

Hamilton Didn't Lead Me to Happiness; Happiness Led Me to *Hamilton*: Life Lessons on the Pursuit of Purpose

Bryan Terrell Clark

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Bryan Terrell Clark is an actor and singer/songwriter whose roles include Washington in the Broadway hit *Hamilton* and Marvin Gaye in *Motown: The Musical*. Clark also co-founded the company inDEFINED and hosts performing arts workshops.

Prior to Clark's speech, the audience joined in singing the first verses of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a hymn often considered the Black national anthem:

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.¹

Coming in, we knew we were going to play this amazing anthem to the Black cultural experience, so I joked, "You know, it's a little bit like singing a hymn." If you've ever had to sing a hymn, everyone is super excited for the first verse. Everyone knows it. "Amazing Grace"? Everybody knows it. I said, "When it's time to sing the second or third verse, nobody can tell you the words."

It's actually the same way with the national anthem, which is why it's important for us to understand why Colin Kaepernick chose to kneel during that song. Everybody's like, "What about the veterans?" My family is full of veterans. That's not why he chose to kneel during that song. He chose it because, if you look down a couple of verses in the national anthem, it talks about keeping people enslaved, and the only other option you have is death.² I think that might be the one appropriate song of all the anthems in America to kneel to. The more you know, right?

We were talking about singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and some said, “Don't worry. We're going to sing the first verse, and the second verse is printed, and then we're done.” When we went to the next verse, everybody sang, “Let us march on till victory is won” and then mumbled through the rest because they didn't know the rest of the words. I also love the people who are like, “I'm not even going to try. It's not on the paper.”

I'm super excited because I can think of no other way to honor Dr. King and his legacy and the work that continues than to sing a song by those whom I call “Johnson & Johnson.” It's not the Johnsons you may be thinking of but J. Rosamond Johnson and James Weldon Johnson. It's a song of hope, and it's a song of liberty, and it's a song of triumph, and it's a song of victory. That's most of our lives if we really boil down the details of our lives.

I'm so thankful that we made it through 2019; 2019 was a roller coaster of a year. High highs, beautiful things. Babies were born, jobs were made, anti-racist work happened, but also there was a lot of death. There were a lot of breakups, lots of people lost loved ones, and lots of people learned of illnesses. I'm learning that life happens to everyone. And there are a few things that we are going to talk about today that I want you to keep in the back of your head as we're in this thing called life, as it happens to everyone.

The question is this: What are you going to do with yours? It doesn't matter what age you are. Regardless of what it is you're wrestling with or trying to overcome, we are all still here, and, at some point, the thing that we all have in common is that we're all going to go. It's interesting to me because we are terrified of it, right? No one wants to talk about death. You could hear a pin drop in here because you're asking, “Why is he talking about that? I thought he was just going to rap *Hamilton*.” In *Hamilton*, if you know the musical and if you know American history, there's a lot of death. It's a tragedy and it's a victory and it's a comedy. Life is a comedy. Most times when I ask, “How many people love *Hamilton*?” everyone raises their hands. I ask, “How many fans we got?” and everybody raises their hands. I ask, “How many of you have seen it?” and I get crickets. Since I didn't bring tickets, I'll rap George Washington's introduction (*Clark performed a section of “Right Hand Man”*).

I'm so inspired by Lin Manuel Miranda because he is a Latinx man who is a theater nerd, who loves politics, who is a rap aficionado, who had this dream of creating a musical about the Founding Fathers. They would be rapping, and they'd be mostly People of Color. If you would've told me then that this was going to be a success and revolutionize musical theater as we know it, I would have laughed you off the planet. Nothing about that idea sounds cool. Everything about it sounds weird and corny. I would have said, “I like the rap part. Let's think about the subject matter.” A black George Washington rapping? It reminds me that all of those idiosyncratic things, all the proclivities that you come into this space with,

are the things that are your superpower. It's every single thing that makes you you, every single thing that makes you strange.

It's a story of a young man who was born into a matrix. Inside this matrix, he was told what he was supposed to do, how it was supposed to be done. He was born into a world of darkness, pun intended. In this space, he grew up under great leaders. He grew up under great orators, but there were circumstances and situations by which life was managed and life was enacted that put him in a position where he was supposed to accept things that were inhumane. What was crazy about this acceptance is that he grew up in a space where everyone around him accepted it, too. They accepted things like being able to perform in a space but having to enter through the back door. They had to accept having to be confined to only living in certain spaces and receiving certain minimum wages, which were below anything anyone could live on. He had to be okay with the fact that discrimination was the everyday. He had to be okay with not being able to eat in certain spaces. He had to be okay with watching his brothers and his fathers, his uncles, his sisters, and his mothers lynched and raped. He had to be okay with that. What was strange about that space for him was that everything inside of him saw things differently than what was in front of him. He understood that he was inside of a system that wasn't really real. It was real because it was impacting who they were, but it was only real because everyone around him agreed to it.

I think about *Hamilton*. I think about the financial system. If I was to tell a room full of people right now, who probably have, to a degree, varying financial states, that money was not real, you would laugh at me. But you might agree if I said money was a system that someone made up one day and that we agreed to and that at some point before that we were trading beads and shells and things. It's a mode of exchange. Someone created this idea, right? I say the same thing about race and racism. Someone created this.

There's an interesting story about how the Irish first came to America. I was working on this show, and we were in Toronto, which is also interesting because we were working on an American musical in Toronto. I found out that there was a time in America when the Irish were not white. There's an area called the Five Points, and there's a movie with Leonardo DiCaprio called *Gangs of New York* that takes place around that same time. The idea was this: there was a free black neighborhood in Five Points in New York that also was inhabited by Chinese people and Brown people. They were allowed to own property and have businesses. For the most part, it was a thriving, cultural melting pot and community.

When the Irish first came to America, they were not considered white. They were not allowed to vote, they were not allowed to own property, and they also lived in this community. Things got crazy when they started to get drafted for war. The Irish were like, "Wait a minute. I can't vote, you don't want me to own property, and you're uptown just calling out names to fight in your war —O'Malley and

O'Brien, and so on?" They got together and said, "We're not going to take this." They marched uptown and burned down the draft building, and then they became like zombies and went back downtown. The point is that it was after that moment that the Irish were considered white in America. And you know very well that, especially in Europe, a French person would never identify themselves as a Brit—or the Irish, for that matter. The northern Italians, I love my northern Italians, but do not call them anything else. What I realized is I live in a space where we've kind of lumped each other together, and we've all kind of just become this thing.

I'm interested in all of these things, and all these interests come from my mom. My mother is a really powerful woman. Her name is Tonya Clark. My mother has more master's degrees than I can count. She was one of those women that if you brought home a 96 percent, she would go, "Great. Where are the rest of the points?" She really cherished education. She cherished Black excellence. She cherished history. She was a schoolteacher who became a principal, who became an administrator, who became a principal again. She was a Sunday school teacher who became a pastor and founded a church. That is who my mother is.

My mother understood the power of creating from spaces that aren't typical. She saw the world in a different way. My mother did things like this: She worked in Baltimore city, where we grew up, and she saw students come to school literally hungry and starving. The stories that I could tell you about the things she saw would literally bring you to tears; it would take the rest of our time. She had this idea one day. She told the students, "If you find any loose change on the street, bring it to the classroom, and I want you to put it in this jar." And over the year, I believe it was the first semester, but it may have been the whole year, they put their money together. I was like, "Great, and now you're going to take them all shopping and get them food?" And she was like, "No. We're all going take that money, and we're going to give it to the homeless." I was a kid. I didn't understand because her students were also in need. She said, "No. I'm going to show them the power of giving. I'm going to empower them. Because when you give to someone, it's a blessing and it might meet that need, but they don't necessarily feel empowered. But when they can see the power of their offering, they will become powerful magnets for more, so they can continue to do it." The power of giving is that just as the person you give to is blessed, blessed is the giver. That's who my mother is.

My mother and I were talking about passion and how it leads to purpose; I really believe that life is a road, so to speak, and passion is like the compass on the road that'll lead you to purpose. I asked my mother not too long ago, "When did I first say I wanted to be an actor or work in music or anything in the arts?" She said, "Before you could talk. Before you could speak." I said, "Let me rephrase. When did I first *say* I wanted to be a performer?" She said, "Before you could talk. When you were young, your

favorite shows would come on television or your favorite music would come on. You would stand in front of the TV and just bounce.”

I think that it’s our job as teachers, educators, and mentors to sit back and listen as opposed to laying out what we think our children should do. It’s our job to sit back and listen to the God-given callings that are already resting inside of these beautiful lives that we get a chance to steward. My mother was that person. My mother said, “I could tell what you were drawn to and what you were supposed to do that young because I sat and I listened to you and I watched you as opposed to telling you what you should do. I listened, and I was shown the path that you would take.” I said, “Wow, Mom. You’re amazing. My mom is like an angel.”

My dad, on the other hand, is the opposite. Whereas my mother loved education, my father could really care less. He got a full scholarship as a track star and did not take it. He got married to my mom very young, and he said, “I just want to work.” My dad was a blue-collar worker and worked hard. My dad was one of those people that you could not walk down a Baltimore street without someone stopping him. Where my mother cared about education and excellence, my dad cared about people. He loves relationships, and he just has this crazy walk. He looks like George Jefferson, and he talks like a pimp from a ‘70s movie. He’s from South Carolina but grew up in Baltimore.

My dad, without a college degree, worked at Westinghouse and went to work every day wearing a white lab coat. He worked with engineers. How was this happening? I found out that my dad was a favorite at Westinghouse because he was selling drugs to some of the executives; upper management was getting high. My dad was a drug dealer for about seven years. He hid it from us until he got hooked on drugs. He told me this not too long ago: one of his clients, I don’t know if it was necessarily a coworker, asked him to smoke cocaine with him, and my father said that that was the moment. My father was in and out of our lives most of my life, and it was a hard thing because my father was a great dad when he was home. He was full of so much love, but when he was on a binge, he would disappear because he didn’t want us to see it, so he didn’t come home high. I never saw my dad high once. He would vanish completely, and I was really angry.

Around the age of early middle school, I sat my parents down. They were together and not together, and he was there and not there. I said, “Hey, can we have a family meeting?” And they said, “Yeah.” I said, “I’m going to start off by saying this: ‘I love you both, but I am done.’” They were looking at this kid like, “What?” I was in middle school, so twelve or thirteen; my voice hadn’t even dropped yet. I said, “I’m done with you both.” And they’re like, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, here’s the thing. Mom, you are such a woman of principle, and you love him so much that you are standing by this oath that you took at an altar: in sickness and in health. You’re seeing this as a sickness, and you will not leave him because of the oath you took, no matter how much damage it’s doing to yourself and to us. You think

that you're doing the best thing for the family by staying with him, and you think it's for us. Hey, I'm the 'us,' and I'm telling you: "Leave him! This ain't workin'."

I said, "Dad, I think you're a great person. I think you want to be a great dad, and you don't know how to be a great dad. I don't think you've ever been taught how to be a great dad. I don't think you have the skills to be a great father. And you're wrestling with something right now that you need to go and handle. I'm letting you both know this now as I'm entering middle school: I'm done. Whatever you decide to do, it's on you. But me? Peace." I went into middle school after that and was virtually silent for about three years.

Part of my silence was because I was at that awkward age where young people are becoming adults in front of you, and some of us are still kids. You've got girls wearing earrings and lipstick, and I'm still watching Power Rangers. My best friend at the time was dating the "hot girl" at the school, and he's starting to smell himself, and he's playing sports. I'm like, "Oh, I don't know what's happening. Life is changing." I was awkward.

I was quiet except in gospel choir, and, even though I stood in the back and kind of sang (there were a lot of us who were just kind of rocking and singing), I remember this one dude yelled really loud in the middle of gospel choir rehearsal, "Yo! You can sing, yo! Your voice real high! You sound like Whitney Houston or Coko from SWV!" I was mortified. I wanted to just crawl in a hole and die. And the director of the choir asked me to come forward and made me sing the solo. I was shaking and terrified and wanting to pee on myself, but I sang. Singing was the only place that kind of gave me a sense of peace. I went on to sing a bunch of solos. I sang at the graduation. I directed the choir.

My Aunt Brenda went to my mom and said, "You know, I think he's really got a gift, and I think we can get him to open up if we push him a little bit more in the arts. I'm going to get him his first acting class." Here was the stipulation from Aunt Brenda: "Now listen. If you ever get on a red carpet or you ever have a mic in your hand, you need to tell whoever you standing in front of that Aunt Brenda was the one who got you your first acting class." So, in front of cameras and people that I don't know: "Aunt Brenda, thank you! You're the one."

I went on to a performing arts high school in Baltimore by the name of George Washington Carver Center for the Arts and Technology. I had a great time there. I finally found my swag. I think that's why I started to walk a little bit like my dad, and I was like, "Okay, this acting thing is a different thing." I had a really great time, but I was interested in so many things. I was interested in theater, sure. But I was interested in politics and world religion and social justice and possibly being a lawyer or a counselor. I had so many different things that I wanted to do, but I got this scholarship to the University of Maryland, and the stipulation was that I had to be a theater major. So, I said, "Okay, I guess I'm going to be a theater major. Cool." And when I was there, we were learning all kinds of things, but I was not really into the

theater thing at the time, especially musical theater. It's funny that I have a whole career in it, but I thought it was so corny. I just thought, "If you are not animated, why are you singing?" I just hated it. I just did not understand it . . . until I saw the musical *Rent*.

The moment I saw this musical, I was like, "Yo, now *that* I can get into. They are voices that I'm familiar with. There's rock, pop, R&B, and gospel, and they're talking about things I feel like we can relate to in real life. I'm down for that." I started skipping school, and I started going up to New York to audition for everything. I even auditioned for *Rent*. I was in callbacks for *Benny*. I didn't get it, but I was auditioning. Then, Tonya Clark, the principal and the minister and my mom, found out that I was skipping school. How do you think that went? Not well.

I said, "Well, why don't we compromise? Why don't I go to NYU or some school in New York?" And she said, "Are you out of your mind? You've been skipping school to go to New York. If I put you in a school in New York, you're never going to go to class." So we settled on Temple University, which is in Philadelphia. I was a theater major, a religious studies major, and a music major all at the same time until they told me that I would have to stay an extra year. I said, "We not doin' that," and I became a theater major, music minor, with a religious studies concentration. While I was there, I was taking a class called Theater for the Profession, and I thought, "Finally, the worlds are going to come together. I want to just work, and my mom wants me to stay in school. I can learn about working while I'm at school. It's going to be perfect."

The class was a lie. It was not theater for the profession. It was audition-for-grad-school class. Great. More school. Don't want to do that, so I started skipping school again. I was going to New York. For those of you who are getting the wrong idea right now, I also had a 3.98 GPA while I was doing that. So here's the thing, I'm not saying you're not tired sometimes. I'm not saying sometimes you don't want to skip class just because, but my mom always said when I was younger, "You can't go play outside until you do your homework." So I'm gonna kill all these tests and write all these papers and then go and audition.

While we were in the class, however, the class was getting us ready for something called the URTAs.³ It's a very strange process where there's a big room in a hotel, and you go and do two monologues. There are like sixty plus schools there. If they like you, they ask you to go to a single hotel room where they interview you and then you will possibly get an opportunity to go to their school. I'd like them to take that out of hotels; it's a little weird. Nothing weird ever happened. Trust me. But I think in a 2020 context we might want to think about changing the space, right?

I did well, but I went to the head of my program, and I said, "Hey, I have a question. I don't understand why the top acting schools aren't here. If we're going to audition, where are schools like NYU? Juilliard? Yale?" And she said, "Bryan, I think you're going to do really well at the URTAs. I

think you shouldn't worry about it." But I was like, "If we're going to do it, let's do it." And she said, "Well, here's the thing . . ." I said, "Well, just say it. What is it? You don't think I can do it?" And she said, "Bryan, you're black." And I said, "I know." She said, "Well, those programs don't really accept a lot of black people. That's number one. Number two, those are expensive schools, and I don't really know if they're going to offer scholarships. Three, those are really expensive applications, individually. You're going to have to travel to those places, and I don't really know what your financial situation is, but it's going to be a lot. I think you should just do the URTAs." I said, "Okay." And I took that same money that I was using to go on those Greyhound buses and audition, and I got on a Greyhound bus and went to NYU. I got on a bus, and I went to Yale. I got into both. I went back, and I said to her, "Now I really don't know what to do because I've gotten in at Yale and NYU. At the same time, I had been auditioning, and I also was in callbacks for Simba in *The Lion King* on Broadway, and I was also about to be in a show called *All My Children*.

I went to visit the schools. The moment I stepped on Yale's campus I knew. There's a knowing. This is the thing that I want to encourage you all to do, no matter what age you are: listen to your inner being. You know. The problem is that we have listened to so many things other than ourselves that sometimes it's hard to hear that inner voice. For a long time, your inner voice sounds like your parents, and I think that that's right and that's safe. But, at some point, you've got to begin to listen to your own inner being because that inner being, that voice I'm talking about, tells you what the right next step is. You don't always have to know what the end is going to be, just what the next right step is.

As much as I was skipping school and doing all of those things, I knew that the next right step for me was to go to Yale School of Drama. I'm following my passions during all of this journey, right? All of this is the GPS, the inner compass, taking me from this place to that place. While I was at Yale in my second year, I did a program called the Dwight Edgewood Project, which took inner-city, underserved youth in New Haven and we brought all of our resources from the Yale School of Drama and helped them tell their stories. We literally helped them to write plays, and we performed their shows. What was powerful about that for me is that I realized, "Oh, my goodness. We're giving voice to people who don't have a voice. Who is that like?" It's just like me. Even as I went on to work in *Motown* and *Hamilton* on Broadway, that calling to helping others have a voice never left.

That desire to give voice amplifies everywhere I go. With a friend of mine, I came up with this company called inDEFINED. The name comes from defining yourself from within. I had this radical idea: I want people to break labels. We put these silly labels on ourselves, or people put labels on us that are not really who we are. I want people to be able to break them. And my friend said, "Okay. Let's start off with simple things. What does that look like for you?" I said, "Well, since we're talking about labels, let's make it literal labels. Let's take a t-shirt and put words on it and then put lines through them." And

he said, “Cool. Let’s start off simple with words like ‘hate’ with a line through it and ‘fear’ with a line through it.” We decided to take all the proceeds and give them to organizations that work with underserved youth and arts education in New York City. What we didn’t realize was that in a matter of about three months, we would help to raise over a hundred thousand dollars. This was from everything from hosting events, selling the shirts, and connecting with other similar organizations. This magical thing happened from a radical idea in the living room just because I wanted people to have a voice. Little ideas like that inside of you can change lives, just like my mom’s little idea, Pennies of Love, where she told her kids to find change, grew. First, it was just her classroom, then it was the entire first grade, then it was the entire school, and then it was the entire city. These little ideas, these small things, can grow and effect huge ripples of change in your life.

When I think about purpose, I’ve heard a couple of different things. We get passionate, and sometimes it’s just about remembering what your passion is or being open to your passion now. But when it comes to purpose, that is a tricky thing. Purpose has often been defined as when your gifts or your talents meet a need or serve someone else. Therein lies purpose, right? Some people say, “Purpose is your reason why.” My godfather was on a show called *Law & Order* for some time. When I was graduating, I was so happy because, as an actor, I thought, “I can’t believe it. You’re on one of the best shows on TV. *Law & Order* is never going to go anywhere. It’s a juggernaut.” And I asked, “Don’t you just love being on the show?” And he said, “No. I say a version of the same three to five lines every week: ‘Court adjourned.’ ‘Overruled.’” I said, “Yeah, if I think about it, you’re right. You say the same thing in a different order every week.” He said, “But do you know why I love doing that show, besides the fact that it is a great show?” And he did love the show. He said, “The real reason I love that show is because of that.” He pointed to the garage. He was turning his garage into a guest home because his mother was sick in Detroit. He said, “She’s going to come and live here. That is why I do that show.” So, whatever it is, you have to find your reason why.

Oftentimes because life happens to us, we use it as excuses to not follow our passion and to not walk in our purpose. What we don’t realize is that the things that happen to us are actually aligned with our purpose. While I was doing *Motown* (I got a great opportunity to be handpicked by Barry Gordy to do this show on Broadway), I’m playing Marvin Gaye, and it’s our first week of rehearsal and I’m about to go in and sing “What’s Going On” by Marvin Gaye for the first time. We’re on break, and I get this phone call from my mom, and she says, “I hate to do this, but I know you would want to know. Your cousin was shot and killed last night in Baltimore. He was caught in a crossfire.” Besides being devastated and heartbroken, I was angry because I didn’t understand, in a country as wise and as powerful and all the other adjectives that we want to give it, how something silly like that could happen. How can a life be taken from someone going to his car to get his phone charger? How are the guns just out like this?

I wanted to march on Washington. I wanted to fight for gun legislation. I wanted to do all of those things, and my stage manager said something so powerful that it changed my life. She said, “I know you’re upset and you’re angry. Does he have children?” I said, “Yeah. He’s got two sons.” She said, “Start there.” So I did, especially with the oldest one; I became a father figure to him. I’ve helped him through college. He lives in Los Angeles now. He is thriving, and that relationship came out of that. Sometimes, when it comes to purpose, we don’t feel like we can do anything because the things we feel attached to feel insurmountable. What I say to you is this: start in your sphere of influence.

I’ve had a great opportunity to talk to people who are working on gun reform legislation, and it’s interesting because that happened to me, but it also happened for me. My mother often quotes this great scripture that says, “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”⁴ What I think is so powerful about that specific scripture is that what it’s saying is that whatever is happening in your life, you can mine the experience for the gold that’s in it. You are not the only one going through what you’re going through even though it feels like it, and there is great purpose in where you come from and where you’ve been.

I used to be so ashamed of my dad. A couple of years ago I was working on a song in the studio with this producer, and I was using drugs as a metaphor for toxic relationships, codependency in a relationship, and I thought the lyrics were beautiful. I thought it was great, and he did, too, but he said, “Can we just make it about drugs?” And I said, “Yeah, it is about drugs. It’s a metaphor.” He said, “No. Can we make it actually be about drugs?” And I was like, “You mean like poppin’ Molly?” I said, “Well, there’s somebody we can call about that. I can call my crackhead daddy.” We called my dad and put him on speakerphone, and I said, “Hey, Dad, we’re writing this song, and it’s about drugs.” And my dad shared some things on speakerphone that brought me to tears in the studio.

My dad said, “You know, I went to rehab twenty-two times.” He had gone back and forth to rehab twenty-two times for over two decades. That’s a person who really wants to get better. After five times, I would have been like, “Hello, my name is Bryan. I’m a crackhead. Love me as I am. I tried. Didn’t work. Not me. God bless you.” That was not my dad. My dad fought to get the sobriety he knew he deserved. It was interesting because it wasn’t until they started to really transform the work that they were doing in rehabs that they actually found out that he was chemically imbalanced. All of a sudden, it made sense why he was choosing the certain kinds of drugs that he was choosing. He was literally trying to balance himself without him knowing it. Once they discovered that—boom—he was healed that quick.

I talk about my relationship with my parents and, obviously, I’m super close to my mom and couldn’t stand my dad, but my dad is literally my best friend. I think about what he’s gone through and the fact that my mother is this minister and has all these decorated degrees. My dad is a minister, too, because no one wants to hear from someone who hasn’t gone through something. My dad is able to share

his testimony and his experience, and I've watched lives change in people who wanted to give up. If my mom was this angel, my dad was a dragon, and both of them taught me how to fly.

My dad is the poster child for resilience. People say to me, "How can you go on, going in door after door and being told no, no, no, over and over again?" I auditioned for *Hamilton* seven times and was the longest-running George Washington for a long time. "How could you go back seven times?" they ask. It's an audition. My dad was on drugs. You know what I mean? My dad would always say, "If you still have breath in your body, it doesn't matter who you've hurt or what destruction you've done. You have an opportunity to get it right as long as you are still here." And that is the life that my father lives.

So, I say to you today: What is your passion? You may have more than one. What is your passion? And now that you know what your passion is, for those of us who do, what I find is that that's not enough. You've got to find your reason why. Now that I'm almost 40 years old, the most consistent thing that I run across in the vast majority of the people I meet, in whatever age range, wherever they are in the world, is that most people are not happy. Isn't that interesting? It's weird because I'm so happy most of the time. Most people are not. It's not whether you have a lot of money or you don't. It's about whether you have a level of fulfillment, and fulfillment is a different thing. It's something that the outside can't really supply unless you're walking in alignment and walking in your purpose. You've got to know your reason why you do what you do. Even if you've got to show up to that job that you are tired of going to but you know you're helping your sick grandmother or your child who's sick, when you know that that's the reason why you're doing it, it gives you a different kind of energy. It's a different kind of motivation. You put on your game face and say, "I know why I'm here." Or, in this room right now where I'm exhausted and can complain about all the flights I've been on and how long I've been up, I know I'm here for a purpose. I know somebody in this room identifies with me and identifies with my story and needed to hear it because they were either going to give up or they had just lost their way.

You show up, and you don't even have to do a lot but just be. No one's requiring you to do anything else besides be who you are. But believe it or not, that's the hardest thing to do because somewhere around that time I got silent during middle school is when the world starts to tell you that in order to succeed, you have to not be yourself. You have to fold into the walls and be like everybody else. I'm here to tell you: "We gonna change all that." I don't care how old you are; I don't care how young you are. You are here for a reason, and your life has meaning, and there are people that you are attached to, whether it's your children or your spouse, whoever it is that your literal breath affects. And it's important that you're here, and it's important that you know that. You deserve to feel alive again. You deserve to be happy, and you deserve to embrace your passion. You deserve to know that passion leads to great purpose, and it blesses those around you.

I'm going to leave you with two challenges. Challenge number one: for the next two weeks, I want you to take responsibility for your own happiness. It's not the government's job to make you happy. It's not your husband's or your wife's job to make you happy. It's not your job's job to make you happy. Guess whose job it is to make you happy? Yours. For the next two weeks, every single day, find something small that makes you happy, even if it's that there's a little bit of sunlight outside and you decide to pause and take a moment of selfcare and go outside and feel the sun on your face. I gave this challenge to my sister, and she said, "For two weeks, you know what I did every single day before I got in the shower? I would get naked, and I would turn on ratchet music about making money, and I would just dance in the bathroom before I got in the shower." I would imagine my sister losing it to some Cardi B song every day, but she said it just made her so happy. You deserve to be happy, and, though it doesn't mean that your whole world needs to change, if you find a way to be happy, your whole world will change. I'm not being facetious when I say I'm literally living my dreams. But the thing is I thought it was going to happen in reverse order. I thought once I had this relationship, or once I had this money, or once I started working with this director, and once I had this bit of status, or once I got this degree, and once I got all of these things, that would make me happy. It doesn't work that way. It's the opposite. Once you get happy first, all of the stuff comes and then it just feels like a bonus. So, first assignment: find a way to be happy.

Second assignment, and this is the more technical, harder one: I want you to start your day every day writing five to ten things you're grateful for and watch how your day changes. My whole life has changed in the last three years, and it's because I started doing this. Those of us who are Type A personalities, overachievers, kind of like my mom and me, usually start off our day with what feels like a checklist. I wake up in the morning, and I say things like, "Okay, I'm going to pray; maybe I'll meditate. I'll jump in the shower, and then I'll get dressed. After I get dressed, I'll do this. Oh, and I've got to do that thing." I've even made a list that includes getting in the shower. Some of us get on Instagram right away. Some of us go right to our email. When you do that, you're starting your day being inundated with other people's ideas, other people's images, other people's requirements and requests of you. I started doing this study of a lot of spiritual people that I love, but then, for a long time, I put that aside, and I started studying people who ran Fortune 500 companies. What I found is that, even though the language is different, the principle is the same. If you watch *Shark Tank*, you know Daymond John from that show. He said something that blew my mind: "When I go into the office, I don't let anybody mess with my first 90 minutes. I don't look at any inbox. I only send outbox." It's the same principle.

Start your day off sending out what you desire. Start your day off having; don't start your day off deficient. Some of you wake up, and the first thing you think is all these things you have to do. There used to be a saying, "When there's one small thing that goes wrong, everything goes wrong." It's like

starting your day off that way. But when you start your day off having, it's the opposite effect. It doesn't happen overnight, but, over time, you train your brain to look for things to be grateful for. You train your brain to make you happy, and, before you know it, you are literally living your dreams.

NOTES

1. James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," *Complete Poems*, 2000, *The Poetry Foundation*, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46549/lift-every-voice-and-sing>.
2. The third stanza of Francis Scott Key's poem, "The Defence of Fort M'Henry," which was later put to music and called "The Star-Spangled Banner," is:
And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havock of war and the battle's confusion
A home and a country should leave us no more?
Their blood has wash'd out their foul foot-steps' pollution,
No refuge could save the hireling and slave,
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave;
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave.

Francis Scott Key, "Defence of Fort M'Henry," *The Poetry Foundation*, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47349/defence-of-fort-mhenry>.
3. URTAs stands for University Resident Theatre Association auditions and interviews.
4. Romans 8:28, King James Version.