

THE JOURNEY TO MEANING

Creating the Business and Life of Your Dreams



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with Curtis Verstraete

INTRODUCTION

I learned who I wanted to be and what I wanted to do with my life in the summer of 1980.

Up to that point, I thought playing sports and hanging out with my friends was pretty much what life was all about. I knew school was important to my parents so I did the work necessary to keep up my grades. Working at a job was something I had done here and there to earn pocket money. My vision of the future was a mixture of naïve and vague images that included driving an expensive car to a cool job in a modern building, and then coming home at the end of the day to a big house with a pool. Oh, and there was a wife, some kids and a dog in there somewhere.

My vision for my future became clear and very real over the course of two weeks in late August. It started one Monday morning, with my father asking me to meet him for lunch. We met in a restaurant near his office and after ordering, he asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I remember just staring at him. I didn't answer and my mouth may have been hanging open because he smiled and said, "That's what I thought your answer would be."

I didn't want to appear completely stupid, but I was grasping when I blurted out that I thought I would like to own my own business.

"Just like you do," I added.

Well, I didn't know it yet, but I had just opened a door that once I stepped through would shut be-

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hind me; there would be no turning back. (Actually, it's more accurate to say I stumbled through the door thanks to a healthy push from my father.)

My father told me that if I thought I was going to be a business owner, I had better start right away. He said the first thing I needed to do was figure out what being a business owner was really like. He then asked me to interview a dozen of his friends and acquaintances that were business owners. He told me to call them, introduce myself, tell them what I was up to and treat them to breakfast or lunch. He gave me eight questions to ask and said I should come up with four of my own. He didn't give me any money, so I knew the meals would come out of my pocket.

What I learned from the interviews changed my life. As soon as I got over the realization that my father was actually a pretty cool guy, I knew I wanted to be like the subjects of my interviews; they were real people. They were practical and knew what life was all about. Most revealing at the time was learning they measured success by the number of people they helped, the difference they made in the world, and by their ability to create greater meaning in their lives and in the lives of everyone around them. It wasn't just about money.

This revelation set me off on a journey of discovery, a lifelong search to learn what it takes to be a successful business owner.

Along the way, I have learned most business owners treasure independence above all else. I have also

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learned that the ones who are truly independent know they cannot succeed on their own. They rely on their customers, employees, suppliers, families and friends for the support, encouragement and understanding needed to succeed. They seek advice and guidance from experts and advisors who help them navigate new territory and address persistent problems.

I learned there is a circular dynamic at work here. In order to be truly independent as an individual, you need to be successfully interdependent as a business owner. And, in order to be successfully interdependent as a business owner, you need to be independent as an individual. When you don't create interdependency in your business, you cap its potential. It is limited by what you and you alone can do and your potential can diminish over time as you force yourself to do things outside of your natural talents. Passion wanes, burn-out sets in, and then you have no one but yourself to turn to for inspiration and energy.

So, where does it all begin and what sustains this circular dynamic?

Through all of the years I have helped business owners, I learned 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.

Although my journey is far from over, I have writ-

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ten this book to share what wisdom I have learned so far. My goal is to help you build a business that honors and nurtures your purpose, contributes to the well being of those around you, and helps you live a life filled with meaning.

Don Hadley March, 2008

About this book

To create this book, I have collaborated with Curtis Verstraete, one of the many people who have helped me develop and refine my business over the years. Curtis has been instrumental in the clarification and packaging of the principles, concepts, and strategies I use to help my clients. To produce this book, Curtis helped me refine the strategies and content for each chapter as well as write the action and dialogue sequences.

This book is written as a parable that follows friends on a wilderness adventure of discovery and growth. Richard and Michael are composites of the many people my team and I have met, worked with, and learned from throughout our careers and their journey is a metaphor for all the journeys taken by the many clients I have helped.

As their adventure unfolds, they explore important concepts and strategies for creating a life and business filled with meaning. To help you apply these strategies and concepts to your life and business, we have provided exercises at the end of each chapter. You can

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choose to read the book straight through and then go back to the exercises, or work through it chapter by chapter. Above all, I sincerley hope this book makes a contribution to your business, your life and your total overall success.

(To download additional copies of these exercises, visit our web site www.ffgusa.com and enter this password: _____)

CHAPTER #1
THE MEANINGLESS TREADMILL

“Stop acting as if life is a rehearsal. Live this day as if it were your last. The past is over and gone. The future is not guaranteed.”

Wayne Dyer

My name is Michael and through thick and thin I have always thought of myself as an optimistic, positive person with the strength, intelligence, and, I guess, the courage to meet any challenge the world can throw at me.

I have proven my abilities time and time again as I built my business and lived my life. My business is all mine: I created it out of nothing, no one knows it better than I do, and no one can manage it like I can. I have always had the energy - a seemingly infinite source of power - to do what was necessary to make my business and my life a success.

If you were to take a snapshot today, the picture of my life would look pretty good. I have a great home, my family is very well provided for, and we live in the best neighborhood in town. My business is growing, my employees are well paid, and we constantly acquire new clients. To top it all off, here I was driving to meet my best friend for a week of rest and relaxation in one of the country's finest, unspoiled wilderness areas.

But, despite how great my life may look from the

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outside, driving gave me time to think about my life, and the more I thought about it, the less successful I felt. In fact, I felt tired, desperate and confused.

My journey had begun just before dawn. But, by the time I completed the drive from my home in Spartanburg, South Carolina to my friend Richard's acreage, the sun had burned off the morning haze. Squinting as I turned into the tree-lined drive, I saw Richard standing on the front steps. As I got out of my car, he greeted me with a tremendous hug and then invited me into his kitchen for breakfast. He loves to cook and always makes a special meal whenever we get together. Thanks to the good food and his excitement for our trip, I was able to put aside my feelings and enjoy the moment.

After breakfast, I grabbed my bag from the car, and threw it in the back of his new Land Rover. Richard had made all the arrangements and told me to bring only my clothes and personal toiletries.

"Hey, where's all the stuff we're going to need?" I asked when I saw there was only one large backpack in the vehicle.

"Don't worry, it is all taken care of at the other end," Richard said. "The outfitter knows his business and I trust him."

We drove to the private landing strip where Richard kept his twin-engine airplane and we were in the air just before eight o'clock.

We were headed to the town of Ely in northern Minnesota and as we flew, I looked down and be-

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gan worrying about not being prepared for the trip. I started to question Richard's faith in the outfitter, but realized I shouldn't worry because I trusted Richard. He had always said and done the right things, so why should I feel this way?

As we flew over the Blue Ridge Mountains, I kept telling myself life was great and I should feel great, but instead feelings of desperation and confusion again began to worry me. Above all, I felt very, very tired. All I could think about was the mess I would probably have to deal with when the trip was over. It was oppressive. My stomach began to sour and I began to dread what was ahead.

Just then, Richard tapped me on the shoulder and with a huge grin said, "Michael, do you read me? Come in Michael. Earth to Michael! It's a beautiful morning, you're with one of the greatest guys on the planet, so what's eating you?"

I couldn't help but smile, but I also needed to come clean. "Look Richard, I know we've been planning this trip for months, but I'm just not sure I should be leaving the business right now."

His grin turned to a gentle smile as he said, "I may be wrong, but I think you worry too much. After all, how many bad things could happen in a week?"

"Oh, don't ask," I said. "Just last week, my goofy brother-in-law landed a new account by promising to give them the world. Trouble is, he gave it to them for the price of Pennsylvania. No matter how often I tell him, he just can't seem to understand how to do

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things the right way.

“And then my accountant tells me our cash flow projections are way off so I had to dip into my personal account to make payroll. I hate doing that, it makes me feel like I’m going backwards.

“I barely see my wife and kids lately because I’m always at the office. I guess they are getting used to it because they don’t seem to miss me any more.

“I feel like a slave to my business despite having hired some top notch people over the years. The business doesn’t run perfectly unless I’m there. My employees just don’t get it. No matter how often I tell them the right way to do things, they eventually go off the rails one way or another. They can’t seem to make even the simplest of decisions on their own. And then, when things go wrong, no one takes responsibility and I’m left to clean up the mess. It’s like they don’t know why we are in business.

“I’m beginning to wonder about that too. Why am I in business? Why does it seem like I have less and less time to do what I like best? And I don’t dare implement any new ideas... in fact, I can’t remember the last time I had a good new idea. It’s like I’ve forgotten why I started the business.

“And that’s not all! Two weeks ago, I got a letter from my attorney that says one of our former employees has launched a lawsuit because they don’t think they got the retirement benefits they were promised. I mean really! We have one of the best packages around, so what gives?

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“To top it all off, I’m not sleeping at night. I wake up at all sorts of outrageous hours worried about what will happen next and stewing over whether or not it’s all worth it. Everything I own is tied to the business. What if it fails? What if I’m wrong? I don’t even know what the business is worth or how I’ll ever be able to retire.”

Even though I wanted to go on, I had to stop for a breath. Richard’s eyes had widened with amazement while I ranted. When I stopped he managed to smile and glare at the same time. I had seen this look before: it meant, “You’re going to do what I say and you’re going to like it”.

“Michael, answer this simple question: What progress have you made over the past year?”

The question was like an unwanted guest at dinner, it barged in on my self-pity and frustration and I knew it wouldn’t go away until it was satisfied. As upset as I was, the fear and frustration I felt was familiar. Even though it wasn’t comfortable, it was familiar and my infinite source of energy had enabled me to cope with it for a long time. In my eyes, I was a hero for coping with all the stuff thrown at me. I didn’t want to feel good, I wanted someone to acknowledge how much of a sacrifice I was making day in and day out.

“Look Michael,” Richard said after watching me struggle to answer. “Take it easy. Stop and take a breath, relax for a minute. Trust me, I can tell you need to step back and let things go. You’re so fo-

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cused on controlling everything you've lost your sense of direction."

He paused for a second and then with a huge grin said, "Based on the story you just told me, a week isn't going to make a difference because things couldn't possibly get any worse! And besides, you just never know who we might run into out there. Perhaps you'll bump into someone who'll help you see that your glass is more than half full."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

One of my favorite quotes comes from Lou Tice who said, "I turned my face for just a moment and ten years later it became my life".

The scorecard below will help you stop and do an accounting of your current situation. This type of assessment is critical if you are to break through the daily grind all business owners face and avoid looking up after a lifetime of effort only to wonder, "What happened, where did my life go?"