

**12@12**  
**Know Your Why<sup>1</sup>**  
**February 4, 2016**

Today I would like to tell the story of three people. Well, in some ways just two people. The third person is you. But my hope is in telling the story of the first two people that in some way it will impact your own story. Or at least reflect upon it.

The first two people are very much alive and active. You may have even heard of them. The first owns a shoe company. He is the founder of the company and its CEO, although CEO is not the title that he is known for. His title at TOMS is CSG, Chief Shoe Giver. To understand that title you have to know something about TOMS and about Blake Mycoskie. Mycoskie is an entrepreneur. He started a reality TV network in the early 2000s after having starred on the *Survivor* show. The network didn't make it, and Mycoskie found himself on vacation in Argentina wondering what his next business venture would be. While there, he met an American woman who served with an organization that provided shoes for impoverished children. For days he traveled from village to village seeing poverty like he had never seen it. Of that experience he said, "It dramatically heightened my awareness. Yes, I knew somewhere in the back of my mind that poor children around the world often went barefoot, but now, for the first time, I saw the real effects of being shoeless: the blisters, the sores, the infections."<sup>2</sup>

Upon his return he started TOMS. It was a different kind of shoe company. Its purpose was to provide shoes to people like the impoverished kids he had seen in Argentina, and its funding mechanism would be to sell shoes to the public with the understanding that for every pair purchased a pair would be given away—a 'One for One' offering as they call it. To say that TOMS took off is probably an understatement. Even though the shoe market has an endless number of players, in a span of less than six years TOMS grew from a business housed in Mycoskie's apartment to one that had over \$300 million in revenues. By 2012 the company had experienced a growth rate of over 300% for 5 years running, and it was still giving away one pair away for every one purchased. Celebrities were buying the shoes, hundreds of stores big and small wanted to stock them, and media outlets were wanting to tell Mycoskie's story.

All this should have meant that Blake Mycoskie was riding high. He was an entrepreneur at heart and wanted to help others. TOMS was the perfect and successful combination. But in the midst of this success, things weren't sitting well for Mycoskie. In fact, he had become rather disillusioned. The company he had started with great passion had now become a monotonous chore. He didn't look forward to showing up to work.

So in the fall of 2012 Mycoskie took a sabbatical from TOMS. He had recently married and given the crazy growth of the company in previous years he had every excuse to get away. What people didn't know was that Mycoskie was considering whether TOMS was something he would stick with. It was during the sabbatical that Mycoskie recognized that TOMS had become about the *what* of shoes (styles, colors, trends) and the *hows* of supply chains, marketing, and distribution. And in the midst of all the *whats* and *hows*, the *why* of TOMS had gotten buried. About this epiphany he writes this:

I realized that TOMS had veered away from its "why." In the early days we always led with our story: We weren't selling shoes; we were selling the promise that each purchase would directly and tangibly benefit a child who needed shoes. But our desire to sustain the company's hypergrowth had pushed us away from that mission and into competing on the "what" and "how," just as every other shoe company does. In an effort to meet aggressive sales goals . . . our marketing increasingly felt product-focused rather than purpose-focused.<sup>3</sup>

Mycoskie had gotten into the business to help people. He saw buy his first shoes because *they* wanted to help people. This is what TOMS was all about. And when he rediscovered the why of TOMS the passion came flooding back and TOMS surged ahead under Mycoskie's continued leadership.

Now let me tell you the story of a second person. It is the story of Arthur Brooks. I think you will see that though Brooks' story starts in a different place it ends somewhat similarly to Mycoskie's. Brooks was a college dropout, though kicked out may be a better description. He loved music, and he just couldn't get himself to keep his head in the

books. His instrument of choice was the French Horn, and soon he found his way to Europe playing anywhere he could. Brooks was no street corner musician, he was very talented and for years he played for the Barcelona Symphony. By this point he was in his late 20's and married, and for whatever reason the deeper questions of life began to pepper his mind. He asked himself, "Why do I play music?"

In answering this question, Mycoskie recalls being influenced by the words of Johann Sebastian Bach. We think of Bach as a great composer, but in his own day his greatness was not really recognized. He was seen more as a great teacher. And one of his pupils asked one day, "Why do you write music?" This is a question any of us could be asked in regards to what we do. This was Bach's answer: "The aim and final end of all music is nothing less than the glorification of God and the refreshment of the soul."

When Arthur Brooks read this of Bach, he was taken back. This was not the answer he would have given regarding his own musical career. In fact, this is what he said of this period in his life:

I asked myself if somebody said to me, "Brooks, why are you a French horn player?" Would I say, honestly, "the glorification of God and the good of mankind? ...The answer would've been no. I wouldn't have said that. I would've said something about my own personal edification or the progress of my career or it pays a living or I'm really good at it or, hey, I dig music. I wouldn't have said the glorification God and the service of mankind."<sup>4</sup>

At this point in this story you might think that Brooks re-adjusted his *why* of music and went on to even greater heights in the world of music. That's what I would expect as well. But that's not what happened at all. When he considered the idea that he was made to glorify God and bring good to others, music did not come to the forefront at all. What came to forefront for Brooks was helping the poor, but not helping the poor by serving at a food kitchen or creating a company like TOMS or even by providing music to the underprivileged. Instead when he thought about glorifying God and refreshing the souls of others, an interest in learning how people become un-poor emerged. Soon Brooks went back to school; first to get an online degree. Then he continued on in graduate school, studying poverty and public policy. Eventually he earned his

Ph.D. and later held the Louis A. Bantle Chair in Business and Government Policy at Syracuse University. Today Brooks serves as the president of the American Enterprise Institute, a heady conservative think tank that speaks into public policy.

To say the least, Brooks' road to influential economist was not conventional. If you look up the *Wikipedia* entry for Brooks, the title under his name is still "musician," even though he is now best known for his books on economics and public policy. World class musician turned world class economist would be the better title for him now. And this transition, this unconventional transition, took place all because he asked the question why. Why do I do what I do?

When we come into a setting, a setting like 12@12, and we are introduced to people, it does not take us long to ask or be asked the question, "What do you do?" I do not degrade this question, I ask it all the time myself. The answer to that question often helps me make connections. I might know something of the person's field that allows me to ask more questions and learn even more about the person. Or perhaps I know someone with whom they may do business. Asking, "What do you do?" can be a very helpful question. But I wonder what would happen if in addition to asking what do you do, we also asked people, "Why do you do what you do?" That is a rather more interesting question, isn't it? And a scarier one too. It is an interesting question because it gets more to the heart of what makes a person tick. If answered it give us insight into a person's values and priorities. But it is a scary question too, because it is one that would be hard for many of us to answer.

I wonder, however, if avoiding that question puts us in some less than satisfying places—places where work becomes monotonous as it had become for Blake Mycoskie or places that miss our life calling as the musical life had become for Arthur Brooks. Recently, I have been asking myself the why question a lot. You might find that a bit of a surprise for someone who is in the ministry. But ministry or not, it's easy to get caught up on the *whats* and *hows* of everyday experience and forget the *why* that really fuels living.

When we began today, I told you I would share with you the stories of three people. I shared with you the story of Blake Mycoskie and the

story of Arthur Brooks. The third story is yours. Your story no doubt has lot of whats and hows to it. There is something that you do, and there are ways that you do it. Just as there are for me. But it seems to me that your story is incomplete or perhaps a bit hollow if it does not also include a sense of why. I would even go so far as to say if you don't know your why you really have little chance of knowing what Jesus called abundant life (John 10:10).

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- <sup>1</sup> The inspiration for this talk came from Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (Penguin, 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> Blake Mycoskie, "[Blake Mycoskie Conceived the Idea for TOMS Shoes While Sitting on a Farm, Pondering Life, in Argentina](#)," *Business Insider*, September 21, 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> Blake Mycoskie, "[The Founder of TOMS on the Reimagining of the Company's Vision](#)," *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> -----, "[Dr. Arthur Brooks and John Carr at the November 2015 Faith Angle Forum](#)" *Ethics & Public Policy Center*, accessed January 1, 2016.