

In Over My Head

I was about 9-years old when I told my mother I planned to win an art contest that was advertised on the back of a cereal box. If my drawing of the famous geyser Old Faithful were judged one of the best, I'd win a prize. Mom tried to explain just how many people would enter a contest like that, presumably so I wouldn't be disappointed when I didn't win. I understood the odds, but I was sure I was going to win anyway, so I sketched my picture and sent it in.

I won a camera.

When I was 11 years old, I was certain I would find the Golden Egg at the annual Easter Egg Hunt in my town. Imagine a field full of hidden eggs, the area is covered with kids looking for those eggs, and only one egg is the golden one. Against all odds, I was sure I would be the one to find it.

Later that week, my picture was on the front page of our local paper. "Scott Adams Finds Golden Egg."

It was about that same time when I first heard the word valedictorian. I was surprised to learn that there was an actual name for the best student in the graduating class. I decided to become one of those. How hard could it be?

In 1975 I graduated as valedictorian.

I recall one day in eighth grade science class when the teacher was giving the answers to some standardized tests we were taking for practice. I raised my hand and pointed out that his answer was wrong. I argued that he was misinterpreting the question. This didn't seem likely to him, given that he was a professional science teacher and I was 14. But to humor me, he agreed to go back to the source and check.

I was right. He had misinterpreted the question.

On my first day at Hartwick College I met a large muscular guy named Bob near the communal mailboxes. He was in his early twenties, returning to college to finish his degree. In the course of conversation we discovered that we both played tennis, so we set up a match. He spouted something about being the top player at his previous college and how he would mop the court with me. I had never taken a tennis lesson, but I played often and usually won, so I assured him that he would be humbled.

He turned out to be the better player by far, but he had a bad day and I won. He was both surprised and displeased, or at least that's my interpretation of why he smashed his racket to bits in front of me after match point. A few months later he became the top player on the college team. (I never beat him again.)

During my corporate career I attended a mandatory class on problem solving. The first exercise involved a case study that was selected because there were so many factors to consider. Our job was to use the tools they taught us and weed out the unimportant factors until we found the root problem. We were assured that this process would take quite a while, and some groups might never solve it.

I read the case and identified the root problem on the first pass. It was the sort of solution where once you saw it, you knew it was right. The instructor accused me of cheating because he had been teaching the course for years and no one had ever solved the problem just by reading it.

I remember telling my friends and family that I was going to submit some comics to become a syndicated cartoonist. I don't remember even one person predicting I would succeed. Thousands of wannabes submit comics for syndication every year and only a few get contracts. And most of those comics fizzle after a few years. My entire art experience included frequent doodling plus getting the well-deserved lowest grade in art class in college. That was my total preparation for my new career.

I sent my samples to several comic syndication companies. One syndicate helpfully suggested that I find an actual artist to do the drawing for me. United Media had lower standards and offered me a contract for Dilbert. That turned out to be a good move on their part.

When Dilbert was only in about fifty newspapers, and I still had my day job, I got a call from a meeting organizer in Calgary asking if I wanted to give a speech – preferably a funny one – to a bunch of engineers. I had spoken to small groups before, generally at my day job. And I had taken the Dale Carnegie course, but that only involved giving speeches to my 40 classmates. It was a long way from standup comedy in Canada. But they offered to pay me \$5,000 U.S., which got my attention. I figured the worst thing that could happen is that I would embarrass myself in Canada.

So I flew to Canada, showed them some comics that had gotten me in trouble and told witty stories. They loved me. That was about 300 paid speeches ago. I can't tell you my current price, but the biggest offer I ever turned down was \$100,000 to do a one-hour speech for a tech company. (I had prior commitments.)

A few years into cartooning, an editor for a major publishing company approached me about writing a humorous business book. I had never taken any writing courses. I hadn't even read many books. But I said I'd give it a try.

That book was *The Dilbert Principle*. It became a #1 New York Times Bestseller. So I pumped out a second book right away, and the two of them occupied #1 and #2 on the non-fiction list.

About a year later, after a meeting with my tax accountant in a nearby town, I stopped into a restaurant for lunch before heading home. The manager was an acquaintance I knew from her prior job at a restaurant where I had eaten hundreds of times. We chatted and she mentioned that someday she wanted to own her own restaurant. I had always wanted to invest in a restaurant, for reasons that are unclear even to me. So I said that if she was serious she should put together a business case and I'd consider funding it. She did just that. Everyone told me I was nuts to get into the restaurant business with no experience.

The business (Stacey's Café) has been a solid success, and Stacey and I opened a second one a few years later.

Several years ago I was approached by some advisors for people in high places. I can't give you the details of this story, or even tell you why I can't give you the details. But the gist of it was that they needed help squelching some bad ideas that had taken hold in the public consciousness. They thought humor might be one part of the solution, and they were Dilbert fans, so they tracked me down. The challenge was that the bad ideas sounded terrific to the uninformed person. You couldn't kill these particular bad ideas with logic because the arguments against them would be too complicated. You had to go in through the back door.

I suggested a few cleverly designed, hypnosis-inspired phrases that were the linguistic equivalent of Kung Fu. They were simple (that's my specialty), and once you heard these phrases, they made any competing ideas seem frankly stupid. Think of Johnny Cochran's famous refrain "If the glove doesn't fit, you must acquit." In my opinion, O.J. is a free man largely because of that phrase. My phrases worked the same way.

The people in high places tried my phrases. The phrases became world headlines the next day. I could tune the TV to any news channel and hear my words coming out of pundits' mouths. The phrases smothered the competing ideas and just maybe changed the course of world events. (One can never know for sure.)

I mention these stories because over the course of my life, every time I try something different or unlikely, someone says the equivalent of "don't quit your day job." When I venture into areas clearly outside of my expertise, I hear "You're in way over your head." You've probably seen some of those comments in this blog.

Somehow I have to square that seemingly good advice with the fact that I've so often been successful against long odds, especially when I'm in way over my head. In fact, that's when I do my best work. I gave you several examples, but trust me when I say there are plenty more. Here are two.

I was in way over my head earlier this year when I used Google to correctly diagnose a rare problem with my vocal cords after four doctors couldn't. (A specialist has since confirmed my diagnosis and successfully treated it.)

I have a degree in economics, but frankly all I remember is something about lowering prices to increase volume. Yesterday a friend forwarded me this tongue-in-cheek story about how I might win the Nobel Prize for economics.

<http://www.marketwatch.com/News/Story/Story.aspx?guid=%7BBE57F0AA%2D03D9%2D4320%2DC4D%2D83363B6372F6%7D&siteid=myyahoo&dist=myyahoo>

To put all of this in context, and before you start to vomit at my bragging, I must confess that I fail miserably about ten times for every one success. (That's an accurate estimate. I've literally kept score.) But interestingly, the failures always involved activities that seemed entirely feasible. I was completely qualified for all of the things that failed. Ironically, I couldn't even "keep my day job."

In this blog I've spent a lot of time noodling about the root causes of terrorism and conflict in the Middle East. Realistically, it's unlikely that a cartoonist could fix those problems. And you'll get no argument if you say that I'm in way over my head.

But if you were me, wouldn't you try?