

Walter Deyhle

Always Wonder What You're Going to Learn

Walter Deyhle is blessed with the ability to change the way he sees himself when circumstances knock the scales off his eyes. He counts two such experiences among his life-defining moments.

The first took place some twenty years ago. Walter and his wife, Barbara, had settled into a pattern that's common in mixed marriages: set the whole question of faith aside and spend Sundays developing home life. In their case, 'mixed marriage' meant Walter had grown up Catholic, and Barbara had been raised under the auspices of the Church of Christ. Neither of them was eager to assimilate into the other's tradition.

"I saw my faith as, you know, the original version," Walter says, "and even though Barbara's church had some elements that were similar, I didn't want to switch, and neither did she."

So they secularized, and that was okay — Walter says the object that represents his center is the barbecue grill in his back yard, because so much family activity centered around it: all four Deyhle boys and many of their friends romping and frolicking on the lawn while Walter and Barbara flipped the burgers and basted the chicken.

A good life, but there was something missing. "We had four young sons," Walter says, "and since both of us had grown up knowing God, we felt they should, too." So when new friends in a new neighborhood invited them to attend a local non-denominational church, neither his tradition nor hers, they decided to give it a try.

"It was different from anything we'd ever seen before," Walter says. "People actually worshipped. I was like, 'Wow, these people are really affected by what's being sung and what's being said.' Like they're lifting their arms and everything. Both of us were pretty sure the other

one was turned off by this, so in the car on the way home I'm waiting for her to say how horrible it was and she's waiting for me to say how horrible it was, but neither of us said anything until I finally got my nerve up and said, 'That was pretty good, wasn't it?' and she said, 'Yeah, it really was.' So we went back.

"They had a children's ministry, which was another new experience for us," Walter explains. "At the Catholic church, your kids stay in the service with you — we had taken ours a couple of times, and half way through we'd realize that one had crawled under the pew and he was four or five rows back. But this place had dedicated children's programming, which was entirely different. One day we were leaving the parking lot and my older son says, 'Thanks for finding us a church, Dad.'"

Another distinctive feature of our new church was that members sometimes came forward to witness, and one day a man Walter respected rose to share a vision he had had. He said the Lord had shown him a picture of the boardwalk at Ocean City, and suddenly Christ was there. So all the people on the boardwalk lined up to meet Jesus, and He went along the line saying either, 'I know you,' or 'I don't know you.' The man went on to suggest that some of the people who expected to be known — including people who were sitting in church that day — might be surprised to hear Jesus disavow them.

"And suddenly I realized he was talking about me," Walter says. "My wife and I vacation on the boardwalk at Ocean City every year. I was living the American Dream — great career, great wife, great kids — but I didn't have a real relationship with my savior. After that, everything changed."

Walter is the senior tax partner at the accounting firm Gelman, Rosenberg, and



Freedman. He joined that firm in 1983, right after completing his undergraduate degree at the University of Maryland. "Back then it was an employer's market," Walter says, meaning that if you didn't have a perfect academic record, you had to take whatever offer you might get, but early in his tenure at GRF, an incident told Walter he had landed in the right place.

"At that point the firm had only six employees," Walter says, "which was great for me because it meant that I got to do everything — taxes, auditing, accounting — and handling clients on my own from the very beginning. One day I was meeting with a client who ran a video store, and I noticed that her records showed no activity on Tuesdays. I thought maybe they were closed on Tuesdays, but she said no, they just didn't run anything through the system on Tuesdays. So after the meeting I was talking with Michael Gelman, and I asked if it was normal that they just wouldn't run anything through their system one day a week. The next thing I know, he has the client on the phone, and he says, 'You have two choices: recreate everything that happened on Tuesdays this past year, or come and get your records and find another accountant.'

"As a young person on the staff, that really impacted me because clients are the lifeblood of your firm. But that showed me that what's more important is your values and your ethics," Walter says.

"Then in 1986 there were incredible changes in tax law, which was also great for me because it meant that a lot of the things older people knew were no longer relevant, so I was given the reigns to the tax department, which was small at that point, but I set to work learning the various computer tax programs, and we grew. My first year at the firm, our revenue was about a million dollars, and now we're up to 25 million, and we have 110 employees."

That success notwithstanding, Walter doesn't have the classic accountant's personality, he says. "In high school I was better in English than in math. I was a fantastic creative writer — my classmates were always eager to hear me read my work. But I was never going to make money doing that, so I gave it up."

The practical component of his personality might be traceable to losing his father at an early age. "My dad was a CPA with Price Waterhouse, and his biggest client was Allstate Insurance. Well,

when they opened an investment arm, they offered him the job of CFO in that new venture. So he moved the family from Maryland to Chicago, where Allstate was headquartered, and four months later he died, in his early forties."

In the aftermath of that tragedy, Walter's mother brought her children back to Silver Spring, where her own family had its roots, and that's where Walter grew up. He got his elementary education at St. Joseph's Catholic School in Beltsville, and went to Good Counsel High School in Wheaton, which was something of a step up in the world.

"Most of the Good Counsel families were upper middle class, and we really weren't," Walter says. "But there's a benefit to hanging around people who are better off. It pushes you to excel."

School was important to Walter — he worked hard and did well — but sports were the real enthusiasm of his youth, especially football. He had the good fortune of being coached by men whose judgement was not clouded by having sons on their team. "They were like Vince Lombardi to me," Walter says. "They would do things that would get them fired today — they would scream and they would cuss, and if you weren't paying attention they would grab your face mask. And I really liked that discipline. It made us really good."

Walter traces his work ethic to his mother, who ran the household alone after losing the father of her children, and continued to exert primary influence after remarrying. Walter went to work delivering papers at the age of eleven, and he has been employed ever since, working at Sears through high school and college, and bolstering his income with construction work in the summer.

"I was a practical teenager," Walter recalls. "I probably could have played football at a small college, but I knew that wouldn't go anywhere, so I just went to the University of Maryland. I didn't have a passion for any particular career at that point, so I decided just to go for a degree that would get me a job, which meant engineering, medicine, law, or accounting, and the last of those seemed like the best fit for me."

His tenure at Maryland afforded another opportunity to re-examine himself. He joined a fraternity in his first year, and in some ways that affiliation resembled his experience at Good Counsel. "Most people there were ambitious," Walter recalls, "but there was also a lot of partying

—so much partying, in fact, that I actually went through a whole year without earning any credits. It seemed funny at the time, but looking back it was one of the saddest parts of my life. I had always thought of myself as a disciplined person, but with no one making me get up, I wasn't even going to class. And it scared me to have so little self-control."

It scared his mother, too, because, as she revealed at that time, she had been married to another man before meeting Walter's father — an alcoholic who abused her to such a degree that she was forced to divorce him and start over. So seeing Walter tread a similar path, even briefly, was alarming to her.

In an effort to allay his mother's fears — and his own — Walter joined forces with a couple of friends who were in the same boat. "We agreed to get together every evening after class to play handball or basketball and then go to the library together," he says, "and that's how we got out." Shortly thereafter he met Barbara. They became engaged in 1982 and were married in 1983, just before Walter went to work at GRF.

Walter and Barbara had four sons in rapid succession. Barbara stepped away from her career with Sears to run the household, and Walter worked on growing the tax department at Gellman, Rosenberg. "The firm's motto, 'Where personal attention will never become obsolete,' really does explain us," Walter says. "We're large enough to have all the technical capacity a client could want, but small enough that you know your calls are going to be returned. And you're dealing with partners directly."

Walter's mother died in 1993, and shortly thereafter he and Barbara made their first visit to their future church and embraced a new spiritual home.

"For me, what the church impacted most was my life as a husband and a father," Walter says. "I can be prideful and selfish, and a richer relationship with Christ forced me to confront that."

"As an accountant, I always like to have my finances in a row," Walter adds, "and like most people I would throw 20 dollars in the collection basket without another thought. But at our new church we started to tithe. Like, at the end of the year I'd donate my whole bonus check. It's all from God anyway," he says. "None of it's mine to keep."

Recently, that reality was underscored in

another unexpected event that refocused Walter's vision. Five years ago, Walter and Barbara bought a house near Wilmington, North Carolina, where their oldest son lives. When the time comes, they plan to retire there. In preparation for that change, Barbara had already moved into the house and started building a life there: she had joined a Bible study group, a Mahjong club, and a quilting club, and she was building friendships with neighbors. For his part, Walter was spending four days a week at the new house, working from that location on Fridays and Mondays. It was an exciting transition toward a new phase in life.

"And then Hurricane Florence hit," Walter explains. "It sat over Wilmington for a couple of days, and the northern rain bands fell all along the Cape Fear River, which is about a mile from our house. And we didn't have flood insurance. No one in the neighborhood did, because the river is a mile away."

Under normal circumstances, a mile would constitute plenty of buffer space between one's home and any flooding that may transgress a river's banks, but Florence dropped 23 inches of rain on the Wilmington area in two days, filling Walter's house with water from floor to ceiling.

"I'm a person who thrives in chaos," Walter says. "During tax season, for example, I love having fifty returns that have to be reviewed in the next two days — that sort of stuff gets me going — but I went down there and I just froze. Because there was nothing I could do to make it better."

"I'm still working through what all this means. Spiritually, we understand: things on this earth are fleeting — I didn't really need the flood to convince me of that. Or maybe I did, because, you know, it's almost like you're trying to create your little heaven on earth."

Everything had to be dragged out of that little heaven and trashed.

"I had bought this really nice golf cart," Walter says, "and it was parked in the garage, which filled with water to the roof — completely destroyed. And as they're dragging that golf cart out to haul it to the dump along with everything else — and I mean everything on the first floor of the house; we had to tear it down to the studs — I suddenly remembered that there were a dozen new golf balls in the glove compartment, so I said 'Wait, wait!' And I ran over and pulled those golf balls out," Walter recalls. "Like all of a sudden that

was going to make the difference.”

For Walter, the real difference made by that event has nothing to do with golf, or houses, or flood insurance. The real difference is a better sense of what makes heaven on earth: caring about other people, especially his wife. “For her it was like the Bible — before the flood and after the flood,” Walter says. “I was still living in Maryland most of the time, but her whole life was down there. And it was wrapped up in the lives of all her friends, most of whom were devastated. And she has great concern for other people — that’s just who she is. So since then I’ve realized that she needs a different kind of care from me. And I’m glad to be able to give it.”

Walter and Barbara have decided to rebuild instead of selling, as most of their neighbors were forced to do. “It’s probably not the best financial move, but that’s all right,” Walter says. “Our son’s there, and that’s where we want to be, so we’ll start over. We feel blessed to be able to do that.”

Walter’s advice to young people is simple: treat every day as a learning opportunity. “Always

go to work wondering what new situation you’re going to encounter today,” Walter suggests.

“That’s what makes your career exciting.”
Your career and your life.

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon’s Blog](#).



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