

# Quality Control and Brain Damage

by **Howard Lee**

I began working in quality control because I am an alcoholic.

In 1981, I went to the Florida Institute of Technology in Jensen Beach to major in underwater technology. I wanted to be a commercial deep sea diver. This dream came to an end in January 1982. My father drove me back to school after winter break, and on his return trip to our hometown of Green Pond, SC, he was killed in an automobile accident. It was his fault; he had been drinking. It was difficult to be angry with him, as I was partial to the bottle myself.

I had gone to school because I wanted to do something that would impress the old man. With him gone, school just wasn't the same. I came home and went to a branch of the University of South Carolina, but my heart wasn't in it. I quit school and took a job as a heavy equipment operator.

On April 4, 1987, I spent a big day drinking at the beach, and that night, I rear-ended a carload of people. The next morning in jail, I made a personal assessment. No one was dead, but there had been a lot of property damage. I determined that if I didn't stop drinking, things would get worse and I would likely die like my dad.

That was my long-term decision. I have been sober ever since.

In the short term, I needed to find a job I could walk to. As a heavy equipment operator, I had been commuting every day as much as 50 or 60 miles to different construction projects. My driver's license was now revoked, and I knew that when I got it back, car insurance was going to be expensive. I got a production job at a local factory. It was different from what I was used to, but going to the same location to work every day had advantages I had never considered.

After a year working in production, a job opened in the quality department. I was the only one in the plant who applied who had taken algebra in high school. That was enough to give me an edge, and I got the job.

I became fascinated with the science of quality, especially statistics. I couldn't commute to a school to be formally educated while holding a

full-time job, but I spent all of my spare time studying everything I could find about quality. In 1994, an engineer at my company suggested ASQ certification as a way to validate what I had taught myself.

## Patience perseveres, even in the worst of circumstances.

I joined ASQ and became a certified quality technician (CQT) in March 1994. My next goal was to become a certified quality engineer. I looked forward to December 1995, when I would reach the required eight years of experience to sit for the exam.

Things didn't work out well. I had begun driving again after moving to Islandton, SC, which was beyond walking distance from my job. On June 6, 1995, I was driving to work in very bad weather. My next conscious thought was on July 3, almost a month later, when I woke up in a hospital and was told I had been in an automobile accident. Even when we are stone cold sober, the world can be a dangerous place.

I had suffered a traumatic brain injury, and it was two years before I had the motor skills and mental capacity needed to function on my own again. It was another year beyond that before I could read or perform math. I don't know how many weeks and months I sat in my chair and looked at that CQT card. I felt it was the only evidence I had that I had ever been able to do something.

It was during this time that I adopted a mantra: Rock is hard, but water is patient. It came to me one day when I was teaching myself to walk again on the dirt and gravel road outside my home. I noticed a heavy rain had washed out some of the road, and it occurred to me that, eventually, the water would wear all the rock down to dirt. Rock is hard, but water is patient—I began repeating this to myself often.

After spending a year maintaining a

mental inventory of the things I could no longer do, I decided to start a list of things I *could* do. I told everyone I would think in terms of my ability rather than my disability. When I began focusing on the things I could do instead of the things I couldn't, I became able to do more things. I will never belittle the concept of paradigm shifts again.

Of course, it is really hard to start from scratch when you are nearly 40 years old, and "two years as an invalid" just doesn't look impressive on a résumé. In 1998, I enrolled in a technical school, and in 2001 I received an associate's degree in general technology. I worked at several different jobs for a few years, but I couldn't find my niche.

In November 2005, a quality technician job opened near my home. I sent a copy of my CQT certificate with my résumé. They called me for an interview in January. I told them at the interview that if I was hired, I planned to pick up where I had left off and take the CQE exam soon after I started. The company, Panolam Industries, hired me in February, largely because of my quality technician certification. It gave me an edge.

On Dec. 2, 2006, without ever having taken a formal class in quality or even basic statistics, I took the certified quality engineer exam and passed on my first attempt. One day it will give me an edge, too.

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