

# OUTWITTING FAILURE

BY

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**COMMON  
SENSE**

**FOR  
SUCCESS**



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Outwitting Failure is an update of a self-help book published in 2012 by D. L. Dennis. This book was called The Book of Common Sense For a Successful Life and is no longer in print.

The concepts in the original book have been expanded in Outwitting Failure giving the reader more useful tools for a successful life – a path to follow for outwitting failure!

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE BUCKET LIST

Do you have a “Bucket List”? Have you ever thought about things you would like to achieve, or places you would like to go? Have you ever made a list of activities you would like to participate in, goals you would like to accomplish, or projects you would like to be involved in? If you have put these things in writing, then you have a “Bucket List”. If you have not, now is the time. Everyone needs a “Bucket List”! It gives you something to dream about and goals to strive for!

In writing this book, I have accomplished one of the items on my “Bucket List.” Much of my career was spent training salespeople and imparting ideas I believed to be important to attain success in life, not just for their financial success, but also for a well-rounded successful life. The first years I spent training salespeople were centered more on teaching the “nuts and bolts” of the business and how to be financially successful. However, the more experience I gained, and the more I observed about life, the more I came to realize that being successful was not just limited to learning the “nuts and bolts” of the business and striving for financial success. I came to realize that there are two other areas of life – social and spiritual – that have a great impact on a person’s success in life. I have seen individuals be extremely successful financially, but be a miserable failure in one or both of the other areas of life. When this happens, the financial success may slip away. I have also observed people who let their social success impede the progress of their financial success. Life is like a three legged stool – all three areas need to be in balance. Therefore, my goal for the past few years has been to put in writing practical ideas and principles with the hope that individuals who truly hunger for success and are seriously seeking a path to success in life would find these ideas and principles beneficial and utilize them.

No matter how your life started out, or where you are at this time, if you are not satisfied, you can change it. I doubt that many people I met in my life thought I would accomplish very much, and there were years I felt the same way. I am sure some people even thought I might be a statistic of one bad kind or another. I did not have a family who lived in a house with a white picket fence that epitomized the American Dream; I did poorly in school and quit when I was sixteen; I bounced around in my early years, never staying in one place long enough to accomplish anything. That does not paint a very pretty picture – and it wasn't. Nor would it suggest that a bright future was ahead of me. Here is how it all started.

## CHAPTER 2

### A FAULTY START

Neither my mother nor my father had much interest in my welfare, at least not to the extent that either of them was willing to take care of me. At the age of six months, my maternal grandparents in Jacksonville, Illinois took me into their home. At that time, my grandfather, Charlie, was fifty-three years old and my grandmother, Lucy, was forty. I do not think that raising a grandson was what they had expected to be doing at that point in their lives. Neither of them had much formal education. My grandfather had a second grade education, and my grandmother had four years of education. They lived in a one-room house built from used lumber with outside plumbing, well water and a pot-bellied stove for heat. There was no such thing as public aid as we know it today. However, periodically we were entitled to receive surplus cheese, powdered milk and dried beans. For my weekly bath, my grandmother would heat kettles of water on the stove and pour it into a galvanized tub near the stove. In my early years, I assumed that this was the way everyone took a bath. My grandparents could not afford to have another mouth to feed, but they accepted the grandson that was foisted upon them. They were honest, caring individuals and accepted the responsibility.

As a child going to grade school in a one-room country schoolhouse, I was relatively happy but often wondered why I did not live with my parents, or at least with one of them. My mother lived in Chicago, Illinois, and my father lived in Jacksonville, Illinois not far from where I lived with my grandparents. I saw very little of my mother or my father. Therefore, I did not develop a relationship with either one of them.

For some unknown reason, at least to me, when I was to enter the fourth grade, my mother decided that I should live with her in Chicago. I left my grandparents' little house and the small town's one-room

schoolhouse to attend a large multi-grade school in the Windy City. Attending a large city school was a rather difficult transition for me, but not nearly as difficult as was the relationship I had with my mother, who was an alcoholic and had numerous male friends. I saw many things during that year that a nine-year-old should not be exposed to. We lived on the fourth floor of a very old tenement building. I trudged up those stairs many times not wanting to open the door to that apartment.

Within a short time after arriving in Chicago, I was introduced to a small gang of 10 and 12-year-old street “toughies” who called themselves the Orchard Street Gang. Even though there was no drug activity “yet”, they would steal anything that wasn’t tied down. One of the ways those little gang members made money was to guard each end of an alley where a floating crap game was taking place. If the police made an appearance, someone would run down the alley and warn the older gang members, who were running the crap game. That’s just one of the many petty crimes that were committed. If you have ever seen the movie called *The Dead End Kids* – that was us.

Fortunately for me, after a year my mother decided that I was too much of an inconvenience. I was sent back to live with my grandparents once again. Frankly, I was not the least bit unhappy with that decision. Had I not been sent back to live with my grandparents, I am sure my life would have turned out quite differently – and not in a positive way. I do not know what happened to all of those that were in the gang but a few years later, I was told that one was in prison for selling drugs, one had been shot and killed, one was a drug addict and the another one just disappeared. With those statistics, my chances were slim!

So back to the one-room house in Jacksonville with my grandparents I went. When I was fourteen years old, I was caught up with the wrong crowd again and the outcome was not good. I ended up in the juvenile detention center and the county jail for car theft and burglary – a joy ride that turned bad! This episode resulted in one year of probation, but because I was a juvenile it was erased from my record. I was placed into the custody of my father who lived in Jacksonville, not far from my grandparents. The year I



spent with my father was not any better than the year I had spent with my mother. I was simply a “body” in his house. He was too busy drinking, chasing women, and fighting in bars to be concerned about a son. After about a year, I was shuffled back to my grandparents again. I did learn one lesson during that period of time, though - I never wanted to break the law again!

During my school years, my grades were probably typical for a kid that was shuffled back and forth between family members, and, of course, I did not always choose the right peer group to hang around with. I was not a stellar student except for Art Class. That was the class I liked, and that was what I was good at. The other subjects in school held little interest for me. I quit school as soon as I could. I cannot blame my lack of interest in school on a learning disability, or inability to learn because of my IQ, or some other reason; I just was not motivated enough by anything or anyone to continue my education.

At the age of sixteen when I quit school, I boarded a Greyhound bus with sixty dollars in my pocket and headed to Chicago. I was very fortunate in getting a job as an office boy at the Kimberly Clark Corporation and earned forty dollars per week, a fortune, or so I thought at the time. In looking back at that time period of my life (and it is a little fuzzy!), I am sure this was the first time I became aware of another world, a world where people were educated, dressed like business people, and seemed to be striving for something better in life. Even though I was not employed in that job very long, my experiences during that period of time, both during working and non-working hours, made an impact on me whether consciously or unconsciously. They were tucked away in the back of my mind. Bits and pieces of those experiences would come rushing forward at various times in the coming years.

I managed to get a small, furnished two-room apartment and supplemented my income with any odd job I could find. I quickly learned that forty dollars a week was not such a large fortune in the City of Chicago. Sometimes I painted apartments, hustled a few pool games in pool halls, and occasionally sold a sketch. I quite often carried a sketchpad and pencil

around wherever I went. I only stayed in Chicago one year before I felt the pull of “adventure on the road” once again. I left Chicago with a few dollars in my pocket. I traveled to California, stopping for a short period of time in many of the states that I traveled through. I had acquired a union card in the painters union, so I could usually find some sort of painting work. I took any job I could find to put a few dollars in my pocket.

Those months on the road were not easy ones. I probably would have been considered homeless a few times except for the fact that, when I could afford it, I put a roof over my head (often in a seventy-five cent per night flop house). No matter where my travels took me, I always sought and found work.

When I had spare time and work was scarce, I would frequent the library and read various types of books. Now that I did not have anyone telling me I had to read, I seemed to want to. There was a yearning inside of me to learn and to make more of my life than what was happening at the moment. I did not know how to make that happen, but I knew I was not going to give up.

I began to realize that the people in my immediate family and most of the individuals I had been exposed to were very poor role models. For the most part they lived from day to day and barely eked out a meager existence. I think this realization was the beginning of trying to figure out what I wanted in life, or at least what I did not want. But at that time, it was only a small glimmer, a spark now and then. I do not think that I was really conscious that this was going on in my mind, but as I look back, I can see that the seeds had been planted. It took a few more years, many more difficulties, and many more mistakes before those seeds began to germinate and bloom.

I eventually made my way back to the Midwest to my grandparents' house where I slept on a cot in their basement – a dark, unkept basement. I was almost eighteen at that time. Painting was my one skill so I began painting houses with my grandfather. My grandfather also plowed gardens with a team of horses and trained horses for other people. He taught me to

ride a horse, and the time we spent together with the horses gave me a lot of pleasure. This existence was a far cry from being on the road or the streets of Chicago. I had a roof over my head and some food, but life was far from satisfying.

This day-to-day existence did not hold my interest for long. I took off for Chicago once again, this time landing a job as a cab driver. Driving a cab in the City of Chicago was an interesting experience, but after a few months, I once again returned to Jacksonville. I was restless no matter where I was. Some people might say that I had “sand in my shoes” but it was not the lure of travel that made me bounce around from one place or another. Nothing seemed to be the right fit no matter where I was.

Once I returned to Jacksonville, I married and had a son by the time I was nineteen and a half years old. In those three and a half years since leaving high school, I had traveled a lot, seen a lot, worked a lot of jobs, and now was responsible for two more people. I was still going nowhere! By now, you are probably thinking that I was a very slow learner! Would I recommend any young person do what I did? Of course not! I was going through life the hard way. But, once again, some of those experiences – good and bad – were unconsciously tucked away in the back of my mind to surface at a later time.

In my travels through Missouri, I had the opportunity to work with a tree care company where I was given the opportunity to learn a lot about the trimming and care of trees. I will be forever grateful for that opportunity. This initial training sparked an interest in learning about the care of trees. In 1957 when I was 22 years old, I studied, took a State test and received the designation as a “Tree Expert” in the State of Illinois. That interest has stayed with me throughout my entire life, and I still love to “talk trees.”

I started my own tree care business when I was 21 years old. I bought a used chain saw, a hand saw, the materials to make a homemade tree saddle for climbing, and one hundred-feet of manila rope. I needed to make a living for my family, and I thought this was the easiest and quickest way.

I really enjoyed working with trees, and I thought I was relatively good at it. I headed out onto the streets of Jacksonville to start my business. I walked the streets, knocking on doors and asking people if they needed their trees trimmed. It put quick cash in my pocket and food on the table for my family. I was starting my own business although I had no idea how to actually run a business. All I knew how to do was knock on doors and trim trees. I continued to study and learn as much as I could about trees and also began studying for my GED. I finally realized that I did need that high school diploma. I was a few years late, but I got it in 1957! I was 22 years old.

Life takes unusual, unexpected turns. When I was 22 years old, a Jacksonville city council member suggested that I take the examination to be a firefighter for the fire department. A few months later, I passed the examination and was hired by the City of Jacksonville as a firefighter. I could not have taken that examination if I had not gotten my GED. I continued working in my tree care business on my days off from the fire department. I thought I was making progress, and compared to what had taken place the prior years, I was. My biggest problem was that I had no idea how to handle money. It came in the door and back out as fast as I could make it.

During the seven years that I worked full time as a firefighter, I also worked many hours in my tree care business. I was putting food on the table, had a small two-bedroom house, a nice car.....and a lot of debt. I began to feel that I was stuck in a rut, one that I was going to be stuck in for the rest of my life. Most people would probably ask, "What more did I want?" I had a secure job and a business on the side. What was my problem? If you had asked me at that time, I am sure I would not have had an answer. I just knew that it was not a blueprint that I wanted to continue to follow for another thirty-five or forty years. I did not have the answers to all that was rolling around in my head, and I did not have anyone to turn to for those answers.

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