



Wilderness University

May 1985: Apple's mountain of unsold inventory was growing along with its debts. Sales were declining and losses were looming. Apple's co-founder Steve Jobs was "*relieved of operating responsibilities*," and a few months later he resigned from the chairman's post to start a new computer company called NeXT.

What came next for Jobs was the unexpected twelve years in the corporate wilderness. Twelve years of painful, dispiriting, humiliating, stressful failure. His vision was to build a high-powered personal mainframe computer for students. He was advised to keep the price under \$2000, but ended up going to market with an underpowered computer carrying a \$6500 price tag. For students! The printer alone was another \$2000.

When students didn't bite, Jobs started selling to businesses and fared little better. He eventually got out of manufacturing and tried to make NeXT's software profitable. His main customer was Apple R&D, who eventually took over the company when Jobs returned to Apple in 1997.

And what a return it was! Apple's business model was rotten and fermenting. Fruitful it was not. But Jobs's return turned Apple around and the rest, as they say, is history (and billions of dollars).

What changed? All who know Jobs agree that the wilderness years transformed him:

"It's hard to see how anything like that would have transpired. The Steve Jobs who returned to Apple was a much more capable leader – precisely because he had been badly banged up. He had spent twelve tumultuous, painful years failing to find a way to make the new company profitable."

(Randall Stross, Professor of Business at San Jose University)

"I am convinced that he would not have been as successful after his return at Apple if he hadn't gone through his wilderness experience at NeXT."

(Tim Bajarin, president of *Creative Strategies*)

"He's the same Steve in his passion for excellence, but a new Steve in his understanding of how to empower a large company to realize his vision."

(Kevin Compton, previously senior executive at *Businessland*)

Among the lessons he learned were:

How to delegate

At NeXT he did everything, from designing the office furnishings to designing the finish on internal computer screws. He once kept Businessland executives waiting twenty minutes as he directed a landscaping crew where to place sprinkler heads.

How to listen to advice

Many had tried to advise and counsel Jobs, but he wouldn't listen. Seven vice-presidents left or were "let go" from NeXT from 1992-1993.

How to retain, not just attract, top talent

Apple Inc. has a remarkably stable executive team.

Stop modeling future technology on past technology

The iPod, the iPhone, and the iPad all abandoned conventional shapes.

The idea of a life-transforming wilderness experience is nothing new to the Christian, of course. Moses, David, and even our Lord Himself went to Wilderness University. Nobody wants to study there, but God sometimes sees fit to send us there.

I spent nine months in Wilderness University in the year 2000. And I learned more there than I ever learned in seminary. Our church had divided over moral and doctrinal matters. I was sure I had done what was right and had taken a stand for truth. Yet I ended up without a congregation and on the pastoral shelf for nine long months. I was so cast down, I even stopped preaching for a couple of months and withdrew from all church service.

Among the lessons I learned at WU:

- *No one is indispensable.* God may use us for a time and then leave us out of the picture for a while as He picks up other instruments to advance His kingdom.
- *God does not owe us anything.* At the end of the day we are unprofitable servants, having done only what was required of us.
- *You can do the right things in the wrong way.* Pride, self-confidence, and the desire for victory and vindication are obscene, whatever the rights and wrongs of a situation.
- *Self-pity is dangerous pity.* Feeling sorry for oneself is utterly pointless, totally selfish, and spiritually catastrophic.
- *God bruises and breaks to prepare for future usefulness and fruitfulness.* Without the wilderness I was nowhere near ready to pastor the flock God gave me in November 2000.

No, my return from WU was not as financially profitable for me as it was for Steve Jobs. However, I do believe it produced a huge spiritual return that continues to pay dividends to this day.

If God has you presently enrolled in one of WU's courses, I hope you will be encouraged by the invaluable lessons you can learn there. I'll probably be back for a refresher course some day as well!

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