

# An Investment Banker's Take On Life

MUSINGS BY A PINOY INVESTMENT BANKER ON LIFE, LIVING AND, YES, INVESTMENT BANKING

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SUNDAY, JUNE 24, 2007

## Sunday Musings: Living An Authentic Life



Remember the figure of Greek mythology who was condemned eternally to push a rock up a steep hill, only to see it tumble back down of its own weight when it reaches the top, and then the whole routine starts all over again? That's Sisyphus for you. And it strikes me as ironic because, if I were to believe Homer, Sisyphus was supposedly the wisest and most prudent of mortals.

There's a Sisyphus in many of us, wise and prudent, wanting to break free from the curse of incessant meaningless work. However, only a few have been favored with clues on how to do it, and among those lucky few, even fewer have shown the courage to actually do it, for fear that the rock they want to leave behind might in the end crush them.

### *Meet Hans Keeling*

Hans Keeling belongs to this brave few who have said goodbye to their Sisyphus self and not been crushed by that mythic rock. Did you notice the newest link in my Blogroll? Yes, NEXUS Surf, that's what.

Hans Keeling is Founder and Managing Director of NEXUS Surf. And how did I get to know Hans? That's an interesting story by itself, but that's not what we are here for today. Today, our story is about Hans, and what lessons we can all learn from him in order to live an authentic life we love to dream about.

### *A Sportsman and Corporate Lawyer*

Knowing that Hans grew up in Marin County (Tiburon), California, I'm not surprised that he has a passion for skateboarding, windsurfing and snowboarding. His passion for sports continued even as a university student. Hans briefly played NCAA basketball for legendary Pete Carrill as a freshman undergrad at Princeton University. However, he transferred to Stanford University after a year at Princeton, put sports in the backburner to focus on his studies, and graduated there in 1998. Not content with a Stanford education, Hans went on to law school at the UCLA, and graduated there at the top 1% of his class.

He was subsequently taken in by Sullivan & Cromwell, an international law firm founded by Algernon Sydney Sullivan and William Nelson Cromwell in 1879 with a storied past. Sullivan & Cromwell, whose practice

revolved around domestic and international finance, had been involved in the formation of Edison General Electric Company, U.S. Steel Corporation, and the construction of the Panama Canal, to name a few. Today, it has full-service offices in the U.S., Asia and Europe.

Hans' corporate law practice took him to these places, where he advised clients in the execution of over \$17 billion worth of capital markets and M&A transactions. Not surprisingly, many of his friends today are in the finance world.

### *Breaking Free From His Sisyphus Self*

No doubt, Hans had a prestigious job. He had a promising career. But something was gnawing at him inside. His authentic self was asking him: Was there more to life than just the work he did? He was aching to find new challenges and work that he would find personally fulfilling.

As an investment banker, I'm familiar with the kind of work that a corporate lawyer like Hans did at Sullivan & Cromwell. Like I mentioned in my earlier series on "My Life As An Investment Banker", lawyers are an indispensable party to a transaction. Deadlines are almost always tight, and no matter how diligent everyone is on the finer details of a transaction, in my own experience, some wrinkles or surprises almost always crop up at the most inopportune time, near the closure of a deal, that throws everyone in a frenzy. Just like tiny droplets, over time these can fill up a bucket, then.....splash!

That's how it was to Hans, who saw the light, on that now-famous Sunday of his 2004 Brazilian vacation, while strapped to Tim Ferriss a paraglider thousands of feet above the white beaches of Copacabana, featured by (a fellow Princeton grad) in his book "The 4-Hour Work Week". The following day, upon his return to LA, he submitted his three-week notice and never looked back.

Next only to meeting his dream girl, discovering the sport of surfing would change his life forever. In his own words: "I had enough and decided to drop it all cold turkey and start a surf/adventure travel company in Brazil aimed at young professionals who were in the same position I had been in -- worked a ton, appreciated the finer things in life, and wanted amazing vacations doing something totally different from the norm on the rare occasions there was time to get away from it all."

### *Enter NEXUS Surf*

In the end, Hans' passion for adventure sports, foreign culture and travel guided his destiny. He founded NEXUS Surf in Florianopolis, Brazil, which is one of the newest hot spots on the jet set vacation scene. A very timely decision, I would say, as surfing, which used to be a sport primarily for beach bums, is now a \$10 billion industry. With highly stressed, cashed-up executives swapping the board room for the long board, so to speak, surfing is beginning to acquire a new luxury status.

According to Hans, surfing has become "a great theme for a vacation, as it's a sport that people really enjoy learning or trying out at least." Interestingly, most of NEXUS' clients are finance types or execs from 28-38 and far from the hard-core surfer stereotype one might imagine when thinking of a traditional surf camp.

Exactly what services does NEXUS offer? "We basically set up everything for people here, from VIP access to the best nightlife on the island (which blows anything in the US out of the water, by the way...) to professional surfing lessons and adventure sports options like river rafting, horseback riding, paragliding and much more, luxury accommodations in beachfront townhomes and villas (featuring WiFi and international phonelines with free calls to/from) and tons of little details, like local cell phones, rental cars, breakfast service and more, all provided as part of our packages", goes Hans' long answer.

## *Epilogue*

What does it take for us to live our dreams, break free from our Sisyphus selves and embrace authenticity? The first of a thousand steps, I guess, as Hans has shown, is to conquer our fears. Like all of us, he had his own doubts as he confided to me: “I went through all the fear and anxiety of leaving behind an expensive education and ‘prestigious’ job”. But now, he’s “happy as can be and haven’t looked back since.”

It’s up to us now whether we want to think of Sisyphus as the patron saint of workaholics, to borrow that phrase from Gregg Levoy, or the patron saint of procrastinators. Have a great weekend!

*(NEXUS Surf has been the focus of a study by Stanford Business School, and has been featured in Forbes Traveler and Riviera Magazine. Hans Keeling is also in the book “The 4-Hour Work Week” by Timothy Ferriss. This is gratis, not paid, post in case you’re wondering.)*