

# The Power of Living Your Purpose with Kerry Washington

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## Speakers:

Speaker A - 19.69%

Speaker B - 80.31%

## Notes:

**Living with Purpose:** Kerry Washington shares that living her purpose involves listening to her inner guidance and intuition, balancing personal joy with making meaningful contributions to others.

**Challenges and Growth:** Kerry reflects on discovering her biological father wasn't the man who raised her, a revelation that reconnected her with her intuition and allowed for deeper self-understanding and personal growth.

**Representation and Impact in Media:** Kerry discusses the cultural significance of Scandal, highlighting how representation in media has the power to reshape perceptions and create opportunities for marginalized voices.

Storytelling for Activism: Kerry explains how her work often intersects with activism, focusing on marginalized communities. She shares an example from Save the Last Dance to demonstrate the power of narrative in humanizing underrepresented stories.

Hope through Action: Kerry finds hope by connecting with real-world changemakers and encourages others to take action, emphasizing that individuals have more power to affect change than fictional characters like Olivia Pope.

**Speaker A** 00:00:12  
Amazing.

**Speaker B** 00:00:13  
That was a nice greeting.

**Speaker A** 00:00:17  
Everyone's very excited to see you. Carrie.

**Speaker B** 00:00:19  
I'm excited to be here, excited to be seen.

**Speaker A** 00:00:22  
Thank you so much. Well, as you know, Dreamforce, this is our biggest customer and technology event. I know, and we've been talking all about AI all week long. But also what's super important is representation and making sure that we're elevating the voices that are often underheard or underrepresented. And so thank you for being such a vehicle to uplift those voices in media and beyond.

**Speaker B** 00:00:47  
Oh, thank you. I feel really lucky that I've been able to be of service in that way. And I don't think those two issues are mutually exclusive. Right. I think representation in AI is so vital.

**Speaker A** 00:00:59  
Absolutely. We're going to get to that great teaser for the audience. So our session today is called living your purpose. It is.

**Speaker B** 00:01:07

Ah.

**Speaker A** 00:01:07

You are such the embodiment of living your purpose.

**Speaker B** 00:01:11

You think?

**Speaker A** 00:01:11

Yes.

**Speaker B** 00:01:13

Okay, I'll tell my therapist you said that.

**Speaker A** 00:01:16

Please do.

**Speaker B** 00:01:17

Please do.

**Speaker A** 00:01:19

No. You truly inspire us all, and your work is so focused on elevating others, on activism, on helping others beyond yourself. Can you tell us a little bit about what living your purpose means for you and how you came to this journey?

**Speaker B** 00:01:37

That's such a big question. Um, I think for me, living my purpose is kind of a. I think I have a twofold approach to trying to figure out how to live in my purpose. I feel like none of us will really know. Maybe some people know. I feel like at some point, maybe down the line, I'll be able to look back and really understand whether or not I lived my purpose. So I do try to stay curious about purpose and stay humble about purpose, like, stay willing to be led in new directions if that's what's required of me. Um, but I think my approach to trying to know if I'm in alignment with purpose is that I really try to listen to my own inner guidance. I try to pay attention to the things that resonate for me, the things that pull on my heart and tug on my spirit and feel right for me. And that has been, um, that's been something that is newer for me in my existence as a human, which is something I wrote a lot about in my book, thicker than water. I feel like for many, many years, for most of my life, I haven't had access, my intuition, in the way that I do now. So I think that's a big part

of it. Um, and then I also think it's about paying attention to what's happening outside of me. Right. Like, not just focusing on, like, what do I like? But also, where is my work of value? Like, where am I able to bring value? Where are the places that, when I show up, I can make a meaningful contribution? And it seems that other people's lives are made better in some way. What problems am I able to solve? So kind of what brings me joy? And then also, where am I useful? I think those are the things that help me understand what purpose might be.

**Speaker A**

**00:03:27**

I love that. Uh, and I know in your book, and you just mentioned, you talk about intuition and your journey and finding yourself through some of the challenges that you face.

**Speaker B**

**00:03:36**

Yeah.

**Speaker A**

**00:03:38**

And if you feel comfortable, can you share with the audience some of those challenges and how you were able to overcome them?

**Speaker B**

**00:03:44**

Sure. Um, but, you guys, just because I tell you doesn't mean you shouldn't read the book. So if you haven't read the book, read the book. Um, I do the audio. I'm good at words. Saying words, you are very good at. Um, so you can get the audiobook. Um, but, yeah, this time last year, actually, I was on my book tour, and, um, I talked a lot about the fact that I actually sold a book idea that had nothing to do with these kind of deeper questions. A book idea. That was the ten things that I learned from Olivia Pope. And, um, I know I should probably still write that book. Um, but right around the time that I was pitching that book to publishers, my parents, reluctantly, for those of you who don't know, sat me down and told me that my dad, who raised me, is not my biological father. And, um, this was shocking and also not so much shocking. Like, there was something in me that knew that something in our home was off, but I never knew what I didn't know. Um, and so one of the greatest gifts of my parents courageous act of telling me something that they had no intention of telling me, they both wanted to take this to the grave. But one of the things they gave me was not just the facts about my biology, but they gave me a pathway back to my intuition. M because I had known growing up that there was something going on in my home, and I never could put my finger on it. And so I thought that the problem was with me, and I didn't understand that I was right, that there was a dynamic, um, that I wasn't privileged to know about, but it was an affirmation of my inkling, my spidey senses. Um, and so I was really grateful for that pathway back to my intuition and kind of the permission to get to know myself more clearly, more deeply, more honestly. And that has

been a really exciting new addition to my life.

**Speaker A**

**00:05:57**

I love that so much. I know a lot of people here can relate to that journey or maybe are on that journey themselves. And I think I can speak for the whole audience when I say many of us are scandal stans. We love scandal.

**Speaker B**

**00:06:13**

Thank you. I'm very appreciative. That show changed my life. Um, so thank you for watching.

**Speaker A**

**00:06:20**

It changed my life, too.

**Speaker B**

**00:06:21**

So a lot of people say that to me. It also changed the culture. You know, it really did, kind of. When we talk about representation, you know, we take for granted now how inclusive many of our television shows. And, uh. But at the time. And there was a lot talked about it back then, but at the time that scandal aired, it had been almost 40 years since there had been a black woman as the lead of a network drama. And I was in my mid thirties, so in my lifetime, I had never seen it. And, uh, it was really exciting to watch that change because of Scandal's success, which is not like, to say I was so great, I changed television. What happened? Audiences were so great. Like, you guys tuned in and, you know, in a risk averse business landscape, we needed to prove to studios and networks that audiences would tune in for a protagonist that looked like me. And when you all, uh, did that, when audiences around the world did that, it opened up the possibility for who our heroes and antiheroes, because Olivia Pope is, I think, is a little bit of both who our heroes and anti heroes could be.

**Speaker A**

**00:07:33**

You know, one of the most memorable moments from the show I know that people always talk about is the Papa pope speech about. Yes. How you have to be twice as good to get half as much.

**Speaker B**

**00:07:44**

Yes.

**Speaker A**

**00:07:45**

Which I think particularly for.

Well, I just got chills when you said it.

**Speaker A**

**00:07:48**

Yes. Particularly for those of us from communities of color and especially black families, that is such a prevalent theme.

**Speaker B**

**00:07:56**

And so any marginalized community. Right. Like, I think, in a differently abled bodies community, you have to be twice as good to get half as much. I think, you know, in the LGBTQIA community and in so many communities, there is this sense that you are representing a marginalized community. You have to be twice as good, and you should expect to get half as much, which is not okay.

**Speaker A**

**00:08:20**

It's not.

**Speaker B**

**00:08:21**

Yeah.

**Speaker A**

**00:08:21**

And I think what's so powerful about that, uh, speech is that so many people who haven't seen themselves saw themselves similar to seeing you in that role on scandal. And when we think about the projects that you work on. You are so intentional about making sure you're centering representation in your projects, like little fires everywhere, which I really loved.

**Speaker B**

**00:08:43**

Thank you. Thank you.

**Speaker A**

**00:08:45**

Many of you here love, and I know you have your own production company which is focused on this. Can you just talk to us a little bit about what inspires you and why do you think this is so important?

**Speaker B**

**00:08:55**

Yeah, sure. Um, I mean, the first thing I thought of when you said, um, that at the production company, we center stories about marginalized folks. I think about a moment that I write about in thicker than water where I had kind of a turning point in my career,

where I had played just about every white woman's best friend, right? Like I had been Meg Ryan's best friend. I had been Julia Stiles best friend, and I had also been a lot of wives, right? Like I had been Jamie Foxx's wife and forest whitaker's wife. And I was like, when do I get to be at the center of the story? Um, and luckily I have my managers here. Actually, now I have representation, I have team members who supported that idea. Um, but what's funny is I was thinking about it mostly as a creative proposition of like, I have so much to offer. I'd like to be the lead character in something at some point. Um, and I didn't realize in that moment that that was a political act.

**Speaker A**

**00:10:02**

Mhm.

**Speaker B**

**00:10:03**

I was being an artist who felt like I had something to say. But when you are the member of a marginalized community and you say center me, it is perceived as a political act because we want to just kind of walk through life and think about who we think about and be able to walk past and ignore communities that may not feel relevant to us. Um, but I feel like my work as an artist, as an actor, has always been to take a character and make sure, like, when I think about, for example, a movie like save the last dance. Mhm. That character, Chenille, in many ways could have been perceived as a statistic. She was a teen mom in the inner city, um, from a working class community, and I knew that it was my job to take her beyond the realm of statistics and make her truly human. My job as an actor was to breathe life into her so that she wasn't like a tragic number of what's gone wrong in inner city culture. She was a rich, aspirational human that you paid attention to, that you loved, that you might even want to be. Because I feel like that's part of the power in narrative, is that we have the capacity to, to make you sit and think and experience a life that either really resonates because it is so reflective of who you are and where you come from, or we allow you a window into an experience that is not yours. And yet you still see yourself, because at the end, in that specificity of being a teen mom in the inner city in Chicago, what you realize is that she's just like you, too, because she just wants to be loved. She wants to be seen. She wants to be successful. She wants to achieve her dreams. So, um, I think it's really my artistry and my desire to honor our deep humanity, no matter who we are or where we're born or what we look like. That kind of lends itself to a lot of my activism, because the work is the same. Right. At my company, Simpson street, um, we talk about standing at the intersection of what makes us all unique and different, and also what makes us all the same. And that is where that's what drives our storytelling, is looking for those very unique stories that tap into our universal humanity. Um, but it's the same work on the Simpson street venture side, and it's the same work on the Simpson street impact side. Whether it's social activism or investing in companies that I am a part of, the goal is always to find ways that Honora all of our value as human beings and to make sure that we all feel like we matter.

I'm love that. I love the mindfulness and the thoughtfulness and the intention in the work that you do. And I know there are so many in this audience who, whether in big or small ways, are trying to do their part to center marginalized voices or to, you know, center the whole human. But some people are afraid, and I would love to hear from you. What is your relationship to. It does take courage, especially in an industry that some of the work that you're doing can be seen as political or revolutionary. Do you have a relationship to fear? Do you ever feel afraid, or.

**Speaker B**

**00:13:21**

That's such a good question. Um, I do feel fear, but I think one of those quotes that I think about a lot and that I talk about with my children a lot is that idea that courage is not the absence of fear, that it's the capacity to feel the fear and do it anyway. Um, I don't think it's realistic for me to not experience fear. I am afraid often. Um, but I think part of what I try to ask myself is what's really important. You know, when I look back, what do I want to say mattered to me in my life? And am I willing to stand in those values?

**Speaker A**

**00:14:21**

Mhm. I love that.

**Speaker B**

**00:14:23**

Yeah, it's a lot of trying to. It's a lot of trying to look ahead to make sure that I'm walking towards the idea that I want for myself, you know, the dream that I have for myself. Am I taking actions today that put me on a path to be the person who I want to be? Um, yeah, I love that.

**Speaker A**

**00:14:47**

And you talked about earlier the importance of centering those who aren't often centered. And that's the work that we do in stages like Dreamforce and other events where we work to really make sure those who don't usually see themselves, particularly in technology, can see themselves on stage, can see themselves in those conversations.

**Speaker B**

**00:15:05**

Bless you, whoever sneezed.

**Speaker A**

**00:15:07**

Bless you. And we know that at Dreamforce, we've talked a lot about AI, and you mentioned this earlier, it's so important that we have representation in AI, in any technology that's shaping the world around us. But we'd love to just hear how you think we can bring everyone along, particularly marginalized communities.



We just have to be in the room, we have to be in the conversations, we have to be at the table. Like, we can't create a machine that thinks for all people, if not all people are a part of the conversation. Right. Like, we're not doing that. Yeah. And I think it's just. It's really important for us, when we talk about fear, it's important for us to be willing to be in rooms where there might be resistance to us being in those rooms. I think not everybody is lucky enough to work at a place like this company where representation is so valued. But we think we have to fight to be in those rooms in order for our virtual and digital worlds to look anything like the real world. Mm hmm. Absolutely, yes.

### **Speaker A**

**00:16:17**

And I know for you, when you talk about representation in these different spaces and through your different work over the years, how has your thinking evolved when you think about using storytelling for activism? Did you always know you were going to use storytelling for activism? Do you think about it as activism?

### **Speaker B**

**00:16:36**

Um, yes and no. Sometimes I just do projects because they're fun. Right. Like a movie. I don't know how many of you have seen, there's a Wayne's brothers movie called Little man. Like, there's nothing political about that film. Right. That was just joy. Um, and there are certain things that I do just for fun. Um, but I think I am just so curious about the human experience that I'm often drawn to material that goes a little deeper. And again, I think in many ways, if I made the choices that I made, but I was a straight, white, cisgender man who was curious about the things I'm. Who was, like, telling a story about my deep inner life, nobody would consider that political. That would just be like pop culture. But I think it's because I am who I am, and I'm asking these questions, saying, like, I matter, that it's seen as political or things that matter to my community. Um, but I did. So when I was a teenager, I auditioned, and I talk about this also in the book. This was not meant to be a conversation, plugging my book. Um, but I talk about this theater company that I was in in New York City. And, um, I auditioned for this theater company because it was theater. It was, like, a way to make a little bit of extra money. And my mom saw an ad for it. It was like an educational theater company. And my mom is a retired professor of education, so I think she thought, like, okay, there's some healthy frameworks around this. But when I got there, we realized that this was a theater company that was run by the adolescent Health center of a really well known hospital in New York City. And we were doing shows. The company was writing and performing shows around sexuality education. It was the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. Um, a few, you know, this was like 90, 90. So if you think in 1988 was when 1987 was when the article appeared up here, I think, in the San Francisco Chronicle about a strange gay cancer impacting the community. So this is, like, two years into the epidemic. We were writing this show about homosexuality, safer sex, wearing a condom, losing your virginity, drug addiction, iv drugs. My parents were like, what? Um, I was 14 at the time, so when I first joined the company, the only

monologue they let me do was the one about whether I was gonna lose my virginity or nothing. Um. Um, but I did that work for ten years, on and off for ten years. And part of what we had to do with the company was not just sing and dance and act, but in order to write these skits, we all went through these very intense theater, um, I'm sorry, very intense health education classes. Um, at the adolescent health center, we became peer educators, and we also became activists because we would sometimes go to churches or community centers, and they would say, please come talk to our kids, save their lives, tell them everything they need to know, but don't use the word condom. And we were like, well, that's not going to work. Um, and so we started really being activists for education, for healthcare for, um, equality in healthcare. It was a time when we were begging the president to even just say the word AIDS. Um, so I think from a very early age, the connection between arts and social change became embedded within me. Um, and so I got to see how art transforms people. I would get on a stage. Oftentimes, students would be dragged into a gym, and they'd be like, what, man? I don't want to be here. What are we doing? And we'd all be nervous, be scared. Um, and the music would start in a boombox in the corner, and we would have to win them over. And by the end of the show, it was also, like, the best acting training I ever got, because we would kind of do these open ended skits, and then at the end, we would stay in character, and we would ask the audience to help us solve our problems. We would say, should I lose my virginity or should I tell my dad I'm gay? The audience would help us fix our life problems, but we would have to stay in character and be able to have conversations as our characters, no matter what they asked us or what they said. So it really helped me to learn how to build the backstory and know who my characters are. Um, but I got to see how reluctant audience members changed. I got to watch them evolve and grow, learn new skills, become different people. And I think that still happens. I think, you know, with a show like *unprisoned*, I have a show on Hulu called *unprisoned* that I'm very proud of. Thank you. Um, and that's a show about a family that's dealing with a returning citizen. I play a woman named Paige Alexander, whose dad has been in and out of jail my whole life. My dad is played by the brilliant Delroy Lindo, and he's incredible. And the show is a comedy, so it's about, like, these very, very intense family issues, but it's like that spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. And I really see how audiences idea of what a criminal is is transformed when they watch the show. Their concepts about how the criminal justice or injustice system impacts families is transformed because they watch the show. So I never want to take for granted this power of what we can do with narrative storytelling. Um, but also, not everything I do is to change the world. Sometimes I just try to change the world on its own, without art.

**Speaker A**

**00:22:31**

I think it's safe to say that you, being you, is changing the world.

**Speaker B**

**00:22:35**

Oh, uh, that's very kind.

**Speaker A**

00:22:36

Yes. You living in your purpose.

**Speaker B**

00:22:38

Thank you.

**Speaker A**

00:22:42

So, we have a room full of people here today, and I know they want to hear from you. Your advice. I think, again, there's so many that you've changed their life. I know you've changed mind in some way by your arts and the work that you do. What advice do you have for the audience who are looking to either amplify their voices or make an impact, or even just live in their truth and share their superpower with the world?

**Speaker B**

00:23:07

Um, okay. Everything happens for a reason. So I just noticed that I have family members in the audience, which is amazing. Um, and I'm so glad you guys are here. I love you. Um, so I feel like it's perfect that you asked me that question in this moment, because I think so much of it is making sure that you have a circle of people in your life that can, uh, support you. And that might be the family you're born into. It might be your found family, it might be a best friend. It might be a twelve step program. I don't care what it looks like. But finding spaces and places where you can be yourself and you can tell your truth and still belong, I think is really important. Because a lot of doing what scares me in life is about knowing that I may walk into a space and say something and do something that's gonna make other people not like me. Um, it might upset people. I might get rejected or judged or, um, ridiculed. But if I have my spaces of belonging, it matters less, because I have places where I can be myself and be loved. Then I can go out and risk being that publicly, without attachment to having everybody like it. Um, not everybody has to like me. You don't have to like what I say. You don't have to like what I do. I have places where being myself is cherished and valued. I have places where I matter unconditionally. And that gives me permission to be who that is out in the world. And that, by the way, that might be a deep spiritual connection. Like, it might be that you, in your prayer and meditation, you know, that. That, like, divine love, is the place where you are loved unconditionally. Whatever it looks like, find it. Find places where, you know you can be your full self, unapologetically, um, without apology. Without apology.

**Speaker A**

00:25:17

That apology that resonates so deeply. Hadn't you final question? Because I know we're coming at time, although we wish we had you for the whole time.

That was so fast.

**Speaker A**

**00:25:28**

Thank you for being here with us. Someone, um, asked me this on a panel this week, and I'd just love to hear your thoughts. They asked, you know, in such a hard time for so many, when we look around the world and we think about marginalized voices in our communities, what gives you hope?

**Speaker B**

**00:25:45**

Well, first, I want to say thank you for this beautiful conversation and thank you for all the work that you're doing for diversity and inclusion. And, um, it's really. I'm so grateful for the space that you're holding in such an important community. Um, it's really admirable and important. I'm grateful. Um, what was the question?

**Speaker A**

**00:26:13**

You could just give me more affirmations. We could skip the question.

**Speaker B**

**00:26:16**

I give you that the outfit is amazing. I have those same shoes.

**Speaker A**

**00:26:23**

Um, so the question is, what gives you hope?

**Speaker B**

**00:26:26**

Oh, what gives me hope? All right, so you. And, um, what gives me hope is honestly plugging in to solution. Like, I know right now, uh, there's a lot to be afraid of. There's a lot of anxiety in the world. But I find that when I'm able to shift into hope is when I do the work, right? Like, sitting at home in my bed or on my couch, being afraid I'm doing this. Cause, like, I'm eating, right. That is not. That does not breed hope for me. But when I can connect to other changemakers, um, and people who are really in solution, that is what brings me hope. I'll say as an example. Um, and I know that there are many different politics reflected in the room, but I'm going to speak to my personal ones. Um, when I woke up on the morning after the election in 2016, my social media was just overwhelmed with people saying, like, Olivia Pope, you have to fix this. And tagging me like I'm supposed to fix it. And I. Like, I had a lot of feelings about that. But one of the feelings that I had. One of the thoughts that I had was, we have done ourselves a disservice in a democracy when we think that imaginary characters on television have to save us. Because the reality is. Yes, the reality is that every. Every single person who was tweeting and instagraming that they have so much more power than Olivia Pope. Olivia Pope can't vote. She can't

phone bank, she can't volunteer. Cause she's not real. Right, but, like. But each of us can. Like, we have the power to be the Olivia Pope's of our homes, our school boards, our communities, our states, our cities. We have that power to save our culture and to defend each other's humanity, civil rights. We can do that in ways that Olivia Pope cannot in the real world. And, um, so part of what I started to do was plug into some of the real life activists who are in the trenches in community, doing that hard work of democracy building day in and day out. And I thought, how do I turn this spotlight that's on me to them and get people focused on their work and in service of their work? I don't need you in service of Olivia Pope. The show's not even on anymore. But I need you in service of these real life Olivia popes who are knocking on doors and making phone calls and saying, we all matter. We all are the people. Um, and so that, for me, that's what gives me hope, is when I can plug into real world solution. Trailblazers, people who are doing the work and be of service to them.

**Speaker A** 00:29:22

Amazing. Well, thank you so much.

**Speaker B** 00:29:24

Thank you. Thank you.

**Speaker A** 00:29:28

Thank you for all that you're doing. Thank you for being a trailblazer yourself just by living your purpose. Thank you for calling us delusional, for thinking Olivia Pope is saving us and reminding us. Reminding us that all of us can be Olivia Pope.

**Speaker B** 00:29:43

Find your white hat.

**Speaker A** 00:29:44

Yes.

**Speaker B** 00:29:44

Find your white hat.

**Speaker A** 00:29:45

Be a gladiator.

**Speaker B** 00:29:46

Yeah.

**Speaker A**

**00:29:47**

Thank you so much. Did we handle that, Karen?

**Speaker B**

**00:29:49**

You handled it, girl. You handled it so good.