

The Alternative Line

by Joe Holzer for CNY-PCA Redline Report Copyright 2010 <http://www.holzerent.com>

Life Happens

Life is, if anything, about change. We are born, which means we change from the relatively safe cosseted space of our mothers' wombs to the harshness of cold air. Then it gets worse. We move from diapers to socially acceptable behaviors, then return to diapers eventually. We go to school, go to work, and pretty much go to hell. If we are lucky we find love along the way; if really lucky we find a soulmate to share the journey of our changes. Unfortunately, too many of us find that sharing too hard.

Along the way we have some signposts which point us in directions. If we are smart, we make good decisions. But it is inhuman to make ALL good decisions. So we sometimes deviate from the ideal, or what we perceive of as the "ideal" for us. It is in those times that we are not the masters of our own destiny. Examples included the draft, which most of those driving Porsches understood to be a generally undesired demand on us, and potentially life threatening. Those of us of the female persuasion never had the "joy" of that exercise. I'm not sexist; ask my daughter what I think women are capable of. But in that respect they got a "pass" and never had to be subjected to the possibility. Other examples have included the economy, enemies, politics, health, timing, and others.

One of the most overlooked and misunderstood of those has simply been odds. You have heard it said that opportunity favors the prepared. So, for example, when IBM called Bill Gates to ask if he had an operating system for their PC, because they were frankly too enamored of mainframes to care about that upstart Apple and writing a DOS was beneath them, though their mainframe customers were clamoring for the ability to do their own spreadsheet work without having to get the permission of the exalted keepers of the secure rooms who got around to running their analyses when they damned well felt like it. Remember? Now Bill didn't have a DOS. But he knew a guy who had one, but had nobody interested in it. So, before Bill had even discussed it with the guy, he promised IBM that he had one they could use. Now, what would the world look like today had that guy told Bill to eat rat poison?

A clear example is also education. While I have been unable to find anyone who will seem to consider me as the project manager I am, for reasons I can only guess relate to the fact that they have to find some means to sort the pile of candidates' resumes and I am missing some buzzword so the computers Bill so ably enabled to do the hard work are spitting mine out before any person with a brain gets to read them. That's probably because that person is so busy because "headcounts" matter more than cost/benefit. When that happened, I must have been asleep, because the last I knew generating value greater than your own cost was profit. Must be my MBA is no longer valid. Or so the evidence would suggest. Yet it is impossible to believe that the average person, which is someone with neither an MBA nor an Engineering degree, should be more marketable. When and why did that start?

Sure, I could lament the shipping of manufacturing jobs, which certainly includes mine, to China and India. But that would imply that I had some greater right to that job than an equally qualified guy who would do the job for 10% of my cost. And now India is finding that South America and Africa are competitors for their labor. Welcome to globalization.

Any of you remember a guy named Wendelin? When he took over at Porsche, they were in serious trouble. He kicked ass and took names, and implemented best practices from around the world. And Stuttgart ceased to be the only place they made Porsches. Today Stuttgart represents a minor percentage of Porsche production. That sea change must obviously have been emotionally and otherwise disrupting of Porsche, but it had to be done. And WW got far closer to actually buying VW than people recognize. Had not the world financial system collapsed, he, rather than a Piech appointee, would be running both VW and Porsche. Small wonder there were Porsche engineers who cried when WW was forced out.

On a personal note, my wife of 37 years has decided she has not had enough control, so is doing the same to me. Implicitly, this could be the last thing you ever read in the Redline from me. Or, it could be the start of something unimaginably great. Experience has shown that EVERY time I was laid off, after a period of grief thru acceptance, I landed something much better than I had left. Even after the Enron debacle, which to my mind is a microcosm of what is wrong between the haves and have-nots; a loss of ethical behavior, when GE no longer needed my services, I thought my business skills would help my wife to start her medical practice. And at first it was envigorating; I had to learn a lot about a system I had only known as a customer. As an engineer, I can assure you, medical practice finance was designed by Machiavelli. And then insurance companies got unethical. And politicians let them get away with it. And when someone finally tried to fix it, the Republicans chose to focus attention on Monica Lewinski, or to merely obstruct completely by leaving the playground. Democrats, having learned that keeping a class of Americans as victims so they could exploit them for votes, ultimately could not muster enough courage to do the right thing, and flushed the opportunity. And the people with short memories, which sadly represents too much of the electorate, will return the same bozos who got us in this mess in the first place.

With Lynne choosing to destroy what we built as a team, the only winners will be lawyers. Already I have had to spend enormous hours pulling together more financial information than even the IRS wants, and with absolutely no possibility of its value not being less than it was when I started. Had I any intelligence I would have refused and been better off. But no such luck. So Lynne had to be in charge. It was, after all, “her” business. I am simply codependent. So last year she made less than any year I was running the financials after our first two. As a clinician she may be first rate, but as a business woman she is self destructive. In retrospect, my deciding to help her, and then to work hard at developing an EMR system for her was a colossal error, both for my career and for me personally. It removed me from my prior experienced field, which seems to suggest that I am incapable of managing projects because I wasn’t managing those projects last year as well. And since my prior work had kept me away for more than half the time, it put my proximity too close to her toes, which was clearly a threat to her “independence”. If there is any solace, it is the full recognition that even a miracle may be inadequate to protect her from herself, as she has already demonstrated repeatedly. Saddest, though, is that “I told you so” will both be lost on her and add nothing to my dinner plate.

Yet, do I detect a glimmer of possibility on my horizon? A friend from the Porsche Club has been instructing part-time with AAA for some time now, but was lamenting their increasing demands on his time to me one day. My situation is that while the economy is in the tank, the likelihood of landing a decent PM role is slim at best, and with the added drain on our family finances (to say nothing of the diminished value of our investments having to be cashed out at their lowest value), I asked him if they might need other instructors. I had taught a pair of the neighbors’ kids to drive, at their request because they were having conflict with the kids and they had been told by my daughter what a good instructor I had been (high praise from ANY teen indeed) for her. So, long story short, I am in process of becoming a “certified” AAA driving instructor (believe it or not, NYS will only allow instructors to be paid if they are 1. Associated with a licensed training agency, and 2. Pass their test with an 80% correct score, and 3. Attend and pass a 30 hour course, so they may receive their NYS card which must be on their person at all times because an “Inspector” can hop in the training car at any time and yada yada... Small wonder we have the problems with educational outcomes today. Government is like beavers – they get in the mainstream and dam it up). The pay sucks – were I to do it full time it would be poverty wages, and there are no benefits, which in my mind would be the only justification for it being a W2 rather than a 1099 compensation so I could use my other business tax benefits to offset. Don’t get me started. But teaching our kids to drive has become invisible in the priorities of the vast majority of school systems, which might explain why the driving (as well as so many other) skills are getting worse, and the demand at AAA seems to be growing exponentially. Just not the way the cost for the rest of education seems to be going. As I said, don’t get me started.

The thing about the AAA gig is the great unknown; as Bill Gates found out with IBM, you just never know when the right opportunity might show up, and you just have to have the balls to jump on it. Knowing what I do about parent – child conflicts at that age, and with my known success history (albeit small), and with the equally known parental eagerness for their children to succeed at that rite of passage, who knows; there might be some parent who can afford to pay AAA and needs a PM, who will equate my ability to teach their child to drive with an ability to herd the many cats in the typical project. At least it might get my resume past the computer text mis-match. Hope springs eternal... And you just never know. Because luck favors the prepared.

