Minority Leader
HOW TO LEAD FROM THE OUTSIDE AND MAKE REAL CHANGE

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When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid. —Audre Lord
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sit in the living room, a cozy space, warm in the early summer. I am perched on the edge of the sofa next to Valerie, the home’s owner, a lovely black woman in her late forties. Across from us, seated close together on a wide settee meant for one, are her two children, a son and a daughter.

Politicians rarely visit their streets, which are nestled in a poorer community in south Georgia. Valerie beams with pride that both her children are headed to college in the fall. David, seventeen, plans to study criminology. Maya, eighteen, her belly round with her first child, intends to become a middle school teacher. Both newly graduated from high school, Maya will give birth in mere weeks and begin college months later, an unwed teen mother. Her intended school is more than three hours north of her home, so her mother will raise her newborn baby while she starts her freshman year.

Valerie speaks matter-of-factly about the coming challenge:
raising a new child just as hers leave the nest. Still, she is determined that both her children pursue degrees she never received. Maya, the mother-to-be, wonders aloud how she’ll do so far away from home and her baby. Yet in the next breath, she explains how college will be best for her and her child. Their future success rests upon her.

I’ve come to their home as part of my campaign for governor, so I ask Valerie what she expects of someone like me. What can I do to help make lives like hers better? In her soft voice, she replies she just wants better options for financial aid for her children. They will succeed, she says, if they can afford to stay in school.

As I look around the modest home, passed down through generations, I understand both the pride and the desperation tangled in her response. She got them through and has given them the tools to carve out better lives for themselves. We chat more about the worries she’s lived with all those years, our discussion turning to the crime and poverty in their community.

Then I ask Valerie what she wants. At first, all I get in response is a quizzical look that suggests I need to reconsider my bid for higher office. I repeat, “What do you want? For you? What secret dream do you have for yourself?” Her confused expression turns to one of surprise. “I don’t know,” she tells me. “I’ve been a cashier at the Piggly Wiggly for twenty years.”

“You must want something,” I probe, “something you’d like to do for you.”

“A day care,” she admits quietly. “I’d like to start a day care for unwed mothers, like my daughter. So more girls can finish school and pursue their dreams.” But that ambition is beyond her—her body language, her tone of voice, her averted gaze speak louder than her words. I press her, but she demurs with a smile. “Let’s just see what happens if you win the governor’s job.”
Valerie’s house in south Georgia is not too different from the squat redbrick house where I grew up on South Street in Gulfport, Mississippi. An oak tree grew in our front yard, shading the front sidewalk, forbidding grass to grow beneath its shade. Pink azaleas bloomed each spring from bushes that flanked the front door. Our rented house, and the others set close by, teemed with children—all black, all working-class. We played in our postage-stamp yards, make-believing the fantastical. Superhero exploits. Cops and robbers. As we got older, we’d talk about moving to New Orleans or living in one of the mansions along the beachfront that lay less than five miles away, across the railroad tracks that ran in between our neighborhood and the wealthier environs. We dreamed of more, while our parents’ lives centered around survival and making it from paycheck to paycheck. Instinctively, we understood that more had to be possible, even if we didn’t know what to do to get there. These imaginings—these desires—are the root of ambition.

As adults, like Valerie, we tend to edit our desires until they fit our construction of who we’re supposed to become. In such a world, I wouldn’t dare dream of running for higher office, for mayor or governor or president. At least for now, Valerie sees herself retiring in twenty more years from the Piggly Wiggly as a cashier, rather than as a small business owner who helps a community raise its children. From our brief meeting, I could see she had the fire, albeit at a low burn, of a minority leader. She had ambition. She had a vision. But she didn’t have the faith. And understandably so.

Whether we come from working-class neighborhoods or grow up comfortably middle-class, minorities rarely come of age explicitly thinking about what we want and how to get it.
People already in power almost never have to think about whether they belong in the room, much less if they would be listened to once inside. These men—and they are usually men and typically white—do not have to grapple with low expectations based on gender or race or class. Ambition for them begins with reminiscences of old times and older friendships or newer alliances. The ends have already been decided, with only the means to be discussed.

Most potential minority leaders feel the same lack of faith Valerie had, at least at some point in their evolution. We may not know how to get the first job, let alone make it to the big chair. We don’t know how to take the leap from accepting our fates to actually changing them, and not just a little, but radically. Then there are those who simply do not know what they want. The drive to achieve burns inside, often without a clear target.

We want to “be something,” but what that is remains hazy. Often, we cannot articulate our goals because they lie just beyond the reach of who we are supposed to be. Ambition’s scale is irrelevant. What holds us back is not scope. It’s fear.

And because we don’t know what to call our dreams, don’t know how to make them happen, or are pretty sure we’ll be disappointed, we just stand still. But becoming a minority leader demands that we embrace ambition as our due.

In every sector where I’ve worked, I am driven by my ambition to encourage others to find their own dreams and exploit their potential. Whether I’m mentoring young people in organizations or speaking with those looking to forge new careers at midlife to explore their potential, the starting block is knowing
what you want—and then wanting more. Run for office, take the helm at corporate boards, go back to college, or start a small business. Whatever the path, this book is designed to help locate our ambition and use it to create a path to leadership that does not bow to inner doubts or outside prejudices.

**GETTING LOST IN POSSIBILITIES**

During law school, one of my tax professors, Anne Alstott, hired me as a research assistant for a book she was coauthoring. As I combed through the reams of documents, I struggled to organize them into coherent and useful information. I tried to categorize by theme, by type, even by the size of the page, legal or standard. Lost in the sheer enormity of the project, I couldn’t determine what was real and relevant versus what were merely interesting facts on a page.

When I presented my initial findings to Professor Alstott, she listened thoughtfully, asking the occasional question. At the end, she motioned me over to the whiteboard in her overstuffed office filled with books and monographs, and she told me the secret of how she approached research. Finding the truth requires three simple questions, she explained, and they must be answered in any investigation: (1) What is the problem? (2) Why is it a problem? (3) How do you solve it?

Finding, owning, and living one’s ambition can feel a lot like that research project. In a world filled with options, we are paralyzed by choices. Or, worse, in so many cases, when we’ve been told our options are limited, we need to have the wherewithal to find our way to more. Rather than seeking outside expertise on
whether we deserve what we want, we must look inward, not simply at our fears—of losing, of not being sufficient—but at the great difference living our ambitions can make if we succeed.

When we win, we achieve beyond ourselves. We become models for others, known and unknown, who see our victories as proof that they can win too. Even by simply embracing ambition, talking about it, trying and failing, we mentor others to see their potential. And by going beyond our own limits, we change the places we inhabit. We bring a fresh perspective to a company or a cause, a minority lens that expands and shifts how the work gets done. This is not news. Think of the companies scrambling to add women to their executive offices, people of color to their boards of directors. Or the nonprofit that adapts its mission because of the unique understanding it gains from incorporating the experience of those who have been outside.

When I work with young people and others seeking leadership positions, they are primed to jump to the third question, to the how of it, without understanding the what or the why. Some pick a place they want to land or a title they like and then expect teleportation. It may sound corny, but so many of us forget that finding and fulfilling ambition is truly a journey, and one that does not come with a map or GPS, especially for those of us on the outside looking to get in. The effort can be sweaty, teary, and messy as much as it can be rewarding and empowering. I call it the hard work of becoming more.

So what takes us beyond the dream to charting a new reality? What I’ve come to think of as Alstott’s Queries, framed slightly differently, have become a cornerstone of how I frame almost every endeavor. Whether the dream is to run a company, run for office, or run a 5K—or even if your dream has not yet been discovered—the path to realizing ambition is the same:
1. What do I want?
2. Why do I want it?
3. How do I get there?

Before exploring these steps, it’s crucial to understand and internalize our very right to even be ambitious. Because, for too many of us, we are stopped in our tracks before we begin because we don’t believe we deserve to want more. And it is by wanting more that we begin.

I KNOW YOU ARE, BUT WHAT AM I

Early on, I had two experiences that helped me understand how to convert imaginings into ambition and realize that “too big” isn’t a good reason not to try. The first occurred at the end of my junior year of high school. My public high school required all juniors to take the PSAT. Despite not having the tutors like some of my school friends, I’m a pretty good test taker and did well. My scores prompted an invitation to apply for a program I’d never heard of before—nor had any of my teachers. Still, I completed the extensive application for the Telluride Foundation because it promised a summer program away from home, and I thought it would be exciting to go to the north. I applied, and they selected me to attend TASP, which stands for Telluride Association Summer Program, a nerd summer camp for high achievers. I took the second plane ride of my life to Ithaca, New York, where I lived with fifteen of the smartest teenagers I’d ever met. For the first few days, I studiously avoided conversation, baffled by how I had been chosen to join them.

To a person, I could not compete. I wrote poetry for our high
school journal. A girl there had published a collection. One was a concert-level violinist, and the others sounded like college professors. In our classroom sessions, I was called upon to answer questions, and I got more answers wrong than I ever had at Avondale High School. The other students referenced books I’d never read and scholars I hadn’t heard of. Even casual conversation left me adrift, floundering to understand cultural references far beyond me. When I dared to introduce television into the mix, you’d have thought I cussed.

At the end of the first week, I called home, begging my parents to let me leave. I was out of my depth among these brainiacs, embarrassing myself every day. My parents, cruelly it seemed, refused. They demanded that I stay and learn as much as I could from the experience. My dad told me to get comfortable with not being anywhere near the smartest person in the room. I had to accept that I simply did not have the background or education the others did, and it was up to me to decide if that mattered.

The comment stung, but he was right. I had always been smart, but I needed to test myself against those who were smarter, more talented, and more accomplished. My ability to dream meant hearing about, and entering, worlds far different from my own. Athletes are encouraged to test themselves against better players. Proverbs tells us that iron sharpens iron. So too does ambition sharpen ambition. Dreams hone other dreams.

I stayed for the full summer, never once proving myself superior to anyone. Six weeks could not erase the difference in upbringing and access. But I learned from them, in our classes and beyond. I learned to mimic their sense of self-confidence and certainty. I didn’t lie about what I knew, but I began to carry myself differently and speak with more authority.

Not everyone’s ambitions will be world domination or Car-
negie Hall, but we should be driven beyond what we know and feel safe doing. Ambition means pushing past simply what we are good at. The goal is to stretch ourselves, to explore our potential, even when we know we won’t be first or the best. I sometimes advise people to watch what they fear, what makes them most nervous or feel the most self-protective—sometimes fear masks ambition. And unmasking it can unleash your drive.

Telluride introduced me to a world larger than my own, and then came Spelman College. A historically black college with a student body composed of 99 percent African American women, missionaries founded Spelman to help freed slave women embrace their liberty. Spelman operates as a four-year course on deprogramming black women stereotypes—the welfare queen, the hypersexualized Jezebel, being the lowest rung of the minority hierarchy—replaced by a parade of chief executive officers, public intellectuals, scientists, artists, and actors.

My mother tricked me into attending Spelman. A lifelong Southerner, I’d planned my escape by applying only to schools north of the Mason-Dixon Line. I had no interest in a women’s college—a black one at that. Most of my classmates since kindergarten had been white students. Plus, as I hadn’t been allowed to date until I was sixteen, the idea of a cloistered college experience held no appeal. But Mom guilted me into applying, reminding me that she hadn’t had the opportunity to attend due to her family’s poverty. When I was admitted, she convinced me to take advantage of a day off from school to visit. I found myself astonished by the incredible diversity of a black women’s college, a stone’s throw away from a black men’s college, Morehouse College. In the end, my visit persuaded me to add Spelman to the
list of colleges I might attend. I put the names into a cup: Spelman, Swarthmore, Sarah Lawrence, and Vassar. Spelman came out three times, and I sent in my acceptance.

At Spelman, I had the second experience that moved me closer to knowing what I wanted for my future. Suddenly, I found myself seeing how much blacks could achieve, beyond the handful of television shows I’d watched. My new classmates were the daughters of politicians and famous lawyers and corporate leaders. One of my closest friends mentioned in passing that she had the U.S. surgeon general’s home number. While several of us came from more modest means, our college expected us to dream beyond our narrow understanding of what we could be. I threw myself into college life, hungry to become this new superwoman: the Breaker of Stereotypes, Destroyer of Black Woman Myths. I was now in a context that included people of color, women no less, who had confidence that they could succeed.

I learned at Telluride and Spelman that I was allowed to craft my future. Those experiences had quelled some of my self-doubt; but even then, I pretended to be more fearless than I felt. I tried out for the spring play, despite my personal worries that I wasn’t as sylphlike as my castmates. I ran for vice president of the Student Government Association as a sophomore, clearly lacking the years of experience my predecessors and my opponent had. I persevered and won, despite my shortcomings and despite my own inner doubts, which I managed to keep at bay, though just barely.

This is where Alstott’s Queries, the what, why, and how, become most critical. Once we accept that we deserve to want more and we understand how giving birth to ambition requires knowing ourselves better, we’re ready to actually start figuring out what lights us up and then plotting out our pathways to get it.
WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT

When I was eighteen, I spent an evening in our college computer lab, the fluorescent lights crackling overhead reflecting off the near-green screen. While the few other students there on a weeknight likely toiled over papers, I’d been driven from my dorm room by what felt like an urgent project. In the lab that night, I created a spreadsheet. The Lotus 1-2-3 document laid out my life plans for the next forty years. Seriously.

As a teenager, I’d read about John D. Rockefeller, who’d kept careful lists of each goal and painstakingly mapped every moment of his life. Since he’d gone on to become one of the wealthiest men in the world, the idea of writing down my lofty goals struck me as the right approach. The act also allowed me to plan rather than act, to set future goals and avoid hard choices in the here and now. Whether scribbled into diaries or typed onto a computer, the act of writing down what I wanted became an ego’s Christmas list. Lots of stuff that you know Santa will never deliver.

I hadn’t come to the computer lab because of a sudden burst of inspiration. Quite the contrary—my heart had been broken. Chad, the second boy I’d ever dated, decided to end our relationship. As he pointed out in painstaking detail, I had not been a good girlfriend. He told me I had no passion, no capacity for love beyond my pursuits. Between student government and the spring play and classes, I’d not invested as much time in the actual work of our relationship. To be honest, I spared our relationship less attention because I didn’t know how to do it well. Extracurricular experiences seemed much easier than navigating the emotions of romance. As aggressive as I could be in secular pursuits, affairs of the heart perplexed me, and I focused on what I understood.

Still, when he broke up with me, my confidence shattered.
All around me, young men and women managed to effectively date one another. My abject failure—and I believed at the time it was all mine—surely signaled only one truth: I should focus on my professional life.

Fueled by sorrow and outrage, I decided to map out my life that night. A cold, comforting spreadsheet seemed to be the best way to focus on what I was good at, particularly by Chad’s estimation. The sheet contained four columns: year, age, job, and tasks. And they represented very different facets of myself. I was determined to embrace them all.

I intended at age twenty-four to write a best-selling spy novel like the stories I’d been captivated by in the Bond movies and on General Hospital. I’d organized my college class schedule around the exploits of Anna Devane and Robert Scorpio, denizens of the fictional town of Port Charles and spies for the WSB, the World Security Bureau. Despite watching these shows since childhood, and every Bond movie, none of the characters on my beloved soap looked like me, and precious few blockbuster thriller novels had black women on their covers. My mother, a librarian for most of my childhood, had taught us how books shaped our sense of the possible. For me, for other young black girls, I wanted to write books that showed them to be as adventurous and attractive as any white woman.

By thirty, I would be a millionaire running a corporation whose purpose I had not yet figured out. Having grown up as working poor, I decided having money was next. With my new wealth, I would help my parents buy their first house, a Kennedyesque compound on the shores of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Like the perennial winners in the Publishers Clearing House commercials, I dreamed big.
Fame and fortune had been put on the docket, and only power needed a slot. Lucky for me, I had also decided I wanted to be the mayor of Atlanta by the age of thirty-five. Of the dreams I had for myself, becoming mayor struck me as the most ambitious. I’d read a handful of prominent black suspense writers, and Oprah had already begun her path to great wealth, so the road to items 1 and 2 seemed doable, albeit incredibly challenging. Although Atlanta had a black mayor, no black woman had led a major city in the nation, so I allocated fifteen years of prep time. All this while sitting in Spelman’s computer lab late into the night.

 Though my list was exhaustive, and driven by grief and the need to reclaim my sense of self, the results were vitally important. I began to access what I wanted. I might not get there in all those arenas (though I have come close!), and my specific ambitions might not endure, but that wasn’t the point. The point was that I was letting myself experience the feeling of wanting itself: acknowledging in print—in a formal spreadsheet even—that I could see myself thriving in the world, that I was allowed to dare to want.

This audacity of ambition starkly contrasted with the place where I’d grown up. As a high school senior, I had a solid GPA and a list of notable achievements, but I wasn’t terribly outgoing and never had been. In childhood games with my sisters, I’d pretended to be a tycoon, a superhero, or President of the World, but those dreams held as much reality as an episode of Dynasty. In my real life, my natural introversion meant that I had few close friends and I rarely socialized outside of school.
Reading served as the spark for my imagination of a different future. I rarely met a professional person in daily life, though there was the occasional doctor or professor at the college where my mother served as librarian. And I certainly didn’t see them in my neighborhood where most people worked hourly-wage jobs. Because I didn’t know people who had grand dreams, moving beyond make-believe seemed harder and harder as I grew older and games lost their allure.

After hours in front of the computer that night, I reread my spreadsheet and surprised myself by laughing out loud. Suddenly I saw the obnoxiousness of the list of to-dos that I’d painstakingly plotted. Part of me laughed at the sheer length of the list and the incredible heights I wanted to reach in so many arenas. But I also laughed with self-mockery. Despite being surrounded by Spelman’s daughters of accomplishment, I had no clear way to do any of what I’d imagined.

My finger lingered over the Delete key, but in the end, I pressed Save. While my boyfriend’s derision compelled me out of my room, the project was mine alone. In the lab that night, I realized a core tenet behind deciding what you want: don’t stop yourself with the logic of possibility.

Logic is a seductive excuse for setting low expectations. Its cool, rational precision urges you to believe that it makes sense to limit yourself. And when your goal means you’ll be the first, or one of the few, as I desired, logic tells you that if it were possible, someone else would have done it by now.

Whether the hesitation comes from well-meaning counselors or skeptical bosses or from that little voice in your head, embracing ambition means learning not to listen too closely to anyone. Ambition should be heady stuff. It should make your neck itch and your palms sweat. Or, if you’re lucky, ambition may bring a
smile to your face. The smile of actually seeing a different, bigger future.

I DON'T WANT WHAT I HAVEN'T GOT (AND OTHER LIES)

Over the next several years, I curated my spreadsheet like Gollum tending his Precious, but I also continued to question the rightness of my reach. While I would proudly tell certain friends of my dreams, the sheer boldness of my ambitions gnawed at me. And even carefully organized spreadsheets can’t predict the future, I would find out. But they—or another form of planning—are more than an avoidance technique. Knowing what lights you up and embracing what you daydream about are the first steps.

What comes next to turn ambition into action is understanding the why. When you understand the roots of your dreams, you will have deeper insight into why you want what you want. You’ll be able to either strengthen your resolve or clarify if the target you’ve chosen is the right one. What you want to do and why you want to do it should align.

I can easily trace my goal of becoming mayor to my freshman year of college. Through my volunteer work, I’d already regularly attended city council meetings and understood the importance of a mayor’s decisions in tackling the poverty in Atlanta. When I first added the goal to my spreadsheet, I held a superficial dream of being in charge of the city. But later in that spring of 1992, America exploded when the Rodney King verdict was announced in late April. In Los Angeles, the city teemed with a violence that had not been seen in decades. In downtown Atlanta, where I attended school, young black men and women
smashed windows, overturned cars, and ransacked the city. For my part, I joined with fellow students in a silent march down to city hall from the Atlanta University Center, known to Atlantans as the AUC.

The AUC—the nation’s largest contiguous consortium of historically black colleges and universities—including Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, Morris Brown College, and Spelman College, as well as the Interdenominational Theological Center and the Morehouse School of Medicine. The AUC possesses a proud tradition of civic engagement, as the college home of luminaries such as Martin Luther King Jr., Marian Wright Edelman, and Walter Francis White. I wanted to do their legacy justice, and I felt called to continue their work.

Yet, although I helped lead the peaceful protest, the gesture felt emptier than I expected. I understood what drove those angry young people to hurl bottles and shout epithets. Some of the protesters lived in the oldest housing projects in Georgia, stolid rust-brown buildings situated across the street. For those who lived a stone’s throw beyond the privileged gates of Spelman and Morehouse, of Clark Atlanta and Morris Brown, their violence expressed an impotence and outrage too explosive for dignified marches.

I revered the civil rights movement and appreciated the laws that granted us the right to ride buses, to sit at lunch counters, to cast ballots. But the slowness of real change fueled the riots’ intensity, from coast to coast. Decades later, inequality still ravaged poor and black communities. Then toss in the continued international struggle to end apartheid, the skyrocketing incarceration rates that scooped up too many of black folks’ cousins, and a youth poverty rate that defied the wealth of the era. I knew the truth behind their rage.
In the wake of the Rodney King verdict, college kid and disenfran-
chised neighbor alike, we reviled the decision of twelve jurors to
ggnore the videotaped evidence of racist cops. Yet the riots posed
only a distant distraction for a number of my fellow college stu-
dents. On our campuses, final exams were beginning and students
unmoved by or inattentive to the social unrest hurried around the
AUC to take their last tests. They had little interest in the Korean
grocery stores being looted as frustrations boiled between neigh-
bors or in the black businesses destroyed in a blaze of Molotov
cocktails. Amid the destruction, most of the talented tenths of the
AUC ignored calls for marches in favor of turning in term papers.
As college students, we’d been trained to believe that our education
separated us from those outside our classrooms, and we would do
our best work for everyone by acing our tests, not by direct action.

Still, as the police moved into our area of the city to quell the
unrest, a strange thing happened. Tear gas canisters rained down
onto our college quads, vile smoke flooding the open spaces.
Across the street, similar bombs exploded in the eyes of Section 8
housing dwellers. The police swarmed onto our campuses and
the housing projects both, and suddenly, any distinctions between
our two worlds were meaningless. The police only saw congrega-
tions of young blacks, and race became a unifying marker of guilt.

The Atlanta police cordoned off the interstate exit leading to
the area, and marked cars stationed around the area prevented
anyone from leaving. Trapped on campus, I fumbled for a way to
act, unaware that the next few hours would change the course of
my life. Watching the news, I heard false reports about why the
area was under siege and facile explanations for complex social
problems. After seething and talking back to the television set,
I called the most offensive station to demand they do a better job of telling the story. The person who answered my call refused to take my message to her superiors. She politely hung up on me, and I less politely called back. Just before her third hang-up, she snapped that I was tying up the line.

Truth telling, especially stories about minorities, matters. We are so frequently viewed through lenses that encourage the majority to fear us or to distrust us. That afternoon, I watched as an entire city—a nation in microcosm—heard from their news reporters to once again be afraid of black people. To believe us all to be destructive, angry vandals rather than complex human beings who had seen in a single verdict an indictment of our humanity. If Rodney King could be beaten on tape, and his known police assailants exonerated, what would stop others from furthering our treatment as subhuman?

Quickly, I looked up the numbers to all the television stations. Before the advent of 24/7 cable news, most people got their sense of what was happening from just four networks. Worried that their stories would cement a narrative about blacks in Atlanta, I scribbled down the numbers on several sheets of paper. I went up and down the halls of my dorm and organized fellow students to begin calling the television stations to extend our protests. Like the march, the act of making calls didn’t require extraordinary courage, but dialing phones gave my friends and me a way to help. As I’d learned from my parents, protest takes on multiple forms. And, as I’d also learned, being black did not change with zip code or by entering the elite gates of a private college. But a phone call to a newsroom could change the conversation, if only for thirty seconds. Soon, the television stations demanded a name to go along with the phone calls jamming their lines. I flippantly told my friends to just give the news stations my name.
Again, this was not a premeditated or complicated strategic act, which we often associate with ambition. The why of ambition can be born in a moment. The decision to act, to reach, can be in response to an external crisis. Or, a fleeting idea can ignite you and point you toward something bigger than you are. The key is to be aware of what is going on both around you and inside you, staying open to opportunities to authentically express what you believe and who you are.

As our phone strategy stretched on, I watched the footage of our campuses surrounded by cop cars. Rage dueled with sadness as I saw the treatment of black students and residents in a city ostensibly run by and for black folks. In the end, we were all the same to those in charge.

My reaction to the equity of suspicion shamed me. If I was honest with myself, I was upset because all my borrowed trappings of elitism meant nothing as Atlanta burned. That disquiet stayed with me the rest of the day, scratching at my conscience. I had to confront the why of my outrage and how I would deal with its aftermath. I needed to probe my own sense of privilege. But, for the moment, I needed to focus on correcting the record.

Unfortunately, our phone jams of the TV stations had no effect on their coverage. However, by the early evening, a television producer invited me to join a community town hall to be simulcast across the city. I assume they picked me because of my prolific phone calls (and I was the only real name they had).

I arrived at the studio where I met Mayor Maynard Jackson for the first time. I had seen him before from afar, but I had not met the legendary man who, at the age of thirty-five, had become the first African American mayor of Atlanta and of any major city in the South. Race had driven him—both the reality that blacks could control a major city and the history of how the city had
treated blacks. Nearly twenty years later, a different issue of race stirred me now. Black people occupied the mayor’s office and much of the city council and held high positions in commerce and civic life. Despite the visible progress Mayor Jackson’s legacy had yielded, race continued to define many of our problems. Poverty, struggling schools, and decaying communities plagued black faces in a city that had black leadership.

Awed to be in the presence of such a powerful leader, a black one no less, I listened as he offered his analysis of the riots. While he acknowledged the profound disappointment of the verdict, he decried the reaction. Then he offered choice words for the young demonstrators who had wreaked havoc on his city. As he spoke, my awe turned to anger. This powerful man who stood at the head of a city known for its civil disobedience seemed to hold no sympathy for those who found no other outlet for their despair. So he had sent the police to public housing and to our campuses.

Anger, like any strong emotion, can move us beyond our normal comfort zones. In front of cameras and the crowd, I demanded to know what the mayor had done for the dispossessed youth of Atlanta. For the undereducated who turned to gangs and drugs. For the impoverished who worried more about their next meal than their grades.

With a boldness that surprised me, I excoriated his record and scoffed at his leadership. If I’d thought more deeply before I stood, I might have held my tongue. But I had shed much of my fear of not being right during that Telluride summer program. And since I was there, in the halls of power, being relentless seemed in order. In this moment I had access to power, a voice, and a question. Sometimes the why of ambition can only be discovered in a nervy action that cuts against our natural instincts. Maybe it is asking the question in a meeting that no one else has—and
that you think may expose your ignorance. Or pushing back on
a superior. Presenting an idea others have mocked. Speaking up
does not create ambition, but the act can help you to clear away
what might be blocking your view.

In return, Mayor Jackson lectured me on how far the city had
come, about the sacrifices made by earlier generations. Then he
looked down at me from his very imposing height and promised
to give my concerns due consideration.

And the mayor kept his promise. A few months later, I began
work as the research assistant at the Mayor’s Office of Youth
Services for the City of Atlanta during my sophomore year in
college. Like a lot of college students, I worked while going to
school. In my case, the job changed my life, channeling my wor-
ries about injustice into a place designed to guarantee access. I
had not been naïve about government’s power, but on the inside,
I saw firsthand how government, though an imperfect tool, pro-
vided a way for an introvert like me to raise my voice and act.

Those two days in late April imprinted themselves on me, sharp-
ening a childhood that had prepared me to wonder about how I
would help my people. I didn’t come from a political family, had
never had a full conversation with a politician, even when I had
attended zoning hearings at city hall. And though I had typed in
my goal of becoming mayor weeks before, those days revealed
why the role could be so vital. What I had were opportunities
that those outside Spelman’s gates did not, and I had a responsi-
bility to do more because I’d made it inside.

For the next decade, I followed the plans on my spreadsheet. I
failed miserably at becoming a millionaire by thirty, but I met
enough of my metrics to be in a pretty good position. According
to my calculations and the plaudits of those who knew my goals, I was on track to achieve my life’s ambition: becoming mayor of Atlanta.

Turns out, I was wrong.

I don’t want to be the mayor—of anywhere. I focused on a job title and work that seemed to meet my dreams, but the job itself should never have been the dream. Ambition should be more than a title or a position. I’d focused on the what, not the why, and for more than a decade, I organized my life around that what. I understand now that knowing the real reason for your ambition allows you to figure out if a different path will get you there.

This is a distinction of immense difference. At its most complex, ambition should be an animation of soul. Not simply a job, but a disquiet that requires you to take action. For me, my ambition owed as much to my desire to serve communities isolated by poverty and racism as it did to my refusal to believe either had to be permanent fixtures in our lives. I latched on to the role of mayor as the clearest path to what I imagined could be accomplished. But realizing the why of my ambition allowed me to alter course and explore new roles that could accomplish the outcomes even more effectively.

We all set our sights on jobs we want, titles we covet. But, like dating the wrong person, we have to learn to understand what is truly for us and be willing to break up to find the real thing. We stay too long in jobs, hoping the work changes, rather than hunting for the right fit. Ambition means being proactive. The executive who becomes a writer. The teacher who becomes a banker. The shipyard worker who becomes a minister. Those are our inspirations. Being willing and able to change course means honing our ambition to the point where we know when it’s time to move on or up.
Becoming mayor isn’t the only ambition I had wrong. Rather than writing the seminal espionage novel, I became a romantic suspense writer. Turns out, once I put pen to paper, I finally understood I wanted to write stories about women who looked like me, ones whose lives were as exciting as anything I’d read or seen on a movie screen. I didn’t have to be Ian Fleming to tell those tales. When I let go of my fixation on crafting the pièce de résistance of spy craft fiction, I found a story—and a career—that I had never imagined.

I first ran for office because I understood that government has a tremendous capacity to help people unlock their own potential, and I wanted a job where I could foster change for families like mine. Families who want more than entry-level jobs that pay the lowest wages. I want to lead a state that does more than survive—doing okay by some, and not so great by too many of us. That means becoming governor, although no black woman has ever held the job in American history.

I have absolute clarity on the role I want next, but as you consider what wakes you up, don’t discount the importance of having no real answer to the question. Indecision, effectively applied, is a great way to figure it out. Give yourself the space to explore why you don’t know what you want. Is it that you are afraid of the scope of your dreams? Or that you have too many dreams to pick just one? Maybe you haven’t seen enough of the world to know what you want. Perhaps the hesitation lies somewhere in between. Finding your ambition demands that you allow yourself the time and energy to understand what holds you back from defining what you really want.

I am a living example of the fact that there is no glory in having only one supreme goal. Too few books on achieving your dreams acknowledge that we are multifaceted beings with many
different talents and interests. Society sometimes chides us to be focused on one goal, one passion, one ambition. It starts in college when we’re told to pick a major. Or think about the suspicion we feel when an actor announces a Christmas album or a politician writes a romance novel. “Jack of all trades, master of none” is the unkindest cut.

Benjamin Banneker, astronomer, clockmaker, and abolitionist, who laid out the plans for Washington, DC, also carried on a heated correspondence with Thomas Jefferson over the abolition of slavery. Professor of mathematics Dalip Singh Saund broke barriers as an Indian American who fought to secure the right for Indian immigrants to become US citizens in 1949. Forced to be a farmer for much of his time in the United States, he later became a US congressman, the first Indian to serve. Think of Beyoncé and Lin-Manuel Miranda, who master multiple arts, securing Grammys, Oscar nominations, and Tonys for their works. But also, consider the dedicated nurse who spends every weekend at the animal shelter, driven by an ambition to treat the suffering.

It’s been twenty years and my spreadsheet, now upgraded to Excel, has been edited several times. Swap in or out a dozen jobs, many I never imagined at eighteen, and I better understand why the spreadsheet is so important to me.

While I climbed my way toward what I thought was the mayor’s office, I also honed my skills as an attorney. I learned the law under the tutelage of exceptional lawyers, including Teresa Wynn Roseborough, a brilliant woman who had become the first black woman partner at our law firm.

One afternoon I sat in her spacious office, the sunlight from the twenty-first-floor windows streaming in and lighting the
room with a pearlescent glow. My digs on the twenty-third floor of the law firm were not too shabby, especially for a third-year associate. I had a window, a secretary, and a path to partnership. My job at Sutherland Asbill & Brennan came as close to marrying my interests as any legal role could. As a tax attorney, I had burrowed my way into a tiny subgroup that specialized in tax-exempt organization law. Shorthand: I helped nonprofits and charities but got paid like a corporate attorney. Our clients ranged from multinational NGOs to well-financed corporations that did business with nonprofits to universities and hospitals.

Yet I had grown restless and thought more and more about my spreadsheet and the political goals I recorded there. I sat in Teresa’s office and shared my plan for how I would move from my perch on the twenty-third floor to city hall. Instead of the approving nod to my careful planning, she challenged my focus on the mayor’s job. Was it a broad enough platform for the visions I held? Did I only want to affect Atlanta, or should my ambition aim even higher?

When you decide what you want and why you want it, take action immediately. Do not wait for an invitation to act. I promise you, the letter is not in the mail. Know what you want. Know why you want it. Know how you will achieve it. Then get started. Take a class, apply for a job, read a book about it. But do something that moves you forward at a constant pace. If you can walk away for days, weeks, or years at a time, it is not an ambition—it’s a wish. Wishes feel good and rarely come true. Ambition, on the other hand, fuels your days and refuses to be ignored. It challenges your sense of self and fulfills your sense of wonder. So pay attention.

And get to work.
AMBITION EXERCISE

We tend to measure our passions by their likelihood of success, not the joy and excitement they bring. Use this exercise to reveal if you are being honest about what your ambitions truly are.

You can find this and all the exercises in this book online at minorityleaderbook.com/exercises.pdf. I encourage you to download the sheets and fill them out. It will make a world of difference.

What would you do if you had unlimited money?

If you could do any five things for the rest of your life, what would they be?

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

What else would you ask for?
Rank your top five activities from most appealing to least appealing.

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<th>Least appealing qualities</th>
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Would you swap out anything from the “what else” list for what you wrote as your top five activities? Why or why not?