

The Zen Of Stan

By Stan Adler

Story 5

It Takes Courage To Sell

Once, many years ago, while waiting for a train in New York, I found myself standing near an elderly man who was leaning on a cane and smoking a Meerschaum pipe with an amber stem. I commented on the classic design of his pipe, and we began a conversation. Eventually he asked what I did. When I told him, he nodded, peered through some wisps of blue smoke, and said, "Next week I'll be a hundred, and one thing I can tell you . . . don't expect life's very best unless you're giving it your very best." With that, he boarded one train and I boarded another. We never saw each other again, but I'll always remember his words of advice.

Often, the best way to do your best is to do something different, something unique. It takes daring and courage to try something completely new. When it works, when your courage is blended with skill, you look your best—when it doesn't, you may fall on your face and look your worst. That's the chance you take.

“What the hell—you might be right, you
might be wrong . . . but don't just avoid.”
—Katherine Hepburn

When a powerful new idea comes to mind, it has a taste and feeling all its own. Once you experience it, you are not really satisfied with anything less. It might mean giving your business card to someone who is eating dinner and may not want to be disturbed. It might even include interrupting a private conversation and telling the people across the aisle that you just happen to be in the business of selling something they're discussing.

People don't like to be surprised . . . people have a right to their privacy . . . there's a time and place for everything. All of these things may be generally true, but keeping your distance has little to do with selling.

Knowing how to mix courage and skill can create a feeling of intimacy at a moment's notice . . . excite people without their permission . . . uncover opportunities at inopportune times

. . . make you feel good about *doing* something rather than *thinking* about doing something.

Utilizing courage in a sale is sometimes an imaginative or courageous move that doesn't often ask permission to happen.



It was a perfect day for lunch at La Petite, the little soup and sandwich cafe located in the Town and Country shopping center. The dozen or so customers at the sidewalk

tables were as busy talking as they were eating. I couldn't help but listen to fragments of nearby conversations as I finished my avocado and tomato sandwich.

A woman at the next table was explaining to her three friends that she wasn't ready for counseling or the group activities that went with it. A young man at the opposite table, wearing walking shorts and hiking boots, told his friend about a day hike that starts at seven thousand feet and ends above timberline and passes four "totally pristine" lakes along the way. His friend said she was spending next summer at Yosemite. Across the way, two little kids in soccer uniforms were spraying themselves and their parents with water guns. "Johnny? Jessamyn? Please put those away for a while," admonished the dad, pointing his finger and shaking his head. "Please don't get the other people wet."

I tossed a bite of bread to a sparrow that looked at me expectantly from the edge of the sidewalk. It caught the crumb before it landed, and flew up to the red tile roof with the tiny windfall clamped in its beak.

A cool breeze blew the napkins off a couple of tables while people squinted and gazed up at the dazzling sunlight. It was one of those days when you were grateful for more than the food on the table and at a loss as to how to express it.

Suddenly, a high-pitched shout shattered the mood.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen!"

I turned around in my chair, looking for the person who was so blatantly interrupting the peaceful afternoon. A kid in his early teens with thick red hair pulled back in a ponytail stood in the middle of the sidewalk just a few feet from my table. He wore jeans and a white T-shirt that was several fashionable inches too long, and stood beside a large plastic container with a folding lid, which he opened as if it were a box of props. With arms spread wide, as if he were about to break into song, he smiled brightly and launched into his pitch.

"How are all of you today?" he asked. "My name is Charles and this is my part-time job. Today we are featuring peanut brittle." He laid a box of peanut brittle candy on the sidewalk. Most of the cafe customers suddenly became intensely interested in their salads and sandwiches.

**"It doesn't work to leap a 20-foot
chasm in two 10-foot jumps."**

—American Proverb

"We also have chocolate clusters . . ." He put a box of chocolate clusters next to the peanut brittle. "And coconut fudge, and vanilla taffy, and strawberry taffy." As he spoke, he set out one box of each, carefully arranging them in one precise line. "Now you can have any one of these boxes of delicious candy for six dollars or *three* boxes for only fifteen dollars!"

Nobody said or did anything. The incidental conversations came to a halt. Some customers looked like they were biting their tongues or trying not to laugh; others tried to pretend the kid wasn't there.

Charles hitched up his pants and made a real effort to maintain his broad, assertive smile as he said, "Now don't everybody all jump up at once."

Nobody made a move or said a word.

The kid began carefully putting each box back into his container. He looked up and said, with one last wide-eyed smile, "I notice some of those sandwiches you're eating have onions on them. A nice peppermint cream wafer would probably really hit the spot, and I just happen have some peppermint wafers . . ."

A couple of people smiled when he said that, but still they didn't make eye

contact. Finally, after a short embarrassed silence, the kid shrugged his shoulders and said to no one in particular: "Maybe somebody would like to try just one box." He glanced around; no one responded.

As he closed up the box, I heard him say to himself, "I tried."

Without thinking, I said, "Courage."

He looked up. "What?"

"That took courage," I explained.

"Yeah?" he asked in a tone that seemed to add "So what?"

"That was a courage sale. It'll work someday," I said, thinking more in terms of years than days.

"Thanks," he said glumly.

I started to explain that no one in my family ate candy since my daughters were now away at school, then I remembered something I had been taught long ago: to satisfy a customer you must sell them something. I was the customer and I was watching a novice salesperson with a tough sale turn and walk away. "Wait a second," I said. "I'll—"

Before I could finish my sentence, he turned around and walked into the little cafe. I watched as he walked up to the counter, put his container down, and spoke to the cashier. He took a box of peppermint wafers from his container, carefully opened it, and placed it on the counter by the cash register. I saw no money change hands. He shook the cashier's hand, and walked outside with a smile that said he was in control and was about to launch a brand-new idea.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said in a quieter voice, "I hope I didn't disturb your lunch too much. When you're finished eating, you might want to walk inside and help yourself to a free mint, courtesy of Charles."

Within seconds, four customers got up from their lunch and lined up to buy candy from Charles. I was the fourth customer. As I paid him for a box of peanut brittle I said, "That was good selling."

Lowering his voice and tilting his head to one side, he said, "Thanks. It took courage."

I nodded and smiled, and when I turned around to leave, he said, "Sir?"

I turned back around, and he extended his hand. As I shook his hand, he said, "It worked *today*."



The next day, Victor dropped by to give Carrie an out-of-print cookbook that contained a recipe she had been asking him about for years. I had put the peanut brittle in a candy dish on the coffee table, and I encouraged him to try a piece. He chewed it thoughtfully, and I told him where I had bought it.

"You paid a good price for a good story," he said. "As for the candy . . . Well, the kid knew what it took to sell it. He figured if he were giving it away, everybody would take a box. He just had to figure out how to *almost* give it away."

Victor reached for another tiny piece of brittle. "It's getting better," he said.

"And that was good thinking," he continued, "but he didn't count on the generous spirit of most people. More people than we imagine want to be kind and help others. It's just that they have a terrible time finding a comfortable way to do it. So after the kid made a last-ditch plea, he realized that he could walk away embarrassed or try something else. Even if his idea didn't work, at least he could say he had truly tried."

"And you know, Victor, for such a young guy, it really was a pretty good idea."

"It was. But the idea was more than putting out a box of free samples. The idea was something that you gave him at exactly the right time—something called courage. And that's always a good idea."

