

# Chapter 3 – Caught Between

## My Childhood and My Future

It was June 2013, but this summer was not going to be like the previous summer. I was planning on doing a lot more career-oriented things as opposed to biking, swimming, reading and such. Oh, don't get me wrong, I still did those things, just not as much. I love summer and take every opportunity to enjoy it as much as I can. After all, it only comes around every nine months! The summer of 2012 was a scorcher, but the summer of 2013 was not nearly as warm. With the weather being cooler and the bank account getting a little thinner, it was time to get a little more serious about my career.

I had heard through Right Management, the outplacement agency, that nearly 75% of all jobs these days are found through networking. Job boards account for about 15% and the rest is through recruiters. With this information in mind, I hit the road and attended some networking events. I met people I knew for lunch or coffee, attended seminars and conferences and other networking gatherings through my alma mater. At this point it was not nearly as much about finding a job as it was about just getting out of the house, meeting and talking with people and seeing what possibilities were out there. After all, I had been imprisoned in my house for three months while my driver's license was suspended. I was so happy to be able to drive my car again! It was nice to just see humans again! Absence definitely makes the heart grow fonder. I got on a bunch of email lists and pretty much went to every event that came my way.

At the time I think I had about 50 contacts or so on LinkedIn, and I wanted to expand my network. Mission accomplished! In the span of about three or four months I increased my contact list to well over 200. Of course, having all those contacts doesn't do you one bit of good if you don't actually use them! Sometimes you meet people and connect with them on LinkedIn and never talk to them again either because you don't think they can help you or you forget or whatever. But in my situation I didn't contact too many of them simply because I was still in "pondering/searching" mode rather than "finding a job" mode. As I said before, I knew this was going to be a very slow process, like turning around an ocean liner. At least I was out of "rest/relax/recover" mode though. Progress! But I still didn't really know what I wanted to do for my next phase in life, so I wasn't too aggressive in trying to find people that were in positions or companies I was interested in. To put it bluntly, I wasn't ready to be helped by anyone yet. I just wanted to meet people and get the ball rolling on some ideas.

As a matter of fact, I was pondering things so much that one fine, warm, midsummer night I stepped out onto my front steps and stared up at the stars, just pondering life. Immediately a song came into my head. Here are the first few lines (as of this writing the song has not yet been recorded so I will only share a little bit here):

*Staring at stars, pondering life's great mysteries  
Awe'd at how far, some of them seem to be from me  
Every night, I lay awake and wonder why  
All of my dreams, seem to just shrivel up and die*

*What am I missing?  
What am I doing so damn wrong?  
Someone was missing  
So I finally made that call*

*I started talking to Jesus...*

So here I was, a middle-aged unemployed economist, using my musical skills to write about staring at stars as I did when I was a child. As the song says, all of my dreams had shriveled up and died. My dream to be an astronaut, my dream to be a musician and my career as an economist had all ended in failure. Not to boast, of course, but I started to realize I had skills in several areas; I started to feel a bit like Aristotle. Not nearly as smart, of course, but a man with many skills and a wide variety of interests (science, space, music, economics, history, politics, religion, sports, nature), and always curious about the world. I knew I would be able to find something eventually that matched my skills and interests, but I didn't know what it would be, what I wanted it to be, or when it would come. I was just confident that it would. I was not worried at all. Writing a little music put my mind at ease for the time being.

After a summer of networking and expanding my contact list, I decided to finally do something concrete that could help my career. I had always wanted to learn more about econometrics, which is using models to forecast economic or statistical outcomes by using other variables as inputs, but I never had that opportunity at Wells. I was just too busy to take any courses and my supervisor was on the road too much to really mentor me on the subject. Now that I had the time, I figured I might as well beef up my skills in that area, hoping that it would eventually help me to find a good job. The course was taught in Washington, DC and it was not cheap. Luckily I was able to get some funding through the state's dislocated worker program to pay for the course. After reading an entire textbook on econometrics over the spring and summer, I was off to the nation's capital.

The course was four days long and very intense. I learned a lot and made a lot of good connections. Unfortunately for me, all of these people worked at companies outside of Minnesota, and I was not prepared to leave my family and friends. One of the people I met during the course eventually contacted me about a job in Minneapolis, even though he lived in Florida. It did not pan out though. I learned the hard way that just having skills in a certain area is not enough. You need to have experience using those skills, and usually a lot of experience. But how do you get a job without experience? How do you get experience without a job? The old chicken and egg scenario. It was a good company and a good job, but even though I had some of the necessary skills (some of which I learned while in Washington), I didn't have the required experience. Oh well, at least the guy was kind enough to reach out to me, which I definitely appreciated. But it was ironic that not only was that guy in the same course, so was the hiring manager for the job! So I found myself telling the hiring manager about what I learned in DC, and he tells me "Yeah, I know, I was there in the same classroom as you taking that course." An odd feeling indeed when you are being interviewed!

Aside from the econometrics course, I made sure to get out and see the sights. I went to a bunch of museums and saw the war memorials and took tons of pictures. Of course, I had to make a stop at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. Once there, I was suddenly transported back to my childhood and my dreams of wanting to be an astronaut. I was caught between my childhood and my future. I knew what I wanted as a kid, but I had no idea what I wanted now. I wished that I could just go back in time and follow my heart's desire to travel into space, and do absolutely whatever it took to get there. Where would I be now, I wondered? Where would I be if I had studied harder in college instead of partying like

a madman? Where would I be if I had gotten an engineering degree instead of switching to economics and then trying to forge a music career after college? My mind started to wander...again.

Staring up at models of airplanes and spaceships and going through the museum gave me great joy, like a kid in a candy store. There was no more job loss, there was no more Big Walter Smith loss, there was no more driver's license loss...there was just me, and my childhood dreams, and I was in one of the greatest places in the world for dreaming. Then it happened. I came upon the exhibit of the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. I saw and took pictures of some of the magazine covers, photos, articles and such surrounding the tragedy. So not only was I reliving my childhood dream, I was simultaneously reliving my childhood nightmare. The day the Challenger exploded was one of the saddest days of my life. Now, here I was, looking at all those horrific images and even learning some new things about that dreadful day. The sadness from that day returned in full force and stayed with me for a while as I made my way to other exhibits throughout the museum.

I spent several hours at the Air and Space museum and simply did not want to leave. For I knew when I left, I would also have to leave that kid and his dreams behind. I was elated while in the museum, but really felt rather deflated when I left. To perk up my spirits, I walked around the mall and took some really great pictures, some of them even captured the moon, that celestial being that I dreamed of walking on as a kid. You can view the pictures on my website. As I walked around the national mall an intense sense of liberty and patriotism shot through my body and soul. Although I was unemployed, I was standing in the center of the capital city of the greatest country in history. I knew there were plenty of opportunities out there, I just didn't know where. I was in America, where anyone can make it if they put in the effort. That's what I was doing. I was putting in the effort. I was gaining new skills in the hopes of being able to find a job and return to the world of work.

As the sun set on the capital city and I saw all different kinds of people enjoying the warm evening, I felt so proud to be an American. What a country! After a few more days of econometrics training and sightseeing, and it was time to head back to Minneapolis. I had an absolutely wonderful time in Washington, DC. I met some good people, took a lot of great pictures, saw some great sights, learned a lot about statistics and econometrics and even revisited a childhood dream. I also learned about the International Space Station (ISS), and found a website that showed exactly where and when to find it traversing the evening sky. To this day I like to go out and watch it float across the sky and wonder what the view from the ISS is like while looking down on Earth. It must be truly breathtaking! Whenever it goes by I just think of what could have been for me.

After the trip, I felt re-energized and ready to really step up my job search. Once I got back home I planned to start applying for jobs in September. But before that I wanted to enjoy the last gasps of summer on Labor Day weekend. I planned to go swimming on Saturday, then head down to my favorite river town, Stillwater, to catch one of my favorite bands on Sunday, then head to the zoo on Monday. Things didn't go so well. While strolling along the beach on Saturday I smashed my toe against a rock. It hurt, but I went swimming anyway. I biked all the way home from the lake in some pain, but not much. It wasn't until I got home, took a shower and looked down at my toe that I realized it was worse than I thought, for my toe had turned the color of the Minnesota Vikings' helmets, a very deep purple! It hurt, but not bad enough to think something was really wrong. But once I saw the purple, I knew it was broken. I still had my heart set on the rest of the weekend's activities though.

By the time I got down to Stillwater on Sunday, the weather had turned cool and gloomy, not exactly the best conditions to watch a band at an open-air bar! I usually like to get a hotel room so I don't drink and

drive, and I like to get a room by the river and just watch all the activity before the music starts. Well, it was just not very nice out for that. So my toe was broken and the weather was crummy, but at least the band sounded great, which lifted my spirits a bit. The next day it was off to the zoo. By the time I got to the zoo, where you do a lot of walking, I was in serious pain. Still, I wanted to see the animals and get my mind off the job search for a few hours. So I walked around the zoo in shorts, even though it was still very cool outside, and was limping everywhere I went. I enjoyed the zoo as best I could given the terrible weather and a broken toe. It was certainly not the weekend I had hoped for before diving headlong into the job hunt. Alas, the less than great weekend was just another drop in the big bucket of bad things that seemed to be filling up. After a trip to the doctor to get my toe checked – there was really nothing they could do, and it is deformed for life – it was time to get back to finding a job.

Although I still really didn't know what I wanted to do yet, I was focusing on jobs that were similar to what I did at Wells; economics, finance and things of that nature. I was hoping I could maybe even put my \$60K MBA to use...what a concept! Unfortunately, I did not find anything even close to what I did at Wells. I knew, even when I was still working, that this was a very unique job, one that would be hard to replace should it ever come to that. Now that it had come to that, my fears were being realized. I signed up for emails from many job boards, posted my resume on several sites and applied for a bunch of jobs, but nothing was happening. I had an economics degree, an MBA, had previously held Series 7 & 63 licenses and now had some econometrics training under my belt, and I heard nothing but crickets.

Finally, in October 2013, in my fourteenth month of unemployment, I was invited for an interview. A friend of mine was gracious enough to pass my resume along to a recruiter at his place of employment, a financial services firm. Sadly, although I applied for the finance manager job, I really was not too excited about it. Still, I did my research on the company, practiced my interview questions and prepared well for the interview. After a brief phone screen, I was invited in for a face-to-face interview with two people. I thought the interview went quite well. However, I was clearly not excited about the job and it may or may not have shown in the interview. Although I was given the advice that it is ok to interview for jobs you really don't want just to get the practice so that you don't screw up the interview for a job you really want down the road, I just felt a little guilty going through the whole process knowing that I really did not want that job. I felt like I was wasting their time. When the recruiter called me back and told me they were impressed with my background but were going to look at other candidates, I was quite relieved. I still had a decent bank account and was not desperate for a job. It was definitely good practice though, and I felt that the next time I got an interview I would be that much more prepared. It didn't take long before that next call came.

A few weeks later, I got a message from a recruiter at another company. She wanted to know if I was interested in a quantitative model validation analyst position. I was looking for ways to use my economics, finance and econometric skills and this seemed like a great opportunity. After a few minutes on the phone, however, it became evident that I simply did not possess the necessary skills for the job. She then asked if I was interested in looking at a more qualitative role that didn't require so much computer programming skills. I really wasn't that interested because I am more of a data and numbers guy, and this qualitative role was more about policies and procedures, but I acquiesced and we talked about it further. Eventually I was brought in for an interview and things went pretty well. However, once again I was interviewing for a position I really did not want. After looking at the reports they were working on, I just could not see myself enjoying the work. When you are unemployed the first thing counselors tell you is make sure you don't settle, find something you know you will enjoy. Well, I was not yet desperate and still had enough time and money to be picky, so I was thinking this just wasn't the

right opportunity for me. I went home and thought about it and secretly hoped that they would not offer me the job.

As luck would have it, a few days later I got a call and, wouldn't you know it, they offered me the job! I was professional and positive in my response, but I did what you *always* should do when receiving a job offer; I asked for a little time to think about it. I put together a list of pros and cons, thought a lot, prayed a lot, and came to the conclusion after the weekend that...I still was not sure what to do! I'm taking the job...I'm not taking the job...I'm taking the job...I'm not taking the job. Back and forth I went in my head, and just could not make up my mind. So I asked the recruiter if I could come back to their office and have a closer look at those reports that I would be working on if I accepted the offer. I really wanted to see if I could envision myself doing this work or not, which was basically making sure all business lines were following proper procedures and doing what they could to reduce risk and be compliant with federal regulations. So I spent about an hour in the office reading the reports, understanding what they were all about, and went back home to think some more. The next day I called the recruiter with the bad news, it just was not the right opportunity for me, and I turned down their offer. I simply did not want to be the company's financial cop, the guy that everyone feared coming down the hall. That didn't appeal to me in the slightest.

Most people, heck, almost everyone on planet Earth, would say "you were unemployed for 14 months and turned down a good paying job? Are you out of your mind???" But I was proud of not taking a job just for the money, and the money *was* good. I wanted my next job to be something that got me excited to jump out of bed every morning and race to work and get started on my daily tasks. I had four criteria I wanted in my next job; I wanted to do something I enjoy, I wanted it to be meaningful and make a difference, I wanted to work with good people and I wanted to work for a good company. This was not that job. The most important thing, doing something I enjoy, would not be met in this position. It was easily the toughest decision I have ever had to make in my life, but I made the decision, and that was that. I would have to live with the consequences of this decision.

Maybe the next interview was just around the corner. Maybe I wouldn't have another interview for several months. I had no idea. But, once again, my birthday was just a few days away and the holidays were on the horizon. After a ton of networking, applying for a bunch of jobs, having two interviews for jobs I really wasn't interested in and turning down a job offer, it was time to relax and enjoy the holiday season again. I love the holidays, the time with family and friends, the music, the spiritual aspects, being thankful for what I have and celebrating Jesus's birth, and just the overall spirit of the season. The job hunt was going to take a back seat for a while. It was time to be joyful and merry for a few weeks. Unfortunately, I was about to get a lump of coal in my Christmas stocking.

### **Lessons from Chapter 3**

Whatever season is your favorite, get out and enjoy it as much as you can.

If you lose your job, hit the networking trail. The vast majority of jobs these days are found through networking. Don't even waste your time applying online unless you can at least find someone who can introduce you to the recruiter or hiring manager.

When networking, try to meet up with the people you meet soon afterward. Have coffee or lunch, get to know each other and see if there are any connections or if you can help each other out, either now or in the future. It's all about relationships.

LinkedIn is very useful for expanding your network, finding jobs and finding connections to job posters. Use it extensively if you ever lose your job. Take the time to fill out your profile as much as possible and make it professional.

Look inside you, see if there are more skills or interests that you may not be using to make your life more fulfilling. Share your talents and gifts with the world. That's what they are for.

If you lose your job, start learning some new skills. There is a good chance your next job will be quite different than your previous one. If you are out of the labor force long enough, your previous job may not even exist by the time you get another job. Technology moves lightning quick, and you really need to keep pace, otherwise you may find yourself obsolete and not in demand...by anyone.

Try to get state assistance with gaining new skills if you can.

If you ever go on a trip, see as much of the city as possible and enjoy every moment.

Always have business cards ready to pass out. You never know who you will meet wherever you go.

Take a trip back in time, see if there are some clues from your childhood as to what you should really be doing with your life.

When strolling along the beach, be careful where you are walking, lest you smash your toe against a rock and ruin it for life!

If you are young and in college, spend more time with your studies and making friends. Try to control the partying. You can party if you really want to after college, at least until you get married and start having kids. Don't throw away an opportunity to learn just to have a good time. Getting a good education is the most important thing.

If you ever get the chance, go to Washington, DC. Go to the malls, the memorials, take pictures and just enjoy being in the capital city of the greatest country on Earth.

Go to this website and plug in your zip code to find when and where the International Space Station will be flying over your house. It looks like a bright star floating across the sky. I think it's pretty neat, maybe you will too!

<http://spaceweather.com/flybys/>

If you get the opportunity for an interview, take it. It is good practice and you will learn some things and find out what you need to improve for next time. You may feel a bit guilty, but do it anyway. It will really help you.

If you can wait, don't just settle for any job. However, if you are short on cash, take a job if offered. You can always keep looking for another one if you end up not enjoying the work. Just getting a job on your

resume is an accomplishment in itself. Besides, you have no idea when the next job offer will come along, and it may be much longer than you think.

If you get offered a job, make a very thorough list of pros and cons. You may find that the job has more good things than bad things, or you may find that the job is totally not right for you. Do some thinking, do your homework. It also doesn't hurt to ask for a little divine guidance!