

## EVERYONE HAS A STORY!

I asked people from diverse backgrounds to tell me their stories—how they found their passions and purpose, life lessons they wish to share, their approach to life, or anything they thought might inspire others—and I challenged them to limit their narratives to 500 words or less. Working within this constraint necessitated a distillation down to their most important messages.

As you read these stories, you may notice that, despite our differences, we have common ties and shared desires. These are the things that really matter, and bind us as one human tribe.

I hope these stories will inspire you as much as they have me.

-Dan Bena-



# 500 WORDS OR LESS

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True Stories  
of  
Purpose, Passions,  
and Life Lessons

DAN BENA



Compiled by Dan Bena

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## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to my bride, Diane, for consistently being my  
anchor and support

—all day, every day—

and to the remarkable people  
who so freely shared their stories.

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## PREFACE

Over a decade ago, I was waiting to begin a panel on social entrepreneurship at Pace University when I met Pam Allyn, a fellow panelist. We exchanged the usual niceties and traditional introductions and it struck me that, in about a minute or two, I learned quite a bit about her amazing passion for literacy. I discovered that she was the founder of a not-for-profit organization called LitWorld. Their mission, from their website, is “to strengthen kids and communities through the power of stories.” I also was touched that her father was in the audience as a show of support, which spoke volumes about the close relationship of her family.

She, in turn, learned about my career at PepsiCo, and how I became passionate about using the power and influence of the private sector to help change the world in a positive way. We ended up complimenting each other after hearing our “elevator speeches.” I then looked at the other panelists, thinking that each must have an equally noteworthy story. I remember saying to Pam, “I’d love to write a book one day, giving people from all walks of life one page to tell their story.” She thought about it for a few seconds and replied, “That’s a great idea.”

Then, as they say, life got in the way. The kernel of the book idea never quite left me, but it was replaced by priorities that prevented me from taking the time to collect the stories that would form the book. When I left PepsiCo in 2018 and



started my own consultancy, I thought the timing was right to resurrect this book idea. This was reinforced by the fact that my wife, a physician and eldercare advocate, used the Amazon self-publishing service to publish her book of activities for seniors with mild to moderate cognitive decline. Called *Fun Inside*, it is now available in English, Italian, and Spanish, so I had a great example to follow. No excuses.

Since my panel with Pam, the world has seen tremendous changes. As I considered the idea that I shared with Pam over a decade ago, it struck me that there is a much weightier, more serious objective for writing this book and telling our stories. It's no longer just something I originally thought would be interesting and engaging. Now, it's something that—I hope—will help us see that there truly is more that connects us as human beings than there is that separates us. At our cores, we all want the same basic things. We want good health for ourselves, our families, and those we love; we want sufficient financial freedom to provide some level of security; and we want to feel that we stand for something—that our lives matter in some way.

Many years ago, during a family vacation at the Jersey shore, my sister, Barbara, bought me a gift. It was a small scroll on which is printed a quote from the Dalai Lama. Entitled, "The True Meaning of Life," it reads as follows:

*“We are visitors on this planet. We are here for ninety or one hundred years at the very most. During that period, we must try to do something good, something useful with our lives. If you contribute to other people’s happiness, you will find the true goal, the true meaning of life.”*

My goal with this book is that at least one of the stories will contribute to your happiness, whether through hearing about someone’s journey to finding their passion and realizing similarity to your own life, or reading an inspirational story that strikes a chord, or having someone’s life lesson ignite a spark in you that drives you to do something positive for yourself and for the world.

Dan Bena



## **A NOTE ABOUT THIS BOOK'S CONTENT**

These stories, each of which is 500 words or less, were submitted by people across the spectrum of humanity. A true melting pot of ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, education, religion. So many differences, yet so many similarities. My only “ask” of them was to tell the reader something that they think is worth reading, in 500 words or less, about their passions, or an inspiration, or a life lesson, or circumstances that led them to where they are today. They had a clean palette on which to “paint” a masterpiece.

If you would like to submit your 500 words for the next edition, please feel free to visit (and share) this link:  
[www.danbena.com/500-words](http://www.danbena.com/500-words)



# **YOUR PERSONAL MOONSHOT: ARE YOU A PRISONER OF YOUR OWN MIND?**

My late husband, Pete Conrad, was the Commander of Apollo 12 and the third man to walk on the moon. He was also a young man who had a problem reading and spelling. They used to call it stupid. Today, they call it dyslexia. He was expelled from a prestigious school in the 11th grade. His mother took him to another school where the headmaster saw something special in him and took him under his wing. With this support, Pete was awarded a scholarship to Princeton. He became an aeronautical engineer, a test pilot, was recruited as an astronaut, flew four flights in space, and rescued Skylab, our first space station. For the rescue, he was awarded a Congressional Space Medal of Honor. Pete worked in the aerospace industry and created the foundation for the commercialization and privatization of space. What Branson, Musk and Bezos are doing today rests on the shoulders of Pete Conrad.

Not bad for a guy who was expelled from school! An educator took a young man under his wing and that young man got a moonshot. That is the basis of our work at the Conrad Foundation. We give students their moonshot. Our work represents the merger of my passion to transform education and Pete's story.

The Conrad Foundation's Conrad Challenge provides the bridge between knowing something and being able to do

something with that knowledge.

Our online global competition is dedicated to enriching the educational experience of young people by supporting their curiosity, their STEM skills, their imagination and their ability to be an integral part of designing the future. We are dedicated to developing a gender-, cultural- and racially-diverse innovative workforce.

Today, the Conrad Foundation is the only organization of its kind whose programs combine science- and technology-based education, innovation, and entrepreneurship to inspire solutions for achieving global sustainability.

Students competing in the Conrad Challenge have created a water purification system, now deployed in 9 countries. There is one in Nigeria, in a birthing clinic where babies used to come out of the womb and be washed in dirty water. Now, because of these students, they are washed in clean water. Students have created new space suits and exercise equipment for lunar and Mars missions, a system to extinguish fire by using sound, a platform to improve presentation skills, and the list goes on.

One of our students from Nigeria spoke at an event at the United Nations. He discussed the technology he created to help farmers in Africa. He said, “My name is Afolabi and I am from Nigeria. This is my first time in New York City,”  
\*applause applause\* from 800 attendees. Then he said, “I was a prisoner: I was a prisoner of my own mind. I didn’t know I could do things until I found the Conrad Challenge.”

At the end of his talk, he received a standing ovation. That was the beginning of Afolabi's moonshot. There are thousands of students from across the world who are experiencing their moonshots.

Thank you, Pete Conrad.

***Who wrote this:*** Nancy Conrad

*Teacher. Author. Publisher. Entrepreneur. "Visioneer." Public speaker. Named numerous times as among the "Top 100 Women in STEM." Wife of late astronaut Pete Conrad and Founder and Chair of the Conrad Foundation.*





# DON'T THIN THE WOODS

Purpose.

Everyone I admired seemed to have one.

I couldn't find mine.

For half a century,

I searched.

Many seedlings, but none emerged as a tree.

Then I realized that purpose need not be singular.

A forest of stout trees is just as worthy as a lone, mighty oak.

The trick is to keep the invasive vines at bay.

**Who wrote this:** *Diane Hamele-Bena*  
*Physician. Elder advocate. Teacher. Multimedia artist.*  
*Animal lover. Underdog defender.*  
*Bride of Dan Bena.*



## MY PURPOSE

I believe that each and every one of us is a whole, rich world. We have been given free will, and the ability to format and change our environment. We, each of us, are a collection of talents and challenges, and each of us is here for a specific, individual purpose (or several purposes).

We are not just a product of our medium, our environment. Of course, many of our challenges and talents are “pre-programmed,” be it in our DNA, early childhood experiences, or by virtue of physical handicaps, accidents and life events. Major learning events and personal experiences can also help to shape these talents and challenges.

Our PURPOSE is to leverage our talents, to overcome our challenges. And each of us will have to face all the challenges we meet in our life’s journey. Especially those challenges we fear the most. Until we face and overcome these challenges, they are bound to come back at us. And, as we conquer our challenges, we grow and contribute to those around us.

I refuse to believe that our being here is some type of fortuitous accident or series of accidents. Evolution does not negate the existence of a higher being, of some pre-planned existence. And I refuse to believe that, once we die, everything is over, gone. The soul, which is the collection of such riches we have created, lives on. And not only in those who come after us, but as an individual, self-sustaining

being. This is the basis of my faith.

***Who wrote this: Albin Trein***  
*Operations executive. Values-based leader. Multi-lingual. Lived  
and flourished in multiple countries.*

## FINDING ANDREA ALVARES

I think we come into this world to discover who we truly are. This is a lifelong quest that unfolds itself as we live our lives. Reality is that life “happens” as we live it. No other way. No shortcut. No alternative. And it happens in the exchanges we have with others and with the physical and immaterial world we encounter throughout our existence.

Our experiences shape us through the emotions we feel and “experience.” Our intellect then decodes these into rational concepts and helps us attribute conscious meaning to them. And as such, our lives are built and we become us. My conscious life began in a city in Brasil called Goiania in 1971. Born in a family of young parents, one an aspiring linguist and another an aspiring architect (who had given up engineering).

Experiences in a couple of cities in Brasil and later in the US created the early context in which my formation was grounded, and this, combined with my peculiar genetic design, were the defining forces of the “me” that began to shape my personality.

The love of dance, the desire to be the best I could be, the fascination with adventure fueled my search for accomplishment and justice. For I have never been able to look away...from inequality, from poverty, from suffering and pain, from injustice. Never.

Over the years, I have learned to develop skills and a repertoire that helped me make non-obvious connections and transform ambitions and dreams into actions. My life as an executive was the aftermath of a frustrated classical ballet dancer career that was interrupted by a physical injury. But it was the life that was laid out for me.

From business school all the way to a CEO position, to the decision to leave in search of a place where my world view and values were more in synch, almost 50 years of my life went by in a flash. Becoming a mother was the single most transformative experience of my life, turning my emotional structures upside down and teaching me to start from a new place.

Life has been good to me. I have lived love affairs and heartbreaks. I have felt glory and self-doubt. I have felt physical pain and bliss. And I have learned to love. My parents, my siblings, my friends, my partners, my children, nature. But above all else, I have learned to love myself. I suppose that's what life is all about, after all.

***Who wrote this: Andrea Alvares***  
*Chief Marketing, Innovation and Sustainability Officer at Natura,*  
*one of the world's largest B-Corps and the first publicly-held*  
*company to achieve B-corp certification.*

# EMPATHY

I feel deeply—

the suffering of others

the torment of animals

the shyness or bullying of a young child

the frustration and pain of those who are different.

I love deeply—

my siblings, nieces and nephews

my friends

my cats

my girls in the after-school program

the elderly

my cousins

my parents—always with all my heart—my parents.

I feel pain deeply—

for injustice

for the underdog

for the homeless

for those who feel alone

for those who hate and those who are hated.



And I hope deeply—  
for lasting peace  
for equality  
for help for those who are poor, sick, or depressed  
for our earthly home  
for the world's children.

It's tiring, it's sometimes heartbreaking, it's a roller coaster of emotions, it means sleepless nights and tears, thinking of yourself last and worrying constantly, but it can also bring immeasurable joy.

It's called empathy, and that's my life.

***Who wrote this:*** Barbara Bena  
*Senior caregiver. Ultrasound technologist. Dan Bena's sister.*

## FAMILIAR/UNFAMILIAR

I grew up in the Midwest, where everyone I knew was the same race, from the same socio-economic strata, and had similar beliefs. While difference of religion occasionally became an issue, it wasn't enough of a problem to break up friendships. Everything was *familiar*, from the meat and potato diet we ate to the bland clothes we wore and the short bobs our hairstylists favored.

I remained in that familiar world until age 39, in 1989, when I founded Artistic Circles with a mission to create media for social change, focusing on women's issues. This was a totally *unfamiliar* world to me, but one where I longed to make a difference. Over the next 30 years, I created award-winning national and international documentaries for radio and TV, Grammy-nominated CDs, symposiums, and wrote content mostly focusing on women and other minorities under-represented in mainstream media.

In 2007, I started my most ambitious project of all—creating and documenting a partnership between a desert village in Rajasthan, India and students and faculty at Northwestern University, which sits on the shores of Lake Michigan in Evanston, IL. In India, water shortage affected most poor populations, and women bore the brunt of walking for hours to fetch water. At Northwestern, flooding was a problem. I worked for six years to create partnerships between those

two communities.

After filming several times in India, I presented video clips from the Water Pressures project at a corporate conference, hoping to garner support to complete the documentary for broadcast. That's when I first met Dan Bena, then Director of Sustainability for PepsiCo. I took an exhibit booth, which took the last \$5,000 in our account to create the photo banners of the village women from Rajasthan in their colorful tangerine and red saris and video clips from the water projects we'd filmed in those impoverished communities.

I was an outsider, sitting at my booth with nearby purveyors of water equipment. The conference leaders were all Sustainability Heads from the premiere corporations that used water extensively in their products—Nestlé, Intel, John Deere, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo. From the moment that Dan came to my booth and talked with me, I knew that I'd met a kindred spirit. He was passionately interested in and involved with improving global water issues. PepsiCo was a good citizen in India, helping to build wells and provide support for the communities.

Dan made me feel welcome, and we worked closely the next couple years. He spoke to my students at Northwestern and PepsiCo supported the Water Pressures documentary, which aired around the world at public TV stations and elsewhere. Dan and others helped change the *unfamiliar* to the *familiar*. Throughout my career, I learned that what's unfamiliar can

become familiar with enough love, care and attention.

**Who wrote this:** *Ann Feldman, Ph.D.*

*Educator. Collaborator. Author. Creator. Founder of Artistic Circles, a not-for-profit whose projects include a 13-part series for NPR and PRI about women and girls in China, the Ties That Bind; video documentary Peace Project at 9/11; and the Water Pressures documentary.*



## INEVITABLE SORROW, PART ONE: THE LANGUISHING

In my life, I've never taken anything for granted. I was this way from a young age as I matured quite quickly. I remember telling my dad "We've had a pretty good life, didn't we!" And he would always say, "Yes, we did."

It was a privilege to have lived right next door to my parents. I remember when my first real job of 23 years was relocating to Queens and I decided not to go because of the distance from home. I found another job closer to home and my father said to me, "You sat your ass in a butter tub!" Throughout life, however, I was always looking over my shoulder, making sure that the "infamous" other shoe wouldn't drop! I've had a good life up until recently when terrible losses have consumed my mind and body. I've always wondered how people went on in life when they've experienced such a loss. It is all-consuming, all-inclusive and relentless. I don't ever recall being in tune with the feelings of my parents when they lost their parents. I don't recall their journey on loss. Was I too young to pick up on it?

When I first experienced the loss of a beloved kitty, most of my spirit died and my soul filled with tangible never-before-felt sadness. And then I lost my job. After collecting a paycheck for 39 years and having that single piece of survival paper stripped from you is like standing on the tallest mountain and falling over the edge. And if that weren't

enough, my sweet, precious mother left this world.

Her last place of breath was very scary to me, in a way I cannot fully explain. I can, however, express the lonely corridors, the empty room, and the sweet smile of her roommate. The unwanted garbled voices and sounds filling the air and the glaring “4” button on the elevator. It was a cold gray vessel that left my father all alone.

People say time heals. But I say it only worsens. You will forget their smell, their touch, their voice. Yet the world keeps on as if nothing has changed, and behind closed doors in the still of the night, billions of tears are shed for what used to be. I can only hope that one day I can come across a happy medium that will bridge a balance to that “pretty good life” I once experienced until the day that my own soul reaches above.

Behind closed doors, in the dark and quiet of the night, the body and mind have no mercy, and even if you are fortunate enough to not be alone, in quiet silence you lose all control and grief comes in and steals all your resolve. And you are most lucky if total exhaustion guides you into sleep.

Unfortunately, this is a journey we will all suffer. And yet this crazy world will still carry on. I wish strength and inner peace to all who have lost family, friends, and angelic pets.

**Who wrote this:** *This was the only author who requested two parts in this book. Subsequent to writing the first part, she underwent a personal transformation and believes this could help others dealing with grief and loss. Part Two follows on the next page.*





## INEVITABLE SORROW, PART TWO: THE TURNAROUND

Behind silent doors, I've been in crippling sadness, and it took one article to turn me around.

I'm turning a corner, and it hasn't been easy. It all begins in the mind. When you grasp the importance of changing your mind-set, the obstruction in your throat lessens; the pain, knot, and emptiness in your stomach relax; and your entire body begins to ease. It is a healing process that you talk yourself into.

I recently read an article that said a broken heart can lead to cancer. I don't want cancer. Sure, I knew that sadness and stress can make you sick, but reading about the "C" word is a whole other awakening. I'm tired of the total-exhaustion of being sad.

I'm amazed that I had it in me all along, that coping mechanism that we all have but don't access. It took one scary paper article to help me find and, most important, access it. It's not something you can do right on the spot. You need an invisible tangible to grab onto. Mine is quite simple, and when someone passes, most everyone will say it to you. But they are only words until you actually see them, embrace them and believe them. "They are happy, pain-free and loved by God; they are in a beautiful place." There is no pain, suffering or fear in Heaven.

My parents had a wonderful life and they are together again, happy, and pain-free. They would want us to continue their legacy and live a happy life just as they did. Don't just hear the words, don't just say the words, believe them.

Loss is ever-searing and there will still be sad moments. But I'm learning that I can't make myself sick over it. I still cry for my kitties, I still am sad about losing my job and the rawness of losing mom and dad still suck my breath away, but my mind kicks into action and I remember the importance of keeping my mind & body healthy.

The other morning, I woke up breathless and I jolted up from slumber. I was in a small panic and started crying. Did my father really die peacefully? I wanted to call my sister & ask as I felt that hollow in my stomach and throat. That all-encompassing loneliness. But there is nothing wrong with a good cry. Just as long as you don't let the draining effects pull you under. You have to work at it, and it's all controlled in your mind. I will have to make it a conscious decision to climb away. I did that this very morning.

On another important note, wear your good jewelry, wear rhinestones in the daytime! Wear your good clothes. Sport your fancy hats and break out those fancy shoes in the daytime and eat on your good dishes! If you don't, they will gather dust until someone else owns them. Enjoy all of your blessings.

I wish you all Peace. Of. Mind.

**Who wrote this:** *Barbara Paterno.*

*Executive Assistant in both the corporate arena and higher education. Provided primary care to her parents as they became elderly and infirmed.*



## MY STORY?

I don't think of my story as terribly inspiring, but I am inspired and very lucky to feel this way. I am inspired to find ways to create a better future for all—people and all living creatures. I honestly don't know how to do that apart from working with wonderful people and staying close to friends and family and listening more deeply.

I am increasingly feeling that nature is the concept and experience to bring us all together and help us see how to build the future we want. If we listen to and are guided by nature, we are likely to achieve true sustainable development. I love World Wildlife Fund's New Deal for Nature initiative—it is something tangible and complex, yet fully accessible for all of us.

All roads start and end with nature: if we are to address climate change, avoid the 6th wave of mass extinction, eliminate poverty and gross inequality, then I think we must be on a path to respecting and learning from nature. Every child knows this and yet somehow we forget as we age.

I have learned from my grandparents (none of whom was particularly well-educated) that hard work is not only important but rewarding. I have learned from my parents that to be curious and caring are secrets of the good life. I have learned from my family that the best happiness happens so easily when you are open to it and that it really is uncomplicated.

What can we do in this intense, challenging world where time seems to tick unrelentingly and urgency for change is everywhere? I think the best we can do is to stay collectively humble in that we don't know what is going to happen tomorrow; to stay together and get better at collaborating and aligning around a north star that can inspire us; to always think of the next generation of children, animals and trees and measure our actions against their needs.

We have the capacity for staggering generosity, intelligence and kindness, and that gives me hope.

***Who wrote this:*** *Chris Coulter*

*CEO of GlobeScan, an insights and strategy firm whose purpose is to build trusted leadership to create a better future.*

*Author of All In: The Future of Business Leadership.*

## BUMPS ALONG THE ROAD

I recently had the opportunity to interview a group of immigrants who had just become citizens. We were talking about education and language, and a disagreement quickly emerged. On one side was a woman from Bolivia, who had obtained various levels of higher education and was very comfortable speaking English. She also had light skin. On the other was a husband and wife from El Salvador, who were less comfortable speaking English and who were darker skinned.

The woman from Bolivia asked them why their English wasn't better and why they hadn't chosen to go to college. The couple explained that when they arrived, they were on one track: escaping poverty and the trauma that went with it. They worked arduous hours and didn't look back. They had no mental space to think about college or becoming fluent in English. The woman from Bolivia didn't buy it. It was their responsibility, she said, to get a degree and take late night classes to learn English.

I didn't agree with her, but I understood why the woman from Bolivia thinks the way she does. She had access to higher education and was able to make a choice about how she wanted to spend her professional life. If you're reading this book, you've probably had the chance to get at least one degree and made some choices about what your career is.

In this book about finding passion, I want to offer the



following points to keep in mind. (1) Remember that not everybody gets to do this. Self-discovery and the ability to choose your career is a gift we shouldn't forget. Most people don't get to do this. By all means, don't shame others because they haven't done so. (2) Beware of social media. Here exists the world of perfect professional lives, and they usually aren't real. We need to talk more about the bumps we experience along the road, and that a certain amount of doubt is healthy. This is hard to do in a Tweet or Instagram post. Talk to real people instead. (3) If you change your mind, it's ok. Profession trajectories are rarely linear, and we need to talk more about that. I was once told to consider my professional life a series of meaningful projects, that they probably won't seem connected until later—or that they may never be connected. It's the best advice I've received.

In my dream world, every human has the opportunity to find their passion and make choices about what a “professional” career is going to look like. We're not there yet. So, right now, let's be more aware of where we come from and that professional lives are nuanced and complex. And let's talk—not Tweet—about it.

***Who wrote this:*** Christopher Patten

*Artist and designer who applies his skills to improve the worlds of K-12 education and government. Recently a design researcher at the Center for Civic Design, where he used design to help voters vote as they intend. Currently a Design Strategist for the US Office of Personnel Management.*

## CRITICAL EXPERIENCES

The place that influenced me most is Nyigbenya, more commonly known as Tsopoli, the town where I lived for two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer at 22 years old. Tsopoli is about an hour east of Accra, Ghana's capital and on the main West African highway that connects Abidjan to Lagos. A dusty sign announced the name of the town as Nyigbenya, but everyone called it Tsopoli. When I asked an elder in my village about the disparity in the town names, he told me, "A white man put up the sign." In those two years as a Water, Sanitation and Health Volunteer in Tsopoli, I built latrines, a rain catchment system, and a primary school. I taught English and math at the school, hygiene education in the community and set up bread baking projects for the women's group. I also played a lot of soccer with the kids, pounded fufu with the women, and spent a lot of time sitting under baobab trees with old men.

That experience shaped a lot of my current perspective. I lived with a large Ghanaian family and the kids spent a lot of time fetching water for from a nearby river, the Sagrimi. That water was used for everything, and while I used it to bathe, I fetched cleaner water for drinking from a town 7 miles away. I still think of that river almost every night when I turn on the water for my daughters to take a bath in suburban Washington, DC.

The career that followed makes sense now, even if it didn't

always at the time. I knew I was interested in global development or sustainability issues but didn't know how I wanted to work on them. My first job was at an Internet strategy firm before heading to American University for graduate school. I started at AU's School of International Service, and then added an MBA. It was during this dual degree that I started to get more interested in how business dealt with important global challenges.

When I finished both degrees and after a stint at a communications and public affairs agency, I ended up at PepsiCo. My five years at PepsiCo is where I learned a lot about how companies address sustainability from a business perspective. My favorite part of being on the sustainability communications team at PepsiCo was that I worked with so many experts in the Company outside of communications: operations, public policy, R&D, the Foundation. I learned about navigating large companies and, most importantly, got experience in how sustainability can drive business goals and build reputation.

I've since moved back to Washington, DC for family reasons and am head of communications at the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. SFI is a sustainability organization that helps companies ensure sustainable supply chains and works with conservation, community, and education partners on other global sustainability issues like climate change. From Peace Corps to PepsiCo to SFI, I've worked with smart people on important issues. Good thing there are so many people who care, because there is a lot for us to do.

**Who wrote this:** Daniel Pellegroni

*Heads Communications for the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, whose mission is to advance sustainability through forest-focused collaborations. “We believe that sustainable forests are critical to our collective future and demonstrate our commitment to forests through our work in standards, conservation, community and education. This commitment to forests helps create better choices for people and the planet, now, and in the future.”*



## SITTING ON THE STAIRS

I was lying on my back as my breathing coach was connecting with me on a spiritual level. She said, “The spirits want you to tell me a story. Their hints: you are sitting on stairs and the colors pink and purple are flowing.”

Suddenly, I remembered a story I haven’t thought about since the 70s . . . I was 17 years old, living in a small town outside of Pittsburgh, PA. I was at home, sitting on the stairs, plotting a way to get to New York City with \$25, my life savings. I had just hand dyed a dozen pink and purple scarves—the colors were flowing and colliding. I had never been to NYC, but I was sure that if I could get there, my fashion design future would soar—that’s how beautiful my scarves were. I didn’t think, “My scarves may not be good enough.” Oh, the spirit of youth! But since I only had \$25, I never made it to NYC that week, but I did come up with a more logical plan: I will go to the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City.

So, I went to my guidance counselor and said, “I want to go to FIT.” She said, “You can’t be a fashion designer; you don’t know how to draw. And a girl like you won’t make it in NYC. You need to learn how to type and become a secretary—you are smart and will be a great help to someone.” BOOM. (For the record: I couldn’t draw but I could drape, which is a great talent, and I eventually lived in NYC for over a decade and thrived!). At the time, I believed her, and I learned how to

type 100 words a minute, with no mistakes.

Fast forward: I do wonder what would have been if I went to FIT, but I have no regrets because I have a great life professionally and personally. Who knows what's good or what's bad? Back to my breathing coach. She said, "That's the story they want you to tell. Now, they want you to go find that 17-year-old girl who is living inside of you—and this time no one is stopping her."

And now, almost 50 years later from the day I sat on those stairs, I'm on the journey of my life. And this time, no one is stopping me.

***Who wrote this: Denise Restauri***

*Author. Entrepreneur. Social influencer. Founder and CEO of GirlQuake and What's Under Her Coat. Architect of the landmark Forbes Women's Summit. Currently on her "Haute to Hippie Tour," an adventure that takes her from NYC to Venice Beach, where she's getting messy and discovering her next BIG thing.*

## **SWIMMING AND SMOKING: LIFELONG COMPANIONS**

My father, Solly, taught me to swim. My mother, Estelle, smoked. Solly represented South Africa in the 1952 Olympics. Estelle learned to smoke in her teens during the war years spent in New York, where she and her sisters had been sent to escape potential threats from antisemitic German sympathizers in Cape Town.

My siblings, Dianna, Theodore and Jonathan, all swam competitively at school. And always in pools.

Once I started life saving on Clifton beach and experienced the joy of open-water swimming—often over a mile offshore and alone—I never looked back. Robben Island soon beckoned. Nelson Mandela was still imprisoned there. Swims required coast guard approval. My first swim was to raise funds for the university health and welfare charity. The first double was interrupted by a shark and completed a month later. And many along the False Bay and Table Bay coasts followed.

Training requires swimming daily and immersion in cold water (mid 50s). It brought me as close to the natural elements as was possible. In some ways it involves complete sensory deprivation and in others it takes you deep into yourself. And opens my mind to new ideas as I try to tackle daily challenges.



All the while, I attended medical school. I found a focused area of passion in tackling large population challenges. Smoking, I felt, was the greatest of them all. It was not a popular topic. Many of my professors smoked—even in lectures. The largest tobacco company, Rembrandt, had bought respectability by engaging with cancer control, the environment and the city orchestra. Any hint of a change to status quo related to smoking was challenged by industry and its surrogates in government.

That was over 30 years ago.

The early passions remain even as the challenges grew. From Robben Island, the next natural extension was the English Channel and many other swims across Europe and the US. And my work to end smoking moved from Cape Town to national impact in South Africa in the post-apartheid era, to playing a leading role in developing global tobacco control policy at the World Health Organization. All the time building on the science, the link to advocacy, coalition building, policy change and measurable impact.

In late June 2019, the two passions came together. Our new Foundation joined with the University of Catania (Sicily, Italy) to launch what will be a global force to accelerate an end to smoking—and I celebrated by crossing the Straits of Messina, where Odysseus sailed in trepidation. On the one side of the Straits lives Scylla, a multi-headed monster ready to swallow all who pass. On the other bank was Charybdis, a giant whirlpool ready to suck in those who venture close.

Overcoming both has been a lifelong challenge. It remains so and is worth it if we can make a dent in reducing the 7 million deaths a year that occur prematurely among the billion smokers we have in the world. If I can swim daily, I will keep up the battle to end smoking.

***Who wrote this: Derek Yach***

*South African native. Former WHO Executive Director. Founder and Past President of the Foundation for a Smoke-free World.*

*Public health physician. Swimmer.*

*Anti-smoking pioneer.*



## **DOING WHAT I BELIEVED WAS RIGHT AND NEEDED DOING**

Hindsight is great. And in hindsight, I think the secret of my success was doing what I believed was right and needed doing—even if it cost me. Because only then could I live with myself and be proud of myself. And isn't that what success is about? Here are three examples.

When I was a young editor at Reader's Digest, I was doing great—getting raises, being promoted. Then, I had a baby, my beautiful daughter. When I returned to work, I wanted to demonstrate I was serious about my career, so I asked the Managing Editor what I needed to learn to move on to the next level of Senior Editor. "Oh, women don't become Senior Editors," he stated. This was the 1970s, when the "glass ceiling" was made of lead. Subsequently, along with seven other women, I launched a class action lawsuit claiming sex discrimination. We settled on the courtroom steps and the Reader's Digest made changes to equalize its policies. Taking action was not good for my personal career at the world-famous magazine. But it was the right thing to do, and it needed to be done. It opened opportunities for many women—at the Reader's Digest, in the workplace and for our daughters working today.

A second example was when I joined PepsiCo, the huge consumer foods and beverages company. Early on, I was given the responsibility for the Annual Report. At this point,

in the 1980s, a limited amount of information was required. I believed shareholders had a right to additional information on such things as market share and brand growth and other benchmarks of performance. I began to collect data and add it to the report. Soon, PepsiCo reports were winning award after award. Today, many of the benchmarks I added are still included in the PepsiCo annual report, and some are even required by regulation.

My final example is corporate citizenship. My position at PepsiCo was in communications, and I wanted to tell the world about the good things the Corporation was doing. The problem was this was decades ago, and no one was keeping track. As I began to record what the Company was doing, it sparked interest within the Company to do more. Soon, many people within PepsiCo were building robust programs to improve our performance with our product offering, environment and workplace. I was lucky to work for such a progressive company and chief executive officers, especially Steve Reinemund and Indra Nooyi. Today, PepsiCo calls this “Performance with Purpose.” I’m proud to have played a part in building this legacy, as did the author of this book, and we took action because it was the right thing to do and it needed doing.

Bad for me or good, I tried to do what I believed needed to be done and that is my definition of success.

**Who wrote this:** Elaine Auerbach.

*Publishing executive. Corporate Communications leader. Lover of romance novels. Author of Dirty Linen, Fairy Tales for Women Who Have Been Through the Mill, and Jo's Kitchen. To promote reading, when Elaine finishes a book, she leaves it in a hotel room, on a train, or in an office, for someone else to enjoy.*



## FISHERMAN TEACHER

Some of my first lessons in business and economics came from subsistence fishermen and farmers in different places of the world. Not your typical background for a business school instructor. One such teacher was an Alutiiq elder in Alaska.

Chenega Bay is on an island in Prince William Sound. You land on a narrow strip of dirt and the village is a short 4-wheeler ride away. The coffee was black and the elder's face was dark and deeply wrinkled. His people had lived on what we now call Prince William Sound for 10,000 years. They are part of the Alutiiq (ah-loo-tik) tribal family and their native language is called Suqcestun (sooks – toon). He had invited me into his home for coffee. I don't recall the reason. It was the late 1990s and I was working with Camp Fire's Bush Program (now called the "Rural Program").

The Rural Program started 60 years ago as a way to address the high rate of drowning in rural Alaska, which is 10 times the national average. Young lifeguard-trained adventurers like myself were paired up and flown to remote villages all over the state. It was a breathtaking experience and one of the first to widen the aperture of life. I formed close bonds with the many children we met as we taught swimming, creative arts, cooperative games, healthy life skills, etc.

I got to know their parents, grandparents and elders of the villages. Sipping black coffee, we made small talk. We talked



about the sweat lodge where his son had tried to cook me earlier in the day (or at least it felt that way). I remember him looking out over the sound, saying the fishing isn't what it used to be.

But in my memory, the whole dialogue hangs on one penetrating line: "When I die, the language will die with me." These nine words shook me. He had so radically pushed out the edges of the too small circle I didn't know I had drawn around the world.

In March 1989, Captain Joseph Hazelwood had been drinking not too far from where we were sipping coffee. It was a dark and very cold evening and most everyone in Chenega was asleep. It is dangerous to captain any kind of boat when intoxicated, much more so when it's an oil tanker. At 12:04 am, the tanker hit a reef, tearing open the hull and releasing 11 million gallons of oil into the sound. Over 1,000 miles of coastline were devastated, including Chenega.

The global business of companies overwhelmed the small, local business of the subsistence fishing village. The youth don't want to learn the language or go fishing anymore. Most want to wear Nike sneakers, play video games, and go to Anchorage. Maybe in Anchorage or some other far-off metropolis, we won't have to "live off the land anymore."

But that's the only way to live. All economies are subsistence economies. Doesn't all business rely on the healthy flourishing of the natural world and of human communities? We need to keep the languages around that remind us of

what that means.

**Who wrote this:** Erik Foley

*Director of Center for the Business of Sustainability. Instructor in Management and Organization for the Smeal College of Business at Penn State University.*



## A HORRIFYING REALITY

In the 1990s, I think I was the first lesbian on the Wall Street trading floor. Being closeted generally is really painful and takes up an enormous amount of energy. It's a terrible waste of talent and humanity and creativity and productivity. It took me about a year to go through the process. I finally came out, and I will never know if it did any damage to my career. But I don't think so. I would even argue that I wouldn't be where I am were it not for coming out, because I have been able to direct all my energy into my purpose.

I met the woman that I knew I was going to marry. I put a little money in the bank. I had been made a director—I was at Credit Suisse at the time. Stuff goes around fast when you work on the trading floor. I took aside three of my closest colleagues, off the floor, and said, "Look, I want you to hear this from me. I'm gay." That's all I had to do. That was it. Notwithstanding the anxiety associated with doing it, after I did it, it was very gratifying. That's around the same time that Ellen DeGeneres did her outing thing. That was genuinely helpful to me.

In the 2000s, I would say I was out for seven or eight years before I heard an actual bullying comment. I was in London on the trading floor working at UBS at that point. It came back to me that one of my colleagues had said as I was walking by—I didn't hear it—he said it to a group, "How did that dyke get pregnant?" At the time, I was pregnant with

my first daughter. I brought it to HR, but I ultimately decided not to formally pursue it. He wasn't promoted that year, though.

In the 2010s, I was honored to give a speech to the U.N. General Assembly when the marriage equality question was going on in the Supreme Court. When you're in the big General Assembly room, there is protocol. As you go up to the stage, what you're supposed to say is, "Excellencies, delegates, honored guests, and ladies and gentlemen."

The phrase "ladies and gentlemen" bugs the shit out of me. I find it to be exclusionary. So, I'm walking up the big steps and I'm thinking about what to say. I get to the podium, and I said, "Excellencies, delegates, honored guests, and colleagues of all genders." You heard a gasp in the hall. And then I did my thing.

***Who wrote this:*** Erika Karp

*American entrepreneur. Businesswoman. Investment advisor. At the time of this writing, she is the founder and CEO of Cornerstone Capital, Inc. This content originally appeared online in Institutional Investor, June 10, 2019, and was provided by the author, with permission.*

## **BELIEVE IN WHAT YOU ARE DOING WITH ALL YOUR BEING**

Since my undergraduate days, access to water and sanitation in developing countries has been my priority. I was fortunate to get a job right out of graduate school with Catholic Relief Services in New York, where I gained experience on water projects around the world. On a trip to Central America, I visited a village that did not have running water and was struck by how many above-ground graves there were and how small most of them were. While traveling to different project sites, I saw a landscape littered with broken wells and realized there was a gap between what people needed and wanted and what the various aid organizations were giving them. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) was also my area of focus in graduate studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and it was there that I formed an NGO called WaterPartners International (WPI), to find better ways to tackle this global crisis. We developed practices and defined criteria for successful sustainable programs that included the people we served as partners. We collaborated with local communities and delivered solutions they wanted and could maintain with the technology available to them. At that time, it was customary for aid organizations to enter a community, install a well or latrine, and go on to the next community. This was why I saw more broken than working wells. People living in the villages did not have the knowledge or the supplies to maintain and repair the equipment

left behind. Our methodology included working in partnership with local NGOs—engaging local labor, using equipment available, and ultimately leaving behind a community in full ownership of the water and sanitation solutions they chose.

Listening to people who have the problem opened my eyes to how much they were spending, in time and money, to meet their daily needs for water and a place to relieve themselves. I had the proverbial aha! moment and the WaterCredit initiative was born. Soon after we began piloting WaterCredit, I was fortunate to meet with Matt Damon, who co-founded H2O Africa. Matt and I merged our organizations and Water.org was formed. We have since moved to a financial model that is working at scale. In partnership with local institutions and using small household loans, we have now reached over 21 million people with safe water and sanitation around the globe.

We are still losing a child every 90 seconds to a water-related disease. That is absolutely unacceptable, and we continue to push both tested and innovative solutions that will lead to universal access to safe water and sanitation for everyone.

**Who wrote this:** Gary White

*CEO and co-founder of Water.org. Developed the organization's WaterCredit Initiative, a microfinance program aimed at assisting disadvantaged populations to gain access to improved water and sanitation. Leads WaterEquity, a separate 501(C)(3) focused on leveraging impact investments in the sector. A visionary whose innovations have helped millions across the globe access safe water and sanitation. Advisor to several organizations, including Skoll Foundation and IKEA Foundation. Founding board member of Millennium Water Alliance and Water Advocates. Co-authored, with Matt Damon, The Worth of Water (2022).*





## THE REFUGEES WHO SAVED ME

I want to tell you about two refugees. They were kids, eight and three. Their country was traded back and forth by powerful nations. Soldiers from one place or the other filled the streets, and before they knew anything else, the kids knew war. Their families fled to a refugee camp in a neighboring country. And they waited for years to be resettled in a world that wasn't always thrilled to take in strangers.

I work for an organization that, among other things, helps refugees—but I didn't help those two kids...I didn't give them anything. The truth is, they gave me everything. They were my parents—born in the tiny nation of Latvia in the 1940s, stuck between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. In a refugee camp after the war, my dad remembers eating very watery kohlrabi soup every day. Kohlrabi is a type of wild cabbage, and to the end of his life, my dad wouldn't touch it. He would be amused to learn that kohlrabi is now a hipster vegetable at farmers' markets.

Both of my parents' families eventually got to America, thanks to a nation open to immigrants. My parents grew up straddling two cultures, speaking Latvian at home and expected to keep family traditions alive; in the street or at school, it was English and basketball and becoming American teenagers. They passed the importance of both cultures on to my siblings and me. Proud to be American, but Latvian in

our bones, too.

You might have Chinese-American friends who went to Chinese school or Jewish friends who went to Hebrew school. We went to Latvian school every Saturday, which, tragically for the American side of us, meant no Saturday morning cartoons, and Latvian camp every summer.

GlobalGiving, where I have worked for the last ten years, helps refugees like my parents and people all over the world working to improve their lives. We send donations—whether it's \$10 from an individual or \$10 million from a company—to local organizations around the world, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe.

Every day, I am inspired by stories about amazing social change. Like the project in Portland that teaches young offenders to groom and train shelter dogs. I love the idea that those kids are learning a trade while they experience unconditional love. Or the project in Tanzania that trains rats to detect tuberculosis in saliva samples. With their noses, rats can diagnose the disease in a fraction of the time it takes for a lab test, before the patient even leaves the clinic.

Sometimes, in putting together a presentation, I'll be sorting through pictures and see a young child. He or she could be Syrian or African or European, but, inevitably, in their eyes I will see longing. To stop being a refugee and start just being a kid. And I think those children are no different from my parents...who were taken in by a great nation. Who grew up and prospered.

**Who wrote this:** *Ingrid Embree*

*Managing Director at Global Giving, where she helps companies and other organizations invest in their communities, engage their employees, and leverage their brands. Ingrid believes her superpower is amplifying people's good qualities (and Dan Bena agrees!).*



## MY FAMILY IS MY PASSION

I am Dan's middle sister. My family is my passion, clear and simple. I have two children of whom I could not be prouder, who have fought and conquered many obstacles to become exemplary human beings, in addition to becoming loving spouses and parents.

My sisters and in-laws are my friends and I know I could count on them to be there if needed. My "baby" brother is our "go to guy" for anything and everything! I am also happy to have an "ex" family. Though divorced, I am blessed to still be Aunt Irene to many nieces and nephews.

Then came the grandchildren!!!! Hold your horses!!!!!! When God created grandchildren, He gave the greatest gift of all...concentrated bundles of your kids that are here to love, cuddle and enjoy as much as possible.

My dad and mom each had their own wonderful, yet different qualities. As I get older, I understand some of the things they did or said to try to raise us the best they knew how, and how the circle of life keeps turning.

I pray that my children and grandchildren have a kinder world to grow up in and that we all will be together again one day.

***Who wrote this:*** Irene Wasicsko

*Retired US Postal Clerk. Proud mother and grandmother. "World famous" for her elbow macaroni recipe. Sister of Dan Bena.*



## CONSIDER OTHERS' FEELINGS

When I was 12 years old on the Caribbean island of Dominica, I lost my mom to cancer. I moved in with several aunties thereafter. This wasn't working well with them because I was not an easy kid to deal with. I liked my own way. Stubborn, maybe. Strong-willed. I was never really rude or anything, but now as an adult I understand how tough it is to raise someone else's child. I began to realize this toughness when I moved to some relative's house. They were cousins of my mom, people I never knew during the period I lived with my mom. They happened to be neighbors of an aunt I lived with.

My aunt fell sick and passed away, but by then I was already living with my relatives next door. That's when my life took a twist for the better.

I grew up always having my way as a teen—no father, no mother. I had friends, and I had fun (something teens love to do). I strayed a bit and sampled a life in the fast lane. It was all good at that age—the attention, the power on the streets, and all that flashy stuff.

My turning point came when I started ending up in trouble with gangs. Not too much with the law, but I know I used to be watched. At the age of 18, I asked myself a question, "Why must I endanger the lives of people who took me off the streets?" They were not a quarter as hard on me as my mom's sibling, which means they were patient, kind, and I



didn't feel favoritism whenever I was around their family tree; I felt at home. This is when I decided that I could at least make them see that I was worth helping.

I decided to work hard, and to always be positive. I also wanted my mom to rest in peace, for she was a very positive woman who would've wanted me to be the best person ever. That's what I'm trying to be.

***Who wrote this:*** Jefferson Joseph

*Moved to the US from the Caribbean Island nation of Dominica. Held several jobs, including being a companion sitter for elders in long term care facilities, which sparked him to pursue and achieve his Certified Nursing Assistant credential. Provides dedicated front-line care and compassion to our most treasured generation.*

## SAFARI OF A SOUL

Years ago, when people asked me where I called home, I never quite knew how to answer. My roots were firmly planted in Cedar Rapids, Iowa when a dashing young Brit convinced me to marry him and live in a studio flat in London.

Two children later, we moved to Nairobi, Kenya, described as the “Cradle of Mankind,” where I felt happier than I had anywhere else on earth—utterly captivated by the people, vast skies and the contribution I could make on the continent I was proud to call home. But after a decade, I parted from my husband, and, together with the children, made a new start in London, where the steel gray skies and compressed views from my third-floor window reflected my sadness.

Following the murder of my son, Dan, in Somalia, I uprooted yet again, this time to Los Angeles.

Despite my attempts to settle, my soul yearned to return to Africa, where I had felt most alive and productive. I decided to go back to Nairobi, hoping to embrace and be embraced by the place that had so warmly welcomed me. But once there, although I loved visiting my old friends who generously welcomed me into their lives, I was still uncertain as to where I truly belonged.

On the plane headed back to London, flying over northern Kenya in the darkness, I realized I no longer felt the painful

mal d’Afrique that had haunted my departures ever since leaving Kenya in 1988. I was finally at peace. Africa didn’t seem like home anymore, neither did America nor England. I suddenly realized that my true home was where I never thought to look—deep inside myself.

As I reflected on my long, often tortuous homecoming, I became aware that although I had to travel thousands of miles to Africa to first lose, then find and, ultimately, be true to that self, there is an unexplored continent within each of us waiting to be discovered—a place of joy and sorrow, of darkness and light, with limitless potential, challenging every aspect of our being.

To respond to its call is to embark on a voyage that will leave us forever transformed, for it is during this safari of the soul that we confront who we are and who we can become. Cocooned in my seat and lulled by the drone of the engines, I drifted off to sleep, wondering if, after a lifetime of asking questions, I had finally, without noticing it, lived my way into at least some of the answers.

***Who wrote this:*** Kathy Eldon

*Film producer. Author. Co-founder of Creative Visions, a not-for-profit dedicated to using media and the arts to ignite social change. A sought-after speaker due to her ability to inspire audiences, worldwide.*

## **LEARNING TRUE LOVE THROUGH THE ACTIONS OF OTHERS**

Throughout 25 years of working in the healthcare system, my patients and their caregivers, along with my own family, have taught me what true love really means. For 12 of those years, I worked at a cancer institution, where my patients ranged from those receiving curable treatments to those having terminal illnesses leaving them struggling to stay alive.

Not only did I learn a tremendous amount about strength, the human spirit, and the will to live from them, but they have also inadvertently taught me the definition of true love. Watching these patients struggle through painful treatments, sometimes for years, in the hope of gaining just one more day, one more hour, or even one more minute with those they love taught me to appreciate the time I have with those around me while it's freely given to me.

The patients weren't the only people who served as examples of love during my oncology career. It was the spouses, parents, friends, children and caregivers who were willing to put their lives on hold to spend time with their loved ones and care for them physically, mentally, and emotionally as life slipped away from them, but still they produced a brave smile for their loved ones, putting them before themselves no matter what the personal cost.

Recently, I have had the privilege to care for a remarkable

person with ALS, proving yet again that I will never stop learning from others. My patient's wife has spent the last five years, 24 hours a day, caring for his every need, whether it's to scratch his nose, lift him from the bed to the wheelchair, research new technology to help him be able to communicate, give him medicine in his feeding tube, or find pictures of animals to put on the wall to make him smile. Whatever his needs, she is there in a heartbeat. He cannot talk, he can't move a muscle, eat, or even breathe without her help. She has not left her home in a year because he is anxious without her by his side. Without complaint, she stays exactly where he needs her to be. Her love is selfless and inspiring.

Last, but certainly not least, my family. I often share the love story of my parents who were friends as children, high school sweethearts and now married for 46 years. Observing them grow together and watching how they have adapted to their changing relationship guides me in my own marriage. I see how my aunt and uncle honorably put each other before themselves by displaying small acts of kindness to each other every day and making sure to always be silly and playful to help their love grow. Finally, I saw the example of my grandmother, who was devoted to her husband even through late stages of Alzheimer's disease as he turned into a completely different man than the one she committed herself to many years ago.

So many people I have met have shown me what true love is, and I can only hope to use those lessons in my own

relationships and career by showing respect, kindness and love to those around me. I know this life is a gift, but the love that is ours to share is a precious gift we can pass on to others.

I thank all the special people who have influenced my life, especially my wonderful husband and my four rescue dogs who give me their unconditional love every day. The resilience and willingness of those dogs and so many like them to trust and love again is amazing after the mistreatment and lack of human kindness many of them were subjected to in their early lives. Another lesson in love for all of us.

***Who wrote this: Anonymous***

*Occupational Therapist. Devoted dog mom and rescuer. Asks that readers please consider supporting a local dog rescue, whose mission is to help people learn to understand how dogs communicate, their likes and dislikes, and how to connect with them in ways that enrich their lives and the lives of their humans.*



## THE MATTRESS STORIES

I was 12 years old. I was picked up on my beach block as I was taken by bus to my new private school in a very rich area in the Five Towns, New York. I was in 6th grade. I remember as we drove through a torn-down neighborhood with dilapidated buildings, I would watch every morning a group of men drinking at 8 am, and on the front porch was a big filthy mattress. As I watched out the window every day, bearing witness, I would say to myself, “Not on my watch!”

I am 19 in Athens, Ohio. I was in a college town building a community center for the young people in Sugar Creek back on “Honky Tonk” road—no water, no bathroom—just old mining shacks. I hit the back winding roads, letting people know door-to-door that their kids were welcomed. I believe one of the most frightening moments of my life was walking over to an old shanty cabin and knocking on the door. No one answered. I knocked again and again and slowly the door squeaked open, as if I were in a horror film.

“Hello? I am just letting you know that we will have an art center opening soon. Hello?” With that, the door cracked open and as if out of an Irving Penn photograph came a shadow of an old man who sat sandwiched between two filthy mattresses. A beam of grey light pierced the room while a sea of thousands upon thousands of empty bottles of alcohol laid everywhere.

I stood in the doorway, my mouth open and the breath just



taken out of me. He just stared at me . . . a skeleton of a man . . . and I just stared back. We were both frozen in time . . . frozen in his poverty, and I, at 19 years old, bore witness to his pain. Not on my watch!

For 40 years, I have created, through my work at The Citykids Foundation and globally through a media program called “Chat the Planet,” a safe space for young people to come together, share their stories and turn their pain into purpose.

It is my passion. It is what I must do.

***Who wrote this: Laurie Meadoff***

*Social innovator and entrepreneur. Producer. CEO of multiple not-for-profit organizations. Founder and President Emeritus of CityKids Foundation.*

## THE BLANK TILE

I am passionate about passion, and I throw myself into work situations that inspire me. Having grown up in the motion picture business, where my father (Dad would be 110 today) was President of Warner Brothers in the Northeast and was hired by Jack Warner, I was always fascinated with how movies are made. My first time on a set, starring Rock Hudson and Doris Day, one of the camera men asked me to pick up a rock. Startled, I said, "I don't think I can pick that up." He replied, "Try." So, I did, and it was like picking up a cotton ball. It was then that I realized how much of what we see every day is illusion.

I have been able to utilize my political acumen, which took me through working with the then Second Lady (Joan Mondale) as her top advance person for several years, then spending six years with a US Senator who wanted to be president, Gary Hart. Gary's gift was to be brilliant and charm Hollywood, and so I learned how to combine DC and LA, and it has stuck with me ever since.

Having said this, I am writing a book, called "BLANK TILE"—like the tiles in the board game, Scrabble. There are only two such tiles in a Scrabble box. They can connect anything, often making many words, sometimes landing on a triple letter score and a triple word score, but the *blank tile*, although it is a connector, is almost always "worthless" for a score. In my professional life, I have connected numerous people and

things, and often haven't gotten a "thank you" or simple acknowledgement.

That used to eat at me, but now I am finally doing something about that. I am realizing that the "blank tile" does have worth, but I have been looking to others to define it. Now, I look to myself.

I have thrown my passion behind two projects set to be greenlit by Hollywood, and suddenly the "blank tile" has incredible value.

***Who wrote this: Lori Henry***

*Consummate "dot connector." Long and eclectic career, ranging from the White House to the Hollywood film industry to creating a board game to engage grandparents with their grandchildren.*

*Also has worked with numerous not-for-profits.*

## YOU CAN'T REALLY BE TOO PASSIONATE

I have always been told that I am passionate about everything I do.

Looking back, I now know that to be true, since I put great effort into my thoughts and actions—for work, but especially for others . . . people and animals!

After managing almost every part of the business at PepsiCo, the most rewarding role was leading community engagement and social impact, linking business and brand. This role allowed me to marry my love for delivering “good” with leveraging my business leadership for impact and positive change. That’s when I discovered my passion and purpose.

And I never realized it—only in retrospect—but I have been subconsciously very selective about whom I have in my circle. I am drawn to, and surrounded by, top talent, drivers, and inherently kind-hearted, passionate people—almost all with special or unique bonds.

As a result, we are each other’s beacons for both professional and personal matters. We are each other’s trusted “life coaches,” and we each fuel the other’s passions. In the end, it comes down to people . . . the people you enjoy being around, the people who help you grow, and the people who accept and appreciate you for who you are.

So, when we talk about wealth or success, I couldn’t do any

better than where I am today.

***Who wrote this:*** Lynda Costa

*Social purpose and business transformation executive. Animal lover and advocate. Devoted to family, friends, and the underdogs of society.*

## WHAT ARE VALUES?

It is sometimes difficult to answer this question, if presented as directly as this, but if we speak about a time when you felt violated, limited or stepped upon, your values would quickly pop up and become apparent.

“Who will want to marry you if you go there?” The moment I mentioned the opportunity of studying at the University of Oxford, having just returned from an unsanctioned trip in my parents’ car for an interview at the University, my mother, Gurpal Kaur, thought it a bad idea.

Many parents might have expressed support or encouragement. But not my mother. A name like “Oxford” epitomized the British ruling class: the people who had changed her native India so much during the Raj and were ultimately responsible for her ending up in a place where she was alienated, alone, and the frequent victim of violent racial abuse. She envisioned losing me, her best and only friend in our village in Gloucestershire, to a place where I would become exposed to drugs and end up marrying an upper-class white boy called Sebastian.

Marriage. At eighteen, it felt like a cage to be avoided as long as possible: the end of freedom and happiness. Then, as now, what I valued most was the power to set the course of my own life, and not to be constrained by the expectations of others. For my mother, nothing was more important than that I be married off in the right time and to the right boy: a

Sikh, with the appropriate creed, background, and parentage. Both of us feared most what the other desperately wanted, and I suddenly understood the importance of values.

For her, stability held sway, whilst I was moved by the desire for freedom, exploration, and the thirst for knowledge. We both wanted the best for me, but we couldn't agree on what that was. Our starting points and basic assumptions had become irreconcilable. Our values were in conflict.

Once we understand our values and the values of others, the angst disappears. All of us will have moments like this in our life, where the choices facing us reveal something important about our character, desires, and personality. This moment led to my accepting a full-paid scholarship to study over on the other side of the world—The University of Melbourne—in order to study politics, economics and philosophy in practice, and then travel all the countries in between on my way back home. And to then never stop.

Thanks to Kathy Eldon, I went on to join the BBC World Service and have now travelled nearly 150 countries, reporting on some of the most important matters in the world.

What are YOUR values? What matters most to you, and how can knowing your values shape your life? To take this journey, pick up the book, “The Values Compass,” and your life will be more effective, efficient, successful, fulfilling and, therefore, happy. Please do get in touch.

**Who wrote this: Mandeep Rai**

*Global authority on values, working with companies, institutions, and individuals around the world. Reported as a journalist for the BBC World Service and Reuters, among others. Author of the best-selling book, The Values Compass: What 101 Countries Teach Us about Purpose, Life and Leadership. WhatsApp:+447762891397*





## THE LITTLE THINGS

I'm not one for introspection or talking about myself, but this opportunity to do so really got me to thinking. And the first thing I realized about myself is that I have been known to be one who does not react to things in a big way. I am mostly happy and content and tend to think about a situation before I react. Actually, maybe more people should do that as well as to try to put themselves in another's place before they judge.

My “passion,” if you want to call it that, is to love and care for my family and friends the best way I know how. Thinking through who I am and even discussing this idea of sharing stories with others around me has taught me that it's okay—it's fine not to have extraordinary reactions when something happens. But don't let that fool you. I, and others like me, feel it inside, maybe even more deeply than those that are so quick to express over-the-top surprise, anger, elation, horror.

It does not make us weaker; it doesn't mean we don't care. In fact, I realize that I actually appreciate owning some of my own qualities. I have tremendous empathy for suffering people and animals, an almost unlimited capacity for forgiveness, and a strong desire to do what I can for those I care about.

As they did with my Mom, people tend to talk to me, so apparently, I'm a good listener. I'm not a wealthy person, and I'm no longer young and energetic, so maybe the things I

do are not grandiose gestures, but I like to think I am helping in some small ways. One of my friends and I discussed this request to write about “my story” and I said that I don't have an overwhelming passion. She told me that I certainly do: it's being the best wife, mother, sister, friend, aunt, person I can be—giving more than I expect to receive, acting instead of just talking about doing something when someone needs help or encouragement, quietly listening and offering advice, basically—loving.

It's something every one of us can do, but do we? Are our lives so busy that we can't make a call to someone whom we haven't heard from in a while, send a card for special occasions or when someone is ill or has lost a loved one, visit and help out when they are sick or even just lonely or sad, bringing food, making a grocery run or just being there to listen, sharing a smile with a stranger or offering them a compliment?

Random acts of kindness can make your whole day turn around and help someone in the process. It took me a while to realize it, but it turns out the little things really ARE the big things; and yes, they can make a difference.

***Who wrote this:*** Mary McFarlane

*Retired from local government's Planning and Development Department. Devoted to her husband of 49 years, two children and their families, relatives, and friends. Enjoys sunsets, reading, golfing, painting, sports, nature, and being a cat mom.*

*Dan Bena's sister.*

# LISTENING TO SILENCE: FIELD NOTES FROM A SUSTAINABILITY JOURNEY

*“The world was born yearning to be home for everyone.”*

Eduardo Galeano

Sustainable development begins with me. These were the first words I expressed publicly on sustainable development, during the course of a university debate while pursuing my undergraduate degree. In the early nineties, the term was still fairly new, but I realized that I had already been practicing its tenets since my teens. It was to be more a personal quest, or so I thought. Serendipity struck and a decade later I was on the fulfilling journey to professionally assisting India’s visionary business leaders in establishing their sustainability agenda. From governance to strategy, policies, management systems and field projects, I had the opportunity and honor to do them all. Customarily, we believe that we choose our respective professions, but many times professions are shaped from within us. How else could I have embraced the concept so completely?

My journey of co-creating value for business and society through the warp and weft of sustainability opportunities and challenges continued well into the new millennium. Globally, the Kyoto Protocol on climate change became effective in 2005; G3 (Generation 3) guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) for non-financial reporting were introduced in 2006 and Integrated Reporting was beginning

to take shape. Nationally, too, it was a transformative period for Indian industry. Several business groups were making international forays to become India-based multinationals.

It was exciting times and a humongous amount of work had to be done. For instance, what would sustainable development really mean for the developed world? Would it address the same fundamental rights for living a life of dignity—access to quality water, food, education, healthcare and housing? Or would it be different for those who had these rights already? The changed context forced me to recalibrate my concepts around sustainable development and, consequently, my conversations with key stakeholders. It was time to understand the difference between income and human poverty, to recognize its multidimensional nature, including economic, human, political and socio-cultural aspects, among others.

I have traversed a fair distance on my sustainability journey. This amazing gift, this incredible privilege remains as fresh and exciting as when I first started. A lot remains to be done. For instance, how do we address constituencies that are equal, if not greater, contributors to the delicate web of interdependence that sustains life on earth? Key among them are the silent stakeholders—humans who cannot or will not speak; species with whom we co-inhabit the earth, whom we struggle to fully understand; and the environment which we choose to willfully ignore ‘til a hurricane, a scorching summer, a “Day Zero” or a dead whale full of plastic makes us sit up and take notice. How can we facilitate

giving voice to their values, views and vulnerabilities?

Maybe Galeano meant “*everything.*”

***Who wrote this:*** Muna Ali, PhD

*Award-winning Asia-Pacific strategic industry leader with over 20 years of experience in delivering social, digital & environmental impact. Founding Ambassador of the progressive European education start-up, Tomorrow University of Applied Sciences.*



## **HOW DO SOME PEOPLE REMAIN POSITIVE THROUGH SUCH ADVERSITY?**

Sometimes, there is a person who enters our life and influences us in ways we don't expect. I had the good fortune to meet an extraordinary woman named Marie who married my cousin more than 50 years ago. They became a family of six when they added three sons and a daughter.

Their first son was a beautiful baby who, until he was about one year old, seemed to grow and progress as expected. Then suddenly their lives were changed in ways that were hard to believe or understand. Their baby had seizures, and he would never learn to walk or talk like other children. He required 24-hour care.

Unfortunately, as their family continued to grow, so did their problems. Along with the usual childhood illnesses, another one of their children was diagnosed with a non-malignant brain tumor, there was a life-threatening accident and many other extreme difficulties that no parents should have to endure. Their first-born son died from a seizure when he was sixteen.

Marie did not complain but handled every new challenge with love and grace.

The final blow was my cousin's death in his late fifties from Alzheimer's Disease. Marie had lost her loving husband at a young age. Yet, what would have destroyed another person



seemed to inspire Marie to fight harder. She went back to school and became an inhalation therapist. She never asked for or expected sympathy but instead moved on with her life, an inspiration to our family, and especially to me.

When I called her recently to wish her a happy 80th birthday, she chatted with me as usual for a while and then reluctantly told me she has pancreatic cancer. In her words, she is thankful for her family and friends and a wonderful life. She considers herself someone who has had many blessings.

Marie had so many reasons to give up on life or to become bitter or depressed. But she never has, and she won't now. I think I'm the one who is blessed to have had such a wonderful and positive person in my life.

***Who wrote this:*** Anonymous woman  
70-something. USA.

## POSITIVITY

Teaching how to be peaceful. Teaching how to cope, and how to remember that you are enough. That's it. Enough.

Many of the students I work with are diagnosed with anxiety or mood disorders. I'm passionate about teaching "my kids" that they are enough through whatever battle they are fighting. Mental health is my passion.

I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. I didn't know I would end up so involved in mental health and education—but these kids have taught me something that no professor could ever teach me. That I am enough—through whatever battle I am fighting—I am enough for them.

The achievements and "wins" I celebrate might not be an "A" or a "4," but a child making it through a writing lesson without shutting down or giving up. I'm working to instill the same "enough-ness" in my four-year-old son. It's hard to not mow down the obstacles in front of him, but teaching him to cope through failures and celebrate successes with grace will hopefully get him there.

He and "my kids" have taught me that I am enough.

***Who wrote this:*** Jenn Wilson

*Dedicated educator. Closet poet. Proud of her greatest achievement, her son, Cooper.*



## **MY ROAD TO MY PASSION, IGNITED IN THE NEGEV DESERT**

I grew up in Haifa, a Mediterranean port city nestled in Israel's Mount Carmel. Life in the newborn state during the 1940s and 1950s was modest: simple housing, simple food, simple toys. Imagination was my playground. As a teen, I joined a youth movement—boys and girls hiking across the country, singing and dancing Israeli folksongs, discussing how to create a better society.

After completing my military service at the age of 20, I moved to Kibbutz Hatzetim in the Negev desert. We were a small community of young pioneers with a drive for idealism, a thirst for adventure. We were also farmers with a tough task—fighting arid land. Water was scarce, and yields were poor. But I loved getting up in the morning, driving my tractor in the boundless fields. I loved harvesting alfalfa with my scythe, the morning dew up to my knees.

Then came Netafim. At a community meeting in 1965, we learned about a new invention—drip irrigation. We decided to give it a try and founded the company. If it worked, it would address the biggest challenge on our farms and across the nation—water scarcity.

At first, I didn't want to join Netafim; I wanted to be a farmer. In 1967, I installed drip irrigation for the first time in my bell pepper field. The results were amazing. I finally joined Netafim in 1975. I wasn't interested in a managerial

position. I wanted to be where I was always most comfortable—in the field—talking to farmers, promoting drip. A typical day involved checking a new drip installation in a tomato field in the western Negev, then visiting a citrus grower in the Gaza region. We'd sit together on the roof of his pump house in the orchard and enjoy a cup of hot Turkish coffee. A breeze from the sea cooled our faces as we listened to the ticking of the pump. These farmers were not just customers; they were friends, and still are, to this day.

I continued doing this for several years throughout the world—in Greece, the US, South Africa. In Greece, I met citrus and olive growers. As in Gaza, they made fantastic coffee and were excellent farmers—a winning combination!

Heading west in 1981, I spent a few years based in California, helping to introduce drip to farmers. The pump house was in the Central Valley, the orchard was in the Arizona desert, and there rarely was a breeze from the sea. Farmers, however, are a unique breed worldwide, and again I made many friends. The American coffee, however, could learn a lesson or two from the Israelis or Greeks.

All that led me to my current position—Chief Sustainability Officer. I'm proud to witness and promote our achievements, helping farmers across the world "grow more with less" and contributing to a more water- and food-secure world.

And my greatest reward? Hearing a female smallholder

farmer in India talk about how drip irrigation has transformed her life.

**Who wrote this:** *Naty Barak*

*Chief Sustainability Officer Emeritus of Netafim, the global leader in smart irrigation solutions. Founded in 1965 in Israel's desert, Netafim pioneered the drip revolution, creating a paradigm shift toward climate-smart agricultural irrigation. Today, the company serves millions of growers of all sizes in over 100 countries, helping the world grow more with less.*



## **DON'T LET YOUR YESTERDAYS DEFINE YOUR TOMORROWS**

My story began in NYC on June 21, 1980. For those who know me, it would be no surprise that I was sure to make my debut on the longest day of the year. My mother couldn't wait for my arrival. She was in love with me long before she met me. My father was disappointed that I lacked a certain body part that he felt would have made me more valuable and him more proud. Nevertheless, I was somewhat accepted since I was the eldest, but he was on a quest for a son. Four daughters and two wives later, he got his wish.

My parents divorced when I was about three and both remarried when I was six. This is where my story really begins, as the union between my mother and stepfather has been the most critical part of my journey. My stepfather was 28 when he married my mom and took on my sister and me as if we were his own. Words really can't do justice to how amazing of a father and husband he is. God truly blessed us.

My early childhood experiences are responsible for my self-determination. My mother and stepfather inspired me to work my hardest so that their sacrifices wouldn't be in vain. My birth father instilled drive from sheer fear of never wanting to be financially dependent on anyone, like my mother had been on him. Both sides of the coin compelled me to never settle for good enough, in any aspect of my life.

It would take much more than 500 words to tell my "story"



and how I ended up as a 38-year-old VP of Marketing at a wine company living in San Francisco, but that's not how I define myself and that's not the legacy I care to leave behind. Instead, I will share my reflections on the things that I'm most grateful for receiving throughout my journey. After all, it's the experiences along the course of our lives that shape us, and, in many ways, are more important than our actual destination.

My gratitude starts with my faith. It defines who I am. It makes me want to be the very best version of myself. It's my north star in what can be a very dark world. I'm grateful for not always getting what I wanted but always receiving what I needed. I'm grateful for my parents whose selflessness, love and support have shown me how to give and receive love. They taught me how to be humble and how to put others first. They taught me how to be kind and how to sacrifice. I'm grateful for those who have challenged me and for every rejection. There have been many. They taught me how to get up stronger and fight harder. They also taught me serenity in accepting the things I cannot control. I'm grateful for living. Truly living. For experiencing all the incredible things life has to offer by continually putting myself outside of my comfort zone. I'm grateful for friends who have turned into family. Who love me unconditionally and accept me equally for my gifts and short-comings. I'm grateful for being able to have an open heart and mind. For respecting myself and trusting my intuition. For being able to hear God's voice and follow His guidance and for getting back up every time I fail Him, to try to do better. I'm grateful for having the courage to face

my fears, for my independence and for learning how to love and value myself, for rewriting my story and constantly adding new and exciting chapters.

I will leave you with this: there will always be circumstances outside of our control, yet we must not let our yesterdays define our tomorrows.

***Who wrote this: Patty Montagno***

*Accomplished Marketing executive with 15 years of experience in brand strategy and creative ideation at companies including Firstleaf, Treasury Wine Estates, A+E Networks, PepsiCo and Procter & Gamble. Founder of Montagno Media.*



## **IF YOU DO SOMETHING YOU LOVE, YOU'LL NEVER WORK ANOTHER DAY**

It is not the normal path. A scientist working in the lab launching global business academic program partnerships and a Human Resources Masters along the way.

My story begins with Applied Chemistry and Chemical Process Principles studied in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal and Cork, Ireland, respectively. These were to lead to lab-based roles and the perceived joy of QC analysis. A job well done led to procedure authoring and then a passion awakened: enabling others. As new employees joined the organization, their first contact in the lab was me. The first few days navigating their role was done by my side, and the early weeks of learning new processes and building professional knowledge were under my supervision.

A new role in PepsiCo meant stepping into Lab Systems and a hybrid of knowledge and interest—coupled with a 3000 page manual that I was told was “training.” With limited budget and lots of passion, I built my first global program and rolled it out in five countries. The experience of delivering programs across different cultures and ensuring their delivery resulted in measurable output and was a solid foundation for what was to become the next step in my career.

Building on the systems training role, in 2011, I formally joined a training team and set about developing impactful

training programs across a range of topics. In line with the role and through career discussion, it became clear that an educational grounding would benefit me. First, taking a Diploma in Human Resource Management, another good choice that unlocked a passion. I went on to complete a two year part-time Human Resource Management Masters and, as part of this, write an award-winning thesis on Flexible Working.

I now lead a program that delivers 50,000 hours of training a year and lecture on a program that grows our leaders of the future. At the same time, I lecture on the topics of Flexible Working, work-life balance and development of corporate training programs.

My career path has shown organizational fidelity but meandered through roles as opportunities arose and were created by my interest and enthusiasm. Following my passion has been key to my achievements, and sometimes unlocked doors. While mine is not the normal path, a combination of science and Human Resources, it has been a great fit for my organization and me. It is true that if you do something you love, you will never work another day.

***Who wrote this:*** Paul Kent

*Corporate Learning and Development leader and Adjunct  
Professor for University College Dublin, Ireland.*

## **DO SOMETHING THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE**

As a kid, I would always annoy my father by turning off the tap when he was shaving, or I would tell my sister to hurry up in the shower because she was wasting water. At the time, in Mexico, there was a TV campaign called “Gota a gota el agua se agota,” which translates into something like “drop by drop water runs out,” and it worked on me. Coming from Guanajuato, a state in central Mexico where agriculture is one of the main activities but water is scarce, I realized early on how valuable water is. If rain was good in a given year, farmers were happy, but if it didn’t rain, the small farmers with no access to irrigation would suffer.

After graduating with a B.S. in Chemistry, I went to work as an engineer in a multinational consumer goods company in Mexico City. I learned a lot, traveled a lot, and tried my best to have an environmental angle in my projects, but I knew that what I was really passionate about was water, which was actually the most important raw material we used in our operations, but somehow was not valued as such. I had two choices, either continue being promoted at the company or quit and go study more about water and change my career. I chose the latter. I ended up doing an M.S. degree in Environmental Engineering at Columbia University in New York, and took most of my classes in topics related to . . . water. After living in landlocked places my entire life, having the Hudson River and the ocean so close felt (and still feels)

so precious.

At Columbia, I was really lucky to take the Environmental Data Analysis class taught by Prof. Upmanu Lall. It was the hardest class I had ever taken, but it opened up a whole new universe for me. At the end of the semester, I thought, “I would like to do this for a living.” My luck continued and a year later, after finishing my studies, I was hired at the Columbia Water Center under the direction of Prof. Lall. It has been six years and I still feel so grateful every day on my way to work. I am fulfilling my dream of working on water and I am doing it with a group of very inspiring people. I have done projects related to water management in agriculture; studies on the feasibility of rainwater harvesting as alternative water supply in Mexico City, the United States, and Ethiopia; water valuation in the mining industry; analyzing the risks of water dams and tailing dams; and even climate-related human migration. Water covers so many aspects, it is so complex, and it can be incredibly devastating or soothing.

I am drawn to this complexity. There are so many things about our interaction with water that need to be figured out, and I intend to keep contributing to this fascinating field.

***Who wrote this:*** *Paulina Concha Larrauri*

*Researcher at the Columbia Water Center at Columbia University.*

*Passionate about respecting and protecting the water resources we share.*

## GIVE YOUR ALL

My mission in life has always been happiness. A balance of work and life. My learning is how difficult that can be to achieve. It is a constant journey, worth taking.

Like most, my values have been driven by my family. Being the youngest of five, I have always respected my sibling's accomplishments, diversity and path to achievement. We have been shaped by our parents' actions. I doubt they would have called or considered them values *per se*.

Integrity, drive, loyalty and trust. These "values" were first and foremost expected within the family. My parents never spoke of any of these, but they were always on display, and your absence of contribution in any of these areas was either met with swift retribution (my mother) or expressions of disappointment (my dad). Those values continued with my siblings and were expressed in similar ways, depending on their personalities. My father and sister saw no evil in the world and judged no one. My mother was suspicious and cautious. Between the three, the boys tended to lean toward "trust, but verify."

In a nut shell: set expectations; supply the tools; learn when to get out of the way; don't take advantage of anyone, especially if you can; drive for results; expect from others what you expect from yourself.

Realize that whatever you give or think you give, more is



usually expected by others. So, whatever you do, make sure you are certain within yourself that you gave your all.

***Who wrote this: Rob Busacca***

*Corporate Quality Control and Assurance executive. Former Board Member of the Preuss School, recognized by Newsweek as the top transformative high school in the nation for three years in a row.*

*The Preuss School UC San Diego is a unique charter middle and high school for low-income students who strive to become the first in their families to graduate from college.*

## **BE YOU. NOBODY CAN DO IT BETTER.**

The Austrian writer Rainer Maria Rilke's "Letters to a Young Poet" came across my transom at a pivotal point in my career. It was 1998 and I was at HMV, a division of the EMI Music Group, confronted with an option to move to Toronto or Los Angeles—Rilke's letters helped me realize taking an exit package was the way to go.

Rilke had corresponded with a prospective student in the early 1900's, after the kid sent him poetry to review. The student had a job lined up in the family business, but he fancied himself a poet and wanted to know if he had what it took for the artistic life. Rilke told him he was asking the wrong question. It wasn't for Rilke, or anyone else, to say one way or the other; the kid had to ask himself, "Did you wake up each day needing to write poetry with the urgency of having to breathe?" If not, go work for Dad.

I'd written from a young age, but as the first kid in the family to go to college, I felt the need to be practical. After graduating from Harvard Business School, I took a job in London working for HMV, thinking that it would provide the same sustenance as writing or playing guitar. At first, it did, but the higher I climbed, the further I got from the music. Instead of spending my day talking about melody or lyric, we were talking units sold. We might as well have been selling toothpaste.

Call it a mid-life crisis, or simply a pivot, I was fortunate in

that I had the financial stability to make a change without significant upheaval. Of course, it took much longer to find my footing than I had anticipated, but I woke up each day with that life-force, driving urgency for breath; my effort never felt like work.

Today, as a filmmaker, writer, and entrepreneur, I help organizations tell their stories. I'm as comfortable working with writers, cameramen, and studio engineers as I am with the suits. Every day is an adventure.

I got lucky because I knew what I wanted, but, surprisingly, many people don't because they're too busy bouncing from one thing or another, reacting to an email, a phone call, or an interaction with a colleague, never pausing even for a moment to ask, "Is this where I want to be?"

You wouldn't hop into your car and randomly drive, responding to whatever pops up, but in terms of our day-to-day, we too often do. Getting underneath the leaves for your truth is hard, obscured by the expectations of others and emotional baggage. This beautiful book describes many roads to passion; yours is out there, too. Be you. Nobody can do it better.

***Who wrote this:*** Robert Steven Williams

*Award-winning filmmaker and fiction writer. Latest film was "Gatsby in Connecticut: the Untold Story." Harvard MBA. Former music industry executive. Musician at heart.*

## **I KILLED MY PARENTS**

Shortly after college, I killed my parents. Not literally, of course. My parents' drinking had dominated my childhood and teen years. When I went to college, I decided to leave the past behind. I had dreams; determined to make something of my life. A toxic childhood can be a burden. I wanted none of it. I decided to re-write my history: instead of my parents being alcoholics, they were killed in a head-on collision by a drunk driver. I could start a fresh new life, unburdened.

I began to build my career, met my husband and we created a wonderful life together. My career flourished. I became a hospital administrator, did a few years of political consulting and by the age of 35 was a hospital vice president and eventually became vice president for a larger hospital. My husband and I were living the dream. Then, tragedy struck.

My husband was diagnosed with ALS and passed away after three years. It had a profound effect on me. I left my position at the hospital and consulted a bit, unsure of what was next. I became vice president for a human service organization and ultimately started my own consulting firm. I was realizing my ambitions, just not as I had imagined.

My husband, who had been married before, had children, and they had become my family. But something was missing. I started reflecting on my life. For over 20 years, I had been living a lie. With my husband gone, no one knew the "real"

me. But how could I tell my friends the truth—they would never understand. I couldn't exactly bring my family back to life. Or could I?

One night, some girlfriends were visiting and suddenly, crying, I blurted out the truth. They were stunned. Then, the most wonderful thing happened—they embraced me and we shared childhood experiences. Over the weeks and months, I shared the truth with more friends. Rather than turning away from me, they turned toward me—a more authentic me.

Next, I made a pivotal decision. I called my mother. Dialing the number I remembered from childhood, I held my breath. My mother answered the phone. When I said, “Mom, this is Madelyn,” she responded as if she had been waiting for my call. We decided to reconnect. A few weeks later, I was with my mother for the first time in 26 years and we began a new future.

Subsequently, I reconnected with the rest of my family—my sister, cousins and nieces. It has not all been easy. My sister passed away from cancer; I wish I'd had more time with her. Ours was a troubled relationship, but in the last days of her life we'd found our way back to each other. Today, my life is far richer. Killing my parents was an act of survival, something I needed to do to create a life of meaning and relevance. Resurrecting them has given me a life of authenticity and peace.

**Who wrote this:** *This author has chosen to use a pen name,  
Madelyn M.A. MacAskill.*



## **BE A PASSIONATE COLLECTOR OF SPECIAL EXPERIENCES**

My journey through life, full of unique, transformational moments, was always boosted by the pride of being Romanian. From the position of the first spokeswoman in the history of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to my first diplomatic post in Washington as first press secretary ever of the Romanian Embassy to being creator of the first official site of Romania on the internet. From the exciting professional “adventures” in Kosovo and Iraq to the extraordinary years spent as foreign policy adviser to the President, and as the first Romanian woman ever with the diplomatic rank of ambassador.

Currently, as the Representative of the United Nations Secretary General and Head of the UN Office in Belgrade, I serve 193 countries, not only Romania. I am honored to be part of the huge UN family, and to serve this unique universal organization who, like jazz, has been carrying meaning for all societies, and has been crossing all borders, bringing people together, around shared aspirations for freedom, dignity and peace.

I am a passionate collector of special experiences.... I had very many memorable encounters in my life—with Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin, Queen Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace, Pope John Paul II at the Vatican, George W. Bush in the Oval Office, Jacques Chirac at Elysée Palace, and Emperor Akihito



in his Imperial Palace—to mention a few.... But there are, however, two symbolic moments that I want to highlight, here: on one hand, the first mortars attack I experienced in Baghdad—in the campus where I was working—that made me forever reconsider my own perspective on life and destiny, and, on the other hand, my first speech as Romanian ambassador to the United Nations, at the legendary rostrum of the UN General Assembly, from which all major world leaders—from Nelson Mandela, John F. Kennedy, Fidel Castro, Kofi Annan, François Mitterrand, and Margaret Thatcher—have addressed the world, within the last almost 75 years! Those moments give me the chills even now....

If you ask me which are the keywords of all this personal and professional journey, I would put first Roots and Identity. Then, I would add Love and Kindness, Passion and Compassion, Heart and Reason, Hard Work and Intellectual Curiosity! And I would end up by underlining that nothing has ever stopped me from trying to reach Excellence, not even Success!

Immanuel Kant used to say: "Heaven has given human beings three things to balance the odds of life: the hope, the dream, and the smile." I have tried, all these years, to keep all three intact, with the support of my adored family, whose philosophy was always based on an old Romanian principle: "Fă Rai din ce ai!" (Build a heaven out of what you have!)

Finally, I was and will always be inspired by the wise words of the legendary Romanian diplomat, Nicolae Titulescu: "And

even though I won't be a beacon, but a candle, it's enough.  
And even though I won't be a candle, it is still enough, for I  
have endeavored to switch on the light."

***Who wrote this:*** Her Excellency Simona Mirela-Miculescu  
Senior Romanian diplomat, currently serving as Permanent  
Delegate of Romania to UNESCO, with the rank of Ambassador  
Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary. Prior to this, Representative of  
the UN Secretary-General and Head of the UN Office in Belgrade,  
and, before that, the Permanent Representative of Romania to the  
United Nations in New York. Steadfast and dedicated advocate  
for, and supporter of, the youth of our world.



## **ABOUT THIS BOOK'S CREATOR**

Dan Bena is a multi-award-winning executive who most recently served as Corporate Water Steward for Pepsico, where he led the Sustainable Development agenda for PepsiCo's Global Operations, using the power of the private sector as a force for good to help both business and society flourish.

He is Founder and CEO of Dan Bena, LLC, a passion-fueled consultancy; Senior Consultant for Antea Group; Senior Advisor to Safe Water Network; and is on the Board of the United Nations Association Westchester Chapter. He serves or has served on the Leadership Group of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), Steering Board of World Bank's 2030 Water Resources Group, Steering Committee of the United Nations CEO Mandate, the Global Agenda Council on Water Security of the World Economic Forum, the Board of the International Society of Beverage Technologists, and Board of the Washington-based US Water Alliance.

He serves on the Board of the Creative Visions Foundation, a non-profit using media and the arts to ignite agents of positive social change. Their signature program, called Rock Your World, engages middle and high school students in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and provides them the tools with which to become creative activists. Dan also serves on the Advisory Board of Artistic Circles, which

produced the documentary, *Water Pressures*. He serves on the Advisory Board of the Environmental Leader publications group; the new Elsevier journal, *Water Security*; and the novel social media video interview platform, WaterLoop.

Dan was selected as a mentor for the ThreeDotDash.org program of the We Are Family Foundation, a judge for the University of Notre Dame Corporate Adaptation Prize, and an advisor to the social enterprise start-up, Keela. He delivered the keynote address at the Royal Gala in the presence of Their Royal Highnesses Princess Madeleine and Prince Daniel of Sweden and has spoken at over 100 venues spanning the business, government, academic, and non-profit worlds.

He represented PepsiCo at the Our Food, Our Future Summit, in Dublin, Ireland, attended by the Prime Minister of Ireland and the Minister of Agriculture. He was one of only four people invited to provide testimony to the US Senate Water and Power Subcommittee, and keynoted the United Nations Youth Assembly to over 1,000 youth delegates from over 100 countries.

Dan was honored to receive the Light Up the Night Award from the Julia B. Andrus Foundation for youth advocacy and engagement, which resulted in October 24th being proclaimed "Dan Bena Day" in New York State. He was recently honored as a "Global Goals Local Leader" by the UN Association for his role in the partnerships that have provided over 55 million people with access to safe water (end 2020), thereby helping to advance the UN's Sustainable

## Development Goals.

Dan was invited by the President of the UN General Assembly to participate in a high-level panel on partnerships to advance the post-2015 Development agenda. He was named an Honorary Professor by Glasgow Caledonian University and a Trustee of its New York College, which houses the Center for Social Impact.

Keynote speaker, social media influencer, and, above all, wife-, family-, and animal-lover. Dan created the 5H Ladder for Purpose-based Leadership, and his philosophy is to involve the 5 Hs—Head (intellect & imagination), Heart (empathy), Hands (work), Humility (modest self-importance) and Humanity (social conscience)—as much as possible, in everything you do. Learn more about the 5H Ladder at [danbena.com](http://danbena.com).