

The Harder I Work, The Luckier I Get!

A MEMOIR



Conversations with Ron Harper
 CEO, Harper Corporation of America

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THE LUCKIER I GET***

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PRESERVING MEMORIES
Charlotte, NC

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Preface

As I have reflected back on my life during the last ten years, I have consciously wondered what it is that makes Ron Harper tick? Why have I always been in such a hurry? Why am I often not satisfied once a goal is reached or an objective achieved? I have felt if those questions could be answered then just maybe I could slow down and “smell the roses” a bit more.

What I have increasingly realized is much can be learned from examining the work ethic I learned early in life and have stuck with throughout my life. Encapsulated in this ethic are the values that gave me the persistent motivation needed to succeed in business. To better understand the relationship between my attitude toward work and the way I have lived my life is what I set out to do in putting this book together.

I don't play the lottery or engage in any kind of gaming, legal or illegal. Yet, if for some unforeseen reason my name was picked out of a hat and I was informed I had fortuitously won ten million dollars, I would have a very difficult time accepting the winnings. I just wouldn't feel

right about it. I'd have to refuse it or give it all away to some charitable cause.

Over the past thirty-three years, since my wife, Katherine, and I founded Harper Corporation of America, we have been fortunate to have accumulated a considerable estate. But even if someone had given me ten million the day we were married, fifty-two years ago, when we had little more than the clothes on our backs, I have this feeling it would have been dreadful for me. Not that we didn't struggle financially at times. There were periods early in our marriage when I was unemployed and still needed to provide for a family with five children. The point is we can look back over all those years of getting to where we are today with a feeling of satisfaction. Had the results of those fifty years of hard-earned success happened overnight, I would be a different person today. I think life would have been terribly unfair to us if all of our success had come to us without a lot of hard work.

In my mind, I have always associated work with pride in accomplishment, personal dignity and an overall sense of well-being. Getting the prize—some big windfall—without any effort would seem totally out of line to me. Golf pro Gary Player once said, "The harder you work, the luckier you get." I feel like I would have been deprived of the best part of life if I had not had to spend my life working for what I have.

In the pages that follow I tell my life story, beginning in a little manufacturing town in Maryland during the Great Depression. Given that my career pursuits have been such a significant part of my life, I try to trace the development of my work habits. From the example of my hardworking parents, to my time in the U.S. Marine Corps, to my early employment experiences, I have sought to understand how it is that I learned to be so devoted to the work I do. Much has to do with the role models I learned from. Being given responsibilities I was not fully prepared for, struggling to overcome

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feelings of inferiority, and having a burning desire to succeed shaped my character as well.

The accumulated experience I gained early in my career while manufacturing and marketing rollers for printing presses gave me the confidence needed to found Harper Corporation of America in 1971. Since then, our company has become a leading supplier of anilox rolls used in flexographic printing presses, with an international market. We can also claim credit for some of the more significant innovations in flexography over the past thirty years. We have seen flexography rise from being a low-quality, less-expensive type of printing to where it now competes with offset printing in full color and is quickly gaining market share.

In addition, I delve into how my own business practices have been shaped through the course of my career. My strength has always been in marketing and sales and I outline here the tactics I have used, as well as my management style. The final two chapters focus on the rewards Katherine and I have experienced in giving back to the community some of the profits we have garnered, and my own reflections on a lifetime of fulfillment arising from a career that I truly fell in love with.

My father died at age sixty-five. Dad was not a talkative person. He seldom expressed his feelings or discussed what was on his mind. I learned little about what life was like for him growing up as a young West Virginia farm boy, his career, his hopes or his dreams. No question about it, I loved my father, but I never really knew him well. And I miss that intimate, more defined connection with my past.

I also admit that as a teenager I probably would not have been interested in hearing Dad tell me about having to ride a horse to school through two feet of snow, or about his tough life on the farm, or the difficulties our family faced during the Great Depression. Now I am interested,

and unfortunately, it is too late to ask him for answers that are so important to me. The other reason I wanted to write this book is to answer questions about me, for my family. Answers that some family members may have no interest in at the moment, but in time, they will. I hope those who read this book will enjoy doing so.

I have dedicated this book to my longtime friend, sweetheart, and lifetime companion, my wife of over fifty-two years, Katherine (Katherine Tessie Hodges prior to our marriage). Ours was a teenage marriage that did succeed, mostly because of the patience, forgiving ways, and perseverance of Kat, as I am fond of calling her, or “Babe” or “Doll.” The latter, coincidentally, are the same endearing terms I often heard my father use when talking with my mother—which, strangely, gave me a feeling of warmth and security.

Katherine has been my supporter, mentor, motivator, wife, and lover for these many years, even when I probably deserved less. I have not always understood Kat, but I have always loved her dearly—and will until the day I leave this earth. As Katherine has often heard me say, “We have had a wonderful and happy marriage—most of the time—for over half a century.”

I also dedicate this book to our wonderful family—our children, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren—and to friends who may be interested in “what makes Ron Harper tick.” I thank them all for their love, support, and friendship. I will be forever grateful.

An added thanks to four very special people who most influenced my adult life. I regard them as the *four most influential people in my life*: my mother; my high school typing teacher, Mrs. Livesey; Katherine, my wife; and Al Scala, my boss in my early working years, who mentored me like a son. These are the role models from whom I gained confidence and often received undeserved support as I struggled to “find

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the real me” in a sometimes unfriendly and competitive world. I happily give credit and address each of their unique contributions in this book.

Last, but not least, my sincere gratitude to Jack Nelson, who assisted me with my personal memoirs—for without Jack, this book would probably not have been written—and my personal thanks to MaryEllen Goodwin and Sonya Long (Harper Corporation of America Marketing Department) for their special help in compiling the photographs appearing in this book.