

Chuck Piola

The Cross That Made Him a Success

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Businessman of the Month
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Ten-year-old Chuck Piola was mad at God. He was smart. In fact, he was so smart that his mind usually went faster than he could speak—and so he stuttered. The stutter affected him academically, socially and emotionally.

“I was afraid I would be called on in class so I would sit in the back and hide behind some kid,” said Piola, now a semi-retired multimillionaire and author of a new book, “Going in Cold: How to Turn Strangers into Clients and Get Rich Doing it.”

Eventually, the shy young man would be called on, and as he struggled to answer the teacher’s questions, other children would snicker and make jokes. He went to church and prayed that God would cure him. He even rubbed holy water on his lips. But nothing miraculous occurred.

“I was livid,” he said. “I stopped praying. I went through the motions. I prayed rote prayers, but I had no real conversation with God.”

Meanwhile, his classmates continued to ridicule him and to make stuttering jokes, and his teachers did nothing about it. It wasn’t until college that things began to change.

“I knew the only way to beat it was to confront it,” Piola said. “I kept putting myself in positions where I had to communicate. I developed a way to think slowly. I had to start weighing my words. Mostly, I had to say to myself, ‘I have value.’ Little by little, it went away.”

By junior year, Piola was acting in variety shows and musicals. “When I sang, I never stuttered.” He even got the lead in the musical South Pacific. “I had to say the opening lines,” he said. “Opening night, I was sweating through my clothes even though I had never stuttered in rehearsal. I knew I had to deliver that night – and I did. I said to myself, ‘Now I know I can really do this. It wasn’t a fluke.’” At this point, Piola still wasn’t praying. He felt he had overcome stuttering on his own. Life went on.

He met June, his wonderfully Catholic wife-to-be, when his uncle, whose business he was helping run, went into the hospital for two weeks. He had to come to the hospital to get instructions on what to do about various business deals. June was the head nurse. Piola thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but it took him months to ask her out. He was afraid he’d stutter and blow the whole deal. Fortunately, he overcame that fear. The two quickly fell in love, got married and had two children. But God still wasn’t a priority.

Piola’s first job out of college was as a junior high school English and music appreciation teacher. A month before he stated his first job, the old anxieties came back. He knew it was all over if he stuttered the first day of class. The first-year teacher built up a lot of anxiety, but he made it through that first day and ended up teaching for six years.

“In every negative, there’s a positive,” Piola says today. “When

you’re going through the negative, it’s pure hell and you have no idea

what the positive is. It may take 10 or 15 years to know. Stuttering made me very sensitive to the plight of the quiet kid in the classroom. I was able to back up and encourage quiet kids, and calm down the loud mouths. I told the quiet kids, ‘The only time you discover what you know is when you talk about it.’”

When Piola decided to leave teaching, the school had an appreciation night for him. More than 200 of his former students showed up. A parent came to him and said, “You had the uncanny ability to lift up the quiet ones. I want to thank you for what you did for my son. He talks now. He gives us his opinions.” Other parents said the same. It made it hard for Piola to leave, but leave he did. He was 28 years old and had two children. He felt he couldn’t raise his family on a teacher’s salary so he went looking for other jobs.

Piola decided to go into sales, figuring if he could sell knowledge to 110 kids, he could sell anything. He interviewed with more than 20 companies. “Nobody would bring me back for a second interview,” he said. “I made a mistake. I was interviewing with Human Resources.”

At this point, he was pumping gas at night in the middle of the winter. Out of desperation, he answered an ad for a door-to-door sales job with no base salary, no car, and no insurance. “Me and one other guy were the only ones left after one month,” he said. He looked at the salesmen who were

succeeding and thought, "If they can do it, I can do it. I learned it was a numbers game."

Piola worked 12-hour days, making 30 cold calls a day. The first year, he was fifth out of 135 salespeople and won a trip to the Superbowl. Despite that success, life wasn't all roses. "Out of four presentations, I'd sell one. I'd make 20 pitches some weeks, but other weeks only 12 or 15. There were weeks I was dry."

He started to turn to God. He would walk into a church in the middle of the day and say, "God, I'm having a rotten week. Why are you doing this to me?" There were weeks I wasn't getting a paycheck. I would say, 'I'm scared. I can't show my wife I'm scared.'"

Still, Piola was determined he was not going to fail. He had 12 jobs in 13 years. He supported his family and eventually he met the man who would become his partner in a collection business that would reap millions for both of them.

So when did God really come back into Piola's life? It was during a retreat at Malvern. Piola was 37 years old. He was only there because a friend had invited him. The retreat master was a Manhattan priest who worked with street kids. He talked about a boy who first came to his shelter when he was only 5 years old. The priest ministered to that child on and off for seven years. Then one winter day, the now 12-year-old young man found himself outside the Plaza Hotel in New York. He was trying to stay warm. A limousine pulled up. A man got out who was "dressed to the nines." He saw that the boy was freezing and invited him up to his room to get warm, and then raped the 12-year-old. The young man ended up back at the shelter. In language too colorful to print, the young man asked the New York priest, "Where was your Jesus Christ when I was getting raped?" The priest said to him, "He was there getting raped with you."

Said Piola: "As soon as he said that, it all made sense to me. Christ was there when I was going through all those anxieties. I kept reflecting on that. I started to have an appreciation for Christ [crucified]. It was a way for me to wash away a lot of the anger. I thought, 'If it's good enough for God, it's good enough for me.'"

He realized that Jesus Christ was also abandoned and betrayed by his friends. On Palm Sunday, He was treated as a king. One week later, He was crucified. Piola began to think about the Resurrection of Christ, what he calls "the ultimate hope."

He also started to learn about balance. "If you're going to be successful, you've got to have things in balance or you won't bounce back from rejection," Piola said. "It's nice to be able to go to God when the whole world is falling apart. If you really believe you're made in the image of God and God is perfect, then you have a little piece of that perfection. If you have that, what is your job? To water and nourish that perfection."

He also realized that virtue sometimes leads to pain.

"God made me stutter so I could be more sensitive, but being sensitive works against you when you try to sell [and are rejected]. But that's okay."

Today, Piola owns a multimillion-dollar home, which he uses as an executive retreat center for men who are trying to figure out their role in this culture. "Where and how are men going to find the strength and courage to draw the line with our kids and others over values and morals?" he asks. He also opens his home for day-long retreats for seminarians and others.

Piola never holds himself out as having all the answers. He simply invites other men he meets at church or on retreat or at conferences out to "the farm," as he

calls his house, to figure things out with him.

Piola hopes to reach men who "don't go for the holy-roller thing." He says, "Those are the guys I want to talk to. In helping them, I'm helping myself. When I talk, I'm talking to me. I'll say, 'I need this talk today. I've had a lousy month. I had a fight with my wife. I'm out of balance.'"

Only one thing seems absolutely clear to this multimillionaire-teacher-turned-salesmen-turned-motivational speaker who at one time was silenced because of his stuttering – "Struggle makes you."