



“Life is Tremendous”

By Mark Matteson

I met him in 1993. It must have been 6:30 P.M. on a Thursday night and I was stuck in traffic on I-5 in Seattle. I had read his book earlier in the week and was listening to him on audio cassette. There was a number on the back, so I called it. That is how we met. Little did I know that phone call would forever change my life. The quote he is most famous for would be a part of that change: *You'll be the same person in five years, but for two things: the books you read and the people you meet.*

He had the most difficult kind of childhood, having been abandoned. Despite that, he was one of the most lovable men you would ever meet. He would hug you whether you liked it or not. He was also the most generous man I have ever met. He had charisma and charm and was larger than life. When he entered a room, it was forever changed. He was a one-man band.

As an internationally-known keynote speaker, he had a sense of humor that would have you holding your sides with laughter. When you were done laughing, he would hit you right between the eyes with some timeless Civil War wisdom from Lincoln or Grant or Lee...after all he lived 15 minutes from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

He was a brilliant marketer. His image or picture appeared on all his information. His image in silhouette appears on the inside cover of all the books his company published, including my first book, *Freedom from Fear*. He was the only guy I have ever known with enough courage to insert the adjective “Tremendous” as his middle name. From his point of view, everything was tremendous, especially life. He was on a mission, literally, to get you to read books. That was his purpose. His personal library was the single largest collection of books I had ever seen, tens of thousands of books.

He started his business career in the life-insurance business. He eventually built a tremendous sales team. Reinventing himself, he became a public speaker and author in the late 1960s.

His book, *Life is Tremendous*, has been published in a dozen languages and sold over two million copies. He did all this to support his six children. “We would have had more, but my wife, Gloria, hates kids!” he liked to say. A family man of the first order, his daughter, Tracey, told me recently that he packed up the kids in a Volkswagen bus and toured the country speaking and conducting book tours in the 1970s. He was a secular pastor with boundless energy. He loved God and books. He was a connector who knew thousands of businesspeople, pastors, and laypeople. He made you feel good about yourself and, at the same time, challenged you to read good books. The next thing you knew, five books would appear in the mail. So I started reading. Before I knew it, I was reading two books a week. THAT changed my life and fortunes.

Hundreds of people have asked me, “Who is Len?” the character in my book, *Freedom from Fear*. Well, now you know. Charlie “Tremendous” Jones was the inspiration for that character. Surrounded by loved ones, Charlie passed away on October 16, 2008. Before his passing, hundreds of people came by to visit him as he lay in his hospice bed. On my visit to Mechanicsburg in September, I held his hand and we prayed. He said in a whisper, “I am grateful for everything, all the blessings in my life. My beloved...read this passage to me...” On his death bed, he was challenging me to keep reading.

He left an extraordinary shade tree. If you would like a taste of the Jones magic, Google him, or watch him with his eye patch and bow tie on YouTube. Better yet, go online and make it a habit to order one book a month for the rest of your life: www.ExecutiveBooks.com.

You will be the same person in five years except for two things, the people you associate with and the books you read.

—Charlie “Tremendous” Jones, speaker, author, publisher, icon

I thought a little different format for this month's book recommendation might add some value and depth. I met Garth Stein, filmmaker and best-selling author of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, during a book signing at beautiful Lake Chelan, Washington in August. His book was [Starbucks' book promotion pick for summer 2008](#). I could not put this story down and read it in two sittings. Garth graciously agreed to an interview, which follows the excerpt and review below. The theme of each question is a quote from his book.

"In Mongolia, when a dog dies, he is buried high in the hills so people cannot walk on his grave. The dog's master whispers into the dog's ear his wishes that the dog will return as a man in his next life. Then his tail is cut off and put beneath his head, and a piece of meat or fat is placed in his mouth to sustain his soul on its journey; before he is reincarnated, the dog's soul is freed to travel the land, to run across the high desert plains for as long as it would like.

I learned that from a program on the National Geographic channel, so I believe it is true. Not all dogs return as men, they say; only those who are ready.

I am ready."

Advance praise for *the Art of Racing in the Rain*:

"*The Art of Racing in the Rain* has everything: love, tragedy, redemption, danger, and—best of all—the canine narrator Enzo. This old soul of a dog has much to teach to us about being human. I loved this book." —Sara Gruen, author of *Water for Elephants*

MM: "[Far eyes and big eyes](#)". What do you see for this book? What is the goal?

GS: For me, the goal of writing is to be read. To use that old tree falling in the woods idea, if a book remains unread, it has no value as a book, but will make a really nice doorstop. So, my goal is to get my book read by as many people as I can.

MM: "[No race has ever been won in the first corner](#)." How is the book tour going? Where will it take you? For how long?

GS: Well, it's been going and going and going. I just got back from Germany. I'm in San Jose, California right now. I have another California trip planned, and then to New York for a bit before I go on hiatus mid-November. At that time, I will have given seventy-four readings for this book. Next spring I work on my new book, and next June I begin the paperback tour!

MM: *"If it's all about the ride..."* What are you enjoying most now?

GS: I just love getting out there and talking to readers. I really do enjoy it. To think that a little idea that started in my head with the vision of a dog playing up his infirmity on the kitchen floor would move so many people is really inspiring to me.

MM: *"Live every day as if it's stolen from death."* What is a typical day now as you promote? When writing?

GS: I'm basically on the road four out of seven days a week. I do media—radio and print mostly—during the day, and I give a reading in the evening. Because of this schedule, my home time is spent catching up on housework or playing with my family. My writing goes on in my head right now. Soon, it will move to my computer.

MM: *"Listen like a dog, don't steal others' stories."* What is the best advice you followed from mentors?

GS: When I practiced karate, one of my instructors said to me, "When you are completely exhausted, that's when I see what you really know, because you're too tired to try to impress me." I think this applies to writing as well. When we use too much of our ego, our writing sounds self-conscious. Only when we strip away that need to impress ourselves and our reader does the real truth of the text emerge.

MM: *"If your car goes where your eyes go..."* Where are you looking now?

GS: I'm looking forward to achieving a balance between my personal life, my "business" life, and my creative life. If I can achieve balance, the sky's the limit!

MM: *"Two barks means faster!"* How did you get your book into Starbucks?

GS: My editor, Jennifer Barth at Harper, did that. Honestly, I didn't know about it until Starbucks had already made the choice. But Enzo would say that on some level I manifested it, so.....

MM: The very short chapters in your book are like a celebrity getting out of short cab ride. What inspired that?

GS: I think you'll see that the scenes that carry the drama are longer. The scenes that include Enzo's pontifications are shorter. Again, I was looking for balance. The drama is what drives the book. Enzo's voice is what gives it texture. My writing style demands that there's more drama than texture. That's just the way I write.

MM: *"The Zebra is something inside us."* Fear: how and why a big publisher like Harper Collins, was there fear in approaching them?

GS: Well, no. I am fearless in terms of things like that. I think it's important to envision oneself in victory lane always. That being said, my agent is the one who made the deal, and so I was insulated from the process to a certain extent.

MM: Little Enzo at the end of the story, a beautiful call-back. Your use of call-backs is throughout the book. What inspired that?

GS: It's all about setting things up and paying them off. A writer must prepare the reader for what is to come, even if it seems very subtle at the time. As for the epilogue, that was something that I think is satisfying to the reader; however, my first draft did not include the epilogue.

MM: If Steven King is right, that reading is the creative center of the mind, what were you reading when you wrote this story?

GS: Not to dispute Stephen King, but I don't read while I'm writing. I find I co-opt the voice of others without even noticing. When I'm in my writing mode, I have to seal myself off. When I'm done, though, I read quite a lot.

MM: "*Hands are windows to a man's soul.*" What advice would you offer aspiring writers: a) on writing? b) on marketing?

GS: The long answer would take a few hundred pages. The short answer? I once got a fortune cookie, "He who has a thing to sell, and goes and whispers in a well, is not as apt to get the dollars, as he who climbs a tree and hollers!"

MM: Garth, thank you for your time! Continued success!

Do you want a great Christmas gift idea for that man you love who loves dogs or NASCAR? Buy Garth's book, *The Art of Racing in the Rain*. They will be glad you did....

For more information, go to www.garthstein.com/racing