



EXPANDING the Lean-in Conversation




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WHY EXPAND THE CONVERSATION?

When the “lean-in” conversation infiltrated coffee klatches and women across the spectrum — from pedal-to-the-metal career enthusiasts to stay-at-home moms — were experiencing great angst, I felt it was time to expand the conversation. My goal was to reduce the judgment about the

choices we make. We can be so critical of ourselves. Successful enough? Fit enough? Happy family? Balanced life? Clean home? Financial reserves? And the list goes on. I wondered if I could help usher in a feeling of acceptance, an understanding that there is no one size fits all. Different needs mean different paths, and could we at the very least view our journey with more calm?



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I often use the analogy of the autobahn versus the winding road to describe different ways we might travel. Speedsters on the autobahn enjoy a fast thrilling ride, often with a more single-minded purpose. They cover distance. Drivers on the winding road experience life differently, enjoying every twist and turn, yield sign, and maybe even a rest area.

Their journey is uneven, peppered with spurts, slow downs, and stops. Both routes have much to recommend them, but we seem to celebrate the speedsters more. I wanted to know more about the second group — late bloomers, u-turners, fork-in-the-road lovers. What if we shone a light on women who were slower out of the gate, were stymied by their maze, or discovered their calling mid-life? What would we learn?

And so began a project to help a group of women share their stories. Through friends of friends, I found great women, ranging in age (mid-30s to mid-80s), and life experiences. I asked them to share their a-ha moments, turning points, challenges, and something that revealed who they are at their core. By the way, I added, “Can you capture all that in one pithy 1,000-word piece?” The stories that resulted were full of surprises, balancing acts, and gutsy change-ups.

At My Pace shares 36 stories from women who weren’t ripped from the headlines. The contributors include a poet who cares for her ailing father, a pioneering sports reporter who finds meaning in adopting her Chinese daughter, a mom who falls off the corporate ladder, an octogenarian who is still practicing psychiatry, an artist who left epidemiology to follow her passion, and many more fascinating women. Throughout these stories, themes repeat while still retaining a unique shimmer that makes us value each individual’s journey.

GOING FROM DISCOVERY TO CELEBRATION

The first and last women I worked with shared stories that frame the conversation in a way I couldn’t have scripted better. In the first story, “Discovering My Way,” we meet Fran Heller. Fran grew up traveling to Spain and Mexico during her professor father’s sabbaticals and became fluent in Spanish. As an adult, she worked many interesting jobs, trying out the Peace Corps, starting her own travel business, and working on a stock-trading floor — an environment she likens to a frat house. Along the way, she suffered a deep personal loss that put

her in a hospital along with many Latino families. Because of her language skills, she sometimes acted as a go-between for the Spanish-speaking families and their doctors. At the time, Fran was still in search for a meaningful calling, and her experience in the hospital inspired her to become a social worker at 44, the oldest student in her program. She recalls finally feeling connected to her life’s work: *“My first day was on 9-11, and I was at my internship at a Senior Center in Washington Heights. There were many Latinos in the room with me, glued to the TV, some of them political refugees who had fled to the US as their ultimate safe haven. Their doubt and anxiety were palpable. I was in the right place for me.”*

The last piece, “Celebrating My Choices” is by Hillary Gardenswartz, a single woman in her mid-30s and an extraordinary educator. She describes what it has been like to set her own course, which to her surprise has not included marriage and kids. *“It’s not like I was actively choosing or not choosing to find a life partner and move into the next stage that most of my friends had already entered. It just hadn’t happened for me.”* Hillary chooses to run the New York Marathon despite the fact that she hates running. The marathon becomes the symbol of her first “true choice” made on her own behalf as an adult. When superstorm Sandy strikes, and the marathon is cancelled, Hillary chooses to recommit to a second year of training — no small feat for someone who hates running. Hillary writes that the marathon became *“an affirmation of my choices, a celebration that even if my life doesn’t follow the predictable path, I’m worthy of being celebrated for the choices I do make.”*

GETTING TO “CELEBRATION POINT”

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Ellen Arad calls “finding your voice,” that passion or purpose that gives life more meaning. The words are simple, but the process is anything but. When Suzanne Offit, a 50-year-old mother with three boys, decides to act on her calling and go to rabbinical school, her life gets very messy. Predictably, upheaval and displacement occur within her family as she searches to fill both her new and old roles. Suzanne describes the arguments, pain, adjustments, and ultimately deeper love reached. In “On the Need to Dig,” Suzanne writes:

“The sum of those six years of digging and metamorphosis taught me much more than the many parts of rabbinic education. I found my voice...and most importantly, I found a way to take my family with me.”

While finding one’s voice may be step one, there were many other lessons gleaned from the women who reached a “celebration point.” Here are a few:

- **The “Master Plan” does not work as well as incremental adjustments:**

Kim Lorusso, with MBA in hand, was succeeding well at work — and then reached a breaking point. The straddling of family, work, travel, and too many grocery store chicken dinners led her to reevaluate her choices. Step-by-step she changes things up until she reaches what feels like a good compromise on many fronts. The theme of incremental versus wholesale changes is typical. Like a chef testing a dish for seasoning, these women noted subtle (or not so subtle) differences and adjusted accordingly.

- **“Reality Orientation” anchors us:** We should avoid being hamstrung by our expectations of perfection. Barbara Seagle, a pediatrician, describes the look of first-time parents in “Reality Orientation”: “*There they sit, exhausted, exhilarated with overwhelming love, determined not to make any parenting mistakes. They never tell me this, but I see it.*” Barbara advises them, “*No path is perfect, no decision is beyond question,*” and then she uses this advice herself as she prepares for

retirement. Similarly, when Sandra Gregory (“A Few Minor Repairs”) loses her fortune and her husband, she finds herself sleeping in her brother’s basement on her niece’s little mermaid bed. She knows she needs a new start for herself and her sons, and with determination and pragmatism, Sandra trains to become an international tour director. As she departs for her first tour, and has just left the courthouse where she finalized the divorce, she has a moment where she realizes, “*We all were going to be fine. Not perfect. Just fine.*” Both Barbara and Sandra lifted the burden of perfection, anchored themselves in a new reality, and in the process thrived.

- **Resilience can never be overestimated:**

Even the most charmed lives have big dips. These women demonstrated that it is how we manage the dips that matter and are a strong predictor of the future we build. When Susana Fonticoba suddenly becomes a forty-two-year-old widow, raising two children, and is subsequently laid off, she helps her older widow friends acclimate to AOL and PCs to help keep her sanity. Since no one was hiring, her friends suggest that she create her own job helping the elderly adopt technology. She writes in “Wildcat Mountain Revisited,” “*I became business savvy and gained a confidence I never would have foreseen.*” She joined a professional organization, grew to become part of their leadership, and eventually became President. She writes, “*I started out as a shy wife of a man who was bigger than life. If the young woman in her twenties could meet this mid-fifties woman, she would be completely astonished.*”

- **Reinvention is ongoing and restorative:** As Gertrude Stein once wrote, “When you get there, there is no there there.” Reinvention is ongoing and for these women it was energizing. An IT professional trades in her technology tools for rolling pins and becomes a pastry chef. An educator trains to be a life coach and then helps clients the

way she was once helped. A Marketing Communications professional departs from her cubicle in the office and builds a sustainable farm. A lawyer finds her passion is writing and leaves law to start an online magazine. Two educators focused on instilling the power of diversity within the Los Angeles school system become authors and consultants, promoting techniques for *how* we get there (even though as previously mentioned, there is “no there there”). On and on the stories go — expanding our identities, planting new seeds, embracing a dynamic life.

At My Pace is a start to a conversation I hope we can promote within our communities, one born out of respect and curiosity for what makes us tick. It is clear that more voices need to be captured and additional dimensions need to be probed. My experience so far in leading groups through these discussions have been enlightening and very positive — but more can be gained. Perhaps partnering with a community of employers can help accelerate the conversation and deepen our understanding.

The end game for *At My Pace* is to continue to promote strength, openness, acceptance, and reinvention, or as one contributor writes, “*It is important to take a few left turns.*” We will know we have arrived when we learn to celebrate our choices and judge less harshly. Best of all will be when we can applaud each other for living an authentic life that reflects who we are at our core, lived at our own pace. ■

Jill Ebstein founded SizedRight Marketing (SRM), a strategic planning and market research firm for life science and technology businesses. She holds an MBA from the Wharton School. When she is not working, Jill can be found on the tennis court, walking her dog, writing, or engaging with family over freshly-baked scones. Jill self-published *At My Pace* (www.atmypacebook.com), available now on Amazon. To learn more about Jill, please visit www.sizedrightmarketing.com. Contact her at jebstein@gmail.com.