

THUMBS UP . . . OR THE LIONS?

It was not my day.

Have you ever had days like that. You know what I mean. What Tennessee Williams called: “The darkest, vilest February day of my soul.”

Days when nothing seems to go the way you planned. Or the way you hoped. Days when the toast drops, it falls jelly and butter-side down.

You know the feeling. Well, that’s the kind of day I was having.

I’ll explain. First, let me take you back to that scene in *Through The Looking Glass*. The White Queen is talking to Alice about how delicious the Royal Jam is, and tells Alice she will give her some.

But the Queen says: “The rule is, jam yesterday and jam tomorrow — but never jam today.”

“There must be sometime that it’s jam today, “ Alice objects.

“No, it can’t,” says the Queen. “It’s jam every other day. Today isn’t any other day, you know.”

Well, how to begin. The day was like the opening scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Harrison Ford is being chased by the giant rolling boulder. That’s how I felt.

I was asked by a client, one of the major universities in the country, to call on their wealthiest graduate. I make a lot of calls and I love it. So, it would not be unusual for me to make an ask. In this case, for a variety of reasons, I was precisely the right person to ask for the gift.

I had never met the alum before. My charge from the president was to ask for \$50 million.

Now, I don’t know about you. Perhaps you’re accustomed to asking for that much. But for me, that got the adrenalin going at a maddening pace.

When the day came, I remembered Alice. No jam today. From the moment I approached his office building, I’m thinking like the Gladiator in the Roman Coliseum — will it be Thumbs Up or be eaten by the lions.



I'll call him John. That's not his real name. You'd recognize it if I told you. But I won't divulge the name even if you pulled out my fingernails with pliers. Well...maybe I would give you the one name after the first finger nail. But no more than that.

I'll tell you what we know about John. He's in his late 80s. He has a net worth of about \$3 billion. That's as best we can determine. But what's the difference— give or take a couple hundred million here or there.

He gives every year to the University. Most often it's \$100,000. Three times he has, in a capital campaign, made seven-figure gifts. There were two for \$1 million each and one for \$2 million. He loves the University. He says everything he is today he owes to the University.

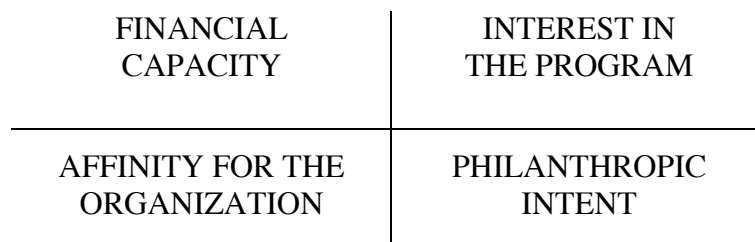
Are you with me so far?

I know what you're thinking. You ask what gives us encouragement to ask for \$50 million. Is that a realistic figure? You're asking the right question.

You know my rule. In a major capital campaign, you can pretty much count on 10 to 25 times the annual gift. That's not going to be precise but it will provide a good beginning in your planning. In John's case, that would mean his gift would be somewhere between \$1 to \$2.5 million. Miles from the \$50 million I am seeking.

But fundraising is more an art than a science. I want you to remember that. I'll keep returning to that point. There are times you throw away the rulebooks. (None of my books, however!)

Think of the quadrant of giving I like to talk about. There may be other factors, but these pretty much determine the gift.



John scores high on all counts. The campaign is for \$800 million for endowment. All for endowment. John's three major gifts in the past were each for endowment. I'm singing the doxology. I'm certain this program will be of interest to him.



Here's something of importance to keep in mind. We can also make a strong case for how important his gift of \$50 million will be to the success of a campaign the size we are undertaking. It won't assure reaching goal, but it will go a long way to celebrating a victory.

He has demonstrated philanthropic intent. It's not nearly what he is capable of giving. But at least it won't be like getting the first olive out of the jar.

As far as affinity is concerned, we're in great shape. He was a member of the University board for sixteen years. He finally had to leave when he reached the required bylaws 75 years of age. (Although they managed to extend his tenure a few years beyond that by some clever manipulation— smart move!)

He never missed a meeting in all his years. Not one. He is devoted to the University. "Everything I am today, I owe to the University," he tells me when I meet with him. I'm lighting holy candles.

And as far as financial capacity is concerned . . . well! Forget my rule of 10 to 25 times annual gift. Remember, it's more an art than a science.

I agree with the folks from the University. Aim at the stars, I'm thinking. You may not reach them. But your arrow will fly higher than if aimed at an object on a level with yourself.

In John's case, all the factors in the quadrant are in proper place, joyfully so. Except for one thing: The level of his past giving. (Not an insignificant matter. I'll need to explore in my visit why he has aimed so low.)

A verity I preach is, if you think something is impossible— it always puts you on the losing side. Nothing in life is more joyful than knowing you must roll up your sleeves and explore the boundaries of the possible. Achieving the impossible is the medicine of the soul. It is more than that. It is life.

The great failure in life is not to make the attempt. It is no accident that the word *Risk* in Arabic means, "earning one's daily bread."

There's one thing more. I believe in miracles. What?, you say.

Yes, I believe in miracles. I am one with Ansel Adams, the renowned photographer. He says he waits for a miracle. "People think I'm crazy. 'Are you waiting?' 'Yes.' 'What for?' 'I don't know.' 'And you hope anyway?' And then all of a sudden there's a miracle."



Now as Paul Harvey would say: And now, here's the rest of the story.

The day has arrived. I get off the elevator on the Executive Floor. Even at his age, he is the chief executive officer and major stockowner of this large corporation. I've been making calls for a number of years. More than you, I bet. Even with my experience, I'm having a severe case of *Doorknobaphobia*.

If you've read my book, ASKING— you know how dreaded a syndrome this can be. (What? You haven't read my book yet. Shame.) But there's good news. The disease is curable.

Doorknobaphobia is knowing you are about to make a call for a gift. But you are afraid to touch the doorknob to enter the office. I'm thinking: "If I go in there and ask for fifty million dollars, he's going to throw me out into the hallway."

What's the worst that can happen? I'm in the hallway now anyway. If he throws me out, I'll be back in the hallway. I haven't lost anything.

Let's go for it. I brace myself. I pray God will lift up upon me the light of His countenance.

I keep repeating under my breath: fifty million dollars, fifty million dollars, fifty million dollars. I don't want to choke on that when the time comes to ask, and I don't want to feel I have a chicken bone caught in my throat. I want to get accustomed to saying the words.

John hears the outer door open and he comes running out to greet me. He says to his Assistant: "I've got fifteen minutes for this young man. Please don't disturb us." (I'm at that age where I have all the wisdom of youth and the energy of the old. No one has called me a young man for so long I figure this is going to be a wonderful visit no matter what he decides to do.)

Even in a brief time, I find out a great deal about John. I probe, I ask open questions. And he's a willing talker.

I glance at my watch. Twenty minutes has speeded by. It's been a great visit. But it grieves me to tell you that I haven't been close to bringing up the question about his gift. Be honest, you can identify with that can't you? Okay, if you're so brave, let me know the next time you ask for fifty million so we can compare notes.

I think it's fair to tell him that I've stayed my allotted time. He does what almost invariably happens. "Oh, it's all right. We can take more time." In this case, I'm not certain whether to be pleased or not. I still have to ask for the gift.



The next time I look at my watch, two hours have gone by. We have now talked about the campaign, but I still haven't asked for a gift. I feel I am making progress backwards.

Then something extraordinary happens. Fasten your seat belt.

His Assistant knocks on the door. (I'm embarrassed to admit to you I'm somewhat relieved. I'll come back and fight the battle another day.) But no, that's not the reason for the interruption. My time isn't yet up.

The Assistant says: "Sir Charles is on the phone. He says you called him." I ask John in a hushed tone (as a priest might speak to the Holy Father): "Would you like me to leave?"

"No, you can stay. Sir Charles is the head of Christies (the giant Auction House). He's just returning my call."

To this day, I can't tell for certain. But from the way he motions me back in my chair, I think he actually wants me to hear the conversation.

This is a slight diversion and has nothing to do with the ask (I still haven't made). But because you and I are now friends, if you have read thus far, I'll tell you what transpired. It is unforgettable.

"Hello, Charlie, how are you. It's been too long since we talked last. How have you been?" Then followed a few minutes of casual chitchat and pleasantries. But get ready for this.

"You know that Van Gough I passed up last year for \$78 million. Well, I've been regretting it every day since. How much is that new Van Gough going to go for?"

John is listening intently. (I am, too, but I'm trying to give the appearance I'm a thousand miles away. I am as loose as water.) Here's what I hear next. I am being careful not to spin out of my chair.

"A hundred and ten million dollars. Oh, my God! I knew it was going to be high, but I didn't think that much. Well, I feel we ought to go for it, don't you? Yeah, yeah, that's what I thought you would say. Okay, let's go for it." Then some small talk and the promise to get together for lunch the next time Sir Charles is in the States.

I hear all of this. I feel like an elephant in the living room.



I was certain you wouldn't mind that brief interruption about the phone call. You will remember that Leonardo da Vinci said: "The reader will not wonder if I make great jumps from one subject to another."

I am trying to think of something brilliant to say following his phone conversation.

Because of what I heard, I am looking for art in his office. But the walls are absolutely bare. Perhaps you don't bring a Chagall or a Rembrandt to the office. The walls are bare, as I just reported— except for one thing. You would have spotted it, too. It was a framed Certificate that he is a Trustee of the Smithsonian Institute.

Well, that is a very special group, a Presidential appointment. He must be terribly proud of the affiliation to have the Certificate framed and on his wall.

Soon I have a revelation. You would have asked the same questions I do. It is inspired. You will agree.

"Don't I remember the Smithsonian is having a major campaign? (I figure I'm safe. Everyone is having a major campaign.)"

"They are indeed."

"Have you made a gift to the campaign?"

"Of course. If you're a Trustee you must give. That's expected."

"Tell me, how much did you give?" (All of this quite conversational. I am only a few feet from him and probing quietly.)

"Five million dollars. A million a year for five years."

"Five million dollars! That's wonderful. Tell me, John, is that a large gift for you?"

"The largest I have ever made."

You're thinking the same thing I am. I can confide to you I felt sunk. If that is the largest gift John has ever made, we're a long way from fifty million.

What would you have done? Oh sure, you're coming up with some superb strategy. Easy for you. But at this very moment, you're not sitting in front of John. I feel like a gunfighter dodging bullets. I plow on.



We talk some more about the importance of endowment and how this impacts the lives of students who will be attending the University for generations to come. John came to the University on a scholarship. He understands the significance. I've touched a nerve.

You know what comes next.

“John, for all the University means to you, we would like you to consider a gift of fifty million dollars.” Then I pause. (I've coached you before about doing this.) But in this case, the pause seems minutes. I want to reach over and take his pulse. The silence is deafening.

Here's what happens next. He reaches across and places his hand on mine. He says: “This campaign will be successful.” (I consider that a positive augury. But I'm not certain. What would you guess? I have answers and responses to hundreds of comments, but nothing like what I hear from John.) I reply.

“This campaign will be successful. It must be. And with your fifty million dollar gift, the endowment the University so sorely needs is assured.”

He is still holding my hand. I put my free hand on his. There we are, the two of us holding hands, for heaven's sake. I've never read what to do in any situation like this.

I'm not prepared for this. I've been told when you see two scorpions very close together, they're either making love or one of them is being eaten by the other. He repeats: “This campaign will be successful.”

I'm still not certain. I ask my Four Magic Questions. (If you want to know what they are, read my book!) For the first time in hundreds of calls, even these don't work. I keep thinking it's more an art than a science.

I ask twice more for the fifty million. (I feel like an old hound dog that stops at every tree.) The response is always the same. Nietzsche said: “What does not kill you only makes you stronger.”

We chat some more. Mostly what St. Paul referred to as, *Spermologos* (idle blabber). The fifteen minutes I was originally allotted has now grown to nearly three hours. I remember I must get a commitment to something before leaving. If it's not a gift, then it must be to a new date for another visit. We set a date.

There's just one bit more before I report to you what we finally decided to do. This is not absolutely relevant, but because we're friends I can't resist telling you.



Here's what happens. I've had an exhausting three hours, filled with bristling anxiety and some considerable frustration. And I'm also feeling a little hyped, like you do when finishing a hard race— exhausted but exhilarated.

I'm out in the hallway again. I'm thinking of a line from the Grateful Dead's 1970 anthem, *Truckin'*: "Lately it occurs to me, what a long strange trip it has been."

I push the Down Button for the elevator. John comes rushing out of his office. "Jerry, that was a wonderful visit. Do you mind if I take my coffee cup back?" Yes, in my excitement, I had actually taken his coffee cup to the elevator, my hands glued in a death grip to the handle. He had to tear it away from me.

I get in the elevator. As the door closes, I hear him say: "Jerry, this campaign will be successful."

You've been wondering about the outcome. Well, here's what we decided to do. I'll shorten this though we took hours to develop our thinking and strategy. We decided to ask for a cash gift of \$5 million, equal to the largest he ever made.

You're second-guessing me. I can just feel it. Would you have persisted, asked again for the fifty million— and perhaps lose everything? I can hear you quoting Michelangelo: "The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but it is too low and we reach it." Yes, we thought of that. We still asked for five million. But I must tell you the question remains with me to this day— like a pebble in my shoe.

He made the gift. We were pretty certain he would. We are going to provide stewardship unlike anything you can imagine. We're going to follow the dictum of Mary Kay: "Make me feel important and appreciated."

In twelve months, we're going back for another \$5 million. Then the year after that. And the year after that. We believe he will be responsive.

You will be pleased to know we have now received three other gifts to the campaign for \$25 million each. And there's John's \$5 million, which we expect will grow. The campaign will indeed be successful.

Regarding the \$50 million request. Sometimes you settle for half. At times less than half. The literature of Chasidism tells us the wife of the rabbi said to him one day: "You prayed so long and feverishly today. What was it for?"



“I was praying the rich would be more generous in their gifts to the poor.”

“Was your prayer successful?”

“Half my prayer was successful. The poor are willing to accept the gifts.”

Well, how do you grade me? Email (ideas@panaslinzy.com). Is it Thumbs Up...or do you throw me to the lions? I'll tally the votes and let you know. I'll also be interested in your strategy and thinking regarding this call. What would you have done?

What I wrote about was the first in a series of many visits over an extended period of eleven months. We brought up the question of \$50 million in each visit, but with no encouragement. The final determination on our part to ask for the \$5 million came after hours and hours of discussion with the staff and the chairman of the campaign.

As complex as the first visit was, it was a completely joyful experience for me. Every moment of it. Out of the many contacts came some principles of our work and life. I'd like to pass on the lessons to you.

- 1 **Believe In Miracles.** I believe in miracles. I want you to, also. I've been at this long enough I've seen it happen time and time again in wondrous ways.

I am fiercely realistic in the way I plan my work and make my projections. I can't function any other way. But I do know that even in your careful planning, the unexpected happens. Something serendipitous. It happens in virtually every program and in every campaign.

Serendipity is an interesting word. Horace Walpole coined it over 200 years ago. He picked up the word from the story of three princes from Serendip, the ancient name for Ceylon.

Wherever the princes went, they never found what they were seeking, but always something else. The word serendipity came to mean finding something very special that could not have been found unless one had been seeking something else.

V.S. Naipaul wrote: “All that I had was an idea— and it was like a belief in magic— that one day something would happen to me, an illumination would come, a miracle. What I had to do was hold myself in readiness so that I could recognize the moment.”

I want you to believe in miracles. You realize George Bernard Shaw said it all in the title of his play, *You Never Can Tell*.



- 2 **Don't Be Afraid To Fail.** Be courageous— and if you do fail, find out why and try again. Thomas Watson, former chairman and CEO of IBM once said to his executive staff: “There must be something wrong. We are not having enough failures. Our people are playing too safe. This is dangerous for us.”

If you haven't done as well as you hoped, think of a different way. Take action. Here's a lesson from *Winnie-The-Pooh*. “Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it.

Fundraising is the pursuit of the possible. To use an electronics analogy...when you say impossible, it's like pressing the Off Button. Whereas when you say, *Let's Try It*— you've only pressed Pause.

To keep trying requires courage, intelligence, and heart. Remember when Toto pulls the curtain down and finds the Wizard of Oz is a fraud, an absolute phony. He has no power at all. Then the Wizard himself helps them realize the real magic is inside each of them, and that they had it all along.

Courage. Brains. And a heart. They found their way back to Kansas. But What they really found is that what they really needed, they already had.

Benjamin Zander was conductor of the Boston Philharmonic. He says: “I know full well every time I step onto the podium, I take a risk things won't turn out exactly as I hoped— but then there is no great music-making without risk taking.

The key to life is how well you deal with Plan B. Be unafraid. If you do fail, Fail Forward. Be like Zander— make beautiful music.

- 3 **It's More An Art Than A Science.** Da Vinci gave us Seven Principles. One of them he called, *Sfumoto*. It literally means, “Going Up In Smoke. He said you must be willing to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty.

The most effective fundraisers live with ambiguity. It is a threat only to rigid minds and brittle psyches. There are times there are no rules to guide you, no charted road. The street sign at the intersection reads: “Not Certain.” “There is no clear answer to this question,” Churchill said. “I know I will have failed if I don't at least make the attempt.”



4 **Along The Way Have Fun.** Fundraising is an exciting and daring adventure.

We're not always certain of the results but when we are successful, there is nothing quite like the fulfillment we feel. It's the flame of fire that burns inside.

Don't die with the music still inside you. If you're not having fun, something is wrong. You're either in the wrong profession or in the wrong organization. Life and this work should be a wondrous joy. Don't be like some who watch television but miss the show.

Be a grateful diner at fundraising's feast. Follow Jonathan Swift's dictum: "Find joy in what you do so that you may live all the days of your life."

Back once more to John and my \$50 million request
Everyone said it couldn't be done,
And if I tried, I'd rue it.
But I tackled the thing that couldn't be done –
And indeed found I couldn't do it.

