

Practical, not just magical lessons from Walt Disney By Gregory Wiens

Recently, I researched the life and leadership of Walt Disney. He was an amazing man. I am not sure where his personal faith stood with Christ, but I am convinced he is a model from which followers of Christ can learn valuable lessons. (While growing up, I figured he wasn't a Christian because the "Wonderful World of Disney" was on at 7:30pm Sunday nights when I had to be in church. Those weren't the days of TIVO.)

Did you know that he grew up amidst very ordinary circumstances? He was pretty much just like you and me.

He only lived 65 years on this earth, having experienced a multitude of failures. He often "bet the farm" on projects. Some paid off; through others, though, he lost the farm.

He watched his parents actually lose their farm in Kansas because they couldn't pay their bills. There were days and nights when meals weren't on the table. He enlisted in the Red Cross at age 16 (during World War I) to help the nation and his family. When he came home, his father thought Walt was foolish for wanting to be an artist of cartoon characters. To pursue this dream, he had to leave home again, this time relocating to Kansas City, where his brother Roy was living as a banker.

It's easy to read his life backwards, starting from points of success and impact. But to truly grasp the significance of Walt's life, you must start with his growing-up years and examine all of the discouragement he experienced along the way. He loved his mother deeply and yet she died in a terrible accident for which he felt responsible. And early in his business career, he had one of his first successes "stolen" from him through a legal loophole. Walt's response? He simply started another creative cartoon company. His desire to help children enjoy life and laughter came from these collective trials.

Here are my top six lessons I can take from his short life:

1. Walt modeled and taught that everyone needs at least one or two significant failures in their life. Through hardships, we learn perseverance, humility, passion and wisdom, which can't be learned otherwise. Every effective Christian leader in Scripture and throughout history experienced failure in their lives. This is where their faith was forged. I know this preaches well, but we must learn to practice this in the midst of the tough times. Do you know someone who is in the middle of a dark time in his or her life? In the Book of James (ch1, vs.2-4) we are told that we will only become mature as we traverse times of trials.
2. Walt was willing to give up everything to pursue his vision. This reminds me of Jesus' words in the Book of Mark, chapter 8, when he clearly tells us that we must be willing to lose everything to experience the Kingdom of God. Yet, too

often I find that we as leaders become comfortable as we age and begin to enjoy our style of living in a way that truly inhibits our ability to lead by faith.

3. At one point in Walt's career, he specifically had to give up what he loved doing (drawing cartoon characters) in order to accomplish a larger vision (to lead a creative company to provide laughter and joy to others). What am I unwilling to give up that is limiting what God wants to do through me as a leader? Can what we are good at doing possibly inhibit what ultimately we could accomplish in the Kingdom? Walt had to give up drawing. I need to invest more in others and do less ministry myself.
4. Walt once told his board that if they all agreed with him, something was wrong. He expected people to disagree with him. He was a visionary --walking way ahead of people, so he expected skepticism. He also saw criticism as part of the refining process. Look at Jesus and the number of critics He faced! Look through the Book of Acts and count the disagreements! As leaders we must expect others to disagree with us. Do you ever consider the push-back as an opportunity for refinement?
5. Much of Walt's success can be attributed to his brother Roy. Walt was clearly a creative guy with perseverance, but it was his brother Roy who possessed the business acumen. He took care of all of the organizational concerns. Walt fully appreciated the fact he needed a team to turn his dream into reality. Roy didn't see his job to limit Walt, but rather to figure out an organizational way to bring Walt's vision to fruition. Who is on your team and so committed to your ministry?
6. Lastly, Walt refused to become a bitter person. He died of lung cancer at 65 with so many setbacks and so many unmet dreams. Instead of blaming or resenting others for his pain, he kept looking toward the future. I wish as leaders we would take more time to forgive others in our past and focus on what God wants to do in and through us in the future.

In summary -

- Everyone needs multiple failures.
- We must be willing to give up everything to pursue God's vision for our lives.
- At some point, we will have to give up what we enjoy to realize something better.
- Criticism is a reaction to leading by faith and an opportunity to refine your vision.
- God usually fulfills visions through teams.
- Forgiveness allows us to lead where God lives.

Now think about that next time you are spending your life savings at DisneyWorld!