life teaches us the difference between wants and needs.. I listened closely to my father as he told those stories. The take-away for me from all of this is how much simpler life becomes when you know the difference between wants and needs. And, by the way, how easy it is to get inundated with the things you want but don't need.

## Learn From Defeat

My third most important insight in life is that we should not let failures overwhelm us. Don't let defeats beat you or cause you to quit. Valuable information comes from failure. In fact, one could say if you never fail, you are not growing. The SpaceX rocket misfires/explosions remind me of this principle. Each failure, often a catastrophic explosion, was an opportunity to learn what not to do. Thomas Edison tried over 2,000 alternatives before he came upon a viable light bulb. Which at first, by the way, had a bamboo filament.

I've made bad decisions, lots of them. I've bought bad stocks, failed at my geoanalysis, failed at important aspects of my business.

One of my biggest defeats had to do with my love life. On our second date, I knew my now wife was the one. As time passed, I'd hint. I'd urge. I'd cajole. In the end I spent *ten years* trying to convince my now wife to marry me. I felt a little like Thomas Edison—WHEN will I find the one that works???

I knew she was the one almost immediately and yet I failed for ten years in convincing her! These setbacks however, were very important because they taught me to be patient, persevering, and to find the lessons to learn in each one. They have a saying in taekwondo, "Never Give Up! A black belt is just a white belt who never gave up." I like that. Whatever your dreams are, never give up. Persevere. Attack the issue again and again and again until it yields. I've read that Chinese students persist in their studies more than Americans because they grew up in a rice-based culture—in which one must work hard planting row after row of shoots. Then wait till they grow. And then the back-breaking work of harvesting by hand with hook knives. This process demands perseverance and patience and determined effort over long periods of time. What percentage of American students will worry a math problem until it yields? How many have the patience to save and then buy instead of going into debt for "wants?"

When you hit a speed bump, learn from it. Don't give up. Worry it. Fight it. Think about it. Dream about it. Find the lesson that's hidden there in the defeat—or should I say short-term setback. It's up to you.