
FIVE MINUTES ON MONDAYS

FINDING UNEXPECTED PURPOSE, PEACE,
AND FULFILLMENT AT WORK

ALAN LURIE

INTRODUCTION

As we look back on the arc of our lives, we often discover that the most significant, meaningful changes came from unexpected, seemingly unremarkable, or even un-welcomed sources. While we were busy planning the direction in which we thought our lives should go, something unplanned entered to steer us onto a new path that led to a destination that we could not possibly have imagined. Something that at first seemed to be a distraction, nuisance, or, perhaps, an outright disaster was, in retrospect, the best thing that could have happened. It shook us out of our routine, allowed for new possibilities to enter, and presented the opportunity to rise above our previous sense of how things should be, what we are capable of doing, and who we are. We now realize that without these uninvited events, we would have gone along on our regular, tired path, and none of these changes would have happened.

These events are gifts of grace, and whether we recognize them and decide to listen to their call or to reject these gifts, we are all helped along and re-directed in this way. The creation of this book traveled just such a path, and came about through a series of events and encounters with extraordinary people that I could not possibly have conceived of,

and to whom I am very grateful. The unlikely ingredients in the recipe of events from which this book emerged include a commuter train, a sweltering August day in New York City, a sweaty business card, recurring random encounters, and a spilled beer. Through these events I met David Arena, President of Grubb & Ellis—a national commercial real estate firm.

Buddhism teaches that we should embrace awkwardness; that this feeling is a signal that we are on the right path toward growth. By embracing awkwardness, we begin to drop the ego's desire to project an image that defends us from experiencing our true, tender selves. We might think that others are impressed when we appear sophisticated, professional, witty, cool, or clever, but this teaching reminds us that we are most impressive when we are authentic. The events surrounding this book have helped to teach me the truth of this ancient wisdom.

David and I first met on a hot and humid day in August on the Metro-North commuter train, which travels from Grand Central Station to Connecticut. I had just run 20 blocks to catch the 6:15 train and slipped in as the doors were closing. Sitting across from me was a man whose face I recognized from a recent cover of *Crain's Business Journal*.

That's David Arena! I should introduce myself, I thought, but look at me. I'm drenched.... Hey, what's the worst that can happen?

Introduction

So, I leaned over to introduce myself. With sweat dripping from my forehead, I reached in to my pocket and pulled out a soggy, limp business card, which he politely accepted, then returned to reading his newspaper.

That certainly went well, Lurie, I thought, assuming I had just blown a promising business opportunity.

Several months later, we ran into each other again. This was on a Friday afternoon, as I was sitting on the train studying a Hebrew text and drinking a beer (two things that I like to do as I head home for the weekend). I looked up to see David sit down next to me. He glanced at my book and, apparently not remembering that we had met, said,

“Excuse me. Is that Hebrew?”

“Yes. It’s actually a section from the Bible.”

“Really? Are you a religious man?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact, I’m an ordained Rabbi,” I answered, “but I also work in commercial real estate. We actually met briefly on this train last summer, and I gave you my card.”

We struck up a conversation, and discovered a shared interest in religion and theology (a conversation that he later described as “being kinda’ out there”). As I got up to leave, I bent over to shake his hand and accidentally spilled beer on his sleeve and into his briefcase.

“Now I’ve been baptized by a Rabbi,” he laughed.

I walked off the train, wondering how I could have been so clumsy, and why I seemed to keep spilling things on this man.

The third time I saw David was in a midtown office reception area. I had taken the day off to do some work around the house but came by this office to drop off a package. Unshaved, uncombed, and dressed in worn jeans and a tee shirt, I turned to see David walk in.

This makes sense, I thought. God forbid I should run into him looking professional!

“Good to see you again, Rabbi,” he said, patting me on the back. “Let’s meet for breakfast soon. Here’s my card. Please call me.”

“Why do you think I keep meeting this man under such awkward circumstances?” I later asked my wife, Shirona. “The first time we met, I looked like I had just run a marathon in a business suit. The second time, I spilled beer all over him, and the third time, I could have been mistaken for the delivery man.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, “At least he’s going to remember you! I think there’s more to this than just random encounters, though.”

After this, David and I continued to run into each other on numerous occasions—on the street, in offices, at industry events, and on the train, and we soon became friends. Then, unexpectedly, he asked me to join his team at Grubb & Ellis. (Now,

Introduction

after two years of working together, I have only seen him on the train twice.)

“I’ve got to tell you, it’s not often that a stranger on a train hands me a sweaty business card, discusses mystical ideas about the nature of the cosmos, and then pours beer in my briefcase. You definitely made a unique impression,” he said, then added, “I believe that this will be a good place for you, Alan. With us, you’ll have the opportunity to do good work, both in your profession as a businessman and your passion as a Rabbi. Look, I have an idea. Our entire group meets every Monday morning at 8:00 AM, and I’d like you to begin these meetings by delivering a short message. Something about business and ethics. Something inspirational and informative.”

This was certainly a novel idea. A Rabbi/businessman delivering a sermon to a New York City real estate meeting! David had never heard me speak in public, and didn’t ask to review what I was going to say, yet he somehow had the faith that this would work. Initially, I was not so confident.

And so, on one Monday morning in January 2007, I awkwardly stood in front of 100 or so hard-nosed New York real estate professionals to deliver my first message. I had searched for something to talk about that I hoped would be interesting, useful, inspiring, and entertaining to a business community whose reputation is not exactly toward things spiritual. This first message was titled “Donkey for Sale.”

(Well, you'll have to read it to get the reference!) In it, I said, "There are many who immediately link business and money to dishonesty, greed, and sin. Is this just the way it is, though?" I asked. "Is there a way to experience success in business, to be comfortable, even wealthy, and to live a life committed to honesty and to the "golden rule" of treating others with respect and love?"

I explained that, "In Hebrew, the word for *work* is *avodah*, which also, surprisingly, means *prayer*. This teaches us that there is a direct connection between the physical world of work and the non-physical world of the spirit. Both are seen as instruments of personal and social change which, when operated in harmony, reinforce each other. Just as we pray for the blessings of spiritual sustenance, we work for the blessings of physical sustenance. The connection of these words creates an understanding that work must be approached with the same reverence that we give to prayer (and, conversely, that prayer requires work, commitment, dedication, and regular practice). In this model, success at work is a blessing that eases our lives and supports and enriches those around us. This model states that, just as the world, if treated with respect, is filled with endless abundance, when work is approached with reverence there is more than enough for all. Spiritual business is based on the premise that, contrary to the common paradigm, one person's gain need not

Introduction

be another's loss; that success and abundance for one does not create scarcity for others."

After this, I delivered messages almost every week. In addition to reading the messages to the Grubb & Ellis team, I also wrote them down to e-mail to the staff, as well as to colleagues, clients, and friends. This book captures a selection of these weekly messages delivered over the course of one year, along with a few additional complimentary essays and speeches given in other venues during that time.

The messages focus on many of the common issues that most of us struggle with: How can I more effectively understand others and be understood? How can I prosper financially while maintaining my integrity? When should I say what's on my mind, and when should I let it go? How can I keep going and maintain optimism in the face of challenges and setbacks? Is it possible to balance all the demands on my time and energy? Where can I find a sense of meaning and purpose? None of these questions is new, and a vast body of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and theology has provided insightful and useful answers. These messages draw on a wide variety of these sources, but from several uncommon perspectives.

First, the primary intent of these messages is to show that the highest teachings from all these traditions ultimately point toward the same direction,

which is, simply stated, the path to becoming better human beings; more caring about others, more intellectually engaged, more connected to our bodies, and more fully awake to the flow of our lives. The principles and practices that these traditions teach foster positive growth in all these aspects of our lives, leading to success and satisfaction at work; meaningful relationships with our friends, family, and community; good physical health; a clearer vision of our truest selves; and a deeper soul connection to the Divine. Although we may tend to view these as separate endeavors, the greatest teachings from all significant traditions tell us that this image of separateness is a harmful illusion, and that we function at our fullest, healthiest, and highest potential when all these aspects operate in unity.

The second uncommon perspective is embedded in the context of these messages: They were prepared for the business community, and usually stem from observations or events that happened at work. These messages propose that the daily activities at work create a perfect “spiritual gymnasium,” where we are faced with very real dilemmas and interactions that require a very real response. Theology and philosophy may propose beautiful ideals, and we may think that spirituality is found only in prayer, religious text study, or on the meditation pillow, but the rubber hits the road when we are faced with implementing these ideals in the complex

Introduction

world of work. If we are committed to true, meaningful growth, then, work is a deeply spiritual environment where, through our actions, we can implement our obligations to others, build our confidence and sense of purpose, practice our commitment to the truth, strengthen our inherent optimism, experience gratitude, and live with a greater sense of balance.

The Rabbis of the Talmud—the Jewish compendium of ethical debate—wonder, “What is the first question that one is asked when standing in front of the heavenly court?” In other words, what’s the most important question that determines whether you lived a good life? They decide that, ahead of the questions, “Did you study?,” “Did you pray?,” or “Did you give to charity?,” is the question, “Did you conduct your business affairs honestly?” The Rabbis recognize that business success is a powerful goal, and that one can be easily tempted to do “whatever it takes” to succeed. The person who can resist these temptations and conduct business in an honest fashion, though, has truly lived according to the highest standard. So, do you still think that your job is not spiritual?

The third uncommon perspective is mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction and alluded to throughout the following messages: uncertainty as a gateway to growth. We live in times of uncertainty and enormous, rapid change. This uncertainty may

be frightening. It may be intimidating. It is definitely unsettling. We may wish that things could stay put, and may feel a desire for solid, familiar ground. But, the messages in this book propose that we view uncertainty in a different way. Uncertainty can, in fact, be a great gift, because it can cause us to re-think our established, fixed way of seeing things, and help the transformation from stagnation to movement; from limitation to expansion. This process leads to change and growth, which is the basis of all life. Without change and growth, our mind, body, emotions, and spirit begin to atrophy, solidify, and decay. As Benjamin Franklin succinctly wrote:

When you're finished changing, you're finished.

Uncertainty and change expose the hidden defenses that we've created to protect us from revealing our insecurities, and once exposed, these defenses begin to weaken. Then, if we are willing, we can walk through a new door that opens to the untold, unimaginable potential that is our birthright as human beings.

In the following messages, I have tried to touch on these three perspectives:

1. Find unity.
2. Practice spiritual growth through work.
3. Embrace uncertainty.

Introduction

These can be very difficult to implement. I know because I struggle with them daily. I hope, though, that this struggle has resulted in some insights that are elevating, useful, and enjoyable.

Wishing you well,

Alan Lurie

June 2008