

Low Standards ...pathway to a great life

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My clients are such a source of inspiration and invitations for reflection that I don't know what I'd do without them! As I pondered several recent conversations I realized, yet again, that one of the reasons my life feels so full and rich, so easy and effortless is that I strive for so little. And that doesn't mean that I don't have hopes and aspirations, dreams, intentions and disappointments. But what it does mean is that somewhere along the line I discovered how wonderful it is to delight in what I have rather than bemoan what I don't have. Perhaps it comes from growing up a girl in a very poor family where expectations of what was possible for women were modest, to say the least.

I'm reminded of a conversation I had over 20 years ago as I was about to get married for the 3rd time ...yup, there I was, 34 years old, two marriages down and already having lived with my partner for a while and planning for another marriage (elaborate weddings have always been optional for me; I'm not big on all the hoopla). One of my female work colleagues was both startled and puzzled by my nuptial track record. So she said to me one day at coffee *"Now Gwen, I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but I'm really curious about this marriage thing with you."* By the way, I've long since discovered that 'I hope you don't take this the wrong way' typically means that something personally affronting and disparaging is about to head in my direction -- but I was still pretty naïve at the time! ...*"I'm several years older than you, I'm much better educated than you are (I'd finished high school; she had an Honours BA), I speak several languages, I've lived and traveled around the world, I've been a model so I know I have a great figure and am attractive (I've always been comfortable with my plain jane face and body), I invest in a great wardrobe and I have a far better job than you do ...so how is it that you've managed to find 3 men who want to marry you and I've only ever had 1 short, serious relationship in my life?"*

I was too stunned to be offended by her inquiry, but after I thought about her question for a moment I replied *"I don't know, I guess I just have low standards!"*

I've reflected on that response many, many, many times in the intervening decades. And I've come to believe that those low standards truly are the pathway that have helped me to create this wonderful life I live.

And my low standards have certainly not been a barrier to accomplishment. Educationally I've acquired both a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree. And I was clear as I stepped into both of those opportunities that my marks weren't going to be the basis for judging myself. As an adult learner I was clear that there were certain things I wanted to get out of both experiences and that getting A's would be no indication of whether I was accomplishing my goals or not. I recall the long hours of twisting and grinding that my peers engaged in so that they made sure they were on the honor roll. And I was clear that those high marks didn't make them any better people in this world. Nor did they translate into increased employment opportunities, promotions or raises.

The other thing I became aware of as I moved through my higher education experiences was that my low standards upset many people. How many professors took me aside to kindly tell me that they saw so much more potential in me than my marks indicated? All I had to do, they said, was to knuckle down a bit, be a little less free spirited, show them that I understood their points and I would raise my marks significantly. But I was clear within myself that needing someone else's approval of my thoughts wasn't a measure of success for me nor was my capacity to regurgitate facts, figures and opinions ever enough incentive for me to burn myself out. I was interested in learning the things I thought was important, not what they thought was important.

Before I left the corporate world I had accomplished a lot, most of it with my high school diploma, although I had completed my BA before I left. Over my 17 years with an organization employing some 45,000 people, I'd managed to rise from a lowly clerical position to being one of the 750 most senior people in the corporation. Sure I worked hard, but there were lots and lots of people around me who worked both harder and longer. I was smart but there were lots of other people way more brilliant than I was. What seemed to make the difference came down to three traits. First, I was always up for trying something new and didn't worry if it didn't work out perfectly. As a trail blazer I'd discovered along the way that getting something started was more important than having it be perfect. Second, I was always willing to engage with people as people and to cut them some slack for their idiosyncrasies. This approach to people included being willing to presume that people who worked in highly specialized disciplines weren't communication disordered, but simply may not be able to understand the needs of someone from another specialized discipline without a translator to the process. Finally, I became aware that it took a lot to de-stabilize me in situations where everyone else was going crazy. My low standards typically involved anticipating that some things would inevitably go not as planned and being willing and able to ride the wave of the crises that produced without feeling like I personally was a failure because it was happening. I think I have my mother to thank for that particular skill. She was notoriously accident prone and I spent much of my childhood cleaning blood up after she cut herself, burned herself or otherwise was rushed off to the hospital, leaving me with the mess and a bunch of bawling siblings to be taken care of!

I have the greatest friends in the world ... Trish, Sandy, Louise, Peter, Tannis, Carlos, MJ ... take a bow, one and all! I'm aware that my low standards help make for great friendships because they create space for us to laugh at our foibles. We accommodate one another's quirks. I accept their periodic absences in my life when they are busy with other things and they accept mine. My house doesn't have to be in perfect shape in order for us to get together and we don't always have to be doing something in order to make spending time together worthwhile.

And then there's my marriage. ...still working on #3 ...actually, my husband fondly refers to himself as lucky Door #3! And it wouldn't be entirely honest if I didn't share with you that when it comes to folding sheets and towels, he has a different story to tell about my low standards ...not!

However, I am aware from listening to countless acquaintances and clients talking about their exacting expectations of their partners and spouses that, once again, my low standards have been a real boon not only to the longevity of this marriage but to the overall quality of how I experience it. My low standards have been a huge invitation for Greg to engage as the autonomous adult he is ...gone are my earlier efforts to care take and mother (otherwise known as nag and complain). Instead there is a willingness to clearly and directly state what my needs and expectations are and to acknowledge when they are being met and to have an honest conversation when I feel they aren't. We engage as two intelligent, consensual adults able to talk through our issues rather than flip-flopping between being mom/dad/rebellious teenagers/self absorbed children with one another. While there are moments when we drop into those states they are very occasional and of very short duration.

My low standards in all my relationships simply require that I be Me at all times. And I always know when my standards have risen because I start becoming other than me and the quality of my engagements with others starts to slip. The awareness that something is missing is my on-going way of reminding me to not only be Me, but to stay awake to who I am always in the process of becoming.

So my question to you is this: where can you lower your standards in order to achieve so much more in your life? Where do you drive yourself crazy in the belief that by being exacting you'll get more, only to have it constantly boomerang on you? Who would you get to become if your standards were a little bit lower?

I think that my garden is probably the place in my life that best reflects my zeal for low standards. It is a wondrous place: small, eclectic, a uniquely wild array of colors, shapes and forms in the sea of manicured lawns and restrained plantings typical of a suburban neighborhood. I encourage re-seeding of annuals and allow them to grow and flower wherever they sprout. I weed, but am not fanatical about it. I water but there are times when flowers droop because I'm busy with other things. My belief is that the occasional experience of drought toughens them up; the ones that die as a result simply aren't hearty enough for my wild landscape. I'm constantly thrilled by the passersby who stop to chat and by the children who delight in the riot of color and texture. The more I think about it, the more I know that my approach to gardening is very instructive as a metaphor for the joys and benefits of living from low standards. It is robust, unique, appealing to all the senses, bountiful, brings delight and joy to many and requires a minimum investment of time and energy for the massive rewards that it provides.

In closing, my wish for you is that you get to live like this too. Aware, awake, creative, reveling in your uniqueness and keeping your standards low enough that the lushness of life has space to flow in and fill you up with aliveness.

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Gwen published *"The Alchemy of Energy –Exploring The CODE Model™"* in 2004. She is currently writing *"Splish Splash -- Painting for Personal Discovery"* a primer for budding artists. Gwen's workshops and numerous articles are available at www.ouicoach.com.