



Interview with Visionary, Businessman & Design Hero Richard Saul Wurman

A Party of One: Richard Wurman's Private Revolution

By Robert Bailey

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Richard Wurman studied at Yale under the renowned architect Louis Kahn. He has written 75 books, two about his Yale teacher and mentor. He "founded" the concept of information architecture. He created Access Maps for cities and has designed numerous systems for organizing information. About 15 years ago he parlayed his interest in information into the world-renowned TED conferences (Technology, Education and Design) At the age of 66 he has just completed "Diagnostic Tests for Men; Diagnostic Tests for Women; Heart Disease and Cardiovascular Health; Pharmaceuticals; When Can I Retire?; and Wills, Probates and Estate Planning. He can be at the epicenter of change seemingly on a moments notice and yet he chooses to live in a beautifully restored mansion in Newport, RI. His temperament, and his story? They're not what you think.

I interviewed him by phone at the end of April 2001.

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*RB: What are the rules of good information?*

RW: There are a bunch of them. The organization of it, where I use the word *LATCH*, location-alphabet-category-time and hierarchy. Wurman's first law is: you only understand something relative to something you understand. There's only three ways of showing a change of magnitude visually. These are little things I discovered and I wrote down. If I'm wrong I'll change it next time. Nothing I do is scientific. Everything I do is kind of my own selfish epiphanies of things that work. And since I've done now 75 books or so and nobody-- It's like that image from (Monty Python's) Flying Circus with that foot that comes down and squashes people. Nobody's doing that to me. So I keep on playing around.

I've just finished six new books on health and wealth. What business do I have doing that? Well, the business I have doing that is that it interests me.

*RB: How much of the change to a visual culture is important in the way information is used.*

WR: It's a lot, although is just not overnight. It really got moving faster and faster with the advent of television. We are a visual society. We can bemoan the fact the people don't have good penmanship. I do. I am always impressed when somebody sends me a letter and it's beautifully penned with that squib pen that makes it fat and thin. I love that. But, I'm not going to beat up on my chest if I can't do it. The fact is that we change. And all the change isn't necessarily wonderful or artistic or vibrant or good. But we

embrace it to make it as good as we can make it, to make it as vibrant and artistic as we can within the boundaries of what we are able to do.

Carving the ten commandments in stone isn't good in itself. Believe me, if there had been a good pen and ink, or rollerball or if you could do a Via Voice, voice-actuated IBM system into a computer, Moses would have done that. But, he couldn't. And you can't look backwards and say 'well that's timeless.' Some things, good buildings are timeless—and they tend to be used for different things. One of the greatest buildings on your top 10 list would be the Pantheon in Rome. It was originally used for one thing, then for another, then for burial and now it's a tourist attraction. And it was used for all kinds of churches in between. They can be used for different things and we see different things in them—because they're timeless.

*RB: Your focus is unique you're not judging anything. You're pretty close to saying common sense.*

WR: Probably Benjamin Franklin said it, uncommon common sense. Yeah. I'm accepting what is and I try to make it better, as opposed to going head on against it.

I love television. I say that every year from the stage at TED because I know it absolutely grosses out the audience. I say 'I love television guys and I gonna keep saying it because those who look down their noses at television you're really wrong.' Is most television bad? You bet! But, then guys most everything is bad. Most lawyers are bad. Most architects are bad. Most movies are bad. Most books are bad. Most cars are bad. Well, all diseases, I guess, are bad. There's a lot a bad around, but that's no reason for throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Because there's a lot of stuff that it still allows you to do. And in every century-- You can't look back at the Renaissance and say there were great architects. No, most of the buildings are bad. There's a few left that are good. But in any one year not that many great things are done. Ever. And that's okay. God, if everything was great you'd be zonked out of your mind, looking at everything. I'd feel guilty I didn't read everything single book, every single minute, every single day. Looking at every building. Going to every City....

*RB: Is that the defining line between information anxiety and peace with information, you're making choices?.*

RW: Ah, no I don't see that as being something different. When I collected all the writings and speeches of Lou Kahn in the second major book I did on Lou Kahn the first sentence of the introduction was, 'He was the youngest person I ever knew.' And if I have a grave stone and that is true that would be my line. That's the measure of myself: Having delight in things. I'm just delighted with stuff, I can't believe it.

*RB: How did you make the transition from being trained as an architect, to doing design, to doing information to writing about what you feel like writing about?*

WR: I did my first book at 26, so where's the transition? I was always absolutely overwhelmed with my ignorance, but at the same time really interested in learning things that were warm to me. And for most of life I did that and was an utter failure—I couldn't glue two nickels together. Cause there was not market for that at all. I have perhaps one of the more indulgent lives that people have. And it was indulgent when I really couldn't afford to, when I lived in--really literally-- a third story walkup over a restaurant kitchen. When I was 45 years old, I got married for the second time and now have been married 21 years here's what I didn't own: I didn't own one share of stock or one bond, I didn't own one piece of real estate or part of it, I just was Dean of school and I was fired by the Vice-President, I had no office, I had no savings. I had an old 5-speed Honda Civic. That's it. And no family.

*RB: What made the change?*

RW: I didn't change. What I was doing seemed to be more interesting to people.

*RB: What need does Richard Wurman fill?*

RW: I dunno. I don't do it for other people. I don't do anything for anybody but myself.

*RB: Now you're sounding like Howard Rourke.*

WR: But, I don't do it for other people. I do it because I'm curious about things. I don't know what other people are thinking. Is there ego involved, sure. The ego of solving a problem in a way.

*RB: Does your freedom threaten people?*

RW: I think I threaten people because it seems like I have a good time. Obviously I've made money. I think a lot of people think I must have always had money. That's bullshit! you know. And most people think I've tried to make money—that's bullshit. I've never tried to make any money. I've made some money, and I do what I want to, and that doesn't sit well with most people.

*RB: That bucks convention.*

RW: I'm not trying to buck convention. I'm not trying to be an angry young man—an angry old man now. If I was trying to play look at me look at me, I sure wouldn't live up in Newport and not see anybody. I've resigned from every organization I was ever a member of, so I'm certainly not trying for any power trips.

*RB: Talk to me about technology. You write that e-mail was supposed to reduce our phone calls, but in fact, it's increased the number of phone calls because we have to respond to our e-mails.*

RW: Well, everything has an effect on something else. It doesn't end with itself. When faxes first came in people said 'oh my God, no one's going to send any letters any more.' The fact is maybe snail mail has changed but we write a lot more letters and we write them on faxes and we write them on e-mail. But, they've increased the personalization of communication, not decreased it. People were looking down on it as technology—but it pulled people together, it didn't pull people apart. I have more communication, more correspondence, more interests, more interesting connection with my family and my kids, with other people, short notes, yes-no, back-and-forth. It's been wonderful.

Is it a very ugly medium? You bet. E-mail is an ugly piece of shit. You've always got to try to see if there's more than one page because you don't want that second page printed out with all that junk that hangs off of it like a dingleberry. It's horrible ugly stuff, it's not formatted well. It'll get better.

*RB: You are one of the best examples of a constantly evolving personality. You say you live your life the way you want and you study and read and just flow.*

RW: I change. I have two more TED conferences to do and then I've sold the company. I know how to do that. I started doing CD-Roms, as that technology got better I did a fantastic set of CD-roms. Well, that was my reason to stop doing it. That was my reason to stop doing it. I figured out how to do it. So this year we web-cast it and people asked where the CD-roms were. C'mon, I'm not doing them for you, I'm doing them 'cause I wanted to know how to do it. Now, we're doing webcasts 'cause I want to know how to do that. It doesn't always make you popular.

*RB: You are running against the grain again.*

RW: But it's not done for those people. It's done so I know how to solve the appropriate problem at the appropriate time. It's about my discovery. Pretty soon I'm dead, so while I'm alive I want to do the things that interest me.

My best one liner is "learning is remembering what you're interested in." I haven't found a better one liner than that.

