

LIVING CASES

PERSONAL SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS OF MEN AND WOMEN IN BUSINESS



*"I have seen something else under the sun;
the race is not to the swift
or the battle for the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all."
Ecclesiastes 9:11 (NIV)*

Life and careers are similar to running a race. The book of Ecclesiastes was written several thousand years ago; yet there are certain life related experiences that remain the same no matter how much technology has advanced.

As the human race becomes more and more reliant on scientific reasoning of cause and effect, how we respond to the core challenges in life and adjust to the twists and turns of running the race of life depends on the fundamental principles of our beliefs. For instance, the most optimal business decision

is often not the result of the most sophisticated analysis, the best database, or the insights of leaders with the most education from the best schools.

Ethical principles and moral compass have much to do with the long range impact and future of the organizations we manage. Strong believers, average believers and non-believers will face the same type of secular life/career challenges over time. How we respond to those challenges will affect our relationship with Christ.

As I looked back at the race I have run so far, it became vividly clear how critically important it was to have Christ in my life. There were several potentially life changing cross roads when I could have chosen the resources of the secular world or taken a direction solely based upon my own intellect, secular information and expert human advice. One particular instance was my experience as the CEO and Co-Chairman of a NASDAQ listed commercial bank as it waded through the financial crisis and its aftermath from 2008-2011.

The concentration of our bank's \$1.2 billion assets under management was disproportionately skewed toward

commercial real estate. The real estate market was in dark straits during this time, the hardest hit among all major industries across the country, and an area attracting the greatest amount of regulatory scrutiny and pressure from the Office of Comptroller of the Currency, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and the Federal Reserve.

Literally our bank management team was like running a race against headwinds in a blizzard, facing economic and regulatory hazards around every corner. Decisions had to be made without clear visibility and on the basis of mostly media driven market confusion. That was a stretch of time when I truly experienced the importance of daily personal devotion time with Christ.

I started my mornings each day with the Scripture (rather than the Wall Street Journal, Financial Times or internal reports). Running each mile with a cup of water from God's Word provided me with a refreshed calmness of the mind and confidence to face the daily unknowns. By His Grace, the bank was able to not only overcome the economic challenges but eventually provide its shareholders with a better than expected return for their investments.

Based on what I learned as a Christian businessman over many decades, I offer the following perspectives on the crucial elements of running a race.

I. Who Are We Running For?

At the beginning of 2014, I ended my formal business career as the Chairman and CEO of the commercial bank holding company through the merger with a larger financial institution. There were many occasions during the merger process when I took the time to reflect not only on the pros and cons of the merger, but also on my own performance in leading the organization through one of the most challenging global financial crises. The self-evaluation led me to expand my inner search to include my entire working career as to how I had functioned as a business executive who is also a follower of Christ. Was I able to run a race that honored Christ?

I grew up during the mid-1960s in a Christian school (Grace Christian School) in Manila, the Philippines. The school was established by Chinese Filipino Christian educators and a few Western missionaries who were expelled from China after the communist takeover. The school was very strict even by the standards of the 1960s. We wore uniforms with white shirts and a triangular (Trinity) shaped school pin with a distinct red colored cross right in the middle. For sports events we wore shirts with the biggest possible school emblem with the same design. There was no doubt that the intention was to insure that we always behave in and out of school in a manner not to embarrass the school and our Christian faith.

Even though we were reminded of our "responsibility" on a daily basis, to most of us (even the "good") students the school pin and its expectation were regarded as a burden to our "freedom," especially when we were off campus "dealing" with the "challenges of the world." Intermural athletic events which may necessitate un-Christian-like sportsmanship especially posed a challenge. As a cross country and track runner

representing our school I constantly wrestled with those challenges.

If our business career were a race, would it be easier if we were not running for Christ? For the past 40 years of my career, how much of the race was for Christ, and how much was for my ego and advancement in the business world? Right after the bank merger I had the opportunity to participate in the Conoco Philips half marathon run, wearing the "Living Waters" shirt. As I put on that shirt, there was immediately a flash back to my days at Grace Christian School. Here I was representing "Living Waters," a Christian organization. Very few people may recognize me, but many I knew would recognize the organization I was running for. I proceeded to ask myself: "disregarding any secular business achievements, how have I performed as a Christian runner?"

II. How Have I Prepared for the Race?

As with any sport or task, performance is directly related to the participant's preparation. Preparation for a race requires serious self-discipline. For weeks and months we would train daily on our own. The purpose was not only to build up our stamina but also to synchronize our minds with the body. Oftentimes it is the mind that gives up and not the body.

During the last few weeks prior to the race, we did practice runs with the coach to pick up some strategic tips and to gain confidence. By race day I had pretty much forgotten everything I had learned except one: the best thing to do in a long distance race was to keep the mind relaxed, to occupy it with thoughts that can distract the runner from the aches and fatigue of the body. At the five mile marker, my mind flashed back to my early years as a high school student in the U.S., and how early preparation at Grace Christian School played a major role in my ability to cope with the new environment.

RUNNING FOR ETERNITY

Who are we running for ?

Was I able to run a race that honors Christ?

How have I prepared for the race?

Do I have spiritual stamina and a focus on Christ?

Run with people who share the same vision.

Can I count on the wise counsel of like-minded believers?

Learn to recharge and restore from the only source.

Am I willing to lean on the strength of Christ and not my own?

My father was a diplomat for the Republic of China (retreated to Taiwan in 1949). After his assignment in the Philippines he was transferred to Santiago, Chile. I came to the U.S. to finish high school in Pennsylvania and then subsequently went to college and graduate school in the Midwest.

Coming to the U.S. to attend high school was not common during the 60's so I encountered language and cultural challenges as well as many teenage issues. I was able to get through high school and college only by the grace of God and the Christian faith I had learned and kept. I knew that my Lord Jesus was always there for me. All the chapel classes and Bible memory contests had prepared me for my early educational years in this foreign country.

I came to realize that no preparation will ever be wasted. What we practice today will impact our lives in the future. Just as a long distance run requires a lot of physical stamina and strong willpower to finish it, so a victorious Christian career requires spiritual stamina and a mind solely focused on Christ.

III. Run With People Who Share the Same Vision

Psalm 1:1-3 says, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."

Running is an individual endeavor, yet one will quickly appreciate it as a group sport. Similarly our career success depends on our personal effort and intelligence as well as group effort and teamwork. In our spiritual walk it will be greatly beneficial to be associated with people who share the same conviction and worldview. There will be many twists and turns, temptations from secular victories that can lead us astray from the path with Christ. During several life changing events I encountered, I greatly benefited from the wise counsel of solid Christ followers with prayerful hearts.

IV. Learn to Recharge and Restore from the Only Source

Jesus tells us in Matthew 11:28-29; "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Half marathons are 13.1 miles, a short distance for some but a respectable distance for others like me. I was actually quite pleased that I was able to finish the race, and was very grateful for the water stops manned by volunteers. I know that many of us would not be able to go the distance without restoring and recharging our bodies. Unfortunately in real life ego and pride sometimes would push us away from relying on Christ's tender loving care. We would rather carry the extra burden and "do it ourselves," so that we can proclaim our ac-

complishments for our own glory. When life's challenges are too strong or complicated for us to overcome, it would be wise to take time off to draw on Christ instead of plowing through with our own strengths.

Closing Thoughts

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, has run the race for all of us. He ran all the way to the cross which demonstrates God's love for the world, so that we may all have the opportunity to receive the trophy of salvation. During our careers we, who claim to be His followers, are also given many opportunities to run races for Christ, with witnesses watching our every step. We all need to make a commitment to prepare for such opportunities. We must be open to "running with Christ" with a humble heart, and to stay close to Him every step along the way so as to draw on His strength, lest we grow weary and lose heart. Let us finish the race with the glory of the Kingdom in our focus.

About the Author



George Lee is Chairman of the 100KStrong Foundation, Chairman of East-West Bank's Advisory Board for Texas, and Chairman of the Board for the data cloud technology company Panton Inc. Until Janu-

ary 2014 Mr. Lee was Co-Chairman, CEO & President of Metro Corp Bancshares, Inc. (NASDAQ:MCBI), which had managed assets of over \$1.5 billion, with market presence in Texas and California and representative offices in Chongqing and Xiamen, China. From 1998 to 2003, Mr. Lee served as the President and CEO of Erimos Pharmaceuticals (formerly BioCure Medical LLC), a joint venture of Johns Hopkins University and a private investment group with focus on cancer research. From 1994 through 1998, Mr. Lee was an investor and EVP of Strategic Planning at Higher Dimension Medical LLC in St. Paul, Minnesota, a cutting edge high tech company involved in the development and manufacturing of puncture-proof materials. Mr. Lee earned his M.B.A. from Minnesota State University and his B.S. in Econometrics from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.