



COMING APRIL 2023

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THE INFORMATION DESK: WELCOME TO WONDERHELL

*"THE GODS HAVE TWO WAYS OF DEALING HARSHLY WITH US.
THE FIRST IS TO DENY US OUR DREAMS,
AND THE SECOND IS TO GRANT THEM."*

OSCAR WILDE

Preface

It's working!

That thing you created, you built, you launched . . . it's working. You weren't so sure you could pull it off, but you did. And it feels exciting, incredible, amazing. Success! It's wonderful, right?

The work you did opened more doors than you ever thought possible. But that work also teased the opportunity of even more doors that you'd never thought possible.

And maybe, just maybe, as you peeked through those new doors into what could be . . . you admitted something to yourself.

I want more.

In this transformative moment, everything changes. There was the you before this moment, and then there is the you after it. And now you can't go back.

Instead of success bringing you happiness, it handed you an increased hunger, a faster pace, bigger goals. And within that increased hunger, that faster pace, and those bigger goals, you also found uncertainty, self-doubt, anxiety, and stress.

Success is *wonderful*. But it's also *hell*.

Success is *Wonderhell*.

Wonderhell is the self-taught sales rep who wasn't sure she could make even close one deal . . . and now is striving to reach the platinum-level corporate award she thought was reserved only for others.

Wonderhell is the eager entrepreneur who started his own business . . . only to realize that its explosive growth demands an understanding of infrastructure and operations that he doesn't yet possess.

Wonderhell is the high-level executive who stood in for her boss at an event . . . and discovered she loves the challenges of being center stage.

Wonderhell is you, in the space between your past success and your next accomplishment—between who you were and who you just realized you can become.

In a way, success is like an amusement park. You looked forward to it for a long time, and when you finally got there, everything seemed great . . . at first. You were starting to have fun. But as the day wears on, with the heat of the sun blazing, and the corndogs and cotton candy churning in your belly, ride after ride, you begin to have your doubts.

I'm not sure I want to be here.

This was supposed to be fun.

Wait, this actually kind of sucks.

We expect success to be an enjoyable ride, but it's more like a terrifying gauntlet of never-ending challenges. Why isn't everything easier? Why doesn't success feel better? Why does it feel like Wonderhell?

You've picked up this book because you have a dream, a plan, a demon, a potential, an unshakeable goal that excites you and scares you at the same time. Maybe you think that goal is silly or even impossible, but it's not. You are simply in Wonderhell.

I have been in Wonderhell, too, and needed to find a way through it. So I sought out answers from more than one hundred others who had made it to the other side. This book tells some of their stories. It is organized to be experienced in either (or both!) of two ways: Read it from cover to cover, following the arc of people just like you, who are striving for success—and attaining it in ways large and small—but wondering why the struggle never abates. Or hop around from section to section, just as you would move through the rides at that amusement park, depending on your own needs and desires.

Yes, I know. That approach is unique. But so are you. So is your journey. And so is your Wonderhell, full of your very own aspirations, burdens, flops, and achievements.

We have come to see this space of uncertainty, doubt, and overwhelm as the *breakdown*, but what if it is really a *breakthrough*?

What if instead of bracing to survive in this liminal space, this middle of the middle, we learn to thrive in it instead?

What if success isn't an endpoint, but a portal to all that you can become?

What if the path to your next great success is on the other side?

Are you ready for your Wonderhell?

Let's go find out.

Introduction

It was 4:28 a.m. Or maybe it was 7:28 a.m. It might even have been 1:28 a.m.

Over the prior three weeks, I'd gone to sleep in ten different time zones and woken up in twenty new hotel beds. But at this moment, I was somewhere around 35,000 feet in the air, with 1,200 miles behind me and 1,200 more to go. I knew only one thing for certain: somewhere between the blur that was "the past" and the blur that would be "the future" was the space I was in at present. And that space at present was upright and locked in a center seat on a red-eye flight.

I was headed home at last, and I was completely and utterly fried.

A couple of years earlier, I had given the very first speech of my life, all the while hoping my stomach wouldn't make a break for the exit. That speech launched a career change I never knew I could have, and prompted me to write a book I never knew I could write. Now, as I was finishing the launch campaign for that book, I wondered if anyone would even read it.

I was nine toes over the edge of incompetence, teetering precariously, with no safety net in sight.

The book's launch demanded that I be bold! So I had wrestled all of my impostor syndrome demons to the ground, hushed every inner voice forbidding me to ask for help, and kicked the shins of my well-mannered instincts, which wanted me to pipe down and not make a fuss. I had no idea what I was doing, but I set crazy goals for myself anyway.

I let my mouth write a whole lot of checks that my hustle had to cash.

But it worked, and the book became a bestseller.

Destination reached!

Success achieved!

I was honored. I was humbled. I was overwhelmed. And sitting on that red-eye flight, I was also bone-tired.

The exhaustion at that moment was unlike anything I'd felt before. Sure, I'd been tired after having two babies. But that was a marathon type of slog, where I just had to quiet the raging hormones on their quest for rebalance, as they screamed in my sleep-deprived inner ear, *You have no idea what you're doing!* (Twenty years later, I can tell you their prediction wasn't exactly wrong.) And I'd been tired with, you know, actual marathons that I decided to run as misfired midlife crises—26.2-mile battles against every part of me, as my body and mind telegraphed that the torture was wholly untenable.

This exhaustion was different.

I had spent the better part of the launch campaign existing on nothing but coffee, protein bars, and the rush of adrenaline that bowel-shaking terror always provides. I'd like to say that along the way I'd found my rhythm, my flow, my stride, but that would be untrue. By the end of the campaign, I was still just as much of a moxie-filled bag of curious awkwardness as ever. But this thing I created, I grew, I birthed, I pursued so very hard for those weeks, and months, and years: it was working.

And squeezed into the middle seat on that airplane, suspended halfway between origin and destination, I heard a tiny voice from within. Rising from somewhere in the alchemy of achievement and exhaustion, bubbling up past the part of my brain that normally governs my humility, it whispered insistently, *This thing has legs . . . This thing has legs!*

This murmur of grandeur set my altitude-addled mind on a mission to choreograph the gymnastics it might take to reach a new level of success—one that I'd never imagined was open to me before.

Wait! I thought. *Maybe I haven't reached my destination at all. Maybe I can go even farther.*

That idea was mind-blowing. It was electrifying. It was wonderful.

But it was also anxiety-provoking. It was stress-inducing. It was hell.

It was wonderful. And it was hell.

I was no longer just jammed into that too-small seat on that too-long flight. I was somewhere else entirely.

I was in Wonderhell.

And en route to Wonderhell, I had packed more than my fancy new bestseller bio. Crammed into my carry-on suitcase was something else, too, something that would forever change me: an expanded vision of my potential.

This was not the first time I felt stressed in a high-pressure situation . . . or wondered whether I was setting my goals at the right level . . . or set out to achieve something that would both salve my pride and satisfy my wallet. But it was the first time I consciously experienced such a fundamental shift in my understanding of *who I could be*. It was the most sudden expansion in my expectations for myself—an entirely new perception of my capabilities in relation to my success. It was the earliest crystallization in my mind of that intersection between the *wonder* of newly available (although still distant) opportunities and the *hell* of my potential.

Yes, I was squarely in Wonderhell. And I'd gotten there on a one-way ticket.

Ego Has Entered the Chat

I bet you've been in Wonderhell, too.

If you're anything like me—yes, I see you!—you've had this moment of realization, when you're standing on a current success while reaching toward the next one. And if you're anything like me, you recognize this as the moment that the burden of your potential slinks into your psyche, unpacks its tent, and camps the hell out.

Are you going to live into this opportunity? it asks. Or are you going to let it pass on by, settling for a life of haunting regret?

The burden of your potential attaches itself to your shoulders and demands that you carry it around in your backpack and serve it at all times. Oh yes, your ego has entered the chat. And it starts to hum the moment you recognize that your idea has promise, that your dream can be bigger, that you were meant for more. It starts to hum the moment you recognize that you could have everything you want—if only you agree to your potential's ever-increasing demands.

We talk about success as if it is a final destination. We think success means that we've arrived, that we are at our journey's conclusion. *Smooth sailing*, we tell ourselves, *easy money*. But it's not.

Wonderhell teaches us that each success is not a final destination at all, but an inflection point on that journey.

A Way Through Wonderhell

In the weeks and months and years since this red-eye realization, I've continued to travel around the world promoting my book and engaging with diverse audiences of all ages, in all stages of life. I've heard time and again the tales of innovators, entrepreneurs, instigators, and iconoclasts who found themselves smack in the middle of their own personal Wonderhell. Some of them thrived in it. Some of them drowned in it. And I couldn't get it out of my head: in their stories, there are lessons for all of us.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I used the lockdown as an opportunity to look for books covering the topic of not just surviving one's experience with success, but thriving in it. I attempted to crush it, to lean in, to 10x—and for what it's worth, I also tried to wash my face, stop apologizing, and become a #girlboss.

What was offered on social media was not helpful either. There, it seemed that success came in only two forms: the hustleporn, slicked-back, suited-up bros jetting off to ink their next deal, or the boho chic influencers imploring me to follow my passion and promising me happiness if only I could breathe into the right energy crystals.

What even are energy crystals, anyway?

None of this worked for me. And it might not work for you either. It certainly didn't work for the thousands of leaders whom I steered through pivotal career and life shifts during my twenty-year career in executive search. And it certainly didn't work for the nearly one hundred glass-ceiling breakers, Olympic medalists, start-up unicorns, and everyday people—like you and like me—whom I interviewed in search of a way through Wonderhell.

Each one of these successful individuals talked about doing what they never thought possible. And each one of them also shared how, at each stage and at each phase, they experienced a crushing combination of doubt, vulnerability, envy, impostor syndrome, exhaustion, and burnout. But each one also made it to the other side of Wonderhell—and was the better for it.

So, how did they do it?

Three main pathways emerged, pointing the way through Wonderhell.

Embracing the Burden of Your Potential

First, they came to terms with their ambition.

Wonderhell isn't just what happens *after* you've achieved success. Rather, Wonderhell is what happens when you realize that your original idea of success was merely a small step, a tiny pit stop, a sweet little waypoint. Success isn't the final destination at all, but a portal—a door that opens to reveal your truest self and purpose, an invitation to achieve and become more than you ever thought possible.

I saw this phenomenon firsthand as an executive recruiter assisting organizations large and small in the search for C-suite talent, interviewing thousands of leaders at these trajectory-defining moments of professional transition. From time to time, we would have an internal candidate—someone currently employed in the organization but in a lower-level role. And every single time, internal candidates who didn't get the bigger job eventually left. Why? Because the very process of interviewing for the bigger job meant that, just for a moment, they had to wear the clothes of that role, speak in the voice of that role, imagine the scenarios of life in that role. And once they did, they couldn't unsee themselves in this bigger role.

Just like these internal candidates, you cannot unsee this new you.

Each time you imagine the next level of success, even before you achieve it, you see a version of yourself that you never knew existed, a potential that you never thought could be real, a promise of who you can become and what you can embody . . . if only you allow yourself to play for a while in that uncomfortable, uncertain place.

Coming to terms with your ambition requires you to learn how to play bigger, make your own luck, figure out who you are, live into your truest self, and let go of the demons that have been haunting you. We will walk through these topics in more detail in *Impostortown*.

Renegotiating Your Relationship with Mixed Emotions

Second, those people I interviewed with a track record of thriving in Wonderhell understood that uncomfortable feelings surrounding success aren't just an obligatory part of the process, but incredibly helpful allies.

In other words, the mixed emotions—the good, the bad, and the ugly—surrounding this discovery of the new you aren't *limitations*, but *invitations*. These emotions are a sign that you're on the right track, navigating toward new opportunities and new growth. And so those thrivers were able to pause and listen to those emotions, reflect on them, learn from them, and renegotiate their relationship with them.

We are told that these uncomfortable emotions are just a “necessary evil,” a byproduct of going after everything we've ever wanted. We are told that we just need to hang on by our fingernails and somehow get through the stressful, unwanted side effects of success, trying to survive these difficult moments while torturing ourselves with a never-ending, flip-flopping internal dialogue: *I can handle this. Wait . . . can I handle this?*

But that survival story is a lie, and that lie is holding you back from capitalizing on your Wonderhell.

Wonderhell isn't a necessary evil. It's the excitement and the fear, the joy and the anxiety, the possibility and the uncertainty, the promise and the pressure you feel when you see this potential new you, and when you realize that the only one who gets to choose which you to become is . . . well, you.

And this means changing the doomsaying voice inside of your head—the one screaming, “You haven't *done* this before!” and warning you to run from your potential—into a voice cheering, “You haven't *done this* before!” and encouraging you to run toward it.

Renegotiating your relationship with the mixed emotions about success means you'll need to manage uncertainty, fly without a net, find your own way, gain perspective on other people, and prepare to go farther together. We will journey through these checkpoints in *Doubtsville*.

Doing It Again . . . and Again . . . and Again . . .

Third, for every single person I interviewed, what was on the other side of this Wonderhell was simply the next one, and the next one, and (if they were lucky) the next one after that.

Wonderhell, it seems, loves itself a repeat visitor.

We think that things will settle down after we crush that next goal, that things will get easier when fear is no longer a factor, that we just need to get through this one stomach-churning, butt-clenching, fight-or-flight moment, as if it's a short-term, one-time hurdle. But in reality, each of our journeys is a series of successes punctuated by losses, by lessons, by life. It's an ongoing cycle. There isn't one big finish line, but a million different little ones.

Look, I'm not telling you to "Suck it up, sis!" I'm not advising you to "Get hard, bro!" What I am saying is this: Accepting your most recent success as a finite destination would mean there is also a finite limit to your growth. And all this does is steal the wonder and leave you in only the hell.

Whether your ambition is spoken out loud with intention, printed in giant letters on your vision board, or just a whispered voice that catches you by surprise, the path to achieving your new, bigger goals runs straight through your personal Wonderhell (again and again and again . . .). Getting comfortable in this repeated, cyclical journey demands that you say no to hustleporn, focus on what really matters, quiet your perfectionist tendencies, stand tall when the floor drops out, and adopt a beginner's mindset. We will explore these routes at length in Burnout City.

An Invitation to Enjoy the Ride

What if, all along, you've been mis-categorizing this space that linked *where you've already been* and *what you've just learned is possible*?

What if everything you have achieved or become, large or small, is simply a preamble to what you can achieve or become next?

What if, instead of dreading Wonderhell and merely surviving it, you could learn to look forward to it and actually thrive in it instead?

What if Wonderhell isn't just a temporary state of mind, but your new permanent home?

This book is my invitation to you: Join me in Wonderhell! Come learn from those who have been fueled and fed by the ride—those who overcame, slayed, or embraced the hell so they could live freely in the wonder.

Some of them had to quiet their impostor syndrome—to accept that they belong; that they are worthy of their goals; that they can achieve anything and everything they want; and that it's okay to want something so big, they can only whisper it to themselves.

Some had to banish their self-doubt—their self-fulfilling prophecy about success being out of reach or only for someone else, about their goals being too big, too hairy, too audacious.

Some had to adjust to, anticipate, or eradicate the burnout that resulted when their current life was unable to support the weight of the possibility they imagined.

Some learned to fly their freak flag. Some learned to let go. Some chose to grow big, and others decided to stay the course.

The stories of some people in this book will sound so familiar that you could swap your name for theirs, while the stories of others will feel entirely out of your orbit. Yet the lessons you'll learn from the distress, discomfort, and discombobulation that any type of growth demands—these lessons are the same for every single person here. They were all in their own hell, and each of them navigated through it to find their own wonder on the other side.

And you can, too.

Welcome to Wonderhell! I'm glad you're here.

Hey, it's Laura.

Are you liking what you are reading so far?

Do you want to be the first to know when Wonderhell is coming out?

[Sign up right here](#) and I'll be in your inbox the moment I have more details.

In the meantime, check out my last book, [Limitless: How to Ignore Everybody, Carve Your Own Path, and Live Your Best Life](#), and see why Robin Roberts named it one of Good Morning America's Favorite Books of the Year.

Thanks for reading!



IMPOSTORTOWN: EMBRACE YOUR AMBITION

The gates of Wonderhell are your personal portal to your next big success. Through those gates, you glimpse the tantalizing future you never even knew you wanted or could achieve. Every bit of that future success can be yours, if only you are bold enough to believe in it—and go after it.

So, what's stopping you?

Is it that disparaging voice in your head that accuses you of being a fraud?

Each time you level up, so does that inner critic, wondering:

Who am I to dare to dream this big?

Will my luck run out at this next level?

What if they figure out that I don't know what I'm doing?

Can I still be successful as the real me?

And how do I let go of everyone else's expectations of me?

It's time to stop shrinking into the smaller box built for you by others—or even the safe, secure but suffocating box you built for yourself—and start taking up a space of your own. It's time to embrace your ambition.

First stop: Impostortown!

Wait, you don't feel like you belong here? Perfect! Neither does anyone else.

The Imaginarium: Learning to Play Bigger
The Fortune Teller: Making Your Own Luck
The Hall of Mirrors: Figuring Out Who You Are
The Tent of Oddities: Living Into Your Truest Self
The Haunted House: Letting Go of Your Demons

The Imaginarium: Learning to Play Bigger

Step right up to the Imaginarium, where dreams and delights appear in a pageant of possibilities! In this gallery of wonders, your true potential will be exposed. The new, more expansive view of yourself nestles itself within your mind, and it won't be dislodged no matter what you do. You enter the Imaginarium as one person, but you will leave as another person entirely, with bigger, bolder aspirations and an expanded sense of what your life could be.

Every Great Story Starts with Guns n' Roses

Simon Tam wanted play rock 'n' roll for as long as he could remember. Instead, he found himself at the Supreme Court with his identity at stake.

Like every great story, Simon's started with Guns N' Roses. "I grew up in the eighties," he explains, "watching their music videos and thinking, 'That's what I want to do.'" He spent several years floating in and out of makeshift bands until finally, in 2006, he formed the world's first all-Asian-American dance rock band, The Slants.

The Slants found huge success, played loads of concerts, sold out big halls. They were living the dream—traveling from gig to gig with guitars and drums and amps and mics all packed into their rickety van—and as long as the van was running, things were great! That is, until they talked to a lawyer who recommended trademarking their name to protect their intellectual property.

Simon was assured that this would take no more than six months and cost just a few hundred bucks. But then the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office denied the request, claiming that the band's name was racist and offensive.

The band members had brainstormed the name themselves when they mused about what they had in common. "Slanted eyes?" someone joked. Simon thought that was interesting because, first, it's factually incorrect: Asians have eyes of various shapes, and Asians aren't the only people whose eyes appear narrow or tapered. But the name worked in another way, too.

"We could talk about our perspective—our 'slant' on life—as people of color navigating the entertainment industry," Simon points out. "At the same time, we could pay homage to the Asian-American activists who had been using the term in a reappropriated, self-empowering way." The government disagreed, and the band was left with a choice: compromise part of their identity and find a new name, or fight the decision.

Simon decided to play bigger. Simon chose to fight.

Into the van, along with the guitars and drums and amps and mics, now went legal briefs and law books. The more Simon dug into the issue, the more he learned this law was being enforced in a way that was harming those it was intended to serve, preventing people like him from turning hurtful language and symbols into badges of pride and honor.

As he fought court case after court case, the legal bills piled up next to the broken-down van bills. It absorbed time and attention. He was forced to take on extra jobs to pay for it. He lost bandmates over it. But Simon recognized an opportunity to make a difference, and he couldn't go back.

In 2017, the Slants won a unanimous, landmark case before the Supreme Court, helping to expand civil liberties for marginalized populations. Simon's work has since been featured in 150 different countries and highlighted in over 3,000 media outlets, including *Rolling Stone*, *Time*, the *New York Times*, NPR, and the BBC. And Simon and the Slants haven't just rested their case. Leading this fight opened Simon's imagination to an even bigger purpose still: starting The Slants Foundation, a nonprofit that supports arts and activism projects for underrepresented communities. "Supporting the arts is more than just charity or entertainment," he says. "It's justice."

Fewer Pantyhose, Bigger Dreams

When it comes to the stories we commonly hear about, whether in the news or in the lives of our neighbors and friends, we tend to be fed the big moments: *This person started this business, ran this marathon, won this case*. Seldom do we learn about the little moments that lead up to those big ones. But often those important moments take place riding down the highway, surrounded by guitars and drums and amps and mics, in the back of a rickety van.

For me, one of those moments happened in a corner office in downtown Boston.

When my executive recruiting company was about five years old, I got the call of most entrepreneurs' dreams. "Laura, we've been watching you," beckoned the voice of opportunity. "We like what you're doing. Would you consider being acquired?"

Someone wanted to buy my business—the business-baby I birthed while birthing two human babies on the side, the business-soul that had shocked me by becoming no small part of my identity. Someone had seen my success and wanted a piece of it for themselves.

It was heady and ego-stroking, a validation that all those sleepless nights of entrepreneurial insomnia (piled on top of maternal insomnia) were worth it. I was counting my money before I even hung up the phone.

We went through the necessary due diligence, strategy sessions, and paperwork—all the usual courtship rigmarole. At last, it was time for the big meeting, to consummate the relationship, and what was I thinking?

Show me the money.

That morning, I got all dolled up in my most professional finery: navy blue suit and power pumps. I had even bought pantyhose (ugh!) for the occasion. At the department store the previous day—flipping through the hosiery sizes with one hand while wrangling a toddler and a preschooler with the other—I'd tried to decipher that periodic table on the back of the package, wondering, *Where exactly on this triangular grid does my post-baby booty land?* But here I was, walking into the building at last—fapitized^[1] as my nana would pronounce—like a real grown-up business lady. Dare I say, there might even have been a strut in my step.

[1] fapitized, adj., Yiddish: looking one's best; fancy; dressed to kill; or (in my nana's case) presentable enough to be introduced to a nice Jewish doctor.

I was ushered up to the CEO's office to sit across a glass table from a kind-faced, older gentleman named David. As he regaled me with his delight over acquiring my business, I peeked at the office's many photos of David with politicians—presidents, senators, and congressmen, all men, all Republicans—and the many stuffed elephants tucked alongside the frames, presumably gifts from those important men for various favors and donations. This was long before the political vitriol of the current day, and while I know and love a number of open-hearted conservatives, I had made my career squarely on the other side of the aisle.

I was not represented on David's shelves.

No matter, I thought.

My pantyhose and I pressed on.

David talked about some "slight changes" to my firm's approach and some "strategic redirection" of our founding principles. He glossed over the values that underpinned every piece of what my company did in his haste to get to the bottom line: that he thought we'd achieved success through some sort of voodoo magic.

It was the usual mild misogyny and slight condescension, unintentional and benevolent—nothing I hadn't experienced a million times already from other kind-faced, older sorts. By this point in my career, I'd gotten good at smiling through it.

But I was not represented in David's words.

No matter, I thought.

My pantyhose and I pressed on.

He spoke of how my small business would be brought into the fold of his much larger company . . . about how we would naturally need to make certain changes aligned with his view of the work and of the world . . . about the steps and the timeline required for me to undo precisely what made the company unique—what made it special—before I would be quietly excused out the side door, and my people, my clients, my processes would become wholly his.

I was not represented in David's plans.

No matter, I thought.

My pantyhose and I again pressed on.

I was supposed to want this—the path that was less scary, more traditional, with real money guaranteed. But something just didn't feel right.

At long last, the conversation turned to dollars. David took a folded piece of paper out of a portfolio and, as if in an old-school movie, slid it across the glass table. "I'm very excited to take your little company to the place of its fullest potential," he said.

I looked down at the piece of paper and, through the crystal-clear table, caught sight of my legs suffocating in their pantyhose prison. Then it dawned on me exactly what felt wrong: I'd made a special trip to the store to buy pantyhose for the occasion of selling my soul to its very first suitor.

I didn't even want a suitor, yet I'd put on a new pair of pantyhose for him nevertheless.

It would all be so simple, though. All I needed to do was unfold that piece of paper, read a number, and surf the waves of five years' struggle all the way to the bank. All I needed to do was unfold the paper and sign on the bottom line.

But I was still looking at the pantyhose.

So I looked up and said, "Thank you for your interest, but I think I'll be the one to take my company to the place of its fullest potential."

I didn't sign on the bottom line. I never even unfolded that piece of paper.

No matter, I thought.

Instead, my pantyhose and I walked out the door.

Be Limitless

Walking out of that fancy downtown office, in my fancy pantyhose—but without that fancy folded piece of paper—was when I decided to start dreaming bigger. Before I'd walked in the door, I had an idea of what my future could be: get acquired, make a little money, fade into the sunset. But sitting there in that office, I realized something: I had built a company based on my own, very specific definition of success. And this sale, no matter how lucrative it might be, was going to fly in the face of everything I held dear.

David wanted to prioritize the maximization of profit; I had started my firm to maximize personal flexibility and impact in the world. As I describe in my previous book, *Limitless: How to Ignore Everybody, Carve Your Own Path, and Live Your Best Life*, I believe that any leader, manager, or entrepreneur must think about these three factors—profits, flexibility, and impact—and make decisions based on one or, at most, two of those factors. It is impossible to start or run a business based on all three. But if you stick with your two main priorities, the third will eventually follow.

Sitting in that swanky office, I realized that this same disconnect on values was the reason I'd left the big marquee firm where I'd started my career. It may not have felt this way to everyone, but the underlying message I got from my managers was: *Profits first, client impact second, and what even is personal flexibility?*

This message didn't comport with who I am. I was not in consonance, so I quit that firm and started my own. And that firm of mine grew to a size that meant David wanted it, but what he didn't understand is that what made our firm different—putting our employees and our clients in front of our profits—was in fact what made us wildly profitable. Being in consonance allowed me to be fully and unapologetically me. Consonance is the central idea of Limitless. Perhaps you have read it, but it bears a brief revisit here, because finding your Wonderhell rests upon an essential goal: being intertwined with who you are at your core and what you hold most dear.

So, here's the skinny.

We all have a similar goal: We want success to feel meaningful. We want our work to matter. But it doesn't, and we feel stuck, no matter how hard we hustle and grind toward success, or how much we achieve it. That's because the problem isn't how we *achieve* success; it's how we *define* success.

Each one of us, at some point in our lives, was given a scorecard—a checklist, if you will—that defined success for us. You might have gotten it from a teacher, a parent, a coach, a friend, a boss, a personal hero, or even an internet celebrity. Most of us have been carrying around this scorecard, tucked away in our back pocket, for as long as we can recall. Many of us don't even remember how we got it. But there it sits, demanding that we fill in all the right checkboxes of generally accepted, externally defined success. We fill and we fill and we fill, but we still end up feeling empty.

Here's why: You can't be insatiably hungry for, deeply inspired by, or happily fulfilled by someone else's goals. In order for your working life to *feel* right for you, it has to actually *be* right for you. And that scorecard? It has nothing to do with you.

Instead, what if you pursued consonance—that sensation of alignment and flow that comes when *what you do* matches *who you are*? Consonance is made up of four elements:

- *Calling* is a gravitational pull toward a goal larger than yourself—a business you want to build, a leader who inspires you, a societal ill you wish to remedy, a cause you desire to serve.
- *Connection* gives you sightlines into how your everyday work serves that calling by solving the problem at hand, growing the bottom line, or reaching that goal.
- *Contribution* is an understanding of how this job, this brand, this paycheck contributes to the community to which you want to belong, the person you want to be, or the lifestyle you'd like to live.
- *Control* reflects how you influence your connection to that calling, in order to have agency in your work (that is, in the assignment of projects, deadlines, colleagues, and clients), offer input toward shared goals, and contribute to your career trajectory and earnings.

Each of us, at every age and every stage, wants and needs these four elements—calling, connection, contribution, and control—in different amounts. Your definition of consonance will be different from mine[2] Plus, how you experience consonance today also will be different from your experience ten years ago and ten years from now.

But once you begin working toward that wonderful goal that is so meaningful to you, you'll find it's the one to trigger that hell, because this time you actually care. Finding Wonderhell means finding that meaningful goal, and this requires doing some things differently.

First, you'll want to ignore everyone else's definitions of success and create your own. And second, you'll want to start dreaming in elephants.

Dream in Elephants

Did you know that it takes two years to gestate an elephant, but only nine weeks to birth a litter of puppies?

So, a dog could bear litter after litter after litter of puppies, and the elephant? Yep, still pregnant. Some things are just so big, it takes a little more effort and resourcefulness to conceive them. And while you might be fond of playing among scores of cute little puppies—hello, bucket list!—if you're trying to do something big, something ground-shaking, something worthy of your potential, bringing a few poodle-sized ideas into the world might not be enough. You're going to want to dream in elephants.

[2] If you need help in finding your own definition of consonance, go to LimitlessAssessment.com and take our twenty-minute, deep-dive assessment.

David Usher is no stranger to dreaming in elephants. Lead singer of Moist—one of the most successful bands ever to come out of Canada—and now a pioneer in the educational artificial intelligence (AI) space, David has always imagined a world that others couldn't yet see, whether it was creating melody and lyrics out of whole cloth, or conceiving of technology that has not yet been built. He also has always had to contend with no one understanding what on earth he's saying.

"When I describe to people what we're going to build—say, an AI rendering of Albert Einstein holding an interactive discussion on the theory of relativity with schoolchildren—they all nod and smile at me," David explains.

Later, he hears about what happened after he left the meeting room: "They all looked at each other strangely and asked, 'What the fuck was he even talking about?'"

Perhaps that scenario of feigned understanding seems familiar to you. Perhaps you are managing a team, pushing them to achieve what they never could imagine for themselves. Perhaps you are pushing yourself, not 100 percent certain that what's on the other side even really exists. You are living through a chaotic, creative, ambitious moment, trying to dream things that are bigger than anyone else can envision yet.

No one is naturally comfortable in this scenario. As David points out, everyone and everything (and even you) will try to beat your idea into submission, to make it more comfortable, until it becomes a boring, normal-size thing that we've all seen before.

"We get beaten down by the realities of technology, and life, and money, and all these things we need to make stuff happen," he says. "But you want your dream to be big enough that even after all this beating down, it still has value to you in its conclusion."

Unfortunately, though, this is where most people off-ramp. After experiencing frustration or a dead end, they drop out of the process and never achieve their most creative work. And that's what separates what David calls, in his book *Let the Elephants Run*, the "one-time creative" from the "lifetime creative": the willingness to get comfortable being uncomfortable, just as David has had to do in his own journey from musician to technology mastermind. Those who can revisit Wonderhell again and again know that in the difficulty, in the struggle, in the failure—in the willingness to dream big—we become our most creative, best selves.

When people can't internalize your vision, it feels like failure. But this type of failure is how you know you're experimenting with new capabilities, pushing past boundaries, and taking enough chances. If you aren't failing at least a little, are you even really trying? So, accept that failure will happen sometimes. Don't let it signal doom. The road hasn't dead-ended; your story is not done. It has only just started getting interesting.

Yes, it's hard, but it needs to be. Opportunity opens its doors only for those bold enough to walk through them—for those who give themselves permission to be ambitious.

Permission to Be Ambitious

Sallie Krawcheck decided to dream bigger after an a-ha moment one morning while putting on her makeup. She looked into the mirror—one eye shut, mouth ajar, mascara wand in hand—and thought, *The retirement savings crisis is actually a women's crisis.*

Compared with men, Sallie reasoned, working women in this country earn less, are expected to take more unpaid family leave, end up carrying more debt, and are not encouraged as strongly to invest. Yet she knew that women live six to eight years longer than men do, requiring a longer retirement horizon—and that 80 percent of women die single. Gender pay gap is an issue, and a big one, but by Sallie's estimation, this is compounded by the faux-empowerment way we talk to women about money.

Most media messages targeting women are either fear-mongering (Money is hard!) or patronizing (Maybe if you could just resist that crème brûlée latte or skip the avocado toast!). Cue Sex in the City's Carrie Bradshaw buying too many shoes and not being able to afford her apartment. Oops! Male-facing media messages, on the other hand, encourage every last Mr. Big to buy the T-bone steak and the fancy car. When money lessons for men are all about power, strength, and independence, perhaps it's no coincidence that 99 percent of investment dollars are managed by companies owned by men.

Sallie wasn't just some random person musing about the economic status of women all around the planet, but a bona fide financial whiz. Back in high school, when all she was thinking about was her cute jock boyfriend, a guidance counselor pulled her aside and pointed to her SAT scores and IQ test results. "You can write your own ticket," the counselor advised. "Do you want to be hanging on the smile of a football player, or do you want to see what you can do?"

Suddenly, Sallie had permission to be ambitious, and she rode that ambition like a rocket ship, from a research analyst role at Sanford C. Bernstein Co., where she pushed to take the company out of lucrative but conflict-rich deals and landed herself on the cover of *Forbes* as "the last honest analyst" in the process, to leadership at Citigroup, where she was recruited as chief financial officer and later head of the Smith Barney unit. "I went from managing two hundred eighty-six people on a Wednesday," Sallie recalls, "to forty thousand people on a Thursday."

On the home front, Sallie was also managing two children, two stepchildren, two cats, and a husband, and could easily put herself in the shoes of her female investors who worried about short-term risk, long-term gain, and how each decision would play out in their own portfolio. Her calculated, judicious, measured way of thinking didn't jibe with the fast and loose ways that Wall Street tends to play. And when she stood her ground on issues that mattered to her, Sallie was fired—twice, in fact, and both times in stories on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*.^[3]

But on that fateful morning, while applying mascara and thinking about the retirement savings crisis, her next thought was: What if someone built an investment business by women, for women?

The person capable of building and running such a business, Sallie figured, would need a deep financial background, like that of a research analyst. She would have to be contrarian, capable of looking at things differently. She would need to be able to assemble and manage a top-notch tech team, and also be credible and connected enough to raise a lot of money from venture capital firms that don't typically fund women in fintech. And she would probably have to be someone who had experienced—and endured—public failure.

"What person has a chance in hell of doing that?" she asked herself. And herself answered back: "You." Everything she had done up until this point was proof that she could play bigger, with her own brand of success. And in 2014, Sallie founded Ellevest—an investment platform by women, for women. As of 2021, under Sallie's leadership, Ellevest was managing more than \$1.5 billion.

[3] David Enrich, "Krawcheck Is Leaving CitiGroup: Wealth-Unit Chief Exits Amid Tension With CEO Pandit," *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2008; Dan Fitzpatrick and Robin Sidel, "BoFA Shakes Up Senior Ranks," *Wall Street Journal*, September 7, 2011.

Sometimes that all-important a-ha moment comes in the back of a rickety band van. Sometimes it comes across a fancy conference table. And sometimes it comes when you're putting on mascara. Regardless of when lightning strikes, give yourself that permission to dream bigger and bolder. Bat those lashes, baby! Embrace this new you.

Are You Ready for This Ride?

You were quite content with your past triumphs and accomplishments until you stepped into the Imaginarium and saw it: the you that you want to be, the life that you want to live, the potential that you want to fulfill. Now you can't unsee it. So, what are you going to do with the burden of your potential—this ambition, this Wonderhell?

I say, get all up in its business and have a ball!

Accept the challenge of living up to this new view of yourself. Rather than apologizing for who you are and what you want, let yourself live fully into this new opportunity on your horizon. Grab hold of past failures that will instruct your future growth. Trade your fear and regret for something new: adventure. It's got to be someone, and it's got to be sometime.

Why not you?

Why not now?

That life you want is right there on the other side of your decision, waiting for you to believe it can be yours. All you have to do is let yourself play bigger in the Imaginarium.

As you begin to discover the Imaginarium—reflecting on your newfound potential and struggling under the weight of its burden—consider the following questions:

- What is your own definition of success, and what goals within that definition compel you?
- When have you felt the heart-fluttering excitement and flow of doing what you love?
- What whispered goals do you have, even if you aren't sure they are possible or don't feel brave enough to speak them out loud?

Hey, it's Laura again.

Congratulations on making it to the end of the sample chapters for Wonderhell!

I'd love to know what you thought.

Email me at LGO@LimitlessPossibility.com and tell me what you loved, what you hated, and what was a flat-out a-ha moment for you.

And don't forget to [sign up here](#) so that I can let you know the moment the book launches into the world.

You rock!



P.S. Do you know anyone else you think would love to read this? Go ahead and forward this to them with my compliments. Why? Because you are awesome.