



# KEVIN O'LEARY

# COLD HARD TRUTH

ON BUSINESS, MONEY & LIFE

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KEVIN O'LEARY



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—Kevin O’Leary

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I dedicate this book to the loving memory of my mother,

Georgette, who led an extraordinary life and remains  
an inspiration to anyone she touched during her time.  
If there is a heaven, God has his hands full with her there.

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# THE COLD, HARD TRUTH ABOUT MONEY

## THINK THE WAY MONEY THINKS

I'm going to give you the bad news first: we live in difficult times. The average person works harder than ever and makes less money than his or her parents. The markets are increasingly unpredictable and volatile. Making, keeping, and growing money feels like a harsh and precarious science. The average investor has grown wary and cynical, accustomed to blurring messages and exaggeration, baffled by banks, angry at CEOs, exhausted by the economic highs and lows of the last few years. Wall Street's reputation is badly bruised, many of its leaders led away in handcuffs or fallen so far from grace they've become untouchable. Esteemed investment houses have been brought to their knees by scandal and bad practice. Many banks and blue-chip corporations, the axes around which capitalism once revolved, have survived only because of massive government bailouts. Investors are increasingly reluctant to hand over hard-earned money to fast talkers making big promises. We've created an economy where small businesses are afraid to take risks because big businesses have taken far too many.

Here's the good news: amid all of this uncertainty beats the heart of the true capitalist, the entrepreneur who sees adversity as opportunity and carves a confident path through the financial rubble. More than governments, these trailblazers are the true paramedics of the ailing global economy. And I am one of them. I believe that as long as people like me are earning money and creating wealth, capitalism has a fighting chance. If what I'm talking about interests you, if you're reading this and thinking, "That's me!" or "That's who I want to be," I'm here to tell you how to get there. I can't tell you that building wealth is easy, but it is possible, and entirely worth it. Capitalism creates freedom, after all, and I can't think of a loftier, more important calling than that.

I'm known for my roles as a venture capitalist on *Dragons' Den* in Canada and *Shark Tank* in the United States. I'm also a financial analyst on *The Lang & O'Leary Exchange* and CBC News. Because of those privileges, I've developed a reputation for delivering the cold, hard truth to entrepreneurs and politicians who've squandered hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars on bad ideas or policies. I'm often called the Mean One, the one to be feared, even the Voldemort of Capitalism. You might think these words hurt my feelings, that I would be insulted or angry. Not so. I have learned one of capitalism's most important rules: money may go to bad people, but it *never* goes to bad ideas. That's why people who think making money is a matter of "really wanting it" or "trying really hard to visualize the opportunity" always crash and burn. The only way to make money is to get completely honest about where money is. Think of money like gravity. It is a law, an absolute. You can argue all you want about how you *feel* about gravity. But when you're hanging off a cliff, do those feelings

matter?

Some people also think that making money is a matter of being good or right. But money doesn't care about any of that. It also doesn't care about you or your family or your country. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Money is neutral. Money goes only where it knows it'll be safe, and that's generally in the vicinity of more money. So building wealth requires the ability to think the way money thinks, which means never confusing money with emotion. In fact, feelings are often obstacles to wealth, because feelings, like the weather, are mercurial, unreliable, difficult to pin down, and ever-changing. Money deals strictly with fact. And as money's biggest fan, I have learned a lot from watching how it behaves, where it goes, where it runs screaming from. When I speak the truth about money, I'm almost speaking as money. That's why I come across as harsh, mean, and brutal. I'm just channeling money, in my attempt to help you understand it and amass it.

## WHATEVER YOU PAY ATTENTION TO GROWS

If you've picked up this book, it's probably because you're interested in understanding money—how to make it, how to grow it. Or maybe you want to know how to spot a good investment, or how to sell your product, or how to run your business or perfect your pitch. Maybe you want to figure out whether entrepreneurship is for you at all. This book addresses all of those things. It's also the story of my money, and how I took a few thousand dollars and turned them into billion-dollar businesses. In these pages, I'm sharing with you life-changing moments and the powerful lessons that have shaped my business philosophy. Along the way, I'll provide succinct summaries of those lessons and some questions designed to get you thinking about your own financial goals and dreams. Not everyone wants to be an entrepreneur, or to start and grow a business. But one thing's for certain: everyone wants to be financially successful and to make more money. I'll share my simple, clear-cut philosophy for investing, growing wealth, and becoming financially secure. I'll also tell you exactly how I built my fortune. You'll meet my mother, who taught me how to manage money; my father, who showed me how to sell anything; my stepfather, who taught me the difference between a dream and a calling; my teachers, who taught me how to turn weaknesses into strengths; my bosses, who taught me that I'd never be happy working for someone else; my partners, who taught me that in order to create wealth, I needed to pair up with people whose strengths compensated for my weaknesses.

With the guidance and commitment of all of these mentors, I survived a personal and professional journey that at times was harrowing, heartbreak, but always thrilling and invigorating. In fact, I not only survived but thrived. If adversity has added energy and vitality to my game, triumph has made me immune to my critics. It's of no value to me to pay attention to naysayers, skeptics, or finger-pointers, because I believe *whatever you pay attention to grows*. Pay attention to the critics, and you absorb that negativity into your DNA, which infects whatever you're working on. Money will flee that inhospitable environment. Pay attention to the horizon line, keep your path uncluttered, tune out unnecessary noise, guard your precious time, and money will take root and thrive.

I'm not talking about ignoring constructive criticism, which adds value if it helps solve problems. I have a lot of time for good advice. What I'm talking about is ignoring the people who said that I couldn't get through school because I had dyslexia; that I would have to wor-

for someone else to be successful; that I would never finish university, let alone my MBA; that I couldn't grow a billion-dollar business out of my basement; and that I couldn't sell investors on the idea that buying and holding on to stocks made good sense and would be tremendously popular. When I proposed this idea to banks in September 2008, they laughed at me. That, dear reader, was more than \$1.5 billion ago.

I've made mistakes, inched close to bankruptcy, been sued, fired, and slandered. I've despaired about making payroll and have taken some detours that were ill advised. These are experiences I'll share with you in this book, because when you've stared down that black pit of financial failure and have found the strength to leap over it to the security of the other side, it gives depth to your experience. I take pride in the fact that all my new ventures began as small businesses and became million- and billion-dollar successes. I'll retrace the steps on that path, and along the way, I'll share some essential business truths that have helped me turn those ventures into fortunes. As any entrepreneur will tell you, the road to riches is never straight and narrow. It can be riddled with financial land mines. Too many times, I've watched entrepreneurs make common and costly mistakes that jeopardize their company's health and their family's security. I'll show you how to avoid those pitfalls and how to have a competitive edge.

Today, millions of dollars move through O'Leary Funds. This money belongs to people who trust me—and my team. I remain keenly aware of this privilege—all day, every day, from the moment I wake up to the minute I go to bed. I measure my success by asking myself some very simple questions: Did I go to bed richer than when I woke up? Did I help my investors do the same? What can I do better, or differently, tomorrow? And if O'Leary Funds decline, and my investors lose money, that bothers me to no end. I lose sleep. It's painful. But that's what I love the most about money. There is no gray zone. You either make money or lose it; you have it or you don't. When I hear a CEO casually shrugging off a financial loss by blaming the vicissitudes of the market, it infuriates me. Because here's the ultimate truth about money: even though it doesn't care about me or you, to make money requires us to care deeply about it.



(Photo Credit [itr.1](#))

# SPEND THE INTEREST, NEVER THE PRINCIPAL— AND OTHER LESSONS MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME WHY

## WHY A\$\$HOLES GET RICH

It was the fall of 2006, and the place was Pearson International Airport in Toronto. I was with my wife, Linda, and our kids, Savannah and Trevor. We had just flown in from our place in Boston to hit the Toronto International Film Festival. I had to use the men's room, so I asked my family to wait outside for a second. While washing my hands and minding my own business, I could sense next to me a stranger turning and staring at my profile. He was doing it every few seconds.

These were the early days of *Dragons' Den*. If you tuned in to the CBC show back then, you'd have seen five well-dressed venture capitalists shifting around uncomfortably in mismatched chairs in some anonymous warehouse in downtown Toronto. The cast that first season consisted of Jim Treliving, of Boston Pizza fame; Robert Herjavec, who made his fortune in Internet security software; Laurence Lewin, who had an enviable job helming a lingerie empire; and Jennifer Woods, a whip-smart cattle mogul. One after the other, jittery entrepreneurs descended a staircase to present their business proposals, in hopes of scoring much-needed injections of capital to take them to the next level. Much like in the real world, we invested in some, but we dismissed most. I have to admit that on more than one occasion during the shoot, I thought I had made a mistake aligning myself with this strange TV show that had originated, naturally, in Japan.

Back then, the pitchers were corralled in a hot tent in the middle of an industrial pit in downtown Toronto. We were fed bad food, worked long hours, and, frankly, were less than impressed with the quality of business ideas being brought to us. I'd seen the British version of *Dragons' Den*, which by then was heading into its second successful season, but I wasn't sure that a show about venture capitalism would really take off in Canada. I find the world of venture capitalism to be the most exciting arena known to man. But it's also full of dry jargon, where you bat around terms such as ROI (return on investment), EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization), and valuation (what you think your company's worth). Riveting stuff to my ilk. But I worried that producers would have to cut out the business essentials in order to make a show like this palatable to the average viewer, thereby alienating its core audience of business fans.

We debuted on October 3, 2006, to lackluster ratings—a disappointment, but not a surprise. Every week, however, the ratings seemed to creep up a bit. By the end of season

one, we were a cult hit—by no means as big as we are now, but people had begun to tune in. I started to become recognized in public, at first in the business arena, and then at the odd restaurant or function, and now I was being gawked at in an airport washroom!

Finally, I shot the guy a look, as though to say, “Do you mind?” And there it was, the flicker of recognition.

“Hey,” this stranger asked, “are you Kevin O’Leary? From that TV show *Dragons’ Den*?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I love that show!”

“Thank you.”

“But you are a total asshole.”

“Oh, really?” I said, a little shocked by such an insult. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you and those other Dragons stole that company from those kids last night. Asking for 50 percent. It’s outrageous! You completely stole their company and their souls.”

He was talking about a company called JobLoft, created by three savvy MBA students. They had built an easily navigable website that advertised minimum-wage jobs in restaurants and other franchises. I, and a few other Dragons, leapt on it. During the pitch, Jim Treliving alluded to the increasing difficulty in finding restaurant workers for that high-turnover industry, and here was a website that corralled them. (The deal fell apart during the check handover, in a spectacular storm of post-due diligence hubris. More on that in [chapter 9](#).)

“Wait a minute,” I said to the irate guy in the bathroom. “Those kids built a great website, but they’ve never run a business. We have every right to want control. That’s what you do when you get into business with novices who’ve never made a dime. They’ll learn a lot from us. And that knowledge, my friend, doesn’t come free.”

“Still,” the guy said, throwing his spent paper towel in the garbage can, “you’re an asshole.”

“Maybe so,” I said, “but assholes get rich because they’re not afraid to ask for what they want.”

The gentleman left in a huff. He saw a woman standing outside the washroom.

“Guess who’s in there,” he said as he passed her. “That asshole Kevin O’Leary from *Dragon’s Den*.”

“Yes,” the woman said, smiling wearily. “I know.”

That woman was Linda, my wife.

Since that incident, I have been called much worse names than “asshole”—on and off the screen. And I’ll tell you why it has never bothered me: because I speak the truth. Not just because I’m a nice guy and want to do the right thing, both of which are mostly true. I tell the truth because I don’t like to lead people astray or to waste time. Money’s great, money is the point of everything, and I can always earn more. But time is a scarce commodity. It is the true universal currency, because you can’t invent, manufacture, or buy time. And not a day goes by when I don’t lament that fact. Therefore, I have no time for people, places, or things that waste it.

A few months ago, I received a pitch from a smart-sounding sales guy about launching O’Leary Funds in India. It was an interesting proposition, but midway through the conversation, obstacles began to surface in my mind. As this man was speaking, I realized that the hurdles we’d have to overcome were too high at this juncture in our company.

growth cycle. There'd be no way to structure the funds so that they'd get the kind of yield that O'Leary Funds investors were accustomed to. I interrupted the pitch and told the sales guy that, for now, expanding into India was not a viable plan. But thanks anyway. He asked me if we could still book lunch, if only to lay the groundwork for a possible future collaboration. I said no, we wouldn't be meeting for lunch. He implored me. I said no again. There was an uncomfortable pause. Instead of calling me an asshole, which is what I think was on the tip of his tongue, he thanked me and got off the phone. I had clearly hurt his feelings. But my only thought was, "Oh well." Unless there's money to be earned, I don't take meetings with people I don't know or need to see. That hour of lunch went into a precious "time bank" I guard as fiercely as I would a few bars of gold. You might say that this man could have become a valuable contact, someone I could eventually do business with. Maybe. But instead of spending my time on more remote possibilities, I prefer to spend it on current ventures I know will yield results. That's why I said no. It's not personal. I call myself the Merchant of Truth because I speak the truth to everybody all the time. And it can sound bluntness to the unaccustomed ear. It might make me come across as an asshole, but that's only because the brutal truth is so rarely spoken these days. It's like an ancient tribal language we've forgotten we know how to speak. But it's a language I learned at the feet of a woman who was a master with money: my mother, Georgette.

## **NEVER LET THEM SEE YOU SWEAT ... AND NEVER PAY WITH CREDIT**

I was born in Montreal, Canada, in 1954, smack dab in the middle of the baby-boom generation, about as statistically average as you can get. But nothing about my family was average. On my mother's side, I'm descended from a long line of Lebanese merchants, who passed down that vital Phoenician blood. The Phoenicians were merchant mariners—traders and sailors—who basically put a price tag on one-half of the Mediterranean, selling it to the other half. Silk, tin, wood, or textiles—it didn't matter as long as they could make a buck. That Phoenician facility with money, coupled with my biological father's Irish charisma and gift of the gab—a laboratory couldn't blend a better vintage of salesman DNA than mine. Business is bred in my bones.

In 1904, my maternal grandfather, Joseph Bookalam, came to Canada from a small village in Lebanon. He was sixteen, and he headed straight to the mining town of Cobalt, Ontario, where he had an uncle who owned a general store. He worked like a dog for about three years, running the till, handling the inventory, and serving customers. Finally, he'd saved enough money to buy a horse and sleigh, and he struck out on his own. Like his forebears and his progeny, he couldn't stand working for someone else, so he became a roving salesman trading with indigenous populations that dotted the outlying villages. Like a true Phoenician, he didn't care who his clients were; he had no issues with their religion, ethnicity, or race. If you wanted what he had, he'd sell it to you: cooking and hunting utensils, supplies for the fur trade, all of it for cash. The man didn't do credit.



My grandfather Joseph Bookalam in 1941.

While visiting relatives in the States, he met my grandmother Akaber and proposed immediately. (Coincidentally, they were from the same village in Lebanon. Only in North America can two people who've never met in their small Lebanese village meet and mate.) They moved to Montreal, where they raised four children. Eventually, with his considerable savings, he opened Kiddies Togs, a factory that made high-end children's winter clothes.

At its height, Kiddies Togs employed dozens of people, and my grandparents did so well that they were able to afford a second home in Ste. Adèle, Quebec. My grandmother was a natural inventor, and she designed the system that brought water to the house using gravity and the existing watershed. Pretty impressive stuff. They had money, but my grandfather was frugal and so strict that my mother risked her life one night rather than face his scolding. This was a terrifying incident that has become a part of our family folklore.

My mother was about twenty and had borrowed her father's car to go to a party. Around midnight, after dropping off the last of her friends, she stopped at a red light. Suddenly, a man jumped into the front seat and held a gun to her head, ordering her to keep driving. My mother didn't scream, didn't panic. She followed his instructions, which were to keep driving in no particular direction. After a while, she finally took a good look at her abductor and realized this fearsome gunman was actually a malnourished, scared, and exhausted young man. Maybe he was a drug addict—it's hard to say. He was certainly desperate. Eventually, he asked Georgette to surrender the car. She was quiet for a few seconds, and then simply replied, "I can't do that. If I don't bring the car home, my father will kill me. And I think I'd rather you do it than him." That was not the answer he was looking for.

My mother then began a conversation with the man.

"What could be so wrong with your life," she asked, "that you would think this is the answer?" The man didn't reply. She began wearing down his resolve and dissipating his anger by telling him that if he killed her, he would ruin not only his own life and hers, but his father's, too, because he would die of heartbreak. My mother always had a way with lost souls. Not necessarily ones with guns, but still, people rarely ruffled her feathers. Along a desolate, abandoned street, the gunman motioned for her to pull over, fished out forty dollars from his wallet, and left. My mother drove home slowly, her nerves, which had been steely and calm, dissolved into shakes and shudders. By the time she got home, she could barely feel her legs.

She never told her father about the incident, never wanted to worry him unnecessarily. But

it highlights one of her best qualities—her incredible capacity to remain cool under intense pressure. I have inherited some of that ability, though I would never want it tested in this particular way. But that skill, of never letting anyone see the roiling anxiety below the surface of a calm demeanor, would come in handy a few years later, when my grandfather died, leaving Georgette, at the tender age of twenty-four, and her older sister, Edna, in charge of the entire Kiddies Togs operation.



My mother, Georgette, as a young girl on a trip to Europe, *circa* 1948. This is my favorite picture of her.

## MONEY = FREEDOM

In 1945, my grandfather died of a sudden heart attack. His only son, Norman, was seventeen, way too young to helm the company, so the task of running Kiddies Togs fell on the shoulders of my mother and her sister. They had logged quite a few hours in the design department, cutting patterns and doing odd jobs. But they had no idea how to run the accounting, purchasing, and marketing departments. So they had to learn those skills from scratch. How? Through trial and error, and by asking a lot of questions. The business flourished under Georgette's trademark pragmatism. She developed a real talent for managing money—in particular, for avoiding unnecessary debt. In fact, my mother always believed that debt was the source of almost every problem known to man. To her, debt was like a cancer, and if you didn't stay on top of it, it could completely consume you.

The first thing my mother did once she started earning a regular wage was to open up her own bank account with only her name on it. (It's the same bank account she kept her whole life, through two husbands, a few continents, and several countries.) Having her own money meant she'd always have her freedom. As an accidental CEO, she started studying the markets and interest rates, and over the years built a nest egg that, on more than one occasion, steered us clear of desperate straits and, frankly, helped me build my own empire. She also began investing in bonds. Georgette's philosophy: never spend the principal, just the interest. She would only invest in stocks that paid a dividend or interest. As far as she was concerned, a stock without a dividend was pure speculation. To this day, her advice guides me. It's the bedrock upon which O'Leary Funds is based.

Money and how you made it was never a mysterious subject to me. I remember very early conversations with my mother. I would ask, "Can I have some money to buy candy?" And m-

mother would say, “What did you do to earn it?” I learned early on that money didn’t come from wishes and prayers. It came from hard work. Even at the age of four or five, I was aware that there was a direct correlation between work and money. She also taught me that you needed to leave money alone if you wanted it to grow. You should always save a third of your paycheck, investing it in stable stocks or bonds that pay dividends or interest. You spend that—never the principal.



Terry O’Leary marries my mother, Georgette Bookalam, in Montreal on November 3, 1951.

“That way,” she said, “you’ll always have money. And if you always have money, you always have freedom.”

In handing over her philosophy on money, my mother was also explaining to me how the whole world worked. I began to understand that money is the lifeblood of a family. Love may be its heart, but it’s money that pumps the vital energy through it. She treated money with respect, and when she needed funds, they were there.



Born Terence Thomas Kevin O'Leary, July 9, 1954, in Montreal.

Soon after taking over the business, my mother realized that she needed one hell of a sales guy to differentiate Kiddies Togs' superior quality from other children's apparel lines that were being manufactured overseas. My mother hired a charismatic Irish extrovert named Terry O'Leary as her head salesman because he had the qualities she lacked. Where my mother was pragmatic, Terry was spontaneous. Where she was careful, he was extravagant. In the beginning, it was a good partnership, in which one's strengths mitigated the other's weaknesses. They soon fell in love and married, in 1951, had me in 1954 and my brother Shane, two years later.

You can easily see why my mother fell for my father, Terry. Here was this happy-go-lucky, charming Irish guy, arriving in the midst of all her hard-working, dedicated seriousness. He must have been a breath of fresh air. But he drank, played cards, and caroused—three things that dramatically clashed with my mother's value system. It wasn't a lifestyle she had in mind for herself or her children. But if it was an unhappy marriage in those early days, we didn't know it. My mother did an incredible job of insulating Shane and me from the fights that eventually erupted over my dad's behavior. All the while, she kept her money separate—some of it, we would later learn, earmarked for an exit strategy.

In the Lebanese culture, businesses get passed down through the sons, so my mother's younger brother bought out his sisters and eventually took over Kiddies Togs. It did well for decades, but with manufacturing increasingly moving to China and Southeast Asia, Kiddies Togs eventually sold for about \$3 million in the early '80s. My mother was no heiress. All the money she had left was money she had long saved from the buyout and invested.

## **DON'T JUST READ THE ROOM—BE WHAT THE ROOM NEEDS**

It soon became pretty clear that my parents' marriage was irreparable, and they eventually separated. When I was six, my father moved out and my mother was awarded full custody. It was a devastating, acrimonious split, but my mother did a masterful job of smoothing over the trauma.

My father would pick us up most Sundays, Shane and I clambering into the back seat of his long, dark car. He'd ask us about school; we'd tell him about our friends. Sometimes he'd take us fishing, or we'd grab dinner somewhere, usually a place where people knew him and were happy to see him. We were always overjoyed by his company, always fascinated by his stories of how he'd pull in big clients. He was still working for Kiddies Togs, so he'd regale us with plans to make it the most successful children's clothing company in the city, if not the country. The fact that he was a salesman was a huge point of pride for me. When I comb through my memories of Kiddies Togs, a few things come to mind: the Coke machine that dispensed tiny cold glass bottles; the sewing machines that were so loud you couldn't hear yourself talk; and the larger-than-life salesmen in the front office. They carried themselves like celebrities, making my father among the most charismatic. They had big personalities and a lot of freedom in those days. They weren't tied down to their desks, and seemed to come and go as they pleased. The girls in the front office (it was always women) seemed happy to see them, and I loved the competitive spirit between the men (it was always men)—for clients, for commissions, and even for attention from their female colleagues. Because the success of the company depended on how much they could sell, their jobs felt heroic to me. Sitting in the Kiddies Togs lobby with a cold bottle of Coke in my hand, watching these men operate, I decided I wanted to be one of them.

I learned a lot from my dad—in particular, that good salespeople don't just have the ability to read the room; they become exactly what that room needs. An average day with my dad, I'd watch him interact with people—whether it was the waitress at the diner, the man in the parking booth, the guy in the tackle shop, a police officer, or a postal worker. I'd see him morph, modulating his body language and voice, blending into the feel of the conversation, seemingly able to connect to anybody and everybody.

"To sell products," he'd say, "people have to be able to relate not just to the product, but also to the person selling it."

Those lessons were ingrained in me, but unfortunately, my father's tragic streak ran deeper than his entrepreneurial talents.

## **WEAKNESS IS OFTEN THE FLIPSIDE OF STRENGTH**

It was around this time that another troublesome fact began to surface: at six, I wasn't learning how to read along with the other kids, a source of incredible frustration for my mother and my teachers. It was horrifying to be singled out in class to sound out a word I couldn't recognize, especially because I could understand what the word meant. That white-hot shame of feeling dumb or slow left me paralyzed. I'd look at a piece of writing, and it was as though the letters had been smashed together into one big pile. I was good with numbers and counting, but the ability to read rows of letters, and to turn them into words completely eluded me.

There was no word for dyslexia back then, but small pockets of expertise around this kind

of learning disability were starting to pop up in certain academic communities. Coincidentally, Georgette discovered one of the best of these schools in Montreal. She grabbed my hand and we made a beeline for the twelfth floor of the Montreal Children's Hospital. Bad enough I had a hard time reading; having to go to a hospital to fix it was mortifying. That feeling disappeared at the sight of the bright blue trampoline in a room off the lobby.

In the burgeoning field of special education, this was a pioneering program. Led by Dr. Sam Rabinovitch and Dr. Margie Golick, it treated the whole child—body, mind, and soul. Part of my weekly treatment involved jumping up and down on a trampoline for several minutes so the doctors could study my hand-eye coordination, balance, and how both sides of my body worked together. It was ridiculously fun, and since I was also restless and hyperactive, it was a genius approach to teaching a kid like me. With all that energy burned off, I could finally fully concentrate. It's a strategy that still works for me today. Though I've given up on the trampoline, I love nothing more than a predawn game of squash before a twelve-hour shooting day, much to the consternation of the producers of *Dragons' Den*. But I mitigate my late arrival in the makeup chair by giving pitchers on the show my full attention.

Georgette scratched her head at the nontraditional teaching methods they used at the Children's Hospital, which included flash cards and making funny sounds. Margie would say, "I don't know if it will help to make him a better reader, but it will make him a better kid."

Their philosophy was also pretty revolutionary. Up until I entered the program, I harbored an incredible amount of shame about my learning difficulties. So the first thing they did was help me understand that my brain was wired a little differently, taking away the stigma of my disability. The job of the doctors, Margie explained, was to map out how the wires in my head were connected so that we could figure out what I *could* do—and it turned out to be quite a lot. They discovered that since I had to develop coping skills to compensate for my weak reading, I was visually and verbally gifted. I could speak with clarity and tell great stories. I had a steel-trap memory and a facility with colors and numbers. Using mirrors, we also discovered that I could read backward and upside down. No wonder I took up photography at a young age and developed an eye for composition without ever having taken a class. I later learned that dyslexic did not mean dysfunctional. I kept company with some pretty amazing people: Andy Warhol, Ansel Adams, Leonardo da Vinci, not to mention Ted Turner, Henry Ford, and Richard Branson—dyslexics, one and all.

The learning program at the hospital was never dull, proving to me that you can make almost anything entertaining with a little ingenuity. In fact, it's a crime not to. Consider *Dragons' Den*. It might be a big hit in Canada, but it has tanked in countries that didn't understand the main rule: entertain! We proved venture capitalism could be a riveting spectator sport.

It's no exaggeration to say that enrolling in special education changed my life completely. To be told that my dyslexia had an upside shifted my perspective on myself and the world around me, and it left me with five very important principles that carried me through the rest of my education, all the way to my MBA and into my business life.

1. Stick it out through difficulties. You don't have to be perfect; you just have to finish.
2. Stand up for yourself.
3. Explain what you need, clearly.

4. Ask questions.

5. If you don't understand the answer, ask for a better, clearer explanation.

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Margie gave me this list, reminding me again and again that no one else would do those things for me. I had to do them for myself. All of these skills would come in handy as I changed schools almost every other year, but they've also become invaluable business tools. That's an incredible legacy for an upstart teaching program on the twelfth floor of a downtown hospital. Margie went on to become an education consultant for the CBC and *Sesame Street*, and she published a popular series of flash cards for parents to help their children develop better reading skills.

Margie uncovered my entrepreneurial powers—chief among them turning weaknesses into strengths. For the first time in my life, I looked forward to attending class. The dyslexia felt less like an awful disability and more like a series of skills that my brain had been developing all this time to compensate for its deficits. Today, I don't worry about my weaknesses. I identify them, and if I can't fix them, I hire people to fill the gaps they create. Business operations, for instance, require an intensely methodical approach, strict organizational skills, adherence to certain protocols, and the ability to pay close attention to details. These are not my strengths, but if I want to run a successful business, my operations department has to be airtight, transparent, and efficient. So I hire the best operations managers in the business. I pay these perfectionists well, and they, in turn, keep me fully apprised of the ins and outs, the ups and downs of every single aspect of my businesses.

Like a blind person with a great sense of smell, I made friends with numbers. They never betrayed or confused me, which is why I think dyslexics make great entrepreneurs. If you must compensate for your weaknesses, you often have to come up with some pretty creative solutions.

There is a lot of shame when children are told over and over they can't do something. These children rarely grow up to be success stories. Margie Golick removed that shame at the exact right time in my life, before it took root and hampered me, and for that I'll be forever grateful. I hope everyone finds his or her Margie.

## BIG PERSONALITIES = BIG SUCCESS OR BIG PROBLEMS

My dad's drinking went from troubling to alarming, and our weekly visits became an increasingly erratic event. He managed to still work and make money, but my mother was worried about our safety in his care. Meanwhile, through her family, my mother had met a young Egyptian man named George Kanawaty. He was doing his Ph.D. in business at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, after which he'd join the UN's International Labour Organization. We liked George, and it was obvious that he adored my mother. After they married, she packed us up and moved us down to Illinois, where George had rented a house on a suburban golf course. It was a jarring change from Montreal, but we were young and adaptable. Shane and I quickly made friends with kids on the street. In the summer, we watched a handful of them set up lemonade stands along the curbs. They gave passersby cups of lemonade, and the passersby gave the kids money. Incredible. How hard could it be to set up my own stand? And since I didn't pay for the product (Mom bought the juice), the capital (George set up the table and chairs), the salary (Shane was six; he worked for free), or the

overhead (our yard), it was probably the most succulent profit margin I've ever enjoyed. But I stumbled upon a far better business plan by looking out the back windows rather than the front ones. Our backyard faced the tenth hole of the golf course. I watched as parched players stopped, rested their bags, and wiped their sweaty brows under the hot sun. It would be eight more holes before they could grab a cold beer or soda in the clubhouse. I realized it was a perfect location for my lemonade stand, far better than the street, which, frankly, was becoming a saturated market. Operating a tenth-hole lemonade stand was like shooting ducks in a pond. I bled my competitors' profits dry, too, because by the time prospective customers hit the sidewalk after a round of golf, they were no longer parched. Even at the age of eight, I was not only earning money, I was crippling the competition, because I was instinctually aware that location was everything when it comes to retail.



My first television appearance: on *Sheriff Sid's Corral* in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, in 1962, when I was eight years old.  
That's me on the right and Shane on the left.

Champaign, Illinois, was not only where I opened my first retail concern, it's also where I made my first television appearance. Shane and I were devoted to a kids' show called *Sheriff Sid's Corral* on WCIA, the local TV station. One day, George made arrangements for us to appear in the studio audience, a highlight of my childhood. I remember watching Sheriff Sid wander around the studio with his microphone to chat with shy kids near the front. Then, dressed up in his cowboy costume, he approached me. I can't remember what we talked about, but we engaged in a full-on five-minute chat. (What can I say? Maybe I gave good sound bites even back then.)

Meanwhile, my father, Terry, was increasingly frustrated by the distance and his inability to see us when he wanted to. Eventually, frustration turned to fury, and one day he called and told my mother to pack our things; he was coming down to Illinois to bring us back to Montreal. Instead of waiting around for his knock on the door, my mother fled with us to Switzerland. The plan was to lie low in Europe until George and Terry could somehow reach

an amicable solution.

We bought tickets to Paris under assumed names. From there, we took a train to Lausanne, Switzerland. Georgette must have been desperate to keep us away from my father, who by then had fallen in with a very eclectic crowd, real Montreal characters. She didn't want us to be raised in that environment. Today I can say without a doubt she did the right thing, because back then it was such an unthinkable action—a mother essentially kidnapping her children so that they in turn would not be kidnapped by their father. But our tense situation soon turned tragic.

On October 27, less than two months into our exile in Switzerland, we received the news that Terry had died suddenly, in Montreal, probably of a heart attack. Shane and I cried when my mother gently broke the news to us. My father's body was shipped to Ireland for burial. Shane has since visited his gravesite to say a proper goodbye. I'm planning to do the same one day.

As a boy, I was heartbroken by my father's death. As a man, I now understand that Terry was a lesson in the dangers of excess, and how easy it can be for a good man—a talented man—to go off the rails at a young age. I have seen what the sales lifestyle can do to the best of people: the constant travel, the potential for rejection at every turn, the need to manage money that comes to you in fits and starts. It's tough—not for the faint of heart. And though I love sales, and I love the life, I consider myself lucky to have been able to pull back from the precipice over which my father fell. By the time I became a salesman myself, I had shaken off a lot of the potentially harmful lifestyle choices that might have contributed to my father's early demise.



My birth father in 1954, in Montreal, during a night on the town. I know I have inherited many of his traits, both good and bad. He died when he was only thirty-seven.

# DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE THE SALE?

Sales often attracts extreme personalities, people who don't need a lot of security, who live by wits and will from deal to deal. The best salespeople know how to navigate the ups and downs of that kind of lifestyle. I know good salespeople when I meet them. Here are five key qualities great salespeople possess:

1. **They occupy the ground they walk on as if they had something to do with being there.** It's all in the walk. My father, Terry, had "the walk." You could call it a strut, but that man made an entrance even if he was just walking into the bathroom. The posture, the poise, the skip in the step—it's all part of the way the best salespeople carry themselves, as if they're the keeper of the best secret in the world and they're here to share it with one lucky customer. Great salespeople bring a vibrant energy into every room they enter. The icing on the cake is the way they dress—sharp, tailored, something that they've likely spent some coin on, and if not an expensive haircut, one that looks like the stylist paid close attention. A good rule of thumb is to dress like the people you're selling to: Don't wear a three-piece suit if you're hawking artisanal beer at a chain of pubs. And I'd whack any employee who showed up in a T-shirt to sell million-dollar mutual funds.
2. **They know a little bit about everything, but a lot about whatever it is they're selling.** Margie Golick taught me way back that as a dyslexic, I *should* have my hand up in every classroom; she showed me how to get comfortable asking a lot of questions. And I tell my sales staff that if their clients have questions they can't answer, they'd better find someone who can. I'm never too proud to admit that I don't understand something because it speaks less to my ability to absorb something and more to the other person's inability to explain it.
3. **The best salespeople are tenacious without being irritating.** You'll hear me say "Never take no for an answer" throughout this book. In those circumstances, I'm talking about the first no, the knee-jerk no, the no that hasn't been backed by research or a second opinion. I don't confuse go-getters with gadflies—those you bat away, who keep returning for more punishment. If your prospect isn't interested, don't waste time convincing him or her. Chances are a reluctant client will be a problematic client. Besides, there are plenty more who will want to hear about what you're selling, so spend your valuable time finding them.
4. **Great salespeople aren't nice—but they are kind.** There's a big difference. I don't like nice. I don't trust nice people, but I find kindness very attractive. Nice salespeople will say whatever it is they think you want to hear to make the sale. And they do it in the sweetest way possible. Kind ones tell the truth. They don't sell false promises. They don't use flattery to butter up clients. And they most certainly don't inflate, exaggerate,

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