

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 55 – Laura Neff – True Belonging

Ramble On

And now a personal word,

I have never retained a personal or executive coach. I've often wondered what it would be like to have a professional coach who would help me realize greater possibilities in life. I have dug deep to know myself and to make choices true to who I am, but it's one thing to do something on your own or with friends and family, and it's something else to have someone trained in the field question you and hold you accountable. I've thought once or twice about being a personal or executive coach. If there is one thing I love, it's helping people unlock good lives. I have been a coach informally at every stage of my professional career as a lawyer, counselor, consultant, advisor, and teacher. This is all to say I am fascinated by the work and by the people who do it well.

Somewhere along the line, someone told me that Laura Neff was one of the most highly regarded life coaches in Charlotte. Another friend told me that Laura and I were similar in many ways. Once, Laura was across the room from me at a social event, but I wasn't able to say hello.

Afterward, I sent Laura a note introducing myself. She agreed to meet me at 7th Street Station in Charlotte. I had hot chocolate at Not Just Coffee. Laura had green juice from Viva Raw. And we talked. I found out that she had closed her personal practice and was now into her second year at Dorrier Underwood. I told her about the classes I teach and a new one I was creating called How to Change the World. We talked about this podcast. We met again for lunch at Luna's Living Kitchen at Atherton Mill in Charlotte. We sat outside under an umbrella on a hot day. I had a fire and brimstone vegan burger, and Laura had arugula harvest salad. We talked about our interests. She told me about her love for superheroes and magic and dragons. I told her about my collection of comic books. We talked about our lives. She lives on land on the outskirts of town with three cats, two dogs, and five chickens. I live a short walk from the main square of the city with two cats and a dog. The more important part was that questions probed for meaning and connection and resonance. The conversations were complex and layered and fun. Laura was someone I could imagine talking with again and again.

We recorded the conversation for this podcast at my kitchen table. I often ask my guests who they were when they were young. The answer reveals something essential about them: a time when they were true to who they are, a time when something happened

that set choices in motion, a time when they were unsettled before they found their way. The answers give a glimpse into a person's deepest story.

Laura shared a memory of being a young girl on her family farm. She explored and rambled about. One day she discovered grapes on a hidden vine. She sensed that no one had noticed them before or appreciated them as much as Laura did that day. She picked the grapes with wonder and delight and brought them back to her family. They enjoyed the grapes together. She is the same person today, exploring personal terrains, seeing what others might not see, and offering insights that nourish who we are.

Laura also talked about belonging. She knew that her family loved her but sensed deep relationships between siblings that existed before her arrival on the scene. Her journey has been to belong. Belonging has two parts: that which belongs to us and that to which we belong. What belongs to us we protect and honor. What we belong to is not complete without us.

I think about how her professional career has been similar to mine. Laura had a corporate job that came easily and well for her but left her unfulfilled. She did not belong. She transitioned into a consultancy of her own, but it was more of the same. She did not find her way back to herself until she became that girl who dared to ramble on. She and her husband traveled for months on a school bus. She came back blown wide open. She found meaning helping other people discover what was true and powerful about themselves. She began ventures knowing they would not be complete without her—until one day she let go of a company she cofounded, until one day she joined a company that had deep relationships between colleagues before her arrival on the scene. The work Laura is now exploring is what it means to stay, in finding belonging in what she declares.

I know that journey well from being an unfulfilled lawyer to starting a company that was not much better to founding a nonprofit organization that expressed my core values to joining a university and learning what it means to stay. I wonder if true freedom is no longer needing to belong. I wonder if true freedom is saying that you do belong.

Laura Neff walks her talk. She is doing the work of self-discovery as she is guiding others to do the same. She lives in integrity. She does what all great coaches do: she helps us know ourselves to lead good lives.

Mark Peres © 2018