

# James Butler's Newsletter #51

Amuse, Inform and Inspire

November 2006

Welcome to all the new subscribers this month. A recent influx of subscribers has left me just 20 short of my next milestone, so if you think this would interest a friend or colleague, please forward it to them – it would be great to pass that milestone before the end of the year. And thank you for the work you have already done in recommending me.

Autumn has finally arrived in my corner of the world (and when studying for my environmental science degree even I had no idea a time would come when it would be late November before I said that), allowing me to combine a seasonal feel with yet another reference to my recent US trip – yes, this month we will be “California Dreaming”.

## *All the leaves are brown*

As I undertake the Zen-like (a philosophical term for never-ending) task of clearing autumn leaves from the garden, I wonder what we can learn from this annual shedding of material by trees.

Firstly, I think we can learn to build a reserve and discard what we no longer need. The trees have stored energy over the warm summer months, and now no longer need leaves to draw energy from the weak sun over the winter. As a result, they can shed their leaves and run off their reserves, their core energy. What can we let go of at this time of year, so we can focus on our core? So many people who are overwhelmed or struggling to do all that they need to, including me, lack focus because of all the unnecessary “stuff” they have taken on. Perhaps a good clear out of tasks and clutter (both physical and mental) would be timely?

Losing leaves at this time of year creates the space for fresh growth in the spring – a vital part of the cycle of renewal for the tree. If we are to benefit from fresh growth in 2007, perhaps we need to clear some old growth first, and consolidate the expansion we have achieved this year. This metaphor may relate to old ideas, which need to be let go before new ideas can be ushered in. It may refer to people – sometimes fresh blood is needed to spur an organisation forward and staff who have gone stale need to be moved on to revitalise them and the business.

Lovers of evergreen trees will be quick to point out that not every tree sheds its leaves at this time of year (just all the ones in my garden, it seems!). So what can we learn from this? On the one hand it tells us that there is never just one strategy to achieve growth – and that different strategies work for different people or organisations. It also tells us, I believe, that so often one way is not ‘better’ than the other, they are just different. In the temperate zone in which I live, there is room for both evergreen and deciduous trees.

So, what brown leaves can you discard? How can you consolidate for the winter, and prepare the ground for fresh growth in the spring?

## *And the sky is grey*

They say the sun only shines on the righteous (I wouldn’t know), but in my view it does seem to shine on the optimistic. So a pessimist is more likely to identify with the line about the sky being grey. Of course, they both experience the same amount of sun, but their experience of the same event will be different. We all view the world through individual filters, formed through our upbringing, our conditioning, our education, our experience and our development.

As an eternal optimist, I am often asked how I always remember the blue sky and not the grey. Of course, I don't know why this is, but I am grateful for it. And, as an eternal optimist, I do believe anyone can access such filters, with practice and the right intention. What filters do you view the world through and are they helpful to you? Would you prefer to remember blue or grey skies?

One way to change how we experience blue or grey skies, is to maximise the opportunity when a blue sky is available. Just yesterday, heavy rain overnight (which we like as it raises the possibility of ending the drought restrictions we still experience here) gave way to glorious clear skies in the morning. Having a flexible job, I was able to take advantage and enjoy a country walk in the autumn air. Actually, as my wife Bev and near-neighbour Liz accompanied me, it was more of a route-march, but that's a whole other story. I appreciate not everyone can down tools and go walking when they want, but I did use to have a "proper job" and I remember using my lunch hour in such a way when I could. And remember this is meant metaphorically, not literally, so rather than discard the idea of maximising the opportunity of a blue sky, ask yourself what is the literal interpretation of this metaphor for you.

And as winter approaches, a few friends have commented how they lament the shortening days and colder weather. I can see their point, because it can be a drag starting and finishing work in the dark, and shivering everywhere you go. But without winter we wouldn't have spring. There is a Buddhist saying of "This too will pass". Remembering this phrase helps us place both adversity and fortune in context. Winter will pass, and we will enjoy longer days and warmer weather again. So, if we face difficult times or fantastic success in our business, it can help to remember that the current reality need not become the future. All we can do is what it takes to prolong the success, and minimise the difficulty!

In your work, what represents the blue sky, and what the grey? Which do you focus on more, and how can you change your filters to focus more on the blue? How can you make the most of the times when the sky is blue?

### *Painless Business News*

I'm delighted to welcome a new Associate to my business, Ann Sharratt. Ann has stepped in as Amanda has gone off to have her second baby (best wishes Amanda). Ann has taught me a lesson or two in efficiency in the few weeks she has been on board – a classic example of fresh blood invigorating a tired old tree! Ann is based on the coast in Dorset and brings a long business background and strong coaching skills to the team.

I'd like to give you an early warning for the next Painless Business Workshop, which will be taking place in Chalgrove on January 23<sup>rd</sup> at 9am. We will be considering how to get the right thing done at the right time (prioritising tasks and personal effectiveness). At just £20 for a 90 minute workshop, it is stunning value and you would be daft to miss it. (Sounds like that optimist talking again!!). In case you're not sure, Chalgrove is in South Oxfordshire, between Oxford and High Wycombe – easily accessible from the M40.

### *Book Review*

I recently attended a conference at the Marriott Forest of Arden hotel, and in the hotel room, as well as a bible was *The Spirit to Serve* by JW Marriott, Jnr and Kathi Ann Brown. As the author's name might suggest, this is a book about Marriott, and the CEO's view on what has made them a success globally. I found it a fascinating read – not least because it pushed a number of my favourite buttons in management. Two key factors in this CEO's perspective on success were looking after your employees and having strong systems for all you do. In particular, the systems allow them to be one of the largest operators of hotels in the world with some assurance of standards across their portfolio.

I must also thank Andy Roach, one of the readers of this newsletter, for sending me an interesting article by David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz, entitled *The Neuroscience of Leadership*, published in Strategy and Business Magazine. This article combined thinking on change management and development with research in brain function to illuminate some of the physiological barriers in our brain to adopting change. Many of my clients will be familiar with the idea of entrenched thought patterns in our minds – especially in relation to esteem or confidence. This article demonstrates the physiological evidence for this, and how we can change it.

### *Painless Puns*

Another reader, the humbly self-proclaimed “Wise Elder” of the UK coaching profession George Metcalfe, responded to last month’s quote of “where there’s a will there’s a way” with his own twist – which I think I like even more:

*Where there’s a wall, there’s a way over.*                      George Metcalfe

When he wasn’t declaring himself to be a hamburger, John F Kennedy had some useful things to say:

*The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining.*

And I know George will be amused that when I first typed “Wise Elder” it somehow became “Wise Welder”. And why shouldn’t a mechanic be a trusted sage?

My favourite pun of the moment is a child’s response when asked to define benign: “It’s what I’ll be after I be eight”.

Thanks to Nigel Day for the following thought, which my good friend Graeme will no doubt agree with:

*The most effective way to remember your wife's birthday is to forget it once.* Anonymous

### *Final Words*

The seasons are part of the cycles of the world we live in – how can you follow the seasons? Is the winter busier for you, so do you need to consolidate in the summer? Or, like the trees, is the winter a time of limited growth, and a period for consolidation?

What seasonal activities would best serve you and your business this month?

Warmest regards

James Butler

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