

Misti Burmeister

Removing Masks, Provoking Greatness

Some people go through life with their true selves out for the world to see. Others put on masks to make it through the day. Still others have masks forced upon them—coping mechanisms that become so ingrained that the wearer doesn't know they have a mask on at all. Such was the case with Misti Burmeister when she was a young girl growing up in Colorado.

While many aspects of her childhood were good, flecks of poverty and trauma drove her to act out, and several instances of troublemaking landed her in juvenile court. Her parents decided to move the family out of Denver to a small town in the far northeastern corner of Colorado called Crook. Due to her troublesome record, Misti was placed in special education, where she went from learning math with regular kids to learning that 1 plus 1 equals 2. "I believed there was something wrong with me," she recalls today.

Misti's parents found they couldn't make a living in Crook, so they moved just outside of Denver, where the kids were enrolled in Valley High School. Misti can still recall that first day in the principal's office, where her mother chronicled all the reasons her daughter belonged in special education. The freshman sank in her chair as she watched the principal, Mr. Wisner, while her mother counted off all her issues.

After twenty-five minutes, Misti's mother finished, and Mr. Wisner uttered the sentence that changed Misti's life forever—"Mrs. Burmeister, I think your daughter's quite normal, and I think she's going to get along just fine here in our regular classes," he said.

"I remember sitting up and wondering, did he see something in me nobody else could see?" Misti recounts today. "A little spark of hope was born for me in that moment. He could see the child behind the mask I was wearing, and he supported me. He went on to be a big savior for

me in high school, coming to my assistance many times as I got into tangles with teachers and coaches. That man saw something in me, nurtured it, and believed in it even when it didn't look pretty. He went against all the rules and kept believing in me. He helped save my life."

Today, Misti has dedicated her life's work to seeing behind masks and helping people become the best versions of themselves. A bestselling author, speaker, and Chief provoker, she helps leaders cut through the noise to identify,

with clarity, what's halting collaboration, dedication, and enthusiasm—and what really needs to change to prompt growth. And she does it all with the joy that comes only when one has found their true calling in life. "I can't not do this work," she says. "I don't have a choice. God blessed me as a communicator—one willing to challenge the status quo and help people to grow, and in the process to help myself evolve. As much as I've tried to run away from this

work over the years, it's not possible. It's what I have to do in this life. It's not the easiest or most fun work, and it scares me sometimes. But at the end of the day, there isn't anything else I could imagine doing that would make me feel alive the way this work does."

Misti was born the youngest of four children in Madison, Wisconsin, and raised in Colorado from the age of four. Her father worked as an auto mechanic, while her mother worked for social services. Alcoholism runs deep on both sides of her family, taking a firm hold on both of her parents. "There was a lot of trauma in my life growing up," she says. "And fortunately, I am now using it as fuel for spiritual evolution."

Misti started ditching school with her brother in the second grade. She couldn't sit still, unsettled by a hunger for attention and anger she could only really identify in retrospect. The family



seemed constantly on the move, and the lack of stability stirred her unsettled spirit even more. She started smoking at age nine, and by twelve, she and her brother would take shots of Everclear in the bathroom of their father's shop. "Neither of my parents really knew what was going on," she recalls. "I acted out for attention. I missed a lot of foundational schooling because everything else was just too overwhelming at the time."

When Misti began associating with gangs in the area, her parents decided a change of scenery was in order. Her father bought an old trailer, so beat up that the roof had caved in. He completely rebuilt it, setting up a small room in the back with a curtain and putting in bunkbeds for Misti and her sister. He put in a couch for Misti's brother, Jimmy, to sleep on, and the family piled in caravan-style to drive across the country to Wisconsin. The plan was to stop for two weeks at a time in areas they might like to live. If Misti's father hadn't found a job by the time the two weeks were up, they'd keep moving.

He never did find a job, and the family ended up in Madison, where her parents are from. They lived in the trailer in the driveway of her aunt's house, but soon, Misti's mother remembered why they'd left Wisconsin in the first place. Being around relatives was too grating, so they picked up and started the long trek back to Colorado, stopping for two weeks at a time as they had before.

Soon after crossing the border back into Colorado, the family arrived in Crook, where they had come to play on the lakes in summers past. The money ran out, so they parked the trailer by the lake and lived there for a month. "There was no bathroom and no shower in that trailer," Misti recalls. "We made it work until my parents found jobs and we settled in Crook. In Crook, kids didn't drink or do drugs. Instead, they played sports. I began to realize that, instead of getting attention through causing disruption, I could get attention by being good at something. It was the first time in my life that I found my fit. I could stop battling, and start building. I think back on that whole experience as a blessing, equipping me with the kind of adaptability, resilience, and boldness that would be key for me later in life."

Back in Denver after a year spent in Crook, Misti's father bought two trailers at an auction, so beaten up that they were uninhabitable. With the kids' help, they ripped out all the cables, cords,

and windows. "The wires were made of copper and we could get some money for recycling them, but we had to burn off the plastic coatings first," she recalls. "It would make all these beautiful sparks in the night—we thought they were beautiful. And just as beautiful, my father converted the trailers into flatbed trailers, selling them for ten times the amount he spent on them. He did it again until he had enough money to buy us a trailer we could live in. We found a little piece of land outside of Denver, and that's where we settled as I was starting high school."

Drawing on the interest in athletics she cultivated in Crook, Misti enrolled herself in basketball even though she didn't have the shoes for it. A classmate passed on her gym shoes to Misti—an act of kindness she still remembers with intense fondness today. At fourteen, she tagged along with her brother when he went to the gym to lift, and found she was able to squat 225 pounds right off the bat. She tried her hand at volleyball as well, but didn't truly find her calling in sports until she picked up shotput and discus. She had innate ability in the sport, and her coach began coming in early and staying late to help her train. "I loved the physical challenge of it, and the idea of having a personal record I was trying to beat," she recalls. "I am a competitor who enjoys a collaborative environment, so it was a great sport for me."

The hard work payed off, and during her junior year, Misti became state champion in shotput. She still remembers the letter of congratulations she received from the Governor for her accomplishments—a note on leadership that transformed her approach to athletics, and to life. "Before that letter, I was the kind of athlete that wanted nothing more than to win," she said. "It was about winning over my peers, my family, my community. But after I read those words, it became about something else. I began to cheer on my teammates and support others in ways I hadn't before. I even coached the competition."

She commenced her senior year with this newfound sense of purpose and responsibility, but confronted obstacles in the retirement of her beloved coach. The golf coach and school counselor was promoted to fill the role, and the two butted heads. "She was demanding that I deviate from the training plan and approach that I knew worked," Misti recalls. "My whole identity was wrapped up in being a state champion, and I was terrified she was going to mess me up. She

ended up kicking me off the team, but thankfully, Mr. Wiser stepped in and told her to let me do my thing." That year, Misti went on to be state champion in both shotput and discus, and the local paper named her Student Athlete of the Year.

While Misti's parents had been notably absent through her childhood, her mother never missed a single track meet. She used all her vacation time from work to attend the away meets and to take Misti to the Junior Olympic meets, where she competed in Louisiana, Utah, and California, among others. "The best bonding experiences of my life were with my mother driving by ourselves to those competitions," she recalls. "My parents were always the best parents they knew how to be, and I have so much honor, respect, and love for the journey they made and who they are. My mom is a doer who really fights for what she believes in and lives each day with a strong sense of purpose, and I'm like that too. She spent much of her life working with Child Protective Services and the food stamp program, finding ways to help people who were less well off than we were. And my dad is the kind of person who is always fixing things and helping people, stopping along the highway to help anyone whose car was broken down. From both of them, and each in their own way, I learned the power of both patience and impatience."

It had never really occurred to Misti that college might be in her future, but thanks to her outstanding athletic accomplishments, she began receiving letters from schools like Dartmouth, asking her to apply. She had never been interested or able to concentrate in academics, so her GPA and standardized test scores were low, but the University of Northern Colorado accepted her through the Challenge Program—a probationary initiative where students could gain admission if they proved themselves. "I knew it would really be a challenge to prove myself, but it was one I wanted to undertake," she remembers. "Sports saved my life, opening this door to education for me. I felt that the opportunity was a gift, so I gave it 110 percent."

Misti spent that semester vigorously making up for the time she had lost in laying a solid foundation of knowledge. She had gotten a D in Algebra I in high school, but she believed she could succeed if she put her mind to it. She memorized her times tables, attended every office hour, and emerged the highest performing student

after her first year. "I was driven by the fear of becoming nothing," she says. "I wanted to do something with my life that I could be proud of."

Once she emerged from the Challenge Program and became a full-fledged college student, Misti became an advisor in the program to help give back, and advised and mentored students for the entirety of her college experience. She quit sports to concentrate all her energy on academics and mentoring, and was put in charge of a summer program recruiting diverse students. "I was focused on helping people from migrant farms who spoke only Spanish, she recounts. "I'd help connect them to resources so they understood how to apply to be a student at the university and how to get scholarships."

The admission and retention of those students began to skyrocket, so Misti was put in charge of the new Stryker Institute for Leadership Development, designed to help middle-aged women from migrant farms go to school for the first time in their lives. As the graduate assistant in charge of the program, Misti helped build it from the ground up, helping to teach leadership and skills that would truly redefine the life stories and earning potential of the program's participants.

Through undergrad, Misti earned a double degree in psychology and kinesiology, studying the mind and the body with the hope of going to physical therapy school. Upon graduating, however, she decided she wanted to instead get her masters in psychology to become a therapist. She set her sights on a program with a rigorous admissions process, and when she was rejected, she thought her life was over. "I wasn't ready for the world," she recalls. "But a friend had just been admitted to a masters program in communication, and she pointed out that it covered the same general principles as the program I had wanted to pursue—just through a different lens. I quickly applied and was accepted, so I earned my Masters in Communications with an emphasis on health and leadership communication. It was a perfect fit for me."

After earning a 4.0 in the program, learning the theories so well that she could debate them for hours, and working through her fear of public speaking, she attended a conference to present her research on the links between communication and health. She caught the eye of representatives from the National Institutes of Health, who encouraged her to apply for an NIH

fellowship. She was accepted into that year-long program and moved to Bethesda, Maryland, in 2002. When it ended, she became general manager at Washington Sports Club but found it boring, and left after a month. She earned money as a massage therapist and as a fitness trainer, and then took a job doing meeting planning with a government contractor.

"I was living in a one-bedroom apartment, and I was working alone," she recalls. "It was a whole lot of alone time for an extrovert. I needed to find a way to work *with* people, so I started researching the company. I read every document they put out in the media in the 25 years they'd been in business. I presented to the CEO of the company, and at the end she looked at me and said, 'Misti, what did your parents do to deal with you?' My energy didn't fit there. I had to quit."

When she left the job, she didn't realize she had only \$37 to her name. But she quickly figured it out. "I'll never forget lying on the floor of my apartment, knowing I had a thousand-dollar rent payment coming due," she recounts. "I pressed my chest against the floor, trying to calm my heart rate. Then I looked up, saw the Yellow Pages, and got inspired. I started flipping through and thought, 'That company or job looks interesting.' I started cold-calling, and over the next six months, I interviewed around 150 professionals. I'd take my laptop to a high-end pizza joint up the street and work from the bar. During my time there, I met a couple of incredibly generous people who seemed to know I needed a little extra help. They wound up buying my lunch more than once. I'd eat half for lunch and half for dinner, figuring out ways to scrape by."

In this way, over the next year, Misti continued the arduous but ultimately rewarding process of forging her own path through life and finding her purpose. Decades later, she would receive a birthday note from a friend that said, "One of your greatest gifts is that people feel safe to take their masks off in your presence." It's a demeanor of profound openness and acceptance—a cornerstone of her personality that spurred 150 businessmen and women to show their true colors to her, in one way or another. And in each instance, she learned another detail of humanity. She also studied people and what it meant to be a good friend—things she hadn't had time to learn through her childhood of constant upheaval. "I didn't even know that you were supposed to bring

something to share when you got invited to a dinner party," she laughs. "Imagine being a clean slate, having to figure it all out. But I learned fast, both personally and professionally."

Misti particularly remembers going into one interview for a nonprofit that seemed ideally suited to her background and skill set. As she sat before the CEO, she described with great animation how she could connect with impoverished individuals with her own experiences growing up in a trailer park, and how she had helped build the leadership institute geared toward first generation nontraditional students. They spoke for almost two hours, and Misti was filled with hope that she'd found a perfect fit. But at the end of the interview, the CEO sat back in his chair and declared there was no way someone her age had achieved everything she claimed on her resume. "At first, I thought he was complimenting me," she says. "But then I realized he was calling me a liar. I left feeling so scared, because how would I ever find a job if people thought I was lying? My hope was squashed, and I got angry. Driving home, I promised that I would never let anyone talk to me that way again, and that I was going to do something to help people like me—young professionals—understand how to communicate with seasoned professionals and vice versa."

It was the seed that led to the creation in 2005 of Inspirion LLC, the banner under which Misti would become an expert business speaker, executive coach, and author. "I decided I was going to go out and make a difference myself, because there are so many people just like me who have hope and want to do great things in the world, and a lot of people like that CEO who are afraid of other people's success," she explains. "He just didn't get it. He didn't understand what's possible. That was a defining moment for me."

Soon after that experience, Misti interviewed with the leader of a great nonprofit who opened up to her about her frustrations with young people at her organization. They would come in to speak with the leader on the first day of the job, and show up without a pen and paper. The leader thought this conveyed a lack of respect and diligence, and was also struggling with retaining young professionals. "I helped her understand that these young people most likely did hope to be successful at the organization, but that they were unaware of what they were conveying or what the

expectations were,” Misti recounts. “I offered ideas on how to mentor them instead of writing them off, and her retention rate took off. And my career launched. I had a knack for helping leaders see situations differently and draw value out of the difficult feedback they were getting. And as I did interview after interview, I saw patterns where the most common and destructive organizational issues stemmed from people misunderstanding each other, though both sides were trying to do good things.”

In other words, most issues in business were the result of missed communication and missed connections—nuances Misti could tease out and illuminate with exacting grace. Her career took off, and she has since traveled nationally and internationally to train, teach, coach, and mentor leaders. At its core, her mission is provoking greatness, challenging people to see beneath the surface to the truth of what really matters to them. “I’m usually called in when progressive leaders are ready to intentionally disrupt the status quo... to instigate collaboration, innovation, and engagement,” she says.

Misti often keynotes to mid-level managers who then bring her in to work with their senior leadership team. She is most in her element when working with these senior individuals at the helm of an organization, where her leadership innovations can ripple down through the main artery of its culture and fan out to all employees. “I help leaders understand what they’re doing specifically, why they’re doing it, and how to communicate that consistently,” she details. “Sometimes I’ll come across a leader with an inspiring vision that’s clear and well-articulated, yet they’re frustrated that their employees forget. I help them establish routines to ensure clarity and engagement.”

In 2011, Misti was contacted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for assistance with employee engagement, retention, and motivation. She was so successful in helping to flip the tenor of the culture that she enlisted a business coach to quantify the approach she had used. This gave rise to her VOICE Model, outlining the five pillars of provoking greatness. “The first is **Vision**—where are we going, why does it matter, and what do we see in the people around us?” she explains. “Next is **Ownership**—do you take 100 percent responsibility for the results you’re getting in your life, career, business, and team? Are you

Intentionally creating an environment that allows you and your team to thrive? Then **Community**—are you creating connections with the people around you? People want to be part of something bigger than themselves, so this piece is really important. And finally, **Energy**—are you empowering the people around you to do what they’re destined to do, and freeing yourself up to dream bigger?”

Misti’s work is also about the facilitation of difficult conversations, which are absolutely key to progress. “The beauty of difficult feedback is that people are showing you what you’re doing that doesn’t work,” she says. “You can either fight that, or you can use it to shift and get the results you want. I also use the fundamental principle that people actively support the things they help to create. As a leader, you want to engage others in a process of co-creating the direction so everyone is invested in striving to achieve it, and you need to constantly reestablish new goals and milestones as you meet the old ones. According to studies by Harvard, leaders spend less than 3 percent of their time envisioning the future and enlisting others in that vision. Yet 87 percent of people say that they most want their leaders with a clear vision. As a leader, it’s crucial that you carve out the time to envision and enlist.”

To date, Misti has authored several books on leadership, including *Provoking Greatness: Unleashing Hidden Potential*. The seed for the book was planted many years ago, when she showed up at her high school English class late and without her homework, as usual. The teacher asked her to stay after class, and Misti was sure she would get detention. But instead, the teacher looked straight in her eyes and said, “If I could insert a wire in your mouth and travel it down your arms to your fingertips, we’d have a writer on our hands today.” Then the teacher walked away. “In that moment, I instantaneously had the vision of myself as a writer,” Misti recounts. “She provoked greatness in me without even realizing it, so my book focused on harnessing that power with intention. It’s about seeing latent gifts in others and provoking them, giving them a place to shine. The idea is that you don’t have to put greatness in someone—it’s already there.”

Misti has also written *From Boomers to Bloggers*, a guide to understanding and overcoming common generational divides for an optimal workplace, and *Hidden Heroes*, a memoir

that chronicles the inside-out journey to discovering the hero that lies within. She especially loves working with companies focused on improving health, including those focused on technology that encourages movement, nutrition, wellness, and improving the environment. "I love working with companies that help us think better and function better as human beings," she says. "I believe in leading from the front. Who I choose to be, how I challenge myself, and the vulnerability I share about who I am—that's leading from the front and showing people how to be courageous. I don't task people with things—I ask them for help, input and ideas, and they take off with it. In a way, my leadership style is inspiring leadership in others."

Through it all, Misti has been grateful for the love and support of her wife, Yvette. The yin to Misti's yang, Yvette is quiet strength with endless generosity and compassion. "She's my rock," Misti says. "I've never met anyone else like her. Her love is unconditional." Misti and Yvette support Tour for the Cure together, an organization that promotes diabetes research. They also swim and raise money every year for Swim Across America, a national nonprofit that raises funds for cancer research. She learned how to swim in 2013 and set her sights on swimming one mile in open water while raising \$500. The journey wound up inspiring her to swim three miles and raise \$3K just 15 weeks after learning. "The progress was infectious," she recalls. "The next year, I decided to swim five miles and raise \$5K. In September, I will swim three miles without a swim angel guiding my way, and raise \$6K. The money goes to the Children's Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins, and goes toward my goal of building courage and community. It's something I really love to do."

Misti is also heavily involved in MissionFit, a new nonprofit in Baltimore, Maryland that provides a safe space for the city's at-risk youth to discover their greatness through fitness. Students self-select into the program and show up for workouts and other life-enhancing skills. The nonprofit was founded by Wendy Wolock, who is committed to changing the lives of Baltimore's inner city youth by providing avenues for building physical and emotional strength to these remarkable kids. "She's doing really amazing work there, and I'm honored to be a part of it," Misti says.

In advising young people entering the

working world today, Misti underscores the importance of listening to your own intuition and common sense, seeking alternatives when you get a piece of advice that doesn't feel right. "When I was doing those 150 informational interviews, one guy told me that if I wanted to work in organizational development, I needed to go back to school and get a degree in that field, and then start at the very bottom at a company like Marriott," she recounts. "That sounded so wrong to me, and of course I didn't do that. Fast forward several months, my first major corporate client was Marriott. I didn't need to go back and do all that—what I had to do was just start, period. When people say things, I remember that if it doesn't resonate with me, it probably isn't right."

Looking back on her journey so far, Misti is most proud of who she's become, and who she has helped others to become in the process. Indeed, it's never easy to take off the masks we wear. But if we're ever to face the day fully, as ourselves, we must engage in the soul-stirring work of knowing, accepting, and revealing our true selves. It's a labor of courage done for the betterment of our relationships with business partners, employees, friends, and family. Ultimately, and most importantly, it's for the betterment of our relationships with ourselves.

At its essence, seeing greatness in ourselves and in others takes a special, almost sacred kind of observation. "A million small defining moments happen every day for me," Misti says. "Always, I'm watching others—and myself—say and do things that profoundly affect the people around them, in ways they might not ever notice. I notice. Every moment teaches me how I want to be, and how I don't want to be. People often talk about mentoring as if it's this process with defined contours, separate from daily living. But for me, it's almost as if the world is constantly mentoring me, every second, all the time. You just have to be aware of it. When you do, every instant of every day is an opportunity to grow."

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