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MASTER'S PROJECT: HOW SELF DISCOVERY CREATES INTENTIONAL LEADERSHIP

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**MASTER'S PROJECT: HOW SELF DISCOVERY CREATES INTENTIONAL
LEADERSHIP**

A Capstone Project Presented

by

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to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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ABSTRACT

The past few years have seen me broken and rebuilt.

These years nudged, then prodded and finally ripped away my sense of control until I didn't have a choice but to let go. Fear and learned behavior had kept me in place but Faith gently guided and reminded me to trust what I could not see.

The first year of this program saw a lot of listening and nodding but I found it frustratingly difficult to integrate the lessons into my life. The second year was filled with devastating personal losses - my partner left me, I was declined a job opportunity after 6 interviews, my Dad passed, and I moved back to the hustle of the Bay Area from my mountain cabin. The world opened up and made demands of where I physically needed to be.

I fought it all. My physical body was inflamed by the negative, shameful, defensive energy I carried and masked with a smile. My leadership as a mother and manager, friend, role model and sister reflected and declined during this time.

The third year started on the floor of my bedroom curled in a ball crying and writing in my journal. Thankfully rereading those words I saw an openness to surrender. The following project is an outline of how I have been able to integrate my learnings from the MLS experience into my personal and professional work in a way that holds accountability to myself and community. The work acknowledges lineage and privilege, and challenges my edges. Including, but not limited to, allowing vulnerability by asking for help, managing fear, building self-worth and Faith.

Please note the work has been transformative and the path ahead feels endless, this is the beginning - a snapshot of the place I orient myself today and the methods and processes that have brought me here.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At times I selfishly believed I was in this alone, I now know I never was.

I want to thank my son, Gideon, who gave up *our* time so I had quiet space to complete and turn my assignments in. He was proud of me (and told everyone) the moment I was accepted. Your heart is so big, thank you my love.

To my partner, Darren, who allows me latitude to explore my path while never leaving my side. For the countless conversations that give me space to process feelings and learnings of the MLS program. For showing me how to slow down and not define my value by productivity. For the absolute gift that being your partner gives me and, with your skill set, the ability to build my dreams. I love you.

Kate, my friend and, lucky for me, neighbor too who held my head up when I couldn't, for being brave enough to show me things about myself I wasn't able to see with exceptional love and grace. Thank you for the game nights, giggles and conversations. I see you.

Susan and Anne, our west-coast cohort, we went through the MLS process together, found safety and inspiration in each other's feedback while being states apart. I could not have done this without you. Holding you both to a Napa rendezvous. I see no end to this trifecta. All my gratitude.

Lastly, my ancestors, particularly my Dad and Grandma. I may not be able to hold your hand but I know you're with me. Feeling your energy is a constant reminder that I am surrounded by generations of love and that I am safe. Thank you for guiding me. This understanding erases my fear and allows me to follow dreams. The pain I felt in your passings was in exchange of this gift.

LIST OF FIGURE

FIGURE 4.1

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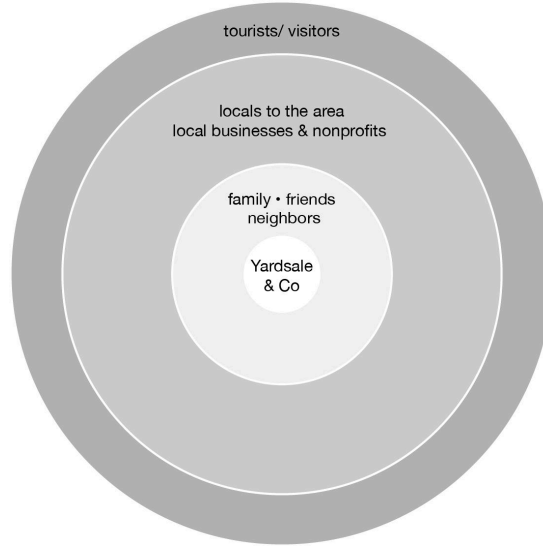


Figure 1: 4.1 Visual of Yardsale & Co.'s Community

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CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT, PROJECT JUSTIFICATION & GOALS

Section 1.1 Introduction

“If you want to live a life you’ve never lived, then you have to do things you’ve never done.”

Sincero (2013)

Sincero’s words have been strengthening my steps as I move in a direction I’ve never gone before.

After over a decade in fashion design, I had seen the cyclical nature of trends as well as the extraction that producing clothes has on the environment and the inequality inherent to the system creating them. I felt out of alignment with my values. In the Summer of 2023 I quit my job to use my experience and savings to open a non-profit thrift store in my beloved mountain town. I would be approaching thrifting differently, the price point would remain accessible, the inventory would be cleaned and steamed before being put out onto the floor, hangers would be wood, I’d use recycled paper as price tags and the space would be inspiring. The profits, as outlined in my Statement of Information, would help the local population with affordable housing needs (Bindman (2022)).

I let go of a paycheck, healthcare, and routine for a heap of uncertainty, mitigated with a handful of tools to manage the fear. I could no longer pretend to care about my work or ignore the environmental burden it extracted from living systems. Finally, I could not stay caged in a role that limited my abilities. I chose to embrace my power, privilege, and used it to benefit the community by living in authentic alignment with my values.

There are a handful of resources that guided what ultimately became my focus and exploration in this process. A few that stand out include Julia Cameron's "Artist's Way," (Cameron, 2002) which encouraged *morning papers* as a means to go deeper than the surface level of our busy thoughts. Glennon Doyle's "Untamed" (Doyle, 2020) gave words to my feelings as well as perspective around the ridiculous beliefs I held around keeping myself small. As quoted at the top of this section, the humor and encouragement of Jen Sincero in her book "You are a Badass" (Sincero, 2013) to believe in our own worthiness. In addition, my strengthening to Source, or higher power and ancestral love, was the silver lining of my father's passing in March 2022 opening a deep connection to Faith. Lastly, methods I used including stillness, inquiry and noticing, journaling and connection to a higher power allowed absorption of the information and created real action.

This work was built upon two decades of my professional experience, a love of creating, a desire to contribute to community, a deep responsibility to extract less from the environment, an informative interview with another thrift store (Smith, 2023), individual community members and other nonprofits with like-minded intentions. Yardsale has become a capable pathway to supporting a coalition that benefits the whole.

Section 1.2 Questions

I started my journey by finding focus around questions of authenticity, specifically the following:

1. What impact can I have on my community when I show up being true to myself and unroot negative learned behaviors? Do edges move? What does authenticity feel like in the body?

2. In leadership, how does acknowledging my privilege allow space for radical candor, creative problem solving and different approaches? Do intentions change? Do power dynamics shift? How will systems change? Somatically, what does it feel like when these opportunities open?
3. What happens when I consciously change how I participate in systems that are designed to keep me small, heal my wounds and take up space to alter systems that can empower systemic changes? What happens when you give yourself permission, instead of waiting for others to give it to you?

Section 1.3 Impact and Goals

The shop is the outcome of my embodied leadership practice. The purpose of the store reflects my own values which are narrowed down to the following:

1. Reduce waste
2. Give back
3. Build community
4. Inspire creativity

I met those goals in the initial few months in a greater way than I could have hoped. The impact, including potential impact, felt limited by my boundaries. Those boundaries are defined by experiences I've had and haven't had, as well as self-limiting beliefs.

I've noticed that when I'm focused on embodying my authenticity and giving deep care to what I'm creating, my input has ripple effects. I've witnessed numerous examples of this, some as minor as clearing the walkway of weeds and debris to next time finding the walkway already swept and weeded by neighboring businesses. I've witnessed the store connecting

customers with their creativity and values. I've been humbled by the power of *asking* as I did this week when I called our local grocery store, to ask where the unsold easter baskets ended up and if I could have them. Their answer was the dump, and yes! Our larger goal of easing housing needs in my community has connected me to government programs, individuals and wealthy community members so we can work together to be part of the solution. The store continually creates a platform for impact on both small and large scales.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

My methods evolved as the shop became real and grew. During the planning stage, I engaged regularly in educational material in the form of books, podcasts, audiobooks, conversations with friends, family and colleagues, a mentorship through the Small Business Association (Carmen, 2023), and astrology (Lanyadoo, 2024), movies and documentaries, painting, exercise, time in nature and internal listening by way of silence. The silence provided openings to spaces that needed healing- particularly around financial fear and self-doubt. I was never far away from my journal which captured thoughts, fears, creative inspiration, and moments of internal understanding. What I noticed was a greater shift from a theoretical understanding of my values to an embodied practice.

One of the powerful methods I wasn't expecting but leaned on often was Faith. Through a vision just after my Dad's passing, I was curious about what I saw, what it meant, and how it made me feel. It created an opportunity for connection with God, angels and ancestors. Part of what enabled me to create the store was deeply believing things would be ok without knowing how. Also, thrift store inventory comes from donations and Faith was believing they would come. What showed up consistently were solutions appearing when they needed to. These included finding a location, the community letting me know how to best serve their needs, donations arriving, and having enough money for expenses. Having Faith unraveled lessons I learned from my participation in corporate America and took me from a place of lack to one of abundance, and from a place of fear to one of comfort. By aligning my work with my values, I felt more whole and in coalition with the community than I had before.

Making this shift in career and leaving a weekly schedule that had defined my time for the last decade was destabilizing. I was so invested in the store's success and the positive feedback loop during the remodel and first months of the store's opening that my methods for grounding were often ignored. I gave the majority of my available time and headspace to the shop. Mornings previously spent journaling or exercising could now find me on the floor of a neighbor's house helping them pack donations, ordering materials, brainstorming solutions to problems, vacuuming floors in the store or cleaning donations. Evenings were not spent in stillness but watching TV to detach. Not caring for my needs created an unsustainable path and instability. Further, my body was asking me to rest. I had to find a new rhythm, re-ground in my methods as well as create boundaries for my energy.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Section 3.1 Community Level - An Exchange of Love

“The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of your life is to give it away.”

(Picasso, date unknown)

The results of this process were profound on two levels - community and personal.

Beginning with community, the project created pathways for deep community building. In the example of my neighbor, who I spent mornings with packing his deceased mom's belongings, I now know him more deeply. I am the recipient of not just the items, but of his joy in retelling his mom's life. In this simple way, I've seen him slowly let go and move on as he untethered from things that have kept him in place. Having reason to stay in communication with friends, neighbors and strangers provides empathy and dimension to the community. They check on me, stop in to say hello and help me fill the store. It's a powerful exchange of love.

Since opening I've seen the store be a conduit for many things. Often what I receive is not an exchange of physical things but stories. The store is a safe space to share vulnerabilities. The store has also become a conduit for wealth disparity, receiving items from wealthier homes and processing them in a way that gives to those in need.

For Hunter, a young man who needed to leave a bad housing situation and would be sleeping in his car, his need was wool blankets. We took our profits and bought him one, as well as offering the store parking lot as a safe place to park and the store to sleep in on the coldest nights.

There have been other ways of community impact - I've been able to employ local women, keep items out landfill, offer an accessible price point and inspire customers to follow their dreams. In addition, I was invited to serve on the non-profit North Tahoe Business Association board (Reilly, 2024), a partnership with the community center and a native plant nursery as well as connections with local artists, government officials, and non-profits through grant programs. Learning about other businesses, nonprofits and grants is allowing Yardsale to integrate and build on work being done around affordable housing.

From the vantage point of the store everyday I'm witness to community building. I've seen families and friends connect and have been witness to two girlfriends laughing and supporting each other while trying on clothes. I've seen others sit in a quiet corner and pick up one of our books. I had a sweet couple come in and buy frames to replace the ones lost in the Paradise fire, finally ready to hang pictures again.

In one final mention of community impact, particularly on my leadership as a mom, my son Gideon sometimes works on weekends with me and, more than once, has wrapped his arm around my shoulder and let me know how proud of him he is. I'm grateful he's been a witness to the community we've been welcomed into and the importance of the work we do.

Section 3.2 Personal Level

On a personal level, the shifts have been both wonderful and destabilizing.

As mentioned, I am filled with energy by the community response, possibilities and connections. The pain in my shoulders no longer aches and I don't wake up wishing I was doing something else but I have had to be conscious about how much I give.

Weekends used to be time to relax with family but are now oriented around the store as they are the most important days of sales. This has changed the cadence of our weeks. I had defined hours for “work” before but that definition no longer exists so I’ve had to develop a practice to consciously choose where I put my energy. I’m called to remember Nature and what she teaches us about nourishing ourselves so we can nourish each other.

My relationship to money has changed too. I spent a lot of my savings updating an office space into retail, so I don’t look as often at my stock investments. I don’t pay myself, so I consume less and spend less time shopping. Not putting emphasis on stock market movement or consumption has caused me to care less about my individual gain; I am instead focused on growing and funding the nonprofit. I now enjoy having agency over my wealth and time. My body is more relaxed now that I am no longer in competition with colleagues for promotions and raises. The shift has given me incredible agency, security, and control over my life.

CHAPTER 4: EVALUATION/ ASSESSMENT: EVALUATION & FINDINGS

There are a handful of ways I assessed the quality of my work. The first was community response and feedback. Beyond verbal affirmation by customers, we appreciated these first two Google reviews:

“SO cute AND reasonable prices. This is the most organized thrift store I’ve ever been to. Really great shopping experience.” - Saskia R, Google review

“Lovely owners, beautiful store front, and great prices! If you find yourself near Kings Beach this is a must stop spot.” - Natalie Williams, Google review

Beyond customer feedback, I am humbled by the quality of the donations we receive. We are not given odds and ends but, instead, resalable items of value. I also assess the quality of the service we provide through the large number of returning customers who often bring family or friends to share the store with.

Lastly, a quantifiable measure of success is that we have visibility to the store’s sales. In the first month we were able to pay our bills, as well as donate close to \$500 dollars to local housing needs. January 2024 was a slower month for sales, but donations poured in which allowed us to build back stock. It has also allowed time to learn about community programs. The second week of February brought our largest week in sales - almost \$2,000. Since opening I have not had to pay out-of-pocket to meet our financial needs, a feat in a small community where businesses often struggle.

The store supports a closed-loop system that minimizes the environmental burden of producing *new* stuff, but there are limitations caused by having a physical space: I could not accept all the furniture people wanted to donate. The solution was to create a board for the community to both post what they are *in search of* and what people are selling or giving away. In one example, a local realtor needed to empty a condo before it went on the market and posting

on this board allowed community members to connect and pick up furniture items for free. This allowed us to meet our goal of lessening the impact of consumerism on the environment by keeping items out of landfill beyond our four walls. I have continued to evolve structures to meet our mission.

The gift of community has been a wonderful result that was not fully anticipated. I want to get clear on Who is impacted by this work? Who is touched by my leadership practices? And what is it that I am trying to create/ build/ transform through this process? Below is a figure to help explain:

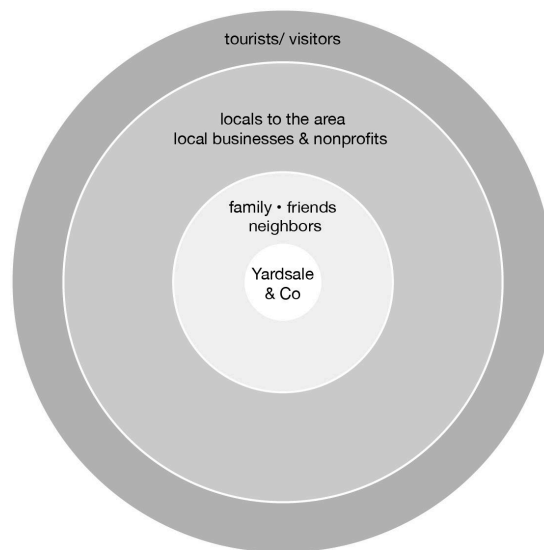


Figure 4.1 Visual of Yardsale & Co.'s Community

I've used the word *community* freely in this report, but I want to define it better (see Figure 4.1). I consider my family, friends, and neighbors my closest community. The secondary circle represents customers I've met through the store as well as other businesses, government agencies and nonprofits I've connected with. The final circle describes tourists or visitors that stay in the area for a limited period of time and support the store by shopping. My leadership,

reflected in the values of the store, touches all of these circles but not equally, and in different ways.

Those in the second circle - local customers, businesses, government organizations and nonprofits I've connected with using the store's values as a platform - are impacted most by the work. Working together with these entities allows for greater impact and understanding of needs. For example, a recent conversation with Emily Setzer, Principal Planner for Placer County (Seltzer, 2024), introduced me to their not yet launched Down Payment Developer Assistance program to support local workforce housing needs. The potential outcome of this program creates an opportunity to reduce old power dynamics and structures inherent in the real estate market and create long-term workforce housing. When working in partnership with local agencies, the result is a community effort, and the work feels significantly less singular. The potential for impact also grows. On a personal level, being able to create/ imagine pathways forward with community is energizing.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS/ NEXT STEPS/ KEY LEARNINGS

As I gain a better understanding of community needs, my approach to meeting them is shifting. We currently meet needs on an individual level as they present themselves in the store but going forward, I'll take a more proactive approach. This includes working with government agencies, applying for funding opportunities and finding ways to partner with like-focused organizations. The repositioning will allow for greater impact towards affordable housing needs and create a coordinated community approach.

On an environmental and giving level, procuring donations is critical to keeping our doors open. Developing reliable sources of inventory is important and a constant thought exercise. Keeping donations as local as possible has meant creating relationships with storage unit facilities, community-focused groups and shops, as well as in-store and digital posts. On an individual level, asking for donations is an internal confrontation with a *fear of rejection*, a feeling I've been noticing, playing with, and challenging myself to confront.

Creating a store that reflects my desire to give back, create community, enable accessibility, and help the environment has freed me to imagine that all things are possible. It has challenged inhibiting thoughts and given me space to create. The results have been fulfilling and given my life powerful orientation. Having the store as a platform, I am motivated to confront fears and shift my personal boundaries and beliefs. This has been an exercise in identifying my values and stepping into power. Owning my power and participating in self-care, it has lessened the control others have in my life. Furthermore, this is a practice of noticing and nurturing the body, like listening to my tummy ache or body resistance, as well as identifying my repeated behaviors. Since leaving a traditionally structured professional environment, I now define what

success looks like for myself and I anticipate that as my work evolves, my individual work will evolve too.

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CHAPTER 7: APPENDICES



Appendix 7.1 Pre-demo/ demo

Transformation from an office space to a retail store



Appendix 7.2 Rebuilding

Whenever possible we upcycled from things that already existed. These tiles were purchased off Craigslist and cut with a saw purchased there too



Appendix 7.3 Sourcing

I sourced shelf brackets, signage and clothing racks from makers through Etsy





Appendix 7.4 Opening

Appendix 7.5 Business Plan

📄 YS BUSINESS PLAN.pdf