

To: Clients & Friends
From: Chris Weil

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“But to convey my own feelings, I cannot do better than to quote from a brilliant and perceptive lecture I heard years ago in Cambridge by the painter John Minton ... in which he said of his own artistic creations ‘the important thing is to be there when the picture is painted.’ And this, it seems to me, is partly a matter of luck and partly good judgement, inspiration and persistent application.”

- From “The Double Helix: A Personal View” by Francis Crick

For many years I have been encouraged to undertake the writing of a book about my experiences in business, a span of about sixty-two years. I have resisted. The resistance has been grounded in part by the sense that I have little to say (unlike, for example, Francis Crick among many others) that would be of interest - except to my family and perhaps those among our clients and prospective clients who would like to know more about our history.

Over the years I have occasionally written vignettes, for the benefit of my children and grandchildren, describing certain specific “moments” in my life (“My First Real Job;” “How a High School Dropout Managed To Be Accepted At UCLA;” etc.). And as many reading this know, I have written a quarterly newsletter/commentary for over two decades. So, as has been pointed out to me, it’s not that I have resisted writing. I have written a ton of material that is, in good part, autobiographical in nature, but have done so over an extended period of time. It turns out that I have resisted not the writing but the pace. When faced with the prospect of what has heretofore been a leisurely “production” pace accelerating from a few pages four or five times a year to fifty (or one hundred, or one hundred fifty or two hundred) pages to be done “now” I have balked. (See below for my solution, or rather my daughter Kit’s solution, to the “now” problem).

It is true that I am no Francis Crick. (I am no Candace Bushnell, either, but so what?) However, if it turns out that I am able to produce a book which fills in some gaps in our family history and provides a context for clients to better understand the development of our business, isn’t that enough?

To overcome the “now” problem I am going to use our well tested quarterly newsletter/commentary format to send out vignettes which, taken together at the end of a certain period of time, will constitute the individual chapters, or partial chapters, of the book. (Ten chapters means two and one half years to completion, unless there are partial chapters in which case it will take an additional X years).

I am very much in sympathy with the Crick quote. It reminds me of this from Woody Allen: “80% of the secret of success is just showing up.” There is also a flavor of Crick in “In the Room Where It Happens” from “Hamilton.” In my history, there is something of Woody Allen, something of Hamilton and something of Crick - as I trust the book will demonstrate. However, luck will feature prominently.

So ... where to begin. I would provide a table of contents if I had any kind of a firm idea what a table of contents might look like. I don’t.

Perhaps best to begin with a quick summary of my early years. This will serve as a kind of foundation for what I expect will be the meat of the story - life from my first real job (1963) until now.

My father, Richard Weil, was a journeyman screenwriter. (Check him out on IMDB). He was from a New York Jewish family with whom he had some kind of breach, prompting him to move 3,000 miles west - and change the pronunciation of his last name. My Mother, Zoë, was his third wife (he would ultimately have a fourth and she a third husband). She was born and raised in a working-class family in Melbourne, Australia and married early to a man immigrating to the U.S. She was never shy about her reasons. Among other things, she was up to here with the Australian macho culture. The marriage didn't last.

Richard and Zoë met and married while she was working at the William Morris Agency in Beverly Hills. I was born July 7, 1937, the first child for either of them.

My memories of early childhood are something of a hodge-podge. I loved our home in the hills above Studio City. I made good friends. I was an excellent athlete and an excellent student. But the impact of three "interventions" during the years 1940 to 1949 caused a profound reversal in my fortunes.

First, my mother began to drink seriously in 1940. I talk about this in a way which would normally be thought the height of indiscretion. But she was very open about her alcoholism and always spoke about it candidly. For example, whenever a subject having anything to do with World War II came up, whether in the company of family, strangers or friends, she would apologize for not being able to contribute to the conversation. "I'm sorry, I missed the war." And then explain why. She stopped drinking after attending an AA meeting at what was then Camarillo State Hospital (she was there as the result of a second DUI) in 1945. But by then (I was eight) whatever the impact of having an alcoholic parent might be was baked in.

Second, in 1947 my father was named during the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings on subversion in Hollywood. Among those named, hundreds of them, some were or had been Communists. But nuance was not a strong point with the Committee nor with its sympathizers. Those non-communists named, whether socialists or social democrats or progressives or New Deal liberals, were all held to be Communist Adjacent, and so a distinction without a difference. The practical effect of the naming was the creation of a more or less deniable blacklist. Those who found themselves on the blacklist ceased to be employed. My father was among them. He was never a Communist, but he was certainly a passionate leftist. It probably didn't help that he was among the early members of the Screen Writers Guild. The Producers, never happy with the Guild, were with few exceptions, champions of the Committee and viewed the hearings and the associated "penalties" as a form of retribution for the Guild's formation in the early thirties, which they viewed, rightly, as an attempt to undermine their power.

So, at the age of ten, I discovered that there were mysterious forces in the world that could, suddenly and unexpectedly, turn your life upside down. I also discovered what it meant to be poor.

Third, within a year or so during which it had become obvious that my father was not employable, my parents announced that they were getting a divorce. I have no recollection of any marital disputes leading up to the day when, suddenly and shockingly, they announced the news. I remember a feeling of what I now recognize as trauma, my small world further broken, insecure, fearful.

To what extent each of these "interventions" was responsible for what then followed, and how their consequences interacted, I cannot say. But from that time, at about age eleven, my life went into an increasingly severe downward spiral. I hit bottom during the eleventh grade when I failed every class (except choir).

When informed that I would have to retake the eleventh grade I told the school, and my mother, that I wasn't going to do it. My mother, remarried and with my younger brother beginning to behave badly was, as they say, at her wits end. I remember undergoing a kind of negotiation. If I wasn't going to go back to school I should move

out, get an apartment and a job. In the alternative, I could enlist in the military. I believe this was actually her first choice as it came with a paycheck, room and board. On my own, what were the prospects for a troubled sixteen-year-old high school dropout with no skills, no employment history and no money?

And so, three days after my seventeenth birthday, I was on a bus from L.A. headed for the Naval Recruit Training Center, San Diego (now Liberty Station) to begin boot camp.

This was in 1954. The next eight plus years (that is, the years preceding my “embarkation” on a business career) were important ones for me, but I have said enough about my “early years” to pass over them quickly - with two exceptions which I include to illustrate the extent to which luck played a crucial role in my professional development.

The next four years I served aboard three different ships, never to be forgotten: USS William Seiverling, DE 441; USS Laning, APD 55 and USS Remey DD 688. They all shared certain characteristics. All were WW2 vintage. All were more or less seaworthy, which meant they got tossed around in rough seas, which meant that it was almost certain I would be seasick during the first day or two we were underway. All had sleeping compartments which had a very distinctive smell compounded from years of body odor, stack gas and dirty clothes. (There is obviously more to this history, but it will have to wait for a later date).

Luckout #1. One day, while serving on Seiverling, I read on its bulletin board a notice saying that anyone from the Fleet could apply to attend NROTC Prep School. Assuming successful completion of the Prep School course, acceptance at a university with an NROTC unit and graduation from said university the candidate would then return to active duty as a commissioned officer.

I had absolutely no business applying. So I did.

In due course, a package of documents showed up, including an intelligence test to be proctored by an officer. (The officer in my case turned out to be LTJG Grogan, who I remember fondly to this day, seventy years later). I took and passed the test. (I never had trouble with intelligence tests, it was subject matter tests that were the problem as I would discover when faced with the Prep School subject matter reviews).

After a month or so at Prep School it became clear that my nonexistent academic preparation put me out of the running. What should have also put me out of the running was the requirement that the task of finding a school to attend was on me, not the Navy. However, almost immediately I had concluded that no admissions officer was going to do anything but wave me away with a laugh, so I defaulted to Plan B. I called my mother and explained my problem. She in turn called a friend from AA who happened to be a Captain in the Naval Reserve Medical Corps. He in turn called his friend the commanding officer of the NROTC unit at UCLA who in turn called the Admissions Office and ... voila, I was admitted.

Meanwhile, however, I was failing out of Prep School, so back to the Fleet I went.

In May 1958 I walked off my ship for the last time and returned to civilian life. I had long since concluded that my first priority was to figure out a way to get a college education. This meant, I thought, enrolling at a community college (I had earned a GED, so this was feasible) and then consider my options after two years. On an impulse, I called UCLA Admissions. To my surprise, I was told that when I didn't show up they put me in a suspense file and my acceptance was still active. All I needed was to take two summer school classes and demonstrate I could do college level work. I took the two classes, a first course in Philosophy and a first course in U.S History, both College of Letters and Science prerequisites. I earned an A in Philosophy (Professor Herbert Morris, Google him) and a B in History.

Luckout #2. Within the first two weeks of Summer School I was browsing in the Student Store when, behind one of the counters, I saw a familiar face. I recognized her as the sister of one of my classmates from junior and senior high. The sister I knew well, Pat not at all. She was working that summer while waiting to begin teaching

in the Fall. We began a discussion - which in due course resulted in a series of dates which in due course resulted in an engagement which in due course resulted in marriage on June 25, 1960.

An observer might well have concluded that we were, to put it conservatively, an unlikely match. She was Catholic, I was a (wobbly) atheist. She was mainline, I was fringe. She was an education major with a focus on career, I was a philosophy major with no focus. She had had a successful academic career, mine was ... problematic. She had been the president of her sorority, I had no use for Greek Life. And some of her friends thought she was making a serious mistake.

So much for the observer. In the course of my writing I will, if she is willing, have Pat explain what it was that drew her to me. But I can say that something was at work, largely unconscious, on my side of our relationship which confirmed the cliché that you marry what you need. I needed intimacy, I needed unconditional love, I needed stability, I needed order, I needed loyalty, I needed a disciplined environment, I needed approval when warranted and criticism when warranted, I needed a partner whose strength was at least a match for mine, I needed a champion. While our differences were not trivial they were surface phenomena. In her, at a deeper level, I saw (or intuited or divined) an ability and a willingness to confront and fulfill the needful. And so it has turned out.

And my luck, in this case, turned out to be significant far beyond her impact on my personal issues. For sixty-five years Pat has been more than “the wind beneath my wings.” She has been a wing. She has been a model mother, loved and respected by our three children and five grandchildren. She has been a successful philanthropist and community activist. And it is not accurate to speak of “my” business career. More properly, it has been a full partnership with each partner fulfilling a critical role. Over simply you could say one was the outside partner and one the inside. Anyone who has ever been in business will understand this. The outside partner is the face to the world, pursuing opportunities and managing the resultant product/service portfolio. The inside partner creates and maintains an environment in which the outside partner can function productively. Much has been written about the importance of a good marriage to business success. My own experience validates this, in spades.

I was lucky beyond words to be there “when the picture was painted.” And the picture could have been much darker. No decision to join the military, no Seiverling. No Seiverling, no Prep School. No Prep School, no UCLA. No UCLA, no Pat. No Pat ... who knows? Lemony Snicket wrote a children’s book called “A Series of Unfortunate Events.” My book might well be titled “A Series of Fortuitous Events.”

Chris Weil

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