

# The Time of Your Life

Doesn't every man run the risk of being trapped  
by the very success he enjoys?

by Phillip Moffitt

**I**T IS a cold and gray Sunday afternoon in January. I am sitting at a desk, looking out a closed window at the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge and Manhattan's East River. There is a fire in the fireplace and the phone is quiet, and it should be a good moment, but somehow it isn't.

**I** am always confounded by how easy it is to lose one's perspective; to forget the priorities that have been so painfully learned in life; to forget what one must do to be a person who is relatively at peace with himself. Moreover, as each year passes, it seems more and more imperative to me that a man remember day to day just what he is about, how he grows, and what makes him feel good about himself.

**T**hinking back, there was a day last summer when I felt as though my priorities were particularly clear, and now, at this moment, trying my best, I cannot begin to recapture the spirit of that day.

**I**t was a summer day made to order for working outdoors. At least it was in Greenwich, Connecticut, where I happened to be on a Monday in the early part of July. The sun was shining—warm but not hot, aided by the company of a soft breeze. The sky was that rare rich blue, appearing so deep that the eyes could sink into it. I told myself to remember this day in all its details. . .the way the sun reflected on the leaves of the big maple tree, the sound of the water splashing against the side of the pool, and the ripe, red blooms of the begonias.

**I**t was not the weather or even working outside that I really wanted to remember. It was the attitude I had toward my work that I wanted to plant firmly in my mind.

**I** had been outside for hours, sitting in a full-length lounge chair, my ever-present yellow writing pads in my lap and the financial spread sheet for the budget of Esquire in my hand. I was deeply involved in planning for

the future, without the interruption of ringing telephones and day-to-day crises that occur in an office. I found that as I considered various opportunities for the magazine, I began weighing the personal costs of those opportunities rather than letting my enthusiasm for challenges simply overwhelm all other considerations, which is what usually happens.

**L**earn from this day, I told myself. Learn that you can order your priorities and act accordingly.

**N**ow, six months later, as I watch the scene of city life unfold in the streets below me, this question of ordering priorities is much on my mind. I know two men who are facing tough situations as the new year begins, because they have been unable to sort out their priorities.

**O**ne is a well-known writer who has become rich and famous over the last fifteen years because he developed a unique style of writing a book. Almost everybody has read

*continued from page 1*

something by this author, and he is widely admired for the quality of his work. All his life he has been driven to be published, read, and recognized for his talent. And he has achieved it all, to the point that he is now struggling with the trap created by his own success. His problem is that he has outgrown his old style of writing a book. He is simply finished with his success formula; it no longer provides him any satisfaction. He knows it is time to change, that he has only a few years of his full creative power remaining, and that these years should be spent on a book project that will arouse his full passion for great work. But he doesn't know that a new style will work for him; there are no guarantees that he will be artistically successful. I have spent hours and hours with him as we debated his immediate dilemma—whether or not to accept a multimillion-dollar advance to do yet another of his formula books or to use this time to begin his own book without big money and no assurance of success. His question: How do I know whether what I create will be worth the sacrifice? Most of the times he ponders this question, he concludes that he will refuse the offer and take the risk of going with his heart, but he has yet to give a final no.

The other fellow is a very successful company manager in his mid-forties who has been considered a boy wonder ever since he got his first presidency title at age thirty-six. He is the classic achiever, right out of the

old school: hardworking, well organized, honest but tough, and very demanding. An executive who has always been the fair-haired boy of top management, he has begun to discover that the “good guy” work style that got him to the top has limited him in unforeseen ways. And he is very upset. It seems that one of the reasons for his rapid rise up the corporate ladder is that he's never acted the rebel, never pursued his own ideas or vision if it meant running the risk of alienating his various “corporate fathers.” Now, although one of the best leaders in his industry, he finds himself psychologically tied to one corporate structure or another, limited to implementing the visions and goals of others. Basically, he is doing the same job he was doing ten years ago, but on a larger scale. He recently refused a wonderful opportunity to strike out on his own, not because of financial worries (he is already worth a couple of million), but because he is petrified by the thought of failure. This is a man who, despite becoming more anxious and depressed each year, endures being the aging boy wonder rather than face the horrible uncertainty of a new venture. Neither I nor others have been of much help to him, because he won't recognize the problem or even admit that there is a cause for his depression.

SITTING HERE listening to the crackle of the fire and the sounds of Sunday traffic as people return to the city from their weekend trip, I emotionally

identify with both the writer and the executive. Doesn't every man get trapped by the very success he enjoys? It is not failure that traps a person, for failure, by definition, forces one to try something new. But how does one break out of a pattern of success, no matter how exhausting or unfulfilling it has become?

What is so striking about my two friends is that their success is so great it has left them with no good excuse. Both feel an angst and each has the power to make a change that might relieve it. How many thousands of men and women are in a similar position, trapped not by failure but by their success? In business, this problem is referred to as burnout; in sports it's “losing the edge”; in teaching it's “lack of enthusiasm”; and in a number of professions it is called a “lack of creative initiative.”

I, too, know those feelings of frustration, feel myself unable to break an old pattern; and I have a recurring fear that eventually it will trap me. My pattern, which must be broken, is that I love crisis management and do it well, so there is little to remind me that my priorities in life have changed and that my work pattern must also change. What was so wonderful about that summer day in Connecticut was that I felt as though I were at last learning how to break that old pattern and could learn to pursue professional goals with a flexibility and spontaneity that would allow me a more

*continued from page 2*

enjoyable life than I had thus far permitted myself.

Crisis management places you in situations that contain a built-in and overwhelming sense of urgency, which dictates that nothing is as important as simply getting done what needs to be done right now. All personal concerns are pushed aside to accomplish the immediate task. Crisis management creates a team spirit that gives a wonderful feeling of meaning to the work at hand. It is like being on a lifeboat on an unknown sea far from land, in the midst of a storm. Everyone in the lifeboat is filled with the urgency of the struggle to survive. It is an existential experience of purpose that seems complete at the moment, although one inevitably finds that at the end of the crisis the sense of purpose also disappears.

I have lots of company in giving myself over too easily to such situations. Who among us does not find himself tempted to become totally immersed in managing the chaos of each day's activities, to be swept away by the pull of unrelenting deadlines, the push of the constant possibility of failure? The act of surrendering all of one's time and attention to the effort at hand provides a sense of being alive that is a legitimate high that's hard to suppress. What crisis management provides is a kick of adrenaline, which comes from the mind's reaction to the chaos in the lifeboat. Problems have to be solved or disaster will ensue. The

mind races and the body reacts with a large dose of adrenaline, and soon the mind develops an adrenaline habit. It is stimulating. It is fun.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this adrenaline charge—in fact, it is the fuel for all high achievement. And crisis management can be effective; but it is too draining, too disorienting, and it robs the personal life, denying higher priorities. Even if it is successful in what it produces, it is still “overinvolvement”—a work pattern that has gotten out of hand. The hard truth is that any person who lives in a constant state of crisis is really only avoiding coping with other facets of life.

When I was in my twenties I thrived on crisis management. It was my method for learning, for defining, for taking a stubborn, daydreaming mind and making it function. Only recently have I learned that as one matures, work must begin to fit into the pattern of a personal life instead of substituting for it. Work can remain a priority, provided there is a peaceful coexistence established between the drive for success and the needs of the personal life. On that July day last summer I was working and planning from such a perspective, and I felt the possibility of that balance for my own life.

As I sit here surrounded by evening shadows, looking out the window at the tugboats going down the East River, I want

to believe that my writer friend can walk away from the big money and do the book he really wants to do, and I hope that somehow the corporate executive will find a way out of his dilemma, although I fear for him. As for myself, I hope always to be one who travels rough seas in search of adventure, but in a well-built sailboat with strong sails, not in a lifeboat.

I know there is a call for action on my part to reorder my priorities, so that I will not chase after the next storm. But the exact nature of those priorities, personal and professional, continues to escape me. When I try to make such a commitment, my mind darts from one subject to another like the flames flickering in the fireplace before me.

For now, I find myself feeling the pressure of the day's ending. It's getting colder outside, the fire needs another log, and I've a long “to do” list on my yellow pad that must be completed before Monday morning begins another week.