

*"Five Minutes on Mondays is a gold mine of enrichment...
It is an easy read with a deep and profound impact."*

—Martin Rutte, Chair of the Board, The Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace,
Saint Mary's University, co-author of *New York Times* business best-seller, *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work*

FIVE MINUTES ON MONDAYS

*Finding Unexpected Purpose, Peace,
and Fulfillment at Work*

ALAN LURIE

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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,

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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?

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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.

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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,

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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.”

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(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

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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

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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.

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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

DONKEY FOR SALE

ETHICAL WEALTH

There are many well-known and funny oxymorons—phrases that are internally self-contradictory—such as the following:

- Civil war
- Forward retreat
- Fresh frozen
- Jumbo shrimp
- Light heavyweight
- Negative growth

How about an honest businessperson? Or a wealthy spiritual person? To many, these are clearly contradictory. This is because we might have been told that to succeed in business, we have to bend the rules, engage in dishonest activities, and play dirty. We may also believe that religion and spirituality disdain monetary wealth, or that a person dedicated to

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spiritual pursuits cannot succeed in the brutal business arena. Such a person, we may think, will get stuck on the rungs of the ladder to success at the first inevitable call to dishonesty. We may hear such a person say, “My commitment to honesty shut me out of the executive suite,”

or “I could have made a lot of money, but I wasn’t willing to sell my soul!”

There certainly are many who immediately link business and money to dishonesty, greed, and sin.

Is this just the way it is,

though? 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? There are two wonderful Yiddish sayings that address these questions in the typical Yiddish manner—head on, with irony and humor.

One:

It’s not that having money is so good: It’s that not having money is so bad.

The other:

I have been rich, and I have been poor—and I can tell you it is better to be rich and happy than poor and miserable.

We might have been told that to succeed in business, we have to bend the rules, engage in dishonest activities, and play dirty.

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And then, of course, there is Tevya, the poor dairyman in *Fiddler on the Roof*, who complains to the heavens:

I know there is no shame in being poor, but it's no great honor either.

These are funny because they are so obvious. Of course it's good to have money, to be comfortable, or, at least, to not be poor. But these sayings also allude to a deeper truth. Although the path to business success for some may be littered with cheating, lying, gossiping, and plain old corruption, we all must know that those who achieve success through this route are not, in the long run, honorable or happy; not truly “honorable” or “happy” in the deepest sense of the words—as someone who lives with a meaningful purpose, in meaningful connection to others, and to the finest that is within. That is because no matter how deeply one buries one's conscience, the voice of morality, which is intrinsically embedded in all of us, will be heard.

There is an illuminating argument written in the Talmud—the Jewish record of ethical and legal discussions—that emphasizes this point. In this debate, the Rabbis 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 how well you lived your life? Behind the scenes, the Rabbis argue; one says that the first question must be, “Did you pray every

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day?” Another asserts that it is, “Did you study?” And another, “Did you give money to charity?” Finally, one suggests, “Did you conduct your business affairs honestly?” Immediately all agree that this is the correct first question. The Rabbis recognize that, although the other activities are absolutely essential, business success is such a powerful goal 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. This person will naturally, and effectively, study, pray, and give money and time to charity. Conversely, if one is dishonest in business, then prayer is insincere, study is ineffective, and charity is tainted.

How, then, can one become rich, happy, and achieve business success, while staying on the route of a higher path—an ethical, moral path? There are many religious and spiritual laws and guidelines surrounding business. In the Bible we are called to give a portion of our earnings to those who are less fortunate; we are told to pay workers promptly; to be diligent in ensuring that we charge the right amount to buyers; to help those out of work to find employment; to share information that is valuable to others; to candidly reveal any defects in our products and services; to remove obstacles from the path of other’s success; to be honest and fair. According to

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the Bible, those who act accordingly will prosper. There might be a misconception that religions spurn wealth, but in general this is not true. Religious traditions spurn ingratitude, hoarding, and cheating, with the recognition that gratitude, generosity, and honesty always lead to the good for all.

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

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A story is told of Safra, a poor, pious shopkeeper, who was trying to sell his donkey. One morning, as Safra was praying, a man in desperate need of a donkey approached him and offered him a price for the donkey. Because Safra was in the middle of his prayers, he could not answer. When the man saw that Safra did not respond, he assumed that his price was too low and doubled it. Again Safra did not answer, so the man tripled his price. Finally, Safra finished his prayer and said to the man,

“Your first offer was the amount that I had hoped for, and I will not use the fact that I was praying as an opportunity to get more than my asking price. I accept your first offer.”

Safra received the price he needed, and the man was not exploited. A successful, ethical transaction. I like to imagine that the story continues. In my imagining, the buyer, who is clearly wealthy, recognizes in Safra a man who deals fairly. He continues to shop with Safra in the future and even directs his business associates to shop there. Soon, Safra’s shop is teeming with business, the man who bought the donkey prospers, and the two men develop a friendship of trust and respect.

Safra’s example sets a standard that is difficult to achieve. How many of us would have the determination to so readily turn down such an unexpected, though unearned, windfall? But this is exactly the

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opportunity for spiritual growth that business presents to us because when business is approached with the same spirit as prayer—with positive intention, honesty, and humility—a deeper and lasting success will naturally emerge.

I owe much of the insight on this subject to The Kabbalah of Money, by Nilton Bonder.

JUSTICE ON THE TRAIN

OFFERING CRITICISM

There are many places that are consciously designed to teach us spiritual lessons: churches, synagogues, mosques, ashrams, meditation centers, nature retreats, and so on. These places are usually quiet oases away from our noisy lives, where we can focus on personal growth and nurture our relationship with a higher purpose. Much of our greatest architecture is devoted to these structures, which usually rely on the powerful combination of symbolic spaces and choreographed ritual to facilitate a spiritual connection. At one time or another, the majority of Americans attend one of these places.

I'd like to suggest an addition to the list. This place does not have a grand edifice, but it shares many of the required attributes of a great spiritual center. It brings together a regular group of people in common purpose. It has ritual that is silently understood by most of its participants. For those who are

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so inclined, it offers the opportunity for quiet meditation, study, or meaningful dialogue with a friend, or a chance to meet someone new. On occasion, it provides a stage for high drama, where human passions are exposed and often resolved. So I'd like to suggest that we add this to our list of great spiritual places: the Metro-North New Haven commuter train.

I take this train in and out of Manhattan every weekday and have discovered that this train is a spiritual laboratory where unexpected lessons can be learned on any given day. Here, in a worn-out, narrow, long, low box, people are crowded together, forced to sit or stand close to strangers who are literally moving toward a common destination. This environment creates interactions that, normally easily avoided or dismissed, must be confronted directly. Moral, ethical, and spiritual dilemmas naturally arise, such as:

Will the standing man wake the sleeping young woman and ask that she take her bag off the adjacent seat so he can sit down? If so, will he speak to her? Will she smile at him or just grunt and go back to sleep? Should he leave her alone and accept that he must remain standing?

Will the man who is positioning himself directly in front of the opening doors move to the side to allow others to enter and leave, or will he push forward to grab one of the few

remaining seats? Should someone say something? Isn't he as entitled to a seat as anyone else?

Will anyone ask the aspiring young businessman to please wait until after he has left the train to make his cell-phoned sales pitch—or at least to speak in a lower voice? Is he aware that he is disturbing others? Does he care? Should he? Who sets these rules anyway?

Should I talk to the man across the aisle who looks strangely familiar? Should I offer my seat to that elderly man standing by the door? Should I say something to the woman sitting next to me, who seems to be struggling with a painful personal issue? Can I help? Is any of this my business?

These little dramas happen daily, and I often spend my time on the train pondering these things. Recently, I witnessed an incident that dramatically illustrates an important spiritual concept. The train was docked in Grand Central Station, and I entered early—fifteen minutes before the scheduled departure time. There were very few people on the train, and I took a seat across the aisle from a young man. He had put one of his feet on the seat directly in front of him and was comfortably reading a newspaper. A middle-aged man, dressed in a crisp suit and tie, entered the train. He scanned the car and suddenly saw the man with his leg on the seat. He quickly walked over to the young man, stopped, and stood over him with his hands on his hips.

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“Do you behave like this at home?” the middle-aged man asked. “Is this how you sit at home, with your feet on the furniture?”

The seated man slowly looked up from his newspaper, then quietly and sarcastically muttered, “Yes, sometimes I do,” and returned to his reading.

The older man’s face reddened. He pushed the young man’s newspaper aside and said in a louder voice, “I’m talking to you.”

“Get your hands off my paper,” the other hissed. “What’s your problem?”

“Get your damned foot off the seat!” the standing man shouted. “Do you think that you are the only person on this train? How is someone supposed to sit there after your filthy feet have been on it?”

“Why don’t you mind your own business and go sit somewhere else?” the young man replied, his voice cracking. “There’s a train full of empty seats!”

“This is my business. You are a rude, inconsiderate man, and I’ll sit wherever I damn-well feel!” the middle-aged man retorted, then abruptly sat down right next to the younger man, who shook his head in disbelief.

“You gotta’ be kidding me!” the young man laughed.

“We’ll see who is laughing,” the older man smirked. “How would you like it if I put my foot on your chair?” Then he turned and put his feet on the younger man’s lap, inadvertently kicking his knee.

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“You f-cking kicked me!!!” the younger man screamed. “What are you, some kinda’ nut?” Then he shot up from his seat, hurried past the now-smiling older man, and muttered, “I’ll just go sit elsewhere.”

“Ah, another one bites the dust,” the middle-aged man crowed, as he relaxed in his seat, triumphant in his victory over the forces of rudeness.

Here, on the train, was a morality drama worthy of Broadway. Actually, it was better than a Broadway play because it was real, and it carried a profound message. This was a three-minute act starring real people engaged in real struggle. The younger man had broken the rules of the train, and the older man was determined to right this heinous wrong. On the surface, it seemed to be no more than this. But the subtleties of the drama displayed an essential truth about the nature of personal criticism. Certainly the older man was right; people should not put their feet on the seats. By his actions, the offense was removed, the seat was made available for others, and the rules were enforced. Justice seemed to have been served. But was this an effective tactic? Certainly the younger man did not leave feeling that he had learned a new rule of etiquette. We can easily imagine that he will put his feet on the seat again, perhaps simply to spite the older man (“No one can tell me where to put my feet!”). We can also easily recognize that the older man did not

speak to the younger man with helpful intention. He took great pleasure in his victory and seemed to have especially enjoyed shaming the younger man.

Of course, there are situations in which we should speak out; when we see that someone's actions are causing harm to himself or to others, or when we hear false statements that could lead to misunderstandings and negative outcomes. At those times we are obligated to do or say something. Unlike the older man on the train, though, how can we communicate this effectively? In The Book of Leviticus is an interesting quote about the nature of criticism that sheds some light on this question:

You will rebuke your fellow, but do not bear sin because of him.

This is an often-misunderstood quote. It requires that we correct someone who has done something wrong but then links this rebuke to bearing sin. Often this sin is seen as the failure to rebuke the wrong-doer, but this is an incorrect reading. We have to look at the words immediately preceding and following this quote to get a fuller picture. Here we find first the impassioned plea:

Do not hate your brother in your heart.

Then afterward comes the most essential statement in the entire Bible:

Love your neighbor as yourself.

The proximity of these statements teaches us that when we approach another to offer criticism, we must be sure that we do so without malice, and with the positive intent to help, as we too would like to be treated. As demonstrated by the drama on the train, an unexamined, unrestrained eagerness to criticize others can lead to unnecessary hurt, shame, and embarrassment. And in its most extreme form, we might even take pleasure in rebuking another, perhaps to satisfy an unconscious need to feel secure by dominating or controlling others, or to redress our own unexplored experience of shame. If we carry this attitude, our criticism will actually backfire, and the sin we bear as a result of our failure to treat the other with respect and compassion is our own diminished relationship with others and a weakening of our connection to the Source of our highest potential.

In his comprehensive volume about ethics, *You Shall Be Holy*, Joseph Telushkin lists six questions that we must ask ourselves before criticizing others:

An unexamined, unrestrained eagerness to criticize others can lead to unnecessary hurt, shame, and embarrassment. And in its most extreme form, we might even take pleasure in rebuking another.

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1. Am I being fair, or am I exaggerating?
2. Will my words hurt the other person's feelings; and if so, how can I express myself without inflicting too much pain?
3. How would I feel if someone criticized me this way?
4. Am I enjoying the prospect of offering this criticism?
5. Is my criticism confined to a specific act or trait?
6. Are my words nonthreatening and, at least in part, reassuring?

This is a difficult and exacting list, and most of us, at times, fall short of this high standard. This may especially be a challenge when we “know” that we’re right (my favorite excuse). We must be very diligent and aware, however, because when we act carelessly in criticizing, we not only hurt others, but we do, as the words of Leviticus tell us, actually damage ourselves, our spiritual growth, and our sense of well-being. When we offer criticism, we should first check our intentions and begin with a heart free of hate, followed by a commitment to compassion. Of course, you do not need to wait for a ride on the train to put this in practice....

TRY THEM, TRY THEM

DEVELOPING PERSISTENCE

Last week, I walked past a coworker's office. His door was open, and I quickly stepped in to say "hi." As I turned to leave, though, I noticed an unusual book on his credenza that immediately grabbed my attention. Most businesspeople have the typical retinue of business books in their offices—such familiar titles as *Good to Great*, *Who Moved My Cheese*, *Freakonomics*, and *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. I would not have been surprised to see any of these titles in his office. This particular book caught my eye because it seemed so out of place in the office of a hard-nosed New York City real estate broker, but its orange/red cover was immediately recognizable. I knew this book intimately because I read it several times a week to my children when they were little. I smiled at him as I looked at the picture on the cover—a catlike creature standing on two feet, bent over, staring incomprehensibly

at a plate of odd-looking green food. Although I hadn't opened this book in more than 15 years, I could still remember many of its familiar whimsical rhyming verses.

My coworker saw my reaction. "*Green Eggs and Ham* is the best book you'll ever read on marketing," he said with a returned smile.

Theodor Seuss Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, wrote *Green Eggs and Ham* in 1960, and it has been a staple of children's bedtime reading ever since. The book is a whimsical tale of two characters; one—named Sam-I-Am—is a small, energetic, enthusiastic, bright yellow creature (of some sort) with a red hat, who tries continually to convince another odd-looking creature—who is never named—to try a plate of green eggs and ham. This unnamed character is a gloomy, pale creature with a crumpled black hat, who repeatedly states that he does not like this dish, and Sam-I-Am repeatedly tries to get him to give it a taste. At the end, the unnamed creature finally consents to try the dish and, surprisingly, loves it! The two then walk off happily, arm-in-arm. That's the whole story.

On its surface, Seuss's story appears to be a simple children's story. As with all of Seuss's books (as with any enduring fable), below the charmingly quirky surface are resonant and sophisticated messages. As my coworker saw, among the messages of

Try Them, Try Them

Green Eggs and Ham is a lesson on one of the key elements for success in any marketing and sales strategy—persistence. Sam-I-Am refuses to give up and will not take “no” for an answer. In the end, his persistence results in a “sale” and a new loyal customer. Sam-I-Am is, in fact, an expert salesman, who uses persistence skillfully. When one approach fails, he quickly and flexibly changes tactics. As his potential client refuses to try green eggs and ham in one place, Sam-I-Am suggests that perhaps he will like them if they are tried in different locations, with different companions.

Sam-I-Am also embodies another key attribute of persistence. He faces rejection with a positive attitude. Seuss draws him as always cheerful and optimistic, even after the unnamed character flatly tells Sam-I-Am that he does not like him. How many of us could avoid taking such a remark personally and find in ourselves the determination and optimism to keep trying? In spite of this overt and caustic remark, though, Sam-I-Am happily continues to convince the other to try his product. He does so because he knows that the rejection is not personal. Sam-I-Am manages to persist cheerfully because he keeps his ego out of the picture and focuses instead on the message. Seuss’s name for this character gives us a clue: Sam-I-Am. He knows exactly who he is (am?) and is comfortable with himself. He knows that the other’s rejection is not a

reflection of anything wrong with him as a person, but is simply an obstacle to be overcome.

There is yet another essential quality of persistence evident in Seuss's story. At the end of the

book, after the other creature finally tries green eggs and ham, Sam-I-Am looks on proudly. He has been confident in his product all along and always believed that if the other simply tried it, he would like it. Sam-I-Am knows that green eggs and ham may sound a bit odd, and that stodgy, stubborn, complacent creatures will immediately say "no," but he also knows that green eggs and ham are delicious (though not kosher...). Sam-I-Am believes in his product and knows that what he is offering is of high quality. At the end of the book, the un-named character actually thanks Sam-I-Am for convincing him to try something new. Like Sam-I-Am, in order to sustain our enthusiasm and to ethically continue to try to convince others, it is crucial that we believe in what we are producing, saying, and selling. Blind persistence for a faulty product, service, or idea is not a virtue.

As we scratch deeper below the surface, we see that Sam-I-Am is more than a salesman. He is a

Sam-I-Am also embodies another key attribute of persistence. He faces rejection with a positive attitude.

spokesman for the power of persistence as a change-agent in our lives and in the lives of others. When we select a worthy goal and persist in our commitment to see it through, regardless of rejection and self-doubt, we can overcome almost any obstacle and limitation. As we know, this is not easy. Along the way, setbacks may tempt us to lose confidence. Naysayers may convince us that we cannot achieve our vision. We may simply decide that we are too tired to continue. Dr. Seuss lightly and humorously tells us that the force of optimism will always overcome that of pessimism, if we can only consistently muster the determination to keep going.

So what lessons have we learned so far about the quality of persistence from Dr. Seuss?

Sam-I-Am is more than a salesman. He is a spokesman for the power of persistence as a change-agent in our lives and in the lives of others.

- Don't give up.
- When one approach fails, try something new.
- Stay optimistic.
- Don't take rejection personally.
- Believe in what you are pursuing.

Dr. Seuss also teaches a more subtle, spiritual lesson on the nature of persistence. At the beginning

of the book, we find the un-named creature sitting comfortably in an armchair, reading a newspaper. Sam-I-Am bursts in on a fantastical vehicle, carrying a plate of the unusual dish, announcing change, risk, and the possibility of something new, shattering the other's comfort zone. The un-named creature resists, stating that he does not like this change, even though he has never even tried it. In this way, Dr. Seuss's creatures are archetypes for the struggle between our inclination to settle for the status quo and our ambitions to create change; between our craving for energy and our attraction to lethargy; between a desire to try something adventurous and the lure of playing it safe. The un-named creature, sitting safely in his chair, is called to try something new; something that he may actually like; something that will change the way he views the world. Yet he continually resists. His resistance, however, is not based on facts or experience, but is a stubborn refusal to respond to this call—a refusal to enter the unknown and accept the risk that comes with changing his old habits.

In the end, the un-named creature finds himself in the dark, on a runaway train, plummeting into the ocean, submerged in open waters, surrounded by strange onlookers, as Sam-I-Am asks yet again, "Try it?" At the end of his rope, his resistance worn out, this stubborn creature finally agrees and, to his surprise and delight, instantly finds that the thing he has

Try Them, Try Them

been so actively resisting—the thing that has taken him completely out of his comfort zone—is actually good for him. Sam-I-Am is his persistent messenger for change, who will not let him off the hook and who continually reappears until the change is embraced.

At its deepest level, Dr. Seuss’s book is a story about the persistence of the call to growth and change. If you have experienced this phenomenon, you know that, somehow, the same message continues to reappear in your life—perhaps in different guises, from different people and different situations—and that this message will continue to pursue you until you consent to listen and act. Then, like the un-named creature, you suddenly discover that the thing you have been resisting is actually good, and you are then grateful that the unwelcome messenger, consistent in his message, had the persistence to not give up on you. This persistence softened you, wore down your natural resistance, and made you receptive to change. As a saying from an anonymous author teaches:

In the confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins. Not through strength, but through persistence.

Now, perhaps you may think that this is an overly ambitious reading of a simple children’s book. Well, maybe so. But try it, try it!

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