

INTRODUCTION

This, the second book in The Journey to Meaning trilogy, addresses the challenges business owners face when reality strikes. In the first book I provided a model to help you answer the question “Why do you own your business?” In this book I present a model for answering the question “How do you persistently and creatively do the work that is needed in the real world?”

In the introduction to my first book, The Journey to Meaning, I said this of business owners, that “... the single most powerful force behind their success is a clear, continuous and powerful conversation about what is most important to them. This conversation enables them to define the meaning of their life. This meaning gives their business focus and purpose, which in turn reinforces who they are and why they are here.”

On his journey to meaning, Michael, the first book’s central character, discovered a powerful purpose with the potential to give greater meaning to his business and his life. But, as Michael returned from the canoe trip at the end of the book, I knew he would have to face reality. Ahead of him were the daunting tasks of cleaning up the mess his business was in and enrolling his team in his new meaning and purpose. As I wrote the final chapter, I knew it was not enough to have set out a model for meaning. In order to go

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the distance, I had to bring Michael, and my readers, to the next level of meaning, beyond meaning envisioned, to where meaning is realized.

Call it implementation, execution, or facing reality. No matter what you call it, we've all been there. While having vision, goals, meaning, and purpose is very heady stuff, it is stuff that can be lost in the blink of an eye with the collapse of a market, the loss of a customer, the mistake of a key manager, the injury or death of a worker, two or more quarters of poor financial results. When reality strikes, words are not enough. Dreams are not enough. Real success requires having the courage to take action and do the work required to deal with reality, to meet any challenge. Real success requires patience, perseverance and faith. And, real success requires wisdom; you need to know what to do, when to do it and how to get it done.

The model put forth in this book is based on my experience working with and learning from business owners. My very first breakthrough came in 1980 when, on the suggestion of my father, I interviewed a number of business owners about what owning a business meant to them and what it takes to be successful. What I learned fundamentally and forever transformed my callow belief that owning a business was all about making money. Each of the business owners I interviewed measured success by the contribution they and their businesses made to people, families, communities, and country. It wasn't about money: it was about helping people and making a positive dif-

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ference in the world.

That first breakthrough in understanding has framed and given meaning to who I am and why I own my business. My own meaning has evolved to the point where I believe it is my role to advise and equip business owners and their teams as they discover and follow their own paths to meaning. I am a guide and an outfitter on their journey into a more meaningful unknown.

Since those interviews nearly three decades ago, I have worked with business owners who are fueled by a powerful purpose that gives meaning to everything they do. Their purpose has helped them struggle mightily and meet every challenge imaginable. While battling against odds that appeared insurmountable to everyone else, I have seen them use every ounce of energy, every shred of knowledge and every element of their humanity to make their businesses succeed.

In this book, Michael will discover that meaning creates a tougher and higher standard by which to measure one's actions. He will learn that these higher standards produce stress, especially when he applies them to his managers and employees. Ultimately for Michael, as for all business owners, the real challenge to meaning is doing the work that is needed. Knowing your meaning gives you focus. Knowing your meaning allows you to spend time doing what really matters. And, as you pursue your meaning, you enjoy greater peace of mind, better relationships and more powerful results in all areas.

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Today, more than ever before, I believe we must draw upon our meaning and purpose, regardless of the challenges we face and the opportunities we pursue. In writing *The Challenge to Meaning* I share all of the fundamental principles and strategies, and some of the core tools, that you need to turn your meaning into reality.

Don Hadley
Summer, 2009

ABOUT THIS BOOK

To create this book I have once again collaborated with Curtis Verstraete, who has helped me go beyond simple success to building a business that is a true expression of who I am and what I am most passionate about. As in our first book, *The Journey to Meaning*, he has written the action and dialogue sequences that make up the parable or story parts of the book.

Once again, you will be seeing the world through the eyes of Michael, a fictitious character whose traits and experiences are a composite drawn from several business owners whom I am currently guiding and equipping. Also reappearing is Richard, Michael's great friend and mentor. And again, just like in *The Journey to Meaning*, Richard is always at least one step ahead as he constantly helps Michael see past his doubts and disappointments.

As Michael continues his journey to meaning, we will support the fictionalized story with practical tools and exercises that you can use to build a business that fulfills your meaning in life. The exercises appear at the end of each chapter and you can choose to complete them chapter by chapter or come back to them after reading the entire story straight through.

To download additional copies of the exercises, visit our website at www.appliedvisionworks.com.

CHAPTER #1
FOOLS RUSH IN
THE CHALLENGE

“You can tell how big a person is by what it takes to discourage him.”

Author Unknown

Fear has an oily way of sliding up beside you and whispering in your ear like an old acquaintance asking to borrow money with no intention of paying you back. Funny thing is, when you listen, you hear your own voice reminding you to feel ashamed of your failings, weaknesses, and long past sins.

As I sat waiting to meet our new client, fear and I were debating the relative merits of staying and trying to clean up what had already become a messy relationship versus bolting through the door and never looking back. Fear was telling me that I was already doomed so I might as well buy a canoe and paddle around for the rest of my life. But, as appealing as fear’s proposition was, I had no choice but to stay put and face the music.

Three weeks earlier, Tom, my brother-in-law and recently promoted Business Development Manager, brought in a deal by promising the world for the price of a small state - a small state in an obscure country, with no natural resources, skilled workers, or any other redeeming values... Well, that’s what I told Tom after he explained the promises he had made.

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While waiting to meet the man who was the CEO and co-owner of Darlington & Sons Industries, I calmed myself by thinking about what had happened since Tom brought in this tainted opportunity. Even though I was angry and frustrated with him, I had little time to deal with it because I was about to leave on a one-week canoe trip with my best friend Richard.

Despite the bad timing and my reluctance to leave my business unattended, the trip turned out to be a huge blessing. Paddling around the Boundary Waters in northern Minnesota may seem an unlikely place to find one's true meaning in life, but that is exactly what happened. I started the trip feeling tired, confused, angry and resentful about the burden my business was becoming. From lake to lake, adventure to adventure, and with my friend Richard's help, I realized I have to be a business owner; there really is no other possible way for me to thrive. This realization brought tremendous clarity. First, by removing the doubt about what I was meant to be, I was able to see that it was up to me to choose how I showed up each and every day. This meant that I needed to figure out why I owned my business.

The serenity of the canoe trip along with Richard's gentle but intentional coaching helped me search my soul for what mattered most. At times I felt completely lost and wanted to abandon the search. But, with no distractions and nowhere to hide, I arrived at a simple and profound truth: owning a business enables me to help people. In this I find true meaning. It speaks to

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me, excites me, and compels me to put everything on the table. Well, at least that was the theory I arrived at as Richard and I paddled our way through the unspoiled wilderness.

But now, that theory was being severely tested. Darlington & Sons were major players in the South Carolina construction industry. They had been awarded a joint state and federal reconstruction contract and we – along with almost all of our competitors – had come banging on their doors looking for subcontracts. Fortunately for us, Tom knows the senior project manager and was able to present our capabilities well and secure an opportunity to bid. Unfortunately for us, Tom got carried away and provided a pricing schedule that cut our margins to the quick. We were here to renegotiate the rate even before the job started! Did I mention how fear has a funny way of turning your knees to jelly?

I stood up to greet Arthur Darlington as he strode towards me. Arthur was old school. He and his two brothers had worked their way through their father's business, starting at the end of a shovel, slowly moving through operating heavy equipment, the back office and eventually to the front office. Their father had retired five years ago and the brothers had since taken the business to new and greater levels of success.

“Michael, it's good to see you again,” Arthur said as we shook hands. “I'm glad your company has a chance to work with ours. I've been hearing a lot of good things about your work.”

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“Thank you” was all I could manage as I picked up my brief case, looked at Tom, and followed Arthur into his office.

Compared to the modern, cold décor of the waiting room, his office had an old-fashioned feeling thanks to a disparate collection of antique furniture. A large mahogany partner’s desk in front of floor to ceiling windows dominated the room. A very old looking, oak, roll top desk occupied one corner, along with a leather sofa, two matching chairs and a wormwood coffee table, created a comfortable looking meeting area.

Arthur motioned towards the coffee table and I chose one of the chairs, as did Arthur. This left Tom no choice but the couch, where he sat at a slight height disadvantage facing his boss and new client. He looked uncomfortable and I thought “Serves you right”. I leaned forward and turned my chair slightly so that I could look more directly at Arthur.

“So, I guess you’ve come to talk about the subcontract,” he said, turning in his chair. “I suppose you are looking for a bigger piece of the deal.”

“No . . . Ah yes, and...”, I stumbled on my words trying to figure out what he meant. I was so preoccupied with the scenario of having to eat crow and attempting to renegotiate the deal that it never even entered my mind that there would be more business here.

“Well, I for one am glad you set this up, because at your prices, working with your firm is very attractive to us. That is, if you can handle the volume.”

I swallowed hard and said, “Yes, yes, our prices

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are exceptional.”

“What sort of volume can your team handle?” he asked, looking first at Tom – who was sitting stock still as if he had just been pole-axed – before turning to me for a reply.

“We are prepared to make a considerable investment and dedicate most of our time and effort to deliver all the volume you need for this project,” I heard myself saying. Oh my Lord, I thought, now here I go! I’m as bad as Tom, maybe even worse!

But I smiled and looked Arthur in the eye.

“Well,” he said, breaking eye contact and looking down at his hands. He rubbed them together, looked up at me, and said, “That’s a pretty tall order. What guarantee can you give me that you can actually handle it?”

“I can guarantee you will know well in advance if we can’t, well before our relationship causes you any harm, that I can guarantee.”

“OK, that’s honest. What do you need from us to make it happen?”

“We’ll provide the exact numbers, schedule and a critical path once we have a chance to work through our discovery process with your project team,” I said as I glanced at Tom. Other than his eyes growing wide in amazement, he still hadn’t moved a muscle.

“From what Tom has told me, there are a number of critical dates and milestones you must meet to earn performance bonuses,” I said. “I want you to know now that we take responsibility for making sure you hit or exceed those dates and milestones.”

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Arthur raised his eyebrows and smiled broadly as he said, “And I suppose you would also like to participate in the performance bonuses.”

“Yes, with our pricing, we are cutting our margins very close to the bone. If we can contribute to your profitability, I think it is reasonable for us to participate in your profitability... at least in a small way.”

Arthur looked at Tom and asked, “So, Tom, what do you think? Can your team pull this off?”

Fear sat down next to me and gave me a bear hug. “Oh no, not Tom!” I shrieked in my mind.

“Well, Mr. Darlington, we’ve been looking for just this type of opportunity to really show off what we are capable of,” Tom said in a quiet but clear voice.

He looked up, smiled at Arthur, and then turned and smiled at me. I could tell he was working up the nerve to say something else. I cut in and said, “Yes, as a matter of fact, Tom and I have had a few long and important talks about your account and what it means to us.”

“OK Michael, Tom, let’s talk about what you need to get started right away,” Arthur said as he picked up a pad of paper from the coffee table and began writing.

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After leaving the Darlington offices, we drove several blocks before saying a word. I was wondering if perhaps I had lost my mind. What was I doing committing to such a huge order, especially with such tight mar-

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gins? I knew the only way this deal would make money for us was to exceed expectations and make sure our client made their client happy. Because there was no margin for error, I would need every ounce of energy and commitment from my team.

Tom stirred in the seat next to me, cleared his throat and in the same quiet voice he used in the Darlington offices said, “Michael?”

“Yes, Tom.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but ... are you out of your mind?”

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

Michael is faced with a problem that he believes is not his fault. The reality is that this might have been prevented if Tom had been well coached and some parameters were set on projects. While this happens in business more than we would like, it is important to keep perspective and learn. As Rudyard Kipling said, to be a man, we must “meet with triumph and disaster and treat the two impostors just the same”. Or, another way to say it is, in every triumph are the seeds of disaster; in every disaster are the seeds of triumph. In Darlington and Sons, both triumph and disaster are possible!

For this reason, we must understand and help our team understand that in every challenging, difficult

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situation a great many positive outcomes are possible, if only we are open to learning from the situation. In the same way, we must be careful when we have successes, to see them fully for what they are and to learn from them. From that perspective, every interaction, challenge, opportunity, triumph and disaster can become a successful interaction where we are always better on the other side of the experience. Hopefully, Michael learns this and will be able to teach it to his team...