

Roger and the Parakeet

Once upon a time there was a man named Roger who lived alone. In fact, Roger had lived alone most of his life. True, he had two older sisters while living at home, but they didn't share many common interests. They had the same parents, went to the same schools, even had the same Sunday School teachers; but they just didn't do very many of the same things. His sisters were always active in clubs and other organizations, while Roger tended to be more involved in individual activities, primarily homework and other scholarly projects.

Even when Roger left home for college, he lived alone. He didn't share his dormitory room with anyone else; Roger was used to being alone. And now, in his mid-forties, Roger still lives alone. But Roger was ready for a change in his life. He decided that a small pet would be good. He knew he couldn't have a dog, for the building superintendent wouldn't allow that. But perhaps a fish or a small bird would do.

One Saturday morning, Roger drove to a local pet store. He looked up the address in the telephone book, and had even called them to make sure they were open. Upon entering the store, Roger was surprised to see how many different types of birds and fishes there were in the store. The storekeeper saw the bewilderment on Roger's face, and went over to help him. After a brief dialog, Roger paid for his parakeet and was on his way home.

The next day after church, Roger took a different way home so that he could drive by the pet store. Seeing the "OPEN" sign in the window, Roger pulled into the parking lot and stopped in front of the pet store. Walking into the store, Roger saw the storekeeper, and said to him, "You told me that the parakeet I bought yesterday would sing and talk to me. But he just sits in his cage and does nothing."

The storekeeper replied, "You mean he didn't peck at his bell, and then start singing?"

"His bell?" Roger replied. "He doesn't have a bell in his cage."

"You didn't buy a bell? A bird like that needs a bell to help him get into the mood for singing. When he pecks it, he hears the tone, and then he tries to emulate that sound with his own singing. You need to get him a bell."

"How much is the bell?" Roger asked the storekeeper.

"The nice sounding bell is \$6.95," said the storekeeper. Roger bought a bell and went home.

The next afternoon, Roger rushed out of work so he could stop by the pet store. He was relieved to see that it was still open. In fact, the sign said that the store was open until 7:00 Monday through Friday. Roger walked up to the storekeeper, and the expression on Roger's face showed that he was more than slightly dismayed. "Well, I put that bell in his cage, but that silly parakeet still won't sing or talk to me."

"That's strange. You mean he walked up and down his ladder, then pecked at his bell, and he still wouldn't sing to you?" the storekeeper asked Roger.

"Ladder? What ladder?" Roger asked.

"A parakeet needs a ladder just as you might use a treadmill to get your exercise. You see, a bird will walk up and down a ladder to get the blood moving, and then he will feel like getting going for the day."

"How much for ladder?"

"Eight fifty," replied the storekeeper.

Roger left the store with ladder. He went home and put the ladder in the cage, right next to the bell. The next afternoon, Roger stopped again at the pet store; the fourth straight day he'd been there. Roger was really getting upset now. The storekeeper wasn't to be seen right away, but Roger found him. "That is really some dumb bird you sold me. I put the ladder in his cage, right next to the bell, and he still doesn't sing."

"Hmm. That's strange," began the storekeeper. "You mean he walked up and down his ladder, preened himself in front of the mirror, pecked at his bell, and he still wouldn't sing to you?"

"Wait a minute," said Roger. "What mirror? He did go up and down the ladder, pecked at that bell, but he doesn't have a mirror to look in."

"Oh my," the storekeeper sighed. "You look in the mirror every morning to see how you look, don't you? Well, the parakeet is also a very proud bird, and he needs to look into the mirror to see how he looks."

"How much for the mirror?"

"The mirrors are on special, only five dollars." The storekeeper rang up the mirror and gave it to Roger, who looked less than pleased.

The next day at noon, Roger was there at the pet store with a small bag in his hand. He went straight over to the storekeeper and said, "That bird you sold me died!"

"What," said the storekeeper. "You mean to say that parakeet you bought just last Saturday died?"

"Yes," said Roger. "And I even put that mirror right down near the bottom of the cage so he could look at himself. And then he died."

"Did he ever sing for you?" asked the storekeeper.

"He never sang," said Roger. "But he did finally talk."

"Really? What did he say," asked the storekeeper.

"Well," said Roger. "He did like you said he would do. He walked up and down the ladder several times. Then he went over to the mirror and seemed to puff out his chest as he saw himself there in the mirror. Then he hopped over to the bell and pecked it; and then he just fell over, rolled on his back and stuck his feet straight up in the air."

"But you said he talked," said the storekeeper.

"Oh, yes," remembered Roger. "Right before he fell over, he looked right at me and said, 'Didn't the storekeeper have any birdseed?' "

Moral: Don't forget the basics. Roger did, and his parakeet died.



Can you relate to Roger? Either personally, or do you know someone like him? Roger was doing everything he thought he needed to do. Given the circumstances, he was doing pretty well. Unfortunately for the parakeet, that was not good enough.

What was Roger's one failing, at least in terms of his parakeet? Roger forgot about the basics. Instead of thinking about the parakeet's food — the most basic need for all animals — Roger was thinking more about the extra things, like having the bird sing and talk. This doesn't make Roger a bad person. In fact, every time he would inquire of the storekeeper, basically asking '*what else should I do?*,' Roger would buy what the storekeeper suggested. So it is clear that Roger had good intentions and a good heart.

Have you encountered people in business, perhaps even close associates of yours, who remind you of Roger? These are people who have good hearts, good intentions — they just seem to forget the basics at times. When they get in this mode, they are not doing "bad" intentionally. They think they are doing the right thing; they are just headed off in the wrong direction.

Think of a recent presentation you've sat in. As the presenter was showing slides, what did the slides look like? Most likely, they had fancy graphs and clip art, and they were printed in color. For many presentations, some use of graphs, clip art and color are appropriate. But there are many times when plain black bulleted text items would get the same message across without the distractions that are created with the graphs, clip art and excessive use of color.

Or what about a business paper you read? Was it clear and concise? Were its main points succinctly stated, and were they easy to find? Or did it seem more like a graduate student's paper who was being graded on volume? Too often in business, the author of a paper loses track of the point in why the paper is being written. It is not being written to impress the reading audience with your knowledge and your ability to amass a ton of supporting material; those exercises should be left in the academic world. The primary purpose of a business paper is to "sell" your ideas to the reader. These ideas might range from the implementation of new personnel policies, to the actual sale of a product your company makes. Certainly you will need some background and supporting data, but that should not be the main focus of your paper. Don't let your good ideas get lost in your own verbosity. Remember what you are trying to do, and that is to make your point. So do that, and then stop.

When you are writing a document, do you get hung up on the formatting of the document? Do you spend more time making sure it "looks right," rather than focusing on what it contains? Many people focus more on form than on content. Form is important, but as in the previous example, you need to get your point across. And that is done with content, not with form.

The point in these examples, and in the story of Roger and his unfortunate parakeet, is that you need to remember the basics. You can do additional things later on, but your foundation — whether it is in a new assignment, a product briefing presentation, or a business proposal — must be steeped in the basics of what you are trying to accomplish.

Thanksgiving Dinner

It was the first Thanksgiving dinner for the newlywed couple, and Margaret really wanted to please Dennis, her husband of only five months. She had proven to be quite proficient in the kitchen already, but this was to be the first major test of her culinary skills. They had invited their best friends to be their guests for Thanksgiving dinner in their apartment – John had been Dennis’s Best Man at the wedding, and Alice had been Margaret’s Maid of Honor.

The apartment was spotless when John and Alice arrived, carrying a bouquet of flowers for the centerpiece. Margaret had even bought a new tablecloth for the occasion. The smells emanating from the kitchen were whetting everyone’s appetite, and it was almost time for the feast to begin. The Thanksgiving meal was going to consist of Baked Ham, Sweet Potatoes, Green Beans, a Lettuce Salad and a Fruit Salad, Baked Rolls, various Condiments, and Apple Pie with Ice Cream for dessert. There would be no excuse for anyone to leave the table still being hungry.

“Honey, will you please help me with the ham?” Margaret called out to her husband who was in the living room with John, both of them watching a football game.

“I’ll be right there, Dear,” he replied as he was getting up to head into the kitchen. “It sure does smell great,” he said as he walked past his wife and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Dennis took the hot pads, opened the oven door, and removed the hot baking dish containing the ham. Placing the ham dish on the wooden cutting board, he used a large serving fork to lift the ham out of the dish, placing the ham on the serving dish. As he picked up the sharpened carving knife and started to slice the main course, Dennis noticed that one end of the ham had already been sliced off prior to cooking. “Margaret, Dear.” he began, “Why is one of the ends of the ham already cut off?”

“That’s the way my mother always did it, and the ham always tasted great. I wanted to make sure that the ham tasted just right for today.” Margaret was talking as if she were a seasoned chef teaching a group of young students.

Well, Margaret was right. The Thanksgiving meal was a success. Everything was delicious, and the two couples enjoyed each other’s company. But Dennis was still a little curious about cutting off the end of the ham. The next evening as they were having leftovers for dinner, he asked his wife, “Did you ever think it was strange to cut off the end of the ham before cooking it?”

“No, I didn’t,” Margaret replied. “It is just something that Mom always does when she is cooking a ham. I never gave it any other thought.”

Dennis gave the outward appearance of accepting this answer, but he still thought it was strange. Why would cutting off the end of a ham make it taste better? The following weekend, the young couple was invited to Margaret’s parents’ house for an afternoon cookout. It was cool outside, but the wind was calm, and there was no rain to spoil the barbecue. The steaks were done to perfection, and all the other items were just as tasty, including the delicious Idaho Bakers, special potatoes that were available at only one grocery store in town.

After the dinner, Dennis, Margaret, and her parents started playing a board game. Tonight’s choice was Scrabble. Dennis enjoyed this game, as he did possess a very good command of the English language. While he was waiting for Margaret to form a word, he asked her mother a

question-type statement. “Mrs. Preston, Margaret says you cut off the end of a ham before you cook it, and I am just a little curious as to why you do it.”

“That’s easy, Dennis. My mother, Margaret’s grandmother, showed me that secret when I was learning to cook as a young girl. It really does make the ham taste good, doesn’t it?” Mrs. Preston looked proud as if she were giving away one of her great cooking secrets. “Oh, Maggy. That’s a good word, P-H-E-N-O-M. And the H is a ‘Triple Letter.’ Go ahead and pick six tiles. Good job.”

The Scrabble game continued until past eleven, when Mr. Preston declared that it was time for him to get to bed. The game was picked up and put away, and Dennis and Margaret thanked her parents one more time for the meal, and then said good night.

“You really had some great words tonight, Dear,” Dennis told his wife as they were driving back to their apartment. His statement was certainly correct, but it was probably quite likely that he was saying this just to soothe his own ego for not having won for the first time in over a year.

“Thanks, Honey. I just seemed to get the right letters to make some good combinations. How did you like the steak?”

“Oh, it was great,” Dennis answered. “Your dad sure does know how to cook on the barbecue, doesn’t he? Where did he learn to marinate the steak, and then cook it to perfection?”

“I don’t know,” Margaret said. “I think men just know how to barbecue a steak. After they ruin a few, they just figure out how to do it right.”

Dennis wondered to himself how long it would take him to be able to barbecue a steak to perfection, just like his father-in-law can do. He also wondered again how a ham could taste better just by cutting off one of its ends.

Margaret and Dennis had been invited by her grandmother to visit her, and so they all agreed upon a weekend two weeks before Christmas. When that weekend arrived, Dennis and Margaret drove the three hours to her house. Grandma Smith’s house was immaculate; the hardwood floors possessed a lustrous shine, all the brass fixtures were without fingerprints, and the windows were all spotless. Dennis could see where Margaret’s tendency toward cleanliness came from.

Dinner on Saturday evening was a delightful meal. Grandma Smith lived alone; Grandpa Smith had died five years ago. As they were enjoying the delicious rhubarb pie for dessert, Dennis asked his wife’s grandmother, “Grandma Smith, Margaret’s Mom says you taught her to cut the end off a ham before cooking it. She says that makes it taste better. Could you tell me why?”

“Oh, Dennis, my young boy,” Grandma Smith chuckled as she started to respond to her granddaughter’s husband’s silly question. “I don’t bake too many hams any more, but when I did, I would cut the end of the ham off because my baking dish was too short for the whole ham to fit inside of it.”

Moral: Know why you are doing what you are doing; don’t do it just because “we’ve always done it that way.”



It seems quite clear that Margaret's grandmother, Grandma Smith, had a valid reason for cutting off the end of the ham. She did it so that the ham would fit inside her baking dish. Margaret's mother, however, just copied her own mother, and cut off the end of the ham before cooking – even though her baking dish was sufficiently large to hold the whole ham. And, of course, Margaret then did what she saw in her mother's kitchen. What we see here is a learned behavior that is continued from one generation to the next. While this can be viewed by some as a good behavior, it doesn't seem to be the right behavior in this story of the ham dinner.

How many of us “cut off the end of the ham before cooking”? We might laugh at this question, but we need to understand how this question fits into our individual situations. Do we, unwittingly perhaps, continue a learned behavior when that behavior is no longer needed? Do we have ingrained habits that we adhere to even when they are not appropriate?

Today's electronic calendars and scheduling systems allow us to set our appointments far in advance, and they even allow us to set recurring appointments. For example, if you have a staff meeting every Tuesday at 2:00, you can set your calendar to include this 2:00 appointment on every Tuesday ad infinitum. Occasionally, however, you will find that you are out of town, or there might just be nothing to discuss. There are two options. One choice is that you can go ahead and have the meeting. Another choice is that you cancel the meeting.

This situation has occurred in my professional career. I was working in San Diego for a large multi-national corporation (which is probably best known for copiers), and there was a weekly meeting that I regularly attended. I showed up for the meeting one week, and there was no agenda for that day's meeting. I asked the general manager if we were going to cancel the meeting because there was no posted agenda. His reply was that we would go ahead and have the meeting because “we always have a meeting” that day. And we did; we held the meeting even though there was nothing relevant to discuss. With a response like that, it is no wonder that bureaucracy gets such a bad name!

This example is not meant to say that all learned behaviors are bad. That we know how to read, write, drive cars, etc., are all examples of learned behaviors that we certainly consider to be quite vital to our everyday lives. There are many examples in the working world where a learned behavior is critical – showing up to work on time; processing certain paperwork in its prescribed manner; treating our co-workers with respect; doing what we were trained to do as part of our job description, etc.

What we need to be mindful of, however, are those actions that do not provide a positive contribution. Does your normal business life include activities that are continued on a regular basis primarily because they are “regular activities,” “weekly meetings,” or other “learned behaviors”?

What about your home life? Do you still pre-wash the dinner dishes before loading them into the dishwasher even though this brand-new kitchen appliance contains a pre-wash cycle? Once autumn sets in and the grass is not growing as much as it does during July and August, do you still insist that the yard be mowed with the same regularity?

The point here is NOT that all routinely scheduled activities are wicked, and, therefore, should be discontinued. There are valid reasons for some normalcy in our lives, whether this is at work, or at home, or in our other outside activities. What must be recognized, however, is that it is okay to question the current value of following set routines and traditions. In fact, it might

even be the proper thing to do. There is a popular bumper sticker, which boldly states, “QUESTION AUTHORITY.” I do not condone the blind questioning or disregard of authority just for the sake of questioning or disregarding. To do so would be the same as making a regular habit of questioning regular habits – certainly its own oxymoron.

What is important is to understand why you are doing certain things that have become routine. If your regular meetings are to provide regular updates or additional information that adds some value, then these meetings are, of course, valuable to your normal course of business. If the department’s monthly off-site gathering continues to instill focus, as well engender new ideas and thoughts from the brainstorming sessions, then it certainly appears that these off-sites are a good investment that should be continued. If you still mow the grass every Saturday morning because you like your yard to be neat and conforming every weekend, there is certainly no reason to change your grass cutting habits.

Continue to do those things that add value and which are important to you. There will be enough distractions that will attempt to pull you off course, and so your regular routines may become a safe haven for you. So long as your learned behaviors are well-intentioned, positive and beneficial, then, by all means, do what another popular bumper sticker says, “Keep On Truckin’.”

Maria Julia and the Sand

Maria Julia Martinez lived in a tiny coastal village called La Jolla del Mar — the Jewel of the Sea. This little village was about forty kilometers southeast of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Fishing had long been the mainstay of the village, and most of its residents lived out their lives there. Although Buenos Aires was reachable from La Jolla del Mar, the metropolis had not yet exerted much influence over the lives of the everyday citizens in this small village.

Maria Julia had just turned seventeen, but she had been working most weekends, as well as the previous summer, to help support her large family, a family of four sisters, four brothers, two elderly aunts, and her mother and father. Her father worked on a fishing boat, but his income was rarely steady, and never enough to feed the dozen mouths in their casa. Her younger brothers were not yet old enough to do much but go to school and play soccer.

When Maria Julia worked, she would ride a motor scooter northwest through Buenos Aires, then follow the Rio Uruguay north until she came to the border crossing into Pysandu, Uruguay. Most mornings she had a small box strapped on to the back of the scooter, and the box would be filled with sand, clean white beach sand. Because she had crossed the border into Uruguay so many times, she knew the border guards and they knew her. They would rarely ask to see her passport, but occasionally the guard would ask what she was taking into the country. After all, even the border guards had a job they had to do. Her reply was always the same, "Only this box of sand, señor." And the border guard would wave her on through.

This routine continued for many months — Maria Julia would ride north through Buenos Aires, up along the Rio Uruguay, and then cross the border into Uruguay at Pysandu. One morning, there were two border guards; one of them had an important air about him. The guard who knew Maria Julia was formal in greeting her, and he insisted on knowing what she was bringing into the country. "Only this box of sand, señor." Even though this response was good enough for the regular guard, the senior man insisted on checking the sand. He had his underling remove the box from the scooter, and then pour it out onto the ground. There was nothing there, just sand. After the junior guard got as much of the sand as he could back into the box, he apologized to Maria Julia, saying that there had been reports of smuggling and there were going to be more searches. Maria Julia smiled as she said, "Si, Señor. Adios." She re-boarded the scooter and rode off.

A few weeks later, the same guard who had searched the box of sand along with his commandant was back on duty at the Pysandu crossing. "Buenos dias, Maria Julia," he greeted her as she approached.

"Buenos dias, Señor Gonzalez," she replied. She stopped the scooter to wait for him to wave her through, which was normally automatic. But this time, he didn't.

"Maria Julia," he started, "will you trust me?"

"Si, Señor Gonzalez. You know I trust you as I trust my own father."

"Gracias, Señorita," he responded with his face blushing. He then continued. "Maria Julia, you have been coming through this border crossing for many months now, and I just have a feeling that maybe you are not telling me everything. I promise I will not turn you into the officials, and I will never tell anyone anything that you tell me. But I do need to know. You keep

bringing this box of sand across the border. Is there anything else you are smuggling else into Uruguay?"

"Si, Señor Gonzalez. Scooters."

Moral: Search for details when required, but don't overlook the obvious.



Scooters! Maria Julia was smuggling scooters into the country, and doing it right under Señor Gonzalez's nose. None of the guards thought anything about it because it was too obvious. No one would be so bold as to smuggle something right in the open. Smugglers always hide things they are trying to smuggle. That is why the box of sand was dug into. Surely anything being smuggled into the country would be hidden in the box of sand.

Much of today's business environment requires much more analysis than in previous times. This applies to both the corporate culture as well as the personal financial arena. One of the ways this thirst for analysis is quenched is by digging deeper and deeper into situations for every little bit of detail.

When the country's Gross Domestic Product is announced, every Wall Street analyst is quick with an opinion as to what that particular level of GDP means for the stock market. If the number is "too high," this number of our nation's output is sometimes seen as being bad because it might induce inflation. A low unemployment percentage should be a good indication that more Americans are working, which would then stimulate the economy. "Too low" of a number, however, and it is viewed by many as bad because people will be wanting to buy goods, which drives the prices up, thereby increasing inflation.

It seems that it is hard to have good economic information these days without its being scrutinized for the bad component of that information.

Before we place all the blame on government-reported information and its excessive analysis by financial analysts, we need to look at our own reactions in the business environment. Have you ever read a report from a subordinate, and been overly critical about some obtuse implication or remote possibility, without first recognizing and appreciating the in-your-face positive statement which is being made? Why do we feel that we cannot accept the information as it is provided, without having to microscopically analyze to the point of tedium?

When you are looking for a common stock to add to your personal financial portfolio, how much detail do you pore over before making a decision? Do you "consult with" numerous services, read dozens of reports, and run all kinds of statistical modeling programs before you can settle on "the short list" of stocks from which to choose? Or do you just get the main information, look at a few fundamentals, and then make the decision?

All of us can cite numerous examples in our own personal lives if we just thought about it. Try this experiment sometime, and see what your results are. As you are walking down a sidewalk or in the shopping mall, look strangers straight in the eyes and simply say, "Hello." What do you think the reactions are likely to be? Most strangers probably won't even know you are talking to them because they will not be looking at you. But those who are looking at you when you greet them will look away, or just ignore you. Why? Because it is not feasible to them that a total stranger would give them a pleasant greeting without expecting something in return.

What is happening in all these examples is that we are trying to dig too deep into the situation and find something else without seeing what is right in front of us. It is time, when we are presented with a new situation, a report, or some information, that we acknowledge the obvious before we go any further. By digging too deep for some hidden message or meaning, we are missing something vital.

We could be missing out on an easy stock pick, one whose fundamentals are excellent, because we went looking for too much information by which to analyze the company's potential. We could be missing out on having our own day enlightened by a stranger because we refuse to acknowledge a simple and honest greeting. We could be missing out on the key point of a business report because the proposal is just too obvious and not all that complicated.

Are you one of the people who are saying, "Not me"? Good managers, savvy investors, warm-hearted people would certainly not do that. Or would they? With today's advances in technologies and available information, we are all caught up in the turbulence of thinking that "there must be something more to it" than what is so blatantly obvious. We think there must be more because we want there to be more.

Why do we want there to be more than just the obvious? We have been ingrained with the idea that more is better. If we have more information with which to make our decisions, then we surely will be making better decisions. Right? Don't count on it.

Why else do we want there to be more? There is the notion that great decisions cannot be made without complex information. If the information we have is obvious, and quite possibly obvious to many people, then it is hard for us to accept the notion that our decision is that good of a decision. If the premise from a subordinate's report is so blatantly obvious to the reader once the report is read, we sometimes tend to discount the value of that report with such thoughts as, "Well, everyone already knows that." This can be very faulty thinking.

Is everything going to be obvious? Of course not. There will be many situations where detailed analysis is not only desirable, but is also absolutely required. What we need to be careful of is to know the difference, and to know when which course of action is appropriate.

Taking it with You

Robert had learned at a very early age how to get things his way. It was not that he was a manipulator; rather, he just knew how “the system” worked, and he then figured out how to make the system work for him. He was also quite successful in all his endeavors.

He was so successful in business that he had made several million dollars by time he reached the age of twenty-five. On his thirtieth birthday, he had a net worth in excess of twenty million dollars. But Robert did not just hoard his fortune. He had faithfully tithed to his church starting with his first real job upon graduation from college. His philanthropy extended beyond his church – he gave generously to many local and regional organizations that helped the less fortunate. Robert’s net worth grew to one hundred million dollars by his fortieth birthday; he was certainly a pillar of good business and charity in the community.

While he was a faithful churchgoer, Robert started thinking about “the future.” And he did not mean just a year or two out – for him the future meant eternity. Robert certainly felt that he would be going to heaven after he died; not because of all the money he gave away. He truly had faith. And it was his faith that would take him to heaven. Robert began a discussion with his minister about “the trip to heaven.”

“Can I take anything with me?” Robert asked his minister.

“What do you mean? Your body is dead by the time your spirit leaves your body,” was the matter-of-fact ministerial response.

Undeterred, Robert tried again. “I know that I will be physically dead, but can I take anything with me up to heaven? I have some personal items that I would like to have with me when I get in heaven.”

Now this was indeed a line of questioning that this minister had never heard. Was Robert really serious about taking personal possessions to heaven with him, or was he just testing the minister? Not sure how to satisfy Robert’s questions, the minister referred him to his bishop. The bishop knew Robert well, and had even played a few rounds of golf with him.

About a week later, Robert went to see the bishop. After about ten minutes of small talk, Robert said to the bishop, “I have a question that my minister could not answer. I was wondering if you could possibly answer it for me.”

Having been foretold about Robert’s visit, the bishop gestured for Robert to continue.

“Can I take anything to heaven with me?”

The bishop was ready for this question – the minister had told him about Robert’s question, and he had heard this same question a few times in his thirty years in the ministry. The bishop had a thoughtful look on his face, looked straight into Robert’s eyes, and asked, “What do you think you will need in heaven that will not already be provided for you?”

“Well,” Robert started, “I have some personal possessions that I would like to take with me. I have a suitcase – you know, the kind with the wheels – that I can put it all in. And I would like to take it with me.”

The bishop might have laughed if Robert had not been so serious. The bishop rocked back and forth a few times, closed his eyes, took a big breath, and began. “Robert, I can see that you

are very serious about this question. And a serious question deserves a serious answer. Normally, I would tell someone asking that question that everything you need is already up in heaven. But I know you have a strong faith, and you have been more than generous with your gifts. Let me talk to my superiors and see what they say. This is very unusual, but let me check into it. I will call you when I hear from them.”

The two men continued their small talk for another hour – talking about their own golf games, the local professional football team, civic activities, the mayor, etc. They could have talked for hours; this was the nature of their friendship. But the bell rang, meaning it was time for the bishop to have dinner. The men shook hands, and then embraced in a shoulder-to-shoulder hug, the kind that some men do.

A week later, Robert’s phone rang. It was the bishop calling. He had talked with his superiors, and they said that Robert could indeed take his personal possessions in one suitcase with him to heaven. The bishop explained that his superiors felt that Robert’s faithful generosity had earned him that special privilege.

Robert smiled. Once again he had figured out how to make the system work for him. He quickly, yet methodically, packed a suitcase full of solid gold bars. He stuffed in a few towels just so they wouldn’t slide around.

His life continued to be showered with much success and happiness. And he continued to give a handsome portion of his wealth to many worthy causes. His community was certainly blessed by his kindness and his giving.

It was arranged so that when he died, his special suitcase would be put inside his coffin with him. He had been assured that even though the suitcase would be inside the sealed coffin, buried under six feet of dirt, that his suitcase would accompany him to heaven.

Well, it happened. Robert died. There was such a huge outpouring of adoration for the man who had so selflessly helped his community. The church was overflowing with a standing room only crowd that had seldom been seen before. What a beautiful funeral it was. Only a few people thought the coffin was a little deeper than most; and the pallbearers seemed to struggle as they lifted it to carry it out to the hearse. No one but the bishop and the funeral parlor manager knew about the special suitcase in the coffin.

As he was going to heaven, Robert had his suitcase with him. The angels looked at him with mild but pleasant curiosity. They had never seen anyone bring a suitcase before. Robert asked around, and he finally found the gates he needed to enter through. And sure enough, St. Peter was there to greet him, just as he had been taught.

St. Peter, himself a little curious about the suitcase, asked Robert, “What is that you have there with you?”

“Oh, that.” Robert replied. “I received special permission to bring one suitcase with my personal possessions up here. You can check your records. My name is Robert.”

St. Peter looked in his book, and yes indeed, there was a notation by Robert’s name: ‘bringing one suitcase with him.’ Satisfied, St. Peter opened the gate for Robert to let him enter. Just as he was about to enter, St. Peter asked if he could see what were the personal possessions that he brought.

Robert gladly opened the suitcase and moved away the towels to display the shiny gold bars. Robert was very pleased that he had been able to beat the system that said, “You can’t take it with you.”

St. Peter looked at the gold bars, then at Robert, and then he quizzically asked, “Why would you want to bring pavement up here?”

Moral: If you are going to carry “baggage” with you, make sure it is packed for where you are going, not for where you have been.



Remember, Robert’s faith was quite strong, but perhaps he didn’t think that the streets of heaven were actually paved with gold. Or perhaps he thought he would have some other use for his gold bars when he got there. But there he was, at St. Peter’s gate, and he has this suitcase full of “pavement” with him. For most of us mortals, this is probably difficult to picture.

But think how it might feel if you were checking in at the finest hotel you can think of – the Plaza Hotel in New York City, or the Ritz in Paris. The bellman has your luggage, and is just waiting to know your room number so he can take it upstairs. All of a sudden, the lock breaks, the suitcase springs open, and all of its contents are now on display for everyone to see. This is certainly an embarrassing situation no matter what is inside.

Think of the construction worker who has a secret love of opera; he can’t really tell his fellow workers because then he wouldn’t be a “real man.” Hogwash! He listens to opera whenever he can; in his truck to and from work, in his apartment, whenever it is on PBS. He even sings along on some of the parts that he knows; not a bad tenor voice. He has been watching the schedules for quite a while, and he is now going to see a few live performances. He has third row center seats for each show, and he is just now checking into one of the world’s top hotels.

If that had been his suitcase opening up in the middle of the hotel lobby, what do you think would have been in there? Dirty brown workboots, stained leather gloves, his metal hardhat, sturdy overalls? Of course not, why would he bring them along? Instead, you would find shiny patent leather black shoes, dress white gloves, a top hat and scarf, tuxedo slacks, etc. He would not have brought his work clothes from home. No; he would bring the clothes he would be needing for where he was going, not from where he came.

How many of us in our business lives and our personal lives carry “baggage” along with us? Do we let our memories of the past cloud our thoughts of the future? Do we allow previous reactions to what we have done affect what our actions will be as we move forward? These are not healthy habits, although it is easy to find many justifications for them.

One reason you will hear is that “history repeats itself.” Thus, the logic is that if someone acted in a certain way toward you in the past, that this person will act the same in the future. That might be true. But it does not necessarily have to be that way. Perhaps you received that reaction because of something that you did. So if you alter your behavior, isn’t it possible then that the reactions you will see could also be different? This does not mean, however, that you must be condescending in all your approaches and actions. Let’s say, for example, that you were making a presentation at a sales meeting. You were asked to present because of your recent successes in completing deals, while many of your peers were not. In talking about your successes, if you present your methods in an arrogant and superior attitude, the reaction you will most likely

receive will be undesirable. Your peers will avoid contact with you, and they will talk negatively about you.

Thus, the next time you meet with them in person, or on the phone, you will have some heavy, negative baggage encumbering you. How do you overcome it? There are many ways, and what ultimately works for one person will be different for another. You could admit that you realize that your style needs improvement, and you are sorry for how your message came across the last time. Unfortunately, this would place you in a very vulnerable position, and many people are not comfortable with that. A less vulnerable method is to present information while acknowledging the important contributions of others, including your peers. Mention one or two examples to give credence to this. While this new approach will not “clean your slate” with everyone, it will certainly give them the opportunity to start afresh with you.

Another reason we will hear on a personal nature is that someone has “treated us badly” in the past, and we are not going to let that happen again. Rather than carry a grudge around the neighborhood, in the supermarket, or even at church, try to take the upper road and be nice to that person. Maybe that person treated you badly because he thought you did something wrong – so much of grudges are built on inaccurate assumptions. Move past those assumptions and move to a “pasture of kinder thoughts and actions.” Sometimes all it takes is for someone to take the first step toward a better relationship. Do not let stubbornness stand in your way of a friendship that can nourish if given the chance. Besides, if you let those grudges continue to build up, the weight on your shoulders can get very heavy.

Carrying “baggage” with you does not have to be a bad thing. You would not want to go on a trip with an empty suitcase. Of course not. You would pack the items you think you will need on the trip. The same holds true for life – both business and personal. Make sure that the items you have “packed into your suitcase” are the items that you want to have with you. It is your choice to include or exclude certain items. Make sure that you make the right choice.

The Well-Dressed Junior Executive

Larry and Michael were in the same graduating class from the University, and they both had an ambitious set of interviews facing them in their senior year. As finance majors, they were both anticipating prosperous careers in top-named firms. The Career Guidance Center had provided helpful information on interviewing, and they each prepared for their interviews with more zeal than they had for last semester's examinations. As friends they did many things together, and they embarked on this "critical phase of schooling" together.

The first step was securing the interviews, which they did with relative ease – both were good students, and so it was not all that difficult to fill their schedules. About half of their interviews were with the same companies. Neither of them had much of a need for a suit during college, although each had one hanging in the closet. There was that occasional formal presentation in class that required wearing a suit, but that was about it. The suits were not new, and they certainly were not very stylish. One of the things Mrs. Potts at the Career Guidance Center had stressed was the importance of having a fresh new suit of clothes for interviewing.

One of the national department store chains had run an advertisement offering a 15% discount to graduating seniors. This was enough to entice Larry and Michael to head down there to buy their suits. As they entered the men's department, they were met by two middle-aged sales clerks who were eager to assist them. "You look like two seniors eager to start the interviewing process," one of the sales clerks said to Larry and Michael.

"Yes, although I am not too sure how eager we are," said Larry. "We each need a new suit, and I saw an ad you ran in the paper."

"Of course," the same clerk replied. "Come with me, sir, and I will get you all set up." So Larry went with the first clerk, and Michael headed over to a different section with the other clerk. "What size suit do you wear?" the clerk asked Larry.

"I think it was a 42 Long," Larry replied.

The clerk showed Larry a selection of 42 Long suits, and Larry quickly settled on the dark blue one with gray pinstripes. A new white shirt and two new ties filled out the order. Counting the fitting and ringing up the sale, Larry was done in less than fifteen minutes.

Michael, meanwhile, was taking much longer. He had told his clerk that he wore a 38 Regular. The clerk, however, insisted on taking some measurements "just in case." "When was the last time you wore that 38 Regular?" he asked Michael.

"We had our final presentations last month."

"And how did the suit fit?"

"The buttons seemed a little snug," Michael said, "so I just left the coat open without buttoning it."

"I think you would be more comfortable in a 40 Regular. You won't see a lot of difference in the coat length, but the extra around the waist in the pants and the coat should make them more comfortable. Let's try one of each size on to compare." The clerk selected one suit of each size for Michael to try on. The clerk seemed a little more interested in helping Michael find the "best fit" rather than just "selling him" a suit.

“You’re right,” Michael said upon exiting the fitting area. “The 40 is definitely more comfortable. I can bend over to tie my shoes much easier than in that 38. What style of a suit do you think looks best? I have always worn a double-breasted jacket.”

Michael’s clerk helped him find a suit style that was more fitting for his physique than the style he had always worn. After the fitting, the two spent another fifteen minutes just selecting two shirts and matching ties to coordinate with the suit. All in all, it took Michael almost one hour until he was done.

One month later, all the interviews were completed and the offer letters had been sent. Larry and Michael went to the Career Guidance Center for a review of the entire interviewing process with Mrs. Potts. Larry was a little dejected because he had received only one offer from his “number one” firms, while Michael had offers from all of his. The two men compared notes after their individual review sessions, and it appeared that there was only one real difference between the two candidates. Mrs. Potts had told Larry that, while he was a great candidate academically, the feedback she received from the interviewers was that his poorly fitting suit gave the appearance of someone who did not project a professional appearance.

Moral: Don’t be afraid to “size up” a situation just because it is a familiar one. It is better to re-analyze (or re-measure), and then have the proper assessment, than it is to just apply the previous solution without all the information.



Larry had worn a 42 Long suit for his entire college career, so it seemed natural to him that that was the size he needed. Michael, on the other hand, used the guidance of a clerk to help him analyze the current situation, and he invested the time to end up with a better result – both a better-fitting suit, and more job offers.

Personally, I don’t think I ever lost a job opportunity because of the suit I wore (or didn’t wear), but the story illustrates a point that is all too common, especially among hard-driving personalities. “I’ve seen this situation before, and I know what the answer is.” How many of you have heard that statement? And how many times was it you who said it? I know I have. There is nothing inherently wrong in the logic, we just need to be careful on how we apply it.

If you are driving your car, and you see the traffic light switch from green to yellow in the intersection you are approaching, what do you do? Do you say, “That is an interesting color. I wonder what the top color is?” No! You know from experience (and training) that the switch from green to yellow will be followed by a switch from yellow to red. And a red light means STOP. So in this case, the fact that you have seen the situation before (light changing from green to yellow), and you know what the answer is (the light will soon change to red, which means you will have to stop), is acceptable.

Let’s say you are a buyer of electronic components, and the Materials Group has sent you a request to purchase one thousand of a certain item. You have purchased this same item many times in the past. You follow the process of submitting the request to several qualified vendors, and you keep track of their responses. Company A seems to be the fastest in terms of responding to the quotation request. The last three times you have asked for a quote on this item, Company A has responded with the same availability and price (in stock, twenty-five cents each). One time Company B came back with a quote of twenty-two cents, and the other two times, Company C quoted twenty-one cents. So Company B got the order one time, and Company C got it twice.

This time, once again Company A responded with “in stock, twenty-five cents.” Company B was at twenty-two cents again, and Company C was at twenty-seven. So Company B got the order. The problem this time, however, is that Company B did not have the parts in stock, and they would not arrive for another ten days. To compound the problem, the Materials Group had marked that the request was “Urgent” this time, but you had failed to notice it. The production line was shut down for ten days because you had not looked at all of the information on the materials request (“That part was never a critical shortage component before” was the excuse you gave your manager). You had ordered that part many times before, and you figured that it was needed just like before – two to three weeks would be fine. Not this time, however, and you and your company paid the price for it.

Is this an extreme example? Yes. Has it happened before? Yes. Will it happen to someone else in the future? Unfortunately, yes.

So how do you get new data to analyze the situation anew each time? And how much do you need to look at every time? Obviously, it depends on the situation at hand; but if there is the possibility (a real possibility, not a far-fetched remote possibility – such as the traffic light may stay yellow forever) that something could be different this time, then make sure you have the current information. In the case above, the components buyer should have read the entire materials request and noticed that it was an urgent request.

Have you ever bought a company’s stock because “it is a bargain at this price”? I have. That stock is still below my purchase price. Why did I think it was a bargain? The stock was trading at multiples that, in the past, signaled a buying opportunity. Therefore, it was a bargain based on old information, not on current information. Had I spent some time investigating the current fundamentals of that stock and its industry, I would have made a different investment. The underlying information had changed – my decision criteria should have also changed.

Do you make other decisions in your personal life that are based on “old information”? Do you not like someone because of something that he or she did a long time ago? Do we refuse to shop in a given store because we received bad service there once? Do we refuse to consider another person’s suggestions because a previous suggestion caused problems when it was implemented? Maybe it was the implementation that was the problem.

When you make decisions that are important to you and to others, make sure you make them with current information that allows you to make the most-informed decision. The same applies when you go to buy a new suit, whether it is at the discount suit outlet, or at a top-brand store – do not tell them what size you wear; ask them to measure you and tell you what size would best fit you.