

FROM CUSCO TO CROSSVILLE – CHANGING CAREERS AT FIFTY-FOUR

BY JIM MERSEREAU

March 3, 2007 was a day that changed our lives forever. It was on that day my wife Linda suffered a stroke on the left side of her cerebellum. Initial indications were that it was a minor stroke, but that diagnosis changed swiftly and dramatically. In less than thirty-six hours her brain would begin swelling, pressing against the brainstem, cutting off vital life functions. Linda was dying. Only an emergency craniotomy to remove most of the left side of her cerebellum saved her life. The good news is that Linda survived. The bad news is that she continues to struggle with significant disabilities as a result of the stroke and brain surgery. And, now, I'm faced with the need to change careers – at the ripe old age of fifty-four.

My work as the Vice-President of an international humanitarian relief agency is interesting and challenging. In addition to researching, planning, and coordinating relief efforts, a big part of my job involves actually leading relief teams to remote locations in developing nations around the world. In any given year it's not unusual for me to have spent weeks at a time in Quechuan Indian villages high up in the Andes Mountains, or in a canoe reaching remote settlements in the Amazon Jungle, or perhaps, in little Gypsy farming villages in the Transylvania region of Romania.

Our teams bring free medical and dental care, dig fresh water wells, construct and renovate buildings, as well as a variety of other forms of relief. That probably sounds exciting and exotic and in truth, it is. I have a passport with lots of stamps in it, unusual souvenirs from interesting places around the world, a big floppy Indian Jones hat, and a cell phone ring tone that plays the theme song from "The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly." It's a really cool profession.

But, I can't leave my wife alone like that anymore. Although she is capable of performing a lot of routine activities around the house, she still needs help with many others. And so as a couple, as life partners, we've entered a new season of our lives. I've realized it's time for me to shift gears and stay home with my wife, and that means finding a new career.

Linda is a tough gal, the quintessential military wife. Twenty-one years of being the wife and mother in a Navy family is no small achievement. She knows how to handle tough times. And true to form, she deals with her disabilities with determination and grit; she allows herself no self-pity or lame excuses.

As a result she's able to do more than any of the doctors or physical therapists thought possible. Last month she went with me on a mission trip to Romania. Recently she has been riding on the back of my Harley. It's a real effort for her to get up there, but once she's on it and flying down the road with the wind in her face, she feels like she's twenty-five and her body is

whole. Her attitude is inspiring.

But the fact remains that she now needs her husband to stay home. After all the years of managing things on the home front while I was out to sea, followed by even more years of waiting patiently for me to come back from Mexico, or Peru, or wherever the latest trip took me, now she needs me to stay home.

So what to do? I'm done leading international relief teams. I have lots of experience as a Naval Officer but that's no longer an option either. I'm an ordained minister and have been the pastor of two different churches, so it's possible a congregation could invite me to do that again. But I had no clear direction. I was fifty-four, on the verge of being unemployed, flustered and floundering. Then I remembered something I'd read years ago. At the time it sounded like nothing more than a far-fetched daydream, like one of those syrupy pieces of advice that sounds great but couldn't possibly come true. It went like this: "Decide what it is you love to do then find somebody who will pay you to do it."

Huh? Like somebody's really going to pay me to sleep late everyday and watch all the college football games on the weekends. Fat chance. But as I continued to wrestle with the problem of what to do next I started to ask myself, "Well, what *would* you like to do?" "Realistically, what kind of work-related, income-producing tasks do you *like* to do?"

Then it hit me – I like to write. In every job I've had, Naval Officer, Instructor, Family Counselor, Pastor, Vice-President, I've always enjoyed the writing responsibilities. As I thought about it I realized that over the years I've written policy manuals, instructional materials, sermons, Bible studies, newspaper and magazine articles, newsletters, short stories, and much more. And people have often complimented me on my writing. Recently some friends have even suggested I should write professionally.

Well, ok. But is it really possible to make a decent living as a writer? I mean, Tom Clancy and J.K. Rollings seem to do well, but the Harry Potter thing has pretty much run its course and there's an absolute glut in the spy-thriller genre. Is it really possible for a fifty-four year old Indiana Jones wannabe to make any meaningful money as a writer? I'll admit I was skeptical but decided the subject at least warranted some research. So I hit the internet, did a few Google searches, explored a few websites, and lo and behold, I discovered the answer to be "yes." "Yes," there are actually many people making pretty good money doing all sorts of writing. Books, magazine articles, instructional materials, newspaper freelancing, technical writing, business writing, web content, short stories, and the list goes on.

So I enrolled in a couple of correspondence courses to hone my writing skills. The Long Ridge Writers Group offers excellent instruction in writing for publication. The American Writers and Artists Inc. have a great course to get you started as a freelance copywriter. Peter Bowerman (www.wellfedwriter.com) has some great books and a very good workshop to help you launch your own business as a freelance business writer.

And so here I am, just a few short months later, I've written three magazine articles and had a short story published. I've also started my own business as a freelance copywriter (www.crossvillecopywriting.com). So I'm well on my way to that new career as a writer and it

wasn't as difficult as I had feared.

Considering the world we live in today, in all probability some of you are facing a potential midlife career change also, so here are a few tips I found useful and which may be helpful to you too:

1. First, realize you are not alone. Many people today face something like this sooner or later and there are plenty of constructive ways to deal with it.
2. Stay positive. If I've learned anything from Linda over this last year it's the importance of having a positive attitude in the midst of adversity.
3. View this change as an opportunity to try something new that you've always wanted to do. Explore the possibilities. Take a career interest and skills assessment test at your local community career center. Read books, take courses, attend workshops. It's the old lemonade from lemons routine. And why not? If the career change is going to happen anyway then why not grab ahold of it and turn it into something good?
4. Get your finances in order by reducing debt, minimizing expenses, and maximizing savings.
5. Rely heavily on your faith in God. The Bible is filled with His promises of provision and guidance. Also, be sure to invite your church family to walk through this with you. One of the most important roles for a church family is to be a source of support and encouragement for us during the times of trials and tribulations.

Cusco, Peru was the capital of the ancient Incan Empire. It's a beautiful city filled with magnificent cathedrals, wonderful museums, breathtaking views, and great restaurants. My international relief work has taken me there many times and I've thoroughly enjoyed every visit. Crossville, Tennessee is beautiful too. Located on the western edge of the great Smokey Mountains it is thickly wooded, lushly green, and a great place to live. The golf capital of Tennessee! I'm blessed that this season of my life will be lived here.

In previous generations most men at the age of fifty-four were preparing for retirement. Their working days were almost over and there wasn't much more for them to do. Not so anymore. In our day, my story is also the story of countless others. There could very possibly be a "Cusco to Crossville" transition in your life too. But the good news is that it's doable! Even more than that, it can be exciting, rewarding, and fulfilling. It's very possible, even likely, that your best days are still ahead.