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Little PINK Book

From Tossed Out to Sought Out

Marilyn Tam's parents didn't want her. But she prevailed anyway, becoming CEO of Aveda and the top-ranking woman at Nike and Reebok without ever applying for a job.

By Taylor Mallory

[Marilyn Tam](#) loves life today, but hers got off to a rocky start. The second child of Chinese parents who wanted a boy and therefore shipped her off to live with an aunt, she was told from the start that she didn't matter, that she wasn't good enough. "I learned from that experience that you're not really a victim of your circumstances," says Tam, entrepreneur, speaker, renowned humanitarian and former CEO of Aveda. "It taught me about reaching out to something bigger than the physical people around me. If you know that you are connected to something greater than yourself and that *you* have inherent worth and are on this planet for a reason, you can surmount any obstacle."

Two things convinced her, even as a child, that she had the inner strength to get out – a higher power and an inner one. "Sometimes when I was in a particularly miserable situation, I'd find solace climbing trees or going to the ocean near my aunt's home," remembers Tam. "The natural world is so powerful and nurturing that I knew I was anchored to some greater power or God or spirit (whatever you call it)." And then there was her grandfather, who died before she really got to know him but gave her a gift in her unexpected Chinese name, one usually reserved for first-born sons of prominent families. "He named me Hay-Lit, a combination of the names of two emperors, one known for wisdom and compassion in times of peace and the other for strategy and prowess in times of war," she says. "Knowing that someone at some time felt that I was really important in some sense, that I was meant for greatness, inspired me when people around me told me I was worthless." Tam's friend, a clinical psychologist told her once that it's amazing she didn't become an alcoholic bag lady. "I laughed. I guess that's supposed to be a compliment. Circumstances either break us or make us grow and become bigger, who we really are."

She's not unwanted anymore. She's co-leading a cutting edge, non-invasive integrated healthcare services and products company, HealthWalk. She consults and speaks globally with Top 500 companies, governments and nonprofits on leadership, diversity, change management and integrating social and environmental concerns into businesses profitably. And she's written an international bestseller, [How to Use What You've Got to Get What You Want](#).

She served as CEO of Aveda, president of Reebok Apparel and Retail Group and vice president of Nike – and never once applied for a job.

"I've always been passionate about what I do, and I share that with everyone I work with, creating a community around me," she tells PINK. "My own passion and mission were so obvious that when a position aligned with my talents and interests came along, my name immediately came up."

"Dedicated" is putting it lightly. Among her long list of community service ventures, she is a national director for SCORE and served for five years on the international board of The Reebok Human Rights Awards, along with former President Jimmy Carter, Peter Gabriel, Sting and several business leaders. And she is an advisor to the country of Bhutan. And she's executive director of the US Foundation, a nonprofit she founded in 1996 "to make a positive difference in the world in the areas of education, youth issues, environmental causes and conditions for peace."

Here, she talks to PINK about when to stay and when to go – and working in a global economy.

PINK: Why did you leave corporate America to start your company?
M.T.: I've left several times. I'm good at most everything except retirement. (She laughs.) I've founded and run three other successful businesses throughout my career – a consulting firm, a Web portal company and a web-based supply chain software company. The first time I started a business, I'd just left Nike. In late 80s, the company was still very male focused and not supportive of women. Aside from me, the next woman was three levels down, and no woman was getting much visibility or support. The whole company was geared around this male testosterone attitude. So I left instead of being part of a system I didn't agree with. When I went to say goodbye to the then-president, he asked where I was going next. I said I didn't know but that this job wasn't serving me. He said, "Wow, you have a lot of balls." I said, "No, I don't have any. That's why I'm leaving." If you focus on that, you can move forward. Sometimes it may look scary or questionable. When I left Reebok, people asked how I could leave. I had "everything" – money, an impressive title, prestige and access to the G4 (I loved that plane!). But when something doesn't feel right or isn't aligned with my life mission, nothing can buy my staying. I encourage people to think that way; your



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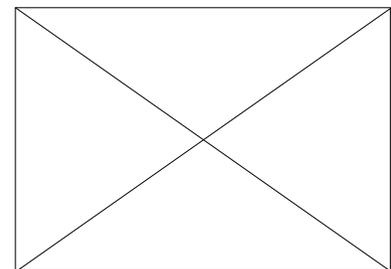
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mission and purpose shouldn't be for sale. When we're not living our mission, we're not aligned with ourselves and things go wrong inside. So I've usually gotten out pretty quickly when I realized I was out of alignment.

PINK: What do companies and leaders need to focus on to remain relevant in this economy?

M.T.: We're working in a global economy in the true sense of the word. When we react, plan, strategize – when we do anything – we have to understand how our decisions will impact everyone else. There are no borders anymore. Every company needs to know why they're in business, what need they're serving. In the 90s and even in 2000, we were me-focused. Everything was about self indulgence and looking out for your own needs. Now nothing anyone does is separate from everything else. So we have to figure out how to go from "me" to "we" – creating community and empowerment, something bigger than one person or one company that will serve greater whole. When a company is looking at short-term goals and thinks it's good for this purpose in this moment, and not thinking about a long-term purpose, it will trip them up later.

PINK: What were the biggest culture shocks when you moved to the U.S.?

M.T.: I left Hong Kong in my mid-teens, alone with two suitcases and a teddy bear. I got accepted early into college and came over halfway through high school to go to college and then to work. It wasn't easy, but I had inner strength and knew the Spirit was with me. That carried me through the many challenges. Just landing was crazy. Coming from a tropical, condensed place where people live relatively close together. And of course, the U.S. is quite casual in many ways, a more transitory culture. I remember taking the Greyhound to my university and seeing miles of open area, filled with trees and rolling meadows. I thought, "Wow, this is a big place." And then I saw the used car lots, acres of cars just sitting there. I'd never seen that. In Hong Kong, they're in multi-story parking lots. The language was a challenge. I came speaking British English. I had to get used to the differences and the idiom. I had no idea what people meant when they said, "How's it going?" For us, it's so simple. But for someone from another country, she just wonders, "How's what going and where?"

PINK: What do you do to relax and rejuvenate yourself?

M.T.: I need physical exercise. It's easy for people who are very passionate about causes and missions to get into their heads and just focus on work. But if there's no physical release, you'll break down. So I do a lot of walking and hiking. In warmer places, I love swimming. And I love being outside in nature – whether it's the ocean or mountains, so I'll just go for a walk through my neighborhood. And I garden. I have an organic garden, an exotic fruit orchard and roses.

PINK: What is the best business advice you've ever received?

M.T.: When I was a young assistant buyer in my first job, my boss, Diane Cohen, taught me a lesson I've never forgotten. Being a rather hip young woman, I had identity issues around what I was helping her buy – moderate-priced clothing for middle-aged women. I didn't relate. It wasn't me. I thought I should be working in junior's fashion. She told me, "It's not about you. It's about who your customer is. You're here to serve a need. This is what will help your customer. If you focus on that, you can be happy and even do a great job selling toilet seat covers." That was a wake-up call. It's about who I'm serving, which makes me feel meaningful.