

I would come home from school—away from Brother Kraft’s influence—it was all too easy to follow along with Joey.

The problem was, Joey was an angry young man. Angrier, even, than me. Together, we got into some bad scrapes. We were like brothers, only one month apart in age, and we hit our teens in the 1970s, when the drug culture was on the rise. It wasn’t long before we and most of our neighborhood friends, our “gang,” joined the party. For me, this time was a low point, the period of the most fights, the most violence, and the most serious crimes. My parents were blissfully unaware of what was going on, I have no doubt, or else they would have taken me firmly in hand. I know they would have been disappointed in their “choice.” But I was lucky, Brother Kraft’s outreach helped pull me through. For Joey, this same era was the beginning of the end.

Things started to get really bad for Joey after we stole his stepfather’s car. We were 15 at the time, and looking for trouble. Joey’s mother and stepfather had gone away for the day, leaving his stepfather’s powerful five-speed convertible sitting out front. It was too much temptation. Although by this time, I was fully aware of my options, and I knew I was doing wrong, the temptation of that jazzy little sports car, white with its black “rag top,” was just too much. Joey and I searched his house until we found the keys. We took the car out, not expecting anything horrible to happen. We simply drove it to the movies and enjoyed the attention we got in the flashy vehicle. But on the way home, Joey and I went too far. The power of that sports car’s mighty engine was simply too much for a pair of troubled 15-year-olds. With my urging, Joey floored the gas, wanting to see how fast we could make that car move. But we hadn’t counted on having to stop—and so when a stop sign appeared, Joey pushed the manual shift hard, shifting down from fifth to second gear, promptly burning out the clutch. It was a juvenile mistake, one that wouldn’t have happened if we’d been driving carefully, slowly, or under supervision. As it was, it took us five hours to push that car home. His neighbors knew what happened and told his parents. Shortly after that, Joey was sent to live with his grandparents, and we lost touch.

My life took a turn then. In truth, that day was a turning point for us both. I became a Christian soon after and graduated from high school. Joey, I later learned, never finished school. Instead, his anger and his drive—the same traits that Brother Kraft identified in me—dragged him down. Following his increasing taste for drugs and trouble, he ended up moving from the Bahamas to the States, and into a life of crime. He died of spinal meningitis in a prison in Florida.

Now, I am not saying I would have followed his exact path. I am not saying that I would have come to such a sorry end. But at one point, Joey and I were “running buddies.” We got into trouble together. But then our paths diverged, and we went our separate ways. Why? Because I was chosen—first by my parents, and then by Brother Kraft. I was chosen by expert people-pickers.

Even after this crucial turning point, expert people-pickers have continued to have a great influence on my life. In my case, as I became a young adult, I was fortunate to meet two expert people-pickers working together. Ed Allen was a religious broadcaster and Stunce Williams a businessman. Ed, a pastor, was a true fatherly type. The epitome of his calling, he could speak and teach, and reach out to anyone. He certainly reached out to me. Stunce was a businessman, strong and smart. I’d been out of high school for a year when I met both Ed and Stunce, and their timing couldn’t have been better.

This was a dreary time for me. After the excitement of my high school turnaround, I had begun to feel that I was wasting my time, facing up to a life underutilized and, really, underlived. I was working, no longer a criminal, but I was bored. The only job I could find was as a “beach warden,” a kind of security guard, patrolling the beaches of Paradise Island in Nassau. Mind-numbing work, and not what I had dreamed of in Brother Kraft’s class at all.

But there was a common thread running through my life, and once again, I was plucked out of obscurity. Like Brother Kraft, these two men were expert people-pickers. They spotted in me the same talent that Brother Kraft had not only identified,

but had helped me hone: my ability to speak. And because I already intuitively understood the idea of the “expert people-picker,” I was able to grasp the possibilities these two men put in front of me. They chose me, and I grasped eagerly for what they offered. Soon, Ed had put me to work introducing his global religious radio broadcasts. Stunce recruited me to host his radio and television programs. Soon, I was hosting a weekly Sunday morning religious radio broadcast and, each quarter, a one-hour television program aimed at young viewers, called “Encounter.”

In addition, Stunce, as the local director for the Christian Prison Fellowship, also enlisted me to visit inmates at a maximum security prison. Again, I knew the value of his choosing me, and I accepted the challenge eagerly. One day as I was visiting cell to cell, I came upon two inmates I knew. They were former friends, young men with whom I’d gotten into various scrapes. And now, I was visiting them—bringing them light and news of the world outside. I was outside, a rising professional, on a mission of mercy. They were both incarcerated, awaiting sentencing for murder. As I sat with them, and as I read the Bible with them, I was keenly aware of how close we had once been—and how our lives had diverged, thanks to a few special people, those expert people-pickers.

I was fascinated then—by the way our lives had diverged and by the way I had been chosen, picked from the flock. I am fascinated still. Are you fascinated? I am fascinated by the concept of people-picking, by the very existence of expert people-pickers.

Expert people-pickers are life changers. They are angels, messengers from God who deliver people from lives of crime or simply from boring, dead-end jobs. They are our saviors and partners for success. They bring messages of hope and purpose. Do you have an expert people-picker in your life? Are you an expert people-picker? Do you have what it takes to be an expert people-picker?

Expert people-pickers have been around for as long as humankind has existed. In historic times, these people may

have been the magicians, wisemen or women, shamans, priests or royal advisers. Whatever the title or position, the expert people-pickers were held in esteem, endowed with authority and obeyed. Samuel, the prophet, a notable example, chose both the first king of Israel, Saul, and the second, David. In both of the men he picked to be king, he identified the appetite, aptitude, and varying degrees of ability necessary for a king. Samuel knew and saw exactly who they were and what they could be long before they were king. Samuel, like all expert people-pickers, possessed the will, courage and strategic prowess to bring about their kingship.

Steve Jobs, for a more contemporary example, is known around the world as the mastermind behind Apple computer, the man who made the iPod a force in popular culture. But in truth, it was another Steve, Steve Wozniak, who started the technical breakthroughs that made the company. What Jobs had was the expertise, the vision—the ability to expertly people-pick—and he chose Wozniak. Although the two had long been friends, it was Jobs who had the vision for a revolutionary company. He chose Wozniak, and convinced the techie genius to devote his energies to their partnership. By picking a technical genius, someone whose skills would complement his own, Jobs made possible a company that has changed the way we live.

In our times however, most expert people-pickers and expert people-picking are not so valued. Jobs is famous because his company has made him wealthy, and we tend to overlook his people-picking skills and credit him for Wozniak’s work. In general, unless they end up getting the credit for their protégé’s accomplishments, we tend to overlook the people pickers. We are unlikely to hear about the adoptive parents, the teacher, the minister or the business person who identified and influenced the Nobel or Pulitzer honoree or even the employee of the year. As thankful as we are when we have the good fortune to work for a great manager, we rarely think to look behind the scenes to celebrate the person responsible for blessing our career in such a rewarding way. Who chose the person who made our life better? Who was his or her expert people-picker? Who brought

that person into the company or the brotherhood, and thus started a chain of events that made our life better?

I thought about this the other day when I thought about Kyle. When I first met Kyle, I wasn't impressed. He looked too casual, like a superannuated college student who has never learned to shave properly or put on a suit.

I met Kyle by accident. I was walking through the Dallas-Forth Worth airport when I came upon a comfortable-looking place to sit and wait for my flight. As a professional speaker, this has become routine: Another flight, another city. The story of my life. As I sat down, a waiter approached me, and I realized that I'd sat in a café with waiter service. I'd have to pay for my seat by ordering something. I ordered a coffee, and—when that ran me more than four dollars—I realized I wanted a little more than just a hot beverage for my investment.

I waited till my server, Kyle, shambled over, looking sort of disorganized and too old for the job. And then I asked him, “Are *you* fascinated?”

He blossomed. “Absolutely!” Kyle said, his face lighting up at the thought. “Absolutely?” I questioned. “Yup. Do you realize the interesting people I get to meet doing this job?” Kyle said, clearly enjoying the opportunity to talk to yet another new person. “I mean last week I met Donovan McNabb.” Using gestures he outlined the size of the football player, his face animated and his voice engaged. “He is big. Big! He is like three persons across,” he said, stretching out his hands to illustrate. “And even though he's huge and famous and rich, he took the time to talk to me.” Kyle glowed with the memory. “He was truly a nice person.” But that wasn't all. “Then I met Miss America. She is beautiful on TV but in real life she is drop-dead gorgeous.” He sighed, his face going dreamy. “Yeah, this is a great job, and what you just said—that's the perfect way to describe it. I am fascinated.”

Who was his expert people-picker? Who knew that this seemingly dull job would be a focus of fascination for someone like Kyle? Who knew that the opportunities to meet the public—even if just to bring them an overpriced beverage—would make this no-longer-young man come alive? Someone

saw that potential in Kyle. Someone saw that appetite, that aptitude and that ability—and Kyle found himself.

** When we are fascinated, we blossom.*

People like Kyle serve their companies and customers well because they are fascinated by the work they do. And, thus, they do it well. I did not realize that I wanted a slice of pie with my coffee until I met Kyle, but after I had ordered one from him, I thought about Kyle—and about the expert people-picker who had chosen him for this job, in this organization. Who was the wonderful people-picker in his life for this organization? Organizations are people-picking all the time. Most organizations have entire departments specifically devoted to people-picking. Their problem is that few of these departments have bona fide people-picking experts assigned to the function. A recent study conducted at Harvard University concluded that 80 percent of employee turnover could have been avoided, because it is due to mistakes in hiring. What does this mean, in terms of institutional expense? Dr. John Sullivan, the executive director of the California Strategic Human Resources Partnership—a consortium of Fortune 500 executives, has done the calculations. The cost of a “bad hire,” he found, can run a company more than a million dollars. Picking the wrong CEO can mean a loss of as much as 10 million dollars.

** Bad hiring practices—also known as poor people-picking—hurts an organization.*

All business-minded professionals agree that staffing—people-picking—directly affects the productivity and performance of their organizations. Putting the right person in the right position is vital. Yet most organizations entrust that responsibility to persons who lack the expert people-picker gene and genius.

Who are these people? Expert people-pickers are a combination of who they are and what they do. I have been