

A
CROWN
THAT
LASTS

YOU *ARE*
NOT *YOUR*
LABEL

DEMI LEIGH TEBOW



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A Crown That Lasts

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Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by W Publishing, an imprint of Thomas Nelson.

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ISBN 978-1-4003-4361-4 (audiobook)

ISBN 978-1-4003-4360-7 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-4003-4358-4 (HC)

ISBN 978-1-4003-4839-8 (ITPE)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023945444

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

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HI, FROM DEMI: HOW TO OPTIMIZE THIS BOOK

I'm crawling on the airport floor, trying to consolidate six suitcases of evening gowns, toiletries, underwear, and high heels into two suitcases while the guy of my dreams, who I'm hoping will one day propose to me, is watching the whole debacle unfold, embarrassed. To make matters worse, there are about twenty-seven people recording and taking pictures of this worst-case-nightmare-come-true situation. And I can feel my airbrushed makeup sweating off my stressed face.

If you're wondering how I got myself into this situation, it's pretty simple: I'd grabbed a bag; my brand-new boyfriend, Tim, had grabbed five; and we'd rushed to the airport to catch our international flight just two and a half hours before takeoff. My dream guy had cut a family trip to Israel short and flown halfway around the world to Thailand to cheer me on as I'd handed over my Miss Universe crown. We'd been dating for a few months at that point, and if I wasn't already smitten, his act of kindness definitely

sealed the deal. Our driver had maneuvered through the crazy rush-hour traffic in Bangkok, Thailand, to help us make it to our flight back to South Africa on time. We'd rolled into the airport with six suitcases and clothes hanging halfway out of garment bags, which I had planned on stuffing into my already overpacked luggage at the check-in counter.

Less than an hour earlier, I'd handed over my crown and my title as Miss Universe on live TV. The Impact Arena where the event was hosted in Bangkok had been packed with thousands of people, and millions had watched the handover of the crown from their homes. So as we continued through the check-in process, people started recognizing me. I was still wearing a full face of airbrushed makeup, double-layered false lashes, and a head of big, bouncy pin curls from the live broadcast. Afterward, I'd only had time to throw on a mismatched track suit and some sneakers—honestly, I wore the first thing I could reach from the top of my suitcase—before leaving for the airport. Quite the odd picture.

I must have stood out like a tornado wearing a tutu. My six-foot-three handsome, athletic boyfriend didn't exactly fade into the masses either. People were crowding around the check-in counter, snapping photos of us, when one of my worst nightmares came true. The agent broke the news to me that my booking only allowed for *one* suitcase. To my despair, I had six! And almost all of them were over the weight limit. Because we were flying internationally, paying for extra bags, let alone overweight bags, was really expensive. So I figured that if I could spread the extra weight into Tim's suitcases, I would only have to pay the normal baggage price and not the fee for the extra weight.

Tim did his absolute best to be kind and patient, but we both knew this was about to get real embarrassing. I needed to open all of my suitcases—along with my new boyfriend's suitcases—on

the airport floor and go to work. And friend, that's exactly what I did. I grabbed dresses and shirts, pantsuits and swimsuits, lotions and makeup galore, and started rearranging, shuffling, and stuffing them into Tim's exposed luggage all while trying not to accidentally fling out a bra or panty for what seemed like the entire airport to capture on video. I mean, I couldn't even make eye contact with Tim at this point! I was so mortified! The only item I couldn't figure out how to redistribute was my stack of forty Miss Universe programs, which weighed a ton.

You read that right, I had forty programs in my possession. Forty magazine-style programs that each weighed the same as a book, with my face all over them. After I'd handed over my crown, I'd grabbed as many of the hefty, shiny, Miss Universe programs as the production team would let me have. I'd given back my crown, my title, and my sash. Those programs were gold to me. They were the last thing I got to keep as Miss Universe. I was *not* leaving them behind in Thailand too.

Tim had a great idea. "Let's stuff them into my suit bag," he said confidently. A few fit in his suitcase, and the rest went into the suit bag as carry-on luggage. I realized that Tim deeply regretted this idea a few short minutes later when his biceps started cramping from awkwardly carrying the bag through the airport. I was just hoping that things weren't as bad as they seemed and that this guy I was still trying to win over would continue to like me back, with or without my Miss Universe programs.

My next hurdle was to hope that the security personnel wouldn't weigh our carry-on luggage at the baggage checkpoint. I tried my best not to make eye contact as they scanned our bags because I couldn't let them see my guilty countenance. Tim tried his best to carry three-dozen bulky booklets as if they weighed nothing more than a suit. To our relief, we made it through security without

alarming anyone. But as soon as Tim picked up the heavy garment bag full of the stowaway programs from the security conveyer belt, the bottom ripped out. Suddenly, the airport floor was awash in shiny program booklets all featuring my face.

The last little drops of my previous identity printed on glossy paper with a big, bold label—MISS UNIVERSE—were physically scattered all over the airport floor. At this point, Tim became a saint! We were both down on our hands and knees, crawling around and grabbing the books as quickly as possible before they drew even more attention. We weren't fast enough though. Before I could grab them all and stuff them back into the torn suit bag, someone yelled, "Oh my word! Is that you? Miss Universe?" I just kept silent and thought, *No, I am no longer Miss Universe. My identity is just as torn up as this garment bag and feels just as scattered as these books on this airport floor.* I had handed over my crown, and with it a giant part of myself, and I wasn't sure yet how to get it back.

YOUR TURN

I don't know what your story is, but I'm guessing you haven't been down on your hands and knees in an airport recently, scooping up your own face. But my hope is that we can connect through the familiar pieces of our stories. You don't need to have lost your job as Miss Universe to have struggled with an identity crisis. You only need to open your phone, get that call from the doctor's office, have a loved one cut you off, a calling fail, a dream collapse, a love die, a degree tank, a last child graduate, or a cross-country move to leave you stranded and starting all over again to be confused about who you are. Take it from the girl who literally dropped her sense of purpose and watched her identity slip through her fingers. My

prayer is that through these stories you'll feel less alone and discover practical steps for how to figure out who you are again, what really matters and what doesn't, and what to do when you're stuck in the messy middle. Let's keep growing together.

On that note, this book is divided into four parts: Dig, Plant, Grow, and Flourish. Here's how to maximize what you get out of them:

Part 1: Dig—In chapters 1, 2, and 3, you're going to recognize the origin of confidence and learn how to unpack your past so you can better understand yourself. This phase is the initial introspection or exploration phase. It will involve us digging into our pasts together, understanding our roots, and unraveling the elements that formed our identities—perhaps uncovering aspects that might not have been beneficial or sustainable in the long run.

Part 2: Plant—In chapters 4 and 5, you're going to learn about seeking out and saying yes to mission-focused opportunities, even if it feels scary. This section focuses on how to do the hard work of managing your time, energy, and resources with optimal priorities so you can cultivate optimal growth. This phase signifies a period of deliberate action. After digging and uncovering the root aspects, planting new seeds or ideas might involve consciously choosing what to nurture and cultivate within yourself. Together we will learn to plant seeds of new values, habits, or perspectives that align with a more sustainable and fulfilling identity.

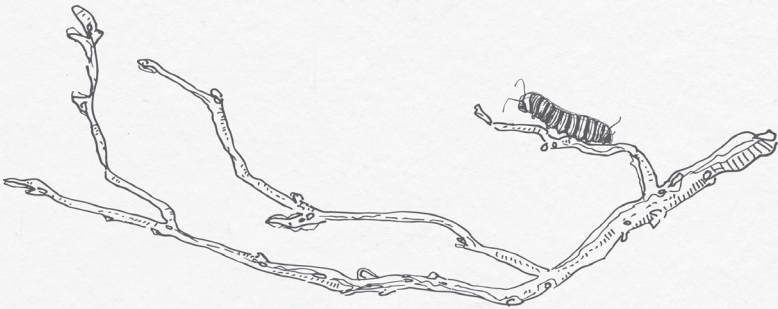
Part 3: Grow—In chapters 6, 7, and 8, you will understand that platform, ability, and skill are pathways to *promote* purpose, not purpose itself. Once the seeds are planted, you'll need to embrace the process of patiently nurturing and allowing those newly planted ideas or values to develop and eventually flourish. It involves personal development, continuous learning, and gradual growth that will allow you to eventually morph into your everlasting identity.

Part 4: Flourish—In chapters 9 and 10, you'll be challenged to see life through the lens of eternity and your work as an opportunity for eternal impact. Flourishing is a continual, lifelong process. Together, we're going to continue to persevere through the good times and the hard ones. This final section suggests the culmination of the process—the flourishing of the newly cultivated aspects of your identity. It symbolizes your thriving era where you have successfully untangled your identity from beliefs, titles, or experiences that were only temporary. From here, you can grow into a more authentic and sustainable version of yourself.

Friend, thank you for accepting my invitation to walk beside you, or maybe it's more appropriate to say *unpack* and *sort through* your luggage together while you come face-to-face with your own identity—all the pieces of it you're trying to make sense of. It's okay to unpack all your baggage full of built-up uncertainty here with me. I've been there. It's messy, but it means you're going to get the chance to honestly pull back the curtain on your dreams and struggles, wins and losses, joy and fears. The exciting part is that you will figure out, all over again, who you are and why your life, with all its ups and downs, matters so very much.

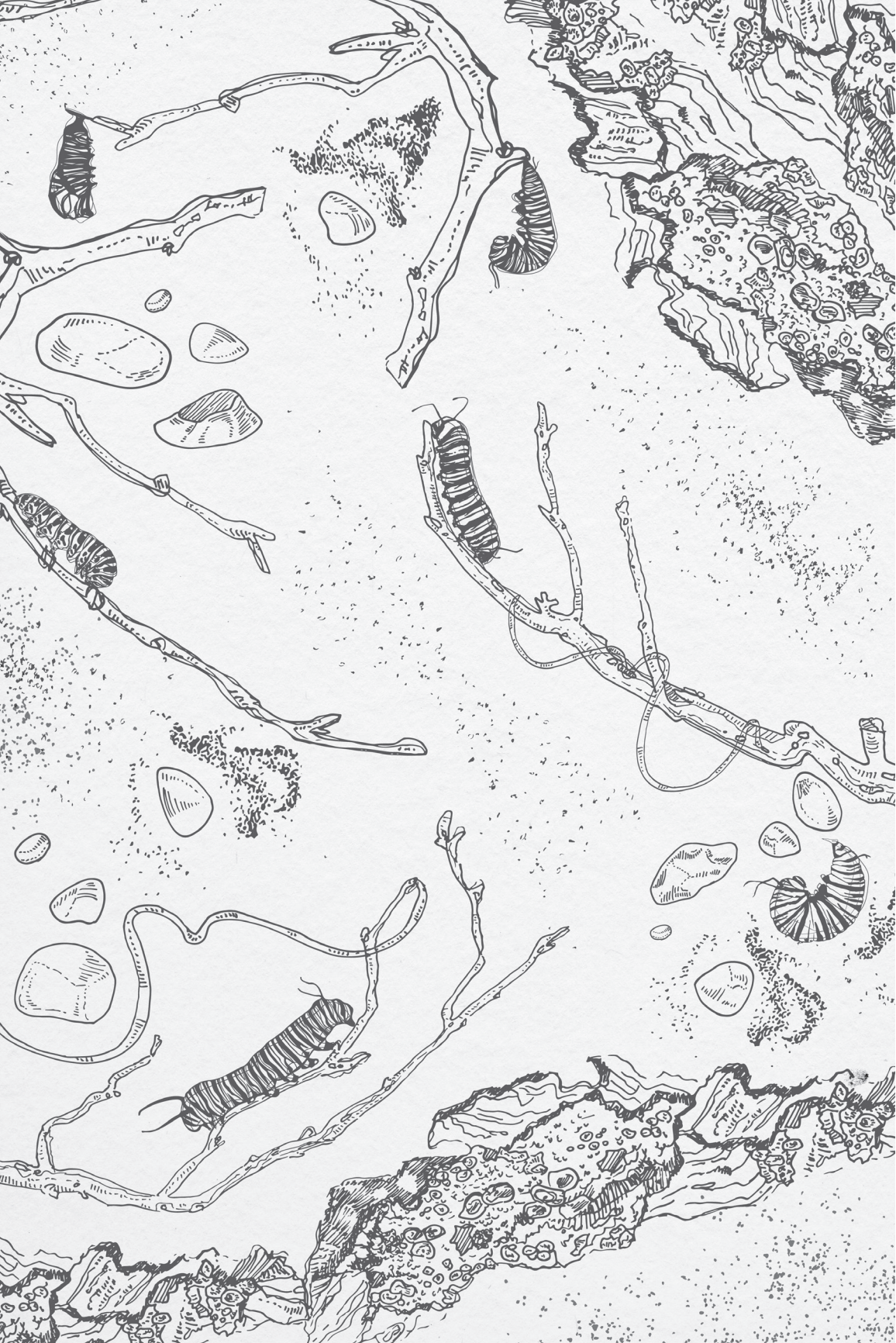
PART ONE

DIG



*Taste and see that the LORD is good.
How happy is the person who takes refuge in him!
You who are his holy ones, fear the LORD,
for those who fear him lack nothing.*

PSALM 34:8-9 (CSB)



In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates famously said, "We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live." *How* we live is important, but understanding what drives how we live is equally important. In chapters 1 through 3, we will "dig" into our pasts to make better sense of who we are to set up where we're going. We'll dive into the common issue of tying our confidence to the wrong things. Next, we'll face the reality that life doesn't always go according to our well-crafted plans. And finally, we'll tackle the frustration of feeling stuck and stagnant in "waiting" seasons.

Each chapter in this dig section gives you the opportunity to do some hard work and perhaps confront some buried pain or make peace with uncertainty. As you'll find out, my story is full of unanswered questions, unmet expectations, and moments of insecurity. But over the last several years, as I have taken steps to dig, I've discovered that although rebuilding or refining your identity is difficult, it opens a door to finally trust God's goodness and sets yourself up for what matters most.

In these chapters, my hope is that you'll:

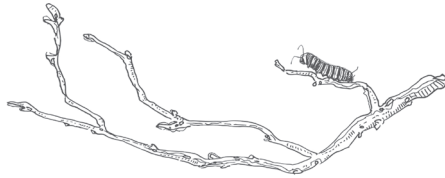
- Recognize the origin of your confidence.
- Identify unreliable identity labels and replace them with truth.
- Embrace God's timing in order to develop a mindset that chooses to trust despite disappointments.
- Be willing to take action and wait on God's timing.

A CROWN THAT LASTS

- Understand the power of what a few seconds of compassion can do for people.
- Appreciate the God-wink moments and allow them to propel you forward.

ONE

UNTANGLE YOUR IDENTITY FROM YOUR LABEL



Take your first walk as Miss Universe!” Steve Harvey bel-
lowed over the thundering chorus of cheers and applause. As
Miss Philippines turned to face the cheering audience and walk
down the runway and into her new life, I spun in the opposite direc-
tion. My year as Miss Universe had officially come to an end.

The hundred-thousand-plus green and yellow Swarovski crys-
tals encrusting the custom-made Gert-Johan Coetzee gown that
draped my body faded into a dull silhouette as I walked into the
shadows behind the curtain. My entire support team—a full-time
manager, security guard, videographer, social media manager, and
stylist, to name just a few—whooshed past me to get to their new
job, the *new* Miss Universe. It felt like I had become part of the
scenery.

Shoot! What do I do now? Do I just wait here? Will someone come

to get me? Someone always comes to get me, I tried to reassure myself. I'll wait here. Surely someone will be back for me soon.

By the time the crowd started exiting the building, I reckoned I should probably find my own way back to my dressing room. But I couldn't remember which direction it was since I'd been escorted backstage by my team before my final walk as Miss Universe. I hadn't been paying attention to where I was being taken because I trusted that the team always had things under control. Then when the show was over, everything went from being fine to my world being flipped upside down in a matter of seconds. And I didn't even see it coming.

Have you ever experienced a moment of heart-stopping, sweaty-palms uncertainty? You thought you had your life figured out—the right friends, the good school, the sweet job—but then a transition, a diagnosis, or someone else's decision forced you to reevaluate who you are and where you're going? Have you ever been completely blindsided by a situation? Perhaps a relationship ended and your whole identity had gotten caught up in being a girlfriend, a bride-to-be, a wife. Maybe you were starting another completely average week when the doctor's office called and changed everything. Or you were caught off guard by not getting that job or *any* job after spending years in college getting all the right qualifications you thought you needed to succeed.

The end of my reign as Miss Universe was my rug-ripped-from-underneath-my-six-inch-heels moment. I had dedicated years of my life working toward that goal, and it was suddenly over in the space of the one minute and twenty-two seconds it took for me to do my farewell walk. When I turned around, I found I had no idea what to do or where to go next. It's a scary experience to be stranded in a future that is no longer clear. It's filled with doubt, questions, anxiety, and in my case, an identity crisis.

I had left something on stage that night. And it wasn't just the Miss Universe crown I had passed on to that year's rightful owner. It was what I had attached to the crown, the one adorned with 500 diamonds and 120 pearls on a delicate frame that glistened and glowed and represented a future I thought I understood. It was my identity. My source of confidence. I didn't know I had lost both at the time. And I didn't realize it was a false identity that I had lost. A false sense of confidence birthed from the promises, dreams, and expectations of achieving something I'd always wanted.

So as I thrust myself into the logistics of finding my way through the backstage maze, the anxiety-drenched question lingered: *What am I going to do now? I guess get out of this dress, find Tim, and make it to my flight back home departing in three hours.* As I went through the motions of slinking out of—and returning—my dress, changing, and heading out to catch the flight home to South Africa, the chaos overwhelmed an unnamable emptiness. I knew two things that night: One, I was returning to my homeland. Two, I had no idea what I was going to do next.

But before I unpack how I ended up on a plane with no crown, no team, and no clue what to do next, you need to know how I arrived at that night in the first place.

BLOOD, SWEAT, AND HIGH HEELS

When I was a young girl growing up in the small coastal town of Sedgefield in the Western Cape province of South Africa, my mom and I would switch on our TV, the old big-box kind, an hour early to make sure we caught the live broadcast of the Miss South Africa competition every year. The opening scene, usually consisting of a choreographed dance, and the question-and-answer rounds were

my favorite. During every elimination round, I sat on the edge of my seat holding my thumbs (the South African version of fingers crossed) for my favorite candidate to advance. My mom and I loved watching; it was our little tradition.

I was mesmerized by the sparkling ball gowns, Cinderella-like shoes, and the “happily ever after” story of a winner walking away looking like a real-life princess with an elaborate prize package. *She gets her hair done for free for a year! What a dream!* I thought. My mom and I loved following the winner’s journey after the crowning. Many former Miss South Africa winners have succeeded post-reign in becoming successful entrepreneurs, business owners, philanthropists, TV personalities, and essentially great role models.

As I matured, I realized that the true beauty of a Miss South Africa is not found in her sparkling objects or temporary fame; instead, it is anchored in empathy and authenticity, which touches not only the eye but also the hearts and minds of those who experience it. True beauty defies conventional norms and remains timeless, leaving a lasting impact on the observer’s consciousness. That’s the type of woman I grew up aspiring to be, a Miss South Africa–type of woman. And I was willing to put in the work to get there. A common theme running throughout my life is that I am always diligent and dedicated to the hard work required to reach a goal. At school I was a B student and usually ended up on the B team in sports. However, I ranked an A in competitiveness, stubbornness, and not taking no for an answer. My husband, Tim, can attest to this. Making the first team or getting an A average was never something that just fell into my lap. It took practicing for hours on my own after the team had already gone home. It took waking up early in the morning to go for an extra three-mile run before school. It took tutoring, long study sessions, and extra after-school classes to get my As. Working for what I wanted became my

default. If I wanted nice things, I had to earn them, including the title of Miss South Africa and eventually Miss Universe.

It's easy to assume the prettiest face with the prettiest dress gets the title. From experience, I can assure you that is not the case. Physical beauty was merely a facet of the journey. The lasting beauty lies in one's ability to inspire, uplift, and empower others. That was what we were ultimately judged on. Thousands of girls entered Miss South Africa 2017. Pageants as a whole can be a lengthy and taxing process. Competing for my national title took more than six months of interviews, completing tasks and tests, doing media appearances, traveling all over the country, taking part in philanthropic work, and participating in fitness challenges.

With social media becoming an aspect of the competition, I was constantly on guard and aware of having sixty million South Africans eyes on me. They watched and judged my every move, outfit, and conversation to determine if I was fit for the title. Because the Miss South Africa organization made use of a public voting system to help determine the winner, the country's opinion mattered. I navigated the weight of pleasing a nation while trying to balance work, finishing my degree in business management and entrepreneurship, and overcoming everyday life obstacles like navigating adulthood.

A piece of advice my mom gave me that still echoes in my memory is, "Demi, no matter what you do, make sure you do it well. If you clean up after your dog, then do it well. If you become an actress, then know your script better than anyone else. If you clean homes for a living, then make sure they are the cleanest homes in the world." In essence, what she taught me was to always strive for excellence. My approach to winning Miss South Africa was no different from my approach to cleaning up after our dog, achieving As as a B student, or making the A-team in sports as a B-level athlete. I was committed to working harder than anyone else.

During my time as Miss South Africa, I had the opportunity to represent my home country on an international stage to compete for the Miss Universe title. Since it was an opportunity that I would never have a second chance at, I decided to take drastic steps to achieve drastic results.

I stopped speaking Afrikaans, my native language, for a few months to better my English. I hired a life coach, a pageant coach, a personal trainer, and a public speaking coach to assist me in competing at the highest level. I had a rigorous schedule that was organized to the minute. Like an athlete in training, it included everything from when I needed to eat to when it was time to go to sleep. It even included walking in high heels for twelve hours some days. Looking at my bunion toe, I admit that I completely overdid that part.

I hired makeup artists and hairstylists to teach me how to appear perfect every day. This was important because once you arrive at Miss Universe, you have no access to your team; you are completely on your own. That includes doing your own hair and makeup every day with the exception of prelims, the final night, and any sponsored photoshoots. Call me the “queen of pin curls” if you want; they became one of my secret talents. I still can’t apply fake eyelashes, however, so I taught myself how to apply a sharp liquid liner to create an illusion of lashes.

The Miss South Africa team held impromptu interview sessions where they drilled me on current world affairs. This helped me stay on my toes and on top of relevant topics. Once you arrive at Miss Universe, you encounter media and judges from every corner of the world, and the interview topics are completely unknown. Being underprepared was not an option. My coach and I decided that if I made it to the top ten, we would do a drastic change and put my hair into a top knot bun. Most girls usually keep their hair down

for that portion of the competition, but we wanted to be different and constantly looked for ways to stand out.

During onstage rehearsals, I estimated what the TV time-out period would be after the top ten got announced. I calculated that I would have four or so minutes to get backstage, change out of my bathing suit, put my hair into a sleek top knot bun, change my shoes and earrings, and get back on stage for the evening wear portion. Yikes! I'm sweating just thinking about how fast that turnaround time is. I would go back to my room after rehearsals and practice doing all the above in under four minutes. Once I knew what music we were going to walk to onstage, I downloaded it and listened to the track on repeat, closing my eyes and visualizing stepping onto the stage. I'd even remind myself that the stage would be slippery and not to be caught off guard by it. I memorized where the cameras would appear to ensure I made eye contact because the judges watch a screen with the live broadcast instead of watching the actual stage. I had everything down to a science to be as well-prepared as possible to give myself the best chance of winning. I wasn't going to take any chances with losing out on my one shot.

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

Lights, cameras, action! The final show was about to start. I was shaking from adrenaline and excitement because I knew I could walk onto that stage with contentment and truly enjoy the moment regardless of the outcome. It's that feeling of being so proud of how far you've come because you know you've given it your all. I was emotional thinking that I was one of only a few dozen women from my country to ever walk that stage. I slipped my "South Africa" sash over my gold dress, fixed my lippie one more time, and silently told

myself, *You go, girl! You've got this! This is the moment you've worked for your whole life!*

When the top sixteen got announced and I was the last candidate to make it into the regional cut, my nerves were strung so tight. But being nervous only meant that I cared—cared about representing my home country well and not wasting a monumental moment. South Africa hadn't won a Miss Universe title in thirty-nine years. This was my chance, but it was also South Africa's chance. The top ten got announced, then the top five, and lastly the top three.

I made it!

Steve Harvey heightened the tension when he said, "The night began with ninety-two of the world's most impressive women. And now we've narrowed it down to three. Each of these finalists have shown they all deserve to carry the title, but only one of them is about to become Miss Universe."¹

Surely it doesn't end here? I didn't come this far to come only this far. It's not over till it's over, I told myself. Steve Harvey called out the second runner-up, leaving only me and Miss Colombia remaining. We took center stage. The last spot remained. Steve got ready to announce the winner as the dramatic music played. I held Miss Colombia's hands, and we wished each other well as we waited hopefully. I remember telling myself with a content heart and the biggest smile, *Girl, you couldn't have done anything else to earn this title.* Win or not, my heart was full because I knew my Creator had already penned my destiny. If this achievement was meant to weave into the larger tapestry of His design for my life, it wouldn't slip through His hands. My cheeks hurt because I couldn't stop smiling. I was in awe of what God had allowed me to be a part of.

"One of you is about to become our new Miss Universe," Steve continued. "If for any reason the winner cannot fulfill her duties, the first runner-up will take her place. Good luck to you both."

Steve looked at the card and announced, “The new Miss Universe is . . . South Africa! Congratulations! Take your first walk as Miss Universe!”

I gasped, held my hand in front of my mouth, and looked around to triple check I had heard correctly. When someone from the organization draped a sash over my shoulders and handed me a bouquet of colorful flowers, I knew my little-girl dream had come true. I had just become the sixty-sixth Miss Universe. My predecessor walked toward me carrying a crown with a seven-feather design, encrusted with 500 diamonds and 120 South Sea and Akoya pearls. When I saw the crown, it immediately felt like a God-wink moment. You know, one of those moments where you have no doubt that God’s hand was in it all along. Pearls happen to be my birthstone.

Being content in that moment before the winner got announced didn’t mean I would have been fine with losing. I was still a girl with a dream who cared deeply and had worked hard to get to this moment. But it also meant that I would’ve been able to walk off that stage at peace, knowing I gave it my everything. While I would have been disappointed about the outcome, I also knew that if it was meant for me, it wouldn’t have missed me. Winning was not only a personal victory but a tribute to the rich South African identity that I am honored to represent. So it felt like a victory for each young girl from a small town somewhere in South Africa with a big dream.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stop smiling. I was so amazed at what had just happened, and my brain couldn’t process it all fast enough. Neither could my cell phone. By the time I reached my room to check in with everyone back home in South Africa, I couldn’t get my phone to turn on. I had gained just under a million new followers in a few hours, and nobody had thought to warn me about turning my notifications off. My phone’s charge couldn’t keep

up with the momentum of new follower notifications. I've heard of people experiencing overnight success; that was literally the case for me.

WHO ARE YOU?

After I was crowned, my manager was the first person to meet me as I came off stage. I'll never forget her first words to me: "Hi, who are you?" I was wearing my new sash across my chest with bold, sparkly letters proclaiming "Miss Universe" and a crown on my head no one could miss. So I responded with the less obvious, "My name is Demi." She asked the same question again, so I responded, "I'm Miss South Africa." Shaking her head and declaring no, she asked me one last time, "Who are you?" And then it clicked. "I am Miss Universe," I proclaimed. She grabbed me by the hand and said, "Great, Miss Universe, let's get to work."

I immediately got whisked away to take photos with media on center stage, followed by a quick makeup touch-up and water break before a press conference with media from all over the world. I got asked questions ranging from how to be confident to how I was planning on solving the water crisis in Cape Town. Not kidding. Then it was time for my first official portrait and group photos with sponsors. Once that was done, my bags got moved into the penthouse suite where I had a few minutes to catch up with my family. After that, I managed to sleep for three hours before leaving for the airport to catch a flight to New York City, my home for the next year. Most of my year as Miss Universe was a very beautiful, very meaningful, and very well-managed rat race.

I had over twenty international trips that year since we visited some countries multiple times. My apartment was provided, the

car service was always on time, my stylist planned my outfits well in advance, my personal trainer wrote up my workouts, my visa applications were taken care of, my apartment manager always had the fridge stocked, and my laundry was picked up weekly. If you've ever lived in New York City, you'll know what a luxury it is to have your laundry done! That year was unlike any year I had ever experienced before or since. I just had to show up.

Since I'd grown up working so hard for everything I wanted, "just showing up" was out of my comfort zone. But as you can imagine, it was something I got used to very quickly. Showing up became my new norm. My doorman greeted me as Miss Universe. At appearances I was introduced as Miss Universe. Even my luggage got labeled as Miss Universe. At first it was cute and fun and exciting, but then slowly, without my realizing it, I *became* the title. Soon, my identity was rooted in the crown on my head and the label across my chest.

My year as Miss Universe was an experience I will cherish forever. I could write a whole book about all the lessons I learned and value I gained from those 365 days. It's a year that without question contributed to shaping the woman I am today. I believe I am better today than I would've been without that experience. I am a better public speaker. I have a better understanding of cultures and countries around the world. I have a broadened perspective on business and different industries. I have stretched my perspective on what I thought my capabilities are. I have the experience of living outside of my home country. I got to witness and experience the needs people have worldwide. And I learned that you do not need to speak someone's language to communicate compassion.

However, the day I was dreading but had always known was coming inevitably arrived. And none of my hard work, diligence, or pageant preparations could have prepared me for it or for what

would follow. When I competed for the crown, I knew every detail of the process. I had researched previous contests; therefore, the order of events was familiar. But I never once thought to research what happens *after* you give the crown back, or what happens *after* you reach your goal or achieve your dreams.

It's kind of like the transition from college to real life. You show up on your first day of school and, even though you're a little disoriented, you know what's supposed to happen next. You have a schedule, pick up your books, attend class, take exams, do internships, eventually graduate, and apply for a job. After that, nobody really talks you through what happens when you get your first job and move into your first apartment. Nobody walks you through getting medical insurance or how to pay your taxes for the first time. Not to mention the oil change you didn't know your car needed two years ago.

After crowning my successor, I walked off that stage and nobody noticed. I had no idea what came next. Eventually, I found my way back to my dressing room and changed out of my sleek Swarovski crystal dress into a more comfortable outfit and walkable shoes; the little bit of identity I had left I put in the dress bag. Later at the airport before my flight I washed away my confidence with makeup remover.

Have you ever rooted your identity in a day-to-day task, routine, goal, or another person? Perhaps you are a mom who's an empty nester for the first time, and your focus of the last eighteen years is suddenly a few hundred miles away, making their own lunch and driving themselves to their own appointments. What are you waking up to every day after you just sold the business you've been building for the last ten years? Who are you when the person you loved stops loving you back? When the goal you've worked years for is met or maybe disappoints? When the job you've spent more

than half your life at is over or pushes you out? When your most comfortable, most familiar label falls away, who are you? What do you do next when what you had to show up for every day is no longer there?

I've often heard people who are facing retirement say that they're scared because they don't know what they'll do with all the extra time on their hands. Walking off that stage was like a kind of retirement for me. I understand that this might sound strange to some of you. You might be thinking that once you walk away with a title like Miss Universe, your future will be filled with realized dreams and endless opportunities. It's certainly what I thought as a young girl entranced by the televised version of Miss Universe. And before competing, a friend had told me, "When you win that title, you will never have to wonder about the next opportunity." Turns out, like most things in life, that isn't quite how reality unfolds.

Of course, the crown creates endless opportunities for all former title holders, including myself. But there's a distinction between wearing the title and *becoming* the title. And there's a danger when you start to take your identity from the crown. For a full year, the reason I was sought after to attend events and do the commercials or receive the awards was not because of my value and worth as an individual but because of the value attached to the label I wore. I became a vessel for an agenda. When there's no longer an agenda, the vessel is no longer needed. Even though the average Boeing 747 is worth approximately \$418 million, they become worthless when grounded as they were when the whole world shut down. Borders closed and there were no passengers to fly anywhere.

It wasn't handing back the title or the fact that I was no longer the number one girl in the universe that crushed me. It was the fact that I had attached my identity to a temporary crown. What hit me in the face like a ton of bricks was that when I passed it on, I handed

over my identity, confidence, value, worth, and what I thought was a big part of my life's purpose along with the crown that used to be on my head.

ANCHOR YOUR IDENTITY TO MORE THAN YOUR LABEL

About a year and a half after I handed over the Miss Universe title, I was, in all honesty, still feeling lost and confused about my life's purpose. But I remember the specific moment when I realized for the first time that even though I didn't have it all figured out, I could find a peace regardless. A few months after Tim and I were married, we were asked to do a joint Q&A onstage. We walked out and sat down on a soft velvet couch center stage. Tim grabbed my shaking hand and held it tight. I wasn't nervous about speaking in front of a full auditorium and to thousands of people live streaming the interview. I was nervous because I still had no idea who I was but felt like I was expected to have my life mapped out for the interview. I tried memorizing the answers to the questions we'd been provided beforehand, but my nerves took over. It felt like my operating system was frozen, like when a computer freezes and gives you nothing but a "loading" screen. Have you ever tried opening a file in your mind and just blanked? It's such a terrible feeling.

Tim and I were asked a few questions. My plan was to have Tim answer as many as possible. *Heck, let him answer them all*, I thought. It was going relatively well since I was able to latch a few words onto some of what Tim was saying, until a question was finally aimed directly at me.

"Demi, you're known for your beauty. You're known for winning these pageants. I see a culture that sends messages to women of

all ages saying they're not enough. I'd love for you just to talk to us for a few minutes about what true beauty is and how you see that."

True beauty. You're not enough. Worth. Confidence. Come on, file! Open! I know the right answer. I freaked out! It felt like I was back in school, staring at an exam page, knowing I'd memorized the answer but just couldn't recall it. We might memorize Scripture like we memorize the formula for solving a math problem, but memorizing doesn't always equal understanding. I knew that God knew me by name, He had a plan for my life, and I was filled with infinite value. How did I know this? Because I had read it in Scripture. However, I didn't believe it at the moment because I couldn't see that plan practically applied to my life.

I recalled Psalm 139:13–15: *Fearfully and wonderfully made. That's a good one.* It's always been a go-to verse for me. *I can make something of this answer*, I assured myself. In my heart I wasn't looking for the right answer; I was looking for the honest answer. The moment I started talking, trying to answer the question while truly having no idea what was about to come out of my mouth, the Lord showed up in my heart. He allowed me to answer that question not just for the audience, but for myself.

When I was set to go and compete for Miss Universe, there were ninety-two countries competing. Being five six, I was one of the shortest girls to ever compete for that title. People started placing me in a box, saying, "She won't win because she's too short." They started defining my future according to my height. Even though I know that's absurd, back then it was hard for their words not to get anchored in my head. I know that in this day and age, many young girls also get put into boxes based on how social media defines them, or based on a single trait, talent, stumble, or mistake.

As a believer, I've had to go back and define self-love, self-worth, and self-image to myself. Psalm 139:13–15 says that we are "fearfully

and wonderfully made . . . knit together in our mother’s womb.” I love the word *knit*. It reminds me of how my grandmother used to knit me little jerseys. We call them jerseys in South Africa, but you call them sweaters in the United States. Grandma would make the most beautiful patterns. One of my favorite jerseys she made was red with a black-and-white panda bear on it. While we were on holiday together, she spent days knitting that jersey, pulling it loose, rethreading it, making sure it was perfect. She even sewed little eyes onto the panda bear’s face to make it look real. Her act of love made me realize that God knit us together in our mother’s womb even more carefully than my grandmother could ever knit that jersey. Just like my grandmother planned out her patterns and blocked her designs to the inch, God also has a precise plan for our lives. He created us in love, by love, and for love. If that does not make you feel worthy, I don’t think any amount of makeup, money, clothes, titles, awards, followers, or praise will ever make you feel worthy.

When we define self-confidence, we will realize that it is rooted in the temporary, just like the crown I eventually had to give back. It is evident that our self-confidence will run dry at some point, but God’s love for us is everlasting and unchanging.

That day and that interview marked a turning point for me. My waiting season wasn’t over yet. My life still felt split between two continents, and I wasn’t exactly sure what came next. But I chose to remember who had made me, and with that assurance came a new type of confidence.

SELF-CONFIDENCE IS SUPERFICIAL

Our English word *confidence* comes from a fourteenth-century Latin word meaning “to have full trust.”² Using this definition,

self-confidence would then mean “to have full trust in oneself.” That is what the crown provided me. Self-confidence, by definition, is fully relying on yourself as an individual. You become central in making all decisions and judgments based on the “full trust” you have in yourself—whatever comes your way! I don’t know about you, but no matter how much I try to muster up *trust* inside of *myself*, I eventually fall short and find myself in a situation where I doubt my own ability, judgment, control, and power. This isn’t always a bad thing; it just means I’m human. Looking back, I now realize why having full trust in oneself is not maintainable. It can lead to a host of negative things, such as:

- *Overconfidence*: Lack of humility and overestimating one’s abilities or knowledge can result in poor decision-making, overpromising, and underdelivering.
- *Dismissal of Feedback*: Rejecting constructive criticism due to the belief that you are always right hinders the personal growth and development that comes from wise counsel.
- *Lack of Adaptability*: It is harder to adjust, approach, or learn new skills when needed.
- *Underestimating Challenges*: Underestimating the complexities of a situation might cause you to take action without fully understanding potential negative outcomes.
- *Failure to Seek Help*: With excessive self-confidence, you begin to believe you can and should be able to handle everything on your own, resulting in burnout.
- *Stubbornness*: With an unwillingness to see things from a different perspective, you are always “dying on the hill” of your opinion.
- *Insecurity When Failure Occurs*: Self-worth that is closely tied to your performance is unhealthy.

- *Fickle Emotions*: Self-confidence is rooted in a feeling . . . and feelings fade.

Although the basic psychological premise of self-confidence can produce healthy and positive outcomes as it relates to mental health, risk-taking, building relationships, academic performance, and such, if we put our *full* trust in ourselves, we will ultimately be let down (or let others down). While self-confidence has its benefits and value, what I have learned is that relying on self-confidence alone for your identity is unsustainable.

GOD-CONFIDENCE IS SOUL DEEP

I propose a different type of confidence not based on our ego but rooted in Someone who is all-powerful, all-knowing, always present, and unchanging! A person worthy of attaching our identity to: God. I call this type of confidence “God-confidence.” And the definition is simple: to have *full trust in who God is!*

King Solomon of Israel, one of the wisest men to ever walk the earth, wrote in Proverbs 3:5–6:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight (NASB).

To have full trust in *who God is* leaves no room for trust in the self. You can only take *you* so far! Since our labels are always changing, we need a source of permanence in which to anchor our identity, a rock that we can build our confidence on. God-confidence echoes

David in Psalm 145:3, “The LORD is great and is highly praised; his greatness is unsearchable” (CSB). God-confidence simply releases control and believes that God is *greater!* He is greater and bigger than you and me and the circumstances we find ourselves in. God-confidence acknowledges that He is “abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite” (Psalm 147:5 NASB). It’s knowing that God provides assurance, hope, purpose, and courage in the face of our challenges.

But God-confidence isn’t just about believing in His greatness, it’s also about understanding His *goodness*. Always. To have full trust in God means you are rooted in knowing His goodness and His promises. He is not just a promise-maker but a promise-keeper. The Bible contains so many promises that God has made to His people. Here are some of my favorites:

- *Gift of salvation*: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).
- *God’s presence*: “Be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5 ESV).
- *Purpose in life on earth*: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10 ESV).
- *Guidance and wisdom*: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5 ESV).
- *Free from shame*: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1 ESV).
- *Continuous development*: “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6 NASB1995).

And perhaps my *most* favorite:

- *God's inseparable love*: “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39 ESV).

When we step back and realize the *greatness* and *goodness* of God, putting our full trust in anything else seems silly—whether it’s a career, a relationship, a label, or a crown. When your emotions are fickle, God is steadfast! When your understanding is limited, He is omnipotent! When you feel insecure, your value and worth in His eyes doesn’t budge! When you are overwhelmed, His peace provides hope! When you feel like you don’t have what it takes, He has overcome the world! When push comes to shove, self-confidence can only take you so far, which is why being rooted in God-confidence is the only way to live. Let’s exchange our superficial self-confidence for a supernatural God-confidence and root ourselves in a crown and an identity that will last for all of eternity.