

Balcony People

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*"Our Life is like a Beautiful Sculpture...
that begins as a lump of Clay,
But like that sculpture, we won't become a Masterpiece...
until Shaped by hands Along the way".*

I wrote that little poem several years ago to introduce the concept I want to share with you. Over my 30 year career, the business world of sales has introduced libraries full of "self help" books that embrace the thought that we are responsible for our own success. Those books and that theme has produced many quotes such as "If it is to be... it is up to me." And even though our business careers must include goal setting which requires self initiation and self discipline, I am talking about a much bigger issue. I believe we are WHO we are today because of the people who have helped shape our lives.

This idea was made clear to me with a simple book entitled *Balcony People*, written by Joyce Landorf Heatherly. This simple book of 67 pages changed my life and it was given to me, by a close MDRT friend in 1985, after my Mother died.

Heatherly says there are two types of people in our life, the balcony person and the basement person. Imagine a person, standing on a balcony... and leaning over to lift someone else up. Now that is a metaphor for someone who has encouraged us, helped us, motivated us, loved us, instructed us, or maybe someone who sat and listened about our problems: A mother, father, brother, sister, friend, preacher, rabbi, or priest; a teacher, a coach, a colleague in the next office, an agency manager or even a stranger. The balcony people in our life are those that help shape us in a positive way.

The opposite is the basement person. The author describes that person as one who is standing in the basement of our life always pulling us down. A negative remark, ridicule, someone who discourages us, made fun of our dreams, didn't have the time to listen to our problems. I won't dwell on those people today, but you need to know the definition so you will understand it. This book and the balcony people concept has become a theme for my life.

Balcony People *(continued)*

It had such an impact on me, that in 1986, I asked my wife and two young daughters to read it. It made an impact on them as well and even though today both daughters are grown and married, the term balcony person comes up often in our daily lives. Isn't it amazing that sometimes the simplest concept will make a difference in a person, a family, friend or colleague?

The book suggests an exercise that will help you identify the people in your life who really made a positive difference. Think about the balcony people who have helped shape your life. I did that exercise almost twenty years ago, and I want to share some of the people who came to mind.

The first one was my mother. Now, she was a true balcony person to everyone she met. It didn't matter if you were the garbage man, the waiter at the restaurant, her friends or her family, she was always lifting everyone around her. She was present at every school event, every ball game, every celebration or at any sign of trouble or crisis. She was there to defend me, encourage me, protect me, provide for me, and to make sure that I went to church and knew the difference between right and wrong. And she didn't have it easy. You see, my dad was an Air Force fighter pilot, a decorated World War II veteran and while flying with the Air National Guard in 1955, was killed on a routine training flight when my twin brother and I were only 5 years old, and our sister Carole was seven. We were living in a small town in Ohio having Sunday lunch with my grandparents, when we received the call that fateful day. Even though I was 5 years old, I vividly remember the military funeral, the 21 gun salute, and the flag draped coffin. My Mother had the strength, the confidence and the courage to move us back to her hometown of Nashville, Tennessee and start all over again.

Even though I don't remember much about my dad, he also lifted our entire family by purchasing a life insurance policy a few months before he died. That financial support helped my mother live in dignity while she rebuilt our lives:

The best example of her lifting others was how she raised my older sister Carole. You see, Carole was born with a birth defect, an undeveloped left hand. My mother never

let Carole feel sorry for herself and made her feel special, not handicapped. It worked. Carole has always been confident, friendly, popular and inspiring. In high school she was a cheerleader and homecoming queen. In college, she was a cheerleader and homecoming queen. Come to think of it, I think she majored in cheerleading and minored in everything else. Today, Carole is a successful social worker with a Masters in Special Education, and a balcony person to others who have disabilities or special needs.

Even though we didn't have a Comfort Zone Camp when I was growing up, I had Coach Lew, my little league baseball coach, and second balcony person that came to mind. He took on an important role in the lives of my twin brother and me. He took us under his wing when we were nine years old and treated us just like his own. I was skinny and my twin brother was chubby and we had never played sports before. He introduced us to athletics, competition, teamwork, and self discipline. He taught us about winning, losing and good sportsmanship. After three years of little league baseball, Coach Lew became an assistant scout leader and invited us to join his son in the Boy Scouts of America. Soon we were camping, canoeing, tying knots, hiking and learning how to survive in the woods. He taught us about leadership and to learn to make good decisions. We learned about God and Country, we learned about integrity and honor. Three years later, he helped us to achieve the rank of Eagle, the pinnacle of the scout rank. He was a balcony person that lifted us into young men and helped develop skills and techniques that would carry my twin brother and me to the exciting levels of USAF fighter pilots, just like our dad. He filled in for the dad we had lost. Those six years prepared my brother and me for much of the success we have had in sports, defending our country flying jets, and in our business. Coach Lew stood on the balcony of my life and lifted me up.

The third person that came to mind almost twenty years ago was Mr. Maxwell, the first Sunday School teacher that Karen and I had as a young married couple. A "father-like image" to the young married couples in his class, Mr. Maxwell was a godly man who helped shape my spiritual path in a profound way that continues today. I was

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a young husband and father and needed a spiritual mentor in my life. Even though I had been raised in a Christian home and had attended church my whole life, I didn't have the confidence or understanding of my faith to think that I could have an impact on others because I didn't think I was "good enough." Mr. Maxwell encouraged me in 1989 to go on a two-week construction mission trip to Central America with our church; and that experience led to two other mission trips in western Africa and taught me that my spiritual journey was just that... a journey. My spiritual journey continues; it has been my moral compass to keep me going in the right direction and to bring me back when I get off track. Mr. Maxwell was standing in my spiritual balcony when I needed it the most.

Well, there have been many other balcony people in my life through the years: Karen, my wife of 32 years, my children Michele and Julie, my twin brother and both sisters and other good friends, some of the closest are in this very room.

In fact, MDRT is a place full of "balcony people" - a place where people from over seventy countries come to share and help one another. Many people I have met at my 23 MDRT meetings have influenced, shaped and lifted my life. That's what we do for each other.

Our industry is a "balcony people" type of industry.

The products we provide lift families up when they need it most, don't they? It certainly lifted my family when we needed it the most.

Being a balcony person is all about family - our immediate family and our world family - lifting each other to heights that could not have been achieved on our own. I offer you this challenge - who are your balcony people? Do they know it? It only takes a moment to tell them. And then it becomes your turn.

I always close with a poem I wrote in honor of my mother and all of the balcony people in my life and I would like to share it with you as I close. It is entitled, "Lifting to the balcony".

A lot can be said about you and me.
Ask the people we know, what do they see?
Do we pull others down critically,
Or do we lift them up to the balcony?

Our actions tell a lot about you and me.
Ask those that care, what do they see?
Are we angry, jealous, resentful no less,
Or we full of love, touch and forgiveness?

Our legacy will tell a lot about you and me.
Ask those that remember, what did they see?
Were we an anchor... and now they are free,
Or are we still lifting up to the balcony?

God Bless, thank you and I will see you in the balcony.