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Redefining Success: How to Disappoint Your Parents and Blaze Your Own Trail The Marketing Chat Podcast ep. 038 Podcast Transcript

Welcome!

Today's episode is going to be very personal and not at all about marketing. There will also be talk about my dad's suicide.

I'm going to my 30th reunion at Harvard in a few days, and I'm preparing to speak on a panel called "Redefining Success: Finding Life's Meaning on Our Own Terms." And I thought that it would be interesting to share my thoughts with you here because many entrepreneurs struggle with defining success.

Five years ago, before the 25th reunion, there was this novel-length post in the class Facebook group where several people were talking about how they weren't going to the reunion because they didn't feel like they had "lived up to their Harvard degree."

A bunch of us got really vulnerable about how we felt similarly—even though we were going to the reunion. Some of us were stay-at-home moms or solo entrepreneurs. Some were between jobs. And some had ended up in jobs that weren't anything like what they had planned.

And it was tough not to compare ourselves to some of our famous or semi-famous classmates. Matt Damon was in our class, though he left before graduating. Not only is he a fabulous actor and writer, he's also an incredibly sweet person.

Actress Meredith Salenger is another classmate, and she's now married to Patton Oswalt.

We've got China Forbes and Peter Dinklage of the musical group Pink Martini.

We've got a number of authors, including Geoff Rodkey, Mary Dixie Carter, and Adam Goodheart.

Katherine A. Rowe is the first woman president of William and Mary.

Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healy is currently running for governor of Massachusetts.

And, in 2017, classmate Ketanji Brown-Jackson was a judge for the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. Today, of course, she is about to be the newest Supreme Court Justice.

So, even though we all went to Harvard, you can imagine how even we can feel "less than" compared to these fabulous classmates.

This panel that I'm speaking on, "Redefining Success," will feature speakers who aren't famous. Just regular classmates who have taken non-traditional paths and have encountered bumps along the way that have made us rethink what success means to us.

Throughout my childhood, my dad defined success for me. And that definition equaled straight As, excelling in at least one sport, and behaving "well." The behaving well was in place from birth! The straights As and sports came to be when I was 9 and in 3rd grade.

My school, which, at that time, went from nursery school through 12th grade, had us take an IQ test. The school told my parents that I was "smart." So, my dad got it into his head that I should go to Harvard. Yep, age 9.

He told me, "With a Harvard degree, you can write your own ticket."

As if we don't all have the ability to write our own ticket or blaze our own trails—at least to some degree.

He had wanted to be a lawyer. He went to law school when I was a baby. But he dropped out after the first year when *his* dad pressured him to go back to Houston to work for the family business—in the oil and gas industry.

So, while he started pressuring me to go to Harvard, he also gave me the goal of becoming a lawyer to achieve *his* unfulfilled dream.

The only thing I wanted to be was an artist, starting from age 5. When I was 7, I tried to sell some paintings at the end of our driveway. My mom ran out there to stop me!

My parents acknowledged my talent in art. They said it would be great for me to “keep up my art” so I could hang my own paintings in my future home. Yeah, not what I had in mind. I wanted to be a famous artist. I wanted my work in galleries and in *other* people’s homes, not my own.

I did get straight As. I excelled in basketball. I did cross country and track and field for 5 years. Then I switched to theater and dance. I took three languages in school: French, Latin, and Spanish. My dad loved that. “Say something in French,” he would tell me when he wanted to show me off to his friends.

I would respond, “Qu’est-ce que tu veux que je dise?” – which means, “What do you want me to say?” Ha ha.

My dad’s love was always conditional. I have a sister who’s three years younger than I am. But it was clear that he loved me more because I gave him bragging rights. She didn’t do well in school. She didn’t play sports. She didn’t speak any other languages. She didn’t create art or write poetry or dance or win awards.

It sucked... for both of us.

She felt unloved. And I felt that I could lose his love if I slipped even the tiniest bit in anything.

In 10th grade, in one quarter, in one class, I got a B. “A B!,” he said. “Well, there go all the plans we’ve ever made for you.”

Wow. In his mind, Harvard was no longer possible. My becoming a lawyer was no longer possible. Writing my own ticket was no longer possible. All because of one B in one class in one quarter.

He was so freaking disappointed in me. It was chemistry, by the way. I still got an A- for the year. And, clearly, it didn’t prevent me from getting into Harvard.

On the one hand, I thought he was being ridiculous. On the other hand, what did I know? My school was a college-prep school and preached excellence above all else.

Harvard could fill its freshman class several times over with valedictorians. And I was not number 1 in my class.

My dad put so much pressure on me to go to Harvard that that was my one and only goal. I wasn't thinking about what I would do afterward. All I was focused on was getting into Harvard. Period.

My way of rebelling against my dad was going to summer school at Yale the summer after 11th grade then telling him that my first choice college was Yale. So silly. We didn't even visit Harvard. I mean, what was the point? What was there would not to like? According to him, it was the best university in the world. So, I had to apply. And, if I got in, I had to go.

But I assured him that if I got into Yale, that's where I'd be going.

Well, I didn't get into Yale. So, Harvard it was!

It wasn't as easy as I'm making it sound. I was actually waitlisted. I wrote the admissions office—without telling my parents or my school. I thanked them for not outright rejecting me. And I essentially said, "Thanks anyway and goodbye." I wrote something along the lines of "I understand how difficult your job must be. I know that you almost never take anyone off of the waitlist. So, I really appreciate your giving me this slim chance anyway. I understand that nothing will come of it most likely. Thank you so much for your consideration. And good luck with the rest of the school year."

Before Harvard sent me their acceptance letter, they called my school to tell *them* I had been accepted. They said that it was my letter that got me in. They said that they had never gotten a thank-you note before from someone who was waitlisted, and they really appreciated my empathy and compassion.

It was really interesting because I didn't write the letter to help me get in. I wrote because I did feel compassion for them. I was picturing them having to make these tough decisions. And I wanted to let them know that *I* knew that I wouldn't be getting off of the waitlist and that it was okay. As if they'd be worrying about my feelings!

Well, that whole experience changed my definition of success a tiny bit. I saw that it was traditional success that got me onto the waitlist. But it was my character that actually got me accepted.

My dad was one of the most honest and honorable people I've ever known. But his focus for me was on performance, not character. So, this was an interesting twist.

I get to Harvard, and it was fascinating to see how my dad's focus on me changed. He never asked me about my grades. I'd volunteer them sometimes. But he never asked. Clearly, getting into Harvard was the thing. The assumption was that I'd do well. So, no need to check in.

Halfway through freshman year, he tells me that he has a connection at this prestigious law firm in Houston where I can get an internship. Ugh.

In the meantime, I'm putting a portfolio together to apply to the Parson's in Paris program to study art in Paris with the Parson's School of Art and Design. It was an application process. I hadn't taken a formal art class in years because of the extra language classes I had taken in high school. But my portfolio was strong enough that I got in.

And... I got the job at the law firm. Shit.

I wanted to go to Paris. I love Paris. My dad loved Paris. He was the one who had sent me to summer school outside of Paris when I was 12—then again several times after that.

"You can do art any time. If you want to go to Harvard Law School, you need to work for this law firm. They're the best," he said. See, he kept defining goals and success for me. And I kept allowing it.

Again, shit.

I just didn't have the strength to say "no" to him at that point in my life. I couldn't disappoint him.

So, I turned down Paris and went to the stupid law firm.

The one good thing that came out of it was that I hated it and decided not to go into law. Now, that probably wasn't fair because they had me doing data entry—of financial documents, many of which I was struggling to identify. That's not what I would have been doing if I had become a lawyer. I wouldn't have gone into financial or corporate law.

But the whole atmosphere of the place was so stifling. And every day I sat there regretting not doing art in Paris. Working in that law firm, even though they were paying decent money, didn't feel like success. It felt like failing.

That experience showed me that giving up a dream is what real failure feels like.

And yet I wasn't majoring in art at Harvard. Even though I had wanted to, I was comparing myself to classmates who had been focusing on art throughout high school and seemed so much better than I was. I felt that imposter syndrome creeping in.

Another lesson that comparison is the killer of dreams.

So, I majored in biological anthropology, which I adored. I went to Tufts after college and got a master's in biology.

And I got married to a fellow classmate. I followed my then-husband to North Carolina where he was stationed as an officer in the Marine Corps. We had two daughters just a few years later. At our 5th college reunion, they were 1 and 2 1/2 years old!

My first husband and I split after 7 1/2 years. I married again and had a son with my second husband. We split 5 years ago, after 15 years of marriage.

During the time since graduating from Harvard, I've never had a full-time job. I was a stay-at-home for several years on two different occasions: First when my daughters were young, then again when my son was a baby.

When I was still married to my first husband, I went to business school for a year but left when he got a promotion that moved us from Houston to Mexico. When I left, I decided to go into art.

It had been years. I went to Texas Art Supply and bought a sketchpad and charcoals. Ridiculously, I decided that, if I could draw something "good" right off the bat, then I would keep doing it. Oh, no pressure at all. I mean, how silly was that?

But it was good. Several sketches were. And, oh my god, how good it felt. I felt like me. I felt home, like I had really come back to myself, to a piece that had been missing.

When my first husband and I split, I started working for myself as a marketing consultant, and I still focused on my art.

A couple of years later, I moved to Pittsburgh, did less consulting and did way more art. I got into group shows and got a solo show in 2003. I made a short film then did a collaboration with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and Attack Theatre, a Pittsburgh dance company.

That was the most successful I had ever felt—living my dream life, doing what I loved.

My dad didn't care.

He had tried to kill himself the first time in January 2001. It was a total shock to all of us—my mom, my sister, and me.

He and my mom had split in 1999. He revealed later that he still loved her. He left her because he couldn't admit how he was feeling about himself—like he had wasted his life.

He was living between Houston and L.A. So, I saw him very rarely. I tried to speak to him as much as I could. But he started to drift away.

Spending so much time in L.A., he randomly became friends with an actress who lived in his building. No naming names, but she stars in "This Is Us." I watched him brag about her as if she were his daughter. He had someone else now to brag about since I didn't give him anything to brag about.

Okay, let me back up. He did come to my first solo show in Pittsburgh and saw my short film. He said that he was proud of me. And he bought one of my paintings.

Then I never heard anything from him again about my art.

My definition of success differed from his.

I was trying to stick with my definition and just ignore and let go of his.

But it was tough. He was my dad. I had spent my whole life living up to his expectations. In fact, when I got my master's degree in biology, he wrote a card that read, "You have exceeded my expectations." I thought that was weird because a

master's degree didn't seem like a big deal. I mean, it wasn't a law degree or a Ph.D. or an M.D.

But it was more than he had. So, I guess that's why he was impressed.

But the art wasn't good enough for him. I could sense that it disappointed him. He didn't mind when I was doing marketing consulting. That was something "real." That was business-related. And I had done work for some high-profile organizations in Houston. But art....

Back at the night of my first solo show, I decided to go all out in disappointing him. That is, I wanted to dis-appoint him from being my judge. You know, judges are appointed to a case. So, I thought that I could dis-appoint him from my case.

He had been the judge of my life, the arbiter of my success since I was 9. And I was sick of it.

If I had become a disappointment to him, then I wanted to take control and actively dis-appoint him from being my judge.

Obviously, he could still judge me and form opinions on me and my life. My goal was to sever my response to his opinions.

While I was creating the works for that first solo show, I was very emotional. The works were based on a difficult period in my life, and I had a hard time bringing myself back out of the emotions I went into while painting or filming.

I don't smoke in general, but for 4 or 5 months, I smoked about 3 packs of cigarettes—total. That is, 3 packs over 4 or 5 months. Yeah, no big deal in the grand scheme of things.

But, I smoked a cigarette in front of my dad. He... hated... cigarettes. His parents had smoked his whole life. And he just loathed it. I knew that there was nothing I could do to disappoint him more than to smoke.

He didn't say a word.

Did it work?

It was silly, but it worked to some degree. I knew that I had really let him down. And I knew that I couldn't do anything worse. So, it was pretty freeing.

But there was still that part of me that was his little girl, that still needed his love and approval. Don't all children want their parents' love and approval?

His second suicide attempt came on election day in 2004.

It was a surprise again because we all thought he was better. There had been no signs at all. Of course, I rarely saw him. So, I couldn't know for sure. But no one else picked up on anything.

After that attempt, I saw him even less. He pulled away so much. And we rarely talked.

I felt for sure that he didn't love me anymore.

Which was silly. But you go back to that sense of being a child. And, when a parent ignores you, they must not love you.

And remember that his love was conditional. I hadn't done anything grand in a while. A year later I would do that collaboration with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and Attack Theatre. But I hadn't done that yet. I didn't have my son yet. So, my thinking was, there was nothing for him to be proud of me for.

In reality, he was so absorbed in his own state of mind that nothing else and no one else mattered. It wasn't me. It wasn't personal. It truly was him.

But over the next four years he pulled away even more... to the extent that I forgot everything about him. I forgot who he really was. I forgot that he loved to tell jokes. I forgot that he used to laugh a lot. I forgot how close we had once been. I just had this sense of his being stoic and dull. Not accurate at all.

He finally killed himself in October of 2008.

For my entire life, every single time that my parents and I would get off the phone, we would always, *always* say, "Love you." My mom and I still do.

The last time I spoke to my dad was 6 weeks before he died. As we were ending the call, I said, "I love you." He said, "Okay, bye."

I was shocked. Clearly, it has stuck with me.

The good thing about it is that I remember the last time we spoke. Most people don't remember the last time they spoke with a loved one before they die. If this had been a regular call like all others, I probably wouldn't remember it.

The other good thing about it is that I remember exactly what my last words were to him. And they were "I love you."

But it took me several years to believe that he loved him. He didn't leave a note for my sister or me—just for my mom, his girlfriend, a couple of clients, and a friend. But not his daughters. He didn't even mention us in his letter to my mom.

He had the presence of mind to write five other letters but couldn't manage even two sentences to his girls. That hurt.

For a while, I felt terrible about having become a disappointment to him. I felt as if things might have been different in those last few years if I had been a "better daughter," if I had been "more successful."

But I know that's not true. Suicide is a complex issue, and he was wrapped up in his own stuff. None of it had to do with me.

I don't mean this to sound horrible—because I love my dad, and I miss him—but several years after his death, it ended up feeling freeing. He wasn't here to judge me anymore. I couldn't disappoint him anymore. He can't define success for me anymore.

It's all up to me.

You see, I *am* writing my own ticket. We all are—to the degree that each of us is capable of doing so.

He had the capability of writing his own ticket. And he had been doing so. He just didn't realize it. He thought that he had to have a Harvard degree to write his own ticket.

But that's bullshit.

He wrote his own ticket when he quit law school. His dad didn't force him to join the family business. Well, yes, there was a ton of pressure. But my dad ultimately made

that decision. My dad forever blamed my grandfather for that. He never accepted his own responsibility there.

He wrote his own ticket and just didn't like where it took him.

Since my dad's death, I've been more conscious and conscientious about writing my own ticket. Though I prefer the phrase "blaze your own trail."

I see that as my mission in life. I've raised my kids to blaze their own trails. I help my clients blaze their own trails.

And I'm blazing mine.

We can't control everything in our lives. We can't choose every little aspect of our lives. And some people have the privilege and the luxury of having more choices than other people have.

But we all do have choices that can lead us in one direction or another—points at which paths diverge, even if we don't recognize that divergence in the moment.

Then it's a matter of taking responsibility for those choices and deciding if the outcome is what success looks like to us or not. And, if not, what can we do to change it? Or, do we need to redefine success?

I haven't followed the traditional path that my dad expected of me decades ago. I'm not the famous artist that I had wanted to be.

But I am totally satisfied with the success that I have achieved and am achieving.

The good grades in high school, college, and two graduate degrees were merely tools that took me to the next level, not what defines success for me.

My character is part of my success—my compassion and empathy.

My art is part of my success—fulfilling that part of my childhood dream.

Helping my clients is part of my success—helping them achieve *their* goals and dreams.

Raising my kids is part of my success—teaching them to blaze their own trails.

And doing this right now is part of my success—sharing a personal story that might somehow help you change your perspective or simply feel seen or heard.

So, I've been sort of all over the place in this episode. Even though it's been 14 years since my dad died, it's still tough for me to articulate all of this in a totally clear way. So, I'm sorry if this has come across as meandering or hard to follow.

And I don't have any tips or action steps for you this time. I just can't boil this down into a neat, little 5-step process.

I hope you got something out my story. And I really appreciate your listening.

I'd love to read your comments. You can leave comments on this episode's page on my website—link in the show notes.

Thanks again. See you next time on the Marketing Chat Podcast.

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