



Special Report

B Y B R I A N B I R O

The Magical Power of Surprise!!

When you think of seizing more of the WOOs — Windows of Opportunity — in your life, perhaps the least known — and yet most powerful tools in your leadership kit is SURPRISE! Using surprise to create “special moments” has more transformational power than perhaps anything else you can do for others.

Through surprise you can breakthrough old routines and patterns, and help those you love see with fresh eyes. You can help them move from fear to freedom, from failure to faith. The best example I can give is a story of surprise that truly helped change my wife, Carole’s, view of herself.

Magical Moments - Surprise in the Family

She still takes my breath away. How could she possibly be turning fifty and look so young and beautiful? Though we’ve been married fifteen years, I can’t help but do a double-take every time she comes downstairs ready to step out for one of our little “dates” together. As I look at my radiant wife, I know I am the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

And yet there have been times through the years when Carole just couldn’t see the incredible person she truly is and the profound impact she has had on so many. At these times of shaken confidence she has doubted whether she really mattered at all.

So when the big milestone of 50 came into view, I knew I wanted to create a “moment” for Carole she would never forget — a moment that would express far more eloquently than words how deeply she is loved and appreciated.

Moments often become cornerstones in our lives that leave indelible imprints of fresh possibility, faith, connection, and transformation. It is in special moments that we take real steps toward understanding, connection, and confidence. When moments are amplified by the wonder of surprise, their impact can empower us to break through fears and doubts and to see our true possibilities.

As I thought about Carole’s big day I wanted her to experience a moment

that was all of these things and more. A moment she could carry always in her spirit that would lift her when disappointment, self-doubt, or stress challenged her peace of mind. I wanted to see her broadest smile, happiest tears, and most amazed expression of utter surprise.

It was this compelling vision that became the seed of Carole's magical moment planted nearly a year before it would come into full bloom.

In January, I flew to New York City for a speaking engagement and a visit with my publisher. As I floated above the Eastern Seaboard thumbing absent-mindedly through the Delta Sky magazine, I chanced upon an article about the Broadway stage version of Disney's *The Lion King*. The description and photos of the play were sensational, and it struck me that a fantastic gift for my wife would be to fly with our daughters Kelsey (14) and Jenna (8) to the Big Apple to celebrate Carole's 50th in style by attending the show. It would be such fun to surprise them all with the trip, and I envisioned their wide-eyed delight as we tasted the Big Apple together. But as I began to ponder the intricate covert planning needed to pull off this caper, I began to think more deeply about Carole and what was truly most important to her in her life.

It was then that the light bulb went off for me. If this was truly to be an event of a lifetime for Carole, it had to be built around what SHE most valued and treasured, rather than what I would like the most. I had no doubt she would thoroughly enjoy *The Lion King*, and even get a big kick out of the surprise trip to New York for her birthday weekend. But, something would be missing. It would be off the mark because I had failed to ask the most crucial questions needed to create a masterpiece moment of the magnitude I wanted her to receive. I hadn't asked, "What would CAROLE'S dream of the perfect celebration look like? What means the most to her?"

Wham! The instant these questions popped into my mind, it hit me like a lightning bolt. Carole's greatest passion is for her friends and family. New York was nice, Broadway exciting, but without sharing her 50th with the people she loves so dearly, it

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would be just another birthday and another trip. Instantly I knew that the heart and soul of Carole's celebration would be a totally different surprise than I had originally envisioned. We would still fly to New York City for her birthday weekend. We would still go see The Lion King. But when we arrived in the City, she would be met somewhere totally unexpected by the friends and family that have filled her life with love. All at once I knew the real reason I had accumulated my zillion frequent flyer miles as a professional speaker. It was all for Carole's moment! I would fly her friends in for one "gala gig" in Gotham! I was so inspired I wanted to jump out of that plane and get right to it!

Later that afternoon I waited for more than two hours outside The Lion King ticket office. When I finally made it to the window I knew there was more than Disney magic in the air.

There was no block of four seats available for The Lion King until March of 2001—five months after Carole's birthday—except for the Sunday matinee on November 12th, the very weekend I had planned! I snatched those seats up in a flash, high-fiving the people behind me as I left the box office in triumph.

I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that in the past I have been known to get so excited about surprises that I have occasionally spilled the beans in advance of the event. That's why I decided to devise a decoy plan to throw Carole completely off track. I figured the best way to keep such an enormous surprise from my clever wife was to let her think she already knew it!

So when I arrived home from New York City I "accidentally" left The Lion King tickets out where I knew she'd run across them. When she found them and pressed me for an explanation, I crumbled. With feigned exasperation I fessed up about my plan to fly her and the girls up to New York for the show. Steven Spielberg would have been proud of my acting performance as I carried on about what an ignoramus I was to have left those tickets out.

"At least," I moaned, "we can still surprise the girls."

Carole bought the act lock, stock, and barrel. After all, it was so like me to botch the surprise. Now she was my partner in the caper, completely desensitized to anything but keeping the plan from Kelsey and Jenna. This was really getting good!

During the five months leading up to November 11th, I set to work arranging for Carole's closest lifetime friends to meet us in New York City. All of my calls were made when I was on the road for my seminars. Since my daughters were also going to be surprised, I couldn't take any chances. Any communication to me from our friends had to be sent via e-mail because Carole and the girls never checked my messages.

As soon as I began making calls, I was completely awed by the response of Carole's friends to the plan. Without hesitation every one of them jumped in with unfettered enthusiasm. One special friend was extremely frightened of flying and would have to travel all the way from Seattle. But no matter—she would fight her fear for this event. She was coming! One of Carole's sisters had never been in a plane before—but for this celebration she'd have parachuted from the Space Shuttle.

Our wonderful friends, Robert and Kristie Werz were the most amazing of all. They were the only participants who lived in the New York City area—out on Long Island in the lovely little haven of Seacliff. Though I was able to use frequent flyer miles for about half of the guests, the cost of flying in so many people was still pretty steep, so I asked if some of the friends coming in could stay with the Werzs at their home. Their answer stunned me.

They said, "No... SOME of the guests will not do. ALL of your friends are welcome at our home. We don't have tons of space, but it will be fun!"

These remarkable people opened their hearts and their home to seventeen travelers, most of whom they had never met. The common bond was the love they all shared for Carole—and that was more than enough.

We were to fly to New York on Saturday, and as the whole plan developed it became clear that I needed to get everyone else there on Friday because of the varying travel schedules. After a seemingly endless stream of phone calls, arranging, re-arranging, and finalizing, all the travel itineraries were set. Robert and Kristie were primed for their roles as innkeepers and had contacted everyone by e-mail with directions and words of welcome. Virtually every square foot of floor space would be occupied by their new

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friends in sleeping bags and blankets. It was the grown-ups turn for a slumber party!

With travel plans set, I turned my attention to the surprise party itself. Carole adores fine East Indian cuisine, and thanks to some great help from Kristie and the technological magic of the internet, I was able to find the perfect restaurant, the Bukaru Grill. Not only was its menu superb, they offered a separate banquet room ideal for a party our size. I explained the whole plan to Raja, the restaurant manager, and he enthusiastically promised to take great care of us. The vision was becoming more of a reality by the minute!

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I had only visualized bringing Carole's friends together for a joyful surprise and magnificent meal. But when these imaginative and likewise inspired friends found themselves together at the Werz's home before the party, creative sparks flew fast and furious.

One of Carole's closest friends, Muff, had quite a history of orchestrating special parties for friends' birthdays and anniversaries. These fantasy events ranged from a Great Gatsby Gala, to a sixties-style senior prom ala the Broadway show Grease, to an Ethiopian tribal celebration. Each theme was chosen to fit a special interest or passion of the person whose day was being celebrated. The formula for these events always included costumes and full-out role playing. Carole had participated in many of these parties during the years she and Muff were housemates in Alaska. In fact, she had co-planned many of the events and treasured those memories filled with delight and imagination.

Carole's 50th gave Muff the perfect opportunity to bring her fantasy experience out of storage with a group of people charged-up with energy and enthusiasm. This was to be no standard birthday party!

Everything was arranged for our friends to meet Carole, Kelsey, Jenna, and me at the Bukaru Grill at 4:30 on Saturday afternoon. Carole knew only that we were arriving in Newark at 2:30 p.m., and would surprise the girls by taking them to the Lion King at 1:00 p.m. Sunday.

A few weeks before the trip she had been disappointed when I told her that the Werzs were going to be out of town at a tradeshow the weekend we were coming to New York. We would miss them by a day. I told her I'd find a hotel in Mid-town so we would be close to the theater and shopping. After she called the Werzs and they confirmed my story she didn't give it another thought.

On Friday, Carole and I packed bags for the girls while they were at school. When they came home that afternoon, I told them that I was going to take Carole shopping while they were at dance practice on Saturday morning. I added that we'd have to leave a little early Saturday to swing by the airport because one of my bags had been misrouted from my trip earlier that week and had finally come in. It was not at all unusual for my bags to arrive late, so Kelsey and Jenna were oblivious to any trickery. Carole was thoroughly enjoying the entire thing!

Late Friday night as Carole unwound in a hot bath, I snuck downstairs to check my e-mail one last time before the big day. Sure enough, there was a message from Kristie posted less than a half-hour before. The message practically jumped off the screen in delight. Kristie bubbled about how much fun everyone was having making plans together, and that they had come up with something terrific.

I was to tell Carole that I had been surfing the net for cool things to do in New York City and had found something she'd really enjoy. It was the hottest thing in the Apple—a new traveling dinner theater group called "The Way Off Broadway Players." They would be performing at a five-star Indian restaurant, the Bukaru Grill, on Saturday evening. We needed to arrive by 4:30 because the first show was to begin at 4:45. The second show was already sold out. Kristie ended the e-mail by telling me this was going to be better than anyone could have imagined. I didn't know what all they were up to, but with that kind of synergy and exuberance, I couldn't wait to find out!

That night was less a time of rest for me than of bubbling anticipation. In fact, this waiting was the toughest part of the entire escapade, because I had to hide my mounting excitement behind a very matter-of-fact exterior. I felt like I was going to burst!

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Carole and I had to turn our heads away to hide our grins when Kelsey came downstairs ready for dance practice Saturday morning wearing her fluffy slippers. They were going to be quite the sensation on the plane! We gobbled down a quick breakfast and jumped in the van (we had loaded the luggage the night before while the girls were asleep).

When we arrived at the airport, I ran into the terminal, allegedly to find out about my lost bag. After a couple of minutes I came back out and told the girls that it would take about ten or fifteen minutes to retrieve the suitcase, and that the airport traffic officer had instructed me to move the van into short term parking.

"Why don't you all go in and pick out something to eat for after dance at the snack bar?" I suggested.

Carole chimed right in with, "Come on girls, let's go. We can use the restroom while we wait too."

In their typical Saturday morning daze, off they strolled into the terminal, fluffy slippers and all.

I whipped the van into the parking lot and scampered back with our luggage to check in. The girls walked by after using the restroom, but didn't see me in line. I saw Carole trying her best to keep from cracking up. I hadn't expected this part of the charade to be so much fun!

Armed with boarding passes I rushed over and met the girls at the snack bar.

"The bag is up at Gate A2. We need to go up there," I reported matter-of-factly. Like good soldiers they dutifully followed me up to the gate just as the flight was beginning to board. It wasn't until I handed our boarding cards to the gate agent and started walking down the jet way that it finally occurred to Kelsey that something odd was going on.

"Are we getting on this plane?" she asked with a look of bewilderment on her face.

Carole and I popped! Through my laughter I teased my daughters, "I wondered how much longer we could keep this going before you finally figured it out. Nice slippers, Kelsey!"

At our seats the girls determinedly tried to get us to tell them where we were taking them. "Are we going to Charlotte to go shopping? Are we going to DisneyWorld? Please tell us?" But we

were having too much fun. Yes, this plane was taking us to Charlotte, but we wouldn't let on if that was our final destination.

The mystery remained unsolved for the girls when we arrived in Charlotte and made our way to the connecting gate. They saw that our next flight was to Newark, but didn't have a clue where that was! Carole's and my smiles just wouldn't quit.

When we were about an hour away from Newark, I casually leaned over and told Carole about the reservations I had made for the dinner show featuring "Way Off Broadway Players." I said I had found out about it on the internet and it looked really fun. She was enthusiastic about the idea and clearly didn't suspect any surprise.

Finally, we descended for our landing in Newark. Kelsey triumphantly declared, "I thought Newark was around New York City!" as the skyline of Manhattan loomed before us. "We're going to go shopping in New York!" This is just about as good as it gets for a fourteen year-old fashion magnet!

After dealing with our bags and hailing a taxi, we headed for the heart of the city. Everyone was excited as we rolled by the Statue of Liberty, the mammoth United Nations towers just in front of us. Carole and the girls still had no idea where we were staying until the cab pulled to a stop in front of the Palace Hotel. Every inch of the grand lobby oozed with elegance. I delighted in seeing Carole and the girls feeling like royalty as we made our way up to our room on the 26th floor. The view looked straight down on venerable St. Patrick's Cathedral, the most famous Catholic Church in America, with dozens of New York's classic skyscrapers sweeping all around us. This was definitely cool!

We had only enough time to clean up a bit before heading out to the Bukaru Grill. Once again I knew there was spiritual energy alive in this surprise, for I had made the reservation at The Palace six months before finding the Bukaru, and had no idea where the two were located in relation to one another. When I asked the concierge for directions I was delighted to find we were only two blocks away from the restaurant. No cab necessary, we left the hotel at 4:25 and strolled leisurely over to the Bukaru by 4:30. In fact, I had to stall a bit by stopping along the way to tie my shoes so we wouldn't arrive early!

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When we reached the restaurant I held the door open for Carole and the girls, not so much out of chivalry, but because I wanted to be positioned behind them so my pounding heart and crescendoing excitement wouldn't give anything away. As soon as the girls stepped inside they were met by a man and woman dressed elegantly and wearing brightly colored ceramic masks. They bowed formally, handed us all playbills describing the Way Off Broadway Players Show, and escorted us upstairs past the main dining area. Kelsey and Jenna looked a little apprehensive as they climbed the stairs because these escorts did not speak, but rather gestured and guided us through mime. Carole, on the other hand seemed quite swept up in the spirit of the action, ready to play and interact with the actors as the playbill instructed. I just tried to tag along behind with a reassuring smile for the girls and quiet anticipation for Carole. It was extra fun for me because though I knew the surprise would soon occur, I had no idea of how specifically it would be unveiled.

After what seemed like an eternity to me though it was only a few seconds, we entered the banquet room. It was a sight to behold! A beautifully decorated grand dining table stretched before us while all around danced and spun the most bizarre looking group of "performers" we'd ever seen assembled in one place at one time. Each wore a flamboyant costume with an even wilder mask. None of the actors spoke to us, though they hummed and whistled to tunes definitely of their own creation. They immediately pulled us into their midst and attempted to get us to join them in their contortions. Carole looked as though she thought this was a little odd, but fun, and went along with them. The girls, however, tightened up with unmistakable discomfort and fired one of those looks at me that said, "Dad, what have you gotten us into this time?" Carole read their body language and tried to encourage them with a smile. The whole effect was truly surreal.

After a few moments of this strange activity, the players gestured to us to sit down at the head of table. We did as instructed and then watched in mild surprise as the actors also sat down around the table. Carole spoke up playfully, "Look, isn't this

neat. The performers are going to eat with us!" Judging by the looks on Kelsey and Jenna's faces, this announcement was not a source of great reassurance. I'm certain at this point they would have hit the exit at a dead run if it had been up to them.

Once everyone was seated, Carole was handed a little note that read,

For the Lady...

The Way Off Broadway Players welcome you to the show...

Kindly ask one of the Players to remove their mask.

When you are ready to continue on, proceed to the next player of your choice...

I held my breath, desperately trying to be invisible, and watched as Carole turned to one of the actors wearing a costume reminiscent of a medieval queen and invited her to unveil herself. Ever so slowly, to build up the wonder, the actor lifted her mask. Carole let out a shriek of utter surprise and delight. "Oh my God!!! MARGIE!!!!" I glanced quickly at Kelsey and Jenna, whose trepidation had instantly been replaced with sheer amazement. Carole seemed to be laughing and crying all at once. Immediately she asked the man standing right beside Margie to remove his mask because she could now recognize from his tall and slender build that he had to be Margie's husband Tad. Carole rushed over to these dear friends from our years in Montana and embraced them in absolute joy. I could feel every face hidden behind all those crazy masks beaming and bursting with emotion. The best part was that when Carole saw Margie and Tad, she immediately assumed that those two had driven up from Wisconsin for her birthday, but that all the others in the room were actors. She still had no idea that the entire cast of The Way Off Broadway Players were not players at all!

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reminded to choose other players to reveal themselves. Looking across the table she pointed to the man and woman wearing the ceramic tragedy masks who had escorted us up to the banquet room. Carole's voice shot up another octave in astonishment as Muff and her husband, Zig, emerged from behind the ceramics.

I choked up with emotion when I saw Muff's reaction. She is one of the most wonderful people I have ever met. Caring, compassionate, fun, and spirited, Muff has been a true spiritual sister to Carole. Their connection runs deep, having lived together, found their husbands at just about the same time, and given birth to their daughters exactly two days apart. But through all the remarkable, magical times we had spent with Muff, I had never seen her out of control, swept away with feeling. Never, until this moment. Her mouth opened, her eyes welled up with tears, and she burst. Control was out the window. Carole bounded over to her and they held one another with ardent affection. After a moment, Zig, a mountain of a man, reached around both, encircling them in a bear hug of mammoth proportion. I stole another glance at my daughters who seemed utterly mesmerized by what was unfolding before them.

One by one, Carole had the players reveal themselves. But not until her sister, June pulled off her Jesse Ventura mask (I didn't even know who she was under that hilarious disguise!), did it finally hit Carole that ALL of the players were actually her friends. She had been so convinced that this really was an off-Broadway show, and so completely unsuspecting that anything like this could possibly happen, that as each mask came off, her surprise heightened. She was in pure heaven, surrounded by the friends and family she loved for an evening of unbridled celebration.

These special people did so much more than show up. They all wrote letters to Carole expressing their love and describing how she had touched their lives. They brought with them a mirror they had made, encircled by a golden wreath and each gave her a little memento to hang from it that symbolized the unique and precious relationships they shared with Carole. One by one they came to the head of the table, embraced Carole, read their "love" letters and explained the meaning of their gifts.

There I stood, holding the mirror so all could see as each dear friend came forward to celebrate their love and hang their gifts on the golden wreath. In my line of sight was the woman I love more than life itself, glowing as she understood, perhaps for the first time, the difference she has made for the people she loves by simply being herself. And just beyond Carole I saw our two daughters, looking at their mother being honored as few people ever are in their lifetime. I was shaking with emotion, completely awed by the moment. Along with the births of our children and our wedding day, this was the best day of my life.

When we returned to the hotel late that night Carole pulled me aside and gently took my hand. Her eyes sparkling she spoke with great conviction.

"My life will never be the same. If I ever begin to lose faith in myself or think that I don't really matter, I'll remember this night. I love you."

This is the power of surprise with those you love. It just doesn't get any better than this.

Is it time to breakthrough in your relationships, work, and life? CREATE surprise for the people that matter to you. Surprise can be as simple as an unexpected handwritten card, or as elaborate as Carole's birthday. The key is to be sure it is THEIR surprise, not yours. To tell the truth, my idea of a terrific birthday surprise for Carole would have been to zip her, the girls, and me off to the beach in Jamaica! But Carole loves and values friendship and family most in her life. By orchestrating a surprise that matched her highest values...the impact and joy was multiplied exponentially. To bask in the reflection of her light, and her love for friends and family, was the perfect gift for me.

I wish you joy in every precious moment!



Brian Biro

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