

The Sacrifices and Success of Service and Selflessness

August Turak

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As a young man, I asked my spiritual director for the most important thing he did on his spiritual path. “It wasn’t what I did,” he replied. “It was what I didn’t do.”

Some people have greatness thrust upon them; for me it was entrepreneurship. In 1988 I was asked to speak to several groups of North Carolina State University students about my spiritual odyssey. The students responded enthusiastically, and several asked me to coach them. They formed a student club, and I agreed to mentor them weekly.

Almost simultaneously, I got a call from an old business friend.

“Listen Augie,” he said, “I was named CEO of United Press International, and I got 150 million dollars to take it out of bankruptcy and turn it around.”

He was hiring a bunch of our mutual friends, and he asked me to be his second in command. The money was fabulous and the fun factor enticing, but I would have to move from Raleigh, NC to Washington, DC. I regretfully said that I was unable to move.

“Why?” he asked.

I told him that I had just promised some college students that I would coach them on the religious life.

“Are you kidding?” he said, “You’re turning down a dream job to work for free for a couple of college kids? Why don’t you just do whatever it is you do up here? We got plenty of college kids in D.C.”

“I got a better idea,” I replied, “move UPI to Raleigh.”

“No way,” he laughed, “my wife would never go for that!”

“Aw c’mon Joe, we got plenty of women in Raleigh.”

Now we were both laughing, but a few moments later it settled in that I had indeed turned down a dream job for a couple of college kids I barely knew. I was between gigs at the time, and I agonized over my decision. The worst part was that I had no one to turn to for advice because I knew exactly what everyone would say.

But despite my agony, I couldn’t go back on my word. Everything I’d learned or better said *become* since setting out on a spiritual path in college told me that I had to seek *first* the kingdom of heaven and that meant keeping my promise to those kids no matter what.

Eventually, the seed that was planted at NC State University grew and similar student organizations spread to the University of North Carolina and Duke University. At first, I worked as a consultant, but demand for

my religious mentoring reached a point where flying all over the country was no longer an option. Besides, as the word spread that I would not move, my reputation suffered, and the phone stopped ringing.

And so, I decided to become an entrepreneur.

Obviously, neither money nor any overt desire to become an entrepreneur had anything to do with this decision. Instead, I saw building a company as a demonstration project; a way to put the religious principles I espoused into practice. Entrepreneurship would be an acid test for these values and everything I had learned from my own spiritual teachers. I wanted to find out whether a company built on the highest moral standards could really work.

In the very beginning there were just four of us. My partner described our business plan as: “We’re smart guys we’ll figure out something to do.” But though the *what* of our business was extremely vague, we were absolutely clear about *who* we wanted to be. We created a statement of principles that we would live by:

- 1) ***We Would Be a Spiritual Company:*** This didn’t mean that we expected everyone to belong to a particular religion. It meant that higher purpose, personal growth, honesty, integrity, and selflessly putting people first were more important than making money. It also meant that our company would be “spiritually friendly:” no one need feel embarrassed for talking theology at the water cooler or taking time off to go on retreat.
- 2) ***High Expectations:*** Starting a religiously friendly business didn’t mean setting low bars and rationalizing failure as just one of the inevitable costs of doing spiritual business in a profane world. Instead, if we were truly in business for a higher purpose then our goals should be *higher* than those who were simply in it for the money. For example, we decided to begin work each morning at 7:30 in order to get a jump start on those heathens better known as the competition; a tradition we maintained for the next seven years.
- 3) ***Caritas and Compassion:*** Establishing our company on caritas and compassion didn’t mean we would never fire anyone. It meant that we would do everything we could to help others get over the bar. But it didn’t mean lowering the bar.
- 4) ***Community:*** Putting community front and center meant that the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. A community capable of extending compassion to individuals must also be composed of people willing to sacrifice for the good of the community. Carrying one’s own weight, for example, is one way for an individual to show compassion for the community.
- 5) ***Promise Keeping:*** Keeping promises meant a management system based on accountability. It meant a relentless war against the ambiguity, equivalence, and outright double talk designed to get off the hook. It meant a goal setting culture that eschews “I’ll try” in favor of “I’ll do.”
- 6) ***Open Communication:*** Professionally this meant having all those “awkward” conversations that usually end up under the rug. Personally, it meant that our people would always find a sympathetic ear when personal issues were impinging on their productivity or merely weighing on their minds.
- 7) ***Telling the Truth:*** This meant no hidden agendas and trumped up business cases designed to mask selfish motivations. We were perfectly sympathetic to someone who wanted more money or a bigger office. What was intolerable was a three-hour presentation which was really just a sly attempt to get the presenter a bigger share of the pie. Put another way, our seventh principle just meant no B.S.!
- 8) ***Anybody can Fight:*** Bickering and political infighting is easy. Compromise and conflict resolution are hard.
- 9) ***Back Against the Wall:*** Peak performance is usually a delicate balance between inspiration and desperation, and we intentionally built a sense of urgency into our company. As a result, though one

of my partner's and I were relatively well off, we only invested enough capital for one month's office rent and phones. We decided that if we couldn't bring in enough money to pay the next month's expenses, we would close the company rather than prop it up with continual cash infusions.

A Zen Master once said, "Seek the Truth like your hair was on fire." Believe me, knowing that bills are due, and no more seed capital is forthcoming is guaranteed to set your entrepreneurial hair ablaze. For six months we survived on pure hustle: at one point I telephone canvassed for a burglar alarm company for \$7.00 an hour just to pay the rent.

The best business decision I ever made was turning down that job at United Press International. UPI went bankrupt for good, and seven years later the company we started on a shoestring and a sheet of principles was acquired by an Israeli company that in turn was acquired by BMC Software for \$150 million.

It was also one of my students that brought me to the Trappist Monastery of Mepkin Abbey, and another who urged me to enter the John Templeton Foundation's **Power of Purpose Essay Contest**. Winning the \$100,000 grand prize for my essay, **Brother John**, launched an entire new career for me as a writer. Finally, it was Duke students who asked me to help them get a startup off the ground in exchange for a sizable chunk of stock in what is now a multi-billion-dollar company.

I now see the whole UPI episode as just one of the temptations that stud our time in the spiritual desert on our journey to the Promised Land. These temptations, like the job at UPI or, for the Israelites, returning to Egypt, always looks like the "smart play" or "safe bet" but may mean compromising our religious principles or personal integrity.

The Lord works in mysterious ways. At the time, my UPI friend and so many others thought I was "killing" my career to "work for free" for a "bunch of kids." Now, I see all the blessings that have come my way as a result of that difficult decision. Blessings that would not have happened if I had not had the faith to seek first the kingdom of God.

It took many years, but I finally know what my spiritual director *didn't do* that made all the difference to his religious life. He never sold out.