

Earl Tupper & Brownie Wise

*Spiritual Lessons from the Tupperware
Phenomenon that Rocked the 50's & 60's*

by Dennis Pollock

Many kids today would probably be clueless if you asked them what they know about *Tupperware*. Similarly, it would have been almost inconceivable for the American housewives of the fifties and sixties to contemplate the fact that there would be millions of young mothers in the twenty-first century who would never in their lives attend a "*Tupperware* party." The idea of flexible plastic containers for foods with airtight seals is taken for granted these days. You can buy them in almost any grocery store and you might even find them at your local Dollar store. We use them for a year or so, pitch them in the trash when they start looking a little worn, and go out and buy a new set for a few dollars. When the Tupperware food storage containers were made available and marketed to the American public in the 1950's it unleashed an economic tidal wave. Poor uneducated housewives found they could succeed and live at a level they never dreamed. Women and couples were making money hand over fist, and millionaires were being created through these pastel-colored plastic bowls. Eccentric inventor Earl Tupper and Brownie Wise, a Georgia-born saleslady with an eighth grade education rode that tidal wave to the very top of the business world.

It all began with an odd young man named Earl Tupper. Earl had been a poor student in school and had barely graduated, but he had big dreams. He dreamed of being the next Leonardo da Vinci, and constantly filled notebooks with illustrations and ideas about possible inventions. Some of them seemed to have promise, but most of them were laughable. He drew elaborate diagrams of a fish propelled boat, which would harness a large fish to a small boat providing a motor-less means of transportation – just as long as you kept your fish well-fed. A comb shaped like a dagger which would clip to your belt, a "no-drip" ice cream cone, and a belt buckle that would hold a picture of your sweetie were other examples of his not-so-spectacular ideas. In fact nearly all of his life Earl Tupper's creative but not always practical mind spawned hundreds, if not thousands of inventions that died before they could ever be born.

But Earl had one thing going for him: he never gave up. Rejections and failures could never stop him from dreaming, exploring, creating, and testing. He simply refused to be discouraged, believing that if he persevered he would some day strike pay dirt and become a rich and famous inventor. Eventually he drifted toward the burgeoning plastics industry. Getting a job with *DuPont*, he carefully observed and absorbed everything that was happening in this new field, and within a year he was ready to start his own plastics company. He made plastic containers for cigarettes and soap, and called his new company *Tupper Plastics*. When World War II broke out, he changed over to making parts for military gas masks.

Turning Slag to Gold

When the war ended Earl Tupper was determined to come up with the latest and greatest in plastic kitchenware. He envisioned plastic containers with airtight seals that would keep foods far longer than anything people had ever experienced before. At this time there were no plastic food containers. Housewives wrapped leftovers in tinfoil or wax paper. Some even used shower caps in an attempt to keep their food fresh for an extra day or two. Refrigerators had become popular and

they certainly helped, but still most foods would spoil within a couple of days. Unlike the dagger comb or the fish-drawn boat, Tupper had recognized a genuine need in America, and should he find the right solution, the possibility that his dreams of wealth and success might not be so far-fetched after all.

Problem was, the ordinary raw materials from which plastics were made in those days were in short supply, and were too expensive for Earl's Tupper's limited means. Author Bob Kealing describes that magic moment when Tupper's fortunes began to turn. A representative for the Bakelite company told him that the plastic resins he was looking to purchase were simply unavailable:

"Well, in that case, what else have you got?" Tupper asked. You must have something kicking around. "As a matter of fact, we do," the rep conceded. What he handed Tupper was a smelly glob of greasy, rubbery, black slag. "We have tons of this stuff sitting around and we don't know what to do with it," the rep told Tupper. You can have all of it you want." The substance was polyethylene, a smelting waste product. ...From this worthless glob of waste product, this smelly slag, Earl Tupper mined translucent gold.

The Mighty Poly-T

It didn't happen overnight. Tupper had his raw material, but he had to find a way to make it practical and attractive. He began to do what he did best – he spent countless hours experimenting with the stuff, breaking it down, changing its components, taking from, adding to. Until that time, most plastics were brittle, easily cracked or broken. Tupper was looking for a way to get his plastics to be flexible, and to develop products that would bounce rather than shatter when dropped on a hard floor. Plus he had to get rid of the odor, the greasy feel, and create colors that would attract rather than repel. It was no small order.

After months of trial and error, and countless failures, Earl finally hit upon the ideal formula. The result was a greaseless, odorless, flexible plastic that could be dyed any color and would last practically forever. He called this new plastic *Poly-T, Material of the Future*. Perfecting an airtight seal was the final step. At last he had a product immensely useful and ideally suited for its designed purpose. *Tupperware* was born. The first basic food container he dubbed *The Wonder Bowl*.

The saying goes, "*Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door.*" That sounds right, but people in the business world know better. **In theory you may only need a better mousetrap, but in practice you have to do some marketing.** Earl Tupper was an outstanding mousetrap builder, so to speak, but a lousy marketer. He was introverted, reclusive, stubborn, and void of charisma. He was at home in his laboratory but awkward and out of place in social situations. He knew how to create but he was ignorant of how to market and sell. He managed to get his products on the shelves of many department stores, and attracted quite a bit of attention from his new products, but still sales were tepid. Seeing these attractive, pastel-colored bowls on store shelves apparently wasn't enough. Tupper was working 18 to 20 hour days feverishly attempting to come up with new and varied forms of his *Tupperware*, but there were no signs that this new invention was ever going to set the world on fire.

Brownie Wise.

Enter Brownie Wise. Brownie was everything Earl Tupper was not (and vice versa). She was outgoing, charismatic, and a born saleswoman. Her sales career started when a representative from

the *Stanley Home Products* company knocked on her door. He stumbled through a sales presentation, trying to sell her on their various cleaners, degreasers, and mops. When he left, Brownie Wise said to herself, "I can do better than that." She signed up with *Stanley* and soon became one of their top salespersons. In a year she was a district manager. She created a newsletter called "The Go-Getter," which she would later perfect under the *Tupperware* brand. She encouraged all her salespersons to be true "go-getters," and praised those whose sales flourished. In one newsletter she gushed, "Florence's sales this week averaged almost \$8 per person! That's real, honest-to-goodness sizzlemanship."

One trait Brownie did share with Earl Tupper was a burning ambition. Just as he fervently dreamed of being one of the world's greatest inventors, she dreamed of being one of the world's top business executives. Going into homes and making sales was profitable, and was certainly paying the bills for the single mother, but she longed for greater things. At a company convention she cornered the president, Frank Stanley Beveridge, and shared her desire to rise high in the company. The company president quickly shattered her dreams, telling her not to waste her time hoping to rise to an executive position – that the executive boardroom of the *Stanley Company* was no place for a woman. Brownie fumed on the train ride home, and began to consider other routes to career success.

Brownie Finds Tupperware

Brownie soon found what she had been looking for when she was introduced to the new kitchen containers known as *Tupperware*. She instinctively sensed that this was a product that would sell very well through in-home demonstrations and sales "parties." Although there was no organized plan for such sales through the *Tupperware* company, she took it on her own to order large amounts of *Tupperware* at wholesale prices, add her own markup, and start selling it in homes to her former *Stanley Home Products* customers. The results were magical. Once people could see the plastic sealable bowls and tumblers, combined with an energetic sales pitch, sales were phenomenal. Brownie's creative juices flowed, and she soon had dealers working under her, providing her a commission on every item sold. She urged her dealers to turn the sealed containers upside down or throw them across the room to demonstrate that they would not leak. She became an unofficial *Tupperware* distributor, even though she had no legal status or contract with the company.

The folks at *Tupper Plastics* soon learned about her. This one-woman bundle of sales moxie was outselling all the major department stores whose *Tupperware* products were languishing on their shelves. She and those working under her were selling the products so fast that the company could not keep up with their orders and soon they had to tell customers they would be put on a waiting list. This just seemed to increase the desire for the *Tupperware* all the more. At last the home office sent a representative to Detroit to see her and find out what she was doing and whether she might be able to play a larger role in the company. In a very short time she was sent to Florida and became the state-wide distributor for *Tupperware*.

Now Brownie really went to work. Buoyed by the confidence the *Tupper Company* had shown her by making her a state-wide distributor, she sat down and wrote out a detailed plan which showed dealers exactly how to put on a *Tupperware* party. She stressed friendliness, smooth presentations, games and prizes, and demonstrations of just how *Tupperware* would make life easier for housewives. In those days most families had only one car and it was used by the husband for driving to work every day. This meant that most women were stuck at home all day. At night their

husbands expected them to cook a meal, do the dishes, and get the kids to bed. All this provided very little social outlet for ladies who had an innate need for social interaction. These *Tupperware* parties gave housewives an excuse to get outside the house for an evening or a Saturday afternoon and laugh and joke with their neighbors. And if they felt a subtle pressure to buy at least one *Tupperware* product, it was a small price to pay for an opportunity to escape the tedium of housework. Tupperware parties proved a gold mine wherever they were seriously attempted.

Everybody benefited: the dealers made a profit, the hostess made some money, and the guests got great kitchen products and a couple of hours of fun with other ladies. In an age where there were few opportunities for women to work outside the home, it was a tremendous way for women to make some extra spending money for a new coffee table or to upgrade their wardrobe.

From Store Shelves to Home Parties

As Earl Tupper realized how much more effective these home parties were than department store sales, he invited Brownie and a few other successful distributors to meet with him for a brainstorming session. Brownie wanted more than simply to share a few ideas with the father of *Tupperware*, however. She urged him to take their products off the shelves of the stores altogether – to make *Tupperware* exclusively available through the dealers and their home parties. Tupper could hardly argue with Brownie's success. In addition he couldn't help but be impressed with this woman whose personality inspired everyone around her. Tupper agreed and *Tupperware* was hastily removed from the stores. From now on, the only way you could get his product was to buy it from a dealer. *Tupperware* became a product bought by women and sold by women. Sales began to increase exponentially. Tupper made millions, and American homes were filled with various sealable, air-tight, *Tupperware* containers.

Brownie soon rose from state-wide distributor to chief executive over the sales division of the entire *Tupperware* company. She was the first woman ever to appear on the cover of *Business Week*. She created elaborate retreats for *Tupperware* dealers every year, which she named Jubilees. There were games, prizes, motivational speeches, costumed parties and parades. One year she buried hundreds of gifts in an acre of ground. The ladies were brought there, where they saw 600 shovels sticking in the ground. Each woman was allowed to dig until she uncovered a prize. The news media ate it up and Brownie became a national celebrity, far more well-known and popular than the inventor, Earl Tupper. Although the product carried his name, in the minds of most Americans, Brownie Wise was *Tupperware*. At their annual Jubilees she offered her own clothes as prizes, and women who won them sometimes would lose forty or fifty pounds so they could fit into them and wear the outfit once worn by the great Brownie Wise. For a time Earl Tupper had no problem with the celebrity of his ebullient sales executive, knowing that she could represent the company far better than he. All sorts of magazine articles were written about her, giving her such praise that she seemed almost super-human.

For the seven years she held this position, Brownie took the company to heights few could have dreamed. Everything seemed to be working together for success at *Tupper Plastics*: a brilliant inventor who constantly developed new and useful products, a feverishly motivated head of sales who lived and breathed for more and bigger sales, and constantly pushed her dealers to do the same, an outstanding product that essentially had no competition, and a home-party based sales program that gave women income, social interaction, and recognition they could get nowhere else. The combination of Earl Tupper and Brownie Wise was proving to be a true dynamic duo.

The Unthinkable

Perhaps it was inevitable that two strong-willed, highly motivated polar opposites like Earl Tupper and Brownie Wise would eventually start to rub each other the wrong way. Opinions differ as to what caused the dissolution of the partnership, but it would seem that it was a combination of Brownie beginning to believe her own inflated publicity, and Earl becoming jealous of that publicity which he, himself, had initially helped to create. Brownie had never been afraid to speak her mind, and as the years passed she became more and more frank with her boss when he seemed ready to move in a direction she felt would hurt the company. In the early days Tupper had been so much in awe of his super-saleslady that he would permit her to dress him down over what she perceived as a stupid idea, but this practice began to wear on him. Friendly phone calls morphed into terse and cold letters and eventually blunt and severe criticisms of one another. Finally Earl Tupper was fed up. He met with a couple of his top execs and told them he was firing Brownie. They were shocked. Brownie Wise had seemed irreplaceable in their minds, and indeed in her own mind. When she got the news she was devastated, and told someone that her life was over. The unthinkable had happened, and Brownie was summarily and permanently severed from the *Tupperware* company.

Brownie was still a relatively young 45 years of age, and would live another 34 years. She immediately tried to put her vast sales experience into a cosmetics company, called *Cinderella Cosmetics*. She planned to use the same home party techniques she had used with *Tupperware*, figuring that what she had done before could be duplicated in the area of cosmetics. But within a year the company failed. Cosmetics were available in nearly every department store, and did not have the same unique appeal that *Tupperware* had. For the rest of her years Brownie dabbled in real estate, took up pottery creation, and lived a quiet and mostly reclusive life. Despite her incredible ambition and charismatic personality, she was never able to reproduce the success she had known at *Tupper Plastics*.

Earl Tupper soon disappeared from public view as well. Within a year he sold his company for 16 million dollars, divorced his wife, bought an island off the coast of Costa Rica, and lived out the rest of his years quietly. He never stopped seeking new inventions, filling notebook after notebook with new and fresh ideas and plans. But like Brownie he was never able to reproduce the success he had known with his *Tupperware* containers. His inventions remained in his notebooks, unused and forgotten. The *Tupperware Company*, on the other hand, hired some talented new execs and grew larger still. Taking their company international and diversifying their product line brought in huge new revenues. And although the "*Tupperware* party" isn't seen nearly so much in the U. S. as it once was, throughout the world today there is a *Tupperware* party held somewhere every 2.5 seconds.

Spiritual Lessons

The story I have just related is not exactly a Christian story. Although the *Tupperware* people sometimes made reference to God in their pep talks and articles, mostly their obsession and focus was all about sales and profits. Indeed some of their more fanatical dealers even spoke of their *Tupperware* involvement as a religion. At their jubilee gatherings enthusiastic *Tupperware* dealers would sing in unison: "*I've got that Tupper feeling up in my head, deep in my heart, down in my toes. I've got that Tupper feeling all over me, all over me to stay.*" Sounds pretty corny to us today, but in those days they pretty much meant it.

We Need Each Other

There are, however, some significant spiritual insights we can gain from this story. The first lesson we learn is this: **We need complementary associates.** Earl Tupper was perfect in his laboratory, exploring, testing, coming up with the latest new *Tupperware* product. But had he been put on Brownie's sales force, he would have failed miserably. She would soon have dismissed the dour, introverted, perfectionist Tupper as "not *Tupperware* material." On the other hand Brownie Wise, so amazing in both selling and motivating others to sell, would have been clueless and hopeless in the laboratory. She needed to be where the people are, creating cornball slogans and encouraging the ladies to constantly strive for greater sales and more home parties.

The truth was, they desperately needed each other, and when they found each other, they found success that totally transcended their individual personalities and gifts. This is not news to our Creator! He has fashioned His own corporation, known as the church or the body of Christ in such a manner as to make us dependent upon one another. Paul writes:

For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." (1 Corinthians 12:14-21)

We are all unique packages of both strengths and weaknesses, of gifts and areas entirely devoid of gifts. It is natural for us to want to improve on our weaknesses, and in fact we should do this as much as we reasonably can. But the reality is this: We are never going to get our weaknesses up to the same level as our strengths. It is a futile and frustrating exercise for us to spend our lives trying to become the full and perfect package with all strengths and no weaknesses. It aint gonna happen! Regardless of how many courses in salesmanship and Brownie Wise seminars Earl Tupper might have attended, he would never have come anywhere near her as a salesman. And regardless of how many hours Brownie might have spent studying the habits and skills of Earl Tupper in the laboratory, she would never have been able to do what he did. Far better for them to excel in their own particular gifts and work cooperatively with the other, who possessed gifts that they lacked.

In the body of Christ we are all given gifts by the Holy Spirit to edify the church and influence others to come to Jesus. But none of us is the complete package. **There was one complete package in the history of the earth and that was Jesus Christ Himself. He was the ultimate apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher, counselor, encourager, and every other role we can name.** But for each of us who follow Him, we are given just a small piece, a tiny portion of His gifts to work in our lives. It is not our assignment to somehow so develop ourselves that we possess all the gifts and can fulfill all the roles in His body. Ears are lousy for seeing and feet don't work very well as hands. Far better for us to find the gifts and calling of Christ given to us, and then walk in our assignment joyfully.

You can be Replaced!

A second lesson we learn from the Tupperware story is: **None of us are irreplaceable**. When things became tense between her and her boss, Brownie Wise refused to give an inch. She defended herself vigorously, and even harshly, blasting Earl Tupper with all the force of her intense personality in her letters. She forgot the simple but necessary truth that Tupper was the boss and she was his employee. She had become so synonymous with *Tupperware* that it seemed totally inconceivable that she would ever be fired. In her mind she was *Tupperware*. She was wrong. When she started her cosmetics company she thought many of the *Tupperware* dealers would desert the company and go with her. It did not happen. They knew where their bread was buttered and weren't about to turn away from a proven income and a product they had come to love.

It is a privilege to serve Jesus Christ in His great and magnificent creation, the church. Whether as a speaker, a pastor, singer, a writer, a home group leader, or any other calling we should never lose sight of the honor of being called by the King of kings to stand in our office. Paul writes, "**I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry**" (1 Timothy 1:12). We should never assume, however, that He somehow needs us, or that we cannot be replaced. We should walk in the fear of God, recognizing that He will hold us to account. **Just because we possess a gift, an anointing, an ability to minister to the people of God does not mean that we cannot be set aside**. Again, Paul declares: "**I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified**" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

What Shall it Profit?

A final lesson we can draw from the Tupperware story is: **Life is more than career success**. Although polar opposites in personality and gifts, Brownie Wise and Earl Tupper both made the same mistake: they made their careers their lives. They didn't just work at a job – they gave themselves body and soul to their careers. Brownie was on the road constantly, forced to leave her son in the care of others. Earl Tupper was known to work in spurts of 20 hour days where he would put a cot in his office and grab an hour or two of sleep, and then go back to work.

God expects us to work hard in our lives. Laziness is never associated with godliness. **But He also insists that we will be willing and able to turn off the switch and tend to family and kingdom matters**. After all when we die, as Brownie and Tupper both have, it is not our business success or our bank account that will identify us as winners or losers in the game of life. It is our pursuit of Christ and His will for our lives. "**What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?**"

For the Christian our career is similar to Paul's tent making job. We do it because we need to support ourselves and our loved ones. As representatives of Jesus we want to do our jobs well and bring glory to His name. But we must never make the mistake of somehow identifying ourselves with our careers. Our identity is far greater and higher. We identify ourselves with Jesus Himself, the One who loved us and gave His life for us. Whether banker, professor, doctor, or janitor, we say with Paul, "**I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me...**" (Galatians 2:20).