

# CHAPTER 4

## Gun-to-the-Head Enlightenment

*It is often darkest just before dawn.*

—SOJOURNER TRUTH

FOR FIFTEEN YEARS I carried on like a perpetual motion machine, pounding my small business into some kind of subservient yet mocking submission. But of course, it was tenuous. Everything depended on me, and if I let up for one moment, everything would come crashing down.

Then, a few months after my seven-month double-shift epic, I hit a brick wall. In my arsenal of last-minute bailout strategies there was no solution to the looming deathblow—my inability to cover even part of an upcoming payroll. My staff would walk out when there were no paychecks, instantly ending Centratel as our clients raced elsewhere to find another answering service to handle their urgent calls. In a single moment, my business would close its doors, and everything I had built in the past decade and a half would be lost, not to mention that my staff of sixteen would be jobless and my three hundred loyal clients would be in crisis.

I was a mentally and physically wrecked fifty-year-old single guy with kids, facing financial and career oblivion, and it was more than an interesting coincidence that Centratel's imminent demise was dovetailing with my almost certain physical and/or mental breakdown. I

was desperate—and for the first time, angry—and the doomsday clock was ticking toward midnight.

## DAWN

The payroll was due in just three days when I yet again lay awake in bed, utterly exhausted. But that night, for the first time ever, I stopped thinking about work details, business philosophies, elaborate theories, or some last-minute divine intervention. It was the end, and there was nothing left to ponder or ruminate about, nothing left to salvage—except one small thing. In a last gesture of raw defiance, I could at least end this long sad epic with some small bit of self-respect. As a final last-gasp effort, I would go down in a satisfying blinding flash. This would not end with a whimper.

Since everything was lost anyway, why not go a little crazy and seize a last resolute moment of control?

*This time there was no salvation* and I lay there in the 3:00 a.m. darkness reviewing the blinding-flash possibilities. I remember feeling a morbid amusement in conjuring up a final death throes. What would it be?

But something was odd. In finally giving up, in my utter exhaustion I was suddenly at peace. How could that be? Then, without coaxing, two simple pragmatic questions emerged out of the blackness: *What have I been doing wrong all these years? And since the end is coming, what is there to lose if I abandon past assumptions and look at my world from a completely different angle?*

My what-is-there-to-lose posture was the catalyst. The certain end of Centratel gave me the freedom to consider *anything*. No matter how outrageous, any new idea was an option because there was no further possible downside. I had a few more days to stretch into unknown territory and do some experimentation, maybe even relax and have some fun with it, because . . . what did I have to lose?

Then, prostrated in bed that night, answers came out of nowhere.

I underwent an enlightenment of sorts. It sounds corny, but in my dream-state I rose up and out of the jumble that was my life. I was no longer an integral part of it. Floating upward, just above the chaos, I gazed down at the details of my business spread out neatly as individual physical components on display on a tabletop. I was reminded of my grandfather's workbench when he was in the middle of

a project: a tool here, a mechanism there, a component over there, all separate from each other but all essential to whatever it was that he was trying to accomplish.

I can still see Grandpa hunched over that workbench, disassembling and assembling.

(Do you get a sense of where I am headed with this?)

From this bird's-eye perspective, it struck me that Centratel was a simple self-contained machine! It was—and is—nothing more than the sum of an assemblage of separate sequential components: answering the phones, sales presentations, payroll preparation, scheduling, handling complaints, etc., with each protocol executing in a linear fashion whereby one step follows another step until the sequence for that particular process is complete and there is a result. I knew immediately that the rest of my life operated in the same way, as a collection of separate and independent processes, each one functioning in reliable 1-2-3-4 sequence according to its own construction. (Yes, I thought, of course these systems intermingle and affect each other—an integrated assemblage to be sure. But that integration can't mask the wonderful separateness of each process, the beauty of each one's individual existence.)

Yes, in Centratel there were actual physical components such as TSR consoles, desks, chairs, copy machines, etc., but these were accessories to the fundamental offerings of the company that had to do with processes and human-to-human interaction.

Late that night a new, deeper vision of reality gripped me, never to let go.

My thoughts raced at lightning speed as I marveled at the simple beauty of it. I understood that my previous view of the world had been wrong. The planet Earth is not a gigantic, amorphous, seething mass of people, objects, and events swirling in disarray. It's a place of order and logic, a place of predictability. The world is a collection of logical systems!

Whether those systems produce what we consider good results or bad results is not the point here. For right now, the point I want you to get is the simple mechanical reality of it.

For the first time, I saw Centratel as a closed package, a primary system—an independent, stand-alone mechanism, a machine—a separate entity, like a human body, an airplane, a tree, or a city. And I knew that the primary system I called Centratel shared a commonality

with all other primary systems in that it was simply the sum of the numerous separate subsystems that composed it.

The logic of it was crystal clear, exquisite. I felt a quiet joy. To this day, I remember every wonderful nuance of that night's vision.

And from that night, I can remember that a line from an old rock song by The Fixx reverberated in my head as I lay there: "One thing leads to another . . . one thing leads to another . . ."

In my head, I looked down on the items on that tabletop and saw that my leadership in the business had been reactionary and therefore horribly inefficient. *I had taken the wrong stance—a backward stance—because the mechanics had been invisible to me! All I did was kill fires, unaware that those fires were the products of dysfunctional individual subsystems that were not being managed.* The subsystems had lives of their own and were acting out their 1-2-3-4 linear sequences without supervision, constantly producing random bad results—bad results that had to be fixed or covered up or somehow absorbed.

*The primary system that was my business was out of control because it was composed of undirected subsystems!*

My world was chaos not because I was some kind of loser or unfortunate victim of circumstance, but because so many of my subsystems were not being controlled. Unsupervised, these chaotic 1-2-3-4 processes composed the dysfunctional primary systems of my existence: business, health, and relationships. Nothing more. Nothing less. Very simple . . .

## **WHO IS IN CHARGE OF ALL THIS?**

Exhausted yet exhilarated, I lay in bed floating above it all, looking down on my world. I remember that in those moments I savored the delicious new vision. It was borderline mystical, a sort of near-death experience but without the tunnel and bright light. Transfixed, for the first time in my life it was clear to me that my perception of reality had been murky and undefined. How does the Biblical quote go? "One thing I know: once I was blind but now I see."

From depths beyond my physical and mental exhaustion more questions surfaced, questions I had never considered before: "Who is in charge of all this?" And, "How does this world continue to function

day after day, year after year, millennium after millennium?” The answers came fast and hard.

I was startled to grasp that there is no human King of Everything who directs the goings-on of the world. On its own and no matter what, this earth keeps turning and life carries on in an overall structured and organized pattern, and . . . no one here on earth is in charge! The indomitable laws of nature ensure systems work perfectly according to their construction. On this earth, gravity works all the time, everywhere. Over here, one plus one equals two, and over there, one plus one also equals two! The incontrovertible laws of nature cause the mechanics of the world to be dependable and predictable, and the God-given gift with which we humans have been blessed is the ability to get in the middle of those mechanics, to manipulate them, to direct our lives to be what we want them to be, to use the infallible laws of nature to our advantage.

Deeply submerged in the vision, I wondered at the silent and invisible organizational strength that keeps this earth chugging ahead like a freight train despite our human race’s best attempts to derail the process. Cyclically, relentlessly, and for whatever reason, this complex world moves along on its own, adjusting, balancing, and counterbalancing. And at the root of it all, and in the middle of it all, uncountable separate linear systems are at work. I thought: *It’s a beautiful thing.*

## **AN INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT DISTINCTION**

I will interject this important point here because I don’t want it to remain an underlying subtlety that you miss. I want this fact to be your stone-cold understanding. Here we go:

In these pages, I am not suggesting you “add systems into your life in order to get your life under control.” I’m not saying that “your life-problems are the result of your lack of systems.” Get that *your life is already a collection of systems*. These life-systems have determined your life condition in this moment, whether your life is going well or not; whether you have managed those systems or not! Systems really do compose life itself! *Now your job is to manage them: to fix the broken ones, to discard the ones that are dragging you down, and yes, to introduce some new ones.* Don’t say, “I never had systems in my life and that is why I have failed.” Rather, say, “*I’ve been failing because I*

*have not been managing my systems, the systems that have been there all along.” Get the subtlety? Make sense?*

## **THE WORLD CHURNS AHEAD WITH POWER AND PURPOSE**

This systems rationale is not another feel-good, think-positive invocation, and it’s not even about faith. It’s about grasping stone-cold mechanical reality. Think about the processes of our lives and then do the numbers. Across time we wake, shower, dress, eat, go to work, and proceed through the day to return to our loved ones in the evening . . . or we come home to an empty house or apartment. Then we watch TV, read, and go to bed early—or stay up late. We go to sleep and then we awake again the next morning.

And, whether we’re “happy” or not, everything around us works fine 99.99 percent of the time.

That’s the cursory overview. Break it down and sequentially track the specific system components of the day’s chronology. It will be thousands of items long. It includes contributing elements to the day such as the coffee maker that works every morning; the car that—despite all of its internal intricacies—operates with the turn of the key and then goes down the road with the manipulation of the various controls; the office we occupy; the complexities of the work we do; the incomes we receive for doing that work. Walking across the room or driving across the country! Computers! Smartphones! Consider the processes of sharing information back and forth with those around us: one-on-one, voice mail, cell phone, e-mail, text, and the written word. Junior high school band concerts and professional football games. A piano. A power drill. Each is a stable and predictable system. Each working flawlessly 99.99 percent of the time!

Envision the system we call a TV. By simply pushing a button, this incredibly complex mechanism jumps to life every time! Beyond the physical TV itself, consider the myriad organizations that put together the programming that appears on it. Then switch gears and think about the lawn mower, the water that flows from the kitchen tap, the electricity that comes to our homes to animate a host of devices, each a complex system of its own.

Contemplate the clothes we wear, the shopping we do, the pet we love so much.

Consider the gas pumped into our cars at gas stations. In some faraway place, sophisticated mechanisms extract oil from far beneath the ground. Then it's transported via high-tech ships, trucks, and pipelines to refineries, where it is converted into gasoline via esoteric refining processes. Next, that gasoline is delivered to an uncountable number of convenient locations so we can pump it into our cars whenever we feel like it. We never think twice about the intricacies of the drilling/refining/delivery systems, just a few of the millions of systems that touch us through the day . . .

And what about the human body? Try to fathom the amazing complexity of chemicals and mechanics that make it work. For each of us, as we progress through the day billions of cells simultaneously cling to each other making us who we are. And as we function moment to moment, trillions of concurrent electrical signals execute automatically.

Incredible!

Consider the miracle of what you are doing this moment, viewing and translating the characters on this page—or perhaps you are listening to my words in the audio version. You are transferring my thoughts to your mind where you instantaneously interact with what I am saying, making immediate judgments, agreeing or disagreeing, line by line. This is happening *now*, in *this* instant.

So far, I have especially focused on human systems, which are just a fraction of the total systems at work in any given moment. Uncountable natural processes add to the numbers and dwarf what man has created, and they all work perfectly according to their scripts.

And once one finally sees the world's beautiful systems-dance for what it is, the mystery of it goes even deeper. Consider that primary systems depend on subsystems, and those subsystems depend on sub-subsystems branching downward and outward, further and further, to subatomic levels.

See that these processes repeat themselves over and over, as they incrementally create new forms and dissolve old ones. And know these systems, in their own various ways, vigorously protect themselves from oblivion.

The world is *alive*, and all by itself churns ahead with power and purpose!

*Stop for a moment and attempt to draw it all in.* The depth and intricacy of life's fabric is astonishing beyond comprehension. Grasp the beautiful complexity of life's workings and know that all by itself this world gurgles and percolates along with no overall human supervision. The countless stable systems that comprise life surge on and on while most of us remain oblivious to the colossal mystery of it—unaware of the sheer elegance of it.

The relentless flow of life carries on no matter what. The sun comes up and later goes down. Grass grows in the spring and lies dormant in the winter. The tides rise and fall. We catch a cold and our immune system quietly rescues us. The microwave works! The car works! Love comes, love goes, and then it comes again. We live and then we die, and another is born.

It's interesting that the two most opposite groups of people imaginable share a similar wonder of the world's enigmatic workings: scientists and the religious.

Systems, systems, systems—everywhere and always!

## **We Are Machines**

Fourteen years ago, as I was charging down a Bend city street on my mountain bike headed for home, a sixteen-year-old driver in her dad's SUV veered across my path. I slammed into the side of it and was launched over its roof to land on the pavement on the other side. To this day, I don't remember either of the impacts.

Knocked unconscious, I came awake only as I was loaded into the ambulance. On the way to the hospital, the paramedic asked my name. I answered correctly. Then she asked me where I had been on my bike and . . . I just couldn't remember. It was several hours before I could recall the details of my long ride before the accident.

With a slight concussion and some bruises, I was released from the hospital a few hours later.

From this experience, a lesson was hammered home. *Our minds and bodies are elaborate machines, machines that perform—or don't perform.* Each of us is an indescribably complex collection of subsystems, operating via countless sequential and cooperative protocols. Our impossibly intricate minds and bodies work well most of the time, but because of the occasional mechanical glitch within a subsystem, sometimes they don't work so well, or yes, they fail altogether.

We should never be complacent about our connection to the world around us; never underestimate the tenuous grip we have on our individual existences. We must handle our bodies and minds with care. We should be careful about upkeep and maintenance, yet challenge them so they stay strong. We must attend to them and never take them for granted.

## THE COLOSSAL MISPERCEPTION

Late that night, entranced in my systems epiphany, I asked myself, Could it be the common presumption that the world is functioning badly—that it's a mess—is *wrong*? Yes, I instantly realized that if we look at the numbers, that presumption *is* wrong, because in any given life, on any given day, countless systems work flawlessly. We don't notice them and so we take them for granted. We seldom appreciate their impeccability. We hyperfocus on individual, mechanical, and geopolitical systems that are not to our liking and conclude that dysfunction is the default way of the world. Blindly locked into this limited vision, we see perfection as an anomaly and imperfection as the norm. That conclusion is backward.

Overall, the systems of this world work absurdly well. It's really true that 99.99 percent of everything works just fine. And even the parts we consider imperfect are that way only because we personally think those parts should be different from what they are. (In truth, this world is 100 percent perfect . . . if we discount what we want. However, for our purposes let's *not* discount what we want. Being pragmatic, let's characterize it as 99.99 percent perfect.)

That night, I lay in bed in wired stupor, thinking about how life insistently plunges ahead within a framework of countless efficient processes. And I thought, since there is no human King of Everything, there has to be an underlying cosmologic urge toward efficiency and order. Some incredibly powerful force out there prefers events to go smoothly, and in fact has inserted itself everywhere. It's holding the world together. It's *making* it work . . . *God?*

This new understanding was the reverse of my previous vision of existence in which I saw my world as a place of barely controlled mayhem, tenuously held together by its human masters. The colossal misperception of my life was that I had visualized perfection as an occasional harmonious chord in a universe more comfortable in its cacophony.

Oh yes, I thought. Indeed, there *is* a God.

Back on that night in 1999, my mind raced on, and it struck me that if the universe has a predilection for order, it should be a simple thing to climb on board. And *since system inefficiencies comprise such a small percentage of my life's events—there wouldn't be that much to fix—I should be able to isolate those problematic systems and then, one at*

*a time, adjust them to produce the outcomes I want.* It should be easy to get things straightened out because cosmological bias is on my side—and let's go one step further: this bias isn't just rooting for efficiency, it's demanding it!

## **OVERWHELMING STRENGTH AND INEVITABILITY**

Is there a real-time analogy for the single-minded power that propels the processes of the world? Yes. Find railroad tracks and stand nearby while a freight or passenger train slams by at full speed. Feel the overwhelming strength and inevitability of it. As the colossal mass of the train surges by, feel the invincibility. This is an in-the-guts sense of the universe's mechanical potency and purposefulness. It's *that* deliberate.

The world's turning is powerful and relentless, and *that* is the point. Why it behaves that way is the human mystery—the ultimate question—but it is not the issue at hand here. *What matters right now is that you “get” that despite the common assumption that chaos reigns, the truth is that the mechanics of the world work incomprehensively well.* And if we can proceed with the premise that there is a proclivity for powerful efficiency—rather than blindly buying into society's almost universal notion that all is chaos—we will stop fighting events. Instead, confident and deliberate, step by step we can descend one layer deeper to go to work to construct the exact lives we want.

## **GUMMING UP THE WORKS AND THE ENIGMATIC POWER**

Of course, it must be said that although there is a regulatory force disposed to keep things flowing smoothly, human free will enables us to wreak havoc on personal and global scales. When a process or mechanism doesn't produce the outcome we want it to produce, because of something we did or didn't do, we must recognize that this is the logical downside of the human race's gift of being able to influence and manipulate.

Dysfunctional systems may constitute just a small percentage of all systems, but for the record let's state the obvious: we humans are inclined to disrupt things, and for this reason there has been horror in the world. The worst of it? In the last century, in fits of narcissistic

insanity, tens of millions of people were slaughtered by Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Mussolini, and Pol Pot. These were human systems gone haywire. And still the agony continues, at its most virulent in third-world, nondemocratic countries.

Then there is the self-generated personal pain that resides within our own individual thought processes. Add to this the self-inflicted damage caused by the neglect and abuse of the body mechanisms that we inhabit, not to mention no-fault setbacks such as accidents and genetic irregularities: the Forrest Gump “shit happens” scenario (a terse yet profoundly meaningful phrase).

Large or small, cultural genocide or a missed appointment, the life events that go wrong are due to component flaws within systems. When a process does not produce what we want it to produce, something within the process is not as it could be. Something is gumming up the works.

Despite all this, and notwithstanding the general media’s allegations otherwise, the majority of lives move from beginning to end with a minimum of true, overt pain. When there is trauma it is most often short-lived. Because of the universe’s inclination toward stability and efficiency, real discomfort is a small slice of the pie; and when it happens, it is most often the result of self-inflicted mental anguish and fear—negative constructs within our own thinking.

Yes, as I said, of course there are the notable exceptions. I am not a Pollyanna.

In any case, *systems want to be efficient*. If a system could talk, it would say, “My single goal—and I am passionate about it—is to accomplish the task that I was built to accomplish!” This means that our efforts to improve circumstances are aided by an enigmatic power that works hard to propel those efforts to success. So, within one’s life, getting things to work swimmingly is not a difficult task if one deals with the actual mechanics of it.

Late that night, lying awake in bed, I realized the force *is* with you.

## **Safety, Comfort, and PC in the First and Third Worlds**

Why are there major differences between life in the Western world and, say, Afghanistan or rural China? Why is life in the West easier than in the East? A part of the answer is that in the West, there are significantly more safety protocols than in the East. Therefore, lives are less in jeopardy. A simple example: In the West, we wear seat belts in our cars 100 percent of the time. It’s the law—and

the law is a system. In the numerous times I have been to the rural Far East, I have seldom seen a driver or passenger buckle up. In many third-world countries, there are no enforceable seat belt laws. Are seat belts actually *in* the cars? Yes, they usually lay buried in the seat cushions—but sometimes the driver has altogether removed them.

Another example: Here in the developed world there are quick and severe penalties for anyone's unprovoked, assertive aggression toward another. In the third world sometimes there are few protections, and meager justice mechanisms can be corrupt and impotent, encouraging undeterred person-to-person crimes.

And the flip side? It is telling that the annoyance of the politically correct is nowhere but in the West. This is a result of people trying too hard to regulate other people. It is systems-thought taken to the extreme by people whose basic needs are satisfied and who therefore have the time and energy—and proclivity—to attempt to channel the thoughts and actions of others. Busybodies.

For the backcountry African, there is no PC thinking, as life is negotiated via just a few systems, systems that have to do with survival. People there don't have the luxury of expending energy on silly PC gyrations.

(And, I'll go ahead and say it here: East or West, and for whatever reason, neurotic/power-hungry people are drawn to political leadership. For the big systems that we all depend on, that can be a very bad thing.)

For a Westerner, it is a good thing to live for a while in a third-world household. It's a crash course in discovering fundamental priorities and humility.

## **FLOAT THROUGH THE DAY IN FASCINATION**

For me, one plus one equals two. For you, one plus one also equals two. The natural mechanics of planet Earth are reliable and can be trusted. And human-devised systems will also operate reliably if they are properly put together and maintained. If they are not put together correctly and/or not regularly coddled, they will fail to produce the results we want.

Few people think their problems are a result of personal process failure. Most see their troubles as isolated outside events, blaming fate, horoscopes, bad luck, karma, God, the devil, neighbors, competitors, family members, the weather, the president, liberals, conservatives, climate change, too much money, lack of money, the educational establishment, or just a world gone bad. And most see problems as overwhelming in number, an onslaught from *out there*, only to be fended off by superhuman efforts. For too many, the excuse/blame list is endless. I had long been a resident of that camp, but when the new systems-mindset vision engulfed me that night, there was zero chance I would ever live in that place again. I now navigate through the day in fascination. Instead of being swallowed up in a hodgepodge of unpredictability and fire killing, I see events and objects as part of one

structured system or another. This real-time, outside and slightly elevated perspective has channeled peace and prosperity into my life and into the lives of those who depend on me.

I call it a spiritual awakening.

Negatives will sometimes worm their way into my day, most often due to fatigue. It's not often, though. Not anymore.

This bears repeating: *the colossal human error is the assumption that there is a cosmic inclination to chaos, when the mechanical truth is that there is a default predisposition toward order.* It's a beautiful thing! I'm a believer now, and I thank God for every moment of this life .

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## **THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE**

By perfecting your life's individual systems—by identifying them and then rebuilding them one by one—order and peace will accumulate incrementally. However, the enhancements in these rebuilt systems must be made permanent or the systems will slip back into dysfunction due to random outside influence. In the workplace, permanence happens first by creating written descriptions of how systems are to operate. And second, by getting responsible parties to willingly follow the steps described in the documentation. Third, involved parties must be encouraged/rewarded for constantly improving their systems. We'll get to those details soon.

Once systems are studied and flawed components are exposed and repaired, they will produce desired results. Creating necessary new systems and eliminating unnecessary ones will add to success. And since this is all mechanical, when the changes are made, improvements will be instant.

For your own situation, not only can you count on an overwhelming bias toward efficiency, but you probably won't have a whole lot of systems to adjust, create, or delete. It won't take long to get your circumstances straightened out.

Now we are at the heart of the Work the System Method.

*Whether an outcome is to your liking or not, the underlying process is performing exactly as constructed.* You are not at the mercy of mysterious conspiring forces or the swirling backwash of chaos. If it is in your power—and so much that affects you *is* in your power—you can fix things! *You can make your situation exactly how you want it to be.*

## **BE READY TO WALK AWAY**

What about those systems you can't repair because they are out of your influence? Relax. If you can't fix something, don't worry about it. Do what you can or walk away, but certainly don't spend time or energy agonizing over it. If you live in a democracy, vote and/or run for office, but then don't complain about the aftermath.

If you have a problem with a coworker, talk to him or her and then don't obsess about the outcome. Metaphorically speaking, if you don't like the TV program, change the channel or turn off the set. Save your energy for efforts that will provide actual positive results within your circle of influence.

## **AN OBJECTIVE**

Back to my story and the looming crisis at Centratel. Late that night, yet another realization struck. My business needed at least one solid objective. From my new vantage point I could see we had been operating without any pointed purpose. The closest I could come to a reason for the existence of the business was that I hoped we would make money and be successful. That is the single objective of the typical small-business owner or corporate middle manager. It is not concrete and directed. It's ambiguous and wishy-washy.

Not only had I never considered its individual components, I didn't have a grasp of the *why* of the organization. It had no direction! This particular insight prompted the birth of the Centratel Strategic Objective document. I'll talk about that in Part Two.

## **THE CRUX OF CONTROL**

Without prodding or willing it to happen, I stepped outside my life and rose above it. I looked down, never again to settle back into the quagmire that had been my previous existence. There was nothing airy-fairy about this. The new vantage point was mechanical and logical. I saw that the solution to my business problems did not lie in becoming more proficient at whacking moles—the solution was to find a way to eliminate those moles altogether. I had to put aside the hammer and dig down into those tunnels to find out exactly where those moles hid. And when I found them, I would ruthlessly strangle them one by one. Their

grinning little furry faces would not deter my genocidal mission. And while I was down there taking care of mole extermination, I would find a way to prevent any mole relatives from returning later.

Ruthless? Yes!

*Late that night I understood way down deep inside that perfectly executing systems were at play everywhere and all the time, and that imperfection was the anomaly. And I realized that my business—and for that matter, my whole being—was the sum total of the results of the efficient and inefficient processes that composed it.* Confident and strong, I would look down on these systems and isolate them one at a time, viewing each as a separate autonomous entity. Per a solid directional plan, one by one and over whatever period of time it took, I would disassemble and then rebuild my subsystems so that each contributed to Centratel's clearly stated goals. Yes, in addition to the repair work, I would add new systems and discard useless ones.

I finally realized this: *the leader's role is to first see the wheels of the machine, and then figure out how to get those wheels turning fast and with maximum efficiency.*

It was simple logic. Creating efficient subsystems would of course cause the primary system—Centratel—to be efficient too. And to take this a step further, it seemed to me that if the individual subsystems could be made more than efficient, if each were to be made potent and powerful, then my primary systems—my business and my life—would become potent and powerful too.

*Once I clearly defined an objective, I just needed to optimize the individual components to meet that objective. The primary system would be super efficient, the end product of the super efficient subsystems that would compose it.*

I hadn't been looking for a revelation, but in my desperation, I got one. It was a vision that revealed the simple mechanics of the world, mechanics that had been cloaked by the dissonance of the day. *It was a permanent shift in perception, and I would never again be a master fire killer. Instead, I would specialize in fire prevention.*

The crux of control? I would never again deal with the bad outcomes of all those underlying inefficient systems. Instead I would expend my energies on perfecting and managing those systems—and good outcomes would prevail.

For a decade and a half, although the simple truth had been floating right there in front of me, the mental turbulence of my fire-killing

approach had relegated this simple yet earthshaking reality to invisibility: a life's condition is not the result of luck or of being good or bad. And it's not about intelligence, karma, attractiveness, education, social class, political stance, or even about how hard one works. A life's condition is determined by simple, cold-blooded mechanics—the mechanics of the systems that compose it.

And what I instantly understood that night was the simple difference between happy people and unhappy people. Unhappy people's lives are out of control because they spend their days coping with the random bad results of their unmanaged systems. Happy people's lives are *in* control because of the good results of their managed systems.

My new perspective was not just an interesting new concept. It was an electric, life-changing revelation. Late that night, the moment the switch flipped in my head, there was no going back. I was a changed man.

## **CENTRATTEL WOULD BECOME A MACHINE**

It was uncanny. My middle-of-the-night reveries surged on into the dawn. Supported by indisputable logic, an entire strategy unfolded as I lay there.

I thought, *If Centratel is an organism—like a human body, or a car, or a TV—smooth and efficient operation will depend on a multitude of simultaneously functioning efficient processes that operate automatically.*

In other words, the business mechanisms I would fix and/or create would function without direct moment-to-moment supervision by me, the owner, GM, and CEO of the company. Other people would be watching the details. The watchers would be employees who would supervise the mechanics of the business without the need for my constant over-the-shoulder intrusion. Centratel would become a self-perpetuating organism.

Centratel would become a *machine*.

Further, this particular machine would be the highest-quality telephone answering service in the United States. We would accomplish this in five steps:

1. We would exactly define overall direction and strategies. It would be done on paper by creating strategic objective and general

operating principles documents.

2. We would break down Centratel's workings into subsystems we could easily grasp: processing calls, staff management, client services, equipment, quality assurance, the protocol for handling client and customer requests, bookkeeping, purchasing, customer services, etc. Then, each of those subsystems would be broken down into even smaller contributing sub-subsystems, including receivables software, customer complaint resolution protocol, employee recruitment, equipment maintenance schedules, and so on.
3. Once isolated, exposed, and understood, we would refine and improve those systems—one by one—so each would contribute 100 percent toward the stated goals of the strategic objective. As needed, we would create new systems from scratch. We would discard useless ones. We would document each process into a working procedure, thus making perfected systems permanent. The execution of the perfected systems would recur without prompting. They would be perfect systems executing perfectly 100 percent of the time, automatically.
4. We would implement fail-safe recurring maintenance schedules. We would set alarms to point out systems that were not functioning properly. And along this line of thinking, we would prepare for unexpected external economic or physical hammer blows.
5. "Replacement" employees would be identified and trained. Every employee, including me, would have someone in the wings who could instantly take over, should that become necessary.

## **FROM ORGANIC TO MECHANICAL**

Why does a car perform the same way every time? Why does a city remain in the same place without spontaneously moving to a new location? Why do we, throughout our lifetimes, continue to be ourselves? The reason is hard mechanical reality: physicality. With the obvious exceptions of fluids and gases, physical objects don't morph into other physical objects or dissipate into the ether. They are mechanical—dependable and predictable.

On the other hand, human communication processes—organic systems—are the antithesis of physical substance. For example, the execution of a non-documented recurring communication protocol not only varies among the individuals executing it, but also changes for any one person, depending on the time of day, the weather, or mood. Untamed, these organic systems are feathers in the wind.

In the workplace, the challenge and the solution is to make these organic human processes as solid and reliable as the mechanical objects that surround us. On planet Earth, we accomplish this with documentation!

## The Essential Formula

The base fact of life is this: every single life-result is preceded by a sequence of steps executing over time.

Here's the simple formula:  $1 \rightarrow 2 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4 = \text{Result}$ .

Therefore, the secret to “getting what one wants” lies in spending the majority of one's efforts in managing the left-hand side of the equation, the  $1 \rightarrow 2 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$  part.

The painful truth? *Most people never see the left-hand side of the formula.* Instead, they expend their energies on the right-hand side—the Results segment—endlessly shuffling, reorganizing, and repairing the random bad results created by those unseen and therefore unmanaged systems on the left-hand side.

Read that last paragraph again. It's the key to all of this.

And remember this rule of thumb: *unmanaged systems produce random results, and random results always add up to chaos.*

## STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE ARE BY-PRODUCTS

In the process of rebuilding Centratel system by system, strength and resilience would evolve as by-products. Outside events would continue to challenge us with unexpected shake-ups, but the business will have become rugged and adaptable. Potential earthquakes would be anticipated; but because we would be prepared, they would be reduced to tremors. Until this point, earthquakes had been earthquakes and there had been too many.

And if what I saw for the business was true—that it was a primary system composed of component subsystems, each of which could be brought to high efficiency and strength—then it was logical this would be true for the other primary systems that were in immediate crisis: my physical self and my mental self. The process for fixing my body/mind difficulties would be the same process I was using to fix Centratel, and

the results would be the same: my body would become powerful and resilient; my mind steady, calm, and efficient.

*Again: the systems mindset is super effective in every life situation because it deals with fundamental cause and effect—the basic truth of how the world mechanically operates everywhere and all the time.*

## **AN ANALOGY TO PACK AROUND**

Imagine a cutaway view of a single-story house. See the first floor, full of belongings. You are there. Your TV is there. The refrigerator, sofa, your job, and your relationships are there. Everything in your life is there. You didn't know it until now, but down below is a basement full of machinery that never stops working. These silent machines are the systems of your life. They have been producing your life results, upstairs. Until now, because the machinery has been unseen and therefore unmanaged, it has been producing random and, many times, bad results. But things are different now. Your new systems mindset makes these machines visible. Now you will be eager to spend time down there in the basement—the basement you didn't know existed—adjusting that machinery to produce the exact results you want upstairs.



It's a very simple thing.  
This is *it!* This is the systems mindset!

## Learning How to Sleep

So, for any recurring problem there is a path to getting things repaired. Take the inefficient process apart and fix the separate pieces one by one.

Earlier I mentioned my problems with getting enough sleep. Sleep intertwines with numerous other biological, social, and relationship processes, but in that broad context one can't begin to find a solution to improving it. What did I do via systems methodology to cure this problem? I envisioned sleep as an independent primary system composed of subsystems.

This new approach led me to a doctor who specialized in sleep disorders. The doctor's recommendations had a strong theme—reduction of stress—and this led me to

the subsystems of yoga, more sensible exercise, and meditation. Also, I would substantially reduce my intake of caffeine and sugar. There were other subsystems to modify, including changing the layout of my bedroom, removing the clock from the nightstand, and going to sleep at the same time every night. I would adopt a more consistent routine for preparing for bed. Another thing: testing indicated my requirements for sleep were less than average—six hours was enough—and so I should avoid long hours of tossing and turning in bed, vainly hoping for eight or nine hours. Lying in bed wide awake, mentally churning away, was stressful in itself, so when that happened, the sleep doctor said I should get up and read, work, or even exercise.

With the help of my regular doctor, I found my blood chemical subsystems were out of balance. Those imbalances affected my sleep in a bad way, and I began to fix that problem with supplements.

I had to reduce my hours at the office, and that meant getting the company to run itself without me having to be there every minute. Of course, that transformation was already underway, using precisely the same systems thinking.

I got back to a healthy sleeping routine over the course of just a few weeks, literally doubling each night's sleep duration.

I attacked the overall problem by isolating the primary sleep system and then breaking it down into subsystems that could then be analyzed and manipulated. By taking an outside and slightly elevated vantage point, I was able to tweak my sleep process to become more and more efficient, one component at a time. This was pure mechanics.

Now if my sleep is less than what it should be, I can quickly identify the errant subsystem, tweak it back to normalcy, and instantly get back on track.

# CHAPTER 6

## Systems Revealed, Systems Managed

*A person needs new experiences. They jar something deep inside, allowing him to grow. Without change, something sleeps inside us, and seldom awakens. The sleeper must awake!*

—DUKE LETO ATREIDES (JÜREGEN PROCHNOW), FROM THE MOVIE *DUNE* (UNIVERSAL PICTURES, 1984)

NOTE: You must “get it” if this new system-improvement approach to life is going to stick. So, if you’re still trying to make sense of all this, I present the next two summary chapters in a meditative, slightly rambling tone. There is repetition, too, as I metaphorically and directly render the core of the mindset. I want you to get it!—SC

### CONVERGING ROOTS

Your day is under your command. Chronic shortages of time and money, emergency decision-making, and dealing with less-than-amusing people are history. Starting with a subtle yet penetrating shift in perspective, you have done the necessary work to eliminate chaos from your life . . .

You discovered that the pathway to control is to objectively observe and then optimize your mechanical and biological processes. You

adjusted your systems carefully, one at a time.

One dictionary's definition of *system* is "a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole." That's perfect.

You've learned that systems don't operate randomly. Like computer code, they relentlessly execute in linear 1-2-3-4 sequence according to their construction. In your world, like everyone else's world, they are embedded wall to wall. And now you know that for sure.

These systems *are* your life! Sometimes your systems work alone, but things are best when they work together.

You wake, study, read, exercise, and eat. You breathe, walk, and digest your most recent meal. You go to work, talk to friends, drive to the store to pick up groceries for dinner. You put gas in the car. You earn money and put it in the bank. Later, you pay the bills.

You're always aware that every one of these accomplishments was a 1-2-3-4 process that executed over time.

Some of your systems are aligned to help you reach your goals, while a few others silently—or loudly—still sabotage your best efforts.

Today, you're making refinements in those few dysfunctional systems that still pull you down, manhandling them into efficiency, pointing them in the directions you want them to point, producing the results you want them to produce. (You are, of course, creating useful ones from scratch as you work hard to discard the remaining bad ones.)

Often during the day, even if it's just for a second or two, you quietly contemplate the primary system that is your life. In your quick, on-the-fly meditative moments you remember that your life is composed of subsystems, and that each of those subsystems is composed of sub-subsystems. You explore your way down further, through the multiplying, expanding, and intertwining roots. Then, still in your head, briefly ruminating, you turn around and work your way back up toward the top. As those roots come together and thicken into a single trunk, you see that they add up to the ultimate primary system that is you.

*You are a system of systems!*

And you always remember that the essence of your work, health, and relationships lies within systems; and although they are veiled behind the buzz of everyday consciousness, there is nothing complicated about them—or about their management.

You see life more accurately. You're one layer deeper than the people around you. In this more concise view of reality, you spend your days extracting, examining, and improving your systems one by one, and you know absolutely that the reward for this incremental approach is that peace and prosperity have quietly entered through the side door.

## **OH. YOU'RE NOT *THERE* YET?**

OK, so you're not *there* yet. Then take a minute, slow down, and find a place where you won't be distracted. Let's work together toward the thrilling instant when the systems mindset takes hold.

Visualize each of the following processes and note the commonality: *sequential execution over time to produce an end result.*

In this moment, consciously concentrate on your world of systems . . . but trust that soon you will effortlessly carry this perception through the day, always living in this place of one layer deeper, easily observing the real-time mechanical processes that generate the happenings of the day.

Suspended in this deeper layer, this *right here, right now* place, you're going to discover the spiritual wonderment you have been seeking.

Here we go. Follow me here: Consider your mechanical world. Start by imagining the closed set of sequential actions over time necessary to drive a car from point A to point B. (Open the door, get in, put the seat belt on, press the start button, carefully check your surroundings, put the car in drive, head out toward point B, etc.)

Describe to yourself the specific linear steps—both mechanical and human—involved in finding a potential customer, making a presentation, and closing a sale. Think about the process of interviewing and hiring a new employee and then what you must do to keep this person for the long term while maximizing his or her contribution. Think about nurturing an intimate relationship, coping with the terminal illness of a parent, giving birth. Then there are the mundane processes of preparing a financial report, writing a paper for a college course, raking the yard, cleaning the house, dumping the trash, doing the wash.

Now ponder your own miraculous human body-mechanism that propels you through this material world moment to moment. Observe its

innumerable individual biological and mechanical subsystems, nearly all of which function without any conscious guidance by you.

Use your imagination, and in your immediate proximity—right now—look around, wherever you are, to see the uncountable sequences that are in motion, most going unnoticed until now. You see that some of these processes don't matter too much, but others have a large effect on your happiness and the happiness of those around you.

Yes, systems intertwine and affect one another. Yet first they are separate entities.

Although almost all of your life processes are automatic, there are many you perform consciously. By focusing on the systems that are within your circle of influence you'll see that tweaking them to higher efficiency is almost always possible.

*You'll know when you get it because within your moment-to-moment experience you will clearly and without conscious effort see the individual systems around you.* You will know for sure that they are all separate from each other—on the street, at the airport, at home, in the mirror . . . and that they are all in constant motion. No longer will you feel suspended in a swirling and chaotic conglomeration of sights, sounds, and events.

And you know that all of these systems are propelled by a mysterious force, a force that many of us choose to call God.

The new vision will be natural and unforced, and you will wonder why you didn't see with this clarity before.

Yes, the moment you *get it*, you'll know it!

It could be right now, as you read these lines. Or maybe next week .

..

## **The Systems Mindset Is a System**

Located in your head, the systems mindset is itself the master management tool used to direct all your other personal and business systems. It's the key mechanism for making the right moves, moment to moment, so you can engineer an efficient life: one of serenity, prosperity, and contribution. Focus on the mindset. Study and experiment with it. Internalize it. Wallow in it.

## **SYSTEM MANAGEMENT IS WHAT YOU'RE AFTER**

You can list a multitude of minor individual systems that are necessary for just getting through the day, not to mention major primary systems

such as running a business or holding a job, coping with college, raising children, making retirement vibrant and meaningful, or just staying levelheaded while balancing a household, negotiating with family members, and providing an income. (I was a single parent of two children for fifteen years and—so many of you know it's true—this role is the supreme test of a human's ability to simultaneously kill fires, build something for the future, and stay sane.)

Each of your personal systems has direction and thrust. Each is headed somewhere, attempting to accomplish something, driven by an enigmatic power.

*Will you manage your systems or will you let them operate randomly?*

Your system trajectories are affected by genetically determined patterns, learned formulas, cultural codes, bias based on race and gender or whatever, humanitarian predilections, simple self-interest, and of course the standard physical predispositions for appetite, sleep, sex, and survival. And again, here is the rub: your unmanaged systems are headed in oblique directions, randomly dissipating or outright opposing your efforts to reach your conscious goals.

At best, a system combines with other systems to help you reach desired objectives. At worst, an errant system invisibly creates problems that manifest themselves subversively, contributing to a gnawing anxiety that you are not in control of your life.

That anxious feeling is not rare. *Most people are not in control of their existences, especially if the definition of control includes the qualifier "I am getting what I want in my life."*

Living can seem complicated, but that complexity doesn't leave you helpless to get a grip on circumstances, because one at a time you can take action on relatively simple subsystem components that you pluck out of the chaos. Or maybe there are systems that are truly fouling up your life, in which case your best bet is to altogether eliminate them from your existence.

This is system management in its most elemental form, and the beautiful aspect of it is that neither your perception of the intricacy of it nor your tendency to lean in certain directions will stop you from improving these mechanisms.

I'll add this here: In our culture, it is common to call the simultaneous handling of the day's umpteen events *multitasking*. This is a flawed expression because it suggests that the conscious, hands-on command

of multiple concurrent undertakings is some kind of laudable accomplishment.

Instead, the term *system management* is what we're after. It defines a thought-out life-orchestration in which one has a firm grip on details and is not living at the edge of crisis, floating along on hope, fingers crossed, prayers recited, and obsessions indulged.

*So, drop the idea that life is convoluted and mysterious and get to work repairing the simple underlying inefficient mechanisms one by one!*

And know this for certain as you consider your own management abilities: trying to find peace and life-control through drugs, food, work, money, silly psychobabble, fanatical adherence to religious or political dogma, running away, or excessive preoccupation with the extraneous—or any other obsession—is an abomination of the simplicity of it all. It's not management. It's evasion and masking and avoidance. These are wholesale quick-fix applications that falsely promise to soothe life's complexities in one fell swoop. Easy buttons! Instead, you'll go deep inside and fix building-block components one at a time. You'll go to work! This is about making small, mechanical betterments in subsystems that over time will add up to a primary system made of steel. This is how you will get where you want to go.

## **AGAIN: THE SUBVERSIVE HOLISTIC THOUGHT PROCESS**

The concepts of holism and globalism are intricately woven into the fabric of our culture. With that, we often suppose an entire mechanism is faulty and so we think we must completely replace that mechanism. This overreaction is too many times rooted in feel-good emotionalism that obscures a more sensible path in which one simply studies a primary system's mechanical construction and then fixes a faulty component. From the start, the primary system is probably better than OK, working well in most situations. Rather than starting from scratch, which in itself introduces a whole host of challenges and unintended consequences, could we just make a simple internal adjustment?

You know the clichés. "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater" and "Don't cut off your nose to spite your face."

## **THIS IS HOW SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE NEGOTIATE THEIR DAYS**

If you are like most people, you have not *consciously* considered the involvement of systems in your not-so-perfect daily life. Therefore, you have not considered *consciously* tweaking those systems in order to eliminate problems from occurring in the first place. *For most people, whacking emerging moles is how life is played out. There is no thought of burrowing deep into the mole hole for some serious mole extermination.*

The little moles are furry, cute-faced decoys that distract us from the critical moves we should be making. Let's burrow deep inside their tunnels and ruthlessly eradicate them all. And then, before we leave, let's do what we have to do so no more moles show up later. After that, confident they will never distract us again, we'll climb back above ground and start working the other processes of our lives that will take us where we want to go.

Here is a mechanical truth: *one can compensate for the negative outcome of a recurring problem, but without repairing the errant process that caused it, the problem will undoubtedly occur again.*

Few people understand the systems approach of successful leaders who intuitively grasp that a seemingly isolated problem is not isolated at all. These system-improvement specialists see a problem as the result of a flaw in an errant system—a system that can be tweaked. For these leaders—yes, way more often from the private sector than from the public sector (don't get me started . . .)—a problem is not a setback just to be corrected and then written off. It's a wake-up call. It's a "red flag for improvement." This posture dictates that *once the immediate negative outcome is fixed, there is a mandatory second step. It is this second step that is key: the problem's cause is traced to the errant subsystem that caused it, which is then modified so the problem won't happen again.*

This is how successful people negotiate their days!

And through the astute business leader's observation, this problem in the primary system calls not just for a subsystem modification, but also for the corrected subsystem's documentation. The unanticipated positive consequence of this work? *The enhancement and documentation will not only prevent the error from happening again, it will cause the primary system to be incrementally more robust and*

*reliable than before the problem occurred.* Taking the second step to fix the cause of the problem distinguishes people who are in control from people who are not in control—the successful from the unsuccessful.

In a business, *the improvement of a system is a system-improvement, and the documentation of that system-improvement is a working procedure.* We'll get to that in Part Two.

The documentation of each revision is critical. In a business, *it has to happen.*

Again, by focusing on repairing problems in this way, the primary system becomes ever more efficient. Rough edges disappear. It's a wondrous thing because as time passes, the mechanism gets better and better. *Imagine a mechanical system that improves with time rather than wears out!* Effective leaders understand this.

## **FOR YOU, NO MORE FIRE KILLING**

At the start, these one-by-one efforts can seem daunting. You work at them for a while and then ask, "When will all these problems cease, and when can I stop fixing and documenting?" But you carry on. After plugging along for a short while more, you notice the pace and quantity of incoming glitches has decreased. You see the demands for fire killings aren't coming so fast . . . and this is the moment in time when a potent conviction takes hold. Now, with fervor, you accelerate the repair process so even fewer errors occur, and your organization and your personal life become ever smoother and more efficient. Profits improve while the vitality and resilience of both your business and yourself increase.

Now you're consciously managing your life, working your systems, no longer a victim of circumstance.

*You'll never go back!*

Once your new documented processes and procedures are in place and functional, you will perform routine reviews of the entire collection. What will be the end result of these ongoing reviews? Your operation's increased efficiency and bottom line will be maintained over the long term. And for you personally? No more fire killing as a way of life, and much more free time. (We'll talk more of routine maintenance in Part Three.)

## Your Job

Your task is to optimize one system after another, not careen through the day randomly taking care of whatever problems erupt.

*Your job is not to be a fire killer. Your job is to prevent fires.*

## HEAVY SEAS

For Centratel, the system-improvement process continues twenty-one years after the implementation of the Method. Now, problems are so few that when one surfaces, my staff pounces on it with a vengeance. It's hard to describe the deep satisfaction of leading a company that operates this way. Like Centratel, my personal existence still has its occasional unexpected ups and downs, but now it's tremendously more resilient and I am well prepared to absorb high pressure and unexpected blows.

This is what I want for you.

For the apple vendor, an overturned apple cart is a disaster, but an apple falling off the side of the cart now and then is a small, easy-to-deal-with occurrence. There is no getting away from random problems that are caused by an unexpected circumstance or unpredictable human error. That's life!

In organizations and in individual lives, outright mistakes account for only a small percentage of total errors. Most problems stem from nonexistent process management and show themselves as "errors of omission." Your new positioning will dramatically reduce this form of inefficiency. (Errors of omission are addressed in Part Three.)

What about the unexpected heavy seas of a debilitating injury or the loss of a loved one? Here it is again: strength and resilience are by-products of the Work the System Method. A life that is stronger and more resilient will be better able to navigate the inevitable dark and turbulent waters.

## Business Is Art

The following hypothesis was suggested to me by a reader who explained it beautifully, and I paraphrase from memory: "Who says art must include a canvas, sculpture, or musical instrument? *Art is creativity, and is there a better example of a creative endeavor than building a successful business?* Indeed, business is art in its purest form! The painter and the musician shouldn't scoff at the entrepreneur or corporate chief who must take hard, cold life itself—sights,

sounds, events, things, people—and stir them into an efficient enough mixture to produce a successful business, something beneficial for all concerned.”

*Business IS art.* It’s a heroic undertaking, and within a successful business lies two wonderful by-products: real and useful value to others— employees and customers—and personal income for the creator.

## **NOTICING POOR SYSTEM MANAGEMENT**

When you get a feel for system management in your daily life, you will notice when it isn’t happening around you. As you interact with the world you’ll find yourself critiquing what works and what doesn’t. You’ll be hyperaware of the processes others control—or don’t control. This new posture as an informal service-quality observer will go with you everywhere.

You will understand the real reasons why people who promise to call don’t call. Why there is lousy service in certain restaurants, retail stores, and hotels. Why there is haphazard communication with a service provider. You will develop a knack for instantly recognizing shoddy workmanship, missed deadlines, promises not kept, bad attitudes, and sloppy execution. You’ll know for sure that these dysfunctional human performances are the logical end result of poor process engineering and/or maintenance, both organizational and personal. Human dysfunction is pervasive; and as soon as your new systems-vision takes hold, you will see these inefficiencies all around you. But when you encounter silky-smooth proficiency in an organization or another individual, you will notice that too, and you will appreciate it for the splendid thing it is.

When you’re at the receiving end of poor service, remember that the ultimate problem is not with the person who is facing you, who may indeed be rude or uncaring, but with the individual at the top of the organization who is not managing properly. Even so, be sympathetic with that leader. Most people don’t understand the system-improvement methodology or even that there is such a thing. With best intentions and working hard, they stumble along, batting off the fastballs as they come hurtling in from all directions. I was like that.

## **PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP SYSTEMS**

What about selfish people who circumvent the rules and don’t consider others? Be careful here, too. Don’t confuse someone’s personality flaw

with their mechanical problem, which could be a simple lack of attention to the details of individual relationship systems. How one goes about cultivating good relationships is also a system, and the methodology must be set up with care and executed with consistency. *For thoughtless people, the base problem is not usually a personality flaw, but the lack of a functional relationship-maintenance protocol.*

This error of omission creates a vicious circle. These people do not return calls or remember birthdays, say hello to strangers, spontaneously smile, send thank-you notes, extend invitations, or really listen while in a conversation. They don't show interest in the vicissitudes or successes of the people right in front of them. They are often know-it-alls. The consequence is they receive little positive attention in return. These lonely people feel rejected and alienated, yet they dig themselves deeper and deeper into loneliness, getting sourer on life as the years pass by. Is it their fault? Well, mechanically speaking, yes it is.

It sounds antiseptic, but it's the simple truth: lonely people don't apply the recurring-relationship fundamentals necessary to make and keep friends. Maybe they don't care enough, or more likely they just don't understand the mechanical reality that having friends requires forethought and routine effort.

Despite the near perfection of our natural world, look around right now and notice that the human qualities of dependability and consistency are in short supply. And because they are in short supply, people accept that condition as normal. Actually, people *should* accept it as normal. It *is* normal! And happily for you, this means standing out from the crowd won't take much effort. The people around you will start to notice your quick execution of detail, your consistent reliability, and the congruency between what you say and what you do. They will especially feel your calm, confident comportment, especially that you are in control of your existence. People can depend on you and know what to expect and this makes you attractive to them. New customers, great employees, and reliable friends will be drawn to you because you doggedly adhere to the simple system-management tenets for cultivating great relationships.

**YOUR LIFE: PROBLEMATIC OR ORDERLY?**

So, how do you perceive your life? Do you see it as problematic—unfair, unpredictable, and inhospitable? Or do you view it as orderly and directed? Yet again, this isn't a matter of having a positive or a negative attitude or adopting some philosophical stance based on feel-good theory. This is about logic, simplicity, and mechanics.

How do you see your life?

## A Certain Billionaire

My companion and I were on vacation in Siena, Italy. We'd been there just a few days, and at night the jetlag of crossing ten time zones had me entertaining strange dreams. A lucid midnight sojourn inspired this 2:00 a.m. writing session.

In my dream, a famous multibillionaire asked me to take the equivalent of the chief operations officer position for his conglomeration of several hundred international corporations.

Upon receiving the offer in this tycoon's ad hoc boardroom located on the tarmac of an airport somewhere, my central dream-thought as I faced him was that I would succeed. I would succeed despite my small-town heritage, my lack of an advanced academic degree, and the shortage of other seemingly mandatory background requisites. My challenges would be prosaic, limited to dealing with frequent travel, the inevitable corporate personality clashes, and whether or not being a part of the enterprise would cause me to feel trapped in a cage. (My current world is smaller, but without restraint I roam it as I please.)

Why was I confident in this dream? It was because my new position would entail dealing with the same simple mechanical realities of cause and effect that I deal with now, just on a larger scale. I would successfully work my systems in this gigantic corporate-conglomerate structure where, symbolically speaking, one plus one would equal two, just like everywhere else. Other than the scale of the endeavor, my tasks would be no different from the day-to-day tasks I already handle.