

Lisa Anne Thompson-Taylor

An Enduring Magic

From before the time she knew English, Lisa Anne Thompson-Taylor would watch intently as her father flipped through the *Peterson Field Guide to Birds* and the *Audubon* bird picture book. By age three, she could enthusiastically tell him that the picture of a large black bird was “a crow” and the blue one was “a jay,” wowing the neighbors. She learned to paddle a canoe before she could walk, and to love nature before she understood there was a difference between the tamed confines of civilization and the limitless essence of the wilderness beyond.

As she got older and spent blissful childhood days canoeing, hiking, exploring, and identifying birds, animals, and trees, Lisa Anne learned more words to describe the sense of magic she felt all around her. “My relationship to nature, and to God through nature, allows me to be who I am today,” she affirms. “Nature is my church and what grounds me, and a sense of magic is what allows me to fly.”

There was a period of time, however, that Lisa Anne lost connection with the nature and magic so essential to her life force. Years later, she found herself going through the motions in an unfulfilling marriage, and professionally stunted in the world of nonprofit fundraising. “The whole reason I went into the nonprofit sector was to do good and move the needle—to have an impact,” she remembers. “But after fifteen years of that work, I was astounded by the widespread lack of impact I had witnessed. I worked closely with boards—people who donated enormous amounts of time, good will, and money—that felt similarly disappointed. I knew I needed to either pivot to follow my bliss elsewhere, or offer a new solution.”

Frustrated both personally and professionally, Lisa Anne sunk lower and lower, to the point that she bottomed out. One winter day,

when her husband was traveling and she sat at home scrapbooking for the holidays, she came to terms with the reality of her depression. “I thought, why is it that I feel there’s no point in really living?” she recalls. “Why do I feel so bad about the future? It hit me that, when I was younger, I had the sense that anything was possible in the world—that sense of magic.”

In that moment, she realized she needed to reclaim a sense of optimism and resolved to use her despair as a flashpoint to kick off in a different direction—one in which she would pursue new solutions to the disheartening forces in her life. A year later, she had separated from her husband and given notice to her employer, setting off on the road to launching her own company. “I had no idea what the hell I was doing when it came to running a business,” she says. “There was a long tail on the comet of my learning curve, but I found that a big part of it was feeling comfortable in my own skin.”

Thanks to her steadfast perseverance and commitment to revive her optimism in life, Lisa Anne is now the successful founder and CEO of Taylor Strategic Partnerships (TSP), a consulting firm dedicated to elevating the culture of philanthropy and helping nonprofits achieve better results. In this work, she aims to reverse centuries-old trends rooted in Victorian England, when philanthropy was strictly a hobby and never a profession. The vestiges of that mindset plagued the field through the 20th century, in which philanthropy was approached as a moral imperative to be pursued on a shoestring budget that allowed one to do what one could. “Doing what you can is not sufficient,” Lisa Anne puts bluntly. “It doesn’t solve the complex social issues that require a venture capital investment to move the needle. Philanthropy’s fundamental flaw was



that it wasn't approached professionally, the way companies with shareholders approach things."

Thanks to the hard work of dedicated visionaries, the field professionalized through 2008 and 2009, creating opportunities to amplify impact by pairing promising moonshot ideas with the resources and evidence-based practices it takes to translate them into reality. Instead of growing budgets organically to take small steps forward each year, boards began envisioning powerful solutions and then reverse-engineering those ideas to chart the course forward. Those blueprints demand corporate efficiencies and larger-scale influxes of resources to build capacity, and that's where TSP comes in. "It's really exciting to be working in the nonprofit sector at a time when it's evolving so much," Lisa Anne says. "In the tremendous possibility of the space, there is magic. We're about harnessing that magic for the good of our clients and the good of the world."

Focusing on social and environmental engagement through charitable giving, social enterprise, impact investing, venture philanthropy, and corporate social responsibility, TSP spends 60 percent of its time focused on improving nonprofit board performance. Nonprofits as small as \$250,000, and as large as Habitat for Humanity, turn to Lisa Anne for guidance when they've come to an inflection point, or when they hope to maintain perceived success through training or coaching. Her process begins with an assessment, which often unearths hidden problems preventing the organization from reaching its full potential. "People aren't trained to be board members, and best practices can make a world of difference," she points out. "Our clients want practical problem solving and solutions, and we create a vision of what their path looks like."

Once a person or organization has fully joined as a client, they have access to TSP's full range of content and events. Lisa Anne also assists with board recruitment and has access to an extensive network to determine the perfect fit for a client's needs. "A good board member can truly be the key to taking your organization to the next level," she affirms. "Beyond their own monetary contribution, they can act as a brain trust and open up their own network for the good of the mission. That can be very powerful."

Lisa Anne's team spends the other 40 percent of its time working with high net worth philanthropists, athletes, and millennial inheritors

who want to amplify their impact in other ways. In this way, the company cross-pollinates between boards and individuals, sharing good governance principles that fuel creative thinking and bring new ideas and resources to help catalyze the process of getting things done. The business model, a unique blend of creative spark and corporate cunning fueled by a passion for positive change, is a perfect blend Lisa Anne's own interests and influences, all sprung from the earliest days of her childhood. "My grandfather died before I can remember, but the impact he and my grandmother had on my mother—and on me—was infinitely positive," she recounts. "Both of my grandparents were fair and even-tempered amidst the turmoil brought by other family members. They handled that turmoil with class, love, and optimism, and were always incredibly nurturing."

Thanks to their positivity and resilience, Lisa Anne's mother grew up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, an exceptionally bright and balanced young woman, with an unparalleled emotional IQ and an uncanny ability to handle stress with grace. She became a gifted nurse and was working at the Mount Sinai Health System in New York City when she met Lisa's father, a Lieutenant in the Army, originally from Detroit. Once they married, he went to Columbia University for grad school and then began teaching film there. Lisa was born in New Jersey in 1973, and when her father landed a teaching position in the Radio, Television, and Film Department at the University of Maryland, the family moved to University Park when she was two years old.

Growing up, Lisa Anne remembers her father reading her *Charles Dickens*, and walking with her grandmamma to the five and dime store nearby. She remembers the movie projector set up in the basement of their home, where they would screen the best of Kurosawa, Hitchcock, and cartoons. "I was an only child, and my parents raised me as a mini-adult," she explains. "Other kids didn't know what to make of me, and I was bullied and beat up sometimes as a child."

Despite those hardships, Lisa Anne remembers a vibrant community around her and the insatiable drive to experience the magic of the outdoors. She watched her mother work her way up professionally, running ORs and ERs and then becoming a healthcare administrator. Lisa Anne

learned to play the flute and would often volunteer at the nursing home her mother ran, playing music for the residents and listening voraciously to the stories they told of fighting in World War II. But most of all, she remembers the magic of nature: the 400-year-old oak tree in her backyard, the boxes of geodes and fossils left under her porch by the geologist who owned the home previously, the animals she always tried to catch. "Our home was very park-like, with so many birds and so much nature to explore," she recounts. "We also went on long trips periodically through the year to Maine, or to my father's family's cabin in Michigan, or to my wonderful summer camp in Vermont. There was nothing more interesting to me than being out in the woods."

In middle school, Lisa Anne developed close friendships and cultivated her love of horseback riding. "I was good at it, so it became a source of strength and confidence," she recalls. "I also had one of the best teachers ever, Dr. Eaton. He taught history through narrative storytelling that absolutely captivated me."

In high school, Lisa Anne attended a science and tech school but found herself more drawn to the softer sciences. She thought she might become a field biologist, but when she took a research practicum with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, she found herself studying ways to make birds grow faster for human consumption. "I had to slaughter so many turkeys," she remembers. "It completely turned me off of science." She was also disillusioned by her first job at a pet store at the age of fifteen, where she saw animals mishandled too often. Instead, she focused her energy on shining in her school's renowned music program, playing first chair flute in the orchestra and symphony band.

It was always understood that Lisa Anne would attend a high-caliber college, and when it came time to choose a school, her parents took her visiting to five different universities. From those trips, she still remembers the tremendous sense of energy in the endless possibilities she saw before her. She had no idea what she was going to do when she grew up, and in the not-knowing, there was magic. Her life was an open book waiting to be written, though there were limitations. "I grew up in a magical world, but it juxtaposed sharply with an attitude of practicality that was prevalent in our home," she says. "Growing up, I was

actually never told I could do anything I wanted in life. My family was very risk-averse and academic, encouraging me to choose a career path that could earn me a living, not change the world. That's why, when I enrolled at Smith College, I planned to be an economics major and become a stock trader."

Lisa Anne enjoyed her classes, but her lifelong sense of wanderlust left her looking for more. "I've always been a chaotic thinker that loves stimulation and constant learning," she reflects. She decided to transfer to the University of Maryland for her sophomore year, and then to the University of Surrey in England where the area is known for its colorful gardens and bright luminaries. There, she became close friends with a European power lifting champion who coached and trained her, taking her interest in bodybuilding to a new level. "It was so much fun, and a perfect fit for the over-the-top personality I had at the time," she laughs.

When Lisa Anne returned to Maryland for her senior year, she settled on a Sociology major. Upon graduating in 1995 with no idea what she wanted to do professionally, she set up a series of informational interviews and began to see she could serve causes she cared about without a science degree. She was then invited back to Maryland by a professor to attend a lecture by Dr. Thomas Lovejoy, a prominent figure in biodiversity conservation. "That was the first time I ever consciously attempted to set myself apart from the crowd by asking just the right question," she recalls. "We hit it off, and I landed an internship at the Kew Royal Botanic Gardens in London."

Six months later, Lisa Anne returned to the US and leaned on her experience planning events in college to land a fundraising position with the National Kidney Foundation. She worked closely with the board, and her service-oriented attitude quickly garnered strong results. In no time, she found she not only excelled at fundraising—she also enjoyed it. She used that passion to land a position with Day's End Farm Horse Rescue, an organization helping horses that had been impounded for cruelty and abuse. Launched by Kathy and Allan Schwartz, the nonprofit was unpolished and folksy, but wanted a new face and presence to help them evolve into a more formal and structured entity. With a compelling demeanor and something to say to anyone, Lisa

Anne was the tour de force they were looking for. “I helped grow their budget by 300 percent, worked with major gifts, and launched their combined federal campaign program,” she recounts. “They were one of the groups that was actually getting it done, and that was a very impactful experience for me.”

To continue her growth and learning, Lisa Anne later took a job with the University of Maryland College Park’s Alumni Relations and Development Department. She spent the next four years embracing the challenge of raising academic revenue for a Division I school, where alumni preferred to give directly to the institution’s sports teams. And though she excelled, she observed that no matter how much money was raised for nonprofits, issues rarely seemed to improve. That frustrated optimism was mirrored in her home life, until that defining moment when she grasped the importance of reconnecting with the magic she had known as a girl.

At long last, she decided to dust off the nature guidebooks that had so captivated her spirit as a child. Over the year that followed, she spent more and more time in a remote wildlife sanctuary in northern Ontario, where her grandfather built a cabin after World War II. She started the tradition of going off the grid for two weeks each year—a period of uninterrupted soul searching that allows her to meditate and focus on her true magnetic north. “Nature creates metaphors and space to think,” she explains. “As a chaotic entrepreneur, I came to realize that thinking is a premium, so that time is invaluable to me. Not only is it vital to my mental and spiritual well-being, but it also allows for the quality thoughts my clients deserve.”

Lisa Anne began keeping a list of all the birds she saw, and with each name added, she healed a little more. With her divorce finalized and her business formally launched in 2010, she drew on her wit, humor, and willingness to take responsibility for any situation—all traits she got from her father. As well, her mother’s savviness and counsel helped her tame chaos with calm. She studied good businesspeople, read books,

reflected, and fine-tuned her BS radar. “I got comfortable and confident with my expertise and my opinions, even when others disagreed with me,” she says.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Lisa Anne underscores the importance of doing your research and always showing up prepared. She also demonstrates the value of being passionate about your work, but dispassionate about business. “Most situations aren’t worth getting angry over,” she says. “Most often, things are neither good nor bad—they just are. Have the mental fortitude to modulate emotion and save your anger for when it’s truly required.”

Beyond that, Lisa Anne has always preferred figuring out her own path through life, even if it takes longer than following someone else’s. “Leadership is like a climbing rose,” she says. “It’s about organically growing and branching off to find the structure that will allow you to ascend. There’s no rule book for that, and no two roses take the exact same path. There’s magic in the not-knowing, and magic in the finding out.”

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

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