

Transcription Fern LaRocca interview

Hello, I'm Kathleen Kaan

And I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: Today we're happy to have with us Fern Alix LaRocca. Fern is the president and founder of Advanced Financial Designs, an investment firm, as well as a Shambhala meditation instructor.

VC: Welcome. Fern, in your meditation practice and your financial planning practice, do you find that more people are seeking out these services as a result of Covid?

Fern: Yes I do. What's coming up more & more is that people say they want to feel more in control of their lives and they want to know what's going on. People are more engaged in wanting to know their financial picture, they want to handle their emotions, and just relax into this strange environment that they're in right now.

VC: Right, and do you find there is a synergy, or relationship between these two businesses? I mean, you're helping people with different aspects of life, but do you find that there's a synergy between these two?

Fern: Oh, yes. When I first started practicing, I dealt with very rich individuals who could afford my services, and I had a larger firm at that time. After the accident I sold my firm and started working with middle class, lower middle class individuals and helping them develop their own financial plan and empowered them to do their own personal finance. So it's a bit educational and a bit coaching. And people have come to me because they know I'm a meditation instructor and say, tell me more about that. And I let them know how you can sell the mind and relax in the present moment and just keep bringing the attention to the now. Because there's nothing we can do about the past, and we don't know what's going to happen in the future. So like training the mind to be "now" and working with "what is" is essential, in financial planning as well as life.

KK: You mentioned, Fern, briefly, "after my accident." So people may not know, and want to know, what happened, and if this was a turning point? Did the meditation, did that help you and how did it help you? Did that become the main point of your life?

Fern: It was just a blip in life. As we go throughout life, there are births and deaths, and trauma and all this other stuff. What happened to me was, I was just out with a girlfriend having dinner, and a rainstorm happened, and she lost control of the car, and the car impacted my hip. I was conscious of it at all times, and had no idea that it was a very horrific event. I thought well, they'll patch me up, I'll be done in a weekend, and be back skiing or something. But I ended up with four months in the hospital, six weeks in intensive care, and had a lower left leg amputation and a right hip impairment. It was a very long journey, many years of going from a wheelchair to a walker, to crutches, to a cane, so a very long journey. And throughout that journey I did realize that my meditation practice really came into play. Instead of thinking about what I can't do any more, I started to think about what I could do. What was possible for

me in the future. So I looked at all those things I missed out on that I never had time for because I was working so hard. Just working my business, and I love financial planning. But this was a time, I could start taking up guitar again, I learned how to make jewelry, I was reading all the books I never had time for, seeing all the movies I never had time for, writing short stories, reconnecting with old friends that I never had time for. So that was a big journey, this reconnection and learning about what I could do, and a sense of enjoyment and just relaxing into knowing that this too shall pass, just like everything else in life. It's just an incident that happened, and I'm healing up, and I'm just going to make the most of the journey. And I've continued that, but it was really an eye opener how much my meditation practice has helped me. It's so subtle that you don't really notice it, but every now and then you get a glimpse into Oh Wow, I could really stay present and work with the situation as it presented because of my mindfulness and meditation practice.

KK: When all this happened to you, were you still studying with other teachers? Were you connected to them in the time when you were in the hospital or doing, getting therapy or what have you? Were you actually still talking to them, letting them help you get through this?

Fern: Yes, my teacher Jakusho Kwong Roshi and Dharma Heir of Suzuki Roshi would come and visit me, and we would talk. I would just practice in the hospital, and we would have chats on the phone and things like that. I studied with him until 1996 when I did get home and I wasn't able to go to retreats and practice in Santa Rosa, he highly recommended that I practice close to home, which was the San Francisco Shambhala Center. So I sort of have my feet in both lineages, but there's a synergy there because Roshi knew Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche really well, as well as Suzuki Roshi and the Sakyong, so there was a friendliness and synergy between the two lineages. I was just very fortunate to have that history of knowing both really well.

VC: That's great. Have you yourself personally been affected by the COVID pandemic in terms of your own access to services that you may need for your health, or whatever?

Fern: No, I live 20 minutes away from Stamford hospital, just about everybody there knows me, I'm a long term patient so I feel at home there and as far as the COVID thing, since the accident, I've lived and worked on line so it's very comfortable. I was already doing, you know, back then they called it teleclasses. I was doing teleclasses, coaching on the phone and on the computer. So I was pretty savvy about working with people on line so this was a natural progression. It's just very heartwarming to see all of the offerings, all of the ways we connect virtually that's bringing us together from various time zones that we would have never ever been able to do which is amazing. I just went to a virtual retreat where there were people from all over the world, 130 people in 5 different time zones and it worked beautifully. It was so wonderful to see old friends because we all can't travel now, so to connect with people far away, see them laugh and talk and sit together was just, it was great.

VC: Yeah, I think that particular aspect has been a silver lining for a lot of people, myself included, because I find myself having regular zooms with people who live all over the country and we never really saw each other that much but now all of a sudden we're having this regular

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connection, so that's one good thing that has come out of this. Another question I had for you, Fern. You mentioned writing. Is this something that you had been doing, or something you expanded on.

Fern: I started journaling a little bit in the hospital and that kind of turned into a blog and then I did several blogs for a while and just wasn't feeling it so I just started writing short stories and people kept saying, you should write about your accident, really write about that. So I did, and I did a first draft but I never, I got distracted with other things and never polished it up or did the rewrite, or look for an agent and all that.

KK: Was that going to be a book, a Television thing or a movie? What did you have in your mind?

Fern: Well, I started out with a book but then I started thinking it might be a good screenplay.

VC: Well, it might be a book that somebody could option for the screen?

Fern: Yes who knows?

VC: All of the above are possible. That is great.

VC. So what advice do you have for people who are stressed out because COVID and the limitations imposed by this crisis?

Fern: Well, I think people have to remember that our world is impermanent. Nothing lasts forever. And we don't know what's going to happen, but we need right now to take care of ourselves and our families. And that's the most important thing, is finding some warmth in your life, something that gives you pleasure. Maybe it's just needing some alone time, or maybe it means more social connection online. But finding out what it is that helps you cope and fills you with joy and take time out to do that. It seems like a little thing, or too simplistic or whatever but we all need to take care of ourselves, and especially in this speedy, busy society that we're in. It's really easy, especially now that we're working out of our homes, to just ramp up even more, or work extreme hours under not the greatest conditions. So it's very important for self-care.

KK: And also be kind to yourself, it's the same thing. It's learning how to be kind to yourself, and we're not used to that. I don't think we're used to that. But part of that is how we get through this, I would imagine.

VC: Indeed, indeed.

KK: I'm interested, I know that on your website you've done a lot of writing about finances and I know that you had a big business before the accident. Are you still working as a financial advisor on a different scale? Tell us about that.

Fern: Yes, I'm working as a financial advisor more in a coaching role, helping people develop an investment plan, or retirement plan. Helping them monitor their taxes, keep their taxes down, looking at cash flow, if they need a budget, helping them develop that. Making sure they have an estate plan, making sure they have their risk managed. So I just coach them in all these aspects of financial planning. Then they feel empowered to do it themselves. And then maybe we review it once a year. We come back together, get all the documents together and say OK, what's going on? Is there anything that needs to be changed, should we stay the same, so do we need to move anything around?

KK: I read somewhere in your bios, and I don't have it in front of me, but it was kind of interesting. You mentioned that people are guilty about their finances, or ashamed, or have trouble talking about it or accepting that they have to take care of themselves. Especially women, I would imagine.

Fern: Right. That's been a problem with widows or people who inherit a lot of money, or trust fund babies, things like that. Where they have enough funds to do certain things, and they're sort of frozen about what they want to do with the money, how is it going to support them, and how long is it going to last? Some people think X amount of money is going to last them a lifetime and they're kind of shocked to figure out that it's not. It can just dry up. So that causes a lot of emotions, like guilt, shame, the confusion and also then they don't know who to trust. Then it gets scary because we haven't really had strong laws to help people find the proper matches of financial advisors for where they're at.

VC: Right, yeah, that's great that you're helping them get the confidence to handle their affairs and all of that. Another question. You mentioned that because of your accident you are totally accustomed to working remotely; you were already in that mode prior to the pandemic. But that said, has the pandemic changed the way you run your businesses at all? Or has it been business as usual for you?

Fern: It's been business as usual, Typically I have my coaching agreements and set up the appointments and we monitor the investments together. Yes, it's been business as usual.

KK: Now the Wholehearted Way. Is that the meditation coaching where people can find you? I know you've written a lot of books, tell us where everybody can find you.

Fern: My website, Wholehearted Way, is for people who are more interested in financial coaching. It has a long bio on me, and then fromfern.com is a place where I have my weird writings, just musing there. And then for the meditation groups, we meet on Sunday mornings Pacific time and Monday evenings, so everyone is welcome to join in on those. There's no fee. They can just contact me and I can put them on the email newsletter list.

VC: Fern, thank you again for being with us today and sharing your story. It's been truly inspirational.

