

BECOMING THE PERSON YOU DREAMED YOU COULD BE

My father left school in the sixth grade. He moved from Puerto Rico to New York City. All by himself. He always hated it when people realized he was a deaf mute and equated that with being dumb. There was nothing stupid about my father. He had a business education from the school of life, and he made the most of it.

My mother is French-Irish - a kind and loving woman who has never told a lie her entire life. She moves through life with grace. She met my father at a deaf bowling event when they were very young and they married soon after. I was born in Manhattan near West 47th Street when my mom was only seventeen.

Two deaf mutes having a baby at a young age presented some challenges. I once asked my mother how she knew when I was crying. She just put me sideways in bed with her at night. "When you cried," she told me, "you would kick my belly and that was how I knew when to take care of you." My parents were the first to teach me that anything was possible because they lived it every day of their lives adjusting to a hearing world.

They took it all in stride. My father loved people and had a great sense of humor. It seems he was always laughing and making others laugh, too. He had a paint and body shop where he built a sterling reputation for being the best in the business. I guess losing his sense of

hearing sharpened all his other senses. He could turn out more beautifully restored cars than any other body shop “artist” in town.

My maternal grandfather was the superintendent of our building. He lived on the first floor and was responsible for the eight tenants in the four-story building. Since my parents were both born deaf, my grandparents taught me how to talk. I began interpreting in sign language for my parents when I was only five or six years old.

Their dependence on my access to a hearing world created a tight bond at an early age that wasn’t always comfortable for me. I always felt as if people were staring at me when I signed with my parents in a grocery store or in a mall. Like most teens, I didn’t want to be different from my peers or stand out from the crowd. Looking back, I see I had the usual angst of “parental embarrassment”—times two because mine had a unique challenge that made them different from the other parents at school.

What I didn’t realize then was that they were arming me with the gifts of a communicator. Looking them in the eyes when I spoke and being clear about what I needed to say showed me that differences are often strengths in disguise. But try telling that to a sixth grader.

Don’t worry, just be

I was attending my sixth grade parent-teacher meeting, filled with my classmates and their parents and, of course, mine. As the teacher outlined the upcoming events for the school year, I began to grow nervous. I was extremely self-conscious and didn’t want all the other kids to watch me relay the information to my parents in sign language.

Mom and Dad kept nudging me and signing, “What is the teacher saying?” My plan was to sit quietly, listen well and tell them about it later.

“Stop asking me what they are saying,” I signed back sharply, trying to pretend that we weren’t different. “I’ll tell you later.”

I was just trying to act cool because I desperately wanted to be like everyone else. My parents were less than impressed. The more I tried

to hush them up, the more forceful their signing became. “What is the teacher saying, Son!?” they signed with a flurry of motions.

A hush in the classroom drew my attention to the fact that the class had ceased listening to the teacher and all eyes were on me instead. I was square in the spotlight. Precisely where I did not want to be with everyone staring at the three of us. I wished the ground would open up around me and just swallow me up. My father saw how embarrassed I was. He looked straight at me with pain in his eyes and signed, “Stop worrying about what everyone else thinks. Just be.”

At that same moment, my teacher figured out she had lost the attention of the class. Not realizing my parents were deaf mutes, she saw me using my hands and said, “Jose, would you like to share something with the class?” clearly irritated at the distraction I was causing.

“Mrs. Horn,” I began sheepishly, “My parents were just asking me what you are saying. But I didn’t want to interrupt the class.”

That really upset my dad. He signed again with a flourish, “Son, don’t worry about what other people think. Just be!”

A few years later when I was 15, we attended a sports banquet and my coach stood up to give a speech. As he began, my parents turned to me to interpret for them.

Again, I didn’t want to draw attention to myself. So, I just smiled as if I were intently interested in the speaker and overlooked their insistence. Out of the corner of my eye, I once more saw my father sign, “Don’t worry about other people. Just be, Son.”

There was that stupid sentence again and I still did not understand what he was saying.

Me as fraternity president? no way José

During the first or second week of classes in my freshman year of college I joined a fraternity. I met a fellow student at Montgomery Wards where I was working 30 hours a week selling appliances to pay for school.

PASSION *for* POSSIBILITY

He invited me to a couple of rush parties. I went through pledging and noticed that they were doing a lot of unnecessary things in the process. However, since I was only a freshman, I just went through everything else with all the other guys.

I have always enjoyed helping people to have a good time. Because I had to translate for my parents from such an early age, I became very sensitive to the needs of the people around me. When I noticed people standing by themselves at a party at a fraternity function, I would go over to them and make them feel included and welcome. I served as chairman of several social functions. Always the planner, I came up with a couple of new systems for rushing quality people. I even made the parties a lot nicer. The turning point came when I was encouraged to run for president of the fraternity.

On the one hand, we had me, the guy who drove a \$600 Chevy Impala and worked at Montgomery wards 30 hours a week. I lived in a little one bedroom apartment. I was paying my own way through college, guardian of my little brother and sister and having to interpret for my deaf parents. And I was dead broke.

And then there was Troy. Troy fit the mold of a fraternity president to a "T." He was from a wealthy family enjoying a free ride to college, living in a luxury two-bedroom apartment. The guy had a beautiful 280ZX and came from Highland Park in Dallas.

I never thought of myself as a president of anything. So there was Troy and I hanging out outside waiting for the results of the vote (and I knew what that was going to be). It wasn't long in coming. As we stood there, I had my game face on and my congratulatory handshake ready.

When they announced José Feliciano as President of the 1982 Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity, I sat down on the nearest chair with a bump. The world went quiet for just a few seconds, and I don't remember hearing much around me. That's when it hit me. I finally got what my father had been trying to teach me all those years ago. *Stop worrying about what everyone else thinks. **Just be!** Don't try to be someone else!*

BECOMING THE PERSON YOU DREAMED YOU COULD BE

It turns out that the same parents that I was embarrassed about because they were different, were the same people who'd taught me the most powerful lesson in my life. *Just be!* I had friendship, love, family and health. They'd taught me to be aware, caring and considerate, and they'd grown a leader.

For the first time in my life, I was just being me and not worrying about what others thought. And the feeling was overwhelming: absolutely right, humbling and strangely good.

WHAT'S INSIDE MATTERS MOST

I could feel my perspective beginning to change, as “aha” after “aha” sunk in. “Just be” was the reason I had won. “Just be” was the reason that I had friends and family who loved me. Those two words became the foundation of my character.

It's not what you have or don't have that matters most; it's who you are. Once you get that, everything you want has permission to line up and fall into place.

I realized the importance of “just be” just in time. By the time I was 18, my parents had divorced and my mom named me the legal guardian of my siblings. I soon became aware of the fact that three little pairs of eyes and ears were paying close attention to everything their older brother did or said. Up to that point, I'd spent most of my life being uncomfortable with and even ashamed of my parents' differences. I knew I didn't want my siblings growing up that way. Because I changed my attitude toward my parents at just the right time, my siblings never perceived them as different or less capable.

Be, do and have. in that order!

Before you can do and have all that you imagine in life, you have to “be” first. You have to be willing to cultivate a strong character. Anytime you can do anything to become a better you, it has tremendous results. A lot of

PASSION *for* POSSIBILITY

times, we approach a relationship with the idea of, “What’s in it for me?” The question should be, “How can I add value here?” Good investments equal strong returns. That’s true with everything that you do in life. Financial investments require money carefully invested; character investments require investments of your second primary currency: time. There is always room to *become* a better person who *does* greater things. *In that order*. You have to be the person you most want to be first in order for you to do what needs doing so that you can have what you most want to have. Be, do, have.

I think we get it backwards. Many times. I hear people say, “Boy, if I had this (material item), I could be anyone I wanted to be.” But that’s not necessarily true. Modern advertising makes us feel as though we would be different people who are happier and more successful if we only had a certain product. The products are the perks, not the requirement.

Sure, some people are drawn to a successful person because of what he or she may have, but it’s the being part that keeps them there. A person’s character can make you think that maybe if you hang around them for a bit, whatever they have inside may just rub off on you, too. Knowing how to “just be” is crucial to success. That’s why you have to “live it” before you can do it or have it.

Clarity of “being” comes next. If a mom says, “My goal is to raise good children and be a great wife,” she is successful if she achieves that, no matter what she has or doesn’t have. You are the one who gets to define your success. It’s important that the picture in your mind and the feeling inside of you matches up with what is in front of you.

Success for my wife means being a great wife and mother. And she’s constantly focused on it and challenging herself in the area of personal growth. I believe that the hunger and pursuit of excellence in our lives is missing for too many of us, and yet it’s the treasure map that leads to real fulfillment.

Business people forget that they are selling themselves, not their product. That comes second. Realtors do not sell houses; they sell

themselves. Pharmaceutical reps don't sell medicines; they sell themselves. Whether it's our personal values, ideas, politics, worldviews, religion - whatever the case may be - who we are matters more and makes a longer-lasting impression to people than what we do.

You Are Your Most Valuable Asset

It strikes me that we are careful to pass wealth and material goods from generation to generation, but equally careless when it comes to passing on family values to our children. If all they inherit is the money, they miss out on the real treasure—the character behind the story of how the wealth was accumulated. The real deal behind the success. Without that story, the money is incomplete, looking for a place to anchor. It's the story that creates a dynasty, a sense of respect for the characters who created incredible wealth and accumulated amazing stories of courage and perseverance along the way. Money is the byproduct; the story is the wealth.

Many successful people fail four or five times before they hit their stride. The patriarch of a family may be a wealthy man today, but what people don't realize is that he may have won and lost a fortune two or three times before he got there.

The grandchildren think granddad always had it big. So, they don't learn to participate in the adventure he has begun and add their own unique next chapter. They don't look at the man behind the money. All they see is the good life. Unless they add an episode or two of their own, they'll never be able to fully appreciate the fruits of his labor or make sure the next crop is ready for harvest. Worse yet, they may fail to inherit his strength and character along with the money. That's like having the pie with no filling.

You may have heard the saying that once you've become a millionaire it is easy to become a millionaire again. There's some truth to that. After the first million, the millionaire has a map for what's required. He understands the rules. And the equipment he needs, including the character he has so carefully cultivated, is all in place. Now, all he has to

PASSION *for* POSSIBILITY

do is duplicate the pattern. Who he became along the way is now worth many more millions of dollars. It might be a long journey to that second million. However, this time, he's ready.

When people inherit money from the previous generation without the accompanying work ethic or the desire to succeed, (the real wealth) statistics show that the wealth has evaporated by the third generation.

In fact, today's statistics reveal that 90% of all inheritances are gone within 18 months.

Why is that? The money is passed on, but not the values. What we haven't earned (or will not nurture), we have little chance of keeping. Therefore, communicating the family mission statement - a vision statement of the family that everybody could buy into - is something that we should all be doing from the day our children are old enough to hear it. If we set expectations for their part in it and look at positioning their strengths within the family business, we can confidently expect the next generation to run an organization after we have gone. We have to make sure they learn to develop those leadership skills and character qualities that brought success in the first place. That's our responsibility. It's part of a growing a successful society which is, after all, an extension of our business.

I created an interview process with my clients to walk people through the life lessons they've learned along the way. The response has been phenomenal as people get a chance to help their kids inherit so much more than just dollars and cents. They want their descendants to know the family story and understand the family values. They want them to know what their great-grandfather was thinking when he had money. And when he lost money, how did that affect him and how did he make it back?

We develop character throughout our lives, but the process begins in our families. It starts from the time we are small and lasts forever as we gain more and more experience. In my own family, I can pinpoint different experiences where my parents took the opportunity to shape my character.

CHALLENGES DEVELOP CHARACTER

I remember the drive to the water department. I was only nine at the time, but I recall rehearsing in my mind exactly what I would say to the people in the office when we got there. My family had just moved to Atlanta, Georgia from Manhattan. I had never seen so many green grassy areas or such open spaces in my life.

I am a native New Yorker, but when I was growing up, the city was a very different place. Back then, I walked a few blocks from where my family lived to public school #51 every day in the third grade. Now we were starting over again in a new city, in a completely different part of the country where they spoke much more slowly and said things like “Ya’ll.”

As the oldest son, I had to help make some of the arrangements for our family’s cross-country move from New York to the South. And on this day, our first day in Atlanta, we needed to arrange to have the electricity and utilities turned on so we could move in.

I understood how money worked because my parents would explain it to me using the checkbook registry. I talked with my parents about what needed to happen to establish services where we would live. As we walked into the water department that day, I’m sure it surprised the lady behind the front counter when she asked my parents, “How may I help you?” and my parents both turned to look at me. I learned to handle adult situations from an early age.

Growing Up Different Is A Blessing

I received the gift of parents who, in their own way, expected me to be a leader at every opportunity and gave me ample circumstances to apply what I was learning. By the time I was 18, I had a full handle on the activities involved in daily family living. It created a lot of trust in our family and built my self-confidence. I knew more about family responsibilities than most students much older than me.

PASSION *for* POSSIBILITY

Sadly, many families don't involve their kids in the day-to-day operations of a family, and that perpetuates ignorance and builds a lack of trust. It seems to me that part of the reason that some parents don't have a lot of confidence in the way their kids handle money is that they didn't allow their children to be involved in the financial process growing up. Consequently, they never developed the mindset and skills necessary to understand the value and role of money in the family. Isn't it funny how we sometimes unintentionally help create the very scenarios we most wanted to avoid?

As I lead families through financial and life planning, I've noticed that parents who are very open with their children tend to be much closer emotionally. There seems to be a lot more trust between members of the family. Oftentimes in families like these, the assets stand a better chance of surviving from generation to generation because parents have taken the time to teach the children about value and the way money works. The kids also know the story behind the wealth. They inherit it all.

On the other hand, there are parents who don't trust their kids to handle the family finances. These parents often don't realize how they contributed long ago to the adult children's inability to function in a world of finance, relationships and personal values. The stalemate in communication permeates the family. The adult children are directionless because they were never included in the map-making process.

No one develops character in a vacuum. It's amazing how much we contribute to developing each other's character - enhancing it or depleting it - by some of the little things we do or don't do.

I don't think my parents have ever fully understood that they were doing me a favor by involving me in family responsibilities that many people would have considered too much for a child to handle. When you're deaf coming into a hearing world, there is a lot more you have to do to simply survive. I watched my deaf parents do better than survive. They raised a family and taught me that anyone could make it.

Praising Someone's Character Every Chance You Get

Does character matter if you get the job done? To me, it's the only way to get the job done. It matters in everything that you do. It requires that you evaluate your own life and lead by example. Character raises the standard everywhere. It's often underrated yet crucial to lasting success.

Sadly, we don't recognize it enough in our homes, offices and communities. We forget to acknowledge positive character traits in other people, instead of citing their shortcomings.

It is one thing to see strength of character in an individual and another to recognize it. We may observe compassion and dependability in others. However, we seldom go the extra mile and acknowledge or honor the quality we observe.

We are so caught up in recognizing accomplishments that we forget to acknowledge quality and character strengths. For example, we could say to someone, "Thanks for getting those notes to me before my meeting." That is recognizing what someone did to contribute to a smooth office environment. And it is important. However, I would rather say to the person who brought me the notes, "Your dependability allows this team to function well. I'm grateful that I'm able to rely on you."

It's the difference between showing gratitude for what people *do* and expressing appreciation for *who* they are. Showing gratitude is almost compulsory and can be accomplished by a simple "thank you." And yet I'm guessing that we probably don't even practice this simple step enough. We don't write enough thank you notes. We overlook making that extra phone call to tell someone that we're grateful. When we express sincere appreciation, we go beyond what they do for us and touch on *who they are*. Where gratitude is generally thankful, appreciation truly validates.

Of course, recognition that takes place in front of others amplifies the effect. People stand taller. They want to do more, and they certainly want to be around someone who values both their contribution and them as

PASSION *for* POSSIBILITY

people. I try to do that in my office, and I can see the amazing impact that it makes on our team.

WE NEED EACH OTHER

Once I mastered the wisdom behind my father's philosophy - just be - I came to another life-changing realization. As a result of beginning to love and accept who I was, I began to find it even easier to love and accept others without them having to do things to make it happen.

The truth is that we need other people in order to allow us to fulfill our life goals. They're your leverage; you simply can't maximize your potential without them. You have a part you must play, but you have to allow others to play their part, too. Possibility - thinking opens the door to many opportunities that require teamwork. If you want to maximize your success, you are going to need to partner with other people. And then it's all about all of you. When you begin to do truly great things, it can no longer just be about you. That's gold in the bank. There's no limit to what you can accomplish in life. Together.