

I'm writing this column from a hotel room in Las Vegas. Seriously. Your faithful, small-town scribe is seated at a very posh desk in a very posh room on the eleventh floor of the *obscenely* posh Red Rock Casino, Spa, & Resort, where she's been ensconced in luxury for the past two days. Your faithful, small-town scribe could get used to this.



First, let me just be honest: Las Vegas has never been at the top of my Must-See list. In fact, I've been actively avoiding it all my adult life. But Jeff and I are attending a business conference this weekend, in hopes of taking our tiny publishing empire to the next level, and the guys throwing it didn't ask my advice on locations.

So here I am. And you know what? I'm having a ball!

Actually, let me qualify that statement. "A ball" is not what you have when it's 75 gorgeous degrees outside, a lavish pool and the breathtaking Red Rock mountains beckon outside your hotel window, there are no conference workshops scheduled all afternoon... and you're on deadline.

Yes, come hell or highwater or slot machines, the column must be written! Doesn't matter that you're totally distracted. Doesn't matter that you're totally *exhausted*. Doesn't even matter that your husband's downstairs playing craps without your supervision. You have a task before you. You must rise to the occasion.

(Update: the husband just returned, \$169 richer. This place is getting better all the time...)

Okay, yes, so I'm rambling here. Flailing, even. Because the thing is – prepare to be shocked – I don't always have Profound Thoughts in my head. Sometimes, I'm just pondering somebody's weird facial hair or picking lint off my sleeve or wondering what to wear to that dinner thing tonight. Sometimes, it would probably be better for all of us if I'd just skip an issue...

But here's the rub: I'm not just the columnist, I'm the editor. And as the editor, I must be vigilant. I must uphold certain standards of discipline and professionalism. I can't go letting my columnist flake out on me just 'cause she's off livin' the high life in Vegas...

And speaking of Vegas... In many ways, it's just what I expected. Everything's sparkly here, and colorful, and really, really big. You might say, as many have before, that everything's "larger than life" in Las Vegas – from the chandeliers, to the beehive hairdos on the gambling grandmas, to the barely-clad breasts of the cocktail waitresses. Larger than life.

Our conference began yesterday with a key-note speaker who definitely fits that description. In a *good* way. Dr. Stephen R. Covey, famed author of "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" gave a presentation that was anything *but* what I expected.

(Warning to my loyal blog readers [kiss, kiss, you two!]: You may recognize some recycled "intellectual property" here...)

I never read Covey's "Seven Habits" book, nor have I read his latest, "The Eighth Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness," as I am generally repelled by books with such titles. (In fact, I've been avoiding the "self help" movement all my life... which may explain a lot of things.) So I wasn't particularly excited about hearing this guy dash off some rote, pre-fab spiel for the

thousandth time, distilling the complexity of human nature and experience down to a few trite bullet points. I've listened to these "inspirational speakers" before, and I seldom find them inspiring.

But Dr. Covey was a genuine surprise. Instead of strutting about like an aging cheerleader on speed, waving his arms and chanting acronyms and corny catch phrases, the tall, striking, sleekly bald Covey stood perfectly still and spoke slowly, deliberately, in a deep, gravelly voice (a cross between Jack Nicholson's and John McCain's), riveting us with his steady gaze and intense delivery. He spoke with a passion so fierce and concentrated that we hung on his every word as if he were some modern day oracle. The topic? Business Management. Or maybe it was The Meaning of Life. By the end of his address, Covey had me wondering whether there's a difference.

His main message was this: We are living in a new business era, and a new paradigm is required if we're to be successful. In other words, Industrial Age approaches will no longer cut it in the Knowledge Worker age. According to Covey, the old-style, Industrial Age boss "managed" people, intimidating them into submission, limiting their potential, bringing them "in line." We are now in what he calls the Knowledge Worker Age. (Some call it the Information Age.) Today's boss must learn to manage *things*, while "unleashing" people, inspiring them and enabling them to reach their highest potential – for their benefit, *and the* benefit of the company. Today's manager must approach each employee as a "whole person," made up body, mind, heart, and spirit. Ignore any one of these four parts, and you do so at your peril... and the peril of your company.

(I'm making it all sound much more touchy-feely than he did. The approach is actually quite rigorous for both manager and employee, requiring new levels of mutual respect, communication, honesty and commitment.)

Dr. Covey contends that the best and most effective leader is the "servant leader," the one who listens empathically, doesn't throw his weight around, and operates not from a position of power, but from a position of *earned moral authority*. According to Covey, the servant leader must cultivate Humility ("the mother of all virtues"), Courage ("the father") and their natural offspring, Integrity. He talked about "timeless, eternal principles" that don't necessarily define our values, which are mutable, but which

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o,
he says, define outcomes. At the end of his talk, he even went out on a fragile limb and shared his belief that these timeless principles, as well as the "spark of greatness" in each of us, come from God.

(I had to look around and make sure I was still at a business conference. In the year 2008. In Las Vegas. Half the people in the room seemed to be holding their breath. The other half were wiping away tears.)

At the reception afterwards, we all agreed that Stephen Covey was, indeed, a highly effective person. Probably even great. How often do you find yourself in the presence of greatness? In the humble, courageous presence of a true servant leader? I don't know about you, but for me, it's rare. And very powerful.

And so it is that I sit here a day later, with the pool and mountains outside my window, and the casino a few floors below me, and a really good book on my bedside table... knocking out this column. Because there's a deadline to be met. Because even though I don't *have* to, I have to. Because I'm both writer and editor, employee and boss, servant and leader.

And because there are people out there striving for greatness *every single day*. They're not

always brilliant; they're not always profound; they're not even always interesting. But they're
always *there.*
They show up. Always. And I want to be like them.