



MY JOURNEY FROM CONTROL TO SERENITY

I WAS ALWAYS A CONTROLLER—I worried too much not to be. I firmly believed the best way to satisfy my needs and achieve what I wanted in life was by controlling everything and everyone. I constantly directed, pressed, persisted, advised, and tried to change others, particularly those closest to me. I hovered over everyone at work. Everything had to pass my close scrutiny and be done my way. At home, Father truly knew best! I advised my children on how to study, as well as how to interact with their friends. I also expounded on how they should play basketball, soccer, and tennis. And of course, in my infinite wisdom I was the one to make the “correct” decisions on important issues my present and former wives faced. In short, my way was the best way—and usually the only way.

Yet, by most standards I had a good life. I graduated from a top college and law school with high honors. I wrote a best-selling book on real estate investing. I developed and taught college-level real estate courses and conducted scores of seminars for real estate professionals throughout

California. I also owned a real estate investment company that had well-known celebrities as clients. And by the time I was in my early thirties, I could afford to live in the exclusive Old Bel Air section of Los Angeles, next door to Sylvester Stallone and only a few doors down from where Elvis Presley once resided.

When I look back on it all, I see that my successes were less a function of my controlling ways than of the sheer time and energy I was expending. My workday didn't end when the sun set. I was driven. My mind worked through the night. Worry, anxiety, and fear were my constant companions, as they are for most controllers. I persisted, even when it was clear that events were well beyond my power to influence or change. I expected my employees to perform beyond their skills and education. At home, I could not accept that my children were different from me. I pressured my older daughter, Lora, to participate more in class discussions and school events when she had a social phobia. I scolded my younger daughter, Lana, for bouncing around so much when she was in fact bravely coping with severe tics from Tourette's syndrome. Indeed, I took everyone to task.

I thought things were fine, until one day they weren't.

EVENTS BEYOND MY CONTROL

A series of rapid-fire traumatic events in my late thirties shook me to my core. It all started with the unusually bad weather in Los Angeles during the winter of 1981. Eight straight days of heavy rains caused a major mudslide at our hillside home. I woke up early one morning, walked into the dining room, and looked out at our newly redesigned fifty-foot deck dangling halfway down the hill, precariously

close to a neighbor's house. At first I thought I was sleepwalking. But after I showered and had three cups of coffee, the deck was still dangling. The repair costs almost equaled the price I paid for the home.

Weeks later, a mentally disturbed neighbor set a fire in my garage, directly below my eight-year-old son Brandon's bedroom. He had ignited a can of gasoline two feet from my car. (This neighbor was subsequently prosecuted for manslaughter when a person was killed in a fire he had set to an apartment building to collect insurance monies.) The fire singed my car and came within an inch of the gas cap before I doused it, barely averting a total disaster.

The incident so unnerved my first wife that she began sleeping in our son's room. (Little did I realize then that we would never sleep together again.) We installed sophisticated burglar and fire alarm systems and, for added measure, bought a police-trained guard dog. We even purchased (and learned how to use) handguns.

We did everything we could but move out of the house. We couldn't do that because we couldn't sell it! There was still mudslide damage to be repaired, and we didn't have the funds to complete it. Plus, there was no longer vehicular access to our home. That same neighbor had illegally graded his lot, cascading rocks and loose soil onto the foot of our driveway.

Soon afterward, I was betrayed by a business partner intent on squeezing me out of my most profitable investment. He controlled the purse strings and began withholding my badly needed profits from the investment. He also told my banker that my wife and I were unstable and that our finances had deteriorated. The problem was, we shared the same banker—my partner had introduced us—and my partner happened to be one of the bank's wealthiest clients.

The bank called in my loans—well in excess of \$1 million in today's dollars—and I didn't have the means to repay them. A stable banking relationship was critical to my business. The sudden deterioration of my financial condition forced me to withdraw from pending real estate deals, wiping out more than two years' income.

Consumed with unbridled anger and resentment, I foolishly launched a costly five-year legal battle that brought me to the brink of bankruptcy. I was obsessed with revenge and with the foolhardy and impossible task of trying to make an honest man out of a dishonest one, and I used every dollar and controlling means available to me in my efforts.

I became distraught and scared—really scared. I was unable to sleep most nights and had horrible nightmares. My wife grew severely depressed. She couldn't get out of bed most days. We soon separated. Too many crazy things had happened within several short years that fourteen years of a good marriage could not overcome.

It was time to face up to the imbalance and emptiness that dominated my life, but there was more to come. During the next three months, one of my most successful investment properties was completely destroyed by fire, and another suffered three robberies, one of which culminated in the shootout death of the robber (and the ensuing front-page headlines). This was followed by a mass exodus of tenants and foreclosure proceedings by the lender.

Next, my dear, beloved grandmother died. She and my grandfather, who had previously passed away, had literally raised me during my formative years. And my son, Brandon, then age ten, bearing the hardships of divorce and the chaos that surrounded him, developed severe vocal and motor tics. It was deeply painful for me to see the diminished glow of such a charismatic and enthusiastic young child.

I badly needed to get away and gain some perspective, so I took Brandon on a week vacation to Club Med in Mexico. When we returned, I went to the hospital for what I was told would be a simple twenty-minute outpatient procedure to remove a skin cancer on my right nostril—something I had kept putting off while dealing with all my travails—and ended up on the table for over three hours, followed by three additional major surgeries over a six-week period to eradicate the cancerous tissue, which had spread through my face like the roots of a tree. I lost half my nose, and it took several more surgeries to reconstruct it. I am fine now, but as luck would have it, my insurance coverage was dropped after the first round of surgeries.

The very thing in my life that I had always felt most secure with—CONTROL—no longer worked. It was time to give it up. I had neither the strength nor the desire to go on fighting whatever demons were going to attack me next.

DECIDING TO SURRENDER

I “surrendered.”

And with that surrender, my blinders fell away, new opportunities emerged, and I was able to glimpse a more serene way of life, one that eventually led to great financial success, artistic achievement, and the most important thing to me now: greater serenity than I could ever have imagined.

When I returned to work following my surgeries, I noticed something quite remarkable. My business had been functioning quite well—without my constant direction! To be sure, there were many things I had to catch up on, but few of my fears had come to pass. On the contrary, several important projects had achieved positive results, with little input from me!

This was a startling revelation. Could it be that I couldn't control people or the outcome of events as much as I had thought I could? In fact, was it possible that trying to control too much might produce effects opposite of what I wanted? Were some matters best left alone or left to proceed at their own pace?

I was certainly curious to find out. I began observing the ebb and flow of work life. I noticed that each issue or challenge had its own unique course and time span, much like the waves of the ocean. Sometimes a transaction would progress smoothly and in an orderly fashion, while at other times things would get bogged down. Some matters would become confusing and uncertain, without any apparent direction. After a while I began participating in this process, but in a noncontrolling manner. I tried to roll with the punches, to go with the ups and downs rather than try to direct or resist as I had in the past. I still remained alert as I waited for opportune times to assert myself and apply my talents, but my involvement grew gentler and less obtrusive. I stopped assuming that my way was the best way. I stopped being so quick to judge. I listened to others and allowed them more leeway. On the whole this took very little time or effort on my part: perhaps I would offer a suggestion at an appropriate moment, or simply acknowledge the good work of others. Frequently it meant slowing down and backing off when I realized I was slipping back to pressing, or realizing that more time was needed for key issues to become clearer. It also involved trusting my intuition and instincts much more. I had always had them, of course, but I had been reluctant to trust them.

The results of doing business in this way were remarkable. Eventually I ended up spending only half as many hours working as I had in the past, because I was able to avoid

time-consuming diversions and focus on what was truly important. I often discovered innovative solutions to complex problems because I was open to new ideas. I was considerably more relaxed. I smiled more and frowned less. I made fewer mistakes and wiser decisions. That really paid off.

LOSING CONTROL IN MY PERSONAL AFFAIRS

Giving up control in my personal affairs, however, was more difficult and took longer. In fact, it was not until my third marriage that I was truly able to give up control with my family. (Indeed, my still-controlling ways had contributed to the failure of a short-lived second marriage.) I started listening to my wife, Sigute, and my children, Brandon, then nineteen, and Lora, then five (Lana was still to come). I stopped criticizing their choices and telling them what I thought was best for them. I stopped “taking care” of them so much and instead allowed them the dignity (and the chance to gain the wisdom) of making their own mistakes. I also stopped trying to change my friends and began to appreciate and accept them for who and what they were. In general, I accepted life more on its own terms and let myself be guided by what felt right and natural rather than by fear and anxiety.

It was during this period that I began to give up long-held, self-serving myths about myself: I conceded that I didn’t know it all. My way was seldom the best way. In fact, I wasn’t the great problem solver that I had taken such great pride in being (and I was not nearly as humble as I had deceived myself into believing). Lastly, I recognized that each person has his or her own unique life journey, and it

was not my role to obstruct that journey by trying to overly influence it, but rather to support it through love, understanding, and acceptance.

UNEXPECTED REWARDS

I found that the more I let go of control, the less I obsessed and worried. Conflicts diminished. Family bonds strengthened. Intimate relations became more intimate. Friendships improved and sometimes changed if they were unhealthy for me. Creative horizons expanded. Work became more productive and enjoyable. And I felt much more at peace. By letting go of control, I was able to get in touch with a natural rhythm that was truthful and nonconfrontational, yet followed no set pattern—one that invariably bestowed great rewards.

My own life bears witness to the remarkable rewards that come from relinquishing control. I went from an uptight, control-driven attorney and businessman to a life-loving person who works less and earns more, an accomplished painter, a published poet, a mentor, a tournament-level tennis player, a happily married man, and the involved father of three wonderful children.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book began to take shape over more than twenty years ago, after I had settled my harrowing lawsuit and took some much-needed time off. I purchased my first computer and started writing in a free-flow manner. My goal was to make some sense of what I had gone through.

I wrote about issues that had deeply pervaded my life for so long, such as gripping fear, obsessive worrying, and

unmitigated anger and rage. As I faced new challenges over the years, I kept writing. These writings served as a personal self-help guide. Increasingly, it became apparent to me that there existed an inverse correlation between the compulsion to control and inner peace and security.

It is thus my sincere hope that this book will pinpoint the dangers of excessive control and show you how to let go of it. Once you do, you are sure to enjoy the serenity that follows. I've tried to provide tools and strategies for losing control in such important areas of your life as family and parenting, work, love and romance, sports, and creative endeavors.

Many of these “decontrol” tools, as I call them, come from my personal experiences, and some were inspired by the wisdom people have shared with me at various meetings and workshops over the years. Teaching others about control has also taught me quite a bit, and in this book I include those lessons as well.

Some decontrol methods overlap, and others simply take different paths to the same destination. Some may work better for you than others. Use what you like and discard the rest. Modify them and devise your own as you see fit. What is required for success is that you be open-minded, make the commitment, and have the courage to change your deeply embedded control patterns.

If you follow this path, you, too, will learn that losing control (or decontrolling) bestows upon you—and those around you—freedom of choice and contentment. It nourishes your soul as you act and respond to life's challenges with more generous spirit.

