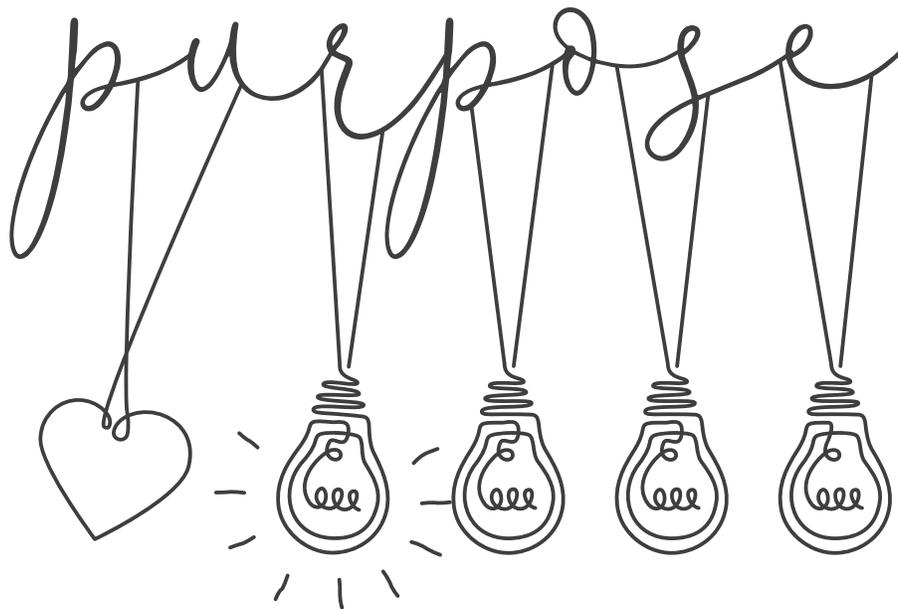


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VOLUME 2



LEARNING TO BELONG

Anika Jackson

There are a few key narratives that have shaped my life and colored the way I see the world. One is the narrative of my parents, their parents, their parents' parents, and many other generations past. These narratives include strength, resilience, curiosity, community, philanthropy, education, and entrepreneurship as the main tenets of our bloodlines.

On one side, we have my American grandfather, an Air Force Colonel building bases all over the world. My father and uncles were raised in Alaska, Texas, Morocco, and Italy, and from that came an appreciation for other cultures. My grandfather was raised by alcoholic parents in a Scottish family that was not well off. He was driven to succeed and fell in love with his best friend's little sister, my grandmother.

My American grandmother, besides raising four boys, held a master's in social work and was very involved in both social causes as well as unions, despite having been raised in a very wealthy family who discovered oil in the early 1900s. According to family stories, her family would sell a piece of land to pay taxes and expenses for the year at the height of the Great Depression, and her father generously gave money to anyone who wrote him a letter and asked for help—whether due to a lost job, or a need for college tuition, or to put food on the table.

On the Thai and Laotian side of the family, we also have a long line of entrepreneurs, caregivers, fearless leaders, and royalty. One of my ancestors is Thao Suranari (Thai: ท้าวสุรนารี; 1771–1852), the wife of the deputy governor of Korat, the stronghold of Siamese control over its Laotian vassals, who was also known as Lady Mo. In 1826, King Anouvong of Vientiane invaded Siam, seeking complete independence when the governor was away. The invaders intended to resettle their captives in Laos. Lady Mo is credited with saving her people. The generally accepted version is that when the Lao invaders ordered the women to cook for them, Lady Mo requested knives to prepare the meal. That night, when the invaders were asleep, she gave the knives to the imprisoned men. They surprised the Lao troops, who fled, and the prisoners escaped. Thai King Rama III soon sent an army in pursuit and defeated Anuvong's forces in three days of fighting. Afterwards, King Rama III awarded Lady Mo the title Thao Suranari or *Lady Suranari* (“the brave lady”) in recognition of her courageous acts. I've been fortunate to visit the statue of Lady Mo in Korat, Thailand, and pay homage to my ancestor with my mother and daughter. We have a statue of her in my home today.

Conversely, my great-grandmother on my mom's side was a Laotian princess who stepped down to marry a Thai commoner. To this day, I'm told by family members that we should never use the family name, Chaisiri (also spelled Shaisiri or Saysiri) if we visit the now communist country. Since the country isn't friendly to royals or former royals, to do so could mean death.

My mother came to the United States for university, and the plan was to receive her teaching degree and then go back to Thailand to run my grandmother's private school. Instead, she met my father, married, and received her MSW, enjoying a career as a social worker while my father taught at a few universities and community colleges.

As you might imagine, growing up, I couldn't decide whether I wanted to be a social worker, an educator, a future philanthropist, or an entrepreneur. All are deeply ingrained in my genetics and my family lore.

In a time when it was not as common to see mixed-race couples, my American uncles each

married women of different faiths and races. One of my aunts is Jewish, one German, one Swedish, one Dominican, and one Brazilian. My mother shares that a few of my father's family friends tried to dissuade him from marrying her, as this was before *Loving v. Virginia*, when it was still illegal in America to be married to someone outside your race.

The culmination of the celebration of cultures, whether through my family's culture, the many dinner parties my parents had with themed food and music, or attending community events such as powwows—alongside my need to bring people together—are experiences that have truly shaped me and live with me to this day. This “otherness” of identity had a profound impact on molding my journey. On one hand, I participated in Thai Student Union performances at Kansas University with my mom performing traditional Thai dances and other rituals. On the other hand, I didn't grow up speaking Thai, and my Buddhist mom celebrated every holiday in the United States along with Thai New Year and the Songkran Water Festival.

As a high school freshman, I wrote a poem that won the school poetry contest. Looking back, it's obvious that my uncertainty about identity was my prompt.

Shades

*I was born white in a Black person's body in a tan person's soul,
and though I struggled to get out no one understood that I was slowly changing shades,
trying on different ones to give me different views.
I felt eventually I'd find myself and the color that was right for me,
but meanwhile I'm stuck with twelve pairs of sunglasses.*

I participated in a wide variety of school activities: debate, forensics, theatre, varsity cheerleading, Junior Achievement, and even the school literary magazine. But I didn't “belong” anywhere. In many ways I felt accepted but balked at the acceptance. I didn't truly know who I was, and that caused

a lack of acceptance from others. I felt discrimination and prejudice for my choices about who I did or didn't date or because certain boys liked me.

My best girlfriends attended other high schools. We met through our shared extracurricular pursuits and bonded over dancing. I was seventeen and driving the hour to the Kansas City area to meet up with friends for weekends of shenanigans and all-age dance clubs. It was during this time that a DJ asked me to start promoting his club nights, which gave me free entrance, earned me cachet, and set me on the path to my future. I've always loved creating connecting experiences and collaborations—finding that inflection point for others that changes their lives for a moment or a lifetime. This is how my career in marketing and public relations was born.

Paradoxically, it was the need for mobility that drove me to end up delaying my education. I could have stayed in Kansas and received a scholarship in debate at a small university. However, I had big dreams of moving out of Kansas and going to a university where I could graduate with an undergrad and an MBA within five years. I started taking college courses at Johnson County Community College after my freshman year of high school and even graduated early. But I also needed to be able to get to Kansas City in order to work. My parents made me a deal: they would buy me a car, but I had to attend community college where my dad taught and I would receive tuition reimbursement.

I received a theatre stipend for a semester and earned full tuition as Student Senate President the next year, but I wasn't motivated to continue my education. I was discouraged at not being able to go out of state, achieve my dreams, and perhaps find out who I was outside the construct of my family and the typical Kansas lifestyle. Instead, I turned to my budding career as a club promoter and event producer. I threw mini raves, hosted a regular club night, promoted various DJs, started a 'zine, and created the community I wanted.

I parlayed my love of music into a move to the Chicago house music scene at clubs such as Shelter and Karma, working for KBA marketing in nightlife promotions (Smirnoff and Camel) as well as calling consumers for Audi's test drive program. I became the magazine *Thousand Words*' twenty-one

and over lifestyle promoter.

After living in Chicago and making little to no money (\$16,000 for the year), it was time for a change. I was tired of working until four in the morning multiple nights a week. I was missing out on opportunities for reliable, better-paid daytime work. At the ripe old age of twenty-three, I had the option of staying in Chicago and going to work for KBA Marketing full-time as a receptionist or working for a company called Food and Drink as marketing director for all their bars and restaurants.

My sister had moved to Los Angeles and married to a man whose family was embedded in the entertainment industry. They were making a small, independent movie, and I took a month off work to come out and help. It wasn't long before I decided to stay in L.A. Luckily, KBA Marketing was a national company, and I was able to work for Smirnoff and Camel campaigns in my newfound city of angels.

Thanks to KBA connections, I also got a new job for a magazine publisher called RayGun. I started out as the receptionist, the only position that was open. These were the days of early internet, and the company didn't have voicemail, either. I took all messages by hand for everyone on staff. I didn't want to remain "just the receptionist" and quickly made myself indispensable. I used my limited business knowledge from Junior Achievement in high school and a few business classes in community college to take on everything from circulation and subscription customer service to accounts payable and accounts receivable.

Eventually, I worked my way into the marketing department. I didn't know how to do anything the way everyone else seemed to learn in university, but there I was, creating marketing proposals for major brands such as Absolut Vodka, flying to New York to present to them, and having the agency question me on how I formatted the decks. I had great creative ideas, but I felt like I didn't know a thing, as all my experience up to that point was through the organic skills that I'd gained from promoting events. Luckily, promoting the publication and our advertisers was also part of the job, and I enjoyed putting on events—everything from fashion shows at clubs to representing the magazine at ski and snowboard events throughout the United States.

From RayGun, I moved on to San Francisco and worked in marketing for Future US. I also helped launch *Revolution*, a dance music magazine, and *Official Xbox Magazine* when Xbox first came out. I finally felt my perfect fit. It was during this time that I decided to repursue my education and “marry” my business and social work interests into a degree in Public Administration.

During my time at *Future*, I moved from marketing into a western region consumer sales and marketing role overseeing seventeen publications. I moved back to Los Angeles so that my -then-boy-friend, now ex-husband, and great co-parent and I could live in the same city again. After eight years, we tied the knot, and I quit my job to pursue my own small agency, Jackson Robles, in Los Angeles, working with a variety of clients on their event production, marketing, and public relations.

Once I became pregnant with my now-fifteen-year-old, I made a choice to step out of the paid workforce and dive into something I’d long been desiring: the fields of philanthropy and voluntarism. And dive in, I did. I became president of the Junior League of Los Angeles after taking a role on the board of a small nonprofit called Undershare. I participated in Leadership Southern California. I had the opportunity to be certified as a corporate board member by UCLA Extension, and I was trying to figure out my “what next,” which ended up launching a nonprofit with other Junior League members called Learn Grow Lead, which still exists to this day.

When I finished my term with Junior League, we moved to Houston, Texas, for my husband’s job. Like everywhere else I’d lived, I threw myself into finding community, especially with a preschooler in tow. I wanted to make sure we had a smooth transition and that we found our friend group so that both of us would feel a little lighter and happier in this new environment.

I became, dare I say, a smug married. One of those women who thought, *This is it for me. We spent eight years getting to know each other; we will always be married. I’ll never need to worry about anything financially. I’ll be provided for. Everything is always going to be okay.* But that’s not necessarily how life turns out. Through a series of events, it wasn’t how my life turned out.

I made some bad tactical decisions before and during our marriage, including going against all

advice and choosing to sign an extremely unfavorable prenuptial agreement. We'd been married for almost ten years, and we were in the process of negotiating a postnuptial while also navigating a difficult time in our marriage. He wasn't happy in Houston, and I was throwing myself into the validation of others through philanthropy, thinking it would help me find happiness.

I remember the conversation very clearly. He'd flown back to Los Angeles and was in the beach community we'd previously lived in. He texted me that instead of a postnuptial, I should just have our lawyers write it up as a divorce because it was inevitable. I cried that night and asked my lawyer to change the document. Little did I know that my husband didn't really mean that. It was a mistake to not get a postnuptial and to proceed with divorce. Now, that's not to say that we would have stayed married. We both had things to work on, but I put myself in a much worse financial position. After being the homemaker and supporting the family that way for so many years, it was time to brush off my skills and get back into the workforce.

One of the most interesting things I found going back to the workforce was who was supportive and who wasn't. I found that some women were there to support me as a single mom starting over. My shot at financial security was contingent upon a move back to Los Angeles, and I wasn't ready to uproot our lives again. There were also those who judged me because they had this idea that I still had all this great wealth from knowing me during my marriage, when I was able to spend six figures on charitable contributions. But after my divorce, I was in a much different circumstance. I needed to work, and I needed to earn an income. I needed to change the way I moved in the world and the way that my daughter and I moved in the world together.

Luckily, part of the great example I got from my mother was not only her love and care, but also that, as a single mom, she still made me hot breakfast every morning before school and came home in the evenings after a long day of work to play *Uno* with me and my little brother. She was the example of a single mom who did whatever it took and came forward with the same strength and tenacity it took to move to the United States from Thailand all those years ago.

One of the most difficult things I found about having a non-linear employment path was that I wasn't very employable. I didn't have one niche; I had many. I ended up working for myself and starting a series of business ventures.

In 2019, we ironically ended up moving back to the L.A. area. I searched for work for several months. I ended up on food stamps after going to the local Walmart and having my card declined. The manager felt called to help me by paying for my groceries. I sobbed, humbled by her generosity, as I was the one who used to be in that position of helping others. After trying again and again to find work, I eventually landed a PR contract client.

Since then, I've been a contractor and consultant, started a firm and hired employees with benefits during a pandemic, merged with an agency, left an agency, and joined another in Full Capacity Marketing. I've become a top podcaster with Your Brand Amplified® and started teaching graduate school at USC Annenberg. I've found that my ex and I can be friends and great co-parents. Our daughter is thriving, and I can be in a healthy adult relationship now that I know who I am. I am learning that I belong in all these spaces—as a podcaster, marketer, mother, friend, teacher, and community member.

I've found myself. I've become comfortable in my skin, and I've found that my non-linear path serves a higher purpose. To know ourselves and appreciate others for being their authentic selves is the greatest gift we have. It's how we learn to belong. Our greatest superpower is found in supporting each other on our individual and collective journeys. It's what drives my work with nonprofits, in education, and with entrepreneurs.

Through the work I'm doing now with Full Capacity Marketing, we've relaunched the Brand Amplifier for Entrepreneurs. My amazing CEO, Celina Shands, has created a version of the Brand Amplifier for Workforce & Education. This program is the culmination of realizing that while many entrepreneurs may have a dream and a logo, we all need a *brand* and a community that helps us learn to belong. And in that belonging, we will achieve the fullness of who and what we can be.