

BREAKING THROUGH

*Communicating to
Open Minds, Move Hearts,
and Change the World*

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CHAPTER ONE

What Am I Trying to Say?

Channel Your Intention

I AM NOT A YOGI, BUT I DO ENJOY AN OCCASIONAL YOGA class, if only to be in sweaty proximity to the lithe and enlightened. I'm the one in baggy shorts and an old T-shirt who has placed her mat at the back of the class, praying that the teacher will call "shavasana" so I can drop into the supine position.

Even though I'm an infrequent (and inflexible) practitioner, I was saddened when, in late February 2020, my local yoga studio closed due to Covid fears. On Sunday, March 1, I was alone on my living room floor, cross-legged on my mat, streaming a yoga session on my smart-phone. Instead of meditating on the great nothingness that yogis like to extol, I was more engaged with the real world than I should have been. My house was quiet, but my head was noisy. I was unable to

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slow and deepen my breathing. Worries kept scrolling in my mind. I couldn't gentle down or settle in.

I had been unnerved by a call I placed early that morning. "It's eerie. The streets of Beijing are empty," Pfizer's senior leader in our China division reported when we talked during the dawn hours. He and I rarely spoke, but I had reached out to him in my role as chief corporate affairs officer at Pfizer, and also as a fellow human; I was troubled over his well-being. I had been paying careful attention to news reports coming out of Wuhan concerning a virus that was moving quickly through the city's population. He confirmed that health officials in China were issuing warnings about a mysterious virus that laid low otherwise healthy people with an undiagnosed flu-like sickness; some became so ill they were unable to breathe without a ventilator.

"I'm so grateful you called to check on me," he continued. I heard desperation in the voice of a man I knew to be steady and stoic. The virus had been recently identified as something I'd never heard of: SARS-CoV-2. It was a new or "novel" form of the coronavirus that has been around for centuries. It had just begun to demonstrate to scientists and researchers its significant ability to spread quickly from person to person.

At the time, prominent doctors and infectious disease researchers believed this highly contagious virus most likely spread by droplets through the air. The media reported cases were spiraling across the globe. I joined millions of people who watched in shock and disbelief as news reports recorded the global, national, and local caseloads. The death toll ticked up hourly. Ten days later, the World Health Organization would declare Covid-19 a global pandemic.

I also recalled disturbing emotions from the night before, when I felt my own panic rising as I walked home after having dinner with a friend in Greenwich Village. My wife was out of town, visiting family on a ski trip. She's immunocompromised, and I was concerned about her. I called her from my cell phone as I walked across 14th Street under a quiet that was unusual even for a frigid evening in Manhattan.

“Something’s not right here,” I said. “Hurry home.”

I imagined millions of others making similar calls to loved ones.

“You worry too much,” she replied. It’s true, I do. But this felt different.

Something was in the air aside from the chill, and I could feel it. I saw it when I stopped in at my corner bodega. The shelves were thinned out. A couple of rolls of paper towels sat on a metal shelf, their wrapping askew. No toilet paper at all. Bread and milk, the survival talismans of any crisis, were severely depleted. A hoarder’s instinct I never knew I had was triggered. The friendly counterman looked like a deer caught in the headlights—we gazed at each other with a mutual feeling of unease, he and I united in fear for a moment. I thought about buying cigarettes, though I had quit more than twenty-five years ago. How could there be no hand soap or paper towels in New York City? I felt the fight-or-flight impulse kick in. But where would I go?

Home. I had to get home. But, with my wife away and my young adult daughter locked down in a hot zone in California, my house would be dark. I left the store empty-handed and scared.

Mostly, I was contemplating the brave mission my company was pursuing in developing a vaccine at lightning speed. Fortunately, my extraordinary boss, Pfizer’s chairman and CEO Albert Bourla, had just made a powerful pledge. From the start he knew exactly what he intended: to find a vaccine before the fall when this deadly virus would likely double back in a devastating second wave with the cold weather. “We will make the impossible, possible,” Albert said. I believed we would find the vaccine. I had to. The alternative was unthinkable.

This mission to find the vaccine presented me with a rare opportunity to be part of a moonshot that could potentially save millions of lives. For me it had the added possibility to repair the abysmal reputation of Big Pharma. This was urgent, not only for business reasons but because it was essential that we earn the trust of many skeptical people if we were to be recognized as legitimate contributors to the war against a virus that was not yet well understood in terms of spread

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and mortality. Imagine the compounded tragedy if we developed a safe and effective vaccine that no one had the confidence to take. We had to build back much of the trust the industry had lost . . . and fast. This was a communications challenge I had prepared for my entire career. It wasn't only the vaccine science that would be groundbreaking, but the intense engagement with the public as well. So very much was on the line.

The Moment Arrives

The Covid-19 crisis had forced people to rethink many things: Where and how should they live? How would they educate their kids? Who would they trust to be in their pod? Maybe this virus could also upend their long-entrenched hostility toward the biopharmaceutical industry. Perhaps the industry that everyone—Democrats and Republicans, the elderly and the young, the wealthy and the needy—loved to hate might be the savior in what became a terrifying pandemic.

I had no doubt that this would be a trying time morally, professionally, and even spiritually. Maybe the yoga could help with the latter, but in the coming days I would need to find the right words to convey what Pfizer was doing to beat this once-in-a-century plague.

This moment, with so much suffering and death, did not lend itself to the tried-and-true crisis communications exercises. I couldn't rely on the basic playbook that every communications graduate student and entry-level professional has been taught—the campaign plan that begins with an ambitious goal, a smart strategy of reliable and non-controversial techniques along with an accompanying set of detailed supporting tactics and maneuvers. Sure, the conventional methods that I've employed over my career worked in other industries or even for other scientific breakthroughs, but not now. No way. This Covid crisis and the velocity with which it was undermining public confidence and was susceptible to rumor would require something more.

Consumers are also savvy; they are already wary of pharmaceutical company communications. Too many advertisements showing happy people running through grass fields while a voiceover gives a long list of potential side effects had eroded our credibility. People wouldn't accept a hackneyed approach when it came to injecting a new vaccine into their bodies and those of their loved ones. At least not without asking a lot of complex and valid questions.

We needed something more powerful and less predictable if we were to succeed in creating confidence and trust in our work at a time of such justifiably profound anxiety. My communications, government relations, patient advocacy, and public affairs planning needed ambitions of equal magnitude to those our company was setting: a first-time vaccine technology shot into arms within a year to save the world. Nothing less would do, but there were few if any lessons from the past that we could draw on.

Still on my mat, I recalled my favorite point in any yoga class. At the start of a session, the teacher suggests we set an intention for our yoga practice. It's a quiet, reflective time just before I hoist my creaky self into downward-facing dog. Blessings for my loved ones or epiphanies to answer my deepest nagging questions float into my mind. Often the sentiment sticks with me all day. Setting an intention focused me on who I wanted to be in the moment, helped me recognize my values, and raised my emotional and physical energy.

That is the moment it came to me.

Between deep ujjayi breaths, the idea of what was required of me in this exceptional time was clear. I needed an intention.

"My intention is to break through," I said, chanting it aloud to myself.

What does that mean? That I wasn't looking to merely modify views in the moment. No, I was striving for a truly new and enduring understanding of what my company could do and what we stood for.

The breakthrough intention became my über-idea, a big overarching thought that would hover above all our work. To cut through the

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noise and fear, we needed to shatter everything the public believed to be true about Big Pharma (and Pfizer is one of the biggest of the big). We had to challenge every assumption and respond respectfully to every criticism. We had to rethink the very essence of our public profile. We had to reintroduce ourselves.

I didn't have the scientific skills to discover a novel vaccine, but I could craft and roll out its surround-sound narrative. Session over! I rolled up my yoga mat, got off the floor, and opened my computer.

"Listen," I said to my team on a hastily arranged video conference call. "Forget the old rules of how we operate. Imagine we are founders of a startup, not a 171-year-old company. I'm no longer interested in playing defense or dodging the broadsides against our industry. This is our moment to strike out and break through to people. What do you think?"

In their response, I learned my first lesson about the power of a meaningful intention. My team was longing for it. They were eager (maybe desperate) to hitch the wagon of their work to a bolder, brighter star. I felt their energy rise. Why hadn't I done this sooner when we weren't in a crisis? I wish I had.

That morning, we discussed what fulfilling the intention to create breakthrough communications meant: the risks we would have to take; how we would have to be more forthcoming and transparent and make ourselves more available. I encouraged them, and myself, to let go of the defensiveness that had become routine during all these years of public criticism of the drug industry. I urged them to be bolder and enter a new world of possibilities for human connection and communication.

We would not find excuses for what could not be done. Absolutely everyone was on board and fully motivated, ready to commit to the intention. Immediately, from our kitchens and basements, connecting over video calls, we set to work.

I'm fortunate to lead a highly talented and intensely dedicated crew of corporate affairs professionals. Teams like ours were built for scenarios like this: when complex corporate ambitions intersect with deep-felt

human emotion. Thankfully, my department encompasses communications including speechwriting, product publicity, social media, and a press office; government relations including state, federal, and major capitals across the globe; a policy shop that acts as an in-house think tank; a corporate responsibility group that directs our foundation and leads our sustainability efforts; a patient advocacy team; and an investor relations group. We had the people with all the skills that we required to meet the intention. Whether you belong to a large team or a small one, whether you're in an agency or are a sole contributor or a job applicant, the power of setting a clear guiding intention is equally valid.

The contemporary corporate affairs group, like the one I lead, is a relatively new function. It was conceived of and fortified to anticipate and respond to urgent needs created by an ever more vocal and demanding set of stakeholders, like environmentalists, patient advocates, human rights leaders, and others who are driven by legitimate and strong passions. These people believe they deserve a say in how companies should operate. They are not wrong. Powerful groups of agitated people can bring a company or a government to its knees. To successfully break through to the public during a pandemic, we couldn't dismiss these groups and their concerns. We mustn't shuffle them off to the side. We would need to enlist them, earn their trust, and get their help.

Examples from the past gave me healthy respect for mission-driven stakeholders. My first memory of powerful intention-led activism was the boycott against the South African apartheid system with a call to stop purchasing products from the country. These actions helped to overturn the morally bankrupt regime. Another example is the AIDS activists who, in the 1980s, pointed their fear and rage at the medical and scientific establishment, ultimately forcing those communities to change the way they conducted research and paving the way for the discovery of treatments that have saved the lives of millions worldwide. More recently, in 2018, a boycott was marshaled against the National Rifle Association for its failure to respond to the torrent of gun violence in American schools. Public pressure also caused several gun retailers to raise the age required to buy firearms and place

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other restrictions on gun sales. Without question, stakeholder activism is a potent force.

There were times when I ducked the overtures from stakeholders, hoping they wouldn't turn their angry glare on my employers. Perhaps I had a certain level of defensiveness and skepticism from years of tense, unproductive exchanges. These engagements often ended in stalemate—each side leaving the discussion exactly where they started, on opposite sides. I'll never forget the time I heard a group of diabetes patients claim that the pharmaceutical industry had a cure for their disease but kept it secret because a lifetime of insulin was more profitable. That allegation made me cry.

There were times when these caustic exchanges made me want to dig a deep moat around my office and pull up the drawbridge. But, if we were going to achieve breakthroughs while people were physically and emotionally locked down, we needed to get ahead of every argument and be in favor with every interested party. As breakthrough communicators, this was our charge. Open the gates, let down the drawbridges, and dry the moat. Invite them in. Welcome the debate. Listen as well as speak. Never stonewall with silence.

Given the pandemic's scope, there was a broader set of interested constituency groups we'd rarely engaged with before, including teachers unions, retailers, government agencies, and advocacy organizations. Some of the leaders of these groups represented a fresh list of power players; others had been more adversarial in the past. Now, we had to extend a hand of partnership. With our new intention to debunk myths and dismantle historic distrust, we had to turn these potential detractors into advocates.

Launching the Breakthrough Intention

Fueled by this powerful intention, there was no door on which I wouldn't knock. I got creative about our roster of alliances. I reached out to Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of

Teachers. A straight talker and a tough negotiator, Weingarten's reputation preceded her. She quizzed me about the timetable for the vaccine and its effectiveness. I shared what we knew, wanting to help her plan for when the nearly 2 million teachers she represented could safely return to the classroom. Millions of students and their parents across the country were counting on those teachers. The stakes were higher than I'd ever imagined.

A few days later, I jumped on a Zoom call with a group of retailers from around the country who had concerns about when their stores and malls might reopen. How could they protect their workforces? When might they be able to purchase vaccines privately for their employees? When did we think the public would feel confident to enter the stores? Again, without pretending to have all the answers, I shared all the relevant information we had. "Thanks for showing up today," the host said when the session was ending.

We talked regularly to governors across the country to share what we knew about the necessary preparations they would need to make to be ready to receive the vaccine if and when it was authorized in the months ahead. Partisan politics did not play a role at all, nor did it have a place in this effort. We didn't care whether the letter D or R was next to the governor's name. We wanted to help everyone in every state. Elected officials with whom we had previously struggled to connect were reaching out to us. We not only took their inbound calls but developed pilot programs and special educational seminars to help them.

With engagements like these, I put our stakeholder strategy on steroids. We no longer waited for the phone to ring, but instead reached out to them, frequently bringing our top scientists and business leaders with us to educate at every turn. Guided by my intention to shatter the status quo, we shifted from defense to offense. We traded in our fears for an exciting sense of new possibilities. We were making progress scientifically, and we were opening minds and moving hearts, even among those most entrenched against us.

Our intention to reintroduce ourselves and communicate in ways that would reestablish trust meant we had to ditch the arrogance

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and engage in conversations, even if we didn't have all the answers. Mindful of all the appropriate regulations and always in consultation with our legal team, we found a way to get closer to people. We were no longer finding ourselves at arm's length from the public. Covid restrictions may have required social distancing, but we were truly connecting with people. We were listening, and we were being heard. Those relationships proved vital over the months that followed, offering us fellowship along the journey.

Albert Bourla was my breakthrough guru. When Albert became Pfizer's CEO in January 2019, he unveiled a new purpose statement for the company: "Breakthroughs That Change Patients' Lives." Surely, this new rallying cry planted the first seeds in my mind about the power of breakthroughs. For that, and so much more, I'm grateful to Albert. He is my friend, my boss, and a peerless leader. I didn't write "fearless," because undoubtedly Albert had frightful moments in the high-stakes race for a vaccine. I specifically call him "peerless" because thanks to Albert's singular vision and sturdy backbone, Pfizer found a highly effective and safe mRNA vaccine and was the first to manufacture and distribute it on a massive scale.

I've worked with nine chief executive officers and reported directly to six. I've studied what it means to sit in the ultimate corner office, and I've experienced a wide range of styles, from the wealth creators and diplomats to the appeasers and placeholders. I know that nothing is a greater symbol of a company's character than its chief executive.

When the pandemic hit, Albert was a relatively new CEO and still largely unknown. If we were to achieve our breakthrough intention, he'd have to step out into the spotlight and be the voice of the industry. I needed to build his profile quickly and smartly. As our leader, Albert would be the most visible proof point of our intention to put a stake in the ground as a company transforming. He was essential to my breakthrough communications plan.

A Greek Jew, a veterinarian with a heavy accent, Albert is not your typical Big Pharma CEO. Like most leaders, he is driven and

demanding. Albert expects a lot from his team, too. But he can also be funny and uses humor in a sensitive way to diffuse awkward situations. Never at arm's length, he is always right there with us, willing to roll up his sleeves when there is a problem to solve or to offer a shoulder if you needed bolstering. Of course, Albert's quest to "make the impossible, possible" led to some tense exchanges for all of us on the team. But, for a company seeking a full image overhaul from the perception that we were arrogant and uncaring, Albert was like a gift from central casting. His open and gregarious manner surprised and charmed people. He was our breakthrough poster boy. We all followed his lead and got personally involved in scaling the walls of skepticism, the hard labor of trust-building, often traveling outside our comfort zones.

Albert pushed us to the brink with seemingly impossible demands and then circled back for quiet conversations to understand our struggles and help us overcome obstacles. He has an ability to both pressure and nurture his team in just the right measure. How does he do that? By making sure he knows us as individuals. He understands who sandbags their goals to overachieve, who sets sky-high targets driven by their own ambition, who requires a kick in the pants, and who needs to be spoken to in supportive tones. Albert's bespoke management of senior leaders was key to our ability to create a Food and Drug Administration-authorized vaccine in eight months versus the usual ten-year time frame.

Suddenly, our previously invisible scientists were like superheroes. We booked them on all the major networks and cable channels. Our chief scientific officer, Mikael Dolsten, was a repeat guest on the *Today Show* via Zoom interviews from his bedroom. Mikael would ultimately shepherd the greatest medical advance in a century, but I still had to remind him to make his bed before clicking on his computer camera for the interview. We were less defensive about granting interviews and more open to unusual formats and audiences. Moving beyond medical journals, our scientific experts were featured in *Forbes*,

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Fast Company, and *People* magazine, which exposed our team's work to a general audience.

Scientists are not necessarily natural spokespeople, so we worked differently, and darn effectively, during the pandemic. We kept things fluid and didn't wait for formal discussions to announce milestones or correct misunderstandings. Our dialogue with the science team became more open and ongoing. Regular check-ins allowed us to craft updates more quickly and to swiftly respond to requests and tackle misinformation. We also capitalized on our scientists' rich and varied experiences, allowing their personal interests to shine through. For example, Bill Gruber, Pfizer's lead vaccine developer, is a soft-spoken and humble pediatrician with a passion for making vaccines for children. We drafted Bill for the *NBC Nightly News Kids Edition* and many other interviews where he could soothe anxieties and answer questions from kids, parents, and caregivers. With each success, the team's confidence grew.

Now that our scientists and executive team had jumped into the fray, I had to up my game, too. It wasn't easy for me. It may be surprising, but I'm an introvert. I draw energy from the quiet pursuits of reading and writing. For me, prolonged exposure to people can be draining. I'm most comfortable behind the scenes. I also knew that if I was going to make good on our breakthrough intention, I'd have to step forward. I was nervous. Over the fourteen years I had worked at the company, I'd grown accustomed to, and been occasionally burned by, heat against the pharma industry. It pains me to say that I didn't always rise to the challenge. I once heard a man groan when he learned he was seated next to "the lady from Big Pharma" at a dinner party. I've been attacked at family gatherings for my career path, and I learned from experience to never reveal my profession to my seatmates on airplanes.

Unfortunately, the old saying "She has a face for radio" could have been written for me. Luckily, podcasts have grown in popularity and were particularly well suited for a time when people were stuck at home

and looking for information and entertainment. I was invited on many podcasts, including top political strategist Bradley Tusk's *Firewall* for entrepreneurs and disrupters and *Greater*, a podcast focused on leadership in New York City hosted by major Gothamites and civic leaders Cheryl Effron and Jamie Rubin. Later I even volunteered for a few television appearances. Through these interviews I found a workable platform to tell Pfizer's story and, more importantly, I found my voice.

Before the pandemic, I often spoke about subjects on Pfizer's periphery, like promoting our charitable initiatives, or I cut the ribbon at a new community program. I relegated myself to the sidelines, never quite sure I had the goods. At Pfizer, I often found myself the only person in the room without an advanced degree. Now in the race to deliver a vaccine, I was drafted into something bigger than myself, more powerful than my doubts. I spoke out with messages that cut to the core: showcasing the groundbreaking work of my colleagues; connecting the dots between our knowledge and the public's hunger for information; understanding people's fear and building confidence for our vaccine. Outside my own bunker, I felt less like a staffer and more like a principal, both relevant *and* revitalized. The intention was not only helping the company but recharging my own batteries, too.

My breakthrough intention that led me to be bold and unafraid proved to be a guiding light that strengthened my spine, steadied my mind, and sustained me in the months that followed. That focused, clear, consistent intention that was understood and enthusiastically accepted by my team and my colleagues set us on a course that truly shifted outcomes around the world.

Intentionality's Highs and Lows

Now that intentionality plays such a major role in my communications and leadership mindset, I look for it in others. It's easy to recognize those who are driven by a singular intention. We see it in their

eyes. We hear it in their voices. Their mission is so ever present, they practically reek of it. There is nothing false, no shred of marketing or public relations to them. There are no talking points, only a deeply held belief, a persistent point to make.

Take Bruce Springsteen, who, clad in blue jeans and T-shirts, has dedicated his music to honoring the everyman. Whether it's the driving beat of "Born to Run" or the ballads "The Promised Land" and "The River," each song Springsteen wrote reaches into your memory and reminds you of the tingle of young love, the ache of hard work, the virtues of striving and struggling, the joy of friendship, and the pain of old age. His lyrics narrate the arc of humanity that most everyone travels. He takes listeners to the Jersey Shore and the roadside bar. It's the same story in all his songs. The man is who he is.

Consider Serena Williams. With every move of her muscled body, she is signaling one thing: that she will be the greatest, as defined on her own terms. When the Williams sisters burst onto the tennis scene, most assumed that Venus, with her elegance and cool demeanor of a classic tennis player, would dominate. But stocky, muscular, emotional Serena surpassed her sister and all other competitors. Since she made her professional tennis debut in 1995, Serena has taken twenty-three Grand Slam titles and became the unquestioned greatest women's tennis player of her time. She also turned the sport on its ear with her fashion choices that screamed, "I will not abide by your traditions!" Defiant and rarely defeated, with every swing of the racket Serena spoke volumes.

Williams and Springsteen, two very different people, share an unwavering intentionality that played in their lives like a drum beating a steady backbeat. It gave them a sureness and made them iconic personas, who always remained true to themselves with their central themes never in doubt.

On the other end of the spectrum, lacking in intentionality when he needed it most, is a man I admire, Michael Bloomberg. A savvy entrepreneur, a successful mayor, and an impactful philanthropist, Bloomberg was unable to articulate a captivating rationale for his

presidential bid. Filing to run for office in November of 2019, Bloomberg limped in late to the game. He opted not to compete in the early states of Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina, banking on a big win on Super Tuesday. He floundered during the debates, unable to express an inspiring vision for his campaign and getting thrown off course by attacks from his competitors. Bloomberg won only American Samoa on Super Tuesday and missed the 15 percent threshold for proportional delegates in several states. It was too bad. A man of his experience, drive, and accomplishment might have made a hell of a president. But, despite spending nearly a billion dollars, he never caught on. His intentionality quotient was zero.

Conversely, one candidate who flourished and found momentum was Mayor Pete Buttigieg who, at thirty-eight, was the youngest in the field. Mayor Pete's signature issue was generational change. In every speech, he displayed that intentionality through his energy and commitment to building a bridge to a new style of American politics. Another communications master is Senator Elizabeth Warren. The former law professor was highly intentional and staked her campaign on a consistent drumbeat of messaging that she would fight corruption and fix what she considered the unfair and broken economic rules.

First prize for clarity and conviction goes to former Vice President Joe Biden who pinpointed the moment he decided to run for the highest office. In what was perhaps the most stirring video to announce a candidacy, Biden recalled that hot August day when he was at his Delaware home and watched with horror as white supremacists marched through Charlottesville, Virginia. Biden was dismayed at President Trump's muddled response that there "were good people on both sides." Armed with moral clarity, Biden hammered home that his bid for the presidency was rooted in a "battle for the soul of our nation." In just three videotaped minutes, Biden made his entire case. No doubts. No hedging. Full-throated clarity.

I have sympathy for Mayor Bloomberg, and anyone who struggles to identify, express, and hold fast to their intentions. It's especially

hard today when we are so easily drawn off our focus. Multitasking is intention's great disabler. I'm guilty of it. I'm fixing dinner while I'm talking on the phone. I'm covertly checking my email while I'm on a Zoom call. I'm bouncing onto Instagram while I'm watching a movie with my family. The multitasking epidemic means we are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It's devastating to one's ability to think and communicate clearly.

But achieving clarity is what intentional communications demands. As writers, speakers, or advocates, we must be able to easily answer the first question: *What am I really trying to say?*

In 2019, New York Women in Communications honored me with the Matrix Award, one of the highest accolades for communicators. In all candor, over decades, I longed for this award because it signals recognition by one's peers. Having been passed over many times, I let go of my wish, assuming it would never happen. So I was truly surprised when the call came. Delighted, I began to prepare my acceptance speech. Suddenly, after years of sitting in the audience fantasizing about my acceptance remarks, I didn't know what I wanted to say. I wrote several versions and asked my wife, Robin, to read them. She'd finish, look me in the eye, and say, "You can do better." And I knew she was right.

My comments were all over the map with no singular, galvanizing point. I thought about the audience, many aspiring young women, some of whom were on scholarship to communications programs. The more I was able to channel their interest, the clearer my speech goal became. In my opening, I admitted that there was "something I kept secret, a trait I wasn't sure I could be proud of. I was *ambitious*, hungry really for more." I chose to speak about ambition, sometimes a taboo topic, especially for women. Ambition is often derided as an ugly trait. Ambitious people are criticized as land-grabbers concerned only with securing larger and larger empires. I don't agree. For me, ambition is about so much more than steps up the corporate ladder. Rather, it's an honest expression of the mountains one wishes to climb.

In the few minutes I had on stage, I told brief anecdotes about how I channeled my ambition and closed with, "Let me say one thing to

the scholarship recipients here today. I urge you to answer from the depths of your heart and the height of your own ambition the question posed by my favorite poet Mary Oliver: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” We are watching with great excitement.”

I walked from the stage feeling complete, less so for having won a Matrix and more so for feeling I’d conveyed a point that mattered. My intention was to debunk the negativity that surrounds ambition. I said what I really wanted to say.

Recently, I’ve made it a habit to locate and land my intention before all communications, including those as basic as a phone call or an email. When older relatives phone, I try to be attentive and present. When I talk to my daughter, I focus on being helpful and nonjudgmental. When I talk to journalists, I seek to be honest and enlightening. If a colleague reaches out, I try to be generous and resourceful. It’s not always easy, but it is worth the effort to have this kind of intentional clarity with each exchange. Conversations end on a more positive note for everyone.

This exercise of focused intention is a bit like a yoga position I enjoy, tree pose. Some days, I stand at the front of my mat, shift my weight onto one leg, lift the other, tucking that foot against my thigh. When it all goes right, I find a visual spot in the distance for steadiness, my focus and concentration deepen, I’m strong and balanced, feeling rooted and liberated. In those moments of confidence, I feel as though I could stand in tree pose forever. Other times, I can’t find the equipoise, my lifted leg drops, balance is elusive, and I nearly topple over. And then, I try again. Tree pose, like intention claiming, is that easy and that hard.

Whenever you have something important to convey, set a clear and bold intention for that narrative. Land that intention deep within you. Write it down. Scribble it in your journal. Put it on a sticky note and post it on the refrigerator. Print it on a T-shirt or bumper sticker. Say it aloud. Tell others to make that pledge public. Own it.