



D DONNA HIGHFILL

WAYS TO SHINE

MOTIVATIONAL MESSAGES - BOOK THREE

DONNA HIGHFILL

The Call of the Mild

Habits, the comfort zone of the brain, start with trial and error. The first time you face a problem, you're not sure how to solve it, so you try out some different strategies and angles. Neurological activity in the brain is *high* during this period. You are being thoughtful and attentive while making conscious decisions about how to act. You're taking in tons of new information and try to make sense of it. Those synapses are all fired up.

Your brain is busy, busy, busy. You try, fail, learn, try something a little different, and then – BOOM –like a mouse in a maze, you find your reward. Now your brain says, *hey, that felt good. What did I do right before I got that reward?*

And you solve that problem the same way again. And again. Habits are simply reliable solutions to recurring problems.

But, as habits are created, something interesting happens - the level of activity in the brain *decreases*. Habits are mental shortcuts learned from experience. That doesn't make habits a bad thing – but it does make them a hard thing to break. It's literally mental cruise control. So, what happens if your habits are not enough anymore? What if the competition finds a better way?

Then you have to go off cruise control. You have to start putting effort into trying and failing and learning and trying again. You have to push yourself in search of that different reward.

Next time you're challenged by something new, and you hear the call of the mild – fight it. Remind yourself that finding a new reward is as simple as trying something new, failing, and trying again until the reward meets your need. Do you want a different result in your life? Ask yourself: Have you *been on cruise control for too long?*

**Chains of habit are too light to be felt until they are too heavy to be broken.
Warren Buffett**

Wins and Losses

Our belief often teeters on a delicate scale of wins and losses. We win, and we're on top of the world. We lose, and we leave the field with heads down and hearts broken.

Here's the truth . . . we're in a time of change that is challenging us every single day. Our lives and work are shifting in ways that require innovative thinking and courageous action. We are going to try new things that sometimes won't work, and if our belief system in ourselves is based upon winning, then we're in a heap of trouble.

Because the greatest things in life have involved a lot of mistakes that resulted in losses.

So, let's change our perception of "lose." Every time we make a mistake, we have an opportunity to learn. Every time we try to charge forward into unknown territory, we're going to stumble. That isn't losing. That's effort.

And absolutely nothing great has ever been done under the cloak of mediocrity and safety. Nothing.

Let's neither be buoyed too much by a win nor bowed too deeply by a loss. Instead, let's keep our eye on the goal of improvement and recognize that both wins and losses as a necessary part of the journey.

**Don't focus on the wins and losses . . . focus your efforts on performing to your full potential.
Michael Chandler**

The Heart's Memory

My husband and I were talking last night about what really matters in life. He is a brilliant man whose short-term memory has, basically, shut down. We're not sure if it came from his cancer treatment or is the road to something else, but, regardless, he feels he has lost the thing he was most proud of – his intellect.

We started talking about things easier for him to recollect – long-term memories. I asked him to share special moments in his childhood. They included the day his bike broke down and his dad walked his paper route with him to help deliver the papers before going to work. The time that his brother (7 years his senior) allowed him to play baseball with his friends. As Neil put it, "I was terrible, but they called me the pepper pot because I never stopped trying."

He remembered when, in his twenties, he created *Cabin Creek Quilts* for women in West Virginia as part of a VISTA project, something that gave those women money to put food on the table and pride in their craft. "Those women deserved something to hope for," he said.

I asked him - "Were any of those memories built around your intellect? Speaking engagements? Ability to recall detailed facts?" Neil took a minute and then said, "I forgot the question." He's hilarious. But then he smiled and said, "not really."

The memories that formed him were all about heart, and family, and making a difference in somebody else's life. They didn't involve status, or grades, or any kind of competition.

Neil asked me to share this story with you, because he wants to be authentic in his journey and share a little bit of himself with others who might be facing something similar. He wants to do what really matters.

So, take care of your heart, and the collective heart of those you love. Because that is what you will remember, even when your memory isn't as sharp as it used to be.

I shall take the heart. For brains do not make one happy, and happiness is the best thing in the world.

Tin Man

Rose-Colored Glasses

My daughter left two days ago to return to her apartment in Los Angeles. She was with us for over 3 months, and every night my son would come over. We watched about four hundred episodes of “The Challenge,” a reality show they loved as teenagers. We played Yahtzee. And when I worked during the day, I could see Samantha with her laptop doing the same

Then it was time for her to leave. And while we were all sad, we realized that COVID had given us this remarkable snapshot in time, where we got to be together again, without distractions. And, yes, we all REALLY like each other. It was fun.

But we also agreed that it was exhausting. Everyone was out of their routine. Samantha missed a couple of interviews because her time clock was off. My son stayed too late every night for his 4:30 a.m. alarm schedule for work. And our grocery bill was INSANE. Our stove actually gave up from all of the cooking. It’s used to me – the person who wipes it down only because something from the microwave dripped on it.

And that is how change goes. We dread it when our lives change, and yet we adapt. We move on to something new, and we romanticize the old. Then the old comes to pay a visit, and while it’s fun for a while, we realize that we’ve moved on in the most positive of ways, and our new place doesn’t have to involve mourning for the past. . . it becomes the perfect place for us right now.

Our family at work is the same way. Our jobs follow the same pattern. We remember whatever we did yesterday as the BEST, and we yearn for all that used to be. But, if the ghost of workplaces past came to visit, I bet you would suddenly remember that everything wasn’t perfect, and you’d enjoy the present more, and appreciate each day, and know that change comes as it should to keep us moving. To everything, there is a season. And even when it’s dark and stormy, be all in, because it’s right where you should be.

**Be happy for this moment.
This moment is your life.
Omar Khayyam**

Funny as Crap

Yesterday evening, I watched my dog go through his toy basket and pull out his favorite moose. He then trotted off, throwing it in the air twice and leaping on it as if somebody else had thrown it to him. He took it to the top of the stairs, then dropped it and ran after it so fast he fell down the last two stairs. He picked the moose up, then trotted off to the living room, happy as a lark.

His levity made me think about how I used to have more fun in the smallest of moments. I remember finding a white rock with which I could make a hopscotch game on the sidewalk; and laughing with friends. Now, fun seems to come with all sorts of requirements – *How much will this cost? How much work will I miss? What if the house doesn't get clean because I'm playing?*

Enough. I threw caution to the wind and went out to play with Deacon and stepped in dog poop. I said a few choice words, but still felt better for the playing. We all need a little more levity in our lives.

To capture the moment, I wrote this poem:

*Tonight I played and stepped in poop,
Then I sat upon my stoop,
I have decided to be fun,
Less like the dark – more like the sun.
So I grabbed a crayon and some paper,
Watched the day turn into vapor,
Wrote this down - my little rap,
That started when I stepped in crap.*

Many thanks to Deacon, who gave me this fun moment:



Good Morning,

I was recently looking at a picture I keep on my desk of a loggerhead sea turtle going back into the water after laying eggs at Holden beach. My sister-in-law was a part of Turtle Patrol there, and we had gotten a call a little after midnight that a female had been spotted going ashore. Our job was to make sure she was not bothered, and that her eggs were laid in a safe area.

When we arrived, she had already dug the hole and laid most of the eggs. Two inebriated gentlemen had spotted her, and were currently being watched by the Turtle Patrol, lest they inadvertently stumble into the nest. I won't go into lessons about how sea turtles lay eggs and how the nest boils and what the experience is like, because I could SO go there and you'd really want me to stop, but I will tell you that watching that approximately 500 lb. female take a few steps back towards the sea, stop to breathe, then continue the slow process of moving into the water until her shell completely disappeared under the ocean, was breathtaking.

It was like watching a dinosaur return home.

Below is a picture of her that my sister-in-law took while I stood with the drunk guys as they cried, "She's beautiful, man":



Why do I tell you about this experience? Because, in that moment, nothing else mattered. During the minutes that I watched that turtle, I didn't care how many days were left in vacation or how much I weighed or what I should fix for breakfast the next morning. I didn't think about

work, and I had zero goals other than to stand completely still and bask in the magic of the moment.

Sometimes we need those times – when we simply look at something so amazing, we stop thinking. We breathe in the moment and let it settle into our souls. And, instead of feeling smaller in the face of it, we feel bigger. Much bigger. We become one with the turtle and the ocean and love whispers the same tune to all involved.

I'm sure you've had that moment. In the face of all of the stress being tossed our way, take a moment to visualize it. Remember what you felt. Then say to yourself, "I'm bigger than all of this." That's right – close your eyes and bask in the complete peace of it. Be the turtle.

Corrective Shoes Can be Badass

Last night, as I was doing my online Boxing workout the instructor said something that caught my attention. His exact words were, “We’re better together.”

I find that to be incredibly true. There is something powerful about sharing our stories and laughing with colleagues and friends. Maybe the mirror neurons in our brains (that help us feel empathy) are triggered by these moments, but I’d like to believe it’s something more. I believe that we are created to connect.

My brother was the youngest of the three of us, and he was really big for his age. Unfortunately for him, he was a gentle giant, so the school bullies always found him. When he was in first grade and almost 6’ tall (slight exaggeration), he always looked too young to be doing whatever he was doing. Sitting in a sandbox playing Matchbox cars looked fine for the little guys, but Mark looked like a 6th grader. So, the bullies would seek him out and begin taunting, or throwing rocks, or shoving him.

Whenever this happened, a call would go out to me and my sister. Linda and I would quickly find each other on the way to the smaller kid’s playground. While she could punch, I had corrective shoes with steel toes that gave me an advantage.

Right before reaching the bullies, we would lock arms. There was power in that action – we connected to each other’s strength and took care of things for our little brother.

And that is life’s greatest secret – being constantly alone is not a natural state for us. In fact, the fastest way to weaken a human being is to isolate them. Why? Because we’re meant to connect. The good news is that we’re always one call away from a conversation that could recharge us, one laugh that could make us feel a little lighter, one idea away from a creative solution.

We’re better together. Whether literally or virtually, there’s no current created faster than the one ignited by joining hands, linking arms, sharing smiles, or connecting through stories. And the best news is that we can do that for each other. In fact, I believe it might be the one thing we were all born to do.

**I want to hold your hand.
The Beatles**

Path Less Travelled

We want a plan. We want to know what the future holds. We want it all, and we want it now.

Instead, we get uncertainty. We get questions, and situations we're unsure of, and people we're not comfortable with. Bad things happen to good people, and good people do bad things. As the saying goes, we make a plan, and God laughs.

Maybe we need to stop looking for the plan and see the possibilities present in every uncertain moment. I remember when I was small, and I asked my mom what heaven would be like. She said that every day would be perfect – there would be no fear, we'd know everybody, and every day would consist of singing and laughing.

I was bored just listening to her. From that day forward, I really had to fake my enthusiasm about going there someday (an assumption on my part). Would every day be exactly the same?

The truth is, we just can't be certain of anything. We can do our best to forge our path, but life might just have a diversion that catches us by surprise. The true skill is the ability to adapt to the diversion, and see it as a challenge, a way to grow and learn.

Because every day gives us a new path, filled with brush and overgrowth . . . and opportunity. Perhaps it's one way of thinking we've not considered before; one new conversation yet unspoken; one idea, lying in wait; one pandemic yet to be solved.

We are in uncertain times, so let's wait, and watch, and trust that the greatest strides forward partnered, always, with fear. Maybe the plan isn't an answer, but a path less travelled.

Trust the wait. Embrace the uncertainty. Enjoy the beauty of becoming. When nothing is certain, anything is possible.

Mandy Hale

Finding the Magic Things

I was on the porch yesterday when a neighbor walked by with her young daughter. The little girl had a small, plastic horse in her hand, and held it up towards the sky. She turned to her mom and said, "Look! My horse can fly, just like the one in my dream!" Her mother turned to her daughter and said, "Honey, there is no such thing as a flying horse."

I wanted to yell out, "Tell that to a Pegasus!" but I had to respect her choice to smash her daughter's imagination. Because who's to say that maybe her daughter's dream was significant? And what if magic is still out there, but we have dulled our senses through disbelief?

It's been shown that in a dream state, deep non-REM sleep is the point at which memories can be fused and blended together in abstract and highly novel ways. The brain will actually take acquired knowledge and extract overarching rules and commonalities, creating a mindset that can help us find solutions to previously impenetrable problems.

The sewing machine came to inventor Elias Howe in a dream in 1845, when he saw people holding spears with a hole in the top as they moved them up and down in a rhythmic fashion. The tune for "Yesterday" came to Paul McCartney in a dream; he checked with people for weeks to be sure it wasn't a song already written. The Double Helix structure of DNA came to James Watson in a dream about a spiral staircase.

Perhaps, we need to take our nose out of our spreadsheets and daydream a little more often. Let's look at the clouds instead of seeking out the latest blog. Maybe we need to follow the lead of a little girl who dreamed about a flying horse, and then made it happen the very next day because she believed in the possibilities of that dream. Perhaps we work to sharpen our senses so that we can, once again, find the magic things.

**The world is full of magic things⁶. Patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper
W.B. Yeats**

Walk On

My daughter was talking to me last night and mentioned that she had started to get emotional recently, for no reason. I told her that I was watching the Netflix series *Ted Lasso* (highly recommended) and cried my eyes out. Why are we both crying? Because our bodies know what is best for us. Tears release excess stress hormones such as cortisol, which can cause physical ailments and play havoc with mood. The calm often felt after a good cry is in part due to hormonal release. Personally, I'm left with a massive cry hangover and I look like something from a Stephen King novel, but my mood does seem better.

The song that played during a scene in *Ted Lasso* is what triggered my tears. "You'll Never Walk Alone" by Rodgers and Hammerstein is one of my favorites and is tied to an experience I had when working in my teens at a blind and deaf camp. On the last day of camp, we always had a talent show featuring a 14-year-old girl who lost her sight as a child. She got up to sing:

When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark

We all lost it. This amazing, young girl we had gotten to know stood before us singing with absolute joy. She got through the song, because now she knew that:

At the end of a storm
There's a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark

In case you haven't noticed, we're under a lot of stress right now. Our sense of safety is being attacked from a variety of directions, and we're just not sure what to do anymore. So let yourself cry, and notice that even when things seem the darkest, we have people we love, and people who love us. That includes our family at work. Hold your head high with your heart full, and:

**Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone**

Small Acts of Kindness

On the day my adrenaline left, I slumped into the couch, looking a lot like a Frank Lloyd Wright creation, so molded to the leather that I looked as if I were now part of the couch. The dog found this an opportune moment to jump up on the couch with me, slobber all over my shirt, and try to rip the scrunchie out of my hair.

My husband looked at me with some concern, understanding that without excessive caffeine and adrenaline I was not equipped to deal with a puppy. So he became my knight in shining armor and offered to walk the dog. He leashed up the beast, and never before had I so valued the sound of a door closing. I shut my eyes and felt the sweet blanket of sleep slowly descending.

Three minutes later, the front door opened. Mentally, I began my whine - Why couldn't Neil keep the dog outside for just 30 minutes?

Then I looked up and saw why Neil brought Deacon back inside.



Deacon had brought me a flower. Granted, he pulled it off our bushes that line our sidewalk but look at that face. How could I stay irritated? The kindness of my husband offering to take the dog on a walk added to the sweet gift the puppy brought me changed my perspective on everything.

The world is in a constant state of change, but what remains the same is our need for small acts that are personal, that are kind, that make us smile, and that envelope us in the realization that love might really be what the world needs now. That love is all we need.

**What the world needs now
Is love, sweet Love
It's the only thing, that there's just too little of
Burt Bacharach**

What to do About Loneliness

Loneliness is not about being alone; it's about being separated from that which or those whom we love. During this time of isolation, you may miss your extended families. You could miss hugs and handholding. You yearn for connection.

The good news is that loneliness can be resolved by falling in love with someone – and that person is you. After all, you came into this world with you, and will go out of this world with you. And yet when it comes to an investment of time and energy, the person we've given the least to just happens to be ourselves.

Children get excited about things they do well – they want people to watch them, because at a young age, they get encouragement. Then, as we age, we get more critiques from teachers and parents and others. We hand in a paper and get red marks that only note what we did incorrectly.

We move from “Look what I did!” to “I don't think this is good enough.”

I remember drawing a pencil sketch of a horse when I was seven years-old, amazed at how well it turned out. I showed it to my best friend's mother, who said, “That's nice, honey, but you don't want to just trace a picture.” I didn't trace the picture, but her words made me like my sketch a little less.

I wish I would have just smiled at her and said to myself, “Nice job, Donna. That's a really good-looking horse.” But I didn't. I walked home feeling hurt by a false accusation, and my tight fist crumpled my picture. I could have walked away with my own belief intact, skipping home with the person whose opinion I most valued.

This week, spend some positive time with yourself. Be your biggest cheerleader. If you make a mistake, congratulate yourself for trying. If you think something is funny, laugh out loud. And if a person is demeaning, simply know that you don't have to absorb their insecurity. You can feel compassion for them, while showing yourself respect. Because your best friend is you, and you happen to really enjoy the company.

Loneliness is a sign you are in desperate need of yourself.
Rup Kaur

We're All in this Together

Every six months, my husband and I go in for his oncology check-up where he receives results based upon a recent PET scan and bloodwork. We usually start this day with breakfast together, enjoying the lingering moments of our last “you’re good for six more months” message. We share gratitude for the years we have been given since his initial diagnosis of a rare cancer called Waldenstrom Lymphoma. Then we drive to VCU to see Dr. Ginder, who is a physician-scientist with a specialty in blood cancers.

We ease into the waiting room, where people have been wearing masks for the nine years we’ve entered. They wear masks to protect their immune systems, now even more threatened by COVID. We see every emotion in the eyes of those waiting to see their doctor or have their chemo treatment – hope, fear, laughter, gratitude and wisdom. What we rarely see are tears. These warriors are in battle mode.

We make eye contact and nod, understanding that we are in this together.

This is our shadow day, and we are not alone. Many of us now know of friends and family members who we have lost their lives to COVID, or cancer, or other illnesses. Every day is an update of loss. We feel like a ship anchored offshore, battered by a stormy sea of bad news.

Here is what I want you to know - there is something about loss and fear that brings out the bravest part of us. On these cancer update days, I am more alert. I watch Neil more closely. On this day we laugh a little louder, cry a little harder, and celebrate with greater intention. It is our shadow day. But what we have found is that shadows are the harbingers of hope, cast not by darkness but by light.

So, no matter what you are facing today, take a moment for gratitude and love. Notice everything. Feel your fear, accept it, and invite the shadow into your soul. Absorb the love of those close to you. Because when you take in this energy, you will emit a light that others will see. And your light might just guide someone else’s fear from the harsh waves of grief to a gentler shore.

Today is our shadow day, and for that we are grateful. Because the darkest shadows are cast by the brightest light.

**We're all in this together.
Shine on!**

A woman with long blonde hair is sitting on the edge of a large, dark rock. She is wearing a dark, short-sleeved top and dark leggings. She is looking out over a vast, hazy valley. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent yellow color. The text is centered in the lower half of the image.

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