

Career Lessons from Mother Teresa

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I have found that by examining the careers of the most successful people out there you can learn a ton of lessons. It does not matter if the person is a business person, a musician, or a religious figure: They all have lessons to teach.

While I am not particularly religious one way or another, for the past several years I have been studying Mother Teresa in short on and off bursts. I purchased a video and a few books about her. The reason she is so interesting to me is that I never truly understood why she became such a household name and so revered and respected. Her name is known all over the world and she is universally recognized by people of most religious faiths as a person who brought a tremendous amount of good to the world. Her career is universally viewed as having left a legacy of good for the world.

While it may seem "crass" to characterize Mother Teresa's life as a career, that is exactly what she had. What did she do differently that made her have such an incredible career? What were the decisions she made that allowed her to leave such a huge mark on the world?

It is fascinating how Mother Teresa emerged from a no one to one who earned worldwide respect, admiration and fame. What is the power that she brought to the world and what can we learn from it? What is the secret of her career?

Learn from Your Past

Throughout my life I have seen people I know adopt the lessons of their parents and propel themselves into great success due to this. For example, many of the "math geniuses" I knew growing up had parents who also loved math and encouraged their kids to be good at it, tutored them at it and so forth. The same thing goes for people who are good at reading, athletics and more. Even many movie stars have parents who were actors and movie stars and inculcated into them the skills and abilities to act, be in the limelight and more.

Most of our parents, teachers and others have taught us certain skills growing up. We pick this stuff up by "osmosis" and do not even realize we are learning it. They transfer thinking processes and other skills to us that give us skills that we do not even realize we are picking up. Regardless of the childhood you had, the odds are very good that your parents taught you something and that you have certain skills that were transferred to you. These skills may have also come about based on who you were friends with, what was important to your parents—or something similar. My point is that we all pick up certain traits, insights and unique skills from others. Everyone does and these insights are meaningful and they shape who we are.

Teresa was born in Yugoslavia and became a nun at 18. During her childhood, she watched her mother constantly open up their house to the poor. Her mother always told her to welcome people into their home and "Never eat a single mouthful unless you are sharing it with others." Imagine what it must have meant to Teresa always seeing poor people in her home, learning lessons about helping the poor from her mother and more. As Teresa grew up she surely began to see the value in helping the poor and serving them. I am sure her mother also imparted various lessons to her about this and the value of this.

Without belittling the lessons Teresa learned, I think it is important to realize that this is no different than the father who raises his son with an appreciation of fixing up old cars, or the mother who instills in her daughter a love of cooking. While these examples may seem quite simplistic they are not meant to be. Instead, they show the things we learn from our parents, we carry into the rest of our lives. When we draw on these they help shape our path.

Mother Teresa's first job as a missionary was in Calcutta, India, teaching high school geometry. She wrote home to her mother once there describing all of her accomplishments such as becoming head of the school and a popular teacher. She also described how nice the school was. Her mother replied that Mother Teresa had not gone to India to be a teacher but had gone to care for the poor. Her mother's letter reminded her of an abandoned woman she had once helped: "*She was covered in sores, but what caused her far more suffering was the fact that she was all alone in the world.*"

This letter from her mother helped Mother Teresa reexamine her priorities and what was important to her. For example, having authority in the school and being popular may have meant something to her ... but what did it really accomplish? Was success and popularity something that would make a true difference to the world? Was this consistent with who she was as a person and what she had learned growing up?

Choose a Goal Compatible With Your Skills and Past

While traveling on a train to a retreat, Mother Teresa had a revelation that her true calling was going to be to serve the poorest of the poor. Her goal was very simple—but also quite profound. Within a short time of formulating her goal, she requested that she leave the community of nuns she was working with to start a school.

Most people have goals and a purpose they want to follow in their lives. However, the goals they choose are often incompatible with who they are. For example, one person may choose to be a dentist even though they hate detail. Another person may choose to go into sales even though they dislike people. People choose goals for a variety of reasons and many times these goals are completely incompatible with who they are and what they know.

Your heart needs to be behind your goals. However, more than just your heart being behind your goals your mind needs to be behind your goals and you want to have an instinctive understanding of the issues that come up when you are dealing with stuff.

It is like this with people. If you meet a person who is like a parent of yours or a former friend, many times you are going to understand exactly how these people think and what you need to do in order to get along with them—and vice versa. I am sure you can think of numerous episodes like this. Your dealing with certain people becomes almost "instinctual" based on dealings you may have had with similar people in the past.

It is like this with goals, information and so forth. When we have a "background" in something it makes us understand the

rules better, be more committed and have a better foundation.

Mother Teresa chose a goal that she knew she could be committed to. She had a foundation in this goal because of how she grew up and the lessons she learned. She had "depth" in terms of understanding this goal.

If you choose a goal for your life and career you should try and make certain that the goal is both compatible with who you are and that you have "depth" in the field you are choosing the goal. For example, Michael Jordan is widely considered one of the best athletes in history. During his basketball career he decided at one point to, instead, try professional baseball. He was a failure and did not do well at all. Why did Jordan fail? My opinion is that despite being such a good athlete, he did not have any depth in the game. In contrast, he had a ton of depth in baseball.

Choose goals where you have "depth" and which are compatible with your current and past strengths and interests. Mother Teresa had "depth" in terms of her goal of helping the poor. Her current and past strengths were also compatible with the goal because she was a nun. The goal she chose fit her perfectly.

Have a Goal and Follow It

Once she realized her goal and her calling, Mother Teresa set out to follow it. She did not say "maybe I will do this one day ..." but, instead, she took action on her goal immediately. She knew exactly what she wanted to do and did not hesitate one bit. She knew in her heart that she had found what she wanted to do the rest of her life.

The moment when we realize that we have found something we would like to do the rest of our lives that is compatible with both our past interests and our current interests is one of the most significant possible moments anyone can experience. In fact, if you have experienced this moment and believe you know what you want to do with your career and life do not let go. This is the strongest advice you will ever receive—the advice will come from within you and the "hunch" you receive can change your life forever.

I believe everyone gets this hunch at some point or another. This hunch comes when you are thinking about what you want to do, evaluating the sort of work that interests you and trying to understand the sort of things that are compatible with your natural skills. Everyone has something that they should be doing and whatever it is you need to find it and follow it.

My life and career changed when I discovered legal recruiting. I had been an attorney at the time and there was a lot of stuff I disliked about the job—but many things I liked. I enjoyed research, I enjoyed writing and I enjoyed talking to people. I did not enjoy the predictability of the job and the long time it would take to reach my potential and so forth. When I discovered recruiting it was like a huge light bulb went off and my life was never the same. I enjoyed the "sales aspect" of recruiting because I had been selling stuff all my life and there was so much more about it that got me incredibly excited.

Once I found this profession, I formed a long term goal "to get people jobs" and never looked back. This has been my life and career ever since and it is wonderful and incredibly fulfilling.

You need to find something like this that really gets you excited and gets you going. It needs to light you up and get you excited about starting work each morning and about your career and life. Whatever you are doing you should feel it caters to your skills and that you could be doing it the rest of your life.

Mother started her "school" in a small open space with no chalkboard and had to teach the children by scratching into mud with a stick. She happily took this job knowing that she was fulfilling a mission to help others who were the most unfortunate in society. She had a mission that she wanted to accomplish and believed that this was the best way to accomplish it.

Change Course to Make the Most of Your Goal

After starting her "school", Mother Teresa found a woman suffering and dying in the street one day. She brought her back to her home and gave her a bed in which she could die with dignity. From this simple step, Teresa ended up creating the Missionaries of Charity.

The Missionaries of Charity were dedicated, like Mother Teresa, to helping the poor of the world. Mother Teresa was well known for giving anyone she was talking to all of her attention at the time: "I believe in person-to-person contact. ...The person I am meeting is the only person in the world at that moment." Out of the insights gained from helping individuals and concentrating on each individual, Mother Teresa gained insight into the meaning of helping individuals the world over:

Do we know the poor in our own homes? Sometimes people can hunger for more than bread. It is possible that our children, our husband, our wife, do not hunger for bread, do not need clothes, do not lack a house. But are we equally sure that none of them feels alone, abandoned, neglected, needing some affection? That too is poverty.

Mother Teresa: In My Own Words, p.27

To me this is a stunning insight into the nature of the human condition that Mother Teresa was able to develop out of her care and love for the poor. It all came out of one goal and concentrating on that goal. When I think of this passage I am reminded of all the people I know who may be well off but are unhappy inside. What can be done to help these people? How many people are suffering around us? How many people need a new job, a new career, or a new life and are allowed to suffer in silence. I personally find Mother Teresa's words very inspiring to my own life goals.

Mother Teresa spent a good deal of her time travelling around to the various shelters her missionaries were running.

She would go from one tiny baby to the next, and if she spotted one which was so frail or sick it seemed likely to die that day, she would wrap it in a blanket and give it to one of her helpers to hold, with the instruction simply to love the child until it died. What mattered to her was that no child in her care should die without having experienced love. One morning Mother Teresa placed one of these desperately sick babies in the arms of one of the lay helpers. The helper held it and loved it until finally it dies at 6 o'clock in the evening. She passed away the hours by humming Brahms's lullaby. More than thirty years later she would still retain the memory of how that tiny baby, weak as it was, pressed itself against her.

Mother Teresa: A Complete Authorized Biography, Katherine Spink, Page 124.

The Missionaries of Charity was an organization that ran homes for people who needed help such as people suffering with incurable diseases, lepers, destitute widows and mothers without husbands and others who could not care for themselves. By the time Mother Teresa died in 1997, the religious order consisted of over 4,500 nuns who, like Mother Teresa, were all dedicated to serving the "poorest of the poor".

THE LESSON

Mother Teresa is universally praised for her legacy of good works, having emerged from obscurity to worldwide acclaim. The lessons of her remarkable life, such as learning from past mistakes, choosing goals compatible with your values, and being flexible in the pursuit of those goals, can also greatly benefit job seekers.

