

STIR IT UP!

**Stay Relevant:
A Self-Coaching
Parable**

**Don't Let Work Happen TO You;
Make it Work FOR You**

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ONE

Standing in line at Starbucks scrolling on my phone, I catch this headline: “AI Is Coming for Your Job.” My younger brother, Frankie, can’t stop talking about AI. The barista calls, “Iced latte for Maribel.” Hurrying to the counter, I pick up my morning jolt of caffeine and flag the article to read later.

It’s a quick ride up the elevator to the eleventh floor. This building is brand-new with state-of-the-art everything. As the elevator doors open, I once again see the shiny chrome letters on the wall behind the receptionist desk that read *WAVERLY*. I still can’t believe that I landed this dream job right out of college. Not that it was easy to get here! Unlike most of my friends, I love my job.

“Maribel. Let’s go,” my boss, Michael, barks as he walks by my office in his Ralph Lauren suit. He’s my least favorite part of the job. I wish I had a better boss, but I’ve managed to rise through the ranks despite his incompetency.

Hmm, I don’t have a meeting on my schedule, but I can see that the whole team is in motion.

“Coming.” I grab my iPad and follow Michael to the conference room, or “the fishbowl” as we call it, because of the glass walls. The rest of the team trickles in behind me. Sarah and Devi are talking about getting tickets to Coachella, a massive music festival in the desert. Carlos, of course, is late. Charlie, the most senior team

member, is on vacation. He's a lifesaver, buffering the rest of the team for Michael. We all settle into the white leather chairs and wait.

"I've got some news for all of you," Michael mumbles while he finishes a text message. He barely looks up and continues. "As you know, revenue is down. We're officially in a hiring freeze and cost-containment mode. I need you all to tighten your belts. We set aggressive targets, and we still need to achieve them—even though we can't add any extra people to help."

His deadpan delivery smacks of ambivalence instead of urgency. The team starts peppering him with questions. Cutting us off, he says, "Cool your jets. You guys will figure it out. I'll be watching the dashboard and the metrics, so make sure you do as well."

Without another word, he walks out of the room. Devi and Sarah seem indifferent as they resume their conversation about which artists they are most excited to see at Coachella.

Carlos furrows his brow as if totally perplexed.

"What do you think?" I ask.

"Don't overreact just yet. You tend to worry too much," he says.

"I know. But based on the look on your face, you're the one who seems worried now."

"I am. I just don't know how we're going to pull it off without any more resources—I don't. I really, really don't," he repeats as he exits the room.

I stay behind in the fishbowl and start to draw a mind map. When I'm stressed, writing things down helps calm me. Across the top I scrawl, *Should I Be Worried about Losing My Job?* I learned this practice from one of my favorite professors at University of California Santa Barbara, Mark Hardy. In the center, I draw a circle with my stylus and write *my job*.

The first branch in my mind map is for questions I have—what I want to know. Another branch says *job elements*, and another, *key projects*. I choose assorted colors for each branch and allow my brain to freely associate and clear out my muddled thoughts. Remembering I have a client to call, I close the file and plan to return to it later.



I smell the enchiladas baking in the oven as I walk through the door of my childhood home. Frankie looks up from the video game on his iPhone and gives me a nod. He's the baby of the family, a senior in college, and still living at home. My dad is watching the Dodgers game while my mom is in the kitchen. I drop my purse on the floor, kick off my shoes, and hug my parents. I love our family dinners.

"Sit. Sit. Time to eat." My mom waves me out of the kitchen.

As I take my seat at the table, I notice the chair cushion sewn by Mom years ago. The cushion has lost its padding and still shows the orange soda stain from long ago. Everyone gathers around, and we say the common blessing, giving thanks for our food.

"Pass the guacamole—the guacamole," Frankie demands.

"Where are your manners?" My mom holds back the large bowl of dip until she hears the magic words.

"Please," he adds.

"How's work, Maribel?" This is always the first question my dad asks. Not "How are you feeling?" or "Do you have a boyfriend?" or "Are you still exercising regularly?"

My parents sacrificed a great deal for me to go to college, and they want to be sure I'm making the most of my education. My response to his question is always positive, because whether it's true or not on that day, I want them to believe work is great. I hesitate. My dad looks up from his plate and waits.

“Uh, it’s OK. Business isn’t as good right now. So the company keeps telling us that we need to help reduce costs—all the while, my boss expects us to deliver more services. We don’t have enough people to do the job now, and we can’t hire anyone new.” I look at the enchilada on my plate, not ready to look my dad in the eye again just yet, and then I continue. “Plus, our targets for the new year are even higher. So I’m not sure what it will mean to my job. But in our last meeting, my boss didn’t seem very worried about it. But I am! I think it could have a major impact on what I do.”

Being old school, my dad believes that whatever the boss says is true. I’m not surprised to hear him say, “If your boss says don’t worry, then don’t worry. Do whatever you can to make it easier for him, and you’ll be fine.”

My mom listens quietly as she eats her dinner. I help clear the table and follow her to the sink to help with the dishes. My parents don’t have a dishwasher. Mom claims she never wanted one, even after they could afford to buy one. “I do my best thinking with my hands in hot water,” she insists.

She gently wipes the brightly painted ceramic plate and hands it to me to dry. First the plates, then the silverware, and finally the glasses. The order never varies.

“Even though your father says ‘don’t worry,’ I know you will. Do you remember what Coach Jacobson taught you about uncertain situations?” she asks.

I stop drying the glass and think about it, but I’m drawing a blank. I shrug my shoulders.

“Coach always told you girls, ‘Don’t let the play happen *to* you; make the play work *for* you.’”

Ah, yes. I remember these words now, of course. During a game, when someone made a mistake or something unexpected happened,

rather than getting rattled on the next play, Coach taught us to think ahead about how we could turn the situation to our advantage. If the runner was on first base, what could we do to keep her there? Even better, how could we get a double play? We learned how to make the situation work for us instead of against us. He always taught us to focus on the things we could control or influence.

Mom smiles, pushes my hair out of my face, and asks, “How can you make this new situation work *for* you rather than acting like it’s happening *to* you?”

Good question, and one that I don’t yet have an answer for—yet.



On the drive home, I can’t get that question out of my mind. How can I leverage these changes at work to my benefit? The dashboard on my Tesla 3 lights up, and Amanda’s avatar face glows as her Beyoncé ringtone sings out. I press connect.

“Hey, how was Tuesday dinner? When will you be home?” she wants to know. Amanda is my BFF from college. We are an unlikely pair, but we bonded freshman year over our love of books, and we’ve been inseparable ever since.

“I’m on my way.”

“Any leftovers?”

“Of course. See you in five.”

I pull into the garage of the townhouse I share with Amanda. Her parents bought it for her as a graduation gift from college. Her dad is a high-powered attorney, and her mom is a hedge fund manager. Amanda has never wanted for anything, ever. I open the door, and my ankle is immediately assaulted with licks by my furry baby, Dakota, a wiry rescue mutt. He’s always eager to see me. I scratch behind his ears and call out, “Postmates delivery!”

Amanda bounds down the stairs from the loft.

“Awesome!” She grabs the Tupperware and buries her nose in it, inhaling the delicious smells. “Good day?”

“Not really. It was weird. Michael made this big announcement about how we have to do twice as much work with the team we have. We were supposed to add four people, and now there’s a hiring freeze. I’m not sure what to think. Of course, my dad—always the optimist—told me not to worry. But my mom reminded me of something my softball coach used to say about flipping the script. He meant that instead of thinking something is happening *to* you, make it work *for* you.”

“Sounds like good advice to me,” Amanda adds with a mouthful of the leftovers.

“I don’t know. At work, things seem different. It’s not as easy as strategizing to win a softball game.”

“Why don’t you just leave? Michael is such a jerk. I bet my parents could hook you up with a new job in a New York minute.”

“But I love my job. The people I work with. Just not my boss. I don’t want to leave.”

“Well, I guess you need to sit down and do your ‘thing’—the bubble map or whatever you call it.”

“I already started one earlier. I know—you think it’s goofy. But it helps me think. I need somewhere to capture all the questions floating around in my brain. I need to have a serious conversation with myself to really understand what’s going on.”

Amanda rolls her eyes and pleads, “You sure you don’t want to just watch Netflix with me?”

“Nah, I’m going to go for a run to clear my head, and then I’ll work on my mind map.”

