

14. Go West, Young Man!



*Champaign, Illinois
November 1994*

IT WAS ABOUT 5:45 P.M. ON A TUESDAY, AND I WAS EXHAUSTED. It had been a long day, and I was ending it by having a staring contest with my computer. I was hanging in there, though my eyes were glazing over.

“Hey, Tim, you okay?” Bob Harrington said as he strolled into my office. Bob was one of my brightest team members—a manager over the human resources consulting group and an expert in compensation consulting. “You look sort of...”

“Comatose?” I said, finally managing to avert my eyes from my computer. “I think I am. Too many projects. Hard to keep them all straight in my head.”

“Funny thing, being in the management consulting business. It’s kind of like running a restaurant,” Bob said as he plopped down in a chair.

“Oh, really?” I said. “Enlighten me.” I could think of a lot of things that this business was like, but a restaurant wasn’t one of them.

“Think of it this way,” Bob said. “Our clients are like customers at the restaurant. They’ve come to us with very specific expectations and

needs. Of course, everyone wants something slightly different. They’ve placed their orders, and as far as they are concerned, they should be our top priority. Never mind that we’re serving fifteen different parties at the same time. Everybody likes to think they’re number one in the queue.”

I shrugged and nodded. “That’s probably why I’m comatose right now. Lots of demands. Tough problems to solve. And everyone wants their solution now.”

Bob headed off down the hall and I shut off my computer and thought about the only problem I really wanted to solve: what’s for dinner. But before I went home, I thought about the intensity of our consulting work. It demanded that we find ways to renew “on the fly,” catching little respites here and there. I stood and looked out my window and across Fox Drive. I was struck by the soothing scene in front of me—a winding walking trail surrounded by trees and shrubbery, covered with a half inch of freshly fallen snow. The street and parking lot glistened with whiteness.

It was late November, 1994, and winter seemed to have arrived though the calendar indicated it was not official for another four weeks or so. Yes, I thought. Our work is really challenging and exhausting—but it’s also very rewarding. We get to make a real difference for our clients, solving very challenging problems. Not only that, I get to do it with people like Bob, Tony, Kevin, Scott, Sherry, Thane and Kim—just a terrific team of talented pros. 1994 had been perhaps the most productive and fruitful year for our consulting team. We seemed to really be hitting stride.

My moment of quiet reflection was interrupted by the phone ringing. The caller ID showed an unfamiliar number, a 619 area code. I picked it up, and on the other end of the line was Pat Tabor, managing partner of our firm’s San Diego office. Pat and I had been promoted to senior manager in the same class—1989. We had both attended the outdoor adventure training course in Colorado that summer, enjoying white water rafting, a challenging ropes course, and lots of good old-fashioned team building in a rugged environment. All of the newly minted senior managers bonded during that experience.

I liked Pat's ambitious style—you could certainly tell that he was going places. In short order, Pat was made a partner in the firm, then managing partner of the San Diego office. He was on the fast track, building a successful and rapidly growing practice. In fact, I had traveled recently to the San Diego office to assist on a large valuation project for a waste management firm in Tijuana. The atmosphere in the office was contagious, with about 50 pros working together with some exciting clients.

Pat wasn't just making a courtesy call that afternoon, as I quickly learned after some brief chitchat.

"Tim, let me get right to the point. Your work was top notch on that Tijuana project, and that's one of the reasons—among others—that I'd like you to consider relocating to San Diego. I'd like you to build a consulting group from scratch, right here. You've done it in Champaign—how about taking your act to a bigger stage? Are you up to the challenge?"

I let Pat's words hang in the air a minute, penetrating my psyche.

"You mean...well, like...move to...I mean, transfer to San Diego and head up a new consulting group?" I must have sounded completely confused, stammering and grasping for the right words.

"Exactly, Tim. And I'd like you to join the senior leadership team of the office and help us continue what we've started here. This is a tiger by the tail, Tim. I want you to be part of it."

I told Pat I'd call him on Thursday. I had a few dozen questions running through my mind, all of which demanded answers before giving this notion serious consideration. But the momentary shock I was experiencing derailed any coherent thoughts. Best to hang up and sort it out before saying anything too stupid.

Bam. There it was. Twenty minutes earlier, my reality had been the problems of the day, thoughts about the reward of working with the Champaign team, and a moment of quiet reflection before heading home. And, now an early Christmas present, you might say, had dropped in from the west coast. Just what was inside that package? The idea of pulling up stakes and moving Toni, Alyssa, Audra, and Kaley

2,000 miles across the country was preposterous. Surreal. Crazy. Unnerving. And yet, compelling.

I headed toward the parking lot. That didn't just happen, did it? I asked myself. Move to San Diego? And why? I'm actually quite happy here, and my consulting career is just beginning to accelerate. This doesn't even deserve twenty minutes of consideration.

I got into my car, inserted the key, listened to the hum of the engine, and reconsidered my position. OK, maybe I should give this more than twenty minutes of thought. San Diego is an amazing city. The office there is really making things happen. This could be an amazing next step for me. San Diego. I let the idea sink in a bit. The big city on a magnificent bay. Southern California. Sunshine and 70's year-round. What's not to like?

I put the car in reverse, pulled out of the parking lot, and headed home. And had second thoughts about my second thoughts. That is the most ludicrous thing I could ever do. Move to San Diego? The very definition of risking it all for the fantasy of "what might be." Just plain nuts. I love my job here in Champaign. I love my coworkers. The camaraderie we have is special. It would make no sense whatsoever to step out of this success into the unknown, essentially starting over.

I was lost in a fog of thought and the car was driving itself down Kirby Avenue. In our ten years of marriage, Toni and I had traveled to California a couple of times for pleasure, and I had been there many times for business. I'd always loved the Golden State and thought it had more than its fair share of magnificent features—mountains, redwoods, coastline, ocean, deserts, and of course, Disneyland. I envied the lucky folks who got to call Southern California home. But moving a family of three daughters and spouse to live there? That was a different matter entirely.

Pulling into the driveway, I recalled a conversation that Toni and I had about one year prior. We were visiting San Diego for a meeting of the American Institute of CPAs Committee on Business Valuation, staying at the magnificent Hotel Del Coronado. Strolling down the sidewalk on our way back from dinner one night, we were nearly knocked over

by a towheaded, long-haired “typical” California teenager whizzing in front of us on a skateboard.

“Sheesh. Watch out, buddy!” the teen yelled.

“Hey, you’re the one on the skateboard on a sidewalk,” I helpfully reminded him. “You watch out!”

“Could you imagine raising kids here?” I asked Toni, categorically grouping all California youths into my tidy mental box, constructed with Midwestern-inspired wisdom.

“Are you serious? This is a different world altogether,” she replied. “No way.”

That pretty much summed things up.

So as I turned off the engine, got out of the car, and pressed the garage door button, I pretty well knew what to expect when I dropped the bomb on Toni in about two minutes.

“You’re never going to believe what just happened, honey,” I announced.

“Do you want water or lemonade with the pork chops tonight?” Toni was placing ice in the dinner glasses. The kids were upstairs in the play room.

“Water’s fine.”

“Alright, then. Have a seat. Now, what’s the big news?”

I related the details about the call from Pat Tabor, the offer to move to San Diego and head up a new consulting team there, and that Pat and I would be talking again in a couple of days. Toni listened intently, a glint in her eye.

“I know this is all very strange, pretty much unrealistic, and otherwise crazy,” I said. “So, I can just tell him ‘thanks but no thanks’ and let it end there.”

Toni looked me directly in the eye, gently put her left hand on top of my right, and calmly said, “I think we should consider this.”

And so, for most of December, we pondered and prayed and discussed the possibility of moving west. And felt exhilarated. And sad. And joyful. And empowered with a sense of new freedom. We also felt the bottom of our stomachs drop out a few times, as if we were on the

Screamin’ Eagle Roller Coaster ride. We quietly (and selectively) shared the opportunity with a few family members and close friends. While all of them seemed excited, few could see us really going through with such a major move. That was a bit dispiriting. In retrospect, I’ve learned that cross-country moves are difficult on everyone—but they seem to have a disproportionate impact on those we leave behind. The sense of loss is more “present” on a daily basis, while the party that moves away seems to be distracted with all of the new adventure.

Toni and I visited San Diego the week after Christmas and naturally it rained most of the week, with unseasonably chilly weather to boot. Figures. We met the San Diego partner team and their spouses during a lovely dinner at Mister A’s, overlooking the twinkling lights of downtown San Diego and its harbor, with a front row seat to the flight path of all aircraft landing at Lindbergh Field. We toured neighborhoods and schools. We hit North County, East County, Coastal, Downtown, and Inland. We visited shopping centers and beaches. And, we talked to many of the folks in the office—only three of whom were native San Diegans, the rest being transplants from other parts of the country. We sat at the (cloudy) pool and wondered out loud about the ridiculousness of such a big move. We laughed and we cried, and at the end of the week the process was, if nothing else, a great exercise in strengthening our marital communication!

When we returned home, we continued the process of talking with close friends, counseling with our pastors and parents, and praying quietly with one another for emerging direction. Interestingly, I’ve often thought that major life decisions should be carefully weighed over a period of time—and that one should seek out multiple confirmations when a major change appears imminent. This is not entirely unlike listing pros and cons of a decision and seeing which side of the ledger weighs more—but it goes well beyond that. It consists of really opening ourselves up to seek the confluence of three things—God’s leading, friendly and unbiased counsel from those we trust, and a settled “knowing” deep within our spirit. When these three align and confirm one another, then the right answer often emerges.

And indeed, as January unfolded, Toni and I began to sense an emerging clarity. Scripture verses and sermons spoke to us about taking risks and trusting God. Our closest friends began to reluctantly affirm that the move seemed to be the right thing to do, though they couldn't quite explain it. In my quiet time, a profound sense of wonderment would come over me as I envisioned our family living in the San Diego suburbs. Vivid dreams about the possibilities began to take root in me, and my spirit became dislodged from its familiar routines and comfort zone. In my mind's eye, and with considerable delight, I pictured Toni and myself leaping from the cliff's edge into the deep, blue water below.

By the end of the month our minds (and spirits) were made up. We would indeed accept the offer and move west. It didn't seem completely rational—and, in fact, I could make stronger logical arguments against the move than for it. But Toni and I were jointly swept up in a powerful eddy of God's direction, the embrace of our closest friends and counselors, and an unshakeable conviction in our spirits that the move was our destiny. Mindful, of course, of the move's impact on our three children (10, 7, and 4 at the time), we brought them into an understanding of our decision as best we could.

The energy and excitement surrounding the move made it no less difficult to contemplate our departure, leaving behind all of our extended family, saying goodbye to a great work team, and turning my back on what was surely a solid opportunity to continue building the consulting practice in Champaign. The "saying goodbye" process, fortunately, occurred over several months' time—from January through May. And over that time, we were able to contemplate and make plans for building a life in our soon-to-be new neighborhood, new school, new office, with new friends... and a new way of life. I was able to make several trips to San Diego to begin the transition process and lay the foundation for building a new consulting team. Toni and the girls were able to visit over spring break, to get a handle on what life as Californians would be like, and see the home site we purchased in a new tract development in Rancho de los Penasquitos.

As moving day approached, the gravity of what we were doing did indeed sink in. This was a major life change—and one that would impact all of us, for the balance of our lives. That sobering realization made Toni and me stop and reconfirm our decision more than once. Inflection points are often this way—two great choices, one perhaps more familiar and one inherent with both risk and new opportunity. But reconfirm our choice we did, and on May 29, 1995, with the moving van fully packed and already on its way, we loaded up the Dodge Grand Caravan and hit Interstate 57 South. We had some fun stops along the way—Grand Canyon, Petrified Forest, a gold mine, and a ghost town, to name a few. The trip was actually quite delightful. Pulling into our temporary apartment home at La Mirage Apartments on the evening of June 1, we collapsed into bed that night, exhausted. Funny thing, we awoke the morning of June 2, our 11th anniversary and first without exchanging cards or gifts—somehow in the hustle and bustle of the move, we'd both lost track of an otherwise important celebration. We both burst out laughing at that, kissed each other, and Toni said to me, "Happy anniversary, dear. Thanks for taking me on this awesome adventure. And by the way, welcome to our new life!"

15. Teamwork



San Diego, California
April 1995

“TIM, YOU’RE LOOKING PRETTY GASSED RIGHT NOW,”

Ken Ritzman said as I jogged by him, huffing and puffing, on my way back to my cabin. Ken was the lead tax partner in the San Diego office.

“Wow, Ken,” I panted, stopping a moment and putting my hands on my knees. “We don’t have terrain like this” (huff, huff) “back in Illinois. That was a pretty challenging run.”

“Enjoy it in, my friend. We have mountains, beaches, sunshine, and plenty of other new experiences for you here in San Diego,” Ken laughed.

The run that morning on winding mountain pathways had been one of the more challenging sessions of exercise I’d ever been through. Twenty minutes in, and I knew I wasn’t in Illinois anymore. The Whispering Winds Catholic Retreat center, nestled rustically in the northern part of San Diego County near Julian, was an absolutely beautiful setting. The dorm-like accommodations were spare, but the natural beauty more than made up for that.

I had joined my future work colleagues on their annual all-office retreat in April, 1995, about two months before my family and I would be moving to San Diego. I’d heard about the retreat during my recruitment

to the San Diego office. Several folks had mentioned that it was a highlight for them, and that they eagerly looked forward to it. Rather unique in accounting firm culture, the retreat was an opportunity for the entire office staff to go off-line together for two days (after tax season, of course!). Everyone—secretaries, first-year staff auditors, senior-level partners, managers, and all in-between—was invited to share meals together, engage in meaningful conversation regarding the most pressing issues facing the company, spend some free time reflecting, and go through a pretty novel set of team problem-solving exercises that redefined what it meant to “work together.”

As I cooled down, the pungent smell of pine trees was a welcome relaxer. The early-morning air was crisp—in fact, I could see my breath. I had about 30 minutes to shower and make my way down to the main meeting hall where we would officially start the day with a hearty breakfast, prepared by the office crew assigned for that morning’s meal (no fancy catering here). Following that, we were broken down into teams of seven and briefed on the main exercise for the day—a scavenger hunt where we would decipher clever clues while crisscrossing the retreat grounds for few hours. The hunt would then transition to an exercise to create a “nature collage” representing our team’s view of the company’s future.

Pat Tabor, the managing partner of the office, also gave us a preview of the next day’s activities—specifically mentioning the Alligator Pit, Dead Man’s Crossing, and Rest in Peace exercises. He seemed to take particular delight in watching our reactions as he read off a description of each “game.” The competitive ones in the group let out whoops and hollers, while some in the group noticeably groaned, and others looked pensive. It was all part of the design—getting us out of our comfort zones and the familiar surroundings of the office.

Though I didn’t fully realize it at the time, the retreat experience was a microcosm of the next several years in San Diego. From that point forward, I would gain a new appreciation for nature and God’s incredible variety of creation. I would work with others in ways I’d not previously experienced—solving tough challenges very much as a team—and seeing the fruit of success as a result. I would experience a deeper integra-

tion of my personal sense of purpose with a larger purpose—that of the company’s, but more importantly, that of the Creator’s. I would be immersed into a corporate culture that valued people, challenged them, and rewarded them. In this regard, and perhaps most importantly, the leadership of the San Diego McGladrey office was reflecting the image of the Creator by the manner in which they designed the office to function.

As I drove to the hotel on Saturday evening following the conclusion of the retreat, God’s Spirit spoke to me: “Tim, the leaders of this office may not fully realize it, but they have created a catalytic environment that is aligned with my purposes. I’ve brought you here to add to the mix, but I’ve been way out of ahead of you on this. Get ready for an amazing ride.”

While on one hand I was excited and pumped, I was also confused.

“Lord,” I asked, “How could the leadership have done this, with none of them professing Christians? Don’t we have to consciously choose to cooperate with you?”

I didn’t hear an answer to my question. Alone in silence, I pondered the question and the deep ramifications of it. Do humans need to choose to align with God in order for him to use them? I’d always assumed so. Certainly, it makes it easier for God to accomplish what he wants, I surmised. But then again, perhaps I had restricted God in my own mind—limited him, maybe. Another twenty minutes of driving, and I was pretty sure I’d put God in my Tim-defined box, and he was showing me that he wasn’t going to be confined there. Furthermore, he was serving me notice that the next four years were going to be a time of significant paradigm shifts for me.

I pulled the car into the parking lot of the hotel that evening, pausing before proceeding to the lobby. I bowed my head in quiet prayer. “Lord, I give you permission to completely remove any restrictions I’ve placed on you. Show me how big you are. Help me to cooperate with your most awesome plan. Amen.”

A revolution had begun. My spirit was ablaze. I was ready to immerse myself in this new milieu, joining Pat Tabor and Ken Ritzman as the newest member of the senior leadership team of the San Diego office.

Pat, lead partner in the audit practice, was also the partner-in-charge of the office. Ken was the lead partner over the tax practice. I joined as the leader of the consulting practice unit. While the three of us comprised the senior leadership team of the office, other partners included Patricia Sbarbaro, Joe LaPlante, Rory Gordon, Steve Austin, and Grant Brisacher.

The “young thinking,” entrepreneurial environment created by Pat and Ken, along with the other partners in the San Diego office, was incredibly attractive and emotionally healthy. This was an office committed to excellence and one that was in a mode of continuous learning and improvement. The San Diego office embodied a philosophy of “who before what.” They were careful to make hires of great talent because they understood the fundamental business principle that great people make great companies. After moving there, I knew that this principle would be essential in establishing a top-performing consulting group, something the office had not had in prior years. Toward that end, I courted and convinced two of my key team members in the consulting group from Illinois—Tony Moore and Bob Harrington—to relocate to San Diego and join me in building a first-rate team. Both were top-notch consultants, and each liked what he saw happening in the San Diego office. It really didn’t take too much convincing, now that I think back on it.

In many ways, the leadership of the office embraced a dynamic of serving employees while simultaneously serving customers. These elements really do go together, but so many companies don’t seem to understand the vital link between the two. The office was actively creating a catalytic environment with employees given challenging work, afforded ample opportunity for advancement, and being personally rewarded for their individual contribution to the overall effort. As our office prospered, we shared that prosperity with the people making it happen, in both monetary and nominal ways. Our goal was for each person to be compensated at a “market or above” salary, with opportunities for performance bonuses.

Beyond the important cash compensation, there were a variety of other “forms of payment” in this employee-focused culture. A few examples: a “snack room” offered a plethora of fruit, bagels, drinks and

snacks, completely free of charge, along with complimentary meals routinely brought into the office during peak seasons. Employees were offered flexible schedules to tend to personal and family matters. As long as the assigned work was completed, employees were free to schedule their personal and work time accordingly. A “fun committee” planned and organized events like the annual “day at the Del Mar horse races,” Christmas parties, and summer picnics. Employees routinely enjoyed Padres baseball games and Chargers football games with clients and prospective clients of the firm, not to mention our families.

The importance of a vibrant workplace environment has proven vital for the employees of many companies. The most current research has found that the environment in which people work can make a dramatic impact on their motivation, commitment to the company, and their overall sense of well-being. Indeed, companies that make a proactive effort to create a stimulating, creative, and supportive environment will see the return on investment in spades. Yet, many companies are still figuring this out. In this regard, I consider myself fortunate to have been part of an organization committed to creating and maintaining a culture of excellence with a focus on its employees—well before much of the present-day research indicated this is what they should do. The San Diego office of McGladrey afforded me the privilege of experiencing first hand a “Thank God It’s Monday!” corporate culture for over three years. Keenly aware of the unique things happening in my workplace, I began to develop a real desire to share the story with others. How much fun would it be to encourage people that it is possible to experience fulfillment in one’s work? Too much, I decided—and that’s when I began to actively explore the idea of writing a book.

16. Thank God It’s Monday!



*Los Angeles, California
September 1997*

THE TRAIN AMBLED ITS WAY UP THE PACIFIC COAST, rocking side to side, the early morning sun reflecting off the ocean to my left. I was surrounded by the rugged, beautiful, and largely undeveloped expanse known as Camp Pendleton, a Marine Corps base. Sandwiched between the sprawling urban development of San Diego and Orange County, this anomaly remains the largest undeveloped portion of Southern California coastline. The ecosystem is diverse—with beaches to the west and mountains to the east—and bluffs, mesas, canyons, and a river in between. It was a lovely way to begin what would be a life-altering meeting with a professional literary agent in Los Angeles, Ken Atchity of AEI. Ken and I had been corresponding via phone and email for a couple of months about a book writing project, but this would be our first face-to-face meeting.

“Do you see the dolphins out there?” an older woman seated behind me exclaimed.

Most of us in the rail car momentarily diverted our attention from our newspapers, books, and laptops to look left. Sure enough, a pod of four dolphins seemed to be racing us up the coast. They were leaping out of the water in what appeared to be a synchronized dance.

“Wow. Cool!” A 10-year-old boy in a Dodgers’ ball cap added. “Are those the ones from Sea World, Mom?”

“No honey, those are dolphins in the wild.”

Very cool indeed. Dolphins in the wild. Swimming side by side and leaping into the air. Their graceful movements elicited a smile in my spirit. In fact, they reflected perfectly the deep, inner emotions I was experiencing that morning. Emotions of profound joy and excitement about the new opportunity that was about to unfold in another hour or so.

Other than the risky step of moving to California, I had pretty much followed a conventional path up to that point in life. Do well in high school, get a college degree in a marketable discipline (accounting), join a respectable firm and climb the ladder to partner. Build a consulting team in Champaign, Illinois, and then transfer to the San Diego office to tackle the bigger challenge of building a team in a large market. The move to California had certainly been full of challenges—but they were manageable within the bounds of a firm and industry that I understood pretty well. The step I would take that particular day was one into completely alien territory. I would soon be opening the door to writing a book. The opportunity was inviting and seemed innocent enough. I’d just add the project of writing a book to my already reasonably full to-do list of projects. Simple enough.

Over the course of my collegiate years and early professional career, I had the idea that I wanted to write a book someday. Most of my thoughts along these lines were fleeting, easy to put off until another day. I had a mortgage to pay and a family to care for—and a full-time job that demanded more than its fair share of energy and attention. But the thoughts continued to recur—and they grew more real in the mid-’90s when I relocated to San Diego. Something about Southern California, with its possibility thinking, stirred me regularly and clarified my vision for writing.

I had thoughts of book themes on more personal topics, and other times thoughts of a work-related concepts and ideas. My experiences with my consulting team in Champaign, taken to even greater depths of enjoyment in San Diego, ultimately helped me crystallize a vision for a book around the concept of a “toolkit” of resources that could assist

people in discovering and aligning their life purpose and their work (a topic, by the way, that you will notice I am still working on!). Little did I know, the creation of this book would set off an interesting string of events that would cause me to rethink and refocus my entire career.

As I stepped off the train at Union Station in LA, looking for Ken Atchity, I thought of what he had said to me after we had gone back and forth about the book: “Why don’t we get together and see if we can do a deal?” Words every aspiring author longs to hear.

Ken waved to me, and I walked over to him, smiling. We shook hands. He had the appearance of a kindly grandfather, salt and pepper hair, a few visible wrinkles on the forehead and a bit of a twinkle in his eye.

“So what do you think of Union Station, Tim?” Ken asked.

“Beautiful. I’ve seen it in a movie or two—but it’s more impressive in person.”

“Yes, it is. In fact, they’re shooting something over in the corner there as we speak,” Ken said.

Sure enough, directly in front of us, a crew of eight looked to be shooting a television commercial or something of that sort. I experienced a small adrenaline rush. This was definitely a different world, I said to myself.

As we sat down for lunch at a café about a block down the street, Ken asked me why I wanted to write a book.

“I suppose you hear a lot of people say, ‘I’ve always wanted to write a book,’ so I won’t use that line,” I said.

He waited patiently for me to find the words.

“I guess I want to convey a message that I am passionate about,” I said. “That is, discovering and exploring a sense of personal purpose and then figuring out how to align that with the right kind of work and workplace. I think I’ve learned some things about that process, having gone through it firsthand—and a book seems the perfect way to share that experience with the world.”

“Good answer,” Ken said, giving me a wrinkled smile. “Writing a book is a bit like birthing a baby—or at least that’s what the females in my office tell me. You are pregnant with an idea, a concept. Something that really grips you, something that resonates deeply. And in the

fullness of time, you have to give birth. You bring expression to your idea by writing.”

“That’s exactly how I feel,” I said excitedly. I was beaming from ear to ear, unable to throttle the emotion I was experiencing. Inside I was saying I am ready to do this! I am ready to share this powerful message with the world—and I need your help, Ken! Somehow, he picked up on all that.

“Yes, I can sense that you’re ready. As we’ve talked over the last few months, I’ve become increasingly intrigued with your book topic. But I felt it was important to meet you and get a better sense of why you’re so interested in this project. I’m going to take you on as a client, Tim. You’re not my typical client, mind you, but I like you. I think you have a compelling message and you seem ready to work hard to develop it.”

True enough. And so Ken Atchity, who normally worked with higher profile clients on Hollywood projects, offered me a literary representation contract. Over tuna tartare and minestrone soup, we proceeded to work out a detailed task list and project timetable.

On the train ride back to San Diego, again amidst some of the most stunning natural beauty on earth, I recall experiencing a wide range of emotions that could most appropriately be described as euphoria. This was a dream and a vision coming true—the opportunity to put into print some exciting ideas that I strongly believed in and to become a published author. While I had envisioned writing a book for years, the fact that it was now becoming a reality was somewhat overwhelming.

As a first order of business, Ken had assigned one of his freelance editors, John Shapiro, to work with me on the project. I scheduled a session with John in Newport Beach to begin working through a long list of stuff—style of writing, target audience, the essence of the content I would produce, timing on producing the work, how we would work together, etc. In that first meeting, we decided the book would be titled *Thank God It’s Monday!* with the subtitle *A Toolkit for Aligning Your Lifevision with Your Work*. The basic premise was to offer a set of practical guidelines for discovering and fleshing out one’s purpose and then finding a way to align that purpose with one’s work. I personally liked the TGIM acronym, because I strongly believed that people whose in-

terests were truly aligned with their purpose would be eager to go to work on Mondays, instead of just “getting through” the work week, waiting for Friday to arrive.

After this initial excitement wore off, it was time to get to work. To get the book into the upcoming spring season, we decided on a compressed time frame of three months to write the book, edit it, and prepare it for publication. We also had to prepare a book proposal to sell it to a publisher. Together, John, Ken, and I went to work. I wrote most of the book at the Mission Trails Regional Park library, about eight miles northeast of downtown San Diego. It was an inspiring setting, with the San Diego River running through Mission Gorge, Fortuna Mountain Saddle and Cowles Mountain framing the perimeter of the park, and the Old Mission Dam offering a powerful history lesson dating over 200 years.

I would typically take a half-day or full day per workweek to camp out in the library and write. Meanwhile, I was required to keep up my full-time commitment as a consulting partner with McGladrey & Pullen. Our work team had very specific “chargeable hour” goals—and I certainly wasn’t going to be let off the hook from those while writing. That meant more work on evenings and weekends. But the sacrifice was worth it. Writing, and looking forward to the finished product, energized me—and that extra energy became the fuel for getting my other work done.

Not only was I experiencing previously untapped energy for my day-to-day work, but the writing and reflecting process began to produce a shift in my thinking regarding my career and sense of calling. At first, the shift was subtle—and then it became more obvious. One of obvious objectives for the book was engaging each reader to plumb the depths of his or her purpose. Funny thing, but the more I read and reread drafts of each chapter, the more I felt the words speaking back to me. It dawned on me that I had only a theoretical understanding of what I was writing. As time went on, it became clearer and clearer to me: It was time to practice what I was preaching to my readers. I had assumed I would be challenging my readers; I found I was really challenging myself.

For fifteen years, I had enjoyed the “friendly confines” of a professional services firm—one that provided stimulating work, terrific peers, plentiful resources, and financial prosperity. It’s time to do something different, I began to hear over and over. Time to get better aligned. Time to make a significant change. Time to take a risk.

I took a mental and emotional inventory. What did it mean to get better aligned? Just how risky would that be and what would it consist of? Was I really ready to make a major change in my career? How would this impact my family? Was it really time to take a big step into the unknown? The questions were numerous. The answers, inconclusive. The process, emotionally wrenching.

I suppose in one way, the prospect of making a substantial change to become better aligned was thrilling—but in a more practical and rational way, it was quite terrifying. For several weeks, I experienced a tug-of-war between the emerging sense of the “new and exciting” with the “solid and familiar.” This was not an entirely foreign conundrum to me. It seemed an awful lot like the decision process a few years prior where Toni and I wrestled with the move from comfortable, positive and “known commodity” of Illinois to the risky, tantalizing and essentially unknown California. And here I was again, contemplating a similar idea—but much sooner than I had anticipated.

“Really, God? Is this you I’m hearing?” I remember asking myself.

No answer.

“I mean, haven’t I already taken a big enough risk in leaving friends, family, and career in Champaign to move to San Diego? Why ask me to take another big step so soon?” I asked, out loud.

Silence.

“The stakes are even bigger with this one, Lord. At least with the move in 1995, I had a secure job, a clear pathway. I don’t know what’s on the other side of this decision.”

Nothing.

But unmistakably, week upon week throughout the early months of 1998, I continued to have the sense that change was imminent, that better alignment was soon to come, that risk was becoming my best friend. This whole development was really quite a surprise. Before writing the drafts of the book, I considered myself in pretty high alignment with

my work—but the more I wrote, the more I had a sense that there was something exciting, adventurous, and altogether different awaiting me in the near future.

My first attempt to access this risky, alternative future was to stay within the firm but rework my focus. In April, I proposed to my fellow partners Pat and Ken that I would pursue professional speaking and workshop facilitation engagements tied back to the TGIM book, all while leading my team of consultants in their work. Pat and Ken were somewhat open to this idea, but those higher up in the firm were not buying it. That idea was ultimately rejected. What the firm needed was for me to “stick to my knitting,” not pursue some fanciful notion of celebrity speaker and facilitator. By June, I found myself negotiating an amicable departure, while simultaneously making plans to form a new consulting, speaking, and training entity. As June, July, and August unfolded, the palpable sense of adventure was growing inside me. Like dozens of clients I had served over my career, I would soon be a full-fledged entrepreneur, the owner and operator of LifeVision, Inc.

I was joined in the LifeVision endeavor by a good friend and mentor, John Chisholm. John had worked as a sales professional, then pastor, and had over the ‘90s remade himself into a highly effective consultant in the fields of conflict resolution, team training, and strategy. He had been instrumental in helping me evaluate my life purpose (see Chapter 13), setting a series of things in motion back in 1992 that had led pretty pointedly to the writing of the book and now the leap to start this new company.

The partnership with John was a great fit; his emphasis was on soft skills (communication, leadership, and organization development) and mine was on hard skills (financial analysis, systems, organization structure, deal doing, and the like). John was based in Illinois, and for the first year, I remained in San Diego. At the time of our launch, I remember thinking I’ve never in my life been more excited, more prepared, more ready to take on this new thing called LifeVision! The world was indeed our oyster. So, without looking back, I took the plunge... not knowing that the plunge would soon be a freefall down the sheer face of a cliff!

17. A Setup for Success? Not.



*San Diego, California
February 1999*

I HAD JUST HUNG UP THE PHONE. The words were echoing in my brain cavity: “We appreciate your proposal, Tim, but we have decided not to move forward at this time. If we happen to change our minds....”

I glanced around my office. Everything seemed to have a dull, uninteresting look—the neat piles of paper, the artwork hung on the wall, coffee cup, mementos of past projects, even the jelly bean jar. The routine had become all too familiar, and I found the trend to be unnerving. That particular conversation had been just the latest potential client project to fall through. Everything seemed to be on track, only to go off the rails at the last minute—with no reasonable explanation.

I sighed and muttered “Really? Come on, Lord. If this wasn’t my livelihood at stake, it would be a comedy.”

Ken Gerard, an attorney just down the hall in our shared office space in the San Diego suburb of Rancho Bernardo, happened to be walking by my open door. He stuck his head in, displaying his typical big, toothy grin.

“Did you say something to me, Tim?”

“Oh, sorry, Ken—just me talking to myself, I guess.”

I must have looked exactly like I was feeling inside. Ken furrowed his brow and said, “Is something wrong, my friend? You don’t look well.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. Just another day at the office.”

Ken wasn’t buying it. “You’re usually pretty upbeat, Tim, but it looks like something pretty heavy is weighing on you. What’s up?”

“Just got off the phone. Another promising project down the drain,” I said. “Gonna have to figure out some way to pay the bills. And, on top of that, just this week I discovered that a former colleague of mine at the firm has been strongly opposed to McGladrey sending me client referrals; he is insisting that he can do these projects. What I thought would be a nice pipeline of work has become barely a trickle.”

Ken told me he’d seen dozens of business folks go through seasons of challenge, particularly when starting a business. The important thing, he said, was how I would respond. Could I embrace the negatives as a learning moment?

A strange concept. I didn’t want to embrace the negatives. I wanted to eradicate them. But Ken was telling me the only way to eradicate them was to embrace them. This was not exactly starting out as I had hoped.

It wasn’t just that my former colleague Larry (not his real name), was making things difficult for me and my new firm, LifeVision. Or that I was seeing potential projects go awry before they began. Or that I would soon be scrambling to find creative ways to make ends meet. The most troubling aspect of this increasingly disappointing situation was the profound sense of irony and incongruity that I was feeling. In starting LifeVision, I had never felt more prepared and more passionate about anything in my professional career. The charter of LifeVision was in full alignment with my gifting and personal vision, or so I had thought. I had believed that the prior 15 years of professional experience, and in some respects, my entire life had led up to this momentous time. And at that point, sharing with Ken my frustration, it seemed that nothing had gone as expected.

I never could have envisioned in August, 1998, what would unfold over the next 22 months—essentially one failure after another. In fact, I experienced more instances of failure in that short time than I had in

the previous 36 years combined. As a result, everything I had known or assumed to be true about God was being challenged. Did he really care that I was failing so miserably? Had he “set me up” for this, knowing all along I’d fall on my face? Was he really “for me” as Pastor Bill Jackson had told me at coffee one morning? Nothing was making sense, and as the weeks progressed, it felt as if every square inch of the foundation underneath me was slowly eroding, shaking, crumbling. After having felt so well prepared, so fired up, and completely convinced that God had commissioned me to go for it, I had been reduced to questioning every aspect of my life, even unsure of my soundness of mind.

The problems started from the very beginning of the business launch in mid 1998. Larry, my former coworker, had always been a friend, supporter, and confidant of mine in the years we worked together. Somehow, my departure and resulting change in my relationship with the firm became a huge threat to him. Prior to leaving McGladrey & Pullen, I had worked out an arrangement to provide consulting services to several accounting firms that were part of the McGladrey Network. These firms were independently owned and autonomous from McGladrey, but subscribed to the Network in order to access training materials, expert resources, consulting assistance, and the like. After leaving McGladrey, Larry made it very difficult for me to continue my work with firms in the Network. While I had planned on roughly a third of our firm’s revenue coming from the Network, the actual figure ended up being closer to 5%. What was supposed to be \$100,000 of work turned out to be less than \$20,000.

My professional identity had always been “management consultant,” dating back to 1983 when I joined McGladrey as a wet-behind-the-ears graduate from Illinois State. So it was difficult to experience so many consulting project letdowns as I transitioned to a small, independent consulting practice. One instance in particular is seared in my memory. The prospect of a huge project had come up for a client in the southeast United States, and I prepared a detailed proposal for strategic planning services for this multi-location accounting firm.

There had been extensive conversation about the possible project, and I’d prepared what I thought was a winning proposal—a very client-

focused, customized approach to helping them through this complex planning process. In fact, listening carefully to clients telling me their needs and crafting proposals was something I’d become quite skilled at over the years. After hearing the firm’s managing director tell me this was a “sure deal,” the deal surely fell apart. To add further insult, there was no explanation forthcoming and no follow-up communication. I was just left hanging.

On another occasion, I facilitated a leadership retreat for a company in Montana that went about as poorly as any project I had ever done. I remember preparing extensively for the project, interviewing several of the firm’s partners in advance. Based on those interviews and the information I’d obtained, I put together an engagement approach that looked great on paper. Again, this was something I’d done successfully many times over in my career at McGladrey, and I felt good about this project. As my commuter flight approached the landing on a Thursday afternoon, I can remember surveying the surrounding beauty of the mountains and feeling energized and pumped up. I was ready to go!

But as the retreat unfolded, issue after issue surfaced that I had not anticipated. There was deep disagreement among the partners about the future direction of the company, and it also came to light that various partners didn’t get along with one another. These types of fundamental problems make a team-building retreat almost impossible to pull off. A really effective team-building retreat assumes some basic level of trust and health is in place to start, and that was far from the case here.

And so, the team-building retreat ended up being akin to a Survivor episode with various factions competing against—and yelling at—each other. What had started out so promising, with partners nodding in agreement to the retreat agenda, quickly deteriorated into a perfect storm of consulting disaster. The issues that had surfaced at the retreat should have been identified in the interviews I had done several weeks prior. But, alas, either I had not asked the right questions, or there had been an inability for the partners to trust me with the sensitive nature of the information—or maybe they were fearful or too embarrassed to reveal the real issues going on in their firm. Not only did the retreat fail to get folks on the same page regarding their firm’s future, but in some

ways, it exacerbated tensions and made things worse. Just like the TV show, I was voted off the island.

In addition to consulting projects, one of the key pieces of my plan for revenue in LifeVision was booking professional speaking engagements. I had done all the necessary preparation work to get this portion of the business off the ground: I hired a videographer to video several of my speaking engagements and assemble a demo tape. I hired a speaker's bureau to represent me. I spent marketing dollars to create promo materials and sent dozens of promo kits to potential customers. I purchased a professional speaker's audiotope training system to perfect my craft (at considerable expense, I might add). And in 22 months, I had booked three paid speaking engagements! So much for that idea.

Other discouraging, disheartening events happened in rapid succession during those 22 months. After one unpaid speaking engagement at a service organization in Lake Forest, California, I received an anonymous, intensely threatening phone call telling me in very heated language to "take my **** philosophy and get the **** out of town." I'd spoken to that group on the basics of creating a Thank God It's Monday! corporate culture—hardly something controversial, or so I thought. Well, at least I didn't have to worry about getting out of Lake Forest, as I didn't live there to begin with. Humor aside, I remember my body shaking for a good 10 minutes after getting that phone call. How many professional speakers have audience members track them down and cuss them out? For me, it was a first, and an unsettling one at that.

Book sales were another key element of LifeVision's intended business model. The idea was to secure a speaking engagement, give the talk, and promote the book for purchase. With my great success at securing speaking gigs, this particular strategy was pretty well doomed from the start. And, unfortunately, my book publisher went bankrupt at the end of 1998, stiffing the book publicist for thousands in fees and leaving me with no real marketing chutzpah. By the end of 1999, the book had sold a few thousand copies and that was that. Another bust.

During this time, my personal journal was full of entries that screamed frustration. One such entry sums it up well:

I feel the weight of owing my investors [in LifeVision, Inc.] better than this. I feel the weight of not pulling my weight in this business venture. I feel, most of all, the weight of not doing what I feel gifted and called to do—speak, write, and creatively develop (and be able to make a living at it).

All of this has caused me serious doubts about my abilities. Is this all just a big test for me to pass? I am emotionally drained and spiritually teetering on the edge.

Maybe this is a huge wake-up call to live in reality. Quit dreaming. Quit visioning and start doing something more realistic.

Well, exasperated as I was, I didn't entirely quit dreaming and visioning. Through all of the failures, I tried to remain resilient. I kept getting back on my feet, only to be knocked down the next week. It was the darkest period of my life. I soldiered on, believing that I was indeed fulfilling my life purpose—to help people and companies develop high-performance habits while pursuing excellence.

But the frustration had taken taking a huge emotional toll. In December of 1999, I called my brother Ben (a pastor) and told him I was teetering on the edge of a decision to hang it up, and that it was becoming excruciating to go into work each day. In fact, I was having serious thoughts of doing something entirely different—like buying a truck, wheelbarrow, and some basic tools, dusting off my childhood-acquired gardening skills, and becoming a landscaper. The simplicity of that plan had, at least momentarily, a tremendous amount of appeal given the complete frustration I was experiencing as a business consultant, speaker, and author.

Always being one able to speak meaningfully into my life, Ben talked me back from the edge of the cliff and told me that he believed I was called to the business world, my present failures notwithstanding. He reaffirmed my gifts and calling, told me that God had not abandoned me, and then encouraged me to think practically and reasonably about changes I could make going forward. Perhaps LifeVision, Inc. had run its course, he said, but there were certainly other business opportunities that I should investigate. It wasn't time to "hang it up" with the business

world, Ben said. Yes, I'd taken a big risk leaving the accounting firm and all of the trappings that supported me. Yes, I'd pretty much fallen flat on my face. And yes, reminiscent of the Sunday school picnic attempt to walk on the water, I was soaking wet and covered with mud. But—and it was a big but—God was far from finished with me. He was intimately acquainted with my mess—and he was still very much in love with me and “for me.”

Indeed, five months later, in May 2000, the nearly two years of full-time “LifeVision, Inc. experiment” concluded with me taking a near-full-time position as president with one of my clients, SourceGear. So, while I was pretty much wrapping things up at LifeVision, Inc., I wasn't leaving the professional business world to become a landscaper. Landing that job was a great emotional relief. After the litany of rejections I had experienced in two years, the SourceGear position made me feel wanted. And, importantly, I was able to regain a sense of personal significance, something that had been almost entirely wiped out over the previous two years.

I had been taken to the end of myself. Every fiber of my faith in a Supreme Being who absolutely loves us, is intimately acquainted with our woes, and is “for us,” was put to the test. And although the stripping away of my sense of self-worth had its benefits, causing me to push toward the outer boundaries of my relationship with God, I don't think he designed us to live in that state for very long. Indeed, I was profoundly grateful to emerge on the other side of those two years with a resolve to better understand my own “story” and sense of purpose, and better understand how they fit into God's bigger story.

18. In the Rearview Mirror



*San Diego, California
June 1999*

I T WAS ABOUT 5:15 P.M. ON MONDAY, JUNE 28, 1999. Audra (middle daughter), Sadie (golden retriever), and I were heading south on “the 15.” In about 10 minutes, we would be connecting with “the 8,” heading east toward Illinois, leaving San Diego in the rearview mirror. Earlier that day we had taken Toni, Alyssa, and Kaley to the airport for their flight. Audra and I got assigned the unenviable task of road-tripping with the family dog for the ensuing 36 hours (the first 12 of which Sadie refused to sit down).

The tears began to flow as we listened to soft worship music. This was my last trip down the 15 as a resident of San Diego, a trip I'd taken hundreds of times before. The sense of loss was tangible, real. Almost overwhelming. The uncertainty of our new future weighed on my heart, creating a physical sensation of pain. What had been the most energizing chapter in our lives—the previous four years in San Diego—had come to an end. And it was not the end I had envisioned.

“Why are you crying, Dad?”

“It's... it's hard to say goodbye, Audi,” I sniffed.