

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

Not Working

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The first thing I did when I got back to Jersey was take a trip to Long Island. I may have given the impression I left the job in Fort Lauderdale on unfavorable terms. Not exactly. I was headed to the Grumman aircraft plant on Long Island to try and sell software I'd developed for my now previous employer. Even though I was no longer employed, a sale would garner me the standard commission. After passing through the expected, but very thorough, security, I was bussed to what appeared to be a very large building. We went right into a normal-sized conference room filled with about two dozen engineers. I had done a few of these sales pitches and demonstrations before and I wasn't nervous then. This was even easier, because I had no concerns about follow-ups or making changes in the software to get the sale.

It was winter, if you recall, January to be specific. I was wearing my bulky suede coat acquired while working for NYU. I had left it, naturally, in New Jersey along with many of my business suits and vests from GBA. My shoes, however, were Floridian, white to be exact. Living in Florida, I had replaced all my shoes with white shoes. Symbolic? Perhaps, but if they appeared strange on Long Island in winter I didn't care. I felt I was doing my former employer a favor.

The Grumman engineers seemed interested, but they needed to see this software demonstrated. This was 1970 and laptop demos were two decades away. My former employer, as you know, was in Florida as was the software, but one only needed a phone line and a terminal. Terminals, in those days, were not today's ubiquitous emasculated computers. They were ancient teletypes and few and far between. The nearest one at Grumman was nowhere near the conference room. As we exited that room we entered the main room of its host building. It was the size of a football field. Around the perimeter were office cubicles, in the huge open center were drafting tables. I don't know who was in the cubicles, but the drafting tables were manned (I saw no women) by engineers. As we walked through this field of blueprint dreams, I tried to calculate the combined salaries in this one room. I gave up when the total went over a million. (Could have easily been two.) We walked diagonally from the conference room to the furthest corner of the large room. Here we passed through a door which connected to another room—of the same size! (And filled with what appeared to be the same number of engineers.)

Eventually, in a far corner of this second football field they found their terminal. They dialed up the computer in Florida, and with a few glitches, we made the connection. I showed them the program. They asked questions. I gave answers. It seemed they wanted more than we were offering. They said they'd get back to us. Us being the boys in Florida; I was now out of the loop. My last job was over.

I mean exactly that. This extracurricular sales venture for my former employer was my very last job. Job in the sense of working for someone else. Job in the sense of regular paycheck. But I didn't know this then. I was back in New Jersey, and looking for work. However,

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friends from my days at GBA in New York had bigger ideas. They wanted me to join them in a venture to create world-class software for Wall Street. There would be six of us and we would become a corporation. We would, that is, if we could find a buyer. We had meetings. We made plans. We prepared proposals. Our people sat down with their people. In the end, it was no go. At the time, we were disappointed. Later, the company we were negotiating with went out of business. Had we made the deal, we would have gone down with them.

There were other projects, also not coming to fruition. Being out of work, I was living on my savings and still paying off the 442 convertible. Back living with my parents. It might seem like nothing was happening, but that would be far from the truth. The Truth, with a capital T, has a way of changing our lives. My life was changing a lot, and changing rapidly. The Truth, in this case, was also known as arthritis. One major attack had me on my back for three weeks. I went to the VA, in Newark, and was offered aspirin. However, upon seeing me, they did arrange for another ten percent in disability payments.



This picture gives some idea of the change. From left to right, my sister-in-law Pam, my brother Robert (her

husband), and me. When I rediscovered this picture in the box mentioned in the foreword, I thought the person on the right was my brother Dennis. It sure seemed like his face, what with the mustache he's worn for many years. I forgot I also had that mustache for a few years. But I knew it was me when I saw the white shoes. I had forgotten how bad I looked back then. For one thing, there was another big weight loss. Looking at my tilted head, I recall the neck pain. Four vertebrae were in the process of fusing. There were many other pains.

About this weight thing. I weighed 155 entering college. I wrestled at 145. After college, I went back to 155. During my military service I was up to 160. My weight crept up until I went into the hospital in '68. I went in over 175, came out at 145. By the end of the year, I was back to my then normal 160. Working in Fort Lauderdale the next year, I kept gaining. My pants got tight. I brought bigger pants, upping my belt size to 32 from my high school 30. Here you see me back down in the 150 region once again. I was even skinnier (145) by the time I moved to Florida in 1974. Since then it's been middle-age spread, gaining another belt size and some thirty-five pounds in twenty-five years. (A combination of more arthritis and less—because of the arthritis—exercise.) Lately, I began pushing another belt size, so I dropped five, hovering in the neighborhood of 175.

There's pain and then there's pain. There are pain-killers and then there are pain-killers. During one of my flare-ups, as the rheumatologists call them, I was put on Darvon. The idea was to relieve the pain. Bad idea. At this time, I was trying to develop software for a human services project of my mother's. The Darvon put me in bed and kept me there. I stopped designing the software. I stopped every form of intellectual activity. I thought it was solely the arthritic fever. It took me two weeks to

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grasp the notion—it was the Darvon. Slowly, very slowly, it penetrated my consciousness: All the Darvon did was make me so stupid I didn't care about the pain. The pain was still there, but I didn't care. End of Darvon.

When I wasn't down due to arthritis, I was thinking about work. First, I realized I couldn't hold a regular job. Then I thought I might work three days a week. In the early seventies, almost everyone was working one full-time job. There were very few opportunities for part-time professional work. It was just as well. The truth was I really didn't know when I could work. I would be fine for weeks on end, but I never knew when—or to what extent—the next flare-up would be. Eventually, I acknowledged the truth. Jobs were beyond my reach. I needed another plan.

I was still talking with my old friends from GBA, seeking mutual opportunities. But, as we've seen, getting buyers for that golden basket was problematical and I needed more options. I played with programming ideas, looking through my notes. My notes. Since college, I'd been making notes: Ideas, questions, thoughts, suggestions, observations, reflections, explorations, and speculations. Even jokes. I had written these without thinking about their future use. Now, what I needed were ideas I could turn into income.

Inventions were one possibility. I had a few of these but how to turn them into money? An example was an idea I called the shadow-clock. In addition to a regular clock face it projected a shadow of the digital time. Years later, someone did market one of these, but how could I compete if I couldn't make a prototype? That was my simplest concept. More were like the one a cable TV station (remember, this is the early seventies) specializing in remote requests for video libraries. How could *I* make money with such an idea? Who could I approach?

I did have one idea for a physical invention I thought I could turn into money. Long a fan of Bucky Fuller, I saw a new application for his minimalist octet truss (later I learned it originated with Alexander Graham Bell). It was possible, I reasoned, to mold some material (plastic was one possibility) into this configuration and use it in constructing walls and ceilings. It used the minimum amount of material fully triangulated for maximum strength. The shape was also useful acoustically, uniformly deflecting sound. When used as a wall, covered by drywall forming pockets, air was also trapped. This was insulation for heat and cold.

I further reasoned I could only make money by controlling the idea, by patenting it. I asked around for a good patent lawyer and was sent to one of the best in New Jersey. Armed with nothing but a paper model, I explained the concept. They explained they charged eight hundred dollars. I didn't have much left in the bank but I took the plunge. After a few weeks, they called me in to show me the results of the patent search. There were a few vaguely similar ideas, but they were mechanical patents. I had jumped in the very technical world of patents without a clue. They said they could, for a few dollars more, search some more or, for a lot of dollars more, try to patent my idea. I felt like a rabbit looking for carrots in a gun shop. I said no thanks. I thought: Let me out of here. I needed to know a lot more about patents.

After some study, I did. For example, I learned that they could have patented my idea as a design patent. Since I didn't know the difference I'll assume I should explain it to you. Mechanical patents cover devices, like a safety pin or a pump. Design patents cover, well, designs. Looking through the book of recent (this was 1971) design patents I found: china patterns, wallpaper, new shapes for drinking cups, and—this really startled me—a number of designs for the space shuttle. The shape of the space

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shuttle is a design patent, owned by Rockwell. The unique moving parts, outside and inside, are covered by innumerable mechanical patents. But the shape itself is a design patent.

I learned about patents in the nearest patent repository, the Newark Library. (Naturally.) I learned more than the difference between types of patents. I learned how to do the same patent search I paid the lawyer to do. Actually, patent lawyers hire students to do the searches. Did I want a job searching patents? No, but trying to make money from my “wall” concept was looking less and less probable. Never mind, I had more ideas.

One was a technique for computers, a way to allocate file space on hard disk drives. Operating systems determine how files are written to storage devices, and I thought I had a better idea. I researched the literature and decided it was worth a shot. Through my previous association with Courant, I was able to present the idea to a few of the more respected professors connected with computing. Courant was a primary a mathematics institute, with a heavy dose of physics, and a smattering of subjects like magneto-thermodynamics. The supercomputer was primarily a tool for these fields and few professors were into computing theory.

No one said it was a bad idea, just not good enough to bother changing the system. In two words, “Yeah, but.” They were probably right. Then. Now, with powerful personal computers on millions of desks, I’m not so sure. For one thing, my more effective storage algorithm required a small overhead of calculation. An even trade-off back then, but no real cost today. Today’s techniques are too well entrenched to change, but if someone had seen the possibility back then, we’d have more efficient systems today.

I'm sure you think your desktop or laptop is powerful, especially for the price. And you're right. But it's not more efficient. The restraints of the early days of computing led to many clever methods for doing more with less. Most of fundamental research in this field was done with computers less powerful than the one inside your computer's printer. Today, no one writes efficient programs. They don't have to. A few of us complain about software bloat, but all we can do is buy more hardware. Today, it's cheaper to solve computing limitations with hardware than improving the programming. Efficient programming, once demanded by the industry, is a lost art. And no one cares.

No sale on that idea. OK, I have another. For almost ten years I had been studying the works of John Dewey. His philosophy of instrumentalism had helped me understand this world. Yet while much of his teachings on education had been adopted, his philosophy had fallen out of favor, merely another intellectual backwater. I outlined a course on the whole of Dewey's philosophy, not only the educational component, and presented it to the New School for Social Research in New York. They didn't bite. I knew the material. I knew I had structured it to be interesting. I thought they needed this course. But they didn't need me, me without the slightest credential or related experience. How could they sell a course taught by someone with my minimal résumé?

OK, I have more ideas. By now you can see I had lots of ideas. (And still do.) Many of these ideas were mechanisms for improving society. For decades, for example, I've advocated replacing marriage licenses with child-rearing licenses. What was important to society, I argued, was not a commitment of marriage partners to each other but to their children. I went so far as to suggest no one could have a child without the signed commitment

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of two responsible adults. Whenever I explained this idea to people, they inevitably concurred. Nice, but what were my chances of reforming society? And making money in the process?

OK, I have another. This was the Negative Option Vote described in *My Life*. To summarize: everybody still has one vote, only we add an option to vote either *for* or *against* a candidate. Simple, but I didn't expect governments or sitting politicians to jump up and embrace this one. What I was aiming for was money to research the concept. First, I talked to people in related fields. One was the head of Political Science at Columbia. Another was a Courant professor researching weighted voting methods. They, and a few others, were giving me the "Yeah, but . . ." answer. Not much encouragement from them, but I was bolstered by the responses from the ordinary men and women in the street. Non-academics loved it.

I wrote a short paper, "The Negative Option Vote," and presented it to various foundations in New York. Some, like the Ford Foundation, said it was not within their purview. Others, like the Twentieth Century Fund, liked the idea, but said they didn't do this kind of thing, suggesting other possible sources of funding. I approached many others, all with the same non-funding result. I took it to Washington, D.C. (as described in *My Life*) and got the same result. I knew, though many conversations with ordinary people, that this was a needed mechanism. I still think so. But by this time I had run out of money and out of marketable ideas.

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