IT'S NOT ABOUT THE SHARK

HOW TO SOLVE UNSOLVABLE PROBLEMS

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HOW TO SOLVE UNSOLVABLE PROBLEMS

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To Tina and Katie

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INTRODUCTION

Problem or Godsend?

THE PRESSURE ON the young director was unrelenting.

He had burned through the studio's money and exhausted their patience.

After shooting was finished each day, the knot in his stomach grew tighter and tighter as he screened the new footage with his team. Sometimes they would watch an entire day's work without finding anything that could be used. "Frankly, the more we saw, the more we worried," recalled Bill Butler, the film's cinematographer. "We had *a problem*."

It wasn't hard to identify the crux of the matter. The film's star, playing the title character, was simply impossible to work with. Complicating matters, the usual inducements—money, flattery, obsequious attention to his comfort—had no effect whatsoever on the film's fickle lead.

So day after day, Steven Spielberg sat in the dark, watching another reel of another day's wasted footage. He was directing his first movie for a major studio. He had already heard the whispers of doubts from studio executives, worried that he was in over his head. He had already overspent his film's *entire* original budget on one prop. He was rapidly becoming convinced this would not only be his first film but his last.

More to the point, though, he had to face the reality that the mechanical shark he had cast in a starring role in his

film *Jaws,* a shark he imagined haunting moviegoers' dreams as some kind of Godzilla of the sea, couldn't swim, couldn't bite, couldn't even tread water.

It was not for lack of effort. The shark—nicknamed Bruce in honor of Spielberg's lawyer—was a phenomenally complicated pneumatically powered colossus, attached to 150 feet of hose linking it to compressors floating above, on a barge. It took a small army of people—each working a different lever that controlled a fin, or the eyes, or the mouth—to make it go. It had been designed by the most experienced talent in the industry—people credited with creating the giant squid in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and some of the most frightening sea creatures ever to appear on film.

But, to an almost comic degree, the shark was a failure. Originally tested in a freshwater tank in California, the shark was shipped to the Massachusetts coastal town where the movie was to be made. There, the filmmakers received a crash lesson on the uniquely corrosive effects of salt water. As its controls shorted out, the shark would move or not move without the slightest interest in who was pulling which lever. Every day there was something else that needed to be repaired, replaced, or re-welded because it didn't work or had been damaged during filming on the rare days the shark had been functioning while the cameras were on. Even its synthetic skin failed, as it became waterlogged and bloated, transforming the terrifying shark into a giant sea marshmallow.

"It kept failing and failing and failing and failing," said Bill Gilmore, one of the film's producers. Richard Dreyfuss, who played an oceanographer in the film, vividly remembers getting into position to start shooting a scene, only to hear the relentless squawking of the crew's walkie-talkies and the alarmed words that rang out from them repeatedly: "The shark is not working… The shark is not working."

Even on its best day the shark was loud and slow. “You could get out of the water, dry off, and eat a sandwich before it could get you,” said *Jaws* cameraman Michael Chapman.

Millions of dollars, months of time, the best technical experts they could find, and what Steven Spielberg had was a rapidly closing window to make a movie about a shark… and no shark.

With a broken-down great white shark on his hands, Spielberg had a great big problem and several unattractive options. He could put all available resources into repairing the shark—and almost certainly see his unfinished movie shut down when he ran out of money and time. He could ditch the failing shark and start from scratch, building a new version designed to overcome the first model’s limitations—and almost certainly never gain the green light to resume filming. He could forge ahead with the malfunctioning shark, employing translucent wires or whatever tools he could improvise to make it move—and get the film shut down, get himself fired, or make a laughably bad movie, consigning his film and his future to the realm of *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* and other movies remembered only for being embarrassingly bad.

This is a book about what we do when we have a problem. And research shows that what we do most of the time is crawl deep inside our problems. We define everything on the problems’ terms. We limit what we think is possible based on the boundaries the problems set for us. We look at the problems every which way, only to conclude that every available response produces alternate forms of failure. Like staring at the sun and not being able to see the sky all around it, we stare at our problems and cannot see anything else, much less a solution.

Steven Spielberg did not stare at his problem.

Despite the fact that the script began with a close-up view of the shark attacking a swimmer, and despite the fact

that the shark was featured all over his storyboards throughout the movie, Spielberg took the failure of his mechanical shark as an opportunity to reimagine what he was doing. He didn't think of ways to tinker with the broken shark or plead for more time and money that would not have been offered—instead, he flipped the situation on its head.

"I thought, 'What would Alfred Hitchcock do in a situation like this?'" Spielberg explained. "So, imagining a Hitchcock movie instead of a *Godzilla* movie, I got the idea that we could make a lot of hay out of the horizon line, and not being able to see your feet, not being able to see anything below the waistline when you're treading water. What's down there? It's what we don't see which is really, truly frightening."

From that thought he saw the solution: Make a shark movie *without the shark*.

Spielberg supplied the suggestion of the shark—in the sight line half above and half below the water, in the ominous and unforgettable John Williams score (which he described as the sound of unstoppable force). And that suggestion of the shark provided the unmistakable, unrivaled presence of menace.

Instead of being the center of every scene, the shark does not make a full appearance on screen until eighty-one minutes into the movie. "It became, the less you see, the more you get," Spielberg said, "because that invited the audience to come to the movie bringing their collective imaginations, and their imaginations helped me make that film a success."

"He had to invent, on the spot, another way of shooting," Richard Dreyfuss declared admiringly, "which was to *imply* the shark, which made an ordinary film into a great film."

Audiences and reviewers were awed by the effect. Calling Spielberg a gifted director, the critic Frank Rich hailed his originality, noting that "the most frightening sequences in

Jaws are those where we don’t even see the shark.” Audiences made *Jaws* the highest-grossing film to date and inspired Hollywood to build their year around the summer blockbuster. Its reputation has only grown over time; it has been named one of the greatest films of all time by the American Film Institute, and it’s become one of a small handful of films permanently preserved by the Library of Congress as a cultural treasure.

All this from what the studio originally saw as a minor league horror movie—a second-tier endeavor behind its top priorities that summer, the forgettable and long since forgotten *Airport 1975* and *The Hindenburg*.

This is a book about problems, but more importantly, it is a book about solutions. The science, you will see, is spectacularly clear: If we look to our problems first, if we let a problem define the entirety of what we do next, more likely than not we will fail. If we set our problems aside and seek solutions, we can succeed beyond all limitations. In fact, fixing the problem itself becomes a side note in a story of a much larger accomplishment. You know, nobody ever asks Steven Spielberg why he couldn’t come up with a better shark.

It all seems so very simple—and yet focusing on solutions is a profoundly elusive path that runs counter to all our life’s lessons. Everything we have ever been taught, every native impulse we have, every source we turn to for help has made us believe that when we have a big problem, we should focus our time, energy, and attention on it, we should work harder, dig deeper, and fight the problem with everything we have. And if Steven Spielberg had done that, his shark and his film would have sunk straight to the bottom of the sea.

Through the science and stories of real people facing real challenges, you will see that whatever your problems at work, at home, in life may be, you can solve them if you are willing to look for a solution instead of staring at the

problem. And when you do that, the problem won’t be so scary anymore. After all, as Steven Spielberg put it, “The shark not working was a godsend.”

CHAPTER 1

Imaginary Philip and the Problem of Problems

WHAT IF THE bumblebee knew it couldn't fly?

We all know what would happen: He'd sit around worrying about how fat he is, and he'd never get off the ground again.

But there's another side to that story. In 1934, when entomologist August Magnan concluded that flying bumblebees defied the laws of physics, he never bothered to tell the bees. And they kept right on flying.

Problems infect our thinking in many ways—but the basic equation is simple. If we let problems define who we are, if we let problems serve as our guide, then our problems tell us what we can't do. We can't do this. We can't do that. Our lives become negatives and absences.

A problem, no matter how important, no matter how significant to our well-being, doesn't belong in the center of our thoughts.

A problem is a barrier. We thrive as thinkers, as doers, as people when we take barriers down. Think about any great advance in any field of endeavor: a great thing, a great idea, a great product, a great story, a great cure. That greatness came about because somebody brought down a barrier. A problem is a barrier. You have to bring it down, or it will bring you down. Just like the bees.

THE ODDSMAKERS LABELED him a 300-to-1 shot. Which is a polite way of saying he had no chance of winning the tournament. But the rookie golfer Ben Curtis was just glad to be there, having barely snuck into the field by qualifying two weeks earlier.

There were good reasons for the modest expectations. As he teed off at the 2003 British Open, Ben Curtis had never won a professional golf tournament. In fact, he had yet to finish among the top 25 at any event. Curtis even shared the oddsmakers' views of his abilities. He was there for the experience, he explained, to have fun and to try to get better by playing against the best players on one of golf's toughest and most famous courses.

Still, the joy of a small-town Ohioan incongruously standing on golf's brightest stage delighted fans and commentators. Their delight was eclipsed only by their shock as Ben Curtis sank his 8-foot putt on the 72nd hole and hoisted the famous Claret Jug as the winner of the British Open.

How improbable was his victory? It had been ninety years since any golfer had won the first major tournament he had entered.

In the space of a weekend, everything changed for him. An anonymous golfer who had never won anything, Ben Curtis now stood beside the kings of the sport, living out what he admitted was a "fairy tale come true." He had to clear time on his schedule to visit the White House, because the president wanted to congratulate him personally. And among the many prizes afforded the winner of a major championship in golf, he collected something of the sport's golden ticket—a champion's exemption that allowed him to pick exactly which tournaments he wanted to enter for years to come.

By 2011, that champion's exemption had expired. Worse, it had been five years since Curtis's last win on the PGA

Tour, and he was playing just to hold on to the status of a full-time professional golfer.

Curtis was desperate to stay on the tour. And the desperation shaped his game.

“Every time I walked onto the course I thought to myself, ‘OK, how am I not going to have a disaster?’” he said.

His sole focus on each hole was avoiding mistakes. “Out there, I’m trying to do everything I can to not make bogeys and double bogeys,” he said. “That’s what my game has become.”

The effort to avoid mistakes clearly had an effect: He made more of them.

“What I was doing, the way I was thinking, was adding more pressure on myself,” Curtis said. “More pressure you don’t need.”

Worse, he was carrying his mistakes from one hole to the next. “In my head I would see replays of a bad tee shot two holes later. I would think about a missed par putt on the next green,” he said. “Even when I had opportunities to put up a good score on a hole, I would think of ways I might make a mistake.”

Staring at the problem left Ben Curtis stuck—exactly where Steven Spielberg would have been if he had kept his focus on his rotting mechanical shark. Fortunately for Curtis, he finally hit bottom.

At the end of the 2011 season, having failed to win or even contend for a title, Curtis’s standing on the PGA Tour was reduced to conditional status. He would, in effect, need to ask for special permission from the sponsors of golf tournaments to let him play anywhere in 2012.

Each week he sat by the phone, hoping to hear that the tournament director had picked him from among the 50 or 100 players asking for one of about eight late-entry slots into the tournament. Most weeks, the phone didn’t ring.

But something happened to him on those weeks when he did get into a tournament. Suddenly, the pressure was gone.

Because he had no status to protect, the prospect of a bad round didn't scare him so much. He began to just play golf again.

Four months into the 2012 season, playing in just his fourth tournament of the year, Curtis ended a winless streak that had stretched out over more than 2,000 days. His win in the Texas Open restored his full-time professional status and, more importantly, reminded him of what he was capable of doing.

"Golf is that way," he said. "It will come up and surprise you if you let it."

YOU ARE AN advanced engineering student. Your class is about to be given what amounts to a pop quiz. In a moment, you'll be asked to sketch out designs for a product.

You rub your hands together in anticipation. Whatever the task, there's no doubt you'll come up with something great.

You smooth out your paper and keep your drafting pencil close at hand.

You're asked to come up with a bicycle rack to mount bicycles on a car. You are given various requirements, but the most important objective is to make a rack that is easy to attach to the car and easy to mount bicycles on.

You are shown an example of an existing but inefficient roof-mounted bicycle rack. It has metal tubes running across the car's roof. Into the tubes, a bicycle's tires are secured. It is, you are told explicitly, very difficult for users to secure the tubes to the roof of the car. Meanwhile, the center tube is nearly impossible for all but the tallest and strongest users to access.

You are asked to come up with as many designs as you can that meet the requirements. You have an hour. Now get to work.

You think about bicycles and cars, their shapes and sizes. You think about people having to lift their bicycles and secure them.

You didn’t become an engineer to be mediocre. You’re not trying for a merely acceptable design. You are there to be the best. So you put pencil to paper and get started.

You can do anything within the parameters of the task in terms of materials or shapes or approaches. So you spin the paper around to get a look at things from a different angle. Your pencil starts flying.

But one image keeps coming to mind. That roof-mounted rack with the tubes. The one with the flaws.

Your first sketch looks just like it. So does your second. Try as you might, your designs keep coming back to roof-mounted tube racks—ideal if your customer base is comprised of NBA centers.

What you didn’t know is that at the same time you were creating variations of that failed design, another group of engineers in the next room was also drawing up plans for bicycle racks.

The only difference is that they were never shown the picture of the bad design. And they were never told to try to avoid putting bikes in the middle of the car’s roof. They were just told to come up with the best design they could.

When researchers David Jansson and Steven Smith lined up all the designs from your group, and all the designs from the other group, the differences were enormous. The group that saw the bad example came up with fewer total designs, far fewer original approaches, and was much more likely to wind up with bikes mounted where no one could reach.[1]

It wasn’t that the second group was any more talented than the first. They weren’t. It wasn’t that the second group knew anything more about bicycles or bike racks. They didn’t.

The difference between the two groups was just this—the first group was asked to solve a common problem with bike racks, and they flailed against the challenge. The second group was asked to design the best bike rack they could,

and they did. In the process, they solved a problem they didn't even know existed.

Jansson and Smith repeated their experiment with other challenges and other engineers, and each time the same thing happened. When asked to design a measuring cup for the blind, the majority of engineers shown a design problem couldn't solve it. More than 80 percent of the group that wasn't shown the problem solved it without even knowing what they were up against. When asked to design a spill-proof coffee mug, those shown the design problem with the mug were seventeen times more likely to fail than those who weren't shown the problem.

These were all very talented engineers. All knowledgeable, capable, skilled, and driven. Yet their likelihood of succeeding varied tremendously based on what they were trying to do. The group that had never seen a bad example let their natural talents carry them to a good design. They wasted not a moment on the problem and spent all their time on the solution. The group that saw the problem wanted to solve it so badly they couldn't think straight. Just like Ben Curtis couldn't golf when he was focused on his flaws, these engineers couldn't design when focused on the problem. But they stayed focused on the problem because problems are so seductive and compelling. It is hard to think about anything else.

"PEOPLE WHO DON'T hate their jobs, they just look at you with dread, like what you have is contagious and they don't want to catch it," Michael observed.

"Or, they say, 'Hey, suck it up, it's eight hours of your day, you can survive it,'" he added. "But the problem with hating your job isn't so much the eight hours you're there, it's the other sixteen."

Just like all those engineers who wanted to fix the bike rack problem, and just like Ben Curtis's fear of bogeys, Michael's problem consumed his entire field of vision.

“Because when you hate doing something, it’s all you can think about,” Michael said. “When you’re at work you count the minutes until you can leave, but right when you leave you think about how you have to go back again. Sunday’s just the day before you have to go back there.”

Michael knows many people have the same frustrations. “A lot of people are bad at their jobs, right?” he said, “But try being bad at your job in front of an audience.”

Teaching five sections of algebra at a community college meant thirty-five or so witnesses every time Michael stood at the front of the room, struggling to hold anyone’s attention. He knew the formulas, could recite them backwards and forwards, could probably teach this stuff in his sleep. Unfortunately, his students weren’t learning much in theirs.

“I didn’t get sleepers every day,” he said. “Some of those once-a-week night classes—with the double period—wow, I would probably lose half the class by the end. And I don’t think they were dreaming of polynomials.”

It wasn’t just a feeling that Michael was underwhelming in his work; there was ample evidence. “We use a common final exam across the college, to test how much progress everyone is making, or, for my students, not making.” Michael’s students consistently ranked fourteenth, fifteenth, or sixteenth out of groups of students taught by sixteen instructors. And the student reviews of his teaching were not exactly encouraging. One student said that they should use Michael’s classes as an interrogation technique—forced to sit through one of his lectures, any bad guy would crack and confess.

“The worst part of all this is that I care,” Michael said. “I care that my students do well, I care that my classroom be a place where math comes alive instead of where math goes to die.”

So Michael did what almost anyone in his situation would do—he tried hard to get better. He read every article and

book he could find on great teaching. He watched videos on teaching techniques. He went to every teaching workshop on campus and flew to teaching conferences across the country.

“By the time I finished being taught all I could find about teaching, I wound up trying just about everything and then trying to undo it. I sped things up, I slowed things down,” he said. “I built assignments for people to go at their own pace, then assignments to keep everyone together. I put absolutely every note and problem in a packet and handed it to them so that they really didn’t need to show up, and then I tried handing out nothing at all so that everything had to be written down in class.”

Michael read one book that claimed the only thing that mattered to students was that you were concerned about them. So then he went to great lengths to engage students in conversations about themselves. One student that term wrote in a review that “it’s like he’s pretending to be our friend because he’s not a very good teacher.” Which, in truth, was exactly what he was doing.

“I was like a dog chasing its tail. I was going after something I could not get no matter how fast I went or how hard I tried,” Michael said.

Michael had run out of new things to try when a chance conversation with a former student turned him around. “She said to me, as delicately as possible, ‘Why are you still a bad teacher when you could be a great something else?’

“And I had no answer,” Michael said. “I had looked at my failures in teaching from so many different angles, but not from the most basic, the most obvious, one. Maybe I’m just not meant for that kind of work.”

The wheels started spinning in Michael’s mind. He had always wanted to be a paramedic. No, that would be crazy, he thought. Then again, maybe he could still be a paramedic. Granted, he would be the rare paramedic with