

Risky business

The plan was to start my own company. But then the bad stuff piled up and my self-confidence took a beating

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I've often asked myself why I wanted to take a risky, entrepreneurial path instead of seeking a comfy corporate job. I suspect it's because I've always been attracted to doing things a little differently.

Maybe it was the combination of being a preemie and an only child that created this mentality, or perhaps it was my mother's excessive doting and exuberant overconfidence in my abilities. Don't get me wrong – I appreciated the effusive praise, but I knew it was highly biased and unjustified. I was pretty darn average, an ironclad B student surrounded by friends who were anything but average – athletic team champions and academic award-winners.

Perhaps the seeds of self-doubt were first sown when I began to compare my abilities to those of my peers. Back then, however, I was too distracted by beer and women to really let it bother me. And besides, the stakes were not nearly as high as they would be later in life.

The original master plan was simple and perfect. After graduation, I would spend a few years working for someone else, learning the ropes, making valuable contacts, and then venture out to start my own business.

It all seemed quite plausible: I had the university degrees, including the ambiguous and ubiquitous MBA. I was self-motivated, personable and a quick learner (so I was told). Friends and colleagues supported me. My naive, idealist,

average mind was filled with resolve and optimism. If I worked hard, good things would happen. What could go wrong?

My first job out of university was as a consultant for a large international firm. Even at the time, the job title seemed ridiculous because I had too little experience to advise or consult about anything.

Nevertheless, I hung in for about four years and then moved on to join the audit department of a large Canadian broadcaster. It was an unconventional approach but there was a logical rationale. The audit department, though I was not an accountant nor even remotely interested in auditing, was one step closer to my goal of being a film and television producer and having my own production company. I'd be interviewing people who had started companies and made shows, and analyzing the ways they made them. I was meeting the right people and learning valuable lessons about the business. It was a means to an end. My entrepreneurial dreams would ultimately be realized.

That was almost 20 years ago. John Lennon was wise and prophetic when he sang, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." My own life has turned into a thick scrapbook of memorable happenings. I travelled, fell in love, got married, had two children, bought a house, moved cities, celebrated family milestones, made new friendships and grew closer in the ones I already had.

There were the inevitable twists and turns: a child with Down syndrome, a divorce, a father who suffered a debilitating stroke, an ex-wife with breast cancer and a rare lung disorder, a few bad relationships and spiralling personal debt. A lot of the bad stuff happened in a relatively short period of time and it got to me – it really got to me.

Days turned into weeks, weeks dragged into months. I fell into a nasty funk, convinced the world was conspiring against me. My self-confidence took a beating. How could it be that my friends were excelling and prospering while I was barely hanging on by my fingertips? I felt so useless and stupid, the only guy who never got the memo outlining the essential secrets of life.

The blizzard of bad stuff eventually subsided and, to my amazement, the important stuff grew stronger. I have wonderful relationships with my kids, who regularly amaze me with their compassion, insight and humour. My ex-wife's courage and optimism in the face of health problems is an inspiration, and has made me a more tolerant, less petty person. My dad has persevered and is still going strong into his 80s; my parents are now planning a cruise to celebrate their

60th wedding anniversary. I continue to be blessed and comforted by solid friendships with extraordinary, talented people.

About a year ago, I left the television production facility where I worked to pursue my dream and finally start my own business. I've done it a little differently and I'm a bit behind schedule. So far, however, my life as an entrepreneur has been tremendously rewarding. I've adopted a stricter discipline and focus, read more and have developed a slate of projects I'm extremely proud of and excited about. One, a biography documentary of the life of Henry Pellatt, has just received a Gemini nomination.

Trying to get a company launched in a high-risk industry amid one of the toughest economic environments in memory is a formidable challenge. But my greatest challenge is working on and improving the toughest relationship of all – the one that preys on all my weaknesses, knows my fears and loves to wake me up in the middle of the night for some nasty taunting. I'm ready now because the journey has made me stronger and wiser, and has left me with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the only adversary I've ever really had – myself.

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