

PREFACE

A Long Story Short

By Mauricio Gatto Bellora

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My mother used to tell the same story all the time. When I was five or six years old, someone would ask the cliché question: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I never said “policeman,” “firefighter,” or “Batman”; I always said the same thing: I want to be a scientist because I want to know it all.

My mother was a French teacher, my father, an accountant; I do not think I even knew any scientists at that time. Where I got that idea from is still a mystery to me. What is not a mystery is that it was already a direction, not an answer.

That direction had a name by the time I was seventeen. Professor Palacios looked at me and said, without hesitation: do not think twice, go to the Faculty of Pharmacy and Biochemistry, that is who you are. The Argentine university system does not allow for the luxury of discovering yourself along the way; you choose your field at seventeen, and you commit. I committed. And every hour I spent in those laboratories confirmed what the five-year-old had apparently already known.

Then, in my second year, something happened that I still find difficult to explain without sounding like I am dramatizing. Dr. Marcelo Nacucchio approached me and said: I need help with my research, and I have been observing you. Would you like to join? I was eighteen years old, still a student, and someone was inviting me into real science, into liposomes, into microencapsulation, into the kind of work that gets published and cited. There was no payment. I did not care. The day had thirty hours at that age, and I could feel that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. Marcelo taught me more than I can properly account for. I probably owe him a significant portion of who I became.

For several years, that world was enough. We were at the frontier of the field in Argentina. It was my life, and there was no visible reason to change it.

Except that there was. The questions began arriving quietly but with intensity. Is knowing a lot about something the same as knowing a lot? Am I going to see the impact of what I do, or am I just a small link in a chain of knowledge that moves too slowly to feel? And the one that stayed the longest: how high can I fly?

I needed to stop and think.

So, I went to Nice, France, in winter, with almost no money and no particular plan other than to sit with the question long enough to hear the answer.

The Côte d'Azur in winter is not the Côte d'Azur of the postcards. It is cold, and quiet, and the sea is the color of steel. There is not much to do there in January except walk, think, and talk to yourself. Which is exactly what I needed.

Stay safe, or test what I am actually made of?

I decided to jump. No parachute. What I did not know at that moment was that the scientist in me would always stay with me and become, more than once, my safety net.

Back in Argentina, I gave myself a year to transition. I searched. Every opportunity seemed a step backward. Quality control laboratories, pharmaceutical manufacturing, the commercial side of pharmacy. All of them had one thing in common: tunnel vision. Repetitive tasks that in no way matched how high I wanted to fly.

Then, in the newspaper (which was how one found jobs in the previous century), I saw a small posting. A company I did not recognize was looking for a young scientist for a part-time scientific advisory role. I could smell the opportunity before I understood it. I hand-delivered my letter. A week later, I was sitting across from the man who would become my first boss in the private sector.

He said, "The job is straightforward." We need to explain to the market why our contact lens care product line costs four times what the competition charges, and traditional marketing has not been enough to do so.

Close your eyes and imagine the size of my smile.

The company was Allergan. My job, stripped to its essence, was to close a gap between what was actually true about the product and what the market believed. The scientific

evidence was real. The clinical outcomes were real. The problem was that no one had explained them. Not the way a scientist would. Not the way a person who had actually read the studies would. The market was running on the plausible story rather than the true one, and I was being asked to replace it.

The product line grew sixfold that year. They made me head of the division, then VP of Marketing. At twenty-eight, I was Interim CEO for Mexico. At twenty-nine, I was the CEO of the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay), a role I held for ten years. What followed is documented elsewhere: Mary Kay, Natura, MonaVie, Hairstory. Forty years. Eight countries. More failures than I would have predicted and more successes than I had any right to expect.

But the number I am most proud of is not a revenue figure or a market share statistic. At least seven people I devoted serious time to developing went on to become CEOs themselves. And counting. That is the achievement that actually means something to me.

There was a moment — I cannot tell you exactly when it arrived, because it does not arrive all at once — when I realized that something had changed.

For most of my career, I was the youngest in the room. In my thirties, surrounded by CEOs who were already grandparents. Always the youngest, always the one with all the time ahead.

That is no longer true.

I am now the most experienced person in most rooms I enter. The one with the most behind me and, if I am being honest, less ahead than before. This is not a complaint. It is a fact. And facts, in my experience, are most useful when you face them directly.

So. I am going to own it and start using the time wisely.

In forty years of moving between industries, countries, and organizations, one thing has remained constant: the gap between what is said and what is real.

Sometimes it is the industry, using what I would call smart communication to tell a convenient story, fabricating belief among consumers who sometimes trust blindly what a serious and well-established company says, even when the factual support is thin, absent, or even pointing in the exact opposite direction. Sometimes it is popular tradition that, with

genuinely good intentions, tries to find an answer to a difficult question, and almost always finds a simple one that turns out to be wrong. I do not need to explain how social media widens the gap by accelerating it. Regardless of who starts the domino effect, the gap tends to grow. And the consumer, given a choice between what is plausible and what is true, will sometimes choose what is plausible, especially when the plausible confirms what they already believe.

I want to help close that gap, at least in the fields where I have something to say.

And then there is leadership. I knew, forty years ago, that I knew far less than the people who trusted me with the responsibility of managing others thought I knew. So, I read voraciously everything I could find about leadership and effective management and all the other useful and occasionally pompous subjects the field produces. I learned a great deal about the mechanics of efficiency and how to maximize results through people. But here is the gap no one talks about enough: what about the other side of the equation? What about the person being led? Where are we leading them, and what are we producing in them beyond our own organization's interests? The belief that both sides cannot be attended to simultaneously is false. I want to prove that. I did it in real life, and I want to share and explain how it can be done.

I was writing this article at two in the morning when my wife came to my office and, with genuine care and just a little bit of alarm, asked me why on earth I was doing that instead of sleeping.

Great question.

She left me thinking while I kept on working.

I like many of the Stoic principles. I believe that actions, among them the transfer of knowledge, are what will create my transcendence. Creating memories in other people's minds carries you beyond one's short terrestrial life. Seven people became CEOs. I want to plant more seeds than that before I am done.

That is why I am doing it. And it needs to be now — even if it is two in the morning.