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How I Got Lucky Massaging Google

by Bonnie Brown

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NOT EVERYONE GROWS UP TO BE A GOOGLE ENGINEER

Let's put something on the table right off the bat: I am not a computer genius. My first challenge at Google was accessing their online calendar to find out who I'd be massaging each day. The helpless feeling I had staring at the computer reminded me of when I'd studied Hebrew. I decided to learn Hebrew because I taught the Bible, and when you understand a people's language, you can understand their culture better. My first teacher came straight from Israel and she said, "I'm not going to teach you the vowels. You don't need them. Everything in Israel is written without them." Sight reading! The public school system's failed experiment was happening to me! For the next two years, my new teacher, a little red-headed Irish pistol, insisted I go back and learn the vowels. I should probably mention here that the vowels in Hebrew are just little dots placed strategically around the other letters. Therefore, newspapers, billboards, signs, and other writings around Israel just leave them out. But that didn't really work for me. I had to catch up with my classmates, who were way past me because they knew the vowels and could sound out words.

My computer knowledge was "missing the vowels." With my limited understanding, I knew I was in big oh-my-gosh-can't-we-just-use-a-sign-up-sheet-at-the-front-desk trouble. In fact, I suggested that very thing on my first day at Google, but the answer given me was, "Bonnie, these people aren't using our calendar system. We want them to, so the only way to book a massage will be through that calendar. We are using *you* to force *them* onto the calendar."

Oh great! I thought. *At least they know how.* Yes, I read the directions they gave me and I was quite proud of myself for figuring them out, but throw me one curve and I became paralyzed. Like the day I stopped two guys walking by my door and told them something was wrong with my computer. It didn't work! They walked in and five seconds later they just looked at me and wrote something on a sticky pad, tore it off, and stuck it on the tower. They started laughing and left the room. I looked at the note and it said *power*, with an arrow pointing to a button. It felt like one of those bad dreams where you are suddenly naked in public.

Pretty soon the situation smoothed out, after I had made every computer mistake possible,

and I realized I was not going to single-handedly destroy the search engine. I was there to massage, after all, and that was going well. My job description was to “manipulate muscles and soft tissue of eligible Google employees and assume a key role in promoting their relaxation and health.” At least this is a loose paraphrase of my contract with them. That was a pretty challenging order considering my clients worked long hours under incredible pressure, sat and stared at computer screens without moving much for longer periods of time than some people sleep at night, and typed feverishly day after day. They would come in to have an hour of relaxation and invariably fall asleep out of exhaustion. I found great satisfaction knowing how much benefit they were receiving under my hands, and I kept reminding myself of that every time the thought floated through my mind, *Bonnie, no one can stay awake around you!*

MASSAGE Clients often ask me, as I've located and am digging my elbow into the knot in their backs, if everyone else has these knots—or is it just them. (We're constantly measuring ourselves by others.) I like to reassure them that most everyone has knots except young children and possibly serious, hot yoga participants. My best guess for the reason that kids don't get those nasty knots in their shoulders and upper backs and necks is that they never stop moving. Just being within a hundred feet of a toddler can be exhausting. Their bodies contort like human pretzels. They jump off everything they can climb onto. They reach, pull, tug, scamper, shimmy, and tumble their way through each day, keeping the fascia loose and unstuck, and the muscles elongated or shortened but always active. They use the big muscles in big ways. We grow up and tend to ignore the big muscles and overuse the small ones. Movement, then, is the key to avoiding those knots in the first place. We attribute it only to stress, but I believe a lack of movement is a contributor.

Once I worked on a two-year-old who was living in such a stressful situation, she bit her nails and had shingles. But no muscle tension knots! Two-year-olds are in constant motion. We should learn to imitate some of this behavior while retaining our social limitations. For instance, while lovemaking, it is acceptable to climb all over each other's bodies, the furniture, the back seat, the kitchen counter, and so on. It remains inappropriate to behave that way at just any social setting. Perhaps, in the interest of free fascia, we should spend less time in formal social settings, and more time in body tumbling...

The upper back and neck are not the only keepers of tension. Another interesting stress catcher is the hands. I watch people's hands throughout a massage. They remind me of flowers. Some are light and limp and hang there like a fuchsia. Others are tightly balled up like ranunculus. I don't say anything, but gently unfurl them with one hand while my other hand is continuing the massage.

Usually it curls back up within minutes. I do it again. Sometimes this curling and unfurling lasts through the entire massage. Are we trying to hold problems for later?

Some fists are hard to pry open even in a massage. They can't completely open up and let go whatever it is they're clutching with such a death grip. The death grip usually tires the holder before the thing held is extinguished. It is a useless, destructive exercise to hold our breath, squeeze our muscles, tighten our jaws, and ball up our fists, but we all do it. In Pilates, my instructor, Lisa, says squeeze your butt, and suck in your belly about a hundred times an hour. I hear her in my sleep. I wonder if there is a way we could replace the tensing of our shoulders and the stiffening of our necks during stress with the squeezing and sucking recommended by Lisa instead. At least then we would have flat stomachs and tight butts instead of knotted shoulders and stiff necks. It's something to think about.

GOOGLE In developing their business plan, I can envision the founders, in all seriousness,
CULTURE adamant about including a lot of gummy worms and Cap'n Crunch. There are
A Cafeteria of food bins all over the place at Google. Of course M&Ms (red, yellow, blue, and
Gastronomical green) indicative of the logo are a mainstay. Licorice, Holland mints, Reese's
Proportions Pieces, dried fruit, nuts, protein bars, fig bars, trail mix, chips, and gum. It's a
snacker's heaven. Glass cases full of drinks—soda, water, fruit juice—smoothies,
espresso makers, soy milk, Toroni flavoring, bread making machines, fresh fruit,
Krispy Kreme donuts. It's a wonder everyone there is not a candidate for sumo
wrestling.

I ate constantly when I was at work, but I burned more calories doing
massage than I took in eating snacks. Between clients, I ran to the bathroom to
scrub up and then stopped by the bins for a quick snack. One might not think
massage is much exercise, but it is—the way I do it. I created techniques to work
out my whole body while doing massage. For instance, when I effleurage down
the back, I stand on tiptoe and balance my whole body with my abdominal
muscles. While working with the arms, I lift one leg behind me and do leg lifts. I
keep everything tight and stand with my feet in Pilates stance and demonstrate
exaggerated breathing, so my clients will remember to work with me with their
breath. As I use one hand on their bodies, I stretch back my other arm to get a
full and open release of all my shoulder muscles and then repeat it on the other
side. I turn my head from side to side, look up and down, and roll my shoulders
forward then back. I squat and stand on my toes and lunge. I get a constant upper
body workout using my arms and upper back strength to smooth out my client's
tangled fascia. My hands work hard, but so does the rest of my body. I could eat
snacks in between every client at Google and still be minus in the calorie equation
at the end of the day. (I always thought I should make a massage workout video
demonstrating how to work out while you work. My friends advised me the

market was too small.)

Google had an incredible staff of chefs led by Charlie, the former chef for the Grateful Dead, which is probably impressive to many, because he's always introduced that way. It was lost on me, however, because shortly after I first met him we were sitting on floor cushions in a Japanese restaurant and the conversation was on art, as I recall. Charlie said something about Jerry Garcia and I asked him who that was. He just stared at me and then asked a gentle question—something like, “What planet are you from?” That was the beginning of a great relationship. I've always adored him, even though he made me cry once. He had a strict twelve o'clock sharp lunchtime and you did *not* violate it. (I thought helping myself to a cup of soup at 11:45 was allowed, but I learned the hard way.)

When it got too crowded, they installed lunchroom cameras so you could sit at your desk and click on the lunchroom site to see how long the line was, to determine when to take a lunch break. I never had time to do that, or stand in line, so I always butted. No one ever complained. After all, who wants to be mean to the masseuse? Charlie took great care of us by providing meals using the best ingredients and with a lot of cultural diversity in mind. I ate a broader variety of vegetables and ethnic dishes at Google than during the rest of my life put together. Lunch and dinner were provided to Googlers every day with simple menus like, “Rosemary scented New Bedford sea scallop skewers with lemony apricot couscous, grilled, stuffed squid with teriyaki sauce, cauliflower asafetida ...” et cetera.

One engineer informed me that it was a bad idea to tell his wife what he had for lunch. When she set down a plate of spaghetti with meatballs in front of him for dinner, it didn't create a pleasant evening when he described his lunch at work beginning with phyllo-encrusted halibut ...

Most of it was delicious, even the turkey meatloaf (I hate meatloaf), but

every now and then a dish was a little too spicy for me. One day Charlie served mussels in some fire-hot sauce with a delayed reaction. I had to run into the break room to grab water. I was putting out the fire in my mouth when a coworker came by and asked me what was wrong. “Those mussels were *hot!!*” I breathed out. I’m sure he heard, “Those muscles were *hot!!*” because he just stood there, furrowed brow, staring at me, the masseuse. I was hopping around and waving at my face and breathing hard. (Needless to say, he did not rush to his desk to sign up for a massage.)

Fat Tuesday, we always had a spicy meal. It was a “big ass” (to use a Charlie-ism) festivity, with music and New Orleans decorations, including those colorful bead necklaces. The chef hid the miniature plastic baby baked inside the cake, which in Charlie’s telling meant that if you lucked out and got that piece you would give birth that year. I guess it’s a tradition like catching the bouquet at a wedding. (Fans of a Louisiana-style Mardi Gras will note that in New Orleans, getting the piece with the Christ child makes you king or queen for the day—and also requires that you assume responsibility for throwing the next Mardi Gras party, thus ensuring that the flow of alcohol continues unabated right up until the moment Ash Wednesday begins.) Naturally, I got the piece with the plastic baby and started hyperventilating at the thought of starting that experience all over again. I kept that baby on my nightstand all year as a constant visual reminder of the importance of abstinence.

When we moved into the new building (and this was becoming a regular event to the point that I bet we single-handedly kept the moving companies in Silicon Valley in business), the café grew to meet the needs of all the hordes of Googlers—and now there were food stations with food culture themes. Charlie’s Grill, Back to Albuquerque, Joaquin’s Landfill Grill, East Meets West, Al Forno Romano, and Vegheads. Often they provided music in the form of live bands outside for your dining pleasure. (If you are fond of young men screaming

unintelligible words at you and jumping all over the stage abusing their instruments as you try to eat, pleasure. I am clearly not from this generation. No regrets.)

Nevertheless, the food continued to be incredible: cauliflower asafetida; spanikopita; *pollo en mole verde*; baked mahogany salmon; orange ginger scented mahi-mahi; pizza quattro formaggio ... ho hum and the list goes on. We enjoyed this luxury every day, for free, and you could bring guests. (There were also peanut butter and jelly sandwiches if you just couldn't take it any more.)