

# RUSTY LINDQUIST

*Finding light, in the darkest of times*

## ONE BURNING QUESTION

I sat with my mom in the living room of my grandmas house, the morning sun pouring through the windows.

We were best friends.

I was 11, and we had gone through tough times together: abusive husbands, poverty, homelessness, despair, and more moves than I can remember. And even though we hadn't been able to afford to keep my older sister, we had stuck together.

We were inseparable.

That's when she told me she was leaving.

And in that moment, my entire world stopped moving. My heart stopped beating. In fact nothing existed, except one burning question... What had I done wrong?

This is my story.

“WHAT HAD I  
DONE WRONG?”

**Note:** This was hard to write. It was was painful to excavate and reconnect with these emotions, I worry about offending, and I fret about accuracy (I know my few memories are fallible). But it's worth it if I can provide strength and perspective to someone who might need it. Because mostly this is a story about how we all have a choice. We can succumb to circumstance, or rise above it. It's a story about finding light, even in the darkest of times.

For a much shorter version, just the basics really, [click here](#).

## A SACRIFICE

In 1974, I was born into a small family in Utah. I had a single older sister,

I and we lived a simple life in a small house, in an inconspicuous town in Utah.

When I was two, my dad developed late-onset schizophrenia. It would set my life on a path I could have never imagined.

He began hearing voices. He thought they were the voices of biblical prophets, they told him he would be next, and he would heal the world of its suffering and wickedness. They started teaching him, and giving him instructions. This greatly concerned my mom, and for good cause.

Before long, he received an ultimatum. To prove his faith and worthiness, he was required to make a sacrifice: me.

My mom saved me.

After a physical fight, we got out of the house and went on the run. We moved every couple of years, always to small towns throughout Utah and Montana. It meant I would never really develop friends, or roots. And we lived light, because we were very, very poor. But I still had my mom, and that was all I needed.



“MY MOM SAVED  
ME”

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## CHANGING SHEETS

When I was about 4, my mom remarried, and we moved into a tiny upstairs apartment, cramped and poor, but still together.

I was excited to have a new father. I was hopeful that we would be friends, that he would accept me. But he was an alcoholic, and a “severe” drunk. In fact, I remember setting up traps... hangers dangling from string tied from doorknob to doorknob (I slept in the hallway). When either door opened, the string would sag, and the hangers would clink together to wake me up when he came in. That allowed me enough time to get out of the way, or at least be awake, if he was drunk, and felt like hitting. He was not my friend.

Soon that marriage failed, and my mom, sister and I moved to a small town where my mom got a job as a hotel maid. They allowed us to live in one of the rooms as part of her pay, and during the day I would go around with her, making beds, and cleaning rooms. I still remember how she taught me to fold the sheet corners over the mattress.

We had next to nothing. But in truth, I didn’t mind. I got to be with my mom all-day, every day, which I’m sure was incredibly helpful to her.



“ I WAS WITH MY  
MOM ALL DAY,  
EVERY DAY”

## HIDING IN A PIPE

When I was about 6 or 7 she gave marriage a third try. I was childishly optimistic about this father. The first time my mom brought him home, he acted really interested in the matchbox cars I was playing with on the hotel floor. "How cool would it be if I had a father to play with", I thought.

We left the hotel and moved to a little trailer house in a remote Utah town, and that's when my mom took me to my first day of school.

I soon realized I was inferior, unaccepted. I was the poor kid. I smelled, my clothes were worn and didn't. I was new in town so I didn't know anybody, and it wasn't cool to hang out with me. It was cool to bully me. So I got a lot of that.

I wasn't very smart. I remember my teacher telling my mom I couldn't come to class until I knew my alphabet. This was a dilemma, because I couldn't be home alone, and there was no money for a sitter. So my grandma came over to teach me. I remember feeling the pressure. I had one day to learn the alphabet. I remember my grandma pulling my hair in frustration. Probably the only way to get me to learn. But it worked, I did it.

But school was a harsh place. At recess I would hide in a huge cement pipe by the playground to avoid getting beat up. It was dark and safe in there, and I could watch the kids play until the bell rang. I would imagine being among them.

I often remember that long walk home from school with my sister, usually telling her through tearful eyes about my troubles. But my mom was always there when I got home, and she would make me feel better. She began teaching me Karate to defend myself. I remember practice in front of her in the living room. Watching and working for her validation. She was a black-belt, which was so cool. You didn't mess with my mom, and I felt safe with her.



"MY MOM WAS  
ALWAYS THERE  
WHEN I GOT  
HOME"



"WE DIDN'T HAVE

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## THE HUNGER GAMES

When I was about 9 my stepdad got a new job on an oil rig in Montana. The move to another remote town didn't bother me. Montana was deep-forest, and to a kid who played almost entirely alone, with such an active imagination, it was totally awesome. The forest was my playground. It was full of mystery and intrigue. I spent every possible hour by myself, wandering the woods, using my imagination. Escaping. Especially if my new dad was home.

RUNNING WATER,  
OR ELECTRICITY,  
OR HEAT”

He was often drunk, and usually angry. He was no longer interested in my cars, or the sticks I brought home to show him. In fact, I was mostly in his way. He'd become easily frustrated with my childish energy, would reach out, and smack me on the head with his fist. I hated that. It hurt, of course, but it was more demeaning than hurtful. And I was getting old enough to notice the difference. Pain went away faster than humiliation. But I was tough, not even he could break my spirit.

Money was very scarce. At one point we lived in a tent. I remember my dad coming home one day with a quarter of a box of Bisquick. We sat around the fire to make pancakes! But the smell overcame us, and we just ate the batter with our hands. It tasted so good.

Eventually my mom tired of his constant meanness and abuse, so at 10 my mom, sister and I left and moved into a tiny camper-trailer parked in the woods across town.

We didn't have running water, or electricity, or heat, and almost no food. I would catch fresh crawdads at the lake to boil them. We ate a lot of millet (seed). I learned to shoot a squirrel out of a tree with a little wooden bow and arrow I had gotten one Christmas (Katniss Everdeen would have been pleased). And I had one good meal every day because I got free lunch at school.

Most importantly, I had my mom. That was what I really cared about. She remained my constant.

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## THERE IS NO FREE LUNCH

**B**ecause we had no running water, in the summer I would occasionally shower under a hose attached to a neighbors house, but in the winter, I just never showered. As an 11 year old, that meant I usually smelled. That made it hard to be accepted, and I was constantly ridiculed by my peers, including (and especially) my teacher.

She had built a little 4-walled cubicle at the back of the class to isolate me. When I would walk in, I would go sit alone at my desk and close the cubical walls behind me. If I didn't, she would. I could only listen to what was going on outside my fortress walls. I would let my imagination make up the difference. I didn't learn much.

But this way my odor wouldn't disrupt the other students, the "more important" ones. My teacher couldn't keep me from coming into the class, but at least she could minimize my impact on her classroom. She exercised



“IT WAS THE  
PUBLIC SHAME  
THAT DID IT”

control the best way she knew how.

But one day when I walked in, she made an open comment about how intolerable I was, and how much I smelled. It was the public shame that did it. The embarrassment that rushed through me, as the whole class looked at me and laughed. In a rush of haste and a lack of logic, I hit her.

Perhaps just what she was hoping for, she marched me right down to the principle's office to suspend me. I remember sitting in that chair across from the principle, who seemed sympathetic, listening to my teacher argue compelling me to suspend me. I knew what that would mean. No more lunch.

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## ATOMIC FIREBALL

I remember walking out of the school building that day. Everyone else was in class. My mom wasn't home to come get me, and we didn't have a phone at home to call her anyway. I walked out of the doors and stood alone in the parking lot. I remember turning around and feeling the aloneness and isolation, and thinking "what am I going to do".

I didn't tell my mom. I didn't want to disappoint her, or put additional pressure on her to find a way to feed me. We had already had to give up my sister, because we couldn't afford both of us. I was worried about what would happen to me if she found out.

So instead I hung out in the woods during school. I remember hiding in the woods outside the playground, peering through the trees, watching the kids play at recess, and imagining being there.

One time I even snuck onto the playground to play with them. But my teacher saw me, and kicked me out.

At lunchtime I would steal food from workers at a nearby construction site, or sometimes from the general store. And after school I would be waiting in the woods outside the school, as the kids came pouring out of the building, I would quickly go from one to the other, asking if I could go to their house and play, hoping to get in on some after-school snacks. I undoubtedly came across as such an obnoxious mooch, but I had to be resourceful.

I remember one time finding a dime on the street while walking home from pretending to be at school. I brought it home with pride, imagining the possibilities. My mom sensing my excitement, told me I could walk down to the store and buy whatever I wanted. I remember standing in that store, weighing my options, imagining the experience of consuming each option. I ultimately decided on an "Atomic Fireball", because I figured that of all the options, that would last the longest. As excited as I was about this rare treat, I



"WE HAD TO GIVE  
UP MY SISTER"

exercised a surprising amount of self-control, carried it all the way home, carefully unwrapped it, and then smashed it with a rock. As excited as I was, I desperately wanted to share it with my mom. I recall carefully carrying the small fragments inside, sitting on the floor with my mom, and dividing them into equal shares. I wanted to give back.

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## THE NIGHT SHE DIDN'T COME HOME

My sister had gone to live with my grandma. So now it was just my mom and I. But these were not the normal happy times together. She was very stressed. All we had was this little trailer, but we had no food, or water, or electricity to keep us warm at night, and we were constantly and uncomfortably hungry, so she started traveling.

She was an entertainer, and would drive her old, beat-up truck to neighboring towns to drum up gigs in bars, or hotels, or wherever they'd let her play. They were usually far away, which meant she'd often be gone for a night or two, leaving me all alone.

But this alone was different. Being alone while playing in the woods was one thing. Being alone during school time was one thing. In fact, I was alone a lot, and it usually didn't bother me, because I knew that in truth I wasn't alone. I knew that at the end of the day, I would come home, and my mom would be there. She was always there.

But this alone was different, because I would come home from a day alone, and would still be alone. This alone was different because it was a dark, cold, small trailer, with thin walls, and at night, huddled under as many blankets and coverings as I could find, I would sit with an empty stomach and listen to the sounds outside, and try to be brave. This alone felt different, it felt more... alone.

Hope got me through. And as long as those nights were, eventually, she would always come home when she said she would.

Until one night, she didn't.

Several nights had gone by and she hadn't returned. She was long overdue, and I was worried. It's times like these that your mind tends to do mean things to you. I began to wonder if she was ever coming home. I began to wonder why she wasn't coming home? I struggled to remember if I had perhaps done something that would cause her to not want to come home. Was this my fault?

I remember on my final night in that wretched trailer, staring out the tiny window into the darkness, wrapped in a blanket, more for it's emotional



“I REMEMBER  
STARING OUT  
THE WINDOW,  
CRYING, WAITING  
FOR HER  
HEADLIGHTS”

impact than warmth, crying softly, and wishing, as if by the power of sheer belief, she would come home.

I had finally given up, fatigue defeating hope, and had just laid down to sleep, when light suddenly poured through the window, and I could hear the crunch of tires on gravel just outside. Flooded with fresh hope, I sat bolt upright in bed and looked out the small window.

It wasn't her truck.

But I kept watching as the truck came to a stop outside the trailer. Nobody was getting out. It was as though she was steeling herself for what she had to do. After what seemed like forever, she slowly climbed out of the passenger side. There was a brace around her neck. It turns out she had been in a severe car accident, and was laid up in the hospital, with no way to come home, nor any way to call. But even if she could, I don't know if she would have.

The accident had changed her.

Not yet knowing any of this, I ran outside in excitement to embrace her. But she was without affection.

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## PACK YOUR THINGS

She came into the trailer with some guy she'd managed to talk into giving her a ride, and told me to pack. "We're leaving tonight".

It was weird.

We didn't talk much, and I had no idea what the rush was. But packing didn't take long. We threw our meager belongings into three black Glad garbage bags, tossed them unceremoniously into the back of the truck, and without any further ado, left our little trailer in Montana, never to return. We drove through the night to my grandma's house in Utah, arriving very late.

It was the next morning that she told me.



"THE NEXT  
MORNING SHE  
TOLD ME"

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## I'M LEAVING

You know how there are certain events in your life that are of such a critical nature that the rest of your life hangs in the balance? They're like hinge-moments, and in these moments time seems to slow down, and you

remember them with clarity?

This should have been like that, but it wasn't.

I only have vague memories of it. I assume this morning, like so many moments before it, became the victim of selective memory. It hurt too much. And as an 11 year old, with such a well-exercised imagination from so much time alone, I think I just chose to imagine that it never happened.

Here's what I do remember.

I remember sitting on a chair in the living room, and the sun was coming in through the window. I remember that because I always loved how the sun poured through a window, and would spend hours lying in it, like a basking lizard, napping, or imagining. And the happiness of the sunlight was sharply contrasted with what happened next.

She told me she was leaving.

I was going to stay with my sister at my grandmas house. I don't remember anything else. I don't think I processed much after the "I'm leaving" part. My brain fixated on this one incomprehensible point.

I had never not had my mom.

At least not for any real length of time. She had always been there. Fathers had come and gone, at 11 I'd already been through three of them, and good riddance. But not my mom. She was my constant. She was my world, my base, my strength and comfort. She was... mom.

I couldn't, or wouldn't, imagine a world without her. I vaguely remember trying to be tough. I didn't want to make this difficult for her. I owed her everything.

Later, I stood at the window and watched as she drove away. I had done this countless times before, always knowing that she'd come back. So I did what I always did. I held on to that one thing that was deepest inside of me. The one thing that always kept me going. Hope.

"She'll come back", I told myself, "she's my mom, she'll come back, I just know she will."

And in the meantime, I had my grandma. I have always loved my grandma, she seemed like a second mom to me. And I was now reunited with my sister. She was a rockstar in my eyes. So solid. A blessed being.

But this comfort, small as it was, was not to last.

"SHE'LL COME  
BACK, I TOLD  
MYSELF, I KNOW  
SHE WILL"

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NOT WANTED



“ALL I WANTED  
WAS TO STAY  
WITH MY  
GRANDMA”

It didn't take long before I started overhearing uncomfortable conversations between my grandma and grandpa, about how he didn't want to have to be a parent again, about how I needed a real father in my life.

I remember wondering if he knew just how many times I'd been disappointed by my fathers, how many times I'd opened myself up to them, and been hurt. How many times I had clung to hope, hope that “this one” would be different; kind, gentle, loving, accepting... a friend. As much as I had clung to hope in life, and found strength in its light — like some internal well that gave life to the spirit in dark times — the hope for a father was something I had long since given up on.

All I wanted was to stay with my grandma and my sister. And here I was listening to my grandpa trying to take that away from me.

His arguments were compelling, and soon my grandma relented. She told me we were going on a little trip to Idaho, to visit my uncle (her other son) and his family.

I hardly knew them, as we'd met only a couple times before, both undesirable memories: once, for a family Christmas gathering, where he'd heard me use incorrect english, and made me stand there, not letting me leave until I figured out the correct way to say it; and then again during another family Christmas where he and my mom had been in a huge fight. I realize now these are unfair memories, but as an 11 year old, you don't have much to work from, and a skewed perception at that.

So we packed my stuff (a single garbage bag), put it in the car, and drove 6 hours to Idaho. I didn't find out the truth till we got there.

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## LOOSING EVERYTHING

We arrived at my uncles house, where my 6 cousins greeted me warmly. They lived in Idaho, on the top of a hill at the end of a long, dirt road, way outside of town.

You're going to live with them” she said.

We had stepped outside. She had something to tell me. I remember walking over to her car, away from the house. “You need a father in your life” she said, “and your grandpa can't be that for you”.

Here it was again. The promise of a father. Like that had worked out so well. And now it was at the expense of everything I wanted, everything I held dear, everything familiar. It was not a good start for a relationship I would forever struggle to build.



“I STOOD AND  
WATCHED AS SHE  
DROVE AWAY”

I stood there in stunned silence. I remember looking around me, as if for the first time. It felt strangely similar to the day I walked out of the school, alone, suspended.

I tried to imagine this as my new house, to be optimistic about my surroundings, but I couldn't. This was so foreign. I was an alien here.

That day, and the days that followed, my new family worked hard to make me feel welcome, to make it easier. And I felt my cousins truly accepted me, which is beyond my comprehension. But it did little to ease the blow.

When it was time for my grandma to leave, I stood in the front, at the top of the hill, and watched, again, as someone I loved drove away from me.

Somehow, this was the moment that hurt the most, and reprocessing it, trying to make sense of it, in the days that followed.

I felt deeply and utterly alone, and it hurt. I felt this great, pressing weight in my chest, like someone was stomping on my heart, mocking my pain. I had felt pain like this in the past, the sharpness that takes your breath away, but this was somehow different. This was more than just another time you rolled with the punches life gave you, which I had learned well. But I couldn't roll with this punch.

It hurt so bad. And then it hurt some more. And it just wouldn't stop hurting.

This felt like life was kicking me when I was down, stomping on my face while I writhed on the ground, it felt filled with fury and rage, like it couldn't get enough, like life was bent on breaking me. It felt deliberate.

I wasn't raised religious, we had never really gone to church because my mom was poisoned by the prospect of it, since the experience with my first dad. But I remember for the first time wondering why God was doing this to me. Was there even a God? If so, did he hate me too? And if so, why? What had I done?

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## WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME

**M**y new family was very generous. There was a warm house. There was food on the table. There was security, brothers and sisters to play with, and lots of little comforts, like toilet paper. I'm telling you, you likely don't appreciate your toilet paper enough. And there was electricity, heat, cooked meals, running water, structure, a real bed, with sheets and blankets. There were so many wonderful things I had to be grateful for.

I noticed none of them.

As much as I had gained, I felt like I had lost everything.



"I WAS LOST... I  
WAS BROKEN"

My mom was gone. My grandma was gone. My sister was gone. Everything was gone.

And I hardly knew this family. How could they ever, possibly love me? I was clearly defective. Why else would literally nobody keep me. And here I was thrust upon them like an unrequested visitor that would never leave. A troubled child that they now had to feed, clothe, discipline and care for. How would they ever accept me? I was eating their food. This was a terribly awkward time. Not out of lack of effort on their part, but I felt like an unwanted child. I couldn't help it.

And in times like these, your brain is not nice to you. I was plagued with troubling questions. Why did nobody want me? Was it my fault? Was I doing something to drive these people away? If so, what? What was wrong with me? Would my mom ever come get me? How could I go to yet another school? How could I start over yet again?

I felt overwhelmed by the sheer immensity of how much had been taken from me. When things had been taken from me before, my mom was always there. But this time, nothing was there, I had no one to cling to, I had nothing that was familiar. I was lost.

That was when my ticks started. The mental and emotional strain had caused me to develop turrets syndrome. I would twitch, or shake, or bend my neck oddly until my muscles would ache from the strain of it. I would sometimes go into the bathroom, overcome by the need to twist and contort my head, and would stand there in front of the mirror, watching myself literally turn in circles, unable to stop it, and realizing that I was broken.

It was another thing people would make fun of, and it would be with me forever.

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## UNEXPECTED DELIVERY

For months, I would spend most nights lying in my bed until my brothers were asleep, and then turning over and sobbing into my pillow, begging for God to bring me back my mom. These were my first prayers. And they were desperate. "Please, please, please, please, bring back my mom... if you're there, please hear me, bring back my mom."

But he didn't.

Instead, something else happened. Looking around me and feeling entirely alone, it was only then that I realized I wasn't. It was only after everything had been stripped from me, that my eyes could see what was there all along.



"I REALIZED I HAD  
A CHOICE"

It was then that I came to know God. It happened over time, but it was very real. I felt his love, I felt his warmth, I felt his comfort, I felt his presence. It was transformative.

And instead of bringing back my mom, which is what I asked for, indeed, all I cared about, he gave me something greater. He gave me strength. He showed me how to forgive. He showed me how to endure. He showed me I was greater than the circumstances of my life. We all are.

He showed me that the purpose of life was not comfort, but strength and progress, which only come from opposition. And the greater the opposition you overcome, the greater the strength you develop.

It wasn't easy, in fact it took several years. But during this time, and with God's help, I realized that I had a choice. We all do. I realized I could either choose to be consumed by sadness, or fear, or anger, or depression, and be captive their despair; or I could rise above it all.

I realized that while I didn't get to choose what life did to me, I did get to choose how I would perceive it. I realized I could choose to let go of my past, and in doing so, I could embrace a new future. So that's what I did.

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## A GREATER HOPE

It was then that I made the tough decision. It was the decision to stop hoping my mom would return for me.

It was holding me back. And it wasn't fair to my new mom, who in her angelic way was trying so hard to fill that role, and by focusing so much on that vain hope, I wasn't letting her.

I realized that the past tends to cling to us, like a leech, siphoning the energy we could otherwise use to move forward, kept alive by things as seemingly innocent as our hope, or our refusal to let go.

I realized I was clinging to the past, and it was preventing me from focusing on the future, a much greater hope. So I chose to hope for the future. I chose to let go.

And that was when I was tested.

No sooner had I let go, then one Sunday morning the phone rang, and my Dad came into my room and handed it to me, "it's for you".

It was my mom. She wanted me to come back. She was ready for me, she said. But that's a story I'll save for later.



"I CHOSE TO  
HOPE FOR THE  
FUTURE"

I had chosen my path, I had found solidarity, I was moving forward.

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## ENGINEERING MY LIFE

When I was 18, I wanted to give back, so I volunteered two years of my life to go serve an LDS mission. I was sent to Sydney Australia, where I learned Mandarin Chinese, and spent two fully-dedicated years not working, or going to school, or doing anything but teaching these beautiful people from mainland China about the Savior, and God, and sharing my experience of how he had changed my life, and showing them how he could change theirs too.

It was an amazing, unexplainable experience, to be lost in a greater cause.

When I came back to the United States, I studied psychology at the University of Utah. I married the most beautiful woman in the world, a girl from Utah that I actually met in Australia.

Now we have 7 amazing children. Yep, seven. They are the most happy, intelligent, sarcastic, funny, delightful humans you will ever meet. We are best friends. They fill my life with joy, and give it meaning and purpose. We have a home where light and truth prevails. Each morning I wake them up with a long, warm hug and a kiss, and dance with my baby in our living room. It's heaven. They will have what I didn't.

I made a career for myself in business, inventing, designing, and managing software products, and later heading up product and product marketing groups and business units.

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## LIFE ENGINEERING

During this time, the better part of the last 20 years (I'm almost 40 now), I've invested nearly every available hour studying the psychology of change, from a biological to a behavioral level; studying engineering; management, product, and marketing methodologies; science and physics.

What I've discovered is that the principles in these fields and disciplines have equal application to life itself.

I discovered that true principles are almost universally applicable. That every physical law has it's spiritual or emotional shadow. That principles from



"7 CHILDREN  
WHO FILL MY LIFE  
WITH JOY"



"YOU HAVE  
STRENGTH TO  
OVERCOME, TO

disparate disciplines, when extracted and applied to life, can provide powerful insight and perspective.

I've spent the last 20 years synthesizing that information, and building a system and methodology for life, and am **now publishing it to the world.**

It's a movement called **Life-Engineering**, founded on the premise that you have more control over your life than you know. That success and change rest upon a common foundation of scientific and engineering principles that when properly applied, give you control over your future.

I've codified this into a **Change Enablement System** and a framework for living called **Escape Velocity**, which teaches you how to escape the gravitational pull of your past, to create a future of your own design.

I've come to understand that you have strength within you. Strength to overcome, strength to endure, strength to succeed. Sometimes all you need is a little help.

That's what **Life-Engineering** is all about. After all, what my life has taught me is that it is not your past that matters, but your future. That is where you should find your hope. And you should make it great.

ENDURE, TO  
SUCCEED"