**The Cradle Maker**

Learning to Lead Yourself First

Larry L. Haynes, Ed.D

The Cradle Maker

Table of Contents

1. A Bad Day at Work

A Bad Day at Work: Why it Matters

1. Never Let Go of Hope

Never Let Go of Hope: Why it Matters

1. Embrace the Unexpected

Embrace the Unexpected: Why it Matters

1. What You Do and Why You Do it

What You Do and Why You Do it: Why it Matters

1. Choose Your Materials Well

Choose Your Materials Well: Why it Matters

1. Tools for the Trade

Tools for the Trade: Why it Matters

1. Allow the Process to Work

Allow the Process to Work: Why it Matters

1. Keep Your Workplace Clean

Keep Your Workplace Clean: Why it Matters

1. Finish Your Work

Finish Your Work: Why it Matters

1. Celebrate Your Work

Celebrate Your Work: Why it Matters

Acknowledgments

Learning how to lead others wasn’t the most difficult task I’d ever encountered. Sure, there were a few speedbumps to ease over, a few hurdles to clear, and a lot of mistakes to navigate along the way. Despite the setbacks and massive amounts of time it took to learn how to overcome bad decisions, the process of leading others was very rewarding and satisfying. Even on the most difficult days, sitting in that chair just felt right.

While leading others presented speedbumps and hurdles, there was a far greater obstacle I had to overcome. I couldn’t just ease past it or jump over it. It was a wall, several hundred feet high, and at least that thick. Made of concrete, I think. Or maybe brick. That wall and I weren’t strangers. We’d met. And I’d personally placed every brick there myself. That wall didn’t represent dealing with difficult people or making hard decisions or having difficult conversations. None of those things are easy but they are doable and you can learn to get better at each one. The real wall for me was learning how to lead myself.

There’s one thing I’ve learned about myself over the years: I’m hard to lead! I like my ideas but I rarely love them. I sometimes like to test the depth of the water with both feet. The ability of my ears to hear—really hear—has waned over the years too. I sometimes do things that I’d never recommend to anyone else. Why? Because they don’t make any sense! I sure wouldn’t want to sell someone on a bad idea. If I did I’d feel bad and start questioning myself—you probably know the drill. But somehow I am such a smooth talker that I can sell myself on a bad idea with relative ease. I am a used car salesman’s dream come true. There’s no haggling over the price. And there’s always a price to pay. There’s no negotiating. No give and take. I latch on to a bad idea and the gavel drops—sold! Here’s what I’m pretty sure is true about you too—you have the same ability and probably some of the same stories to tell. People want to know if you can lead you before they’ll allow you to lead them. That’s why leading yourself is so critical.

Writing this book has truly been a labor of love. At this point in my career, I know that the finish line is getting closer. I don’t need any more awards. I’ve won several and I only know where one of them is right now. One. I don’t need another pat on the back. While those things are nice and sometimes necessary, I am searching for something with lasting value. I want significance. I want to increase my influence. I want to help others on their journey.

I have been blessed to have had so many great leaders in my life. Some were male. Others female. Some old. Some young. Some were educators like me. Others had no education beyond high school. A few even had less than that. Leadership isn’t bound by age, sex, race, religion, education, or profession. It is a business of the heart! So, to all of my former students and colleagues, I say thank you! Thank you for the privilege of leading you when I didn’t know what I was doing. I am convinced that you taught me far more than I taught you. And I am grateful!

To the three greatest joys in my life—my daughters Katelynn, Emily, and Olivia—I say THANK YOU and I LOVE YOU! There is no greater training ground for leaders than that of being a parent. You’ve allowed me to lead, make decisions—some good, some not, and still love me unconditionally through it all. I will never be smart enough to understand that, but I am so grateful for each one of you!

To my soulmate and best friend—my wife Aliceson—I don’t know where I’d be without you! You have been my rock, spiritual advisor, prayer warrior, and encourager! You’ve done so much more than simply define “unconditional love,” you’ve demonstrated it over and over again! I love you so much!

1. A Bad Day at the Office

“Are you kidding me?” Dennis Pryor stared in disbelief at the memo plastered on the breakroom bulletin board. “I’ve got reports to finish, countless emails to answer, and another yearly evaluation to sit through. Plus it’s Friday. Doesn’t anyone around here ever look at a calendar?”

“Don’t feel like the Lone Ranger,” Rose Vincent added with a sigh. “At least you’re going to get your evaluation over with today. Mine isn’t for another two weeks. That’s fourteen long days of wondering how many faults Mr. Sweigert will uncover this year.”

“Yeah, well, at least he has to think for a while to come up with yours,” Dennis added. “I think he’s doing mine first because he’s got so much material to work with.”

Rose poured another spoonful of sugar into her cup. “Just relax, Dennis. It’s just another meeting. We have them all the time. Just do what we all do—show up, pretend to write stuff down, nod every now and then and pretend to look interested. Then go back to your office and work your butt off. That’s all that matters around here anyway.”

“But I hate all of these meetings!” Dennis snapped, his voice rising. “Sometimes I think we meet so we can say we had a meeting. Don’t they have a clue how much pressure we’re under?”

Rose rolled her eyes. “The man upstairs only cares about one thing, Dennis. And we both know what that is.”

Dennis’s eyebrows arched slightly upward. “The man upstairs, Rose? You mean God?”

“Close, Dennis.”

Sweigert Industries was a third-generation, up-and-coming powerhouse in the circuit board industry. Melvin Sweigert III had carefully navigated his family-owned company through several recessions, including a couple of enticing offers to sell the company and retire. Melvin Sweigert III was there to stay. A mountain of a man with a fiery intensity and temper to match, he believed that people naturally worked better under pressure. The more pressure applied equaled more productivity. If a worker either couldn’t or wouldn’t produce, they were brought in and given the Sweigert ultimatum—*Change your productivity or I’ll change your work address.* Melvin Sweigert III had proven many times that he meant every word.

Dennis knew that his department had struggled with keeping up with the demands of the company. They had missed a few deadlines that cost the company two large contracts. As a supervisor, Dennis bore the brunt of Mr. Sweigert’s wrath. *He wasn’t demanding enough. He played favorites. He was too comfortable. Maybe he wasn’t cut out to be a supervisor.* Mr. Sweigert always had his list of reasons why Dennis wasn’t producing.

Dennis had a list too. Ben Green, his second-in-command, was always trying to sabotage Dennis’ work. He firmly believed he should’ve been given the position that Dennis now held. His bitterness had severely strained their relationship and stifled his productivity. Rose Vincent worked hard enough but she never seemed to add anything substantive to the team. Dennis wondered if maybe Rose would be more productive if she spent as much time focusing on her work as she did her online dating profile. He knew that being a single mother with a sizeable mortgage was stressing her out, but the quality of her work had taken a nosedive. Edgar Milton was the newest addition to the team. At only 23, he was brash and full of bright ideas, most of them bad in Dennis’s opinion. Though Edgar was only 10 years younger than he was, there seemed to be a generational gap between them. Edgar just needed to grow up and realize that he wasn’t in college anymore. And then there was Clancy Pitts. Clancy was bright enough, maybe too bright, but he was too timid for Dennis’s taste. He rarely ever spoke up and exuded no confidence at all. A guppy trying to swim with sharks. He just wasn’t aggressive enough to contribute to the team. Sweigert thought it was important to hire and train fresh blood. Young bucks, he’d called them more than once. While Dennis understood the need to expand the team, he’d hoped they’d go after some folks with experience. These young bucks just didn’t have a clue. But none of that mattered, not to upper management. Not to the stockholders. And certainly not to Melvin Sweigert III.

Dennis read through a handful of emails before gathering his materials for their meeting. As he entered the conference room he noticed that everyone employed by Sweigert Industries had been invited. The room was full. Nervous chatter rattled on, with an occasional glance or shoulder shrug thrown in. Fake smiles. A chuckle or two over a bad joke. And then it stopped as Mr. Sweigert cleared his throat.

“I’ll be as brief as I can.” He advanced the slides to show a picture of the building that housed the original company. “My family started this business nearly 50 years ago with little more than a dream and a few dollars. We’ve adjusted to various challenges over the years, we’ve changed with the times.” He clicked through a few more slides. “I had more hair then,” he said as an old black and white picture of him and his dad appeared. “We’ve grown from a two-person operation in the early days to a viable company with over 40 employees. We have contacts all over the world.” He advanced to the next slide, then stopped and tapped the clicker on the table. “Look at the numbers on the screen very carefully.” He paused to give everyone time to let the numbers sink in. “For the past three years, we’ve seen a decline in overall sales. We’re not about to go bankrupt or anything, but a decline is a decline. As you can guess, a decline in sales equals less money for the company.” He clicked through more slides. “And significantly less money for the company means we’re going to have to lay some people off if things don’t change. The new quarter has just started. We’ll have a clearer picture of the direction we’ll have to take in a few months. For now, we’re doing a thorough review of every department and reevaluating every person’s performance. We will be looking at everything—productivity, work attendance, leadership, attitude. Everything will factor into our decision.” Mr. Sweigert made eye contact with every person in the room. “Any questions?”

Dennis Pryor shifted his weight in his chair and scanned the room. No hands were raised. Before he knew it, his hand went up.

“Mr. Pryor,” called Mr. Sweigert.

Dennis slowly lowered his hand. “I was, uh, just wondering about the layoffs you mentioned. I mean, when will that happen?”

Mr. Sweigert motioned to Kurt Willis, his nephew, and the head of the Human Resources department. Kurt Willis folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. “We’ll have those discussions when we do the upcoming evaluations. We’re also looking at some other options. Of course, we don’t want to lay anyone off, but business is business. If we go that route, some of the layoffs will be short-term, others might be permanent. The numbers for the next quarter will be critical. We can’t continue to bleed money and survive. It’s the way things have to be, at least for now.”

“You’re covered in sweat,” Rose commented as she frisbeed a box of Kleenex onto Dennis’s desk. “What are you so worried about? You’ve been here for what—9-10 years? Sweigert likes you. You’re a good employee—”

“A good employee who lost two important contracts,” Dennis interjected. “Being liked by Sweigert is one thing. Costing his company money is another.”

“Just relax, Dennis. We’ve all messed up once or twice. It goes with the territory. Shoot, even Sweigert’s messed up. What’s he on now—wife number three, I think?” Rose flopped back in her chair. “If anyone is safe around here, it’s you.”

\*\*\*\*

Melvin Sweigert III reached across his desk and shook Dennis’s hand. “Have a seat, Dennis.” Dennis nodded toward Kurt Willis and took a seat. “Dennis, I’ll get straight to the point. We’re in trouble. Our profits are down and we haven’t seen much growth in the last three quarters. And to be honest, Dennis, your department hasn’t had a profitable month in over a year.” He leaned back in his chair and allowed those words to sink in. “You used to be one of our top producers, Dennis, but now things have changed. You don’t seem inspired, you miss deadlines, which you never used to do. The innovation that used to be one of your strongest points is now almost nonexistent. And your staff seems to be following your lead.” Dennis was sure they could hear his heart pounding. “Dennis, I can’t keep people on my payroll who are here just for the paycheck. Everyone on my leadership teams has to lead, and I haven’t seen any evidence of leadership coming from you or your department in a long time.” Mr. Sweigert folded his arms. “I hate to do this, Dennis, but—“

Dennis could feel his throat tighten. “Am I being fired?”

“No, not fired,” Kurt Willis jumped in.

“Then what?” Dennis asked.

“Like I mentioned during our team meeting, we’re having to cut back in every department, Dennis. We only had two options. The first was to just lay people off and save on salaries.”

“And the other?” Dennis wanted to know.

“The other,” Mr. Sweigert said, “was to keep everybody on the payroll and cut hours. Dennis, I am not a heartless tyrant despite what some people think. I know times are hard and jobs are incredibly scarce. So, I am hoping that we can at least help keep everybody afloat until we get things turned around. I hope you understand that cutting hours also means cutting salaries.”

Dennis felt his heart sink. “Cut? By how much?”

“Half,” Kurt Willis answered.

“Half?” Dennis responded in disbelief. “And what are we supposed to do to make up for our missing salary?”

“I can’t answer that one for you, Dennis. I guess you’ll have to get a part-time job, at least for a while.” Mr. Sweigert glanced at the floor, then back at Dennis. “I want you to do some soul searching, Dennis. I need the old Dennis, the one who produced more results than excuses—that’s the guy I want back. I need you to rediscover your purpose here at Sweigert Industries. Look, I know you’re disappointed and I’ll understand if you need to look for a fresh start elsewhere. But if you choose to stay, and I do hope you will, some changes are going to have to occur. For now, you’ll work from 8:00 until noon every day.”

“And my team?” Dennis asked. “What am I supposed to tell them?”

“We’ll explain the situation to them,” Kurt said.

Dennis made the ride home in silence. And he thought. About what he was going to tell his wife. About the bills. About his pride. About God. The worst day of his life wasn’t even over yet.

Handling Bad Days:

Why it Matters

The worst jobs in the world. The best jobs in the world. All of the other jobs in between. They all have one thing in common: If you work there long enough you will have a bad day. It is inevitable.

Some of those bad days will be caused by other people. You know the ones—they talk too much, accomplish too little. They’re professional agitators. Every job has them. That’s reality.

Some of those bad days, probably more than we’d like to admit, will be self-inflicted. We are human. We make mistakes. Sometimes we make big mistakes. Mistakes that hurt us. And sometimes hurt others. There’s not a worse feeling than replaying a bad decision and wondering, “What was I thinking?”

Since bad days are going to happen, are you prepared for them? Leading yourself well means that you have to handle adversity the right way. If someone else caused it, what will you do? As a leader, I have found that the typical response, which I’ll refer to as “piling on,” rarely helps. Deciding to make a human piñata out of the offender and giving everyone else a turn with the stick isn’t going to help the situation. Conversely, doing the same thing to yourself when you mess up isn’t productive either. To be clear, everyone must be held accountable for their actions. And “everyone” includes you. But holding people accountable doesn’t include destroying their confidence. Choose your words well. And never forget that a personnel issue is still personal. There aren’t many people who are in a “need-to-know” position when it comes to other people’s business.

Like it or not, you’re being watched. As a leader, when bad days happen, when employees make mistakes, the rest of the team will take their cues from you. You set the tone. You set the standard. Lead yourself well. Be consistent with your decisions. Bad days don’t have to define you, but they can help to refine you!

1. Never Let Go of Hope

Sidney Pryor clasped her husband’s hands. “We’ll be fine, hon’. We’ve got our savings. I can keep kids for a while.”

“We must be looking at different bank accounts, Sid, because the statements I’ve seen show just enough to keep the accounts open.”

“That’s just in the checking account. We’ve got like $500 in our savings.”

“That won’t last long,” Dennis sighed. “And what about the tests?” Dennis and Sidney had been trying to have a baby for almost two years. Their doctor had scheduled fertility tests, which were weeks away and not covered by insurance.

Sidney dabbed at her eyes. “I know. But I guess I’ll have to call and cancel. There’s not much else we can do right now.”

Despite her attempts to stay strong, Dennis knew she was crumbling on the inside. He had found her crying on the bathroom floor, clutching another negative pregnancy test more than once. They didn’t worry much at first. Everyone offered advice from the natural to the ridiculous, including some suggestions that even professionally trained circus performers couldn’t have successfully pulled off. Every time they tried, they’d smile and wonder, *Will this be the time?* And every single month ended the same way. The fertility tests were their last hope.

“I’m so, so sorry, Sid,” Dennis whispered as he wrapped his arms around his wife. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Dennis woke up early, raced through his morning Bible study, which he hadn’t done in months, and retrieved his laptop. He poured a second cup of coffee and scanned through several job recruitment sites.

“Anything look promising?” a bleary-eyed Sidney asked as she snuggled next to him on the couch.

“Well, there’s plenty of jobs for offshore oil workers.”

“Well, that’s something,” Sidney piped up.

“Sid, we’re two hundred miles from the coast. Plus it’s full-time. Plus I’d be gone for weeks at a time.”

“Couldn’t you just commute?” Sidney asked.

Dennis laughed uncontrollably. “Commute? How? By submarine?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sid, it's offshore work. Off the shore, Sid. Those rigs are miles out in the middle of the ocean. That would make for a tough commute.”

Sidney tapped the touch screen, causing the site to minimize. “Well, you know how to swim, don’t you?”

Dennis locked eyes with his wife. “Just barely. Lean in a little closer and I’ll show you what I’m a little better at.”

Later that day, Dennis went for a jog around the block. When he returned, Sid was scanning the web for more job openings.

“Find anything that doesn’t require swimming?”

“It’s pretty thin. This site is basically a catch-all for anything and everything. Mostly minimum wage stuff aimed at teenagers, though. Shelf stockers. Shopping cart retrievers. Hamburger flippers. Stuff like that. Plus the cable company needs workers to help install satellite dishes.”

“Nope,” Dennis answered. “I’ve got enough problems without crawling around on people’s roofs. Besides, the last thing I need right now is to have a bunch of little old ladies ringing our phone off the wall every time the wind blows and their reception gets fuzzy while they’re watching soap operas.”

“You know anything about working with wood?” Sidney asked.

“Some—I mean I took shop class in high school and me and my dad used to piddle around in his shop. Why?”

“Well, here’s an ad for part-time help doing woodwork of some kind.”

“Hmmm,” thought Dennis. “Let me see that.” He read the ad a few times. “I wonder what kind of work it is.”

“Only one way to find out,” Sid said. “Couldn’t hurt to call him, she said, handing him his cell phone. “I’m going to take a shower.”

Never Let Go of Hope:

Why it Matters

No one knows what life is going to throw at them from one day to the next. Babies are born. People die unexpectedly. Coworkers make bad decisions and everyone feels the heat. Those days happen and there’s no way to avoid them.

Hope is a powerful thing. It sustains people through their darkest days. It has helped armies win wars, marriages rebound, and companies stay afloat. But hope isn’t covered in glue. It’s not going to magically stick to you. You have to hold onto it.

As a leader, you are going to face a lot of challenges. When things get hard, everyone looks to the leader for direction. When the Great Depression showed no signs of easing, the whole country looked to President Roosevelt for help. Instead of waving the white flag of surrender, he comforted the masses with his frequent “fireside chats.” The country believed what he told them. He said they had nothing to fear. And they believed him. He gave people who had lost everything the one thing they needed the most—hope. As a leader in your organization, you have the opportunity to do the same thing. Your organization is depending on you.

When times get tough, be the leader who maintains control. Your response to each crisis will be watched. Your body language matters. Your tone matters. The way you walk down the hall matters. Facial expressions tell a story all their own. When your coworkers see that you’re in control, it will enable them to continue to do what they do without worrying. And as a leader, isn’t that what you want?

1. Embrace the Unexpected

“He’s what?” Sidney asked.

“A cradle maker, that’s what he said,” Dennis answered.

“Like cradles for babies?”

“Unless you know of another kind.”

“Aww, that’s sweet, Dennis. Are you going to do it?”

“He said I could stop by if I was interested.”

“My husband, the cradle maker,” Sid said with a smile. “I like the sound of that. So, I want details. Hours? Pay?”

“Well, he said I could work however many hours I wanted, which is a plus. I mean, I explained what the situation was and he was fine with it.”

“What about the pay?”

“He didn’t say a whole lot about that, mostly that it would depend on how many hours I worked, how much I got done. He did say that he would make it worth my while, though.”

“You gonna do it?” Sid asked hopefully.

“Can’t hurt to at least go and talk to him. I mean, it’s better than working fast food and I wouldn’t have to swim to and from work.”

Sidney swatted at him again. “You’re terrible!

Embrace the Unexpected:

Why it Matters

When was the last time you had just one day where everything went exactly as you had planned? As a leader, you know that life doesn’t always follow your script. Life happens. And a lot of it is totally unexpected. Your great intentions don’t pan out the way you had hoped. People leave and join your organization unexpectedly, and a few take parting shots on the way out. A bad financial decision affects the whole team. A personal crisis rocks your world. It could be any number of things. But always expect the unexpected.

Do you have a crisis plan in place? Have you practiced it? You should! Schools routinely practice fire drills, intruder drills, and evacuation drills. Times have changed. Though they may never need them, they must remain prepared just in case.

But what about issues that you can’t prepare for? Do you have a clear chain of command? Does everyone on your team know it? If something happened to you today, would your team continue to function? Would they miss a beat? If a key member of your team took another position with another organization, how would his work get done? Who’s prepared to step in and help the team in a pinch?

Leaders must remain calm when the unexpected comes. Believe me, your body language will say plenty, even if you never say a word. Think through as many surprises as you can. Have your team brainstorm a list of possible problems. And then come up with solutions. While no team can adequately prepare for every unexpected event, make sure yours is as prepared as it can be.

Surprises don’t always mean bad news. Maybe you secured a grant for your business that you’d given up on. Maybe your profit margin is a lot better than you thought. Maybe your insurance provider gave you a refund (okay, that’s a stretch). Perhaps a team member, possibly one you never thought had it in them, stepped up and performed admirably in a tough situation. Allow them to shine! Sometimes those kinds of unexpected surprises are the best ones.

IV. What You Do & Why You Do It

Dennis drove slowly through a part of town that he’d almost forgotten even existed. Old Town. That’s what he’d heard it called for years. Some said it got the name because it’s where the oldest homes were. Others said it was because it was where the oldest people lived. Dennis didn’t know which reason was correct nor did he care. He stared at the address he’d written down—3832 Canal Street— and scanned the mailboxes, hoping to find one that didn’t have numbers that were so faded they couldn’t be read. The houses on either side of the street screamed for days gone by. A few brick homes were swallowed by wooden A-framed houses on piers. All were neatly manicured. Giant oak trees that lined both sides of the street proudly displayed limbs that canopied across the road; it was like driving through a leafy tunnel.

He stopped out in front of an old blue and crème colored house with a long driveway that disappeared past the house. The yard was neatly maintained. Two giant azalea bushes, one on either side of the driveway, were in full bloom. A wooden rectangular sign hung from the porch—The Lehmans: Joshua and Lesa. Dennis had spoken with a man named Joshua. This had to be the place.

He parked his car in the driveway and walked up the steps leading to the front door. He gave a few gentle taps and waited. Within seconds he could hear the sound of footsteps. And then the door opened. An older lady, whom Dennis supposed was Lesa Lehman, stepped out. She stood, Dennis guessed, at just over five feet tall. Her wispy gray hair was pulled back into a ponytail that flopped lazily on her shoulder. Her eyes appeared gray, like deep pools of cloudy water.

“Well, hello,” she said, grasping Dennis’s hand. “You must be Dennis! My husband is expecting you.”

Dennis was intrigued. “How’d you know it was me? I mean, how’d you know that I was the one you were waiting for?”

Lesa Lehman beamed. “We don’t get a lot of visitors, especially ones as young as you. Can I pour you something to drink? Perhaps a cup of coffee?”

“Uh, no thank you, Mrs. Lehman. I just had lunch.”

Lesa Lehman waved her finger back and forth. “We’ll have none of that, Dennis. We are no longer strangers. We are friends. Please, call me Lesa.”

Dennis smiled. Lesa Lehman was a breath of fresh air. “Well, Lesa, I’m here about the ad. Is your husband available?”

“I’m so glad you’re here!” she beamed. “My Joshua, let me tell you, he’s very good at what he does, but he still acts like he’s a young man in his fifties! Here he is pushing almost eighty and he won’t slow down! Take a day off I tell him. But does he listen to me? He says there’s no time to waste. That’s one thing you’ll learn about him very quickly, he gets sixty seconds worth out of every minute. He loves his work.”

Dennis wasn’t sure what to say. *He loves his work.* He remembered when he used to love his job. Those days seemed like an eternity ago. “Is he home? I’d really like to talk to him about the job.”

“I’m so happy he’s finally getting some help! His shop is outback. Just follow the driveway until it stops. He’s back there with a friend.”

Dennis stepped outside and made his way down the driveway. A two-storied garage appeared from under the trees. One of the large bay doors was up and the roar of a saw grew louder with every step. The smell of sawdust filled the air, a scent Dennis hadn’t smelled in many years. A man was using one of the saws so Dennis approached with caution. He waited for the roar to die down. “Excuse me,” he said to no response. The man continued examining a piece of wood. He tried again. “Excuse me,” he said, almost shouting.

The man turned his head and smiled. He dusted off his jeans and walked over to Dennis. “Can I help you, young fella?”

“I’m here about the job,” Dennis said.

“I can’t help you there. You’ll need to talk to the man upstairs.”

“The man upstairs?” Dennis said slowly, unsure of what to say next. “You mean I have to pray first?”

The man let out a long laugh. “Not that man upstairs. The other man upstairs. You must be looking for Joshua, the man who runs this place.”

Dennis smiled. “Yes sir, I am.”

“Thought so. My name’s Jack.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jack,” Dennis responded.

Jack glanced at the clock and dusted off his jeans some more. “Well, it’s about time he got some help. I’ve been telling him for years to hire somebody to help him. But you know how people who are really old get sometimes.”

“Really old?” Dennis asked.

“Really old,” Jack repeated. “I’m older’n dirt and that makes me old. But Joshua is older’n me, so that makes him really old. Like dinosaur old. I bet when the Good Lord said, ‘Let there be light, he hollered, hit the switch, Joshua!’” Dennis stood there wide-eyed, unsure of how to respond. “Aw, I’m just picking with you,” Jack said, with a shrug. “You young folks sure don’t know when something’s funny. Y’all done fried your brains on them computers and little phones you carry around. I knew they’d be the death of us all sooner or later. Oh well, what do I know anyway?” Jack stopped to rub his eyes. “Durn sawdust!” He pulled a wrinkled handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his eyes.” See them stairs over yonder?” he said pointing to a corner stairwell. “They’ll take you to Joshua’s office upstairs. He’s up there doing something, probably trying to figure out how he’s going to put the candles on his next birthday cake without violating the fire code.” He motioned towards Dennis. “You scoot on up there. He said he was expecting somebody.”

“That’d be me, I guess,” Dennis answered.

“Well, you better get on up there. Joshua ain’t one for wasting time.”

“That’s what I’ve heard.” Dennis made his way up the steps and entered a small office. A small desk, almost covered with papers and half-used notepads, was neatly tucked in one corner. Modestly framed pictures lined the walls, most were in black and white though a few were in color. The light hum of an oscillating fan interrupted the silence. In the far corner, an old man, presumably Joshua Lehman, stared out at the blue sky. He wasn’t much taller than Lesa. What little hair he had was tucked under an old, sawdust-covered gray cap. One of his suspenders was fastened while the other hung limp at his side. A pair of round-lensed reading glasses were perched on the tip of his nose. His thin lips moved, but no sound came out.

“Mr. Lehman?” Dennis interrupted.

A somewhat startled Joshua Lehman twitched and turned toward Dennis. “I am so sorry, young man.”

“No, excuse me, Mr. Lehman. Jack said it was okay to come up.”

“Jack, huh? I don’t pay much attention to him. He’s so old that he remembers when water was invented.”

Dennis let out a long laugh. “Well, Mr. Lehman, he was—uh—what’s the word I’m looking for?”

“Crazy?” Joshua offered.

“No, not crazy. Different,” Dennis said, snapping his fingers. “He was definitely different.”

“Different?” Joshua said, scratching his head. “Jack? No, I think ‘crazy’ sums him up pretty well. Good as gold and one of my oldest and dearest friends, but crazy!”

“You’re the boss, Mr. Lehman. If you say crazy, then crazy it is.” Dennis rubbed his hands on his jeans. “Um, look, I didn’t mean to interrupt your work, but—”

“Ehh-you did me a favor, young man,” Joshua said, motioning towards his desk. “I’ve got work piled up past my eyeballs and here I am staring out a window while precious minutes just tick away. Well, you must be Dennis,” he said, extending his hand.

Dennis shook hands. “Yes, sir. Dennis Pryor. We talked on the phone earlier.”

“Yes, yes, I remember you. So, Dennis Pryor, tell me about yourself.”

Dennis hadn’t been expecting an interview. “Well, there’s not much to tell really.”

“Every person that God has given life to has a story to tell. An important story.” Joshua flopped into his chair and motioned for Dennis to sit down. “Tell me your story, Dennis.”

Dennis eased into a chair and wondered where to begin. “Well, I’m 34, married. No children yet, but we’re hopeful. Let’s see, what else? I’ve been working at Sweigert Industries for almost 10 years. We make circuit boards.” Dennis thought hard for something else to say. “And business is slow so my hours were cut. And here I am.”

Joshua nodded, his bottom lip protruding just a bit. He scratched at his whiskers and leaned back in his chair. “That’s all fine and good, Dennis. Now, tell me about you.”

“I just did. I mean, I’m not sure what else you want me to tell you,” Dennis said with a shrug.

“You don’t have to tell me anything, Dennis. But, there’s so much more to your story than those things. I’m not saying those things aren’t important. Never would I say such a thing,” he said as he stood and shuffled to the pictures on the wall. “Part of my story is here. That first one there is one of me and my Lesa on our wedding day.” Dennis stepped over for a closer look. “Pretty handsome guy, huh?” Joshua laughed. “I was quite the man about town in those days.” He pointed at the next picture. “And there’s one of us at Yankee Stadium. 1946 or 47, I can’t remember which. We love baseball.” He took a few steps. “And here’s one of our son, Aaron. 1967, I think. Just a few days before he went to Vietnam. Nineteen years old and ready to conquer the world. He was a good son. And a good soldier.” He took a deep breath. “One day soon I’ll see him again.” He took a few more steps. “The next to last one, the one with the silver frame, is a picture of a young couple with their firstborn.” Dennis inched a few steps forward for a closer look.

“Is that you and Lesa?”

The old man beamed. “Yes, Dennis. That’s us with our daughter Katherine. She was such a happy child! You should’ve seen her! Always dancing around the living room. Singing. And playing school with her dolls. She was an excellent teacher. Do you know that not one of her dolls ever failed?” the old man beamed. “But that was a lifetime ago. Now she’s all grown up. I don’t know where all of the time went. But she is a real estate broker in Texas. And that’s good because there’s lots of real estate in Texas. I’ve seen a map!” He squinted his eyes and pointed. “And look in the corner there,” he said pointing to the lower right-hand corner in the picture.

Dennis inched closer and strained his eyes. “It’s a cradle.”

“Yes,” Joshua replied, “my very first one. You see, Dennis, they are a part of my story, an important part, but they don’t tell the whole story.” He stared for a moment, lost in his thoughts. Then he shuffled back over to his chair and sat back down. “So, let’s try again, Dennis. Tell me about yourself. Better yet, tell me about your wife.”

“My wife?” Dennis fumbled for the right words. “Well, her name is Sidney. I call her Sid, it’s kind of a pet name.” Joshua smiled broadly. “We’ve been married for almost ten years. She’s got blond hair and a beautiful smile.”

“Does she still make your heart go pitty-pat when you see her?” Joshua asked with a grin. “Mine does when I see my Lesa.” Joshua patted his chest. “Doctor’s tell me it’s an irregular heartbeat, and they may be right, but I know what causes it! And she’s been causing it for almost 60 years now.”

Dennis marveled at the glow on the old man’s face.

“Well, yeah, I guess my heart skips a beat when I see her. She’s very pretty. We’ve had our ups and downs, you know, like everybody else does, but we’re doing ok.”

Joshua’s head bobbled back and forth. “Would you marry her all over again, Dennis?” Dennis watched as the old man’s eyes turned to pools of gray, just like Lesa’s. “Do you love her more today than you did on your wedding day?”

“Of course I’d marry her again,” Dennis responded. “I mean, she’s not perfect, but neither am I. And yeah, of course, I love her. What kind of question is that?”

“Have you told her lately, Dennis?”

Dennis began to get flustered. “Well, yeah, I tell her almost every day.”

The old man looked Dennis squarely in the eyes. “Words are one thing. But actions mean more. Have you shown her that you love her lately?”

Dennis rubbed his hands on his jeans again. “That’s getting kind of personal, don’t you think?”

“Please don’t take offense, Dennis. Just remember that there are many ways to show your love besides, you know, the physical way. Sometimes we men tend to only focus on that one thing.” Dennis tried to hide a smile. “I was young once too, Dennis,” Joshua said with a wink. “Enjoyed every minute of it. And we had lots and lots of minutes if you catch my meaning,” he said with a grin. “But my Lesa also loves to get flowers. So every now and then I’ll send her a bouquet, just to show her my love. She loves to go for walks. I’m old and almost everything hurts, but we’ll stroll around the block hand in hand almost every evening. Those little things really matter, Dennis.”

“Yeah, I suppose they do,” was all he could say. Dennis thought about the last time he’d done anything special for Sidney. It had been way too long. Somehow the stress of work and trying to get pregnant had overshadowed everything else.

“Just one more thing, Dennis. Is what you do important to you?”

“Important? Of course, it is. I mean, I probably won’t solve world hunger or obliterate any diseases on my job, but our products are important. People depend on us to provide good circuit boards. And pretty much everything is run by computers these days. So, yeah, my work is important. Plus I went to college a long time to get my degree and I just got promoted a few years ago. I’m hoping to keep climbing the ladder. There’s nothing wrong with that is there?”

“No, Dennis, there isn’t. But why is it important to you? Think a little deeper.”

Dennis took a long deep breath. “I don’t know, Joshua. We’ve got bills, lots of them. And my job pays those bills.”

“Money is necessary, Dennis. Believe it or not, the postman brings us bills too,” Joshua said with a smile. “I offered to share a few of mine with the neighbors, but can you believe they didn’t want them?” Joshua leaned forward in his chair. “But beyond your paycheck, Dennis, why do you do what you do?”

Dennis laughed and leaned forward in his chair. “You just won’t give up, will you?”

“As I said earlier, don’t take offense. Just think a little deeper, look deep inside your heart. Don’t tell me what you think I want to hear. Tell me what’s real. Think about your true motivation. Then answer the question.”

Dennis wrung his hands together. “Tell you what, Joshua, why don’t you go first. Why do you do what you do, Mr. Cradle Maker?” He stared into the old man’s eyes. Out of nowhere a twinge of guilt gripped his heart and wouldn’t let go. “I’m sorry, Mr. Lehman. That was uncalled for.”

The old man waved him off. “I don’t offend easily, Dennis. Besides, it’s a fair question.” Joshua stood and shuffled over to the pictures on the wall again. “Why do I do what I do?” he said, breaking the silence. “Lots of reasons, Dennis. For her,” he said pointing to a picture of his wife. And her,” he said pointing to the portrait of his daughter. “And for him,” he added with a nod toward the picture of his son. But more than anything else,” he said as he made his way back to his desk, “I do what I do for Him.” He held up a Star of David pendant. “I do what I do to honor my God, Dennis. I am a cradle maker. I am not rich as far as money goes. Very few people outside of this town know my name and that’s okay with me. I have the skills to work with wood, to make fine cradles. Cradles that will one day hold someone’s baby. Everything I do must be precise. I don’t take shortcuts. I have to look at every cradle I produce and ask myself one very important question: *Would I place my baby in it?* If the answer is no, then why would I expect someone else to put their baby in it? My cradles hold the most precious gift we have—life. So, every day is an adventure for me. I get to use my God-given abilities to create works of art that will exist and be used long after I’m dead and gone. To me, Dennis, that’s living with a purpose every day.” He picked up a coffee cup, took a sip, and sat back down. “If what you do every day doesn’t matter to you, why should it matter to anyone else?”

What You Do and Why You Do it:

Why it Matters

Knowing what you do is important. You should always be looking for opportunities to get better at what you do. Always. I’ve heard it said that the two most important days in a person’s life are the day they were born and the day they realize why they were born. Sure, loving your work is a great blessing, but liking or not liking your current job doesn’t decrease your responsibility. Someone is paying you to produce and you owe it to them and yourself to be the very best you can be. If you’re a teacher, be the very best teacher your students have ever had! If you’re a top-level executive, perform so well that your name will be at the top of the list come promotion time. If you’re flipping burgers, people are depending on you too! Don’t believe me? Think about the last bad hamburger you purchased. Were you happy? Did it matter to you if your order was right? Would you eat the “burgers” you produce every day?

As important as knowing what you do is, it is exponentially more important to know why you do it. Joshua understands that parents want a safe cradle to put their babies in. He understands that his work matters. Using his gifts to honor his Creator is important to Joshua; it’s the driving motivation behind everything he does. Whether you believe in a personal God or not, your work or whatever your finished product is should remind you that you are working for a purpose higher than yourself.

So, what do you do? Why do you do it? It may not matter to everybody, but does it matter to you? And if it doesn’t matter to you, why should it matter to anyone else?

V. Choose Your Materials Well

“I’ve never heard of an interview like that,” Sidney commented that evening. “Did he even ask you about your experience working with wood? Seems like that sort of thing would’ve been pretty high on his list of things to ask.”

Dennis stretched and yawned. “Not even once. He talked and I listened. Well, that, and answering all of his other questions.” The old man’s words about showing your wife you love her and working for a higher purpose had captured his thoughts.

“Are you sure he’s stable?” Sidney asked. “The last thing we need right now is for you to get involved with someone who’s—who’s—you know, starting to slip a little.”

“He isn’t like that,” Dennis quickly answered. “He isn’t like that at all.” He leaned in closer and struggled to find the right words. “Sid, this may sound strange, but he might be the most alive person I’ve ever met. He knows who he is. He knows what he does and he knows why he does it.” He looked into Sidney’s eyes and winked. “You want to go for a walk?”

Dennis woke up early Monday morning and stared at his Bible. *I’m just going to open it and start reading*. He grabbed at the pages and flipped them open. Colossians 3. *Well, here goes*. For the first time in months, the words appeared to leap off the pages. Dennis’s eyes locked onto verse 23: *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters*. He read those words and his thoughts flashed to his encounter with Joshua. There was no way Joshua could’ve known he read morning devotions. They never talked about it. And even if he did, he couldn’t have known what text his Bible was going to open to. Dennis stared at the words on the page. And he read them again. And again. And again. Every word pierced his heart like nothing he’d ever experienced before.

Dennis thought about his journey. Melvin Sweigert III had hand-picked him when there were other more experienced, better-qualified applicants. Work was exciting back then. The company was growing and so was the team. He’d worked many long hours and a lot of weekends to gain favor with his boss. But there was something else. The product. Sweigert circuit boards. Dennis truly believed they were the best ones on the market. And he developed a passionate sales pitch that had secured many lucrative contracts. The chase. The grind. The money. Those were good days. But those days seemed like an eternity ago.

Over time, things started to change. That’s one thing Dennis couldn’t figure out. Sure, team members came and went, but that was the norm in almost every business. Before long, Dennis found himself arriving for work minutes before he’d be considered late and then leaving at the earliest possible second. Who could blame him though? The new employees weren’t nearly as motivated as he’d been when he was new. And in his new role as a supervisor, he’d grown tired of carrying so much of the weight and shouldering all of the blame when things didn’t go well. Mr. Sweigert used to notice every detail. Now he only seemed to notice when there was a problem. Like the deadlines that were missed. Or the contracts that were lost. Sloppiness. That’s what Mr. Sweigert had called it. Once again Dennis felt like he was taking the blame for work that his subordinates hadn’t done. He’d spent extra time trying to polish the shoddy work they’d turned in. *Work at it with all your heart.* Dennis stared at those words and remembered. He remembered how he’d rushed to get the final presentation ready without reviewing it first. The report was filled with spelling mistakes, had completely left the Sweigert Industries logo off of the bid, and contained a miscalculation that would’ve cost the company a lot of money. But it never got that far. The company left the table before negotiations could get serious. And that was the second time it had happened.

Despite the quality of work that his associates had produced, Mr. Sweigert reminded Dennis that all work coming out of his department was his responsibility, no matter who had produced it. He didn’t want to hear any more excuses. Improve or move. Those words stung as they flashed through Dennis’s mind. *Work at it with all your heart.* He had been passing the buck for way too long.

\*\*\*\*

Dennis arrived at Sweigert Industries a half-hour early the next morning, something he hadn’t done in years. He was determined that even though he was only working a half-day, they were going to get a full day’s worth of production. He quickly read through and answered his email. Then he waited for his team to arrive.

As usual, Clancy arrived early and retreated to his office. Rose and Edgar arrived about a minute before they were late, followed by Ben, which was normal for all three of them. Their chatter abruptly stopped when they saw Dennis.

“Oh, hey Dennis,” Rose said. She walked over and hugged him. “Are you ok?”

“Me? Yeah, I’m fine.”

Edgar faked a cough and stared at the floor. “So, you know, if there’s anything we could do,” he said, his voice trailing off.

Dennis's eyes lit up. “Well, now that you mention it, we’re having a team meeting in 30 minutes.” He craned his neck towards Clancy’s office. “And that includes you too, Clancy.”

“What’s up?” Rose shrugged. “We never meet on Monday mornings, at least not unannounced.”

“I know and I promise it won’t become the norm. So make room on your schedule this morning. I’ll see you in 30 minutes.”

While his team scattered and tried to figure out what was going on, Dennis sat at his desk and typed out a short agenda, and made copies for his team. Then he took his copy and wrote out his answers to each question.

His team stared blankly as he walked around to each person and passed out the agenda. “Read through the questions we’re focusing on today. I know your time is important so I won’t keep you long.” He glanced at his watch. “Thirty minutes tops.”

Each team member stared at the short agenda:

1. What do you do?
2. Why do you do what you do?

“What’s this about, Dennis?” Rose asked. “What do we do? Why do we do it?”

“Sounds like a sales pitch if you ask me,” Edgar mumbled as he slid the paper across the table. “And right now the last thing we need is another lecture.”

Dennis bit his lip to keep from saying the first thing that came to mind. *Work at it with all your heart.* “Okay, fair enough. We’ve been on meeting overkill for a long time, I get that.” He slid the agenda back to Edgar. “But the days of meeting just to meet are over with. Rose, Edgar, I can understand your skepticism. Ben, your rolling eyes say plenty. What about you. Clancy?”

Five sets of eyes locked in on Clancy Pitts. Clancy slumped in his chair and tried to avoid making eye contact with anyone. “Looks like the team mascot has decided not to talk again,” Ben Green snickered.

“I wasn’t talking to you, Ben. Give him a chance.” Dennis turned back toward Clancy. “Clancy, look at me.” Clancy slowly lifted his head and stared at Dennis. “Clancy, you’re one of the brightest guys I know. If you weren’t you wouldn’t be on my team. But no one is ever going to benefit from what you bring to the table if you don’t speak up.”

Clancy placed his glasses on the table and sat up. “You don’t value me, Dennis. You never have.”

The room got very quiet. The words hit Dennis hard. He took a breath and locked eyes with Clancy Pitts. “I don’t value you? How can you say that? I’m the guy who hired you. Or have you forgotten that?”

“You hired me,” Clancy said, “but that interview was the last meaningful conversation we’ve had, Dennis.” Clancy sat up, gaining confidence with every word. “I know you’ve worked a lot of hours, but so have I. So have all of us. But the only time we ever hear from you is if Sweigert gets upset with you. You didn’t make all of those sales and close all of those deals by yourself you know. You want us to respect and value you, but you don’t seem to value and respect us. It has to go both ways.”

Dennis stared at Clancy and took a deep breath. Then he made eye contact with the rest of his team. *Work at it with all your heart.* “He’s right you know,” Dennis announced. “He’s right. I’ve been so busy charting my next move that I’ve handicapped the whole team. And the reality is that either things get turned around in a hurry or I’ll have to start over somewhere else. Maybe that’s what you’re hoping will happen. I don’t know. What I do know is I’m not willing to give up without a fight, and I need your help. Nothing changes if nothing changes. So I’m letting the change start with me.” He stared at his team. “I just want each of you—Ben, Rose, Edgar, Clancy—to think hard about the two questions on your agenda. Just two questions. When you’re able or willing to share your thoughts, just let me know.” He stared at each team member once more, then glanced at his watch. “Well, that’s all I got.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Edgar interjected. “We’re not done.”

Dennis folded his arms and leaned against the table. “Fair enough. What’s on your mind?”

Edgar stared at Dennis—hard. “Respect goes both ways too.”

“I know that,” Dennis responded.

“Do you?” Edgar asked. The room got eerily quiet. “You say you do, but your words don’t mean anything.”

“That’s what this meeting was for, Edgar,” Dennis answered. “To clear the air. You heard me say I was wrong, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I heard you. I’m just not sure you heard me.”

Dennis felt his neck start to sweat. “What now?”

“See, when Clancy spoke up you were all ears. Gonna change things. Gonna move the team forward.”

“So?” Dennis snapped. “What’s wrong with that?

“C’mon, Edgar,” Rose chimed in, “just say what you need to say. Stop playing games.”

“Alright then. Just answer one question for me, Dennis.”

“Fire away,” Dennis responded.

“When will I stop being your black coworker and start being just your coworker?”

“What?” Dennis asked.

“Don’t ‘what?’ me, Dennis. You know what I’m talking about. Whenever you have a conversation about our team, you refer to me as your young black colleague. And don’t deny it. I’ve heard you do it.”

Dennis felt a pit in his stomach. “Well, you are my coworker, Edgar. And you are black and young. I wasn’t trying to offend you, you know that.”

“Really?” Edgar answered. “Have you ever talked about Rose or Clancy or even Ben and said they were your young white colleagues?”

The pit in Dennis’s stomach started to grow. “Look, I wasn’t trying to offend you, Edgar, really I wasn’t. I guess I never even thought about it.” No one spoke for a long time. “I truly am sorry, Edgar. I promise it won’t happen again.”

“I don’t want promises, Dennis. I want to be treated like everybody else. I’m one of your colleagues. Not a black colleague. Not a white colleague. Just a colleague.”

“I understand,” was all Dennis could muster.

“We’ll see,” Edgar answered.

\*\*\*\*

Dennis quickly drove home to change clothes and grab a quick lunch. “Joshua called for you,” Sidney said as she poured two glasses of tea.”

“What did he say?”

“Just to meet him at Sanderson’s as soon as you can.”

Sanderson’s Lumber and Hardware had been a fixture in town for decades. Dennis walked the aisles and looked for Joshua Lehman. He found him in the rows of lumber.

“Dennis, glad you could make it,” he said as Dennis walked up.

“Yeah, me too. Just tell me what you need me to do.”

Joshua stared at his list. “We’ve got four cradles to make. Two out of oak. One out of cherry. And the other out of mahogany. Grab one of those carts and help me select the wood. The oak is right here,” he said pointing to the shelf in front of him. “I’ll choose the oak. The cherry and mahogany should be on the next aisle. You go and get that and we’ll be all set.”

Dennis wheeled his cart to the next aisle. After scanning the bins, he found what he was looking for. He filled the cart with some nice cherry wood. The bin of mahogany was empty. The next bin was filled with pine, so he loaded his cart with it and went to find Joshua.

Joshua’s eyebrows danced when he saw the wood in Dennis’s cart. “Mm-hmm,” he said. “This will never do,” he said motioning to the cart.

Dennis looked at his cart. “What’s wrong with the wood I chose? He picked up a piece of cherry. “This is prime building material. You ought to see the prices on this stuff.”

Joshua took the wood from Dennis and held it up to eye level. “It’s warped,” he said as he handed it back to Dennis.

Dennis looked at the wood closely and noticed the bow in it. “He dropped the wood back into the cart. “I’m sorry, Joshua. I don’t know how I missed that.”

“Bowed wood won’t work when you’re making a cradle, Dennis. No matter how hard you try, the bow never really goes away. You can try to flatten it or use a lot of glue, but in the end, it won’t be the quality that my customers expect.” He stared at Dennis’s cart some more. “This is pine, not mahogany,” he said pointing at a large piece.

“I know. They’re out of mahogany. But look,” Dennis said holding up a piece, “if you look at the grain it’s pretty close to the picture of the mahogany. Once you get a coat or two of stain on it, no one will be able to tell the difference.”

“I’ll know,” Joshua said. “No amount of stain or paint can hide what’s underneath. The maker always knows his creation better than anyone else. Besides, I believe in giving my customers exactly what they ask for. One more thing, Dennis,” he said rubbing the piece of pine, “you see those knots?”

“Well, yeah. It’s pine.”

“Knots can become weak spots over time. And no matter how much you sand it, it can still scratch little fingers.”

“Yeah, but there will be a blanket or a mattress over it. I mean, who just places a baby in a wooden cradle?”

Joshua locked eyes with him “Would you put your baby in it? If the knotholes were rough and scratchy, would you be okay with it? Would you pay for pine when you asked for mahogany?”

Dennis bit his lip. “I suppose I wouldn’t,” was all he could say.

“If it wouldn’t be good enough to put your baby in it, then it’s not good enough to put anybody’s baby in it. That’s my rule.” Joshua smiled at Dennis. “All of this wood, even the knotted pine, would be great for something. Just not for making cradles. The secret is to find where the wood could best be used and use it for that purpose. When you use it the right way, the flaws become less important. But if you try to build with the wrong materials, you end up frustrating yourself, wasting a lot of time, and you do a disservice to the material. Everything in God’s creation has a place where it fits and a purpose greater than just merely existing.”

For the next three hours, they carefully dug through the bins looking for the perfect pieces of wood, pieces born to be part of a cradle. Joshua called the customer who had requested the mahogany, and before the call was over, they agreed to use cypress instead.

“That took a lot longer than I thought it would,” Dennis said as they walked out of Sanderson’s.

“Choosing the right materials on the front end will save you a lot of grief later on,” Joshua commented. “If what you do matters, then so should the materials you choose to use.”

Choose Your Materials Well:

Why it Matters

Every task requires an investment in time and materials. Joshua knows that choosing the right materials for each job is critical. As a cradle maker, he wants to use the very best wood. Wood that is flawed in some way might be great for building a picnic table or constructing some extra shelves to put in your garage, but it won’t work for building a cradle.

Choosing the right materials is critical in your work too. For many of us, our “materials” are the people we hire. I would be willing to bet that you’ve experienced working with people who were probably nice and decent enough, but who had no clue how to help your team get better. Their skill sets weren’t conducive to producing the results you wanted or needed. How does that happen?

As a leader, you must know what kind of person you are looking for every time you post an opening. You should at least have a profile of the education level, experience, and any special skills that would benefit your workplace. Sometimes we get too excited when candidates pass the eye test—they look “right” for the job. They have great personalities, dress well, their resumes are flawless, and they can answer your questions without thinking or blinking. But chances are, you aren’t hiring someone to entertain you. So how much work do you put in when it comes to hiring personnel? What does your vetting process look like? How many references do you check? What kind of questions do you ask? The truth is we can’t “microwave” good employees. There’s a lot of work to do and it takes time. Choose your materials carefully!

How culturally responsive are you? Most companies are becoming very diverse workplaces. In all likelihood, you will supervise a lot of people who don’t look like you. Cultures are different. Attitudes are different. Generational beliefs are different. Believe me, there’s a world of difference between leading someone from the Baby-Boomer generation and leading someone from Generation Z. There was a time when those things didn’t matter, but those days are over. Be very intentional about the kinds of questions you ask during interviews. Educate yourself on how those questions are perceived and answered by people who are different from you. Eliminate those make-or-break questions that are dependent on a person’s background and beliefs. Always strive to keep the playing field as level as possible.

Nearly all job applicants understand that they aren’t the only ones being considered. Your choices shouldn’t be based on anything other than who’s the best fit for your organization. In other words, who’s the right wood for your cradle?

Just because an applicant or even a current employee isn’t working out for you doesn’t mean that they should be tossed onto the burn pile. Perhaps their skill set would be much better utilized somewhere else. Moving people to roles where they fit benefits the organization. It also helps them be happier and more productive too.

I recall one of the instances when I was told that a struggling employee was being moved to my campus. They called me the “elementary assassin” in those days because my bosses knew that I’d move people out of our district in a hurry if they weren’t going to do their job. In reality, I hated that nickname. And I hated those moves. People who didn’t work on one campus probably wouldn’t work on mine. “She just needs to find her niche, the place where she fits,” I remember my superintendent telling me one day. So, I reluctantly added her to my employee roster and placed her in the only open position I had, which also happened to be a position that she’d never done. What were we thinking? The whole thing had disaster written all over it. I watched this employee like a hawk and expected her to crash and burn. Instead, she flourished! She quickly became a trusted employee, one that I was grateful to have on my team. She had skills. But she’d been plugged into jobs that were not her strong suit. Once she was placed in an area of strength and allowed to grow, she blossomed. There is a purpose and a place for everyone!

As a leader, you must also realize that not everyone belongs on your team. You can move people around, assign them different roles, and give them more or different responsibilities. But what if they just don’t seem to fit anywhere? No matter where you place them, their level of production isn’t near your level of expectation. Then what?

Sometimes doing the right thing means having a hard conversation. And sometimes that means being brutally honest with people about your concerns. Telling someone that they’ll need to pursue other employment is hard. But the truth is that employees who aren’t being successful already know that they aren’t being successful. They know it long before you tell them. In most cases, they are stressed and worried. Though this might sound crazy, sometimes these employees are genuinely relieved when you give them the freedom to leave. But whether they’re relieved or blow their top and threaten to sue you, move forward with the move that benefits your organization the most. Don’t make the mistake of allowing weak team members to stay on your team.

VI. Tools for the Trade

The next day Dennis found a Post-it note stuck to his computer screen. Scribbled on it were two phrases:

*1. What do I do? I’m a marketer for Sweigert Industries.*

*2. Why do I do what I do? I’m paying off college loans. EM.*

Next to Ben Green, Edgar Milton was the last person Dennis thought would answer those two questions. Edgar was a marketer for SI, so that made sense. The fact that he saw paying off his loans as the driving force, his purpose, for working for SI came as a shock.

Dennis pulled up several old accounts and reviewed their processes for making a successful sales pitch. As he scanned through the pages it became clear that the quality of work his team used to produce was far superior to what they’d produced in the last year. The older proposals were crisp, to the point, and strongly emphasized the company’s unique SI logo and commitment to producing quality work. Even the proposals that didn’t result in sales were sharp; the high standards for quality were evident everywhere.

Though he was sure of what it would reveal, Dennis looked through every proposal the team had produced in the last six months. The lack of detail and multiple errors with budget-related data was embarrassing. He sent out an email to his team. *I know I said we wouldn’t be meeting as much, but this is important. Team meeting in fifteen minutes. Bring a red pen.*

Dennis passed out copies of recent proposals that the team had produced. “Alright, I want you to look over these proposals. As you’re reading, I want you to circle everything that we could’ve done better. Tell you what, talk it up. Work together.”

Ben Green snickered. “We’re looking at old proposals that we didn’t get? Why? Shouldn’t we be focusing on the future and not the past?”

“Ben, I need you to just hang in there with me for a few minutes. I need everybody to take this seriously. Be critical, be brutal if you need to. But be honest. I told you we weren’t going to meet just to meet.” He stared at Rose, Clancy, Edgar, and Ben. “Get started. You have thirty minutes.” Dennis stepped back from the table. “Get coffee if you need it, tend to whatever needs you may have. But for the next thirty minutes, this is your priority.”

After a slow start and more than a few stares, a few comments started to be shared. Dennis stepped out of the room and into the hallway. “Team meeting, Dennis?” Mr. Sweigert asked.

“Yes, sir. We’re identifying our mistakes and coming up with ways to get better. At least that’s the plan.”

Mr. Sweigert’s eyebrows went straight up. “Grassroots problem-solving. Now, that’s more like it.” He patted Dennis on the shoulder, started down the hall, and then turned back. “Let me know what you find out.”

Dennis was shocked. He hadn’t seen Mr. Sweigert smile in a long time. Feeling a bit energized, he refilled his cup and returned to the conference room. The energy in the room had elevated quite a bit. When the thirty minutes were up, Dennis cleared his throat.

“Sounds like y’all were finding a lot of things to talk about.”

Rose shook her pen. Warm laughter filled the room as she added, “I think I used all of the ink in mine.”

“So, let’s hear it,” Dennis said as he uncapped a magic marker and walked over to a giant piece of chart paper he’d hung on the wall. “Who’s first?”

Clancy raised his hand. “The wording is stilted and not clear. Just because we know our verbiage doesn’t mean that everyone else does.”

“Great, thank you, Clancy.” He scribbled the words *poor wording* at the top of the page. “What else?”

Ben Green jumped in. “In a few places, the costs detailed in the proposal don’t equal the totals at the end. Pretty sloppy stuff.”

“You’re one-hundred percent right, Ben.” Dennis added *no attention to detail with financials* to the list. “Keep ‘em coming,” he said.

“There’s no company logo on two of these. They’re not even on our official forms,” Rose offered.

Dennis added the words *no identity* to the growing list. He took a deep breath. “C’mon, what else?”

Edgar stared at his list. “Dates.”

“What are you talking about,” Rose asked. “That wasn’t on our list when we were talking earlier.”

“He means he hasn’t had any dates in a while,” Ben chimed in.

“Guys, let’s stay on task. We can’t be wasting minutes.” He looked at Edgar. “Go ahead, Edgar. You said something about dates. What do you mean?”

Edgar cracked a half-smile. “Well, Clancy and I noticed some discrepancies with the dates listed on the proposals. From starting dates to ending dates.”

Ben jumped in. “Hey, we’ve never fudged on dates—ever.”

“That’s not what I was going to say, Ben. Let me finish,” Edgar sighed. “Based on these dates,” he said, as Clancy held up two of the proposals, “it took us at least three weeks to produce these.”

“And?” Dennis asked.

“And,” Clancy answered, “We used to produce superior stuff to this in two weeks or less.” He set the proposals back on the table. “And you know what Mr. Sweigert always says, ‘Time is money.’”

Dennis leaned against the wall and added *time management* to the list. “Anything else?” The team members took turns staring at each other.

“Isn’t that enough?” Ben offered.

Dennis put the cap on his marker and took a seat. “So, why did we go through this exercise? What was the point?”

“We were kinda hoping you’d tell us,” Edgar stated.

Dennis bit his lip, stacked all of the proposals, and clenched them in his hand. Then he held them at eye level. “There’s two, maybe three things all of these proposals have in common.” He stared at the list on the wall. “All of those things are accurate. And all of these proposals,” he said as he let them fall onto the table, “were developed and submitted by this team. Everyone in this room worked on these failed proposals.”

“Great, so everything’s our fault as usual,” Ben smirked.

Dennis took a deep breath. “The main thing these proposals have in common is that I was the lead on each one. No matter what any of you did, it was up to me to make sure it was up to the high standards expected here at Sweigert Industries. And I failed. I failed miserably.” The air seemed to leave the room. “And I am sorry for that, guys. I failed you.”

Rose fanned herself nervously. “Well, it’s not like you didn’t have help, Dennis. I think we all let some stuff slide. I know I did.”

“Me too,” Edgar sighed. “I guess even greatness can have an off day.”

“Or several,” Clancy added with a grin. “I’m talking about myself of course.”

“So, now what?” Ben wanted to know. “We can’t undo what’s already been done.”

Dennis nodded. “You’re right, Ben. We can’t. But I appreciate everyone’s honesty. And I truly believe that all of these problems are fixable. This team has the tools to be great. We all have our strengths. If we refocus and recommit ourselves, I think we can right the ship in no time.” Dennis saw a few affirming nods. “You guys have to choose your own path, but there won’t be any more shoddy work coming out of Sweigert Industries that has my name attached to it. Not even if I have to redo everything myself. My name on a project is going to mean something again.”

“Sounds like you had a productive meeting,” Joshua said as they studied the plans for the new cradles.

“I hope so, Joshua. I haven’t felt that productive in a long time.”

“That’s what happens when the right people are using the right tools,” Joshua said.

“The right tools?”

Joshua shuffled to the other side of the garage and slowly wheeled one of his giant toolboxes over to the workbench and opened the drawers. “Have a look.”

Dennis stared at hundreds of tools, all spotless and neatly arranged. “You must have every tool ever made,” Dennis said. “I don’t even know what some of them are.”

Joshua pulled out a hammer. “Would you use this tool on a cradle?”

Dennis looked at the hammer and thought it might be a trick question. “Depends. I mean, a hammer can be just what the doctor ordered sometimes.”

Joshua slammed the hammer down on the tabletop, leaving a circular dent in the wood. “This is a useful tool, Dennis. I’ve used this hammer on more jobs than I can remember. I built this shop using this very hammer. It’s a great tool,” he said as he placed it on the counter, “but not for working on a cradle.” He reached back into his toolbox and pulled out a rubber mallet. “Now this,” he said, “this mallet is just right for working on a cradle. It provides strength but doesn’t scar the wood.”

Dennis laughed out loud. “Joshua, you ought to see all of the jobs I’ve tried to complete with a hammer.”

“Let me guess,” Joshua said, “when all you have is a hammer,” he started.

“Everything looks like a nail,” Dennis completed the thought. “My dad used to say the same thing.”

Joshua smiled. “Dennis, you are like this toolbox. You are filled with a lot of amazing tools. Some you use often. Others you probably don’t even realize you have because you never use them. From what you’ve said, I’d say that public speaking, motivating people and leading meetings are some of your best tools. Am I right?”

Dennis shrugged. “Pretty much. Those are the things I do best. Even my team would agree, I think.”

“What would’ve happened if you’d gone into your meeting today with a heavy hand and put everyone on notice? What would’ve happened?”

“They wouldn’t have listened. This one guy, Ben, he’s still mad at me for getting the promotion he thought he should’ve had. He would’ve thrown me under every bus in sight.”

“But you didn’t go in like a hammer, Dennis. You could’ve, and like the hammer, you would’ve left an impression. But it would’ve been the wrong impression. Use the tools God gave you and use them well. Using the right tools always makes a difference.”

“But what if your toolbox is missing some tools? Then what?”

“You can’t put in what God left out,” Dennis.

“But what if I’m not talking about me personally, but about a team member?”

“If it’s a critical tool, go find one.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Swiss army knife. He opened all of the blades. “This knife has nine different tools on it, even a corkscrew. I suppose if I ever get lost in the woods and really need to open a bottle of wine, I am in business!” Joshua laughed. “But if I need a level or a piece of sandpaper I’m out of luck. Despite what you see in the commercials, no one tool can do everything. But with a toolbox full of the necessary tools, great things can be built. That includes cradles, Dennis. And it includes your team.”

Tools for the Trade:

Why it Matters

Believe it or not, you weren’t equipped to do everything. *When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.* How many times have you approached tasks on your job with that philosophy? Too many, I bet. I’ve known some legitimate hammers. They exist everywhere and they do serve a purpose. They do what hammers do. If you are a hammer then do what hammers do. If you’re not, then use the special tools God gave you.

No one is born knowing how to use their tools. It takes time. It takes practice. And it often means making a lot of mistakes along the way. But once you learn to master your tools and use them at the right time and in the right way, your productivity will soar.

What tools are in your toolbox? Which ones do you use the most? Which ones are you the most confident in? You have strengths. There are some things that you’re just better at than others. Work on your strengths.

Most organizations don’t hire new employees and expect them to do everything. There are specialists. In the school business, we are very specialized. We have people who understand curriculum working with curriculum. Most of those necessary folks would die on the vine if they were placed in the finance department. It’s not where they fit. Their tools are designed to complete other tasks. Finance people love to work with numbers. It’s what they do. Try placing them in maintenance or transportation and watch what happens. They would be miserable! And miserable people rarely produce at levels that benefit the team. It’s not that they’re incapable of learning a new skill or being productive on some level. But if you want peak performance from every employee, match the right tools to the right jobs. It really does make a difference.

VII. Allow the Process to Work

Dennis felt a twinge in his shoulder as soon as his feet hit the floor. The weeks of working with Joshua had helped him rediscover muscles he hadn’t used in a long time. He dressed and made his way to the kitchen. To his surprise, the coffee pot was full and his cup was waiting for him on the counter. Sidney was seated at the table, a folder full of papers was spread out in every direction. “You’re up early this morning, Sid.” He poured himself a cup and walked toward the table. “Have trouble sleeping?” Still no answer. He leaned down and noticed that Sidney was asleep. He glanced at the papers on the table. Some were bills, most of them were passed due. Others were from the fertility clinic. The costs were circled in ink.

A baby. That’s what Dennis and Sidney wanted more than anything. Since his work life had changed, Dennis had been so busy that he hadn’t given it much thought. In a lot of ways, it had been a relief. His parents and Sid’s were more than ready to be grandparents. Dennis had felt tremendous pressure to just “get it done.” He’d heard all of the “still firing blanks?” comments he could handle. Still, he knew that there was a strong chance that the issue was his. He knew that the tests would shed more light on the problem and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know. He stared at his wife and smiled. Despite all of the sacrifices, putting up with his moodiness, and always being the first one there to encourage him when things weren’t going well, Dennis had somehow forgotten about her feelings. He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. Sidney stirred and opened her eyes. “Coffee?”

She rubbed her eyes and put the papers back inside the folder. “No. I’m having a hard time sleeping, that’s all.”

“Looks to me like you were doing pretty well,” Dennis answered.

Sidney smiled. “Very funny.” She shuffled over to the counter and shoved the folder into a drawer. “Busy day today?”

“Half and half. At least the team is starting to gain some traction again. And Joshua, well, let’s just say that every day is an adventure. He’s never in a hurry but there’s always a sense of urgency if that makes any sense.” Dennis put his cup in the sink and wrapped his arms around his wife. “Everything’s going to be okay, Sid. I promise.”

\*\*\*\*

“Mr. Sweigert wants to see you,” Rose said as Dennis settled into his chair.

“Me?”

“Yes, you. He’s been by here twice already.”

Dennis looked at his watch. He wasn’t late. “Must be pretty important.”

“Only one way to find out,” Rose quipped.

Dennis scanned through his email and tried to focus. Another Post-it note was left on his monitor.

*1. What do I do?* *I’m a designer in the marketing department at SI.*

*2. Why do I do it? It’s what I do best. Rose.*

Dennis placed the note with the one from Edgar. Maybe there was hope for this team. He read and reread an email from Gaston Electronics. It was a call for proposals. Gaston was one of the largest corporations on the Gulf Coast. It was also one of the accounts that Dennis had lost. Another reminder of a wasted opportunity was the last thing he needed.

Dennis’s thoughts were swirling. What did Sweigert want? Was he going to be fired? It had only been a month. Surely he’d give him a little more time to prove he could get the job done. He grabbed his pad and pen and started towards Mr. Sweigert’s office.

“Come on in, Dennis,” Mr. Sweigert said. He picked up his phone and made a quick call. “He’s here. Yeah, well stop whatever you’re doing and get in here.” Mr. Sweigert hung up the phone and rubbed his temples. “Some people,” he mumbled. “Sorry about that, Dennis. How have you been?”

“Fine, I guess.”

“Sidney doing okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine.”

“Glad to hear it.” He glanced at his watch. “Where is he? Well, at any rate—” A knock at the door interrupted his sentence. “C’mon in.” Kurt Willis appeared with a folder in his hand.

“Good morning, Dennis. “Sorry I’m late, Mr. Sweigert,” Kurt said as he handed him the folder.

“Take a seat, Kurt.” He thumbed through the pages. “Dennis, we’ve been looking through our reports and felt like we needed to speak with you.” Dennis could feel his heart sink. “Here it is,” Mr. Sweigert said as he held up a graph. “According to our most recent review, your team is out producing every department in this company. It’s not even close, is it Kurt?”

“No, sir. It’s almost two to one,” Kurt answered.

“You know what this means, Dennis?” Mr. Sweigert asked.

Dennis was numb. Two to one? His department hadn’t been that efficient in over a year. “No, sir,” was all he could manage to say.

“Well, it means,” Mr. Sweigert said leaning back in his chair, “it means that if this trend continues we’ll be able to bring you back on full-time soon.

“Full time again?” Dennis could hardly breathe. “Thank you, sir. How long till you’ll know for sure.”

“At least a month, maybe six weeks. But we’ll definitely know something by then. We’re close, Dennis. Closer than I ever thought we’d be after less than a month. I don’t know how you’ve managed to reenergize that group in such a short time, especially working just half-days, but it’s been an amazing turnaround.”

“I really can’t take the credit, sir. My team—Rose, Edgar, Ben, and Clancy—they’ve carried the load.”

Kurt Willis cracked a smile. “That’s what they said about you when we asked them the same question.”

\*\*\*\*

“That’s great news, huh?’ Joshua asked.

“It is, Joshua. It certainly is. I can’t wait to tell Sid.”

“You didn’t tell her when you went home for lunch?”

“She wasn’t there. She must’ve had some errands to run. I’ll tell her later.”

“Be sure you do, Dennis. You know, I got a surprise this morning too. One of our customers is leaving the area. They decided they don’t want the cradle anymore.”

“That’s a shame. Which one?”

“The one you’ve been working on, Dennis. The one made out of cypress.”

Dennis let out a long sigh. “I thought I was doing my best work on that cradle. I finally felt like I kind of knew what I was doing.”

“Almost,” Joshua said.

“Almost? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Come with me, Dennis.” They walked together to the large work tables. Joshua pulled one of the side rails closer. “This is for the cypress cradle, right?”

“That’s right,” Dennis answered.

“So, what is this?” Joshua asked, pointing to one of the spindles. “It’s splintered.”

A lump formed in Dennis’s throat. “I can explain that. See, the end wasn’t fitting just right. I tried everything. Twisting and turning. Sanding. I tapped it with the mallet. But nothing worked. I must’ve spent two hours on that one piece, so—”

“So, instead of taking the time to fix it the right way,” Joshua interrupted, “you gave it some help—with a hammer.”

Dennis bit his lip. “How’d you know?”

“I always inspect what I expect, Dennis. I’ve seen these mistakes before because I’ve made all of these mistakes myself. Unsatisfactory work will always rear its ugly head.”

“Is it ruined?” Dennis asked.

“Ruined? No. But this piece will have to be redone. That will take several hours on the lathe, but it must be done. Dennis, I have been doing this for a long, long time. The steps we follow are time-tested; they work when we stick to the plan. You must learn to allow the process to work. There are no shortcuts.”

“But the customer backed out on this one. Why put in all the time and effort?”

Joshua stared intently at Dennis. “It won’t be my time or my effort. It will be yours. You will finish this cradle. And when you are done you will be able to say, ‘Yes, Joshua, I would put my baby in this cradle.’ And you will be proud of your work as you should be. Then and only then will my maker’s mark go on this cradle.”

“But you don’t even have a customer.”

“I know. But word gets around. Every now and then someone will call to see if I have any unsold cradles. Sooner or later someone will drop by. It won’t last long. They never do. ”

“I sure am sorry, Joshua.”

“It’s a humbling thing to say that we’re sorry, Dennis. I’ve had lots of practice. But saying you’re sorry isn’t always enough. That’s why you are going to finish this cradle yourself. The old man shuffled toward the stairwell that led to his office. “Cleaning up your own messes. They teach that in Kindergarten, you know.”

Allow the Process to Work:

Why it Matters

Every successful organization has processes or systems in place. And most of those processes and systems took years to develop and refine. There’s always a reason why organizations do things the way they do them.

Like most people, I have a GPS in my truck. Unlike most people, I do not like to travel. But my job demands that I go to new places from time to time. So, I type in the address and trust the little lady in the machine to tell me when to turn. I believe her when she says I need to turn right or recalibrate because I missed a turn. Even when I think I’m going the wrong way, I trust the maps. The maps have been taking people to those destinations for years.

Have you ever taken a shortcut that didn’t turn out to be a shortcut? Of course, you have! Whether it’s on the road, or in your marriage, or your office, we’re always looking for a shortcut. We want to bypass some of the work and still get the reward at the end. Dennis thought that using a hammer would make his work go faster. Instead, he ended up creating more work for himself. Why didn’t he just ask Joshua for help? Was he too stubborn? Was it his pride? Whatever it was, he violated one of Joshua’s rules. And violating rules has consequences.

Do you know the systems that govern your workplace? Do you abide by them? If you have subordinates, do they know the systems? How do you know they are following them? What are you going to do when they don’t (and that time will come, likely more than once)?

Most of you know who Nick Saban is, or at least you’ve heard his name. He’s the head football coach at the University of Alabama. He is widely considered to be the greatest college football coach of all time. He has more than a handful of championship rings. His trophy cases are full. His recruiting classes are in the top five every year. They don’t rebuild at Alabama, they reload. But Coach Saban has systems for his program. Everyone is expected to abide by them. I can’t say this with one-hundred percent certainty, but I highly doubt that Nick Saban has ever asked a top quarterback recruit, “So, what offense do you want to run?” That isn’t going to happen. Why not? Because Alabama has an offensive system that works. They have the trophies to prove it. The first quarterback who tries to run his own plays will get more than an earful and will likely play his way onto the bench. They have to run the offense that they run at Alabama. They have to trust the process.

Maybe you don’t understand or even agree with all of the systems that exist in your job. As long as you work there, abide by the rules. Do things the way your organization expects. Perhaps one day you will run your own organization. You will set the tone. You will set the expectations. You will put your systems in place. That may be the day you dream about, but if that day isn’t today, follow the processes your current employer has in place.

VIII. Keep Your Workplace Clean

Dennis shared his good news with Sidney later that day. He’d expected that she’d jump up and down and get excited like she did any other time there was good news. But she remained strangely calm.

“Didn’t you hear what I said, Sid? I’ll probably be back at work full-time in a month or so. Isn’t that great?”

“Honey, that is more than great, it’s awesome news,” she said, smiling. Sidney noticed the upside-down smile on Dennis’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“I just thought you’d be more excited, that’s all,” he said as he joined her on the couch. He put his arms on her shoulders and started giving her a gentle massage.

“Ohhh, my,” she moaned, “That is pure heaven! I’m going to miss these impromptu massages you’ve been given me and I’ll really miss our evening walks.”

“Miss them?”

“Well, before you went part-time we never went for walks because it was always dark when you got home. And the massages, well, you were so tired when you got home that I didn’t want to ask.”

Dennis knew she was telling the truth. But things had changed a lot since then. He moved to her other side so they could be face-to-face. “Sid, you mean more to me than anything else in the whole world, do you know that?” He saw tears well up in her eyes. “And I haven’t told you or shown you as much as I should’ve. I know that. But I am trying, Sid. I really am. And I don’t want our walks to stop. And I’ve enjoyed giving you massages and I don’t plan on stopping.” He held her face in his hands and used his thumbs to brush back her tears. “Plus, you’ve got to remember that the massages aren’t the only impromptu activity we’ve gotten pretty good at lately,” he said grinning. “I do love you, Sidney Ann Pryor.”

Sidney leaned forward and kissed him. “I love you too, Mr. Cradle Maker. I know you’re trying and I appreciate it so much. And we have been behaving like newlyweds since your hours changed, which I think we’ve both enjoyed. I know things won’t be the same when you go back to work at SI, but I am loving this new life with you.”

“Get used to it, Sid.”

\*\*\*\*

Ben Green walked into Dennis’s office and handed him a Post-it note. Dennis quickly read the brief message.

“You got a minute?” he asked Ben Green while motioning to a chair.

Ben glanced at his watch and sighed. “A minute? Sure.” He took a seat and stared at Dennis.

Dennis reread the words on the Post-it note. “Have I offended you in some way, Ben? Because there are times when it seems like you’re mad at me no matter what I do or say.”

Ben shifted his weight and let out a long sigh. “So, you’re going to sit there behind your big desk and act like you have no idea why I’m upset?”

Dennis bit his lip to keep from saying what he wanted to say. “Yeah, I guess I am, Ben. Because if you’re still mad that I got the promotion and you didn’t, I can’t help you. I didn’t make that call. I didn’t promote myself. Sweigert chose me fair and square.”

“Fair and square?” Ben said between clenched teeth. “You call what you did fair and square?”

“I don’t have time for riddles, Ben. Just spit it out.”

Ben got up and paced across Dennis’s office. “You blackballed me and you know it! I was going to be Sweigert’s choice and everybody knew it, including you!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Dennis responded, “and apparently neither do you.”

Ben walked up to Dennis’s desk and stared straight through him. “You told Sweigert that the reason the team had missed a few deadlines was that I miscalculated the costs. And you told him that I wasn’t a team player.”

Dennis stared at Ben, unsure of what to say. “Look, Ben, you did miscalculate the costs on a few projects, but—”

“Why?” Ben interrupted. “Why were my calculations off? Have you ever thought that maybe my calculations were off because you changed your designs without telling the team? We all worked our tails off to get that proposal ready and what happens? The great Dennis Pryor decides to fly solo once again.” He perched his hands on Dennis’s desk. “My calculations were based on what I thought were our final plans.”

Ben’s words hit Dennis hard. “We had a deadline, Ben—”

“And I delivered every time, Dennis! You’re the one who didn’t meet the deadline! And maybe I’m not as sociable with the rest of the team as you think I should be, but so what? Preferring to work alone doesn’t make me a bad employee, Dennis. And why wouldn’t I want to work alone? Why wouldn’t any of us? All you do is complain. Nothing’s ever good enough, not for you it isn’t. You want us to be a great team so that you can keep climbing the ladder. Well, believe it or not, Dennis, some of us come to work with loftier goals than making you look good!” Ben gave Dennis a hard look. “I mentioned sloppy financials in our meeting the other day. Well, I wasn’t talking about my sloppiness. I was talking about yours!” His words hit Dennis hard. “I’ve worked my fingers to the bone for this company, we all have, and the first chance you got you threw me under the bus for no reason. And then Sweigert promoted you instead.” Ben rubbed his hands through his hair. “I know coincidences happen, but come on! You trash me to the boss one day and then I lose the promotion the next. I’d say that’s more than a coincidence, wouldn’t you?”

Complete silence filled the room while Dennis grappled with what to say. “Ben, I wasn’t trying to sabotage you.”

“Well, you did.”

“Ben, I’m sorry. I had no idea you felt this way. I mean, I knew you were disappointed, and I knew there was some animosity between us, but that happens when two people are going after the same job. But I never thought you blamed me.”

“Disappointed? You have no idea, Dennis.”

Dennis glanced at the Post-it note again.

1. *What do you do? For now, I work at SI.*
2. *Why do you do what you do? Because no one else is hiring.*

“Ben, you’re the best financial person I’ve ever worked with. You understand figures better than anybody, and I mean that. Our team needs you if we’re going to get back on top. I don’t blame you for looking for other opportunities. I’d probably be doing the same thing. But for now, I need you to be on board one hundred percent.”

“Well, I don’t have any other choice right now do I?”

“You always have a choice, Ben. Maybe you can’t control whether other people’s work is up to your standards, but you can control yours. And I think there’s a way you can elevate yourself in Sweigert’s eyes.”

“Meaning what?” Ben asked.

Dennis slid two proposals across the desk. “Do these look familiar?”

Ben studied each one. “Gaston Electronics? Warner Circuitry? We didn’t get either one of these accounts.”

“I know. But I believe if we fix the issues we can make another pitch to them. I saw where Gaston was calling for new proposals. That means that the door is still open. There’s a lot of work to do, Ben. I screwed these up pretty badly. But I think you can fix them.”

Ben dropped the proposals on Dennis’s desk. “Even if I wanted to, I don’t have the authority to direct the team to do anything.”

“You do now. I’m giving it to you, Ben. I want you to take the lead. You know I can’t promise you anything, but if you can salvage either one of these you’re going to look pretty darned great to Sweigert. The timeline is really tight though.”

“Like how tight?” Ben asked.

“Like three weeks, and that’s stretching it. I know it’s short notice, so I’ll understand completely if you say no.”

Ben sat us in his chair and looked at Dennis. “Why are you doing this?”

“Let’s just say that we’re supposed to clean up our own messes. They teach that in Kindergarten, you know.”

\*\*\*\*

Dennis loved the smell of fresh-cut wood. He placed the new wood on the lathe and flipped the switch, causing the old machine to hum and whine. He alternated chisels and smiled as the first few sprays of sawdust covered his hands. A proud sense of accomplishment filled his heart as the wood started to resemble the spindle needed for the cypress cradle. For an expert like Joshua, the moment would’ve been one in many thousands. But for Dennis, it was a first—his first cradle spindle. Once the sanding process started he’d stop and check his work. He carefully ran his fingertips down the wood and into every curve and crevice. His attention to the tiniest details had never been keener.

“Looks pretty good, Dennis,” Joshua said. “Any rough spots?”

“Just a few,” he commented. “Mostly in those hard-to-reach spots, though. They’re practically hidden.”

“To the buyer, maybe,” Joshua said. “But to the creator, never. The creator knows where the imperfections are, Dennis. And he is constantly working to smooth out the rough spots. That’s how he shows that his creation is important to him. He loves it too much to let it settle for less than it could be.” He patted Dennis on the shoulder. “Pretty amazing, huh?”

Dennis smiled. “Yes, sir. Pretty amazing.”

“You are doing a fine job cleaning up your mess, Dennis. And just so you know, the process carries over into other parts of our lives too.”

Keep Your Workplace Clean:

Why it Matters

Messes are inevitable. You make them. I make them. Some of them are completely unintentional. Others, whether we want to admit it or not, are very intentional.

Messes tend to take on a life of their own. Sometimes the goal of our mess never materializes. Sometimes it’s worse. The bigger a mess becomes, the more likely it is to affect other people—people you may have never intended to involve.

Some people are professional mess-makers. They’re just messy. Other people have messes thrust upon them. They don’t always create the mess but they are often called upon to clean up the mess. So, do you fall into either category?

I bet that we’ve all said something we wished we wouldn’t have said. Or sent an email that we later regretted. Or passed along some gossip because we weren’t the one being talked about. It happens. But when you realize that a mess exists, either of your own making or not, what do you do?

Unattended messes don’t magically get cleaned up. There’s not a “Mess Fairy” on your job that shows up after hours and makes everything right, is there? So, what do you do?

First, own your part of the mess. Whether your part in creating the mess was 90% or 1%, own whatever part is yours. Acknowledge your mess. Everybody else knows it your mess anyway. And then clean up your mess! Part of being a leader that people will follow is taking responsibility for yourself and cleaning up your messes. Leaders make messes too. And messes made by leaders are often much more public than messes made by other people. So, what should you do if you’re the leader and you’ve made a mess? Take the time, get your hands dirty, realize that some of those affected by your mess may not understand or appreciate your efforts, but get busy cleaning up your mess anyway! Apologize to anyone you may have hurt, whether intentionally or not. Everyone appreciates a leader who acknowledges their mistakes and takes steps to correct them. Why? Because we’ve all been there.

What if you’re the leader and there’s a mess at your job and you didn’t have anything to do with it? That happens. When that’s the case you really have two options: You could choose to ignore the mess and hope it goes away. It might involve employees you don’t particularly like. Or it could seem so insignificant that it doesn’t make a bleep on your leadership radar screen. You may try the “Mess? Mess? What mess?” approach. Just remember that you can only use that option once.

The other option is to address the mess. Addressing a mess is—messy. The mess-makers need to know that you are aware of the mess they’ve made. They also need to know your expectations moving forward. If you don’t address the mess, the mess will grow. People who weren’t involved in the mess to start with will soon join the pile and add more mess.

I’ve tried both approaches—ignore the mess and address the mess. There’s no question which option is easier. There’s also no question which option your employees are waiting and wanting to see.

One of the biggest messes I’ve ever dealt with was created by two employees. I had absolutely zero to do with it. It was a secret mess but it didn’t stay a secret for long. This particular mess made me sick to my stomach. I cared deeply for both of these employees, but it was a personal issue between the two and I absolutely did not want to get involved. The whole issue made me feel incredibly uncomfortable. And then, in a matter of hours, it happened. The mess started to explode. Employees started taking sides. Things got ugly in a hurry. I was sure there was a mushroom-shaped cloud of pure mess hovering over my campus. I consulted with my superintendent and then addressed the mess with both mess-makers. Their mess couldn’t be cleaned up with a broom and dustpan. I did make it clear that the mess only belonged to two people—them! No one else needed to be involved. I also told them that failure to clean up the mess could negatively impact their future employment. It was that kind of a mess. And then I switched hats from Mess Police Chief to Fire Chief of the Mess Department. I started putting out fires all over campus. And I gently reminded my mess informants that fire-starters would be dealt with harshly. As the leader, I had to take action. I had to remember that I didn’t have the option of taking things personally. It was my job to make sure that nothing interfered with learning on our campus. Did I make some people mad? Yes! Did some question my decision-making ability? Of course! Oddly enough, some of the angriest individuals were people who weren’t directly involved in the mess at all. But that goes with the job.

I had a conversation with a young leader a few years ago that has stuck in my memory. I think maybe the reason I remember it is because I completely disagreed with what he said. He had made a major mistake in judgment and we were talking about it one afternoon. He asked me what I thought he should do and I told him. His calm demeanor disappeared. His face looked like someone had turned it with a wrench. And then he spoke. *“My mentor told me to never admit a mistake. And for sure to never admit a mistake in writing. That just shows weakness.”* His tone and defensive posture spoke volumes. Let’s just say there was no way I was going to change his mind. Unfortunately, many leaders have adopted a similar philosophy. I can’t imagine working in an environment where no one, leaders included, ever admitted they’re wrong about anything.

Most messes are survivable. If you created the mess, the key is to clean it up yourself and make sure that you don’t keep making the same messes over and over again. If you didn’t create the mess, then address the mess. People are depending on you. Keep your workspace and the workspaces you’re responsible for clean!

IX. Finish Your Work

Fall rushed in like a whirlwind. As the days passed, Dennis continued to learn from the cradle maker. He found himself spending more and more time at the workshop and getting home later and later. “You look tired, babe. You feeling alright?” he asked as he melted into the couch.

Sidney stretched and yawned. “I am tired. I’ve been cleaning out the attic. You wouldn’t believe how much junk we've accumulated in the last ten years. Seriously, Dennis. Your old baseball trophies? And that set of barbells and weights? The biggest workout they ever gave you was when you stubbed your toe on one of them and then hopped all over the house screaming bloody murder. Not to mention all of those old books you have crammed into that rusty old footlocker. They stink so bad that not even the mice will eat the pages. That ought to tell you something.”

Dennis’s eyebrows shot straight up. “Yeah, me and all my junk. Of course, I’d never mention that hope chest of yours,” he said ever-so-casually. “I keep hoping you’ll throw it out before the termites get fat and sue us. And then there’s that hunched-over dress maker’s dummy that scares the living daylights out of me whenever I see it in the dark. It’s like an obese female version of the headless horseman. That thing has led to profanity more than once, Sid. And you may not know this, but I swear it gets up and dances when we’re not around. I can hear it late at night hopping around on the attic floor. And, let’s see, what else?”

Sidney swatted his shoulder. “Okay, okay. You made your point. Our necessary junk can stay. But it has to be reorganized. I can hardly walk around up there.”

“Well, don’t overdo it. I can help you this weekend,” he said, “unless the dummy decides to help instead.”

“I won’t overdo it. But hey, look on the bright side, I get help from a dummy either way, right?” Sidney laughed. “And since I look so tired, how about a back rub?”

\*\*\*\*

Dennis stared at the paper taped to his chair.

1. *What do I do? Graphic design. Brochures.*
2. *Why do I do what I do? Satisfaction. Clancy*

All of the members of his team had responded. Each had a solid grasp of what they do, but they were all over the page when it came to why they do what they do. Dennis spread the notes across his desk. *No one else is hiring. Satisfaction. It’s what I do best. Paying off college loans.*

“I can’t believe you kept those,” Edgar said.

Dennis leaned back in his chair. “I guess I just needed to know what made everybody tick. Anything I can help you with?”

“Just wanted to tell you that our team is back on track because of you. I don’t know what happened, Dennis, but we’re glad the old you is back.”

Dennis felt a rush of gratitude overwhelm him. He stood and extended his hand. “Me too, Edgar.”

“You know the numbers for the new quarter are due in a few weeks. And we’re all hoping that you and everybody else gets to come back full-time. We need you.”

“I appreciate that, Edgar. I really do.”

Dennis stopped by Ben Green’s office to check on the progress of their new proposals, but he wasn’t there. A note on the door said he was out of the office until 1:00. Their meeting would have to wait until later.

\*\*\*\*

Lesa Lehman was sweeping off her front porch when Dennis pulled into the driveway. “Hey, Dennis,” she said with a wave. “It’s so good to see you today. Joshua said to meet him in his office.”

Dennis waved back. “Ok, thanks, Mrs. Lehman.” He stopped as she loudly cleared her throat. “Sorry, I forgot. Thanks, Lesa!”

Dennis reached the top of the stairs and tapped on the office door.

“Come on in, Dennis.” Joshua was seated at his desk, “And how are you today?”

“I’m good. And you?” Dennis asked as he took a seat.

“Some days good, some days not so good. Today’s somewhere in the middle,” he said, rubbing his chest. “I have something to discuss with you, Dennis, and it’s very important.”

Dennis eyed him carefully. Joshua didn’t seem to be himself. His face looked haggard, his workspace was in disarray. “Are you okay, Joshua?”

“Me? I’m fine,” he said with a huff. “Just a little tired. Old age isn’t reversible, you know.” He took a sip from his cup and fidgeted back and forth in his chair. “That’s enough complaining out of me for one day. Dennis, you’ve done some very good work. You’ve gotten pretty good—not as good as me of course—but pretty good at picking out good materials. You’ve learned how important it is to stick to the plans. And you’ve learned how to clean up your messes. Did I ever tell you that they teach that in Kindergarten?”

“Once or twice,” Dennis said, his voice cracking. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

The old man rubbed his chest again. “I’m going to be okay, Dennis. Don’t you worry.” He took a deep labored breath. “I need you to finish your work. All of it. The cypress cradle. Dennis, it’s beautiful! A real work of art. But you need to finish it. It needs at least two more coats of stain. And sealer. Don’t forget to seal it.”

“I promise I’ll get to it.”

“So many things I was going to get to one of these days,” Joshua said slowly. His tired gray eyes pierced Dennis’s soul. “Today, Dennis. Do not put off your work.”

“But—”

“Would you put your baby in an unfinished cradle?” the old man said between coughs.

“No, sir,” was all Dennis could say.

Joshua thumbed through one of his notepads. “It’s here someplace.” He struggled to turn the pages. “Ahh, here it is.” Joshua carefully tore the page out, folded it, and handed it to Dennis. “This is for you. It is very important.” He coughed again. “Maybe I need to go inside for a little while. Will you lock up when you’re done?”

“Sure, Joshua. Can I help you down the stairs?”

Joshua waved him off. “I’ve been walking these stairs since before you were born. I know the way.” Dennis watched him shuffle to the door and hobble his way down the steps.

Dennis opened the folded piece of paper that Joshua had given him.

*I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. John 17:4*

Then he folded the paper and placed it in his shirt pocket. Before leaving the office, he took another look at the pictures on the wall. They were a major part of Joshua’s story. His wedding day. His son. His daughter. His first cradle. Each represented significant moments in his life, each preserved to tell a story to future generations. Dennis stared at the pictures and wondered. Wondered if he’d have pictures like those to hang on his walls one day. And wondered if he’d ever have the legacy and influence that Joshua had.

Dennis went downstairs and got busy on the cradle. His focus and attention to detail had never been greater. He lightly sanded every inch of the cradle one more time, taking extra care to not miss a spot. Then he gently brushed on two extra coats of stain, followed by two coats of sealer.

Dennis washed out his brushes before taking one last look at the finished product. It was beautiful, just like Joshua said. Dennis was speechless. He couldn’t believe that he’d helped create something so perfect. His thoughts turned to the old man. He thought of all that Joshua had done for him. He took a deep breath and tried to find the right words.

*Lord, it’s me, Dennis. I guess you already know that with you being God and all. Joshua really needs your help. I think he’s sick. So I’d be grateful if you’d help him out. I guess that’s all. Amen*

*\*\*\*\**

“Do you need this paper?” Sidney asked as she threw Dennis’s dirty clothes into the washer.

“What paper?”

“It was in your pocket. Hold on a minute,” she said as she unfolded the note. “It’s a Bible verse. ‘I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. John 17:4’*”* she read aloud.

“Don’t throw it away, Sid. I want to keep it.”

Sidney joined him at the table. “What’s it for?”

Dennis laid the note on the table. “Joshua gave it to me today. He said it was really important. So, that’s why I stayed late tonight—to finish the cradle.” Dennis sighed heavily. “Sid, he just looked so sick.”

Sidney leaned in closer. “You’re really worried about him, aren’t you?”

Dennis nodded. A small tear streaked down his face. “Sid, that old man has changed my life. I mean, at first, I didn’t know what to make of him. He was so particular about everything. Every detail mattered. We spent almost three hours at Sanderson’s just looking at wood.”

“I know,” Sid answered.

“And everything had to be done his way. Sid, do you know how hard it is for me to do something one way when I think there might be a better way?”

“Better than most, babe. I’m married to you, remember?”

“And all that talk about working for a higher purpose and the Bible verses and cleaning up your messes. And finishing what you start. All of it has made me more conscious of what I do and why I do it. I’ve used a lot of what Joshua has taught me at SI, and guess what, Sid. It works. Because of that old man, I might be back at work full-time again as early as next week.”

“We’ve got a lot to be thankful for, don’t we?”

“We sure do, Sid. We sure do.”

\*\*\*\*

The next day Dennis met with Ben Green, who gave him an update on his progress with the proposals. “I can’t believe you got this done in less than three weeks.”

“It hasn’t been easy, I can tell you that,” Ben responded. “But I feel really good about the work. I think we have a real shot with both companies.”

“I’m really proud of you, Ben. Your work is flawless.”

“Thanks. But you never know what might swing a deal one way or the other.”

Dennis thought for a moment. “To help seal the deal, offer them an extended warranty,” he instructed, and then added, “on us.”

Ben’s eyes shot open. “Can we do that?”

“We’re going to.”

“That might be the clincher. I have a meeting with Walt Eddings from Gaston at 1:30. And another with Warner Circuitry at 3:00.”

“Who are you meeting with from Warner?”

Ben exhaled. “Iris Linder.”

Dennis shook his head. “Iris the virus.”

“Or Linder the blender,” Ben added, “take your pick.”

Dennis shrugged. “She’s old school for sure. I’ve dealt with her before, albeit unsuccessfully. No matter what she says, she’s all about making money. And deep down in her crusty old soul, she knows that we provide her the best opportunity to do that. Just give her the facts and work your magic.”

“That’s what I’m planning to do. I’ll keep you posted.”

\*\*\*\*

After having lunch with Sidney and a longer than anticipated nap, Dennis headed for the Lehman’s. Lesa Lehman met Dennis in the driveway. “Sorry, I’m late. I laid down for a few minutes and dozed off.” He noticed the worried look on Lesa’s face. “Is everything alright?’

“Joshua isn’t feeling well today, Dennis. He didn’t sleep well last night. He just tossed and turned.” Lesa stared at Dennis and took a deep breath. “This morning I went to check on him and he wasn’t in our room. You want to guess where he was?”

“I bet I know,” Dennis offered,

“I went into the shop and everything was spotless. Then I went up to his office and he was asleep at his desk. All of his papers and notepads were neatly stacked. The windows had been cleaned too. It took some pleading, but I finally got him to come back into the house and lie down. I even tried to get him to go to the doctor, but you know how he gets.”

“Yes, ma’am. Is there anything you need me to do?”

“Well, Joshua mumbled something about an unfinished order and said to tell you to fill it. Do you know what he’s talking about?”

Dennis thought for a minute. “I know we have a few orders, but there aren’t any that we’re even close to finishing. In fact, I think he’s still working on the sketches.”

“He’s been mumbling all morning, a lot of gibberish,” she said, wringing her hands. “Maybe he’s just confused. He gets like that sometimes.”

“I’ll look around, Mrs.—Lesa, and see if I can figure it out.”

Dennis looked all over the shop. The cypress cradle was right where he’d left it. The sketches for the new orders were on Joshua’s workbench. They were hand-drawn in pencil, the way Joshua did everything. And they were perfect. All of the tools were in place. There wasn’t another project in sight. Dennis sat at the workbench he’d called home for the last two and a half months and thought about how much his life had changed since he started working for the cradle maker. What he first thought would be an inconvenience had turned into a life-changing experience. And the peculiar old man who never seemed to be satisfied had become more than a boss, he’d become a trusted mentor and friend. The buzzing of his cellphone interrupted his thoughts. It was a text from Mr. Sweigert. *Please come by my office ASAP.*

With no work to do at Joshua’s, at least none he could find, Dennis decided to make the drive back downtown to Sweigert Industries. It was almost 4:30 by the time he arrived. Mr. Sweigert was all smiles when he entered his office. “Dennis, I don’t know how you did it, but you did it!”

Dennis wasn’t sure what to make of his comments. “Did what, sir?”

“The proposals! We got the contracts for Gaston Electronics and Warner Circuitry! Big contracts, Dennis!”

Dennis felt numb all over. “Both? We got both?”

“Yes, we got both and we’ve got you to thank, Dennis Pryor! They both preferred us anyway. They just needed us to clean up a few things. And you did! The old you is back and better than ever! Are you ready to come back full-time? Take tomorrow off and celebrate! Take Sidney somewhere nice. And I’ll see you on Monday.”

Back to full-time? Already? A day off? “Uh—sure! But, Mr. Sweigert, there’s something you need to know.”

Mr. Sweigert’s smile suddenly disappeared “You aren’t leaving us, are you? At least give me the chance to make a counteroffer.”

“No, it’s nothing like that, Mr. Sweigert. I just need to clear some things up.” Dennis took a deep breath. “Do you remember when we lost those contracts and I told you that Ben’s calculations were wrong?”

“They were wrong,” Mr. Sweigert interjected, “I did the math myself.”

“Yeah, but they were wrong because I made some changes to the designs at the last minute and forgot to tell Ben to recalculate the costs. I did a rush job so we wouldn’t be late. And it ended up being a big mess, Mr. Sweigert. But it was my mess.” Dennis tried to decipher the look on Mr. Sweigert’s face. “And when we decided to try to do damage control and resubmit these proposals, I gave the reins to Ben. He’s the one who did all of the work. And he’s the one who deserves the credit.”

Mr. Sweigert took a seat behind his desk and picked up his phone. “Tell Ben that I need to see him. Yes, right now.” Seconds later, Ben Green walked in and took a seat. Dennis shrugged as they made eye contact. “You two have put me in an awkward and unfamiliar situation. First, Ben, you came in here and told me how appreciative you were of Dennis’s leadership and how much it meant to you that he allowed you to take the lead on a project. And not an hour later, Dennis, you march in here and say that Ben did all of the work and deserves the credit. That’s a first for me, boys.”

Dennis and Ben stared at each other. “I think maybe we were both wrong in the beginning,” Ben said. “And then we were both right in the end.”

Dennis nodded in agreement. “I’d say that’s about right. We knew we had work to do, incomplete work. I think maybe we’ve learned a little more about finishing a project the right way.”

“Well, whatever it was, I have a problem. Dennis, I can’t wait for you to be back leading your team full-time, but you’re going to be one team member short. I’ve decided to make Ben here the head of research and development. That is if he wants the job.”

Dennis laughed at the look of bewilderment on Ben’s face. “Ben, you better give him an answer before he changes his mind.”

“If I want the job? Are you kidding me? The head of research and development? Of course, I want the job! I gotta call my wife!” He jumped up and shook Dennis’s hand. “I owe you big time.” Then he reached across Mr. Sweigert’s desk and vigorously shook his hand. “You won’t be disappointed, sir.”

“Before you go, fellas, I want you to know that I feel a bit re-energized too.” Mr. Sweigert motioned for them to sit back down. “I don’t share personal information very often. My generation, well, we tend to keep stuff more personal than you younger guys do these days. I guess I’m just getting old, a relic of the past.” He tapped his fingers nervously on his desk. “When my first wife died, that was a long, long time ago, I thought I’d never feel like my old self again. She meant everything to me. Everything.” He muffled a cough and continued. “And then I lost her to an invisible enemy—cancer. We had had those crazy conversations, you know the ones where you’re just talking and you tell her that if something ever happened to you that you’d want her to remarry and go on with life, and then she tells you the same thing. Well, neither one of us ever thought it might actually happen.” Dennis and Ben glanced at each other, neither knowing what to say. “We had two children, a boy, and a girl. Seth and Sarah. Great kids. Seth was only three at the time. Sarah was six. Up to that point I hadn’t been involved much in their upbringing, you know the day-to-day stuff that most men are clueless about. Well, I figured as long as they got fed and jumped in the tub a few times a week everything would be alright. But kids need more than frozen dinners and bubble baths. I did the best I knew how to do, but they needed a momma. So, I made a terrible mistake and quickly married again to a wonderful lady,” he said before pausing to clear his throat.

“I don’t get it, Mr. Sweigert,” Ben said. “How could it be a terrible mistake if you married a wonderful lady?”

“She was a wonderful lady, fellas. Just not the right lady for me. We didn’t even last a year. I’ll tell you something else—It wasn’t her fault, boys,” he said, leaning back in his chair. Dennis and Ben stared at their boss, neither able to speak.

“You know, I suppose you never forget your first love,” he said with a smile. “But you know me, I can be moody sometimes and when she didn’t do things exactly the way my first wife did, I just couldn’t handle it. So, I ended up losing her too. My family, even my dear sweet old momma, God rest her soul, told me I needed to slow down, but moving slowly has never been in my DNA. So, I decided to wrap my arms around the only thing I was good at—work. For a long, long time, that’s all that mattered. I didn’t want to be hurt or to hurt anyone else ever again.” He swiveled his chair around and retrieved a small picture from his credenza. “And then the years marched by and I met Lois. I never realized how lonely I was until I met her. She was all I could think about. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t think straight. I tell you boys, it was like I was back in high school all over again,” he said with a hearty laugh. “She was right for me, boys. She’s taught me that every day is a precious gift and that there were more important things in life than circuit boards and making money. Once I figured that out, my life changed for the better. And things have been good, really good ever since.” He returned the picture to its place. “You boys are still young. You’ve got a lot of life in front of you. I hope you make every minute count! Because one of these days you’re going to look in the mirror and see an old man. And it won’t be me, fellas.” Mr. Sweigert rubbed his hands and stared at his desk. “Boys, I love your enthusiasm but don’t make the same mistakes I did. Don’t forget to enjoy life while you’re making a living. Like that old saying goes, you’ve got to stop and smell the roses sometimes. And I guarantee you if you really look around, there are a lot of roses in your life. Promise me you’ll do that.”

“Yes, sir, Ben answered.

“We will,” Dennis added.

“Excellent!” Mr. Sweigert said. “Now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I’ve got to go to the ballpark. My grandson has a game tonight.”

\*\*\*\*

Dennis couldn’t wait to get home and tell Sidney the news. “It was the craziest thing ever, Sid. First, there I am spilling my guts about how I messed up those proposals in the first place and I’m almost positive that I’m about to get fired and then Ben comes in and everything’s great. I am so relieved! Even Mr. Sweigert opened up a little bit.”

“Melvin Sweigert III opened up? That’s a first,” Sidney said.

“I know. We were getting ready to leave his office and he starts telling us his life story. I mean, all these years people have said he was a player and cold-hearted to the core. Like Ebenezer Scrooge only worse. But none of that is true, Sid. He’s been through a lot of heartaches. It’s given me a whole new level of respect for him.”

“That’s great, honey. Did he say anything about you getting to go back to work full-time?”

“Yeah, he said next week!”

“What about your other job? What are you going to tell Joshua?”

In all of his excitement, he hadn’t thought about how hard it was going to be to leave Joshua. That part-time job had had a full-time effect on his life. He hated to leave while Joshua wasn’t feeling well. “He’ll understand, Sid. We both knew this was going to be short-term. Besides, I don’t know how much longer his health will allow him to work. Sweigert gave me the day off tomorrow. I’ll go by and check on him.”

\*\*\*\*

The sound of the telephone broke the morning silence. Dennis rubbed his eyes and rolled over toward Sid. She wasn’t there. He could smell coffee and bacon. It was going to be a good morning. He stumbled his way to the kitchen. “Hey, babe,” he said kissing her. “That smells great.”

“Hey. Coffee’s on the counter. You want breakfast?”

“Maybe just a bacon sandwich,” he said before taking a sip of coffee. “I want to get over to Joshua’s and talk to him.”

“Oh, you don’t have to go today. He called just a while ago.”

Dennis was confused. “Joshua called? What did he say?”

“Just that you didn’t need to come by today.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, he said he was going to see his son. I think he said his name was Aaron.”

Coffee spewed out of Dennis’s mouth. “Did you say, Aaron?”

Sidney grabbed a paper towel. “Yeah. He said he hadn’t seen him in a long time, but that he was looking forward to seeing him today.”

“Sid, that’s impossible.”

“Why? What’s the matter?”

“His son, Aaron, died in Vietnam in 1967.”

Dennis and Sidney quickly dressed and sped over to the Lehman’s. Lesa Lehman answered the door. “Dennis, I am so glad you’re here. He’s been asking to see you.” She looked at Sidney. “And you must be Sidney. You are every bit as beautiful as Dennis said you were.”

“Thank you,” Sidney said shyly.

“May I see him?” Dennis asked.

“Certainly. Sidney, you come too.” Lesa Lehman led them into the bedroom she’d shared with Joshua for more than sixty years. Joshua was propped up by two pillows and breathing deeply.

“Joshua,” Lesa whispered. “Joshua, you have visitors.”

Joshua Lehman’s eyes flickered a few times before opening. He stared at Dennis, then at Sidney. “You picked a pretty one, Dennis,” he said with a wink. “If only you could pick good wood as well.”

Dennis laughed. “Yeah, she’s beautiful, isn’t she? Joshua, this is Sidney.”

“It’s an honor to finally meet the lady who has to put up with this guy,” he said, pointing at Dennis. “You have such a beautiful smile.”

Sidney blushed. “Joshua, it’s so good to finally meet you. Dennis has told me so much about you and how much he’s learned from you. I’m so grateful to you both.”

Joshua Lehman lifted his hand. “My dear, we—me and my Lesa—we’re the ones who are grateful. Dennis brought new life into our home. And he helped an old man finish some important projects.” He looked out the window towards his shop, then back at Dennis. “Did you finish the last job I gave you?”

Dennis shot a glance at Lesa and shrugged. “I looked around the shop for an order to fill, but I couldn’t find one. I mean, the drawings for the new orders were there, but none that I could finish.”

Joshua laughed. “Fill it, Dennis.”

“But there aren’t any orders I can fill without your help, Joshua.”

“There is one,” Joshua smiled. “The cradle. The cypress one. It is a gift for you and Sidney. Fill it.”

“A gift?” Dennis said, choking back tears.

“You did the work, Dennis. And it is a beautiful cradle,” Joshua beamed. “I couldn’t have done better myself. And just in case you’re wondering, yes, I would put my baby in it.” Joshua coughed and patted his chest. “One day you will be able to look your children in their beautiful little eyes and tell them that their dear old dad built that cradle with his own hands. That is a special thing, my friend. So, fill it.”

Dennis felt Sid’s hand on his shoulder as he knelt by Joshua’s bedside, his face streaked with tears. He tenderly grasped the old man’s hand. “Joshua, I’d be proud to put our baby in that cradle one day. We’ll treasure it always.”

“Well then, there’s just one thing left for you to do.” Joshua’s eyes flickered once more, his chest slowly rose and fell. “Finish the work,” he said with a wink. “Always do your best. And finish your work.” The old man’s eyes slowly closed. Dennis stood by Sidney, his heart ached with sorrow.

Lesa Lehman gently walked over to her husband’s side and gently stroked his head. She held his hands in hers and leaned over and gently kissed his forehead. “You’re a good man, Joshua Lehman, and I thank God for the gift of you.” Tears were streaming down her face like waterfalls. “Tell Aaron that I will see y’all soon.” Joshua’s eyes flickered once as his chest slowly rose and fell once more.

Joshua extended his clenched hands toward the foot of the bed and whispered, “Aaron, I’ve missed you, son.” His eyes slowly closed for the last time. His hands, the same hands that had loved Lesa, held and comforted his children, and created beautiful cradles, fell open, revealing his Star of David pendant. With that, Joshua Lehman, a faithful husband, loving father, trusted servant of God, and devoted cradle maker was gone.

Finishing Your Work:

Why it Matters

The world is full of great people with great ideas. Some of them turn out to be quite successful. Others, though their ideas are just as good or even better, oftentimes just flame out. What’s the difference? Some people learn how to master the art of finishing faster than others.

To not finish a job signifies that it wasn’t that important. We finish what’s important to us. If we’re in the middle of a great movie or watching an exciting ball game, we’ll put off almost everything until it is finished. We have to know how it ends. But even if the movie or game doesn’t turn out the way we wanted, there’s really nothing of lasting value at stake. Okay, you might be upset if your team loses the World Series or disappointed that you spent a lot of money to see a movie that was a real dud. That happens. Screaming louder at the TV didn’t change the score of the game, did it? Throwing popcorn at the screen didn’t make the movie any better, did it? Nothing you do will change the outcome. But so what? There’s always next season. New movies come out all of the time. Second chances for greatness abound.

Real-life can sometimes be a bit trickier. We don’t always get to choose which team we’re on and in real life, our actions do have an impact on the final outcome. We don’t get to decide where the finish line is or how soon we’ll cross it. We do get to decide how we’re going to perform today. Like the song says, *Yesterday’s gone and tomorrow may never be mine.* But today is mine. It’s right here in my hands! As I type these words, it’s Tuesday, October 12, 2021. Plenty of other Tuesdays and Julys will come and go. But Tuesday, October 12, 2021, will only pass through this world one time. And God has given this day to me as a precious gift. I have tasks to start. I have next steps to take. I have jobs to finish. I want to make the most of it!

Do you approach your work that way? Whatever you produce, whether it's widgets, cradles, or spaceships, are you a finisher? One of the things I’ve learned over the years is that very few new projects are given to people who don’t know how to finish. Grant writing is a big part of what I do. My boss has never once said, “Larry, I need you to go after this grant, but it doesn’t matter if you ever finish it. As long as you walk fast and look busy, we’re fine.” I’m going to bet your boss has never said that or anything close to it to you either.

No matter what kind of work you do, someone is counting on you to complete the work you have in front of you. People are depending on you. Does that matter to you? It should! Walking fast and looking busy won’t take you very far. Look at it this way, people who walk fast on the job are either afraid someone’s gaining on them or they’re already behind. If you have to “look busy” you definitely need to revisit your job description. There have been thousands of leaders who’ve come and gone that always looked busy but they rarely produced anything. As a leader, you won’t ascend any higher in your organization if you get a reputation for not finishing your work. If you are an aspiring leader, your chances of climbing the ladder are almost zero if you can’t deliver when you are needed the most.

Finishing matters. Think about all of the great ideas that have been born. As a school administrator and pastor, I have seen some great ideas gain tremendous traction and then die on the vine. Why? Because there were plenty of “starters,”—people who suggest all of the great ideas, a smaller number of “joiners,”— people who get excited and join the work after the initial work is done, and hardly any “finishers,”—people who have enough grit to persevere and finish the work in front of them. Few people want to run the anchor leg of the relay. Plenty of people think they do, but what they really want is all of the glory without any of the responsibility.

I know that some of you are probably thinking, “Well, yeah, but I’m not on the team that finishes the products. I’m a designer, an architect, a third-grade teacher, a cashier, a marketer, etc. Awesome! Do you finish YOUR part of the job? Is it the very best it can be? Does it matter to you what other people think of your work? My wife teaches fourth graders. Fourth graders don’t get to don a cap and gown at the end of the year. They finish up and (hopefully) go to fifth grade. She doesn’t get to put the finishing touches on the final product, but her part of the process is critical. She wants to produce the most prepared-for-fifth-grade students she can. And she does! She is a finisher!

*I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. John 14:4.*

I believe that one day I will stand before God. And when I do, I hope those powerful words from John 14:4 are ones I can say with confidence. Until then, I need to be a finisher. My wife needs me to be a finisher. My children need me to be a finisher. My coworkers need me to be a finisher.

So, what about you? Are you a finisher? Do you finish strong? Is the quality of work you produce at the end of a project as strong as the work you produced in the beginning? Do you make excuses for not finishing? I think we all do at times, but we can’t allow not finishing to become a habit.

What about the people you are leading? Are they finishers? Have you built a team that knows how to finish well? All of them? Let’s face it, some people have mastered the art of walking fast and looking busy. Sometimes they even complete a few tasks, but the quality isn’t there. They take shortcuts and rarely pay attention to the details. Are you willing to have a hard conversation with team members who’ve demonstrated that they don’t know how or aren’t interested in learning how to finish the right way? Do you make excuses for team members who don’t ever seem to finish? Don’t misunderstand, I know that life can throw us curveballs without any notice. And sometimes those curves can knock us off our game and we need time to regroup. It happens to all of us, but when an employee’s grandmother dies for the 3rd time in six months, you need to have a conversation! Just as you need to set the example by being a finisher, you also need to set the expectation that everyone on the team is required to be a finisher.

1. Celebrate Your Work

Dennis and Sidney walked away from the cemetery hand in hand. The service had been short and sweet. Just like Joshua. When they arrived home, they saw something on their front porch. Dennis recognized it right away.

“It’s the cradle I made,” Dennis said as he knelt to grab the envelope that was taped to the bottom. On the outside was written, “Lesa asked me to deliver this today.” It was signed, *Really Old Jack*.

“Who’s Really Old Jack?” Sidney asked.

Dennis smiled. “It’s a long story, Sid.” He opened the envelope and pulled out a small card. Scrawled in pencil and written in a very recognizable shaky handwriting were the words, “Fill it.” He showed the tag to Sidney. “Get the door and I’ll carry it inside.” Dennis slowly eased through the front door, taking every precaution not to bump or scratch the cradle. He gently placed it on the floor. “So, where do you want it?”

“Just set it there for now,” she said. Sidney reached into her purse. “Close your eyes, Mr. Cradle Maker.”

“What?”

“Close them, Mister. And I mean all the way too. No peaking. I can’t stand for no peaking.”

She grabbed a present out of her purse and held it in front of his face. “I think it would look great,” she said, her voice cracking with every syllable, “in our room.”

“What are you talk—” Dennis opened his eyes and stared at the object in Sid’s hand. “Is that what I think it is?” He looked at Sid. Her eyes were filled with tears.

She shook her head. “Yes, Mr. Cradle Maker, it is. You’re going to be a daddy!”

Dennis rubbed his eyes and stared at the positive pregnancy test. “Are you sure, Sid? I mean, really, really sure?”

“Remember that day about a month ago when you came home for lunch and I wasn’t here? Well, I was at the doctor’s office. And yes,” she cried, “I am sure!”

Dennis almost tackled his wife. “Oh my gosh, Sid! I just love you so much!” He gave Sidney a long, passionate kiss. “I can’t believe it! I’ll go put the cradle in our room!”

“Please do,” Sidney laughed, “but take your time, Daddy. We’ve got several months to wait.”

Dennis stopped in his tracks. “Daddy. I was beginning to think I’d never hear that word,” he cried.

“Well, you better get ready, because you’re going to be hearing it a lot.”

“And what about you, Mommy? Don’t you just love the sound of that name?”

Sidney fanned at her face. “It’s the most wonderful word I’ve ever heard. I am so happy!” She brushed the tears out of her eyes. “I probably look like a raccoon by now.”

“Well, maybe a little one,” Dennis teased. “But you’re my raccoon, and I love you!” Dennis picked up the cradle and saw something he hadn’t noticed before. On the side of one of the legs were the initials *JL*.

“What’s that?” Sidney asked.

“It’s Joshua’s brand. His seal of approval,” Dennis cried. “The creator signed off on his creation. I did a lot of the work, but it was always under his watchful eye. I don’t know when he could’ve done this.”

“Didn’t Lesa say that she found him in his shop that morning? Sidney asked. “Maybe that’s why he went out there, to finish the job.”

“That would be just like him, Sid. He always said that a touch from the creator’s hands made all the difference. I think maybe I finally understand what he meant.”

Several months later, the Pryor’s, Dennis and Sidney, welcomed their son—Joshua Paul Pryor—to their family. A few days later, a new picture was hung on the wall. Life was good.

Later that evening, Sidney smiled as she hummed, “Jesus Loves Me” to her baby son. “He’s definitely got your appetite,” she said between verses.

Dennis mouthed the words to the song. A rush of gratitude filled his heart. “Yeah, but he’s got your smile, Sid. And one day when he’s old enough to understand, we can tell him the story of another Jewish carpenter—Joshua Lehman, the cradle maker.”

Celebrate Your Work:

Why it Matters

We live in a society that celebrates almost everything. Birthdays. Holidays. Happy Hour. Weekends. Births. Marriages. Divorces. Religious observances. Sports teams. You name it and we celebrate it. Everything except our work.

We spend more time at work than anywhere else, yet we rarely celebrate the work we do. People are still people at work. That probably sounds dumb but it’s true. Just because we’re sitting in an office or out on the job site doesn’t mean that we don’t have feelings or hopes and dreams. It’s okay to acknowledge that! And when we’ve done good work, we should celebrate it too!

What does that even look like? I think it depends on the person. A celebration doesn’t have to include cake and punch to be meaningful. For some of us, just having our work and efforts acknowledged is more than enough of a celebration. For others, it might take a bit more. Either way, celebrating our work lightens our loads, spreads encouragement, and increases productivity. I believe that happier workers are more productive workers. What about you?

What do you celebrate at your workplace? It has been said that whatever gets celebrated gets repeated. As a leader, do you acknowledge the efforts and successes of your coworkers? Do you ever tell your employees “thank you” for a job well done? Here’s what I’ve learned about celebrating your work: As the leader, if you don’t do it, no one else will. Find out what motivates your people, and it’s different for different groups of people, and get busy! And don’t worry, it’s a total myth that you can appreciate people too much!

Learning to lead yourself takes time and desire. Whatever you do, always strive to do your very best on your job. Know what you do and why you do it. Don’t forget that other people’s motivations may be different than yours and it's okay! Trust the processes that are in place. Someone has already walked that road. They know what works. Trust them! If you make a mess on your job, clean it up! They teach that in Kindergarten you know! Finally, be a finisher! Always be the person your organization can depend on to get things done and done well. What you do matters. And as a person, so do you!