

# THE UN-COMFORT ZONE

With Robert Wilson



## You'll Know When You've Arrived

During the 1996 Summer Olympics, I saw a young athlete with his brand new silver medal around his neck and a massive smile on his face. He was so thrilled with his achievement that he was mixing and mingling with everyone he met on the sidewalk. Perfect strangers were shaking his hand, slapping him on the back, and having their picture taken with him. I did not know who he was, but it was clear that he was relishing the highest point of his life to date.

On March 29, 1982, amid thunderous applause, Katherine Hepburn stepped onto the stage at the Academy Awards to receive the Best Actress Oscar for her performance in *On Golden Pond*. Was she as thrilled as the Olympic athlete that I saw? Probably not. It was her fourth. Been there, done that, the mantle is getting crowded.

In my column titled *Pack Mentality*, I wrote that human beings are highly motivated by status and its symbols. A reader contacted me and said she had grown beyond that. She told me how, after 20 years of financial success, she put the corporate world and materialism behind her. She now works at a fraction of her previous earnings for a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the lives of babies.

I agreed that she had put status and its symbols behind her, but only in one area of her life. I then asked her what level of comfort was she seeking to achieve in her new career?

Abraham Maslow, in his *Theory of Human Motivation*, identified five levels of need that people strive to satisfy (in order, they are: Survival, Safety, Social, Esteem, and Fulfillment). I have found that we work through those five levels separately in each area of our lives: work,

relationships, parenting, hobbies, sports, volunteering, etc. With each new endeavor, we attempt to pass all the mileposts until we reach our comfort zone.

There is a joke about parenthood that illustrates this: When the first baby drops her pacifier on the ground, the parents sterilize it before giving it back; with the second baby, the pacifier gets wiped off; and with number three, it just gets popped back into his mouth. I used to think the humor referred to how harried the parent was from handling the needs of three kids, but now I realize it refers to the parent's comfort level with raising children.

Status is an esteem need, and the symbols that accompany it are recognition for our achievements. However, as long as those status symbols remain important to us, then we haven't mastered that area of our lives. It is when we are in our comfort zone that the achievement is secure. At that point, the symbols are no longer important and we are ready to move on to the highest level: fulfillment. You will know you have reached the peak when you freely share your expertise with people who are levels below you.

Many years ago, I heard an interview with a professional football quarterback. The reporter asked him if he ever taught his secrets of success to younger up and

coming players. He replied, "What, and lose my job to one of them? Hell no! Let them learn it on their own the way I did." Clearly, he was not yet in his comfort zone.

All of us have reached a comfort zone in one or more areas of our lives. I spent six years as a member of the public speaking organization, Toastmasters International. For the first four years, I was fully focused on learning and achieving. In that time, I completed two educational levels and won 13 speaking contests. During my last two years in Toastmasters, I became a professional speaker and was no longer interested in entering the contests. The shine of those "amateur" trophies had worn off a bit, and I found my joy was in sharing what I already knew with those who were just beginning.

You will know you have reached the highest level, when sharing your expertise is as satisfying as achievement.

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