

My Story – by Gregory J. Leeson

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Background

I had initially intended to leave my story out of my book. However, the question arose numerous times on my journeys, so I have included an appropriately detailed accounting of my life. The question was about how to get this done. During a meeting with Bill Randall, he suggested that he interview me and use that output as the basis for a brief autobiography. I prepared meticulously for the interview as, unlike the people I interviewed, the questions were well known to me, other than those extemporaneously posed by Bill.

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Youth – “Living in his own world.”

I read an article about 30 years ago that resonated with me then and still does today. The writer asserted, “*Some people live with a sense of destiny.*” I felt this since my youth, even if the “what” did not crystalize until my 20s. As I see it, three fundamental factors will determine someone’s destiny. You have no control over the first one (although some will argue this). You have partial control over the second one. You have complete control over the third one. They are, in order:

- Luck
- Ability
- Attitude

I grew up with three siblings and had highly responsible parents. My father was a civil engineer and city planner for MT&T, a regional telephone company. He started his career as a telephone man and retired as a telephone man. Importantly, I remember him missing only one workday due to illness. As was typical in those days, my mother cared for the home and never worked after marrying. While my father hailed from an intellectual family background, my mother’s family was blue-collar. Their families represented quintessential examples of those who worked with their hands and those who engaged with their minds.

Both of my parents were social introverts. During my childhood, they exhibited minimal involvement in the community and had a limited circle of friends. Moreover, I cannot recollect being told I was loved, encouraged to pursue my dreams, praised, or celebrating any event except for one solitary birthday party. To illustrate the point further, none of my siblings, including myself, attended our high school graduation ceremonies. On the night of my graduation, I was shooting hoops on the playground. Over the years, my siblings have shared similar sentiments regarding our distant upbringing.

I had my first substantial conversation with my father when I was 19, and with my mother, that conversation took place when I was 20. I gained insights into my father’s life during that conversation with my mother. In his youth, his two brothers left Nova Scotia to pursue studies at one of the world’s elite universities, McGill University in Montreal. My father departed the province to study forestry sciences at the University of New Brunswick, as McGill University did not offer that discipline. Unfortunately, during his academic journey, he contracted rheumatic fever, a debilitating illness, and spent an extended period convalescing, never returning to complete his studies. This illness, which can affect the heart, left my father in constant fear for his health.

Consequently, he lived a cautious life, avoiding risks and rarely venturing beyond his narrow professional path. He never actively sought promotions and seemed content with whatever was given. This cautious approach seeped into our upbringing. While he succeeded in providing for our family through diligence and hard work, he likely never realized his full potential despite his obvious intelligence.

My mother’s life trajectory was influenced by her mother’s death when she was about 10 years old. She didn’t progress beyond grade nine, as she shouldered the responsibility of caring for her father, sister, and two brothers, who went on to prosper in the construction industry. I remember her diligently clipping coupons every Friday, preparing for her weekly visits to three or four grocery stores. If one store had

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bananas on sale, that's where she bought them; if another had a sale on milk, she would purchase it there. My siblings and I enjoyed remarkable stability thanks to my father never experiencing unemployment. There were no issues with alcoholism, drug abuse, or other societal problems aside from the notable absence of emotional involvement. When I compare my upbringing with those I've encountered and evaluate my luck in the parental lottery, I'd say it's a tie, 50/50. Stability, yes. Emotional support, no.

My sister recounted a conversation with her therapist from a few years ago regarding our upbringing, expressing that he was shocked by her experiences. She mentioned that he questioned how she had managed to survive while essentially having to "*raise herself*," a perspective that has always resonated with me. But who was I? What follows are some of the crucial events that shaped my life.

Life began auspiciously for me. Before I entered school, my mother taught me the alphabet and numbers, and I remember the day she introduced me to addition and subtraction via flashcards. During that conversation I had with her when I was 20, she shared that she asked my father when he had taught me math upon his return from work that day. To her surprise, he shrugged, claiming he had never taught me such skills. Perplexed, my parents discovered that I was autodidactic and had taught myself. When I started the Primary Grade later that year, my report card contained these four words, "*Gregory throws himself wholeheartedly...*" I saved this report card and one other until I was in my 20s. I occasionally reflect on those words because they represent the person I aspired to be and the attitude I wished to embody.

Shortly after starting grade one, the phone rang at our home. The principal was calling to inform my parents that after an evaluation, the school had drawn a conclusion about my abilities and recommended that I join a class with grade two students. Though reluctant, as I later learned from my mother, they agreed. I still recall the day I was led out of the classroom, down the hall, and instructed by the teacher to have a seat in my new classroom. I have no recollection of that year beyond that point. If I had not remembered that day and subsequently inquired about it, I would have remained unaware that I skipped a grade as my parents never discussed it. The Leeson children were not expected to stand out. The following summer, after my father's three-year assignment outside the city ended, we returned to the city, and my parents enrolled me in grade two again. When I confronted my mother during that enlightening conversation to which I referred earlier, she explained that after reconsideration, they believed it was vital for me to be with children my age.

When I was six years old, I returned home from school in tears, having been bullied by an older boy. My mother came over, looked down on me, and inquired about what had happened. After I told her, she informed me that she would not always be there to solve my problems and that I needed to stand up for myself. With those words, she turned and walked away. In never picking me up, never hugging me, or consoling me in any way, she imparted a valuable lesson I have carried throughout my life. "*Life is what you make it – there are no excuses.*" My mother confirmed that memory during that conversation years later. From this early lesson, I would soon learn to shape a world for myself.

One poignant memory from my grade three experience had a lasting impact on my life. Our teacher, Mrs. MacDonald, said we could exchange Valentine's Day cards. The night before, I addressed cards to everyone in the class except one little girl, questioning whether to give her one. We placed our cards on

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the teacher's desk the following day, and she began calling out the names. That little girl received a card from the teacher and one from a fellow girl, making it just two cards in a class of approximately 25 students. And then she received one more. It was from a boy. I remember the night before wondering what other kids, especially the boys, would think of me if I gave her a card. When it was over, not only was there no backlash, but I felt good about myself because I dared to be different, especially from the other boys. It was my first real experience with that. Being different was certainly nothing that my parents would have encouraged. I still possess the class picture from that year, and that little girl unmistakably stands out. I have occasionally wondered how her life unfolded.

Four significant events happened during grade four, one laying the philosophical groundwork for my future.

Firstly, I experienced my first epileptic seizure very early in the year, a grand mal episode. It was evident that something was amiss in my brain's development. I still have the 1968 doctor's report from the electroencephalogram labeling my brain activity as *Abnormal*. Reminds me of Mary Shelley.

Secondly, I stopped reading fiction except for those mandated by the schools. Fiction books could not impart the learning I needed. The last yarn that I voluntarily read until adulthood was most likely a Hardy Boys mystery.

Thirdly, I began embracing biographical books. Between the ages of nine and eighteen, I read more biographies than most people would read in a lifetime. Those books offered stories of triumph, love, joy, and perseverance but also of failure, hate, loss, and disillusionment. My focus narrowed down to two distinct groups of individuals: Athletes, the Doers, and Coaches, the Thinkers. These biographies also taught me about historical events, including the Great Depression, WWII, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, the FLQ, and the Counterculture. I discovered what it meant to grow up in dire poverty, whether in Texas, Alberta, or elsewhere, and to avoid making excuses. I read about the experiences of being denied entry to a restaurant because of the color of one's skin, among many other revelations. It was through these narratives that my philosophical framework for living took shape.

Philosophical inquiries captivated me, leading me to John Wooden's celebrated *Pyramid of Success* (I didn't just read that; I studied it) unveiled in his literary work, *The Wizard of Westwood*. I internalized the wisdom that life's purpose transcends oneself, as articulated by Gale Sayers in *I Am Third*. The virtue of perseverance was embodied in Rod Gilbert's (pronounced, jill-bare) book, *Goal, My Life on Ice*. Roy Campanella's poignant journey, recounted in *It's Good to Be Alive*, illustrated the triumph of finding gratefulness in tragedy. I learned about the principles of Sandy Koufax in an eponymously named book when he refused to pitch Game 1 of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur. Finally, Muhammad Ali's principled character resonated throughout *The Greatest – My Own Story*. This brief array of books encompasses basketball, football, hockey, baseball, and boxing, weaving a tapestry of inspiration.

They say you should never meet your heroes, but I met Rod Gilbert when I was 12. That year, the New York Ranger hockey team traveled to Halifax to play the Montreal Canadians in an exhibition game. Gilbert

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scored a goal, and the game ended in a 3-3 tie. After the game, I told my father I was going to the dressing room area to get Gilbert's autograph. About 20 boys were milling around. As the players emerged, all the boys, except me, rushed them. To a man, the players largely ignored the boys. Then Gilbert stepped out. Once again, the boys flocked over, me included. My hero stopped and signed every piece of paper in front of him. I remember a gentleman thanking him, to which he replied in his French-Canadian accent, "*My pleasure, sir.*" I made sure that I was the last one. As we walked out of the stadium, I told him that I had read his book and how I marveled at the fact that he was still playing hockey after doctors told him that that dream would be lost following his two spinal cord operations at the Mayo Clinic. Perseverance and humility; that was Rod Gilbert. He died in 2021, and I never got to thank him.

The fourth event came from my teacher, Mrs. Dolan, who wrote the following on my report card. It was the only other report card I kept into my 20s. She wrote, "*Gregory often appears to be living in his own world.*" After I started this project, I asked two of my siblings to share their impressions of me when we were growing up. They echoed Mrs. Dolan. Indeed, my journey to raise myself, as my sister's therapist noted about her, had begun. Mrs. Dolan was correct. In those books, I found solace from my detached family life and acquired a different way of thinking. Truthfully, there was little need for interaction with my parents. I do not recall ever having an argument with my parents or them needing to discipline me. My mother once recounted how, during the parent-teacher meetings in grade seven, she learned from the teachers that she did not need to be there. There was simply nothing to talk about. She told me that she never went back again.

I watched the 1968 Mexico City Olympics between grades five and six. Besides Bob Beamon's famous leap and the infamous John Carlos and Tommie Smith *black power salute* on the awards podium, my most vivid memory was watching Kip Keino of Kenya win the 1500m race. He won the gold medal after starting the race in last place. Little did I know that this memory would later play a pivotal role in the most significant achievement of my youth.

In grade six, I found myself in a schoolyard brawl that resulted in a fractured right hand after delivering a punch. I missed school the following day for X-rays and the placement of a cast. That same day, the class voted to go on a field trip that, for some reason, required a unanimous vote. The day after, one of my friends informed me that someone had said, "*I'm glad Greg isn't here.*" I'm uncertain if I would have objected, but my aversion to blindly conforming to the group's will was evidently apparent to others.

During my school days, I was fortunate to have two exceptional teachers who recognized my potential and became mentors, guiding me toward achieving my goals. The first of these mentors was Charles Weatherby, who served as my physical education teacher and coach during my junior high school years in grades 7 to 9. This connection lasted through high school, where I continued to benefit from his wisdom through attendance at his Thursday night basketball clinics. He knew me better than any other teacher I had. Mr. Weatherby encouraged me to run cross-country, which started a few weeks after school opened. By the time I left junior high school, I had gone from being just another runner to winning multiple city cross-country races and becoming the best 14-year-old 1500m runner in the province of Nova Scotia. I won the Nova Scotian Track and Field 1500m title in, as I was later informed, a record time. My running

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experience was characterized by starting from the rear, just as I observed in 1968, a challenge I found deeply empowering.

In addition to playing for the junior high school soccer, volleyball, and basketball teams, I participated in a nationwide fitness competition sponsored by the Canadian government to encourage physical activity among schoolchildren. The coveted prize was a prestigious award endorsed by the Prime Minister of Canada. That competition encompassed six diverse athletic events, each assessing a different aspect of fitness, including speed, endurance, upper body strength, core body strength, explosiveness, and agility. To attain the *Prime Minister's Award of Excellence*, a participant needed to rank in the top 5% nationwide in each category, a feat designed to be exceedingly challenging (a 1 in 64 million chance). I am unaware of anyone besides myself who achieved that. Mr. Weatherby's signature adorned my scorecard, and I still possess a copy of the scorecard and the certificate signed by Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau.

Shortly after starting grade nine, my math teacher, Mr. Lacy, approached me with a proposal. Seeing how motivated I was to solve math problems, he offered me unlimited questions to solve and unlimited tests to take. He also permitted me to engage in self-directed learning with encouragement to solve problems however I saw fit. Mr. Lacy did not relegate me to methods taught in the math book. I was undoubtedly the most tested kid in the school that year, analogous to being in math heaven, for me, at least. An interesting thing happens when a child receives encouragement and recognition, something lacking from my home front. That child starts to create.

In a nod to how socially dull I was during my school days (and even beyond), I made time on some evenings that year to ponder how numbers work. I would concoct scenarios and then seek solutions. I do not know how many things I tried, probably not a lot, but I eventually solved two. For the first, I created an equation that quickly sums up a series of structured, increasing numbers. In grade 12, the formula was in my math book. Like me, Carl Gauss, the famous German mathematician, had solved the problem as a schoolboy. Unlike me, his equation had only one variable, so its usefulness is limited. I solved the problem, ultimately, with three variables. That is the equation that should appear in math books.

The second problem had to do with a better understanding of multiplication. One day, I asked myself the following. "*If I knew the answer to x being raised to the n th power, how would I be able to determine $(x+1)$ and $(x-1)$ being raised to the same power?*" Remarkably, there is a framework for that problem that yields a formula. Again, this problem had been solved long before I came along by a mathematician whose name I cannot recall. I came across his work in my first year of university. That day, I picked up a book about groundbreaking mathematical discoveries, and on one of the pages, I found the framework I had created. Furthermore, this comprehension of multiplication played a role in helping software engineers optimize code (binary? assembler?) for specific mathematical operations. It was the *raison d'être* for inclusion in that mathematical history book.

Do *original thoughts* exist? As Issac Newton seemingly insinuated in his famous "*shoulders of giants*" quote, perhaps they do not. My unprompted discovery of formulas published many years ago represented the closest to original thoughts I had. While not always the case, the universe will unfold to reward our efforts to do good. What we put into the world often finds its way back to us. My discovery of the formulas

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in those two books was meant to be. Undoubtedly, the mindset I took from that played a small role in writing this book despite my self-acknowledged limitations with words. Barack Obama called it audacity.

I hold these events from my junior high school days as significant as they marked my first truly validating moments. These achievements, coupled with the encouragement of those two teachers, were instrumental in building my confidence and shaping the trajectory of my university days.

But before getting to those days, there was high school, which mainly was a timeout for me. After graduating from junior high school, I made the biggest mistake of my life by quitting competitive running. In high school, I played on the basketball team and played the number two board in the provincial chess championships during grade 12. While I dabbled in various sports, my talent was never sufficient to go beyond high school and compete, except in distance running. Yet, I quit – the only absolute failure there is in life. I used to place immense pressure on myself to win, and the agony associated with continuing to pursue that path seemed unbearable. I take full responsibility for that decision made as a 15-year-old, but I can't help but wonder what might have transpired had my family been more supportive. Ironically, the only race my father witnessed was when I claimed the provincial title – my most significant running achievement.

Here is a sampling of primarily high school memories that illustrate who I was and how I thought.

Around the age of 17, my neighbor Peter hosted a party while his parents were away for the weekend. Naturally, there was smoking, drinking, and marijuana involved, none of which I condoned. An intoxicated individual who didn't know me began to forcefully offer me a drink. After a minute or two, Peter intervened and asked what was happening. The inebriated boy complained that I was refusing his offer of a drink. Peter looked at me and then turned to the kid, saying, "*Man, that's Greg. If he doesn't want to drink, he won't drink. Leave him alone.*" I steadfastly resisted peer pressure, leading to many Saturday nights spent alone during my late teens and early twenties while my peers were out socializing. My friends eventually stopped inviting me out (the legal drinking age was 19 in Nova Scotia) because they knew what my answer would be.

I recall a gym class playing rugby during my high school senior year. Martin Greenough, a large and powerful guy, got hold of the ball and started charging at full speed. The other boys on my team stepped aside. Despite only being about five and a half feet tall and weighing 135 pounds, I decided Martin needed to be stopped. I sprinted towards him and threw myself into his churning legs, slowing him down enough for my teammates to finish the job. I walked away, likely with a mild concussion, but knowing that I gave 100% and backed down from nothing. I remained stupid into my 40s when I took a charge from a guy about 80-100 pounds heavier than me in a pickup basketball game.

I learned from the great athletes and coaches about whom I read that if you want to stand out, you need to do something that others either can't or won't do. Although high school was relatively slow for me in that regard, there was one unusual thing I tried. I challenged my chess teacher to a game in which I was blindfolded. Even though I never beat him, I discovered who I was and who I was not. I learned that I did not have the innate talent to visually project the chess board when blindfolded, a rare gift possessed by

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some players, but that I was the guy who could retain positions and compete even up for almost 50 moves (combined) before he gained an advantage. I played him twice, getting virtually identical results, and decided to pack it in, having learned about my abilities and limitations.

A fortnight after winning the provincial championship in the 1500m race for 14-year-olds, I entered another track meet featuring a track/cross-country race for boys under 17. My main rival was Brian Malone, the 16-year-old 1500m provincial champion. Shortly after the starting gun fired, I found myself in a familiar position – last place. The first runner I was about to pass was a young boy, hardly more than eight years old. Just as I was about to overtake him, a profound sense of purpose overcame me.

Consequently, I ran alongside the young boy for the entire race, offering encouragement. As we re-entered the stadium for the final 120 meters, the jubilant cheers of the crowd surrounded us. Some undoubtedly knew who I was by reputation and what was transpiring. I urged the young runner to give it his all for the last 50 meters. Ultimately, I finished in last place.

Upon crossing the finish line, I paused momentarily before returning to congratulate him. However, I never got the chance. The boy's mother had emerged from the spectators and was warmly embracing her child. With a contented smile, I walked away, confident that I had fulfilled the purpose set before me that day. Later, Brian confided in me, expressing that he had searched for me during the race, curious about my whereabouts. He had been eagerly anticipating the competition, as had I. I explained that I had other obligations that day. The biography that ignited the selflessness I exhibited that day was *I Am Third*, chronicling the life of Gale Sayers. The book's core philosophy, prioritizing *God, Others, Self* in that order, resonated deeply with me.

I have left my social development as a youth until last because that's where it belongs. During our teen years, social experimentation typically begins as desires percolate to the surface of our consciousness. Out of sheer fear, it never happened for me in my youth. Perhaps the most illuminating story to illustrate this is one about my prom night. Lacking the confidence to ask someone to the event, I took a couple of days to muster up the courage to ask a girl after learning she wanted to go with me. As you may have guessed, I got turned down. It was devastating. So not only did I miss my high school graduation ceremony, as noted earlier, but I missed the prom, also.

Jumping ahead for a moment, when I was 24 and still living in Toronto, I decided my life had to change lest I wind up unmarried and childless, the latter being the fate of my siblings. Our emotionally detached upbringing had far-reaching consequences. After moving back to Halifax, I recall the day when a work colleague asked if I wanted two tickets to see Macbeth that night. Sure. But I had no date. So, I went into the streets and walked into a women's clothing store. I approached the first pretty woman I saw and told her the story. She declined but said that one of her colleagues might be interested. She was a beautiful college gal, and I had a date that night. As a general rule, unless a piecemeal plan is needed, I will jump in head first to solve problems. For dating, it just took a while to wake up. I think it was Reverend Ike who talked about the power of a made-up mind. Well, that was me, and life changed permanently that day. Just like that!

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To sum up my youth:

- In giving up reading fiction for reading biographies at a young age, I was imbued with a deep sense of purpose, even if I could not comprehend its mechanics.
- I was highly self-motivated and never gave a second-rate effort in anything I did.
- I embraced servant leadership with aspirations for achievement.
- Most importantly, I left high school with absolute confidence in my abilities to “do things.” That belief would soon be tested, leading to a life-changing event and validation from others that unfolded during my university years.
- Socially, however, I was mired in the backwaters.

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University – “A young man in a hurry.”

Growing up lacking positive affirmation from family regarding my abilities or accomplishments, I filled that void through competition. I yearned for feedback, and sports always provided the best validation. However, having left the sport I excelled in, long-distance running, I needed to find a new avenue to distinguish myself during my university days. And this one needed to be good as, unlike grade school, my exit from university would inevitably shape my future. My goal was to graduate with a resume of accomplishment that commanded attention.

In the weeks and months leading up to my high school graduation, my mind had already shifted toward envisioning my university days. Thankfully, my earlier experiences had instilled a strong sense of confidence in my ability to make things happen, but just as important, I had a well-crafted plan. The day after leaving high school in late June, I embarked on a 60-mile journey to Acadia University in Nova Scotia, the school I chose to attend and where I intended to introduce myself.

That day, I had engaged in a pivotal conversation with, for me, the school’s most important figure, an American named Richard Hunt, the head basketball coach. I requested and secured an offer to be the team manager for the upcoming season. When I arrived at Acadia in September to study computer science, I wrote to approximately 60 prominent universities in the United States, requesting copies of their latest football and basketball brochures. Most of those schools responded. In Canada, university sports lack the prestige it enjoys at American universities, and Acadia had no athletic teams’ brochure. I was determined to create the first in the school’s history and make serious money.

Despite initially pursuing computer science, my interest in that field waned after about a month of classes. Following my first year, my father arranged a fantastic summer job for me in the computer department of the telephone company. I worked diligently for three weeks, saving every cent possible. However, my father was livid that Friday night when I told him I had quit my job. He admonished me, stating, *“If this is the kind of decision you are going to make with your life, I’m through. I will not pay for any more of your education. You are on your own.”* I didn’t need another penny from him. I sold advertising space in the sports brochure I envisioned that summer and published it in the fall. That entrepreneurial adventure represented one of the most significant achievements of my life. It garnered a lot of attention as people started to say things to me, including the university president, Dr. J.M.R. Beveridge, who knew me by name. I had become one of the student leaders on campus, something on which I would later capitalize.

My primary focus at university was my business, as it was much more important than any piece of paper a university would one day give me. In credential-obsessed 2024, that belief seems anachronistic. For me, “what can you do,” not “what have you read,” counts the most. While I enjoyed intellectual pursuits, my academic interests evolved toward subjects like history, economics, philosophy, sociology, and psychology, which I found more captivating than my schoolboy interests in mathematics and physics. Unfortunately, I was not as academically proficient in those subjects, resulting in less-than-stellar grades. In my third year, I enrolled in all math courses, but within a week, I realized it was a huge mistake; the passion was gone. Following my business achievements, I struggled to envision a future in a technical field.

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Consequently, I took a year off from school to reflect on my path and decided to leave my home province. I transferred to the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, where I eventually graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Economics in 1980. I created the sports brochure for three years, including the year I took off from school and my first year at UWO. That year, I hired local students at Acadia to handle the publication and distribution logistics in my absence.

Among the remarks people made about me during those years was a written comment that stood out. It was composed by Gilbert Chapman, the American athletic director at Acadia University, who wrote, "*Greg is a young man in a hurry.*" I never quite knew how to interpret that comment. On the one hand, it suggests a young man who could make things happen. On the other hand, it hinted at a young man who would eventually encounter a challenge that would compel him to learn some hard lessons. The latter came to pass, although it was still a few years away.

Here is one final memory from my university days that proved prescient later in life.

On September 6, 1975, just a few days after embarking on my university journey, I tuned in to watch Season 6, Episode 1 of the television show *All in the Family*. In that episode, Gloria finds herself pregnant and has to break the news to her husband, Michael, fully aware of his likely reaction. Predictably, he was furious, questioning how anyone could want to bring a child into a world plagued by overpopulation and other troubles. The episode concluded with the reading of a poem written by Alistair Cooke, which read:

In the best of times, our days are numbered anyway. So, it would be a crime against nature for any generation to take the world crisis so solemnly that it puts off enjoying those things for which we were designed in the first place: the opportunity to do good work, to enjoy friends, to fall in love, to hit a ball, and to bounce a baby.

Norman Lear had effectively conveyed his message, and the entire viewing audience undoubtedly grasped it fully – except for me. While I understood the core message, I also contemplated a second one. I pondered Michael's viewpoint and asked, "*Why bring a child into the world when there are already so many without families?*" That day, the idea of adoption first crossed my mind.

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Adult in Canada – “The IQ test results came back. Greg, you are NOT bright!”

During my last semester at the University of Western Ontario, I had the opportunity to interview for two jobs through the recruitment office. The first interview was with one of the world’s largest banks, and the second was with a multinational insurance firm. I can’t be entirely sure, but there’s a chance I may have nodded off during those interviews. One day, as I was walking back home from class with my classmate, David Lloyd, I shared my dilemma of not knowing which field of business to pursue. Given my background, I couldn’t envision myself in a slow-moving, conventional corporate career. David, who hailed from Toronto, Canada’s financial hub, suggested, “*Greg, I think you would be great at investment banking. You should look into it.*” So, I did.

Upon researching the industry, I discovered three key things:

- It was intellectually stimulating, which was highly appealing to me.
- Remuneration, even for young bankers, could be very significant.
- It was not your typical corporate environment; it operated as a robust meritocracy.

Sink or swim – could there have been a better fit for me? However, the challenge lay in how to make this happen. Because,

- I was not going to graduate with a business degree.
- Investment banks were not actively recruiting social science graduates. They would have been at UWO’s elite Ivey School of Business.
- I lacked influential connections.

The odds were stacked against me. My research uncovered nine major firms with international offices. I pursued each one vigorously, sending letters to virtually every domestic and foreign office. I included a copy of my Acadia University sports brochure featuring my picture, along with that of the university president and athletic director, on the opening page. Remarkably, five of the nine firms responded, leading to interviews. After the interviews, three firms – Richardson Securities, Pitfield Mackay Ross, and Midland Doherty – followed up with me. McLeod Young Wier and Wood Gundy declined. In the Wood Gundy interview, the managing director candidly remarked, “*Do you want to know why I called you in for an interview? My head office forced me to meet with you.*” With an attitude like that, I knew that the interview was going nowhere, but it did affirm that my resume had made its way to the top of the pile on someone’s desk at Wood Gundy.

Arnold Shykofsky entered my life for merely 90 minutes, spread over three meetings, but I will never forget him. Initially, an architect who completed one of North America’s most demanding programs, the five-year one at Montreal’s McGill University, Arnold began a midlife career change into investment banking. He was a Vice President at Richardson Securities, the first of the three firms to subject me to Myers-Briggs and IQ testing, a standard protocol for evaluating candidates in the industry. When I received a phone call to visit his office, I was excited, thinking I was about to secure my first job offer. After a brief moment of small talk, we got down to business. He began with a direct statement; “*The IQ test results came back. Greg, you are NOT bright!*” Really, Arnold?! A pregnant pause followed. Dumbfounded, my

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spirits sank until he elaborated on what he was trying to say as he compared my results to those of other individuals from around the country who took the company's test. Arnold had something other than bright in mind but apparently had a whimsical way of communicating. Who knew? He finished his thought with, *"...and that's why I am offering you a job today."* The other two firms offered me a job within days after their test results returned. The vision I had for my university career had come to fruition.

In the world as it is, we are often taught to maximize the attention on ourselves. The biographies I read taught me differently. In that final meeting with Arnold, I heard feedback about my abilities that I had never heard from my parents, and forty-five years later, I can still vividly recall the scene and recite verbatim a few sentences he uttered that day. I think I know why. Every person, even those who understand themselves in a certain way, needs validation. As previously mentioned, my university grades, while acceptable, weren't extraordinary. The subjects I studied didn't align with my intellectual strengths, so I had reservations about my innate abilities. After the explicit conversation with Arnold and the follow-up job offers, I have never doubted myself again.

In 2021, during the COVID-19 lockdown, I tried to locate Arnold, only to discover that he had passed away in 2018. Nevertheless, I contacted his son, Jonathan, in Toronto, and we had a wonderful 40-minute conversation. Despite my brief encounter with his father, I wanted to convey his profound impact on my life. Ultimately, I accepted the job offer from Midland Doherty.

My career commenced in September 1980 after successfully passing the Canadian Securities Exam. The six-month training program exposed me to all facets of the investment business, including the commodity futures markets. Following training, I began working in bond arbitrage on the trade desk in Toronto. In the summer of 1981, I accepted an offer from Pitfield Mackay Ross that would take me back to Nova Scotia. To this day, I'm not entirely sure why I made that decision. My best guess is that I was feeling isolated in Toronto. Remember, I wasn't exactly a social butterfly. At that point, I decided to change that aspect of my life. Shortly after arriving in Halifax, I moved into an apartment and started dating. I was 24 when I finally found the confidence to begin that aspect of my life.

However, some things are not meant to be. I had moved away from Nova Scotia for a reason; I desired to carve out my unique path and sought the challenge of pursuing it in a bustling metropolis. Nova Scotia is undoubtedly a wonderful place to live, but I needed a better fit. In the spring of 1982, I embarked on a quest for knowledge (long before the advent of the internet) about The Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT), where commodity futures were traded. I harbored a dream of philanthropy, and being "a young man in a hurry," I believed that trading futures in Chicago was the quickest route to turning my vision into reality. Success in this endeavor would enable me to pursue my true life's passion. Looking back, it all seemed incredibly naive.

I ventured into John Edgecombe's office that summer and announced my resignation. He wished me well, and I hopped on a plane destined for Chicago to explore becoming a floor trader. After seeking directions from a woman named Shauntel, who would later become my wife, I descended to the basement floor of the CBOT, where the administrative office was located. It was a spacious room with only two individuals besides the employees. Approaching the window, I inquired about membership in the exchange, and the

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clerk promptly handed me all the required forms. As I began to step away, a distinguished-looking gentleman behind me interjected, *“Excuse me, I overheard your conversation and would like you to have my business card. Call me when you get back from Canada.”* Despite extensive research before quitting my job, I overlooked one critical detail. I needed a sponsor who had known me for at least two years to obtain a seat on the exchange. The sole exception to this rule was if an officer of a trading firm served as your sponsor. Oops! As fate would have it, the gentleman who had handed me his card was Henry (Hank) Shatkin, the president of Shatkin Trading, the world’s largest commodity trade clearing firm. He would later sponsor my membership.

Upon returning home, I began finding business partners willing to provide the financial backing for my exchange seat. This process took several months, and after returning to Chicago, I sought out Shauntel, the only person I knew in the city besides Hank Shatkin. I mentioned earlier how *“a young man in a hurry”* inevitably will meet a challenge that will extract a price as he is forced to learn a life lesson. I was about to learn mine – a lesson that placed my most cherished dream in a 37-year-long limbo. Only through grace did that dream never perish.

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Adult in the USA – “But what separated Greg from everyone else was...”

About a year after I started trading, I had lost everything. Shauntel and I had been living together the entire time, and we got married in August 1984. I traveled to Nova Scotia to meet with each of my five investors to apologize in person for my incompetence. It was a snippet from a hockey book that inspired me to meet with them and not run away from what I saw as a moral obligation. To a man, each told me I needed to keep my head up and look for the next opportunity that life would bring. Upon my return to Chicago, I promptly took the first available job to help make ends meet. Shauntel's business was faltering, and, over the years, debilitating six-figure debts piled up. I had transitioned from a hotshot arbitrageur at a global investment bank in Toronto to a minimum wage employee at a store in Chicago. At 27, life was subjecting me to a rigorous test just as part one of my life in the United States began.

The subsequent four and a half years proved exceptionally challenging. Whenever possible, I assisted Shauntel in her business endeavors, and together, we acquired our first computer from Radio Shack. Given my technical inclination, I diligently learned about DOS and various software platforms. I held several jobs during this period, leveraging my acquired computer skills to secure better-paying freelance assignments. I was slowly piecing together a second chance at life, yet I remained far from my desired destination.

During one such freelance assignment at Jacobs Engineering, I encountered a gentleman named Mike Tamburo, who would later become my business partner. On March 9, 1989, we embarked on a venture, crafting software for various clients. Initially, it was part-time work, and as I honed my software engineering skills, more lucrative job offers came my way. By 1996, we were running the business full-time, and one of our clients, Abbott Laboratories, commissioned me for on-site work lasting several weeks. A few months later, a long-term assignment at Abbott materialized, eventually leading to an irresistible full-time job offer in September 1997. Mike bought out my share, marking the beginning of an unlikely corporate career in big pharma at age 40.

On May 1, 1996, I turned 39. Despite my second career getting underway at Abbott, this day was the absolute rock bottom of my life. We resided in downtown Chicago, and I commuted daily by train to North Chicago for my Abbott assignment. It was a beautiful day, with not a cloud in the sky. As I disembarked from the train and headed towards the shuttle bus to Abbott's campus, I gazed up at the clear blue sky and expressed gratitude for my life and everything it embodied, good and bad. Debt, I realized, suffocates dreams and saps one's spirit. On that day, I resolved to never sink so low again. There was one more conversation I had with The Infinite One that day.

Two of my life's three dreams were to become a father and to show my children the world. On that particular day, however, I knew with unwavering certainty that neither of those dreams would materialize. Neither Shauntel nor I believed it responsible for bringing a child into the world when our finances were under such strain. At 39, parenthood seemed unattainable. As I looked up, I asked for The Infinite One to one day reveal why this simple dream would not happen, and I silently mouthed, *“I give her up to You.”* For some reason, I always envisioned myself being the father to a little girl.

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For about 18 months, I maintained a daily ritual of expressing gratitude. Life gradually improved for us, although Shauntel's business continued to struggle. We were a single-income household, but at least the income was substantial. In March 2000, Shauntel shared her research on adopting from China, emphasizing that age posed no barrier and that there was a local organization to facilitate the process. I was all ears. On February 25, 2002, the universe aligned, and I became the father of a baby girl in Guangzhou, China. There were 12 other adoptive parents in the room that day. One whimpered during the ceremony when she and her husband received their child. When our turn came, eighth and last, we walked to the front of the room. On the way, I made the mistake of glancing through the open door. In her nanny's arms was Tang Si Wen, my daughter. I began to cry uncontrollably. Each person in that room endured a unique journey fraught with trials, and I knew mine required me to spiritually relinquish my daughter before I could physically receive her. At that moment, I was utterly overwhelmed. It took over 10 years to discuss that day without tears. Just two months shy of my 45th birthday, the second phase of my adult life as a father in the United States began.

During the adoption process, I was granted eight weeks off from work. A few weeks after returning home, we embarked on a journey to Nova Scotia, where my parents were about to embrace their new roles as grandparents. Despite the entire process spanning 22 months and stealing from King James, Mathew 7:6, I had only confided in two individuals about my intentions until about one month before our departure to China. The first was my boss at work, who needed to write a character reference for me, and the other was my eldest sister, who had the same responsibility. My parents remained oblivious until the moment we walked through their front door.

I confided in Shauntel that, in addition to reconnecting with family and close friends, there was someone else I needed to meet. That individual, Charles Weatherby, was the most influential teacher in my life. Luckily, he lived about a five-minute walk from my parents' home. He was delighted to see me, and I was equally delighted to see him and meet his wife. After reminiscing, Charles turned to my wife and said, "Let me tell you about Greg." After all those years, I would finally learn how this influential figure perceived me. He initiated by stating, "*Among the many student-athletes I taught over the years, Greg ranked among the top five.*" I later calculated that he had likely taught between 4,000 and 5,000 boys, placing me in the top one-tenth of a percent or thereabouts. Then he added, "*But what separated Greg from everyone else was his attitude.*" The realization that this man, who knew me better than any other teacher and had consistently stressed the importance of attitude throughout his career, regarded me as the standard by which he evaluated all others remains the most memorable compliment I have ever received.

My career thrived. When Hospira, the Abbott spin-off I worked for, announced significant layoffs in 2008 due to outsourcing jobs to India, I was one of only three or four fortunate employees to secure a position in another department. I remained in the R&D department until my retirement in 2021 from Pfizer, which had acquired Hospira in 2015. One day, after retirement, I went out for a beer with one of my former bosses. In our discussion, he related a story about the time I was up for a promotion. He said the management team had fun discussing my "case." As someone with no science background, I was a fish out of water in big pharma. Usually, in a hierarchical corporate world stuck on paper credentials, someone like me would not qualify for higher positions. But, as I noted earlier, paper qualifications never mattered to me. He said that I succeeded in big pharma because of my attitude. It was Charles Weatherby again.

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You will recall that attitude is one of the three pillars I identified for success. It is also, in my humble opinion, the most important.

Life had its twists, though, as Shauntel and I divorced in 2008. Remarkably, we managed to maintain an amicable divorce. We both agreed that life is too short to nurture bitterness, which ultimately only harms oneself. As part of our cooperative divorce agreement, our daughter Jennifer split her time equally between us, although she stayed with me more often than with her mother during the early years. That dynamic shifted during her high school years. Another positive outcome of our divorce was Shauntel granting me 17 days each year to travel internationally with our daughter. When Jennifer turned 17, she had already visited 22 countries with me.

My dream of becoming a father had come true. My dream of showing my child the world had come true. Yet one dream, the desire to make a difference outside my immediate sphere of influence that got derailed at age 27 when I blew myself up, remained unfulfilled. Was it too late?

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Retirement – “The dream endured.”

In Dan McAdams’ interview questionnaire, there is a question that reads as follows:

Looking back over your entire life story with all its chapters, scenes, and challenges and extending back into the past and ahead into the future, do you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story? What is the major theme in your life story?

I can articulate my theme in the following manner. The primary challenge during my formative years was to overcome the lack of parental support. I discovered that support within the pages of numerous biographies that taught me how to think. I learned that the purpose of my life is to serve. Embracing this lesson and striving to live it has been the overarching theme of my life.

The ambitious philanthropic dream I mentioned earlier had a distinct nature. Had I succeeded in trading on the commodity market floor, my specific goal was to establish a foundation that would positively impact the lives of others. While that never came to fruition, its essence, to serve others, remained alive.

Following my retirement from Pfizer on October 4, 2021, I immediately began planning the four journeys to engage with individuals who would share the stories of their lives with me. In section four of this book, you can peruse accounts of the impact the interview process had on them. Through publishing a book and delivering speeches, my objective is to provide a mitigating voice during a period in history when cancel culture, and worse, seems to prevail. In its simplest form, my goal is to embody the creed I have espoused: *lives impact lives*, and I aim to help people understand that precept in their relationships with others.

During my 2015 high school reunion, where I served as the Master of Ceremonies, I concluded my speech with a challenge to my classmates. I recounted the story of a gentleman who entered my professional life in 1997 and, ultimately, played a pivotal role in my journey to becoming an adoptive father. This event would not have occurred without him. Many years later, I enlisted the help of a mutual friend to locate him, arranged a lunch meeting, and introduced him to my daughter, whom he had never met. I conveyed the profound impact he had on my life. I have replicated this gesture a few times since then. I encouraged my classmates to do likewise and extend this to you. Not by text message. Not by email. Not by phone call. Not by video call. Do it, if possible, in person.

As of this writing in 2024, I am still determining the audience my vision will reach. Will the media take the time to listen to my story? Will I succeed in finding more speaking engagements? Will this book find an audience? Only time will reveal the answers. However, I know that I have finally touched this dream and am not content with merely touching it; I yearn to fully immerse in it. As someone who has always considered himself lacking talent in “the letters,” it shows that anything can happen when the two rules for living that I had framed and presented to my daughter in 2022 as a Christmas present are followed.

1. *For anything you do, have no fear.*
2. *For anything you do, there is no substitute for preparation.*

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The dream endured.