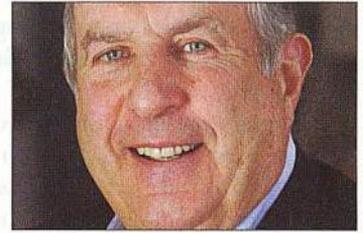


Michael Gates Gill discusses his big coffee break.



Losing his job was one of the best things that ever happened to Michael Gates Gill. After a twenty-five-year career at ad agency J. Walter Thompson, he suddenly found himself unemployed at age 54. He spent the next decade consulting, had an affair, had a child with his mistress, got a divorce, developed a brain tumor (for which he still needs an operation), lost significant hearing in one ear, and eventually saw his consulting work run dry. At a Starbucks, sipping a latte he could barely afford, he decided to apply for a job as a barista. In *How Starbucks Saved My Life: A Son of Privilege Learns to Live Like Everyone Else* (Gotham), he recounts his transition from the "ruling class to the serving class." Gill, who continues to work twenty to forty hours a week at his local Starbucks—with no desire to retire—spoke from his Bronxville, N.Y., home about how he now takes his coffee with extra shots of happiness and respect. —VADIM LIBERMAN

How does it feel to go from presenting ads to Lee Iacocca to being a Starbucks barista?

It feels good! After being fired from J. Walter Thompson, I felt like a failure, and failing in America is not very pleasant. I was depressed. I lost my self-respect and self-confidence. Then somehow, by doing this job, I proved to myself and to others that I could be of value by doing something. It sounds crazy, I know, but it really transformed how I felt.

Do you miss the intellectual stimulation at your old job?

No, because I still get that through my conversations with guests and partners—that's what we call customers and co-workers at Starbucks—and the conversations are just as good as they were at J. Walter Thompson. That, too, may sound bizarre, but I really enjoy interacting with them.

Yet before you became a barista, you never chose to interact with Starbucks employees.

True. I wanted to get in and out as fast as I could. As a customer, I was in a fancy suit, and I felt that it was beneath me to interact with the employees because I didn't see them as people—I saw them as servers. That

said, my experience now with the store's guests has been great. Besides, it's such a relief for me to be in an environment that's casual and not so uptight.

You say you get more respect serving coffee than you ever did as an adman.

Respect was the biggest thing I found at Starbucks. At J. Walter Thompson, I helped Fortune 500 companies write mission statements saying how important their employees were, but I never treated my own staff with respect. I didn't care about them at all—only about the work. I forced them to put work above their private lives. I remember telling people they'd have to work the weekend, and I'd expect them to jump up and agree to it, almost as if they were saluting.

Respect was never something even mentioned at work, other than at expensive training courses that were mostly useless. But at Starbucks, on day one my new manager brought me coffee and pastries. Someone else always did those things for me—I would *never* have done things like that for my workers. And rather than order you around at Starbucks, a manager will often ask, "Would you do me a favor?"

Isn't that just an order disguised as a request?

Of course, I still have to do whatever I'm being asked, but words matter. The way something is said matters. Little things like that make you feel like a valued human being. You know, a lot of companies say they put customers first, and I always used to say, "Anything for the client." But at Starbucks, they put their own people first. Even part-time workers get company stock and great health benefits, including dental and vision coverage. I never got that at J. Walter Thompson.

But your high position at the agency must have commanded respect.

I wouldn't say that. If I had a good idea one day, I was a hero, but when I didn't, I was a bum. Now, everyone in the store I work at is always very encouraging, which doesn't happen in advertising. Co-workers at J. Walter Thompson treated each other's accomplishments with annoyance and anger. If someone succeeded, someone else would think, Well, what about *me*? I, for one, rarely encouraged my own people at the agency. Looking back, I realize that the reason for my behavior was because I myself was anxious.

According to your book, offering praise was against corporate policy at JWT.

Yes, can you believe that? I recall how our personnel director had a meeting with managers to discuss how to fire people. We were told not to ever send praiseworthy memos because they might come back to haunt you. I think that's demoralizing. The corporate psychology wasn't about how to help people be better but, rather, Oh, this guy might sue us one day. Once you set that inhibition in motion, it creates a miasma in the workplace. At Starbucks, you're told to say positive things to partners. Any partner—not just someone who's high up—can give another partner an award. It feels empowering.

Still, you went from making six figures to earning ten dollars an hour.

Yes, my lifestyle changed tremendously. After getting fired, I became a consultant, but after ten years, my clients eventually drifted away, so I was desperate to find work. I went from having a big house to moving into an attic studio apartment by myself, with a new child to support. Even a latte at Starbucks was proving to be extravagant. And now, on my salary, I have to be very careful spending money. I stopped shopping at Tiffany and Brooks Brothers.

And that's supposed to convince me you're happier now?

Yes! This simpler life has made me happier.

So maybe money really doesn't buy happiness, but do you think most executives could be convinced that lack of it does?

I don't know. It would be shocking for them not to play golf at the fanciest golf club with a very select group of people who believe themselves to be masters of the universe. It would be shocking for them to serve coffee to anyone. All I know is that I feel grate-

ful that I had—and continue to have—this experience. I'm happy to have discovered, even late in life, that I don't need all the stuff that I always thought I needed. I learned I could be happy without all the trappings and the status of a more materialistic life or a lofty title or a big house or a fancy life filled with fancy people.

You know, this isn't so much about the money as it is finding respect. I think that CEOs and top executives should temporarily do what the lowest ranked people at their corporations do.

You want CEOs to go out on sales calls, work on a factory line, and clean toilets?

Yes. I don't know if he cleans toilets, but Starbucks' CEO sometimes works in stores serving coffee.

What if you were told at JWT to spend time doing low-level work?

I would have said that I didn't want to do it, because I wanted to only be around the top people. But I now realize that since the biggest challenge any top executive has is how to motivate people to really care about their jobs, he has to know what it's like to actually be in that job. It would be a revelatory experience.

Indeed, it was revelatory for you to be the only white worker at your Starbucks.

Yes, I wasn't used to working with people who weren't like me. At J. Walter Thompson, I only had confidence in people who were like myself—a white male. Essentially, if a person went to a private school and looked good and talked good—and by that I mean that he talked and looked as I did—then I'd be more apt to hire him and want to work with him. And if the person wasn't like me, then that person was stupid. OK, I'm exaggerating a little, but still, I'd be less comfortable introducing them to my clients, too, because they shared the same prejudices. I think

it was an unconscious prejudice meant to maintain the status quo—and I thought of myself as liberal and enlightened!

How ironic that it was a black woman who hired you at Starbucks.

Definitely. My world turned upside down.

Maybe you could've benefited from some diversity training at JWT.

Oh, I've been through that. Diversity was a big word at the agency and in almost every mission statement that I wrote for clients, but unless you experience it, you just don't believe in it—and by experience it, I mean that you need to be put in a situation where no one knows who you are and everyone is working under great pressure to achieve a certain goal. If everyone were equal and forgot about title and who's working under whom, then executives would realize that, Hey, people of different backgrounds may be better able to do some things. For instance, I was totally shocked that some of my partners at Starbucks were better at managing people than I ever was. I'd always considered managing my great skill.

One last question: Is it true that Tom Hanks will be playing you in a movie based on your book?

Yes. I'm in a total state of shock that it's going to be a movie, or even that my story became a book. But I'm not going to give up this job, because I enjoy it. I just wish that I knew at my former job what I know now about interacting with people. It's a shame that in corporate America there isn't more of a positive human dimension at work that's elevating for everybody. People need to be more respectful. My job at Starbucks is proof that if you can instill a culture of respect in a frantic retail setting, then you sure as heck can do the same in a corporate environment. ☺