

SESSION 2. ACRES OF DIAMONDS

Audio Transcript

In 1843, a man was born who was to have a profound effect upon the lives of millions of people. His name was Russell Herman Conwell. He became a lawyer, then a newspaper editor, and, finally, a clergyman. During his church career, an incident occurred that was to change his life and the lives of countless others.

One day, a group of young people came to Dr. Conwell at his church and asked him if he would be willing to instruct them in college courses. They all wanted a college education but lacked the money to pay for it. He told them to let him think about it and to come back in a few days.

After they left, an idea began to form in Dr. Conwell's mind. He asked himself, "Why couldn't there be a fine college for poor but deserving young people?" Before very long, the idea consumed him. Why not, indeed? It was a project worthy of 100 percent dedication – complete commitment.

Almost singlehandedly, Dr. Conwell raised several million dollars with which he founded Temple University, today one of the country's leading schools. He raised the money by giving more than 6,000 lectures all over the country, and in each one of them, he told a story called "Acres of Diamonds." It was a true story that had affected him very deeply, and it had the same effect on his audiences. The money he needed to build the college came pouring in.

The story was the account of an African farmer who had heard tales about the other farmers who had made millions by discovering diamond mines. These tales so excited the farmer that he could hardly wait to sell his farm and go prospecting for diamonds himself. So he sold the farm and spent the rest of his life wandering the African continent, searching unsuccessfully for the gleaming gems that brought such high prices on the markets of the world. Finally, the story goes, worn-out and in a fit of despondency, he threw himself into a river and drowned.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, or farm, in this case, the man who had bought the farm happened to be crossing the small stream on the property. Suddenly, there was a bright flash of blue and red light from the stream's bottom. He bent down, picked up the stone – it was a good-sized stone – and, admiring it, later put it on his fireplace mantel as an interesting curiosity.

Several weeks later, a visitor to his home picked up the stone, looked closely at it, hefted it in his hand – and nearly fainted. He asked the farmer if he knew what he'd found. When the farmer said no, that he'd thought it was a piece of crystal, the visitor told him he'd found one of the largest diamonds ever discovered. The farmer had trouble believing that. He told the man that his creek was full of such stones – not as large, perhaps, as the one on the mantel, but they were sprinkled generously throughout the creek bottom.

Needless to say, the farm the first farmer had sold so that he might find a diamond mine turned out to be the most productive diamond mine on the entire African continent. The first farmer had owned, free and clear, acres of diamonds, but he had sold them for practically nothing in order to look for them elsewhere.

The moral is clear: If only the first farmer had taken the time to study and prepare himself – to learn what diamonds looked like in their rough state – and, since he had already owned a piece of the African continent, to thoroughly explore the property he had before looking elsewhere, all of his wildest dreams would have come true.

The thing about this story that so profoundly affected Dr. Conwell, and subsequently, millions of others, was the idea that each of us is, at this moment, standing in the middle of his or her own acres of diamonds.

If only we will have the wisdom and patience to intelligently and effectively explore the work in which we are now engaged, to explore ourselves, we'll usually find the riches we seek, whether they be financial or intangible, or both. Before we go running off to what we think are greener pastures, let's make sure that our own is not just as green or, perhaps, even greener. It's been said that if the other guy's pasture appears to be greener than ours, it's quite possible that it's getting better care. Besides, while we're looking at other pastures, other people are looking at ours!

To my mind, there are few things more pitiful than the person who wastes his life running from one thing to another, forever looking for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and never staying with one thing long enough to find it.

No matter what your goal may be, perhaps the road to it can be found in the very thing you're now doing. It wasn't until he was completely paralyzed by polio, and forced to reach into the rich resources of his mind, that a courageous farmer got the idea of producing exceptionally good meat products on his farm. From that idea, one of the country's most successful meat-packing companies was born. His farm contained acres of diamonds, too. He'd just never been forced to dig for them before.

Your mind is your richest resource. Let it thoroughly explore the possibilities lurking in what you're presently doing before turning to something new. I say that because there were probably good reasons for your having chosen your present work in the beginning. If there weren't, and if you're unhappy in the field you're in, then perhaps it's time for some serious exploration.

Dr. Russell Conwell's life is an example of the importance of a willingness to change once one's own pasture has been thoroughly explored. As I mentioned earlier, Dr. Conwell began as a lawyer, then became a newspaper editor before he finally found his true calling as a clergyman and the founder of a great university.

One of the best examples of a person's finding acres of diamonds hiding in his work is the story of Stew Leonard of Norwalk, Connecticut. Stew Leonard began as a dairy-route deliveryman. As he worked his rounds, he began to think of all the products connected to the dairy business that his customers really needed. With very little down, he bought a working dairy, and with a lot of hard work, he began to build a business around it. He kept the working dairy intact and the center of his operations, and he surrounded it with windows through which his customers could watch the process. And he began to add other products to his line.

Today, his dairy store is the largest in the world, and he sells everything in the food line. People come from all over the area to shop at Stew Leonard's World's Largest Dairy Store. They love it, and he loves them. People who are too old or infirm to come to his store on their own are picked up in Stew Leonard's buses and brought to the store. He has a multimillion-dollar business that grew out of a delivery route. The diamonds were there, and Stew Leonard made the most of them.

Every kind of work has such opportunity lurking within it. The opportunities are there now, clamoring to be noticed. But they cannot speak, or print signs for us to read. Our part of the bargain is to look at our work with new eyes, with the eyes of creation.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "It is our duty as men and women to proceed as though limits to our abilities do not exist. We are collaborators in creation."

A man I knew in Arizona began with a small gas station. One day, he was sitting at his desk and watching through the window while one of his young attendants filled a customer's gas tank. He watched the customer while he stood about, waiting for the job to be finished. It dawned upon him that that man had money in his pockets and that there were things he needed, or wanted, that he would pay for, if they were conveniently displayed where he could see them. So he began selling other items: fishing tackle, then fishing licenses, hunting and camping equipment, rifles, shotguns, ammunition, hunting licenses. He found an excellent line of aluminum fishing boats and trailers. He began buying up the contiguous property around him. Then he added an auto-parts department. He had always carried cold soft drinks and candy, but now he added an excellent line of chocolates in a refrigerated case. Before long, he sold more chocolates than anyone else in the state. He carried thousands of things his customers could buy while they waited for their cars to be serviced. All of this guaranteed that most of the gas customers in town would come to his station. He sold more gas. He began cashing checks on Fridays. The bonanza grew and grew.

It all started with a man with a human brain, watching a customer who was standing around with money in his pockets and nothing to spend it on. Others would have lived and died with the small service station – and they do. My friend saw the diamonds.

Both my friend in Arizona and Stew Leonard in Connecticut are customer-oriented. Serve the customer; serve the customer better than anyone else is serving the customer. Stew Leonard's company policy is conspicuously displayed in his store for all to read, and it goes like this: "Rule 1. The customer is always right! Rule 2. If the customer is ever wrong, reread Rule 1."

Upon seeing a wealthy customer drive in, many service-station operators might say to themselves, "I ought to be in his business." Not so. There is just as much opportunity in one business as there is in another, if only we will stop playing copycat with each other and begin thinking creatively – begin thinking in new directions. It's there, believe me. And it's our job to find it.

Take the time to stand back and look at your work as a stranger might. A stranger might ask, "Why does he do it that way? Has he noticed how what he's doing might be capitalized upon – or multiplied?"

If you're happy with things as they are, then, by all means, keep them that way. But there's great fun in finding diamonds hiding in ourselves and in our work. We never get bored or blasé, or find ourselves in a rut. (A rut, we're reminded, is really nothing more than a grave with the ends kicked out.) Some of the most interesting businesses in the world grew out of what was originally a very small idea in a very small area. If something is needed in one town, then the chances are that it's needed also in all towns and cities all over the country.

You might ask yourself also, "How good am I at what I'm presently doing?" Do you know all there is to know about your work? Would you call yourself a first-class professional at your work? How would your work stand up against the work of others in your line?

The educator and author J.B. Mathews wrote: "Unless a person has trained himself for this chance, the chance will only make him ridiculous. A great occasion is worth to a man exactly what his preparation enables him to make of it." (I'm sure Dr. Mathews intended to include the female half of the world in that statement.)

I'm often appalled by how little people know about the business they're in. "That's not my department," they'll say. (I suppose if they would see a fire starting in someone else's department, they wouldn't report it.) Most real-estate people don't sell homes and property. They *show* homes and property – something a six-year-old child could do. They often know nothing at all about selling or marketing, yet they call themselves real-estate professionals. They're actually tour guides. "This is the living room," they say to intelligent men and women who already know what a living room looks like.

Someone (come to think of it, I think it was I) once wrote that the human race is much like a convoy of ships in time of war; the whole fleet is slowed down to protect the slowest ships.

And human beings march slowly en masse, unmindful of the diamonds beneath their feet. To become diamond miners, the first thing we need to do is to break away from the crowd, and quit assuming that because people in the millions are living that way, it must be the best way. It's not the best way; it's the average way. The people going the best way are way out in front. They're so far ahead of the crowd, you can't even see their dust anymore. They're the people who live and work on the leading edge, the cutting edge. And they mark the way for all the rest.

You and I have a choice to make, really. It takes imagination, curious imagination, to see diamonds in their rough state as cut and polished gemstones, and to see a pile of iron ore as stainless steel.

To prospect for your own acres of diamonds, develop a faculty we might call "intelligent objectivity" – the faculty to stand back and look at your work as a person from Mars might look at it. Within the framework of what industry or profession does your job fall? Do you know all you can know about your industry or profession? Isn't it time for a refreshing change of some kind? How can the customer be given a better break?

Each morning, ask yourself: How can I increase my service today? There are rare and very marketable diamonds lurking all around me; have I been looking for them, examining every facet of my work and of the industry or profession in which it has its life? There are better ways to do what I'm presently doing; what are they? How will my work be performed 20 years from now? Everything in the world is in a state of evolution; how can I do now what will eventually be done anyway?

Think of what Stew Leonard did with his dairy route, and my friend in Arizona, with his small service station – what “Famous” Amos did with his chocolate-chip cookies, and what Procter and Gamble did with soap. Sure there's risk involved. There's no growth of any kind without risk. We start running risks when we get out of bed in the morning. Risks are good for us. They bring out the best that's in us. They brighten the eye and get the mind cooking. They quicken the step and put a new, shining look on our days.

Human beings should never be settled. It's OK for chickens and cows and cats, but it's wrong for human beings. People start to die when they become settled. We need to keep things stirred up.

Back in 1931, Lloyd C. Douglas, the world-famous novelist who wrote *The Robe*, *Magnificent Obsession* and other best-selling books, wrote a magazine article titled “Escape.” In that article, Douglas asked, “Who of us has not at some time toyed briefly with the temptation to run away? If all the people who have given that idea the temporary hospitality of their imagination were to have acted upon it, few would be living at their present address. And of the small minority who did carry the impulse into effect, it is doubtful if many ever disengaged themselves as completely as they had hoped from the problems that hurled them forth. More often than otherwise, it may be surmised, they packed up their troubles in their old kit bags and took them along.”

The point of the article was, simply, don't try to run away from your troubles. Overcome them; prevail, right where you are.

What we're really after is not escape from our perplexities and frustrations, but a triumph over them. And one of the best ways to accomplish that is to get on course and stay there.

Restate and reaffirm your goal – the thing you want most to do, the place in life you want most to reach. See it clearly in your mind's eye, just as you can envision the airport in Los Angeles when you board your plane in New York. Or, like a great ship in a storm, just keep your heading and your engines running. The storm will pass, although sometimes it seems that it never will, and one bright morning, you'll find yourself passing the harbor light. Then you can give a big sigh of relief, rest a while, and almost before you know it, you'll find your eyes turning seaward again. You'll think of a new harbor you'd like to visit – a new voyage upon which to embark – and once again, you'll set out.

That's just the way this funny-looking, two-legged, curious, imaginative, tinkering, fiddling dreamer called a human being operates. He escapes from problems not by running away from them but by overcoming them. And as soon as he overcomes one set of problems, he starts looking around for new and more difficult pickles to get himself into – and out of.

So if you find yourself looking at travel folders and thinking of running away, go ahead – think about it. It will get your mind off things for a while. Then zero in on your goal (we'll talk more about that later in this program), and get busy. Take one thing at a time, and before you know it, you'll start seeing those diamonds scattered all over your world, and you'll be out in the clear again.

If you feel like running away from it all once in a while, you're perfectly normal. If you stay and get rid of your problems by working your way through them, you're a successful citizen.

Start taking an hour a day with a legal pad and pen to dissect your work. Take it apart and look at its constituent parts. There's opportunity there – that's your acre of diamonds.

Exercises — Write your answers in the space provided below.

1. List opportunities that surround you now, in your current work. Brainstorm; write down whatever comes to mind.

2. How can you increase your knowledge of your current job, trade, industry or profession?

3. How can you improve your job performance now?