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Know Your “Why”

*Everyone has a purpose in life.
Perhaps yours is watching television.*
David Letterman

When I was growing up, we would often visit Grandma’s house for dinner. Being a farm girl from Oklahoma, my grandmother believed life would just not be the same without a hearty home-cooked meal. Her table was always heaped with all the fixin’s you would expect: mashed potatoes, roast beef, gravy, carrot cake, rhubarb pie, sweet tea, you name it. Her cooking was the best, but luckily for my brother and me we played a lot of soccer to work off the heavy-duty cornucopia of calories!

Grandma took it as a personal affront if we did not finish every last bit of food on our plates and lick them clean enough to put right back in the cupboard. Before the table was cleared, she would look around, assess the situation, and decide if our plates were indeed cleaned to her satisfaction. If not, she would say, “Eat every Potato and Pea on your Plate.”

My brother and I would laugh uncontrollably as she studiously went about the business of clearing the table with no regard as to the source of our hilarity. To this day, I am not quite sure whether that was her wit and humor or not. And I’ve never forgotten that early lesson about the importance of Ps.

These days, there are three Ps I value above all others (even the green kind—sorry, Grandma!). They are Passion, Purpose, and Persistence. Without the “Three Ps,” nothing else can happen. As a matter of fact, nothing

of greatness has ever been accomplished in the history of mankind without the Three Ps! And there have been many books written on the subject, so I won't belabor it here. However, I will simply say that before you trudge forth and start growing your business, it's critical that you know your "why." You need to know and be passionate about your purpose if you are to find the courage to be persistent enough to succeed.

Although the story below is not business related, it illustrates the point of how important and powerful knowing your "why" can be.

Many people ask themselves, *What will I do when I retire?* Well, *golf*, of course. For my cousin Bill Burke, this wasn't a very satisfying answer when he reached the ripe old age of sixty and contemplated the void of his newly opened schedule. He had already achieved many pinnacles throughout his long career in law: four Lifetime Achievement Awards, including one from the Business Law Section of the California State Bar Association.

"When I first retired," Bill told me, "I decided it was important to take up some kind of safe and sane hobby, like golf or tennis. After much thought and research, I settled on the sport of high-altitude mountaineering." Bill traveled to the Cascades and took a climbing course. Soon that seed grew to a strong passion for mountaineering and a rather "lofty" goal.

"After the class, I returned home and then immediately set off to climb Mt. Rainier in Washington. From there it was Mt. McKinley in Alaska, the highest mountain in the North America," he recalled. Soon, his passion and purpose called him to even greater heights. He determined to climb the legendary Mount Everest, the highest peak in the world. Bill's 3 Ps were tested to the limit on the day he was finally ready to go for the summit. He writes:

During the evening, the winds picked up, and, by morning, we were experiencing gale force winds. . . . This was what I had feared the most. After all the effort to get into position for a summit run, the weather was turning against me, threatening to put a violent and sad end to my dream of reaching the summit.

I stayed in my tent all day on May 22. There was no other option as the winds were now hurricane force, coming up the Southwest Face from Nepal, picking up speed as they crossed the South Col and roared down the Kangshung Face into Tibet on the other side. . . . I lay in my tent all day and into the evening, praying for better weather. . . .

Our plan was to head for the summit at 8 p.m. so we could summit before the unofficial 2 p.m. turnaround time the following day. Despite

my prayers, the winds did not subside. They even got worse. At 8 p.m., my Sherpa, Mingma, entered my tent and recommended we delay our departure time until 10 p.m. I agreed. There was no surcease in the winds and, at 10 p.m., Mingma entered my tent again and asked, “We go up, or we go down? Up to you.” Without any hesitation, I said, “We’re moving up.” My thinking was that, once we got off the South Col and started moving up the face of the mountain, the winds would be more tolerable. I was right.

Inside my tent, I slowly put on my climbing gear and then exited into the howling wind. I will never forget that moment. I looked up at the sky and could see billions of stars twinkling down in the blackness of the night, indifferent to my peril and my predicament. I felt as though I could reach out and touch them, and, in a strange sort of way, I was calmed. As I looked at the route up the Triangular Face to the South Summit, I could see the headlamps of the other climbers snaking up the mountain, each person completely detached from everyone else, frozen in his or her thoughts, dreams, fears, hopes, and aspirations.⁷

On May 23, 2009, at the age of sixty-seven, with frozen fingers and an oxygen mask, Bill Burke became the oldest American to reach the summit of Mt. Everest and return alive. His passion, purpose, and persistence had, quite literally, taken him to the top of the world.

Bill is the only person in history to climb the highest mountain on every continent after the age of sixty. His next goal, at the age of seventy-two, was to scale Mt. Everest again, only this time from the north side. On May 25, 2014, he accomplished this goal and became the oldest person outside Asia to climb Mt. Everest. Did I mention, he was seventy-two?

With passion, purpose, and persistence, you can move mountains—or, if you’re as crazy as Bill, you may choose to climb them!