

## Losing my job turned the world upside down and taught me profound lessons.

by **D. MERRILL EWERT**

# INTRO

**Y**ou know it's not going to end well when your boss starts a conversation with, "This is the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

My wife and I had two young kids, a mortgage we couldn't afford and an idyllic life in the house of our dreams. I had recently left a well-paying job that took me away from home at a rate that had become destructive to our family life and accepted an administrative position at a well-known college.

And then it ended. The program I managed was cut back and my job eliminated. I was angry, terrified and embarrassed, thinking others would assume I was fired for incompetence. This was the worst moment of my life. And though I didn't know it at the time, it was also one of the best moments because I was about to learn some profound lessons.

### Lesson 1 **Let it go**

Angry and frustrated, I called a well-connected mentor and friend at another university and unloaded. I hoped she would offer me a job. Instead, she told me to get over it and hung up. Moving on is easier said than done.

Nights were the worst. I'd sleep for several hours and then toss and turn until morning. Sometimes I'd sit in the dark living room thinking about how unfair everything was. I'd pray and cry. When Saint John of the Cross wrote of "the dark night of the soul," he wasn't exaggerating.

I was at the end of my rope. Desperate, I prayed at 2:30 one morning: "Lord, I can't do this anymore. I can't get past my anger at the college for what has happened. I can't wish away my fear. This burden is too heavy for me to carry. I can't seem to let it go; you will have to take it away."

I relaxed and a sense of peace like I'd never experienced before literally swept over me. The next thing I knew, it was 8:00 a.m. I had not slept that late in years. From that point on, I could sleep again. Though it didn't change my circumstances, I learned I had to let go of everything—anger, fear, frustration—before I could experience God's healing touch. The former was a conscious, rational choice; the latter was the powerful work of God.

### Lesson 2 **Seize the moment**

"You're the luckiest man around,"

said a pastor who listened to my story over dinner shortly after I lost my job. "How many people in their 40s get to start over and decide once again what they want to be and do?"

Frankly, I wasn't feeling particularly lucky but was intrigued by his next question: "If you could choose absolutely anything, what would you really like to do next?" Without thinking, I blurted out that I wanted to teach, mentor graduate students and do research at a major university.

I quickly reminded him, however, that we were in a deep recession and universities were laying off professors and promoting early retirements—not hiring new faculty. On top of that, I had committed "professional suicide" a decade earlier when I left a faculty position at a research university to work for a mission organization. I asked the pastor, "What university would hire me now?"

"That wasn't my question," he snapped, "I want to hear your dream." He was neither very patient nor interested in hearing about the barriers to my dream. As we left the restaurant, this pastor promised to pray that I'd find a university teaching position where I could teach,

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work with graduate students and do research—but only if I prayed too. That was when I stopped worrying about simply finding a job and began thinking about how God might open new doors.

### Lesson 3 Explore broadly

I read Richard Nelson Bolles' book, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* It forced me to reflect on my professional experience, evaluate my gifts and articulate personal goals. I took a test designed to ascertain a person's gifts and interests. What did it suggest to someone who enjoyed travel, relished intercultural experiences and spoke other languages? Become a flight attendant! After I stopped laughing, I realized this exercise did identify some themes that reflected my gifts and interests. This new self-understanding framed my ongoing search for a position in new and deeper ways.

### Lesson 4 Walk with those who build you up

When I shared the pain of losing my job with the interim pastor of my church, he explained that he had been removed from his position as a denominational executive several years earlier. He both understood how I felt and reminded me that the God who had brought me to this point had not abandoned me now. My Heavenly Father, he suggested, would lead me into something new and exciting if I opened myself up to him. As we parted, I felt ready to look for another job. My pastor stayed in touch, prayed for me and lifted my spirits.

Around the same time, I had lunch with an old friend who had lost his job several years earlier. He was still angry, bitter at his former employer, vindictive and unemployed. As I listened to him, I could feel the life being sucked right out of me. I learned later that potential employers considered my friend toxic; they didn't want to contaminate their own workplaces with his anger and cynicism.

These dear friends taught me a very important lesson in two very different

ways: Surround yourself with people who build you up and avoid those who would take you down with them. I learned to hang out with people who would encourage me and run from those who invited me to wallow with them in their own misery.

### Lesson 5 Expect surprises

A faculty member met me in the stairwell one morning as I was finishing up my job. Our philosophical differences about the nature of higher education ran deep. We had often argued, leading me to conclude he had little use for my work or me. He was something of a curmudgeon, so I definitely didn't want to talk with him that morning. Unfortunately, the stairwell was narrow so I couldn't ignore him.

He stopped me, grabbed my arm, reached into his billfold, pulled out a tattered scrap of paper with a faded list of names and said, "That's my prayer list." Then he asked, "Do you see whose name is on top?" It was mine. "I pray for you every day," he said. Without another word, he stuffed the paper into his wallet and continued down the stairs.

I'm glad he kept walking because I didn't want him to see the tears rolling down my face. I thought I knew this man, but I didn't know his heart. God uses the most unlikely people to walk alongside us during our hour of need.

### Lesson 6 Don't settle

I was desperate for a job when two friends each offered me a job. I lacked the requisite skills and passion for one of the positions and the other wasn't a good fit, yet it was very hard to say "no." In the midst of this, I remembered the words of that pastor: "Follow your heart. Don't settle. Don't jump at the first thing that comes your way!" I knew I wanted to teach at a research university, but it was hard to walk away from job offers.

Before the year was over, I was teaching at an Ivy League school, doing research and mentoring graduate students. I earned tenure and ultimately a senior

leadership position. I clearly saw God's hand in this.

Several months later one of my new colleagues asked if I understood why I got the job. They had received nearly a hundred other applications, so I was interested in hearing why my name had risen to the top. My colleague explained that what tipped the balance for the search committee was what they had learned about me through my friend—the one who had told me to "get over it" and hung up on me.

### Lesson 7 Serve in your own area of need

Several years later, while visiting our former church, a man I didn't know introduced himself to me. "I want to thank you for your letter," he said. "It was an enormous encouragement to me." I stared at him blankly; I had no idea who he was or what he was talking about.

He explained. After he lost his job the previous year, his brother sent him a copy of a letter I had written to this friend when he had lost his job two years earlier. My friend was so encouraged by what I said in the letter that he saved it and sent copies to other people, including his brother.

Over the next few years the two brothers sent copies of that letter to a number of other people who had also lost jobs. Some of them, in turn, copied and circulated it further. God had used my own pain to encourage others walking the path I had traveled.

As a university administrator, I've been forced to lay off people, so I understand the pain they experience. Though I don't know exactly how they feel, I know how it feels. And although every situation is unique, I know that God wants to carry our pain and will bless us with new joy. **CL**

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