

It's
Never
Too
Late

It's
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Too
Late

MAKE THE NEXT ACT OF YOUR LIFE
THE BEST ACT OF YOUR LIFE

Kathie Lee Gifford



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*With gratitude to my parents, Joanie and Eppie, who said they
loved me too much to deny me the privilege of making mistakes.*

*And for every mistake I've made (and there were many),
I thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus, Yeshua, for forgiving me.*

I Need to Make a Change in My Life

by Kathie Lee Gifford

I need to make a change in my life
To rearrange what's left of the rest of my life
I've been living far too long in this dusty old room
I need to plant a dream . . . I need to watch it bloom

I need to make a choice in my life
Surrender to the voice I've ignored all my life
I've been waiting far too long watching dreams pass me by
I need to learn to live before I die

I hunger to taste more while I still have the gift of time
To taste a wine so sweet, I never dreamed it could be mine
To savor every sunset and to say at the end of the ride
I smiled at ev'ry sunrise, I sailed on ev'ry tide
No question was unasked, no glance was ignored
I drank deep from the well, more than I could afford
I can't waste another chance, can't waste another day
Watching all my dreams just waste away

No regrets
No what-ifs
No if onlys
No what might have beens
I need to make a change in my life

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Foreword

What can I say about dreams? There's lots to be said about them. Everybody has them. Everybody wants them to come true.

It's always been my belief that you never get too old to dream. I often say (and mean it) that I wake up with a new dream every day . . . well, at least one, usually more. Dreaming is easy. Making them come true is the hard part.

A wish and a dream are not the same. You can sit around and wish all day long about wanting this and wanting that. But that's not gonna get you anywhere if you don't dream up a plan and then act on it.

I've often been quoted as saying, "In order to make dreams come true, you have to put legs, arms, feet, hands, and wings on them." In other words, you have to work your ever-lovin' butt off to get the job done. Of course, you also have to have a plan and a talent in whatever field that you want to be successful in. But with blood, sweat, and tears, it can be achieved. Most people are not willing to sacrifice sweat and tears, much less blood. Even though that's very graphic, it does amount to that.

Some are luckier than most and don't have as hard of a time achieving their goals, but it still takes time and devotion. I know it looks easy for people like me and Kathie Lee to say all of this, seeing as how we're both successful women. But believe me, we didn't

FOREWORD

get there without all of the things that I just talked about. We both paid our dues, we dreamed big, we paid big, and we're still doing it at our age.

I've always loved Kathie Lee, and I respect and admire her openness, her talent, her beauty, and her willingness to share her life with others. I know she has been an inspiration to me as well as millions of others through the years. I was fascinated, but not surprised, when she decided to leave a well-established, secure career to start a whole new chapter in her life.

It's Never Too Late is great and will be such an inspiration, not only for the older generation but to young ones as well. After all, a dream is a dream, and it can come true at any age. I've written books about dreaming and I've read many books on the subject, but this one covers it all and more. And just when I thought I knew everything there was to know about dreams. You go, girl! I will always love you and be dreaming along beside you.

—Dolly Parton
August 2020

Dream with Me

I never intended to take this stroll down memory lane. What began as a book that would help us all remember “we’re not done yet” turned into a lot of looking back. But isn’t that the way it goes? God always seems to have His own idea of what’s best.

As I was writing, I realized the importance of knowing not only where you are but also where you’ve been and what got you there. That perspective can help you figure out where you want to go next.

So where *do* you want to go?

You might say, “Good question, Kathie Lee. I’m not sure” or “I haven’t really thought about it” or “How the heck am I supposed to know that?”

I have one word for you: dream! Let me say it one more time to be sure you got it . . . *dream*.

If you’re my age, or getting close, it’s probably been a long time since you last thought back to those days when you had dreams of what or who you wanted to be when you “grew up.”

But it’s time, friend. It’s time to ask yourself, “What would I do if I could?” Toss out the phrases *I can’t* and *I don’t know how* and start dreaming about the what-if that might get you off that couch and back into something you want to do.

Maybe me sharing my story will give you some perspective and help you get started on your own. At the heart of my personal

INTRODUCTION

dream of singing and being in movies is my love of inspiring and entertaining others, so hopefully, some of my stories will do just that for you.

Are you ready?

Dream with me. Because it's never too late to dream.

one

Begin Again

*How do I begin to begin again?
Breathe deep and let all the fresh clean air in?
How do I find the courage to say
I'm gonna start a brand-new life today?*

—“NEW EVERYTHINGS” BY KATHIE LEE

GIFFORD AND BRETT JAMES

Certain moments in life can take on a rich significance in retrospect. Take, for instance, the time I was kicked out of the Brownies. No, I'm not kidding. I actually was kicked out of the Brownies. They insisted I turn my beanie in. All because I had bought into the Join the Brownies, See the World propaganda.

I arrived at the first meeting super excited, but all I could see was the back of the beanie on the girl in front of me—who had bought into the same propaganda.

It turns out talking about the world is not the same as seeing the world.

For the first time in my young life I felt duped, disappointed

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that what I'd been told was not actually true. So, I started my own Brownie troop at home, and the organization took umbrage and asked me to never show up again. (I think I remember my parents giggling, but I'm not sure.) That experience has stayed with me for decades.

Disappointment can do a number on you, but only if you let it. I'm not sure where I got the drive and determination to keep moving forward, even at the ripe old age of seven, but it likely had a lot to do with my dad and mom.

I was born into a wonderful family with two parents who knew very early on that they had an unusual child in me. They always showed their love in spite of my uniqueness, encouraging my adventures, circuses, concerts, and plays in the backyard. They let me raid the family pantry to open a corner store on our street. They smiled as I started the children's newspaper for our neighborhood. I'm eternally grateful to God for my parents.

I tried to foster the same kind of love and support in raising my own children, Cody and Cassidy. You'd have to ask them if I succeeded. Actually, please don't. Let them write a book that can't hurt my feelings when I'm dead. Regardless, they have turned out to be remarkable, delightful, completely unique, and imaginative individuals who are doing exactly what they were created to do—create.

Cody is an extraordinary screenwriter and producer. And Cassidy is an accomplished film and television actress. They're fun. They're kind. And I don't resent them for my stretch marks at all. They were worth it.

Today, I find myself at a point in life where the labels that technically apply to me could actually define me, if I let them. I'm a widow. And I'm an empty nester. Please don't throw in senior citizen—I already know that too. I'm basically alone for the first time in my long life. That thought by itself could either terrify me or

BEGIN AGAIN

thrill me. I'm trying very hard to be thrilled. Growing older is not for the faint of heart, but I truly believe that this next season of my life has the potential to be the best season in a life that, to this point, has been jam-packed with amazing opportunities and great adventures.

So, what's next? After lunch, that is.

I don't know, and that's the point. I can make the rest of my life what I want it to be. I can fill it up with people and have a celebration, sit by the fire and write an oratorio, or sit alone and have a pathetic pity party. For the very first time, it's my choice to make.

I moved from Connecticut to Nashville after eleven years on NBC's *TODAY* show with Hoda Kotb. I could not wait to get settled in and begin a brand-new life. One thing I've always loved is song-writing, so it was a real joy to have the opportunity to collaborate with singer-songwriter Brett James. "New Everythings" is one of the songs we composed for a movie that I'd written for Craig Ferguson and me to shoot in Scotland. In the film the heroine, Annabelle, is widowed and sets out on an unusual adventure that takes her to Scotland, leaving her former life in Nantucket completely behind. She is childless, jobless, but not hopeless.

I loved playing Annabelle. She's a pure spirit, doing the very best she can to find whatever joy is still available to her, perhaps hidden deep somewhere in the Highlands. As of this writing we have finally found the right distributor for the movie. It has taken over two years, but for a long time it looked like it was never going to happen. That's the risk you take when you dare to not only dream but set out to make those dreams come true. Even if it kills you.

Some of my dreams have taken years to come true—like *Scandalous*, the Broadway musical that took thirteen years and fourteen million dollars to create, only to close after three weeks. Nothing I have ever dreamed has been easy. Nothing. Show business

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is brutal and has left many a carcass on the red carpet. I don't intend to be one of them.

As Stephen Sondheim once said to me, "You did the work."

Yes, I did, and I'm still doing it.

There is joy in the struggle of hard work, and there is profound pleasure in the sweat of it. I may have twenty years left in this life, or I may have twenty minutes. But I'm going to drink this life to the dregs while I can. Because it's never too late to begin again.

two

Share Your First Love

*We had so many good times
Why do good times always have to end?
Stopped countin' all the days
Since we went our separate ways
Now you show up with your "Hey, girl, how you been?"
Not again.*

—"NOT AGAIN" BY KATHIE LEE GIFFORD

Yancy Bailey Spencer III. Even now, after all these years, the sound and sight of his name moves me deeply. Yancy was my first love. Not a flirty, silly high school kind of love. I mean a true love . . . the kind that stays with you for the rest of your life.

Actually, truth be told, my daddy was my first love.

You can read most of my growing-up story in my 1992 memoir, *I Can't Believe I Said That*. The *Reader's Digest* version is that my dad was a navy man stationed in Paris, France, with his wife, my mom, and my three-and-a-half-year-old brother, David, when I was born at the American Hospital in Paris. I was their "love child"; my

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mother always said she actually fell in love with my daddy during their two years in that gorgeous country.

Shortly after my debut we moved back to the States, which is where my sister, Michele (Michie), was born. Not long after that we were transferred to Germany and then finally back to Annapolis, Maryland, for good.

I had many rich experiences growing up in a family that had a lot of love to go around. With a full scholarship, I ended up attending Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, as a drama major with a minor in music. I was a semester shy of graduating with a degree in music performance when I left the university in the winter of 1975.

People have questioned why I left early. All I can say is that I knew there was something else I was supposed to do and somewhere else I was supposed to go. Even then I knew when it was time to leave something that, on the surface, seemed a very good thing.

I can't explain this phenomenon except to say that it's a gnawing in my spirit that won't go away. A restlessness about *what is* and a growing excitement about *what's to be*. It's the way the Holy Spirit leads me, gently whispering into my being until I finally acknowledge it and my heart says yes.

I knew I was supposed to move to Los Angeles, but I was waiting for specific direction. I am the worst waiter in the world. I hate not being able to take action, and yet I know God does some of His best work in me when I am in a holding pattern.

While I was praying and waiting for answers, I started writing a book. I was twenty-two years old, had barely lived, and had no right to think that (1) I had anything deep or revelatory to say and (2) anyone would be interested in what I had to say if I said it. Still, something in me wanted to put my life on paper and preserve my experiences during one of the most tumultuous eras of

SHARE YOUR FIRST LOVE

our time—the '60s, a decade marked by the Vietnam War, “make love, not war” mentality, and a cultural loss of respect for authority. Hippies abounded, and although I was drawn to their sense of freedom and expression, there was also something in me (thank God) that was frightened by how that kind of freedom could damage the soul and, with the rampant drug use, the body.

I've always hated drugs. My body doesn't respond well to them. In fact, I'm allergic to many pharmaceutical drugs, which is probably why I wasn't curious to try marijuana, and certainly not LSD or any of the other hallucinogens.

I was a happy girl. I loved Jesus and wanted to serve Him with a faithful heart. At that time someone like me was called a Jesus freak. (Actually, I'm still a Jesus freak.)

I knew that I was living in a defining moment in our history, and I wanted to encapsulate it in writing so that someday, if God blessed me with a daughter, she would know what her mother had experienced. I sat down to write, and for three weeks, I barely got up, writing in longhand what eventually became *The Quiet Riot*.

Page one, chapter one began with these words: *I was fifteen. He was nineteen and all the things first loves are made of. Tall and tanned so deep, no winter's pale approached him.*

I know, but cut me some slack, okay? I never thought it would get published. I met the aforementioned Yancy Bailey Spencer III on his nineteenth birthday, July 2, 1969, on the boardwalk in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, where my family spent the summers running an inn.

He was already a renowned surfer from Pensacola, Florida, on the Gulf Coast. It was instant. That's all I can say. Bam! I took one look and my heart was his.

Love at first sight is a real thing. This love I fell into with Yancy would stay with me in a profound way for the rest of my life, but also his, which ended suddenly.

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When I met Yancy he was not a Christian. None of his surfer buddies were, either, but my sister, Michie, and I always shared with them about Jesus. They all thought that Jesus was about as cool as they came—they were just not sure He was God.

Our situation was complicated due to the geography between us. By the time I was a senior in high school, Yancy had already been a professional surfer traveling all over the world participating in surfing competitions for several years. There were no cell phones then, so we rarely got to speak. It was a great surprise when one day he called me at my house in Maryland inviting me to visit him and his family after Christmas in Pensacola. We had talked about getting married after I graduated (I know, I know), and I couldn't wait for the holidays to arrive so I could get on a plane to be with him and meet his family.

Certain moments sear themselves in your memory—this was one of them.

After Yancy picked me up at the airport, he took me across the beautiful bridge on the way to Gulf Breeze, where he lived. He stopped the car on the other side, looked at me with his beautiful blue eyes, and said, "I'm so happy you came, Kathryn." (He is the only person in my life who ever called me by my real name.) "Seeing you has made me realize how much I love Pamela."

What?

It turned out that he had met a beautiful young woman named Pamela in the months before, and as often happens when you are young and impetuous, he would marry her a few months later.

I remember going home to Maryland after that weekend and banging my head over and over again against a door. Stupid for sure. But certainly an expression of the pain and the hopelessness I felt at the time.

Several years later Yancy called to tell me the wonderful news

SHARE YOUR FIRST LOVE

that he had come to faith in Jesus at Rock Church in Virginia Beach and realized the mistake he had made in marrying so hastily. On a trip home to visit my family I met him on the boardwalk one night to cry and pray that God would show us a way to be together, but in the end we both believed that divorce was wrong and he should try and stay in the loveless, Christless marriage. His wife ultimately left him, but by then I had married my first husband, so we had missed our window of opportunity to be together.

Yancy went on to marry a beautiful Christian woman named Lydia who had, ironically, learned about him through reading my book *The Quiet Riot* (which had miraculously been published in 1976 and was a surprise bestseller).

Many years later, Lydia and their gorgeous eighteen-year-old daughter, Abigail, came to the studio to watch *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee*. Yancy had called and asked me if they could come to a taping while they were visiting New York looking at schools. Abigail was a gifted singer, dancer, and actress who wanted to pursue a career in the arts. I'll never forget the first time I met her. *Breathtaking* was the only word that came to mind.

During the show I acknowledged them in the audience and then invited them to visit with me in my dressing room afterward. While there, I called the head of casting at ABC, who just happened to have watched the show that morning.

"Send her over," she said to me. "I want to meet her."

That's how capricious this business is. One minute you're an unknown entity sitting in a television audience, a few hours later you're auditioning for *All My Children*, and nine months later you're accepting a *Soap Opera Digest* award for Outstanding Female Newcomer.

Abby lived at our house in Connecticut for the first six months after her move to New York to work on the soap opera. We all adored

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her. This extraordinary actress has since gone on to act in film and television hits such as *Mad Men*, *Suits*, and *Timeless*.

On the morning of February 14, 2011, Valentine's Day, I answered my dressing-room phone. It was Abby calling to tell me that Yancy had died while surfing in Malibu, California. He'd had a heart attack. He was sixty years old.

"Kathie," Abby cried, "will you please tell the world that my daddy is gone?"

I was incredulous.

"But, Abby . . ."

"My mom also wants you to. My whole family does." She paused. "Tell them that he loved Jesus and died exactly the way he would have wanted to."

So I did.

It was only later that I learned that Yancy had led dozens of young surfers to faith in Jesus. There is a statue of him on Pensacola Beach.

Who in your past has been important to you? If that person is still living, I urge you to reach out. For me, all I can do is say, "Rest in peace, sweet surfer, sweet friend. You will forever be my very first love."

three

Never Give Up

*Lord, You have told me that if I have a need
I should just ask it of You.
There is never too great a task for You.
So, Lord, now I'm asking You.*

—“ALL THAT I NEED” BY KATHIE LEE GIFFORD

With time and distance, and hopefully a dash of wisdom along the way, you're able to see everything that has happened in your life with a new perspective. In your recollections of the past, a pattern emerges, and a distinct path forward eventually becomes visible.

When I left Oral Roberts University in 1975 to move to Los Angeles, I decided to give myself one year to make it in a business that I had already been warned was brutal. I found a tiny, cheap rental apartment and got a C-list agent to begin making the rounds. To say I was green would be like saying that spring comes after winter. Even with years of performance experience behind me, I was woefully ill-prepared for the critical beating you receive when you audition for commercials, film, television, or even industrial shows.

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I felt like a raw piece of meat during each interview. Then came the inevitable, endless wait by the phone for the call from your agent telling you that you didn't get the job.

I tried to convince myself it was all part of the learning process and that I would get better with each audition. But after six months, discouragement set in, which negatively affected my auditions. It was a perpetual Catch-22. My self-talk turned toxic.

You can do this, Kathie.

No, you can't, or you would have done it by now.

You're making a fool of yourself.

Your agent is going to dump you if you don't book a job.

Your money is running out, and so is the clock on the year you gave yourself.

Loser.

I paid the bills by appearing as an atmosphere person—essentially an “extra”—on *Days of Our Lives* and as the singer on Kathryn Kuhlman's television program *I Believe in Miracles*.

Kathryn Kuhlman was a well-known and controversial faith healer at the time who had quite the following. She was unusually eccentric and a little frightening to me. I had to audition for her, and I chose to sing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” “How Great Thou Art,” and “Amazing Grace,” while she silently bore a hole into me with her steely eyes. After I finished, I held my breath. Kathryn Kuhlman glided over to me in her satin gown, took my face in her hands, pulled me close, and declared, “It's adorable.”

I sang on her show every Sunday for the whole year, and I don't remember her saying one more word to me. The gig paid the bills, but it certainly wasn't taking me any closer to my mission of making it as a legitimate talent in Hollywood.

About nine months into my first year in Hollywood I began to get a little notice in the commercial world. I was getting callbacks,

NEVER GIVE UP

meaning casting agents would call my agent to schedule me for a second audition. This happened over and over for a few months. The same people were often in the waiting rooms with me, yet it seemed the jobs always went to actress Nancy Morgan. I wished to know her secret. What magic did she have that I lacked?

I frequently wanted to give up, go home, and become a florist or something else less stressful. Then I'd get a fresh burst of courage and yell out loud to myself, "Come on, Judy [a la Garland], *let's put on a show!*"

Despite my attempts to stay optimistic, I cried myself to sleep many a night, pleading with the Lord to break through for me. Finally, I had to get a real job, so I began working as a hostess at the El Torito Mexican restaurant on Ventura Boulevard in a neighborhood outside of Los Angeles. Honest work, of course, but depressing.

Then someone told me about a job in Vegas that had just opened up. One of the singers in a group called the Windsong Trio had dropped out of a show that was scheduled to open at the Landmark Hotel. The producers were frantic to find someone who could learn the show immediately and open in forty-eight hours. I never stopped to think how impossible that was. I was young and ignorant and desperate to actually work doing what I had longed to do my whole life.

I took the job, learned the show, and performed three times a day for the longest month of my twenty-two years on this planet. I was miserable. I was sharing a room with the other two Windsong singers: a Baptist preacher's daughter and an ex-beauty queen. They were both nice enough, but the craziness began each night after the third show. I'd head to bed, exhausted, and the two girls would head out for a fun-filled night of God knows what. Then I'd get up at about five in the morning just as they were returning. I admired their stamina but remember feeling deeply saddened that they were partying night after night.

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This show finally came to a blessed end, and I returned to LA to continue auditioning for work. I was one week away from my self-imposed deadline of one year to “make it” when I auditioned for six new commercials. As per usual, perfect Nancy Morgan was at each audition, probably already counting her residuals.

To my utter astonishment I was chosen for five of the six commercials, but due to scheduling conflicts, I could only book three of them. I cried into the phone when I called my parents to tell them that I was actually, *finally*, on my way to a real career.

I shot the commercials one after the other and took great pleasure in smiling at Nancy Morgan, who was also cast, during each one. She smiled right back, as if to welcome me into the inner sanctum. It felt good. Commercials paid my bills, but they didn't really build my career. I needed to break into a series of some sort where I could gain stability in this crazy, completely unpredictable industry.

I tried out for a children's show and was convinced I nailed it. The head writer kept smiling at me and nodding his approval, but once again my agent had to deliver the news that I hadn't gotten the job. Not even a callback.

It seemed I was in the wrong business. I thought, *If I'm not right for a simple children's show, what am I ever going to be right for?*

My agent called one day soon after to say, “Kath, they want to see you for a new game show over at Ralph Edwards Productions. Have three songs ready.”

“Okay,” I agreed, wearily. *Here we go again.*

When I arrived at the audition, I thought someone had made a mistake. There was no one else waiting with me. I double-checked the address and time I had written down. Yes, I was in the right place, right on time. Suddenly a young woman appeared.

“Kathie Epstein?” she said.

“Yes,” I answered. “Where is everybody?”

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“It’s just you,” she replied. “Mr. Edwards will see you now.”

I followed her into a large conference room full of people I’d never seen before. Except for one: the head writer of the children’s show that I’d thought for sure I was going to get a month before. His name was Gary Bloom, and he smiled a big smile and winked at me.

What is going on? I wondered.

All I could do was launch into the songs I’d prepared. I had barely finished the last one when the legendary producer Ralph Edwards walked over to me to shake my hand.

“Welcome to Ralph Edwards Productions.” He smiled graciously. “Welcome to *Name That Tune*.”

I was stunned. In an instant, my entire life changed. The trajectory of my career went through the roof and nothing would ever be the same. That’s showbiz.

As it turned out, Gary Bloom had told my agent that while he had loved my earlier audition, he thought I was too sophisticated for the children’s show. But he was working on another show that he was sure I’d be perfect for.

He was right. I learned two hundred songs in five days and shot the shows for the entire year in a few weeks.

We taped at the NBC Studios in Burbank right next to *The Tonight Show*, and, finally, I thought, *So this is what it’s like to make a living doing what you love to do*.

As I walked through the gate for the first time with my agent and parents, past the security guard who greeted me warmly, I whispered this prayer: “Dear Jesus, I know my life is about to change. Thank You, Lord, for this amazing new chapter in my life. Please help me to treat every single person I meet exactly the same—from the executive producers to the guard at the gate. And I will give You all the praise.”

I squeezed my daddy’s hand. He was still smiling because the guard had confused him with one of his all-time heroes, Roy Rogers.

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“Hi, Roy,” he had said to him. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you, kindly,” my daddy had responded, never letting on.

We giggled.

A few weeks later we wrapped the season, and I headed to the car in the parking lot feeling elated. It had gone well. I hadn't made one mistake in two hundred songs. I was on my way. My daddy came up after me, and the same security guard stopped him.

“Mr. Epstein,” he said, “I just want you to know that every time your daughter came through the gate, love came with her.”

“Thank you, kindly,” my daddy answered with tears in his eyes.

Thank You, Jesus, for the reminder that it's never too late to *never give up*.