



*"Whenever I climb I am followed by a dog called Ego."  
— Friedrich Nietzsche*

The tidal wave of questions, the poisonous feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt when you get sacked bring on a nasty brand of pain. It can paralyze the most hardened of us.

Last year, 2004, I was fired from my job as the camera operator on a movie. I was shocked and upset; still, I saw it coming, and it didn't devastate me as it did the last time I'd been fired — 19 years ago. Back then as now, the firing was not about my ability to pan and tilt. It was about the chemistry between the Director of Photography and me.

How simple if being a camera operator was only about flawless composition and camera movement. We all know the tougher job is the interpersonal dance we must do with the Director of Photography, Director, and others.

In the summer of 1986, my daughter and my operator's card were in their infancy. I was hired to operate on a new television series — single camera, streets of LA, hot young actors, hardball stories. It was going to be great! I was so intoxicated with the prospect of seven months of work that I purchased a very expensive stereo system the weekend before we began shooting. My youthful enthusiasm grew during the first week (a quality I've learned to keep in check). The only point of contention arose when I asked for a gear head and the DP reluctantly acceded. He was a fairly new Director of Photography, having been a gaffer to Nestor Almendros. He suggested that the fluid head was a more organic tool in the creation of cinema, and as far as he was concerned, all other panning and tilting devices were inferior. I tried to hang with that philosophy until we arrived at a long complicated FAST dolly move with an abrupt stop. Even locking the pan an instant before the end of the move created substandard results in my opinion, an opinion I'm afraid I shared in some subtle or not-so-subtle manner. On Friday, the gear head arrived.

I came to realize the DP couldn't operate wheels. I felt a naïve and foolish sense of superiority. Sunday morning he called me at home and asked me to stand down, and not having the balls to fire me outright claimed he was going to "try someone else out," leaving open the possibility I might be invited to return.

I was devastated, sure that a career in cinematography was history. The world was passing me by. I had a hole in my bank account, a kid in diapers, and a fabulous stereo system we could all spend time listening to.

But, as the joke goes, I was available.

Let's jump forward to the spring of 2004. Over the past few years my career has been filled with harmony and great filmmakers, mutual respect and gratitude. In other words, I'm due for a bad one. And I've got it: on a feature, I've been paired with a Director of Photography who is at one moment charming, clever, funny and the next paranoid, vicious, ungrateful and sadistic. It's a struggle to get through each day. So my wife, the poor soul who shares my angst, whips a book on me — *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz.

<http://www.miguelruiz.com/teachings/fouragreements.html>

I have a natural aversion to self-help literature; aside from royalties to the author, most of these glitzy tomes provide too little for too few for too short a time. However the slim volume and simplicity of Ruiz's *Four Agreements* appealed to me. Opening to any page, I found words of wisdom and solace.

The premise Ruiz says is that we've all made agreements, usually on an unconscious level, with ourselves that convey the message — we're bad, we're wrong, we're unworthy, we're undeserving, etc, all bad juju, negative shit.

Ruiz says we have to make new agreements with ourselves, and there are four of them:

**First Agreement: Be impeccable with your word.**

Impeccable meaning "without sin." Our words are more powerful than we acknowledge. Words can create unity and good will. They can just as easily destroy someone. The choice is ours. Think before engaging mouth. Next time you're on the set, listen to the words floating around. It's fascinating to recognize those that are creating good things and those that are divisive or intended to harm.

**Second Agreement: Don't take anything personally.** The director of photography is telling the producer that the quality of your work sucks and will cause him personal ruin. As you run to IMDB to recheck your credits it occurs to you that maybe, just maybe this has nothing to do with you and is a product of his neurosis.

**Third Agreement: Don't Make Assumptions.** One week on a film set will introduce you to the destructive and costly consequences of assumptions. If every member of a film crew made this agreement, run away production would cease because film-making costs would plummet.

**Fourth Agreement: Always Do Your Best.** Not so easy when you're ignoring Agreements 2 and 3, and slandering the Director of Photography at every opportunity.

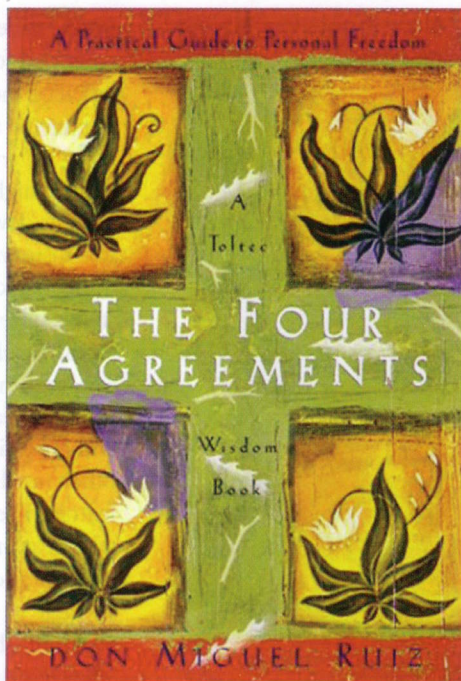
These simple but profound statements had a remarkably palliative effect by helping me maintain a clear sense of who I

was in the hailstorm of crazy coming from the DP. Rather than feelings of hate and vengeance, pity emerged as the most sensible reaction to his behavior.

So with *The Four Agreements* in my suitcase, I left town for a month of location work, and confronted the one thing I couldn't bring myself to do.

This Director of Photography had assembled about him key crewmembers who he treated just as badly as me. They however had the remarkable ability to bounce back and engage in arm-punching, humor-the-boss, machismo banter every morning. It occurred to me that this ritual was like the guys buying insurance for the day — humor him early in the hope that today I'm not the one on the receiving end of a new orifice.

Small talk has never been my strength, and the best I could muster was a respect-



Film Production Rule 8C: Last day on location is traditionally a good day to fire people, and on our last day I was.

Meanwhile, back in the summer of '86, still smarting from the TV show firing, I accepted extra camera work on an HBO movie. The production coordinator from that project called me a month later to work on another HBO film with a Danish Director of Photography. Within a year, this extraordinarily talented DP was filming *The Abyss*, and then a Spielberg picture, *Always*. I went with him on both of those important projects, survived, and emerged with credits that launched my career as an operator.

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*I consider myself blessed and fortunate to have traveled my career path. A huge part of that gratitude is based on having been fired in 1986.*

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ful and sincere smile and “good morning.” At the end of the day or week, I couldn't bring myself to dine or shoot pool with the DP as the other keys did. Undoubtedly it was my lack of hom-age that led to my release.

So much of the camera operator's job is linked to confidence. When you have it, you can't fail. As soon as someone above you starts to question your ability, your confidence can become the victim. When that happens, the quality of your work is in jeopardy.

I had one director fire me real early in the day. Unfortunately we were on a boat, in the middle of Puget Sound. He was stuck with me and I with him. I shook it off the best I could and continued to do my job. The rest of the day went fine and at the end of it, I said “goodbye” and asked if he needed me to help him find my replacement.

Annoyed, he snapped, “No no no, you're not fired!” and walked away.

The absurdity is always there.

—Dan Gold SOC

It was never about the work. And after the pain went away, I realized that it was a bad situation to begin with, and a sane individual would have quit. But it's not in our nature as camera operators to walk away.

—Dan Turrett SOC

on having been fired in 1986. If I hadn't, I might never have broken into features. Of course, not getting fired might have brought an equally satisfying career in TV — becoming a Director of Photography or Director could have been my story; it's all speculation.

Let's come forward again to that last day on location. In the quiet aside that was my most recent firing, the Director of Photography opened up to me in a way he never had. He was as genuine and clearheaded as I had ever seen him. He remarked on my “lack of malice” — I'll never forget the phrase. He said I just had lost the spirit and energy he needed from his operator. I admitted to that and asked for the chance to find it again, but it was too late. We parted with a handshake.

I would be a fool not to confront my role in all this. None of us is free from responsibility. My inability to implement the Second Agreement handicapped me, kept me from being there for the Director of Photography in a way he needed me to be. And that's what it really boils down to for camera operators. There are going to be times when we either reinvent ourselves, swallow pride and adapt, or get marching orders. I admire the other crew members who survived because they were resilient enough to forge ahead, giving their all and not succumbing to the daily onslaught of character assassination.

As I look to the next job I realize my work is cut out for me.

Oh by the way, the gaffer-turned-DP from 1986 called me not long ago, nearly 20 years after the fact, to apologize! I was so stunned I failed to thank him for my career. That's a phone call I need to make.

