

By Jeff Thoren, DVM, ACC



I launched my own company in 2005 and the next 5 years would be the most transformational period in my life—not as a result of being wildly successful, as I had hoped, but due to adversity, personal pain, and chronic disappointment.

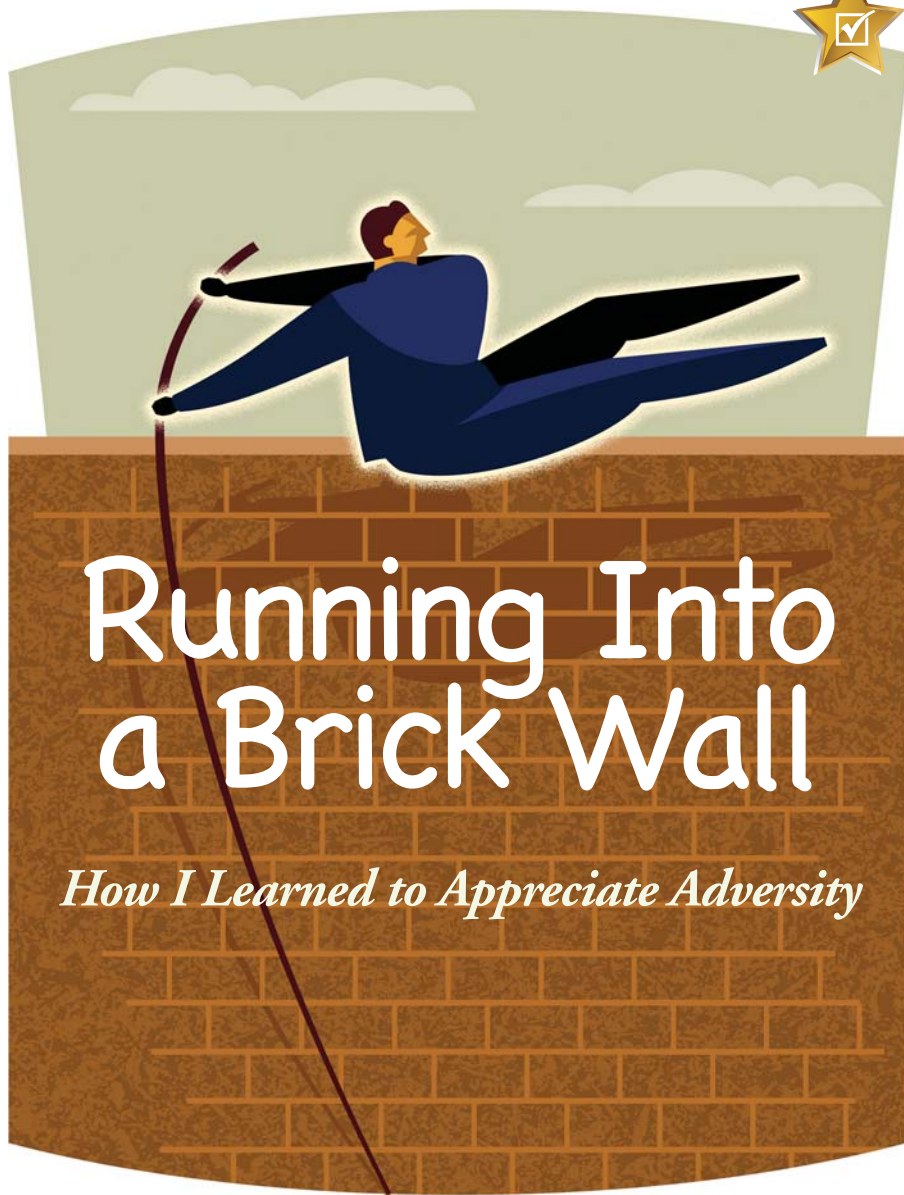
I set out with a dream of making a difference as an independent coach/consultant by equipping people to create healthier, happier, and more successful workplaces through better leadership. Scoffing at the statistics warning that a huge percent of business start-ups end in failure, I forged ahead.

I soon discovered that when pursuing dreams, running into brick walls is inevitable. The first wall I faced was leaving the security of a corporate paycheck. The pressure of providing for my family became immediately more apparent and a voice of self-doubt was whispering “Do you really think you can pull this off?”

More formidable brick walls soon followed. In March, I lost my dad to cancer. His gentle and wise presence was an anchor for me, and now that anchor was gone.

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In 2008, my wife lost her dad after a long illness, and our attentions were drawn to caring for the needs of both of our mothers who were adjusting



Running Into a Brick Wall

How I Learned to Appreciate Adversity

to life without their mates; both had been married for 50 years.

Then, last November, my mom, who had believed in me, supported me, and was always there for me, died. Sitting in her apartment afterwards, it hit me... “they’re *both* gone!” This wasn’t just another brick wall; this was like being hit with a ton of bricks. I recalled telling my wife several years earlier, “Once my folks are gone, I’ll finally be able to live my own life.” Now I was wondering how I could go on without them.

Layer on top of this the economic

downturn and you have a recipe for despair. I spent a lot of time mourning my loss as well as grappling with feeling lost and directionless. I questioned whether the vision with which I had launched my company was still valid. Was it time to throw in the towel?

My introspection and self-analysis culminated this year, a week before I was to deliver a presentation entitled, “R You Surviving or Thriving? The Three R’s You Need To Prevail in an Uncertain Future” to a group of veterinarians at the NAVC Conference.

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Here are some things I've learned.

1. **Accept personal responsibility for your life.** When faced with adversity, we can choose to be either a victim or a victor. My first challenge was to adopt an attitude of self-accountability, a willingness to take personal responsibility for my own results; a bias toward solution and action.
2. **Be like Denmark.** Denmark is the happiest country in the world according to a recent study. One characteristic accounts for why: they have low expectations! In Denmark's culture, external things are not expected to bring fulfillment, nor relationships to end all problems. High expectations can lead to a semiconstant state of angst and dissatisfaction. I'm beginning to realize that the blessing of modest expectations is that they leave room for many experiences to be a pleasant surprise.
3. **Seek character, not comfort.** Nothing of any lasting value comes without a struggle, hard work, dedication, and perseverance. The inevitable difficulties we encounter serve to test and develop our character... *if we choose to embrace them.* By avoiding challenges we settle for mediocrity. Instead of looking for "easy street" where we don't experience any worries or difficulties of any kind, I think we'd be better off to accept Helen Keller's conclusion, "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing." In a daring adventure, I'm much more likely to be in a state of constant stretching, learning and growth.
4. **Learn to reframe.** The great philosopher Lily Tomlin observed, "Humanity invented language out of a deep need to complain." And, indeed, conversations about what's wrong and who's to blame are commonplace in our day-to-day lives, especially at work. What we focus on becomes our reality and absorbs our energy. If we focus on the positive, it becomes our reality, and vice versa. So, instead of asking questions like "What's wrong?" "Whose fault is it?" and "Why is this such a failure?" ask questions like, "What's good about this?" "What am I responsible for?" and "What can I learn from this?"
5. **Cultivate an attitude of gratitude.** I'm learning to be more and more content, regardless of my circumstances. In November 2007, I decided to try Martin Seligman's "gratitude exercise." Here's how it works:
 - Set aside 5 minutes each night, preferably right before bedtime.
 - Think back over the previous 24 hours and write down up to 5 things in your life for which you're grateful.
 - Do this for 2 weeks, and if you find it helpful, incorporate the practice into your daily routine.Now, almost 2 years later, I haven't missed a single day. Interestingly, I'm finding that I'm now listing hardships and personal challenges as things I'm grateful for, since they force me to learn and grow.
6. **Slow down to speed up.** For many, "busyness" is a badge of honor. However, extreme busyness creates people who appear harassed, fidgety, and oppressed by the shortness of life and the demands of duty. I've found that I need to regularly step off the treadmill of work and life and spend time in reflection and deep thinking. Without reflection (making a conscious effort to learn from my experiences), it's difficult to keep my life and work in proper perspective. I've realized that the direction of my life is more important than its speed.

One of the three R's happened to be *resilience*, and at the time I felt anything but resilient. I heard my inner critic shouting, "You are in no way qualified to give a presentation on this topic!"

But throughout all the mourning and reflection, I kept coming back to something Randy Pausch wrote in his book, *The Last Lecture*. Pausch asserts that "brick walls are there for a reason. They're not there to keep us out. They give us a chance to show how badly we want something." Looking back, I can see that the brick walls I've faced *have*



By avoiding challenges and seeking pleasure and comfort, we settle for mediocrity.

been there for a reason. By experiencing them, I've learned some valuable lessons, not the least of which is a renewed sense of purpose.

I admit, when facing brick walls it's pretty easy for me to react inappropriately. Withdrawing and avoiding the issue, hoping it will just go away; getting angry and/or frustrated; using some kind of "power play" to get my way; and lapsing into despair are just a few of the ineffective coping strategies that come to mind. I'm learning, though, that my brick walls can actually make me a stronger person. I'm learning to appreciate adversity.

What lessons are the "brick walls" in your life waiting to teach you? Are you responding to your current circumstances with fear and uncertainty? Or hope and determination? You know, you do have a choice. And what you choose to do when faced with adversity makes all the difference. ■

Skillset addressed in this article: self-awareness