

J. W. "BILL" MARRIOTT, JR.

AND KATHI ANN BROWN

A portrait of J.W. "Bill" Marriott, Jr., an elderly man with white hair, wearing a dark pinstriped suit, white shirt, and a red and blue striped tie. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. His arms are crossed.

WITHOUT  
RESERVATIONS

HOW A FAMILY ROOT BEER STAND GREW INTO  
A GLOBAL HOTEL COMPANY

## 6

### DECIDE TO DECIDE

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*“The unfortunate thing about this world is that good habits are so much easier to give up than bad ones.”*

— W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM, novelist

A few minutes before 10 a.m. on October 2, 1989, I hurried aboard an Amtrak train at Union Station in Washington, D.C., for a three-hour trip to New York City. The miserable rain outside mirrored my mood. I had been awakened by chest pains in the middle of the night and had not been able to go back to sleep. Instead, I'd gotten up, popped a couple of aspirins, pedaled my stationary bike for a few minutes and headed to the office before 6 a.m.

As I settled into my seat for the long ride, I was still feeling lousy.

Two minutes before we were due to pull out of the station, I grabbed my briefcase and hopped off the car, my chest on fire. Bracey, my driver, had stuck around, in case I didn't make the train. I jumped into the backseat, and he raced to Georgetown University Hospital.

Over the course of the next three months, I suffered two more heart attacks and underwent a coronary bypass operation. Counting time in the hospital and time at home recuperating, I was out of commission for the better part of six months.

When you're going through something as dramatic as a heart attack, you tend to think that a mistake of gigantic proportions has just been made. Someone else — not you — is supposed to be lying in this particular hospital bed, staring at the ceiling or watching an IV drip.

In my case, there was no mistake; I was exactly where my bad habits had put me. For years leading up to my heart attacks, I had been the walking stereotype of the workaholic executive: too little exercise and rest, too much work and too many heavy dinners too late at night. By the third heart attack, I concluded that if cardiovascular trouble didn't kill me, my wife probably would if I didn't make some changes in the way I was living.

Most of the adjustments I made were the standard ones we've all heard about. I made the typical dietary changes, cut back on travel a little bit, began exercising regularly on a treadmill and picked our lakeside home in New Hampshire as the relaxing place to visualize when I need to calm down during stressful moments.

The most difficult change by far was attitudinal. Not only did I inherit my father's workaholicism and heart problems, but I also picked up his habit of worrying. While Dad was alive, he frequently handwrote long notes to me in the dead of night because he literally couldn't rest until he'd gotten whatever was bothering him on paper. Night-shift associates at our properties would do a double take when they spotted the chairman walking briskly through a hotel kitchen at 3 a.m., wide awake and raring to go. Dad paid for his perpetual restlessness with an ongoing series of illnesses that sometimes took him away from the office for months at a time. My mother spent a great portion of her time nursing him back to health, only to watch him lose it again to work and worry.

I've never been quite as bad as my father. On the other hand, I probably didn't learn as much as I should have from his up-and-down state of health. Or at least, I didn't learn until I got waylaid

by serious illness myself. Like my dad, I have a hard time sitting still when there's work to be done. (And there's always work to be done.) Over the decades, I definitely have had a rough time not worrying about the millions of things, large and small, that can go wrong at Marriott.

The irony, of course, is that my heart attacks only brought more worries. One of the worst aspects of the illness was the timing. In the fall of 1989, some of the signs of bad economic times that I mentioned earlier were becoming hard to ignore. Being upset by the unpleasant thought that I was sidelined just as we were perhaps about to encounter some of our biggest challenges didn't speed my recovery either. It was also not easy to face the fact that three decades of 16-hour days on the job had put me in the very position I most wanted to avoid: not being at the helm if we hit rough seas.

Rough seas or not, my body told me in no uncertain terms that I had to slow down, take it easier and make some fundamental attitude changes — or risk getting socked again with another heart attack. One critical attitude adjustment I made in the aftermath of illness was to become better at delegation. I still chomp at the bit waiting for results from our team, but I no longer have my hands in everything that goes on in the company. My penchant for being hands-on remains as strong as ever; I simply don't exercise it.

One of the most valuable lessons that my heart attacks taught me was to improve the balance in my life between work and play. I *thought* I had things in balance while my four kids were growing up, years before my heart attacks. I made it a point to be available to help them with homework, talk through a problem and cheer them on at school events. If I wasn't traveling, I was home by 6:30 p.m. for family dinner, even if I had to go back to my desk later in the evening. On weekends, we visited museums and battlefields, attended sporting events in Annapolis, Md., and more.

My heart attacks in 1989 showed me that I didn't have things quite as balanced as I thought. So I made a commitment to draw a bigger, bolder boundary line between work and home. My wife, Donna, and I have a standing "date night" each week to give us time to decompress together. We usually head out to the movies — alternating between fast-paced thrillers (my choice) and "chick flicks" (Donna's choice). And, of course, we've taken lots of wonderful family trips together around the world.

A better balance also meant working harder at saying no to demands on my time. Naturally, family, our church and the company take precedence, in that order. Invitations to just about everything else are frequently and politely turned down. Saying no is hard for me, but I must.

I also added Pilates to my regimen. I try to work it in twice a week. My wife and daughter-in-law had told me I was "shrinking" and needed to do Pilates to get my posture and stature back. They keep telling me it has improved my posture, but I'm skeptical. I do think it's made me more flexible. For an old guy, I'm pretty flexible. It's stimulating and it's kind of fun and I enjoy it. I wouldn't want to do it seven days a week, however. I still prefer my time on the treadmill, five times a week; a habit I developed after my heart attacks.

Why have I told you this? If even one person learns from my life-threatening experience, changes his or her habits and is spared a heart attack or other stress-induced illness, I'll be pleased. Anyone who thinks that pushing the limits of human endurance is necessary to a company's success should think again. The pursuit of excellence in business shouldn't come at the price of good health and well-being nor at the cost of family and friends. My heart attacks merely made everyone worry, from family to friends to associates to Wall Street. Work hard by all means, but don't run up a huge tab of stress and worry. Sooner or later, you will pay for it, and so will everyone around you.

The other personal lesson that I want to share is one that came early in my adult life and fortunately didn't require the drama of a heart attack to sink in. I learned it while growing up in my church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon Church. Former Church President Spencer W. Kimball termed it "deciding to decide."

For me, it meant that as a young man, I concluded that I simply wouldn't do certain things, like be unfaithful, smoke, drink alcohol or use drugs. I chose to put my family first, then my church, then my business. And I decided that that would be the last time I'd have to make a decision about those particular temptations or personal priorities.

As 19th century philosopher Thomas Carlyle once said, "A man lives by believing something, not by debating and arguing about many things." Once you decide to decide, life becomes surprisingly simple. You don't have to think about certain issues or questions again. You simply get on with things and don't waste time and energy rehashing — debating and arguing — the problems and possibilities.

Speaking purely from my own experience, a personal decision to make family a top priority can be tremendously gratifying. My happiest moments are those spent with my wife, Donna, our children; our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Mormons believe that families stay together for eternity, so we tend to view the family circle as the central source of daily support in our lives, in good times and bad. We laugh together, pray together and give each other a boost when we're down. In a world that often seems bent on self-destruction, the security of a close-knit family provides riches beyond compare.

Deciding to decide and then sticking to those decisions has another benefit. No doubt I sound old-fashioned, but I think there's satisfaction to be had in standing firm against the onslaught of temptations that are part and parcel of contemporary life. Saying

no consistently can provide a sense of real power in a world that often seems out of control. Not everyone finds the idea of hard-and-fast choices appealing, but I've found it liberating. It can also keep you humble by providing an ongoing reminder that no one's judgment is so infallible that a few rules aren't necessary. I can say in all honesty that I've never met a happy playboy.

Both ideas I've touched on in this chapter have to do with recognizing personal limits. In the case of my heart attack, I learned that the old saying about robbing Peter to pay Paul has dangerous consequences. I stole from my health in order to satisfy my workaholic habits. For my trouble, I almost missed watching my grandchildren and great-grandchildren grow up.

Recognizing my limits was a pivotal factor in my decision in December 2011 to step down as Marriott's chief executive officer. I'm confident that Arne Sorenson will do a terrific job.

Remember what I said earlier about not letting an institution be held hostage by the presence or absence of a single individual? While lying on my back in a D.C., hospital in 1989, I had learned that Marriott the man might be felled by illness, but Marriott the company has a constitution of iron. Our executive team had stepped up to the challenge of my absence beautifully. I would have been devastated if our company had fallen into disarray or paralysis simply because I was out of commission for a few months. As much as anyone likes to think he or she is indispensable, it was gratifying and comforting to see Marriott's organizational maturity and teamwork come through in what could have been a crisis.

In the years since my heart attacks, I've had plenty of opportunity to ponder and choose the best way to guarantee that my presence or absence would never be a deciding factor in the health and well-being of the company. I've been in the saddle long enough (more than a half century) that I could easily have contracted Founder's Syndrome. We all know the type: the hard-driving workaholic who dies at his desk; the 92-year-old

patriarch who won't give up the reins to the younger generation; the founder who keeps so much vital information to herself that when she dies, the company falls apart within months.

I can understand how hard it is for someone who has built a company from scratch and has a tough time hanging up his spurs. My dad had a tough time handing off responsibilities to my brother, Dick, and me. Of course, the company was much smaller then. Today, a global company like Marriott with \$12 billion in reported revenue in 2011 is so big and complex that I would have been fooling myself if I thought that I could — or should — control every aspect of our operations. Besides literally working myself into the ground, I would have been setting up the company — my life's work — to fail. That's not something I could imagine doing. And so, years ago, I decided two things: I would make sure that we always had plenty of executive bench strength. And I would step down, with no hesitation and no regrets, when I knew in my heart that the time had arrived.

When that moment came in December 2011, the news of my retirement as CEO was greeted as we hoped it would be: as a natural outcome of a succession-planning process that has been under way for years. But the announcement also qualified as “big news” in that, for the first time, someone outside the Marriott family had been chosen for a role that is the most high profile in the company. For the first 85 years of Marriott's history, the CEO slot had been held by only two men: my father, then me. That's quite a run.

The decision to step down wasn't difficult for me. My 80th birthday was on the horizon, and I honestly don't believe that anyone who is 80 should be running anything. Most companies have a mandatory retirement at 65. A lot of CEOs are retiring in their 50s, some of them in their early 60s. I had been CEO for 40 years, and I decided the company needed a younger person to do the day-to-day stuff that a CEO needs to do.



From the moment the transition was announced, Arne and I both received hearty congratulations, as well as plenty of questions about how the decision came about. It would make for more dramatic telling if I could say that I had a fireworks-and-marching-band epiphany while sitting on my dock in New Hampshire at sunset or while watching Arne deliver a flawless speech to a group of financiers. But, in all honesty, the choice of Arne was a gradual process, an evolution.

I recognized Arne's talent immediately when I first met him back in the early 1990s. He was a private litigator then and worked with us on the split of the company into Marriott International and Host Marriott. I asked him to come on board to head up mergers and acquisitions. At some point I found myself listening to Arne's ideas with more than ordinary interest. He had a good grasp of the company's strengths and weaknesses, a feel for the future of the travel industry and a sense of direction that impressed me and others. Not to say that he was alone in having those characteristics, but Arne definitely stood out. He also seemed to "get" our values and culture — key for anyone who might lead the company someday.

I know many people expected one of my four children to be a natural successor. That's understandable. Debbie, my oldest child and only daughter, is a hard-charger in her role as head of Marriott's government affairs, but she has been in the role only a few years, after spending the last two decades being a full-time mother. Stephen, my oldest son, has his hands full dealing with a rare medical condition that has slowly robbed him of most of his sight and hearing. My youngest son, David, works for the company, but he's still young and would need plenty of time and experience to grow into such a big job.

My second-oldest son, John, seemed the most likely candidate in the eyes of many observers. And I won't say that he wasn't put through his paces to see if the role might suit

him. He made the rounds of company operations both here and abroad.

But John is a born entrepreneur. He thrives in an environment that isn't chockablock with four- and five-hour meetings, which is what a lot of the CEO role entails. I was sad when John opted to leave the company a few years ago, but he's happier doing his own thing. To spend the better part of your life doing something you don't love is not the ticket to happiness. It's more likely to lead to ulcers and disenchantment.

Among other pursuits, John manages the family's real estate investments as chairman of JWM Family Enterprises, which he founded. Plus he's vice chairman of Marriott's board of directors and he heads up a successful medical testing start-up. So even if we're not working side by side on a daily basis, we sit next to one another at our board meetings. I think that getting the question of succession out of the way has made us better friends. And he no longer has to put up with the scrutiny that comes with having Marriott as a last name.

Arne, too, was given different responsibilities around the company to see how he thrived in various roles. He was our chief financial officer at one point and also spent some time as the head of our European lodging operations. The board of directors and I have watched him handle the strain of 9/11, various overseas crises we've faced plus the economic downturn, and I came away feeling confident that he was a great choice for CEO. By the time we announced the decision in December 2011, he had been handling some of the CEO-level duties for a couple of years, so stepping into the role officially wasn't difficult for him. He has the blessing of our board and the Marriott family and has been well received by Wall Street, our shareholders and our partners. We really couldn't have asked for a smoother transition.