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Self-Knowledge

Listen to your heart

If you were to ask me during the early years of my career, “Maria, what is your passion? What do you really want to do?” I wouldn’t have had a good answer. I had a general idea that I wanted to pursue journalism, and I found, almost by accident, that I had an interest and facility in business reporting. But there are a thousand different ways of expressing those interests, and I was still feeling my way. Luckily, I was in the right place to figure it out.

Landing a job as a production assistant at CNN right out of college was a dream come true. I didn’t even realize at first how valuable the opportunity was. When I was in school, people only wanted to work for the big guys—the established networks. But as I would discover, being at a small, non-union network like CNN allowed me a fuller plate of experiences. At the major networks, you had one job only and that was your narrow slot—whether it was

teleprompting, ripping scripts, or floor direction. At CNN we all wore many hats, and I was able to learn every aspect of broadcasting.

What a time to be in the news business, especially at such an energetic young company! The Gulf War was just starting, and CNN was making history in news reporting. It was also pioneering an aggressive approach to business news, with *Money Line*, *Business Day*, and *Business Morning*. I was happy to go to work every day. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do at the time, but I did know that I loved the urgency and immediacy of the news business. I also knew I had a knack for learning things by speaking to people and getting information.

Within a couple of years I had found what I felt was the right fit for me: working as an editor on the assignment desk. That doesn't sound too glamorous, I know, but I loved it. I wrote and produced pieces for on-air reporters like Kitty Pilgrim, Terry Keenan, and Jan Hopkins, who were the early stars of CNN's business division. I also worked with Lou Dobbs on his popular show, *Money Line*.

At CNN I watched and learned from many smart, hardworking newshounds who loved what they did. They knew what they were good at and adapted to a changing news business—particularly during the war, when things were moving so fast. I admired their courage as they reported from war zones in the midst of bomb blasts.

I loved my job and was completely engaged in what I was doing. And then, after five years, out of the blue, CNN

announced that it was going to restructure the assignment desk. My boss presented me with the “good news” that I was being promoted from assignment editor to producer on the overnight shift. My immediate reaction was disappointment—not the usual response to a promotion. I didn’t want to stop what I was doing. I was having such a great time, and I was good at interacting with sources and fostering the right relationships to get newsmakers on the air. I was beginning to compile a fantastic Rolodex. And I felt that I was valuable on the desk.

The promotion was a great opportunity, with more money and a better title, but it was not what I wanted. I was very upset, although I tried not to show it. I fled to the library on the twenty-second floor, where I could cry in peace.

It was a big moment of truth for me. Like most of my peers, I had been conditioned to think of my career as a climb up the ladder. The important thing was to keep moving upward, and it didn’t matter how much you loved it as long as you nabbed the better title and the bigger paycheck. And suddenly here I was, accomplishing just that, but in my heart I knew it wasn’t a job I would love. It wasn’t right for me.

What to do? I wandered into the ladies’ room to clean up my face, and as I stood at the sink, wiping my eyes, Kitty Pilgrim walked in. I’d always looked up to Kitty, although she was only a few years older than me. She had broken into the boys’ club of business news so smoothly, and she always seemed sure of herself. To this

day, Kitty remains one of the top business anchors and reporters at CNN. I wondered how one achieved such confidence and certainty. I sure didn't feel it.

Noticing that I was upset, Kitty stopped to talk with me. "Kitty," I confided, "I don't know what to do. I love this place, and I don't want to leave. I'm proud to get promoted, but I think I will hate my new job. Should I quit? Should I just suck it up and enjoy the promotion?"

Kitty was very wise. She said, "Maria, you have to think about where you see yourself in five years. Once you get that picture, then you have to work toward it now. That's the best advice I can give you."

It was the first time anyone had spoken to me about taking the long view of my future. On that day, I began to think seriously about where I was headed. I considered what I loved—being in the center of the news, interacting with people from all walks of life, writing stories, reporting. I also realized an aspiration I hadn't dared articulate before: to be on camera. I knew that as long as I stayed true to my ultimate goal, I could take the new job and use it as a stepping-stone to my future. And that's what I did—with a little help from the crew.

I took the new job and started producing on the overnight shift, but I now had a larger plan: to build my portfolio and on-air experience. I convinced my boss to allow me to work longer than the typical day. After my regular shift, I'd go into the field with the morning crews and pick up the news and sound bites when the markets opened. I'd write out scripts, and when I was alone with

the crew, I'd ask them to shoot me on camera, reporting, so I'd have some clips. I'd wheedle and plead—"It will only take ten minutes. I have a script. Can you just shoot me?" And they were very kind and supportive. With their help, I created a portfolio of clips: "Maria Bartiromo, reporting for CNN Business News."

My heart was telling me what to do. And when I had compiled enough clips, I sent a tape to several places, including CNBC. I'd decided that I wanted to be where business news was central. And CNBC called me back. They liked my tape.

So one morning, after working all night, I got myself together and went to meet the then top executive, Peter Sturtevant, and Roger Ailes, who had just become the new president of CNBC, at their office in Fort Lee, New Jersey. I could feel that the interview was going well. We clicked. I know you can't always be sure that your instincts are right about these things, but that day, at the tender age of twenty-six, I thought I knew. I left the meeting so convinced I had the job that I went back to Manhattan and bought two new dresses.

I was exhausted by the time I got home. I had to get a few hours' sleep before I went on my night shift at CNN. In the middle of a deep sleep, I heard the phone ringing, and I grabbed it groggily. It was CNBC with an offer: they wanted me to be an on-camera reporter. I didn't go back to sleep that day. I was elated.

When I think back on that period, more than sixteen years ago, I see the journey my younger self took, and the

truth I learned has stayed with me. That is, you have to know yourself and follow your heart. Titles, prestige, and money are fine, but if you don't love what you do, it's all meaningless.

Control your fate, or someone else will

Jack Welch has been an important mentor for me. When I joined CNBC in 1993, he was the chairman and CEO of our parent company, General Electric. Jack used to say, "Control your own destiny, or someone else will." (There was even a book about Jack with that title, *Control Your Destiny or Someone Else Will* by Noel Tichy and Stratford Sherman.)

It's such a basic idea—a centerpiece of success: You can't go through life thinking that the tide will just move you along and take you where you want to be. You have to swim there. In today's economic climate, I hear a lot of people saying, "I hope I don't get laid off. I hope I can hang on to my job." It's a paralyzing attitude. You might survive this storm, but what about the next one? Do you want to spend your life hoping that bad things won't happen to you? I know I don't want people working for me who are just rolling along with the tide. I want the strong swimmers—and it's okay with me if they falter sometimes, as long as they're in there kicking, moving forward.

I'm struck that one of the main characteristics of our time is the overwhelming feeling many people have that they're not in control. Many high-achieving professionals

are sitting in their offices every day, hoping the phones on their desks don't ring with the dreaded summons to the head office. I have spoken with many of them, both personally and professionally. They see what's happening on Wall Street—firms consolidating and going out of business—and they're afraid they're going to be victims of the cut-backs. I notice two types of responses: Some people feel that they're trapped by circumstances and there is nothing they can do but wait and hope for the best. Others take action, improving their skills or looking for options in other fields. The big question is, How can you be like the latter group and take control of your fate in perilous times?

Here's where Kitty Pilgrim's advice is relevant. Instead of waiting for the ax to fall, and praying that it doesn't, ask yourself, "Where do I want to be in five years?" Then start moving toward your goal. Take practical steps every day. Figure out what you need. Maybe it's more training, or a broader network of colleagues and friends, or a mentor. Whatever your specific needs, be proactive.

The very act of deciding to take charge of your future helps control your emotions. It's so easy to feel like a victim, to be afraid. Fear has a ripple effect; it leads to depression. And when you're depressed, you can't be at your best, so if an opportunity does come along, you won't be ready for it. Even if you have little or no control over your circumstances, you can always control how you choose to respond. After 9/11, I had the opportunity to spend time with some of the women whose husbands worked in the towers and were among the more than three thousand

people killed that day. Their initial reaction was shock and despair. In addition to the terrible emotional toll, they were also filled with fear and uncertainty about their families' financial futures. Yet they picked themselves up, and their public advocacy on behalf of victims' families became the inspiring legacy of a great tragedy. A group of the widows played a central role in pushing for the 9/11 Commission and became persistent voices for the truth about how the attacks happened and how future attacks might be prevented. These women responded to unimaginable heartbreak by deciding that their husbands' deaths would not be in vain. They elevated not only themselves but the nation. Their leadership inspired others to fight on and take action.

Make the biggest mistake of your life

Following your own path means taking risks. Maybe they'll work out, maybe they won't. When I decided to leave CNN for CNBC, I made an appointment to see my boss, Lou Dobbs, and tell him the news. He gave me a hard look and said, "Maria, you are making the biggest mistake of your life." What Lou was telling me was that he believed in me. He also believed in CNN as the best place with the most opportunities for my future. At the time CNBC was an upstart, and I'm sure Lou felt I was short-circuiting my career. It's easy to see that an opinion like that from a person you respect could send

you spinning. But I had to trust myself and be willing to take my knocks if it didn't work out. It occurred to me then that Lou might be right. But I also understood that if I made decisions based on fear of failure, I would never get what I wanted in life. My taking the CNBC job wasn't a reckless act, but a decision firmly grounded on two factors: one, knowing what I wanted; and two, realizing that if it didn't work out, I could dust myself off and try another way.

You can find similar examples in the lives of most successful people—moments when the fearful chorus was screaming, “No!” But they decided to say, “Yes.” Think about the heat Hillary Clinton took when she announced her plan to run for the U.S. Senate. People said she was riding on her husband's coattails, that she wasn't a “real” New Yorker, that she didn't have what it takes to be a senator. She refused to listen, and she proved them wrong. Or consider Bill Gates's decision to drop out of Harvard to focus on building the small company that became Microsoft. His family was distraught. How could he leave *Harvard*, the place of so much opportunity, to pursue what must have seemed like a pipe dream? Time proved Clinton and Gates right, but it took self-knowledge and determination for them to follow their hearts in spite of the naysayers.

I'm always intrigued when I meet successful people who made leaps into unknown territory and who had cause to ask themselves, “*What* am I doing?” before finishing the leap. I asked Eric Schmidt, the chairman and CEO of

Google, about his decision in 2001 to join the company. He was forty-six years old, nearly a generation older than the young founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who were only twenty-eight. He was well established professionally, an engineer and an executive with an impressive track record. At the time he was recruited for Google, he was the CEO of the technology company Novell. The Google founders were kids embarking on an untried venture.

“Was it a big risk for you to join Google?” I asked Schmidt.

He recalled for me his first meeting with Larry and Sergey. “I walked into their office, and Larry and Sergey were standing there with a projector, and I saw a large image of my biography on the wall,” he said. “And they looked like children to me. It was a very open meeting. We had a debate about what they were doing and what I was doing, and I left thinking, ‘I’ve never met people who are so full of themselves.’ But I also thought, ‘I am going to see those people again, because they are really pretty special.’”

Schmidt acknowledged, “I thought at the time I was taking a terrible risk, but it was a risk that made sense because, from my perspective, I wanted to work on something really interesting. I didn’t understand the search business or the advertising business. Nor did I necessarily believe Google would become a huge success.” So why did he do it? He told me that what attracted him to Google was the enormous creativity of the two young men. “Brilliance often comes in a strange package,” he said

with a smile. “Think of Mozart or other eccentric geniuses. And I’ve had the privilege of working for that kind of genius in Larry and Sergey—and they’re just as brilliant now as they were when they founded the company. When we started working together, I used to refer to them as ‘the boys.’ Today, they’re no longer ‘the boys.’ They are seasoned veterans in technology with a very nuanced view of how to lead organizations and change the world.”

And today, Eric Schmidt is very happy that he took the risk and joined Google. It has not only made him very wealthy but also very happy. He loves going to work every day.

Take money out of the equation

I recently gave a talk at Wake Forest University to students about to graduate from business school. During the discussion period, one student said, “I’m not sure what I’ll do. When I decided to go to business school, everyone was telling me it was such a good idea, that it’s the path that will take you to where the money is. Until the recession hit last year, I expected to start earning a high salary right after graduation. I need that salary because of my student loans, and I deserve it because of how hard I’ve worked. Now what am I supposed to do?” I felt for the guy. I’m sure he was very bright and capable, but I also saw him as a clear example of many students today who have lost their way. They’ve been following someone

else's playbook for so long that they don't know how to think about their futures in anything other than monetary terms.

My first job out of school paid \$18,000 a year, and it wasn't that long ago. My peers and I didn't expect to make big bucks right away. What we dreamed of was the chance to get a foot in the door, to make a start at following our dreams. Today's students have very high—and sometimes unrealistic—expectations for how they deserve to be compensated as soon as they graduate. But no one is “entitled” to make a lot of money.

After my talk, I sat down with Steven Reinemund, the former CEO of Pepsico and now the dean of the Wake Forest business school. He told me how difficult his job was because the primary way the university attracted new students was to show how many graduates landed high-paying jobs with top firms. Students thought solely in terms of the potential compensation. There's nothing wrong with wanting to make a lot of money, but its role has become far too important in the way people think about or define success. At the time of my speech, many of the top firms weren't hiring. The well had run dry. I interviewed Pepsico CEO Indra Nooyi at the university, on stage in front of students. She was very candid. I asked her what her advice was for students trying to find their way in this environment. She said it was a major opportunity. When else would you have the chance to follow your heart and take money out of the equation? She said it was time for people to look at the world, find the needs, and try to

give back, and she encouraged the students to use the first year or two out of school to do good for someone in need, to volunteer, or to travel. In other words, to use the tough job market as an opportunity to stretch themselves.

Steve Reinmund was also very thoughtful about the business environment and the implications for the university. He said to me, “Business schools need to change. Currently, the best gauge we have for how well we’re doing is when recruiters offer our students the highest-paying jobs. It occurs to me that this is the wrong gauge. We’re encouraging students to want the most money instead of pursuing jobs based on what they love, what they’re good at, and what could have a beneficial impact on the country and the world.” This gauge was partly responsible for creating the bubble in financial services that burst in 2008. Talented MBAs came out of business schools, and instead of choosing careers in a variety of sectors that form the underpinnings of the economy—manufacturing, health services, technology, and the like—they headed for big money at Goldman Sachs and private equity firms like the Blackstone Group. Why? Not necessarily for love, but for money.

We began to discuss what it would mean if the measures of success for a university were tied not to how much money its graduates earned but to something deeper and more lasting. This was already beginning to happen to a certain extent, with universities like Wake Forest encouraging students to get involved in programs like Teach for America, AmeriCorps, and the Peace Corps as ways to

build their résumés. Career counselors at schools could play an important role by helping students explore career options outside Wall Street.

I asked Nouriel Roubini, professor of economics at NYU's Stern School of Business, what advice he would give to students coming out of school today that would set them on a course for success. Nouriel is incredibly astute. A full two years before the financial collapse of 2008, he predicted that the United States was headed for a major housing bust, an oil crisis, and a recession that would create a seismic shock in the world economy. Few people gave his predictions credence. The *New York Times* nicknamed him "Dr. Doom." Today Nouriel has been proved right. While his message isn't always easy to hear, he's one of those rare people who has his finger on the pulse of the economy. Nouriel believes that students shouldn't go into finance, but instead should share the wealth of their knowledge and experience in other fields. "I think this country needs more people who are going to be entrepreneurs, more people in manufacturing, more people going into sectors that will lead to long-term economic growth," he told me. "When the best minds of the country are all going to Wall Street, there is a distortion in the allocation of human capital that eventually becomes inefficient."

Nouriel's point is crucial: We must reevaluate what success means and how we talk about success, especially to the young people who are making decisions about their futures. Over the past twenty-five years, the financial services arena has grown in importance, becoming a dominant

part of our economy. It has a tremendous allure, with most of the talented people coming out of business school headed into financial careers where they are very highly paid. They were no longer considering the broad scheme of the economy and looking at careers in manufacturing, biotech, and other bedrock industries. Now we've had a shock to the financial system. The allure is gone, and so are the jobs.

I always tell students, "Don't go into an industry because you feel that you're going to get rich from it. Don't take a job because you think that's the best money you can make. Always take a job because you love what you do. The money can follow, but if you don't love what you do, you're going to be miserable. And if you're not happy, you're not going to want to work."

And now I challenge students to take it one more step: "Imagine if all jobs paid the same. What would you want to do with your life?"

I invite you to ask yourself that question now. Be honest. If you took money out of the equation, what would be your ideal profession? If it's different from what you're actually doing or training to do, you face a serious dilemma—a conflict of self-interest. In that case, measure the distance between your aspirations and your reality, and start taking action to narrow the gap. How much are you willing to sacrifice to do the work you love? It's fine to have aspirations that include financial success. After all, a key premise of capitalism is the opportunity to prosper, no matter where you start out. On the other hand, if you study

the backgrounds of the most prosperous people in society today, you'll see stories of achievement from the ground up. Oprah Winfrey started out as a local radio reporter in Tennessee. Steven Spielberg began his career as an unpaid intern at Universal Studios. Former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina worked for years as a secretary at financial firms. Warren Buffett was an investment salesman in Omaha. Ron Meyer, now the head of Universal, started out as his boss's driver. There are hundreds of similar examples. Today, because their lives seem magical, it's easy to forget how they got there.

*“Where you are from is not
who you are”*

These are the words that Ursula Burns heard repeatedly from her mother when she was a young kid growing up in a poor neighborhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Today Ursula is the CEO of Xerox Corporation and is the first African American woman to lead a Fortune 500 company. She is an important role model for those from humble beginnings who aspire to greatness.

Ursula credits her success to performance—her engineering talent has been on display at Xerox for almost thirty years—not to gender or race. Her ability to be an innovative thinker, she told me, stems from her life story, one that is very different from that of most executives at

Xerox. “Coming from a place that is different from the norm helps to make that a natural way to approach problems or opportunities,” she told me. “I was born and raised in the Lower East Side of Manhattan to a single mother. And that for me is normal. Most of the leaders in the industry come from a different background than I do, so my unique perspective adds value to my contribution. I have always seen it that way. And Xerox is a great place for a person like me, because it values individuality.” Ursula is referring to the fact that Xerox was at the forefront of employee diversity programs as early as the 1960s, and she was a beneficiary of those efforts. Today, one-third of Xerox’s executives are women, an impressive statistic in corporate America. In Ursula’s view, diversity—the combined life experiences of people from different backgrounds—enhances the makeup and potential of a company. Rather than fighting against her roots and their associated disadvantages, she views them as inherent to her successful journey.

Oprah Winfrey also stands out as an example of a woman who found the secret to success by just being herself. Dennis Swanson, now with the Fox network, has been credited with “discovering” Oprah back when he was the general manager of the ABC affiliate in Chicago. He told me that Oprah was a young woman who didn’t fit into the conventional TV mold, but she wanted to break into television. He gave her a job reading news, and it just didn’t work. She was awkward and stiff, and she definitely didn’t look the part. But Dennis saw something in her. He said,

“Oprah, don’t read the teleprompter. Just be yourself and show me what’s in your heart.” That’s what she did, and she blew everyone away. Dennis remembers Oprah asking him, “How did I do?” He replied, “All I can tell you is when you go home tonight and get feedback from your friends and family, be sure to keep your head on straight because we need it to fit through the door when you come to work tomorrow.” Oprah was an instant success by being herself.

Acknowledging your roots and being true to yourself is a powerful foundation. Every single successful person I spoke to in the course of writing this book mentioned that. I know where they’re coming from, because it has been my own experience. As a child in Bay Ridge, I never imagined that my face would be on billboards. I could not have predicted that leaders in politics, finance, and science would be answering my phone calls, meeting with me, and asking for my opinions. I wasn’t sitting in my kindergarten classroom imagining a television career. But, like Ursula Burns, my path was being formed by the constant message coming from my parents and teachers: “Where you are from is not who you are.” And yet equally important is never forgetting how you achieved what you have and where you come from. I am so proud of my Italian American background, where hard work and values were the foundations of success. It is one of the reasons, no matter how busy I am at work or traveling, I try hard to give back to this community. I regularly host the Columbus Day weekend parade and gala because of my love of my heritage.

Be the only you

When I speak with people in the entertainment industry, I sometimes feel they radiate an underlying worry. It's especially true of women. They're looking at the younger women coming behind them, always conscious that they have a shelf life—an end point when they'll no longer be able to attract the same kind of attention. This mentality is pervasive in our culture, and it isn't just among entertainers. But all of us in television feel the pressure with unusual intensity. I have been inspired by so many women, but two that stand out are Goldie Hawn and Mary Hart, who have demonstrated remarkable cool in the face of the pressure.

I met Goldie a few years ago at *Fortune* magazine's annual "Most Powerful Women in Business" conference. She was one of the inspirational speakers, and she also led a yoga class, which I took. We hit it off and became friendly, e-mailing and getting together when we could. Goldie is a delight to be around. At sixty-three, she exudes a youthfulness and a positive spirit. Over dinner one night I asked her, "How have you stayed successful in Hollywood, when there are younger, fresher faces wanting what you have?" She laughed. "That reminds me of a line I had in a movie: 'Everybody wants to be me.' What movie was that?"

When you've made so many movies, it can be hard to keep track. I supplied the answer—*First Wives Club*—and we laughed. Then, turning serious, Goldie said, "Maria, it's

very simple. There are many people who eventually will come along and try to be ‘me’ or to replace me. It doesn’t matter. I just focus on what I’m doing, because that’s what I can control.” Goldie is comfortable in her own skin. She knows that if she starts watching her back, she’ll collide with what’s ahead. She told me that she hasn’t made a movie in seven years because she wants to do what makes her happy, and she only looks at scripts that truly interest her. She finds tremendous fulfillment in her family—including her partner of twenty-six years, Kurt Russell, and her children, Kate, Oliver, and Wyatt. She has also started a foundation whose mission is promoting the emotional health and well-being of children. One thing I know about Goldie: She will always be herself, fully and happily. She likes herself, and she doesn’t try to be anyone else.

Mary Hart, at fifty-eight, is gorgeous, powerful, and relevant. She continues to be the popular host of *Entertainment Tonight*. I recently said to Mary, “I can’t believe you’ve been doing this for as long as you have, since entertainment is such a youth-oriented business. Let’s face it: How many cute young blondes want to be you?” She laughed at that, and said, “They’re always going to throw younger, fresher kids at you to make you feel insecure. I don’t think about it. I’m doing what I’m doing, and my viewers know me, and the newcomers are not me. I’m the only me!” That really hit home: *I’m the only me*. Sure, there will always be others who have qualities you don’t have. But when you’re comfortable with yourself

and can appreciate your special qualities, no one can ever supplant you.

I realize that you may be skeptical about the advice to be yourself, perhaps thinking it's a tough thing when you're just getting started, and especially difficult if you work in a large company. One of the reasons I appreciated Jack Welch so much when he was running GE was that he let us know that individual creativity thrilled him. He was famous for sending personal notes to people who did something smart or innovative. As the recipient of several of his notes, I can tell you it was a real confidence booster. But Jack told me that the notes weren't just a tactic to boost employee morale. "It turned me on to write them as much as it turned them on to receive them," he said. Jack viewed his role as comparable to an orchestra leader. "An orchestra has basses. It has violins," he said. "And the leader's job is to touch every one of those people so they know they're free to think and do things better."

Herb Kelleher, the charismatic cofounder of Southwest Airlines, is widely admired for creating a culture of individuality. He described it to me in simple terms: "We tell our employees, 'Be yourself. Have fun. Don't be afraid to do what you want to do. We hired you because you're you. We don't want you to come to work looking like a robot or an automaton. We want you to be yourself at work.'" It has been a winning formula for the airline.

Sometimes it takes extra effort to be yourself—and to find out who your self really is. When I interviewed Bill

Ford, I was struck by the fact that although he had special opportunities by virtue of his heritage, carrying the Ford family name and legacy also presented special challenges. He had to find a way to create his own identity and make his own mark on the company. He had to ask himself, “How can I make an original contribution?” Bill was not interested in being a caretaker. He became the first American auto executive to aggressively pursue green technology. “I’ve been an environmentalist my whole life,” he told me, “and I’ve fought a lot of battles during thirty years at Ford. In fact, when I first went on the board, I was told I had to stop associating with any known or suspected environmentalists. And I said, ‘No, of course I have no intention of stopping.’ I was viewed as a bit of a Bolshevik throughout my whole career.” Against the odds, Bill Ford persisted, rebuilding the iconic Rouge plant as the greenest plant on the planet and launching the first American hybrid, the Escape. By following his personal instincts, even in the face of resistance, Bill Ford made an indelible mark on an iconic company.

Successful business leaders understand that people really do matter—not just in the cold “human resources” sense, but as individuals with all their unique styles and passions and approaches to life. Once you understand that, you have the permission and the power to go places no one has gone before and to imagine opportunities that didn’t previously exist.

*Stay true to yourself through
the transitions*

I spent some time talking with Condoleezza Rice when she was secretary of state, as well as after she left office. She is an impressive woman—smart, self-confident, and global-minded. What makes Condi so successful, though, is that she never forgets where she came from. She is down-to-earth and humble. She speaks movingly about growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, where her parents bridged two worlds. They lived through the worst years of segregation, yet they were educated, progressive people who recognized that change was in the air. They raised Condi to live, not in the old world, but in the new world that was yet to be. In essence, they raised her on an act of faith, and their faith paid off. Condi constantly expresses gratitude for her upbringing, and for the love and support that propelled her while also keeping her grounded.

When I interviewed Condi shortly before she left office, I was very curious about how she would handle her change in status. I've always wondered about the experience of going from a high-profile position in a presidential administration to life as a private citizen. It must be difficult. One day you're meeting with foreign leaders, traveling the world, having a huge impact on the future of our country and others. The next day you're watching someone else take the reins. Condi admitted that it was an emotional time

for her, coming to the end of her tenure with the Bush administration. But she was clear that being secretary of state was not the only role that defined her; she still had her identity and passions, just as she always had.

Condi told me, “I’m an educator at heart. I’m someone who believes in the transformative power of education. I’ve seen it in my own life. I know that education is the way to a better life.” Reflecting on her time in office, she said, “What is most admired about America is that you can come from modest circumstances and do extraordinary things. But you can’t do them without the benefit of education.”

In the coming years, Condi plans to be a force for opportunity in education. She doesn’t see it as a divergent path from her role in government. In fact, she is the first to insist that she is not a politician.

What impresses me about Condi is her enthusiasm for the next stage of her journey and her strong sense of identity. She doesn’t view the change in her circumstances as a jarring, dissonant note. She is not wistful about the past. Like the classically trained pianist she is, Condi Rice is going seamlessly from one movement to the next, understanding that each period of her life is part of a complete symphony.

Take it personally

You may not own the company, but you own your life. Maybe the job you have now is not the one you really want, but you have to inhabit it every day, take it

personally, and know that what you do makes a difference. I learned that lesson very early in life. During high school I had a job at a bridal shop. I told myself, “Sure, carrying around heavy dresses will earn me money, but trying them on and visualizing my own wedding one day is more fun.” I didn’t take the job seriously enough, and I screwed around. I’d try on dresses and get distracted. Well, it may not have been important to me, but it was sure important to the customers. I got fired, and I was devastated. I cried. How could they fire me? It was pretty simple: they needed someone who could own the job, not just hang out.

I always tell the writers on my shows, “The words you’re sending out over the air are going to have an impact. People are going to base important decisions on those words. Never forget that.” When I have a project to assign, I don’t hand it to the person who is just marking time. I look for the one who will take it personally.

When I interviewed Sir Martin Sorrell, the British businessman and CEO of WPP Group, the world’s largest advertising agency, he told the story of how he learned what it meant to take work personally. Martin told me that he came late to his passion. “At the age of forty, when I was having my male menopause—or I think what’s technically called andropause—and looking back at what I’d done and what I wanted to do, I decided to go off on my own,” he explained. “I started WPP with two other people in a one-room office. It was as near as a man could get to having a baby, certainly not physically, but psychologically and emotionally. And this is a key to success—having an

attachment to the business, a love for the business, and a passion for the business that a founder has. You are most successful in life when you are having fun at what you are doing. It may sound trite, but if you set out to make a lot of money, my experience is you'll be unsuccessful. But when you set out to follow your heart and dreams, you become a sort of natural success story. You want to spend all of your time doing it. I don't think people are successful because they make a million dollars, or a hundred million dollars, or a billion dollars. That is just keeping score. I think you have to be comfortable in your own skin. I am a founder and when you are a founder, you have an attachment and love for the business and a passion for the business like no one else. It's not a job you are hired for. It's 24/7 and you take it all personally. I have loved the challenge of new media, of the consumer insight and building a business from scratch." Martin's business, which started with two people, now has 133,000 people, \$7 billion in market value, and operations in 106 countries.

"The best way I can put it," Martin added, "is the way Bill Shankly, a famous coach in the U.K., did. Shankly managed the Liverpool Football Club, and he used to say, 'Football is not a matter of life and death. It's more important than that.' And so, WPP to me is not a matter of life and death; it's more important than that. Everything that happens in my company I take personally."

That's also what drives Chris Gardner, the CEO of Gardner Rich & Co., whose remarkable story was the sub-

ject of the hit Will Smith movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*. Chris went from being a struggling salesman to losing his home to founding a multimillion-dollar Chicago investment firm—all while honoring a promise to always be there for his son. A series of bad breaks left him homeless at one point. He had interviewed at every firm on Wall Street and finally been accepted into the Dean Witter training program, but he wasn't the most polished candidate. He still didn't have a permanent home. I asked him, "Did anybody at work in the Dean Witter training program know about your dire situation? Did people know there were nights that you actually slept under your desk?"

"No," he answered, "and they did not need to know. What they needed to know was that I showed up at work every day and I lit it up. Every day I started out in this business doing retail brokerage. And that level of the business is all about numbers. That meant two hundred phone calls a day. I knew that every time I picked up the phone, I was digging my way out of a hole and creating a better life for my children."

When I asked him the secret to his success, Chris said, "I honest to God believe, with all of my heart, that you've got to find something you absolutely love. Something that gets you so excited that you cannot wait for the sun to come up in the morning because you want to go do your thing. Money is the least significant aspect of wealth. I've got one problem right now, Maria, that some of the richest people in the world do not have. And that is, I cannot sleep

at night because my face hurts from walking around smiling all day.”

Beat the stereotype

I’ve probably been asked a thousand times what it’s like to be a woman reporting on the male-dominated finance industry. It’s a fair question. If you walk around the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, you’ll still see very few women in the sea of dark suits. One of my colleagues at CNBC joked, “I think ninety-nine percent of the women at the Exchange work for us.” The barriers to being a woman on Wall Street are real, but I’ve always believed that I could work through them and even enjoy the challenge.

I like the way Meredith Whitney, one of the sharpest banking analysts around, put it. She is a former managing director of Oppenheimer & Co. and now runs her own firm, the Meredith Whitney Advisory Group. Meredith has the uncanny ability (and the accompanying nerve) to get ahead of the trends, and she isn’t afraid to have unpopular views. She got out in front on predicting the troubles of Citigroup and other banks, and she took a lot of heat for it before her predictions were vindicated by what happened during the meltdown. “As far as being a woman in this industry,” Meredith told me, “it doesn’t matter if you’re a toad if you’ve got good ideas and you can make people money.” That’s the truth. Like me, Meredith tries to focus on the work and ignore the chatter. “Ultimately it just

comes down to work ethic and not being scared to take chances,” she said. “People are starved for good research in a bad market, and I’m consumed by all of this. I’m not getting a lot of sleep, but you’ve got to strike while the iron is hot.”

That’s not to say that women don’t have extra distractions to deal with. People love to gossip, especially about the way we look. But the fact is, you don’t get anywhere in your profession unless you know your stuff. Good looks might open some doors, especially when you’re in media or entertainment, but it’s the *goods*—knowledge, experience, and work ethic—that will keep you there. Assessing women based on their looks is similar to the compartmentalizing of any group. Take the elevation in 2009 of the first Latina Supreme Court justice, Sonia Sotomayor. Marc H. Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League, made an interesting comment about her appointment to the court. He told me that while it is an important historical milestone, it is Justice Sotomayor’s distinguished record of academic excellence, legal expertise, and outstanding judicial performance, not her race or gender, that are the strongest testament to the hope that millions of children will achieve their dreams if they persevere, no matter where they start in life.

I’m proud to have broken some barriers in business news, and I know I did it not because of the way I looked, or even because of my gender, but because I worked and studied hard, learned my craft, and was resourceful. Period.

Create your own measures of success

Success means different things to different people, so you have to figure out what it means for you. Recently, I was reading about how Oprah Winfrey was disappointed in herself because she had put on weight. And you might say, wait a minute—she’s *Oprah*. She has everything in the world. How can she use weight to measure her success? Well, obviously Oprah has other measures of success too, but I understood how she felt, and I sure know what it’s like to put on a few pounds while the world watches. We all have certain markers for ourselves, and weight is one Oprah puts in place to gauge her personal success. At the end of the day, only you know how you’re living your life. Only you know if you’re measuring up to your own standards. Only you know if you feel right in your skin.

Here is a useful exercise when you’re thinking about your own success. If you accept the fact that you are in charge of your destiny, ask yourself, what are your personal measures? If you can answer that question, it will protect you and give you a sense of control during tough times, when the rug gets pulled out from under you.

There are two keys to considering your personal measures of success. The first is that they should be achievable. If you’re five foot two, you wouldn’t say, “I’d be successful if I played for the NBA.” Again, self-knowledge is important. The second key is that, to the extent possible, your measures should come from inside.

So name your success measures. Write them down. Look at them at the end of each week and evaluate whether your actions, attitudes, and achievements of the week were true to your core. Turn off the judgments of others and look inside. If you get in the habit of doing this every week, soon it will become second nature.

In the course of your life and career, the goalposts will change many times, but with self-knowledge the central goalpost—who you really are and what you aspire to—will remain steady.