

MARK ALLEN ROBERTS

BRANDING BACKWARDS

A BRAND'S
ODYSSEY TOWARD
SELF-DISCOVERY

"Dnarb is a classic example of how we too often see things from the wrong perspective. Mark Allen Roberts has a unique ability to cut through all the complexity and transform perceived problems into simple breakthroughs that resonate. This book is a classic example of applying his 'out of the box' techniques in the areas of positioning and branding. Business owners will find Mark's presentation of what a brand truly is to be both enlightening and a simple guide for sustaining growth in their own businesses."

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by MARK ALLEN ROBERTS



www.outBsolutions.com

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PREFACE

WORKING WITH VARIOUS companies over the past 23 years in a variety of industries I have experienced some common challenges with regards to marketing. Just as the question “what came first the chicken or the egg?” creates discussion, so too the question “what came first sales or marketing?” can generate much debate. I believe marketing plants the seeds of what a product or service does in the minds of its consumers and purchase influencers and establishes the product or services’ perceived value proposition. Sales then occur in response to matching needs with solutions.

I wrote this short story as a response to a challenge from a client who stated “*you have a way of breaking down very complex theories into executable strategies, I wish someone would write a book that explains; marketing, branding and positioning so non- marketing people can understand.*” First, everyone is in marketing and the sooner a client understands this the quicker we can establish the foundation for profitable, repeatable growth.

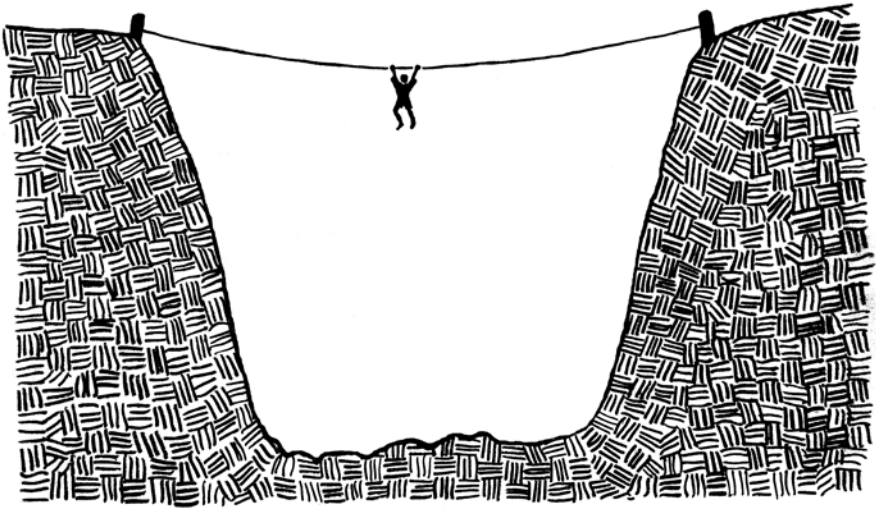
Having never written a short story before I was challenged by how to write a message that sticks and adds value. I was reminded of how the sales training I have led over the years produced the best results in the

market when the salespeople created a personal story around the product or service. To accomplish our team goals salespeople need to understand the product and personalize it through an emotional attachment of a story uniquely their own. This insured first they owned the benefit the products or services provide and secondly through a story they have a tendency to “stick” with clients. I used a story in the pages that follow to discuss a topic and help it stick and add value to you.

Some time ago one of my many mentors said “*you know what Einstein said...if you can't explain something to a six year old you probably do not understand it yourself.*” This also resonated with me in writing this story and what you will find in the pages that follow is a topic, told in the form of a story, strategically filtered to its core, to insure it connects and can be applied.

Thank you to Pauly Heller for her editing and writing. And Billie Bishop for her graphic illustrations and layout.

THE CRISIS



DON'T LOOK DOWN," I command myself. Perspiration drips from my forehead, stinging my eyes. "Don't look down!" I repeat emphatically, even as I sneak a dizzying peek at the thousand-foot drop below my dangling feet. My palms, raw from my hand-over-hand course along the rope over Yaw-On Gorge, shout at me to let go. But that would lead to disastrous results—my body banging against the steep, rocky walls, bones fracturing, breaking, pulverizing as I plummet, careening to my demise.

"No!" I shake the gruesome image from my head. I must continue

this final, treacherous leg of my quest for the Ancient One who alone holds the answer I seek.

Thirst sets every breath on fire in my parched throat. The straps of my bulging backpack dig into the flesh of my shoulders. Maxed-out muscles quiver and cramp, screaming at me for relief. Why don't I just let go and end this foolhardy quest? At least my hands and forearms would thank me during the remaining seconds of my life before I slam into the ground.

Why have I brought myself to this awful place of pain and doubt? The question rings through my half-conscious brain like a death knell, tolling doom through my foggy, tormented thoughts. A vulture circles overhead in a hypnotic rhythm of loops ... dizzying, circling ... looping ... slipping ... falling into the gaping, rocky teeth below.

With a gasp I fling both my legs up, crossing them over the rope. Heart pounding, I see my entire 21 years of life in a flashing instant of clarity....

Passionate Beginnings

Joined by the passion of youthful love, my parents brought me into the world and saddled me with a strange name—Dnarb. Who knows? Maybe they wanted me to stand out from all the rest of the little girls of our village of Tekram. But whether by name or by nature, I realized I was different. Everyone else seemed to have a focus, a direction for his or her life, but I didn't have a purpose of my own. Instead I found a sense of satisfaction in helping other villagers with their daily tasks. And the more they appreciated my assistance, the more I wanted to help them.

One day, Miss Coco, a local seamstress asked me to help her create

richly embroidered, pleated curtains for the town hall. When I arrived, Miss Coco said, “Welcome, Sewer. Come sit here and I will show you what to do.”

“Thank you, Miss Coco,” I answered politely. “But my name isn’t ‘Sewer, it’s Dnarb.”

She looked at me sternly, just a hint of a smile in her eyes, and said, “That may very well be your name, but as long as you work for me, you are ‘Sewer.’ And you will need to acquire some sewing tools to do your job here.”

Day after day we toiled at the task, and I watched Miss Coco’s fingers deftly stitch row after row of tiny, perfect stitches at three times the speed of my own. The words MASTER SEAMSTRESS she had embroidered in gold floss on the front and back of the identifying cowl worn by all the adults in our village certainly defined her appropriately.

“Miss Coco,” I asked, “What makes you stand out above all the rest of the seamstresses in Tekram?”

Smiling, Miss Coco replied, “Why, my child, my seams are the straightest and my stitches the finest in all of Tekram. Once I was like all the other village seamstresses, sewing whatever I could for the most meager of wages. But then one day, I chose to move beyond the mundane and routine; I stepped out of the box, “OTB” so to speak. And I went on a journey to discover how I could make a better living doing what I loved better than anything in the world—sewing.”

“Where did you go? Did the journey take you far away?” I pleaded with Miss Coco to tell me more. But she only smiled and continued stitching.

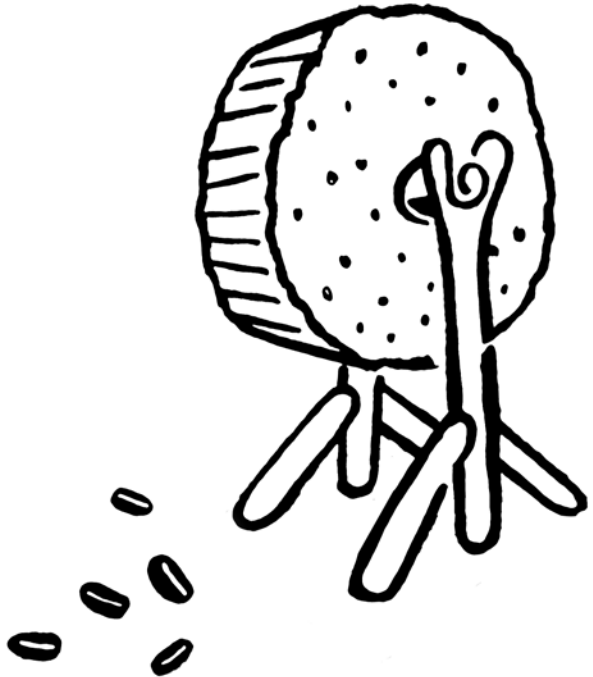
“One day when you’re ready, you will find the answers you seek,” was all she would say on the subject.

Every Day, the Name Old Thing—Grinder

The following week, I went to help Mr. Buck at his coffee shop. When I arrived, he said, “Welcome, Grinder. Come sit here and I will show you what to do.”

“Thank you, Mr. Buck,” I answered politely. “But my name isn’t ‘Grinder, it’s Dnarb.”

He looked at me sternly, though his eyes sparkled, and said, “That may very well be your name, but as long as you work for me, you are ‘Grinder.’ And you will need to acquire some grinding tools in order to be of service to me.”



DNARB'S QUESTION

HE SHOWED ME HOW to grind roasted beans into the perfect blends he used to brew the fresh, rich coffee that transformed villagers' early-morning facial expressions from blah to brilliant. I watched Mr. Buck in his dark brown cowl with the words MASTER BARISTA inscribed in bright green on both front and back as we worked behind his busy counter. Could I ever be that skilled at something? So I asked him, "Mr. Buck, what makes your coffee in such demand? Every eatery in town serves coffee, yet your shop is always full of customers."

Mr. Buck smiled knowingly and replied, "Why young lady, my coffee beans are always the freshest because I am the only barista in town who grinds his own beans. And I brew coffee every twenty minutes, so my patrons will never have a bad cup."

I pondered his answer. Wouldn't it be cheaper to buy pre-ground coffee like the other coffeehouse owners used? Certainly then he could charge less and make more of a profit on his sales while competing with their low prices. Yet there was no denying that Buck's Coffee Shop was always busy. So the next day I asked him, "What is your secret? Your coffee costs more to make, and you often pour pots of it down the drain after twenty-one minutes. It just doesn't make sense to do business that way."

Mr. Buck looked at me thoughtfully, as though carefully weighing his words. “One day,” he said, “I decided that I didn’t want to be like all the others. So I went OTB and risked venturing out of the box to go on a journey to discover how I could improve.” Then he stopped abruptly, and no matter how much I pleaded with him, he wouldn’t say more.

Every Day the Name Old Thing—Blender

The next week found me at Tekram’s premier ice cream shop, working for Mr. Bell. When I entered his sparkling clean shop, he was wiping a child’s handprints off the glass front of his display freezer. His spotless white cowl bore the blue insignia DAIRY-MASTER. Mr. Bell said, “Welcome, Blender. Come sit here and I will show you what to do.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bell,” I answered politely. “But my name isn’t ‘Blender, it’s Dnarb.”

He turned and looked at me seriously, but his eyes twinkled as he said, “That may very well be your name, but as long as you work for me, you are ‘Blender.’ Here is a list of tools you will need to acquire in order to be of service to me.”



DNARB'S QUESTION, PART TWO

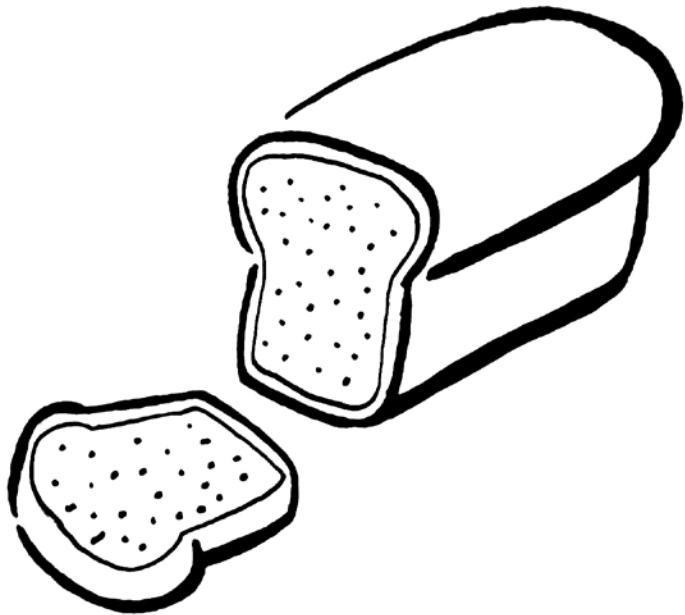
EARLY EACH MORNING I would blend the ingredients to make the chocolate or blueberry or strawberry or pistachio ice cream for the day's customers. I mixed tubs in rainbows of colors. I enjoyed helping Mr. Bell because his shop was always full of smiling children. While helping clean the utensils one day, I asked him, "Mr. Bell, why do so many villagers come to your ice cream shop? After all, people can get ice cream from many other places in the village, yet your door has a steady stream of customers coming through it.

Mr. Bell rubbed an ice cream scoop with a soft, white cotton towel as he replied, "When I was a young man, I was apprenticed to an ice cream maker in a far-off land. There I learned that the best ice cream is prepared every day from fresh ingredients blended according to a unique recipe. When I returned from my apprenticeship, I sought out one of our village elders, the one they call the 'Ancient One.' He taught me to move out of the box and mentored me in the principles of OTB by helping me understand how my business and my dream were to take shape."

Every Day the Name Old Thing—Blender Again

As the years passed, I assisted many of my village's people. Having heard from Mr. Buck how I'd helped him grind his coffee, Miss Krisp, the baker, asked me to help her grind her grain into the finest flour. Then, Mr. Sherwin, the painter, heard how good I was at blending ice cream and came to me for help blending his paints.

I couldn't help noticing how Mr. Sherwin's business thrived. So I asked him, "Why does everyone buy paint from you? Certainly, your paint isn't the least expensive."



DNARB'S QUESTION, PART THREE

THAT'S TRUE, BLENDER," he replied. He insisted on calling me Blender no matter how many times I told him my name was Dnarb. But by this time, I'd gotten used to people I was helping calling me different names. "However, I take the purest pigments, and my blended colors become the richest and do not fade over time. My colors hold their brilliance, and I am the only paint maker in these parts who gives a 15-year guarantee. I learned the secrets to selling the highest quality OTB paints at the hearth of an old fireplace high in the mountains when I was a young one slightly older than you are now. But I've said enough for now." And I couldn't get him to say another word about OTB and the mysterious, old hearth high in the mountains no matter how hard I tried.

And so my days were filled with activity. In my desire to serve, I tried to be whatever the village tradesmen thought I was, be it grinder, blender, seamstress, bartender, mower, sower, reaper or sweeper. I seemed to have no trade of my own. But for every job I did, I acquired the necessary tools: sewing needles and shears, coffee mills and grain grinders, ice cream makers and paint blenders, rakes, shovels and brooms. You name it, I had it in a growing pile in a corner of my room at my parents' house. And every time I went to help someone new, I'd

have to purchase more tools and add them to the pile that threatened to take over all my living space.

Some days when no one requested my assistance, I would go into Tekram to find odd jobs. I quickly learned that I preferred to have others seek me out based on my reputation than to approach strangers. Often when I asked for work, I'd hear, "Are you trained in this craft? Who are you and what have you done?" If my past experiences did not match the merchant's needs, I'd have slim hope for finding work that day.

Collared on Cowl Day

But I was young and still living with my parents, so my needs were few, and I rarely gave money a second thought. I was happy just knowing I could help so many people with so many different types of needs. Eventually, however, Cowl Day arrived. According to Tekram tradition, I was now old enough to receive my officially inscribed cowl and strike out on my own. I joined the throng of other 17-year-olds in a ceremony on the village square. One-by-one we went forward to receive our draping collars from Tekram's elders. How I envied the ones who already knew their calling. They walked with confident strides and radiant faces to be pronounced "Mechanic" or "Mapmaker" or "Mountain



Climber” or even “Mother.” But my cowl settled over my shoulders bearing only my name, “Dnarb.” I smiled for my parents’ camera, but inside I felt useless and empty.

The Backpack

I determined at that moment that whatever it took, I would find my life’s calling. When I told my mother of my new mission, she cried. “Why can’t you be satisfied working as a seamstress or a blender or a grinder?” she asked. “You’ve done all of those well. You have connections and you could make a good, secure living with a guaranteed income.”

But I was insistent and would not be swayed from my risky plans. When my parents saw they could not change my mind, they gave me a large, sturdy backpack as a going-away present to hold all the tools I’d acquired through all my work experiences.

For the next four years, I wandered from village to village, from town to town and from city to city. Yet no job satisfied my heart’s longing to fulfill my calling, and nothing provided the income to live above the level of a common laborer. By now, I staggered under the weight of my misshapen backpack full of tools so necessary for each job, yet somehow so useless to me. I worked 14-to-16-hour days, yet barely stayed afloat financially. And every night when I undressed for bed, my cowl—placed carefully on a hanger—reproached me with its inscription.

“Dnarb! When will you ever be more than this nonsensical, nearly unpronounceable name?”

THE BOOK OF THE ANCIENT ONE

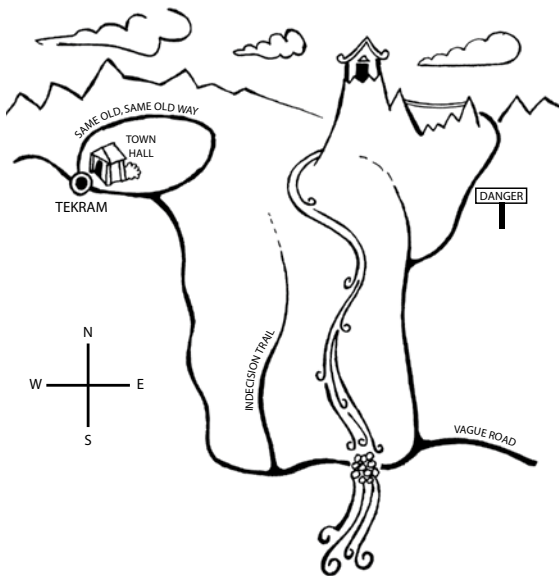
THE AFTERNOON OF my twenty-first birthday found me working at Tekram's library. At my parents' request, I'd returned home for what should have been a joyous occasion. The librarian, Miss Dewey, hired me as a reader, but taking this job was a mistake. It seemed as if every one of my parents' friends came to the library that day to borrow or return a book or video, and they all wanted to talk about their children's glorious careers. Hearing the news of my classmates' successes served only to increase my shame over my failing to achieve my goals.

I finally sought refuge amid the reference and out-of-circulation books. Backing into the farthest corner, I bumped an old, dust-covered book with the smell of time, and caught it just before it would have hit the floor. I thumbed through its brittle pages and realized it contained Tekram's most ancient writings penned by and about the village founders.

Normally, such histories bored me with their outdated language and slow pace. But a reference to the Ancient One caught my eye, and I knew I had to learn more. So I checked out the book and took it home, where I pored over it until nearly dawn. The Ancient One, I learned, had helped map Tekram's original layout and taught its inhabitants to understand how to best serve their village and how

to position it geographically among other towns and villages, taking advantage of the surrounding natural resources, roads, highways, rivers and communication channels. I longed to learn more about this marvelous, wise man about whom I had heard only snippets through the years.

Hungrily I turned the pages, gobbling information with my eyes. But just as it had been with the seamstress, the baker, the painter, and the ice cream maker, my enlightenment came to a dead end. As I reached the last discolored pages, I discovered the Ancient One had moved far away from the village to live high on a nearly unreachable mountaintop. The book's final paragraph said that he needed to "step out of the box and go OTB" from Tekram. What could these words possibly mean? How could the Ancient One have chosen to not participate in the activities of the village he had helped to establish?



The Map

A map directing seekers to the Ancient One's hermitage adorned the inside back cover of the book. Clever illustration, I thought as I set the book on the nightstand by my bed. Turning off the light, I wondered if this was merely an old wives' tale or did this Ancient One truly

exist? Yet something about that map kept me awake. I had to examine it once more. I sat up, turned on the light, and flipped open the book's back cover.

This was no ordinary illustration! This map was hand-drawn. And why hadn't I noticed the tiny signatures in the lower right-hand corner before? There they were—Coco ... Buck ... Sherwin ... Bell.... My heart pounded in my throat. I knew I was onto something life-changing. Just as I had insisted on finding my calling the day I received my cowl, I now set my sights on finding the Ancient One.

As quietly as I could, I repacked my rucksack with all my tools, hoisted it onto my back, and tiptoed toward the door.

"Dnarb!"

Busted!

"Hi, Mom. Sorry if I woke you up. I was going to write you a note."

She glanced from the backpack to the book in my hand and shook her head. "Dnarb, don't do this. You have no idea what's out there. Why don't you just stay here where you're safe?"

"Mom, if you'd wanted me to be safe, you wouldn't have given me a name like Dnarb! You wouldn't have encouraged me to go out and try to help all those people—the very people who told me about the Ancient One!"

She gasped and took a step backward, clasping her hands together over her mouth. I felt a sudden, unexpected surge of tenderness toward her. Stepping forward, I touched her damp cheek.

"Mom, this is something I have to do. Look at this pack I'm lugging around day after day. It's bulging with so many tools I can barely fit through a doorway. I'm exhausted, and I don't think I'm any nearer

my objective than I was when I left home four years ago.” I kissed her forehead and squeezed myself and my burden out the door.

The Way to the Ancient One

The map led me to an inconspicuous trailhead behind the Town Hall parking lot. It started out easy enough, but soon I was slipping and tripping over moss-covered rocks in my path as the trail grew steeper in its uphill climb. Overhanging tree limbs snagged on my pack, gradually tearing holes in it. As I struggled along, I could hear some of the tools drop out onto the path behind me. Words I'd read in the book came back to me: “The path to the Ancient One is difficult. Many will start out and many will turn back weighted by their tools.” I wasn't sure which tools had fallen, but I knew I had to keep going. I was afraid that if I stopped to pick them up, I'd be unable to get moving again. So I let them lie where they fell and figured I could pick them up on my way back down the mountain.

So when the path forked, I opened the book to refer to the map without stopping my forward progress. Big mistake. Just as I noticed the “Danger” sign on the map, I stumbled on a slick rock. The weight of the outlandish bundle I carried pitched my upper body forward. I didn't even have time to think, I'm falling, before my forehead hit the ground and everything went black.

When I opened my eyes and saw where I was, all I could do was scream. A huge ravine gaped an inch away from my head like a monstrous mouth lined with jagged, rocky teeth. My hands and arms had been flung over the edge. No wonder I hadn't been able to arrest my fall. I put my fingertips to my forehead and felt a goose egg-sized bump and the stickiness of blood.



Peering over the edge, I saw dozens of tools in various states of disintegration rusting at the rock-strewn bottom. And scattered along the steep precipice far below, the pages of the library book with its map—my guide, my hope, my... my... I started to cry.

I don't know how long I sat there. But eventually I knew I had to get up and move forward. That knowledge filled me with fresh determination to reach my goal. No sooner had I stood and adjusted my

pack than a flash of a butterfly's wing caught my eye, and just beyond it—an enormous tree with a sign tacked to it. “Yaw-on Gorge,” I read.

No way, I thought at first. But there HAD to be a way to the Ancient One if Coco, Buck, Sherwin, and Bell had left that map in the book, and I was determined to find it. I don't know if the bump on my head was making me goofy or what, but I actually spoke to that tree.

Tree Talk

“Okay, tree, how do I get to the other side of Yaw-on Canyon?” That's when I saw the arrow pointing straight up to the rope tied around the trunk, stretched over the menacing fissure and attached to a similar tree trunk on the far side.

I looked at my hands, felt the weight of the load on my back and asked, “But is that the ONLY way?” Lightning flashed on the mountain's summit illuminating a hut I'd not seen before, and suddenly I knew. Yes, there was the Ancient One's home, and yes, this was the only way. Without hesitation I climbed up to the rope and started my hand-over-hand way across, but I'd not gone far before the weight of the pack and sheer exhaustion nearly overcame me. If I hadn't managed to fling my legs up over the rope, I'd have fallen to certain death.

Back to the Present

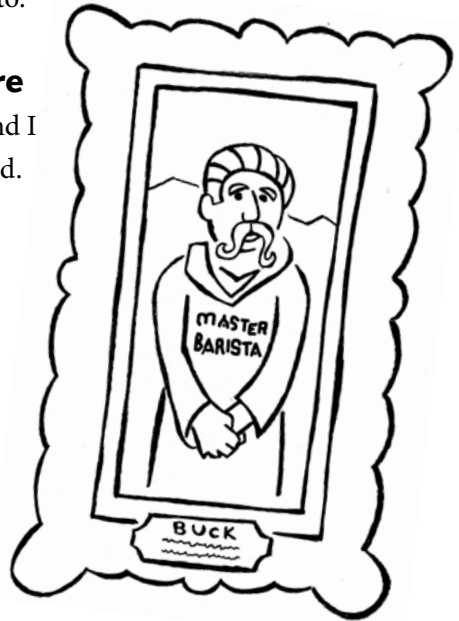
I hear my blood roaring in my brain and a great clattering sound. Suddenly I feel a hundred pounds lighter and scramble like a sprinting opossum the rest of the way across the chasm. I let go of the rope and drop to my hands and knees, kissing the sweet earth, thanking God for sparing my life, and breathing in the sweet, clean mountain air. When I

lift my head, I see the stone-lined path before me leading gently upward to the Ancient One's home. With the cottage now in view, I assess it as I approach. It can't be more than one or two small rooms from what I can see. Wildflowers line the path, which I follow to the Ancient One's freshly stained front porch and forest-green front door flanked with pots of geraniums. I lift my bleeding hand and can barely form it into a fist to knock. Fortunately, I don't have to.

Those Who Have Gone Before

The door opens, apparently by itself, and I enter, cautious and curious but unafraid.

The great entry hall belies the simple exterior of the cottage and I realize there is far more within than what I'd imagined. Portraits of Tekram's villagers line the walls. From door to door, floor to ceiling they gaze at me, proudly displaying their cowls emblazoned with their names and titles. A few, more ornate frames bear engraved plaques. I move closer to read them. There's Buck! His plaque reads,



“Coffee Maker, one who uses freshly ground beans and always serves fresh coffee.” And Miss Krisp, whose plaque says, “Baker, one who bakes with all the freshest ingredients and always serves her products warm.” I'm moving on to read Mr. Sherwin's inscription, when a slight sound, as of someone clearing his throat, startles me. I turn and see a

wide doorway across the room, and beyond it, a gigantic fireplace nearly dwarfing the white-haired man sitting in a bentwood rocker to one side.

The Ancient One

“Good evening, my child. I’ve been expecting you. Who are you?”

“Pardon me for asking, sir,” I respond, “but if you’ve been expecting me, why don’t you know that my name is Dnarb of the village of Tekram?”

The old one smiles and says, “My dear, though my body is old, my mind and eyesight are still very sharp. I can read what it says on your cowl . . . but who are you?”

I blink at him, feeling quite stupid, then blurt, “I guess I don’t know how to answer your question. People have always assumed who I was, and I never thought about it myself. I mean, I know my name, but I don’t know what it means.”

My interrogator’s silver hair sparkles with golden light as he pokes the fire. “Are you sure?” he says. It’s more a statement than a question.

“Of course, I’m sure who my parents are, and I know what I’ve done to serve others,” I respond. “My mother told me my name is older than our town. She said it is traditionally saved for someone special. . .but I dismissed this as a mother’s love.”

“The edge in your voice reveals your frustration with my line of questioning,” he says, though not unkindly, considering my insolence. “Come here and sit with me. I have not visited Tekram since long before your birth, so we have never met. Perhaps together we can determine who you really are.”

WHO IS DNARB?

HEART POUNDING, I BREATHE, “Yes.” Does this old man indeed know how to end my restless years of service to others? He seems to already know so much about me. I want to believe my labors to arrive at this place have not been in vain.

“What do you have there in your backpack?” His question startles me. I’d forgotten about my burdensome bundle of tools. Perhaps its contents will reveal to the Ancient One who and what I am. As I shrug out of it, it seems amazingly light, and in a moment I can see why. It is totally empty.

“Oh, Ancient One, please forgive me! The branches tore holes in it, and I must have lost all the tools that would reveal who I am as I went over Yaw-on Canyon. All of who I am is gone, but I do know one thing—I am Dnarb.”

“Do not worry, my child. Those who truly seek me always lighten their load along the way. Now let us retire and get some rest. In the morning, we will start shaping who you are.”

All I see in the sparsely room to which he leads me is the bed. Sleep has never felt so sweet.



Lesson One: Weeding

But it doesn't last long. The sun has barely topped the horizon, when the Ancient One is tapping my shoulder. I smell strong coffee brewing and rolls baking in the oven. My mouth begins to water. "It's time to get started, little one. We have much work ahead of us."

What will he have me do? I imagine myself, the disciple of the Ancient One, sitting at his feet, as he pours into me his vast wisdom. But after sharing our simple breakfast, he leads me outside to the manicured path I so recently trod to his door. "Today," he announces, "you pull weeds."

So much for sitting at the feet of the Ancient One. There will be very little sitting that day, as one by one, I yank the prickly interlopers out from among the flowers. My hands are still sore from the previous day's encounter with the rope across the rocky gorge. I'm tempted to quit, but I've never given up at any task, no matter how daunting. So I keep grabbing and yanking and tossing into a bag, grabbing and yanking and tossing into a bag, grabbing and...

"Stop, little one, and tell me what you are doing." Startled, I look up to see my mentor sitting on the porch enjoying a cup of tea. How long has he been watching me? The corners of his eyes crinkle as I reply,

"I am doing as you instructed. I am pulling out the weeds. See?" I indicate the bags full of unwanted plants.

The Ancient One smiles. "You may be pulling out the plant, but unless you get to the root, nothing is accomplished. The true essence of the weeds lies in their roots. If you fail to capture the root, the weed will grow again. Snapping only the surface plant causes the plant to multiply." With that, he rises and re-enters his home.

"Perhaps I am a weed puller," I say to myself as I prepare for bed

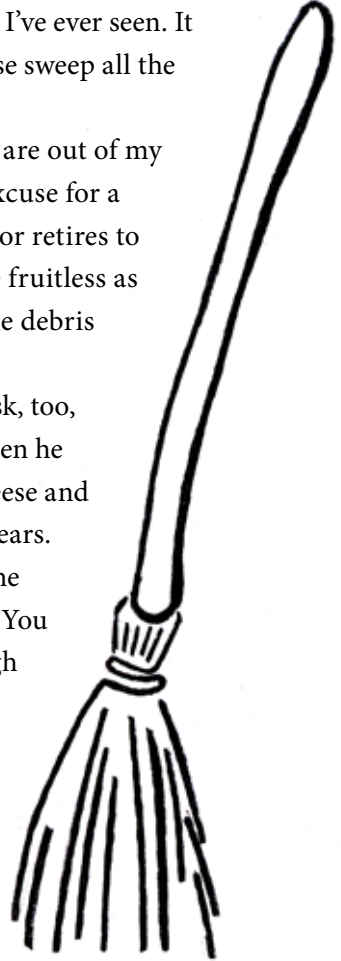
that night, “and this is what the Ancient One is teaching me.” With that thought I climb into bed and fall asleep as soon as I close my eyes.

Lesson Two: Sweeping

For a full week I pull weeds. Then one morning, the Ancient One hands me a broom—the sorriest excuse for a broom that I’ve ever seen. It appears to be twigs tied randomly to a staff. “Please sweep all the walkways,” he says.

“With this?” I ask, knowing before the words are out of my mouth that he will nod yes. So I take the sorry excuse for a broom and apply myself to sweeping as my mentor retires to his seat by the fireplace. Naturally, my efforts are fruitless as the broom’s uneven bristles catch very little of the debris littering the paths.

But I trust that there will be a lesson in this task, too, and the Ancient One does not disappoint me. When he brings out a midday meal and I chew on some cheese and apples, he pulls out of a bag a pair of trimming shears. “Now, little one, I want you to cut the bristles of the broom so that they are even and precisely angled. You see, activity alone does not define one. It is through intentional strokes in all we do that we clear walkways throughout life.” Now I believe I am a sweeper.



More Lessons and Tasks and Polishing

And so the days and weeks pass into months as I perform tasks for the Ancient One and he teaches me through each one. One morning he leads me to the Great Room that I first entered so long ago when I arrived at his cabin. I am to clean the glass and polish the frames and plaques of Tekram's portraits. Perhaps I am a polisher. But that thought brings me no joy, and I know there must be more to my life than polishing. I find it interesting that some portraits have titles for what the villagers do, and a select few also say what sets them apart.

Just as I finish the final swipe of the cloth on the final plaque of the final portrait in the Great Room, the Ancient One appears at my shoulder. "Excellent work, little one. Come with me now for there is something I want you to see." He touches my elbow and guides me through a labyrinth of hallways to a room I've not seen before. How can there be so much space within what appears from the outside to be such a small, simple cottage?

The only furniture in this space, a massive round table in its center, holds a tall candelabrum whose many candles radiate light throughout the otherwise empty space. While I blink at the flickering candles, the Ancient One speaks. "Who are you?"

I've lost track of the number of months I have been in this place, yet he still doesn't know who I am? Suddenly my eyes burn with hot tears. I don't know who I am either. "Some have said I'm a blender, a sewer, a grinder, and many other things. Since I have been with you, I have been one who weeds, one who sweeps, and one who polishes. Please tell me, Ancient One, how do you see me? Who am I?"

The Metal Wall

“Little one, this will still take some time, but you are not far from the end of your search. Do you see that wall?”

The candlelight barely penetrates the dull, rough surface of the far wall. I move closer and see that from floor to ceiling, it appears to be one large sheet of very tarnished and corroded metal of some sort. No wonder it absorbs the light—all of its once-reflective qualities have been dulled by years of neglect.

“Your name is not Polisher, but your recent performance in the Great Room has proved to me that you can polish. I want you to return this wall to its brilliance and shine of many years ago.”

So I begin polishing ... and polishing ... and polishing. Day after day, sunup to sunset, I polish. I polish until my fingernails are worn to the quick and my knuckles are covered with scrapes and scabs. And whenever the Ancient One stops by to check my progress, I ask, “Are you sure I’m not Polisher?”

His answer is always the same. “I cannot see clearly yet. Keep polishing.”

Finally the discolored metal surface begins to reflect the light of the candles on the Great Table in the center of this Mystery Room, as the Ancient One calls it. Why, I do not know. What is a mystery to me, however, is why I must continue this endless polishing, which is by far the most difficult work I have ever done. In my estimation, the age-old metal wall seems little changed from one day to the next. Is this tedious polishing the work I was born to do? Please, God, let it not be so.

The Mystery Revealed

As I ponder this question, the Ancient One approaches and surveys my progress. “Yes, little one, I can see you have worked hard at this task, and the metal begins to gleam. Yet its surface remains clouded.” He gives me what must have once been a cowl from Tekram, and with a pang I realize how long it has been since I have seen anyone dressed in that familiar village dress. The cloth looks as old as the Ancient One himself.

“Yours?” I ask. But instead of answering, he says, “Use it with this crock of polishing paste, and you will get the results you seek.”

Now as I slather on polish and buff the wall with the Ancient One’s cloth, the metal takes on a lustrous brilliance I had not imagined it could possess. I spread out the cloth to dry on the stone floor and take

a few steps back to admire the wall’s now-flawless reflective quality. It reminds me of the cool waters of the streams flowing down the mountainside. I’m intrigued by this reflection for no one in Tekram ever possessed such a perfect mirror. I search the far shadows of the room in its metal twin, and study my own image, amazed at how much older I look than the child I still imagine myself to be.

Then, what’s this? In the bottom corner of the Mystery



Room wall, I see my own name—DNARB! Some of the letters are backward, yet there it is, on the polishing cloth I've been using. How can it be that I've never noticed my name there before? But when I examine the old cowl, it's not my name imprinted at all. The Ancient One's garment bears the word BRAND. It doesn't say DNARB after all.

Answers at Last

Before I can call for him, he is there. As if he knows in advance what questions run through my mind, he says, "No, little one, your mind is not playing tricks on you. I see your head turning back and forth, and you are wondering why the garment's reflection bears your name, but the garment itself says something else."

The sun has set, and I begin to shiver.

"Ah, I see you are getting chilled in the evening air. Here, I have brought you your cowl. It will warm your neck and shoulders."

The familiar feel of my traditional garb comforts me as it settles on my tired shoulders. But when I look into the polished metal wall, I'm startled by what I see. There's that strange new word—BRAND—on my cowl!

"Ancient One!" I cry. "I'm confused. I am Dnarb, the one who polishes. If this wall reveals mysteries to me, shouldn't it say Polisher?"

"Come, child. Your work on this wall is done." I follow him to the Great Room with its enormous fireplace. He motions me to the Great Chair and seats himself on one of the pillows on the hearth where I have so often sat in his presence. What's wrong? Why is he giving me his seat?

Secrets of the Brand

His kind eyes seem even softer and wistful as we sit looking into the

fire for a while. I think I see a tear slide out of the corner of one eye and trickle down his cheek until it's lost in his beard. Then abruptly he rises and stands in front of me.

“Young one, you are not a grinder, a sewer, a blender, or even a polisher,” he says, searching deep within my eyes. I nod encouragement for him to keep going. “Those are all things you have done to meet the needs of others. But they do not define who you are, because you, child, are Brand. And a Brand that reinforces a unique position rules over all the tasks defined in the minds of the villagers of Tekram. A brand clearly decides its root and quickly and intentionally positions people and businesses in the minds of others who may need their work. The great brands create an emotional attachment to the value they uniquely provide in the minds of those they serve.

“You are special. Far too many base their definition of who they are on what they do. The others who came to me, who labored past the Yaw-on Gorge and lasted to the weeding or to the sweeping or to the polishing all learned from me. But one by one they quit at their tasks before making it to the Great Wall of metal. They retired back to the village, satisfied to adorn themselves with identities based on the way they thought I and others saw them. The service they provide is respectable and should be honored.

“However, you, child, came like I did before you many years ago, determined to learn the truth regarding the driving force within you. I did not quit at the daunting task of polishing the Great Wall. And neither did you. You did the difficult work and you have earned my name—Brand.

“The magic of the mirrored Great Wall changing your name before

your eyes will always remind you how often people see who they are backwards. Most allow others to define them by what they do and what the others need. We were all brought into this world through someone's passion. Don't let that passion die within you by settling for others' definition of who you are.

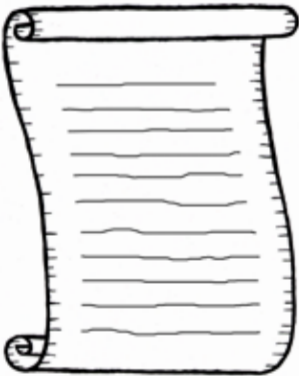
The Mantle and the Parchment

"I pass to you now the Mantle of the Brand. You, the one who brands, give power to the select few who raise their heads above their daily business long enough to seek the differentiation. These few find unique positions with your help and brand their value proposition in all they do.

"Now I must leave you. Not your years, but your wisdom and experience have earned you the title of Ancient One. You will guide those who are willing to make the journey and have a commitment to their own destiny. Though many will start the climb, most will retreat. A handful of them will find their way to your door. As you know, reaching your goal requires the discipline to be who you are in all you do. Love them all. Some will come and just serve. Some will choose a position, but not effectively brand. Some however, the disciplined few will position themselves and develop their brand, their inner voice in the minds of those they serve. These will be the great brands.

"I have waited many years for you to come. And now my turn at serving the village of Tekram is rolling into its small speck of eternity. Remember, my child, you are one who brands and you serve all who toil. I leave with you my Magic Parchment. Be careful to do what it says, and be careful what you add to its words."

As he gathers his few possessions into a bundle, I examine the parchment in my hand. At first I see only squiggles and designs as I wonder about all that has transpired. Then I blink and focus all my attention on the venerable scroll, and the words leap into order. This is what they say:



- If you do not state who you are, others in the marketplace will create mental images of how you meet their needs.
- If you wish to lead, create a unique position to serve.
- One of the most powerful ways to build who you are is through spreading the value you provide from conversation to conversation (almost virally, like the common cold).
- Be intentional in all you do. If you are a baker, use the freshest ingredients, or be the friendliest baker at all times.
- Make sure you study objectively what you see in your mirror. Are you thinking backwards and allowing the village of the Market define you, when the true responsibility is yours?
- The more you work on polishing your client's brand, the more you'll clarify who and what it is. Even though you can polish, you must help your clients understand that you are not the polisher; you are a brander.
- Have them create continuity in all they do to express how they uniquely serve, like musical notes of a song that supports the musical presentation.

- Although it's easier to help the young ones who have not yet fallen into the groove dictated by the market, encourage the older ones as well. It is never too late to climb out and challenge the status quo.
- Some will come seeking how to apply their passion. Others aren't quite as ready to hear, but will come again and again until they have ears to understand what you are teaching them.
- Now you, Brand, have eyes to see that Tekram is actually a "market", a community of individuals who exchange what they value for goods and services they value more. And they will rejoice over those who boldly state who they are and who defend all they do. You make meeting their needs and the needs of those they serve easier.

I look up from my reading to see the Ancient One standing before me with his tattered bundle under his arm. I can still make out the letters spelling BRAND on his former cowl that I'd used as my polishing cloth. He looks much smaller and frailer now than he did when I first arrived so many years ago.

"You see, young one, when I came here long, long ago, I, too, was Dnarb. The wise one who met me here asked me to weed and sweep and polish, and my letters, too, became magical and I became Brand. So now, you, too, must shape the letters of others and share your gifts with all those with need in the market. Do so with no expectation, as some will understand, some will just be, and others will be defined by those with needs—We call them the Ghosts of Default. Love them, judge them not young one.

“When and if they are ready, you will help them. And one by one, you will hang their portraits in the Great Hall. And one day, you will know the time is drawing near when the Great Metal Wall is covered in tarnish and clouds and you can no longer see the reflection of the candles. At that time another Dnarb, like you, will come. Be ready. Do your teaching well.”

He shuffles as slowly as time itself to the doorway. There he turns and drinks in the faces on the walls with a long, deep sigh. “Love them all as they all need to be loved, my dear Brand.” I watch his form fade into the distance, blinking back my tears, then he is no more. But wait! I see movement! A young boy struggles up the path dragging an empty backpack behind him. He is covered in a white dust, and his cowl says “brick mason.”





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

FOR MORE THAN 23 YEARS, Mark Allen Roberts has created record-breaking business growth for his clients by combining good values with good business. From a merchandising idea with Frito-lay that generated more than \$1.5 million in sales in less than ninety days, to helping a small \$ 2 million plastics company realize sales of \$300 million, his innovative values-driven approach to marketing, sales and leadership has generated explosive incremental sales and profits with each company he has helped.

His Out-of-The-Box strategies have been used by his clients to sell product and service solutions in a variety of markets and business channels. In addition to helping clients with marketing and sales strategy he taught marketing at the collegiate level and is an author and public speaker.

MARK ROBERTS is available for interviews, speaking engagements and consultations on a limited basis. For more information, call **602-206-6918** or visit **www.outbsolutions.com**