

GROWING THROUGH WORK

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I am here to foster a safe common ground where people genuinely connect and thrive. Each person I encounter and each task I engage in, I create a space where people identify and develop their God-given gifts. A place where people share their stories, trade ideas, and are fully engaged so that they and their community prosper mentally, physically, spiritually, and financially.

This is my personal mission statement. These words are written on the inside of my notebook and I read them before I start each day. It is what I hope to achieve at home and at work, which are both part of one life—my life. It is about seeing, being open to, and creating opportunity for myself, for my coworkers, for my clients, for my community, for my husband, and for my children. When I share this mission, people ask, “How are you so clear about your purpose? How did you come up with this?” The answer is that I developed myself, as well as awareness, through my work.

I have always found work to be meaningful, enjoyable, and fulfilling. Having been challenged so often to defend my experience of work, I began to ask myself why it is that I feel this way. How did I come to have this context for work? The fact is that I never expected it to be anything else. Why is that?

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My Roots in Work

I grew up in a working-class town in New Jersey that was a mile square. My mother was the child of Russian-Jewish immigrants, and grew up on Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn. My father was the child of second-generation Italian immigrants, and was a World War II veteran. Both my parents believed firmly that work builds one's character, and they relied on work for survival. Note that I say "survive" and not "thrive." We lived just shy of poverty, and the focus was on making ends meet.

My mom was a teacher's assistant in a nursery school four blocks from our home, from the time I was in kindergarten until I left home for college. She did this so she could be home when I got back from school, make dinner, and take care of my father and me every night. When I asked if she liked her job, she would say, "I get to work with children, make art, help pay the bills, and be there to take care of you and your father. What's not to like?"

My father worked as a manager at a local manufacturing company and, later, in the real estate business. When asked if he liked his job, he always replied emphatically, "Yes. It is a new adventure every day."

Being of limited means, he would secure work at factories that produced items that we needed. When my mom and dad were first married, he worked at a linen factory. When I was a small child, he worked at Gabrielle Toys.

Dad would seek out a manufacturer that he wanted to work for and then comb through the papers or stop by to find out if there was a position open. For a few days in a row, he would visit the facility and watch the workers. He would have lunch where they had lunch and listen to them talk about work; what they liked, what they disliked, how things could be better. He would sometimes engage them in conversation and ask questions. Then he would scribble a whole bunch of revisions to his résumé, and my mom would retype it (on the typewriter!). The next day, he would go back and submit it. When he interviewed, he had a good understanding of the work and issues on the floor. When he was hired (and he had a 95% success rate), he

would work to address the issues and implement the suggestions that he heard from the workers.

Around the time I was in second grade, he switched careers. My parents borrowed from family members in order to send me to private school, hoping to give me a better life, but our family needed more money to manage each month. After some discussion, my parents figured that if my dad could be the superintendent of a building, we could live rent-free. A former army man, he was able to fix anything. He took a semester of courses and got the necessary licenses, and then went door to door to local buildings. When he found one that was both hiring and suitable for habitation by my mother's standards, he used the same approach he used with the manufacturers: visited the building, spoke to residents about the facility, and then applied to the management company. He was hired, and we moved into a one-bedroom apartment in the building within a week.

My experience of work has been that it is a vehicle to obtaining what you need and want, as well as a place to learn about life. It is there for you, accessible, if you are willing to explore and risk a bit.

Work was also a source of joy and comfort. It was part of my family life, not a separate thing. I associate work with times where I laughed and played and created memories with my family. We worked at home together, cleaning off the table after dinner, washing and putting the dishes away. We'd clean the house together on weekends, inside and out. (Dad sawed the handle down to the right size on the broom and the rake so I could help.) "Time to do our work!" my parents would exclaim with joy, making a game out of it.

When my dad needed to fix a part for something, he would find something for me to fix too. We'd set our tools out on the table. I took apart and reassembled the alarm clock and radio countless times. (I do not claim that they actually worked afterwards). When my mother cooked, she would give me a job to do, even when I was two: snapping the ends off string beans, taking peas out of the pod, scrubbing vegetables. They never sent me off to watch TV or play while there was work to be done.

My favorite thing to do was going to work with my father, and

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my fondest memories of him are from the times I did. When he worked at Gabrielle Toys, he would take me onto the floor and introduce me to each worker. As we walked to each of their stations, he would tell me a little about them; if they had a child my age, where they came from. They would greet me and explain what they were doing, and I would watch the toys I played with being made.

I experienced work as fulfilling, both emotionally and physically, way before I ever got paid for it.

My Road to Work

Frustrated by all the negative responses I got because of my family's financial position, I asked to get a "real job" (not babysitting) when I was 14. I asked my father for advice, since I didn't know what I wanted to do and had no experience. My father said, "You gain experience and knowledge through work. To get a job and be good at it, you have to find out what you don't know and where to get that information—just observe, listen to people, and ask questions." We spent a Saturday afternoon walking around our town retail center and discussing all the different types of jobs; what I thought would be involved and what I thought I might like or be good at. We settled on a small cookie factory, and my parents helped me apply.

After the cookie factory, I worked part-time throughout high school. I was a cashier and informal manager at the local 7-Eleven at age 15, a cashier at the supermarket when I was 16, and delivered pizza when I was 17. When it came time to apply to college, I wanted to go to school for journalism and media arts. My guidance counselor said it was a waste of time and not practical but helped me work on my applications anyway. I started college at a local four-year school and lived on campus. I worked in retail and started waiting tables to pay for tuition.

My dad got sick after my first semester, so I left school and came home to help out. I found an apartment nearby, worked two jobs, and was home every day to help out and help take care of my dad. One of my jobs was waiting tables on the weekends at a café in Weehawken, along the Hudson River. One day, a regular customer, an older gen-

tleman who drove an antique Jaguar, asked me to sit and talk to him. My manager told me to “sit and listen to what he says.” The older gentleman asked me, if I could have any car I wanted, what it would be. I said a ‘69 Camaro. He asked, why not a BMW. I told him it was because I didn’t have that kind of money and couldn’t live that kind of lifestyle. He said, “Only because you say so.” He went on to describe an experiment that he and a colleague had conducted. They placed an ad in the classifieds with the same job description for three months in a row—each month, they changed the salary. First \$30K, then \$60K, then \$90K.

He went on to explain that they never got the same résumés, and asked me, “If you thought you had the qualifications and experience to do the job at \$30K, why wouldn’t you apply at \$90K? Because people are like cadavers with a tag on their toe. The tag says ‘I am worth this much,’ and they live their whole lives, and make all their choices, based on that number.” I went back to my shift distracted.

I remembered all the times my parents and I walked past houses and imagined what it would be like to live in one, all the “what if” conversations, and all the infuriating “we can’t” conversations. The next week, I walked up to the old gentleman’s table and said, “Please tell me how to change my life.” He handed me *Think and Grow Rich!* by Napoleon Hill. For the next few weeks, we discussed the book after my shift. One day, he handed me a newspaper classified ad. Then he said, “There is a job open at the main office in Customer Service for the company that owns this restaurant. Why don’t you apply?” I told him I didn’t have a suit. He gave me \$100, and told me to go buy one and pay him back when I got the job and my first paycheck. I called, scheduled an interview, bought the suit, got the job, and paid him back with my first paycheck.

We had one final meeting before I started the job. He said, “If anything were possible, what would you want to accomplish?” I resisted at first, but when he pushed, I said, “\$100K salary, a Master’s degree, a house, and a best friend to go through life and have a family with.” He said, “It’s yours. You just have to go and get it.” I asked how. He said, “Start by making sure you do work that doubles

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your salary every four years.”

There was that message again. Not knowing how to do something, not knowing anyone—these were not things to be frightened of or let stand in your way. The responsibility to identify and create opportunities was up to me. There was no “right” or “wrong” job. Just another chance.

I started as a customer service representative at NY Waterway in 1994, making \$19K. My first office job. I quit my waitressing job and never saw the old gentleman again. My dad died of lung cancer in the fall.

The four years I spent at NY Waterway included two promotions (first to Customer Service Manager, then to Sightseeing Sales Manager) and the beginning of a decade-long career in tourism. I watched, I listened, and I asked questions. I arrived at 7:30 a.m. and had coffee with the VP, ate lunch with the deckhands and bus drivers, stayed late, and worked weekends with my boss. My boss was an extraordinary mentor, who invited me to shadow her everywhere she went: every meeting, every committee, every association. I did everything I could to learn about the tourism industry. This led me to a job as Director of Marketing and Sales at the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. At this point, I had begun to serve on many tourism committees and was traveling nationally. Three years later, I joined the Marketing & Communications team at the American Museum of Natural History, and started traveling the world to promote the museum and tourism in New York City. I started chairing committees and planning promotional events for New York City .

One day, when the Museum was working on the Annual Report, the Editorial Department called and asked, “What is your Master’s degree in?” I asked them what they meant, since I didn’t have one. “Well, what about your BA?” they asked. I told them I didn’t have that either. A few minutes later, I got called in by my boss. “I just heard you don’t have a four-year degree. It is required in order to work here.” “Well, you hired me,” I said. Puzzled, we went together to HR and obtained a copy of my résumé, which confirmed that I did not say I had completed college. I was immediately enrolled in a

matching tuition program.

I was always fascinated by how our civilizations came to be—and why they failed—so I went back to school to complete my Bachelor's degree in Humanities and Classic Civilization. I graduated from Montclair State University in 2000; it took me 11 years. After three years, a position as Assistant VP of Marketing opened up, and I applied. My boss took me aside and said that, as a result of my educational experience, I would not be considered, and that, in order to advance, I would have to go somewhere else.

So I did. For a year, I worked for a global entertainment company as Vice President of Marketing at Madame Tussauds. Working with a cohort across seven countries, developing branding and corporate culture locally and regionally—it was like getting an MBA. I remember my very first meeting, where the people in the Finance Department told me I would have to write a complete marketing plan and budget, and that my compensation would be based on hitting revenue goals after Earnings Before Interest, Depreciation and Amortization (or EBITDA). I had no idea what that meant, but I spent days on the phone and in meetings, and a sleepless weekend writing the plan and budget. I watched, I listened, I learned. It was there that I witnessed the most impactful and engaged workforce I had ever seen. The General Manager shared the entire budget line-by-line with the entire staff, and explained that if they could help reach revenue and cut cost, they would have wage increases and bonuses. The staff worked like crazy, generated innovative solutions, and managed their own schedules, to the great success of the organization. I loved the fact that management understood that the people, the ground-level people, were always the heart of the organization.

It was a tremendous learning experience, yet I didn't feel like I fit in. In a frank discussion with the General Manager, she said I cared too much about people and not enough about profit, and that I was better suited to work for a non-profit or in public service. Searching my soul, I realized she was right.

Having an interesting, well-paying career, finishing college, serving on industry committees, and traveling the world was a long

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way to come for someone like me. Having evidence that I could do well and like my job gave me the confidence and permission to start seeking out what I cared about. Work led me to a deep curiosity and interest in the impact of our economic development initiatives in New York City's neighborhoods—the people, the businesses, the places. I started to reach out and offer my experience and expertise as a consultant, and had the great privilege of writing the Strategic Plan and Tactical Handbook for Brooklyn Tourism for then-borough president Marty Markowitz in 2002, which led me deeper and deeper into Brooklyn's neighborhoods.

In 2004, my mom called me from the hospital. She was having trouble breathing. I drove from Brooklyn to New Jersey, and within a few hours we learned that she had lung cancer, which had already spread through her body. Nineteen days later, I watched her take her last breath. During her last few days, she said, "I always told you to be careful, be responsible, don't take too much risk or you might get hurt. I was wrong. Risk everything and live with your heart."

I spent the next year working as a consultant in Brooklyn, trying to listen to my heart. This was no longer simply a good idea, this heart thing. For me, it was life or death. I was no longer working to put poverty behind me—I was working to create a life worth living. It was here that I made a tremendous shift. While I believed I could create the opportunities to find value in my work, I was now able to find work that reflected my values.

I attended several local meetings and heard the then-president of the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce speak on numerous occasions. He was smart and passionate about building a better Brooklyn. He related with equal measure to the maintenance staff and elected officials. I admired him greatly and shared his passion for the borough. I approached him after a meeting and told him I was committed to helping him realize his vision for Brooklyn, and asked how I could work with him. I offered all my tourism and marketing expertise in return for a chance to learn economic development in depth. He created a position for me as a consultant, which then evolved into Vice President of Marketing & Membership at the

Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce, where, among many things, I got to work with Brooklyn manufacturers to promote their products. I attended every meeting, read every book, and learned all I could about economic development.

Working at something I loved, with a team of people I deeply respected, made all things seem possible. I met the man I was meant to spend my life with. We planned our wedding. It was 2008 and the market crashed. We got married, then both lost our jobs and our savings, while also having a brand new baby on the way. My husband couldn't secure work for two years. I took on consulting jobs; working on neighborhood economic development projects and helping small-business owners organize to create the communities they envisioned together. In our one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, we welcomed Michael John in December of 2009; Madeline arrived two months after I completed my graduate degree in 2012.

In my application essay to NYU, I wrote about the way in which we approach economic development, and how we develop these plans for communities, centered on buildings and attracting businesses to a space. Building structures without building a community is fruitless. I said I wanted to invest my time, my experience, and my heart in changing that. In essence, I wanted everyone to have the opportunities I had.

So here I am—filled with gratitude and deeply blessed. I escaped poverty and made my dreams come true. Fulfilling the commitment made that fateful day in the restaurant, I doubled my salary every four years—I earned a promotion that got me a salary that once seemed unattainable in 2008 before I lost my job. I was (and still am) fortunate to have people in my life who called me to a higher game, and that I was open and willing to answer their call.

I feel truly blessed and grateful for every minute. Now, as a mother of two small children, my actions and attitudes lay the foundation that will set them on their own paths. How do I create the same love of work I have and instill in them the expectation that they can author their future?

Oliver Wendell Holmes penned: “To reach the port of heaven

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one must sail. Sometimes with the wind, sometimes against it. Always sail, never drift nor lie at anchor.”

For me, this means to really choose a direction and be invested in it with all your heart. To learn what you can, and to be open and engaged during the journey. If you are, then you can feel the wind shift, and you know how and where it is time to alter or adjust your course.

I remember the birthday when I received my first toy chest. I loved it, and called it my Treasure Chest. It was beautiful, but it was also empty. When my father worked at Gabrielle Toys, he brought home toys for me. When he left that job, the chest was full— full of beautiful things that I played with every day, and cherished.

Work has been that for me. I was an empty chest when I started working. Each job was an adventure, full of hidden treasure. Just like that chest in my childhood bedroom, I didn’t know what would be in it when it would come, but I knew it would be filled. Through my work, I filled that chest with experience, knowledge, confidence, and pride. It connected me to others and to myself. It developed my skills and taught me who I am, through trial and error and through individual practice and reflection. It gave me freedom. It helped me hear my heart and discover my purpose.

Work is the joyful discovery of who we are and what we can become. If you are connected to it, it shows you clearly where you are in your development, and leads you to where you are meant to be. It is a hearth for the fire that burns inside you.