

He Who Sees True Opportunities Shall Always Prosper

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

People lose their jobs. Often people are released, even from the best jobs they might have ever had. People may find themselves in a position where they cannot find a job that is as good as the one they lost. What is important, however, is what people do when they are in this position. I cannot tell you the number of people I have seen completely *blow it* when it came to reestablishing their careers, after losing their prior jobs. I do not want you to be one of these people.

I grew up in a city called Grosse Pointe, outside of Detroit. Grosse Pointe is a city that is on a lake, and the larger, more expensive homes are all on or near the lake called Lake St. Clair. Moving away from Lake St. Claire the homes get less and less expensive, until eventually the neighborhoods become areas where men wander around in front of their quaint, run-down homes wearing wife-beaters, drinking beer, and working on their cars, whilst shouting at their wives from their driveways. This is the area where I grew up. In fact, I had a bunch of construction equipments that I parked in front of my house by the time I was 19, which fit in just fine. By the time I was in my early 20s, I had started what I am pretty sure was the largest asphalt sealing company in Grosse Pointe, working on the driveways and the houses of the wealthier home owners in the city. Most of my clients were in the homes that were closer to Lake St. Clair.

I remember one of my wealthiest clients lived in a really large house near the water. He worked for IBM in Detroit. He purchased a new car every year, and whenever I would come by his house to do work, he would fill me in on his kids' various accomplishments that year. Since his kids were my age it was always interesting hearing about what they were doing.

"If he can get his grade point average up to a 2.7, then the Chicago-Kent Law School may admit him on probation!" he might tell me about one of his kids.

His kids, like the kids of most of my clients, did not work during the summer. Instead, they typically spent their summers hanging out at country clubs around Grosse Pointe, traveling, and so forth. The fathers paid for these various pursuits. I resented kids like these to some extent, because they seemed to have such cushy lives, and were really able to enjoy and experience their youth in a much different way than I did. My own free time was pretty much consumed with doing work outdoors, whereas these groups of kids would pile into cars, go play tennis and golf, go to the pool, and so forth, and have great summers in all respects. Now, they never got very good grades or went to the best schools; however, none of this seemed to really matter that much. Back then in Detroit there was a bit of an "old boy network" that these kids knew would support them when they would get older. This sort of network was not really available in other parts of the city.

The man never asked me any questions about myself such as where I lived, whether I went to school, etc. Although he seemed to lack a genuine personal interest in me, I still thought that he was a pretty nice guy in most respects. True, he was somewhat aloof, a little condescending, plus I was always a little jealous of his kids--but that was okay.

I remember one day I was doing some work on his driveway, and his daughter, who happened to be my age and whom I did not know, came outside and started telling me all the stuff I was doing wrong on the driveway. She really talked down to me, which did not make me feel very good about myself, but I tolerated it as best as I could. I was unsure what this episode was really all about, but it was a bit humiliating because the girl was of my age and I had seen her around. She was as close to a *debutant* as you could get in Grosse Pointe, and was largely considered unattainable by guys who were her own age.

I worked for this man and his family for close to 10 years and it was overall an interesting and positive experience. I thought they were nice people, and I appreciated that the gentleman gave me work every single year. He was a kind man who paid me fairly, and was just a fundamentally good person.

When I was 27 years old I sold my asphalt [business in Detroit](#) and moved to Los Angeles to take a [job with a law firm](#). I never returned home to visit Detroit during the summer--not until I was around 35, because I really had no reason to go back there. One summer my sister called me and told me that our mother's house needed a lot of maintenance, and that I should come see her to help with fixing all that was wrong.

At that particular time my mother's next door neighbor was under investigation for murdering his wife. I had been hearing one story or another about bad happenings in the old neighborhood and was curious, if anything, to go back there and see what was going on. When I arrived I was shocked. The entire street I had grown up on was in the midst of an economic meltdown. Probably half the houses on the street were for sale. It was not good. Moreover, my mother had not done any maintenance on the house for a long time. The garage door did not close and stayed half open allowing any passersby to see inside. Many of her door screens were ripped and needed to be replaced. As I surveyed the incredible number of repairs that needed to be made, I decided I would start with the screens. I took the damaged screen doors to the corner hardware store, Lochmoor Hardware.

When I was at Lochmoor Hardware, I was quite surprised to run into the man whose house I had worked on for close to a decade. He was standing in line. I remembered that the man had worked at IBM and asked him some questions about that. He told me that he had lost his job in a downsizing that had occurred some time ago, and since that time he had started a local maintenance service as a handyman. It was really hard to believe. I knew things were bad back in Grosse Pointe--but this was really bad. It was like hearing that Donald Trump was selling encyclopedias door to door.

"I charge a few dollars more per hour than the other guys out there but I do quality work!" he told me. He handed me a card and told me he charged \$20 an hour, and that instead of having the hardware store fix the screens, I could hire him and save a lot of money. I told him that I was in town to fix up my mom's house, and I literally remember his body going from a slump to erect as I talked about this.

"I'm your guy!" he told me. "What's wrong with the place? Can I follow you back to the house to take a look at it?"

When he got in his car to follow me back to my mom's house, I realized he was driving the same Buick he had been driving 10 years ago. It was out of style and the paint was faded. I remembered that, before, he used to purchase a new car every year, and here he was driving this old car. The car's belts whistled, rattled, and whined as he started it. When we got to my mom's house and were walking up to the front door he said something to me I could not believe:

"Did you ever screw around with my daughter?"

"No, she was a little out of my league. See where I grew up?" I smiled motioning towards my mother's little house. The lawn had not been mowed in weeks. Children in diapers were playing in front of a house with peeling paint a few doors down.

"I tried to get her to talk to you every year you visited us. You were always really enterprising and I thought you would be great for her. Oh well, it's too late for that now. She got married a year ago."

He pulled a little notebook out of his back pocket and started writing down all the things that he thought were wrong with the house. He started on the outside of the house and the first items he wrote down were things like *hose bib*, which was sticking out of the side of the house, for example. And he pointed out other problems, such as the aluminum siding, which was coming off in various places.

"You've got to let me have this job!" he told me. I had to go out to do something and I gave the man my cell phone number. I told him to call me and that I would make arrangements for him to come and do the work.

Over the next several days I sat down with my mother and studied the situation very carefully. Her house needed so much work. However, the values in the neighborhood were falling incredibly fast. In fact, her house was worth less than half of what she paid for it and, in addition, she owed more on it than it was worth. After doing the math I told her that I did not think it made sense for her to do any more work on the house.

I returned to California and over the next several weeks I received at least ten messages or so from the guy I had seen at the hardware store. The first messages were pretty standard sorts of follow up messages but the later messages turned a little desperate and he started talking about giving me special deals and so forth. I typically never answer my cell phone, and I did not want to call back and have a discussion about work that needed to be done on my mother's house.

Had he not been someone I had admired growing up and had even aspired to be like, it might have been easier to return his telephone calls. However, seeing him in the state he was in at the moment---a formerly very successful businessman now begging for work as a \$20 per hour handyman---was very disheartening to me. It did not make sense.

And this brings me to you. What does this have to do with you and your career?

I have thought about this incident repeatedly throughout the years because it is a reminder of what can happen to any person's career when it is suddenly thrown off the tracks. This man's story with IBM could have been any one of a number of stories of former employees of General Motors, Enron, or any other number of companies where people's jobs suddenly became irrelevant and were eliminated. The possibility of losing work in this manner is a real danger, and it can happen to anyone. Without work, most people become very confused and do not know what to do with themselves. In this man's case, I am sure that he looked for work for sometime after the layoffs, eventually giving up and deciding that he would become a handyman. I remembered when I had known him in the past that he was always tinkering with this or that around the house. Maybe this work was suited to him. There is nothing wrong with him becoming a handyman, of course. However, this is not something that men living in multimillion dollar houses, who have sustained careers with important roles, working for major corporations, typically end up doing.

How precarious our careers and lives are. What was so alarming to me about the man I met at the hardware store, however, was the fact that he seemed to be going about reestablishing his career the wrong way. He was looking for money and trying to renew his prosperity in a way that was unlikely to lead to what he was seeking.

Russell Conwell was a Baptist minister, orator, lawyer, and writer who lived from 1843 until 1925. He was the Founder and the first president of Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and he is also well known for his inspirational lecture, *Acre of Diamonds*. Conwell delivered the speech *Acre of Diamonds* to over 5,000 separate crowds in the 1890s, and it was primarily from the income generated by this speech that Conwell gained the financial resources to establish Temple University. *Acre of Diamonds* states that in order for us to find fortune, opportunity, and achievement, we do not need to look elsewhere. Instead, the resources for us to become rich are present all around us. At the beginning of his story, Conwell talks of an Arab guide who wanted to find diamonds so badly that he sold his property and went off on a futile search:

So he sold his farm, collected his money, left his family in charge of a neighbor, and away he went in search of diamonds. He began his search, very properly to my mind, at the Mountains of the Moon. Afterward he came around into Palestine, then wandered on into Europe, and at last when his money was all spent and he was in rags, wretchedness, and poverty, he stood on the shore of that bay at Barcelona, in Spain, when a great tidal wave came rolling in between the pillars of Hercules, and the poor, afflicted, suffering, dying man could not resist the awful temptation to cast himself into that incoming tide, and he sank beneath its foaming crest, never to rise in this life again.

Shortly after the old man died, the farmer to whom he had sold the farm discovered a large diamond mine right on the property. Conwell describes one situation after another where similar situations occur. The idea of Conwell's story, which is so powerful and positively inspirational, is that there is opportunity everywhere if you know where to look. So many times we do not see the opportunity right in front of us and instead we start looking elsewhere, in all the wrong places.

The more I thought of the handyman, the more I felt that he should be doing asphalt work around Grosse Pointe, like I used to do. I had made thousands of dollars a week doing this. Right in front of this man, every single day, he was passing over the driveway of his multimillion dollar house while he went out and looked for handyman work. When I left the asphalt business in Grosse Pointe, there were not a lot of people that showed up to take my place. This man could very easily have done so and there would have been a tremendous amount of work for him. Instead, he was handing cards out at the hardware store and leaving effusive messages on my cell phone about replacing the bib on my mother's hose and readjusting a garage door. There are opportunities all around us and these opportunities can be incredible and massive.

I would say this man could probably have done very, very well after the layoff. For decades he had worked for IBM, presumably earning hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. Surely he must have learned something, some skill. The reason his story is so interesting to me is because around the same time I had bumped into him, I had also heard about another man who had lost his job at IBM due to the same downsizing. That person meandered around for a year or so not doing much, and then he ended up coming up with an idea that made him incredibly rich--not just wealthy, fabulously wealthy.

Maybe I should not be telling this story (I could get sued for it-who knows), but I will share it with you anyway. I know of another man who lives outside of Chicago, who I was told also used to work for IBM. He had been working on some sort of patented device or something while at the company before being let go. After he was let go he kept thinking about this device and realized that the way the company was about to manufacture it was going about it all wrong, and through a flash of inspiration he realized a way to manufacture it at 10 times cheaper cost, and in a way that would even make the product 10 times faster. He had been sitting out of work for awhile and all of his non-compete agreements had expired. He spent a couple of weeks writing and filing a patent for his idea. A few months later he started getting calls from IBM and without him even doing anything they ended up paying him tens of millions of dollars for what he discovered.

This is the idea of diamonds sitting right beneath our feet. There is valuable information and material available to all of us-- often right in front of us, and we can take advantage of this at any time we are ready. You just need to use a little ingenuity, and you will see many of these opportunities open right up to you. It is not as much where you are but who you are. Today, all around us there are great businesses starting up while other businesses fall by the wayside. There are great careers commencing while other careers fade into obscurity. There are people who are making the most of the situation, and there are those who will seem to disappear when they lose their jobs. This is how it has always been. You, however, do not need to fade into obscurity. Instead, realize that there are opportunities right before you, and all you must do to see them is *look*.

He who sees true opportunities shall always prosper. People of ingenuity are not limited by the economy, their employer's favor, or where they live. Their mind creates abundance all around them, no matter what others and the world may do.

THE LESSON

When many people lose their jobs, they find it difficult to find a position as good as the one they lost and blow it in terms of reestablishing their careers. Take time to look for opportunities, as valuable information and material is available all around you. Use ingenuity, and you will find these opportunities opening up to you, and you will prosper.

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