

An open disputation of the myth of a so-called work ethic.

The Maniacal Laughter of the Damned: Why you can live and work in the real world without making a deal with the Devil

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THE MANIACAL LAUGHTER OF THE DAMNED



*Why you can live and work in the real world
without making a deal with the Devil*

Organized Religion calls me a sinner.

Government calls me a taxpayer.

Employers call me a human resource.

Business calls me a consumer.

I'm therefore of value in this life only to the degree that

I grovel, pay taxes, work, and buy stuff.

You'll forget me if I have nothing nice to say.

RANDY VAUGHAN

The Maniacal Laughter of the Damned:
Why you can live and work in the real world...



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The Big Question

There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living. [Henry David Thoreau]

Every question has four ingredients: The person asking, the person being asked, the relationship between them, and the motive behind the question.

For example, a young man hears, “Why are you getting married?”

When posed by his best friend, the question could be suggesting that he’s making a mistake because there are “so many women and so little time”.

That same question could be coming from a broken heart when it’s the little brother who sees his big brother, and best friend, abandoning him and all the fun they had playing ball and video games.

It’ll mean something else completely when coming from his dad who wishes he’d remained single but “had” to get married after a night at the drive-in spent in the back seat of a ’64 Ford.

And the question could be expressing great dismay and sadness when coming from his mom who’d always dreamed of her son becoming a priest.

The *motive* is everything, the truth of it, and especially the *perception* of it that can be accurate, or completely wrong. Suffice to say you can answer a question neither truthfully nor honestly unless you understand both the question and the motive behind it. If you misunderstand either, your answer might be sincere, honest, and truthful, but still be wrong.

You could, for example, ask me, “Are you Randy?” Unless and until I know whether you’re asking me if that’s my name (capital “R”) or if I’m sexually aroused (small “r”) *and* why you’re asking, any answer I give can be right or wrong, truthful or misleading.

I asked a question in the third-grade that foreshadowed what has become, for lack of a better word, my destiny. I asked the teacher why the woman, not the man, changes

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her name when they get married. The classroom erupted in laughter. I was embarrassed, humiliated.

The teacher was great. She said, “Randy, I honestly don’t know. All I do know is that it’s a tradition.”

That question and brief bit of dialogue established forever my relationship with authority figures and my peers. To this moment I respect honesty of character, no patronizing, condescending tones or words. For example, she (the teacher) could’ve said, “Randy, you’re too young to understand.” She didn’t.

As for my peers, I’ve had many years to ponder this seemingly innocuous event. I have a name for their laughter because I’ve seen it in action time and time again. It’s the smug laughter of those who know the answer and can’t believe anyone else could be so stupid that he didn’t also know it. But it’s also the nervous laughter of both those too shy to ask the question and those who didn’t think of it for themselves in the first place. Theirs is the laughter of wanting to fit in, to belong with the rest, to not be seen as “different”.

I call this *the maniacal laughter of the damned*. They’re “damned” because chances are they will spend the rest of their lives exerting more effort at trying to conform than searching for meaning and truth. I know this because the other kids stopped laughing as soon as the teacher answered my question. I know this because I see adults repeat it over and over in every conceivable setting.

Yes, every kid goes through this. By adulthood, however, most have chosen to remain silent, to not ask questions. It’s as though asking questions immediately translates into open defiance and disobedience. Maybe this is why most people prefer to follow the path of obedience for it truly becomes the path of least resistance.

Given the undeniable influence of the Judeo-Christian influence in our culture, I’d often wondered if the quickness to label someone like me a “devil’s advocate” doesn’t have its basis from the first question in the Bible being asked by the serpent, the “devil”. We have “In the beginning God said,” and then we’re introduced to Adam and Eve who were busy frolicking among the fairies and unicorns, and then along came the serpent who posed that first question to Eve.

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I think it's a "fair" question to ask whether or not the serpent had personal knowledge of the command given to Adam and Eve. Maybe he/it really did *not* know what was going on and was merely curious. If you were an outside observer watching a couple of people eat anything and everything in sight except for the fruit of one specific tree, wouldn't you want to know why?

That's me playing devil's advocate and, as I've already stated, the motive behind the question is everything. In this case, it's to show that the serpent's question can be perceived as "temptation" only if you grant him/it personal knowledge of the command. And if that's the case, you've agreed that two supposedly opposing sides of good and evil are working together, leaving you and me caught in the middle and trying to make sense of it all.

I've since learned, much to my surprise, that the term "devil's advocate" began with the Roman Catholic Church and that it's a very good thing, well, for what that's worth, coming from me.

But whether it's actual and intended, or a perception that can be accurate or erroneous, *motive* is what can interject conflict into something as simple as asking a question.

A long time ago I knew a man who told me he shot groundhogs because they dig holes and the farmers' cows would step into the holes and break their legs. "Do you fill in the holes after you've killed the groundhogs?" I asked. "No," he said. "Well," said I, "what's the point of killing the groundhog if you're not going to fill in the hole?" We never spoke much after that because he correctly perceived the motive behind my question, the unspoken "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

So what then is the motive behind asking every young person in this country, "*What do you want to be when you grow up?*" This question falls under the category of "You know what I mean" simply because what's being asked is what type of career, occupation, employment, vocation is one considering in order to earn a paycheck or make money.

But "work" is not the same as "employment" any more than is "earning a paycheck" the same as "making money". This book is about *both* the labor and employment

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required to earn money *and* the very “work” of everyday life, the conflicts and complexities we all face on a daily basis.

So while asking someone “what do you want to be when you grow up” may carry with it the best of intentions, with rare exceptions it is an exercise in futility. And in the darkness of this nation’s emphasis on money and materialism, I won’t argue the need for young people to give serious consideration to these matters. Failing to do so, lacking a clear vision, choosing nothing by default results in...me. With no specificity in mind, one goes where one can find suitable employment. Sometimes it works out that such jobs do indeed become the stuff of careers and lifelong occupations. But when that doesn’t happen, the choice, by default, is to merely have a “job,” or more than one, maybe dozens.

There is, however, a double-edged sword contained within that question. Encouraging young people to decide what it is they “want to be when they grow up” is asking and expecting them to first pick a career, then choose a college that best prepares them for that career, then invest all those years, all that energy, and all that money so that they can, *for the rest of their lives*, day after day, do the same “work” over, and over, and over.

Now maybe I get bored easily or need new challenges from time to time, but I can think of few careers, few occupations, few *anything* to which I would want to commit the rest of my life for money and materialistic gain. I’ll make a comparison.

Your son or daughter tells you he/she is getting married. He’s barely twenty years old and you insist he’s too young to make such decisions. You try with all your might to get him to think in terms of *the rest of his life* in order to dissuade him. But when it comes to money? Oh, *then* we encourage them to make this commitment and trust them to be “mature” enough to make such decisions. It’s madness. It’s folly.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

If you ask a six-year old girl that question, she might say something like ballerina. At ten she’ll want to be a puppy-doctor. At fourteen, nurse. A boy will say cowboy, then fireman, then secret agent. I’m applying stereotypes from the 50’s, but the point is made.

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Why then is everyone so convinced that a young man or lady in their late-teens or early-twenties has any more of a real vision and understanding what they want to do with *the rest of their lives* than they did only a decade previous?

Do you not know that boredom with a career is just as likely as boredom in marriage and that an initial “true love” with one particular occupation will eventually prove to have been mere “puppy love”? Giving birth to lifelong occupations based on intercourse between youthful notions of perfect careers and financial security is still a shotgun wedding. The chances of passion and romance years down the road are very slim.

And no, I’m not forgetting the insistence to “do what you love and the money will follow”. Yes, it would be wonderful if each and every person was afforded the luxury of both knowing what that elusive thing is to which they wanted to commit the rest of their lives for the sake of making money, as well having the means to make that dream come true. That is *not* the reality of the situation and if you say otherwise, you’re either lying (to me, yourself, and everyone else) or selling something, or both.

This nation also refuses to bring the same tolerance and understanding into the world of employment as has happened with love and marriage. We wanted “no fault” divorce, and we got it. We now complain about the “breakdown of the family,” the high divorce rate over such things as incompatibility, irreconcilable differences, growing apart, and finding a new love. We don’t like it, but we’ve accepted it.

Simultaneously, however, there’s little of the same sensibilities regarding “career choices”. Too many jobs in the past become anathema in the eyes of future employers. Leaving for more money is foolish if the current employer has a better benefit package. It’s too bad that “the ties that bind” have more to do these days with jobs, working, and money than love and marriage.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

The worst of all consequences with this question is that you’re successful in creating people who identify themselves by the labor they perform in order to make money. “I *am* a doctor.” “I *am* a truck-driver.” Neither is true. Whether I like it or not, I understand the “hyphenated-American” thing. But to identify yourself in terms of what you do merely to

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make money? If suicide is killing your own body, I wonder what they call murdering your sense of identity?

The essence of a man or woman is not to be found in what he or she does to earn money. But isn't that precisely what the phrase "Human Resource" has accomplished? It has reduced the essence of man to nothing more than his usefulness in the pursuit of commerce, consumerism, profit, and greed.

And *that* becomes the motive, intentional or not, behind "What do you want to be when you grow up?" You're to place your confidence, your trust, and your energies in the institutions (colleges, universities, employers) and philosophies (capitalism, "business 101") to be followed in this pursuit of financial security.

And in return you are rewarded by being treated like a *resource*!

You are nothing more than a necessary expense required for the company to remain in business and make a profit. And if the company could find a way to replace you with a piece of machinery or furry barnyard animals, it would do so without blinking an eye. True, you're a "human" resource, but your humanity comes in a very distant second-place to your role as a resource.

If "growing up" means becoming a willing part of *that* system, I'm glad to say that to this very moment I have no idea what I want to be when I grow up. Getting old is inevitable, but from what I've observed, "growing up" usually means "giving up".

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The Hiring Process

One of the saddest things is that the only thing a man can do for eight hours a day, day after day, is work. You can't eat eight hours a day, nor drink for eight hours a day, nor make love for eight hours. All you can do for eight hours is work, which is the reason why man makes himself and everybody else so miserable and unhappy.

[William Faulkner]

Early on I made the distinction between pure “work” and its ignoble cousin called “employment”.

“Work” is just so much effort expended in order to achieve certain results. Performing the same activity for money makes it “employment”. A twenty-dollar bill on the bedside table reduces making love (or even just having sex), to prostitution. The act, the “work,” is the same. What differs is the motivation.

Following general usage, I've since used the word “work” for “employment” but *never* the other way around and, within the specific context, there should be no confusion. But now it's time to examine the “work” of finding “employment,” the hiring process. And that process is truly some of the most degrading, demeaning, humiliating, and infuriating *work* one will ever do, work for which you receive no pay. You're a prostitute performing gratuitous acts in the hopes someone will propose marriage.

This journey actually began with the last section of the previous chapter. And if reading want-ads is like looking through a telescope at a distant planet, what follows is the actual trip to get there. Ahead are galaxies of confusion and contradiction, black-holes of mind-numbing lunacy, and parallel universes of much needed humor, usually encountered when you least expect it.

So welcome aboard.

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The Résumé

This process of finding employment begins with a document called the “résumé”. In theory, the résumé is a Joe Friday version of “just the facts”. It’s designed to be a factual history of educational background, work experience, job skills, and so forth. In short, it’s the chance to “sell yourself” on paper. It’s so important, in fact, that there are entire books and industries based on making *your* résumé perfect, something that’ll “stand out” from all the rest. I recently received an email from an outfit that pulled my résumé from an online job-search site and offered to make my résumé “perfect,” and for *only* \$299.00. Thanks, but no thanks.

Already we’ve come face-to-face with another shining example of double-speak and contradictions. Make *your* résumé “stand out” by making it look like everyone else’s. It’s the same as when my generation was growing our hair long like the Beatles because we all wanted to be “individuals”. Now everyone is getting tattoos in order to be “different”. You have a problem with that?

This whole idea of a perfect résumé is very much like sitcom laugh tracks, being told *what’s* funny and *when* to laugh. I don’t watch sitcoms for that very reason.

In reality, the résumé is the finest example of creative lying the average person will ever be forced to undertake. It’s the equivalent of political spin, the antithesis of the lies a company tells you about what a great and wonderful place their organization would be to work for. When a company states in an ad that they’re seeking “wide diversity of experience *and* a stable work history,” you must grant the job-seeker some latitude and poetic license. So don’t be surprised when a six-week period of “unemployment” is actually time spent at a former employer that the job-seeker would rather forget ever existed. And if he doesn’t tell you about it, you can’t verify it. (Based on my own experiences, however, I suspect employers have their own little version of “star chambers”.)

Résumés come in the three basic flavors of chronological, functional, and a mutant combination of the first two. Choose wisely because your future depends on it. You’re doomed if you send a vanilla résumé to someone who prefers chocolate.

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It's the so-called experts and human resources managers themselves who claim they simply haven't the time to read all the résumés they receive. Because of that, they've established purely subjective requirements to determine which résumés receive their attention, and which get tossed into the trash.

For example, some employers (used in the sense of the person who receives and allegedly reads the résumés) admit they summarily ignore all résumés on any color paper other than white. That's shallow, apathetic, arbitrary, and capricious simply because it's another contradiction. Wouldn't a nice canary-yellow résumé "stand out" from the rest? But making such an attempt to do what you're told, i.e., "stand out" from the rest, now guarantees you a toss into the trash can.

What they mean, of course, is to make the *content* "stand-out".

I recently read comments by one of these human resource experts who said she read no résumés whatsoever lacking "bullets" to draw her attention to the salient parts of the résumé. At the same time, however, it's a rare résumé indeed that should be longer than two pages. So let's say you're looking to hire someone who has experience folding tin-foil panties. Exactly how much trouble and how long does it take to scan a two-page document looking for the words "tin-foil" and "panties"? A human resource manager who summarily refuses to consider a résumé lacking those "bullets" is anal at best.

It's time I play devil's advocate because now we have a bigger problem. "Bullets" come in a variety of sizes and shapes. My software has seven styles of them. So now of course even if you use "a" bullet, chances are it won't be *the* correct one.

The claim that they're too busy to *read* all the résumés they receive is dubious at best. Unless I'm sadly mistaken, part of a "human resource" manager's job description is to hire human resources formerly known as people. Why do you care if the paper is white, canary, or a couple of table napkins?

One word: Appearance.

In the world of corporate America, appearance is everything.

It reminds me of an experiment some years ago. A rather ordinary-looking younger white guy stood on the side of the road, thumb out in the air, trying to hitch a ride. The experiment was based on how he looked, how he dressed, i.e., his appearance. He did

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everything from homeless man to hippie to CEO in a snazzy three-piece suit and tie. Three-piece suit and tie got him picked up more often than all the others, proving that most people still “judge a book by its cover”.

Ever notice how you and I are told to *not* do this?

Employers and book-publishers live and die by it.

During the eighties I read about a couple of writers who conducted their own little experiment to prove how purely subjective is the world of book-publishing. These guys re-typed, word for word, the entirety of *War and Peace*. They changed absolutely nothing except the title and they put their own names as the authors. If memory serves, it went through some three-dozen potential publishers before one astute person actually (a) did *read* it and (b) recognized it as one of the classic novels of all times. All the rest had dismissed it as “having no market,” “no potential for sales success,” and so forth. As you will see, the entirety of the hiring process is equally as subjective.

The résumé needs to contain pertinent and specific information. It’s understandable that it be pleasing to the eyes. We get it. I’m simply at a loss to resolve how the required content of a résumé, mere words on paper, can be made to “stand out” when burdened with capricious rules to ensure uniformity of style, format, and the overall physical appearance of the document.

I’ll just stick with the advice I’m about to give.

Regardless of how you got there—responding to an ad in the newspaper, personal lead, or just walking through the front door—if you’re now sitting somewhere filling out an application and the ad didn’t state the need for a résumé and no one asks for it, *do not* offer one. Yes, anathema, I know. How dare I challenge the conventional wisdom regarding finding a job in this country. I’m doing it because here in the “real world” of us average blue-collar types, men and women who are just trying to find a job to pay the bills and raise our families, résumés inevitably backfire.

First, we’re back to trying to decide exactly what *type* of résumé *might* be the *right* one that *this* potential employer would be less likely to throw into the trash without ever looking at it. Remember, it’s the employers themselves who openly and freely admit that

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“appearance” and “format” and “font size” and who knows what else are far more important than the actual content of the résumé.

In fact, some still insist you use that really fine linen paper for your résumé, even though this is the year 2007 and this part of the hiring process is often done through email attachments, applications completed online or printed and then faxed. And *if* this “fine linen paper” is understood to be limited to occupations for people with more formal education, those in the “higher income” brackets, it’s just one more admission that appearance is everything and substance is nothing. Only now it’s a combination of eye-candy *and* tactile sensualities.

The perfect résumé is, without doubt, the Holy Grail of employment in this country. And though I’ve yet to find this sacred chalice, I have inadvertently discovered the main reason for its existence. Compliance in seemingly inconsequential matters like the color of paper is but a test of your willingness to obey. Failure to do so bars you from gaining entrance to the secret chambers. It’s not brave and gallant knights they seek, but only loyal pages to serve them on *their* journeys and quests.

So I simply prepare a résumé the same way I live, which is to do so on *my* terms as much as possible. An employer, or other people for that matter, who can’t and won’t meet me halfway are preoccupied with obedience to life’s trivialities. I’ve neither the time nor disposition for such trifling indulgences.

It’s worth repeating that the résumé is nothing more than a record of your educational background, work history, and so forth. So why bother with a résumé when you have to transfer these details to the employer’s job application?

Two valid reasons come to mind. First, obviously, is if you’re asked to mail/fax/email one in response to an ad. In that case, you have no choice. So here’s the little trick you need to learn. Make sure your résumé contains exactly the same information as you would put on the application if you’re called in for an interview, that and nothing more. In short, when preparing your résumé, pretend you’re filling out a job application. Remember, had you walked in off the street, asked if they were accepting applications, and they said “Yes,” all they’d know is what you put on the application.

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Test yourself by comparing the information you'd put on an application with what you're told is required on a résumé. See if you don't agree that you probably hanged yourself by putting too much on the résumé. Less is better.

The second reason to prepare a résumé is so you'll have all the necessary information needed when you do fill out an application, those details of addresses, phone numbers of past employers, personal references. Take a résumé with you each and every time you go to fill out an application but do not offer it unless it's requested.

Do make certain it's free from typing mistakes and that the overall format is pleasing to the eye. There's no reason to buck the system regarding the importance of a clean, well-written résumé. It's just that the rest has become cryptic HR-code, corporate America's version of Zen koans. (It's pronounced "koh-aan" and an example is "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" And don't even think about trying to answer until you demand that the person asking it defines "clapping". If not, it's like getting an "F" on a test after being told "there are no wrong answers," well, except *yours*.)

The content of your résumé, the words, the details of your experience, is the substance required to get you called in for an interview. But it's the well-placed blank spaces that make it easy, and therefore more likely, to be read in the first place. A quick search on the internet or visit to the library will provide you with countless examples.

Few of the jobs I've had required a résumé. It's a given that most of these came before I had a computer, allowing me to email a résumé before an application is submitted. The downside to this luxury, however, is that finding employment has actually become more difficult. It's perfectly understandable since employers pre-judge an applicant based on nothing more than words on paper. At least in the "old days" of filling out the application at the employer's business, you were physically present along with the written words. You stood a greater chance of actually talking to the company's representative.

So my experience has proven to me that the only information vital to your résumé is exactly the same as you put on a job application. And of the many résumés of various flavors I have submitted online and via email, those which have been the most successful at getting me called in for an interview are those composed just as I've stated

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here. The last three interviews I've had all made it a point to compliment me on my résumé. None hired me, but the résumé "stood out". I either faded into the background or, more likely, "stood out" more than the words on paper.

So when all is said and done, the only real purpose of a résumé is to get you called in for the interview.

But even if it's just a formality for the company's records and files, you will rarely get to that interview without first having to complete an application.

The Application

Employers provide the job application. No two are alike, yet all want the same information. I've completed applications that were purchased from office supply stores, some that were copies of a copy that was originally worked-up on an IBM Selectric typewriter, and still others whose lineage goes back to manual typewriters and mimeograph machines.

Applicants prepare the résumés. These are to be identical in style, format, and appearance. The details contained within the résumé are nearly identical to that required for the application. And employers complain they receive too many résumés that fail to meet their expectations and requirements; hence those unworthy documents are thrown away.

The moral of that little tale is that a job application is allowed to reflect the employer's tastes, preferences, and budgets. Résumés must be made to *conform*. Enough said.

If this hiring process was about anything else other than appearance, obedience, and conformity, a reasonable person would conclude there's a very obvious solution to this dilemma. *One document*, prepared by a "someone," that would serve as *both* résumé *and* application. Make it available online, at bookstores, and in libraries. Applicants need only fill in the blanks, printing neatly, and employers would easily stamp their name in a blank space conveniently left at the top.

But that's not going to happen, is it?

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Diogenes spent his days carrying a lamp in daylight, searching for an honest man. Armed with current global positioning satellites, he'd have little success finding sanity and reason in today's world.

So the job application is when, for the benefit of a *potential* employer, you document what amounts to nothing more than your life's story, including name, education, past employers, social activities, achievements, awards, and other tidbits.

Want-ads pale in comparison to employment applications for being deceptive, humorous, insulting, and for proving how devious employers really are. For example, is there any valid reason to request information about one's elementary school? There's a presumption at work here. If you went to high-school, or college, or both, it's rather certain there's an elementary school or two in the past.

Up to and throughout the fifties, maybe even into the early sixties, sure, you might wanted to have known about elementary school simply because there were still many people working, and looking for work, who had little or no high-school education, let alone college. I worked with lots of men who fell into this category, some who literally signed an "X" as their legal signature. God, I miss their honesty, intelligence, and wisdom.

But be realistic. What are the chances you'll ever again encounter anyone who hasn't at least some high-school education? And you can't get into high school without elementary school, so again, just remove references to elementary schools and be done with it.

And also, with few exceptions (such as driving a truck), asking an applicant's age is forbidden, only if the person is over eighteen (or some such). But when you ask for the dates we attended or graduated from high school and college, it's simple, basic math to work backwards to get a rather good idea of the candidate's age. So why not just ask? And if it's going to remain illegal and improper to ask, then remove any and all requirements on an application that can hint at the person's age.

Lacking a college degree does not make a person stupid. Indeed, the most tragic mistake this country has ever made is equating formal education with intelligence.

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But now is when you'll thank yourself for having prepared that résumé. Think of the résumé as the ultimate cheat-sheet. Filling out the application becomes a simple matter of copying your own notes from one piece of paper to the next. Viola! You're done. And besides, if you're completing the application after the employer already has your résumé, you want to make certain that what's on the application matches your résumé. You better have all your facts, stories, and outright lies together, in one place, before you get started. And yes, you're going to lie and all concerned know it.

Now I've done my share of hiring and when it comes to filling out a job application, these are absolutes:

Be neat. Printing is always better than writing.

Fill in *all* the blanks. If something doesn't apply, write "N/A" (not applicable). Leaving something blank is the same as ignoring someone who's speaking to you. It's rude.

Bring your own ink pen. You know for a fact you're going to fill out an application, so be prepared. Going to complete an application without a pen reeks of being irresponsible. But I bet you took your cell phone. And please don't ask to borrow a phone book so you can look up telephone numbers of past employers. Bring all that information with you. This is why you must always keep with you a neat, accurate, and complete résumé.

Now look closely at that application. More often than not, buried somewhere, you'll find the warning, "*Do not write* 'See Résumé.'" I rest my case as to why you never offer a résumé in addition to the application. The employer has given you an official document for you to complete and the information he requires is on that document. He neither needs nor deserves more unless and until he requests it.

Now you get to all those attachments, one of which asks you to "self-identify" in terms of race/ethnicity and gender. It's *mandatory* that the employer request the information but it's *voluntary* as to the applicant's choice to answer or not. So tell me what I'm supposed to think is going to happen if I *volunteer to not* give this information? Am I to truly believe that you will still give me a fair hearing and chance? People who won't read a résumé if it's on the "wrong" color paper or lacks "bullets" will now attempt to reassure me that *not* volunteering this information has zero impact on their hiring

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decisions. It's the same as an employer telling me I have *exactly* the stated skills and aptitudes for the available position, yet I'm "over-qualified" because of my experience. Somehow that makes sense to them. To say it strains credulity is an understatement.

These attachments regarding race, gender, veteran status, etc., sound eerily familiar, don't they? Remember those want-ads? Some often state specific interest in "women and minorities" and "bilingual candidates". I'm certain it all means nothing. Wink Wink.

And I really wish the powers that be would decide, once and for all, whether I'm "white," "Caucasian," or "white, not Hispanic".

And pay close attention to the not-so-fine print about employment being "at will" and those "ninety-days probationary" periods. Employers are in-your-face with this stuff these days. At the same time employers are making it clear they can terminate your employment for any reason or no reason, they still have the audacity to want a two-week notice when you quit. "At will" works both ways. End of discussion. Yes, I practice what I preach. In my experience bridges once crossed are better burned.

There is one more important aspect regarding the application itself: Lying.

You've been told that lying on your application is a guaranteed reason for termination. But there is a loophole here. It suggests there will be some degree of investigation *after* you're hired. Think about it. You've convinced them you're the "ideal candidate" and you're hired. Unless you prove yourself to be a major screw-up after the fact, wanted by the police, or turn your boss over to aliens for an anal probe, chances of any post-employment investigation are slim, at best. In that case, you should be fired for being a screw-up, not for lying.

So the truth is you'll get fired for lying only if you get caught lying. And even then you won't get in trouble for lying, only for lying badly.

Here's an example of lying on an application *and* getting caught at it. I really have had my share of legitimate supervisor and manager positions. But a company for which I worked as a driver had closed and I was out looking for a new job. One caught my interest, a sort of manager/driver position. I saw no harm in "embellishing" my previous

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employment with the now defunct operation, so I said I had been the “warehouse manager”. After all, how could they verify it?

I was called in for the interview and shown to the interrogation room (an empty office space they were using for interviews). As I entered, I heard a man’s voice, a familiar voice, calling me by name. I turned and it was a man who’d worked as a driver for the same company that was now closed. He’d stayed only a couple of months and then moved on. He was the man who would be interviewing me, the man who would decide if I got hired or not.

No, I didn’t get the job. I’m thinking it’s because he knew I wasn’t the “warehouse manager” but he never mentioned this during the course of the interview. Of course, I “could” have been *after* he left. But at the time, I was hoping he would remember that I was the guy who had trained him back at the other job and showed him the different routes we traveled. I guess all that meant nothing.

I do know he was much more likeable as a co-worker than in his new life as this manager-whatever he was. Man, was he full of himself. He’s another example of a blue-collar in it for the power and assumed prestige. And of course there’s the whole audacity of him giving me the third degree on “where I would be in five years” considering the short time he had stayed at our previous employer. I guess “that’s different”.

Interestingly enough, I saw him just a couple of weeks ago. He has a new job. His previous employer was purchased by yet another larger player in the same industry and, according to him, he quit because the new organization was intolerable. My money goes with my experience and observation of how it works in the real world. The new bunch came in and cleaned house, sweeping away the existing mid-level managers.

Now here’s an example of *not lying* on an application.

I’d been working for nearly a year as a correctional officer when I applied for a position as a county sheriff. One question regarded previous drug use. So I told the truth. As a teenager, I had indeed smoked pot and had taken acid (just once with the acid, which had resulted in making an unexpected trip to the emergency room). I also had consumed gallons of beer, blackberry wine mixed with 7-Up, purple passion, and just about anything and everything else containing alcohol. But no questions were asked

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about alcohol consumption. Moral of story is “alcohol good, non-taxed, non-controlled drugs bad”.

But I didn't get the job. According to them, the reason was my admission of previous drug use. Their concern, so they said, was that I might still have those “bad” connections and so forth. We're talking 1978 in southwest Virginia, not exactly the hotbed of drug-related gang activity. And me, I'm thinking if drug use is *that* bad, wouldn't you want to have someone like me who allegedly has contact with “those” people?

Had I lied, they'd have never known anything about it.

In addition to the application and various attachments, common now are agreements for drug tests, background investigations, even credit checks. And despite all this, employers continue to complain about the poor quality of their workforce. Well, if those you've hired have passed all these barriers and you're still not getting the people you want, don't you think that maybe it's time to re-evaluate not only this part, but the entirety, of the existing hiring process?

I'll move on now, leaving that as an example of a question purposely used to challenge and confront authority. It's a question filled with malice, an insult disguised as a question, and “they” know it.

So you've agreed to a drug test, a criminal background check, an investigation into your credit history. Goodbye presumption of innocence, hello presumption of guilt. You've acknowledged your gender, race, veteran/handicapped status. Goodbye discrimination and hello hiring quotas. Those are different you know. Just ask any good politician or human resource manager. Refusing to hire someone because of race, for example, is bad. Hiring them *because* of race is good. See how simple this is? And remember that *not volunteering* that *mandatory* information will *not* be used against you. Can I get another Wink Wink?

At this point your application (and résumé, but *only if requested*) has been reviewed by a person now inviting you to participate in:

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The Interview

I peed on an electric fence when I was eleven or twelve. That wasn't nearly as painful as a job interview. The cows in the pasture, however, thought it was hilarious.

Whether the interview is with just one person or it's a tag-team match and you're not allowed a partner, all parties involved have everything there is to know about you to determine whether or not you're qualified to do the work for which you've applied. They've seen and read your qualifications, i.e., your résumé and application. You've established and they've agreed—or you wouldn't be sitting there—that at the very least you have the documented requisite skills, talents, attributes, and experience to actually perform the required tasks.

The first consideration is the lingering debate about how to dress for an interview. Your guess is as good as mine on this one. Just try to fit how you look in the interview relative to the job for which you're applying. You really don't want to work for anyone who wants to see you in a shirt-and-tie when you're applying for a job running a bulldozer or driving a dump-truck.

Before a recent interview, I was told to absolutely *not* wear blue-jeans and/or a tee-shirt. The job, before I continue, was a route-driver for a company that handles recycled oil. I doubt that the nice slacks and sports jacket I wore were the daily "uniform," but I arrived looking rather good if I do say so myself, sans tie.

As for the manager who was interviewing me? First, there was that wrinkled short-sleeved polo shirt that was half-in, half-out, and looked entirely too large even for this guy who would've easily made two of me. Add to this the disgustingly predictable tan khaki slacks that he either had been wearing for weeks, or had slept in. And surrounded by "no smoking" signs and posters, it was a real pleasure to talk to him while he spit tobacco juice into a plastic cup.

But *these* are the people who are going to pass judgment on *us*.

If I accomplish nothing else by writing this book, I hope I can convince you to look beyond the physical appearance of these people and see that behind even the most handsome/beautiful face, warm smile, shiny teeth, and perfect manners is just a man or

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woman with all the hypocrisies, rudeness, and slovenliness as this man. He was, at least, perfectly open and honest both as a person *and* as the employer. It was refreshing as hell to talk to him.

Stripping away their titles and authority and seeing their humanity neutralizes their reduction of you to a human resource. Think of this along the lines of advice given to people afraid to speak in front of a group, and that's to imagine everyone naked.

The interview begins simply enough with introductions and small talk. "Nice to meet you. Sure has been hot lately. How 'bout them Mets?" We're told the idea is for the candidate to get relaxed and feel comfortable. No matter what "they" say at this point, it all translates into "'Welcome to my parlor,' said the spider to the fly."

Lights. Camera. And action! You are now the unwitting star in a corporate play and the stage was set long before you ever arrived. The company's actors are in front of you. They've had ample time to rehearse their lines but you're supposed to ad-lib your way through this. You're expected to say your lines from a script you've never seen, to actors you've never met, and any deviation is the end of any chance you had to get that job.

The play continues and the person interviewing you leans back in his chair. You recall that some experts say you must sit-up straight and make good eye-contact. Others say to follow the lead of the person conducting the interview. So what do you do now? He's all laid-back, relaxed. Should you mimic him? No, wait. Maybe he's just setting you up to see if you fail to maintain the "expected" posture and demeanor.

The play has begun and the show must go on.

You're still struggling with the first dilemma when you hear, "Tell me a little about yourself."

Is this an invitation to discuss your private life, or are you to infer that the question is limited to your "professional" life? Mention your wife and kids and chances are you just doomed any chance you might have had of getting that job. At the same time, however, and depending entirely upon the person to whom you're speaking, you might be just as screwed if you do not mention your family because he was still in the "warm up" stage and sincerely wanted to know about you, as a person, separate and apart from any potential value you have as a resource.

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Too bad corporate America and employers have convinced themselves, and most of us, that discussions of family are to be off-limits during job interviews. As I said before, if they only understood that love of family is the prime motivating force for *wanting* and *needing* to work. Instead, they want someone who can convince them he “loves” the job. What a bunch of goobers.

One of the earliest bits of dialogue in this play focuses on “employment specific” questions. You’ll be asked about previous employers and your duties, accomplishments, and failures. Isn’t all that information right there on your résumé, or application, or both? You now see that these required documents are treated like the manuals packaged with every electronic gadget and gizmo. Who reads the manual?

Here’s where you’re supposed to practice pithy, succinct, concise. Brevity may indeed be the soul of wit, but explaining why you were fired for being a disgruntled pilot of alien spacecraft used for abducting truck-drivers who announce over the CB that they “ain’t got no panties on” is going to take some explaining.

You *can not* and *will not* win in this matter of attempting to explain and justify your past. Everyone in our culture is familiar with the inherent contradictions of an authority figure being allowed the luxury of having it both ways, yet none dare confront employers in this matter and make them understand it’s a non-issue, completely irrelevant. It’s like the previous brief mention of an actual ad that stated, “We’re looking for someone with a wide-variety of experience *and* stable work history.” So you’ve had ten prior jobs, all doing the same thing as the position for which you are now being interviewed. The fact you’ve had ten employers will be used against you to demonstrate that you’re unstable. Document just one employer and you’ll be told you haven’t the required experience.

Every young person knows you can’t find a job without experience and you can’t get experience without a job. We all know you can’t get credit without a credit history, but you can’t have a credit history until someone gives you credit.

Employers want education, but they also want experience. They want experience, but they also want stability. They’ll substitute some types and varying degrees of experience for education, and vice versa. The “ideal candidate” is the person who is best at solving riddles.

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The play continues with questions like, “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

What they want to hear is “I want nothing more than to be a valuable team-member and contribute to your company’s success.” Thank you very much for that insightful response, Captain Obvious. Notice the throwbacks to that old work ethic here? They want *you* to commit to an employer in a day and age in which downsizing and relocating overseas are routine business practices.

I call their bluff and this has been my answer for the last few years:

“Ma’am/Sir, if you can guarantee me that this company, as it stands right now, under the same ownership, in this very location, will still be here five years from today, then I’ll sit here and tell you that nothing else in life is more important than being part of your ‘team’. If not, it’s completely unfair and disingenuous of you to ask me about what I may or may not be doing five years from now when the simple truth of the matter is I have no real idea of what tomorrow is going to bring and neither do you.”

There’s usually a deer-in-the-headlight look accompanied with a strained silence. I wait, purely for dramatic effect, then ask, “Is it safe to assume this interview is over?”

It almost always is and that’s okay. There’s another play in which to perform just around the corner. Actually, I’m starting to enjoy these things. I’m meeting all sorts of great people, honest, sincere, and helpful. And I encounter trolls who wouldn’t let me cross that bridge no matter what I say or how I say it. They have college degrees, mind you, but they’re trolls nonetheless.

I was in an interview recently. I had responded via email with my résumé attached. The lady asked me, “Are you comfortable with email and using attachments?”

I didn’t get the job. Beating your head on the desk is never a good response.

The play continues with open-ended questions. And with each question the truth of the real reason for this little drama becomes more and more clear.

“Why should we hire you?” is part of almost every script.

Somehow you’re to repeat the same written and documented reasons stated on your résumé and application that got you this far in the first place. You’re supposed to ad lib a bit of dialogue which, once you’re through talking, means nothing more than “You

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should hire me because I've documented I can do this job, dumb ass." You omit the insult only because you're a good person.

Answer too forcefully, or with too much confidence, and you risk sounding arrogant, patronizing, and condescending. That makes you intimidating and no employer wants that. Try balancing your proven accomplishments and skills with a wee-bit of humility and you look weak and lacking in confidence. No employer wants that, either.

The writers of this play are good; you have to give them that.

You'll also be asked if you have any questions for those who are conducting the interview. In essence, this *is* a two-way street. They are interviewing you to see if you would be right for them. Conversely, you should be interviewing them as well.

So you and I are told we should ask questions such as, "Why has the position become available?"

Do you really believe they're going to tell you they fired the previous guy because it wasn't until after he was hired that they discovered he was really a reptilian overlord from the planet Rantoinne and was wanted for making crop circles in Kansas? And they won't admit he'd been laid-off and refused to come back because that makes it sound like business is bad. Likewise they're not going to tell you that the former employee quit and moved on to something "better" because that's an admission that there *are* better things "out there".

Think about this, people. If *you* are there to "sell yourself," don't you think the company's agents are there to do the same thing?

You're supposed to ask about chances for advancement. So, here we go again with more double-speak and more self-incrimination. I mean you're there, trying to get hired as a floor-sweeper, and right out of the gate you start asking about when you become the in-house cleaning supervisor? Sure, that *might* show enthusiasm and dedication to the potential employer (i.e., that you'll still be there five years from now), but it *could* also be interpreted as, "Hell, this guy ain't even in the door yet and he's already wanting to move up the ladder."

Here's what can happen when you listen to the experts:

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I was being interviewed by an arrogant, pompous little twerp who was oh-so proud of having worked his way up to supervisor/manager of the department in which I would've been working if I'd have been hired. I really tried with every ounce of my being to remain courteous and professional. When it was my turn, I asked all those "right" questions. "What's the corporate environment like here? What sort of management style do you prefer? Would we have time for you to introduce me to some of the people with whom I'd be working?" And so forth.

It became clear that this was as boring to him as it had become to me simply because he had made it all about him and his success rather than the job and position. I also noticed he preferred monosyllabic communication. So I finally said, "I do have one more question, if I may." He nodded. "How long would it take me to have your job?"

That was a completely fair and legitimate question since, after all, he'd made it clear they did promote from within. He was living proof, right? But I'd never seen anyone end an interview as quickly as he did. "We'll let you know." He felt threatened, intimidated, not at all pleased by a display of determination to be a success within their "team". Okay, so I pissed him off. That's what I wanted to do.

Here's a real problem I have with this notion that the applicant should ask these questions. And I can get this across quicker by telling you something that happened just a couple of days ago.

The interview had gone well enough and he finally asked if I had questions for him. "Sir," I said, "I'm not sure what sorts of questions you would have me ask. We've discussed the details of this position and we've all agreed [there were two gentlemen conducting the interview] I would be perfect. You covered the benefits and holidays and so forth. The only thing you didn't mention was the pay. And here's why I don't understand why guys like me are told we should ask about this."

He was smiling broadly and nodding. At last, a man who "gets it".

"Most ads for most jobs," I continued, "state the pay. Now in my world, you don't apply for a job that pays less than what you're willing to accept unless the pay is close enough so that the pay-cut isn't that big of a deal. And yes, I know such matters are

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negotiable, so why not go on to the interview and simply ask for more. Wouldn't you agree?"

He nodded.

"But in this case, I have no idea what the pay is for this job. You haven't mentioned it and it wasn't stated in the ad. But your application did ask for a preferred pay range. Now I have to conclude that what I put down is close to what this job pays or you wouldn't have wasted your time. After all, if what I put down is less than what it normally starts out, you just saved yourself a lot of money if you bring me in at what I said I'd accept, right?"

Another nod.

"So as far as I'm concerned, you haven't offered me the position and asking about the pay is both a moot point and, with all due respect, an insult to you, personally."

Now here's what he said: "You're right. The pay you asked for is completely within range for this position." He paused, looked at his partner and smiled, then added: "But you're the *only* applicant who even bothered to answer that question on the application."

I couldn't believe it and I said so. "What the hell is wrong with people these days? Leaving it blank is like saying you'll work for anything, nothing. It's like groveling. At the very least write something like entry level or some such...." And so we went on for a few more minutes. Of course, I've still not heard anything from him.

I mentioned previously that I've tried my hand at sales and that I hated it, that I'm no good at it. But did you notice the "sales technique" I used on him? I ended everything with a question, evoking a "yes/no" response. I got all "yes" answers but still didn't get hired. Maybe there was a booger hanging out of my nose? And for the record, that same ad for that same position has run three more times since I applied and while working on this manuscript. I so love poetic justice. I guess they just can't find that "ideal candidate".

So to sum up the problems I have with the advice that applicants should ask a whole bunch of questions, I'd say that first, we wouldn't be there if we didn't think we could do the job for which we're applying. Second, most all of the really important matters such as benefits, hours, etc, are covered during the course of the interview. Third, the company *is* what it *is* and they're not about to change their "corporate

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environment” or policies of hiring from within/without simply because we don’t like it. And if those rather trivial matters are *that* important, than yes, ask. But if you think they do *not* lie about such things, you clearly have very little experience in the real world.

Fourth, when it comes to the pay? Again, that’s usually stated going into it, either in the ad or the person conducting the interview tells you at some point. If not, then yes, we’ll ask.

Fifth: When was the last time a potential employer was required to “open his books” to a job applicant in order to “prove” that he’s not merely a front for a drug-smuggling operation? Presumption of guilt works both ways. But it’s the applicant *only* who’s required to disprove this presumed guilt. Companies and employers are above reproach. Human-person bad. Legal-person good. I want to scream at times.

This sixth reason is *the* big one. I’m certain you understand that people conducting the interview have “rules” they’re told to follow, such as not asking about religion, for example. Well, another of these rules is for the interviewer to take notes during the interview. It’s not only excellent advice but just plain good sense. If you were going to talk to a couple or three dozen people spread over two or three weeks, wouldn’t you need some notes, some reminders, of who said what, the impression each left you with, and so forth? Hell, even if you just jotted down, “Don’t hire Randy! He’s a trouble-maker.” At least that’s something.

Yet very few people out of the hundreds of interviews I’ve endured have ever followed this advice. They simultaneously allege, however, that a job applicant’s absence of questions during an interview indicates apathy toward the job and company.

So if my refusal to ask mostly pointless, silly, and inane questions suggests apathy, I’m perfectly justified in following their lead by insisting that the absence of their taking notes and writing reminders about the candidate sitting before them is tantamount to the same apathy, only now it’s from the employer’s side of the fence.

All I mean is if you’re going to be interviewing dozens of people for a job and you don’t take notes of some kind to remind you later of who said what, how they answered, and all the rest, then *you* tell *me* why and how I should ever believe you’ve given any of us a “fair” and reasonable consideration. In essence, you’re wanting me to truly believe

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that three weeks after talking to me and after talking to dozens of *other* people who've come *after* me—you're wanting me to believe that you remember me well enough to make a truly "fair" decision relative to the three people you talked to yesterday?

That's crap and you know it.

You now understand why I suggested earlier that you might be better served by trying to apply for the job just before any stated datelines. That early bird might get the worm, but maybe not the job.

Okay, you were invited to this little play based upon factual answers to simple questions. So this so-called interview certainly isn't about your qualifications. Now, however, you're expected to explain, justify, and defend the obvious. Why? What possible reason(s) can there be to invite you into a room and get you *talking*?

By both logical conclusion and my own intuition:

A job interview is the time spent in the presence of one or more representatives of the company to give them the chance to decide if they like you or not.

That's my definition. It's the best I can do.

But you better know and believe that those people in that room with you are *not* your friends. They don't care about you, period. Their sole purpose for showing up is to find any reason whatsoever to *not* hire you.

Repeat after me: You are talking to people who see you as a *human resource*. A company's vice-president once told me he needed to hire some "warm bodies". Do I really need to say more?

Your absolute *only* goal in a job interview is to say or do nothing that would give them cause to dislike you. Sounds simple, but even this is a double-edged sword. It's no more complicated than the old joke, "Excuse me. Do you know what time it is?"

Glance at your watch and answer with a mere "Yes" and you will be hired by those who play by one set of rules and summarily dismissed by those who were expecting you to actually tell them the time. Give the time and the first bunch will have you escorted out of the building. There are subtle distinctions at work here. Employers insist they want candidates who are honest and truthful. *No, they do not!* They may indeed want honest

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and truthful *answers* to specific questions, but they run like hell when it comes to honesty and truthfulness of character.

That leaves you choosing between speaking the *truth* and telling them *what they want to hear*. And isn't the latter the stuff of "good" selling? And isn't that why you're participating in the interview in the first place, to "sell yourself"?

So once the legal specifics have been met regarding race, gender, and all the rest, and presuming those annoying details regarding qualifications, education, and experience are relatively equal, the final choice of who gets hired and who doesn't comes down to how the employer answers this one question, "*Do I like this person?*"

Let's say you own a nightclub and need a piano player. You're interviewing Lionel Richie, Elton John, Billy Joel, and Barry Manilow. Do you have any doubts as to the talent these men have and their "proven success" to "attract customers"? So whom would *you* hire if you had to choose, and why?

I maintain that the person who gets hired is the one the employer (the person conducting the interview) likes the most. Or maybe it's simply the one he dislikes the least. And the *only* way employers can decide that is by getting you to *talk*. We desperately need a job applicant's version of the Miranda Rights. After all, isn't it obvious that everything you say can be, and *is*, used against you?

But I once had my choice for the "ideal" applicant overridden by the VP (who hired "warm bodies") who never even talked to the lady. After that, I told him to hire whomever *he* wanted and to leave me out of it. He did. So nothing's set in stone, that's for sure.

Several months ago I was interviewed for a "regional manager" position. Two company agents versus me. They never stood a chance. The HR lady was articulate, kind, thoughtful. She made great eye-contact. She actually listened as I spoke, unlike one woman who read her email during my interview with her (a corporate witch, perhaps?). Yes, she told me that's what she was doing, naturally apologizing all the time she continued doing it. So after I'd answered the questions, explained my "personal" management style, and all the rest, she said, "Randy, I've never heard it put so perfectly. You really do understand how to balance the needs of the company with those of its

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people.” Goo-goo stuff like that. She sounded so sincere. Then came what’s usually the last question you’ll be asked. “Do you have any questions for me/us?”

In this case, I couldn’t wait to try another piece of advice from the experts and professionals. “Yes,” I said. “When do I start?”

According to MasterCard: Priceless.

But really, *she* had made it perfectly clear she agreed I was that elusive “ideal candidate”. I was indeed completely justified in asking the question. So I did. Conclusion? She was lying. That’s okay. Because then I got to watch her stammer and stutter her way through what amounts to what we all hear. “Don’t call us, we’ll call you.” And that phone hasn’t rung yet. But eventually one does find a job.

I don’t know if what I’m about to suggest is at all original or not. After all, I’ve spent most of my life actually working and, obviously, looking for work, not writing books and advice columns about it. So there may be all sorts of golden nuggets out there about which I know nothing. But have y’all ever thought about using a “non-interview interview”?

Let’s say a person walks through your door and asks if you’re hiring. You say “Yes” and tell him to have a seat and complete the application. Right here and right now is your chance to conduct a *real* interview, the results of which you could trust completely. Sure, it’s based on a bit of duplicity and misdirection, but I’ve established that the existing hiring process is already nothing more than childish games and conflicting advice.

Simply have a current employee come in and pretend to fill out an application. *That* employee could talk to the real applicant and get an honest sense of who that person really is. I can’t tell you the numbers of times I’ve talked with other applicants sitting nearby who, after just a brief “Hey, what’s the good word?” from me, would immediately and freely admit they were filling out the application only to meet the employment commission’s requirements to keep those unemployment checks coming in. See? There’s one less you’d have to worry about giving any serious consideration.

No, I’m not suggesting you have your “accomplice” ask illegal/unethical questions about family and so forth. But you and I both know that the average person is nervous as

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hell in a formal interview. And making judgments based on one's conduct and behavior in that type of situation guarantees you'll make incorrect judgments, and do that probably most of the time.

So have someone talk to them—talk *to* them, *not* “interview” them—in a relaxed, informal setting. They'll tell the truth about things that really do matter. “Yeah, I got fired from so-and-so but there's no way I'd expect another employer to believe what really happened....” Then you'd actually “hear” both sides of the story from the applicant simply because he's in an environment in which you've removed any and all reasons to lie.

You could conduct this type of interview even with those whom you've called to come in based on information from a résumé. You and the candidate both know there's always that brief waiting time until Ms. Crow comes out to take the applicant back for the actual interview. This is the perfect time to have a “stranger” strike up a conversation to get a true sense and feel of what this person is really like. That would give you a very reliable and true first impression.

I've had interviews in fast-food restaurants, hotel lobbies, all kinds of unorthodox places for all kinds of reasons. It could be a new company just starting up and construction on their facility isn't complete. Maybe the guy's on his way out of town and really does want to talk to you before he leaves. The possibilities are endless.

But this is the perfect time to literally *see* and *observe* what the person whom you're considering hiring is really like. If he's standing outside smoking a cigarette, does he toss the butt on the ground even though there's a bucket sitting there? Does he hold the door for people entering the building? You want first impressions? You got 'em.

I've always sworn if I ever had my own business, my own “thing” in a physical building, I'd incorporate *one* “process” to determine whom I would hire. I'd lay a twenty-dollar bill on the sidewalk just a few feet in front of the entrance. Any potential job-seeker who entered and immediately said he'd found the money and wanted to know if someone had dropped it would be the person I'd hire and I wouldn't give one damn about “lapses in employment” or any of that other trivial nonsense corporate America and employers still want to believe matters. It doesn't.

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Anyone who did *not* attempt to find to whom the money belonged would be shown the door. I don't care how many degrees you have, how much experience you can document, how perfect your résumé is. A person like that can't be trusted.

Of course, as soon as I typed that last sentence, I remembered the old joke about the man whose daughter was dying and all he needed was \$10,000.00 for her treatment and she'd be fine. One day he found a suitcase with exactly that amount. He turned it into the police station. His daughter died. After his own death, his first question for God was, "Why didn't you send me the money I needed for my daughter?" God said, "I did. It was in the suitcase."

So there exists the possibility that the applicant who made no attempt to find out to whom the twenty-bucks belonged truly was in a dire financial situation. After all, he *is* looking for a job and it *is* possible he's been out of work for a very long time. Perhaps his situation was so bad he felt compelled to keep the money.

Fair enough. I'd talk to him first. But don't you think that at some point in the interview you'd uncover the truth of a situation like that?

So there's really no difference in the desired results of the current hiring process and the scenarios I present. Employers really do want only to hire the best people they can. (I really don't believe that last sentiment, not for a moment, but I'll let it stand only to give employers the benefit of the doubt.) But I have to part company when that desired result is based on nothing more than words on a piece of paper (résumé and application) combined with purely subjective feelings carried away from the interview by the person who decides whether or not to hire.

There really *must* be a better way—for both parties involved.

I do stand by what I've already written and I'll go to my grave believing it. You hire whom you like, period. The rest is a silly-assed game, nothing more than a ritual, a play in which all are expected to act in accordance with their assigned roles of either candidate or interviewer. Getting hired is a business version of an Academy Award.

I promised myself when I began writing this I would purposely avoid using *any* references or sources whatsoever. In other words, this is about *my* experiences, observations, conclusions, and why I'm absolutely certain that mine are rarely different

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from the rest of the average employees in this country which, of course, also makes it all about you, as well.

But I can tell you that there are those “experts” who’ve reached the same conclusions. So I’m going to break my rule and use just this one source, a business online called Integrated Management Resources, Inc. In trying to convince employers why they, the employers, should use assessments as part of the hiring process, I read this: *“Most hiring decisions are made in haste—during the first five minutes of an interview.”*

Five minutes! And worse yet, the *first* five minutes. That’s just enough for the introductions, a bit of that “small talk,” and the obligatory, “I was looking over your résumé/application and....”

And after that the rest is a waste of time because that person sitting across you has probably already made up his mind as to whether or not you’re going to get the job. All that wasted time on the résumé, wasted time filling out the application, and the rest of the wasted time sitting there pretending to be involved in a “serious interview”. It’s very true that there’s “no second chance to make a first impression”. What a shame that we prefer a contrived and pretentious first impression to honesty of character and integrity.

Years ago I heard that most men propose marriage in dim light that would never be suitable for buying a tie. Employers hire *people* in total darkness and then express dissatisfaction with their human resources. With eyes and ears wide shut, *people* accept employment with a purely legalistic, fictional “person” and forever complain about being treated like a resource.

My good friends, it’s time to awaken from the American “dream” in which humanity is a second-class citizen, bred only to serve the elite corporate “person”.

Just one final parting shot regarding the interview, if I may. This one, perhaps more than any other aspect of either looking for work, or actually working on the job—*this one is my personal hot-button*.

We’re told that it’s “proper” and “professional” and “increases your chances” of getting that job if, after the interview, you send a “Thank You” note, a nice, handwritten

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thank-you card. It will be one bitterly cold day in hell before a potential employer ever gets a “thank you for the interview” note from me.

Since I got laid-off this last time (while working on this), I’ve responded to over thirty ads via résumé and online applications. Out of those I’ve had six interviews. Of those six, three gave me that old “We’ll let you know” routine. The other three, however, told me in no unmistakable terms that they *would* let me know whether I was, or was not, the one selected for the job.

It’s been three weeks since the last one told me this. Just last night I sent her an email, the contents of which, if she can read between the lines, said, “I’m damned glad you did *not* hire me because you’d have proven to be just one more two-faced, lying employer in my long list of many before you.”

This is simple common courtesy. I don’t care if you interview two-thousand people. Unless you *tell* them outright that you will contact them *only* if they are selected for the job, you owe it to them to let them know they did *not* get the job. And for anyone who wants to try to rebut this with the “Now, Randy, these people are really busy and...,” I want you to know I’ve heard it all a thousand times and I just put my hands over my ears and I’m shouting *la la la la la* at the top of my lungs. Yes, I can do that *and* type at the same time.

When you make *that* argument you once again reinforce and prove every point I’m making in this book. Corporate America and employers (as both the “company” and the individuals “at the top”) are supposed to be in some way(s) “better” than the rest of us and that we’re to spend all our days groveling at their feet. And all I’m doing is telling you *why* that’s a damned lie.

I’m of the conviction there is only one relevant question to be asked during an interview. And remember, you’ve already weeded out the “undesirables” from the information on the résumés and applications. Weed them out because of failure to fill in all the blanks. Weed them out because you don’t approve of their past employment history. Weed them out because you got a paper-cut from a résumé that wasn’t on your precious fine linen paper. Your reasons will always be subjective and capricious, but

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once you do have someone worthy of your personal time and attention, you need ask them only one question.

If I hire you, can you be trusted to do your best for as long as you work here?

Notice it's a two-part question, begging a "yes" answer. It's an attempt to revert to the days of a "gentlemen's agreement". It won't take long after the person has been hired to see if he/she is living up to the first part, i.e., "doing his best". If he is not doing, or with more training simply cannot do, the job satisfactorily, there's no harm, no foul. And the second part acknowledges what we all intuitively know and understand. *Life happens* and despite our best intentions and plans, things don't always go the way we want.

Personally, I'd rather have a reliable, hardworking soul whom I might have to replace after just six-months rather than a mediocre slob taking up space for five years.

I said previously I'm speaking in general terms regarding employers, supervisors, CEOs, human resources managers, i.e., "corporate America". Suffice to say I've angered quite a few people over the years who've taken personal offense at my observations, conclusions, and remarks. I think it was Jonathan Edwards, one of the old Puritan preachers, who said, "I speak to none but the guilty." So if you find yourself getting all indignant because what I'm saying hasn't been your experience, or you're a manager and you know you're "different" from those about whom I'm writing, then I'll just remind you of what employees hear all the time, "Don't take it personally."

But if you don't like my generalizations, you now know and understand how job-seekers, applicants, and employees feel when we have to deal with employers' "generalizations". We have to pee in a bottle and agree to background checks and all the rest because corporate America imposes upon us a presumption of guilt. So I honestly regret you may have taken personal offense where none was intended, but with all due respect, you're just going to have to get the hell over it, just like we do.

Nevertheless, whether it's Divine intervention, luck, skill at selling yourself, chemistry with the person doing the hiring, the stars are aligned correctly, or blood sacrifices to Lucifer, sooner or later you do find a job. And if you think *getting* the job was tough, wait until after you start working and you try to keep it. I bet you've never noticed

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the small sign over the doorway after the interview is over and you've just been told you got the job. It reads:

Abandon hope all ye who enter here.

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It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong.

[Voltaire]

I've already told you of the maniacal laughter of the damned I experienced in the third-grade. I asked a question others hadn't thought of, or lacked the courage to ask, or already knew and couldn't believe others didn't know. As if they were born omniscient. Pick one because either way, all involved were more interested in fitting in and being like everyone else than asking questions and looking for deeper truth and meaning. It does *not* make me better or smarter, only different.

Or ask yourself how often you hear someone say, "That's a very good question."

During the 80's, while doing commercial plumbing work, I was sitting in a meeting with managers and engineers who were going over blueprints, trying to decide the best place to put the "water closets". I had no idea what a "water closet" was, but I knew these men loved their practical jokes. I'd watched them torment more than one new guy, always a younger man, with such things as sending him after a "chain stretcher". Add to that the memories of the third-grade and there was no way I was going to come right out and ask. Before the meeting ended, one man mentioned "water closets" in context with "toilets". I found out without having to embarrass myself.

But that harmless question asked in 1960 of why women, not men, change their names in marriage proved to be the beginning of a journey I've come to accept as a destiny.

How else do you find yourself in the fourth-and-a-half grade? I'm aware there is no such thing. But there is when you get placed in the fifth-grade for the last three months of the fourth-grade, come back the next fall to spend three more months in the fifth-grade, and then move up to the sixth-grade for the rest of the year. I took three years in two. So I just say I skipped the fifth-grade.

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If asking that question in the third-grade started this path, skipping a grade became my version of bearing left while most others went right, of taking the road less traveled. And you must understand that even though the teachers and principal discussed this at great lengths with my parents, all involved let me have the final decision.

It was in the limbo of this fourth-and-a-half grade that our teacher had me and another boy debate two girls from the class. Each student had a turn to make his/her presentation, followed by a chance for each to make rebuttals of what either of the other two opponents had said. The topic was West Virginia coal production. Don't ask me.

During one girl's presentation, she made a statement, a statistic of some sort, and then a moment later completely contradicted herself. I couldn't wait to get up in front of the class to point it out. And when it was my turn for the rebuttal, I did just that. Man, did I ever. And the whole classroom erupted in laughter and it was clear the other boy and I had won the debate and....

And then I saw the look on the little girl's face. She was experiencing the same maniacal laughter of the damned I had experienced just one-and-a-half-grades earlier. The difference was that *I caused it*.

At that very moment, I learned something about myself. Being on the receiving end was bad enough, regardless of who is to blame. But being *responsible* for someone else having to endure it was more than I could bear. And that's when I swore that competition, in any sense of the word, was something I would avoid as much as possible, *never* take seriously, and *never* for my gain at someone else's expense and loss.

So while it's clear I can be confrontational, I'm not at all competitive, not in terms of sports or real-life or in any other way you can imagine. Life, in general, and working in particular, is often called a "rat race". I'm not in this thing to try to do better than you, to one-up the next guy. It's only about me doing the best I can relative to no one else other than myself. If I have to make you look bad for me to "win," it won't happen. If I have to stomp on you to climb that corporate ladder, it won't happen. Few people are more utterly despicable than an employee who gets through the day making himself look good by going to the boss and trying to make others look bad. "Look. Randy's not working."

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“Look, Randy’s not in his area.” Usually, of course, supervisors and managers fall for this crap, love it, in fact. Besides, if it’s a rat race and you win, you’re still a rat.

So the initial victory of having won the debate was quickly flattened by the regret that I had caused the tears and the look on that little girl’s face. From there my “difference” grew exponentially. The more I tried to fit in, to belong, to compromise who I *am* with what others expected and demanded of me, the worse it got.

Now, absent living in an abandoned missile silo and growing sea monkeys your entire lifetime, you’ve found yourself wearing either face at one time or another. I.E., I’d guess you’ve been picked on, made fun of, were on the receiving end of this laughter. But you’ve also done your share of dishing it out, haven’t you? It’s accepted as being part of “normal” life and few give it a second thought. Fact is there are several kids from my old neighborhood I’d love to see one more time, just to apologize for the way I treated them.

But having skipped that grade, I was, quite obviously, for the remainder of elementary school one-to-two years younger than everyone else, less “mature” by the same factor, and even worse was that my classmates made no effort to conceal their perception that I thought was “better,” “smarter” than them for having skipped a grade. With all the love I have for my wife and daughters, there was never one second in my entire life then, nor since, that I’ve ever thought or felt that way. Different, yes, but never better or smarter.

So this meant I was twelve when I entered high school (there were no middle schools back then, simply grades one thru seven, then eight thru twelve). By now I was entering what I’ll call my third year of being openly ostracized from my peers. Sixth-graders had wanted nothing to do with me, nor seventh, and now I was in high school? No way could I keep going like this.

Given the popularity of sports, I figured I’d finally be accepted if I played on a team of some kind. So I played eighth-grade basketball. That’s a true statement, but it’s also the biggest lie you’ll ever hear me tell.

You see, I was the *only* kid who went to each and every practice. I was the *only* kid who went to each and every single game, home or away. I remember this so well

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because my mom was also at every single game and, long story made short, that's the closest she and I ever were before, or after, I left home. Summed up simply, she and I never spoke to each other the last ten years of her life and, to this moment, I have no idea where she and my dad are buried. So yes, her being there at every game is indeed something I remember vividly.

How often do you think I got to actually play in a real game?

Exactly twice. For all my dedication and loyalty in making it to *all* the practice sessions and *all* the games and—just a wee-bit of bragging here—for having worked harder than the others just to make the team, for having more heart because of who I was, two years younger and all the rest...for all *that* I got to play less than *one minute* in exactly *two games*. We were winning by such a wide margin that the coach realized I could do nothing to hamper the guaranteed victory, so he put me in just before these two games ended.

I'm the first to admit I sucked plum out loud. But I did steal the ball away from one of the other players and I can still hear the crowd cheering for me.

And change that to *they* won, not "we". I had nothing to do with it. I never "played" basketball. I made the team and attended all the games, but I never really "played" basketball. Do you understand why I'm almost anal about my choice of words, why I insist people "mean what they say and say what they mean"? A woman can say she's going shopping and mean she's either going to actually buy stuff or merely look around for a while. Men laugh and say it's crazy. But when a man goes "fishing," what *he* really means is it's a chance to sit on the bank, or in the boat, drink beer, and drown worms. File this under "same thing, just different". When they said "to get a good job get a good education," all that was meant was "to get a good job, go to college".

Now if I knew, or even thought, it might be significant to a potential employer, what would I say? "Yes, Sir, I was *very* active in sports in high-school. I was on the eighth-grade basketball team." Do you see what I just did? I told the *truth*, because I was indeed "active" *and* I was indeed on the team, and I completely lied because I definitely intended for him to get the wrong impression. Or is that not lying? The mind, she boggles.

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And do you not think and believe for one minute if an average nobody like me thinks in these ways that those running businesses and hiring people do *not*? Besides, where do you think I learned it? Now expand this idea to include politics and religion and you should be left feeling as if you just walked through a spider's web.

So another seemingly innocuous event, eighth-grade basketball, was to foreshadow for the rest of my life the reality and actuality of every "team" of which I would ever be a part. *All* involved—coaches and players, employers and co-workers—*all* want only to "win" and none involved give one damn about you unless and until you're clearly part of that "winning effort". You're the unknown crew-member on the original *Star Trek* television series who gets beamed down with the stars of the show, but never returns.

In other words, when it comes to fitting in, to being "part of the team," it's very simple. "Doing your best" is never good enough, period, and they lie when they continue saying it is. But at the same time, you never know who and what you really *are* until you've failed over and over to reveal that which you do the best. And in this case, your best has nothing to do with being or doing better than anyone else.

Now come with me to eighth-grade science class, third floor, room 308. Isn't it amazing how painful memories leave us with such vivid details? The teacher had us do a conversion problem, Fahrenheit to centigrade, then pass our answers to the student behind us. The teacher asked what some of the answers were. Kids spoke up with the answer that was on the paper in front of them. "No, that's wrong," said the teacher. "Nope, that's also wrong."

It didn't take long to see that there was *one* answer shared by the majority and, after that, it was the same couple of answers the rest had thought was correct. But *all* were wrong. And then the teacher asked, "Does anyone else have any other answer?"

The girl behind me raised her hand. I could've died. She had *my* paper, *my* answer, and I knew for a fact that what I'd come up wasn't even close to everyone else's. But it was too late. The teacher had asked her to read my answer.

Hello maniacal laughter of the damned. Everyone was laughing, at me, again! Would this madness never end? I mean, I'm on the basketball team, for God's sake. I'm doing everything I can to fit in. Can't y'all meet me at least halfway?

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And finally the “authority figure” spoke. “Randy’s answer is the only correct one,” said the teacher. (My pal and I used to call her “Iron Fist” because we could make her so angry she’d slam her fists on her desk.)

Ha! In your face, losers. I’m right and you’re wrong, neener neener neener. I was entitled to gloat for a moment or two.

And just as I had learned something about myself back in the third grade, I realized something else at that moment, something with which I clearly still struggle to this very moment. It takes the form of a question. “Is it more important to be right (i.e., correct), or liked?” Over the years I’ve developed a rather keen sense of which situations will move me to choose one over the other and just how far I’ll “push” to be correct, as well as how much I’ll “compromise” to be liked. With enough effort, insight, and understanding, it is possible to accomplish both. And as with questions and lying, *motive* is everything in these matters, both real and perceived.

But it ended the same. Everyone around me continued to impose upon me the certainty that I, that puny little boy who skipped a grade, thought he was better than them, smarter than them. And that’s never once been the case. On the contrary, all I have ever done is to try with all my might and soul to fit in, to belong, to be part of the team.

It’s just *never* worked out that way.

I could relate hundreds of such stories and incidents in both everyday life and the world of working. I’m hoping my employment history makes the case for me.

Now here’s a thought. Maybe I’m suffering from some form of psychological “transference” or “projection”. Is it possible that at no point has anyone around me ever thought or believed any of this at all about me (that I thought I was “better”), but only that I’ve projected those thoughts and feelings onto them simply because I’ve been a Charlie Brown to the world’s Lucy? If that’s the case, I can live with that, too. I’d rather be stupidly trusting than spiteful and malicious.

Ever hear the story of the beloved king, his loyal subjects, and the evil sorcerer? The sorcerer hated that the king and the people got along so well. He poisoned the water and the subjects became blithering, slobbering fools who now hated their king.

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Rather than be separated from his people, the king willingly drank the water and became rather stark-raving mad himself in order to be like his subjects and to again be accepted by them.

I'm of the conviction this king was a total fool.

All this, the maniacal laughter of the damned, is no more complicated than struggling with how far you're willing to go to be "normal". The deeper level, obviously, is to examine if it's even possible to be "normal". That discussion, however, is beyond the scope of this book. So if my life's path is the result of not fitting in with "normal" people, then with all due respect and as Chelsea, my older daughter once told me, I prefer to continue going through life with my batteries in backwards.

And *that* becomes the whole point of this book, of everything I have to say. Be yourself first and to hell with trying to be like the herd. And here's one more attempt at explaining why.

When your best isn't good enough and they laugh at you for being different, you have two choices. You can go through life tip-toeing on eggshells, placing the needs, wants, and desires of everyone else ahead of your own, in which case you're going to miserable because now you're suffering the worst form of "self" denial imaginable. Square pegs into round holes, you know.

Do that, however, and I have very bad news for you. Your employer did not hire *you*, the person to whom you're married did not marry *you*, but only a "you" whom you've fabricated and created in order to please everyone else around you. And you can justify this all day long by saying it's for everything from financial security to romance and love. It's still reduced to you've sold a lie and you're living a lie. And sooner or later all parties involved *will* figure it out, including you. Personally, I would submit that if you do have the gift of "being all things to all people," you have no real "self" to begin with.

The real reason you did it was not for love or money, but rather to avoid hearing the maniacal laughter of the damned. Somewhere along the way you got tired of not belonging, not fitting in, and you quit, you gave up. You reached the point where you cared more about what others think of you than whom and what you truly are. You began to care more about the tangible results in your life than you do the actual living of

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that life. It's a crime scene and you've made certain the evidence convicts you of being just like everyone else.

So you can keep doing that, or you can read Shakespeare, *To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.*

We've now gone full-circle. Despite all appearances to the contrary, our lives are not a straight line from birth to death, but rather a circle that always and inevitably leads back to ourselves. We're really not much more than a bunch of gerbils on wheels, going from one experience to the next followed by another, the point of which, I thought, was to learn and gain experience. Sadly, as far as I'm concerned, these days it's more about money and physical comfort than self-improvement and change *or* self-revelation (two seemingly opposing ways of looking at the same thing).

We're back to being "different," even if by now you understand that being different means absolutely nothing more than being *you* for a no more noble reason than never being "...false to any man."

Or let me put it this way. In life there are two kinds of "peace". The first is the absence of conflict between two or more people, and God knows I'm all for that. The other is inner peace, peace with, and within, yourself. I draw the line at doing all I can to avoid conflict with others at the price of sacrificing my own sense of inner peace. Okay, I do that most of the time. This is the same dilemma we face when choosing whether to be correct, or liked. I will tell you this, however. If your "inner peace" is grounded on others compromising to your political views, conforming to your religious beliefs, capitulating to your business demands, *you* have the damned problem, not those who fight, resist, and rebel with every ounce of their being.

But *please* don't think this "maniacal laughter of the damned" is just a phrase I came up with some twenty years ago to describe my own feelings of embarrassment and hurt feelings at so-called harmless laughter. It is that, of course, but do not file this under youthful peer pressure and summarily dismiss it.

Two diametrically opposed forces are set into motion each time it happens. There are those who do the laughing and, as it must follow, those who are on the receiving end. Each carries its own potential for an extreme logical conclusion. And most any idea

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or situation carried to a logical conclusion results in an absurdity of some kind. At the same time, however, if a matter crumbles under the weight of what some would say is “excessive scrutiny,” are we to continue clinging to those notions anyway just because they make us comfortable?

In the world of politics, you usually reach these extreme logical conclusions through “incrementalism”. Two such political issues prove how consciously aware people are of this. You’re familiar with both, so this can be brief.

What do those who are “pro-choice” and those who are wrongly called “gun nuts” have in common? Both resist attempts at suggested restrictions on their respective positions. And both are wise and correct for doing so. In short, and in total contradistinction to the advice we’re given for our daily lives, both strongly resist compromise, conformity, and capitulation. You don’t see them worrying about a “greater good,” now do you?

Agree to a ban on abortion during the last month, and soon it’s two, then three, then completely. (I’ve said I’m apolitical. I truly have no idea what the current status of the “abortion debate” is, so please forgive me if I’m stating a situation that may already exist. I’m trying to make a point, not be factual and accurate regarding the details.)

Agree to a ban on those “Saturday night specials” (I remember that one happening) and you get where we are now. They thought it was bad that people were shooting at each other with little .22 caliber, six-shot revolvers. Now we have fifteen-round 9 mm semi-automatics. And nobody could see *that* coming? Logical conclusions. Very simple stuff. Give an inch, take a mile.

When you compromise, conform, and capitulate, you’re constantly trying to recapture lost ground. So take matters to an extreme logical conclusion *in the abstract* before any action takes place and you can figure out how to avoid the insanity of logical absurdities in real life.

Here are a couple examples of extreme logical conclusions of the maniacal laughter of the damned, minus the laughter. After all, the phrase is meant to suggest the degree to which people will go in order to fit in, to belong, to follow the crowd, to be “normal”.

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Remember the Buffalo Soldiers from American history? A bunch of black people had fought on the side of one bunch of white people against another bunch of white people to help end the mistreatment to yet another bunch of black people. Those same black people later continued their alliance with those same white people to perpetuate new suffering against a bunch of red people who, if memory serves, were the ones to call them “Buffalo Soldiers”. I’m thinking the black people and the red people should’ve joined forces against their common enemy, the white people. But what do I know?

That’s just one real-life, tangible, observable proof of the accuracy of the Milgram Experiment. Far too many people will, at some point, after having been mistreated in the smallest or greatest of ways, join in causing the torment of others. And *that’s* considered “normal” because the “majority” acts this way. People, that ain’t right and you and I both know it.

Now think of a riot. And no, not one stemming from “social unrest” among society’s “underclass,” the poor and uneducated. Let’s talk about those more affluent and refined, supposedly “better” college kids from upper-income families who go on a rampage after a sporting event. Yeah, that’s a very noble reason to riot, don’t you think? But let just one person throw a brick and all hell breaks loose. Why do so many otherwise “normal” people participate in it?

The question *is* the answer. They participate because it’s *accepted* as being “normal”. Bad, yes, but “normal” just like laughing at the kid who stutters and the one who asks “stupid” questions. *There* is your precious “normal”. You can have it. “Normal” scares the hell out of me. From where I sit and in my experience, the world’s problems are caused by “normal” people who in turn have the luxury of defining “normal” for the rest of us and seem obsessed with poisoning the water and making us all “normal”.

Most parents, at some point, say to their children, “Would you stick your head in a fire just because all your friends do?”

So do you *really* want to throw bricks and overturn cars just because “everyone else is doing it”? If Martians landed and began killing everyone on earth, but a bunch of warriors from Planet X came to our rescue, would you enlist in the army of Planet X to help it invade another world? Well, why not? It’s all perfectly “normal”.

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But that's addressing only one end of the yardstick, isn't it? That's taking into consideration only those who "do the laughing". What about the other "extreme," those on the receiving end of the "laughter"? And you now can understand that this "laughter" runs the gamut from laughter to mischief, mayhem, violence, and death on a grand scale.

So what about that stereotypical "loner" who goes out of his way to *not* fit in, not belong, not run with the crowd? The very word itself conjures images of crazed killers and sociopaths. Ah, but the 'loner' is *not* considered "normal," is he? *That* conduct and behavior is quickly labeled *abnormal*, isn't it?

Talk about a twisted moral. It's bad, but "normal," to take part in violence and killing during a riot, *as part of a group*. It's also bad, but "abnormal," to do this *while acting alone*. Just who in the hell are the people that make up these rules and insist they have it all figured out?

Dwayne Hoover, in Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Breakfast of Champions*, had problems attributed to "bad chemicals" and "bad wiring". In other words, he had neurological problems and his body chemistry was screwed up. Mr. Vonnegut was a genuine treasure in a world gone mad. You *must* read the book.

But for now, put all science aside, all the research and studies such as the Milgram Experiment, any and all considerations of physiological and body-chemical imbalances and disorders, all considerations of "behavioral psychology" and all the rest and here's what you get.

Not every bystander participates in mob violence, do they? Not every "loner" resorts to violence to "get even". Well, if you truly *want* to understand what is going on around you, *look at the people who avoid both extremes and you'll solve this riddle*.

And as is my preference, I'll pose it as a question.

What do the "loner" who resorts to violence and the "normal" people caught up in the mob mentality share in common? The answer, ironically enough, is nothing. They share *no thing*, the "absence of anything". They share no vision, no understanding, no acceptance of anything or anyone in life greater than themselves. There's no other

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person, no other *anything*, tangible or intangible, in their lives they love enough to give them cause to constrain their actions.

They lack any real purpose and meaning in life.

They have no answer for the pertinent question posed by Stone Sour (from *Omega*):
Do you serve a purpose, or purposely serve?

So the greater truth is that it's no more "normal" for a "loner" to go on a killing spree than it is for people to take part in a riot and mass violence. "Normal" conduct and behavior seeks to avoid *both* extremes. Well, it does in my world.

Make no mistake about it. I've known and encountered people who make southerners insist "he needed killing" should be an acceptable, legal defense. It's meant as a joke, just so much hyperbole. But you know what? Not a one was worth me throwing my life away. Do that and you've admitted they "won". I'll not let anyone drive me that far. Remember when I said I do *not* compete? Here's the "why" carried to one of those logical extremes. It's another classic example of Zen. You win by not playing the stupid game.

This is very much like people talking about wanting to die a "natural death". What they mean, of course, is they want simply to go sleep one night and not awaken. But truthfully, what's more "normal" in today's world than being murdered, assaulted and beaten to death, shot for having "disrespected" someone, having your body smashed and sliced and cut and ripped to pieces in a car "accident," ceasing to exist when the plane drops from the sky, deteriorating mentally and physically while your body gets eaten away by any number of clever diseases lurking about, and so forth? Those are the "normal" ways to die. And that's *not* what people really mean, is it?

So the question begging to be asked, and answered, is not why *do* some people become "loners" and others are content to "follow the crowd," but rather why is it some *do not*? Now I have absolutely no clue as to why "life" works that way, I just know it does. And with all due respect, I really think no one else does, either. They just want you to think they do. It makes them feel really good about themselves.

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But at least part of the answer is to be found in the difference between the words “mimic” and “learn”. Remember the advice that if you wish to be a success you should *mimic* the actions of those already successful?

Well, what does the plethora of experts tell us about the origins of child abuse, for example? They insist it’s “learned” from their parents, that by being abused, they “learn” that this behavior is supposedly “normal”. We will lay aside the fact no one ever defines this alleged “abuse,” which must mean it’s very much like art in that no one knows anything about it, but everyone knows it when they see it.

So if they’re correct, every abused child should grow up to be an abusive adult. But that doesn’t happen, does it? Ever ask yourself why, or rather, why not?

Those who grow up to perpetuate this behavior do indeed *mimic* it, no doubt about it. Those who do not, however, actually *learned* from it, and what they *learned* is that it sucks to be treated that way and therefore they *learn* to not do it to others.

But why one grows up content to *mimic* while another truly *learns* escapes me. But face it, we’re back with the harsh results of the Milgram Experiment, that statistically speaking it’s “normal” to *mimic* the actions of others and therefore, by default, “abnormal” to really *learn* from one’s experiences. That’s just scary as hell.

Perhaps now you understand why I have absolutely zero-problems when people accuse me of being “different,” of not being “normal”. I refuse to go through life mechanically mimicking everyone else, not when *learning* simply makes so much more sense, is the natural and “normal” thing for me to do.

I started out by saying this was about me. I then expanded it so you would understand that it’s also about *you* because despite any and all the ways we might be different, we share the most basic commonality of all. We’re out there working and trying to do the best we can. I’m hoping now you can see it’s not about “me,” or “you,” or “them”. This is all about *us*.

And because it *is* about “us,” you’d better believe that embarrassing and humiliating laughter associated with the maniacal laughter of the damned is the *least* of your worries. It’s the maniacal *everything else* of the damned that you’re up against not only regarding employment, but the rest of your life as well. You’re living and working in a

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world filled with people content to go through life mimicking the actions of others for no reason other than to be “normal”. Worse, of course, is that their sole mission on this planet is to demand you do the same.

The maniacal laughter of the damned is being expected to dream in black-and-white just because most everyone else does. My dreams have always been in the most vivid colors imaginable and I won't apologize for that.

Remember the little girl from the fourth-and-a-half grade? Our responsibility in life—yours, mine, and everyone else's—our most important duty is to do all we can to avoid causing others to suffer the maniacal laughter of the damned. *Her* responsibility, if I could go back in time, which I can't, and which is why I wrote this book, is to completely ignore, challenge, question, and defy those who attempt to, or actually do, cause it. That, my friends, is also *our* responsibility.

Some say life leaves us being *either* the bug *or* the windshield. If that's true, then I choose *bug*. I hope by now you understand that I don't believe it's an either/or proposition at all. And yes, I'm clearly damned weary of living in a world that does believe it has to be that way.

An open disputation of the myth of a so-called work ethic.

The Maniacal Laughter of the Damned: Why you can live and work in the real world without making a deal with the Devil

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