

# Chapter 1

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My name is Seth. Like my namesake in the Bible, I'm an ordinary person. I'm not trying to be a modern version of Thoreau. Or, a latter day B.F. Skinner. I don't have those ambitions.

I don't want to adopt an alternative lifestyle. Or, to search for my inner bliss. I've never checked out and moved into a commune. Or, backed away and lived off the grid. I'm an independent person, yes, but I'm no separatist and certainly not a troublemaker.

The world I'm about to describe, therefore, isn't of my own making. Nor is it an affinity into which I was born or fell into through inheritance. It is, instead, an assembly I was invited to join.

My acceptance, on the other hand, was an act of free will. Becoming a member of Walden 4G was, as they say, a choice I made freely and without any reservation. And, that pledge of allegiance has changed my life forever.

Walden 4G is the way America is supposed to work. It reflects the best of us. The exemplar we imagine ourselves to be. The image of America in our kids' eyes before the jaded cynicism of adulthood sets in. It is the vision for our nation's utopia.

That's my description, I admit, but I don't think the others who share this community with me would object. In fact, I think they would appreciate the compliment. They would see it as an affirmation of their aspiration. After all, they believe they are reinvigorating the American Dream.

I still don't know why they contacted me. Maybe it was because I spent so much time searching for answers on the Web. I was out there a lot in the summer of 2010, leaving footprints in the cyber-sands. It was the metronome of my day to pound away on my keyboard as I slid from search engines to Web-sites and back again. And again and again.

I was unemployed or as the popular euphemism describes it, "in transition." While I was crystal clear about what I was moving from, however, I was uncertain, even confused about what I was moving toward. My default position was normal, I guess. It was to find the same kind of job doing the same kind of work I had always done. Which is odd when you think about it. I mean, it's not as if the norm has treated the lot of us especially well.

Nevertheless, that's where I had started my search for reemployment. I was old fashioned enough to check the newspapers, but up-to-date enough to spend a lot of time at job boards on the Web. There were plenty of openings being advertised despite the stuttering economy, but the way they were described did little to inspire my enthusiasm. In fact, most of the postings seemed more like a modern medical miracle - a cure for insomnia in five hundred words or less.

But, to be fair, that wasn't really what was holding me back. The truth is that the more I looked, the more lost I became. And now, I know why. But at that point, I couldn't see a way forward. It felt as if I had been dropped into a featureless world with a GPS that was on the fritz. There was no way to tell where I was and, maybe even worse, where I should be going. All I could distinguish was an implacable sense of futility that seemed, at night especially, to

morph into a strain of hope-resistant anxiety.

I had been badly burned by my last employer. Deep down inside, I knew I should have paid closer attention.

The people at the top of the company had been very clear about their priorities. Like the good graduates of business schools everywhere, they had proselytized their objectives in vision statements and management memos. We were a private company that had a lot of outside investors banking on it, so the only thing that mattered to them – the sole and exclusive metric they recognized and valued – was what could be counted at the bottom line.

Still, I was caught completely by surprise – no, I was rocked right down to the strands in my DNA – when I walked into work that day and read the email telling me to report to the HR Department immediately.

Two hours later, I was sitting in the parking lot wondering what had happened to my life. On the outside, I suppose, I looked calm, but on the inside, I was traumatized. Thoughts formed and floated away like the translucent creations from a kid’s bubble pipe. No sooner did I reach out to grasp one when it would dart and dance off and be replaced by another. I sat there in my sagging driver’s seat, watching everything I knew and had counted on burst into nothing except a memory. And, it was that sense of lost familiarity – that absence of a solid foundation I could understand and brace against – that led me to my exploration online.

Somebody once told me that there are at least a hundred thousand job boards on the Web, and I know folks who are determined to visit every single one of them. They get up each day and launch off full of great expectations, and whether they get the best of results or the worst, they are never deterred.

But not me. First, I had to comprehend what had happened to my career. I needed to figure out the essence of my failure. I wanted to know why I had been terminated. What had I done wrong? What alignment of circumstances or accumulation of factors had made me vulnerable? Why had I been the one to get shoved out the door?

If I couldn’t get a fix on that – if I was unable to find the answers to those questions – then how could I be sure it wouldn’t happen again? If I had experienced such an injury once, I was weakened and susceptible to a second occurrence. And a third. It was a new and unexpected aneurism in the work side of my life, and I was desperate to repair it. Just the memory of my firing – the jagged edge of the event – made me clench my jaw and resolve that I would do whatever was necessary to protect myself.

So, there I was sitting in front of my old Dell Optiplex 740 cruising around the Web looking for wisdom. The connection was slow for some reason, and my right foot was wagging back and forth in syncopation with my growing irritation. I don’t usually keep my Outlook open when I’m online, but on this day, for some reason, I had. That’s why I heard the ping signaling the arrival of a message.

I looked at the name of the sender in the From column and immediately thought spam. It had been sent by someone or something called *sallyport@V4G.us*. There was no name associated with the address, so I checked the Subject. It was just as odd. Instead of a topic, it was a question.

**“Are you looking for something?”**

And beneath that, in the body of the message, there was nothing. Not a word.

Normally, I would have quickly deleted the thing, but the address piqued my curiosity. The

acronym 4G, of course, has come to mean the fourth generation. It's seller shorthand for the latest technological sugar plum fairy we consumers are supposed to believe in. First, they gave us 3G, and now, we're on to the golly-gee, whiz-bang 4G.

But, this was different. I had never heard of a W4G, and the mystery of that slight alteration, I admit, piqued my curiosity. Before I could pursue it, however, my trusty cynicism kicked in and pulled me back to safety. Probably some poser, I decided, trying to get me to wire money to Nigeria. And the domain - that .us - was so obscure, it would only have been used by someone who knew nothing about those of us who actually live in the U.S. of A.

The message may have fooled my spam filter, I thought smugly, but it had met its match with me. I was the ultimate adjudicator, and my judgment was more discerning. I smiled to myself and reached over to hit the Delete key.

The passage in time and space was infinitesimal, but it was all that was necessary for a door to open. Before my finger could reach its destination, I found myself looking into a mystery. Another message had pinged its arrival in my Inbox.

This second communication was also from sallyport@W4G.us. But, this time, the Subject was even odder. It read,

“Perhaps a more accurate question is ...”

At that point, I couldn't help myself. My eyes followed the ellipsis into the body of the message. There, it came to an abrupt end:

“... are you lost?”

The presumptuousness of that question - the implied criticism embedded in those three words - grated at my already fragile self-confidence. My customary defense - a quick trigger temper - rushed to protect me. Just who did this jerk think he was? And, what was he doing intruding into my personal space? Where did he get off even sending me a message like that?

My reflexive anger burned white hot for only a moment, however, and then its clarity of perspective blinked out like a spent skyrocket. All of a sudden, the outrage I had felt at the temerity of this unidentified interrogator was replaced by an unsettling gloom. Though I was loathe to acknowledge it, he had struck a painful blow. He had somehow breached the privacy, not of my employment situation, but of my interior being - my own true self. And, that anonymous intrusion had triggered an autonomous response.

After that unthinking reaction, however, my temper had cooled and with it, my interest in firing off a counter volley. In truth, I didn't care enough to fight. I also realized that my apathy left me with only one other option. In that most modern form of flight, I once again reached over to hit the Delete button. It was a simple solution and the right one, I told myself. I didn't have to give in; I just had to make my interrogator go away.

I high-fived myself, convinced that I had made a canny decision. My privacy would be preserved. My security would remain intact. Taking this step would, I concluded confidently, establish me as the one in charge of the situation. And then, without any hint it was coming, an alternative synapse closed and my inner celebration was abruptly shut down.

I was, after all, searching for a way out of the jobless jungle I was in. In some respects, I told myself, that did mean I was lost. Maybe I had taken a wrong turn or misread the signs. Or, maybe, everything had changed, and I hadn't paid attention. Whatever the reason, though, I

was where I was, and this new domain was unlike any I had ever seen. There were no familiar landmarks and no sign posts that made sense. It was a region that had been colored outside the lines of what I was used to. I was looking for a new job, and the world of work was suddenly no longer recognizable to me.

I put my hands over the keyboard and slowly tapped out a reply.

“I suppose so.”

And, even as I asked myself why I was doing it, I added an honest explanation.

“I’m out of work and looking for what’s left of my career, so yes, I guess I am lost.”

There was no immediate answer to my message. I waited several minutes for a reply, but nothing came back.

“Figures,” I said reproachfully to myself. I’d been suckered once more by another seemingly heartfelt message without a human on the other end. I had proven P.T. Barnum right yet again by responding to a machine. And worse, my doing so had helpfully verified my email address to its owner – some spammer in Russia who was now selling it to his buddies all over the world. I frowned at my naiveté and then clicked out of email and went back to my searching.