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HOW NOT TO LIVE A TAKE-CHARGE LIFE

You can live a Take-Charge life, even if you come from the least likely background. Neither your failure nor your success determines whether you can have a Take-Charge life.

I went to an all male high school. How that happened, I still cannot completely figure out. How I managed to live in the Bronx and go to an all male high school near the tip of Brooklyn, to this day defies my imagination. I have always felt that my “debt to society” was paid in my “imprisonment” at Brooklyn Technical High School. Graduation was like parole after four miserable years of incarceration.

Here’s how life at Brooklyn Tech worked out for me. At the end of the first semester, my grades were straight A. At the end of four years, I graduated 1300th out of 1400. It seemed as if I were powerless against the forces running roughshod over me. My life had Taken-Charge of me, and it did not stop there.

HOW NOT TO CHOOSE

When it came time to choose universities, I had only one requirement—girls! I did not care about anything else. It did not even matter if my professors spoke languages I did not understand.

I took advantage of every moment of my first two years in university. I joined the fraternity that was known for one thing alone: Party-

ing. My life became one huge party. I was so out of touch with academic reality, that I would go to the fraternity house to study for my exams. What could be more ridiculous than studying for a final exam with some of your most imbecilic fraternity brothers, and a group of tag-along girls? Within five minutes of studying, the night would invariably deteriorate into a party.

I still remember a huge sociology final exam for which I was preparing. I do not remember it because of the content of the exam, but because of the intensity of the watermelon fight that lasted until dawn. I also remember the incredulous look of my professor as I walked into her exam room covered from head to toe in watermelon juice.

At the end of my first two years of university, I was the proud possessor of a 2.004 grade point average. Considering that one needed a 2.00 average to remain in university, I saw my academic career as a complete success. I was still free to party my way through my last two years of university.

For some bizarre reason (i.e. my Jewish mother's wishes), I was planning a career as a tax lawyer. By the end of the introductory year-long course in accounting and tax law, I was doing miserably, but had struck up a friendship with the professor. We had a few things in common. We were both Jewish. We both had strong Jewish mothers. We were both dating the same girl!

I met with the professor. He explained to me that I needed to pass the final exam of his course in order to pass the entire year of study. The night before the final exam, he handed me several pieces of paper and said, "If you look really carefully at these pages, you may find yourself doing very well on the exam." As I was to find out later, this was the exam, only without the title "Final Exam" on it.

The following morning, I quickly looked through all the pages. All I could see were numbers. I did not have the energy or the inter-

est to do anything with the questions. When I received my final exam grade, I learned that I had set the curve in the class—my 29% was the lowest grade the professor had yet seen in his short professorial career. The professor met with me, and did something that was incredibly gracious (if not possibly a bit illegal). He told me that if I promised to never, ever take another accounting course, he would give me a C for the year (that was one more 2.00 for Rich!).

I didn't know what I was going to do next. I had no real interest in anything. Surfing struck my fancy, but I had never done it. It just seemed like a great way to spend my life. I had not worked at academics since my first semester in high school six years earlier.

A TAKE-CHARGE SEED

One day, a friend handed me a book that he had found interesting. It was *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Sigmund Freud. I read the first chapter, and was hooked. I signed up the next year for every psychology course I could take. I told my fraternity brothers that I was about to become a *real* student. One of them laughed so hard, that he sprayed his mouth full of coffee all over me in his amusement.

Something happened shortly afterwards that changed the course of my life. I overheard a conversation between a couple of my fraternity brothers. They were taking bets against *me*. The going odds were 5 to 1 against me being able to have the B average I said I would have at the end of the coming academic year.

It was at that very moment that the seed of a Take-Charge life sprouted within me. I would not have called it that at the time, but that is what it was. I made several decisions right on the spot. First, I was going to leave the fraternity. Second, I was going to make new friends with the top students I could find at the university. Third, I set my sights even higher. I was going to have a straight A average.

I dropped out of the fraternity, and had nothing to do with it ever again. I became friends with students who encouraged me to read classical literature, who studied five or six hours every day, and who had really intelligent things to say. The only goal that I did not entirely attain was to have a straight A average. Over my next two years of university, in which I took approximately twenty courses, I received one B. All the rest were A's.

I applied for graduate studies in Clinical Psychology. I knew that my chances were slim for acceptance into an APA approved Ph.D. program. These programs had thousands of applicants, most of whom were straight A students for four years.

I was astounded the day I opened a letter from the one graduate school that accepted me into their Ph.D. program. For an entire day, I carried that letter around, showing it to one person after another. Late in the day, someone said to me, "Congratulations on your scholarship." I asked, "What scholarship?" He replied, "This one," pointing at the letter.

In my excitement, I had overlooked the second paragraph, which revealed to me that I had received a U.S. Public Health Fellowship. This scholarship covered all of my tuition and living expenses. It was such a good scholarship that at the end of each of the first two years of graduate studies, I had enough money left over to take a trip to Europe. In fact, during the second summer, I met my future wife, Nancy, in Venice, Italy, while hitchhiking through Europe.

I have never sat down and analyzed what was taking place in my life back then. Looking at it now, I can see that at the particular crisis moment, I began to make real and serious decisions. I decided to do what was good and what was right, even if it was hard. I was also very successful in my internship and postdoctoral work.

I was now ready to begin my career as a Clinical Psychologist. I was already teaching at a university. Now I would also be on the

faculty of a major medical center. By all standards, I had arrived. I was a totally different person than the kid who stood before his professor drenched in watermelon juice on the day of his final exam.

On the human level, I was now a success. Is such human success what I mean when I speak of a Take-Charge life? The answer is *No*, and we will see why in a moment.

TAKE-CHARGE ACTION INITIATIVES

1. *What does a Take-Charge life NOT look like?*

2. *If you wanted to have your life Take-Charge of you, what would you do?*

3. *What commitments do you have to break, and what commitments do you have to make, for you to achieve a Take-Charge life?*
