

THE LIFELINE
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Hillel could have mastered almost anything. But destiny decided for him at the age of 8. During a vacation in Granada, Spain he followed his parents into a shop on the street leading up to the Alhambra, where beautiful wood inlay boxes were fashioned. Hillel was fascinated by them and even more, by the ancient proprietor, a thin, hunched over man with blazing eyes, who had been creating the boxes for at least 50 years. When the ancient one saw the captivated boy he looked at him deeply and his thick eyebrows rose. “Será mi discípulo!” (“You will be my disciple!”) Neither Hillel nor his parents spoke Spanish, but when it was translated, the boy’s eyes lit up in turn. Hillel’s father thought it was crazy, and would have fled the shop but Hillel and his mother kept him there.

After prolonged negotiations, conditions were agreed upon. Ultimately, Hillel served as Jamal’s apprentice for the next 10 summers, learning the venerable art, not only from Jamal but from other master artisans who were wont to sojourn with Jamal. Each of these artisans had perfected unique proprietary techniques, which they revealed to Hillel given that he was the apple of Jamal’s eye. These masters esteemed Jamal as much for his extraordinary sense of prospective customers as for his consummate artistry. Jamal could tell not only who would buy his boxes but almost always which ones they would choose. It was this psychic sense that told Jamal that Hillel was the spiritual son he had sought for so long. Indeed, at a younger age than anyone, Hillel developed both high technical expertise and that rare psychic sense, and with greater geniality than Jamal.

In the spring before his 9th summer in Granada, Hillel’s family took their first hiking trip to northern California. There Hillel discovered the towering redwood trees and the beautiful, light and durable redwood. He shipped some unblemished redwood to Jamal’s shop. Jamal was ecstatic. Hillel was overjoyed to know that he had finally given his master something invaluable. But when Hillel arrived in the shop, little redwood was left. He couldn’t believe how fast it had disappeared.

In the 10th summer, Jamal felt himself failing, and knew it was time for Hillel’s ultimate lesson. Taking Hillel to his private workshop, which he had never been permitted to enter, Hillel first noticed some of the missing redwood and then espied a shelf with the most mesmerizing boxes he had ever seen. Jamal smiled and told Hillel these were modern versions of the legendary Pandora Box, which the redwood plus a base of aromatic cedar had at long last enabled him to succeed in creating after a lifetime of failed attempts. Jamal spent the summer teaching Hillel its secrets and its responsibilities. “The Pandora Box is not a pretty tourist item. Each is an lifeline for one soul only. It will be your sacred duty to see, honor, guide, and thereby free each person’s soul in designing their box.”

By summer’s end, a new light shone in Hillel’s eyes that would remain with him all his days. Jamal blessed Hillel through the eternal binding tie of love and bid him, “Adios para siempre”. Conjoined tears anointed the shop’s sawdust-strewn floor.

When Hillel returned home to California's Peninsula at the end of that summer, he knew his life's path. He excelled in college, triple majoring in chemistry, geology, and forestry. Chemistry deepened his knowledge of glues, resins, lacquers, metals, plastics. Geology revealed to him the intricacies of gems and minerals. Forestry familiarized him with the world's woods.

During summers of his college years, Hillel continued experimenting so as to surpass perfection. He discovered other woods that made Pandora Boxes, each with its own character. He loved durable cherry wood even more than redwood, given it develops with time a richer, deeper red-brown hue.

Upon graduating, Hillel set about launching his career as master of Pandora boxes. His parents felt strangely calm about this most unusual career choice despite not being able to conceive how Hillel could ever make a living at it, especially in the prohibitively expensive Peninsula. Somehow, they recognized in him an extraordinary destiny.

Hillel looked around to find a small shop with an apartment above it. For weeks, he scoped the streets of Peninsula towns fruitlessly. One day, looking out from the Caltrain, he noticed a dead end alley alongside the tracks and sensed that his shop and home were there. Getting off at the next station, he tracked down the place. A single, inconspicuous narrow side street led to the dead end alley. An even more obscure alcove extending from the alley opened into a courtyard, in whose center towered a huge cypress tree filled with birds, which blocked any direct view of the shop and the small apartment above it.

Location, location, location are the three most important things in business, and Hillel had chosen what seemed to be a location to guarantee failure. His parents almost choked when they saw it. "Hillel," his mother asked, "How are you going to sell anything in a shop that no one could possibly find even if they knew exactly how to get here?" And his slightly sarcastic father chimed in, "You'll provide seeing-eye dogs, of course?" No, there would be no dogs, and for that matter, no web site either.

How can your business succeed if you do absolutely everything wrong? Yet, somehow, Hillel was confident. For his shop, he fashioned a stunning, Colonial style redwood sign with the name, Pandora that tilted in the interminable summer north wind. He adored his shop, outfitted it with entrancing display cabinets of his boxes, and lined its walls with large photographs of natural wonders on Earth and in Space. It all gave the shop a cozy sense of the cosmos.

For two months not one person came to the shop or even suspected it existed. Hillel worked mornings, and in the afternoons hiked or biked into the hills or walked around the downtown. In evenings that he didn't stay at home reading, he might go to the sports bar in town or take the train to San Francisco. He had a happy, but not yet intimate social life. Soul mates take time to find. If any casual acquaintance asked him what he did for a living, he answered gently that he was in business for himself, and never specified what.

On one of his downtown walks he came upon a distraught man of Mayan descent. Hillel followed him unnoticed until the man reached home. Hillel then returned to his shop and designed a Pandora Box for the man.

At dawn three weeks later Hillel returned to the man's house and knocked on the door. After a few quiet minutes the man, still half asleep opened. Hillel said in Spanish, "I have a gift for you that you must accept. Get dressed and follow me."

Hillel then led the man, who appeared to be in a trance, to his shop.

On entering the shop, the man's eyes opened. Handing the man the box he had made, Hillel said in Spanish, "I saw that you are a good man in need. So, I made this for you. It is yours."

The man looked at the Pandora Box and his eyes opened wide. It seemed to him to have some inner glow. He took the box protesting, "But I must give you something in return."

"It is a gift and I have already received more than its value, but if ever you treasure something that you have made or worked with your own hands, I will be honored to accept."

Several more silent weeks passed when another man of Mayan descent entered the shop. As he checked the boxes he was surprised to find that all were sealed and when he shook them, a faint noise came from some tiny, loose object inside. Just as he started to ask about these curious features one box struck him forcibly, almost as if it were illuminated from within, and he knew he had to have it.

Hillel, anticipating his questions, told him that every Pandora box must remain sealed, must be unique, must guard its own secret, and that its price was, "Exactly what you think it is worth to you." Then he added, "I must put on a few finishing touches, so while you're thinking, please hose down the courtyard. The tree holds many birds." The man started to think that the request was demeaning, but after looking at Hillel's placid gaze, realized it was right.

Over the next months, a few people, all of Mayan descent, found the shop, yearning for a box. Almost invariably the shop did not hold the perfect box, whereupon Hillel would ask for some weeks "to create the box that is designed for you!" And during that period he demanded from each a series of arduous labors. As for cost, Hillel always told them, "Pay exactly what you think it is worth to you!"

When Hillel had been in business about nine months, the first person from the upscale side of the tracks found his way to the shop. He took some time before hesitatingly settling on a box. But Hillel would not sell it, even when the man made an incredible offer. Perplexed, the man asked why. Hillel responded, "You want this box for a gift. That makes it impossible to choose correctly. Each box is meant solely for the person who wants it for himself."

"How did you know I wanted it for a gift?"

“People have a look when they crave something for themselves that they never have no matter how much they want something for someone else, even for someone they love preciousy.” The man left the shop frustrated, but profoundly impressed by Hillel.

Word diffused upward. Hillel now had a slow but viable business. Each of his occasional customers entered the shop feeling it a temple, paid a ransom for their personalized box, and wound up doing some Herculean labors as their box took form. Hillel was always selective about accepting a customer. He simply sensed all who lacked the elusive, unalloyed yearning and gently refused them.

On the anniversary of the day he gave his first gift box to the distraught Mayan, the man returned with his family. His whole being appeared transformed. “That gift, that box has been a miracle. From the day it entered our home, happiness and hope entered. In some mysterious way, you blessed us. And similar changes have come over all my friends and neighbors who bought your boxes.” He then presented Hillel with the keys to a shiny old car he had spent the year repairing and refinishing.

Hillel’s eyes glowed and moistened. He embraced the man saying, “This car is exactly what I have needed and wanted, and your words are become a lifeblood to me.”

Some days later a young, impeccably-dressed woman barged into the shop, rapidly scanned it and abruptly demanded the most expensive box. Hillel said, “It’s clear you’re trying to shop for an arrogant boss accustomed to rolling over underlings, and who sees most people as underlings. You could never find the right box for him. He must come by and for himself.”

The woman was so struck by the psychic power of Hillel’s gentle words she seemed to shrink and confessed, “My CEO did order me to buy him the most expensive box. I’m scared. He doesn’t tolerate failure.”

“Just tell him I said, ‘You’re missing the whole point!’ He’ll give you no trouble. And he’ll come himself.”

The CEO did show up the next day but quite late, and with his chauffeur driving the corporate limousine, of course. He stormed out, slamming the limousine door, and stomped over to the shop. Finding it locked, he rang the bell forcibly and repeatedly. Hillel opened the window of his second floor apartment, leaned out and said, placidly, “I’ll be down in 15 minutes.

The CEO couldn’t understand why he waited. No lowly, small shop keeper ever dared make him wait. But wait he did. Fifteen minutes later, dressed for the evening, Hillel exited the shop and met the CEO in the courtyard. He gazed directly and silently at the CEO for just about 30 seconds. [Try that some time! It’s incredibly difficult.] The CEO briefly returned the gaze but began to feel fidgety and averted his eyes. Then, in a graciously insistent voice, Hillel commanded, “Stop missing the point! Come back tomorrow...by yourself! Be here when I open the shop – you’ll see the light.” And Hillel walked off into the evening air.

The CEO raged all night. He knew it was beyond ridiculous, repeating to himself, “All this over a little wooden box with primitive, superstitious, nonsensical claims of absurd properties? I must be out of my mind.” He rarely slept much but that night he slept very little and very poorly.

Well before dawn tinted the eastern sky, he reached Hillel’s shop sans chauffeur, and waited two hours until he saw the shop light, having fumed so intensely he could not even have imagined doing any work. When Hillel opened the door he gazed at the CEO in the same manner as the evening before. Suddenly, the CEO couldn’t help laughing. Now that he thought of it, the situation was really quite silly. Hillel simply said, “That’s more like it. Come on in.”

The CEO found the shop stunningly worldly and otherworldly. Hillel excused himself, telling the CEO to feel free to examine everything. The CEO fell into an almost hypnotic state. Time slowed for him. Every box showed magnificent workmanship, but though he had heard one might grab his soul, none did. Just as he finished, Hillel reappeared, looked at him and said, “There’s nothing here for you. You need your own box.”

Hillel then told the CEO, “With you, I need more time to think. While you’re waiting, hose down the courtyard! The cypress holds so many birds.” The CEO couldn’t believe his ears. This young worm, fresh out of college, completely unknown, barely starving, running a tiny shop and living above it in a garret right by the tracks, had the effrontery to order him to be his street cleaning lackey. And he obeyed.

When the CEO finished his labor and returned to the shop, Hillel thanked him and addressed him in a measured tone. “I still have much to think about, but we will do this in three stages. First, prepare to be away and unavailable for several months, so take an official leave of absence. You do realize it is your life you must focus on. Second, you’ll fly to Sydney where I’ll have a guide meet you and take you to the Murray-Darling Depression. There, you will seek, and find a perfect piece of the perfect wood for you – *Allocasuarina luehmannii* or buloke. It’s the world’s hardest wood, over 5000 on the Janka hardness scale! Third, upon your return, I will demand labors from you while I create your box.”

“You will pay in three installments. Tomorrow morning, bring \$200,000 cash to cover expenses. Three days before you leave, you’ll wire to my account the 10% down payment of \$10 million. Once it has been transferred I will provide you with your itinerary. You’ll wire my account the balance three days after you return from your odyssey. I want to add one personal note. I am afraid for your sake that I am grossly undercharging you. If I find that, I’ll add to your labors.”

The CEO was so shocked at the outlandish price and Hillel’s genial audacity that he couldn’t register everything, and begged Hillel to repeat it, a first given his quick, comprehensive mind. Hillel repeated nothing, but smiled spontaneously at the CEO and said, “Let’s walk out together. I am closing up for the day. It’s far too beautiful to be indoors. See you back here in two weeks.”

Months later, when the CEO finally claimed his hard-earned prize, he asked Hillel the question that had plagued him from the start. “How could you face me with such unwavering courage, considering my manner and the fact that you were barely eking out a living?” Hillel responded,

“It was not courage. People who are drowning in desperation are absolutely silent. I can hear their silent scream. It’s my gift to design their lifeline.”

Search Hillel’s soul and you would find no change. The only hint of a material change was that as much as he loved the courtyard cypress tree, the proximity to trains roaring past all hours of the day and night was too much, so he found a new shop and home, far from the tracks and high in the nearby hills, hidden at the heart of a maze of winding streets, and guarded serenely by a grove of noble cypress. Somehow, though it was even harder to find than his first shop, everyone who needed to, did.