

DEAR JACK

by Joe Smerkers

My mind is racing as I think about and envision our upcoming meeting.

My associate, Jackie, and I arrive at World Headquarters at the appointed time, and are shown to a splendid conference room near your office.

The others are already there wondering who we are and how we could get an audience with such important people.

Someone - I don't know who - handles the introductions and pleasantries. Jackie puts them at ease by her professionalism, integrity and character. I on the other hand make most a little nervous. What new ideas does he bring? Why do we need this, now? What's in this for me? Five years and I can retire. Who needs this?

When you arrive the room becomes silent. All eyes now are on you. You are very gracious and come over to introduce yourself. I say, "It's an honor to meet you." Our handshake communicates more than words. Strength meets imperfection. Power meets weakness. Success meets failure. Somewhere between the paradoxes, somewhere within the handshake we start to communicate.

But the realities of business intrude. The old paradigms of models, theories, and strategies take hold. Someone says, "Let's get started. We are here today to talk about leadership. We understand that you have some different ideas, and we would like to hear them and to understand them more."

Thus we are asked to present our ideas. Thus we are asked to give answers to the unanswerable. Thus the trap is laid.

We have reached what - but a few short years ago - would have seemed the pinnacle of possibilities. The chance to sell our ideas to one of the most respected companies in the world. Not only to the top echelons - the best and the brightest - but to you.

Heady stuff. Validation of all the work. Validation of all the preparation. Validation of all the pain. Validation of all the hope.

By now we are starting to communicate without words. This by the way is making the others nervous. How could they understand each other? They have never talked. We've read and screened all the correspondence. What's going on here?

So you and I begin. I ask what it is that you want for the company. For yourself? I ask how you feel about what you - and everyone else - have accomplished? I ask you to share a story of which you are most proud? I ask if you ever feel powerless? Exhausted? Unfulfilled? I ask what you do at those moments? I ask, in spite of all the successes, what troubles you? I ask if you think there might be a better way?

I ask all of these things because I care. I care not only about you and the others at the table. But I care about the thousands of ordinary men and women who roam the halls of your company.

I ask you to look inside yourself to form but a simple question. After the growth - of which you should be proud. After the plaudits - which you justly deserve. After the job well done - and it surely was. What difference did I make?

Maybe because of my illness I have become much more sensitive to time scales of late. So I share a story about T-Rex that I watched the other evening with my son.

T-Rex lived some 65,000,000 years ago. It's hard for me, and I believe my son, to fathom that large a number. So I suggested that the US has existed for 200 years, equating this to about a timeline of one inch. I used my fingers to demonstrate the point. T-Rex lived at a time past that would stretch from Albany, NY to Disney World in Florida.

How do we as mortals, as humans deal with making a difference in the span of a few short years, when in reality our impact is - in most

cases - inconsequential over the duration of time? Over the duration of epochs.

Do we let go of trying, abandoning all action because "Nothing matters anyway." I hope not. Do we dwell in safety because we have climbed the mountain and our time for rest is at hand? I hope not. Do we abandon our destiny, our journey because we have already achieve more than most? I hope not.

We are now engaged as one in thought and reflection. Jackie is doing her best to help the others. But this is not what they wanted. This is not about ROI. Faster. Cheaper. Better. This is not about productivity. This is not about 6-Sigma.

This is about the challenges and the imperfections of facing, of living, of respecting, of even loving. is about working and living in the paradox between science and spirituality. In the paradox between leadership and management. In the paradox between control and freedom.

This is about letting go of my belief in self-power. About serving with purpose outside of my Self. About ordinary men and women engaging their collective wills to achieve shared and substantive ends. Ends that are never cleanly divisible between business materialism and human dignity.

This is about participative spirituality. Accepting that only by doing, by living can we truly make a difference. And accepting that when we do we will make mistakes.

Somewhere in the room a voice of reason speaks out saying, "Ok, enough." What's wrong with what we have been doing? What's wrong with 6-Sigma? My God haven't we've done enough?

I can hear the pain in the voice. The understanding that what is being discussed is more difficult, more painful, more fearful, more troubling than any business problem or opportunity.

So I say that you all have been good stewards. You have achieved much. Given

much. Done much. And it is not mine to ask that you do more.

But I say to you that beyond this doorway lies great treasures, the scope of which few have ever seen. Treasures of joy. Of life. Of hope. Of peace. Of tranquility. Of meaning. Of difference.

Beyond this doorway lies Camelot and windmills and dreams. Beyond this doorway all things are possible. Beyond this doorway voices of vision, values, and integrity sing in unison to offer hope to the world.

Beyond this doorway hope does not infringe on reality. The realities of our lives, our jobs, are but the small price we pay for the joy of living. For the joy of the treasures we behold.

A voice yells out, "Do we have to be dead to enjoy these treasures?" I say, "No." In fact the treasures are meant to serve the living To enrich our lives. To nourish us through the struggles of life, of living, of managing, of resolving conflicts, of facing our own imperfections, of balancing our successes and failures, of tempering our anger and frustrations.

The treasures have always been there. All we need to do is open our eyes, our hearts, our spirits. They are ours for the taking.

It's clear now that everyone needs time to digest what has been spoken. What has not been spoken. So it's time for us to part company. And I trust you have enjoyed our first meeting as much as I.

In leaving I hope that each of you have the opportunity to step through this doorway. May each of you have opportunity to experience the Joy of Life that I am experiencing today.

Until we meet again, Jack, thank you and all the best.