

Happiness is a Funny Thing
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Chapter Eleven

Elimination is the Key



Mr. Wilcox was one of the most memorable people I have ever met. He was a gemologist who owned and operated a store called The Rock Shop on the bustling and garish main strip of Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Gatlinburg lies at the entrance to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park where idyllic streams cascade over ancient rocks and hiking trails provide an escape route from the chaos of modern civilization. But in Gatlinburg, that chaos literally presses right up against the boundary line between the natural beauty of the park and the gaudy environs of a true

tourist trap town. The result is a surreal juxtaposition of people and nature. Gatlinburg is basically a traffic jam surrounded by restaurants, tee shirt stores and wax museums.

Sandwiched between all the flashing neon motel signs and identical trinket and souvenir shops was a small store that sold jewelry fashioned from every kind of mineral and stone you might find on planet Earth. When I was just a kid we would visit the Smoky Mountains and I could always count on a few hours in The Rock Shop looking at shelves of fossils and amethyst geodes while my mother and grandmother examined the rings and necklaces and bracelets that were displayed in a rectangle of connected glass cases at the center of the store. Within that glass rectangle was a man who for decades was as much a fixture of the store as the display cases of quartz crystals.

Mr. Wilcox seemed very old when I was a child of five, and when I visited in my thirties with my wife, he was still there and just as active and enthusiastic as ever. I reminded him of my mother and my grandmother who had come so often to the store and he remembered them clearly and described my two sisters as well. I knew it was rude, but I had to ask him how old he was. He proudly declared that he was almost 90, and admitted that he still worked 40 or more hours a week on his feet the whole time. I guess when you

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stand next to 100 million year-old fossils all day, 90 seems downright juvenile.

I expressed some interest in a few items in the case and he produced each gem with a story of where it came from, what forces had shaped it, and what unique properties each stone possessed. He was passionate about his work, obviously successful and apparently very happy. I saw an opportunity to learn from someone who had the wisdom of a lifetime and the successful result of whatever philosophy had guided him on his journey, so I asked him, “Mr. Wilcox, you’re so healthy and lively and you seem to be a happy person, could I ask what you consider your secret?”

Mr. Wilcox, nodded his head, “Absolutely, I’ll tell you exactly what it is.” Then he heightened the drama by beckoning me closer as if it really were a secret he didn’t want everyone to know about. I leaned in and turned one ear to him and he said in a low voice, “*Elimination* is the key.”

“Elimination? You mean . . .” I started.

“Irregularity will kill you!” he said solemnly.

Okay, it wasn’t exactly an Oracle of Delphi moment. I expected something lofty and philosophical and instead I got a pitch to eat more fiber. I had to chuckle a little at that, but in the

years since Mr. Wilcox shared that pearl of wisdom, I have reflected on it, and not just for the reasons you think. If you consider it, the survival of every living organism relies on the ability to get fuel and to eliminate waste. I read an interesting factoid just the other day that more *drosophilae* (fruit flies) die from constipation than from any other cause, which is weird because you'd think with all that fruit. I mean *cheese* flies I could understand, but fruit flies?

If you've ever had a bout of fruit fly's complaint, you know how miserable the body feels when that part of the system is down. We feel out of balance, slow, and bloated. Did you ever consider that we sometimes need an emotional, mental, and spiritual colonic as well? We hold on to painful memories when they are no longer of any use but to cause us misery. We ruminate over our failures, we fret about what isn't happening or often what isn't even likely to happen. We watch disturbing images on TV, we think thoughts of failure, we get so busy with minutiae that don't make time to talk to God or to tell the people we care about how much we love them. We feel empty and void and yet our brains are stuffed with entertainment, anxieties, regrets, and self-doubt. We're constipated in ways that are far more hazardous than any physical back-up.

When we get to the point when the digestive system can't retain any more, the body can take

some unpleasantly strong action to set itself to rights. The mind and spirit though, are another matter. There is almost no limit to what crud and junk can be stored in there so you have to resolve to be more selective about what you take in. You'll find that as you start putting the right things in your mind and spirit, most of the sludge will be flushed out (I apologize for any unfortunate image that description may have conjured).

Master motivator Zig Ziglar uses an illustration with lemons and oranges where he points out that no matter how you squeeze them, the orange will always produce orange juice and the lemon, lemon juice because that is what is inside. Whatever we have inside, he points out, will be expressed when we are under pressure. We may think we are balanced, loving, positive and spiritually complete, but when the pressure starts to squeeze us from all sides, whatever we've filled our minds and hearts with will start to flow. If it is bitterness, we'll get anger. If it is hatred, we'll get blame. But if we've really tried to feed our spirit and mind with joy and charity and prayer, then in our time of distress and pressure we'll have our hope and love and faith to sustain us.

WATCH YOUR INTAKE

Tim Ferris is a young entrepreneur and the author of the best-selling book, **The Four-Hour Work**

Week. In it, Ferris lays out a four-step plan to creating an automated income stream to enable a lifestyle built around realizing the individual's dreams as an alternative to waiting for retirement to escape the daily grind. One of the four steps in his process is elimination of the things that take 80% of our time and produce 20% of our rewards. He recommends going on a "low-information diet" during which you don't surf the web, watch news or read the paper. It is a good exercise and a real eye-opener. It is amazing how much time is consumed getting information for which we have no real use except to entertain or to cause us unnecessary anxiety.

I like keeping up with the news of the world, but I have taken an important step in my information intake routine: I don't watch the late-night local news. I've made this decision for a couple of reasons. First, there is always local morning news when I get up so I haven't really missed anything I need to know. Secondly, almost all the news is bad anyway. Think about it for a moment. What is the 11 o'clock news? It is every bad, terrible, horrible, awful thing that happened anywhere in the world compressed into one half hour just before you go to sleep. The late Rich Jeni observed that the difference between world, national, and local news could be summed with, "in world news, people in other countries are *dead*, nationally, people in America are *dead*, and in the local scene, people right near your house are

dead!” It’s good to know *what* is going on, but it’s also important to decide *when* you should know it.

Television is so ubiquitous that it is hard to escape. Of course the Internet is gaining ground and the spectrum of good and bad is even broader. On TV, there are some things that I recommend you avoid altogether. Trash TV (a redundancy if there ever was one) like Maury, and Jerry Springer and all such programs that just take a glass-bottomed boat tour through the sewers of human behavior are—in my humble opinion—as bad for your soul as cigarettes are for your lungs and heart. These are followed closely by screaming pundits who work in outrage and anger like Picasso worked in oils and pastels. There is no spark of cultural or political controversy so small that they can’t fan it into a conflagration of national indignation and raging demagoguery. When we think of the polarization of America, we have these guys to thank for much of it.

Other programming is a judgment call for each individual. I don’t watch programs like CSI and Law and Order because I feel bad enough after the news. I don’t need fictional horrors to come up with more heinous and fiendishly complicated crimes than regular serial killers can think of without a writing staff. I’m not saying it’s all bad, but it’s not for me.

With movies people tend to be more discerning in their viewing because it requires money and a specific intention to go see one. Still, there are more poor choices than good ones because, sadly, aberrant sex and gratuitous violence sells tickets. When my wife and I go to the movies we enjoy watching the coming attractions. Watching the trailers is my third favorite part of going to the movies, after popcorn and Twizzlers. Making a trailer is a separate cinematic art form and I appreciate a good one. Too many of them are better than the movies themselves with great editing and sound, and for many years until the untimely passing of the great Don LaFontaine, the same narrator for all of them.

After each preview, my wife and I go through a quick evaluation process where we turn to each other in the dim theater and exchange a nod, a shrug or a shake. If we open our eyes widely while rapidly nodding our heads, it means the movie has made our short list of films we'll want to see. If we shrug and turn our palms up it means that it has potential but at best it's going to be a dollar movie or a video rental.

Most movie trailers will get the headshake, which of course means, "Not even if you paid me." Features sure to get the shake include any title with a Roman numeral larger than II in the title, anything showing scenes of actors leaping in slow motion away from explosions or cars being

inexplicably launched into the air, and any story set in a bleak post-apocalyptic world where all survivors fight for water or fuel but apparently still go to the gym regularly. Add to that any plot that turns on the main character's ability to do things that are physically impossible like stop time, fly, read minds, converse with animals or ghosts that no one else can see, or—in the case of Kevin Costner—speak with a British accent.

Finally, and most importantly, any film that deals with a kidnapped child. For that last one we don't even wait for the end of the clip. All we need is the narrator to say, "A child is *missing*. . ." and we are shaking our heads like someone just offered us escargot. We know it's just a movie, but ever since we became parents, we have been unable to endure even a dramatic portrayal of a parent's worst fear. It's just not for us.

With the omnipresent video camera, though we don't have to settle for the dramatic CGI portrayals of mayhem on the big screen or forensic dramas where actors are auditioned to lie still on a stainless steel table. Now we have real blood and gore in so-called reality programs that present actual human suffering as just another entertainment choice. Again, there might be some edifying aspect to some of them, but for me they are must-not-see-TV.

A couple of years ago when I was a little less selective in my viewing choices, I happened upon a program on The Learning Channel that changed everything. Now you'd think you could watch The Learning Channel without fear of trash programming, and you would be mostly right. The show in question is apparently widely regarded as educational and in fact many nurses and healthcare professionals I've talked to watch it and really get something out of it. The program is: *Trauma, Life in the ER*. It was one of the most disturbing hours of TV I ever watched. I don't really understand why nurses would watch this show. Are they not getting enough pain and suffering on their regular shift so they like to continue to experience it vicariously over dinner?

I know I'll never forget it. The installment I saw was one they later used in their promos so it was kind of their signature episode. In this segment there was, no kidding, a man in the ER who had a 7-inch knife in his *head*! I'm not making this up. Right in the top of his head, buried to the hilt, a knife. They showed an x-ray of his skull with this long knife right in the top. Now, I don't know anything about medicine, but do you really need an x-ray to tell you what the trouble is there?

“Well, Bob, we got the x-rays back and we think we've diagnosed your trouble. According to these it seems you have a big knife in your head, you

see that there? We're almost positive that *is* your problem."

I don't remember how they explained it got there. I don't think it was accidental although I suppose it could have just been a bad night at Beni Hana's. I'm guessing that it was a crime and I'm assuming that they are looking for a tall assailant, but I really can't recall because I was just so horrified at the image of this handle sticking out of this poor man's head like a stick in a candy apple.

The hard part of this whole thing was that they didn't know how to remove it. It wasn't like you could walk up and yank it out like Arthur and Excalibur or something. The knife was lodged right in his brain and the slightest touch could result in death or paralysis. So they brought together a team of specialists and neurosurgeons and they conferred over their options and one of them actually suggested, "What if we leave it in?" I'm not sure but that might have been the janitor from maternity. Leave it *in*?

They didn't do that, I'm happy to report. They were able to remove the blade and I believe the patient made a more or less complete recovery, but what if they had gone with that course of action? I don't know how you would even break that news to the patient. What would you do, maybe use a good news/bad news approach?

“Well, Bob, there’s good news and bad news. The good news is, your hat’s not going to blow off so often . . . but there is a downside. You’re going to want to avoid thunderstorms and horseshoe tournaments.”

Needless to say, I don’t make that program part of my intake anymore.

What are you taking in and what do you think it’s doing to you inside? If you are like most Americans, your TV is on over 6 hours each day with an average of 6 acts of violence portrayed every prime time hour. You watch TV during dinner, 45% watch news during that important family time. I don’t know about you, but with my mashed potatoes I’d rather have gravy and “how was your day?” than kidnapping and murder. These are some of the most disturbing figures I’ve seen since the last time I shopped for beachwear. If these facts describe your routine, let me go Dr. Phil on you and ask, how’s that working for you? Are your entertainment choices making you stronger or are they altering your perceptions in ways that raise your levels of anxiety, anger, fear, and despair? If so, you have to expect that what’s inside may be expressed when the pressure is on.

You can deny it all you want, but we tend to become what we behold. The research bears out my mother’s wise admonition that it is impossible to walk in mud without getting dirty. If we

surround ourselves with images of violence, we are more likely to consider violence in conflict situations. If we indulge our lust with meaningless physical conquests and imagery that stresses only the physical aspect of sex, we erode our capacity for intimacy. And if we entertain ourselves with constant depictions of the darkest aspects of human depravity and selfishness, we will eventually become cynical and jaded people unable to feel authentic joy and hope.

Of course there are some people like real homicide detectives and trauma nurses who have to see the real dead bodies and the knives in the heads of patients and thank God for them. They are truly heroic for their willingness to confront the horrors that I don't have the courage to face, but ask them and they'll admit how critical their need is to unplug and find balance.

I had the privilege of seeing a presentation by Dr. Duane Dobbert, a psychologist and an expert in the psychology of sex offenders and child molesters. He has the unenviable job of consulting on cases sometimes involving the abduction and murder of children. I spoke with him at length after his program and the question that was foremost in my mind was how he maintains his hope and even his sanity in the face of all the evil he must encounter in his job. He discussed a strong faith in God that helped sustain him and bolstered his sense of purpose even when he dealt

with heartbreak and horror. Even so, he admitted that the job sometimes took a tremendous toll on his soul and his emotional health. But then he explained that three things in addition to his faith also helped to keep him from imploding:

1. **A positive focus:** He constantly reminds himself of the importance of the job he has been called upon to do by focusing on the lives he has helped to *save* rather than the tragedies he has been powerless to prevent.

2. **Support :** He credits his wife as the caretaker of his emotional health. His family in general and his wife in particular are constant sources of strength and renewal.

3. **Healing humor:** It's no surprise that humor is part of his self-care regimen, but he mentioned the movie *Dumb and Dumber* specifically. I'll admit this one took me a little aback. The idea that the preservation of one's emotional health could be in any way attributed to the film career of Jim Carrey is so counterintuitive that it borders on the surreal. He explained that the broad comedy is so wonderfully meaningless and silly that it turns out to be the perfect antidote to the grim realities of his job. It is humor as therapy, and it's just what he needs.

Thankfully, there are people like this good man out there who serve all of us by being willing to look directly into the darkness of the human soul. The risks to his emotional and physical health are very real. When we stare at monsters, they also

look back at us and their poison can seep into our minds and hearts, destroying our ability to feel joy and hope, but the good doctor is wise and recognizes these threats. He first draws strength from God, but then he also takes positive steps to ward off the damage to his spirit with three strategies that are wonderful tools even for those of us who don't have to toil in the basement of the human heart.

Keep the focus on the positive by constantly reminding yourself of your purpose and your triumphs. When I was a child, my mother provided the spiritual foundation that has sustained me all of my life. She loved the Psalms and told me many times that, although I was named after my dad, David would likely have been her choice for a name anyway because her favorite biblical figure was David. David was a complex individual. A man of great faith and bravery, he was also vulnerable to very human temptations and at times fell into periods of deep depression.

The best-known story involving David is of course his victory over the Philistine giant, Goliath. When young David goes out to face what appears to be an impossible task, he reminds himself aloud of his past victories. In I Samuel 17:36 David says: "I have killed a lion and a bear and this Philistine shall be as one of these."

David was a shepherd boy still too young to be a soldier. He was only there in the Valley of Elah on an errand from his father to take some things to his older brothers who were in King Saul's army. All around him were battle-hardened warriors who knew how to fight and who probably had victories of their own to call to mind, but instead they looked at this gigantic brute bristling with sword and shield and sparkling body armor down in the valley and said, "look at the *size* of that guy!"

David, focused on his purpose and his faith in God, and—remembering the lion and the bear against which he had already prevailed—marched down without as much as a sword or a helmet into the valley before the bellowing Goliath and popped him with a rock. Such is the power of faith and focus and the importance of calling to mind successes past.

Connect with others.

Although David was so connected to God that he marched out to fight alone, the rest of us are perhaps not quite so spiritually fit or self-sufficient. We crave human contact as a basic need. We are social animals by nature and that innate need for contact has driven the communications revolution. Never in history have we been so readily connected to anyone anywhere on the planet. Wireless technology and the Internet have shortened the distance between any two

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people on Earth to a click of a mouse or the press of a button.

Paradoxically, the technology that brings us so close has also isolated us like never before. People don't talk in airports, they check their email on Blackberry units, tap away at their laptops, or shut out even the possibility of a conversation by overriding their sense of hearing with little white earbuds from their iPods. If they do have a conversation, it is on a cell phone or on those ridiculous Bluetooth cyborg appliances stuck in the sides of their heads like plastic leeches. Hands-free technology has taken off, blurring the line between the techno-savvy and schizophrenics answering the voices in their heads.

We used to have occasion to talk with people face-to-face in our daily activities. Not so very long ago we had milkmen, butchers, and cops on the beat. We trusted our car to the man who wore the star and he wiped the windshield and chatted with the customers while he filled the tank. We banked with actual tellers and on warm evenings we sat on the front porch where we talked with our neighbors. And when we watched television, it was one of three networks that about a third of the people we knew had probably also seen.

The arrival of the digital age has meant more convenience but far less personal contact with people outside of our calling circles. Cable and

satellite programming has given us hundreds of specialty channels to indulge our individual interests in ever-narrowing niches.

Now, given the chance to trade the convenience of ATMs, email, and the Discovery Channel for bankers hours, hand-written letters and a programming choice between a show about a talking horse or a show about a talking car, I think I'd take *now* over *then* every time. But every technological advance also has a cost, and the cost of specialized programming, the self-service kiosk, and wireless technology has been an increase in personal isolation. The result is a crowded but micro-niched and lonely world. It is more important than ever to reach out to others, starting with the people closest to you.

Here's a disturbing fact about the price of increasing isolation and its effect on our families. In a typical modern family, eating dinner together is an increasingly rare event and, judging from a survey presented by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) that represents very real risk to our kids.

"The survey finds that the more often children have dinner with their parents, the less likely they are to smoke, drink or use illegal drugs," says CASA chairman and president, Joseph A. Califano, Jr. at Columbia University. "It is a

tragedy that family dinners decline as teens get older."

Compared to kids who have dinner with their families twice a week or less, kids who eat with their families are a 24% less likely to try marijuana, a third less likely to smoke and about half as likely to drink. Why should eating together make such a difference? It doesn't have so much to do with the food as it does the seat at the table. In the time we eat without other distractions that isolate us, we have an opportunity to talk, to laugh and even to argue. We strengthen our connections to these people who share our address as we directly interact with them in close physical contact around the table for a few minutes each night nourishing our relationships just as we nourish our physical bodies.

It's not simply loving each other that we're talking about. Loving our spouses, our kids, and our parents is not enough. Every connection we have requires ongoing maintenance. The support and strength we've nurtured will be tested. At the time of crisis, when we desperately need the support from our loved ones, is a poor time to discover the consequences of failing to strengthen and reinforce family bonds.

The summer after my son was born, I went to our state fair. In the multi-purpose building, government agencies had set up information

booths to educate the public about all the important things that they do. I stopped by the department of mental health booth. I don't remember why, maybe I was just checking to see if anyone was looking for me. Anyway, the woman at the booth asked me if I'd like to take a stress test. I said, "You mean like on a treadmill?"

"No," she explained patiently, "this is the department of *mental* health." I had apparently made it clear to her that an intelligence test wouldn't be necessary.

"Oh, sure," I said, "of course I'll take the test."

The test was something called the Holmes-Rahe scale. The Holmes-Rahe consists of a checklist of life-events that one has experienced within the past 24 months. Each one marked, like "divorce," "the death of a loved one," or a "change of residence," is assigned a certain number of "life crisis units". The more traumatic the event, the higher the number will be. The death of a spouse is 100 units, a job change is 36, and planning and taking a vacation is 12. When the units are tallied, the level of stress indicated by the score is a predictor of the likelihood of a stress-related illness in the coming year.

A score under 150 is considered healthy, 151-200 is mild and represents a 33% chance of illness, 201-299 is moderate and so the risk increases to

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50%. At 300, the level is considered severe and the risk to health is about 80%. It just happened to be a very eventful year and when my score was tallied, it was something like 427.

“Oh my,” she said when she looked at my printout. “That’s very high.”

Of course, learning my stress score didn’t do much to alleviate it. Now I was stressed about how stressed I was. I thought I should tell the people close by to back up. I was one crisis unit from spontaneous combustion.

The woman could see I was alarmed and she said, “Now don’t panic. I need to ask a couple of questions.”

“You mean like is my insurance paid up?” I said.

“No,” she said, “Like, do you have a job that you consider important?”

“Well, yes, “ I agreed. “I think it *is* important.”

“Good,” she said, “Now, do you have a supportive family?”

“”Yes I do.” I said. “I have a wonderful wife who I’m deeply in love with and a new baby and my mom, dad, and two sisters I love very much and they’re all wonderful supporters.”

“That’s great,” she said. “How about a group outside of family either at work, or church or somewhere that accepts you for who you are even when you fail?”

Not “if” I fail, but “when”? How did she know? This woman was *good!*

I thought of friends and groups I was blessed to be connected with and confirmed that indeed I had such a group.

“Well then,” she said, “Don’t worry about your number.”

“Don’t *worry* about it?” I asked, incredulous, “But it’s 427! I ought to have my initials on your machine as the high score!”

“Well, it is high,” she admitted, “but the number is only half of it. You do something you believe in and you have support from family and friends. With that kind of support, I doubt there’s number you couldn’t handle.”

She was telling me that it was a question less of stress than of balance. The more stress, the more we need support and loving relationships to provide the counterweight to the crises that weigh on us, but for that support to be there, we need to be active. Play with your kids, eat with your teens,

hug your wife or husband, call your mom, tell your friends how much they mean to you. Don't be afraid to *feel*. If you're a man forget those ridiculous macho notions you see on television and movies. Clint may have been cool for 35 years of films as the enigmatic and emotionally distant drifter, but in real life he admitted in a 2004 interview the only movies he had recently watched were Shrek and Finding Nemo with his then 7 year-old daughter.

It is not weakness to need love and support. We were designed for needing others, but we need to keep in mind that a need is not necessarily a right. Love like food, is best when it is shared, and seasoned with joy.

Laughter, the next best thing.

Guess what is the most bonding of all emotional experiences, the one that brings people together and most effectively breaks down barriers of race, religion, age, gender, and socio-economics? If you guessed "laughter" then you'd be, well, wrong. Shared laughter actually comes in second. The number one experience to bond people is actually disaster.

Katrina, 9/11, the California wildfires that killed and displaced Americans were all terrible catastrophes, but they did bring out some of the best in people who opened their hearts, their

wallets and some even their homes for the victims. But, for all of the good that it sparks in others, we really don't want to engineer disasters just so we can inspire generosity and human connection, so we'll settle for the next best thing. Laughter, when a group shares it, is a common emotional experience that erases boundaries and brings people together in a positive collective experience.

Over the past twenty years, companies have spent billions of dollars on team-building experiences for their employees to spend anywhere from a half day to a week at a time at retreats climbing ropes, rafting down fast moving rivers, or bruising office chair-shaped fannies in saddles atop temperamental horses.

I have presented at some of these outings and occasionally I have even participated. A couple of years ago, I was booked to present at a team-building retreat for a physician-recruitment company. It took place at a dude ranch in Michigan and I was invited to take part in the "survivor series" of planned events. In the advance letter I was instructed to bring along my cowboy hat and boots and "clothing you won't mind soiling."

It sounded like fun. Having grown up watching Bonanza and Gunsmoke, it was kind of a dream come true to ride and rope like my childhood

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heroes. As it turned out, though, as a cowboy I was more Billy Crystal than Ben Cartwright.

It started out well. I put on my western gear and I thought I looked pretty authentic except for the price tag I discovered still dangling from the back of my cowboy hat at the end of the first day. We rode horses along a trail that wound through a forest of tall pines. We ate steaks prepared chuck-wagon style, which meant well charred and on metal plates balanced on our knees. All along the gentle trail it was kind of a Roy Rogers experience, but when we got to the rodeo arena, it all went Rawhide.

The arena was about the size of a football field and surrounded by a tubular steel fence. It was covered with a deep loose mixture of sawdust and dirt and other “organic” material that finally explained why all cowboys wear boots. The entire area reeked of livestock. This was to be the site of our team-building survivor games.

We formed into teams and entered the ring for a few activities that included prosaic games like tug-of-war and a version of tag that required us to stomp balloons tied to the ankles of opposing team members. Then the ranch hands herded calves into the ring, each one with a ribbon tied to its tail. We chased the poor things around like Masai warriors on a lion hunt, yanking cattle-scented ribbons off their south ends with our bare hands. Let me tell

you, there's not enough Purell in the world to make that smell go away.

In the next part of the competition we broke into smaller groups for a variety of undignified activities like using verbal instructions to guide a blindfolded team member through an obstacle course that included barrels and piles of cow manure.

I didn't volunteer for that one, but I had to participate somewhere so when the activities leader said "chute dogging" and no one raised a hand, I half-heartedly lifted mine to signal that I was a team player. Unfortunately, the leader saw me and said, "Ok, you!" Since I was the only volunteer, he drafted another *chute-dogger*, a woman in her forties with salon nails and perfectly coiffed hair. The only thing even remotely western about her outfit was the turquoise in her earrings.

We were led into one end of the ring by a wide gate outside of which stood a large horned bovine creature serenely chewing its cud, whatever that is. This animal was as high as my chest at his shoulder and although I'm no judge of livestock, I'd put his weight at about the equivalent of a full city bus. The instructor gave us the goal. We were to work together to "dog" or wrestle down this powerful beast as he was driven with a slap on his rump from the chute. I was speechless. Cow wrestling? Why don't they call it by a term that I

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would have recognized before I volunteered like, “recreational trampling,” or “suicide by beefsteak”? I’ve seen the crazies at the running of the bulls in Pamplona, but even they have the sense to run *away* from the horns.

I was supposed to engage this monster and muscle him to the ground. I remembered the letter had instructed me to wear clothes that I wouldn’t mind soiling, but I had no idea they meant from the *inside*. I completely lost my David facing Goliath philosophy. I never killed a lion or a bear and the one visit I ever made to a farm I got chased by a duck.

I looked over at my partner and I could see immediately that she had no intention of breaking any of her freshly balanced nails, so there was really no point in discussing strategy. I just spaced myself out a ways and nodded my head to release the beast.

With a loud slap that raised a cloud of dust from his well-muscled backside, the steer bolted out of the gate and ran right by my partner who squealed girlishly and then for some inexplicable reason, slapped him again as he sped by. This additional giddy-up inspired the animal to an even higher gear and as he charged by I wrapped my arms around the horns and was immediately yanked off my feet so hard that my right foot popped out of my boot.

With a strength borne of pure undiluted terror, I hung on to the horns like Indiana Jones gripping the hood ornament on that Nazi truck. Amazingly, my hat stayed on but the brim flapped up a la Corporal Agarn. My lips skinned back from my clenched teeth and the whites of my eyes showed all around and—in the fierce wind produced by the hellish speed of the panicked animal—dried out so that I couldn't blink. Behind me I left stuttering tracks in the dirt from my remaining boot while my right sock fluttered like a flag of surrender.

Finally, physics overpowered adrenaline and my arms gave out. I lost my hold and—still unable to close my eyes or lips—plowed, face down, into the nitrogen-rich surface of the rodeo ring. I came up sputtering and rubbing my eyes looking like a coal miner but smelling like a used plumber's snake. When I got back to my cabin, I remember that it took a half hour to floss the rodeo ring out of my teeth.

Later, after the longest shower of my life, the whole group met for dinner and karaoke. Around the tables, everyone recounted the stumbles and comical pratfalls and yes, my short, terrifying ride and subsequent face plant in the rodeo ring.

I don't know if there were any real team-building lessons from the tug-of-war, the ribbon chasing, or

the chute-dogging. It doesn't matter. The real teambuilding took place later as everyone laughed at mutual embarrassments. Those moments of comedy were worth the trip and have become the bond that took a work team made of individuals and forged a unit built on a shared experience of joyful laughter. Falling face-first into fertilizer may not qualify as a disaster, but it's the next best thing.

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About the author

Dave Caperton is a speaker and seminar leader teaching the power of joy to lower stress and boost success for top organizations in business, education and healthcare. His background as an educator and stand-up comic and comedy writer is evident in his programs that his clients have described as “insightful”, “soul-searching”, and “frankly hilarious”. For availability and booking information visit: www.davecaperton.com