

### **An aspiring (clumsy) super-hero.**

Early 1960s, a beautiful Rome. My parents split up when I was six months old. She was a very beautiful woman, with her blue eyes and black hair, but she was unlucky in love. She had a great personality, she worked as a public manager and was always so busy, she wasn't home very often. Him, because of unfortunate circumstances, I never saw again. I had a humble but decorous childhood – we only had one salary, but **my grandmother, Anita, was the center of it all: a tough but loving woman of the south of sound principles.** Her poignant affection was always there for us. I filled the void left by my father's absence living in the superheroes' world: Batman, Superman, Flash, Zagor and, also, Spiderman. **They dazzled my life, saving the world without getting anything in return. When I was five, I felt like Batman and Robin had adopted me: every week we went and saved the world from the closest newsstand.** I did not want justice, **I needed action:** I wanted to save others. All of this inside a chubby shy boy. But when the passion is greater than one's means it is always dangerous.

During one of the missions, I almost kicked the bucket. It was 1966 and I was **Captain Mark.** In an attempt to free my (imaginary) team from an (imaginary) blockade, I jumped into a (real) glass window. But, being clumsy, I actually broke through the glass: between the noise and the surprise, **I found myself on the floor, covered in blood and broken glass.** This resulted into a one foot long cut on my right arm: a fraction of an inch to the side and I would have cut a vein open. *"The kid was lucky,"* said the doctor. Thank goodness! My grandma almost had a heart attack, but, in the end, she saved my life. My mission had been successful, though: I had opened a breach and saved my team. Nevertheless, that broken glass symbolized the start of a care-free and careless life, at my own risk. I did a lot of good things, but I also paid the price: that foot long gash on my arm never worked as a reminder.

When I was eleven, in middle school, my mom sent me to Judo, in an attempt to fix my clumsiness and avoid more bullying from my classmates. The teacher, a very Japanese man, did not care for my clumsiness and he kept throwing me around until I, astonishingly, became top of the class (he must have been a very good teacher). From that moment on, no one ever bothered me again, except for older students from other classes (who turned vicious after being held back a grade) who wanted to challenge me. I "leveled up" in the game of bullying, but it wasn't a game: I soon learnt that being cunning and diplomatic would get me further than fighting (it was too much work). **So, it didn't take long for me to go from American comics to Greek epics: the fast Achilles, Hector, Ulysses...** When I was twelve, I lost my self in the Iliad, the dazzling Troy, the heroes and their weapons... but I really did not understand all that fuss just for a woman. Now that I think about it, though, I did name my last child Elena.

### **Gymnasium – The first experiment for a different way of teaching.**

**With my passion for Greek epics, it isn't hard to understand why I chose the Gymnasium (a high school for humanistic and classical studies).** I lived in a world that was both imaginary and real. It was a life full of incredible people: my grandfather and my birth father had been amongst the leaders of the resistance – both capable of enduring Nazi torture; my mom always busy promoting common goods; my grandma was an elementary school teacher; my uncle was the head of Interpol; my aunt a manager at the Ministry of Public Education... and so on. Everyone was a hero in their own way. And in *my own way* it felt like I was just keeping the family legacy alive. That's why, **I started a sort of "social career" as a political activist: at seventeen I was Student President** for the leftist party. I studied at Liceo Classico Plauto, in Rome, during the so-called Years of Lead (or "years of terrorism"), at the height of the Red Brigades movement and of a vigorous ideological confrontation.

I was innovative and inclusive with my classmates: I remember that **when I spoke during the rally, there was absolute silence,** we were all in sync, on the same ship towards an ideal world. Even the fascists (who

never actually attacked) kept quiet. They gave me a **nickname** (oddly enough, they had no idea of my family history): **The Partisan**. It carried a sense of mockery, but also respect. When you put yourself on the line for humanity, without distinctions, unexpected things tend to happen.

It was 1978. Two of my quick-thinking activist friends and I persuaded “my side” (the left) and my Catholic classmates to occupy the high school for two weeks, with the go-ahead of the headmaster (we did not want to force him to choose). We called it “self-management” and I laid out the plan for **my first teaching experiment**: a series of classes on “*everything you wanted to study but...*”. It was amazing. A lot of the kids choose their university careers because of the self-managed classes. **I taught Psychology**, already a passion of mine, and I was a well-liked teacher! We all also behaved in an orderly fashion – no sex in bathrooms, nor violent confrontations.

**Lots of passion, but broke.** I was 18, in Piazza Santa Maria in Trastevere, when I found myself with only 1.000 lire (even back then it wasn’t that much) and I realized I had to start working. In order to make a living for myself without help from my family (in those times, it was commonplace...), I started studying theatre and entertainment: in the afternoon, I worked **as an entertainer for kids** in private schools. After that I kept working in the Valtur holiday resorts, where I met a group of professional actors of the Piccolo Teatro di Milano (they were working there as well), who taught me how to mime, amongst other things. When I finished high school, I started a **small theatre company** with the aim of “social aggregation”, as it was called back then. In 1980 and 1981 we staged the fairytales I wrote, and even the famous **“Roman Summer”** hired us. The fairytales were good, but **I wasn’t a good actor**. Nonetheless, the acting years (through the evergreen Stanislavski method) helped when facing **public speaking**, in classrooms and congresses.

Speaking of the Gymnasium, I always loved the classic setup of the Greek gymnasium: *mens sana in corpore sano*, that is why, during all of this, I also **played a lot of sports, at a pre-agonistic level**: skiing, ping pong, tennis, middle-distance run. After I turned 30, I regretted not having pursued one of the sports to an agonistic level. At 50 years old, I was happy about it: I am a fit but healthy adult and I can still play sports, work, travel... at full capacity. To this day, tennis and running are my great loves in the sport department.

### **Wanted by the Secret Service.**

1979. One day of my last year of high school, an Israeli man who looked like he was from the Secret Service came to my school. The headmaster called me and told me to talk to him privately. **The man asked me if I wanted to go to Israel**: the country was willing to invest in my studies and, after a while, I would be free to choose if I wanted to work for them or not. It was one of the many “decent” offers got in my life, a life too independent to ever let me work “beneath someone”. Also, I kind of liked Palestinians better. But then again, that aggressive style of “**talent scouting**” made a mark on me and inspired some of the recruiting strategies at today’s Social Change School. I respected the way this country was willing to build its own future looking everywhere for opportunities: it was amazing compared to Italy and its recommendation system.

Let’s be honest, I also had a girlfriend: Paola, the feminist girl of the school. We had a passionate relationship and it was hard for me to let go. And Rome, during that time, was truly alive. I finished school choosing philosophy as my final subject and a dissertation on Erich Fromm, Marcuse’s Frankfurt School, **Marx and Freud**, two of my newly acquired superheroes.

### **Environmental efforts.**

My mother and my adoptive father offered me to go study abroad, something like *Business Administration*, a career suitable for the upper-class. But I wasn’t interested, and I started studying Psychology in Rome, which

did not have mandatory classes. That left me – at 19 years old and in the middle of the ecologist movement – with enough time to found with another two crazy people **an Environmental Organization**, of which I was vice-president. In 1980, we organized the first Firefighting Camp in Italy, in collaboration with the International Civil Service and the Forest Rangers: a nice operational experience for **volunteers from all around Europe. I coordinated the Camps for three years, learning good managing skills**, getting better at English, but – most of all – I learnt to cook, and drink wine. It was a paramilitary experience: we did help with the fires and, if the direction of the smoke changed, we were in trouble. A well-organized teamwork and a chain of command were pivotal – there was no room for lone heroes. **Captain Mark finally had a real team**: his job was to protect his team from being surrounded... by fire. He had become careful and his clumsy body was just a childhood memory. This volunteering experience lasted three years – during the summer months: a lot of sweat and no holidays. Obviously, cynics started spreading the rumors that we were the ones setting the fires, only to put them out and gain money – but it was the shepherds, who wanted the grass to grow faster to feed the sheep.

### **An Officer and a Gentleman.**

After the experience as Student President (17-19 years old) and the coordination of the Firefighting Camps (20-22 years old), my third managing experience, mostly for economic reasons, was that of Lieutenant in the mandatory military service (24-25 years old) while I was still studying. I went from paramilitary to full-military. It was set in Cesano and one of the most difficult courses: there were guerrilla simulations, patrolling the forests for days, while looking for the paratroopers; **7.60 NATO tracer bullets sizzling above our heads**, shot by the famous **MG** machine guns, covering our advance; hand grenades awkwardly thrown as far as possible. And then I was sweating, holed up – in the sporting battalion – with the **middle-run**. Even through the machine gun and rifle fire, we did not miss the infamous final of 1984, Roma-Liverpool!

My Captain's name was Aiezza. He was a rocky former boxer of a few words, but with a great sense of responsibility: one time, after the latest suicide of one of the enlisted young men, while criticizing the way the Colonel was leading our battalion he told me: *"This guy wants this barrack to work like a Swiss clock... Cresce', when the fish stinks, it starts from the head"*. That quote **"When the fish stinks, it starts from the head!"** was a revelation. It taught me that **the leaders are inevitably always responsible**. I was so angry at the Colonel, I started training my troop under his window, mimicking the sound clocks make... he wasn't happy, but I was satisfied. I stopped only because my Captain ordered me to. As for the Colonel? A few years later he showed up to the flag-rising in his underwear and was committed. I guess, time brings everything to those who wait.

I learnt a lot from military training. What made me who I am today is the teaching to **respond to hardship with determination (at times even attitude) instead of putting myself down**, which was a step forward for an existentialist like myself; I also learnt responsibility and the loneliness leading brings, especially when you're forced to temporarily upset others. While I was an Officer, I kept studying Psychology and I was preparing myself for the exams. I liked studying better than I liked spending my time at the Officers Club. As I was close to completing my military service, in 1985, **my grandmother fell into a coma**. She woke up as I came in, shouting a choking *"My love...!"* only to die a few moments later. With her, I lost my childhood and one of the greatest loves of my life.

I finished my service, turning down the chance to continue a military career, which did not reflect my willingness to live. I spent almost all of the money I had earned, saving up for a great **"trip to the West"** with Claudio, my "American" best friend, who's still more than a brother to me. He moved to the USA just after high school to undertake a marvelous career as a software engineer in telecommunications. **We were two 25 years old on the road**, driving an old **Ford Mustang**, from the infamous **Tucson**, Arizona, directed to **Los Angeles**. We took a full week at **UCLA to study for my dissertation** and then we went for a visit (or a bet!) to Las Vegas, through the Death Valley, **Easy Rider's landscapes just to be clear**, but without the drugs – we were wired enough as it were. We passed Flagstaff's woody highland and there we saw **Las Vegas**, shiny like a desert mirage, like the Land of Toys...

**Reality is a description.**

Toys aside, even though I truly earned them after two years of **military discipline**, I was eagerly and seriously studying experimental social psychology, with a fervent passion for constructivism and **epistemology**, from Russel to Popper, but especially the later and more radical epistemology of Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend. Since I was 18, I had been mindfully interested in oriental spirituality and mysticism... after a few intense and mind-opening experiences which affected and still influence my life and my research. Carlos Castaneda, Buddhism and zen, epistemology, constructivist psychology, they all converged and pointed me to the realization that the world is just a construction. The “*observational data*” does not exist: it is the result of theoretical premises. Let’s make a simple example... rub a lighter and say “*the gas does not light*”: it looks like a simple “**fact of reality**” ... but on the contrary, **it is a complex mental construction**. You are *assuming* that that object you know as “*lighter*” carries inside a “*flammable*” substance called “*gas*”, that this “*gas*” subjected to certain conditions will “*light up*”... or, at least, you’re “*expecting it*”... of course, there is a lot of theory behind every simple “*fact*” and nothing is really given, but everything is widely constructed and described.

But I was lucky enough to figure out that, below this never-ending description of the world, there is a *vibrant silence*, a “different reality” – from which to draw energy, love; and I later found out I could “ask” it for help, in the silence of meditation. Some experiences (without any hallucinogenic, I swear!) allowed me to see how living beings and people are – according to an ordinary perception – vibrant “energy fields”, intertwined in a general energy field: not “separate identities” contained within set borders. If you think back to Van Gogh’s painting “Starry Night” and you observe the way the cypresses vibrantly stretch like flames, the vibrant energy present in that painting, you can better understand what I’m saying. It’s my favorite painting and Van Gogh is the artist I understand better. This dimension of spirituality that I lived in a dynamic way pushed me, after I turned 26, towards **martial arts**. I started with karate, up to a brown belt, and then I briefly tried “*IaiDo*”, literally “*The path to the meeting of the souls*”, the Japanese martial art based on the katana. Even though I haven’t practiced in a while, mostly because of my lack of “martial” aptitude, between Judo, Karate and *IaiDo* I still feel the samurai influence, in reaching a “cleanliness of the gesture”, in trying to avoid adding too much mind to everything, in the sense of dignity. Akira Kurosawa’s “The Last Samurai” is one of my dearest film, especially the character of Katsumoto (the leader of the samurai group, so kind and dignified, but tremendous in battle). Currently, I practice Sudarshan Kriya, a type of Indian yoga **mediation**, based upon respiration techniques and mantra.

### “Outsider” social psychologist.

While I was studying psychology, I received the second “decent offer” of my life. They offered me a job as an Occupational Psychologist for **Alfa Romeo** as soon I as graduated: my adoptive father (after nine years, a good person and a good relationship) was an executive at ICE (the Institute of Foreign Trade), the then President of Alfa Romeo, Ettore Massaccesi, was a friend of the family and every now and then we welcomed the Minister of Industry for dinner; my career could have been fast, profitable and, I think, easy. Nevertheless, in those years I thought that the “factory psychologist” worked for the “masters” and I did not like it, also I could never stomach recommendations. To this day, I am not sure if I did the right thing, I did not evaluate the offer thoroughly enough, like in other situations, where I favored impulsive behavior and idealistic reasoning. **The line between idealism and stupidity sometimes is very thin and I did step over it sometimes.** If I have to be honest, had I evaluated the offer better, ASVI (the Social Change School) would never have been born.

From the ages of 25 and 29 (between one thing and the other) I was actively cooperating with the **Department of Social Psychology** at Sapienza University and I was a part, for three years, of the cognitive psychology group – Constructivist Psychology – which was then the new frontier in Psychology. I did my experimental dissertation in Social Psychology about the explanation of love and the scholars inside the university found it very interesting; this way I gained some sort of trust inside the Department. Briefly: there were two opposite experimental currents trying to explain “love”, one said “similar loves its similar” (with its roots in social psychology) and another “people love who’s different from them and completes them” (more psychoanalytical). From an epistemological point of view, it is interesting to note the immensity of experimental proof provided by both schools of thought! This helped me confirm my position on radical epistemology – “science” is a description (Karl Popper was obsolete) and I formulated another hypothesis, related to the experimental thesis: the problem could be solved with a theoretical super-construction. The **Theory of Thematical Compatibility** of life’s planes – which can be based on likeness or

complementarity. Good heavens!, they told me. It's fun!, I thought. The thesis was then cited by my tutor and other authors (without notifying me) and developed at an international level, in a way it contributed to better explain... love! The environment of **academic research** looked average and based on strategies I did not find dignified and, that's why, after four years of very fun work – I refused – the third “decent offer” of my life. I was offered a contract to work for the university, a lot of work for 800.000 lire, which did not solve much for me.

I decided to use my time for an internship (amongst other things) in a **psychiatric hospital**, in Rome's Forlanini's SPDC Ward (Prevention Service for Diagnosis and Cure), for chronic patients. It's the most fun I've had on a job in my while whole life; sometimes with the patients we had “mad” fun! They all cared and looked for me, I was able to “get into” their worlds and bring them up – for a little while – for comparison. Let me tell you just one story: a girl with a chronic disorder said she was “dead” and that's why she could not feel anything. I brought her scalding hot tea without telling her, she drank and burnt herself. “*Ouch, it burns!*” she said. “*It looks like your tongue and your mouth are alive, then*”, I told her. From that moment on we started talking and she started to reconsider herself – I had opened a small “scalding” breach! Let's just say that between mystical experiences, samurai spirit, radical constructivism and hanging out with crazy people, I feel like I'm justified if I find the ordinary reality a little amusing. In the School, sometimes they tell me “*You really are crazy as a horse!*” Indeed, I've always been an “outsider” – like my super-heroes.

From 28 to 31 years old, after my specialization in Cognitive Behavioral Psychology with SITC, my professional registration and subsequent license to practice, I worked as a **Cognitive Behavioral Psychotherapist**, which I liked very much, and I was good at it. My greatest achievement was helping a couple above 60 years old find their way to each other after 10 years without making love – it was beautiful to see them leave in their old trailer and hear that it had been an “intense” trip, even at night.

### **Dreams and the hard reality – The Impossible Enterprise.**

When I was about 30 years old, my life took a strange (and later “dangerous”) turn. At the change of the decade (between the 70s and the 80s) **ecology and environmentalism had become huge**. The Big Issue at the time was not climate change, but the general pollution – renewable energy sources and recycling. Aware of this, we founded the Environmentalist Association. In 1982, I asked myself: **what if, instead of just “defending” the environment, we don't start a “green” business...? What if I turn from an activist to an entrepreneur?** I was driven by a need to put values and politics into “action”. I wanted to do something useful. I had just finished reading an ecology book and I was struck by the concept of **recycling organic waste** and manure in particular, which were the main culprits of polluting groundwater. At 22 years old, I finished my experience with theatre and, in order to put myself through school, I started producing **substrates and fertilizers for plants**, with my own small semi-agricultural business. In the beginning, it was very small and artisanal, we had few workers, a big tractor, the sacks were filled by hand, loaded on my back (10-15 quintals) and then delivered to the plant nurseries (my back would suffer from this, I still throw out my back now and then). **I was different from other sellers because my substrates were “ecological”**, which interested the kind of public who was aware of the problem. **Today I co-design masters with NGOs, at the time I co-designed substrates with nurserymen, this makes me laugh a lot!** It was a lot of work, but it was wonderful, at least two times a year I dream of going from the web back to the... earth and step back into that small business! The shared human experience was really strong as well: most of the times I worked and dined with the workers, two of them (Polish) came to my wedding and, when they became wealthy enough and moved to Canada, one of them – Enrich – the dearest of the people I've ever worked with, hugged me tight and kissed me on the mouth (an Eastern custom) – he then wrote from Canada that he was well and he thanked me. I learnt a lot from my workers, perseverance, resistance, work ethic, but also the risks (the loneliness of faraway families, alcohol abuse). I think they'd have a lot to teach nonprofit workers.

At 26, after finishing my military service and coming back from the USA, I managed the business and I delivered the goods with a truck, in which I changed my clothes only to go out and enter the Department of Social Psychology in order to do research (a real “chameleon of social change”)... and the business got bigger. When I was 29, I bought the business of my biggest competitor, the biggest in Latium, and I merged the two. I wanted to jump the gun and since I could not surpass it on the market, I bought it for the small capital of half a billion lire, in the 90s it was a lot of money, especially when you're 30. Banks, bills of

exchange and a small but unstable consortium of partners. Beautiful product lines, big packaging, a full job from the choice of raw material, to marketing, to managing the sales network. Circular economy is nowadays really popular, and it will be the future, but that very original green start-up would still be cutting-edge today!

**Dreams complicate life and, most importantly, without the right expertise and mindset they can turn into nightmares.**

So, from 30 to 35, I was stuck being **an entrepreneur almost full time**. My partner had thrown in the towel almost immediately and I was forced to oversee everything about the company: it was a small production and distribution business. I learnt to operate mechanical shovels, forklifts and trucks. I learnt how to sell and how to manage networks of representatives and the wallets of buyers. I became a collector and I learnt how to deal with banks and suppliers. **I learnt how to work in the winter, at 7 am, with hands so cold I could not fit the key into the gate**, and so on. If today I am able to look at a student and, more or less, predict what his career will be, at the time I could know everything that was into a sack of soil just by sticking my hand into it. Not bad for a psychologist, passionate about epistemology and mystical inclination... during those years I had to become friggling practical and solid and I gave up on almost everything else. I also had to ask for help to my other best friend, Fabian, a German guy who, at 26 was already marketing director for FIAT's East Germany's branch. He helped me manage the economic and financial side of the business, saving my ass more than once. **But, alas, when there's someone dreaming, there's someone else leeching off said dreams.** While I was dreaming of... "recycling the world", in three years 120 million were stolen – generating sets, trucks, vans – which insurance never paid back. One of the suppliers set the warehouse on fire, forcing us to buy everything from scratch. The plant supervisor found robbers inside "his" shed and ended up into a knife fight. On my birthday, a worker almost lost his fingers because of the shears of the bagging machine. On the next birthday, the Financial Police pulled over one of our trucks: one of the transport documents was not in order and we were fined. And so on. But I was as stubborn as a mule (with all my respect to the mule) and the more they threw sticks and stones at me, the more I got angry. I did not see the ominous signs I'd be able to see now: *just give up, this is not your future.*

**A dirty offer.**

But the "best" was yet to come... In 1991, we received a visit from a traffic officer, Rolex watch and golden chain in plain view above his unbuttoned shirt and hairy chest. He told me we were late for some permits and that in three days they would be closing down the establishment. I told him that bureaucracy was to blame for the delay, and I asked him to wait a couple of weeks. He didn't change his mind. He took my arm, brought me somewhere no one could hear and told me: *"Obviously, we can help each other and solve the problem."* I couldn't close, even if just for two weeks. I would lose all my clients, go bankrupt with debts in the millions still unpaid. I'd have to fire about ten workers and lose my job. But, most importantly, I'd lose the project I spent everything on. Like all the other sellers and dealers, I had no other choice but to pay. Nevertheless, silence filled my mind and I gave the truest and most sincere answer: *"I can't"*. It was irrational, self-harming... honest. I told everything to the workers and, since they were honest people, this pulled us together. The officers came and closed it down. One of the workers, R., a hardworking man, said: *"You know what we can do now? We work at night. We go out at 6 am for deliveries and we close it down after that."* We were all on board. A "clean" crime to avoid a dirty one (moreover, both of them disposed of by now).

**Had I accepted that dirty offer, I would have tainted my soul and I don't think I would have been able to open the School and talk about ethics, dreams, and integrity. That "I can't" turned out to be a passport to my future.** How could I preach and form social change by being a victim of such a system? My business would have stayed open, but something more important, inside of me, would have shut down.

That's why today, when I hear people talking about "engagement" I laugh a little. I remember those workers and comrades (all Italian and with other employment opportunities) who were willing to work with me at night and commit a small crime for two weeks: yes, my "engagement" standards are a little high.

I figured out that the "Italian system" that is supposed to support entrepreneurs is so inefficient and oppressive that it only creates skillful bandits. If you are not harsh, I'd dare to say even "evil", you either become so or go bankrupt. **I lacked more cynicism, but most importantly the characteristics that make a for profit businessman: the attachment to "things", the appreciation of property, the value of quantity, a little bit of cynicism... I didn't feel like myself anymore.** I had made three mistakes, of

the big ones. One of which was having rejected the offer to be bought out while I was still in time. I was the only partner who gave any guarantees to the bank and I ended up being the one to pay up. They bled me dry, like the small Captain Mark! One day, while I was wading through mud after a big storm that had caused hundreds of cubic meters of substrates to turn impossible to sift, I decided I should go another way in life: it was a healthy way of giving up. I wanted to start a new professional and life path, one that would resonate with my true self.

### **Ask and you shall be given.**

I was only 35 and I had spent the last 5 years embarked in an exhausting enterprise without caution or the necessary skillset. But I was satisfied, because after bagging thousands of cubic meters of soil, more than half of Rome was using our ecological substrates. I started selling the equipment and slowly the whole business. I didn't go bankrupt, but the "impossible enterprise" cost me a lot. In exchange, I got stronger and I learnt more about management and business initiatives than I would have in 10 foreign MBAs. I learnt the dangers of dreams, for which you lack skills, and strength of character, but, most importantly, I saved my soul.

In misfortune I found the good... I started practicing and developing a relationship of trust with the Lord – I call him, in confidence, **"The Boss"** because He's the only one I listen to. The problems I faced with the company were so much bigger than I was, and I had lost confidence I could solve everything leaning on my sole intelligence and strength of will, my ego. That is why during meditation I gave myself up to the Boss, asking Him to help me... because I couldn't bear it anymore.

During this time, I was free to have children and take care of them, to go back full-time to social issues, something I never truly gave up on: I was dusty, in part defeated, but I had a **different awareness**.

I had been cooperating (amongst other things) with the society **"L'Arte del Quotidiano"** (*The Art of Newspapers*), leaders in the field of **promoting Italian Artistic Craftsmanship**, of which my mother **Titti Carta** (blue-eyed, black-haired), who passed away prematurely, had been the undisputed expert and promoter for over 30 years. I was co-running the magazine "Artigianato tra Arte e Design" (*Craftsmanship between Art and Design*), which led me to become a publicist and a journalist. In 1996, collaborating with **Bruno Mondadori**, we published "LA SEDUZIONE DEGLI OGGETTI - Annuario dell'Artigianato Artistico Italiano" (*The Seduction of Objects – Italian Artistic Craftsmanship Yearbook*), a wonderful book on the Italian state of the art – or state of the craftsmanship! It was my idea, brought to life by my mother – her greatest legacy to our country.

Today, I would consider myself "a little distracted", but my life is like a tile made of a lot of mosaic pieces, it doesn't matter how many the pieces are: it's the final composition that counts. And this are my qualifications and licenses, in chronological order: Ground Troops Lieutenant, Psychotherapist Psychologist, Journalist, Businessman, Consultant, Editorial Manager. Finally, Father, even if I'm not registered anywhere, but that's exactly where one should need a license to practice! It's a real mess trying to put everything together in a coherent way. That would be my next challenge.

### **ASVI Foundation – Agency for the Development of NonProfit (then, Social Change School).**

**I had just completed a meaningful life experience in entrepreneurship and management; it was unique in Italy and in other countries as well. So, in 1996, I felt like I had to make my newfound knowledge accessible to young people and teach them how to avoid my own mistakes. I wanted them to follow their dreams without hurting themselves (too badly).**

I went back to when I was 18, to the self-management in high school and the alternative teaching. So, I accepted a full time and well-paid job as a coordinator and educator for FSE classes of "business development". It was a great experience in learning, teaching and managing a classroom, about high standard training programs. These were all characteristics I lacked, but there I found the same 'bewitching' talent I had practiced in high school rallies. My performance as a teacher was astounding – I was told by my amazed colleagues. The framework was starting to form itself: business experience, psychology, "political" approach, training, love of youth... To paraphrase Hadrian: *'I found, below the rocks, the secret of (my) sources'* and these were flowing in a strong river: what was missing was the ideological release.

How could I best impact social change, starting from something I liked doing and I was good at? **I didn't want to train "ordinary" entrepreneurs and managers or to promote "ordinary dreams": I wanted to strengthen and encourage dreams of social change**, those people who wanted to "put on the helmet" and change the world. Who better than me? That's why I judged that my impact as the manager of a single

organization would be minimal: I had to help train a lot of managers, in a bigger project. But how to reach them?

During my years as an entrepreneur, I kept acting as a consultant for social cooperatives and I thought I could be working in this field. With the eyes of an entrepreneur and a manager, I realized the great opportunities the nonprofit world had to offer, but also the lack – even at basic level – of management and entrepreneurship.

The “**pandas**” of nonprofit, slow and thoughtful but on the right track, could learn so much from the “**sharks**” of for profit, fast but unruly, and vice versa.

I finally found that “ideological release” I had been working on in 1996 and 1997: **ASVI – Agenzia Per lo Sviluppo del Non Profit (Agency for the Development of NonProfit), September 27, 1997**, baptized in Rome, Campidoglio, endorsed by the Prime Minister and the Department of Social Politics, the Third Sector of Rome was all there. To me, it was a gift from God. I was graced by God and I will never stop being thankful. Every experience, every brick from my life fit perfectly into place. But how could I engage with managers? Were they ever going to come to class for a serious course?

Let me provide a little context. **During the second half of the 90s, the Big Issue wasn't ecology anymore, it was the internet.** On August 3, 1997, **Steve Jobs** launched the ad “Think Different” challenging IBM's old “Think”. **Jeff Bezos and Amazon** were challenging Barnes & Noble declaring themselves as “the biggest library of the world”. Stanford University, September 15, 1997, **Sergey Brin and Larry Page** were launching the first version of “Google”. I wasn't that far-sighted; it was pretty obvious that long-distance training – with a delivery update – would become the future of training. The website was simple, the first lecture deliveries were done by e-mail, noisy analog connections, we acquired a fax program that would send them automatically and on a big database...

I went from ecology and (soiled) earth to the virtual bytes of web-based training, a nice leap, wouldn't you say? But both start-ups were products of their own time and were destined to grow... into something good!

### **ASVI – (Very) difficult beginnings – for a change!**

In the meantime, my partner, Caterina, and I welcomed Sophia – 1995, Giordano – 1996, while Elena Maria would be born in 1999. I had given up on everything to work on ASVI, counting on a large credit from the training institution I mentioned... but I got struck down badly: the agency (respected, a mix between public and private, and renowned), unexpectedly did not pay half of the 40 million they owed me and then went bankrupt. Caterina had been working in social cooperation for year, but in 1998 she found herself out of a job. **In 1998, during the first year of ASVI, we had two small children and no money, forced to ask loans from our friends – luckily, they were many. One day we woke up and realized we didn't even have enough money to buy milk. It was a hard time, ASVI was not taking off, and we were worried we had bet on the wrong horse,** after a few months we were 30 million (of lire) in debt, with little gain and even fewer students. After the hard times I experienced with the “Ecological” Company, this would be the second most difficult managing challenge of my life. We eventually came out on top, thanks to great **passion and determination**, but also to my **marketing** abilities. During this time, I turned down – it's kind of crazy – the fourth decent offer of my life. I had the chance to manage **Telefono Azzurro** in Milan, with a paycheck six times as big as what I was making with ASVI: I only recently told Caterina about this offer, had she known, she would've killed me – and she would have been right! But I truly believed in this project and I wanted to carry it forward. 1998 was ending and I finally had a stroke of luck: SPERLING & KUPFER, leader in outreach publications on management, published “*Il Manager del Non Profit e le nuove sfide dell'impreditoria sociale*” (“*NonProfit Manager and the new challenges in social entrepreneurship*”). It was the first book on this professional role, and it saved me (and not just me) from (professional) suicide.

### **ASVI's development.**

The rest is ASVI – Social Change School's history. We took off driven by an ideal that was implicitly “political” – I remember with amusement that **in 2001-2002 our website was monitored daily by the CIA, whom we had to reassure that we were not terrorists.** For many years, and I will never understand why, my uploads on YouTube seemed to be connected to Bin Laden, instead of... Gandhi or Mandela. ASVI wasn't born as a “Training Institution”, but something of “Social trans-formation” – **training as a way to bring social change. Training would be my “superpower!”.** When I read Nelson Mandela's



autobiography, I recognized myself in his words: “Education and training are the most powerful weapons to change the world”. Mandela was my new superhero, that ideal father I never had. My greatest regret is not having had the chance to meet him, but in a way – like many others – he has always been with me in trying times.

I always saw managers of nonprofit as the key to social change. In 1998, to train them I had the idea to create “**online masters**”. They were rudimentary, by e-mail (sort of like Radio-Elettra), and there were a few seminars, but they were appreciated, since I personally followed the lectures and there was a dialogue (on the phone). The first Italian MASTER was in FUND RAISING, the first in EUROPLANNING, the second in chronological order in NPOs MANAGEMENT. It was innovative in its content (the first masters of the field) and in its delivery methods (distance training). The numbers, although, were still small. After the attack on the Twin Towers of 2001 we had our breakthrough: this tragedy inspired in people a desire to commit themselves professionally, even in those who came from for profit and were looking to make something of their lives. And we were ready to welcome them.

In 2003 I wrote, gathering qualified authors for the project, “*Manager e Management NonProfit, la sfida etica*” (“*NonProfit Manager and Management, the ethical challenge*”). It was a 750-page, Bible-like book, of which we sold 3.000 copies – a lot of which in pre-order. I had no idea where to put the six book pallets, so we settled for our house’s living room. The children were very happy to climb and play on them – until we sold them all. In this contribution, I collected a lot of important “players”, the world of social cooperation, the volunteering and the fundraising ones. I created a contamination and a creative exchange that would lead to positive results. In particular, I persuaded the volunteers from FIVOL (Italian Volunteering Federation) that being a manager didn’t necessarily mean “losing one’s soul”. Approaching nonprofit was like a good doctor who is also a professional – this doesn’t belittle but better his genuine call. Massimo Coen Cagli and I launched in the Third Sector the “governance paradigm”; namely, nonprofit can’t change the world alone, it’s the collaboration between the players and the efforts around a problem to co-manage: it’s the seed of what would become “Social Innovation” and also of the... Avengers! It was an amazing cultural challenge. Word spread that I had become an entrepreneur and a manager after a solid field decision, and I earned the trust of my colleagues. **Often, we persuade others with our history and not our theories.** McLuhan used to say: the medium is the message.

**A second cultural battle emerged with the media;** they were talking about volunteer work instead of professionals. A kind volunteer helping an old lady cross the street is better news than a professional who launches a campaign to change the practicability and the “system”. Because of my speeches and publications (“*Guida alle Professioni ed al lavoro del nonprofit*” – “*Guide to Professions and working in NonProfit*”, with an introduction and a very good review by Corriere della Sera), I became the representative for the Italian medias on the subject and I give lots and lots of interviews, everyday starting with: “*NonProfit isn’t just voluntary work but...*” In this operation I managed to involve Universities (Alma Laurea), the Third Sector’s Forum, Volunteers and Social Cooperation and, most importantly, the Ministry of Labor, in order to acknowledge officially the professional managing roles of the field. Imagine the patience, guys...!

### **A life project.**

During my first years at ASVI I received more coherent and appealing “decent offers” in comparison to move to Israel or work for Alfa Romeo, continue with a military career, or be a researcher in social psychology. After the chance at Telefono Azzuro, I received the offer to be Marketing and Fund-Raising director for **GREENPEACE** in 2003, adjunct professor on the subject of nonprofit management for the University of Bologna in 2005, amongst others. Then, a relationship with the **Symbola Foundation** and **Milan’s Polytechnical University**, and other offers in my ordinary resume. But “Ubi Major, Minor Cessat” and in the last 20 years ASVI has been my “Ubi Major”. I only indulged in a few lectures on Rai-Nettuno, for the University of Bologna and I did a little bit consulting – of the fun kind – like training the Top Management for Oxfam Italia, LAV and others. The collaboration with Symbola Foundation was a beautiful adventure with Realacci, De Masi e Profumo – I was hired as a “**social intellectual**”: the definition amused me, but it was, in fact, spot-on. Of course, having an important role in Greenpeace did tempt me. In return, I allowed myself to write a lot, in the form of books and on infamous blogs – recently, the Huffington Post, finally using my “journalist” skills.

If I chose to carry on and stay with ASVI-Social Change School, I didn’t do it for money or the fame, but for a **mission** I believe in and the pleasure of seeing my students shine.

Nonprofit is very generous, but also a little shut, mediocre and arrogant. Seldom, it is managed at the best of its possibilities and I wanted to gather the best efforts in a more international development project. That's why...

### **London melting pot.**

Between 2007 and 2015, I started, for this very purpose, my “Londoner period”: **commuting between Rome and London**, I shared an apartment with a former student when London, in full recession, was affordable for someone with a lower wage such as mine. I was living in a humble apartment in Oval, I used to leave my laundry to the dry-cleaning below my house when I left for Rome, and upon my return I picked it up. I discovered the city late, in my 40s, and thanks to a Palestinian former student, Samr, who became a close friend. For almost 10 years, I was surrounded by the cultural and professional melting pot of London. Teachers and colleagues were by then good friends, I assimilated their way of thinking and going back to Rome was boring. The first thing I noticed was an energetic crash of the people around me. Picture going jogging or throwing a party with music and lights and poems in one of Italy's graveyards... in London everything seems possible! You feel at the center of the world, you dare do the impossible (also without cocaine). To this day, when I'm trying to undertake a challenge that seems bigger than I am, I go at night on the Millennium Bridge, feeling the wind and opening myself up to the skyline, breathing in that energy and flying among the skyscrapers... When I could, I worked in Regent Park and the weekends at Kew Garden were an infinite pleasure.

The English style of the School, the quality of the Master in Fundraising, everything about Social Innovation – which I later introduced in Italy, along with some of the London colleagues – it was all born during this time. The first phase internationalizing the Masters was born there. In London, in 2006, we founded the Euclid Network, the network of European NonProfit executives. We also designed leader2leader, an Italian network I coordinated from 2008 to 2019. The book “*Social Innovation and Social Business*”, which was the first of its kind in Italy, was born and finished in London, Caledonian Road.

When I go to Chelsea, where I am often a guest of a dear journalist friend or I just use it as a base of operations, even after all these years in Madrid, I feel at home. After work, I go jogging in the wonderful graveyard at Brompton, a neoclassical delight, full of squirrels, mothers and children during the day, and creepy crows in the dark of night.

The day the results of the Brexit referendum (which I had guessed) came in I was in Downing Street at 6 am. I was with a dazzled RAI 3 troupe, that had been startled awake at night by the unexpected result, watching David Cameron cry because of the disaster he had just caused.

### **Bangkok and one tie too many.**

In 2012, we were in Bangkok signing a deal between the School and the AIT – Asian Institute of Technology, the “material” University of Thailand. The meeting was organized by Sandro Calvani, President of the Scientific Committee of the School, one of the two highest ranking Italians at the United Nations, as a UN representative for the South-East of Asia, with 138 missions all over the world (*“more than Wojtyla”* as he loves reminding people). I did not understand the deal would have such an official framework, with a Faculty table, the Dean, Italy-Thailand flags and a gift exchange. The night before, Sandro told me: *“Marco, obviously you did bring a tie...”* *“I don't have it and I never wear it, Sandro”* *“I'll give it to you”*. It was one of those awkward moments, in which by staying true to yourself you risk putting one of your colleagues in trouble – the last thing I would have wanted. But I had an idea: I would wear a very elegant suit with a blazer and shirt both with Korean-style (or so I thought) collars. It would have been impossible to put a tie on such a “foreign” suit. I go to the ceremony dressed like this and, while Sandro is looking at me with a puzzled look, I introduce myself to the Dean, a very good person I would never think of insulting. He looks at me, glances at my collars, grins and thanks me. You want to know what happened? The collar I thought was Korean-style, was in truth Iranian and the Dean... well, he was from Iran! He thought I was doing it in his honor, and he was pleased. A little bit of luck always helps and like in the Epics... fortune favors the brave.

### **Madrid, Social Change School, joys and sorrows.**

In 2015, we took the internationalization of Social Change School a step further. London was very expensive, while in Madrid – which I visited frequently – we had good connections and the chance to expand

into to the Latin-American field. Also, between Rome, London and Madrid the latter was, hands down, the best choice to live and work in. That's why we chose Spain. I moved to Madrid in August 2015, with the prospect of transferring the office and the staff within the first months of 2017. Rocio Requena is from Madrid and this helped us take root a lot faster. While the Office was still in Rome, we worked for a year as a start up in a small apartment in the center of Madrid of only 50 square meters, where I still live, very close to Parque del Retiro.

Fortune doesn't always favor the brave... towards the end of 2016, things took a turn for the worse on a personal level. In January 2017, Rocio was diagnosed with a grave illness as we were about to open the Madrid office. Something we did not predict and that affected our lives profoundly. **For months, it looked like a tempest of misfortune was raining down on us, everything that could go wrong did, both for the School and on a personal level, including new staff entries in sensitive sectors.** We came into work from the hospital almost every day. With incredible strength, dignity and dedication that even the most normal of people can find during these trying times, **it's incredible the way the world is habited by small and silent, but dignified heroes. It's also incredible how some people can instead stoop so low,** especially people who – coming from nonprofit and with a great resume – had seemed a perfect fit for the School. Oh well, like Aeschylus said: *“No mortal will ever spend their life unscathed from sorrow, life always pays its price to everyone”*, but the price paid, both now and then, was too much, too much!

And when hardship was so difficult even someone so... stoic could not handle it, the only thing left for me (in June 2017) was to go back to the Boss, with serious intent, and say *“I can't do this alone anymore”*. “Ask, and you shall be given”, and “the Lord helps those who help themselves”.

## 2018-... A Worldwide School

Today, the School has a lot of students and staff members from all over the world. There's a lot of Africans, people from the Middle-East and Asians. My “ancient” identity “as a Roman” was frequently mingled, even if us “Romans” are international... in our DNA!

**My Italian roots are still very strong,** but my cultural views on the key topics of the School had to evolve. The way we think and practice “**management**” in Europe is very different from how it's viewed in other continents – managing of time is a good example of this – and the same with leadership: **the African, European, Asian and American ideas of “being a leader” are all very different.** Writing teaching units and books for “all of the students” is a wonderful but risky challenge. We must forget eurocentrism and truly work with different people coming from different backgrounds. Otherwise, the risk is to write something generic, devoid of life experiences.

## Permanent centers of gravity.

When I say this, I'm thinking especially about those who work in the Third Sector and tend to be completely “sucked into” it, that a full life needs to be multidimensional. It needs balance among its different **centers of gravity... children, work, friends, travels, sport and health, books and, obviously, love.** I didn't talk much about my three **children** (because of lack of space and in order not to bore the reader), but they're all hardworking, someone's more of a hippie and someone else is more the “management” type. I was a real pain in the ass and in between my “one thing or the other” they were my absolute priority, together with my work. My lack of a father growing up made me feel a big **“obligation to be there”.** **I tried to convey, through examples and educational push, that state of “being in the world” in a dignified and industrious way, that I learnt from my grandmother and my best workers,** but also the willingness to go further with one's career and to produce something of value: the foresight to leave a situation better than how they found it. I always tried to schedule my job in a way that would allow me to be extremely present for my family. I made a lot of mistakes, but I was always present and committed. And that's why they think of me as a pain in the ass (but with love)! I was lucky enough to have an intelligent partner (mother of the three of them) and we were always united. **Being a father truly makes you feel like a father to everyone,** and that's what I feel for the students and, in general, the children in the world.

Friendship, I think I let it show, is another big chapter of my life. I believe that friendship and a good mood are more important than love for an individual. The only true and fundamental dimension is a “universal” kind of Love, the only form of enlightenment – which costs nothing! – that can make the existence vibrant and meaningful. It is a light that should touch everything – dreams, fights, power, career, enemies, falls, successes. And, after all, **we all have our “broken glass”: we can use it as an excuse to see ourselves as unlucky in a hostile world, or we can contemplate and shine, in between the shards, our inner light.**

### **Many tiny heroes, many shiny reflections.**

Today, after “spilled blood”, mud up to my knees, dream-killing bandits, visible and invisible scars, I’m even more confident in the huge power of a dream for social change. **“Heart on your sleeve, eyes wide open”** – as I say to my younger students and based on the very realistic proportions illustrated by Thomas Edison: 1% Inspiration, 99% Perspiration.

American superheroes from the 60s had limitations: they were the only protagonists, lone wolves, who didn’t help others become heroes. **“Big man” Leadership v. shared Leadership.** I chose the latter. I’m not backed by cartoon superheroes anymore, but by a pantheon of “attendees” and colleagues who are achieving important things all over the world, **tiny heroes of flesh and blood, thousands of reflections to brighten the world with a better light.**

When I was a child, I wanted my upper-body to be as big as Batman’s, but (luckily) it didn’t become so. I have a lot of work and growing to do and I’ll never hit as hard as Captain Aiezza and the former boxer, Mandela. But, who knows, if that clumsy kid from the 60s met me today, **maybe I could appear to him as some sort of a superhero, with the Power... to Train!** A power not everybody has. Isn’t it wonderful?

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**EPITAPH** – it’s an established practice here at Social Change School, we ask it of the attendees and our staff. This is mine.

### **Marco Crescenzi, London, Regent Park, Queens Mary Garden, May 2050.**

Marco donated to this rose garden his ashes, shed among the Vanity Fragrance, the most aromatic of the roses of Queens Mary Garden, contributing to the blossoming to come.

He lived an often stormy life, disseminated of successes and failures, dominated by weeds, but it grew like a wild shrub. He was able to slowly clean his garden, trimming dead twigs and extracting the best he could offer.

He planted a myriad of roses. Some grew strong, others a little less, some grew with a wonderful smell, others were just fresh. All of them enriched the world.

Even through his all-encompassing commitment, he did not fail the most important objective, to profoundly savor the perfume of life.