

*Lead
from the
Outside*

**HOW TO BUILD YOUR FUTURE
AND MAKE REAL CHANGE**

STACEY ABRAMS

PICADOR HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY NEW YORK

INTRODUCTION

In November 1994, I entered a hotel room in Jackson, Mississippi, the dusk of late autumn broken by streetlights that flickered against the window. I'd spent the day vying for a title no one like me had ever won before, one I had no road map for winning. What I had instead were two parents, Robert and Carolyn, who sat and waited in that hotel for me, the second of their six children, while I tried.

The Rhodes Scholarship committee called the daylong session an interview, but the experience felt more like a grueling oral exam—a cross between *Jeopardy!* and Celebrity Trivial Pursuit with questions about foreign ministers, abstract painters, and dead scientists. Prior to my junior year of college, I had known little of the Rhodes, the Truman, the Marshall, or the Fulbright. These prestigious awards, I thought, were only chased by students who spent summers abroad or did postgraduate study in Europe. Fellowships like this were an unlikely topic of

conversation for first-generation college students or their children. So when the Rhodes panel had asked how winning their scholarship would change my life, I stumbled. I didn't know, and even sitting there, the prize nearly within my reach, I feared learning the answer.

I had feared it so much, in fact, that I almost hadn't submitted my application. I had offered excuse after excuse to the professors who exhorted me to apply: England was too cold; the application too long; I had better things to do with my time. In truth, though, I didn't want to apply for the Rhodes Scholarship because I didn't want to lose. And I knew I wouldn't win.

I was afraid that outside the comfort of my black women's college, I would prove all those who had looked down on me correct: I was a big fish in a multiculti pond, but I couldn't compete with the true heirs to American power. The Rhodes was not for the likes of me, or those who looked like me, and certainly not for working-class kids, especially a working-class black woman. Because at twenty, I had fully internalized all the "-isms" that taught me to strive but not exceed my limits.

Plus, I had research to back this up. Only a small number of African American students had ever won the Rhodes by 1994, and no black woman had ever been the Rhodes nominee from Mississippi. But, when I finally admitted my fear to the dean of my college, I found the response I received strangely compelling. You're almost guaranteed to win, she said, if you get past Mississippi.

Hope sparked for an instant when she laid out the pathway to success. I could win this rare victory if I could outshine others from my home state. But if beating the odds in Mississippi was the only way to Britain, I wouldn't bother packing my bags. Mississippi had perfected soul-crushing poverty wrapped in gentil-

ity. The state had birthed my parents and tried mightily to deny them futures. It failed, but not for lack of trying. *Get past Mississippi.* The phrase barely captured the stark reality of the “where” that raised me.

My parents had followed the rules for advancement as they understood them: they finished high school, graduated from college. My mother, one of seven, not only defied family tradition by crossing her high school stage with a diploma, she excelled in college and went on to receive a master’s degree in library science. My father, the first man in his family to go to college, did so despite an undiagnosed learning disability. They secured the degrees that should have guaranteed success.

My parents, who had marched for civil rights as teenagers, also knew intimately that the end of Jim Crow did not mean the rise of black prosperity. And they knew the advantages of education provided no security. They worked hard, did everything they were supposed to do—my mom as a librarian, my dad as a shipyard worker—and yet despite following the American prescription for prosperity, they sometimes barely kept their heads above water.

My mom never liked the descriptors of our economic status like “working class” or “working poor,” so she called us the “genteel poor”—we had little money, but we read books and watched PBS. More important, our parents refused to believe that their lot meant their children could not do better than they had. Instead, they created their own prescription, known in our family as the Trinity for Success: go to church, go to school, and take care of one another.

We may not have had running water every day, and the power bill might go unpaid, but nothing interfered with my parents’ trinity of education, faith, and service—service to family, service

to others. Inside our house, we three older girls each had personal responsibility for a younger sibling. On Saturday mornings, my younger brother Richard would creep into my room and over to my side of the bed I shared with my sister Leslie. He would shake my shoulder until I woke, and I'd follow him groggily into the living room where the television sat mute until I pulled the knob to bring the cartoons. Richard knew to wake me because he was my charge. Our eldest sister, Andrea, cared for the baby, Jeanine, and Leslie watched over our youngest brother, Walter. Often, later on Saturdays, we would volunteer at a soup kitchen or in a youth detention center, where my parents reminded us that no matter how little we had, there was always someone with less, and it was our job to serve that person.

Our parents also taught us to learn for the sake of knowledge itself, and they made certain we understood no one could take knowledge from us. Circumstances could steal your house, your job, your car, but no one could take the contents of our minds. With learning, they believed, we could always find a way. And proof of our knowledge—a college degree—would be a tangible reminder to those who doubted us because of our skin color.

The neighborhood where we lived, comprising two streets, was working class and entirely black, at least until I was in fifth grade or so. I remember when the Brooks family moved in, the first white people to live in our area. Growing up, our sister Andrea, served as the ringleader, organizing our games and managing our recreation. We were probably the only kids in our community who played Library or voluntarily watched ballroom dancing.

Church anchored our souls, providing a steady diet of lessons for navigating the uncertainties of a life of working-class poverty. We soaked up parables from the Bible mixed with real-life sto-

ries of the men and women of the civil rights movement. Our faith, which taught us to reach beyond our mortal selves, lent gravity to what we were taught by my parents' daily lessons.

The emphasis my family placed on faith, learning, and service gained me access into Spelman College, and I had a respectable 3.65 GPA, but nothing like the 4.0s Rhodes scholars possessed. My record of community service could not be faulted, but the summer before, I'd met other potential applicants who had saved small villages in India or spoke fluent Farsi. My farthest travels had taken me to Ithaca, New York, and Scottsdale, Arizona.

Small insults had also built a layer of resistance to risk in me. Once, in middle school, after I won a citywide essay contest, my dad drove me to pick up my prize. While he waited in the car, I ran inside to receive my ribbon and my \$50 reward. But the woman in charge—white and grim-faced when I introduced myself—refused to give me the money. I couldn't be the author of the winning essay, she declared to the others milling around the school lobby. When I protested, she demanded that I produce photo identification, an impossibility for an eighth grader. I demanded my prize, but inwardly granted her the validity of her doubts. Hers was not the first or last nick in my confidence. Again and again, throughout my childhood, teachers had challenged my right to be in advanced classes, to question their assumptions, to presume equal rights to my peers. Although I usually insisted on going forward, the repeated doubts took root. What if they were correct?

Even in an all-black college, I grappled with fears of inadequacy. I had once imagined becoming a physicist. I'd been a top physics student in high school, and published in a university's academic journal as a twelfth grader. My freshman year, I took an advanced course at the college across the street, where they still

had seats available. I sat in the course, surrounded by men. While I was not an A student, I held my own through midterms. Shortly before an exam, the professor held me back after class. He cautioned me that I might not be suited to the complexities of higher math the long-term pursuit of physics required. A student at a women's college, I chafed at his warning, but his prediction wormed its way into my confidence.

When the next semester enrollment came around, I did not select any new physics courses. Instead, I flirted with other majors, slowly abandoning my interest in the hard sciences. If I didn't try to become a physicist, I knew I couldn't fail. Four years later, as I grappled with the Rhodes, I again balked at an opportunity because I had decided early on that I wouldn't attempt what I could not win. And my loss seemed certain—I was black and a girl and from the wrong family and the wrong zip code.

Looking back, I clearly see reality did not mirror my internal dialogue. By my senior year, I had spoken at the thirtieth anniversary of the March on Washington, been hired by the Ford Foundation to write about youth poverty, was an A student and president of the student body. But for me, each achievement felt grounded in race and class and gender. I was really good at being a black woman, when compared to other black women. But could I be more than that? My answer seemed to be a resounding "no." A small voice said I could do what I had done in that freshman physics class and concede before I tested myself. But a louder one declared I could look to my accomplishments, to the places where my otherness had been celebrated, and leverage the confidence I'd earned there. In this contest, I could use the factors of race and gender to beat the rigged system. If I could get past Mississippi, it might be my otherness that did the trick.

I relented and applied and received an invitation to come to

Jackson for the interview. The committee appeared unimpressed with my answers, and I left my interview deflated, certain that the hopes pressed into me by my parents and professors had been proven false.

I heard the results later that afternoon, standing shoulder to shoulder with the other applicants. Without the benefit of cell phones in 1994, I hurried back to the hotel where my parents waited. I walked the several blocks because I had no money for a cab. With a click of the key, I entered the hotel room and told my parents the news. The Mississippi Rhodes panel had selected me as one of their two standard-bearers to Texas for the finals. I had broken the curse: a black woman would speak for our state. And in the aftermath of my announcement, I watched my father cry.

We talked for a long time that night. About how scared I was about trying and failing, about what losing in Texas might mean. My deepest fear found voice—that I would disappoint them by not measuring up. That because of the “-isms” arrayed against my race and my gender and my background, I would never be enough. My mother told me, her throat tight, “We know what the Rhodes Scholarship is, baby. But we never imagined, from where we began, we would have a daughter who would have this opportunity. We’re so proud of you. You can’t fail, even if you don’t win. Because you’ve already won the hardest part.”

A few weeks later, I traveled to Texas where I did not win the Rhodes Scholarship. The loss devastated me in ways it took years to catalog; but in the attempt, I changed my life. Because I suddenly saw opportunity where I had never been brave enough to look before, and I found that failure wasn’t fatal, that otherness held an extraordinary power for clarity and invention.

Armed with that loss, I would return to Texas and get a

master's degree from the University of Texas. I would attend Yale Law School, the most exclusive in the country, where I would try to confront the questions of race and gender in a space that prided itself on its meritocracy, on ignoring the value of privilege, though I could count the number of folks who looked like me in a class on one hand. When I graduated from Yale, I joined a white-shoe law firm, where I was the only person of color who practiced my type of tax law. Despite the long history of the firm, only two people of color had ever become partners—and this was one of the more diversity-conscious law firms in Atlanta.

I published romance novels and chafed at stereotypes that placed me on shelf spaces designated for urban black writers rather than in the general romantic suspense category. Between the publishers and the bookstores, they assumed a black writer with black characters couldn't appeal across color lines with her stories. So instead of sharing shelves with Nora Roberts and Elizabeth Lowell, I squeezed in between all the other women romance writers of color in our assigned section.

For every success—becoming deputy city attorney, running for office, and rising in less than four years to serve as the minority leader of the Georgia House of Representatives—I have consistently confronted racism, sexism, ageism, and other phobias about my otherness.

Still, I must work each day to silence the voices of the essay judge and the physics professor, and even my own, when I doubt what I have the potential to become. In defiance of my fears, I have launched national campaigns and won and lost elections, and I have started companies that folded and succeeded. I took the lead of a broken party, knowing that we would wander in the political wilderness for at least a decade. Then I decided to run for governor of a state in the Deep South, and in the attempt,

become the first black woman to lead a state in our nation's history.

But that night in Jackson remains with me always, as a reminder that leadership is not divined by pedigree or demography and that origin stories are simply the beginning.

As a forty-four-year-old African American woman working to transform the politics of Georgia—a southern state on the brink of majority-minority status—I continue to grapple with the questions I confronted in Jackson. In my run for governor, reporters describe worries about my ability to win an election with white voters. The same question is not posed about my white opponents' ability to cultivate voters of color, although we comprise 47 percent of the population in Georgia.

My candidacy is the culmination of what I learned in pursuing the Rhodes—that what I seek to achieve is bigger than any prejudices about who I am. Call it success, leadership, confidence, or any of a dozen descriptions; what we're in pursuit of is power: the power to control our lives, to change our fates, and to win what some have been raised to take for granted. But there are few how-to guides to help those of us who are "other" to become the ones in charge. Power and leadership are hard, and it's especially difficult for those who start out weighed down by stereotypes and lack of access. Convincing others—and often ourselves—that we can overcome obstacles takes confidence, guile, and tactical maneuvers. I have learned how to seize opportunity, how to plan for victory and for defeat, and how to acquire, hold, and wield power, and I wrote this book to share what I've learned and the strategies I employed.

Leadership stands at the crux of how we get to power, and it demands the willingness to go first, to take responsibility as well as hold authority, to help others get where they need to go.

I've seen leaders emerge out of nowhere in moments of great turmoil. But more often, a leader evolves from a good person who is willing to make hard choices and handle the consequences. Effective leadership can be difficult to find in general, but for some of us, we find ourselves blocked or discouraged, confronting power we aren't supposed to have.

Almost weekly, I sit on panels and in meetings talking to women, young leaders, and people of color—those who are told they are not supposed to be in charge—about how I got to where I am and where I plan to go next. One thing comes up again and again in these discussions: that our otherness operates as disqualification, and our inherent qualities render us less than others, and therefore unworthy. In *Lead from the Outside*, I want to dispel the bigotry of that thinking, and I want to talk about how those of us who stand on the outside can charge right in.

§ Inevitably, wherever I speak, I get the question “How do you do it?” But I think the most important question is this one: “How do I banish doubts and get out of my own way?” The straight answer is that you must. No one born into the minority has the luxury of giving up, even if we do not win enough of the time. When I am standing before groups of activists of color, leading a dialogue with women, or sitting in intimate conversation with the young people who work with me, I want them to understand the urgency of self-confidence coupled with self-awareness. Our obligation is to trust our capacity to lead and to gather the tools and training necessary to do it well. We'll make mistakes, as everyone does, and ours will likely be judged more harshly. Yet our triumphs will also resound, and they will show the way for those who also doubt their calling.

What I learned from my family—my siblings who have achieved and the ones who struggle with drug addiction and

incarceration—is that we are the architects of our futures. What my parents and family gave me are tools—tools that I use to fix problems and excavate opportunities and destroy obstacles. And, like any tool, if someone teaches you where to get it and how to use it, you can build something too. This book does not promise solutions, but I can show you the right tools and how to use them in the right way to make incremental progress that matters.

Beyond the question of how we push through is *what* we are pushing for. I am driven by a bitter hatred of poverty and the lack of mobility that keeps families in endless cycles of wasted ability. Kids should grow up as I did with a belief in their potential, no matter where they start or how differently they learn. I want to see the single Latino dad without a high school education decide he can start his own business. I want to register the Haitian immigrant to vote, because she deserves to have a say in her city's government. Knowing what drives your own passion is key, regardless of the scale or target. Writing poetry that finds a publisher or starting a day care center for homeless teen moms are both transformative ambitions. Finding out what you want to fight for is critical, and knowing how to get from thought to action is often easier said than done, so I also share exercises to help you figure it out for yourself. I encourage you to write out your own answers—on paper or in a digital format—and I promise, you'll surprise yourself in the process.

This book is for the outsider looking for the magic decoder ring for how to gain and hold power. But let's be clear—there isn't one. Instead, we have to understand and master the components of power: ambition, fear, money, failure, opportunity, and access. I break down how they function in leadership, and I offer stories to illuminate what works and what is harder to accomplish.

Leadership is hard. Convincing others—and often yourself—

that you have the answers to overcome long-standing obstacles takes a combination of confidence, insight, and sheer bravado. Finding ways to prevail, while bringing others along with you, is the core of being a good leader and the central tenet of *Lead from the Outside*. I wrote this book with the experiences and challenges in mind that might hinder *anyone* who exists outside the structure of traditional white male power—women, people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, those without money, and millennials ready to make a change.

By putting “otherness” at the center of the conversation, I do not intend to alienate anyone who has claims to privileges, but to draw a clearer map to the skills that have eluded the rest of us for so long. As minorities move closer to parity, we have to be ready to lead beyond what we might imagine. And that requires a handbook written for our experiences and challenges—a means to become the minority leaders who own our power and change our worlds.

Excerpt from LEAD FROM THE OUTSIDE. Copyright © 2018 by Stacey Abrams. picadorusa.com Picador is a U.S. registered trademark and is used by Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC, under license from Pan Books Limited.