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for hospitality



Finding Inspiration Through Adversity

by Gretta Brooks



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Gretta is a proven leader in the hospitality industry with 30+ years' experience running three global sales organizations, leading award-winning hotel sales teams and earning numerous sales and service awards. In 2015, she founded SalesBoost, an online training solution that is revolutionizing learning and professional development. Based on [The Science of Learning](#), SalesBoost improves the human capital of an organization using innovative technology and active learning principles. SalesBoost makes learning interactive and provides a practice environment allowing individuals to build muscle memory, which in turn, forms new skills. And, skills are the new global currency.

How Gretta Found Inspiration Through Adversity is a story that encourages curiosity, shows how facing your fears can open new doors, and energizes the desire to just "Do It!". Enjoy!

"And, then, yes, it indeed turned out to be breast cancer."

My journey started on a hectic Thursday in October in 2014. I had just returned from a sales training event with my global sales team. As I drove into the parking lot, I noticed a big pink bus in the driveway at Omni's corporate headquarters, and I realized it was a mobile mammogram facility. It hit me then that I didn't remember when I had my last mammogram, so I hopped on board and asked if they could fit me in. I was a few minutes late to a meeting, but I got my mammogram.

Life has many unexpected turns. I certainly didn't expect my mammogram that day would turn out to be positive. Yet without that diagnosis, I would have never been in the position to build a leading adult learning and development company.

When cancer knocked on my door. I allowed myself to be curious. And, being the type A person that I am, I needed a new plan. Just because I had cancer, I didn't push away my burning desire to learn and try new things.

I was ready for the results. I have always been prepared to hear them. My family has a long history of cancer, so, I would imagine hearing the prognosis at different stages of my life and how I would handle the news. I would talk to my doctors about things I could do to minimize my risks. In fact, I had a full hysterectomy to avoid uterine cancer several years earlier.

I had formulated my plan long before I knew my diagnosis by selecting UTSW and the doctor that I would see if my results were positive. My mother and husband thought this was an odd thing to do, but it gave me something to do while I waited. And, in the end, it gave me confidence when I heard those words.... You have aggressive cancer that will require a double mastectomy and chemotherapy. The surgery I could handle... but chemo?

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If you have experience with chemo, you would agree with me that it sucks. It's really archaic having medication that kills 1/3 of your cells with each dose. You go through a cycle where you feel beyond awful, and then you start feeling better. Before you feel normal again, you are dowsed with chemicals and start the process over again.

I expected to have my hair fall out and feel bad, but I never expected the worst of chemo. I lost my mind. I lost the ability to complete sentences and do math in my mind. Seriously, I couldn't multiply simple math problems. I couldn't remember how I got to work that day. And, yes, I went to work a few days after each dose of chemo. Working kept me busy, which is much better than sitting around "feeling sick" all day. Oddly enough, I was able to do my job just fine, so when I told my leadership team that I wanted to retire, they thought I was rash. Just take some time off. The problem was, I had done the research and knew that it would take me months or even years to earn back my mind.

How was I going to get my brain to function so that I could be a fully functioning executive and lead my team? I wanted to handle some significant issues at work, and they needed my full brainpower. It was a difficult decision, but I decided to retire to fully dedicate time to recover my brain and my body. I didn't have any idea how long it would take, so I used all the brain cells that I had every day during retirement to research and learn about the neuroscience of the brain.

I put all of the things I learned into practice and made good progress each month, but it was slow. And, then, something happened. I developed an itch, then a calling and then a passion. And, today I feel better than ever, doing better than ever and enjoying my work and personal life in ways I would never have imagined.

So, what did I learn and how did I get here?

Part I Learner's Mindset

Planning can be my most significant gift to give or my biggest downfall. When you have a goal and a deadline, planning is easy. Our brains just click away, and we get things done. When it comes to making a personal plan, that is a challenge for me and maybe for some of you. I found that when I made plans in bite-sized pieces in weeks and months, it was easier to manage. And, I gave myself the freedom to change course.

I was reading over 5 books at one time, although I could only concentrate for 20-30 minutes at a time. Keeping a journal helped. It was like talking to my future self. I would re-read what I thought about the day before and build from that each day. Instead of worrying about what I could or couldn't do, I just proudly took the gift from the day before and moved on. That's been my mindset ever since. Let go of yesterday and do better tomorrow. I also realized the power of learning something new each day. Even if it was on a subject that I already had knowledge or experience. I made it my mission to maintain a learner's mindset.

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Part II Finding the Gap

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Part II Finding the gap

Gretta found that the gap between learning and performance was knowledge retention. After researching with experts in neuroscience and andragogy, she discovered that the way to build that missing knowledge retention is through the Active Learning process, which creates muscle memory through practicing real-life scenarios, much like a pilot learns through flight simulation.

Finding the gap. I think I've been doing this all my life but just never realized it. How many of you do your best thinking in the shower or the car? Did you know that you do your best thinking while walking? Your heart pumps more blood to your brain, which improves both oxygen and therefore, brain function.

I was walking every day for 20-30 minutes to get my body back in shape, but I found the greatest benefit was to my brain. And, while I was walking my dog in a park, I developed the idea of SalesBoost. Honestly, my husband thought it was a little far-fetched that a recovering chemo patient would be good at starting a business. Well, I finally wore him down.

And, he knew that when I'm passionate about something, I will make it happen, so I had his support. I knew the science and, the challenges I was always trying to solve at work were an itch that needed my attention. How could I go back to work and do the same thing again and get better results? After a few months, the idea finally formed. I was going to research how I could automate active learning based on The Science of Learning to improve the results from current training methods. There is a massive gap in adult learning today, and it is skill-based learning. Knowledge-based training and information are available at our fingertips, but we don't really learn "how" to do something or practice enough to learn a new skill.

SalesBoost was formed, and my biggest personal challenge was, what am I now? I've defined myself as a hospitality leader all my life. My ego was confused. What do I tell people that I'm doing? What will they think?

I think I avoided taking risks most of my life to prevent that issue. How do I define myself without definition from a title? When I was introduced by my husband to someone new, he and I were tongue-tied trying to describe what I was. Am I an ex-hotelier developing a startup? Am I a retired hotel executive starting a training company? It was the most challenging part of the journey thus far.

I got over it and just kept thinking, what's the worst thing that can happen? Could I proudly fail in front of my colleagues and venture out on my own and try to do something that would make significant changes to learning and development? I took the leap of standing out. Sure, I could fail, and as my husband says to me, "I'd rather you try than regret never trying." Do it, Gretta, do it!

Part III

Overcoming Obstacles and Adversity

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Overcoming obstacles and adversity

How does one overcome obstacles and adversity? Well, I have filtered it down to this... bring your best self.

Some things you should remember; sleep, exercise, and meditation. Yes, meditation. We'll get to that.

It's amazing how much brain health keeps the rest of your body healthy. Because, lord knows, being unhealthy does not feel good. I really took away a mantra that helps me focus and be more deliberate. Bring your best self. It gives me purpose every day and helps me define my actions.

What does that conjure up for you? When you "bring your best self," you are open, ask great questions, do what you say you'll do, prioritize the right things, have enough energy for your family and friends, and most importantly, you make time for yourself. I learn best by doing so I've put this into practice. I'm a nicer person, calmer and less anxious. I can handle a considerable amount of stress without losing my cool. Not always, but most of the time. Most startups have a founder that is exhausted and loses their health because they're overwhelmed and do things that are

bad for them. That really goes for most of us in stressful situations. We look for an easy fix.

I learned that I was taking sleep for granted. I'd get 5-6 hours and then try to catch up on the weekends. Did you know that sleep affects almost every tissue in your body? It affects hormones, our immune system, appetite, and heart health. I learned that a minimum of 8 hours of quality sleep per day will improve my brain function, my mood, and even my weight.

Tired people are less productive at work. They are running on fumes, exhausted, irritable, and have difficulty concentrating. Hormones are released during sleep which repairs cells and controls the body's use of energy. Those hormone changes can affect your weight. I focused on sleeping and started to lose weight. And, more importantly, I began to concentrate for more extended periods. I'm a nicer person overall. But sleep is work for many of us. We stay up worrying, or we can't stay asleep.

Want to know what I do to get a good night's sleep? First, I set a time and stick to it. I have a plan, and it helps that my husband goes to bed when I do. Next, I use Bose sleep buds or white noise since I'm a light sleeper. I also use a sleep mask, so I have a total black-out. Then, to get to sleep, I sip on valerian root tea and take a hot Epsom salt bath. I do have to take melatonin if I'm traveling. Doesn't it sound nice? I never stopped the self-care that I learned from my days recovering from chemo.

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Part IV Your Value is Your Network

I mentioned before that exercise improves brain function. It also enhances your sleep if done early in the day. I just started walking 15 minutes a day for a few weeks and then pushed to 20, 30, and after a few months, I was able to work out. Instead of a glass of wine, I'll take my dog on a walk or just walk around to let my mind have a break. It's amazing how stress festers when we let it.

Talking about stress, let's go back to meditation. Do you have a meditation practice you perform daily? I meditate at least an hour a day, and if I don't, I feel it. My anxiety creeps in and rears its ugly head. Meditation is a lot like sleep. It helps you control the noise in your head.

Did anyone watch Tiger Woods win The Masters? I was cheering for him at the end and just in awe of how well he did. It wasn't shocking to me that his daily routine consists of various meditation techniques. He told a reporter with CBS Sports that his method includes meditation, juggling and mind training.

In 2011, Harvard found that mindfulness meditation can actually change the structure of your brain. After eight weeks of meditation, the thickness of the hippocampus improved, which governs the learning and memory area of your brain. Meditation relieves anxiety and depression while improving attention and concentration.

Meditation certainly helps me relieve my anxiety by allowing me to push away my annoying thoughts without running from them. I just recognize that the annoying thoughts are there but don't give them any attention. I focus on my breath and becoming centered. If you'd like to try, I highly recommend the app 10% Happier.

Part IV Your value is your network

Gretta had the desire to build an award-winning team around her to help bring her concept to reality and deliver a solution to the market that is the only online training solution in the universe that can provide automated practice simulation. Using A.I. with real-time feedback and coaching, the learner can simulate sales and service encounters over and over. Gretta's desire has been fulfilled with the talent and philosophy of SalesBoost.

And, last but not least, success cannot be gained without your network. Remember, when I was terrified to come out and let people know that I was taking a risk? Well, I didn't realize the power of my network until I started SalesBoost. I put up my shingle, and within a day, I had customers calling me.

“Success is only
how you define
it”

I had built a reputation throughout my career and built relationships based on integrity. I made it a point to stay connected with my network not only because I valued their opinions and honest critique, I truly cared about them as a person. My father and mother taught me a lot of impactful lessons. My father worked for the Boy Scouts of America for 40 years, and my mother's father was an Episcopal priest dedicated to serving others. Life was to be lived with purpose and to leave something meaningful behind. No pursuit is unworthy if it is to leave this world a better place.

We're all busy. Warren Buffet and Bill Gates are pretty smart guys, and their interview on the topic of busy is so great. Busy is the new stupid. If you bring your best self to others, you'll live with more intention and make a difference.

Success is only how you define it.

So, the advice I give to you is to face adversity and make it your passion to learn more about it. Embrace a Learner's Mindset. New doors will open. And this is where inspiration comes in to lead you to new opportunities in life.

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