

Chapter 1



The First Step to Success: Using the Resources You Already Have

The day I was born—actually, the very moment I was born—San Francisco shook. The ground shifted, the sidewalks quivered, and Californians braced themselves for an earthquake. Right before my mom passed out from the cesarean anesthesia, she let out one last howl: “This baby’s shaking up the world!”

...And she was right.

The energy of that earthquake has been whispering to me ever since.



My parents were regular, working-class Black folk from San Francisco, a city articulated by nature: violent cliffsides; grand oak trees in Golden Gate Park; redwoods that pierced the sky in the nearby Muir Woods; and, on occasion, a cosmic fog that arched into the city and settled, in a heavenly way, right on the concrete.

In the early mornings, that fog would sometimes float into the historically Black neighborhood Bayview–Hunters Point from the cold and seal-filled bay waters. That’s where my mom, dad, brother, and I lived. In

the evenings, our house was regularly bathed in the big, bold sunsets that reached in from the depths of the Pacific Ocean.

The way wilderness snuck directly into my early childhood was less dramatic than San Francisco's epic, mountainous proportions: It was through a bunch of squawking chickens. My maternal grandmother lived around the corner on Quesada Avenue, and she had a noisy chicken coop in the backyard. And *oh*, did these chickens make themselves *known*. They would cackle and holler whenever we came out of her house to collect greens from the garden. I remember those chickens staring at me when I went to pick the zucchini we would use to make sweet zucchini bread.

My grandma's chickens lived in San Francisco way before Facebook and Google dominated the city. This was San Francisco in the early 1980s, the Reagan Era, and the end of social safety systems. When I was a kid, California was rapidly closing institutions for those in need of support. Mental health institutions were shut down, and Section 8 housing benefits were cut. The city was pulsing with addictive drugs, which spiraled into a homeless epidemic. Black folk were being locked away in epic proportions for drug use, and the city seemed to constrict us around our necks for simply trying to find our way out of Jim Crow and into the economy.

Of course, I didn't know all this was happening when I was five. But I could see the micro-effects of those policies pulsing in my other granny's neighborhood in the Western Addition, where she lived in a three-bedroom apartment on the first floor of a brutalist housing project. Granny (my dad's mom) lived there with my aunt Gloria, my cousin Shontae, and her crazy pet parrot, Happy, who, whenever I visited, would squawk, "Aye, Motherfucka!" right into my face. I would run to my grandma, crying.

But Granny would hold me up and say, "*Nah*, baby, you go say *fuck you* right back!"

I never did. Instead, I ran to the wide, rectangular windows and looked out to watch the neighborhood passing by on the street. Sometimes I would see men driving by in their cars, playing loud music that rattled the glass, or sometimes groups of rowdy teenagers strutting down the street playing Rapper's Delight at top volume like they owned the place.

Other times, the people outside my window didn't act so PG. There was some messed-up stuff going on in the beehive of affordable housing. Addiction birthed drug deals and colorful characters: pimps decked out in

suede coats with fluffed-up blue fur collars flirted with girls barely clothed in leather miniskirts. Men gambled, and dominoes or bloody fists fell regularly in the courtyard.

Behind the courtyard was a playground where I sometimes played with the other project kids. Once, some big girls came out and teased me about my hair. “You look like a horse!” they said. My heart started to beat—*boom boom boom*—and my feet sprinted me outta there, landing me right back in Granny’s apartment with tears streaming down my face.

“What are you doin’ here, girl?” my granny said. “If those girls are mean to you, you gotta go out there and show them who’s boss!”

“Yeah,” my aunt Gloria said. “Go out there and tell them that’s *your* playground and you *beat* their ass if they don’t listen to you!”

I did go back out there but couldn’t muster the courage to show *anyone* anything, so I just waited until what I thought was the right amount of time to retreat into the domicile of the vulgar parrot and violently inclined aunties.

This summarizes my very early childhood (we lived in San Francisco until I was five), but this existence—the projects, gang violence, the city—was my dad’s *whole life*. And I believe it taught him a very specific and awful lesson: My dad learned *very early* that violence was *how you get things done*.

Besides my dad, my granny had three other kids: two daughters and another son, Tommy. Uncle Tommy had a rough life. He was always odd and lived with Granny for a while when I was young. When my little brother, La Mar, and I visited, Uncle Tommy was always just sittin’ in the corner and never said much to us. Instead, he just muttered quietly to himself, shaking his head in painful, imaginary solitude. It wasn’t until much later that Granny finally told me that Uncle Tommy had been in a car accident, fallen off a cliff, and suffered severe head trauma from which he never really recovered.

Later on, in the dark shadows of the projects where my granny lived, some guys jumped Tommy and kicked him in his skull as they beat him to the ground, took his wallet, and left him on the street. That assault exacerbated Uncle Tommy’s head injury, furthering his inability to function, and he became an unhoused person in downtown San Francisco.

I'm unsure if Uncle Tommy ever talked to my father again after his injury. I imagine that caused my dad emotional pain and some straight trauma. It didn't help that even *before* Uncle Tommy's accident, violence pierced my family through its patriarch: My father's father was murdered way before I was born. I don't know *how* or *why* my grandfather died, but I know that Black men have a history of being murdered in this country for reasons beyond their control.

Something about all those experiences—my grandfather's untimely death, Uncle Tommy's decline, and the chaos of the projects—formed my dad's belief system that violence was *always* the answer. That sank deep into my dad's blood and molded him into the person he was to become.

I'm not a psychologist, but here's my take: Because my dad was forced into being the only "man" of the house, that identity took hold of him. He transformed it into a specific and pernicious belief system that manifested as a characteristic: He had to *control everything and everyone around him*.

That meant controlling *literally* everything that his family did and used—from the money to the modes of transportation. In totality, he wanted to be the only one the family could rely on to survive. That feeling of control made him feel *powerful*, and that power made him feel secure. Ironically, his obsession with control *made everyone around him terrified*. That controlling energy got a lot worse when he had a house of his own to take care of.

My earliest memories of my dad revolve around the soundtrack of his demands. "Get me water," he used to say to me as he collapsed on the couch after work. (He sold washers and dryers at a now-defunct department store.) "Give me the remote." "Get my shirt for me." "Do what I say!" he used to shout, sending orders into the very fibers of my brain.

Often, his barks were not just about getting me to comply with acts of service but were just about illustrating his *power over me*. He had so many orders because he wanted to be obeyed. This was often the case when he came home late from work, burst into my room, and started to scream, "Do your homework!"

"But Dad," I would say as he stood over me, "I've already *done* my homework."

He would raise his hands, and the way he stood sent me dead quiet. "*Don't talk back to me, LaTresse. Just do what I said! Do what I said!*" And I

had to pretend to get out a piece of paper and do math exercises just so he would feel obeyed.

The black belt would come out if I dared to say no or insist that I *did* my homework. And that black belt hurt. It hurt a lot. The black belt did more than physically harm me, though. It instilled a sense of fear in me that would take decades to overcome. My dad's dumb rage mainly taught me that I couldn't protect myself. I couldn't defend myself because no matter what I said, I would be *wrong*, and he would be *right*. And thus, I shouldn't have a voice. *Using my voice would cause me pain.*

In some ways, my dad tried to protect my family from everything that wasn't him. When the economy of Bayview—Hunters Point began inching toward mass unemployment because the city closed the naval shipyard, my dad moved our whole family out. We landed in Sacramento when it was just a rusty town full of white folk, but it echoed the promise of opportunity.

Our new Sacramento home was solid and simple: a one-story off-white house on the corner of a suburban development that my dad bought for \$58,000 on July 9, 1980. To me, a city kid used to sidewalks and crowds, it was like we had moved to a *very* green moon—right across the street from us was a horse farm. The horses pooped and farted and stared at us—trust me, I stared *right* back. They didn't look like me; what the hell had those girls been talking about? Moreover, what the hell was a horse doing right outside my house?

While San Francisco had big parks dedicated to bridging the natural world and urban life, in Sacramento, that merging didn't need to be curated—there were just a lot more plants all around. Some were menacing, like the prickly red rose bushes, whose spiky thorns would scratch you if you got too close, that lined the path to our new front door.

But there were nice plants too. The first tree I ever loved—a wide weeping willow—lived in the far-right corner of our front yard. She took herself seriously, with far-reaching branches and a commanding shadow, a compelling commodity during the hot Sacramento summers. This tree spoke in a soft, authoritative hum: Its whispering leaves would flutter and flirt with each other when the wind picked up and settle down in a rustling sleep when the air was calm. I liked to read under her branches. I liked to read there a lot. Cradled in the crevices of her roots, I was safe from my dad's control.

It was more than that, though. In the inverted nest of the willow branches, I was even *powerful!* It was a secret power, though: I possessed the magical ability to be in two wonderful places at once—in nature *and* in the far-fetched lives of the characters whose stories unfolded in familiar words across pages—where no one could tell me what to do. Not even my dad.

I wanted *everywhere* to be like that. I knew then, shaded from the sun, that I wanted to have *real* authority in my life, not just the magical kind but the tactical kind. I wanted to live a life where *no one* could ever tell me what to do. The type of life where my voice had power! Where people listened to me and I was respected. And, if I dreamed big enough, a life where I could travel and have adventures—just like my friends in the pages of my books.

Looking back, though, it must have been a funny sight: a Black girl with books underneath a willow tree, having a great old time all by herself. I imagine that's what everyone around me saw because none of our neighbors were Black; they were all white or Asian. The only other Black kid around for a long time was my little brother.

While my brother, La Mar, grew up to be a bit of a party boy and then became a bold adventurer, we started out the same: same toys, same parents, and same rules. He had soft, brown skin, short hair, and soft brown eyes that flashed whenever an opportunity came about.

Eventually, La Mar and I would come to have a healthy competition around our careers and education. Still, when we were growing up, my mom tried to keep everything equal and fair—which started with us getting the same (girly) presents. At Easter, we both got baskets decorated in shiny pink bows, filled to the brim with chocolate eggs. I have a picture of us gripping the wicker handles, smiling as if we'd just won the lottery.

It went unsaid that La Mar liked a lot of my stuff. For my father, that was a *terrible* thing. I loved Cabbage Patch dolls—big cheeks, big poofy pink skirts, and pigtail hairstyles—and when I got one, I took to cradling it like a little baby. My mom got La Mar a doll too. His doll had the same pink skirts and foofy hair, and he swaddled and dressed it up like it was his own baby.

That was not amusing to my father. The sight of La Mar playing with a pink doll sent him into a rage. “What a fucking *sis*sy,” my father would hiss when he saw us playing dolls on the gray carpet. “Why would you buy him a doll?” my father would say as he turned to my mom, who was watching us from the kitchen. “Do you want our son to grow up and be a *sis*sy?”

He yanked the doll away and handed him a football. La Mar and I started to ugly boo-hoo cry. Dad just took the car and left us there.

That was the gist of it.

When we—my mother, brother, and I—walked parallel to the prickly rose bushes, traversed under that arched entryway, went through the front door, and entered my father’s house—we crossed into the unnatural odor of the patriarchy.

It smelled like a powerful, medicinal, bitter perfume of control.

And while there are so many things I could tell you about my father—to give life in words to the way he sauntered into rooms and swallowed all the air; how his anger fueled the heat in the little house; how he used money as a method to induce subordination—the truth is, a lot of the specifics of the trauma were swallowed by my memory, in the interesting way our brain fogs our pain in an effort to protect the body.

But I will lead with this *lovely* anecdote. When I was seventeen, I was getting ready to choose my college. With pamphlets of historically Black colleges spread over my desk, my father peered over my shoulder and laughed in my face. “Instead of all of this *shit*, you need to learn how to iron a man’s shirt. *That’s* how you’re gonna get by in life.”

Three big things happened at that moment. First, my heart broke. It broke because I realized that my father did not like or believe in women. He did not think that we, as a gender, were capable of doing much more than being adult babysitters for the men we married.

The second thing his remark did, was, in fact, remarkable: It made me realize that I didn’t need my dad, or any man, or anyone’s permission to do exactly what the fuck I wanted to do in life. I was going to do it—*whatever it was*—all by my damn self.

The third and final thing his comment did was *fuel me* for the rest of my damn life. It drove me *up*, and it drove me *out*. It birthed the sounds that would become my soundtrack: *Get outta that house; find freedom; don't let anyone get in your way—big energy, big movements, just like the earthquake*. And while my father's heaviness set me free into the ocean of life, all of that energy did the opposite to my mom. It drove my mother *down*.

My mom, Carol, was a stay-at-home mother, not by choice but by force. My dad did not want her working outside the home. My parents met when she was nineteen, and I (and that earthquake) came just two years later. She became a mom before she had become herself. And my dad made sure she never existed, in an economical way, on her own. And that was just the start of the problem.

The more significant issue was that my dad needed to control every aspect of her life, including her access to her own sense of accomplishment. She wasn't allowed to work, so she felt stupid; the more foolish she felt, the more stupid he called her. The end result was a hopeless and bored human being with no autonomy or self-worth.

Once, when I was seven, my dad slammed open the front door, walked right up to the living room windowsill, and ran his finger across the dark wood instead of saying hello to any of us. The windowsill was a little dusty. Like the Hulk, his hands clenched into tight fists. The veins on his face began to pulse bright red as he huffed over to my cowering mother, yanked her hard from the couch by her arm, and shoved her toward the window. She almost hit the wall. But she caught herself, and he yanked her finger and used it to wipe up the dust.

"What is this?" he screamed, shoving her dust-laden appendage right into her face. "What the hell have you been doing all day? Why are you just so lazy? Stupid girl," he said before releasing her and huffing back to the kitchen to get a beer. At that moment, my mom shrank, her spine curved, and I could see her breathing slowly. Like an animal playing dead from the shock of trauma, she had trouble moving from where she'd been left. When she finally unfroze, she went straight to her garden: the only place she had any authority.

Her garden was lush. She transformed the barren, fenced-in backyard into an Eden, with a bold perimeter of velvety greens, luscious plum trees, and tangy lemon trees that burst explosions of zest into the late, suburban air. She would coax greens—crunchy gem lettuce, rich arugula, and sweet zucchini—out of the earth with gentle hands. What she could do with just some seeds and a little dirt was incredible.

Those greens fed us. Salads, filled with sliced sweet tomatoes plucked from wire gates, would appear for dinner alongside a roasted chicken as soon as my dad walked in from work (if dinner wasn't ready when he got home, dear god, he would get *mad*). For dessert, natural sweets: plums and cantaloupes grew plentifully and filled our plates. In this subtle way, nature, which was synonymous with the taste of freedom and my future, would sneak into the house on our plates, and the greens would nourish me—filling me with ideas I couldn't quite name at the time.

Idea about what it would be like to get out of the house. What if I did, really, could shake up the world?

Now *those* were ideas I liked.

I spent a lot of time thinking about my mom and my love of nature when I decided to write this book. I knew I wanted to write a book about freedom, making my own choices as an independent Black woman, and my coaching career where I empower others to live boldly, without fear. The more I thought about the *kind* of book I wanted to write and the lessons I wanted to convey, the more I realized that my dreams were the *exact opposite* of my mom's lived experience.

The simple truth is that, from a very early age, I craved freedom and my own money because my mom had neither. I wanted to be free. To be smart. To control my own life. My mom had nothing except the fashion magazines she had hoarded in the back closet. She had no freedom, no way out, and two children she had *no idea* how to pay for. She had never had a real job; she had no marketable skills and, unfortunately, had a mother who took no issue with how her husband treated her. ("You don't have to

work, child, count your blessings,” my grandmother used to say to her.) How *helpless* I believed her to be.

So, my mom stayed in this abusive relationship with a demanding and controlling husband because she couldn't leave. It was an okay enough situation for a while because she had her own car. The car served a specific, service-oriented purpose: My mom could get groceries, pick us up from school, and take us to the library. And it was nice, not being a latchkey kid, to come home from school and get a big old hug from my mommy. But then, when I was about fifteen, my mother's car broke down.

When she asked for a new one—desperate for even an ounce of freedom—my dad said *no*. When she asked again, he retaliated with more criticism and more restrictions. And so, her fear took over and blocked her from ever using her voice again.

When my mom stopped even asking for freedom, it affected me: I doubled down on my internalized belief that *if you dare to use your voice, you will suffer dangerous consequences. My voice doesn't matter*. Yet that same spiral was also linked to a powerful self-mantra: I gotta get out of this house; *I gotta get out of here to survive*. I swallowed both thoughts as true.

Even though I wasn't sure *how* I would get out of that house, I was able to hold on to the firm belief that I *would* and *could* because of one very famous lady. She taught me that Black women *could* really make money by using their voice, that Black women's voices *do* really matter, and that you can really do anything you damn want: the public's fairy godmother and everyone's favorite talk show host at the time, the almighty Oprah Winfrey.

School got out at 3:30 p.m., and Oprah—successful, powerful, charismatic, and *Black*—came into my living room and spoke some truth to me every day at 4:00 p.m. My mom watched her constantly. (I think I've seen every Oprah episode by default.)

Oprah wasn't afraid to ask tough questions and get what she wanted. She sat on that stage and *owned* it. And she was *rich* and *unmarried*! She got to make *all* this money and keep it all to herself. That was crazy! That was revolutionary! And thus, Oprah, for me and so many others, became the absolute embodiment of freedom.

I'm not sure when it happened, but I decided I wanted to *be like* Oprah. I wanted to be big, bold, powerful, and heard. I knew it was possible—if Oprah could do it, *so could I*.

My mom heard Oprah too, but the mogul whispered something different to her. Over her twenty-five-year TV career, Oprah interviewed women who were victims of domestic and emotional abuse. Those terms were unknown to my mom and hearing them changed her world. My mom watched episodes where husbands controlled suburban women like her and learned that abuse didn't have to come from the impact of a fist, but it could come from obsessive control over movements and money.

One day, for the first time, she realized that *she* was in an abusive relationship and that my dad had effectively emotionally smothered her into submission. With that—the ability to name her experience—Oprah's TV show *changed everything for my family*. We could finally understand what we were up against. But while my mom finally knew what was wrong with her, she had no resources to change the situation. (Though not for long.)

When Oprah wasn't commanding the afternoon talk show space, a few other TV shows poured into my living room, mainly *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*. AKA more Black people succeeding, navigating the chaos of life, and—drum roll please!—going to college. When Whitley Gilbert, the main character of *A Different World*, attended a Black university, I realized I wanted that experience so badly. I wanted to go to college. I knew then that I had to learn to use my voice—like Oprah—to get there.

So, while my dad's controlling demeanor made me anxious and hyper-alert to aggression, it also did something else: It made me *hyperaware of any opportunities that would help me get out of that house*. The main and most logical path seemed to be to get to college. (Thank you, Whitley!)

Doing well in school seemed like the logical answer to my dreams of attending higher education. But the school did not seem to embrace me the way I embraced it. Mostly because I was Black and almost everyone else was white. I was always the *only* Black kid, swaddled by white students in the Sacramento suburbs until finally, in third grade, two Black twins—Imani and Iyana—arrived.

Imani was in my class, and Iyana was in another class. I was so excited—another girl who looked like me. Adding to my excitement was Ms. Kendra, my first Black teacher. So, naturally, on the first day of school, I picked up

my school bag and plopped it down next to Imani when we got to select our own seats.

It was like an alarm went off in the classroom. Immediately, Ms. Kendra came around and moved me away from Imani and said, “No, you ladies can’t sit together; you will certainly talk too much.” It may have been the first time this happened to me, but it wasn’t the last. Unfortunately, this pattern—treating groups of Black people like misbehaving children—kept repeating even as I became a nonprofit executive. (But more on that later.) Ms. Kendra inadvertently taught me the lesson my dad did: *Be quiet, listen, or bad things will happen to you.* But the joke was on Ms. Kendra.

She sat me next to a redheaded white boy, Morris, who practically glowed with freckles, and I talked to him the *whole* year. It didn’t matter to me what skin color my friends had; I just wanted to use my voice and talk! Ms. Gavin didn’t forget that. During the parent–teacher conferences, she told my parents I wouldn’t amount to much because I could not stay quiet during class. My dad nearly laughed. “I tell her that all the time!” he said as my mom sat in dead silence.

Thankfully, the rebel in me—the same one that kept whispering, *Hey, LaTresse, just focus on getting outta that house. Don’t listen to everyone else. You got your own back; you got the earthquake behind you!*—didn’t listen to any of Ms. Kendra’s nonsense. Little did she know that I was going to be like Oprah.

When I was thirteen, I realized I was community-minded and began dreaming of being a community decision-maker. I also developed an exciting curiosity: I wanted to *see what I could do*. I knew I wanted to be free and not like my mother, who was always under the control of someone else. Then, amazingly, those predilections lined up with an opportunity: The City Council of Sacramento had an opening for a youth commissioner.

I applied immediately. I wanted to help people, and this opportunity would elevate my college apps—win-win! I sent in my application and waited for a response.

A few weeks passed, and my mom came home with a big, fancy, embossed envelope stamped with the Sacramento City Council seal. “LaTresse.” She came over and hugged me before she handed me the letter,

“Oh pumpkin, open it!”

I ripped open the envelope and let the words pour out. “As one of the top three finalists for this youth city council member position, you are invited to read a speech for the commissioners. The best speaker will be awarded the position.”

Right away, I thought of Whitley (I was on my way!), and I begged my mom to go out shopping. We got a snappy professional business dress with black tights and loafers for me. I felt so fancy in that outfit. I had no idea that this pattern of dressing up would become so important to me and advance my career so much.

Later that week, we went to the big government building with too-cold air conditioning and marble floors, and I read my speech about how much I loved Sacramento and what services my community needed to thrive.

My competition was two white boys. My audience was the very white and very male city council. There was only one Black city council member, who sat just off to the left. (I did not know that this demographic would ironically mirror many of the boardrooms I would occupy later in my career.) So, on that day, dressed in my new dress, I read my speech and was videotaped for deliberations.

I never got to see the recording. Instead, the next day after school, my mom pulled me aside in the living room before my dad got home and said, “Oh, pumpkin, after you left, there was a little bit of a controversy.”

“What do you mean, Mom? I didn’t win?” I said.

“No, darling, I’m afraid not.” Immediately, my heart dropped. Oh no. And there it was. The next consequence of using my voice: *rejection*. They said *no* to me.

“Why, Mom?” I asked, almost on the verge of tears.

“Well, baby, this is what I heard. After you left, the only other Black woman on the council said it was really unfair that they had put this young Black girl up against two privileged white boys. The Black woman accused all the other city council members of setting you up to fail for this opportunity.”

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I think you gave those boys a run for their money. Tresse, I don’t think this is the last time you’re gonna be in that situation. But next time, you gotta know that you have every right as a white boy to be on that stage.”

That was something to chew on. For the first time ever, I got positive reinforcement for trying to use my voice.

Even though I didn’t get that position, my mom was right. While I’ll never know if I didn’t get that job because of some nepotistic connection one of those boys had, or if they were just better candidates than me, or if they didn’t give it to me because I was Black, it doesn’t matter, because that experience made me *braver than I was before*.

It made me realize that I could—and should—use my voice, if for no other reason than to continue to step into white spaces and shake things up. To make people uncomfortable with my Blackness, femininity, and desire to be a leader. It wasn’t going to be easy—that was clear—but I was gonna keep trying. And you should too.

How to Use Your Voice

I am an executive coach, and here’s what I do: I help my clients get out of their own way. One of the biggest obstacles I see women—especially women of color—face in the workplace is letting the fear of using their voices stop them from reaching their highest potential. I know that for myself, finding the courage to communicate my needs and goals—and having my voice be heard—was a hell of a journey. I had swallowed so much negative programming from people and institutions throughout my early childhood that it was difficult for me to really believe my voice was *worthy* of being spoken. I’m glad I stuck with myself.

While it took me some time to implement bravery, outspokenness, and boundaries in my career, once I did, everything (and I mean *everything*) changed. I negotiated better salaries, more time off, and even got a professional executive coach included in my employment package. I eventually changed my life and became an entrepreneur with the launch of Bonsai

Leadership Group. My company executes my dream: to help nonprofit organizations identify, retain, and meaningfully support Black, Indigenous, and other folks of color in leadership positions.

I also help my clients find and use their voices in the workplace. As a result of my coaching, my clients have had profound accomplishments. Some have negotiated better titles, moving expenses, and higher salaries; others have figured out ways to grow their programs and respect within their organizations; others have learned to communicate with their difficult bosses and get what they want. Overall—everybody gets a voice! You get a voice, and you get a voice, and you get a voice. Catch the reference?

If you want to improve the resilience and strength of *your* voice, here are some of the tactics I use with my own clients.

Why Your Voice Matters

To gain confidence around using your voice, I like to start with this question: *What power has your voice already given you in your life?* I encourage you to write down three ways your voice has already paved your path to your current success.

1.

2.

3.

Now I want you to dig deep: *What are the main barriers, obstacles, fears, or anxieties you have around using your voice now?*

1.

2.

3.

Now, let's think: *What could happen if you use your voice more? What jobs could you get, how much more money could you have, and what negative programming could you put to rest?* Name three things you could have if you used your voice the way you dream of.

1.

2.

3.

When you can hold all three answers (how has your voice served you in the past, what's blocking you from using it now, and what could happen if you used it in the future), you can bridge the gap between *where you are* and *where you want to go*.

Now, let's look at strategies to get that voice up and out.

Overcoming Your Fear of Being the “Angry Black Woman”

Seventy percent of my clients are Black women, and nearly all of them have asked me the question: *How do I position myself in predominantly white spaces as a Black woman without sounding angry or ungrateful?*

But what they mean is, “LaTresse, how do I *not* get labeled “The Angry Black Woman?””

I want to take a moment and debunk that identity. This stereotype has deep, racist, and misogynistic roots in our cultural bias toward the American Black woman. The very label is a myth that is socially intended to limit Black women to the rules of patriarchy.

Here’s my take on why the label generates so much fear: I think so many women, especially Black and Brown women, are stuck in this thought loop: *We’re making a lot more money than our parents, we have better jobs than our parents had, so we shouldn’t want more.* Yet we do. We want more. We want more respect, pay, benefits, and growth opportunities.

But, inside, we struggle to believe that we are fully worthy of those things. Instead, we get stuck in the shame and guilt-driven dissonance that comes with having a six-figure-salary job and *still not* being treated the way we want to be treated in the workplace. I have found that women are often gaslighted into believing that their six-figure salary equates to *having a real voice in the workplace.* It often doesn’t.

And I am here to tell you that you shouldn’t settle. You should have exactly what you want in life—and work—and nothing less. And asking for it will not cause you to be labeled the “Angry Black Woman.” Here are some ways to reframe, reclaim, and ultimately release that label.

1. Sometimes, it is helpful to reframe the stereotype. Instead of being an “Angry Black Woman,” here is the *truth*: You are a woman who is trying to be authentic. You are a woman who is *saying what needs to be said.* Does that sound better to you? Well, good, because you are! That label is just a deeply negative way of framing those two very positive attributes.
2. If you are still anxious about using your voice to make a new request because you are scared of being labeled an “Angry Black Woman,” let’s

backtrack a little. Think about your past: Was there another time you were nervous about speaking up but did so anyway? How did you handle that situation? Write it down below:

3. So, you are saying that you've *successfully* used your voice before? If you have, what communication techniques did you use to be successful in that prior situation? (Were you calm? Direct?)

a.

b.

c.

4. Now, is it possible that some of those same techniques could be used in this new situation? What three things could you do to prepare yourself when you make this new ask?

a.

b.

c.

What I aim to teach you through these exercises is that you do, in fact, *Already know how to use your voice* (if you've done it before). And if you've done it *once*, you can do it *again!* All you have to do is think strategically about what techniques have worked for you historically and reapply them to the following situation.

This, effectively, is my personal coaching philosophy. I believe all my clients already have answers to their problems. As a coach, I help them get to the solution faster by using an inquiry-based approach.

If you are interested in learning more about finding and using your voice in the workplace, check out the additional resources available exclusively to readers in the **Book Bonuses**, which you can find in the **QR code** in the beginning of this book.