

## **Is That Your Natural Color?**

If I were a doctor or a lawyer, I might not get asked this question as often as I do: “How did you get into this line of work?” Apparently, to some folks, there’s something quixotic, exotic, and perhaps idiotic about someone who does public speaking for a living.

So here’s the deal: I was born with a big mouth. Before turning six, I asked my mother for a microphone for my birthday, and (as family lore would have it) my older brother got down on bended knee, begging her to ignore my request. While every report card I got in grade school and middle school reflected my academic prowess, they also indicated my gift of gab (although not necessarily using “gifted” terminology). Once I entered New York’s Stuyvesant High School, I was immediately drafted for a team that develops and rewards those of us who are elite athletes from the neck up: The Speech and Debate Team.

At the end of my senior year of high school, after three years spent travelling around North America competing against other mouthy masterminds, I won the National Championship title. So, starting at age 17, I began doing presentation skills training at colleges and corporations, and I’m still doing that today.

In the words of one client upon hearing my story, “you’re like the Doogie Howser of public speaking!” Thanks...I think.

With over 20 years of speaking experience under my belt (over my collar?), I think I know what I’m doing. But more importantly, I know for sure that I’m doing what I was meant to be doing. I’ve taken a natural talent and interest, and turned it into a career.

Like most of us, I had many talents and interests as a kid, but not all of them were worth pursuing as an adult. Was there good money to be made in collecting puffy, scratch-n-sniff, googly-eyes stickers? Did I miss my calling by not pursuing a career as an overweight, under-flexible, uncoordinated tap dancer? Could I have made a living just by driving my brothers bananas?

Probably not. I managed to unearth a particular natural gift, water it with time, energy, practice, and attention, keep it in the light, and my vocation -- and avocation -- was born. I’m doing something so “me” that I can’t imagine what my life would have looked like without this element. It’s the career equivalent of marrying your high-school sweetheart: sometimes, the right match comes along earlier than you could have imagined. I realize every day that finding and falling in love with the right job early in life is a supreme blessing that I have been given – and that not all of us feel so blessed.

Even if you weren’t born to speak, sticker-collect, or shuffle-shuffle-ball-heel, you came into this world with rainbow of natural colors that you once honored and delighted in before you were saddled with the responsibilities of adulthood. Maybe you were innately athletic, like my daughter Sophie is. When people

ask, “what’s her sport?” we answer, “whatever she decides it is.” Yes, she’s just that good -- so good that it’s hard for me to believe that she and I are blood relatives.

But here’s the tricky part: she has big dreams of becoming a professional basketball player. It’s possible, of course. Anything’s possible. There are a few barriers, of course: #1: She’s tiny; #2: She only plays basketball at summer camp; and #3. The odds of anyone becoming a professional athlete are slim.

Whether or not she becomes the next Sheryl Swoopes, I predict that she will honor this natural color – her athleticism – throughout her life. It gives her pleasure, reward, and challenge. Basketball doesn’t have to become her career for her to reap the benefits of staying physically active, strong and fit. As long as she continues to enjoy and develop her natural gifts, then, from my perspective, it’s a slam dunk.

The great Chasidic teacher, Rabbi Zusha, believed that at the end of his life, when he would be asked to give a reckoning and inventory of how he spent his days and made an impact, he wouldn’t be asked, “Why weren’t you more like Moses?” Nor would he be asked, “Why weren’t you more like Abraham?” He anticipated that he would be asked, “Why weren’t you more like Zusha?” In other words, he would be held accountable for how much of his natural color and vibrancy he was able to bring to life, to use to enrich the world and the people around him.

If you’ve been waiting for the end of your days to ask yourself, “how could I have been more like myself during my life?”, then you’ve been waiting too long. Whether you could use a new career, a new hobby, or just a new perspective on what makes you tick, think back to the natural colors you were born with. It’s time to honor who you really were – and probably still are.

1. What were your favorite activities as a kid?
2. What were you known for doing well?
3. What made you feel most proud? Excited? Engaged?
4. When did you stop doing these activities? Why?
5. What elements of these activities are you still engaged in, personally or professionally?
6. What activities have you abandoned that you’d like to revisit?
7. What talents do you know you still have?
8. How will get started?
9. By when?
10. Who might you get to join you?