THE GIFT

WHAT YOU HAVE THAT THE RICHEST MAN CAN'T BUY
It was a beautiful Spring day in New York City. Central Park at noon time had become a haven of rest for Mack Johnson. He looked forward to escaping his high-rise office cubicle to clear his head from the frustrations of work. The economy was sinking fast and with it his hopes and dreams.

He felt like a complete failure. His world was slowly crumbling around him. While only 37 years of age, Mack wondered if true success in life and work would ever come. While sitting on the park bench eating his ham and cheese sandwich on rye, he wondered:

- Have I gone in the wrong direction with my career?
- Why does success come so easily to everyone else?
- What is the real purpose of my life?
- How will I ever escape the financial ruin that I’m in?
- Will my wife and family ever respect me as a provider?

The Downward Spiral

Because of the failing economy, Mack was working twice as many hours for even less compensation. His work was based on a commission structure. Due to the lack of commissions in recent months, their financial life was slowly deteriorating. This was causing a strain on his relationship with Amy his wife.

He still remembers the moment he laid eyes on her as a Freshman in college. Amy was sitting with a group of friends in the college cafeteria. Her smile was infectious and mesmerizing. She was a natural encourager who always had a positive word to say. While Amy was beautiful to look upon, her positive attitude was the one quality that always meant the most to him.
Mack was a pessimist by nature. The glass was always half empty in his eyes and Amy would always pull him out of his current "mental pit." Her words were a source of energy, like finding an oasis in the desert. She was his rock. Amy was the one person that Mack could always depend upon. Back in the day, there were several times he wanted to quit college altogether and she always provided the boost that he needed to get through his current challenge.

Now, times are much different. Between the lack of his involvement at home, the strain of taking care of two kids under the age of six, and the daily financial struggles, Amy had become a different person than the one he had married. Mack almost resented her. "Where is the beautiful encourager when I need her most?" he thought.

For the past several days on his daily commute home on the subway, he often wondered if she would even be there. In fact, it wouldn't surprise him to find a note saying that she and the kids were gone. In some ways, he couldn't blame her. After all, he was a big reason as to why they were in the mess they were in to begin with.

For the past several days, he had come to the same park bench at noon hoping to discover an answer that would solve all of his problems. Everyday he left disappointed. Today, he even turned his direction and focus on God. "God, why are you choosing to punish me?" he wondered. "What have I done to deserve such a miserable life?"

"Do you even care about the pain I am feeling?" he screamed inside. He would have screamed the question out loud if it wasn't for the rollerbladers passing by. Mack was convinced that even God was against him too.

Mack even had thoughts of running himself. Running from all of your problems seemed like a good solution. After all, facing them seemed too hard. Maybe he should write a goodbye note to Amy. It would almost be as if he was doing her a favor. She was probably better off without him. As he sat on the park bench, Mack began to dream up a plan for running.

"I could run to Florida, find a job at a retail store near the beach, and live in a small apartment. All of my cares, worries, and frustrations would immediately be relieved," he thought. Shaking his head and coming back to reality, Mack knew that couldn't be the answer.
Get It Out of Your Head

Mack was so frustrated that he even spent several minutes just sitting. His mind was so much on overload that he got to the point of not really thinking about anything at all.

He just sat and stared.

Coming back to reality, he looked at his watch to see that he only had about 20 minutes left before needing to be back at work. It was then that a thought occurred to him. "Maybe it would be helpful to just get all of these thoughts out on paper." He remembered once in a time management seminar that the speaker told him a little bit about how the mind works. It only takes three or four items to make our brain feel overwhelmed and that just writing them down can help bring you some mental clarity. At this point, any mental clarity would be welcomed so Mack pulled out a piece of paper.

At the top of the page, he wrote: WHY AM I SO FRUSTRATED? Over the next several minutes, he began to pour out all of the thoughts and frustrations that had him on the downward spiral. He wrote everything that came to mind without even judging as to whether it was true or not. For almost 15 minutes, it seemed as if the pen never stopped. Suddenly looking at his watch, he realized what time it was. He only had five minutes to get back to work. He quickly folded the paper, placed it in his suit pocket and decided that he would have to look at it later.
Mack rushed off the elevator of the 19th floor toward his cubicle. He arrived without anyone noticing that he was a few minutes late (or so he had hoped). He noticed that his voicemail light was bright red on his phone. Nothing unusual or so it seemed. He punched in his code and it was his boss asking him to stop by his office.

Mack hung up the phone wondering what Ray, his boss, could possibly want. He recalled the day that Ray hired him over 5 years ago.

It was a great day.

Mack thought this was the shot he had been waiting for. Yet today he had many doubts. Mack wasn't sure if this job was the best fit for his strengths. After all, the main reason he took this job in the first place was for the income potential. "Listen to us and we will make you a lot of money. When you succeed, we succeed," Ray said on Mack's first day on the job. Now it felt more like your failure is causing our failure.

Mack knocked on Ray's door.

"Come in and have a seat Mack," said Ray.

Ray was a short, stocky gentleman in his late 40's. He was a firecracker. He knew how to take action and get things done. While the employees admired him, they also feared him a little as well. He expected the best no matter the situation. Today Ray looked perplexed. It was almost as if Ray was at a loss of words. A rare sight for the fiery boss. Something was going on and whatever it was it didn't seem good.

"Mack, I am going to just cut to the chase. We are letting you go."

Mack's heart sank. Even though he worked mostly for commissions, his family depended on the salary draw that he received to supply the family's basic needs of clothes, food, and transportation. Ray continued talking, but all Mack heard was muffled words as his mind was elsewhere.

Mack finally tuned back in as Ray said, "Due to company confidentiality polices unfortunately the termination is immediate. We have to have you leave today."

Ray stood up offered his hand and said, "It's not personal Mack. It's just business."
It sure felt personal. After all, could anything else go wrong? I put in extra hours for this company and this is what I get in return, thought Mack. Beyond that was the pain of telling his wife. Could this be the straw that breaks the camel's back. This news could potentially be crushing to their marriage, he thought.

Mack headed back to his desk. As he got closer, he heard his desk phone ringing, but had no desire to answer it. He picked up an empty cardboard box that once had reams of paper in it and he began to place all his belongings in the box.

Surprisingly, Mack did not have a whole lot of personal belongings. The last item he saw was a certificate pinned to the cubical wall. He pulled out the thumbtack and took a closer look. It was an Employee of the Month certificate from two years ago. He remembered that time vividly. He landed one of the biggest clients the firm had ever obtained. He received much praise for that accomplishment. Too bad he also lost that large client six months ago during the financial collapse. He said his good-byes to his fellow co-employees and then walked out the door for the last time.

He headed down the elevator and out to the subway station. All the while, wondering how we was going to break the news to his wife.
Walking in the front door of his home, Mack surprised everyone with his early arrival. His two kids came running to the front door as always. He remembered when Amy would come to the door with just as much enthusiasm. Lately it seemed as though he always had to initiate the first hello.

While she was a bit surprised to see him home early, she didn't really question him as to why. Mack tried his best to put a smile on his face for his kids but he was definitely not smiling on the inside.

Thoughts of the future scared him.

Would he ever overcome all these challenges, he wondered. Coming back to reality, he noticed his two kids tugging at his shirt wanting to go outside and play. Mack wasn't really up for it, but he obliged. The last thing he wanted was for the kids to feel any of the weight that he was under. He wanted to keep life as normal as possible for them. They were certainly a handful though.

His daughter Kayla was five years old and full of life. She was in charge and everyone knew it. The only reason she got away with it was because she was so adorable. Mack's son Jordan was only three years old but had his own little personality. Jordan genuinely thought he was a superhero and that the fate of the universe was in his hands. He was easily excitable and always positive. He reminded Mack of Amy's personality at least before everything started heading down hill.

Literally being dragged outside, Mack went out to play with his kids. Kayla wanted to ride her bike and Jordan wanted to throw football. Even though Jordan could barely catch, he tried anyhow. His favorite was hiking the football but it never went very far.

At least the weather is nice today, thought Mack. Is this the best it will get for me? After all what dad is out throwing football with is kids in the middle of a workday? Mack wondered.

Still Mack managed somehow to get focused back on his kids again. He was determined to set aside his troubles and just enjoy the moment for a little while. It was actually a little bit of medicine for him. They played tackle football in the front yard for
what seemed like an hour. They laughed and climbed on top of Mack just to make sure he was in fact "tackled."

Finally, suppertime came so they all went inside. At the dinner table the kids talked a lot but not much interaction was happening between Amy and Mack. Mack kind of enjoyed sitting together with everyone at the dinner table. He sort of forgot what it felt like. He had been working so many long hours at work that he could not remember the last time he was home for supper. He still hadn't really decided how he was going to tell Amy that he lost his job.

After dinner, Amy took the kids upstairs to get a bath and get ready for bedtime. Mack sat in his usual chair reading the newspaper. He silently turned over to the classifieds section to see what job openings might be available.

Not a single job looked all that interesting to him. He even doubted that any of them could even pay him what he need to survive. They were already two mortgage payments behind on their house and he was wondering how that was going to turn out. Money lately was too much to think about.

Denial was a much easier route to take. Although it didn't solve anything, not looking at the budget or bills until he absolutely had to seemed like a better plan. He even cringed every time he logged into his bank account online. The remaining balance was always much less than he thought. There was even times that he wished a few thousand dollars would just magically appear in his bank account unexpected. But that was never the case.

After finishing the paper he headed upstairs to tell the kids goodnight. He gave each of them a big hug and kiss and headed off to his bedroom. He jumped onto the bed and turned on the TV. Still having no plan for telling Amy he decided that watching some television would be a good distraction for him. After about thirty minutes, Amy walked into the bedroom.

"Kids asleep?" Mack asked.
"Mmm..Hmm," was Amy's reply.
Mack muted the television.
"Amy we need to talk," Mack said with a deep breath.
"You lost your job today didn't you?" Amy replied while taking her jewelry off for the night with her back still turned away from Mack.
"Yes....but how did you know?"
"Mack, you were home at 2:30 in the afternoon. When's the last time you were even home before dark?"
"Wait a minute....I've been working hard to provide for you and the kids," Mack said in a defensive voice.

"We don't want your money, we want YOU!" She said with tears in her eyes. "Actually, I am not even sure if I want you...but I at least want the kids to know who their Father is," Amy continued.

"Hey, now wait a minute. I just spent the whole afternoon playing with them outside!" Mack said passionately.

"Let's just go to bed. I'm too tired for this right now," Amy said in a frustrated tone as she climbed into bed.

Mack reached over and turned out the lights. They only had a queen sized bed but it seemed like there was a great gulf between them as he tried to get some rest.

What a day, he thought as he took a deep breath. I wonder what tomorrow has in store. Even better maybe I will wake up and realize this was just a bad dream.

Mack rolled to his side away from Amy and fell asleep.
The next morning Mack woke up to an empty bed. At first it startled him until he heard everyone downstairs. He had just slept in. That was something he had not done in a very long time. He actually kind of enjoyed it.

For the last several years, he was up way before the sun. He had to in order to catch the subway to be to work on time. Even though it felt strange for him not to have an agenda for the day, he sort of liked it. The real challenge was figuring out how to survive all day at home with the tension as high as it was. He managed to get dressed in order to head downstairs for breakfast.

When he arrived in the kitchen, he heard his kids say unanimously, "Daddy!" That made him feel good until Kayla said, "Daddy, what are you doing here?" It was an honest question, but it still hurt. I guess the kids have been used to being without me, he thought. Jordan had pancakes and syrup all over his cute little face. It was obvious he had been taking turns between using his fork and using his hands to eat his breakfast.

After breakfast, Mack decided to go for a walk around the neighborhood. He thought it would be a good way to clear his thoughts and besides being in the house with Amy all day was probably a recipe for disaster.

As he felt the coolness of the morning, it began to revive his spirit just a bit. There was just something about being outside. He continued walking toward the back of his subdivision. The last phase of houses were yet to be built. The roads were paved, the lots were primed, but there was just land and no homes. The building of new houses had come to a screeching halt since the recession hit.

As the road winded to the back of the property, he saw one empty culd-e-sac after another. It was quiet and peaceful. Much different than what he experienced most mornings. Crowded subways and grumpy people with a hot latte in tote, all rushing to work.

Walking to the end of the street all he saw was empty lots and the woods that seemed to outline the back of each property. He saw the birds as they whipped around, played and chirped. Life must be easy for birds, he wondered. He noticed the
mist rising from the pond at the end of one of the culd-e-sacs. He decided to just sit by
the pond and think for awhile.

He pulled out the paper he had written on the day before. It was the document
he began to write as he sat on the park bench in Central Park. It was his attempt to get
all of his frustrations out on paper. He began to read each item one by one. It was a
long list of everything that was frustrating him in life. He took another deep breath as
he began to fill the pressure pour onto him once again. He still had no answers to all of
these problems.

As he looked up, Mack noticed the pond was as still as ice and the mist rose from
the pond in a calming, soft way. The sun was just beginning to peak over the tops of
the trees. He saw the rays of the sun as they began to shine through onto the pond.
What an awesome sight, he thought. The pure beauty of the moment caused him to
turn his eyes upward.

**Just Show Me a Sign**

"God, if you are at all interested in me, give me a sign. Just something. I don't
know what to do or where to go from here. I have always believed in you, but I am be-
ginning to have my doubts. Do you even really care about me? If so, prove it!" Mack
crumbled the paper and shoved it in his pocket. He stood up, brushed himself off, and
began to make the trek towards home.

As he arrived within a 100 feet or so from his home, he noticed a FedEx truck
parked directly in front of his house. What could that be? He wondered. It had to have
been something Amy ordered. She knows we can't afford to spend any money right
now, he thought angrily.

The FedEx truck sped off before he got to the house. Walking in the front door,
he saw Amy holding an envelope package.

"What is it?" He asked Amy.

"I don't know. I didn't order anything," She answered.

At least that made him feel a bit better. Whatever it was, he wasn't going to be
happy unless it was a million dollar check from Publisher's Clearing House. He
grabbed the tab on the envelope and ripped it open. Inside was a letter and four plane
tickets to Idaho. Confused he began to read the letter:
Mack and Family,

I hope you are doing well. I recently heard that times have been tough on you, Amy, and the kids. Grandma and I have been praying for a few days about what we might be able to do to help. Included with this letter is 4 round trip airline tickets to Idaho. Sorry if we are being a little presumptuous, but we are both convinced that you need to get away and come see us.

Can't wait to see you, Amy and the kids!

Love you,
Grandaddy

P.S. The tickets are non-refundable.

Mack was speechless. It's been awhile since he even spoke with his Grandfather. He had a mix of emotions. On one hand, it was a bit rude to just shove 4 airplane tickets in someone's face and expect them to drop what they were doing and come out to Idaho for a week. On the other hand, he did ask God for a sign. There was no denying that it was a sign.

By the time Mack finished his thinking, Amy had just finished reading the letter herself. She took a deep breath and was trying to process this as well. She always had a tendency to think through all of the details. Mack was more spontaneous, but he learned early on in their marriage that she wasn't that way and needed time to process out the specifics.

Amy finally spoke up, "Well, I'm not completely happy about it, but I don't want to waste their money and generosity either. I guess we're going. Besides, it will be good for kids to spend some time with them. Your Grandparents are getting up there in age."

Mack just listened. He was a bit surprised that she jumped on board so quickly, but then again he wondered if deep inside she wanted a change of pace herself.

"OK, looks like we are going on a trip kids." Mack said shrugging his shoulders. With that, the packing for the trip began. After all, the plane was scheduled for take off in less than 48 hours.