

If I Could Go Back in Time in my Career...

Shôn Ellerton, March 19, 2021

Looking back in hindsight is one of life's great teachers and for me, this is especially so with respect to how I conducted myself through my career.



The other day, I picked up on a curious but poignant passage in Ayn Rand's book, *The Fountainhead*, when the lead character, architect Howard Roark, engages in a little philosophy with his buddy millionaire newspaper mogul, Gail Wynand, aboard his private yacht. He made the inference that the 'second-hander's' delusion is the allure for prestige and a perpetual quest for seeking approval from others. He then ends with the statement that the worst 'second-hander' of them all is the one who goes after power.

The Fountainhead is a rather lengthy tome containing a plethora of stories centred around, in my opinion, quite unsavoury characters, on power and corruption, greed, individualism vs collectivism, and moralism amidst a world of architects and mogul media giants. In fact, I cannot cite one character in the book who is genuinely caring, altruistic and selfless. What struck me about Howard Roark's character is his seemingly uncaring desire to be appreciated by others. He does not desire power, nor does he require approval from others. He is ideologically insistent that his actions are his and his alone and vehemently opposed to outside influences which might have a direct impact on his creations. He represents the paradigm of extreme individualism embodied in Rand's philosophy of objectivism. Yet, paradoxically, he seems willing to help a friend or acquaintance in need, not out of altruism, but out of pity and of his own arrogance. For example, with Peter Keating, introduced early in *The Fountainhead* as a fellow architect who flew to the top of society through the conventional means of seeking popularity through the press and ultimately, the

public's eye; much like a movie star's course through life. Keating used the genius of others to the betterment of his position in society, in this case, using Roark to design his buildings for him while claiming the credit for his own. Interestingly, Roark has no desire to be paid or take the credit, his only demand that none of which that he designs is altered in any way and rather to live in a near state of destitution than to reap any immediate rewards in exchange for compromise. This exercise in not exercising delayed gratification is all too evident when the situation is reversed when Keating falls from grace and Roark rises like a phoenix into the upper echelons of society. Not by popularity, stardom or through nepotism, but rather of the ability to ultimately gain the utmost respect of others by standing by one's own convictions to near martyrdom. In one aspect, the book conveys the message of the dangers of making short-term gains by capitalising from the powers and abilities by others. Roark then falls from the throne of grace in the public eye by deliberately blowing up one of the buildings he designed. Not to cause harm—taking precautions to ensure no one would be hurt—but to make a personal statement that he held the power of his own soul embodied in the structure in which he designed.

Whilst reflecting on my own past careers, in my case, in the world of engineering, telecommunications and IT, much of that portrayed, philosophically, in that book, made a lot of sense. During my thirties, I was driven with a passion to drive my own projects, to create new initiatives, whether they were creative mobile phone microcells contained in telephone boxes or spearhead a new kind of municipal wireless 'hotzone' in a bustling city centre. The 'Roark' in me wanted little compromise, collaboration or interference in the projects I ran wanting to ultimately create feats of engineering that I had ultimate conviction that its success would be incontrovertible. It was the arrogance I had then portrayed. The 'Keating' in me strived for attempting to climb up the career ladder as quickly as possible by often alerting others through the mechanism of laud and approval on the pieces that I had created. In other words, I was overly zealous in plastering my name down on any piece of work I worked on and then tended to openly portray disappointment when not recognised. In hindsight, this is not the behaviour or deportment I would have exhibited if I showed more self-confidence and selflessness.

Such is the case of my experience of hitting the ‘glass ceiling’ whilst in the employ of an engineering consultancy during a major rollout of a cellular network in Australia. During my early forties, I climbed up the career ladder in the company I worked for but fell short of making the grade of being made a partner. Access to this ‘exclusive club’ was elusive and I struck all elements of my not gaining admission to it through the fault of others rather than my own. I was steadfastly convinced that my approach in how I ran the team, the projects I ran, and the works I created was the correct way. This could imply that I might have been an autocrat, but that was not the case. I delegated duty responsibly and fairly, partial to viewing the interests of others within the team as inseparable from my own. However, I was often dismissive of, what I perceived to be, shortcomings within the institution from those sitting on the other side of that glass ceiling. I pointed many an accusing finger to those who, seemingly, with little encumbrance, had climbed up to the top of the ‘ivory towers’. I lived in a perplexed state not understanding why I was not to be admitted to the Elysian Gardens of my chosen profession. What was I doing wrong?

Many years later, it all seemed to make an incredible amount of sense. As time advanced, the yearning to pass and share knowledge to others increased while unbridled ambition to simply excel over others diminished. Perhaps, this is one of the hallmarks of scaling the pyramidal gap between knowledge and wisdom. Indeed, it is not uncommon during one’s ‘autumn years’, to gain satisfaction on imparting experience and knowledge to others rather than purely to absorb and take knowledge and learnings from others for one’s own betterment. This is not to suggest that unchecked ambition be tossed on the proverbial bonfire but rather, to denounce the method of achieving one’s ambitions via the knowledge and wisdom of others without reciprocating accordingly or, at least, to express gratitude and give recognition where it is due. In practice, a relative few with fervour, needle-focussed vision and extreme determination coupled with risk and apposite timing will reach the starry heights of fame and fortune but for most who try, the road to success is heavily marred with potholes of failures and setbacks. However, I came to the realisation that achieving the right balance of ambition and respect for those who employ you will, in general, offer comfortable returns.

During the time in my career where ambition and arrogance blinded me of achieving self-realisation and a candid respect of others who, at the time, I deemed of either being staid and narrow-minded in their thinking, I continued to

pursue relentlessly on those projects and tasks in my own way often viewing collaboration from others as being either obstructive or even threatening. It would be wrong for me to suggest that nothing came out of being arrogantly ambitious; indeed, I am pleased of the outcomes of many of the projects I had put into place. However, the question that I recently asked myself is this. Would I have been able to create some of these projects if I had not acted selfishly, independently and guardedly? For years, I would have surmised that I would not have been able to for fear of not being given the recognition or the credit for my works. Indeed, there are managers and other superiors, who likewise, abuse their positions by taking sole credit for the works created by their employees without giving the appropriate recognition to those in their service, but in the long run, many often run afoul at some point in their careers by continuing in this fashion. I have seen it happen many times. However, I now staunchly believe that being less guarded, more collaborative and acting selflessly would have made me, ultimately, more successful, less stressed and happier. It is often difficult to let go the creations we build but we tend to forget that those creations are indelibly etched into memory and mind. When Roark blew up his own building in *The Fountainhead*, the creation still survived—in his soul.

When I look back on my younger ‘whipper-snapper’ days, it dawned on me that, in a similar vein, I would not want to be treated in the same way that I treated some of those superior to me who I considered incumbents reluctant to change, in my working establishments. It is easy to forget that they, themselves, suffered the same professional gauntlet to secure their positions also forgetting that on their journeys, they have attained the wisdom and temperance which is so often in short supply with the young and upcoming, full of energy and fervour as they are. In hindsight, I wish I would have done things differently in those days, but perhaps, this is basic human nature exhibited at various stages of life simply meant to be.