

CTRL ALT SURVIVE

The Secrets of My
Small Business Success



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For Doug, who fostered my interest in audio production and ham radio, and gave me the Canon XL-1 video camera that I carried around the world in several adventures that are detailed in these pages. That camera helped me support my nascent family while I gradually figured out how to be a grownup. His profound generosity and love of neighbor inspired me to be generous to others and to look out for people who need help.

I think he would hate this attention, but might have loved this book.

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Chapter 1

THE BEAR WHO WANTED TO BE A BEAR

“We are thieves, stealing glimpses of an American dream that we can never achieve. Welcome home. Swim into the ocean, drown in your devotion. We refuse to compromise. We had to get it right.”

— Hideous Supermodels

My mother shopped at garage sales most weekends when I was a little boy. Often, she selected for me another child’s discarded treasure, like some GoBots, which are unlicensed knockoffs of Hasbro’s Transformers, re-imagined to be more compatible with poverty, or a plastic replica of Luke Skywalker’s landspeeder with two out of three air-cooled thrust turbines still intact.

On another occasion, she brought home a book, *The Bear Who Wanted To Be A Bear* by Jörg Steiner, which was an odd sort of vaguely socialist parable about a bear who woke up from hibernation to the sounds of a factory being constructed above his den. The factory management is skeptical of the bear’s claim of being a bear, and they insist that he must stop being a “lazybones” and must shave and

punch a time clock and get to work in the factory. The illustrations are comically dystopian and more than a little bit Soviet, and I won't spoil the ending for you, but the bear finds himself wrestling with questions of identity, meaning, and purpose.

I lied to you. I'm totally going to spoil the ending. Eventually the bear gets laid off, and that ends up being a good thing, because he subsequently wanders in to a hotel, and the clerk at the front desk refuses to rent him a room because they don't allow bears, so he suddenly remembers that he is, in fact, a bear, and joyfully goes back to his den to sleep through the rest of the winter. It is an above average children's book.

I had the fortune of traveling to Gliwice, Poland once. My first job out of college was at a Fortune 500 engineering and construction company that was started by John "Si" Fluor in Santa Ana, California in 1912. I started in the marketing department, and one of my assignments was to make propaganda videos about how terrific global outsourcing was. I liked to travel, and I had a video camera, so they sent me to capture footage in glamorous oil and gas producing places like Oklahoma, Illinois, Louisiana, and Texas, but also to the Philippines, China, India, and Poland.

I prepared for my trip to Gliwice by learning 30 phrases in Polish that I thought might be important. Phrases like "Dziękuję" (Thank you) and "Dzień dobry" (Hello), but also some fun ones like "Czy mówisz po angielsku?" (Do you speak English?) and "Niestety, nie mówię po polsku," which I hope means "Regrettably, I do not speak Polish."

I got there a day early, and in contrast to much of Europe,

war-torn Gliwice is not a place where English is reliably understood by the populace, but I delighted in exploring the city, armed with my thirty poorly pronounced and mostly useless phrases. I ordered food by pointing at a menu item without knowing what it was, (delicious, but I still couldn't tell you) and I wandered the beautiful town square where I enjoyed some very good Tyskie and Zywiec beer.

When my hosts eventually arrived, one of whom turned out to be Dutch, we went back to the town square and I discovered that they were all very curious about Americans. I remember we were drinking this sort of prune flavored liquor called Slivovitz (or Śliwowica in Polish) which might have been serviceable as a substitute for gasoline. They asked me what Americans considered to be strong liquor, and I lamely said something about Jägermeister, which I had never tried, but assumed to be strong based on contextual clues, and they laughed hysterically. One of them said that his grandma uses it as cough syrup.

Another one of them wanted to show me photos from her trip to America, which turned out to be mostly palm trees, people wearing U.S. flag themed apparel, and several rather ordinary looking pickup trucks with lift kits and large tires. It was fascinating to see America through her eyes, but something about these engineers struck me in the same way our questionable transportation choices apparently struck them. Every time I said "tell me about yourself" or "what do you do?" they never said one word about their careers.

Instead, they said things like "I'm a skier" or "I'm really just a family man" or "My obsession right now is backpacking." It made me begin to wonder why Americans

universally describe their identity from a sense of vocation. Ask an American to tell you about himself, and he might say “I’m a dentist” or “I make terrible propaganda videos about global outsourcing.”

I realized that I wanted to be like them, to have a sense of self that wasn’t exclusively about how I paid my bills. Perhaps, like the bear in the hotel who wanted to be a bear, I was on to something. I wanted to find out who I was outside of work. I realized, in that town square in Poland, that to do that – to have a different outcome than everyone else, I was going to have to make some different choices than my peers and learn to embrace risk. That was the seed that grew into years of attempted entrepreneurship, and eventually a business. I didn’t want a ceiling on how much money I was allowed to make, because I wanted to someday earn the right to *be* more than my *job*.

In the fall of 2009, I was having dinner in a Chinese buffet restaurant with two old friends. We agreed that IT services were ripe for disruption, and had a few half baked ideas that we imagined were disruptive. I remember saying, “What if we can do this for ten years and then sell it for a life changing amount of money?” We defined that as a number with at least two commas in it, and all decided it was a fantastic idea, so I quit my job in Las Vegas and moved back to Southern California on New Year’s Day, 2010, with my wife Kelly and a three month old baby boy in tow.

We each deposited \$800 into a Bank of America business checking account, and filed for incorporation in California with the help of our new accountant, Larry. We celebrated at

a mediocre sushi restaurant and I nearly got into my first bar fight.

It was terrifying and exhilarating. I felt alive and anxious and determined. I will resist the urge to leave you in suspense. One of my co-founders left the company on good terms in 2016, and my remaining partner and I achieved the outcome we had dreamed about, ten years and seven months later, to the day. It was an incredible thing to be a part of.

Together, we worked to build a company that served customers around the nation, through fits and starts, scrap by scrap, until it earned recognition by both Ingram Micro and CRN, ranking it as one of the top 500 IT Managed Service Providers in North America.

We started with a vision that wasn't fully formed. A jumble of half-truths and even some wildly misguided beliefs that made our failure almost inevitable. But here's the thing—we were lucky, because some of our other ideas incrementally pushed us forward. Every chapter of this book dissects one of those ideas, those advantages we didn't know we had, which when stacked up, helped us arrive at an inflection point where someone was willing to send us an embarrassingly large wire transfer in exchange for what we had built.

I'm really not here to flex. The heroes of this story are our employees and our customers. They gave me reasons to want to be better at this and inspired me every day. This is also a story about some uncomfortable truths—what it really takes to build and run a company, and how we did it. I intend to spill some tea about the screw-ups, the sleepless nights, and the moments when self-doubt claws at your throat.

Being in charge, most of the time, feels less like steering a ship and more like duct-taping a leaky hull. Leadership is less about control and more about learning, over and over, that you really don't have much, and figuring out a way to move forward anyway.

This is also a story about letting go.

Not long after the IT business sold, I escaped to Nashville for a few days with my friend Carl. I brought my guitar because we were hoping to write a song. It wasn't the first time. Twenty years earlier, we had been paired up to write music together in a songwriting class at the Contemporary Music Center on Martha's Vineyard. Out of that forced collaboration came *Salvadoreña*—a melodramatic acoustic rock number that sounded a little like Dashboard Confessional crooning about a displaced janitor who had the misfortune of walking past us while we were looking for inspiration. We found out later she was really from Guatemala, but “Guatemalteca” didn't roll off the tongue the same way, so we took some artistic license.

We spent several days in Nashville writing the song that became *Devotion*. Serendipitously, our old drummer Paul happened to be in town, so we brought him along too. I take strange pleasure in naming things. We named our band *Hideous Supermodels*, a name I chose in homage to a C.S. Lewis novel, *That Hideous Strength*, and because it strikes a delicious balance between being pretentious, meaningless, and yet unmistakably memorable. A hideous supermodel, I opined, is a person of average beauty, just like a tiny giant is