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A conversation with Ted Turner

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Philanthropist, world-class sailor, and former media mogul Ted Turner recently put all his wisdom and the observations of those who know him in his autobiography *Call Me Ted*. He won the most prestigious prize in sailing, the America's Cup, in 1977, founded the 24-hour news network CNN, briefly owned MGM studios, bought the Atlanta Braves baseball franchise, donated \$1 billion to the United Nations - all in between having five children and three wives. His most famous ex is Jane Fonda, who said he has abandonment issues from being left at boarding school at age 4.



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(THE BLADE)

Turner, 70, talks about his father's suicide and what his business success and being a billionaire mean to him.

Q: You started working at such a young age [12]. Do you think that gave you an advantage, or was it something more?

A: I don't feel like it hurt in any way. It probably did give me an advantage because by the time I was out of college after working nine summers in a row at my father's company in every area, I already knew how to run a billboard business. Anyway, all businesses have a lot in common, so yeah, I think I was ahead of the curve by having started so young.

Q: You were considered an outsider in the sailing, broadcasting, baseball, and Hollywood communities when you got into them. What is it about being an outsider that you thrive on?

A: You know, it's kind of fun to be the underdog. If you're the favorite all the time then winning doesn't mean that much, but if you're the underdog, you know - like the Pittsburgh Pirates are a lot of the time and the Braves were, too, for a long time - when you win, everybody really takes notice. I think you probably get a little more appreciation for having surprised everybody who had written you off.

Q: So is part of what drives you the attention you get when you win?

A: I wouldn't say it's what drives me now. It was one of the things that drove me. I wanted to be a success. Ever since I was a little child, school said, "Work hard and be a big success." Your parents said, "Work hard and be a big success." Even society in general says that. It's the American way.

Q: But not everybody does it.

A: I got it. All I was really doing was following orders.

Q: By your own admission you had a tough childhood and experienced ...

A: Tough is good for you. That's what makes you strong. But it doesn't make everybody strong. Tough circumstances wreck some people. They aren't strong enough to rise above it. So it just

depends on the person. It doesn't work for everybody. Real hardship probably breaks more people down than it makes into champion caliber.

Q: So the strong will survive.

A: That's really the way it is. Unfortunately.

Q: Your father and mother left you in boarding school at 4. That's really too young.

A: I know, but it was just for one year. It probably made me stronger because I did survive.

Q: Are you happiest when you are competing or working?

A: Um, happiest ... well, I've been so busy all my life I don't know anything else. I do feel a bit out of sorts, quite a bit out of sorts, if I don't have something to do. I always have something to do so I won't be, you know, so I won't feel useless.

Q: You say you didn't set your goals in monetary terms, so how did it affect you when you became a billionaire?

A: Well, not very much. I couldn't tell anybody here at work that I was a billionaire because they'd all ask for raises and we didn't have enough money to give 'em. And I couldn't tell any of my friends because they would have thought I was bragging. So I went home and told my wife. I said, 'Honey the stock went up today again. It crossed the billion dollar level.' She said, 'I don't have any time to worry with that. I've got to get these kids to get their homework done.' So it was a big non-event. I thought it would be that bells and whistles would ring, but really nothing happened. I just saw in the news that some billionaire somewhere committed suicide.

Q: Yes, in Germany.

A: I don't know why he did. I saw it on the tape on CNN and I said to myself, 'That doesn't surprise me.' You know, I gave a billion and a half away. So I almost gave myself into the poor house. I became an irresponsible, uncontrollable giver.

Q: But it was never about money for you.

A: No, but there's nothing worse than being old and broke. Particularly if you are used to being able to go to nice restaurants and things. I drive a 20-year-old car.

Q: Yes. You talk about how frugal you are in the book.

A: I told the truth about everything.

Q: You've also had some close calls sailing like the storm near Cape Hatteras and the Fastnet Rock Race in the deadly storm. So what does scare you?

A: I was scared. A little bit. I was concerned. When we heard the weather report that night [for the Fastnet Rock race] I predicted that 20 people would die and I think 18 did.

Q: After two near-death disasters you still went back to sailing.

A: Absolutely, that's how life is. They say when you get thrown off a horse you have to get right back on that horse and ride him some more that afternoon. But if you wait a day or two you will never get on a horse again.

Q: Was there a time in your life when you felt the most vulnerable?

A: Well, it's hard. I've lived 70 years, so I have felt vulnerable a lot of times. But I guess when I was 4 years old and went off to boarding school I felt vulnerable. I wanted to be with my mommy and daddy.

Q: How about in business?

A: Nah. I felt invincible.

Q: Was your father's suicide about money?

A: It was partially about money but he had a nervous breakdown. He really was ill.

Q: How did you cope with that?

A: You know you just have to keep moving forward. Your family, they want you to keep living and stay out there. I knew that's what they wanted me to do, so I kept doing the best I could and working hard so that I could get my mind off of it. If you dwell on tragedy you just get into a state of depression and then you need a psychiatrist. And they're expensive. [laughing]

Q: You've been to one.

A: I have.

Q: Did you ever think of yourself as depressed?

A: No, thank God. That's one reason, my psychiatrist -- I see monthly, mainly just to chat and keep up. You know, he's a real expert on depression and he tells me I don't have depression. I have a moderate case of anxiety sometimes, but anxiety and depression are different. You can have both of them at the same time and that's not good. I read his book on the subject.

Q: Jane Fonda says you are chased by demons and have to keep moving. What do you make of that?

A: Oh, fiddle-de-dee. You know, Jane's entitled to her opinion. She's a very intelligent woman and very perceptive. But I didn't agree with her about everything or we'd still be together. Have you ever been divorced?

Q: Yes, I have.

A: Well you know what I mean. At least I still have a girlfriend or two. You know that's difficult enough.

Q: Well, you've always had a girlfriend or two.

A: That way it's safer.