



From Welfare to the White House

*How I Reclaimed Myself
and How You Can Too*

Cosette Leary

From Welfare to the White House

*How I Reclaimed Myself
and How You Can Too*

Cosette Leary

* * *

This book is dedicated to my children Kayla Leary, Audreona Collins, Champagne DeWitt and Bond Tyler, III. My children have been my best teachers in life and as I watch them blossom into the incredible individuals they are today, I am beyond proud to be their mother.

I also dedicate this book to Dina Dwyer-Owens and Carol Dugot for loving me enough to see my talents at first light.



Prologue

I want to tell you about my grandmother. My grandmother was a fantastic woman; she taught me the art of family. When I was a teenager we spent a lot of time laughing and talking. We would make biscuits baked in bacon grease and sop them in jelly and butter after a long day of what she called, "woman's work." We would laugh and tell each other stories. She would tell me what it had been like being a young woman in her day and she often compared that to what she considered it to be like for me being a young woman in my day.

We shared a special bond in that we both had the same first name, and we each had become mothers at the tender age of 15. Our bond always seemed to make our talks that much more meaningful as if through me, my grandma could talk to her former self as a young woman -- and for me, I could talk with the older woman that I would one day become (funny, I recognize more of her within me each day).

We would sit up for hours and laugh and gossip like two hens, you wouldn't believe it! On one particular day, while I was helping her wash dishes, she said to me, "Baby, mama got to go sit down in the chair, I am getting tired now, and you go on and finish up those dishes." I said, "Okay," and we kept on talking and laughing.

All of a sudden, I noticed while I was laughing, I didn't hear her laughing anymore. I turned around and looked at her and what I saw shook me to the core of my bones and changed me for the rest of my life.

My grandmother was sitting in her oversized recliner, her hands gripping the arms, her face beet red, crying. Her face looked like it had been washed with oil and water.

I ran over to her side and said, "Mama, what's wrong?" She was crying so profusely it was hard for her to catch her breath. When she finally caught her breath well enough, she stuttered: "I didn't do half of what I wanted with my life!"

In that instant, I knew no matter how much I loved her from the bottom of my heart, I couldn't give her back one hour, let alone any years of her life so she could go back and have a do over. My grandmother looked at me and grabbed my hand very fervently and said, "Cosette, you promise me, promise me that you will do all in your power to do everything you want to do with your life!" I was 16 years old when she was forcing me to make that promise.

I replied, "Mama I will. I will do everything I can to make sure I live the life I want." She said to me, "You know I could have gone to live in Harlem, NY. I wanted to be a school teacher, but I didn't." Her words echoed in my head and in my heart. She had said, "I didn't, I didn't, I didn't." She didn't do it. And she realized in her mid-70's that she could not go back and ever change that. Curiously enough, I realized that fact too.

That was a huge life lesson for me, and as profound as it was, my youth could not hold its complete message and insightful warning. Over the years, honoring my grandmother's past while pondering the manifestation of my own history has shown me many areas of significance within my life. One of the most meaningful things I've learned is that we need to love ourselves enough to truly believe in our ambitions, to truly believe we are worthwhile, to truly believe that we deserve a good life and that we have an obligation to help other people through our own example.

Through my grandmother's speaking of remorse and my promise to her to live my life to its fullest, today I am a woman who has found and reclaimed herself. I am a woman who is very much sure that everything from my past, the loneliness, the feeling lost, the questioning of myself and trying to find myself through my glimmers of hope, are all powerfully established right now in the fact that I am living and pursuing my dreams.

While I enjoy seeing fantastic smiles on the inspired and encouraged faces of others as I help them to discover themselves, I am completely moved, encouraged, and motivated by these Sheroes and Heroes to press on with my passions and purpose.

This is the story of how I recreated my life from poverty and disempowerment to become who I am you are today -- a keynote speaker, life coach, and advocate for low-income people. I hope it will inspire you to break free of your limitations and live fully.



My Early Struggles

Why is it that talking about our past makes us want to pull up a chair and have a long sit-down? Many times in my life, the window to my past has flung uncontrollably open only to mock me, saying “Look, look what the wind just blew in.”

Life of Stress & Poverty

Like so many of us, I felt as if I were stuck in a desolate, abandoned and forsaken lonely dominion called my life. I was a single mom and I felt like a cliché. My four children and I were conditioned to a life of all-embracing poverty. My days didn't seem like they had a whole lot of substance to them besides the habitual absolute stresses of my day-to-day routine which seemed to be saddled with the endless burdens of crisis and confusion, comprised of anxiety, worry, and trauma all wrapped up within my gut like a knot of never-ending nervous tension. This was my daily yardstick, my leg-puller model, and damn it all to hell, I wanted a do-over!

I wanted to be able to have what I saw so many other people having, a full life. I used to seethe with envy at the thought of other families taking fun-

filled vacations while I could only stalk the mailbox hoping to find a discounted pass to the local zoo for me and my kids. Television commercials would often manipulate my emotions, sending me into tantrums with their parade of family-fun cruises, sleek new cars, and hip back-to-school ads showing kids in the latest cool fashions when I could barely get enough school supplies for my children, let alone back-to-school clothes.

Yes, I wanted to be like the beautiful people I saw on TV! I wanted success, happiness, and a star-studded crystal-white pearly smile. I wanted to be a part of society instead of living my down-graded existence of never-ending social service programs with their amplified echo over the Welfare office bullhorn, "Number A-52 to window E." The life I longed for was one that would not include the degrading feeling of shame tangled up in circumstances like frequent overdrawn checking accounts, not having enough money to cover the bills, or being embarrassed about buying food with paper food stamps - which over the decades would become the plastic EBT food stamp card. But underneath my livid outbursts, there was a real problem with me wishing for a well-rounded life. There was a severe speed bump on my road to obtaining that ever-so voluptuous do over.

My Dilemma

While I deeply desired a well-rounded, prosperous life, I didn't know how to obtain a full life. I was grateful for my children, I was grateful for a roof over our heads but I wanted to be independent enough to not need some form of social service or housing subsidy to provide that roof over our heads. Back then the only thing I had going for me and my kids was the fact that I obtained my General Equivalency Diploma (GED) -- and I barely had gotten that. It took me several years and five attempts before I passed the test, and let me tell you, with each failed GED test, I felt as if my life and any hope of getting out of my poverty rut was fading fast just like sands pouring through an hour glass.

From my first big fat "F" grade attempt, I began dying inside. Without that ever-needed GED certificate, I had no way of pulling me and my children out of poverty. I believed that I was slow on the uptake and a failure at saving us from the funk inside the bowels of being poor and invisible. I was all my kids had to look up to and while my GED instructors would tell me to just study more and try harder, I was never given the supportive roots of

basic education growing up. I didn't come from a secure home with a parent saying, "Now go wash your hands, grab a snack, and let's hit that homework champ!"

No, in my household, I was told every day that I was stupid and that God himself regretted creating me! So with each echo of, "We are terribly sorry, you did not pass this time," I felt the repetition of my mother's dismissal and elimination of any form of value that could be held within this pathetic, wretched, heartbreaking insignificant excuse that God had given her for a daughter and now an inadequate mother.

My raw truth ran down my face with each tear I cried. Poverty was my scarlet letter amplified through my lack of academic acumen. I was not only my own let down, but I was also my children's springboard to a life of economic ruin and daily rejection from society. I wasn't one of the beautiful people that I envied on TV. Nevertheless, as for that GED test, the fifth time was a charm and if nothing else, in the end I did pass it, right?

While I had obtained my GED, which alone was not a one-size-fits-all safety net for my entire life, I often spent countless hours fantasizing about all the reasons why I did not have the chandelier lifestyle of those beautiful people I saw on TV. Another area of my past that would roll in the front door and sit on my couch just to stare me right in the face was the trauma I suffered from relationships which never seemed to last long, conditioning me to a frozen state of loneliness. Each relationship seemed to stumble over the one before and the loneliness just continued to creep in. It crept in because at my heart's core, I didn't know how to love myself completely.

That loneliness continued to bark at me and it made me feel lost, confused, and abandoned. I felt like everybody else in society was better than me. You know, they had cars, good jobs, nice homes, 2.5 kids, and a dog. Hell, sometimes even a hamster! Couples walking hand-in-hand looked like they were happily married to each other, or at the very least, happy to be with each other -- and my life didn't look anything like that. I was an exhausted trinity of me, myself, and I. I felt left out of the loop of society. Loneliness combined with feeling lost, that was the repeated anthem of my past and I did not know what to do to change that. I only wanted to find someone to truly love me for me, for me, FOR ME!

Did I Actually Hate Me?

The beautiful people on TV didn't know me and chances were that they never would. So why did I hate them so? Why did those perfect minivan mothers around my town make me want to just go and punch holes in their tires?! Why did I simply hate the happiness of others? Those were great questions, which I usually shoved out of both my head and heart because I somehow knew that, at the root of those questions, I would be face-to-face with myself and the truth about how I felt about me was a place too scary to poke around in.

Truth be told, I didn't hate the beautiful people. No, rather I hated not being one of the beautiful people. I hated me and my reeking poverty. Their middle-class lifestyles seemed to only remind me of my continued lack, and I felt as if they all judged me by my have not-ness. I projected my self-shame onto the masses. You see, what terrified me most about my life was simply never having one, never knowing how to thrive. I envisioned myself as a bag lady holding all of what the wind had so frequently blown into my world as dead weight. I was suffocating, drowning in my own tears and I didn't know how to scream for help. Although I often persuaded myself that while I didn't know how to bellow out my need to be saved from myself, if there was any way in which I could transform my circumstances I would, but I was so disconnected from the powers that be and the beautiful people.

I didn't feel connected to anything or anybody beyond my children and the little home that we made within the four walls of our apartment. Inside our little home my days were busy, getting the kids off to school and me going to some welfare eligibility appointment or sometimes to work whenever I could find a job that my soft skills qualified me for, usually at a nursing home or a day care center, never really making enough money to leap off social services for good. The peculiar thing is, I recall many an evening in our home when those food stamps afforded me and my children a fun-filled game night of Monopoly and candy. We would go to the big grocery store and buy bulk candy and that would be our gambling habit, our vice if you will. While we didn't have what the Beautiful People had, with each roll of the dice we sure knew how to let it ride!

If I Had the Power to Change One Thing

In a way it is comical to imagine me and my children with all that Monopoly play money and hear them argue with each other over who will get to be the banker. Within our intimate land of Monopoly make-believe, we could become rich -- imagine that! My kids, they were my real-life beautiful people and I knew they were too beautiful for the life that we had, that life of poverty and loneliness. Many a day I would wonder if I had the power to change that major area of my life...poverty.

Poverty, that malicious condition which was depraved within its offense, was always there to greet me in the mornings or tuck me into bed in the evenings by way of some demand to pay up now or else! I can't tell you how many times I got sucked in by some pre-approved mail order catalog or some kind of "You Can Have a Credit Card Right NOW" trap!

I wanted to have the authority to get out of poverty clear and free, but poverty was a prison not only of limited physical resources, but of the mind as well. While I often felt that my battle was with the masses, I grew to learn that my war was an internal one, and that I had to confront the person that I was in order to get the answers that I so desperately needed to obtain the power to change this one thing in my life called poverty.

Making the Shift

I wish, I wish that I wasn't invisible! These very words were the emotional record that continually looped in my head all of the time. The crazy thing about this was that I had the power within me to become visible, but it would take what I call "borrowed courage" and a ton of hard work and a fierce amount of feeling like the world had triple-dog dared me to show them all! The first task was the hardest; I had to believe in me.

I had to qualify myself to myself. I had to meet my own personal requirements before I could challenge society. My to-do list began with a complex question which demanded the self-examination of the most inner parts of me -- my woman in the mirror -- and what exactly defined me as that woman. Hmmm, there it was, that naked question of "Who am I?" I probed my deepest emotions in my desperate attempt to reclaim my life! The question of just who I was had a host of sub-questions that stacked upon each other in a way that was my own Jacob's ladder, and I knew it.

Seeing My War Within

So here I was, living with the war of me, myself, and I. The main challenge here was that all of my peers saw their identity the same way in which I saw mine, and although we all suffered from groupthink, I had to somehow detach from it and define my uniqueness in order to get to know myself, relate to my life's calling, and then have the courage to love me for me!

In order to have a connection to my life's purpose, I needed to understand the woman that I was beyond the wearisome titles of single mother, low-income individual, under-educated, lonely, and "less than." The single mother in me was my emotional Chief of Staff. Being a single mom was my identity, it gave me both value and sorrow. I owned the title and in turn it owned me.

The Bitter Sweet

I felt such pride when I would see a smile come across one of my beautiful children's faces and when I would sit in an auditorium and witness one of my children singing "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and the like. While my heart would swell up and leap for joy, the woman in me beyond the single mother felt a huge void and I thought that finding the comfort of a man would be my fail-safe switch. While I loved being a mother, loneliness ruled my heart all mingled up with feelings of being torn away from society.

I wanted to have passion, bliss and love, along with a sense of having some traditional family norms -- and that was the crux of the matter. I had no father figure in the home for my children and whenever I did, all hell would break loose, leading to one emotional catastrophe after another. This was the intimate culture of our home life. Although it would look like an obvious no-brainer to many people, I seemed to fall for any cat-call or pick-up line that came my way, only because I didn't know how to value myself. I chased the value that others gave me. I was so hungry for it because I identified with being poor, I was the bag lady. I had no real book learning, and no one seemed to see me beyond being a case number.

Over time, I began to wonder, was I more than poverty? Could there be more to me than being under-educated, lonely, and less than? These questions seemed to be coming from my soul and my bones could feel it. One day, I began to answer these questions and I had an epiphany.

“Would I triple dog-dare myself to own my life and to go after the life I really wanted?” The crazy thing about this was that I had to believe in me enough to be liberated from my desperate life-support I.V. system and escape the prison of my poverty.

In order to do this, I realized I had to remove myself from my shame of being a single mother. I did this by recognizing the beauty of me and my children, not just our hardships. I began to weigh the cost of my mindset, and then I asked my soul a very deep question, “What can I do right now to activate change within my life and take pride in being a strong single mom?” The answer that my soul gave me was, “Understand that you are valuable enough to ask for help!”

Hmm, ask for help? Where would I go to ask for this help? I was a low-income individual and I only knew the world of welfare checks and subsidies. Then the light bulb went off, ding-ding-DING!!! My internal voice suggested that I seek out those who are not in poverty who have created an incredible life for themselves and ask them how they did it with a garnish of “Will you teach me how to do it too?” And that is just what I set out to do -- I did the ASK!

The way that I went about doing my ASK centered on seeking out individuals that had achieved certain areas of huge successes. My core approach to executing this task was rooted in researching CEO's of mega companies and finding a sense of common ground with them then mailing them an introduction letter about myself and requesting some form of audience with them.

While I went for some high profile individuals, I also reflected on leaders within my community and I took bold steps towards introducing myself to them as well and ASKING for their mentorship. As I did the ASK, the fact of me being undereducated didn't seem to matter as much because now, I was being educated and fostering new-found relationships! Through this practice, I became less lonely and I began to realize that I was truly so much more than “less than.” This new insight begged a probing question within itself: Just who was I anyway?

I was a woman who desired a do-over! What I found out floored me: I discovered that I was my own “Genie in the bottle” and my authority was

there within my self-worth, which would destroy my low self-esteem impoverished demons. I would find out in the long run that I always had my ticket home. I just had to be able to believe in me enough to dare myself to cash it in by introducing myself to the world. I asked myself, "Would the real Cosette please stand up?" And so it all began!

The Looking Glass Moments of Self Reflection:

How do you define yourself?

What do you deeply desire?

What is getting in the way of achieving your desires?

Who can you reach out to for help?



How I Changed My Life

Getting to Know Myself

To get where I am today, I needed to take a very hard-line look at myself. I needed to get some resolve with who I was and what I was about. I had to ask myself, what did I really want out of life?

Through answering this question, I discovered the real me and I began to stand up and shout out! I recognized that I was someone who wanted to have a jubilant life; I desired to celebrate my life. I required security for my family. I craved the opportunity to use my talents and gifts. I strived for having dignity and respect. I wanted to give back to my community, and I wanted to be able to help other people feel good about themselves.

Blow the horns, shout it from the rooftops, I had found the real Cosette! But then I had to reclaim this new amazing woman along with my life -- and that's when the deep work began. Reclaiming myself went well beyond just recognizing myself; that task required the skill set of taking ownership of

my life and no longer allowing myself to blame the world for my problems. This was a new compass and I was about to chart a new course in my life!

Living Through My Self-Respect

A big part of my mission to find and reclaim my self-worth was learning how to live through my self-respect. I had to start to respect myself enough to make changes in my life that needed to happen. I needed to get past my habit of blame shifting. It was essential that I embrace my vulnerability and look at my raw, messy self and say, "This is who you are and these are the things that you want to change about yourself and these are the things you want to keep and enhance about yourself."

Living through self-respect meant that I had to begin to set internal boundaries regarding negative self-talk, my habit of shutting down through fear, and remaining in my pit of self-doubt. I had to start admiring the aspects of myself which I was and could be proud of. I had to begin to celebrate my life and find ways to venture out into the great big world. Part of making that happen was walking and speaking my own truth. I couldn't always look to other people for answers, nor could I mimic other people's lives and try to copy what they had. Being unique (which we all are) isn't about being a carbon copy. We are all unique in our own right, and until we begin to realize how special we are and stand up for being special, it may be difficult to truly live out loud and to walk and speak our truth.

I come from direct poverty and this book title, "From welfare to the White House" is real. This is my truth because I spent a lot of time being an intern in public policy positions. I own the fact that yes, I came from a welfare check background, food stamps and all, but those circumstances did not own me or my gifts and talents. Poverty could not ultimately direct what I would be able to contribute to society. While contributing so much to myself and my family, I began to own my truth and I started to be liberated.

I started to understand that poverty did not define me; rather, it strengthened me and gave me the courage to go out and speak from my personal perspective while maintaining a deep level of self-accountability, which propelled me to go after my dreams.

Heck, I could honor and respect that!

The Looking Glass Moments of Self-Reflection:

What is your truth? Are you deeply self-aware? What are some ways that you can become more conscious about the real YOU?

What steps can you take to build your self-respect?

What aspects of yourself do you admire and feel most proud of?

Honoring My Past

Recognizing my truth also meant honoring my past. And I honored my past by respecting where I came from and appreciating that there was a way to enhance my life so that I didn't have to stay trapped within the grips of poverty. I could go out and be a beacon to myself, my children, and other people in the community. I could be a beacon of hope.

I then reflected on my life lessons. My life lessons allowed me to appreciate both the hard times and all of the good times -- and everything in between. One of the most valuable lessons I have learned is to put myself first. If I don't take care of me and maintain a healthy emotional, physical and mental balance, then how can I live out loud? How can I stand proud in who I am as a woman found and reclaimed if I didn't learn a very valuable life lesson -- to live my life within the capacity of my gifts and talents, my hopes and dreams, to my fullest capability? My Grandma taught me that rule and a very essential part of her precious lesson to me was to put myself first by unconditionally loving the woman that I am.

Learning to Love Myself

Discovering ways and tools to use in order to love myself was not an easy task. In fact it was freaking hard! I had spent my whole life begging other people to please love me, please tell me that I am good, valuable, pretty, smart, gifted, wonderful; that is, lovable. For as long as I could remember, my mother had drilled her belief that I was absolutely worthless into my heart, mind, body and soul's mainframe. From the time she and my father

divorced she hated his DNA running through my veins and, therefore, she made it her life's mission to let me know just how insufferable I was to her.

While my mother and her husband (my stepfather) force-fed me my daily ration of being intolerable within their perspective, outside forces such as elementary and junior high school were yet another emotional battlefield. Many of my classmates bullied me, beat me up, and called me painful names, all of which only compounded my uncivilized home life on a daily basis, and so loving myself had never been one of my strong points beyond the love I held dearly in my heart that my biological father had given me -- thank God for that!

Consequently, as I grew into a young woman, my habitual knack for not finding Mr. Right -- rather latching on to a slew of Mr. Wrongs and Mr. Right Now's -- didn't make for a favorable result towards enhanced self-worth. This condition of low self-esteem had been inherently imposed upon me and now somehow I had to break the ties that bind! This of course would take some intense inner work.

My first step was to undertake a period of self-reflection, self-talks, and inquiries. My first question was: "If I could muster the power to go back and make all of my adversaries treat me the way that I would have preferred, what would that look like?" The answers to this question led me to learn how to love Cosette!

My heart's response was that I would make my foes treat me with kindness, allow me to have an opinion, show me compassion, tell me on a daily basis that I was important, delight in the act of me laughing, letting me see that I was beautiful, and placing myself within environments which allowed me to see that I was smart and that I was a good person. Inside my imagination, this action would come from the request for deep heartfelt conversations with my former foes expressing both my genuine emotions and concerns.

Stage two was to own those answers for myself and to begin to treat myself the way that I would like others to treat me. The first of which was to be kind to myself -- but how would I begin to do that?

The Looking Glass Moments of Self-Reflection:

Do you often work from a “fixed mindset?” Are there areas in your life that are more of a reflection of the opinions which others have dumped on you and you have simply accepted as raw truth?

How can you love yourself more? How can you treat yourself the way that you would like others to treat you?

What painful experiences can you rewrite in your mind?

It Began with Coffee

I started my path of self-kindness with a cup of coffee -- that's right, a cup of coffee! I always admired the way the beautiful people seemed to hang out at Starbucks, so one day I just bit the bullet and went inside a Starbucks and ordered a White Chocolate Mocha for \$3.75. This was a gift I gave to myself. It cost about the same as a pack of chicken thighs (back then), but this was for ME! I drank the cup of coffee as if it was my last treat, something rich and perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime moment. The greatest feeling was that for the first time, I was sitting both with and among the beautiful people; in fact I was one of them!

While sitting in the coffee shop, I eaves-dropped on the various conversations taking place all around me. Their conversations sounded so cultured, so sophisticated and so accomplished. I saw men and women looking intently at each other and I admired one lady's Burberry scarf. I mentally ran my fingers across their briefcases, their stylish blazers; I gazed at their somehow chic over-worn shoes and imagined myself standing in their shoes! I absorbed the hot smoky steam of my coffee, taking notice of the smell and warmth of the heat rising from my paper coffee cup, and I gently whispered to myself, “Thank you.”

That small act of personal kindness began to change my opinion of myself in both new and exciting ways.

On that day of delighting in my cup of good 'ol coffee and the unrestrained wonder of participating in the act of owning my inclusion in society, I began to taste self-importance, and the gratification that I had pushed my do-over button!! Somehow, being inside that coffee shop with the all those beautiful people and feeling beautiful myself awakened my dormant courage, and now I was becoming animated!

Poverty's death grip loosened, and I felt my heart's stay of economic execution. For the first time, I did not see myself as the overrun, impoverished bag lady. I had crossed over into the world of Middle Class America -- and now I wanted to inhale the authority to thrive!

I was proud of myself; I had arrived! The radical breakthrough happened when I took that first action step. When I made the choice to do something completely outside of my poverty box, I realized that I had the power all along; it was locked up inside of my mindset. None of those individuals inside of Starbucks had invited or forced me to walk through those heavy glass doors -- I just went for it!

My initial act of kindness to myself helped me to love me and know that I was strong and that I could and would find a way to outwit the scarcity within my life. I gave myself the gift of having a new opinion about the woman that I was. I was compassionate with myself at the same time, a skill that I would nurture over time.

Buying one cup of coffee on a whim was one thing; elevating myself out of poverty was a whole other feat. While I had felt a dose of courage, keeping that energy running without falling into the pit of negative self-talk and feeling like I still sucked would take an extraordinary amount of do-not-tuck-my-tail-and-run radically honest self-compassion. Just how was I to do this?

I realized I needed to convince myself that I was important enough to discover the method of the "how." Honest compassion required me to look at my strengths as well as my weaknesses. Reflecting on my strengths allowed me to see that deep inside, I did value myself; in fact the truth was as they say, "in the pudding." I was on this journey because, despite what I may have convinced myself of, I truly wanted my do-over and I truly wanted to thrive!

Through the exhausting salvaging and re-claiming of my strong points, I acknowledged that I was outgoing, funny, brave, driven, and intelligent. I realized that I had style and PIZZAZZ! Heck, I was the bomb! I could have my coffee and drink it too! While I was certainly enchanted by my newfound brilliance, I still had to dance with my weaknesses. Upon diving into this abyss, I came face-to-face with a soul-gripping truth -- I had to become my biggest cheerleader. I had to stop looking to the brass rings of others to find my unique identity. I had to own me, and in order to do that I had to concede to the idea that building the life that I wanted was my obligation and that I had to love myself enough to make that my life-long resolve; in short I had to stand up and love me for me. Seeing myself in this light compelled me to understand that I was important and that I needed to live a life of laughing out LOUD!

Framing a new opinion of myself and developing compassion for myself catalyzed my rebirth. Emboldened with these new superpowers, I was able to tell myself that I was important -- and that helped release me from my chains. I found myself celebrating my life, while loving the effort and myself!

This work of heart taught me that I was beautiful just by being the unique, profound woman that I was within my own skin. I had a duty to myself -- I had to walk with my head held high, in any setting, recognizing my kindness, honest compassion, and genuine worth, knowing that I was a good person. I began to look at what I could do to empower myself and I realized the more empowered I became, the more I would be able to empower other people. This exercise gave me a growth mindset and wild courage. I then fell in love with ME!

The Looking Glass Moments of Self-Reflection:

What are some ways that you can expand your growth mindset, give yourself permission to be happy and begin to love yourself MORE?

How can you be your own cheerleader?

Making it to the White House

Thanks to my newfound self-love, I fulfilled one of my life's greatest dreams -- in 2008 I became a student of the prodigious public policy think tank, the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. As I walked through the mammoth doors of Brookings, I felt like Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz and I knew that I wasn't in Kansas anymore. My heart was swollen with pride.

There I stood -- a former foster child and teen mom, welfare woman, food stamp and state medical recipient. There I stood steady and fixed inside the grandeur of the institution's magnificence; the brilliance of its architecture, the faint smell of power within its corridors. I was brought back to earth when the gatekeeper at the front desk asked, "May I help you?" and with the feeling of my soul's gratitude I replied, "Yes I am here for my Senior Executive Class and I need to know what floor to go to." I was now living out loud!

Having that incredible skyscraper feeling of being awakened and a part of something as titanic as the Brookings Institution stirred my passion to both become and do more.

One afternoon, something happened that emboldened my desire to help others all the more. As I walked up to sit on the lawn of our nation's most famous house, what I saw ripped at my heart. As I looked around, all I could see was the many homeless people camped out on the evergreen lawns of the White House. This odd vision did not match my idea of the dignity and illustrious splendor of our country's first house! All of these individuals in some shape or form displayed poverty in full effect.

Stunned and numbed, I located a bench to sit on. As I took my seat, I noticed a homeless lady sitting next to me with a shopping cart of makeshift items. She offered me a peanut butter sandwich which I politely turned down. While buzzing from my Brookings class earlier in the day, I found myself in a strange land, and yet I recognized the feeling all too well.

The homeless lady put the sandwich back into her bag and said to me, "You like the White House -- are you a politician?" I answered, "No I am not, but maybe one day." She stared at me and asked, "Are you going to

give a face to the homeless?" and before I could offer her an answer, she began to ramble on that she used to be a registered nurse until she got into an accident and had surgery on her brain and she could not work anymore. She started spouting medical terms in a rapid pace as if she had just awakened back to life. She asked me again, "Are you going to give a face to us homeless people?"

I could not come up with an answer -- I mean how do you reply to such a question? All I gave her was a saddened look. She then turned her attention back to her cart of treasures. She pulled out a flat yoga ball and offered it to me. Again I said no thank you. The homeless woman said "Okay" and put it back into her cart. After about three minutes or so she said, "I got all this stuff and it is good stuff. I want to give you something to remember me by." So again for a third time, she offered me a token of her world -- a small book, and this time I accepted her gift and felt tears well up in my eyes. I didn't want her to see me cry, so I politely told her that it was a pleasure meeting her and excused myself.

She had given me something from her personal pile of "good stuff." I knew as I walked away that I would never see her again and in my hand was a piece of her "good stuff." We all have "good stuff" inside of us, don't we?

As that evening rolled into night and I was back at my hotel, I placed all the contact cards that I had collected that day across my bed and reveled in my new-found world of possibilities held with each name on each card. I placed the little book that my homeless friend had given me in the pile, and out of nowhere I burst into tears. She had asked me if I would put a face to the homeless people, those who felt lost. I was crying because in all of my comfort and safety I had done something terrible -- I had never asked her for her name.

It is in her honor that I now work to bring value to everyone I meet, including my clients. We all have "good stuff" to give, even coming from welfare to the White House.

The Looking Glass Moments of Self-Reflection:

Will you answer your life's call even if it doesn't look the way which you envisioned it to look?

What are some ways that you can put your "good stuff" to work to build the life you desire?

Spreading the Love

My journey to self-love led to my desire to inspire others to also fall in love with who they truly are, inside and out.

As I began to write this book in 2016, the woman I found and reclaimed in me became a Certified Professional Life Coach, my original dream from 13 years ago! As a coach, I help others live authentically, celebrating their strengths while accepting their weaknesses as being human - helping them to see their magnificence, while I continue to do the same for myself. We're all walking the same path together, all trying to better ourselves.

Living Out Loud

You know what I often do when I wake up in the morning? Before I get out of bed, when my eyes first open, I say to myself, "Right in this very moment I have the opportunity to decide to live this day to the fullest. I can take the time to taste the air I breathe and then exhale into vivid motion!"

Have you ever bit into a juicy piece of fruit? I mean really bit into it and the juice runs down your chin and your fingers and it's so sweet you just suck up all that tastiness? That's how I face each morning when I first open my eyes. I realize I have a new day, that I'm in the future even while I'm in the present. I have the power to make the best out of my day which will vibrate into my future all the while, treating myself the best way that I can. Let's live out loud! I'm going to taste the fruit of my life and I'm going to drink it all up.

The Looking Glass Moments of Self-Reflection

What practices can you take every morning to have a juicy, alive, and powerful day?

What can you say to yourself?

A Hopeful Future

The future is something that hasn't happened yet, therefore, anything can be made real, right? The most incredible thing about the future is that we can build a future of our own starting right now because all our hopes and dreams are possible.

To me, hope is a phenomenal feeling. Hope can bring you back from the depths of ashes. Hope can make you go for things that other people may consider to be impossible. Hope is able to rebuild communities after catastrophes. Hope is able to restore an individual's shattered will, rebuild love within broken families and re-establish friendships that have been torn. I know a lot about hope because hope is what I have been living on for a long time. I hope, (pun intended) that I never stop hoping. Because hope is possibility, and yes, hope is the future!

The future is what's hoped for; it's what we see in our present within ourselves and how we hope to pursue the wonderfulness of ourselves in our future. That's what the future is. What are you hoping for in your future? I ask that question because sometimes we don't stop and think about who we are right now and how much impact that is going to have on who we continue to become in our future. I hope. Ha! There is that word again, that you and I continue to challenge ourselves to really celebrate our lives out loud! The future looks bright, yes it does.

In the future, I see myself rejoicing within my uniqueness and embracing the person that I see, and the similar attributes that I see in other people. In the future I see myself living out loud, really living out loud!

The Looking Glass Moments of Self-Reflection:

What are you hoping for in your future? Are you willing to hold open space and be flexible with yourself while enjoying the ride of YOUR LIFE?

Thank You

I thank you, the reader, for taking the time to share your time to read my words. I hope somehow you see some elements of yourself and you realize that you are uniquely fantastic, and that your dreams, passions, and hopes are all wrapped up inside you. You have the power to unleash the real you and share that person with the world.

What I want you to take away from this book is that you owe it to yourself to go after everything you want. You are worth the hard work; you are worth the time and the investment that it will take to celebrate who you are and what you have to give to this world. You can live out loud, you can dance in the rain, you can believe in your future while you are celebrating your present. You can celebrate others, you can drink in life gulps at a time, you can taste the juiciness of your life, and you can respect your vulnerabilities and appreciate your uniqueness. However, in all of that, you are the only one who can truly do that for you, you have to believe it for yourself.

This is your life, so live it well and remember: Be present in your moment, your life belongs to you today and your future is up to you!

Acknowledgments

In 2004, God sent me a most incredible gift wrapped up as two incredible Earth angels; Dina Dwyer-Owens and Carol Dugat. These women listened to my hopes and dreams and gave me the courage to fasten my wings and escape poverty! Thank you both for loving me and showing me my true reflection!

As a teenage mother I was given the amazing Leslie Green as my foster care social worker. Leslie always told me that I was smart and that I could do anything that I put my mind to! She loved me as if I was a part of her family and I adored her as well. Thank you my dear Leslie for loving me so much! I hope that every foster child may be blessed with an extraordinary social worker like you!

A truly special thank you to my dearest of friends and love ones – all of you have blessed my life!

Gail King (VHA); Leslie Green; Mama Susan Howe Taylor; Michael E. Schmidlen; Auntie Leann Holliman Johnson; Kathleen Careaga; Tajunana Ross; Wendy M. Featherson; Nancy Biery; Joyce Shorter Brown; Chic Thompson; Lewis S. Lewis; Bob Dingethal; Pat Jollota; David Carrier; Tim Probst; Rosalba Pitkin; Betsy Wright Hawkings; Libby Gill; Gene McNaughton; Dr. Debra (Debi) Jenkins; Samantha Lelo; Edward Scheinerman; Tyrone Yates; Rolanda Washington; Shay Franco-Clausen; Michele Douglas; Hillary Prepula; Tracie Baldwin; Cindy S. Cooper; Pauline Hamilton; Rachel O'Rourke; Mollie Macarthy-Openshaw; Peggy Furno; Degundrea Harris; Joe Pitkin; Michael Ceriello; Erika Worth; Paul Iarrobino; Lys Ella Severtson; Minda Aguhob; Steve Jennings; Ashkan Tabibnia; Claudiu Raymond; Lynda M. West; Kim Justice; Rachel Rosen; R. Tod Kelly; Victoria Clevenger; Marilyn Howell; Ronnie Joy Krasner; Victoria Ruke; Sandy Sanders; Alain Torres; Mark and Mary Kay Liston; Anjela Ford; Sophia Trevegr; Elaine Goldman and the Kelso, WA WorkSource Department. I love and adore you all so much!

And where would this book be without my publisher and editor? It is with deep gratitude that I acknowledge my publisher, Christopher Van Buren. Christopher, thank you for what you do. I want to especially thank my wonderful editor Gail Koffman who helped this book come into fruition. Thank you, Gail, for your sharp eye, remarkable listening skills and vivid imagination. Thank you for hearing my voice, and for seeing me in each and every page of this book. I love you to the moon and back. Now on to the next book!

Cosette Leary is a keynote speaker, life coach, and non-profit consultant and ambassador for low-income people. Look for her upcoming autobiography Laugh Out Loud: Healing The Woman Within.

Contact her to learn more at ***cosettefiredupandready@gmail.com***



Photo by Kate Singh