

Find Your Moment of Obligation by Lara Galinsky

People who successfully tackle big social, environmental, and economic problems are driven by what I call a moment of obligation — a specific time in their life when they felt compelled to act. These moments become their North Star; they keep them going in a positive direction when everything seems dark. The obligation is not only to the world but also to themselves.

Activists or social entrepreneurs aren't the only ones who are moved this way. We all have experiences that deeply inform who we are and what we are supposed to do. But only if we allow them to.

Take Socheata Poeuv. She borrowed a bulky video camera from her office job at a television studio and carried it all the way to Cambodia. But when she got there, it felt nearly impossible to get anyone to talk about the Khmer Rouge genocide. Not even her parents — survivors who had accompanied her on the trip — would open up. Socheata followed her father through an empty field, video camera in hand. There is nothing to see here, she thought. It seemed to be the story of her entire trip. But she continued, driven by the haunting memory of the day a year prior when her parents sat her down and told her the truth about their experience with the genocide and the adoption of those she had always thought of as her siblings after their biological parents had passed away at the hands of the Khmer Rouge regime.

She trailed after her father in the field remembering this moment when suddenly, he began to speak.

"We buried your aunt near here after she died," he uttered. Then he raised his hands to his face and cried. This conversation became a central part of the film Socheata created about her family. This film later led Socheata to found an organization that shares stories of the genocide to support the healing process of generations of surviving Cambodians and Cambodian-Americans. Neither of these would have happened if Socheata's parents had not sat her down and told her the truth. This was her moment of obligation.

As a leader at Echoing Green, a social change organization that has supported Socheata and nearly 550 social entrepreneurs like her through a fellowship program, I've heard countless stories of these moments.

For 2006 fellow Andrew Youn, the moment came when he went to Bungoma, Kenya and visited the home of a widow who only had enough to serve her hungry children one meal of flour and water that day because her crops were failing.

For 2012 fellow Rachel Armstrong it was when she was forced to give up her childhood dream to become a farmer in rural Minnesota due to crippling cultural and environmental

poverty and a growing lack of connections between rural neighbors, urban eaters, and farmland.

For 2012 fellow Markese Bryant, it was when he read *The Green Collar Economy* by Van Jones who argued that the environmental movement was an extension of the civil rights movement. If that was true, Markese wondered, why wasn't environmentalism penetrating the campuses of historically black colleges and universities, and how could he change that?

We've all been deeply moved by problems in the world. We see that something isn't right, that a community deserves better, or a social injustice needs to be corrected. It could be that something terrible — or even something wonderful — happens to us or someone we know. Perhaps we witness an injustice. Perhaps we simply read an article about one, but something about it moves us as powerfully as if we were the one who wrote it.

Unfortunately, many of us are not prepared to recognize these moments for what they are. As a result, we let them pass by. We chalk them up to emotional experiences or brief blips of inspiration and move on with our daily routine. And we lose out on creating meaningful careers and lives.

Here are a few tips for recognizing your own moments of obligation.

They're strong. You can recognize the moment by the intense feelings it invokes. The moment itself doesn't necessarily need to be dramatic, but what it brings up in you is.

They keep showing up. Sometimes, the experiences will reoccur. You'll notice an issue again and again. Patterns will emerge and you will see that, for whatever reason, you are drawn to delve deeper into this particular issue.

They're personal. The moments are very often personally meaningful. They are connected to your own experiences, or the experiences of people you care most about, the way in which Socheata's moment of obligation was.

They take hold. Finally, they just won't let you go. They scream for your attention, creeping into your mind when you are minding your own business — sitting on the couch, watching TV, or trying to get a good night's sleep.

Everyone is moved this way from time to time, but what sets those who help solve the world's biggest problems apart is the decision to turn that feeling into action. They say, "Someone has to take responsibility for this problem. And that someone is me."

Since Socheata responded to that first moment of obligation by lugging a borrowed video camera to Cambodia, she's had many more moments and has found new and innovative ways to respond to them. Today, Socheata is the Chief Executive Guru at goBlue Labs, which combines ancient wisdom about mindfulness with 21st century neurotechnology in order to help people perform better in life and work. And I am sure she will have more moments that will allow her to build a meaningful, purpose-driven life and have an impact on the world.

As will you. But will you recognize them? Will you not let them pass you by? And can you turn these powerful moments into action?