

Wharton professor Richard Shell's unorthodox new book on success draws on his own wandering path to an academic career—which included jobs house-painting and fundraising in DC, a nasty bout of hepatitis in a Kabul flophouse, and a flirtation with monastic life in Korea—and celebrates the power of uncertainty. **By Dave Zeitlin**

Shell's Odyssey



On the last day of the class he teaches on the meaning of the word *success*, as the students turn in their final papers—“exploring, based on course readings and original research, [their] personal philosophies of success,” in the words of the course description—Wharton professor G. Richard Shell is almost always asked the same question:

“OK, Professor Shell, what’s *your* final paper?”

For a while, he deflected such inquiries, telling his students that the course—The Literature of Success: Historical and Ethical Perspectives—is about them discovering how they define success and how they plan to achieve it. It wasn’t about him.

But about three years ago, he decided that he would take his students up on their request. His answer is *Springboard: Launching Your Personal Search for Success*, published by Portfolio/Penguin in August, which he hopes will shift the conversation on what it means to be successful.

“A lot of professors write books and then devise courses,” Shell says in his Huntsman Hall office. “But I actually devise courses and then write books.”



Shell—the Thomas Gerrity Professor and professor of legal studies and business ethics and management at Wharton—is best known as a leading expert on negotiation, the subject of his previous three books: *Make the Rules or Your Rivals Will* (2004), *Bargaining for Advantage: Negotiation Strategies for Reasonable People* (2006), and *The Art of Woo: Using Strategic Persuasion To Sell Your Ideas* (2008) [“The Guru of Woo,” May/June 2008]. In part because it strayed from his main area of expertise and also because he says he had to “ditch and dodge” the clichéd rhetoric endemic to the American success-book genre, *Springboard* turned out to be a more daunting project.

“When I started to write it, I thought, ‘This will be easy. I’ve got the course. I’ll just turn the course into a book,’” Shell says. “But I realized about three months into trying to do that, that [it] was impossible—because the course is very interactive, it’s very intimate, and the students and I have a dialogue. I couldn’t write a book like that. I would say of all of the books I’ve written, this was twice as hard to write as anything else.”

But as he wrote, Shell was guided not only by the readings he assigned for the success course (ranging from self-help books to Charles Lindbergh’s autobiography to Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*) but also the tattered notebooks he found in his closet. In many ways those notebooks—journals he had written decades ago—turned out to be his biggest resource of all. As he read through them, he realized that to finish his “final paper,” he needed to go back to the beginning, when he embarked on a remarkable journey of self-discovery that would transform him from what he called “a lost soul” into a popular professor at one of the world’s most prestigious business schools.

In other words, he had to retrace his own path to success.

“I’ve been researching the subject since I was 21,” he says with a grin. “I just didn’t know I’d be writing a book about it.”

Shell never thought he’d use his journals to write a book. He kept them around, he says, on the off chance his kids might some day like to read them. He’d never looked at them himself—what would be the point of reading about his own life when he had already lived it?

But as he spent a couple of months poring over those notebooks—“I was an obsessive journal writer,” he remarks—it quickly dawned on him that his memories were drastically different than the reality.

“The first thing I recognized, which I thought was astonishing, was I had told stories in my head about myself that were absolutely not true,” he says. “I had written a past about myself that was just a convenient story that led me to Wharton. All of us tend to do that. Wherever you are in life, you sort of write a mental story to make the present make sense. So reading those journals, I suddenly realized how clueless I really was about who I was and what I wanted to do.”

Reading through his journals, he says, was one of the most emotional things he’s ever done. He laughed. He cried. And then he summarized nearly 20 years of his life into 15 pages for the introduction to *Springboard*.

It begins with a startling admission that few people know about him: that he didn’t start his academic career until he was 37 and spent most of his twenties unemployed, “much of it deeply uncertain about who I was and what I wanted to do.” He then details those uncertain “Odyssey Years” (a term he uses throughout the book to describe when people set out to discover their own values and goals), chronicling his early life as a part-time housepainter in Washington, DC, who had severed ties with his parents. “Painting houses gives you plenty of time to think and I spent much of mine in culturally inspired success fantasies,” he writes. “I became a world-famous poet. Then I was an important member of Congress. Then it would be time to paint the trim on another window sash.”

Goaded by those visions, he eventually found a job at a fundraising consulting firm, and was given an office with a window and a potted plant (which actually was another one of his fantasies). But despite the window, that job proved to be no better for him than painting houses, and feeling like “an actor posing as a professional,” he quit his job and set off to “travel the world with my life savings of \$3,000 and a backpack.”

Shell traveled from Greece to Turkey to Iran to Afghanistan, reading the entire Bible as he went. The journey, he says, was “not just a physical one but an intel-

lectual one, an emotional one and a spiritual one.” But it also proved to be a dangerous one. While in Afghanistan on Christmas Eve, he blacked out and collapsed on the side of the street. When he came to, a couple of other travelers told him he probably had hepatitis. Dizzy and sick, he stumbled back to the cot that cost him 50 cents per night, located in a dirty hallway of a flophouse.

At that point, he was certain he had hit rock bottom and that “the status quo of my life on the road had become intolerable.” And when two “cheerful, energetic and generous” European teenagers who belonged to a religious group called the Children of God gave him Christmas cookies that night, he became inspired to find something that would make him equally happy.

“One of the things I think is important is letting yourself be able to hit the bottom,” he says, now almost 40 years removed from his lowest point. “Because if all you’re doing is avoiding the risk of hitting the bottom, you’re basically in self-protection mode—which is going to keep you from finding out what you’re capable of. For me, I had stretched myself as far as I could, to the limit of my endurance. I exhausted myself in the search for finding an answer. And I had been looking in the wrong place.”

The right place, it turned out, was the classroom. He realized that while attending law school at the University of Virginia, where the “energy and intellectual excitement” of a particularly good class left him wanting to be the “person in the front of that room.” By that time, he finally felt like he was on the right path in other aspects of his life. He had reconciled with his parents and gotten married to his college sweetheart. And after finishing law school, clerking for a federal appeals-court judge and working briefly as a lawyer, he joined the Wharton faculty in 1986 to teach legal studies.

In many ways, Wharton was an unlikely landing point. He was an English major in college who never even considered the idea of teaching business. In fact, in one of his journal entries, he wrote *business* as the first item on a list entitled “Things I could never teach.” But after so much intellectual searching, being on a college campus just felt right to him—so much so that he “never paused long enough to wonder if I was out of place or not.”

“By the time I had done all the work to figure out who I was and what I wanted to do—and I had my wife to counsel me as well—I hit the ground here at the age of 37 on a mission,” he says. “I wanted to succeed, so I could have a career. I had never had a career.”

Shell has been at Wharton ever since, often standing in a room in front of determined students who know exactly what they want to do with their lives. But for those who don't, he tries to relay a message from his own experiences—and which he offers now in the book:

You don't need to avoid uncertainty.

“The truth of the matter is that nobody is certain,” he says. “But the culture here discourages any sign that you're not sure. I really feel like part of my mission is to be the person who says, ‘It's OK. Be uncertain. Everybody's uncertain. Don't feel inadequate. Embrace it. Go with it. Let that lead you to the interesting stuff.’”

“I think everyone who knows exactly what they want to do is closing their lives down.”

While the introduction to *Springboard* focuses on Shell's life, the rest of the book is designed to be about the reader. With exercises and questions sprinkled throughout the pages, Shell's main objective in the first section is to help readers determine what success and happiness means to them on a personal level. And in the second section, his goal is to assist them in figuring out what their capabilities are and how they can use them to achieve their own version of success.

From the outset, Shell knew he was stepping on tricky terrain because there are many similar books in the self-help genre. A lot of them, though, are “dreadful” reads that are “full of cliché and self-indulgent memoir and motivational speaking,” he says. And they almost always go down two distinct trails. One is a do-what-I-did book written by someone who reaches the pinnacle of his or her profession (often in sports). And the other is a vague single-concept visualization of how to follow your dreams and be successful.

As a teacher—and not a preacher, he says—Shell tried to change the narrative.

“I think what differentiates my book is it's actually designed, because of the way I designed my course, to help someone who reads it think about themselves and

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integrate these questions into their own experience and come up with their own theory about what steps they need to take to achieve the goals they believe in,” he says. “I don't think a lot of success books are that open. I think they all preach.”

One of the most well-known books about success published in recent years is *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell's 2008 bestseller, which suggests that luck plays a big role in why some people are more successful than others. But that theory runs counter to the view—rife in the world of self-help and espoused by some psychologists—that success is not a matter of circumstance but about having the right psychological disposition. Shell can see both sides of the debate.

“Part of what I'm trying to do in this book is bring us back to the middle,” he says. “It's not bootstrapping. It's not rags to riches. It's not, ‘You can overcome any hardship and succeed.’ It's not as simple as that. But I don't think it's as deterministic as *there's no free will*.”

Shell certainly believes in free will, which is made apparent when he puts his readers through “The Six Lives Exercise” early in the book. In the exercise, he describes the career accomplishments of six different people before detailing their personal lives. Nobody on the list makes a lot of money *and* has a perfect life at home, so how you rank the lives should give you a good idea of how you'd like to ideally balance career success with family success.

The “Six Lives Exercise,” he argues, offers a chance to “choose your life.” From there, instead of preaching about how to get the life you want, he shares stories of how other people reached their goals—from famous people like aviation

pioneer Charles Lindbergh and tennis great Andre Agassi to some of his own students. It's a blend of storytelling that has always defined his style as an author and a teacher.

“All of the books I've written have been very story-driven,” Shells says. “That comes from having learned as a teacher that a class wakes up when you tell a story. People love narratives.”

One of the most telling stories Shell relates is about a Penn alumnus named Eric Adler WG'96.

When Shell first asked his former student if he was willing to be featured in a book, Adler was surprised. “Before that moment,” Adler says, “I had no idea I'd play a role in anybody's book.” But he was also flattered by the idea and figured it was the least he could do for a professor who had meant so much to him.

“Everybody has a few teachers in life that really have a huge impact on them,” Adler says. “And Richard Shell was one of those people for me.”

When Adler attended Wharton's MBA program in the mid-90s, Shell had not yet developed his success course. Instead, Adler got to know him by taking his legal studies and negotiation classes—“I tell people all the time that I took negotiation from the best negotiation professor in the world,” he says—and through the personal conversations they had.

Adler had been a teacher for eight years before coming to Wharton, and had confided to Shell that he wasn't sure what he wanted to do after graduating. Very sympathetic to that kind of mental grappling, Shell tried to offer assistance, suggesting that he could perhaps combine his business degree with his knowledge

Second Acts

Marci Alboher C'88 can name the exact moment she decided to change careers for the first time. An in-house lawyer for a magazine subscription service, she was on vacation in Rio de Janeiro when she got a call from her boss asking if she

would come back to work early to fix a problem. She was already feeling ethically compromised in her role, and that conversation provided the wake-up call she needed to quit her job—and her career in law entirely.

Two decades later, Alboher is an expert on the subject of career transitions, with a specific focus on “encore careers,” the recently coined term for people reinventing themselves later in life. And she believes her new book—*The Encore Career Handbook: How to Make a Living and a Difference In the Second Half of Life*—can serve as a road map and nuts-and-bolts guide for baby boomers who want to, in her words, “change the world” rather than retire.

The book, which not only chronicles Alboher’s transition story but offers hundreds of others, is designed to help people overcome obstacles and successfully change their career trajectory when they otherwise might not know how to do so.

“We have 10,000 people turning 65 every day,” she says. “If even a fraction of those people get hold of the encore idea and want to work on their own encore careers, think of the impact that can have on issues like homelessness and poverty and education and the environment and all of the issues we care about.”

At 47, Alboher is not yet in the “encore” stage of her life. Her own professional makeover happened while she was still in her 30s, but she can relate to the struggles older people have adjusting to new careers, because she had many of the same ones after leaving her comfortable job as a lawyer to become a freelance journalist and author.

“I had to get used to being a beginner again and learn from people who are much younger than me,” she says. “And that’s a real encore theme. If you’re in your 50s and 60s and are taking a chance, you may be managed by and learning from people who are young enough to be your kids. I got a taste of that when I had my first career change.”

Despite her initial challenges, Alboher forged a successful career in journalism, writing for a slew of publications and penning her own column and blog for *The New York Times* called “Shifting Careers.” During that time, one of the people she wrote about was Marc Freedman, whom she calls the “pioneer” of the encore movement. And when the *Times* cancelled her column, she made her

second career transformation and joined Freedman at Encore.org, the nonprofit organization he founded to promote encore careers.

Now a vice president at Encore.org, Alboher recently returned from a six-month national book tour to promote *The Encore Career Handbook*, which was published in January.

“I called it an *encore listening tour* because I really traveled the entire country taking the pulse of this kind of really burgeoning social movement,” she says. “People were really yearning to connect with other people in their communities who want to have an impact.”

One of her stops was at the Penn Bookstore in May, when she was on campus to celebrate her 25th reunion. Her classmates haven’t reached encore age yet, but she says that many of them were inspired by her message that it’s never too late to make a social impact. And some, she notes, are already exploring some of the later-in-life career options she writes about in her book.

“I felt like I was catching my classmates at a time where they could start planning for futures and thinking about how they want to leave a stamp on the world,” Alboher says. “We’re in a generation where we don’t just think about doing that with philanthropy. It’s one thing to have enough money where you might want to leave your name on a building or sponsor a scholarship for Penn students. But what would it be like if you dedicated the latter part of your career to doing work that’s part of your legacy? I think people were really receptive of the message.”

As her frequent use of the word “legacy” and talk about “changing the world” indicate, Alboher has ambitious plans for the encore movement. She’s hesitant to even call *The Encore Career Handbook* a career book because, to her, that implies “climbing the ladder or succeeding in some way,” whereas she hopes her book will “appeal to people whose most important motivator is they want to make a difference in the world.” She then points to people like Bill Gates, who she thinks will be remembered more for his recent philanthropic work than for creating Microsoft.

“I think it helps that we’ve seen very high-profile people move into second acts that are so much about fixing the world’s problems,” she says. “That’s something we can all aspire to, really.”

Although her book has been published and her book tour now completed, Alboher believes she’s just getting started promoting encore careers, which is becoming more important every day as life expectancy grows.

In the future, she hopes that encore education becomes a standard in higher learning and that her book can become a “textbook” in those classes. Even more than that, she dreams that the encore idea will soon become a part of everyday vernacular.

“We hope to get to the point,” she says, “where when people hit their 60th birthday rather than being asked, ‘Are you thinking about retiring?’ it becomes commonplace for people to say, ‘So what’s your encore going to be?’”—D.Z.

of education. But a short time later, Adler excitedly told him that he had decided he wanted to become a consultant. “Inwardly, I had my doubts,” Shell writes. “Outwardly, I congratulated him and wished him luck.”

Shell’s trepidation was not without reason. Adler landed a consulting job shortly after graduating—but stayed for less than a year. “I literally said to myself on the first day, ‘Uh-oh,’” Adler recalls. “I very quickly came to realize that I had

an entrepreneurial bug. Being a management consultant is not entrepreneurial. You give advice and you leave.”

Nevertheless, Adler calls his year as a consultant his “favorite mistake”—not only because he learned what he *didn’t*

want to do with his life but also because during that time he met his future business partner, Rajiv Vinnakota. In 1997, they launched an ambitious non-profit called The SEED Foundation, which aimed to provide boarding-school educational opportunities to disadvantaged students. Their unique model proved to be highly successful and has since been featured on CBS's *60 Minutes* and in the documentary film *Waiting for "Superman."* And Adler, who always cared deeply about education, had found what Shell refers to in his book as "meaningful work—a sweet spot of success that appealed to his entrepreneurial motivations, made good use of everything he knew, and advanced a goal he believed in."

Shell goes on to feature other Penn students, but Adler's story is probably the best example of forging your own unique path to success. Later in the book, Shell suggests five steps to achieving success, all of which Adler seemed to follow during his brief career hiccup and ensuing non-profit startup:

- Discover what you do better than most by taking inventory of your unique capabilities;
- "Set yourself on fire" by combining your satisfaction-based and reward-based motivations;
- Earn self-confidence through trial and error; learn to fail;
- Focus the four powers of your mind—passion, imagination, intuition, and reason—on goals that inspire you;
- Influence others by establishing credibility and engaging them in genuine dialogue.

"If you ask me, 'Who do you think is successful?'" Shell says of Adler, "I would point to people like him."

Michael Shafique W'07 first crossed paths with Shell more than a decade after Adler did. But just like Adler, he leaned on his professor as he struggled with what he wanted to do upon leaving Penn.

"More than any other Wharton professor, I connected with him on a personal level," says Shafique, who started on a pre-med track midway through his

undergraduate years and is now a resident at Duke University Hospital. "He was a great influence and motivator for me. When I decided to pursue medicine, professors on both sides of the academic spectrum—finance and pre-med—would scratch their heads at my chosen path. Professor Shell, on the other hand, got it. His personal path in life, though different than mine, opened his eyes to exploration. I think that enabled him to understand my choices."

For Shafique, the best part of Shell's success course—which he calls "the single best class I took as an undergraduate"—was how much of the focus revolved not solely around career ambitions but around character building, family, and religion. One of the best essays Shell ever read, he says, was Shafique's emotional account of running into an Amish family in Center City and how, despite being mentally drained from an eight-hour MCAT preparatory class, he was overcome with emotion as he listened to them break into some kind of hymn. Shafique wrote that it was his first true spiritual experience, and Shell says that reading it brought tears to his eyes. The two have remained close ever since.

"I honestly feel very lucky to have stumbled into that class back in the spring of '06, some kind of higher power or something," Shafique says. "I think in 20 years time, I will still be emailing him about more milestones in my life. What Professor Shell has taught me will last a lifetime."

Shell recognizes that some of the lessons he conveys in his course and his book may be different than those of other professors and academic authors. But it's not something he tries to hide. Years ago, during his travels, he was invited by a monk in Korea to live in a monastery and dedicate his life to the search for enlightenment. Shell gave the proposition some thought before ultimately declining and beginning his new quest for a better life at home. But he still meditates daily and has a collection of Buddhist statues lining the windowsill in his office. In fact, after a frustrating process to find a suitable title for his book, it was during one of his meditation sessions that he came up with the name *Springboard*.

"I'm part of a notable minority of professors within the Wharton school who are more humanists than statisticians," he says.

Because of his multi-layered background—he also says that he's "read and seen and listened to every play Shakespeare ever wrote"—Shell has always been a proponent of interdisciplinary learning at Penn. A few years ago, he set up a faculty seminar on success in honor of Penn founder Ben Franklin's 300th birthday, enlisting the help of people from many different departments. One was a PhD student named Angela Duckworth Gr'o6, who went on to teach at Penn and become a world-renowned psychologist ["Character's Content," May/June 2012].

"I'm really just deeply and genuinely grateful to him as a junior academic who benefited from his mentorship when he had no formal responsibility to do that," Duckworth says. "And I have a feeling he must have done that for many other people, too."

That panel turned out to be the precursor of Shell's success course, of which Duckworth took the "virgin voyage" as a student. Immediately, she was struck by the breadth of material in the class—from the books of self-help guru Tony Robbins to ancient Greek philosophy—as well as the personal relationships that were built.

"He really cares about his students," Duckworth says. "He takes a big interest in their particular lives. The success course is relatively small, and he develops relationships with students that are rare."

With *Springboard*, Shell has taken his course beyond the walls of his classroom. And while publishing the book is part of his own personal success story—the latest twist in the unlikely path that has taken him from painting houses in DC and backpacking through Afghanistan to Penn's campus—he hopes many others like him can carve out a life that makes them just as happy.

And maybe his book can help them along the way.

"My goal is for this book to find its audience," Shell says. "In my dream world, there is a copy of this in many college bookstores, sitting in the window for the student who is wondering what he or she wants to do." ♦

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