

## **Today Was My Last Day at Work, Ever. December 11, 2012.**

Well, that is how my daughter Sarah put it.

I don't mean "work" of every kind. I mean "work" for a company. Professional work.

I planned to quit. I just had not decided when.

I cut back to one day a week on my 66<sup>th</sup> birthday last May.

Most of the company still reported to me, at least on paper, and I am still President.

A person cannot really contribute much at one day a week. So I really wasn't.

Two weeks ago we had our Annual Management Review meeting. Other managers prepared for and led the meeting.

I intentionally said very little. It went well without anything of substance from me.

Later that day my partner and I met to discuss the coming year's budget.

At the right time I suggested a way to shave some money out of the expense column. Stop paying me and I would stop coming in.

We discussed a few necessary details and I sort of snowballed him into agreement.

Circumstances dictated that today would be my last day.

Other than that I have not given it much thought.

The company had a cake and a get-together for me at 10 a.m. I did not expect that but I should have.

I did not have a speech prepared so I spoke extemporaneously. I did OK.

I took a group out to lunch.

I received several cards and some thoughtful gifts.

Later in the day, an engineer who has worked with me for 22 years sat down in my office and said, "You know, I think this is a lot bigger deal for us than it is for you".

I think he is right.

I am not sure what to make of that.

I never really wanted to be an engineer. I have a good aptitude for it and I have done well but it was never my goal.

My goal has always been to be a farmer.

I decided to become an engineer so I could afford to farm.

I was about ten years old at the time. Here is how I decided.

This took place around the time that my Pa, a dairyman, started his off-farm work as a carpenter for Orin Thompson. I suppose around 1957.

One morning Ma and Pa were talking about money and about the big money engineers were earning on a government missile project.

This was before NASA. NASA was formed late in 1958.

They had been to a gathering the night before. A party or a meeting. There had been conversation about the extravagant pay engineers were getting. The incredible number of \$9,000 per year has stuck in my mind.

Financial concerns were coming up a lot in those days. The late 1950s were a very hard time for farmers.

It occurred to me that if I became an engineer, I could afford to farm.

The same way that Pa was becoming a carpenter so he could continue to farm.

That steered me into a technical career.

There was one other turning point that got me into medical devices.

That came when I was working at Honeywell in Hopkins.

I was a senior technician at the time and going to school at night. I went to night school almost continuously until I was in my fifties. I studied engineering at the U of M. Nursing and medicine at North Hennepin and the U. Business and organizational management at St. Thomas.

I was doing some interesting design work at Honeywell. I had developed a system using early integrated circuits to randomly arm anti personnel bombs. These integrated circuits developed into microprocessors. Microprocessors are the key to all modern electronics. At the time I was one of only a few people who knew how to use them.

Honeywell was patenting my design which made it effectively impossible to completely disarm a minefield.

This was at the peak of the Vietnam War protests.

One day a group of clergy and pacifists were staging a march at the Honeywell building. Some of us were watching from the windows. My peers were making jokes about using our products to clear the crowd. I did not agree with the protestors. I am not sure I had a strong opinion one way or the other. I was working at Honeywell to support my wife and kids. Nevertheless, it occurred to me that maybe I was on the wrong side of the window. Or at least, maybe I should invent something better than bombs. That was about 1970. I checked around and learned of a new company named Medtronic that made life saving equipment. It was a hard company to get into. I applied and interviewed for a year before they hired me. My first project was helping to develop a system for sending EKGs over the telephone. I got a patent for that. Over the next decade I worked my way up to Senior Electrical Engineer. I cross trained. I understood the technology and the human body. Because of that and because I stayed calm in a pinch I spent a lot of time working with leading doctors in the OR. I have 13 US patents for medical devices. I reached a point where if I was called into a meeting and I said a thing could be done or could not be done, or if I said it would take 18 months, they simply believed me. It was a little scary. One day I was musing at my desk and a head hunter called. I was in an odd mood, he was persuasive and he was parked outside. He said he only needed a few minutes. He just wanted to buy me a cup of coffee at a nearby shop. I went with him and we chatted. The next day I got a job offer based on a resume he wrote from his notes. I became the Engineering Manager for a company that produced machines which tested integrated circuits. The machines had to be incredibly fast both mechanically and electronically. Wonderfully challenging stuff. Absolute, state of the art. Within two weeks I realized I had made a big mistake. I missed the OR. Nothing is more meaningful than to design a device that connects to a human and saves a life or reduces pain. I decided to cross train again and prepare myself for a bigger role in medical devices. During my five years at the testing company I managed engineering, reliability, quality and manufacturing departments. My superiors went along with my transfer requests because I brought a new perspective to each assignment. Over time I achieved certification by various professional societies as a Quality Engineer, a Reliability Engineer, a Senior Manufacturing Engineer and a Quality Auditor. Then I looked for a different job. I was hired as Director of Engineering by a start-up medical company. The company was founded by ex-Medtronic executives. That was in 1989. I became President in 1993, then COO, then CEO. We developed pioneering products for neurosurgery, orthopedics, spine surgery, pain management and airway management. Many are still being manufactured and sold today. The company was financed by and controlled by venture capitalists. Capital dried up when the "dot.com" bubble burst in the late 1990s. I took the company into foreclosure, found a partner with money, bought certain assets and founded our existing company, Clarus Medical LLC. Since then we have had OK years and tough years. We have held the company together. Producing good products and providing good jobs. The pay has been fine. I have traveled a great deal. Gail and I have seen the world. It has been a good career. Tomorrow is my first day as a full time farmer after 42 years as part time. Which is best, the journey or the destination?

Tom