

Part 1

America

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Finding Joy at Home

I can't say for certain exactly how it happened, or when; but like a slow marinade of spices and oils and herbs, my body has been soaking in the Midwest since my mother first wrapped me in a white blanket. I have absorbed the textures unique to each season: Lush grasses upholstering rolling hills, the crunch of leaves underfoot as I scout goldfinches in the garden. I have listened to the winter calls of red-tailed hawks that fly boldly near the icy, spring-fed waters of our pond. I have memorized the lines and arches of the trees I love, stared in reverence as they swayed in the wind, bending and dancing and nearly singing to me—composing a forest cathedral that seemed to be mine alone.

I know this place as one knows a sister or a close friend—intimately and effortlessly.

Trying to remove the Midwest from my being—from my blood—would be akin to attempting to separate out the varied ingredients in my mom's winter potato soup: *Impossible*. My love for this place is so ingrained in me—so deeply pressed upon my very soul—that it is part-and-parcel of *who I am*.

I remember a day when I was a child, bouncing along in the backseat of my grandparents' Buick on our way to Amish Country. I always loved those Sunday drives; hearing the gravel crunch on the old country roads, driving somewhere to pick wildflowers on a hill or in a meadow. The autumn sun streamed in through half-open windows and dust danced in the glow of the backseat as I watched barns flash before me like immense wooden strawberries on county-sized vines.

Maybe that's the first time I paid attention to Ohio; maybe that's the first time I knew it was special to me. Or to someone.

Living here has, in some ways, softened me—to the beauty of the earth and the simplicity of nature. Yet in other ways, it has toughened me—left me with calloused hands and skinned knees. I hold both sides of the coin in my hands, feeling the weight equally.

It hasn't always been easy to live in a small town with a big last name, so my dad made sure I observed and *practiced* the Midwest work ethic that makes us the "Breadbasket of America." After all, if we're going to feed the nation, we must all be ready to get some dirt under our nails.

Midwesterners, I've found, are ready to do that hard work. Whether it's farming or manufacturing, our state stands on the shoulders of willing workers and their desire to make honorable contributions to society. I grew up seeing that—not only from my mother and father—but from neighbors and teachers and friends; people who ask for honest pay for an honest day's work. People who find pride and esteem in holding a job that provides for their families. Ohioans, it seems, embody the Midwest work ethic that epitomizes Longaberger—and, in a greater sense, the history of basket weaving in America.

In light of these willing hands and able bodies, I can't tell you how acutely I feel the pain that accompanies the dismantling of so

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many jobs across our nation and even more so here, closer to home. To recognize that people want to be given a chance—just *one shot* at a better life—and to see them stumble over shoestrings that someone else untied is sometimes more than I can bear. I turn on the news and see that faces are cast down while unemployment numbers are steadily up. Sadly, we no longer live in a time of abundant factory jobs and blue-collar opportunities. And there are times during quiet moments when I wonder: *What if my dad were trying to start this business now—in 2010? Could he do it? Would it thrive? . . . Would it even survive?*

There are people who look at me and consider my position within this company, assuming that I “have it made.” *Why would Tami have to worry?* they might wonder. Well, believe me—I worry *plenty!* I worry about the employees who depend on me. I worry about treating them fairly and balancing their needs with an ever-present bottom line. I worry about keeping this tradition alive—about developing another generation of first-class basket weavers who will find an audience in the marketplace and esteem in the town square. I worry about the Midwest.

But amidst these ominous gray clouds, rays of light splinter and break their way through the bleak exterior. If you’re willing to wait and watch, you’ll see them, too. It seems to me that taking a step back lends a new perspective to these clouds. Maybe it requires taking a deep breath and going back to school to find your light. Maybe it means taking a step in a totally different direction, while capturing a willingness to try new things that you never imagined doing.

For me, the light comes when I take a step across the ocean.

I have been blessed with opportunities to serve women on the global stage, and proudly serve as the chair of the Arab Women Leadership Institute. As such, I was honored with an invitation to travel to Jordan as one of my biannual trips. Nestled between

Israel and Saudi Arabia, Jordan is a land peacefully tangled in a complex history. Although women are well represented in their universities, they are striving to move upward socially, sharing many of the dreams that you and I have for ourselves: To be respected, to make a difference, to achieve their own definition of success.

When I met Dr. Wajeeha Sadiq Al-Baharna, I knew I had encountered a strong and interesting individual who was destined to make waves in her country. An expert in interpreting women's rights in the Koran, Dr. Wajeeha explained to me that the Koran *does not* place upon women the kinds of heavy restrictions and legalism that we see marching across our TV screens on the evening news. Rather, she argues, men have *distorted* the guidelines in this book and imposed these rules as a form of religious fanaticism. Dr. Wajeeha dreams of helping women inch forward in their fight for equality, and she is willing to step outside of very structured boxes to do that.

Dr. Wajeeha could very well leave the land she loves; she could look out at the burkas and list off the rules and say, *Never mind! It's not worth the fight!* And I can't say I would blame her if she chose that path. Transforming the perceptions and beliefs of a community—an entire culture—is a *monumental task*.

But Dr. Wajeeha isn't choosing that path. Instead of giving up and walking away in defeat, Dr. Wajeeha *stays* in her country, remains true to her homeland, and strives to make it better.

And isn't that what so many of us have done in these tough economic times? Of course, some families have had to move by necessity—and justifiably so. However, I seem to hear about just as many who have stayed and tried to move mountains in the communities where they've grown up and come to love.

Take a moment and reflect on your own journey over the past year or two. Have there been moments when leaving the place you

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call home seemed particularly tempting? If you decided against the move, what was it that held you in place? Was it family? Your church or religious community? The landscape and the beauty that has become like an old friend?

And if you had to move, do you ever think about home? What do you miss? What do you love about your new surroundings? How can you bring fresh light to that place?

Wherever the road of life has taken you, I'm certain if you search your memories that you will find that the geography of your childhood has made a few cameo appearances. Perhaps the landscape was one of the characters in your story; maybe it even had the starring role. For many, visiting the beach in summer is so intertwined with thoughts of mom and dad that they're pressed to remember family without sand and water and pails of shells.

That's the beauty of *place*—the beauty of *home*. It becomes a part of you even when you move and try to stuff it away; even when you don't realize you're soaking it in, there you are, heart and soul, *marinating*.

Whether I'm working with Arab women or European business women or the Ambassador for Kenya, I look into eyes eager for direction and creative ideas . . . and I see light. I see the spark of ingenuity that I see in America, and it reminds me of home.

The home I love, that continues to shape me and inform my worldview.

The home that gives me hope and light for the future.

