

WORDS FLOW THROUGH ME

A COLLECTION
OF WRITINGS

David W. Handler

Words Flow Through Me by David W. Handler

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David W. Handler
Tomball TX 77377
www.successhandler.com
blog.successhandler.com

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Dedication

To Kathy. More adventures to come!

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Foreword

The only high school ‘choose your topic’ writing exercise I recall was an analysis of Billy Joel’s *Only the Good Die Young* toward the end of my senior year. The teacher liked it so much, she thumbtacked it to the bulletin board outside her classroom... at a Catholic high school.

The college research assignment that sticks with me is ‘Rhetoric and Composition’ my first semester at UT-Austin. After several years of chemotherapy, my mother decided to try controversial Laetrile treatments to fight her cancer, so that seemed a natural topic. Midway through my oral report, the 24-year-old TA stopped me and said, rather rudely: “The word is ‘pluh-ce-bo’ David.” Like I was supposed to know it wasn’t pronounced ‘place-bo.’

Fast forward 33 months. Two days before I was to return for my senior year – and the last day of my summer sports internship at KDFW-TV in Dallas – Dale Hansen said he wanted to offer me a job. “That’s great,” I replied. “I graduate in May.” He looked at me and said, “The job won’t be here in May. I need you now.” He spoke to my parents that night and promised I’d get my degree, so I drove to Austin the next day, met with the dean, and took a leave of absence to be Dale’s producer. I was 21 years old... making \$5.05 per hour.

Working with Dale, I learned to write for sports television. When I joined John Anthony in 1995 at the travel company we co-founded with his sister Cynthia six years earlier, I learned to write employee handbooks and travel brochures. When I went to work for Bud Hadfield at ICED in 1998, I learned to write magazine articles and franchise operations manuals.

When Kathy and I launched our coaching firm – Success Handler, LLC – in 2003, my business coach Ernest Oriente suggested I write a monthly e-newsletter. We sent the first issue, which was text

only, to about 20 friends and family. For several years I wrote for a few magazines and eventually started a blog that continues today.

Words Flow Through Me is an anthology of these various mis-sives... with some minimal tweaking from the original versions. I hope you find it informative and a little entertaining. While I didn't keep that Billy Joel paper, I am certain Sister Joan Markey launched a lifelong writer that day in 1978.

Until next time, continued success in all things.

David W. Handler

June 12, 2020

NEWSLETTERS

“The difference between the almost right word and the right word is... the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” ~ Mark Twain

Each of my monthly newsletters focused on an overall topic – with an opening story, two related shorter pieces and a complementary sidebar. These are my favorite ones.

Do The Right Thing

JANUARY 2007

I was 14 when Watergate took over the airwaves. I remember watching Richard Nixon make the speech that would forever define him: “I shall resign the presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as president at that hour in this office.”

On the morning of August 9th, Nixon gave a final wave as he boarded Marine One, the helicopter that would take him into political exile. Upon inheriting the Oval Office that day, Gerald R. Ford said, “Our long national nightmare is over.” Last week, the man who began life with a different name, became an Eagle Scout, turned down the NFL to attend law school, served on the Warren Commission and ascended to the presidency without ever being elected, was laid to rest back home in Michigan.

Leaders from both sides of the aisle expressed admiration for our nation’s 38th president. One of the most touching came from the man who succeeded Ford. “A great statesman,” said former President Jimmy Carter, “he wisely chose the path of healing during a deeply divisive time in our nation’s history.”

One month after becoming president, Ford gave Nixon a “full, free and absolute pardon” – despite the objection of his entire staff – and political observers feel it ultimately cost him the election against Carter. In a 1984 interview with CBS News that was held by agreement until his death, Ford revealed the difficulty of that unpopular decision: “I had to weigh the political ramification, which was obviously negative, with the benefit to the country, which was very significantly on the upside. And that’s part of your job in the White House.”

Fortunately, as the owner of a business, while your decisions are important to those around you, the weight of the entire country doesn't rest on your shoulders. That said, frequently I work with clients who aren't achieving everything they want, because they feel so much pressure to make the correct decision every time. This type of thinking leads to many different challenges:

Paralysis – Inability to address key issues

Toleration – Overlooking employees' negative actions

De-motivation – Trapped in a rut that drains energy and desire

Avoidance – Focusing on the wrong priorities

If you recognize yourself somewhere in these descriptions, then think back to the day you agreed to go into business. While you were excited about the road ahead, did some uncertainty accompany your giant leap of faith? What did you do at that exact moment? I'm guessing you took pen in hand and signed your name on the dotted line, fully believing it was the best decision for you and your family.

Whether it's buying new equipment, expanding your product offerings, or handling the always difficult task of firing an employee, you need to look in the mirror and know that only you have the power. Just as President Ford did when he looked in the camera and said to the nation: "My conscience tells me that only I, as president, have the constitutional power to firmly shut and seal this book."

With 32 years to reflect, history looks back on the Nixon pardon as the correct decision for our nation at the time. In 2001, Ford received the John F. Kennedy "Profile in Courage" Award at the JFK Library in Boston. A bipartisan committee of political and community leaders vote on recipients, and Senator Edward Kennedy, who had originally opposed the pardon, remarked, "But time has a way of clarifying past events, and now we see that President Ford was right."

Keep Moving Forward

APRIL 2007

As a nine-year-old boy in Kansas City, he rose early each morning to throw newspapers for his father's route. At 16, he tried to enlist in the military, but was turned away for being underage. Instead, he joined the Red Cross, went to France and spent a year driving an ambulance during the war. By 22, he had moved to California and declared bankruptcy due to a bad business venture. At 27, he journeyed to New York, only to discover the distributor stole the rights to his creation, leaving him broke once again.

On the train back to California, he began doodling new ideas on a piece of paper. Showing one to his young bride, he spoke of producing a series of films. She approved of the idea... and suggested a key change for the featured character. Thus, in 1928, the world came not to know Mortimer Mouse, but the more appropriately named Mickey, starring in *Steamboat Willie*.

Over the next 38 years, the imagination and drive of Walt Disney resulted in many innovative film, animation and engineering techniques. He won a record 22 Academy Awards among 59 nominations. Yet money would always be a challenge as he gambled on bigger ideas: producing *Snow White* during the height of the depression; building Disneyland, when many felt it would flop; presenting *The Mickey Mouse Club* on weekday afternoons; coming into homes in living color on Sunday nights as the host of *The Wonderful World of Disney*; and, in the biggest gamble of all, buying up swampland for the "Florida Project" that would become Walt Disney World Resort.

Taking chances is one of the roles of a leader. If your intention is to achieve greater things, then start acting bold. For Walt, the

dream was never about amassing a fortune. Instead, his purpose was to make people happy. “I don’t make pictures just to make money. I make money to make more pictures.”

In explaining his view of leadership, Walt once shared this interaction: “I was stumped one day when a little boy asked, ‘Do you draw Mickey Mouse?’ I had to admit I do not draw anymore. ‘Then you think up all the jokes and ideas?’ No, I said, I don’t do that. Finally, he looked at me and said, ‘Mr. Disney, just what do you do?’ Well, I said, sometimes I think of myself as a little bee. I go from one area of the Studio to another and gather pollen and sort of stimulate everybody. I guess that’s the job I do.”

Many consider Walt Disney’s greatest gift to be storytelling, which he used often to share his vision. In 1934, so the story goes, he invited the top Disney animators to join him on a soundstage. Standing under a single spotlight, he let them know they soon would be producing a full-length animated feature. Then he shared the entire fairytale... not just telling it, but acting out every part including the mannerisms and voices of Snow White, the wicked queen and the seven dwarfs.

Taking a cue from Walt, look for opportunities to be a storyteller. Think about your team meetings, discussions and presentations: What would it look like if you reached deep inside your creativity and shared stories with your audience? Would such an approach have stronger impact on your employees, customers and prospects? The key to being a good storyteller is to look for connections that resonate with your listeners. Pay attention to current events, study historical figures and turn to your own experiences to touch those you’re trying to engage. You’ll find they relate to your messages more easily.

Last week I took my nine-year-old to see *Meet the Robinsons*, the latest animated feature from Disney. It’s a fun-filled, entertaining adventure. Like all Disney movies dating back to Walt, there’s a

lesson attached, and this one is “Keep Moving Forward.” That’s true for everyone, regardless of your age. Trust your imagination to reveal big ideas, take more chances and – like Disney – you’ll build a great company, too.

'11 THINGS' LISTS

“When you do BIG things, you make big mistakes. The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing.” ~ Walt Disney

During the early years of writing my monthly newsletter, I included an offer for readers to request an additional '11 Things' list about the topic. These are some of the best.

11 Things I Learned at Putt-Putt and Still Use 27 Years Later

MARCH 2004

1. **Make 'Em Laugh** – The easiest way to put guests at ease is to have fun with them, especially when hosting eight birthday parties a day for groups of rambunctious kids.
2. **Discipline Works** – Success requires patience and a stick-to-it-no-matter-what attitude. This comes in handy when doing course maintenance in 100-degree Texas heat.
3. **Everything Counts** – There is nothing more important than the small stuff. Customers notice little things like clean bathrooms, blooming flowers, empty trash cans and a smile.
4. **Practice Perfectly** – Those who become the best leave nothing to chance, and the Putt-Putt professionals practice their geometrical shots over and over and then some more.
5. **Just Listen** – There is much to learn from others who know more than me: I can still picture the time Putt-Putt founder Don Clayton visited and shared his knowledge.
6. **Enjoy** – The best gift life has to give is to let us do something we truly love.

7. **Stretch** – Becoming a good public speaker requires standing up in front of an audience and doing it many, many times until it's comfortable. Making announcements on a microphone with a lot of strangers looking at you was a great experience for a 17-year-old.

8. **Provide Value** – At Putt-Putt, it was a three-game ticket for the price of two, and all it took to get most people to buy was a quick explanation capped by “and it's good anytime”.

9. **Watch Out** – Some people in life will always try to take advantage of others, even 13-year-old hotshots playing a game called “Bump” for a dime a hole.

10. **Connect** – It takes just a little extra effort to make customers feel like their visit is the single, most important thing in the world; always seek opportunities for interaction with them.

11. **Think Big** – Ken Smith, the franchisee I worked for, challenged us to be the best course in the system, and one summer we hosted the Professional Putters Association Championship to prove to ourselves just how good we could be.

BLOGS

*“You create your own universe
as you go along.” ~ Winston Churchill*

*I began writing a blog in 2009, and dutifully try to publish three
each month. It is often more an exercise in freeform thinking
than writing to share business lessons. These turned out well.*

Tom Tom

JANUARY 22, 2018

I hate Tom Brady.

I love Tom Brady.

Depending on where you live in this football-obsessed country and who you root for, you might have a lean toward one of those statements. As for me... they're both true.

Based on success between the hash marks, '12' is the Greatest of All-Time. He led the NFL in passing yards this season; and will likely retire with the second most career yards... and most touch-down passes.

He has more wins than any starting quarterback with 233, which, incidentally, is 90 more than the other 'Greatest' contender – Joe Montana. Plus, his 27 playoff victories are the same as Peyton Manning and Brett Favre... combined! Then there's those five Super Bowl rings and the one he might add in two weeks.

However, Brady winning so much is getting old, boring, frustrating. And the way he does it lately: falling behind by double-digits, then mounting heroic fourth quarter comebacks. For goodness sake, lose already.

Need I mention he cheated? Yeah, Deflategate. You know those few ounces made all the difference. Perhaps there should be an asterisk by his name in the Hall of Fame? Oh... and how about the officials always making every call in favor of the Patriots. Conspiracy!

Yet, through love and hate, I admire Tom Brady: how he keeps his body in top shape at age 40, prepares for each game and laser-focuses when everything is on the line. The GOAT is a model for how everyone should approach their jobs.

Overnight Success

FEBRUARY 16, 2011

Kathy and I had dinner two weeks ago at the home of a couple we've grown close to recently. At the end of a wonderful evening together that included intriguing conversation and a meal featuring delicious pork, our hostess asked if we would like to see her latest paintings. Chris is an excellent artist and illustrator – with several published books – and she wanted to share her recent foray into impressionism.

As she shuffled through various outdoor, still-life and portrait works, I was amazed at her ability to vividly capture subjects on canvas. Being a neophyte to the art world, I asked about one nighttime scene of a bridge with water flowing rapidly beneath it: “How long did it take you to do that?”

“An entire lifetime,” she quickly responded. “It’s my art degree, the decades I’ve spent learning colors and technique, the ability to transfer what I see with my eye to my hand and onto the canvas, and the 10,000 hours I’ve stood in front of an easel. That’s how long it took me to paint that bridge.”

Malcolm Gladwell highlighted the 10,000 hours phenomenon in *Outliers*, using Bill Gates and the Beatles as prime examples. It’s considered the standard for how much time someone must put in to become an expert. Gladwell got it right... and our friend Chris is living proof. So, keep practicing.

Addendum: Kathy and I commented that night how much we liked the pork entrée. Chris said it was her mother’s dish. A few days later, a note arrived in the mail. Enclosed was the recipe for “Mom’s Tender Lemon Pork Chops.” Those artists... they don’t miss a thing.