

The Thrill of Breakthroughs---Gently Powering into 2021

Jennifer Webb

We all carry around ideas of who we are...successful entrepreneur, creative parent, dedicated runner, etc. We label ourselves, often based on years of disciplined efforts to be the best we can be in our businesses and lives. And sometimes our labels aren't productive, we see ourselves as less than we'd like, also based on years of habitual thinking. As long as we believe our labels, to a degree we're stuck. We have no idea what we're capable of once we remove some of these labels. It's this habitual way of thinking that blinds us to so many opportunities.

Let me give you an example. I broke my wrist the day after Christmas in a silly little accident, just not paying attention to where I was stepping. Since my arm began swelling immediately as well as hurting a lot, I picked up one of my current labels-- "woman of a certain age"-- meaning I started telling myself that perhaps my bones were more brittle these days and I should expect this...at my age.

Then I read about the Tarahumara tribe of Mexico who believed strongly in becoming more vigorous with age and demonstrated it by living well over 100. They were also the greatest known marathon runners.

What if I described myself as someone who became more vigorous and athletic as I aged? A crazy notion, or a different way to envision something. We are what we think, and perhaps one of our biggest drawbacks to doing and being what we want, is the beliefs we are holding right now about what is and isn't possible. Change your beliefs, decide to selectively forget some of your labels, and see what may open up to you as a new business opportunity or revolutionary personal mantra that reshapes your world.

We're all looking for breakthroughs in 2021- genuine eye-opening epiphanies that enable us to be better or newer versions of ourselves. As we head into this promising new year we need to remind ourselves that we've had months of conditioning to think small, hold ourselves in check and tell ourselves "no" in order to survive a year that dug deeply into our reserves of resilience and patience. A cautious, scarcity mentality (albeit temporary) was the norm, and pretty standard from a coping perspective.

Changing to an expansive, growth mindset may feel a little strange right now, we've worked so hard to suppress much of what we wanted to think and do. But as we really start to plan for a future post pandemic, we need a new set of guidelines to help us seamlessly transition on to a better reality.

Here are a few suggestions for 2021:

- Say yes first. When we can't guarantee the outcome—can we still say yes to the possibility? Many years ago I applied for a job as an editor for a union newspaper in New York. I could tell the interview was going well and then I was asked if I could process film and manage a darkroom. I had taken a course in processing film, but it had been years ago. I answered yes. Later, after getting the job and moving to New York, my new boss pointed to the dark room and I asked if he could help me brush up on my skills. He ran me through everything once, I stayed after he left and practiced, and kept the job. I'm not advocating being dishonest, I'm saying most of us tend to say no as a knee jerk reaction, and in the process miss many opportunities. What can you say yes to this year?
- Try something the old you wouldn't do, and make it OK to feel uncomfortable or even fail at it. Just getting outside the definition of how the 2020 version of you would handle the problem or spend a weekend, opens you up to new answers, new ideas and new adventures. I for one spent years living by a set of somewhat rigid rules. I spent weekday nights at home, for instance, and saved my play nights for the weekend. That's how I missed the final (FREE) concert of Simon and Garfunkel in Central Park in New York City. It wasn't on the weekend! What would the 2021 version of me do if I didn't have a defined set of rules that I always had to follow. Changing how we think about anything helps us see new opportunities, solve problems from a different perspective and in general get outside our limitations. We set up our governing rules, we can change them.
- Access your positive energy and learn to create a new habit of focusing on the good, the upbeat first regardless of the circumstances. Our brains are wired to scan for, store and recall negative memories much more often than positive ones? Of the 60,000 thoughts we think each day, up to 70% can be negative...it's in our DNA.

Try this, think of a great memory when you felt supremely confident, and savor the feeling. Hold onto the thought for 20 seconds (neurologists tell us that the longer something is held in awareness the more emotionally stimulating it is and the more neurons that fire and wire together). Focusing on the positive memory we want increases dopamine and makes it easier to keep giving the experience our attention and strengthening its neural associations in implicit memory. Bottom line, when we remain alert to letting go of the negative thoughts and keep focusing on what helps us feel good, we set in motion unlimited opportunities, build our creativity and problem solving abilities.

- Be contagious. Damning words following the year of the pandemic, but think about it. Be the harbinger of optimism, infect people wherever you go. Hope, joy and optimism are highly-desired emotions, capable of turning around companies, departments, teams and friendships. Remember we're wired to neurologically mirror each other when we have a connection, and the more people we form connections with, the more we spread a promise of optimistic possibility. If you want to build morale in any environment, it starts with you.

This pandemic has taught us not to take anything for granted. It's also given us an opportunity to realize what matters to us, what we missed terribly that we couldn't do, and who we couldn't wait to see or hug.

Whether it's your management team, family circle or board of directors, pay attention to what you're saying and how it impacts those around you. There's tremendous strength in how you are saying what you're saying.

- Don't regret the past, it's gone. Decide that fear will not hold you back, and then dare to try something you've always wanted to do or need to do. Perhaps you need to say something to someone that you've put off saying, or take a course, or leave a job or move to a new place. All of this is about choosing to bypass fear, put the past to bed and just do it.

Years ago, I wanted to play guitar so I bought myself an inexpensive guitar and found a teacher. I can't remember how many lessons I took before my instructor actually told me to take up another instrument, my hands were just not built for that instrument he said. Now that was a little rough at the time; I knew I was not a good player, I just didn't realize I was that bad. But I listened to him, gave up the guitar and began playing upright bass, something I still play today and absolutely love. The definition of who I am does not hinge on whether I'm good or not, that's not even the point.

Think of those who perished in the World Trade Centers. Many victims were young and ambitious and I'm sure they thought they had all the time in the world to start spending more time with their families, learning to play an instrument or whatever was high on their bucket lists. Since we don't know anything about our tomorrows, there's never been a better time to give yourself permission to do what you want or need to do.

Let's take what we've learned from 2020 and evolve even further, creating a habit of defaulting to the possibilities instead of the drawbacks. It enables us to be better leaders, managers, colleagues, friends, lovers, parents and most of all more compassionate companions to ourselves. Happy New Year!