

BREAKING FREE

The Quest

*An Errant Knight
leaves the
Corporate Life, to
find a life of his own*



by John Bugay

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An Errant Knight leaves the Corporate Life to find a life of his own

Breaking Free: The Quest
My Journey from Errant Knight to Free Lance

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*For Mom...
sorry this has taken so long*

“THE INVISIBLE HAND”

Every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it...He intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for society that it was no part of his intention. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.

- Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations

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*Some of the names in this book have been changed to
protect both the innocent and the guilty.*

INTRODUCTION: TIME AT HOME

When lunchtime came one clear and sunny March day, I raced out the door of my Grindle Company office with a kind of determination that was uncharacteristic for me. I have always been wishy-washy. But my determination that day came from the fact that I was using my lunch hour to go home and make love with my wife.

To me, time spent with my family has always been the best time, and having a half hour alone with my wife is the best time of all.

It would be a short visit. The trip home always seemed to be too long, even though home was only 15 minutes from the office, and the commute was through suburban, rather than city traffic. The lights were almost always out of sync with each other, and when I was in a hurry, the stop and start was maddening. But on this particular afternoon, the lights worked in unison, and I had the unbelievable good fortune of being able to race through six of seven green lights.

At \$450 a month, our three-bedroom townhouse was not an inexpensive place to live on my meager salary as Grindle's advertising manager. It was March 1995, and I had just recently been promoted to advertising manager, in a company where all starting managers earned a base salary of \$30,000.

"I'm home," I said, a bit too loud as I entered the front door.

"Shh, the kids are in bed, but I'm not sure if they're sleeping yet," said my lovely wife, Miss Elizabeth.

I slipped off my slip-on shoes and walked as quietly as I could up our inside steps. It was an old apartment, built in the late 1940's, and these steps had gotten a lot of use. I walked up softly, trying not to creak them, my feet wide apart to straddle the creaky parts in the center. At the top, I gave Miss Elizabeth a long, slow kiss, pulling her body toward mine at the waist, and I threw my coat over the arm of the couch.

"Thank you for coming home," she said. "You know I love our time together."

One of the amenities of our newly refurbished townhouse was a brand new carpet, and the space to spread out on it. Miss Elizabeth led me by the hand to the spread of blankets, quilts, sheets and pillows she had prepared on the floor in front of the TV. We took full advantage of our little half-hour that day, the several days before and the several days after. Through our lunchtime activities, we conceived a child,

our fourth. I always hated having to go back to work, and I always wished there was a way I could stay home. A little more than a year later, freelancing offered that way.

MONEY CAN'T BUY BACK TIME

The thought of being home has always been an important one for me. From the time I was five years old and walking up the hill toward kindergarten, I have wanted to be “home.” The notion that I wanted to freelance came later. But virtually every day while I was “at school” or “at work,” I thought of being “at home.”

More recently, the notion that time is slipping away has begun to press on me, as I have gotten older. (For me, Y2K brought age 40 with it.)

“No one, on his deathbed, wishes he’d spent more time at the office,” said personal effectiveness guru Stephen Covey in his book *First Things First*. Life is too short. And in a way, working at home these last five years as a solocareerist has put me far ahead of that game. I have spent far more time with my wife and family in the last five years than I ever could have done if I had not gone freelance.

Look at how it adds up. A 40-hour week is about 25% of your life, 40 hours out of a 168-hour week. When you add on commute time, which can average an hour or two each day (not to mention the time spent simply sitting in traffic), overtime and other time spend related to your job, like a non-paid lunch hour, and you might be spending as much as a third or even half your life in any given year involved with work-related activities. That’s not including the hours you don’t get to see because you’re asleep.

Time with spouse, time with kids, time alone to ourselves: it seems as if there’s never enough of it. Time is the thing that we are always losing, that we can never recover once it’s lost. And the older we get, the faster we seem to lose it. As the old saying goes, “life is like a roll of toilet paper. The closer it gets to the end, the faster it goes.”

Many people look forward to retirement as a magic moment, and they base their plans on that moment. “When I retire, I’ll have the time to do what I want to do: to read, to relax, to go fishing, or to go back into consulting, or whatever.” In the meantime, they devote themselves to their work, the companies get the best times of their lives, and the net effect is that they and their families get the leftovers.

Even the mighty risk losing out. Today’s tech millionaires will get older, and they’ll get ailments that money can’t fix. They will see loved ones become sick or get hurt and pass away. Their rolls will spin faster, and they will be powerless in the face of the human condition that makes certain that we all do our share of suffering. What comfort will the money be, compared with the love of a spouse, friend, or companion of many years, or the friendship and honor given by children when one is on one’s deathbed? Money can’t buy back time.

On the other hand, freelancing gives me the opportunity to spend as much time as is humanly possible with my family, even when I’m working full tilt. I have a 30 second commute (usually at 5:00 am or earlier). I work a bit, then I’m available to

help get the kids off to school, and not long afterward, my wife and I share breakfast together. I can be close to her all the time and still earn a living.

In his book *A Severe Mercy*, author Sheldon Vanauken wrote about a “Shining Barrier” that he and his beloved wife Davy set up around their marriage, to keep close to each other and to protect themselves from, among other things, the ravages of time. Time presses on, but my freelancing has enabled me to set a barrier against the world that enables me to preserve as much time with my family as possible.

It is nothing for my wife to bring me lunch while I’m working, or to stop in for a little lovey dovey. Nor is it unheard of for me to take off a little early to sit out on the porch with her and just talk for a few hours on a sunny afternoon. That means more to her than just about anything else.

On top of that, my youngest children, who are not in school yet, have the opportunity to come into the office and give their dad a hug any time they feel like it. What kid wouldn’t benefit from that kind of access to their dad?

There’s another benefit to freelancing. Recently my wife had an opportunity to see her father for the first time in 30 years. Because we live the freelance life, we had a ready opportunity to pack up our five kids and haul them off to California for a week. I didn’t have to get somebody to cover for me. My work was done on time; nobody missed us. And we got to have the experience of a lifetime.

I HAD NO SPECIAL HEAD START

You may be thinking, “that’s ok for you, but I have responsibilities, and I just can’t run off and start a business of my own.” And I admit, things like family, debt, maybe a feeling of inexperience, can all tend to make you feel like it’s not even worth trying.

I’m writing about my own experience, because I had no particular advantages, no head start. There was no opportunity for me to start freelancing with my old company as the first client, as some people do. I hated my job. And I didn’t have a working spouse who could support the family while I got my feet on the ground. She always has stayed home to take care of the kids.

But I always knew I had a strong desire to get off the corporate treadmill, to work at home, to buy back my time.

As much as you want something in life, you still have to have a workable plan in order to get it. So while I was “breaking free,” both before and after I left Grindle, I relied heavily on the books of Tom Peters and other forward-thinking business gurus for advice and encouragement.

In his book *The Tom Peters Seminar*, Peters suggested that employees think of themselves as free agents, giving their all for their companies: not for the sake of the company, but because their jobs and their livelihoods depended on it. Peters was conscious at that time of the new economy and its ability to “change the way we work.”

Today, it is less important that someone puts in face time at the office or job site. Work is the means to an end, not the end in itself. In the world of work today, almost

anything goes if you can turn it into a sound economic proposition for your employer.

Work, any kind of work, is ultimately good. Human beings were made for work. God created Adam to be a worker, to work in the garden – and indeed, man was designed to find fulfillment in his work.

On the other hand, we have one life here on earth. How do we spend it? I have chosen to spend as much of my life as possible on the care, nurture, and relationship with my wife, and the development of my family. I don't simply want "quality time" with my family that I squeeze into the small pockets of time that are available around my work schedule. I want "quantity time."

While I was working, I used to drive home at lunchtime to spend 30 minutes with my wife. Today I can hug and kiss her any time I want, any time she wants. There still is no place like home. Peters, who lives and works, for the most part, from his home on a farm in Vermont, seems to understand this.

KNIGHT MOVES

The first step of any journey toward a freelance career should be to begin to think of a plan. "No wind favors a ship without a destination," as the saying goes. The philosopher Epictetus put it another way: "Say first what you will be, then do what you have to do."

Earlier in his career, Stephen Covey, in his *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, recommended that you "begin with the end in mind" in trying to reassess your life. Try to imagine your own funeral some three years down the road, he says, and imagine the eulogies your friends, family and colleagues would say. Or imagine what you would want them to say. In doing that exercise, he says, you are writing your own "definition of success." If you are honest with it, it helps you to decide what's really important.

I learned about the need for planning by playing chess. I also learned from experience that it's hard to stick to a plan, especially when you're getting your butt whipped. But you get your butt whipped less frequently if you have a good plan.

Chess also taught me another lesson. Several of the chess pieces can move across the entire board in a single move. But one piece, the Knight, can never take a straight path to where he is going. He can only move two spaces at a time, and never in a straight line. The Knight's move is, in effect, a two-spaced dogleg. And while it may take a while to get used to it, a Knight, in a chess master's hands, can be a formidable weapon.

You know where you want to be. Some people are lucky; they can get there in one simple step. Others are knights, and it takes a little longer.

I was fortunate to have had this chess training. Many of the gurus suggest writing down your plans and goals. I've never been the type to write down those kinds of things. But I always managed, through the years, to keep alive in my mind the idea of spending a lot of time at home. That desire carried me through all the frustrating years at work, and eventually out the door and into a solo career of my own.

THE PERPETUAL JOB SEARCH

My quest was long, frustrating at times, and full of Knight moves. There's a reason for that.

I can trace the beginning of my journey to the first time I read the timeless job search classic, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* In that book, author Richard Nelson Bolles advocated that you follow your dreams to find your life's work.

Of course, he also said that freelancing is akin to a perpetual job search. You are always looking for work. Then he described the job search process in our country as "Neanderthal."

People have been changing jobs and otherwise looking for meaningful work since Adam and Eve were fired as caretakers of the Garden of Eden. The problem, for a long time in our economy, was that there were fewer jobs available than people to fill them. For most people, looking for work is probably the hardest thing they will ever do, especially when times are slow. It hurts. People reject you on a daily basis. You feel powerless. Your hopes can ride the same roller coaster again and again. You feel useless and used, and often it seems like there's nowhere to turn. That thought in itself discourages people from trying.

So in formulating my plans to become a freelancer, I was essentially looking forward to committing myself to a long and continual job search, with all the pain that would involve.

But it never really got that bad. Economic conditions have changed over the years, and opportunities are opening up for freelance workers all over the place. The challenge is in finding those opportunities, organizing them, and creating a business with regular, recurring work cycles that can provide a decent living.

A few years after I read *Parachute*, I had another epiphany when I read a career book by Martin Yate, author of the *Knock 'em Dead* series of resume/career books. In 1993 he wrote a formidable but not very well known book called *Beat The Odds*. Back then, it was still hard to find a job.

Yate counseled that in order to beat the odds stacked against a job seeker, an individual should try to follow three separate career paths, all at the same time: a core career, an entrepreneurial career, and a dream career.

You might think of your "day job" as your core career – keep doing a good job while you're there, but also plan and prepare to break out into your "entrepreneurial" career, in this case, as a freelancer, contract worker, or independent consultant. The "dream career" is pretty much what it appears to be. Keep on writing that novel or movie script, or keep designing that "dream home," because if you've followed the other two pieces of advice, you will have laid a good foundation and income base to support your more "speculative" ventures.

Ten years ago, I never could have hoped to become what I have always dreamed of being: a freelance writer, working at home, making an adequate living, with a lot of time to spend with my family. But this is America, the place where dreams come true.

LEARNING THE RULES OF THE ROAD

I first knew I wanted to be a writer, some kind of writer, as early as the fifth grade. As most writers know, it is a kind of love-hate relationship: I loved the feeling of success I felt when I got an “A” on a paper, but I hated the long hours sitting in front of the blank sheet of paper in the typewriter. (Computers have made that part a little bit easier.)

In college I majored in “English Non-Fiction Writing,” the name the University of Pittsburgh gave to its catchall writing degree at the time. It essentially combined journalism and a magazine writing program.

But I couldn’t have picked a worse time to go to college. During my years at Pitt in the late 1970’s, the steel industry here decided it couldn’t continue in its old, bloated ways, and the employment rate at US Steel dropped from something like 120,000 employees, to 20,000 employees, in the span of just a few short years.

That left a lot of people out of work. So when I was graduated from college during the recession of 1981, it was like being thrown out into a vacuum. The unemployment rate in Pittsburgh eventually rose to over 22%, near depression era levels of 25% or more. It was bad, and there was no way I could think of to make a living as a writer.

After college, I muddled around for a few months, unemployed, though after a while I was able to get a job with a Christian singer named Jeff Steinberg, as a roadie. It wasn’t even really a job, because I didn’t get paid on a regular basis. But it was ultimately a good experience for me. (I liked to think of all those great writers who had odd and crappy jobs before they made it big.)

Jeff was a handicapped, “physically challenged” performer who worked out of Memphis, TN. He had been born with no arms, and badly deformed legs. But he had a singing voice like Neil Diamond, and his performance impressed me in a way that few other things had impressed me in my life.

After the concert, he mentioned that his travel assistant would be leaving to get married, and he asked for applications. After discussing it with my family and some friends, I thought it might be a good opportunity. And just a few weeks later, I was on the road with him.

Jeff sang his own personal brand of contemporary Christian music, which included songs written especially for him, as well as previously recorded songs that fit with his message of inspiration: that with God's help, anyone can overcome any obstacles they choose to overcome, in spite of the handicaps they face.

I traveled with Jeff for the better part of five years, working as his driver, personal assistant, and soundman. Life was lonely on the road, but I had a chance to meet a lot of people around the country. I also wrote a lot of letters during those years, and I used to say I'd have it made if I ever got a job writing letters. Unfortunately, there were not many jobs like that, and when it was time to get off the road, nothing that I had done seemed to translate into a skill set I could sell to potential employers.

OFF THE ROAD AND ON THE DUST MOP

I spent some time looking for a job, but nothing turned up. Frustrated, I answered an ad for one of those retail outplacement services that promised to write my resume, mail it to a large number of area companies, then help "coach" me through the rest of the follow-up and interview process. For a tidy sum they would write the resume, obtain a list of employers, and "mail-merge" the names into the letters, to create, in effect, a personalized "mass mailing."

I interviewed with a youngish gentleman, paid a deposit, and waited to review a draft of my resume. I remember hoping that these experts on employment could translate my experience, which I detailed in the interview with my young advisor, into something that local employers would find valuable.

But when I went back to review the resume draft, I was horrified. It was poorly written, full of mistakes, and it hadn't said anything I couldn't have said myself. After a revision or two, it wasn't any better. I argued and complained, but as many people who sign with this type of firm, I ended up losing my deposit.

The bright side of that experience, however, was that I got a renewed sense of the value of my own skills as a writer, and at the same time I was hooked on the value of mailing lists. As part of my job search that year (1986), I scoured the local yellow pages for phone numbers of doctors and hospitals, because I was interested then in a PR position in health care. I called to ask who the PR director was, I incorporated those names into a mail merge file, and I sent personalized letters to over fifty PR people in the city.

I got a few job leads from that effort, but after a few polite interviews, I didn't really know where to turn. I ended up taking a job with a company called Color Tile, selling floor and bathroom tile. It was a sales position, but I spent a lot of time unloading trucks, creating displays, and dust mopping floors. The dust mopping inspired me to search for better opportunities. I found a non-work-related opportunity when I met Miss Elizabeth. I married her right away, though after the honeymoon, I still had to go back to my job working for Color Tile.

Eventually, I found another sales job with a small retail electronics shop. There was less dust mopping involved, but the job wasn't quite right. I still didn't know how

to communicate that I was an excellent writer and that my work experience, odd as it had been, would have been a great valuable to an employer who needed to put words on paper.

I wasn't happy with the job opportunities that existed in Pittsburgh, so we moved to Memphis a few months later to work for Jeff, this time in the office, working on booking. Unfortunately, working for Jeff in 1988 was no better a business proposition than it had been the first time I worked for him. Eventually I left Jeff's employ and found a job working for Color Tile in Memphis.

After several months there, a little guy named Jigger Davis joined our staff. Jigger was a real go-getter. "You have to slow down, Jigger," I said to him at one point. "You're making the rest of us look bad." Later, Jigger was promoted to store manager ahead of me. That hurt. After all, I had come from a time and place where seniority meant first promotions. I was not accustomed to the idea of a meritocracy, in which a junior person could advance more quickly than I did, just because his performance was better.

But I didn't really want to put in the effort to compete and succeed at Color Tile. I wanted to be a writer. It's easy to get stuck in a position you don't like. If I was going to be stuck, I wanted to be stuck in a job as a writer.

GETTING MY FIRST WRITING JOB

The job search experts tell you not to expect much when you send out a single resume – especially in response to a newspaper ad. But I figured I had to start somewhere.

Through an odd set of circumstances, I was able to get my first writing job in Memphis, working for a resume writing service. Some people might not think that's a real writing job, but it counted for me. At least I was "in the business." Fed up with my Color Tile job, I answered an ad in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* that went something like this: "Do you have a flair for writing? Sales experience? Send a resume to PRS." The ad gave the address.

This seemed to fit my experience fairly nicely. I responded:

To Whom it May Concern:

I don't wish to seem disrespectful, but I don't believe that one can have a "flair" for writing (in response to your ad in the *Commercial Appeal*.) A person can have a creative imagination or an ability to put his thoughts on paper in a clear and logical manner, but truly good writing is hard work.

Now that I've run off at the typewriter, I'd like to apply for your job, even though I don't know what it is. But I've been writing for a long time now, and it would be nice to get paid for it. (And almost anything would be better than Color Tile.)

My qualifications are detailed in my resume. I would like to add that my Non-Fiction Writing major included classes in both journalism and Public

Relations writing. Also, I've written several short stories and magazine articles, though none of these have been published yet.

I'm 28 years old, married, and I have an eight-month-old little boy. I'm looking for a stable job with a good salary and room to grow. If you're looking for somebody like me, then I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

If you're old enough, you may remember seeing ads in the various classified ad sections around the country, for "Resumes, \$9.00 and up." PRS, The Resume Company, turned out to be that company, and I worked for them in 1988-89. It wasn't really a job though. I was hired to work as an independent contractor.

The owner of The Resume Company had built the organization simply by hiring freelance writers to manage and operate offices, growing the existing offices to capacity, then sending out a branch office to a busy location nearby, and hiring new sales/writers to staff the offices and handle the overflow work. Those individuals with larger offices (and more writers) became the regional managers, and the process continued onward and upward. At the time, the company had 600 offices.

I worked in a branch office off a main office in Memphis, in the little town of Bartlett. I had a nice little setup there, a one-room office with a small partition wall, giving the effect that I had a private office behind an entryway. They provided me with a small office space, a desk, several chairs, an Olivetti typewriter, and a copier. I was required to buy paper and office supplies (including the much-used correction tape) from them.

I wrote resumes on the Olivetti. I kept the original master (paper) copies on file, and when people wanted changes or updates to their resumes, I would pull out the master copy, get out the white correction tape, and then hope I could work out the line spacing to the point that it wasn't noticeable. At worst, I could re-type the whole page. (PC's were being pretty widely used in business by 1989, but not by The Resume Company.)

In order to attract prospects, the company advertised their then-famous nine-dollar resume, but if I wanted to make any money, I would have to "upsell" those individuals who wanted a resume to a "better" product or package.

The pay scale could have been fairly lucrative for a better salesperson. Because of my recent bad experience with a similar type of firm, I was better able to understand what my customers were going through. And I vowed to produce a better product, at a better price, than the resume that had been written for me.

My second year with PRS, a partial year (January to September), my sales totaled about \$25,000. That seemed to me to be a tidy sum, given that I was having to "sell-up" from the advertised \$9.00 resumes. I have never been a great salesperson, although I did manage once to sell a \$200 resume package. Of course, my "commission" was only about a third of that.

There was other compensation, though. I did get paid in experience. This position

was an important introduction to the world of being a writer. And it taught me what it was like to be self-employed: a lot of selling, and a lot of writing.

MY FIRST TASTE OF FREELANCE WORK

The important thing about working as an independent contractor was that the position afforded me the freedom and the opportunity to do some of the first freelance projects I had ever done.

One of those projects was to create an “advertorial” article for the co-owner of a small chain of high-end hair styling salons. The article described the efforts the salons made to take superb care of their clients. I was paid for the work with five free haircuts. (That was no small bit of change in those days).

Later I came in touch with a small PR firm in Memphis. The owner, Cary, had a small two-person office in the heart of the city, and she was very well connected. One of Cary’s clients, a lawyer, had written an article that dealt with the important investment rule known as “the Prudent Man’s Rule – the return OF your investment is more important than the return ON your investment.” The article was cryptic and wordy and full of lawyer-speak. Cary wanted to try to publish the article in other publications, so she asked me to “thin-out” the language.

I knew nothing about investments, and I wrestled long and hard with the article, but eventually I put it into a more readable format, and not long afterward the article was published in a national trade magazine. If I had chosen to stay in Memphis and build a career there, working for Cary would have been a good way to get started. However, I really didn’t want to stay in Memphis.

WHAT COLOR IS MY PARACHUTE?

Writing resumes also gave me an opportunity to read a lot of the current job search literature, and that’s when I first came into contact with my destiny.

I read *What Color Is Your Parachute* for the first time in 1989. Richard Nelson Bolles has created a wonderful guide for following your dreams as a way of deciding on your life’s work. However, Bolles advocated that job seekers NOT send out mass resumes. This was precisely the opposite of the approach The Resume Company advocated, of sending out lots of resumes.

I told this to my supervisors, and they said, “You can ignore what Bolles said. We’ve been in business for 25 years, we know what we’re doing.” Bolles’s method, I later found, was thought to be a bit offbeat by other job-search professionals. Resumes really are a necessary job search tool, for the most part because employers ask to see them, and there really is no other way for a job seeker to put his or her qualifications in front of as many potential employers as possible.

(For the record, Bolles recommended a series of personal visits to small employers, where the human resources bureaucracies have not yet taken hold, to get hired on the spot by the “hiring manager,” often the owner of the company. But if you have any hope of working for a larger organization, you need a resume.)

Despite the conflicting recommendations between Bolles and The Resume Company, I was looking for guidance in my own career. I completed Dr. Bolles's exercises meticulously. I knew I wanted to write, generally, and the gentle probing questions in the book helped me to understand more specifically what I wanted to write, in what context, for what kind of company, and even the geographic location where I wanted to do it.

Because my entire family was in Pittsburgh, I knew I wanted to start my new career in Pittsburgh. So moving back to Pittsburgh became my highest priority, though I wanted to be able to do it in the context of a writing career. And preferably, that job would have me working for an ad agency, a PR firm, or a hospital.

So in the fall of 1989, I asked my mom to send a copy of the Pittsburgh Yellow Pages down to me in Memphis, and I started calling the ad agencies, PR firms and hospitals in Pittsburgh to ask about their writing needs.

FAST EDDIE, MARKETING MARK AND OTHER KIND FOLK

I set up a couple of interviews, and not long afterward I quit my job with The Resume Company, and bought a bus ticket to Pittsburgh. Miss Elizabeth was working at a full-time job at the time, though it wasn't a good one, but she stayed in Memphis with our two-year-old son.

Later I realized that I had almost literally "bet the family" on my ability to move up to Pittsburgh and get a good job, with no real reason for thinking I could do it other than "I wanted it badly enough." *What Color Is Your Parachute* encouraged that thought.

The bus ride to Pittsburgh was a long one. Miss Elizabeth and I didn't know, while I was getting on the bus at the bus station, how long it would be before we would be able to afford to have her come up to Pittsburgh as well. As it turned out, we spent Thanksgiving, Christmas, and most of January apart.

I kept a journal for those months, and it was full of appointments and phone numbers with dozens of lower-level people at agencies all across the city. Though I was 30 years old, I found myself meeting with lower-level people at the agencies, younger than I was, who kept referring me to the small weekly newspapers.

"You have to get some writing experience," they said. I was so frustrated with this response that I once carried my whole stack of resume samples, three-inches thick, into an interview, to prove that I had been writing.

An older gentleman who worked for one of the hospitals, after reading both my legal article and my hair-stylists article, told me, "you write very clearly." But he offered no hope for me beyond that compliment.

There were also some wonderful, helpful people along the way. Marketing Mark was probably the one who struck me the most. Mark had just spent ten months himself on a job search, which resulted in a job as Director of Marketing for an old and dignified local rehabilitation hospital.

When I showed up at Mark's door, he had just started, and he had no thoughts of

hiring anyone. But he looked at my qualifications and, with a great deal of empathy, he told me that there were a lot of companies he knew of that could hire someone like me. That day, Mark took the time to sit down with me, to open his address book, and to give me the names of a dozen contacts he had met during his own job search.

Another good lead came from Fast Eddie, who was one of the first calls I had made while still in Memphis. Fast Eddie at The Agency was an early morning person, so when I called from Memphis at 7:30, he was just getting in at 8:30. He was one of the friendlier people to talk with, and I called him several times, first to ask him about writing opportunities in Pittsburgh, and later to set an appointment to meet with him. My meeting with Fast Eddie was a real turning point for me, because he referred me to his partner, Irish Tom. "Tom's the person who handles the writing end of our shop," he said.

A TEST PROJECT

The Agency had been running an ad for itself with this headline: "How to Get Big Ad Agency Services, Without the Big Agency." It was Irish Tom's headline, and he was proud of it. (He knew that ad agencies could be, generally, a pain in the ass to work with, and specifically, a huge siphon for a company's hard-earned ad budget.)

Tom and Eddie had recently branched off from one of the larger ad agencies in town. Their intention was to provide the same high quality advertising services, using the same "talent" the big ad agency had access to, without making the client company pay for the high overhead associated with big agencies.

They had one big client and several smaller ones, and they had just enough overflow work that they needed a part-time freelance writer. And fortunately for me, their current freelance writer had just gotten a job somewhere else.

I didn't get the job right away; Tom was from the "I don't know, let's find out" school of advertising. So he said, "Let me give you a test." I was all for it.

Tom wanted me to rewrite a news release he had written. He was (and is) a brilliant man, but he was not very good at writing news releases. And so, calling upon all the skills I developed during my journalistic training, I focused in on the important benefit of the product, and turned in a stellar release.

"I think you can do this," Tom said. He asked me for an invoice and he paid me \$25 an hour for the job, which was an astronomical figure for me at the time. And he gave me another project.

For my next project, Tom asked me to write a brochure for a new business concept, in which he would write marketing plans for other companies. Tom was a strategic thinker, and he had an uncanny ability to look at a business, find out what they were selling, and say, "This is your message."

I worked for what seemed like an endless period of time on the brochure, and turned in copy about three weeks later. "This is good, but it reads more like a term paper than a marketing brochure," he said.

Honing in on my weakness, and being the good manager that he was, Tom put me

in a room and described basic copywriting elements to me. In a nutshell, these were “features,” “benefits,” and “proof.” I quickly re-wrote the brochure according to the vision Tom had just bestowed upon me. I was on my way to being a copywriter.

HERR GRUFF JOINS THE AGENCY

About the time I was doing test projects for Tom, another Big Agency guy was getting laid off from another ad agency in the area.

Herr Gruff brought with him a client or two, and it seemed as if he had become a senior partner in our little Ad Agency. He moved into the small office where I had been working, and Tom set up a computer for me in what had been (and continued to be) the storage room.

Herr Gruff was a good idea man and an experienced copywriter, and I was happy that he took me under his wing as a protégé. One piece of his writing really stands out. He wrote a follow-up letter to Tom’s “Big Agency” ad, which we sent to anyone who responded to the ad. I thought it was fabulous. In fact, I got the impression, on first reading it, that the language actually “sparkled.”

After that, I was proud to be Herr Gruff’s understudy, and I looked forward to working with him in my new career in advertising.

LEARNING THE BUSINESS

During those days, Tom was eager to give me all the training he could on ad copywriting. He knew I was able to write; I just needed to learn some of the basics of advertising, and to apply a knowledge of advertising to my own writing skills.

He recommended books by David Ogilvy (*Ogilvy on Advertising* is still highly pertinent, after all these years), John Caples, Bob Stone, and Hanley Norins, author of *The Complete Copywriter*. I had some money in my pocket, and while my small family was still in Memphis I had time to read, so I greedily devoured some of these books. But I was very lonely.

“You know, I’ve spent a lot of time here,” I said to Tom. “You’re giving me \$25 an hour for about 20 hours a week. But I need a full-time job before I can feel comfortable bringing my family up. I won’t ask you to pay anything more than you’re paying now. Why not stretch that to \$12 an hour and 40 hours a week and call it a full-time job. That way I can bring my wife and son up here.” Irish Tom consented to that. “That’s not very much,” he said. “We’ll do it, and if things work out all right, maybe in a little while we’ll give you a raise.”

In all, I spent about three months at my parents’ house, looking for and getting a job, my first as an ad agency copywriter. I bought a one-way plane ticket to Memphis, and for the first time in months, I was on my way to having what would seem like a “normal” life.

There was a happy reunion in Memphis. Happiest of all, I think, was our son, whom our Memphis neighbor had called “The Little Professor.” The Professor could chatter on, it seemed, for hours, without saying a real word. But when I showed up at

the end of the ramp at the airport, The Professor, surprised to see me, said the first real words I ever heard him say: “It’s Daddy. Mama, it’s Daddy!”

IRISH TOM GIVES ME A RAISE

One of the bad things about working alone, as I had done in Memphis, is that you have to pay the abominable self-employment tax, which includes the 7-odd percent that all individuals pay to Social Security, plus the 7-odd percent an employer would chip in. When tax time came due that April, I was unpleasantly surprised by that unhappy fact – I owed more than \$1,500 from tax season the year before.

I didn’t have that kind of money, and I was horrified about it. I went to talk with Irish Tom about my dilemma. “Tom, when you hired me, you said you might be giving me a raise some time soon. Now would be a good time.” Tom not only gave me the raise, but he fronted me the money for my taxes as a loan.

I had a great time working for The Agency. There were six of us, Tom, Gruff and I were the writers, and Fast Eddie, Rockin’ Randi and Princess Penni were the artists. We did some nice work together. It was a fairly new company, located in a small office building at the edge of a business district just outside of the city, about a quarter of a mile away from Tom’s home. Tom had four boys at the time, all under the age of five, and he went home for lunch as often as he could. (Tom ended up with seven kids, all boys.)

My primary client was a start-up medical organization called The Hypertension Center. These doctors used high tech NASA equipment to measure a dozen or so different things that were going on with the heart, measurements that would enable them more precisely to determine what was causing a person’s high blood pressure. It was a good idea.

Herr Gruff and I worked on the account together, from the initial meetings and presentation, through the day they handed us a check for \$21,000. Our first efforts were highly successful, and we were able to schedule a number of TV news appearances and follow-up news articles. But it was so new that health insurance companies were not willing at that time to pay a premium price for that kind of testing, and not long afterward they closed their doors for a lack of patients.

MEET MARV BOXMAN

I learned that in the ad agency business, people come and go quite frequently. A person at an ad agency might have a good relationship with a particular account, and so when they leave that agency, they’ll often carry the account to another agency.

That summer, one of Herr Gruff’s old buddies from the Gruff Buddies agency, Marv Boxman, started showing up at our office. It turned out that Gruff Buddies was having a bad time, as was everyone else, and Marv, a senior account manager, was spending time with us, trying to drum up some work. He brought one account with him – a media account for a company that manufactured drain-cleaning snakes, and there was hope that more business would follow, because Marv had had a long record

of success in account building in his previous positions.

Marv had grown up in the Pittsburgh area, attended a respectable college, and then moved to New York to work for J. Walter Thompson, one of the largest agencies in the world, for some very large clients. In a way, he had more “Big Ad Agency” experience than the others.

That experience, and some of his college-age contacts paid off for Marv. By fall, Marv had met with an old fraternity brother, Kip Apple, about a position with The Grindle Company, a large roofing company out in the suburbs. Not long afterward, Grindle hired him as advertising manager.

Unfortunately for the rest of us, the dark clouds of the recession were forming on the business front. In August of 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. US President George H.W. Bush quickly mobilized the country for war, sending a half million troops to the desert in just a matter of weeks. It seemed as if the whole country took time out to watch. The level of business activity simply fell off a cliff.

“WE GOTTA LET YOU GO, MAN”

As the tensions of that August faded into October, I became increasingly restless about my position with The Agency. By November 1, Irish Tom called me into the office and confirmed my fears. “We gotta let you go, Man. Randi and Penni had to go, too. We just couldn’t afford to pay all of you. We’ve already taken a pay cut ourselves. They’re going to have to leave The Agency immediately, and they’ll be able to collect unemployment benefits. We’ll keep you on the payroll through November 30, because you have a wife and a kid. There was no other way. Eddie, Gruff and I all took pay cuts in August as a way of trying to make this work.”

“I understand,” I said.

“We’ll pay you through the end of November, and we’ll forgive the rest of that loan you owe us,” he said.

There is no fear quite like the fear of losing your job, and worse, there is no feeling quite like being unemployed. When you lose a job, things change, and those changes don’t always look like they’re going to work out for the best.

Everything you have, everything you own, is dependent on your job. Your home, a stable family life, how you are able to spend your leisure time, and even your identity are shaped by your job. Having a good job can be the difference between eating well and having to count the pennies to see if you can buy an extra can of beans. I know because I had been there before.

That night I bought a bottle of Lancer’s Rose wine, and took it home to Miss Elizabeth at our small apartment. After all, it was a new beginning, of sorts. I was trying to make the best of a bad situation. She was not amused.

THE STORY OF “OLD LUTHER”

Gruff, I heard later, had argued that I should have been allowed to stay on, that I was a good, effective writer, but he was overruled.

Tom, Gruff, and Eddie were gracious enough to let me use their computer and laser printer as much as I needed during my job search, for things like letters, resumes, and the like. I made a lot of contacts, but nothing seemed to be happening.

One day, when I was particularly discouraged about the pace of my job search, Fast Eddie told me a story about money management, featuring a character named “Old Luther,” that I’ve always tried to remember:

Everyone got a kick out of Old Luther, who could always be found sitting quietly at the bar. The other patrons would have fun with him, putting a quarter and a dollar bill down on the bar, and asking him to pick one. Luther would always take the quarter. They thought he was pretty dumb. Then one day, someone asked him. ‘Why do you always take the quarter?’ Luther replied, ‘I’ve got a lot of quarters in my pocket. The first time I take that dollar bill, I know the game’s over.’

I was just looking for quarters at the time, but there were none around. The atmosphere during Operation “Desert Shield” was very tense, and every business in the city seemed simply to be “sitting tight,” waiting for something to happen.

I was spending another Christmas unemployed, although at least I had my wife and son with me in Pittsburgh. Things became more complicated after the holiday celebrations wore off, however: we found out that Miss Elizabeth had become pregnant with our second child.

INTO THE QUAGMIRE

One day in late January 1991, I showed up at The Agency office, unhappy with the way my job search was going, to put together another cover letter. There was a note on my computer screen, in Irish Tom's handwriting.

"Call Marv Boxman," the note said, and it gave his home phone number. Marv had been hired as advertising manager for The Grindle Company in November, just as I was being let go. I knew that Marv had been working the last few months with The Agency on some sort of program, but by this time I wasn't spending much time there, and so I really didn't know what was going on. And while this activity was certainly helping The Agency to get back on its feet, even as the bombing phase of the Gulf War was well under way, I had already given up hope that any of that work would spill over to me.

But I was excited to hear from Marv. I called him, and we set a time to have lunch. "Grindle has a pretty nice set-up down here in the suburbs," he said. "He's got a \$60 million dollar company, but he's practically unknown in the city. I heard about the company through an old fraternity brother, Kip Apple, who's the chief accounting guy down there."

The Grindle Company was a commercial roofing contractor, with offices nationwide. They had developed a system of generating sales leads through a direct mail program and a separate telemarketing program. Marv had been hired to help coordinate these efforts and also to develop an image campaign that would help Grindle break out of the grungy image of "roofer" that the company had acquired.

HOW CAN GRINDLE DO IT?

In the roofing industry, there is a saying that a good roofer can make a building watertight using peanut butter and sandwich wrap, but a lousy roofer could use all the best materials and still have a leaky roof.

I didn't know anything about roofing, but I did know that in business, a good name can be worth a lot. In fact, Tom Peters, in his book *The Tom Peters Seminar*, mentioned that when Philip Morris, for example, purchased Kraft Foods, the total price of the deal was \$12.9 billion. "When the accountants finished their work," he

says, “it turned out that Philip Morris had bought \$1.3 billion worth of ‘stuff’ (tangible assets) and \$11.6 billion of ‘other.’” Most of that “other,” it turns out, was Kraft’s good name.

In that regard, Grindle had a problem. Nobody knew what a Grindle was, and “Grindle” did not automatically communicate “roofing.” As it turned out, Marv and The Agency were working to prepare a series of high-impact ads and brochures that would give The Grindle Company the professional image that Grindle wanted.

One of the first things that Marv and The Agency did was to develop a positioning statement, a tag line that could be used in all Grindle communications, essentially to tell the world that Grindle was a premier roofing company. Together, they came up with the tagline: “The Goof Proof Roof.” That positioning statement became the primary theme of the new image campaign, and it appeared in all of the national advertising, in the form of the headline, “How Can The Grindle Company Offer A Goof Proof Roof?”

“I NEED WRITING HELP”

Marv was hired to replace two women who left the company at the same time: a former Professor of English who served as the department manager and who did most of the writing for brochures, newsletters, and other corporate communications; and a woman who had coordinated the company’s direct mail program.

In the process, Marv inherited two administrative assistants, neither of whom had a good understanding of how a professional advertising department should function. These two secretaries didn’t seem to be able to get along with each other, so Marv decided that it would be best to let one of them go, and in the meantime to hire someone with a writing background who could help him get a few things done (since he did not think of himself as a writer in those days.)

“Internally, I need writing help. I have this newsletter that I have to do every month. The Agency is working on it, but I won’t be able to afford having them do it for long,” he said. “You wouldn’t believe what they’re charging me.” So in February of 1991, he hired me to what became my second corporate writing job, finally with a company that seemed to be doing well in spite of the Persian Gulf War and on-going recession.

I was excited about having, for the first time in my life, a job I thought would be stable for a number of years. I knew that when you work for a company, that company wants and expects that you will dive in and devote yourself to your work. At least, you do that if you want to get ahead. And so that is what I did. I was determined to stand out at my job.

Thus began my career as Advertising Assistant for The Grindle Company and as Editor-in-Chief of “The Grindle News.”

The advertising part, working with the guys at The Agency, was a lot of fun, but writing and editing the newsletter gave me a great opportunity to talk with a lot of people across the company, and really to get to know the company in a close and

personal way. Early on, my position was well regarded, and I had a great deal of help fitting in with the corporate culture. Connie, the secretary who stayed on, shared an office with me. She was well known and well regarded by the people who worked there. Her mom had until recently worked in The Grindle Company cafeteria, and Al Grindle himself had attended Connie's wedding. The combinations of Connie's friendly introductions and my own work ethic helped me to find my place in the company.

Marv also bought a camera for the department, and so unofficially, I became the keeper of the official company record. I was summoned to virtually every company event, where, as photographer, I was highly visible and a lot of important people within the company got to know who I was.

I was careful to do some of my best work for that newsletter. And I got a lot of compliments for it.

CAR PAYMENT SANDWICHES

Not long after I started, Miss Elizabeth and I decided we needed to buy a new car, because the floorboards had rusted out in the old Dodge we were driving.

We looked around, and we settled on a blue 1991 Toyota Tercel. We had one child with one on the way, and we wanted something that was going to last a long time. Grindle was paying me the whopping sum of \$18,000 per year, so we figured that if we cut some "luxuries" out of our budget, we could buy a new, low-end car that wouldn't need any repair work for a while.

My end of the sacrifice meant I would stop eating out for lunch, and I would brown bag it with peanut butter sandwiches instead. They were cheap, and we saved enough money each month that the car payment was a relatively painless expense for us to take on.

Connie, my neighbor at work, liked to make fun of the fact that I was eating "car payment" sandwiches for lunch.

"YOU'LL BE PRESIDENT SOME DAY"

As much as I liked my job, I had a hard time getting anything done on the company's 1984 vintage computer system. Grindle was nothing if not cheap with his computers. I remember one of the computer (IS) staff guys giving me a tour when I started, and bragging about the fact that their system was powered by four Intel 386 chips.)

So I started carrying my Smith Corona Word Processor back and forth to work. With it, I could write, effortlessly, without having to call the computer department too much for help. I hated to bother people if I didn't have to.

At the same time Grindle had hired Marv Boxman, the company also hired a high-powered general manager for their (much smaller) flooring division, named Howard Twinkle. Howard had enjoyed a long, almost stellar, career as a rising star in the industrial flooring industry.

Howard frequently saw me walking in and out with my Smith Corona, and he told me a story about the guy in the brick factory who would walk out every day with one brick in a wheelbarrow. They wondered why he was only taking one brick out at a time. But the reality was, he was really stealing the wheelbarrows.

He said I reminded him of that story. I told him I was simply trying to get my work done.

“With your dedication, you’ll probably be president of the company some day,” he said.

I wrote the first few issues of the newsletter using my little Smith Corona. I typed up the copy, and gave hard copies to the printer, Tall Tony, for typesetting and layout. It was a long process.

Not long after that, one of the company’s other IS staffers suggested I go to a seminar on desktop publishing. At that seminar, individuals from Adobe Systems presented the big picture behind desktop publishing, and I was hooked. So my IS friend and I made a presentation demonstrating how much money the company could save on the composition fees our printer charged to typeset the newsletter. So The Grindle Company bought a Macintosh for me, and I was in business as a desktop publisher.

“KEEP YOUR HEAD LOW”

When the Persian Gulf War was over in late February, Al Grindle bought everyone in the company a t-shirt celebrating the victory. I was impressed by this gesture, and I told Irish Tom about it.

As a holdover from my days with The Agency, Irish Tom and I liked to have lunch together. On these special occasions, it was almost always pizza, and at one of our pizza lunches not long after I was hired at Grindle, Irish Tom told me to watch out for Al Grindle, because Grindle appeared to him to be a “wolf,” the kind of business owner who could chew you up and spit you out for no other reason than that he was having a bad day.

I tended to see things differently. Having just been unemployed for almost four months, I viewed the austerity and prosperity of The Grindle Company as a kind of job security for myself. “No, I see how much money the company makes, and how well they treat the employees. I just need to work to stay on the good side of him,” I said.

“Just keep your head down low. Being visible cuts both ways. You’d be better off just trying to be the best writer you can be. My father lived through the depression, and his advice to me was, ‘if you have a trade, you’ll always be able to make a living.’”

At first, I only saw Al Grindle once in a while. He was a big fat, husky, gray-haired wheezing old man, who only showed up one or two days a week. One time, I must have been staring. He quipped, “You think I’m heavy? You should try carrying around my wallet!”

There really was not much at all that was appealing about him, that I could see,

except for the fact that he had a lot of money, and he gave you some of it if you did good things for him and his company. Once I was called in after hours to take photographs of a private sales dinner. At the end, he handed me a \$100 bill out of his wallet. But it wasn't enough merely to give it to me. He had folded it up, and showed it to me with his thumb pointing to the big "\$100" in the corner, so I would make sure to know that I was getting something special.

Others in the company held the same view that I had, and his track record tended to bear this out. Many of his old drinking buddies had been transferred into semi-retirement, to warm, sunny sales territories like Florida. Much later, I discovered that Grindle used geography to punish as well as to reward, sending those who had lost his favor into out-of-the-way places like Arkansas.

HOW AL GRINDLE BECAME A MILLIONAIRE

Like many people, Grindle was interested in telling his story, and he saw that I, as a writer, might be useful to him by helping him to tell it. At first I was very shy around him. But eventually, my curiosity overcame my shyness, and in fact, he seemed to perk up when I asked him questions about his own background and the history of the company. In fact, he seemed to relish the chance to tell me his old stories. And I was very curious about the history of the company, and how Al Grindle became Al Grindle.

When he was a kid, Grindle said, he had worked a Kool-Aid stand, for the thrill of making some money and running a business. "I was impressed by the old movies that showed business leaders juggling their businesses from offices high atop their tall skyscrapers," he said. "I always wanted to be like them."

He graduated from a Cleveland area high school in the late 1950's, and after a brief stint in the national guard, he worked as a salesman for several companies involved with industrial maintenance – a function which included roofing. Over the years, he became proficient in his work.

He started the Grindle Company in 1968 after a dispute with an employer, moving his new company in Pittsburgh to avoid violating a non-compete agreement. He told me he struggled to pay his \$140 a month office rent.

His intention really was to compete with his former employer, and not long after his non-compete agreement expired, he opened a branch office in the Cleveland area. His new company grew quickly over the next several years, but he expanded too rapidly – and found out the hard way that salespeople in remote locations are hard to keep track of – and the business almost went under.

The late 1970's brought a big turnaround for The Grindle Company. Moe Hawk and Larry Shark, who had started as work crewmembers and had remained loyal through some of the company's lean times, proved their worth to Al Grindle, and they began to take on more responsibility. Moe and Larry both helped the company expand into new locations.

Grindle had also hired a loyal, trustworthy accountant, Kip Apple, in 1977. Kip

had worked in some very unsatisfying positions prior to that. But with this being Pittsburgh at a time of great downturn, Kip made the job his own, he got Grindle's books in order, and the company managed to maintain its growth.

Around that time, a new kind of roofing "technology," ethylene propylene diene terpolymer (EPDM) was just being introduced in the roofing industry. EPDM was a black rubber sheath that is stretched and attached to a roof, and when there are no holes in it, it works very well. "Just so no one walks on it wearing golf shoes," as Irish Tom liked to say. The new material came on line with very long manufacturer's warranties, and Grindle was among the first contractors to use it on a regular basis. It was more affordable than standard roofing, and Grindle soon established a sales-and-installation pitch that could be (and would be) replicated in many locations.

The combination of having a hot new product to sell and having access to new markets through geographic expansion helped the company to grow exponentially during the late 1970's and early 1980's, at a time when much of the US economy (especially in Pittsburgh and the northeast) was experiencing sluggish times.

Moe and Larry, and another individual, Lance Little (a salesman), each in turn moved out of Pittsburgh to manage new locations in Cleveland, North Carolina, and Chicago, where they became Regional managers and later Regional Vice Presidents. (After his first flirtation with bankruptcy, Grindle was hesitant to give out any real authority, but he realized he had to do it eventually.)

The company continued to grow throughout the 1980's, sending out satellite offices from each of these locations, and by 1991, when I joined the company, there were 30 sales locations and 20 contracting centers, as far away as Miami, Florida, and San Francisco, California. In all, a thousand employees, and a thousand people and their families were dependent on The Grindle Company for their livelihoods.

By 1990, The Grindle Company had developed a typical corporate pyramid-like structure, with Grindle at the top – heaven forbid that he should lose his balance and fall on any of them – with a second tier of managers (including Kip Apple, Lance Little, Moe, Larry, and a string of Curlies and Joes) who served individually as vice presidents and together as the "Executive Committee."

WHAT THE GRINDLE COMPANY MEANT TO SOME PEOPLE

Though the Grindle Company was not well known in the area, or even in the roofing industry, the fast growth of the company during the 1980's helped more than a few people, who were otherwise bound by rust-belt shackles, to overcome their humble beginnings and lift themselves into positions of "corporate management."

Here's what one of these laborers-turned-executives told me, as I reported it in one newsletter:

"When I was laid off from my mechanic's position, unemployment in Youngstown was at 22%. I was happy to take any position. I started working for Al Grindle in July of 1981, and my first day off was Thanksgiving. It was

unheard of to work that much back then. Al Grindle told us that he wanted to make the company the biggest and the best some day, and that the people who helped build that dream would benefit right along. And he's kept his word on that."

That gentleman later went on to manage Grindle's entire west coast division.

Al Grindle and some of his close associates were able to see what it was like to watch a business grow beyond any of their wildest dreams. Just beneath the surface of that story, however, was a tumultuous mess of corporate intrigue and backbiting that no normal person would want to be a part of.

Grindle's policy was to give people just enough slack and reward to entice them to work hard enough to advance to the next level. Of course, when reward time came, there never seemed to be enough. Grindle ruled with an iron fist. And his motto was, "I get mine first."

AL GRINDLE BUYS A NEWSPAPER

That Al Grindle had started a small roofing company and turned it into a \$60+ million industry leader is an amazing story in itself.

But when a CEO millionaire is in the company of other millionaires, being a roofer is pretty much last on the pecking order of "prestigious occupations" (behind physician, lawyer, stock broker and plumber). Even though you are wealthier than they are. So in search of some respectability, Grindle decided to diversify, and he purchased a small, hometown newspaper.

His intention was to buy a network of about 20 of these small newspapers, make them profitable, collect an average of \$50,000 profit annually from each of them, and increase his fortune by a million dollars a year.

In the announcement that the editor wrote describing the paper's new owner, she had hacked to pieces all the facts of Grindle's life. Al Grindle called me into his office, handed me the story and asked me to rewrite it in the next 30 minutes, so that it could be published in that day's paper.

It was my first trip to Al Grindle's office. Grindle ran the whole operation from his command center there. He was not a very tall man, and so he had had some wood parquet flooring installed under his high-backed leather chair, which set him a bit higher than anyone sitting across the desk from him.

The two chairs across from his desk were lovingly referred to as the "blast" chairs, because he could really blast into some unlikely soul. The word "blast," of course, was reminiscent of the 1950's era military films that featured US Marines hunkered down in trenches, watching a nuclear explosion, waiting for the blast to go over their heads, and then getting up and moving forward. Marv told me he had once been the subject of a Grindle blast, and that it wasn't a pleasant thing at all.

I was extremely nervous when I returned to my cubicle to write the story, but Connie told me to relax, that she knew I could do a good job with it. I pounded my

Smith Corona keys until my fingertips were nearly bloodied, and I did well enough on the assignment that he sent my article up to the newspaper and told them to run what I had written. I was very proud to know that Al Grindle had seen me do a difficult thing very well.

THE MARV BOXMAN ADVERTISING PROGRAM

If there was one thing Marv Boxman knew, it was how to manage an advertising program. He had done it for some of the biggest clients in the city. But he got himself in trouble with Grindle because he had almost always done it from the point of view of an ad agency, rather than as an employee of the company who's money is being spent. That was dangerous with The Grindle Company because Marv didn't realize that there was often an invisible asterisk beside everything Al Grindle said.

When you're the Account Manager for an agency, and a client tells you "we've got a million dollar budget," you look for the most efficient ways to spend that million, so as to maximize the impact that advertising program will have.

But when Al Grindle tells you, "our advertising budget is about a million dollars," what he doesn't tell you is "we'd prefer your expenditures not exceed that amount, and "be prepared to stop spending that money as soon as 'Grindle Says Stop.'"

Marv directed The Agency to produce and place ads in a range of trade journals, and in The Wall Street Journal. As well, he produced a 300,000-piece direct mail program, based on the advertisements, and spent nearly \$100,000 on the construction of a brand new 24' x 20' x 16' custom trade show booth.

Trade shows had always been an integral part of Grindle's marketing efforts. They give salespeople a chance to talk directly with customers, in a non-threatening environment. Marv had written four large trade shows into the schedule using the new \$100,000 booth, one in March, and three in the fall. "I'll handle March, but I'm not going to all three of those in the fall," Marv said to me. "I'll take two of them, and you go to the other one."

A NEW BABY AND A TRIP TO ATLANTA

The first two of the shows were in Atlanta, and the third one was in Florida. I couldn't go to the first Atlanta show in September because Miss Elizabeth was expecting to give birth to our second child that month. So Marv made arrangements for me to go to the second Atlanta show in October. (He wanted the trip to Florida.)

So tentative arrangements were made for me to fly to Atlanta. Miss Elizabeth and I talked it over. "I hate the thought of you being away while we have this new baby," she said. And I agreed. So we asked Marv if I could drive down instead, and take the family with me, and he thought that would work out all right. "You are saving the company a plane fare," he said. "Just leave Sunday, a day early, and we'll let you have the extra day off coming back."

Our Big Healthy Quiet Baby was born right on schedule, and so when the trade show came in October, we packed up the Toyota and drove down through West

Virginia in the fall. There's not a straight and level stretch of road in that state, but the red autumn leaves made for a magnificent trip.

In Atlanta we stayed in a very fine hotel outside of the city. Miss Elizabeth enjoyed the accommodations, and I commuted to the convention hall each day. The magician who was performing for us at the trade show treated us one night to dinner and a close-up magic show. Our Little Professor had a great time.

ADVERTISING "HELP" FROM LARRY SHARK

For the first half of that year, 1991, the program unfolded (and was received) very favorably. Commercial roofing is a capital expenditure, and even though the economy went into recession late in 1990, all of the companies that had budgeted to buy new roofing during that fiscal year continued to make those expenditures throughout the year, in spite of the recession. But as companies set new fiscal numbers based on the recession, roofing expenditures were among the first to go.

That meant customers stopped buying Grindle roofs just as the economy was picking back up, and just as Marv's advertising program was rolling out.

Unfortunately for Marv, he had signed long-term contracts with various publications in an effort to get a lower cost-per-ad. By early summer of that year, Al Grindle was alarmed enough about the drop in sales to tell Marv Boxman to pull the plug on much the advertising program. Everything he did from that point on was scrutinized.

Larry Shark, as I mentioned earlier, was a member of the executive committee, and VP for the whole Southern Region. He was a one-time roofing crewman and warehouse manager who knew nothing about advertising, but he did know a lot about the ways of the Grindle Company. Around mid-summer, while Marv Boxman was appearing to be unresponsive to demands of Al Grindle to stop spending money, (even though contracts had already been signed), Larry was given "full charge" of the advertising program.

Marv told me he felt as if he could do "nothing right for these people."

ANOTHER TEST

Like Irish Tom, Grindle's method of operation involved giving people small tests to see how they perform. However, Grindle was a much less compassionate employer than Tom ever was.

Grindle wanted to provide some marketing "oomph" for his newspapers, and so he decided to run a schedule of ads and outdoor boards for his newspapers. He asked Marv to give him some ideas. Marv naturally asked The Agency to develop these ideas. At the same time, and behind Marv's back, Grindle asked me to come up with ideas for those same ads and outdoor boards. I have always tried to do the best work I possibly could do, and I worked hard to develop a set of ideas that Grindle's newspaper would be proud of.

When it came down to it, Grindle liked my ideas better than the ones that Herr

Gruff at The Agency had come up with. Grindle used my work. “Yours is just as good, if not better,” he said. “Besides, I won’t have to pay you nearly as much as I’d have to pay The Agency.”

MARV BOXMAN GETS FIRED

Marv Boxman was a fine man to work for. He knew the business of advertising, and I believe if Grindle’s complex corporate culture and unique budgeting methods could have been communicated to him in an honest, realistic manner when he started, instead of somewhat forcefully as his program played itself out, he would still be there running the show.

Nor did he have help from the economy in late 1991. Because of the tendency for roofing to lag behind the rest of the economy, the Grindle Company had had a strong sales finish in 1990, during the recession. But during the last half of 1991 sales fell through the floor.

Al Grindle was not used to seeing down sales months, 5%, 10%, even 25% off from the previous year. December sales were off by 50%. He was used to seeing sales figures go up from year to year. When they were going down, Grindle understandably was alarmed.

On January 2, 1992, Marv was called into a meeting with Larry Shark. It turned out to be an exit interview. He had been let go, and he was told to clean out his desk and leave that day. At least they didn’t ruin his Christmas.

“Anyway, they gave me a month’s severance pay,” my now former manager had said. “That’s not bad for only having been here a year.”

Marv’s departure was part of a corporate-wide bloodletting.

“You’ll probably stay on for at least a short while to take care of some things,” he said. “But I just don’t know what their plans are for you.”

A CORPORATE-WIDE BLOODLETTING

Connie had been let go as well. But the bloodletting was not only limited to the advertising department. Grindle had given me some advance notice that there would be more changes, but at the time, I was too naïve, I think, to know what was going on. Certainly the drop in sales alarmed me; a year earlier, I had been let go from a company that suffered from declining sales.

At the same time I was developing ads for Grindle’s newspapers, I had also been asked, as a result of the PR work I had done for the flooring division, to submit an industrial flooring article to one of the maintenance publications we had contacted.

I wrote the article with the help of Big Bob, who was the flooring sales manager. In fact, the article was going to be submitted as authored by “Big Bob,” who was, after all, the source of information for the article.

Of course, Al Grindle needed to give final approval to every piece of information that was to be released from the company, and in late December of 1990, this flooring article came across his desk. “It’s a good article,” he told me. “But when you

send it in, put your name down as author,” he said. “And by the way, keep that under your hat.”

THE FALLOUT

In January, at the same time Marv Boxman was let go, about half of the flooring division was let go, (including Howard Twinkle and Big Bob), and a significant number of the sales and contracting locations for roofing were shut down as well.

Because I managed the newsletter mailing list, Al Grindle called me into his office to go over the new arrangements with me. I sat down in one of the two “blast” chairs across from his desk. The organization chart on Grindle’s desk was littered with bright red “x’s,” each of which meant that that entire location was now gone, people and all, effective immediately.

There are two sides to every story. When the going got tough, above all, Al Grindle was profoundly concerned that his business would survive. He has shown over the years that he would do whatever necessary to make sure the business survived, even if it meant letting go a large part of the company to save costs.

When the dust cleared, and I saw that I was the only person left in the advertising department at the Grindle Company. I knew that great fortunes had been promised and created for some of Alvin Grindle’s top lieutenants. I had some hope of being put into a position where I could benefit from this.

As it turned out, they merely raised my salary from \$18,000 per year to \$21,000 per year, and “retained” me as Assistant Manager of Advertising. I had mixed feelings about this. And over the years, I discovered that these mixed feelings had some basis in truth. I was experiencing firsthand Al Grindle’s method of putting carrots in front of people to get them to work harder to move on to the next level.

JOBS ARE HARD TO COME BY

After a year of working for a seasoned professional like Marv Boxman, I was assigned to work for Miss Magpie, the telemarketing manager who now became General Manager of Marketing. The Magpie was not a marketing professional, and she really had no idea of what marketing and advertising were about, except that market conditions enabled her telemarketing department to be successful at obtaining sales leads for the company.

Even though I did not receive the promotion I wanted, Marv’s demise left a somewhat open career path for me, and I thought I might like to try and take advantage of it. “They’re not going to go outside to hire another manager right now,” I said to my wife. “They’re probably going to give me a shot at it.”

“They should have promoted you to manager right away,” she said. “That’s what they’re asking you to do anyway. You should be paid for it.”

“I’ve done too well for them, and I’ve saved Grindle a bunch of money. They’ll promote me when the time comes. They’re just testing me. This really is my chance to move into management.”

For me, management was the Holy Grail. It meant a title, a raise, more money, and the kind of respect I had been hoping to find in a job. But my line of reasoning did not sit well with her.

“John, you’ve got to get out of there – you see how they treat people. You can get a management job somewhere else,” she said.

“Jobs are hard enough to come by,” I said. “You can’t just go and get a job as a manager when you’ve never been a manager before. I need to keep working there, get promoted, and then go somewhere else.”

It was to be a constant area of friction between us.

MY FIRST ASSIGNMENT AS ASSISTANT MANAGER OF ADVERTISING

At my first meeting with The Magpie, I felt it was important to develop a sense of trust. I had my own ideas about how things could and should be done. And knowing the uncommunicative nature of my predecessor’s tenure, I wanted to make a presentation to the executive committee that would put everything on the table, in a way that would show off my potential value to the company. So for a few weeks, I stayed late and worked the 60-hour weeks, devoting myself to doing what needed to be done to get the advertising department back into the good graces of the company.

Since there was no real budgeting process at The Grindle Company, I asked the accounting department for copies of the invoices for all of the previous year’s expenditures. I totaled up the total costs for what The Agency had been charging. (The agency had put together a brochure for each of the five roof systems Grindle sold. And the cost, start to finish for each of these projects was in the range of \$14,000-17,000. Those figures gave me a benchmark against which I could compare my own work. As well, knowing what the industry was charging at the time was a big help to me down the road in knowing what I could charge myself.)

I made a nice presentation to the Executive Committee in February. I introduced myself to them, and I outlined the “state of the department.” I also presented an overview of a program I thought was needed at the time. At the end, they gave me a standing ovation.

In spite of that, my first “official” task (given by Larry the Shark) was not to do any great writing or managing project, but instead was to negotiate the best possible price we could get on business cards. So I went to several of our vendors and got them to beat each other over the head until the price of our business cards went from \$45.00 per thousand to \$40.00 per thousand to 30.00 per thousand, on a single order of cards.

GRINDLE GIVES ME A CHARGE

Grindle was not at the Executive Committee meeting where I made my debut presentation, but he came over to my office one day, about a week later, and told me he heard I had done a good job at the meeting, and he asked to see some of what I had put together.

I happily obliged, and I walked him through some of the items I had presented.

“You have some good ideas,” he said. “We’ve kept you on because of your creativity, and you’ll have plenty of opportunity to exercise that creativity here.

“Just keep in mind one thing. This is my company. I formed the Executive Committee as a convenience to myself. We grew very quickly, and it became hard for one person to keep an eye on the whole company. But they don’t run things here, I do.

“Whenever you have plans to do things, be sure you go through proper channels, and present your ideas through The Magpie and the Executive Committee. But even though you get their approval, I still want to see everything that goes through here.”

SHIFTING GEARS

The gist of the committee's message to me at my first meeting was "do not spend any more money on advertising." It would be ok to buy such day-to-day necessities as letterhead and business cards, etc., but any print ads were to be pulled, even at the expense of being "short-rated" for the advertising that Marv Boxman had committed to.

Some of these expenditures were significant, such as a commitment to run an ad in the Wall Street Journal through the first six months of the year. I had to cancel the program, and convince Kip Apple that the Grindle Company needed to pay the short rate on the contract for the ads that had already run.

And I was told not to use The Agency any more. A year earlier, they had to let me go. Now, I had to tell Irish Tom, Herr Gruff, and Fast Eddie that they were no longer working for Grindle. That was hard, because, during that hard year of the recession in 1991, the Grindle Company was their biggest client. I knew it would be devastating for them.

I made an appointment to go and visit them personally. Herr Gruff had planned a big welcome for me, and indeed, I was welcomed as their client, as a returning hero would be welcomed, and as their primary contact to their biggest account.

However, the news I had to share with them wasn't going to make their day. "I don't think we're going to run any more ads," I said. "In fact, we're probably not going to do any more advertising. I need to find out what we owe you guys, so we can pay everything off, finish that last brochure you're working on, and then sit tight for a while."

My relationship with these folks turned icy in an instant, especially with Herr Gruff. Gruff, I think, was hurt by the fact that, at best, I hadn't fought for them, the way he had fought for me. And at worst, he feared that I had been in competition with them. And thanks to Al Grindle's test project, that's exactly what had happened.

LEARNING BY TEACHING: THE INTERN

Times were lean, and ad agencies of all sizes began to call on me for work. Dave Boor, whom Marv had used on a spare project or two, was one regular visitor. Grindle was a fair sized company, and if its ad expenditures were to keep pace with its sales

figures (the Boor's reasoning went), it could have been a pretty nice sized account.

However, I was not allowed to outsource anything, and I was told to rely on my "creativity" to get things done. Still, I was eager to do the best job I could do, for the sake of my future with the company, and to learn everything I could learn about advertising.

Before Marv left the company, he had received an application from a would-be intern, and he thought it might be a good idea to hire her. Little Debbie was a young lady from Bethel Park who was graduating from college who needed to work in a 40 hour per week internship.

Grindle accepted this idea because she would work free of charge, (though later they decided they would pay her.) Debbie was an art major, and she was able to help design a new letterhead/business card, and she took care of having a lot of the printing done.

BACK IN THE FREELANCE ARENA

Miss Elizabeth persisted with her belief that I had no real future with The Grindle Company. So I compromised with her. "I'll see how things go with Grindle, but in the meantime, I'll look at other options, too."

Several weeks later, I answered an ad for a "freelance writer" in a small publication called "The PennySaver," and I found myself sitting at a bar with a bank VP named Hunky Haluska.

Maurice "Hunky" Haluska was a big, tall man sitting erect on his tiny barstool, with a full white crop of hair, and a dirigible of a white shirt covering his taller than average torso. His sitting erect gave him the impression that he was already trying hard to steady himself.

"Call-me-Hunky, everyone does," he had said over the phone. I had sent him samples of my work in the meantime, and we had decided to meet at The Depot, an old railroad-car-turned-bar that was located halfway between where I worked at the Grindle Company in Bethel Park, and where he worked at The Bank.

"You know, John, you're the only person who responded to my ad?" he said. "You and an old Granny from Homestead, who likes to write poetry. Why are you reading the PennySaver anyway?"

"I usually don't. It was just an accident, it came in the mail, and I started flipping through it, I guess. Why are you advertising in the PennySaver?"

"I like to start off small, and build things up from there," he said. "If I find my writer in the PennySaver, I don't have to spend the money for an ad in the Sunday paper, I don't have to put up with the hassle of looking through hundreds of resumes and all that."

He explained to me that The Bank had often fluctuated in its philosophy of advertising; sometimes they would hire an ad agency, sometimes they would have someone on-staff who could handle the work, and at other times, Hunky worked alone and relied on freelance help. Hunky had just lost an Assistant and was again

entering in a “work alone” phase.

“By the way, John, when I’m working on a project, I like to throw out a lot of different ideas at a time, and then get feedback from them. It helps me get the creative ball rolling.”

That helps, as does a shot and a beer, I thought.

“Okay,” I said.

“Have you ever heard of the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892?” he said.

“No sir.”

It turned out that during the heyday of the Carnegie Steel era, a precursor of USSteel and USX Corporation, the workers were trying to form a union. In an effort to break the fledgling union, Carnegie locked the men out, brought in replacement workers, and hired the Pinkerton Guards to keep the regular steel workers out.

The men fought to get their jobs back, and a number of people died in the fighting. To get their jobs back, the workers conceded on many issues, but they showed the power that people have when they organize together against a perceived injustice.

Twenty years after that event (and probably as a result of it), a group of those same steel workers got together and chartered a Savings Association, which over time became “The Bank.” They pooled together a certain amount of their savings every month, and out of that money, they made home mortgages available to members of the community.

That year, I bought a tiny Mac Classic II, with an integrated 9” grayscale monitor. It was a frustrating computer to work with, but it was the only one I could afford. And in the true sense of American capitalism, I was now the proud owner of “the means of production.” And now because I had my own equipment, I had an opportunity to work on the first large and prestigious piece of work for my portfolio: I was given the opportunity to work on The Bank’s first-ever annual report.

It turned out to be a 24-page document, including the covers. I wrote text for several of the articles, and Little Debbie, working on the side, put together a rough layout for me, which I implemented using my small Macintosh. Doing the layout for a 24-page document, using a 9” grayscale monitor, was like shoveling snow with a spoon. But it turned out to be the kind of work sample any fledgling freelancer would be proud to have in a portfolio.

UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE

By May of that year, Debbie was graduating from college. She applied for a full time position with the company, which they didn’t give her. Grindle had another person in mind: his personal physician had a daughter in college who needed a summer job, and so Grindle gave it to her.

After having Debbie and the physician’s daughter around for some months, (working as interns), the general impression crept up that there ought now to be a second position in advertising, and that position needed to be filled. The Magpie and

Kip Apple decided, it seemed, they wanted someone reliable around who could “keep an eye on me.” Enter Miss Jan.

Miss Jan had worked in the National Accounts area of the telemarketing department. She was around 40 years old, and she had never had any experience with marketing or advertising or printing, or anything else dealing with what I did. In fact, she had been a stay-at-home mom for 20 years, and her job with Grindle was her first in a long time. She was working now to put her son through college.

But when Miss Jan moved into the position, I worked with her and essentially taught her what I knew about advertising and printing. I saw her again not long ago, and she was still very thankful to me for being so kind and helpful.

JUST JOKING!

The Magpie also had a secretary named Colleen. There was never a dull moment with Colleen. She had a very loud voice, and she was not afraid to use it.

One day, I had snapped a picture of her joking around, pulling her nostrils back and making a pig face. Normally, I included an employee photo on the back page of the newsletter. But before I turned the document over to Al Grindle to review, I was required to give a copy to Miss Magpie, for her approval. Jokingly, I used this photo on the back page.

The Magpie was a fairly uptight person, not wishing ever to do anything out of the ordinary. Alarmed at the thought that anyone in her department might be seen as having fun, she jumped from her chair faster than anyone had ever seen her move before. She stormed out of the office and crashed her thigh into the corner of the desk, which left a large and painful bruise that took some time to go away.

It was a painful lesson – for The Magpie – but at least it taught me something about the use of humor at The Grindle Company.

MY FIRST FAILED BUSINESS ATTEMPT

In 1992, in the excitement of watching the Pittsburgh Penguins win their first Stanley Cup, I started a book project. In that book, which I called “the work book,” I tried to put together a combination “motivational-and-how-to” book that would help the average person understand the hiring process and how an effective marketing plan could help them find a job. After all, “teach a man to fish...”

At that time, I envisioned the following four market conditions:

The outlook for the 1990’s called for persistently high unemployment, with many employers constantly on the lookout to trim payroll and other expenses

Many of these newly unemployed would find themselves in the position of being unemployed for the first time in a long time (given the “lifetime employment” mentality that existed, especially among larger companies in those days.)

Many also would want to try to find another job right away, but they would have no idea of how to look for a job beyond “check the papers” and “go to an employment agency.”

Frustrated with their prospects, they would seek professional help, and they would seek it in the form of my book.

In retrospect, I was wrong on several of those assumptions, and that particular book never went anywhere. But who could have predicted the arrival of the Internet and the economic ups and downs that came about because of it?

GETTING TO KNOW THE INDEPENDENT GUYS

During the first year of my tenure as Assistant Manager, I came across a unique demographic that I will call “Independent Guys.” These were the “marketing consultants” who were consultants merely because they were in between jobs.

Dave Boor was one of them, as was a gentleman named Todd Bailey, another displaced agency person who showed up in my office looking for some work to do. Both of these individuals will show up later, at key moments of the story.

But there seemed to be dozens of others, and I was always polite to them. In fact, I tried to be kind to everyone who came through my door. Often these “independents” were not writers or designers; but rather they were “account executives” or “project managers” who would get projects done by cobbling together groups of freelancers. And often they were just “independent” while they were between jobs.

My thought at the time was that I could do all of the writing that needed to be done, that I could hire freelance design help when needed, and that these “project manager” types merely collected money for providing a service I was capable of doing myself. And in fact, it was pressed hard upon me by Grindle, The Magpie and others, not to spend money on outside vendors, unless it was absolutely necessary.

THE 25 YEAR BROCHURE

In spite of this climate of stinginess, The Grindle Company was still a business, and it needed printed literature in order to present itself as a modern corporation. That gave me a good opportunity to do some quality work for the company, in the form of my newsletter, of course, and several other minor projects. I continued to try to prove my value to the company, and I especially liked to compare the cost of my work with the amount of money we paid to The Agency for similar work.

By the second half of 1992, the economy had rebounded, and the company had also resumed its upward growth curve. The growth spurt was so significant, in fact, that Al Grindle promised everyone a trip to the Bahamas for the January sales meeting if they hit a target sales figure.

The year 1993 was going to be a special year for the company, Al Grindle told me late in 1992. “Twenty-five years is a long time to be in business. I’d like to start off

the year with a new brochure, one that describes our company, its history, and our commitment to the future.”

He told me what information he wanted included in the brochure, and then, after a comment about his money, he told me, “Maybe when you’re the boss...when you have 25 years of experience, you can afford to sit back and relish your success the way I have.”

I wrote the piece from start to finish – I intended it to be a “sales presentation” that could sell the company without a salesperson. It turned out to be a very long 12-page brochure. I asked Little Debbie to do the design work, but she was working full time at another job. Even though I was able to do some adequate desktop publishing (adequate enough for Hunky!), I didn’t feel as if I had the experience to do a really first rate design.

Grindle gave me permission to spend some money and do a nice job. After talking with several agencies, I hired Princess Penni, formerly of The Agency, to do the design work. Penni was working on a freelance basis with another agency in town.

“I’m hoping they’ll hire me full time,” she said. “Full-time” work, of course, brought with it that elusive helping hand that only a company can provide, called “benefits,” which, at Penni’s level, consisted of health insurance for a single person, a week’s vacation and perhaps the automatic deduction of some payroll taxes (which she, as a freelancer, had been paying on her own.) Some benefit. I would argue that she was better off to stay freelance, but at the time, that’s not the way many people thought about it, at least here in Pittsburgh. (To a large degree, her experience mirrored my own situation with Irish Tom several years earlier.)

Some weeks she worked 40 or more hours for them, but other weeks, when there was no work for her, she would hang around there anyway, waiting for something to come up, often spending time there without being paid for it.

After I was done writing my brochure copy, I gave it to her along with some of the photos I collected. She put the document together and oversaw the production, creating a very nice layout in the process. The cover had the look of an engraved silver ingot – “25 Years of Excellence” – sitting on a background of dark blue velvet, the official color of “Grindle Blue.”

As it turned out, the company reached the sales goal, and so the piece needed to be printed in a hurry, in time for the winter sales meeting in the Bahamas. Everything was going fine until the printer we used came back with a color proof. In those days, color proofing systems weren’t all that wonderful. Grindle Blue was supposed to be a deep, rich blue, but the proof came back purple.

I showed it to Grindle. “I hate purple,” he said.

“It will be Grindle Blue,” I said. “They will use Grindle Blue ink when they print it. They can designate that sort of thing. This is just a proof that we can use to see that the photos are all in place and that the text reads the way you want it to read. It has nothing to do with what the actual color will be. We’re just showing you a clean, sharp layout, so you can see what the silver ingot will say and look like.”

“Just be sure it’s not purple,” he said.

“It won’t be,” I said. Nevertheless, Al Grindle gave a stern warning to Kip Apple and The Magpie, to make certain the brochure didn’t come out purple. They trusted me to some degree, but when the appearance of the company’s primary sales brochure was on the line, Kip Apple and The Magpie decided they wanted to go along to hold my hand.

GRINDLE CO. BUNGLES A TRIP

In November, when it was determined that the company had reached its sales goal for the year, Grindle was, as he had promised, going to celebrate by taking selected employees to Paradise Island in the Bahamas, for the January sales meeting. It was generally considered to be a mandatory trip for salespeople, although it was not necessarily mandatory for those other employees who had been invited. Those employees not selected to go, or who opted not to go, would receive a very generous cash bonus instead.

Since Miss Elizabeth was about 6 months pregnant at the time (with our third child), and since she would be 8+ months pregnant in time for the trip, we talked it over and we decided it would be a nice thing to have the money, instead of taking the trip. Why risk having a baby on a trip out of the country?

At first the Magpie thought this was acceptable, and we made our plans along these lines. So The Magpie didn’t have us on the list of people to go. But after she consulted with Kip Apple, she was told that I had to go to take pictures of the event. Of course, at this point, the tickets had already been purchased, and so my wife could not go on the trip, since she had already committed herself to not going. (Although they were able to squeeze an extra seat for me because of the urgency of my mission.)

Miss Elizabeth was of course heartbroken at the thought that we might have to be apart at such a crucial time, and after all we had been through in the last several years. Over the next several months, our discord at home over this matter only increased.

Around Christmas, my mother told me that I needed to call The Magpie and tell her that I needed another ticket. I wasn’t happy to do that at all, but I called, and somehow, miraculously, the Magpie came through with a second ticket. So Miss Elizabeth and I flew together to the Bahamas.

The trip went marginally well. I ended up taking a lot of good photos, and I put together a very nice eight-page double issue of the newsletter, commemorating the event. Miss Elizabeth had a somewhat decent time, and she loved the warm weather, although the fact that she was required to attend certain company events, which included a number of “spouses only” meetings, put a damper on her ability to have fun there.

One such meeting was put on by The Lawyer’s wife. It included such topics as “how bubble baths can reduce the stresses involved with having your man out of

town for such long periods of time.” My wife was not impressed.

When we returned from the Bahamas, everything seemed to be back to business as usual, at least for the time being. A couple of weeks later, our third baby, The Squirrel, was born, and he came in a bit of a hurry. (My parking ticket was stamped precisely at 2:26 am, and he was born before 3:00 am!)

THE DOUBLE-EDGED GENEROSITY OF AL GRINDLE

After that trip, however, it seemed as if my entire stay with the Grindle Company was one long trial.

Al Grindle had it in his heart to be generous. But the Bahamas trip was an example of the double-edged generosity he exhibited. There was perhaps no other company on earth where salespeople had it so good. Grindle’s motto was “give’ em every thing they ask for, because that way they won’t have no excuses.”

Once he gave them “everything,” though, he felt justified in making extraordinary demands on them. He expected extraordinary results from his salespeople. But even when they delivered, it never helped them in the long run. The motto always seemed to be, “that’s nice, what have you done for me this month?”

Grindle Company salespeople were put upon in brutal fashion to exceed their sales figures each month. Those who had a decline in their year-to-year sales figures were required to drive (from wherever they happened to live) to Pittsburgh for a special “underachiever’s” meeting. Those who had two off years in a row were summarily terminated, with no questions asked.

As part of his “program” that year for rehabilitating those wayward salespeople with only one off year, Al Grindle asked me to put together a piece of literature to help these underachievers. Internally, this piece of literature was called the “pass-out” piece. Each underachieving salesman would have a “pass-out” person hired for him, whose only job was to make cold calls in the local area, and to “pass out” this piece of literature unique to that sales territory. Each piece was to contain a complete overview of Grindle Co. services, a list of local references, and a tear-off reply card that would be returned to that local office.

In putting together the special double issue of the newsletter, I had, evidently, not assigned enough importance to this particular Al Grindle project. Somehow, I still was not fully aware of the necessary order of priorities. GRINDLE RULES was the correct order, and even though The Magpie was harping on me to get the newsletter done, she was not aware that Grindle had also given me this other assignment after we got back.

To make a long story short, Grindle’s pass-out piece did not get printed in time for the underachievers meeting, and he was (I heard) livid. Of course, muck rolls down hill, and Miss Magpie took the full brunt of this explosion. No doubt she was sitting in one of the blast chairs.

* * *

CALLING GRINDLE'S BLUFF

Immediately afterward, I was called into Miss Magpie's office. Kip Apple was there, and they were looking pretty somber. Their job was to inform me that I was being suspended for three days without pay, and I was still to make sure that the pass-out piece was printed.

I was very upset. I went home that day, talked it over with my wife, and decided that they had no right to ask me to work without pay. I drafted the following letter and faxed it off to The Magpie.

February 16, 1993

Dear Magpie:

This letter is to confirm the nature of our meeting yesterday, with Kip Apple, regarding the status of my future employment at the Grindle Company.

My understanding is that Mr. Alvin L. Grindle, as the C.E.O. and principal shareholder in the company, has stated that because I did not have the "Pass Out" literature piece completed in time for this meeting (of which I was totally unaware - and more, I was on vacation, at your suggestion, because of the birth of a child), that I am to be suspended without pay for three days.

Furthermore, Mr. Grindle has put into no uncertain terms that if I do not have this piece of literature completed, printed and delivered to the field by March 1, that my job will be terminated. Given that I am now suspended without pay for these three days (February 16, 17, and 18), it seems as if Mr. Grindle is intentionally making my job more difficult.

As a solution, both you and Mr. Apple have suggested to me that I continue to work on the piece during my suspension, and without pay, in order to keep my job. To me, that seems unfair and highly irregular.

I hope we can discuss this matter further on Friday when I return.

Sincerely,

Don't you know, just a few minutes later, I got a call from The Magpie, telling me that they were wrong to suspend me without pay, and to come back in and finish this "pass-out" piece.

REHABILITATION

I learned, for the first time, that it was possible to push back against the Grindle system, which until then seemed to be impenetrable. In order to get himself out from the bad end of a legal battle, Grindle simply asked me to return to work and do the best I could to get the piece done. However, I was to be treated as an underachiever, and Kip Apple and Miss Magpie were ordered to put me on a program of rehabilitation. I was to keep a log of all the projects that people around the company had requested, who requested them, and when they were due. Of course, I was to pay particular attention to get done the projects that Al Grindle himself had asked

me to do. I was to report all of this in a weekly meeting with Kip and The Magpie.

In retrospect, it turned out to be a good management tool; there needed to be some regular reporting system, so that others in the company could be kept up to date with what I was doing. And in fact, I did well with all of this personal attention, and things went fairly smoothly, although I was not promoted to Advertising Manager for another two years.

After that, at company events, I felt as if I were some kind of criminal, and that I needed to keep a very low profile, to the point that I often must have seemed “antisocial.” That need not have been the case, however, because my “rehabilitation” was merely another facet of Grindle’s calculated method for keeping the minions in order. A lot of Grindle employees probably felt the same way.

“WOULDN’T WORK FOR ANYONE ELSE”

Not long after the Grindle had cut loose about 25% of the company (Marv Boxman included), I was talking with old Alex, who at the time was the employee at Grindle with the longest continuous service, having started in 1969 and made it through all the tumult of the 1970’s, when the business was in a constant state of “almost going under.”

Alex was well past 65 when I met him. He had his own office in the corporate building (a luxury in those days), he had his protected accounts, and he seemed to be able to work only when he felt like it. He was, in fact, the first among the “semi-retired” under the Grindle system that I mentioned earlier. But Alex was in a different category, it seemed, all by himself. Quite often he and Al Grindle could be seen having lunch together in the cafeteria, reminiscing about the old days.

While I was at The Grindle Company, I found that Alex’s office was a good place to hide, and some of his advice proved to be invaluable. One thing Alex said that stuck with me: “after working for Grindle, I wouldn’t want to work for anyone else.”

Some time later, I heard Grindle’s explanation of why Alex was still around. “He can stay around as long as his balance sheet stays positive.” He was able to write his own schedule, including one or two trips a year to California, to visit his flooring accounts there, and to see his daughter. (He had “protected” accounts in California.)

But like Marv Boxman before me, whose activities were closely monitored by Larry Shark when he was in trouble, I would often feel similarly harassed by Miss Magpie, who asked me why I was five minutes late from lunch.

“Lance is waiting for you. You know our lunch hour runs from 12:30 to 1:30. And you only work from 8:30 to 5:00. That’s only 37 and a half hours a week. Mr. Grindle is kind enough to give you that extra half hour a day.”

Ho hum.

THE BOOR

In spite of the hardships I was having with Grindle & Co., my position there made me something of a prize to some of the local ad agencies. I was, after all, in

charge of the advertising for a very large local company. And Dave Boor was the kind of schemer who would do anything he could think of to ingratiate himself with a large potential client.

In this regard, he invited me over to his home on a Saturday to discuss a potential project he was working on.

“A local Realtor organization sporadically puts out a couple of issues of two different newsletters for their members. I’m thinking about approaching them with the idea of upgrading the image of these publications by combining them into one nicer, regularly published piece, and selling advertising as a way to make it pay for itself. The problem is that I’ve never used a Macintosh, and I know that you’re an expert at it...”

I’ve never appreciated the insincere form of flattery that The Boor was practicing.

The truth is, I had been using a Macintosh for a couple of years at most, to produce a simple four page monthly newsletter. I wasn’t happy about having to go out on a Saturday to be asked what I thought of a potential business idea, and to give lessons on how to use a Macintosh.

I said, “Dave, I appreciate you showing this to me, but I really don’t want to get involved in this right now.” While I tried to be accommodating to everyone, The Boor just really seemed to get on my nerves.

THE CLIMB OUT OF THE PIT

It's always important to have someone older and wiser than you are to help guide you up the corporate ladder. The person I "adopted" to be my mentor during my Grindle years was Biz Genius, who started working for Grindle as a consultant, and soon was hired as Chief Administrative Officer, taking the place (and office) of Old Jack, the former VP of Administration, even while Marv Boxman was still in the fold.

Old Jack, an accountant and executive committee member, was ousted, it was said, for the crime of sitting in Al Grindle's chair in the boardroom. Others said that Old Jack just got too greedy with Al's money.

Over the several years Biz and I worked together, I got to know him as a person of integrity, to trust his business judgment, and generally to look to him the way one would look to an older brother who could give advice on shaving, dating, and business.

At first we began discussing generic business issues. Later we started talking about some of the real business issues that The Grindle Company was facing.

One of these issues stands out in my mind. Grindle had talked about taking the company public and selling stock through an IPO. Biz had felt that in order for Grindle to go public, it would be important for the company to demonstrate the ability to grow through other means than just expanding its roofing operations. A prime way of doing this, he believed, would be through acquisitions of other types of building services companies that would enable the company to make more profitable use of certain elements that are already in place. For example, we could purchase a southern regional flooring contractor, as a way of expanding that capability geographically. Or we could acquire a network of regional HVAC companies that could work out of Grindle's existing warehouses, thereby adding to potential sales ability without adding overhead expenses.

Biz and I spoke at some length about how we might find companies that would be worth purchasing. Specifically, Biz thought it would be possible to make Grindle's telemarketing and advertising services available to candidates on an outsourced basis. We could monitor the kinds of sales leads they would get, and then make the decision to purchase companies based on the results of these real-life tests.

But over time, I lost enthusiasm for his expansion ideas because, while there may have been some initial interest, it seemed to me that the Regional VPs, who worked hard to maintain control in their own “feifdoms,” would not be interested in diluting their own power on the executive committee by having “regional vice presidents” from these new companies cluttering up that committee.

In fact, Biz’s effort did wither and die for a lack of interest.

After a short while, Biz seemed to have developed more complaints about The Grindle Company than I had. Eventually, I took a risk and told him first about some of the difficulties that Marv Boxman, Howard Twinkle and some others had faced with the company, and later I told him about the on-going difficulties I had been having. In the end, it was not much of a risk at all; Biz Genius was one of the most honorable men I have ever met, and perhaps the truest friend I had in that company.

THE IN-HOUSE AD AGENCY

Along with the mental workouts I got in my conversations with Biz, I continued to read voraciously, especially in the areas of marketing and advertising. I maintained a moderate work schedule with Hunky at The Bank, until he got an Assistant, Vito.

And I also kept my business sense sharp by thinking through and then pursuing a couple of new business opportunities.

The first of these, a concept for a newsletter called *The In-House Ad Agency*, was based on my own experience as a writer. My plan was to sell subscriptions to a newsletter that kept small business owners up to date with some of the trends in marketing.

I showed Biz my marketing plan for *The In-House Ad Agency*, my thoughts for how the newsletter might work in a different form, and he even agreed, at my suggestion, to work with me on the project (short of the point of investing money into it.)

“Your objective with any business like this,” he said, “is to reach ‘escape velocity.’” That is, he said I should plan to earn enough of an income from the venture, so that when I left my full time job, I would still have a full time income.

In producing this first issue, Tall Tony the printer agreed to help on some of the printing, which included a letterhead, envelopes, business cards, postage-paid reply cards, as well as the first issue of the newsletter. I mailed several hundred of these to small and new businesses, and later I followed up with some of these via telephone.

It was a very good theory, and I think a very good newsletter. Unfortunately, I didn’t sell a single subscription, and after that, I never put out a second issue of the newsletter.

GRINDLE’S FIRST \$100 MILLION WAS THE HARDEST

While I was working on all of that, at the end of 1993, Al Grindle called me into his office and showed me sales estimates that predicted the company was going to

break the \$100 million mark for the first time.

“We want to do a nice new brochure that celebrates this fact,” he said.

I was always happy to do a new brochure. A brochure not only gave me a tangible opportunity to show off my work; producing a brochure was also a genuinely enjoyable part of my job.

“I can remember at the end of our first year in business,” Grindle said. “Our sales were \$98,000. My first operations manager and I had a Christmas party with pizza and beer, and I told him then that some day we’d be celebrating our first hundred million dollar year.”

It was like Al Grindle to think big, and I am sure that his ability even to conceive of a number that large helped him to attain the goal.

“WHEN I GROW UP, I WANT TO BE LIKE YOU”

For such a special piece of literature, Grindle of course gave permission for me to hire a professional designer to work on the brochure. I wanted to do a nice job, so I checked with a number of different ad agencies and designers and asked them for “guesstimates” as to how much they would charge me to do the piece.

Princess Penni was first on my list; but she didn’t have time to work on the project because she had actually gotten her wish, and had been put on the official payroll at the agency where she was working. I couldn’t go to her new employer to do it, because I knew Grindle would never pay Ad Agency prices. Fast Eddie also begged off, because he knew I would squeeze him on price, but he referred me to another designer they had used on an occasional basis, a freelance designer named Wayne. “Not only is he a really good designer, but he’s also got a good Macintosh set-up that would be compatible with yours,” Eddie said.

I met with Wayne, and I liked him a lot. He was different from some of the other “independents” I had met. I especially liked the idea that he worked out of his home, that I would be working directly with the name on his ticket (instead of with a junior staff person), and that he wouldn’t be charging me for office overhead, etc. Wayne was, in fact, living the kind of life I wanted to live. “I want to be like you when I grow up,” I told him.

As for the substance of the copy, I talked with Biz. “They say that reaching the first million is the hardest,” he said, “and it’s the same with the first hundred million. It took 26 years to reach the first hundred million; but if you figure 10% sales improvements, using the investor’s ‘law of 72’ (that an investment will double when the interest rate multiplied by the number of years equals 72), then we should reach our second hundred million in just about six or seven years.”

Biz was largely correct with his prediction. But I wasn’t around long enough to see that second hundred million.

ASSEMBLING THE \$100 MILLION BROCHURE

We decided to give the piece a somewhat more “personal” flavor than the

previous piece I had done (the 25 year brochure, which essentially was a sales pitch). Grindle asked his secretary, Barb, to let me go through some of the personal items he was storing in his office. There were old business cards, letters, and gifts his employees had given him, a stack of business cards from some of the other companies he had owned and discarded over the years, and a box full of old photographs.

The executive committee had given Grindle a bar of silver for the 25th anniversary a year earlier. Among Grindle's pictures, I found a photograph of him with his employees from his very earliest days, a plaque congratulating Grindle on being the first \$1,000,000 salesman (in 1977), several old business cards, and several other very old photos of roofers doing their thing. (These roofers did not present a pretty sight).

Wayne placed these together in a nice collage for the cover, and he had them photographed by Hum Dinger, a rather eccentric photographer he knew, whose studio, coincidentally, was in his home.

The brochure worked out well; it was introduced to the company at that year's sales meeting trip to the Bahamas (yes, there was another one, and no, that one was no smoother than the previous one.) It became the company's lead capabilities brochure for a number of years, and it was popular with the salespeople even after I left the company.

LIFE IN THE EARLY 90'S

Generally, I hated working at The Grindle Company, though it had its advantages. Life was smooth during those years, and it was a time of growth for my small family. I had one child when I started with Grindle, and four children by the end of 1995. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Even though I was still Assistant Manager, I was building a very credible portfolio. My monthly production of the Grindle News continued unabated through these years, and it gave me a chance to know, and become known by, the primary movers of the company. I always wrote about the topics that Grindle wanted to see, but I also was able to write about the more interesting personal aspects of my fellow employees, whenever I was able to learn something new.

I have always been an avid reader, and I was using the time to learn everything I could learn about business. Key texts for me at the time were *Positioning* by Al Ries and Jack Trout, along with their *Marketing Warfare* book (in which the concept of Guerrilla Marketing is introduced.) I continued to re-read new versions of *What Color is Your Parachute* as they came out (every couple of years). Job-search literature was high on my reading list; one of my favorites was *Rites of Passage* by John Lucht, an up-close look at the world of executive recruiters.

After my failure with *The In-House Ad Agency*, Biz and I had regular discussions about how I could have changed my strategy, and later, almost anything related to business. He started a subscription to the *Harvard Business Review*, and he let me

borrow new issues as they came in. We talked about everything from the Deming theory of management, to his own “lemming” theory of “life in a big company.” (Lemmings are known for their mass migrations; sometimes they migrate en masse over a cliff. Quite often, corporate life encouraged this kind of behavior in employees.)

I spent a lot of time reading Tom Peters’s work, *Liberation Management*. It turned out to be his last big, scholarly, 800-page book. In that book, published in 1992, he cited predictions of high-bandwidth networks, and he gave his overview of how traditional business models would be dismantled by the emergence of small, fast, fashionable companies. Peters even advocated “creative destruction” in those days, before “re-engineering” became popular. Biz thought he was off base; as a good, conservative Presbyterian, Biz couldn’t see the point in the destruction of anything.

As well, Miss Jan and I had brought a measure of stability to a department that had seen quite a bit of instability. We became more than just business cards and brochures; we also helped to organize trade shows on a national and regional basis, and we were actively involved in helping to produce and organize many of the company’s regular events (including sales meetings and the Bahamas trips, which seemed to be occurring on a regular basis).

Because of Grindle’s reliance on me as a writer, and hence as the official recorder of Grindle Company History, I was able to take some liberties by pushing up the quality on many of the projects he gave me to do, such as the 25 year brochure, and the \$100 million brochure.

THE FIRST OF THE ANNUAL REPORTS

Annual Reports tend to be a company’s “flagship” piece. These are the highest quality document a company produces, generally, because they give the ability to really show off a company’s financial performance.

Until that year, Grindle had been having me write a promotional paragraph for his Ernst & Young audit reports, which were then produced on a laser printer, photocopied and spiral bound. But after the success of the \$100 million brochure, Grindle trusted me with some more elaborate designs for his annual reports. And these in turn made it easier to show off his company, at times and places when his audiences might not necessarily understand or respect a roofing company.

I was also able to work with some of the younger marketing people in Magpie’s telemarketing department (she was advertising for “marketing” positions, not “telemarketing” positions; she explained to me that it made recruiting easier to do it this way.) Without giving away her secret, I liked helping people advance themselves in their careers, if I was able.

One year I worked on an annual report with a young man who was going to school for design; he did a set of custom illustrations for me. These no doubt looked good in his portfolio. A year later, Yeoman Mike moved from telemarketing to advertising to work as my assistant. He was neither a writer nor a designer, but he

had majored in communications, and he generally knew how things worked. He was a welcomed addition to our small department.

In January of 1995, we took the third of three trips to the Bahamas. Before the trip, The Magpie told me I was to be promoted to Advertising Manager, which was the prize I had been working toward for several years. “We want to reward you for the work you’ve done, the improvements we’ve seen. We think it will give you a lot more confidence in how you present the company to others,” she said. That year, they also introduced the whole “management team” to the group, and finally I got to stand up in front of everyone to be recognized.

My salary was increased to \$30,000. And afterward, Grindle wanted to see me.

THE BIG 1995 PROJECT

Since I had started my job there, The Grindle Company had always been the second largest roofing company in America. Only one company was larger, and that was because of a merger between two of the other large players in the industry. But in 1995, The Grindle Company was poised on the verge of overtaking even this new #1-rated conglomerate. “Those two companies never worked well together; they had competing philosophies. If our sales projections hold, we’re going to overtake them this year,” Grindle told me.

“Being Number One is going to mean a lot to us in terms of publicity, and in terms of respect. So we’d like to do an advertising campaign to tell everyone about the fact that we’re now the biggest and the best.”

Grindle seemed to like to hold his promotions around big milestones. These events gave people a goal to focus on, and they tended to foster messages that could bring everyone together, though the level of cynicism throughout the company tended to be quite high at any given time.

As part of his campaign to show off our new #1 status, Grindle also told me about his plans to build a new Corporate Headquarters.

“We’ve been in this industrial park for years, and our customers have to drive through a residential area, and then past a craft shop to get here. This is no way to show off a company of our size. We’re going to build a new headquarters building right on the Interstate, so we can pick up our customers in a limousine at the airport, and drive them 20 minutes to our headquarters, literally without having to stop once.”

Grindle also had a way of mismatching people and their talents. Even though Biz Genius had no experience at all in construction and engineering, Grindle gave him the job of overseeing this building effort. I didn’t see much of him for a while after that. But Biz was the smartest person in the company, and nobody else seemed capable of doing it.

I have to admit, I was caught up in the plans, just as much as everyone else was. It was an exciting time to be a part of The Grindle Company.

IRISH TOM MAKES THE BREAK

Looking for help with this ad campaign, I called on the smartest ad guy I knew, Irish Tom. “Can you come and talk with me about this program, and maybe give me a cost estimate on it?” I said.

So Tom showed up at my Grindle Co. office for the first time. After we talked about the project, he asked me not to call him at the office.

“I’ve left The Agency,” he said.

“You can’t do that,” I said. “You are The Agency.” Tom had co-founded The Agency in 1988, along with Fast Eddie. However, Herr Gruff had become more and more surly in the intervening years, bitter about the loss of the Grindle account and other business difficulties. Tom told me the story about how he had started doing some consulting work on the side, with non-profit organizations, and Gruff was furious because he felt Tom was robbing The Agency of fee income by doing so. Eventually the conflict became so bitter that Tom felt there was no other option but to “make the break” on his own, and separate from The Agency.

Tom developed the ad message we were looking for, and Wayne did the design. We ran ads, a direct mail program, and follow-up materials, all based on Tom’s message.

Irish Tom had given me my first job in advertising, and I was very happy to be able to return the favor and give him one of his first freelance jobs. In all, he invoiced The Grindle Company \$5,000, which was no small sum when you are starting out on your own.

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Harvey Mackay, a highly successful business owner and author of the *Swim with the Sharks* books, suggested that when he needed to discipline an employee in a memorable way, he would ask them to sit in his chair, and tell him what they thought the punishment should be. Everyone hated sitting in the boss's chair.

But at The Grindle Company, where everyday occurrences often took on legendary significance, "sitting in the boss's chair" took on a slightly different twist. "The last time anyone sat in Al Grindle's chair, it was Old Jack, and we know what happened to him," said Larry the Shark. (As you'll recall, Jack was terminated from the company, not long after that, and replaced by Biz Genius.)

The ad program I had put together with Irish Tom was well received throughout the company. Now that I was a "manager," I was asked to attend a meeting of the department managers.

At this particular meeting, which was fairly well attended, I sat down in the seat next to Grindle's chair, which was one of just a couple of empty chairs. Grindle was letting the others conduct mundane business, while he took care of his own business from his office, adjacent to the boardroom. One by one, Grindle called the different department managers into his office to give them his own instructions.

Then Grindle had me paged. I was called out of the boardroom in front of all of my new management peers, and I was in his office with him asking me to work on another project. When Grindle called for you, especially in front of others, it was meant to be a sign of favor; when he ignored you, you were out of favor.

But when I returned to the boardroom, I saw that my stuff had been moved. The Magpie had taken my seat, and she put my stuff in front of Grindle's chair. So I sat there. Even though I knew that she knew the story of Old Jack as well as anyone. Maybe she perceived me as a threat.

A few minutes later, when Grindle walked into the meeting, Larry the Shark helped me quickly out of the chair, and the Grindle part of the meeting went on without a word about it.

DRIFTING APART

The summer of 1995, our family moved from the townhouse apartment into the first real house we ever lived in as a married couple. It was an old wooden-frame house, covered with insulbrick, a kind of insulated shingle. Inside, it smelled funny – musty, as if a hundred years of dampness had settled into its foundation. But the house was still standing. They built them to last in those days.

My father had learned about the house from one of his old walking buddies. He was the husband of the landlady, whose mother, a woman in her mid 90's, had recently had a heart attack and was placed in a nursing home. Pennsylvania law concerning these situations gave the woman the option of keeping the house, just in case her mother recovered and could move back home. We moved in, still renting but with only a month-to-month lease, with the caveat that we might have to move out in just a couple of months.

However, the rent was very affordable - Pennsylvania state law required that our landlord could not make a profit in a case such as this one, (where the owner was in a state-operated nursing home). Since there was no mortgage on the house, we were able to rent it for \$120 a month, which covered the property tax, plus utilities.

Living in West Mifflin, the town where I had grown up, had a certain “rightness” about it, too, even though it made my commute an extra 15 minutes each way, which in turn, ended my lunchtime lovemaking. There were other factors that made it an attractive move. At the time, we were expecting child #4 (whose conception was described in the introduction of this book).

The house sat on a relatively large lot, and the huge lawn was an ideal place for the kids to run around.

WORKFINDERS

The bad thing about having such a big yard was that it meant having to cut the grass, and with a hand mower, it took about three hours. Still, it gave me a lot of time to think, and one day while I was cutting the grass, I came up with an idea for another business.

Earlier I mentioned that I had worked for a resume writing service. It occurred to me that I could start a business that would combine a form of database marketing with the job search process. I called this potential new business *WorkFinders*, a name that I thought described the process very well: find a job, or find work, by sending hundreds or even thousands of resumes and personalized cover letters to business owners, in any geographic market(s) my customers wanted to reach.

In theory, I would access the Dun and Bradstreet business database, pull a list of companies based on the job seeker's desired market, and I would use that list to create 100, 500, or 1,000 or more personalized letter and resume packages that my client could then send out.

While this process would rely heavily on technology, *WorkFinders* would still be based on traditional job search methods, such as “paper” resumes, “paper” cover

letters, and traditional direct mail services.

Biz and I talked about this opportunity for a long time, secretly, of course, and over the summer I was able to implement it. I bought a new color Macintosh computer, a model with an integrated PC card, so that I could run the Dun and Bradstreet software. I rented office space, printed letterhead, business cards and a small brochure for myself, and I even ran some ads.

Fortunately, the ads did pull some responses for me, and I felt as if things were moving along. However, I hadn't correctly targeted the ads. More calls came from people who thought I had actual jobs to offer, than from would-be customers. The name I had selected, "WorkFinders," may have promised a bit too much.

WORKFINDERS, PLAN B

As my thinking evolved, it seemed as if this kind of program might work well as a marketing program that could attract business for small one- or two- person businesses that might not otherwise have had time for such a program.

So I pulled a list of these firms and did a small mailing to that audience. I was delighted to get a response from a guy named Stock Broker, who said he actually wanted to do some marketing for himself, but wasn't sure of where to start.

I set up an appointment with Mr. Broker, whose office was just minutes from my office at Grindle. I explained to him that I was just starting up, that I had a full-time job, and that it would be best if we could meet after hours. He said that was all right, it would give him a chance to finish up for the day.

I am the nervous type, not a natural salesperson by any stretch, and during the meeting, my first ever with a potential business client, I am sure I gave a very bad performance.

Nevertheless, Mr. Broker ("call me Stock") seemed very interested. "This can help me reach a certain kind of client I don't normally have time to go after," he said, and he asked me to put together a proposal and cost estimate for this kind of program.

After the formal part of the meeting, he asked me about myself, and I told him about my job at Grindle, that it was ok but that I was tired of the job, wanting to make some extra money, etc.

"Have you heard of Grindle?" I asked. He lives around here, and his company's Headquarters is just up the hill.

"No, I haven't," he said.

"I guess roofing isn't well known, even though the company is as big as it is."

GRINDLE'S STOCK BROKER?

I went ahead with the proposal for Stock, and I never heard back from him, although I did see his name again. It was on a letterhead that was sitting on Al Grindle's desk. If Stock Broker was Grindle's stockbroker, it was possible that Grindle knew about WorkFinders, and that he was at least curious enough to try to find out more about it.

I asked Biz about this, and I thought it might be worth an effort to ask Grindle directly, if he would mind sponsoring it. After all, he did own a lot of other smaller businesses on the side. “What’s wrong now with going to Big Al, showing the project to him and telling him I’ve been working on this on the side, that I think there’s a market for it, and that I think it could sell. It won’t cost much to produce. And since it’s a direct response business, the advertising will be accountable.”

I could hear the radio advertising: “hey, are you looking for meaningful work, because I’ve got the job search tool for you . . .” And I thought I could tell Grindle that this effort wouldn’t take anything away from The Grindle Company, because I could do it on my own time. “But with your business sense (and enough cash to make the thing go . . .)”

Irish Tom thought that having these side ventures was a good thing for me, given my struggles at The Grindle Company. “It helps you keep your sanity when times get rough,” he said. But he didn’t think Grindle was exactly the right person to help me “get away from things.”

Irish Tom recommended another book to me: *Growing a Business*, by Paul Hawken. I read it in two days, and it made immediate sense to me. (I thought that if Irish Tom were reading books like that all the time, that it was no wonder I thought him to be one of the smartest guys in the world.)

Hawken recommended starting small and allowing growth to happen. In fact, Hawken believed that having too much money could be a problem, because if you have the money, you’re tempted to go full throttle, but you spend all the money, and you haven’t really learned anything.

Incidentally, Peters would have recommended an opposite approach. He pointed out that from the venture capitalist’s (VC) point of view, it makes sense to fund a lot of start-ups. Out of 20 companies funded, he suggested, 16 would fail, three would break even, but one would make you rich. And from a start-up’s point of view, VC/IPO seems to be the “easy way out.” Get lots of VC, and then go full tilt. But the reality has been that after VC comes WC (water closet) and that’s just where many have gone, down the toilet. And where are all those IPO folks now?

I asked Tall Tony about this idea as well, since he had had a long history of working with Grindle. “John, there was a time when Grindle wanted to buy this print shop,” Tony said. “And I considered it. After all, he offered me a lot of money. But in the end, I decided that what I really wanted was independence, and if Grindle had money invested here, you know who would be calling the shots.”

In the end, I decided not to ask Grindle about the project, though I became more certain over time that he knew about it. At one point he even told me he had a “great concern” about all the people he had let go over the years.

DADDY, PLEASE DON’T GO TO WORK

While all of this was happening, I was getting another kind of pressure: from my little-but-growing family. In 1995, it was then my littlest one, the three year old

Squirrel, who, kissing me good by for the morning, looked at me with the deadly seriousness that only a three year old can muster, and said, “Daddy, please don’t go to work.”

How do you look at a little kid, who wants all of you, to tell him you have to go to make money to have this house and our food to eat. He understood, as they always do, but I always walked away from those encounters wishing there were another way to do it.

Nothing has ever been more important to me than my family. At the time my first son was born, I was working at one of those fill-in jobs that happened to come my way between other jobs. The company was a small, family-owned retail chain with just three or four stores. Unfortunately, their scheduling policies wouldn’t permit me to take the day off the day my wife was scheduled to get out of the hospital. I was extremely frustrated by their stubbornness, and I ended up walking out on them to go pick my wife up from the hospital.

Now, looking my little Squirrel of a son in the face, I wanted more than ever to be able to work at home, and to be home for all of them. But with a much bigger family, I was sure I was not going to be able to just walk out on a job. I needed a way to reach “escape velocity” while I was still getting a regular paycheck.

THE GRINDLE COMPANY SEVERANCE POLICY

Al Grindle wanted to show a picture of the construction site for the new headquarters building in the 1995 annual report. On the cover, Wayne and I decided we would like to feature one of the long-term foremen as the typical Grindle employee. And we thought it would be a nice touch to show Al Grindle in this report, at the construction site where the new building would be built.

The day we went out to take the photo, Grindle suggested that he and I ride out together in his car. He was a natural salesman, and he liked to talk a lot. He never minded talking about how much money he was making, or about business in general, because he thought it would help to entice some of us little people to work harder and do better.

During the ride, he got a call from a sales manager, and I heard his side of the conversation about how the sales manager should let go two of his salespeople who weren’t working out.

After that call, I mentioned to him that old Alex had once told me that he never wanted to work for anyone else. Grindle seemed truly flattered by that. “I watch things from the point of view of a writer,” I said. “I try to understand them objectively. Last month at the sales managers’ meeting, when you had to kick me out of your chair, I remember thinking that I wouldn’t want to have to sit in your chair. Not with the kind of decisions you have to make.”

“That’s the hard part,” he said. “You have to like what you do, and if you lose interest, there’s no sense staying around and beating your head against the wall. We were just talking about having to let some salespeople go. When we have to let

someone go, we try to do it in such a way that lets them save face and lets the company save face. We know they're going to have to look for a job, so we give them a generous severance package that includes payment for outplacement so they don't have to worry about making the mortgage payments on top of everything else."

One might expect that any company would offer severance. So Grindle went on to emphasize his generosity. "We had one guy recently who outlasted his severance twice and we extended it twice, until he found a position. We want that transition to go smoothly for the company and for the person we're letting go."

As Grindle continued to talk, I made my mental notes.

"It's not that they're bad people, or that we're a bad company. But sometimes the chemistry isn't right. We've given these guys every chance to get back on track (i.e., salespeople being profitable) – the motivational speeches, the threatening speeches, the extra help they need if they've felt like they needed it. If they were ever going to get back on track they'd have done it long before we ever let them go."

A good salesman is as good as his word, and Grindle prided himself on his sales ability. When the time finally came for me to leave The Grindle Company a year or so later, I remembered this conversation, and my careful memory here helped me to negotiate a better deal when we mutually decided it was time for me to leave the company.

ANOTHER SCHEDULING CONFLICT

Every summer, Miss Elizabeth and I liked to go camping, and in 1995, we had made plans to go camping with my brother, the Mailman, and his family. Since postal work schedules are decided months in advance, and we knew that he would have off the weekend of July 7-9, we made a deposit and booked space at the camp.

However, we found out afterward that Grindle's summer sales meeting was scheduled for that same week in Pittsburgh. I had asked for a half day off on Friday, so that we could pack and drive up to the camp, and based on the previous year's sales meeting schedule, most of the important work of the sales meeting had been completed by Thursday.

The Magpie thought it would be ok for me to take the afternoon off. But then the meeting schedule was changed to include a Friday luncheon and sales award ceremony. Cindy, the Office Manager, who had scheduled the meeting, mentioned to The Magpie that I would be needed to take pictures. The Magpie seemed to get a little concerned about that. "Grindle Comes First," was the rule.

"Yeoman Mike said he'd cover for me," I said.

"You'd better check with Cindy. You know, if Grindle wants you there..." she was shaking her head. The implication was, "you can't have the day off..."

I told Cindy about the camping trip and asked if it would be all right if I asked Grindle about it. Horror of horrors, miss a sales meeting? "Go ahead and ask, it's your hide," was the response I got. "Just let me know what he says."

Later in the day I had to go up to Grindle's house to show him some of the photo

prints for the annual report, and I told him that I had asked for a half day off Friday, before the schedule change for the sales meeting.

“Sure, that’s ok. Just be sure we’re covered for pictures.”

So I got to go camping.

THE COMPANY HAS A HEART

As amazing a year as 1995 was for Grindle, the end of that year offered several major turning points in my life: We had moved into our first house. I had finally been promoted to manager, a thing I had waited years for.

And we were, at the time, expecting our fourth child. By October, Miss Elizabeth was showing the signs of high blood pressure, a temporary condition that came with her pregnancy. Her doctor gave her an order for complete bed rest. But with three other kids at home, that was going to prove to be a difficult order to follow.

“I have a Macintosh setup at home,” I said to The Magpie. “I can do everything at home that I can do from here. Would it be possible to work from home for the next couple of months, so that I can take care of my wife and the kids?”

She asked Grindle, and thank goodness, the answer was “yes.” And so after all the frustrations, all the struggles with The Grindle Company, I found out that yes, the company really does have a heart. And I received my first taste of what it was like to work at home.

A DIGRESSION: THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

In my earliest memory, I was in a crib, in an oxygen tent, in the children’s ward of the old Homestead Hospital, with pneumonia. From what I have been told, this happened before I was two years old.

The crib had metal bars, like a metal cage. It was the only crib in a children’s ward of maybe a dozen beds. The oxygen tent was clear plastic, much like a box within the cage. My grandmother had given me a little metal car to play with, and I was playing with it, at a time when I was supposed to be sleeping. I remember someone telling me to go to sleep.

They say your earliest memories can shape the rest of your life, and perhaps this “box-in-a-cage” experience has something to do with my need at this point to seek freedom from a dominating corporate authority.

People are willing to pay a great price for freedom; here in the US, it started with the war for Independence from England, and since then, all wars have been fought in the name of Liberty. And even in our popular culture, we see movies in which heroes (like Mel Gibson’s *William Wallace*) die tortured deaths with the word “freedom” on their lips.

Some time ago Amway co-founder Rich DeVos published a book by the title *An Uncommon Freedom*, which spoke about financial freedom as a necessary component to the enjoyment of other kinds of freedom. I don’t know much about financial freedom, but in my lifetime, I have had the privilege of seeing, first-hand, an

uncommon kind of freedom in a very common man.

You could say that I get my entrepreneurial leanings honestly. My father, like most men of his generation, worked for the same company for 37 years. It paid the bills, but it also put a great deal of stress on our family. By the time he was 55 years old, in the mid 1980's, that company decided they didn't need him any more.

But instead of giving up and retiring, he opted for an early retirement package that gave him a chance to start his own lawn and garden business, to work at something he enjoyed, to earn a little bit of extra money, and perhaps build a business that could be passed on to his children. So he bought a truck and some lawn equipment, and he was in business.

Ten years later, he was still working at it, except he had slowed down just a bit.

One of the things he liked about his business was that it was seasonal, that it gave him time to go deer hunting in the fall. He had the winters off. In early December 1995, he had felt a bit of heartburn after a day of hunting. But that heartburn didn't go away, and the next day he went to a doctor, who said he had had a mild heart attack.

Not more than a week later, he was told he needed heart bypass surgery. By December 11, he was in surgery, and I spent the day at the hospital, waiting for the surgery to be done. Because of a collapsed lung during the surgery, he remained in intensive care for over a week.

Two days after the surgery, however, Miss Elizabeth decided it was time to have our baby, and so I was in a different hospital, with a different kind of a life crisis. That day, she gave birth to #4, The Little Tiny Baby Boy.

If I hadn't been able to work from home those last two months of 1995, those two experiences would have been terribly stressful for me and for others around me. I am most grateful to Grindle for giving me the opportunity to be there for my loved ones, for my father and my son.

HOW I DECIDED TO GO

The Grindle Company was a very big company, and Grindle seemed to view his company as a big chessboard. And he certainly liked to move his people around as if they were his pawns.

For a long time, Lance Little was Grindle's "right hand man" in the area of sales and sales management. A short hefty man, Lance was actually more of a nub than a lance. He had joined the company during the early years, in the early 1970's, and he rose to a position of prominence with the company as it grew during the heyday of the 1980's. Grindle always paid his salespeople a huge commission. But for Lance, it wasn't enough. Maybe he turned "to the dark side." But for some reason I don't know about, he was forcibly ejected from the company. It's probably fair to say that he was in line to join Moe and Larry on the executive committee, had he not gotten himself in trouble.

During his year away from the company, Lance Little drifted through several jobs, but he at least had the honor not to break his non-compete agreement. Branded as a roofer, though, he had a difficulty finding other work.

Grindle knew this would happen, and he waited for Lance to return to him, hat in hand. And sure enough, Lance ended up asking Grindle for his old job back. So Grindle let Lance return, but with conditions. He was asked to start a brand new program, with no customers and no accounts, having to start cold and maybe further indebt himself by working on a draw. "If you can get it going and build it up, it's yours."

This new program was called "National Accounts," the point of which was to introduce Grindle to large manufacturing organizations that owned more than just a few large buildings. General Motors, for example, with manufacturing plants in many locations across the US, would be targeted as a national account. Lance Little would find a VP of Operations, who was in charge of maintaining all of these facilities, and would offer them a "single source of responsibility for all of their roofing needs."

It has never been easy to nationalize a roofing program. As a business, roofing has a relatively low "barrier to entry." Anyone with a ladder and a truck can call himself a roofing contractor. That leads to a lot of fragmentation in the market. For example,

when GM Detroit needs to fix a leaky roof, they call one contractor, which might or might not be Grindle. When GM Akron needs a contractor, they call their own Akron-area contractor, again one that might or might not be Grindle.

But under this National Accounts program, when any GM facility anywhere needed a roof, Grindle would offer them the luxury of having to know only one contractor to call.

No program like this one ever existed among roofing contractors, although several manufacturers tried to form their own networks of “approved” contractors.

But because Grindle controlled the contracting process (in a way that no manufacturer could do it), they could offer the kind of standardized service and centralized reporting that large companies like. In this regard, Lance’s National Accounts offered a tremendous competitive advantage to The Grindle Company.

Eventually, over several years, Lance Little worked his National Accounts division from \$0 to \$50 million in sales, hiring several new salespeople, and soon National Accounts became the source for nearly half of the Grindle Company’s revenues. And Al Grindle soon became Lance Little’s “Number One Fan,” you might say.

During the time Lance’s National Accounts division was making its meteoric rise, Al Grindle was often heard saying he wished he had more than one Lance Little on the payroll. This was because Lance’s work ethic enabled him to put in many long hours, and indeed time translated into money for a decent salesman. (In the Christmas 1995 issue of Grindle News, which featured a list of “Christmas Gifts We’d Like to See,” one of Lance’s amigos wished him an eighth day of the week, so he could work that day, too.)

After all, with only one Lance Little, a very large portion of the total roofing market must be going to waste. The National Accounts program appealed to large manufacturing organizations that had facilities across the US, but there was a wide range of other kinds of companies that had similarly widespread facilities, without a manufacturing function. These he called “Corporate Accounts.”

A “LITTLE” CORPORATE INTRIGUE

Grindle believed in creating competition among his underlings, giving them a series of “tests,” believing that the cream would rise to the top. In looking for his second Lance Little, Grindle happened upon a fast moving, forward-leaning fire hydrant of a salesman named Benjamin “Rocco” Reginald.

Rocco had been president of another, smaller roofing firm that had to go out of business because it couldn’t compete on price with Grindle. (Grindle had recently begun to operate on very slim profit margins in order to acquire market share.) In the case of Rocco Reginald’s roofing company, Grindle was happy to ease the pain Rocco experienced while going out of business, by hiring Rocco and some of his more experienced employees to work at The Grindle Company.

And in the spirit of competition, Grindle named Rocco to head up the new “Corporate Accounts” division, as a way of enhancing and competing with Lance

Little's National Accounts effort.

Rocco was up to the competition. Within a few short years, Rocco and his small group were closing in on the \$25 million figure, which made them a very formidable competitor to Lance Little's group. It was so formidable, and so fast-moving, in fact, that when Grindle's accountants were looking for ways to save money, they recommended that National Accounts and Corporate Accounts be rolled into the same program to eliminate redundant costs.

Grindle named Rocco as the new Vice President of this consolidated division, which continued to be named Corporate Accounts.

Realizing that this move could leave Lance Little's legacy with the company very badly damaged, Grindle, out of compassion for Lance Little, created a new position at the beginning of 1996, Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing.

Until this point, there was no senior manager to meddle with me, except for The Magpie. And recently, she had been letting me alone because I was doing a good job.

The sales and marketing functions within the company had always remained separate. But it wasn't long before I realized that the displaced Lance Little, defeated at his own game by a newcomer, and now involved in a discipline he had never dealt with, had become my new boss.

WORLD HEADQUARTERS

The Grindle Corporation moved into its new World Headquarters building in the spring of 1996, with as much pomp and circumstance as Grindle could muster. The building was not yet actually completed, and there were still construction workers milling around, finishing things off while we moved. A whole wing had yet to be completed. Still, we were moving in, because Grindle said we would be moving in by June. And he kept his word about that.

As I mentioned earlier, Grindle used geographic location as a way of meting out punishments and rewards. I was one of the managers who was given a prestigious corner office in the new building. Even though it was on the ground floor, the symbolism was obvious, and I could not help but be flattered by the decision, which, without a doubt, had been sanctioned by Grindle.

But the move to the new building created its own set of problems for me, the most immediate of which was that it had doubled my commute time again, from 30 to 60 minutes. I experimented with the routes, and the quickest, and maybe the most pleasant (though not the shortest) route was through the back roads of Washington County. At least I could bypass the start-and-stop traffic through the suburbs.

The hour-long commute was a difficult transition to make for a guy who thought 15 minutes was too long. I perceived that I was soon going to have to make some decisions. Should I try to consolidate my position with Grindle and leave our "new" old house, to move closer to Headquarters? Or should I think about how to leave The Grindle Company? Those decisions were not far away.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Lance Little, Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing, was now two slots above me in the chain of command. I was a little concerned about this at first, but Biz Genius seemed to think it was a good thing. “Grindle only puts Lance somewhere he knows things are going to happen,” Biz said. But as it turned out, Lance was far too meddlesome a boss for my liking. I could tolerate some meddling from a supervisor, but there were two incidents that really irked me.

First, Lance took note of the fact that I had been using freelance designers to produce some of my better-looking work. He also had access to the invoices.

“This outsourcing bullsh— has to stop,” Lance told me. So in order to eliminate the \$10,000 or so in freelance invoices each year, Lance hired a Pretty Blonde to be our new “graphic designer,” at a salary like \$25,000.

Unfortunately, Lance knew as little about Blondes as he knew about graphic designers, or about hiring practices in general, for that matter. The Blonde had never even had any design experience. She was a math teacher at a local high school. But one day she decided she didn’t want to teach math, that she wanted to be a designer, and her resume just happened to cross Lance’s desk at the time.

But it was good enough for Lance Little to say that he had taken charge of advertising and had actually done something. His second activity was a little more of a concern to me.

Grindle was buying a roofing company in Canada, and they wanted some literature produced for Grindle Canada. Somehow, Lance Little didn’t think I was able to get this done on time, in addition to all the other work I was doing, and so he brought in another vendor, contradicting himself and initiating some “outsourcing bullsh—” of his own to do the work.

This new contractor was Todd Bailey, one of the “independent guys” I had met earlier. Bailey had his own network of freelancers working for him. But Bailey was just as confounded about his new assignment as I was; he told me Lance had brought him in on the strength of two five-minute interviews.

HUM DINGER

In a way, the next three months were the hardest months of my life. But somehow, it seems, that at the most difficult periods in your life, key people walk on stage and help you to uncover your own true philosophical leanings, and to help you make those critical decisions. Or maybe you just find similarly disgruntled souls who can help you commiserate.

One such person at this point in my life was the photographer Hum Dinger, who himself was a solocareerist. Once a corporate and industrial photographer with a large office and staff, he had pared down his operation to the point that he was a one-man show working out of his home, much as Wayne was doing.

Hum Dinger was a child of the 60’s, with a good moral bent. An old “Dead-head,” (a follower of The Grateful Dead musical group), he drove a 1970’s era Volkswagen

Bus, and for a time he sported a foot-long mini-braid down the middle of his back.

Hum had taken the photos of Grindle at the construction site of the new Corporate Headquarters for the previous year's annual report. Hum showed up wearing, among other things, his mini-braid, and dark socks under his sandals. When Wayne complimented Grindle on his tie as being highly fashionable that day, Grindle gave one of his back-handed answers, directed right at Hum: "you've got to stay up with the times."

It was one of Grindle's sideways insults, and Hum took it with some indignation. But being a moral and religious man, he told me his instinct was to pray for him.

TEN MINUTES EARLY IS TOO EARLY

Given the up-and-down nature of my job, the new headaches brought on by Lance Little, and the decision of whether to move out of our house or quit Grindle, I decided finally to take Miss Elizabeth's long-standing advice and look for another job.

So I started sending out resumes, and I got a call almost immediately, from a small software company that had been spun out by one of the local Universities. (I really knew how to write a resume!) We scheduled an interview for 2:00 on a Friday in July. I took a half-day vacation, to make sure I had time to find my way there.

The directions there were good, and I arrived in the area around 1:00. I always tried to leave myself enough time driving through the city, because you can never be sure of construction or traffic.

Of course, I was carrying my portfolio of work samples. I parked at a restaurant nearby and took the time to organize myself. Around 1:45 I headed over to the interview. I knocked on the door, and was greeted by the receptionist, who offered me a soft drink and showed me to a conference room, where I was seated.

A few minutes later the gentleman I was to interview with entered the conference room with two other people. We all shook hands, and then my host mentioned to me that I did not arrive at the proper time for the interview.

"I'm sorry, I was under the impression the interview was at 2:00," I said.

"Yes, 2:00. It's now only ten minutes to two. You are not on time for your appointment, I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

I was too shocked to say anything.

"This is the door. Please leave. Thank you very much for your time."

And without explanation, he showed me out. I never heard from them again, and I never bothered to get back in touch with them.

SWIMMING UPSTREAM

That summer, I was busier than ever at Grindle. Salesmen and operations managers out in the field were impressed with the work we had done on the ad campaign, and they wanted their own areas to be included in the action. I started receiving a lot of requests to photograph on-going jobs, and to write about this or that job as a case history, and generally to be a popular guy among the sales people.

On top of this increase in workload, I was fairly alarmed at some of the new “innovations” that Lance Little was bringing to the department that I had run successfully for the last four years. But working with Lance on a day-to-day basis made things even harder.

Grindle was planning a grand opening celebration for the building in the fall. One of the more ostentatious features of the new building was a meeting room that would have a dozen trade show-style displays, featuring all of our products and services.

Putting these displays together meant organizing the products and services, writing copy about them, and selecting photographs to match. One week I spent several days, working with the Blonde, (who was charged with “designing” the room), going through our photo files to find suitable photos for these displays.

Not long after I finished selecting the photos, I gave them to Lance. After a while, he came into my office and told me we needed to select photos for the new displays.

“I just spent two days doing that,” I told him.

“I didn’t like the photos you picked.”

“I picked perfectly good photos. And they’ll give us the resolution we need to blow them up and still look good.” I had been looking at it from a technical, artistic point of view. He was looking at the roofing details. He insisted we go through the process again.

“I’ve got other work to do,” I said. “I’ve already done this once. If you don’t like what I picked, you’ll have to do it yourself.”

Not long afterward, I was told I had to move out of my corner office, and upstairs to a cubicle on the third floor, nearer to The Magpie’s office. Lance had finked to Grindle, and I was being punished via geographic location.

Driving the hour to the new Grindle headquarters building had been hard; now it gave me an excruciating pain. Just pulling into the parking lot in the morning and knowing I had to sit there, upstairs in my cubicle for eight hours, made me nauseous.

DOING THE DEED

A moment came when I couldn’t stand things any longer. Friday, September 13, 1996, I requested a meeting with Kip Apple and The Magpie. We finally got together at 5:00, in Kip’s office.

“I want to leave the company,” I said. Kip nodded from behind his huge empty desk. He knew I was dissatisfied, but he didn’t know just how unhappy I was. “What are you asking for?” he said.

“Mr. Grindle told me there’s a severance program for salesmen. When they leave, he said, it’s not always because they’re bad salesmen (or bad workers), but sometimes there’s just not a good fit between them and the company. Grindle said we give them a chance to leave on good terms, and we help them find their next position,” I said. At that moment, I was glad Al Grindle liked to brag about his generosity. “All I’m asking for is the same kind of consideration. Marv Boxman got severance equivalent to a month’s salary for a year of service. I’ve been here for

almost six years. I'd be happy with whatever you could offer."

"We'll talk it over with Mr. Grindle and see what he wants to do."

As I had done when I found I was being let go from The Agency, that night I bought a bottle of wine for Miss Elizabeth. She was happy that I was leaving, but also frightened that I had done it without more preparation. But she was very supportive. "I've been asking you to leave there this whole time. I just wish you had found a better way to do it," she said.

"Grindle's a salesman from way back," I said. He's not the kind of guy to brag about severance packages, and how generous he is, and then not give you something."

"Yes, but technically, they could say you quit, and that they don't owe you anything. You probably couldn't even collect unemployment insurance," she said.

"Let's just wait and see."

It was a very tense weekend, and I felt the twinge of fear that we would end up without anything to fall back on. But it was a risk I felt I had to take. And I felt confident that I would be able to start a freelance business. I just needed a bit of a cushion to get started.

BLUE MONDAY

By the following Monday, Grindle, Kip and the Magpie had sufficiently completed their discussions that they knew it was going to be my last day. I didn't know it, though, going in, and I continued to worry.

The day began like any other day at the office, any recent day, that is. I received a call from a Chicago manager, who was bidding on a metal roof job, and he "immediately" needed a set of metal roof photos (which were nonexistent). The Tennessee Region was doing some reorganizing, and they wanted a short article for the *Memphis Business Journal* or the *Chamber of Commerce News*. The Traveling Safety Guys stopped by and asked me why I was in the cubicle instead of in my office. The day was full of requests like that.

By 4:00 that afternoon, thankfully, I was called in to a meeting with The Magpie and The New Lawyer. They explained to me that I was to take my personal things out of my cubicle, to leave the building that evening; it would be my last day. Grindle had decided to give me three months salary if I would sign a non-compete agreement. They gave me several days to have an attorney review the contract. I was more than happy to sign.

It was over.

Making such a leap was uncharacteristically bold for me. I can remember standing on a diving board as an 11 year old, just a few feet above the water, and having a crowd of people practically beg me to jump, but I just stood there, consumed with fear. After about a half hour I finally jumped, after a great deal of coaxing.

I'm not sure how to characterize the fear that held me back. I have felt it at other

times during my lifetime.

Yet I had just made the biggest leap of my life. And aside from a few negotiations that remained to be completed, I was now finally at the end of my career with The Grindle Company and at the beginning of my new life.

MY CAREER AT THE GRINDLE COMPANY

My five years with The Grindle Company were a struggle.

I wanted to leave almost from the start, but I couldn't think of a good way out. Miss Elizabeth thought I should just start looking for another job. But I didn't really want another job; I wanted to try starting a business of my own.

It's true that my salary doubled, from under \$18,000 a year to \$36,000. Before I left, The Magpie pointed out that this was an astounding increase. But I had started from scratch, and knew people in the "real world" who did what I did, who made much more than \$36,000 per year.

After I got out of Grindle's chair that one time, and I listened to him talk about how he felt uneasy with the company at that point in the year, I understood something I hadn't understood before. I didn't want to sit in his chair. Not with what he was having to tell those guys, about how their livelihoods might be on the line. Not having to think about the kinds of decisions he might have to make.

I learned a lot from Al Grindle; I saw how he worked with people. He was willing to be flexible, to a point. He let me work from home the couple of months I needed to do that. Another time, he let a woman who worked for his other companies also work part time from her home. He let Alex and about a half dozen old, semi-retired guys around the country do their thing, where they could earn a decent living in their retirement, in a warm and sunny location if they chose to do it.

In his prosperity, he entered into business partnerships with brothers, brothers-in-law and even his own employees on a dozen different kinds of businesses, forming companies as diverse as a restaurant, a title-search firm, a construction management consulting firm, and even real estate.

He looked for loyalty and enthusiasm and a capacity for work and profitability in his people. In my five years with the company, I served Grindle well, and in exchange, I got a severance agreement that lasted through the end of the year, essentially three and a half month's pay. And because I had spent at least five years with the company, I had become vested in the company's ESOP plan, and I had a good start on retirement.

GRINDLE'S PHILOSOPHY

"What's on the sheet?" It was a familiar question, asked by Al Grindle – "the sheet" being his pet name for the daily sales sheet. Whenever a salesman made a sale, anywhere in the company, it was listed on the sheet. Devotion to the sheet helped the company grow from a two-man operation with \$1,000 in the bank, to a \$150 million industry leader with more than 50 locations and 1500 full time employees.

Al Grindle didn't become a multi-millionaire by being dumb. He was a good, aggressive salesman, and a good, tough manager. He knew what he wanted, he surrounded himself with loyal people, he wasn't afraid of taking small chances, in a business sense, and he also was fierce in cutting his losses early, if things looked like they were going to be money losers for him.

Grindle built a \$100+ million dollar business by keeping an accurate file of information on each customer and potential customer, including a call history, access to whether we have done business with an affiliated company, the kind of work, the amount, that person's likes and dislikes, what was discussed, and more.

Ultimately, it was my experience working for the Grindle Company that gave me the incentive to look for other avenues of employment, and eventually to break free to the freelance life.

Still, Grindle's philosophy of business was also ruthless, with regard to employees. When he was thinking about buying all the small newspapers, he said, "I can get all the college graduates I want to work for me, for \$12,000-\$13,000 a year." This was during the recession year, 1992, but it still was indicative of how he thought about people.

The Grindle Company was a juggernaut. If you wanted to work 50 or 60 or 70 hours a week, Grindle would suck it in. But if you resisted, if you didn't want to work on a Saturday because of family considerations, you were an expendable person, who could be gotten rid of any number of ways: via a process of non-promotion, by being left where you were for an overly long period of time; or you could be demoted and humiliated, as I was. Or they could make things so frustrating for you that you'd simply quit.

The Grindle Company goes on; I'm glad I'm gone.

BEING FREELANCE

The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it – Michelangelo (as quoted by Tom Peters).

You wake up one day and discover you've gotten a thing you'd wished for, for a long, long time. I had that experience on September 17, 1996. The first day of my new life, I could not contain myself. Literally. I was awakened far earlier than I would have liked by an aggressive case of the runs. I rolled over immediately and felt the sheets. They were dry, at least. My pants, however, were a mess. It was a good thing the weather was getting cool, because my extra clothing had kept things otherwise contained.

When I left The Grindle Company, I knew that I would have income through the end of the year, thanks to Al Grindle's tendency to brag about how good and kind his company was. But I was certain that money would go fast in the next three months.

During my *WorkFinders* days, I had set up a small office in the pantry, just off the kitchen. This now became my permanent base of operations, though I barely had room for my one small desk, chair, and bookshelf.

When I called friends, co-workers, and potential clients, to tell them that I'd left The Grindle Company – a departure that was by mutual agreement, by the way – the response often was, “How could you do that? You've got four kids.”

But I only had their best interests at heart. And I viewed my job as dad as one of pouring my life out to support and nourish them.

MORAL SUPPORT

It's often said that when you “lose a job,” that it takes a lot more discipline to do simple things every day, like getting out of bed, getting dressed, working a regular work schedule, and things like that. But I found myself working harder than ever. Hemingway said in his memoir, “hunger was good discipline.” In chess, there is a saying that “a threat is stronger than its execution.” Somehow in my mind, I combined those two ideas together, and I had the sense that the threat of hunger was better discipline even than actual hunger might have been.

I finally had the opportunity to start my own freelance business, and I was

energized to make things work. My schedule those earliest days involved waking up at 4:30 and spending some productive work time, then having breakfast with the kids, helping to get the older ones off to school, to settle the younger ones, then getting on the phone and start selling. That's a good prescription for success, and I was hopeful.

During those first few months on my own, I read *The Tom Peters Seminar* over and over, making notes in the margins, highlighting different sections of it in all different colors, and filling the pages with business cards and sticky-notes so I could find the good parts as I needed them.

Peters (taking his own advice and producing, for the first time, a small book) advocated a "perpetual revolution" in business, in which imagination is the main source of value in the new economy, where everyone could benefit by assuming they had just been laid off permanently (and adjusting their career strategies accordingly), and that a person's resume and rolodex were the true sources of their ability to prosper in business.

I took heart from those recommendations. After all, I thought of myself as a creative, imaginative person. I really had left the corporate world, permanently, I hoped, and so any career-strategy adjustments I made would be based on necessity (and hence would not be merely academic), and that at Grindle, I had developed both a sound resume and a broad network of contacts.

The Tom Peters Seminar kept me going through those difficult months, helping me to set and keep some simple goals as I moved forward. I kept a notebook, detailing what I thought various sources of income might be, and I kept those projections updated as things changed – whether prospects showed interest, or if their interest waned – even though I had no idea where the work might be coming from.

IRISH TOM TRIES AGAIN

Reality often conflicts with the best of plans, however. My first day out, I got a call from Irish Tom's good friend, Casey Jones, who was a kind of jack-of-all-trades within the local graphic design community. Jones needed someone to write copy for a software reseller web site he was working on, and I was certainly willing to help. I met with Jones, and he treated me like a serious professional.

A few days later, I met with Jones and his Designer, who showed me the cartoon character they had created, at the suggestion of Irish Tom. (Tom liked creating characters, but he hated animating them. His philosophy was, "I love coming up with the ideas, and I love writing the first ad. After that, they can get somebody else to write the second and subsequent ads." In this case, I was to be the follow-up guy.)

Unfortunately, I thought, the Designer there was too much in love with his own creation. The illustrated character was very fine looking, but it took the artwork 30 seconds to load, right there on his machine. I mentioned this to him.

"I don't think that's too much time. I think people will be patient," he said.

"Of course it looks good. But nobody's going to wait that long for it to load."

The Web was brand new, and there was, at the time, no guru like Jakob Nielsen to comment on web usability. Who was I to say one way or the other if it was a bad decision? I hated to be disagreeable on my first time out, but I felt it was important to be honest in sharing my opinions. And I took heart a few years later, when I finally did get to read Nielsen.

That was the only job I ever got from Casey Jones. And it took him months to pay my invoice.

MY MARKETING PLAN

Earlier I suggested the importance of having a plan. As a long-time chess player, it didn't take me long to form one.

"There's no greater security than having a diverse client base," Irish Tom said. And ideally I sought to have five clients who could pay \$10,000 each. This concept was suggested to me by George Sorenson's book, *Writing for the Corporate Market: How to Make Big Money Freelancing for Business*. In it, Sorenson outlined his philosophy of making a living by writing for the people who have money. I had ruled out the idea of trying to write for the fiction or magazine markets. Neither of these promised any sure hope for financial success.

In my mind, there were going to be two different kinds of clients. The first was the direct client, those companies such as The Bank, which would have me work on complete projects for them, from concept to completion. These might turn out to be newsletters and brochures, and they could also have included other projects such as web site design and direct mailings, for example.

A second kind of client was the indirect client: among these were ad agencies and PR firms that interacted directly with the client and hired me to perform some specific function. My overarching thought, though, would be to "work from home," and not, as "Princess Penni" had done, to hang around at an agency simply hoping they will have some work for her to do, and then doing it.

Once I had defined those two markets, and once I had come up with a concrete list of organizations within those markets, there was a struggle to craft a message to each of them.

CRAFTING THE MESSAGES

Of course, knowing my business would be crucial to finding and reaching any potential clients. The last thing I wanted to do was to go out and say, "I just left a job I hated, barely by 'mutual agreement' with the company,' and now I need you to pay me to do a gig."

I was able to draw on my experience to put together a message that would be meaningful to potential clients. I knew, for example, that writing my monthly newsletter for Grindle, that there was a time, each and every month, that the deadlines would require me to stop everything else I was doing, and spend several days working full-time on the newsletter to get it done. My thought was that I could

offer harried marketing managers the opportunity to take such hectic times off their hands, (whether on a monthly or quarterly basis), and give them the opportunity to bring more order into their lives.

I also recognized that there were peaks and valleys in workload, such as at times before conventions and sales meetings, when there were scrambles to get many things done on time. "I can help you get those projects done, and there is no need to hire another staff person who will only sit around and waste time during the off-peak periods," I would say.

As well, (full of Peters), I imagined myself sitting down in front of a potential client and saying, "Mr. client, you should use me because I'm the best person for this job. No one else will bring more competence and enthusiasm to this project than I would bring. If this has been a headache project for you, then your headache days are over. If you've had a lot of turnover, I can bring a kind of stability that even a full time person can't bring, because I'm taking the long view; I want to be doing this for a long time."

THE 1000-COMPANY MAILING

In approaching the corporate market, I took my *WorkFinders* idea to heart. I downloaded a list of a thousand companies in the area from Dun and Bradstreet, and I mailed a letter to each of the CEO's, modified slightly to take into account the differing needs of companies or agencies.

Here is how that letter went:

Dear Potential Client:

Are you tired of feeling like you have to hide the good silver every time your advertising agency pays you a visit? I know how you feel. Recently, as advertising manager for a local \$140 million industry leader, I got to know a lot of ad agencies.

Now as an independent copywriter and project manager, I can provide you with the kind of service that I always wanted to see - the kind of service that will complement your own in-house capabilities. Here are a few examples:

- Target your best markets, and intensify your marketing efforts to those markets through sound strategic planning, based on real information.
- Put forth your best corporate image in all your communications - ads, brochures, catalogs, flyers, internet sites - with graphics that sizzle and copy that sells.
- Get your company's name in front of your markets with highly credible, third party referrals through corporate PR efforts and published articles.
- Keep your name in front of your best customers, with inexpensive, non-invasive newsletter types of communications.

As a writer, I can personally work with you on a wide range of projects,

from newsletters, news releases, case histories, and feature articles to advertisements, brochures, annual reports, direct mail and sales presentations.

Plus, I have a good network of contacts with some of the best art, photography, printing and audio/video independents in the city, so you can take care of all your communications needs through one convenient source.

See for yourself. I'll be happy to send you some recent samples of my work. Or if you prefer, simply call and ask for a no cost, no obligation estimate on your next marketing project.

Sincerely,

P.S. In putting together your marketing budget for 1997, I hope you'll consider working with a freelance writer. Chances are you can save hundreds or even thousands of dollars per project, while still maintaining the high quality you need to stay competitive.

RESULTS THAT LASTED FOR YEARS

That effort generated results that have lasted for years. Several companies called me immediately; others stashed my letter away and called me later. I am happy to report that after five years in business I was still generating income from clients who responded to that mailing.

One of my first calls came in November from the president of a distribution company called Efficient Machine Tool Sales, Mike LaBlonde.

Incidentally, machine tools sales are measured among the leading economic indicators, as defined by the economists who measure those things. Machine tools are the lathe-type instruments that are used to grind the screws, bolts, and other metal parts to precision specifications, usually to create custom tools and parts to build other types of machinery. Essentially, they are the tools that make the machines that run our economy.

Typically, each machine costs hundreds of thousands of dollars. Mike was interested in sending out a press release for each of his customers who bought a machine, as a kind of added value service he would provide for them. His message to his potential customers was, "if you buy a machine from us, you'll not only get the best machine tool in the industry, but we'll give you free publicity about it as well."

Mike wanted to establish a "machine-like program," if you will, in which I would create a standardized press release, contact his customers and find out the details of why they bought one of his machine tools, and then publicize that purchase either in local or trade media. It was a good idea, in principle. And he didn't care that I knew nothing about machine tools, only that I was willing to learn.

As it turned out, Mike wasn't willing to pay a lot, but I took the work because I wanted to say my mailing had pulled in my first customer. Doing this work was an exercise in frustration. First I had to wait for him to make a sale (he said usually there would be four or five each month). Then I had to contact his customers, who often had reasons not to accept Mike's kind offer to send out a press release.

One of his first customers, who worked out of his garage, was in the process of a divorce and didn't want his soon-to-be ex-wife to know he had acquired this new business asset. Another, very large customer (about 20 machines) was purchasing them for use in a business in Eastern Europe, and didn't have any need for publicity.

This project was important because it taught me a business model that I could offer to businesses over and over again. And although I continued to keep Mike as a client over the next two years, it became too difficult a task to contact all of his busy and diverse customers, set up a time to talk with them, interview them, write the press release, get it approved, and then try to place the release in the various publications. I ended up resigning from this account, but I learned a lesson about pricing.

A 30-PAGE RFP

As a result of this mailing, I also received a request-for-proposal (RFP) from a local Engineering Firm. When my letter arrived at their office, they were in the middle of a search to hire an ad agency. They had been sending their 30-page RFP to local ad agencies, and my letter arrived on their desk at about the right time.

Not knowing what to do, I faxed the RFP to Wayne, my designer friend, and he in turn sent it to his associate, The Renaissance Man, who owned a small two-person shop that often hired freelancers like Wayne. We quickly cobbled together an idea for how we might work as a "virtual agency," and we submitted our proposal. Together, we finished second out of eight in the competition to get that work, and I was proud of that.

(As a footnote here, I stayed in touch with this Engineering Firm, and after a couple of years, the Winning agency had pushed a little too hard and was becoming tiresome to the engineering firm, who asked us to resubmit a proposal. We met with them again, and this time we were in a better position to give them what they wanted. We became their "agency," and I continue to do a significant amount of work for them. Of course, the income from this work was several years down the road.)

TELEMARKETING TO PR FIRMS AND AD AGENCIES

While those kinds of successes provided the kind of charge that kept me going, the prospect of earning any income from them in 1996 was far off. I also needed to create an immediate source of income, and I thought there would be an opportunity to make some money at the local agencies.

So I pulled a list of ad agencies and PR firms in the area, but instead of writing to them, I hoped to capitalize on any immediate needs they might have, and I began calling them directly. I made meticulous notes on which agencies I called, when I called them, who I spoke with, what we discussed, and when they might be available for a meeting.

I had lots of good conversations with low-level employees and administrative

assistants. And I spent a fair amount of time meeting with people, even principals from some of the smaller agencies.

But for all the time and effort I spent courting the agencies, the funny thing is, I never actually got any decent work from one of them.

THE COMPUTER LETTER

Since my first direct mail effort had generated so much activity, I decided to do it again. This time, I pulled a list of all of the technology-related firms in the area, and I fired off another letter:

Dear Computer Company Owner:

What will it take for your business to survive and thrive in today's volatile economy? "Marketing is everything," according to Silicon Valley guru Regis McKenna, who has helped dozens of companies like yours to dominance with smart marketing programs.

By way of introduction, I am an independent copywriter and marketing manager, with connections to some of the best art and design independents in the city. And as independents, we can help you market your products and services for far less than you might think.

Here's a small sampling of what we can do for you:

- Target your best markets, and intensify your marketing efforts to those markets through sound strategic planning, based on real knowledge and information.
- Put forth your best corporate image in all your communications - ads, brochures, catalogs, flyers, internet sites - with graphics that sizzle and copy that sells.
- Get your company's name in front of your markets with third party referrals through Corporate PR efforts and published articles.
- Keep your customers coming back to you, with inexpensive, non-invasive communications, like newsletters, support literature and more.

I'll be happy to send you recent samples of the work we have done. Or if you prefer, we can give you a no cost, no obligation estimate on your next marketing project.

After all, marketing drives your sales, and sales are the name of the game.

P.S. We work as consultants or on a project basis - and your project is important to us. So call or write today, and ask for a free, no-obligation estimate on your next marketing effort.

After I mailed the letter, I got calls from several software companies, and I actively followed up with two of them. One of the companies was more interested in finding a primary source for inexpensive market research (no such thing exists), and though I did a good bit of speculative work for the other firm, internal corporate

struggles kept them from moving ahead. The letter also made its way to the files of another software company, The Software Boutique, where they decided that if they ever needed writing help, I was the person to call.

MY REPLACEMENT AT THE GRINDLE COMPANY

I mentioned that I had called everyone who might have known me and told them that I had left the Grindle company. Dave Boor wasn't on my list of people to call; though it was just a short while before I got a call from him.

The Boor had been coming around for years. There was never any work for him, but he just kept trying.

Now The Boor was going to be magnanimous in helping to get me started. "I'm moving on now, I have a new opportunity, and I'm giving up the business," he said, and he wanted me to meet with me. He described a project he thought he could turn over to me, "because it might help you get started. But I don't feel comfortable telling you this over the phone." So we arranged to meet at his downtown office on a Sunday night.

"I'm moving on because I'm losing clients," he told me, although he made a point of not telling me where he was going. "This account used to be one of my smaller clients, but through attrition among my other clients, this has become my largest account, and now it consumes my life."

If it was consuming his life, I certainly didn't want it consuming mine. Those were the magic words that turned me off this opportunity. He continued. "Don't worry, this year, the advertising's already been sold," he said. "What I can do for you, is arrange a meeting for you with my client, tell him I'm moving on but that I have someone who can handle the project."

As the numbers worked out, I would get \$1,300 every two months to put together a 24- or 32-page newsletter, and there was an opportunity to gain other work from the client. The idea of turning down paying work didn't sit well with me, especially at this point, so I met with his client.

"We're a nonprofit organization," the client said, "and we pay for this publication out of membership dues. Thankfully the Boor was able to sell some advertising and keep this project going."

But I knew the kind of work I wanted to do, and selling ad space in a limited-circulation publication, in a specialty discipline that I wasn't familiar with, wasn't the kind of work I wanted to do.

Not long after that I found out that Boor had, on my departure from Grindle, immediately sent a resume, and was immediately hired by Lance Little into my former position. A month later, I heard that Miss Jan, The Blonde and Yeoman Mike showed up at the Magpie's door, saying, "either he goes or we go." The Boor was kicked out of The Grindle Company after only thirty days in office.

THE SHEEP DOG AND THE OFFICIAL UNIFORM

One of the individuals I had met, through some other freelance work, who I'll call the Sheep Dog. He had been editor of a local faith-based newspaper, and I had written him some spec articles, which he published. Later he left the newspaper business and was working from home, editing a magazine via long distance.

"I liken myself to a sheep dog, because I see people out there, and I just try to herd them in directions they want to go." Curiously, he was also a good friend of Irish Tom's, though they had met through another venue.

The Sheep Dog and I met for lunch one day. "I see you're not wearing "The Uniform."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Look at me; if you're working from home, you need to be wearing the sweat shirt and sweat pants with the holes in them." This was before Business Casual became the style. Grindle was a white-shirt-and-tie place, especially on Mondays, when Al Grindle would show up for work. (Grindle also showed up on Thursdays, somewhat more casually attired, to make phone calls and read the mail.)

Lunches, appointments and other types of meetings are nice to have when you first leave a job, because they help you maintain a schedule and they give you something to do. But ultimately, they won't pay the bills. For that, I had to rely on the help of some good friends.

TALL TONY

From September through December 1996, I had a regular check coming in because of my agreement with Grindle, but after that the income level would drop like a rock if I soon didn't get some real business.

Probably the first bit of real paying work I got from any source was from Tall Tony the printer. Tony knew well before I left Grindle that I wasn't having a good time there.

"I don't have any copywriting per se, but I have a steady flow of desktop publishing work coming through, and I can use a hand right now because my design person is very busy," he said.

True to his word, Tony had a few projects, and because I was interested in being home to make phone calls, he gave me a key to his shop, so I could come in at five o'clock in the morning and work on his projects (before his folks got in at 7:30).

Tony was an invaluable resource during these first months, and he even helped me develop a good client from his own customer list. Craig Industry was president of a family firm, The Industrial Company, and that company still ranks among my top five clients. The Industrial Company was, aside from The Bank, my very first "direct" client. The company operated in a very tight niche industry, manufacturing the connection products for commercial ductwork. Incidentally, Craig Industry, it turns out, had known Al Grindle before Grindle's had made his millions.

THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

As I feared, 1996 came to an end, and with it, any semblance of a normal paycheck. I wasn't panicked, however, because I had built up a sufficient head of steam with possible clients, and I was able to see some checks come in from jobs I had done for Tony, Mike LaBlonde and Craig Industry at The Industrial Company.

It was even more important that Miss Elizabeth was able to see some checks come in.

Several years earlier, when I was promoted to Ad Manager with Grindle, I had written a letter to Hunky Haluska at The Bank, telling him of my promotion, and "resigning" from The Bank (I had been getting precious little work from him since he hired Vito anyway.)

But once Hunky found out I was on my own, he stepped up to the plate to help me. During those first few months after I left Grindle, he sent a few small projects my way, such as news releases, flyers for new branch openings, and things like that.

In January 1997, Hunky gave me my first really, really big important break. He wasn't happy with the ad firm that had come in after I had "resigned." They had produced several issues of his customer newsletter, and he didn't want them to do it again. He asked me to do the project.

The Bank's *Steel Town News* was a four-page, tabloid-style newspaper that was distributed to the bank's 40,000 customers. It was a twice-a-year project that Hunky could have produced in-house, but it would have been a major disruption for his staff.

Hunky and I negotiated a price for me to do the project, from start to finish (initiating all the interviews, writing the articles, taking the photos, doing all the desktop publishing, overseeing the printing, and having the piece delivered to the mail house). He was even able to give me about half of the total negotiated price as an advance to start the project. It was a huge amount of money for me at the time. I can easily say that without Hunky and his generosity, my effort to "break free" would have been a truly frightening experience.

WORK STARTS COMING IN

After the first of the year in 1997, and with a check in hand from The Bank, I was somewhat more relieved about my prospects for starting a sustaining business.

Aside from my work with The Bank and from my own marketing efforts, a number of small regular projects that first year came in from personal referrals.

Marv Boxman, who after several years of struggle since leaving Grindle, had landed with another small ad agency in Pittsburgh. Marv had an old friend in public relations named Maddigan, and on Marv's referral, Maddigan agreed to meet with me. Maddigan was a one-person shop, (his wife was his secretary), having recently merged and then "un-merged" with a larger local ad agency, as he put it.

Maddigan was working at the time for a lot of old-line industrial accounts, including a steel company, and other large industrial types of companies. Jack was kind enough to pass some of the overflow article work my way, and he was a very good editor.

I never made much money from Maddigan, because I was always an expense on his books, and not, at that time, someone who could go out and sell his business for him. Still, of all the agency-types I ever worked for, I liked Maddigan the best. He gave me some of the best counsel I ever heard: "*always try to work for companies that would consider your invoices to be small.*"

Around that same time, I called Marketing Mark at the Rehab Hospital in early January 1997. It was the first time I had talked to Mark since I moved back to Pittsburgh in 1991. (At that time, he had just completed a ten-month job search, and he was one of the kind folks who had unloaded the secrets of his Rolodex on me.)

Mark was genuinely glad to hear from me. "It's good to see how people are faring over time, and to see that they're doing well." He asked me if I was going to be around for a while, or if I was just freelancing because I was between jobs.

"I'm in this for the long haul," I said.

"I have a couple of big writing projects that come around every couple of months – an annual report, a couple of fundraising newsletters, and odd projects like that," he said. "It's hard to find a steady writer, and to build consistency. It seems like my freelance writers always leave when they get a job."

Working in a nonprofit setting, Mark didn't have much of a budget for freelance help. But he also needed to make the best use of his in-house people. Asking an internal person do those occasional projects would overload that person to the point that their regular work might not get done.

Over the years, Marketing Mark has liked my work, and he has always printed pretty much word for word the copy I gave him. That, in turn, inspired me to be more careful with what I submitted to him.

SHARING CLIENTS PAYS OFF

In March of that year, I got a call from The Renaissance Man (with whom I had made the proposal to the Engineering Firm). The local Pepsi Bottling Plant had gotten a new marketing manager, who wanted to issue a monthly "best practices" newsletter, for their 2000-odd person marketing region.

Renaissance and Wayne both figured this project fit within the scope of my abilities, so we met with PBG, came up with a theme and a masthead, and we were in business.

I would do the copy and layout, and Renaissance would handle the printing. I received a fixed \$400 per month for the project, usually paid 90 days after the project is completed.

I mentioned earlier, I don't like working for agencies, but in this case, it turned out to be a nice project, because, after all, it was for a company affiliated with Pepsi, and I knew they would be around for a long time. Five years later, the project was still being published on a monthly basis. During that time, I worked on more than 50 monthly issues, at \$400 a pop, which adds up to more than \$25,000 in income over the years. (After that, Renaissance raised me to \$600 per month, which was nice for a few months, until PBG decided they wanted to restructure the newsletter to a larger, quarterly publication.)

This project worked because we provided a valuable service to them, giving them a chance to put out a nice piece, minimizing their headaches putting it together, and enabling them to spend their time working on the things they do best.

THE SOFTWARE BOUTIQUE

Sometime when you sow your seeds, it takes a while before things start to grow.

The letter I had sent to computer firms in late 1996 made its way into the files of at least one software company. In April of 1997, I got a call from The Marketing Lady, who was Director of Marketing at The Software Boutique. They needed to write a brochure for a new product they were developing, they didn't have the staff to do it at the time, and they wanted to see some samples of my work. I sent them a copy of the In-House Ad Agency, among other things. The Lady, seeing this newsletter, thought that I might be almost a perfect match for them.

At the meeting, I found out the interesting routing my letter took.

It had been addressed to The Gentleman, who was president of the company. He

routed it to The Lady. As a marketing letter, it fell under her bailiwick. She in turn routed it back The Gentleman, with the note, “If I ever get hit by a bus, this is the guy to call.” The Gentleman routed it back to The Lady, with the admonition, “I’ll keep that in mind; in the meantime, please be careful crossing streets.”

So now here I was, in The Gentleman’s office on a Saturday morning. “Miss Elizabeth used to fuss when I had to work on Saturdays,” I said.

“Now she says ‘GO!’” the Gentleman interjected with a laugh.

It was true enough.

The Boutique produced a kind of software that was ahead of its time – a neural network product that put complex statistical analysis and decision support at the fingertips of the (direct) marketer who had access to data.

Their primary product had been introduced in 1993, and they developed other products around their main product. My first project for The Boutique was to produce some new product literature for their new Point of Purchase product.

I was very proud of the work I did on that brochure. Our relationship really improved early on when The Lady asked me for my opinion of a mailer she was going to do, that was going to slam the competition. I told her I thought the creative idea was a good one, but nobody would respect the slam part of the mailing. She had almost sent the thing out the way it was, and she was grateful for my opinion. After that, she always regarded me as a trusted friend and advisor.

Throughout 1997 I did sporadic work for The Boutique. But near the end of 1997 they received a new infusion of venture capital, and The Lady informed me that I was “kind of being written into the budget.” We had a meeting, and she outlined a whole bucket full of projects that I was to work on.

That kind of meeting really warms your heart. But there are also hazards to working for small software companies, which I was later going to find out first hand.

LOOKING BACK ON MY FIRST YEAR

My first year in business wasn’t a stellar year, financially, but it was enough to pay the bills. I grossed over \$26,000, netted \$22,000, and we made it through. At this point, we were still living in our 1880’s era wood frame house, and we were only paying only \$120 a month in rent. Thank heaven for low fixed expenses!

By the end of 1997, I had a handful of regular clients, and I had done a dozen other one-time projects that had been good for several thousand dollars. I had sent out thousands of letters, I had made hundreds of phone calls (many of them cold calls), and by the end of that year, I had the overwhelming success of being able to say, “I made it.”

Things would still not be easy, though. The woman who owned our house passed away, and her daughter, our landlord, now The Executor, was no friend of ours. We were given the opportunity to buy our \$120-a-month house for a great deal more than it was worth, or we were going to have to move out.

The house had no furnace – it was heated by several gas-powered space heaters,

which were inefficient and even dangerous with small children around. Nor did it have a regular sewage hook-up. Both of those items were badly out of current building codes, and they would need to be corrected before we could purchase the house. We decided we couldn't afford it. And not surprisingly, the banks we talked with agreed. So by the end of that year, we had to move. Because we had a big family, we were looking for the biggest house we could find for the money. The house we found was out in the country, a big old \$500-a-month rental house that came with huge heating bills and a leaky roof.

1998: THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES

By the beginning of 1998, we had settled into our new house, and my office moved from my small pantry to a corner of the dining room near the kitchen. Effectively, I had the whole room to myself, but I could not imagine ever filling up that space.

I situated myself with a separate phone and fax line, as well as a third, personal phone line. There was no mail delivery to our home, so we had to get a P.O. Box. And because the Post Office was just up the street, I settled into a routine of walking there every day at 9:30, to check for any incoming checks.

Early that year, we learned that #5 was on the way, and would be due some time in June.

I had a small but stable client base. I was getting some repeat business from The Bank, including the opportunity to work two more issues of *The Steel Town News*. Pepsi's newsletter was a regular monthly project, and I was making a small bit of money from Efficient Machine Tool Sales.

Most importantly, I had a commitment from The Software Boutique that I would be working on a lot of different projects as they expanded, including a quarterly six-page newsletter. The Lady at the Boutique would call me any time of day, sometimes early in the morning, sometimes late after office hours, for my opinion. It was almost as if I were a part of the staff.

Essentially, I was primarily engaged in working, instead of looking for work. I had even come to the point at which work was looking for me.

THE ADVENTURE GROUP

Every now and then you get into a situation that makes your head spin. My adventure with AdVenture was one of those times.

The Sheep Dog was one of those kinds of guys who knows everyone. And while I was ramping up my work with The Boutique, I got a call from Jane Hippie, a freelance editor who was working on a new web-based publication that AdVenture was producing for one of their clients. Jane was interested in building a writing team who could work on this web-based publication. She had gotten my name from The Sheep Dog.

For the first issue, due to be published in April, I wrote one article. Because they

were putting together a writing team, but hadn't quite gotten it together, and because summer was coming and everyone was going on vacation, I ended up writing seven of the ten articles that appeared in issue #2 (The publication was not quite monthly, but not quite bi-monthly). My list of articles included products from just about every large software vendor this reseller worked for, including Microsoft (I wrote the cover story, an interview with Steve Ballmer), IBM, Symantec, CA, Network Associates, Visio, and a few other major players.

Since the publication was new, the people I was supposed to interview rarely knew who I was or why I was calling. I spent quite a bit of time tracking down "the right person to talk to," and even more time trying to set up interviews with them.

The articles also required that I do a great deal of Internet research, pulling articles and product literature about the products I was to write about. My old 14.4 modem required that I spend huge amounts of time doing this research. And for several months, my acres and acres of new floor space, that I never thought I could fill, were covered with piles of articles I had printed out as research for the large number of articles I was to write. Thank goodness Miss Elizabeth had a sense of humor about my mess.

AdVenture was doing the project for one of the most anal-retentive software distributor organizations in the business. To do the interviews, and to make certain there was "back-up" for anything that was written, AdVenture was recommending that we record the phone interviews and have transcriptions made.

Radio Shack sells a number of devices that enable you to do this. And believe it or not, I selected the wrong kind, and I lost several of my key interviews because the interviewee's voice couldn't be heard on the tape. It was a maddening experience. I remember sitting in my work area in our big old house, and about half of the floor of this large room was covered with different stacks of paper, each stack representing a different and unique project. It was deadline hell, and although the payoff was pretty nice, it was not an experience I cherished.

Later, as AdVenture built the staff, I was scaled back to two or three articles per issue. The articles always came due at the same time, creating a tremendous sense of deadline urgency, which in turn, always caused a good bit of pain for me. But that's the business.

As a funny side note to illustrate the effect this anal-retentive client was having on AdVenture, consider the change in dress code. The first time I visited them, I went wearing a white shirt and tie. That day, a muscular guy wearing a tank top and cutoff shorts told me never to wear a tie again. Several years later, I attended a writer's meeting; I wore jeans and a nice shirt, but everybody else had white shirts, ties, and the women wore business suits and dresses. I felt out of place.

CLIENTS COME AND CLIENTS GO

While I was making my mark in the technology sector, there were changes at The Bank. Hunky was retiring, and Vito, his able young assistant, was taking over. Vito

liked to do things his own way, and although I produced another two issues of *The Steel Town News*, Vito scaled back the kind and scope of projects he was sending my way, and on top of that, he was always trying to negotiate down my prices.

A year earlier, Hunky had taken my idea of scaling back on their quarterly, 12-page employee newsletter, *The Scoop*, and converting it to a monthly, two-page newsletter, which they called “miniScoop.” The miniScoop project paid a lot less than the Pepsi two-pager, and on top of that, I had to spend money to get it printed and delivered.

That was bad, but thanks to this project, and the fact that Vito wasn’t able to spend the time to do the project in-house, I was able to maintain my close contact with The Bank.

Together, The Boutique and AdVenture contributed almost \$30,000 to my family income. As well, the work I was doing for other clients, including the Rehab Hospital, The Industrial Company, The Bank, Pepsi, and a few other odd projects enabled me to net another \$15,000. So I was happy to say that my second year in business, I had the pleasant experience of nearly doubling my income.

I also lost several clients during the year, through attrition or lack of interest. Maddigan was gone ; he had evidently given me a chance for a year, but when he found out I wasn’t going to be the salesperson he wanted, he never called me back. I had to turn down work from Mike LaBlonde as well; I couldn’t do his small projects on a timely basis, so I resigned from his account.

Two years in business was a milestone in my mind; I remembered back to my year with The Agency. Irish Tom celebrating the fact that, even though there was a recession at the time, The Agency had survived in business for two years, and that was a good indicator that it would continue to survive.

The year was memorable for me for another reason. Early in 1998, my father was diagnosed as having cancer; by Thanksgiving, he had passed away. I was at his side the day he died.

HOW THE Y2K CRISIS PLAYED OUT FOR ME

By the end of 1998, we had built up a cash cushion the likes of which I had never seen. Unfortunately, we needed to use it. Several factors were at work. First of all, we had the opportunity to buy a house, our first, and that took a down payment and all of the stuff we had to buy in order to move in (a storage shed, the rental on the moving van, etc.)

Not coincidentally, the house was just up the street from the old 1880’s era house that we had lived in for three years. A neighbor had bought our old house just to get the land, at about a third of what our Landlady told us we would need to pay for it, and he tore it down.

People in the neighborhood, true Pittsburghers, had a hard time believing that we could survive when I “didn’t have a job” and my wife was a stay-at-home mom. I developed an answer for this, telling people who had “jobs” that they, too, were really

self-employed, except that they had one big client. When that client no longer needed their services, they became unemployed. On the other hand, I had a number of “employers,” somewhat smaller in nature to be true. But I was fairly confident that I could lose a client or two, and still have a working business.

In 1999, I tested that theory in real life. My two biggest clients, The Software Boutique and AdVenture, both dealt in software that wouldn’t directly help companies deal with the pending Y2K crisis. For both of those clients, their 1999 revenue fell precipitously.

Personnel changes also caused some headaches for me that year, especially at The Software Boutique. Early in the year, The Boutique was doing well enough that they felt they could hire a full-time marketing manager who could work for The Lady, and they did. The new marketing manager took over many of the writing chores I had been doing, and so my work was scaled back quite a bit. They also hired a sales manager who turned out not to be much of a sales manager, and combined with the lack of demand for anything but Y2K software and services, they had a very bad year.

AdVenture, too, was scaling back. The publication, which had started with a 45-day publication cycle, was reduced to once every 60 days. The rationale was that it would give the editors two months to go through their rigorous approval cycles. The result, the contribution these two clients made to my monthly income was reduced from \$30,000 in 1998 to about \$6,000 in 1999.

I got a few projects from Vito at The Bank, but not much. The Hospital was steady, as usual, as were the Industrial Company and Pepsi. But overall, my income for 1999 dropped as much as it had risen for 1998. Still, in the words of Irish Tom, “we’ve been around for more than two years; the company won’t go out of business.”

And somehow, I managed to survive this downturn. It was highly uncomfortable while I was going through it. The important point to make here, however, was that my theory was essentially correct: I was able to lose one or two clients, even my largest clients at the time, and still have an operating business.

IT PAYS TO KEEP IN TOUCH

Over the years, I have made it a point to keep in contact with clients and near clients, for the most part during the holiday season, sending Christmas Cards and even engraved pens (with my name and phone number on them).

And by and large, this kind of keeping in touch has helped me to pick up new work, as old clients have faded out of the picture.

I mentioned earlier that The Engineering Firm had called me back, and they couldn’t have picked a better time to do it. They were not happy with the work their agency was doing, and they were re-opening the competition, so to speak. This time, Renaissance, Wayne and I went in with a similar proposal to the one we had submitted two years earlier.

It helps, too, when you’re competing with someone the client doesn’t like. We

picked up a nice chunk of work from The Engineering firm, including a customer newsletter, which we upgraded in a major way, and an ad schedule in the local business newspaper, which we totally revamped.

THE SOFTWARE BEHEMOTH: SMITH OR SMYTHE?

During the years I was writing for AdVenture, one of the regular companies I was writing for was The Software Behemoth, located in New York. And through a contact I made there in the PR department, I started working for the VP of PR, PRBob. At first Bob gave me great hope: "I'm going to call you, and I know you have other business to do, so don't worry about turning down some work every now and then."

"I don't intend to turn down too much work," I said.

He sent a few news releases in a staccato fashion for me to edit, which I returned just as quickly. Then I never heard from him again. I found out later that he had hired some staff writers, and my services were no longer needed.

I wanted to continue to work with this client, so I talked with my internal contact, which put me in touch with another VP, who put me in touch with Debby Smythe.

It really helped that her name was Smythe, because the CEO's name was Smith, and when you said the last name to some of the company employees who worked outside the corporate office, their attention really perked up, because they usually were never quite certain whether Smythe was related to Smith.

Debby Smythe gave me a couple of assignments writing customer success stories. These caused problems for her because customers were erratic to work with. They all had different agendas. Some saw the opportunity to get their names mentioned in a "free" piece of literature; others were highly suspicious, and did their best to give away little or none of the information that I needed.

The amount of work I was doing for them really exploded, however, when Debby decided she was leaving The Behemoth. She knew I was a nice guy, and she decided to give me lots of work with lots of different people, to help get me connected there.

It worked, and I got to know the next two generations of people in her position over the next several months. (It was a period of high turnover).

The problem was getting paid. The person who did the Exit Interviews was going on vacation, and so Debby had to leave the company three days early, and consequently my invoices, carefully timed to arrive before her scheduled last day, ended up in a vortex.

90 days later, I was still waiting for about \$7,700 in cash. The good news is that it came, and it was just like receiving a windfall.

FIVE YEARS AND COUNTING

Throughout my fourth and fifth years in business, eventually I built up a nucleus of five to seven regular clients, each of whom provided me with income totaling anywhere from \$5,000-\$15,000 year. It is the most stability I have seen since I

started. And this scenario was, in fact, very similar to the one I was planning for when I started out, with five clients @ \$10,000 each.

As Irish Tom used to say, “you’re in the computer as a vendor,” and it’s easier for them to keep calling me than to stop. As well, it is a confirmation of Irish Tom’s insight about a business stabilizing after two years in business.

Two of my clients came from networking efforts, two from other kinds of direct contacts I made, and I got two fabulous clients from my direct mail efforts. I am very proud that the range of marketing efforts I tried has led to this diversity in my client base. It has helped me to weather some of the down times.

My clients come from many different industries, as well. Today I have clients in software, health care, banking, engineering, manufacturing and consumer products. 1999 was a rough year because of Y2K, but from here on out, I think the odds that all of them will suffer a downturn at the same time are pretty small.

At first, personnel changes were maddening for me, and I have often lost business when a client hired a new marketing manager. In recent years, though, that has changed. Vito has since left The Bank, but because of contacts I have been able to make over the years, I was introduced to his successor with a good recommendation, and so far I have continued to publish their employee newsletters.

As well, Debby Smythe left The Software Behemoth, but I have been able to continue to work on projects there because of good recommendations I have received.

I have found that newsletters are a good form of work for me, because they offer recurring work. Every month or two months or three months, I work on the next issue of a project, and I can count on having that work to do in the future. I believe this kind of security is a result of my efforts to work directly for the client who is commissioning the work, and from staying away from ad agencies, PR firms and other kinds of middlemen.

The ad agencies always seemed to keep me at arm’s length, as if I were a competitor who could steal their business. Which is true. But when they are crunching, sometimes they really need a lot of help.

Aside from the constant need to find or create new work, there have been other problems since I’ve gotten started. Freelancing is not an easy life.

CASH FLOW IS EVERYTHING

Not long ago, I was on the phone, on hold, waiting for my bank manager, trying to raid the retirement account so we could have grocery money for the week. Both of my checking accounts were near zero (though not overdrawn, thankfully).

It was not that I hadn’t been busy. In fact, I had about \$12,000 in receivables at the time (which, when you use the accrual method of accounting, counts as income), and a bunch of that money was 90-120 days past due.

On top of that, I had about \$4,000 in work that had been booked though not yet completed. None of that helped me with the grocery bills, however. Fortunately, a

check arrived that same day, and I was off to the bank to replenish my badly depleted bank accounts. But as all of the business planning books tell you, cash flow is everything when you're working at a business.

There are other times I've wondered why I'm doing this, such as those times when I'm on the phone with an important client, maybe the CEO of a new company who doesn't know me very well. All of a sudden the toilet flushes, or the baby screams, or my wife screams at a baby, or the dryer buzzer goes off. Things like that make me want to crawl under the desk.

Freelancing makes for a challenging life. But as Scott Peck pointed out in *The Road Less Traveled*, "Life is hard, and the sooner we realize that, the sooner we are prepared to deal with it." I've been working solo for more than five years now. It wasn't easy to get started, and it's not easy to keep going. But the rewards are worth the effort.

CONCLUSION: INCOMPARABLE WEALTH

During the early 1980's, I got to know a popular Christian singing group called the Imperials. Their lead singer at the time, Russ Taff, had as powerful a singing voice as you can get. Thousands of people attended their concerts.

After recording a few albums with the group, Taff decided to leave the Imperials and go out on his own. Not long afterward, Jeff Steinberg and I, traveling in Texas, saw a marquis that said Russ Taff was going to appear in concert at a local church. So we made plans to go and see him.

We showed up at the church, and there were more band members than audience members. I felt humiliated for him. I can't imagine how he must have felt.

Taff experienced what I believe many would-be solocareerists encounter – a period of “wasteland” existence, as he later described it, marked by frustration and failure, while trying to make the adjustments necessary for relying on themselves in the world.

If you've ever tried water skiing, you could compare this period of time to the moments of limbo when you are finally up and out of the water, but before the rope tugs on you. If you don't know how to handle this tug, you're going face first into the water, at a pretty good speed. It takes a few tries to get the hang of it.

I will be the first to tell you that I've had some setbacks, professionally and financially, since setting off on my own. After all, having the backing of a large, established organization, to some degree frees you from a lot of mundane things, like keeping the books and paying taxes and a host of other annoying business and regulatory responsibilities.

At a recent lunch with my old friend and mentor, Biz Genius told me that he very much appreciates the advantages to working for a large organization, in spite of the BS you have to put up with. “You have to put up with those things anywhere.” And now that he is VP, CIO, with 10 years of experience under his belt, it's not hard to imagine what those advantages might be.

On the other hand, after nearly five years as a work-at-home freelance writer, I'm in a position to make a comparison, and as a husband and father of five small children, I would not trade the money and convenience of working for a corporation in exchange for time at home with my family.

* * *

WATCHING THE CLOCK

I got a call not long ago from a communications manager at a local hospital, where they had just lost their two staff writers at the same time. The hospital needed a couple of writers to fill in, and they wanted them to come in, two to three days a week. It was an alien world for me: show up at 8:00, stay at your desk all day, take an hour for lunch, and leave at 5:00. The hours from 3:00 pm until 5:00 pm each day were torture.

I try to live each day with my wife as if it were my last. We drive a junky van, we live in a small house, we keep our expenses down low, and in return, we get more of what's really valuable, time together. You can always get more money, but time, once spent, never returns. The important thing is that you recognize what's valuable in your life, how it's valuable, and then order your life around it.

Probably the first time I realized this was at the time when my first son was born. I was working for a small, family-owned electronics retailer that had grown just large enough that they had to hire people outside the family as store managers.

My son was born at 9:00 pm on a Sunday night; I was scheduled to work on Monday. I wanted to be there at the hospital with my young family. But my manager insisted that I show up for work on Monday.

"We'll give you Tuesday off, to bring them home from the hospital. You don't need to be there today, they have people taking care of them."

That was true enough, but I've almost never felt so helpless as I did at the store that day, sitting like a prisoner behind the glass display counter.

During those years, there was a popular song out that I felt captured the spirit of that store. I couldn't get the tune out of my head.

We gotta install microwave ovens
 Custom kitchen deliveries
 We gotta move these refrigerators
 We gotta move these colour TV's
 Now that ain't workin' that's the way you do it
 You play the guitar on the MTV
 That ain't workin' that's the way you do it
 Money for nothin' and your chicks for free
 From "Money for Nothing," - © 1987, Dire Straits

It seems like that was so long ago. But really, the same amount of time has flown by for all of us.

My gut feeling is that if you've completed this book, and made the journey this far with me, you have what it takes to keep on going and reach your goals. Not all of them, but at least some of them.

I hate to keep quoting themes from our popular culture, but when you find a truth that's stated succinctly, you just have to borrow it. This one is from a Barry

Manilow tune: “It’s a long way up when you’re coming from nowhere...”

Howard Twinkle, the flooring superstar who never quite reached his professional goals with The Grindle Company, always used to tell me: “Reach for the stars, and keep your eyes fixed on them; even if you don’t quite get there, you’ll still have traveled a long way.”

So if you’ve begun your journey toward a solocareer, or if you’re just beginning to look into it as an option, I wish you Godspeed.

APPENDIX: GETTING STARTED

If you want to break free and become a freelancer, or to start any kind of business on your own, it's important to have a plan. But you can't plan in a vacuum.

In chess, you must accurately assess the position. It's like knowing the landscape. You have to know "what's out there."

In the real world, that means you must know two things: what's going on in the world and what you have within yourself. You need to understand what the market needs, how the market works. And you need to be able to assess your skills accurately, in order to sharpen them where necessary.

In that regard, you would do well to talk with a lot of other solocareerists about how they got started, or read their stories. There are many, many different ways to find freelance work; in my experience, you have to decide on a couple of different areas of work you want to do, make sure they are able to pay the bills, and then be furious about your pursuit of them.

YOUR EARLY MARKETING EFFORTS: PURSUE WORK FURIOUSLY

In general, you should spend less time worrying about what your logo, letterhead and other marketing materials look like, and more time directly reaching out to the people who are able to give you actual work to do. I say that because the cash flow difficulties are very real. In my case, when I started, I almost had to be frantic about getting paying work.

I can't say it enough: pursue new work furiously. By that, I mean you should do all you can to make sure you are doing an effective job of selling yourself, and not worry about much of anything else. Even if you're not comfortable selling yourself, it's the one thing you should be doing with all of your might. In my case, I did everything that the job search professionals recommend in order to get new work – networking, cold-calling, mass-mailings - and I put a great deal of effort into all three of those methods. I ended up getting work from all of those sources, as well as from other sources.

I would try to speak directly to the managers in the corporations for whom you hope to work. They all have peaks and valleys in their workload, and you can

position yourself as “an additional staff person” when they need the help, someone they can let go when the valleys come in workload; at those times, someone else may have a peak in the workload, and you are off to that place.

Freelancing is a crazy way to make a living, and I can’t stress enough the need to have your “sales pipeline” full of contacts and potential sources of work. Otherwise, you might finish a big project, send it off, and then find yourself saying, “what next?”

YOUR PORTFOLIO OF WORK

As Tom Peters says, “I AM MY PORTFOLIO,” and you should always look for a way to package up your work, so that a potential client can take it in easily. As a writer, I have it easy, because I can carry my projects around in a real portfolio. But no matter what you do, you can “package” your projects, whether in the form of project case histories that show a definite benefit for your clients, or even in the form of client testimonials.

When someone asks me for samples of my work, I typically send them in a US Priority Mail envelope. If I can get them back, it’s great, but I never expect to get them back. (I used to work for a resume-writing company, and we always recommended people to send their resumes out flat, in a 9x12 envelope, to keep it neat looking and to try to stand out from the other mail that comes in. I have a sense (though no proof) that my Priority Mail package has that effect.)

Regarding contracts, I have never used one – I have always taken people at their word, although I have been asked on one occasion to sign an agreement with an agency-type of person that stipulated I would not steal his clients. That was not a problem for me, because I would not want to get the wrong kind of reputation.

USING THE TELEPHONE TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Your telephone is an excellent resource. My first three months out, I made hundreds, if not thousands of phone calls. There is an excellent book on prospecting by Bill Good entitled *Prospecting Your Way To Sales Success* or something to that effect. I’ve used it, and the numbers really add up. It’s an old book, but a library may have it.

Good recommended having a script, in which you qualify the prospect on two levels: “Do you use independent contractors,” and “do you have a current budget for independent contractors?” Only if they say yes to both, do you then say you’d like to send them further information about yourself. Good would call these folks “cherries.” Following a simple but direct script, and making 40 calls an hour, and using a decent list, Good estimated that you should be able to get about three or four “cherries” per hour. That’s a good aggressive rate.

If you call four hours a day, three days a week, you would get probably 12-15 cherries a day, maybe 45 in a week. That’s a lot of information to send out. After four or six weeks, you’ve got several hundred good, qualified prospects at various stages of closing. But in getting to this level, the important thing is to MAKE THE CALLS.

Therefore, sticking to the script is essential, and don't be afraid to move to the next person, if the current one doesn't qualify. Don't leave messages, and don't feel badly that so many people are saying no. **THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS TO MAKE THE CALLS.** If you make 200 calls in a day, you should feel very good about that.

Of course, you should treat personal referrals differently. Take all the care you can with those. Your purpose is to get up and running in a very short period of time. In my case, I had to make a lot of calls because I only had a few months in which to start generating income. Remember, it takes time to do the work, it takes time to send the invoice, and often it takes even more time to get the check. That's a long cycle, and so that's why I recommend a "furious" marketing effort, especially when you are getting started.

MISFIRES

When I was starting out, many people referred me to the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America). I think it gave them an opportunity to soothe their consciences and at least give me some hope, instead of just saying, "no, there's nothing here for you."

Organizations like that obviously have their advantages, in the form of the ability to offer you networking opportunities, to pick up some advice, etc. I briefly followed up with these associations, but I found out that they all have their routine (fill out an application, send money, go to this meeting, etc.), and it was clear that all this work was distracting me from the more important matters, i.e., making customer contact. And now that I am established, I haven't felt much of a need to go and join these organizations.

I have never gotten any work from the web, either, whether that meant e-mailing out my resumes, or by posting on job boards, or anything like that. Maybe there are lots of techies who have gotten work that way. But I was making my big push before the Internet had really caught on.

Filling out resume forms on the web always seemed like a waste of time, similar to the feeling I got while filling out applications to join various associations.

FEEL FREE TO CONTACT ME

If you're thinking about making the break, there is no substitute for "having a friend in the business," whatever that business is. Please feel free to email me with any questions you might have: solocareer@aol.com.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Book of Proverbs tells us there is wisdom in many counselors. I have been blessed to have access to some outstanding wise counsel. Over the years, none of these has had more of an influence on my thought life than Dr. Jerry Haughton of Memphis, TN. Jerry has been a good friend, pastor, and counselor since my early days in Memphis during the 1980's.

Donna Bartko made it feel like old times when she tore into subsequent drafts of the manuscript with her red pen. This book would have lacked a great deal if it hadn't been for the tough questions she asked.

For my own career education, I owe a great deal to Ted Erkman, the real-life Marv Boxman of the story. Ted and I continue to work together on a number of projects. He is a solo-careerist now, and he understands perfectly when my little girl wants to sit on my lap as we work.

Irish Tom, Biz Genius, you both know who you are.

If there are any typos in this book, it won't be the fault of George Airel, my father-in-law. George plowed through the story several times, and if an error existed, he found it. George is also a painter, and he was kind enough to offer his talents for the cover of this book. His greatest contribution to this work, however, was giving me his daughter, my beloved wife, Bethany.

The Grindle Company continues to be a juggernaut in the roofing industry. I've lost touch with the company over the years, thankfully, though I've heard from and about some of the characters. Al Grindle is of course wealthier than ever. Kip Apple is happily retired or semi retired. Lance Little retired to Arkansas. (I hope the mosquitos there love him!) The Magpie has also retired, and is living a happy life as a babysitting grandma. Miss Jan put her two children through college, and she and her husband have built a big new house for themselves, out in the country.

While Dave Boor was at The Grindle Company, he asked to borrow a work sample from me, a brochure I wrote describing the company. I lent it to him, but I told him it was the only one I had left, and he needed to return it right away. I haven't heard from him since.