

## SWANBERG AWARD ADDRESS

The Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award is named in honor of Harold Swanberg, MD, the founder of the American Medical Writers Association. The Swanberg Award is presented to an active member of AMWA who has made distinguished contributions to medical communication or rendered unusual and distinguished services to the medical profession. The Swanberg Award is presented during AMWA's Medical Writing & Communication Conference. The recipient of the 2017 Swanberg Award is Brian G. Bass, MWC.



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## Where Am I? A work in progress.

By Brian G. Bass, MWC

Of all the places I ever thought I might be, I never expected to be here.

I was never going to be in a field as technical as medical communications. I never imagined I would have something of value to teach others. I never thought I would be successful. As hard as it is for me to believe that I'm right here, right now, receiving AMWA's highest honor, there are people in this audience who don't know that someday they're going to be here, too. And if you're thinking to yourself that it's impossible, I thought the same thing, if I even thought about it at all. But clearly, it's not impossible.

When I was young, I had lots of potential. Unfortunately, it was resting potential. And boy was it resting. Perhaps hibernating is a better word.

When we're born we have all the potential in the world. Unlimited potential. This is me at about 3 years old. Not only did I have potential, I had hair! And blonde hair at that. Unfortunately, shortly after we're born, limitations start being placed on our potential. This is a picture of how therapists may one day say I warped my daughters' potential. In my defense, I only wanted them to know that normal is overrated and that there's much more to discover, much more fun to be had, if you're not afraid to embrace your imagination.



Everyone faces limitations. Many are out of our control, but the worst limitations are the ones we place on ourselves. Those are the limitations I want you to reject.

To understand why I think it's amazing I'm where I am today, I want to tell you where I've been. And I want to preface it with this: a necklace my wife gave me many years ago. It's a double pentacle that simultaneously represents change and

signifies completion. She knows me, and she knew how much meaning it would have for me. I've always been restless. It's hard for me to be still, physically or mentally. I like to complete things, but I don't like being done. This necklace is a constant reminder that every ending is a new beginning, and that I had better get started.



Once I was going to be an actor. A singer. A dancer. The theater was my passion. So much so that I ignored just about everything else. Math, science—I had the potential. But I limited myself. So much so that by high school graduation I was easily among the least likely to succeed. This was me on the right, playing an unnamed character in *Fiddler on the Roof*. I was about 15.



I was the first person in my family to go to college. I was paying so little attention in high school to my future, it took my father asking me when I was a junior whether I was planning to go to college or move out and get a job. With all the jobs I had had as a kid, I knew I wasn't qualified to do much of anything that I would want to do for the rest of my life.

I've been working since I was about 5 years old. I always liked money. Technically, I guess that's when I started my first company. I painted and sold rocks to my neighbors. Yes, people actually bought painted rocks. Apparently, cute little kids can get away with almost anything.

Next I sold lemonade to golfers at the golf course down the street from where I lived. I mowed lawns, and I had a newspaper route. I worked in a pet store and in department stores. I worked in factories and in food service. I really didn't want to do any of these things for the rest of my life, but I loved performing. So college it was.

I went to college as a theater major. Near the end of my freshman year, I realized that making it as an actor really means first making it in the food service industry. I wanted none of that. So where would this journey take me next? After taking a cold, hard look at myself, the only other thing I loved to do was write. Advertising became my new passion. I was then a sophomore.

Not counting the angst-soaked poetry I wrote as a teen that was published in high school literary magazines, this is my true professional publishing debut. It's the first ad I ever wrote. I was working at a clothing store at the mall. When the store manager mentioned he had to create an ad for the holidays, I volunteered. What did I come up with? What the well-dressed tree is wearing this year...and most people too! Clearly my punctuation skills were not fully developed. But check out my illustrative ability! That is one snappy-looking tree.



The fire was lit. I was turned on and passionate about advertising. I started taking every college course I was interested in. As interesting as that was, it led to a hodgepodge of seemingly unrelated courses. My transcript looked like a page from *Where's Waldo*, with Waldo being the common thread that would support a degree. Believe me, Waldo was nowhere to be found. This was particularly a problem because at the college I attended, juniors had to apply for their majors.

Ramapo College of New Jersey was just 4 years old when I started there. It was one of only a few institutions of higher learning in America that, at the time, would grant degrees in nontraditional or interdisciplinary majors. I had spent a year taking mostly theater courses, and another year and a half taking everything from writing, marketing, and international finance to public speaking and the sciences. If I wanted to graduate at the end of 4 years, I needed to make sense of this. So where was I now? Between a rock and a hard place, that's for sure.

I had to appear before a committee of faculty and administrators to explain why the things I had done to date and the things I would do for the next year and a half would be worthy of a degree in communications. If I was successful, they would grant my request. The room was small and stuffy, and it was the afternoon before Thanksgiving break. I remember it all too clearly. Pacing in the hallway awaiting my turn, the answer came to me.

When it was my turn to face the committee, I explained that my career was going to be as an advertising copywriter. Naturally, all my writing courses were applicable, and as it

turns out, so was every other seemingly unrelated course. In advertising you have to present your ideas, which makes the acting and public speaking courses relevant. And clients will come from all industries, which makes all the other courses seem relevant. It was daring, but possibly brilliant. And this thinking, as you'll soon see, has changed my life. And by the way, it was also successful.

It was also a very memorable day because I met the woman who would become my wife. I was energized from my very recent success, and we had a brief conversation in the hall. In all, it was the best day ever!

Breaking into advertising in New York City wasn't easy. After college graduation, I took a job in a factory to pay for needed car repairs. I offered them an honest day's work for an honest day's pay, with the understanding my future was elsewhere and I would give them as much notice as possible when I needed time off for interviews. About 6 months later, I landed my first copywriting job at a New York ad agency. It was a small agency whose clients were all in the performing arts. How convenient, given my previous career aspirations. I was in heaven—the best of both worlds for me!

I was the only writer, and I got to write advertising for concert artist management companies who managed all the great classical artists of the time. My best memories were shaking hands with the great jazz pianist Eubie Blake—whose fingers I swear wrapped around my entire hand twice, meeting the violin virtuoso husband-and-wife team of Pinchas and Eugenia Zukerman, and watching a young tuba prodigy play an empty 5-gallon water jug in my office. I also wrote advertising for many of the top off-Broadway theaters. Perhaps my biggest accomplishment came during the early days of cable television, when I helped to launch a new premium service called Bravo. Some of you may be familiar with it.

A good friend of mine was working at Van Heusen in Manhattan. She knew I was in advertising and asked whether I would be interested creating ads for the outlet stores around the country. Since it wasn't a conflict of interest with my current employer, I gladly took on the freelance work—freelances should always err on the side of yes. So I freelanced in the evenings and on the weekends. This would become a pattern for me throughout my early career. Wherever I worked professionally, I always freelanced on the side.

The owner of the ad agency was a great guy. Funny, creative, energetic, but a lousy businessman. The agency grew, and then it faltered, without the owner ever really understanding why either had happened. I left for the advertising department at Macy's Herald Square, where I nearly worked myself to death for the longest 13 months of my life. Nothing—and I mean nothing—prepared me as much as Macy's to become a successful medical writer.

How can that be? One thing I've learned on this journey of mine is what I first discovered the day I defended my college degree—things that are seemingly unrelated are always related by at least one thing: the person experiencing them. The trick is learning how to tie all the loose ends together so you can learn from them. Here's how I learned to be a successful medical writer in the advertising department at Macy's Herald Square.

On any given day, writers in the advertising department were simultaneously working on 11 weeks of newspaper ads, 7 weeks of Sunday circulars, plus the occasional direct mail pieces. I learned endurance. Believe me, as a freelance, I rely on this every single day. Because there was no time to get anything done, there was also no time to get anything wrong. So I learned how to quickly and accurately assess what needed to be done. I learned to trust my instincts, own my decisions, and learn from my mistakes. Considering the volumes of highly technical information we have to filter as medical writers, the pace of our deadlines, and the myriad legal and regulatory guidelines we have to know, it's easy to see how this has come in handy for me.

When my wife and I were expecting our first child and we couldn't figure out how we found the time for that to happen, I knew it was time to leave Macy's. Before I left the company we both performed in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. We were square dancers around the turkey float—a float they still use at the start of the parade. Not only that, but footage from the parade was used in part of the opening for a TV sitcom the following year, so we were on TV every week!

I spent a little more time in retail advertising, but my heart wasn't in it. I knew I had to get back to an ad agency, but how? Since college, I had interviewed with all the big agencies: BBDO, Grey, J. Walter Thompson, and others. I had great first interviews, but no one ever offered me a job. At the time, I thought that was terrible. But over the years and in hindsight I have realized they did me a great favor. I never would have been satisfied in a cubicle, being the guy who came up with "is" in "Coke is it!" That wasn't my place. I needed to be front and center.

I answered an ad for a small ad agency whose clients were in animal health pharmaceuticals. We were both intrigued by the prospect of working together, but because I had no discernable scientific ability, I freelanced for them for a while. We quickly discovered it was a good match, and I was hired. I was thrilled to be using my creativity and my brain in scientific ways. The owner of the company was a great guy. Funny, creative, energetic, but a lousy businessman. Sound familiar?

This agency would mark the last time in my career I would work for someone else; well, not including a brief sidebar, but that's a story for another day. Since the big ad agencies wouldn't have me, and the small ad agency owners didn't know how to

run a business, I had no alternative. I had to do it on my own.

Of all the companies where I've worked for someone else, going all the way back to my newspaper route, only 2 are still in business. Fortunately, my company is one of them. Macy's is the other, but I hear they're struggling.

I have to thank all the bad businessmen I've worked for in my career. To the untrained eye those experiences might seem like train wrecks. But I learned from every one of them. I learned how not to run a business. They taught me well.

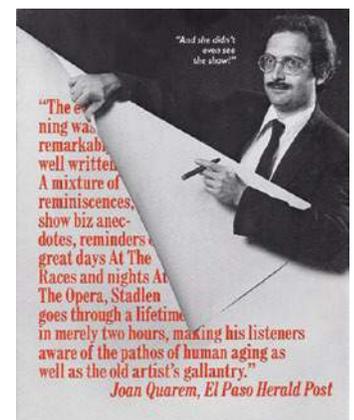
My first day in the office of my company was Monday morning, August 19, 1989. At the time it was an ad agency, just like those I knew and had worked for previously, and the company was growing. But evenings and weekends I was freelancing—yes, even freelancing on myself—as a medical writer. I was trying to figure out how to transfer my experience in veterinary medicine to human medicine. Soon that part of the business began growing, too.

I want to tell you a story about how I landed my first freelance gig with a medical communications company. I was presenting my portfolio, which comprised all the medical writing I had ever done at the time, all in veterinary medicine. So I already had one foot on a banana peel, considering I was interviewing with a medcom whose work was in human orthopaedics. The person I was interviewing with saw a brochure peeking out of the back pocket of the portfolio and asked why I hadn't shown it to him. I told him it was from a past life and wouldn't be relevant to medical communications. I had forgotten the brochure was still in there. Once again, something seemingly unrelated made all the difference.

It was a brochure I had written at the ad agency in New York, for a touring production of *GROUCHO*, based on the life and lunacy of Groucho Marx.

These types of brochures were boilerplate. A brief description of the show surrounded by quotes extolling it. But I love Groucho Marx, and I love doing things like they've never been done. So I chose to write the brochure in the first person, as if Groucho himself had written it. I watched his movies, I read his books, and the brochure was one of my favorite samples—but not for a freelance gig in medical communications.

I hesitantly took the brochure out of the pocket and explained what it was. I was trying to read the guy's face as he read it. Little did I know that he loved the theatre. He put the brochure down, looked at me, and said "If you can write something like this, you can certainly write about hips and knees."



And so the journey continues!

By the fall of 1993, I was spending more time freelancing as a medical writer than building the ad agency I had started. That's when I realized the world didn't need another small ad agency, but that I could make a difference as a medical writer.

I became an AMWA member on January 1, 1994. It was very kind of Jim Yuen, then president of AMWA, to come into the headquarters office to sign my membership certificate on New Year's Day. I never imagined that someday, this membership certificate would be joined by one recognizing me as an AMWA Fellow, a beautiful plaque commemorating my AMWA presidency in 2013 to 2014, and my achievement of MWC certification. To fully appreciate the gravity of that last one, the MWC, you need to understand that I registered "barely breathing" on the last standardized test I had taken, the SAT, back in my powerhouse high school days.

When I began focusing solely on medical communications, this was my inspiration. I was going to do medical communications like it's never been done. I was speaking to someone who was a medical illustrator. He told me about an organization he belonged to, the Association of Medical Illustrators, and proposed there might be a similar organization for medical writers. The internet was in its infancy, so it took more than a few mouse clicks at the time to find AMWA.

Before I found AMWA, though, I came upon an ad for a creative competition, which is quite common in the advertising field. The Medical Marketing Association was having a competition for the best medical advertising of the year, and this was the theme of the competition. The theme was "Heavy Medical" (you know, like heavy metal music). I had to buy the tee shirt. On the back was the Heavy Medical Credo—"I swear I'll do it like it's never been done." The image on the front is a caduceus and the snakes have a serious attitude. And "In Awe" was emblazoned across the staff. It communicated a commitment to excellence with a take-no-prisoners attitude that inspired me to kick medical communication butt.



This was my other, and perhaps more important, inspiration. This hung on the wall facing my desk, precisely at eye level when I was seated. I saw it every day. I couldn't not see it, and I couldn't forget it. It's a quote from Shakespeare, from his play

*Measure for Measure*: "Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt." Life is scary. Business is scary. We all feel that we have so much to lose. But nothing is lost by a bad moment that isn't regained twofold by the opportunity to learn and grow or reinvent ourselves thanks to the experience.

Seemingly unrelated things become completely related and relevant when you look at them the right way—like my college transcript or my GROUCHO brochure. The worst things can become the best things—like big ad agencies who wouldn't hire me, and small business owners who taught me how not to run a business. Endings, and beginnings.

I remember driving to my first AMWA meeting in January 1994. Until just recently, I was a member of the Delaware Valley Chapter—shout out to my DVC peeps! Now I'm a member of the Florida Chapter—shout out to my Florida peeps!

The first AMWA meeting I ever attended was a chapter meeting held on a Saturday in Ambler, Pennsylvania. I was honestly so scared. Although I had already been a professional writer for 15 years, and a medical writer for 9 years, I knew I would be out of my league. I almost turned around, which would have been the biggest mistake of my life—fearing to attempt.

Sure enough, the people in attendance at my first AMWA meeting had more letters after their names than I have in my name. But it turns out I had nothing to be worried about. These were the most welcoming and interesting people I had ever met. I knew I had found my home. This is where I'd been headed and didn't know it. I'm sure many if not most of you had the same first experience.

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*The Walter C. Alvarez Award is named in honor of Walter C. Alvarez, MD, a pioneer in the field of medical communication. The award is presented to either a member or non-member of AMWA to honor excellence in communicating health care developments and concepts to the public. The Alvarez Award is presented during AMWA's Medical Writing & Communication Conference. The 2017 recipient is **Helen Osborne, MEd OTR/L**. You can read about her acceptance speech in our Online-Only Supplement.*

*The John P. McGovern Award is named in honor of John P. McGovern and is presented to a member or nonmember of AMWA to recognize a preeminent contribution to any of the various modes of medical communication. The McGovern Award is presented during AMWA's Medical Writing & Communication Conference. The 2017 recipients are **Steven Woloshin, MD, MS**, and **Lisa M. Schwartz, MD, MS**. You can read their acceptance speech in our Online-Only Supplement.*