

Finding new routes to old destinations . . .

Three stories . . . about a violin, a diamond, and a box of gloves . . .

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In November 1995 Jack Riemer attended a concert given by violinist Itzhak Perlman at Lincoln Center in New York City. Six years later he described the evening in a column for King Features Syndicate.

“If you have ever been to a Perlman concert,” he wrote, “you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child, and so he has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches. To see him walk across the stage one step at a time, painfully and slowly, is an awesome sight. He walks painfully, yet majestically, until he reaches his chair. Then he sits down, slowly, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play.”

On this evening, however, something went wrong shortly after Perlman began to perform.

“Just as he finished the first few bars,” wrote Riemer, “one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap -- it went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. . . . People who were there that night . . . figured he would have to get up, put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches and limp his way off stage -- to either find another violin or else find another string.”



But he didn't. Instead, as Riemer recalled, “he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began, and he played from where he had left off. Of course, anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night, Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, re-composing the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them they had never made before.”

The hall exploded with cheers and applause when Perlman finished. Everyone rose to their feet screaming and cheering, “doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done.”

Perlman “smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said -- not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone -- ‘You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left’.”

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As Mark Miodownik points out in his 2013 book *Stuff Matters: Exploring the Marvelous Materials That Shape Our Man-Made World*, the biggest diamond yet discovered is an entire planet five times the size of Earth. It’s located in the Milky Way, orbiting pulsar star PSR J1719-1438.

Down here on earth, the “biggest yet found is the size of a football. Extracted from the Cullinan mine in South Africa, it was eventually presented to King Edward VII in 1907 on his birthday and is now part of the crown jewels of the British monarchy.”

The Cullinan diamond was formed about three hundred kilometers beneath the surface of the earth; over billions of years, high temperatures and pressures converted carbon rock into a diamond, which probably rose to the surface during a volcanic explosion -- where it lay for millions of years until miners discovered it a mile underground.



But the owners of the diamond had a problem. Shipping it back to Britain “posed an enormous security challenge . . . since the discovery of the largest ever rough diamond had been widely reported in the newspapers.” According to Miodownik, “Notorious criminals like Adam Worth, the inspiration for Sherlock Holmes’s nemesis, Moriarty, who had already managed to steal a whole shipment of diamonds, were perceived to be a real threat.”

But the owners tricked the swarm of criminals. As Miodownik tells it, “a decoy stone was dispatched on a steamboat under high security while the real one was sent by post in a plain brown paper box. The ruse worked precisely because of another remarkable attribute of diamond: Being composed solely of carbon, it is extremely light. The entire Cullinan diamond would have weighed little more than half a kilogram (about 18 ounces).”

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Back in 1913, Sam Goldfish (formerly a Polish immigrant named Shmuel Gelbfisz) had a lucrative job as sales manager for the Elite Glove Company on New York’s lower Fifth Avenue. But President Woodrow Wilson had just signed a new tariff bill: From now on, American glove companies would not be allowed to import foreign gloves without paying an import tax.

According to his biographer, A. Scott Berg, Goldfish “ordered crates of the finest ladies’ dress gloves from France, but instead of having them shipped in pairs, he requested that they be separated into boxes of right-hand gloves and left-hand gloves, each shipment sent to a different addressee at a different American port. Goldfish planned to let the parcels go unclaimed, leaving them to be auctioned after a few months by the two different port authorities. At each auction he would be the only bidder, for clearly hundreds of gloves for one hand were completely useless without their mates. Goldfish bought them for a song, matched them, and was able to sell highest-quality gloves far below market price.”



SAMUEL GOLDFISH
General Manager and Treasurer
Jesse Lasky Feature Film Co.

But Goldfish didn't stay in the glove business, despite his sleight of hand. He joined Cecil B. DeMille and others as partners in the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company. To make movies.

And he changed his name.

Samuel Goldwyn became one of the most successful producers in Hollywood. His career lasted more than 45 years. He won two Oscars, received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and produced such beloved films as *Wuthering Heights*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Porgy and Bess*, *The Bishop's Wife*, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, and *The Pride of the Yankees*.

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All these stories share a common trait: The ingenuity of the people involved.

We spend a lot of time celebrating social entrepreneurs and marveling at the impact they make on social needs. But we rarely see the foot soldiers.

Every day, every member of your staff can either salvage or derail your social enterprise -- because every day they collide with new challenges. The best among them don't even pause -- they just find new routes to old destinations. They get it done. They don't even talk about it -- and their supervisors rarely see it. Even if they do notice, supervisors don't pay much attention to how they did it. They're focused on results, not process.

*Deeply embedded beneath all the heroes and haloes of the social enterprise world are the anonymous, ingenious operations people, the ones who make things go. The everyday miracle workers. **Because there is no right way to do things when the situation changes -- there is only the way that works.***

As Jack Riemer put it at the end of his column about Perlman's astonishing concert, "perhaps our task in this shaky, fast-changing, bewildering world . . . is to make music, at first with all that we have, and then, when that is no longer possible, to make music with what we have left."

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SOURCES: *Goldwyn: A Biography*, by A. Scott Berg, published in 1998 by Riverhead Books, a division of Penguin Group USA; *Stuff Matters: Exploring the Marvelous Materials That Shape Our Man-Made World*, by Mark Miodownik, published in 2013 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; "Perlman makes his music the hard way," by Jack Riemer, King Features Syndicate, February 10, 2001.