Ambassador Richard Carlson

So manners bring you outside yourself and keep you from drowning in the sea of "me," and force you to acknowledge other people.

—Dick Carlson

When a man has done so much in a lifetime, it is prosaic to sum up that life in one sentence. Name a job, and Dick Carlson has mastered it. He's been a magazine writer for *Time* and *Look*, a newspaper columnist and reporter for United Press International, a law clerk, a private detective, a TV anchorman, an organized crime expert, a TV network documentary filmmaker, a merchant seaman (and member of one of the smallest and toughest unions in America), an international radio show host and counter-terrorism expert. He even ran for mayor of San Diego—and almost won. And yet his most enduring legacies, he says, are his two sons, Tucker and Buckley, his grandchildren, and his wife, Patricia. Who, then, is Dick Carlson?

A voracious reader with a personal library of more than 10,000 books.

Dick has never passed on an opportunity that presented adventure or interest. Once he even attempted to read in preparation for the California bar, without bothering to attend law school!

Dick has a perpetually open mind, open in such a way that he is always seeking to add to his rich inner life. As his son Tucker remarks:

> "He's an intellectual and a very deep person. He is the best-read person I've ever met. My father reads a book a day, every day. That's not an exaggeration. His library is so large that you think it is not real. You can walk through it and he's read everything. He brings a book with him everywhere."

Dick's life, at its beginning was neither simple nor easy. Dick was an orphan. His mother was a pretty blonde girl from a small town near Boston. In the snowy winter of 1941, when Dick was six weeks old and she was sixteen years old, she dropped him off at an orphanage called the Home for Little Wanderers, in Boston, and disappeared from his life. Only many decades later did he track down his mother, Dorothy Anderson, and find information about his father, Richard Boynton, after combing through old records in Boston.

For the first few years of his life, farmed out from the orphanage as an infant, Dick lived as a foster child with a close-knit family in Malden, near Boston. Although he didn't leave their home until he was almost three, Dick has no memory of those years. He found out about them in 1979, when the elderly foster parents, carrying an album of photos of Dick as a baby, tracked him down in San Diego, where he had been anchoring the news on the CBS television station.

Dick was taken from his foster home by the orphanage to be adopted by the Carlson family. His new parents were in their mid-thirties and childless. They lived a few miles from Boston in the small town of Norwood, with a population at the time of 16,000 people. Dick's father was an executive at the Winslow Brothers & Smith Tannery of Norwood, the oldest tannery in America, run by former Massachusetts Governor Frank Allen and owned by the same family since 1776. The Carlson family lived in a house on Vernon Street in Norwood, built around World War I by his mother's father, a successful Norwood builder. The Carlsons were conventional upper-middle-class New Englanders, who provided a good life for Dick, even when the tannery closed in 1949 after a bitter strike and Dick's father was thrown out

of work. The Carlson family gave Dick affection, good manners, and a dog and cat as pets, which prompted Dick's lifelong love of animals.

Dick's parents never mentioned his adoption. No one ever spoke of it to Dick—neither the neighbors in Norwood nor the Carlsons' many relatives. The culture of the time, or at least the culture of his family, dictated taciturnity about events or situations considered too personal for conversation. People in his family could never say the word "cancer," for instance, or "divorce." They had euphemisms for them, if they mentioned their existence at all. It wasn't until Dick's adoptive mother died many years later that Dick learned factually that he had been adopted.

In some respect, he didn't have to be told. He already knew it. He knew in his gut, for reasons he still can't explain, that he wasn't fully the son of his parents. He loved them; they loved him. Yet he never felt completely connected to them. Perhaps he had lived too long, too formatively, with his forgotten foster parents.

Conditions changed for the worse for Dick's adoptive family at Christmas 1953, when his forty-four-year-old father died of a heart attack. In the ensuing weeks, twelve-year-old Dick consciously knew that he would now be responsible for making his own way in life. He prayed at night that he could do that. He never thought to pray that things would be easier, but he prayed that God would make him strong enough to build successfully on the life he had been given. This began his path of self-sustained employment, learning, and adventure.

Dick's jobs were typical of any young man: working in a Christmas tree lot, mowing lawns, bagging groceries in a store, working on a produce truck early in the morning before school. But something else made Dick different. He was wild at times, aggressive and quick to fight, particularly after the death of his father, but he was usually polite to everyone. He treated every person in the same respectful manner, unless they purposefully crossed him. Tucker describes it best, in reflecting on the lessons his father taught to him and his brother:

> "Manners set you apart. Manners do two things, according to my father. Manners are something that people can instantly recognize in you. Decent people have good manners, and that's how you know them. Decent people walking down the street know each other by their manners. Instantly you know someone by his or her manners. Also, manners put the world into perspective. All manners are about thinking about other people, acknowledging the existence of other people and their desires. So manners bring

> you outside yourself and keep you from drowning in the sea of "me," and force you to acknowledge other people. They make you less selfish, bottom line."

Geography, serendipity, and friendships played a large role in Dick's destiny. He wanted to go to Brown University, in Providence. At sixteen, in his senior year of high school, he had an older girlfriend at Pembroke College (then the female counterpart to Brown), and he spent a lot of time with her on campus. But his mother was forced to go to work after his adoptive father died, and there wasn't enough money for Dick's tuition at Brown—not that Brown would have taken him if he had been rolling in cash. Dick was expelled from high school that year for frequent truancy and general delinquency.

He recalls being completely bored:

> "I seldom went to class. I missed weeks at a stretch. The truant officer, Mr. Hopkins, was always looking for me. I was either at the library reading or in a saloon drinking beer and eating clam cakes with my Pembroke friend. I was definitely a juvenile delinquent. But, I want you to know that obstacles related to past behavior can be overcome. For example, this year [2010], I was inducted into my high school's Hall of Fame. These were the people who expelled me fifty-two years before. I went to the ceremonial lunch, and there were four or five inductees and a hundred or so people. Nobody mentioned that I had been booted from the school. I wanted to say something about it, but they asked me not to. I think they were a little embarrassed, though I wasn't."

Dick joined the military at age seventeen, one step ahead of the law and two steps ahead of the draft. It straightened him out immediately. Later, Dick tested himself physically, becoming a deep-water SCUBA diver and a sport parachutist and skydiver.

Dick became a reporter for United Press International at age twenty-two, after working as a copy boy for the night city editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, Glen Binford, who boosted Dick's career by sending him out to report news stories for the *Times*. Over the years, Dick's jobs brought him into frequent contacts with political figures like a young Ronald Reagan and Bobby Kennedy, and show-business stars like Doris Day and Rosalind Russell—he lived in her guest house in Beverly Hills—Jimmy Stewart, Jack Warner of Warner Brothers, Cary Grant, Frank Sinatra, and Mia Farrow,

with whom he was very friendly. Dick once flew to Las Vegas on Sinatra's plane with Farrow and Tina Sinatra to join Sinatra at his weekend opening at the Sands Hotel in 1965.

Dick worked often with Jake Ehrlich, the famous criminal lawyer and prolific writer upon whom the character of Perry Mason was based. He was friendly for years with famed San Francisco businessman Louis Lurie, owner of the Mark Hopkins Hotel, around whose lunch table he rubbed elbows with the famous men of the time. Working then as a UPI reporter, Lurie remarked to the young Carlson that lunches like this are a "good way to meet interesting people." And they were.

As a young man Dick moonlighted as a private eye for Hal Lipset, America's greatest gumshoe and wireman, the fellow who invented the bug in a martini olive. For many years Dick was a dues-paying member of the Sailor's Union of the Pacific, a small, very tough San Francisco union, and he sailed, with a Coast Guard Merchant Marine permit as an Ordinary Seaman on a Pacific Far East Line tramp freighter in South Asia for much of a year, taking a leave from UPI.

Dick had a lot of jobs. In fact, he may sound like a book-jacket blurb from the 1950s, about the diverse occupations of the author. Find the interesting in life. Never hoard an opportunity. Those are part of the life philosophies that Dick lived by and passed along to his sons. Tucker remarks:

> "He manages his time well. He, like all productive people, is in a constant state of agitation about how lazy he is. My father is one of the least lazy people that I have ever met. But he is convinced that he is lazy, and he is always fighting an ongoing battle with himself about how little he is accomplishing."

Dick is always looking for the next adventure, the next opportunity, and because of this, he has been able to accomplish much in life. Dick's been a wire service reporter and newspaper rewrite man, a night-shift crime reporter, a television and radio correspondent, a leg-man for columnist Louella Parsons in Beverly Hills, a television anchorman and a host on multiple TV and radio shows, a documentary filmmaker (he wrote and produced three TV films—two for ABC, one for NBC), a magazine writer for *Time* and *Look*, an organized crime expert, and a beat cop in Ocean City, Maryland, about which he has written extensively.

As Dick's skills progressed, so did his responsibilities. Not many people can attest to doing even half of the things Dick had done at this point, but

because of his ardent desire to learn and because of the manners that kept him in high regard with whomever he met, Dick was just getting started. He ran the Voice of America for the last six years of the Cold War, the same for Radio Marti to Cuba. He was assistant director of the U.S. Information Agency, and spokesman for the agency. All of these appointments were by President Reagan. He was appointed, by the first President George Bush, as the U.S. ambassador to the Seychelles Islands, a beautiful archipelago in the Indian Ocean, far off the east coast of Africa, famous as a haven for spies and international rogues and site of a large U.S. spying operation. (CBS's *Sixty Minutes* did a segment on it called "Islands of Spies.") He returned to the United States to be president and CEO of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the parent to PBS and NPR. Later, he was president and CEO of a King World company, the most financially successful TV syndicator in America, with *Oprah*, *Wheel of Fortune*, and *Jeopardy* among their cash cows.

For the past six years he has been Vice Chairman of the well-known counterterrorism think tank, the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, with offices in Washington and Brussels. The FDD was begun by Malcolm Forbes, Jr., former U.N. ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, former CIA director Jim Woolsey, and foreign correspondent Cliff May, in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11. For many years Dick has also been Chairman of InterMedia Research, of Washington, D.C., and London. InterMedia does sophisticated polling and opinion studies in difficult-to-access parts of the world such as China, Tibet, North Korea, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and many parts of Africa.

Dick does effective and important work. He writes a weekly newspaper column on national security. He hosts the international radio show *Danger Zone*, which runs on Sirius/XM satellite radio in the United States and Canada twice a week and runs on British Sky Radio and the World Radio

Network in Europe, Asia, and Africa. He broadcasts from the Christian Science Monitor studios in downtown Washington and the World Radio Network studios in London.

Dick has certainly made a difference. He's been at the center of many of the major engagements and important political and cultural developments of the latter half of the twentieth century. Why? Because, as Tucker says, Dick will not pass up an interesting and newly challenging opportunity. As Dick himself tells, he did indeed go with Tucker to Afghanistan. On his trip, Dick's wish for an interesting experience was more than granted. He describes the exciting flight:

> "My son and I boarded a Pakistani International Airlines plane in Islamabad on the evening of October 21, 2001, to fly to Dubai. We had spent the week in Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and in Peshawar, up by the border, trying and failing to get into Afghanistan. Tucker was attempting to interview the one-eyed Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban, for CNN, where he was a correspondent at the time. That was the plan. I have a close English friend, Lord Michael Cecil, who was a major owner of the phone company in Afghanistan. He had been helpful with some logistics (including Mullah Omar's cell number), but it didn't work out.
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> It was an interesting but uneventful week, other than one day when we drove from Islamabad to Peshawar on the old Grand Trunk Road. We were near the entrance to the Northwest Frontier when we had a flat tire, a blowout. This is an incredibly dirty, dusty road jammed with thousands of people trudging, lorries packed with animals, crates, and vegetables, thousands more people squatting along the roadside. After the blowout, the driver took the wheel off, thinking he could get a repair nearby. Tucker and I got out of the beat-up Fiat to help him. Within a minute, Tucker and I were surrounded by a dozen hostile Pashtun men. They began shouting "CIA, CIA" at us. They were working themselves into a spit-fit. (We kept shouting back, "No, no, we are Canadians!") One of them was waving a rusty hunting knife, stabbing the air with it. We threw the tire into the backseat and careened away on three wheels.
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> In a couple more days we headed out of the country, flying from Islamabad back to Peshawar, where the plane stopped to pick up some more passengers, and then on to Dubai, in the Persian Gulf. The U.S. bombing runs in Afghanistan were really heavy, preventing us from flying over Afghanistan on the way to Dubai—too dangerous. So we flew around the country. Twenty minutes from Dubai, high over the water, there was a

> terrific explosion. I thought we'd hit another plane. We made it to Dubai airport shaking violently and flying, it seemed, somewhat sideways. We came in for a crash landing and skidded into the desert. Tucker and I jumped into the inflated slides. We went down those rubber tubes like greased lightening—something I've always wanted to do."

Many people spend a lifetime trying to avoid such moments. Dick doesn't look for these dangerous events, but he doesn't turn away from them either, and seizes them as they appear. He lives life. He pursues his interests. He ran for mayor of San Diego many years ago. He was a top vote-getter in a primary crowded with candidates, but later lost to the incumbent Mayor after a tight and nasty runoff. It was a grueling run, but even losing was worthwhile for what Dick gleaned from the experience.

Dick's myriad adventures have not only provided him with a rich array of experiences, but they've also put him in a position of power to help others. Once, three years before the end of the Cold War, Dick visited Soviet Moscow as part of his work with Voice of America. There, he and his wife Patricia met, late at night, in a grim Moscow flat with a twelve-year-old Russian girl named Vera, a VOA fan who listened surreptitiously to the jammed broadcasts with her parents. Vera had curly red hair and bright blue eyes, spoke perfect English, played classical piano, and loved the idea of democracy. Most of all, she said, she loved the cartoon character Garfield, who she had once seen in a British newspaper. Why?

"Because he's my hero," said Vera. "He's tough. He doesn't put up with a lot of foolishness from others. He is free. He is American."

When Vera hugged Dick and Patricia goodbye, she said, "I will be coming to America some day; I will see you again." The poignancy of this moment was underscored by the Carlsons' knowledge that Vera's father was a Soviet physicist who had applied to emigrate with his family, and had been vehemently refused by the Communist authorities.

Dick was struck by Vera's charm and intelligence. When he arrived back in Washington, he wrote Jim Davis, the creator of Garfield. Dick explained about Vera's affection for the cartoon cat, and asked for a drawing for her. Davis sent one signed to "My friend Vera," which Carlson put into the diplomatic pouch at the State Department and had delivered to Vera through an embassy officer in Moscow.

A few weeks later, at a Washington dinner party, Dick told the story of Vera and Garfield to a Reagan administration speechwriter. "Why don't you ask the president to help her get out?" Dick said.

At that time, President Reagan was preparing for his historic trip to the Soviet Union to meet with President Gorbachev. The message got to President Reagan. A deal was secretly struck with the Soviets. One month after President Reagan returned from Moscow, Vera and her mother and father stepped out of a U.S. government limousine in front of the Voice of America offices on Independence Avenue in Washington. Dick and Patricia Carlson were waiting on the front steps. Vera bounded up and hugged both of them. The first thing she said?

"I told you I would see you again—in America!"

Vera Zieman and her parents settled in Massachusetts. Vera graduated from Tufts University and is now a respected scientist and an accomplished musician. She was recently married, and has a baby and enjoys a good life in America. Dick Carlson made this possible because he cared about her, loved his country, and wanted a young girl with big dreams to realize her desire for American freedom.

Despite all these adventures, the most important thing about Dick's life is the relationship he has forged with his two sons, Tucker and Buckley. They are grown and independent and have families of their own—five children, between them. Today Dick's role has shifted from a caretaker-father to his sons' best friend. But once, and for many years, fatherhood was his most important job. Tucker recalls how his father tried to pass along to himself and his brother the many life lessons he had learned, at the most ordinary moments:

> "His main strategy for dealing with adversity is not complaining about it. He made a decision early on that he'd rather die than whine in public. All through our childhood, that was the central lesson: never complain. He coupled that with humor—he is the funniest person that I have ever met. He believes in humor. It's more than just that he is funny. He is committed to seeing life through that lens.
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> [As kids,] growing up in La Jolla, California, which is a warm, almost tropical climate, we would almost always get bugs in our breakfast cereal, and we would complain about it. And my father would always dismiss our complaints as the whining of affluent, spoiled kids. He is very tough. And one morning we were all sitting at the table—my brother, Dad, and I, all three of us living together—my brother poured his Captain Crunch in the bowl and said, "Yuk! There are bugs in here!" And my father said, "That's not true! There are no bugs in there!" And we all look down and there are these insects floating in the milk. My father said, "The fact that a few bugs

> bother you is just pathetic." He took the bowl and ate the whole thing just to prove the point!"

Tucker recalls how very seriously Dick took his duty towards his sons. Not a day went by that Dick did not write his sons a letter:

> "My father wrote me when I went to boarding school at fourteen—and I never lived at home again—a letter every single day all four years while at boarding school. Every day. When I was a little kid, for years, my father made brown-bag lunches for my brother and me. Our school didn't have a lunch truck or cafeteria, and every single day he put a note in our lunches, a different one for each of us. And every day it was a quote, a joke, or a riddle. And I saved every single note, and I saved every single letter. I have massive boxes of them in my basement. I know how hard that is now that I have my own children. I know how hard that is.
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> I'm forty years old, and my father writes me every week. Not e-mails, but letters. The other thing he did was to introduce ideas to us as children, and I mean little children. I read *Animal Farm* in second grade; it was one of the first books I ever read. And he explained that this was an allegory. This is Trotsky. This is Stalin. But he sent me, every day, articles and books and magazines. I had subscriptions to every single magazine known to intelligent man by the time I was sixteen."

Dick knows that when all is said and done, his relationship with his sons and with his wife Patricia will be what matters most in his life:

> "When you're gone, pushing up the petunias, they won't remember you long at the law firm or at IBM or in the newsroom or at the hedge fund or machine shop; and after a short while they won't remember that you were ever there at all. That's the way it is in life, and always has been, and you are a fool if you don't face it. Billions of completely forgotten folks have come before us, and memory of them has vanished. What you did as an occupation will mean nothing, gone in the snap of two fingers.
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> But what you did or are doing with your sons and daughters will mean everything, both to them and to you. It will pay you dividends unending for the rest of your puny life. And the memory of what you do, what you say, what you think, will survive long after your death; it will live through your children and their children, maybe for generations to come. I didn't really know this when I was young, but I figured it out later, and it is true."

Many would be envious of all of Dick's experiences. Others, having had such adventures, would rest now on their laurels. Not Dick Carlson. He's sixty-nine years old and still working full time. He has no intention of retiring. When the time comes to cross the final river, he plans to help row the boat. That is the life of Ambassador Richard Carlson—so far.