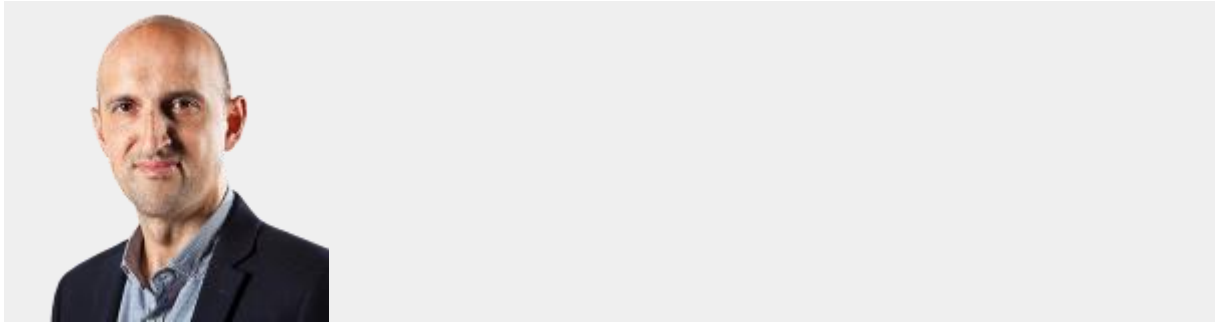


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Williams driven by a deeper purpose

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Most people know about the challenges faced by Serena Williams. Learning to play tennis in a bullet-ridden suburb of LA, practising for hours amid gangs and drugs, the periodic bouts of racist abuse, not least when she was booed and there were “undercurrents of racism” in Indian Wells in 2001 after her sister, Venus, withdrew from the event through injury.

“It has been a tough journey since I was a child,” she told me in an interview in 2009. “Isha and Yetunde [her two oldest sisters] had the two beds on top and Lyndrea and Venus the two down below. I had to sleep with a different sister each night, sort of alternating between their beds. But I didn’t see it as a negative. To be honest, I felt lucky because it gave me a chance to get real close to each of my sisters.”



Williams has been motivated by far more than money and self-interest
MARK KOLBE/GETTY IMAGES

She also talked about the terrible moment in 2003 when her oldest sister, Yetunde, was killed in a drive-by shooting. “I still find it difficult to talk about what happened with Tunde,” she said. “She was nine years older and like a second mother. She called me ‘kid’ and took me clothes shopping . . . I had been talking to Tunde on the phone earlier that day and she had been real excited about what was going on in her life, and mine. I just couldn’t make sense of it. It was like something out of a dream.”

Three years later, after a vain attempt to bottle up her feelings, Williams fell into a deep depression and her ranking dropped to 139. “I needed to take time out from tennis because I had an injury to my leg and had all sorts of emotional and spiritual wounds,” she said. “I started to see a therapist because I was in a bad place and needed to talk things through.”

When she flew to Australia for the first grand-slam event of 2007, she was unseeded. Chris Evert had penned an open letter saying that Williams was tarnishing her legacy. The Australian press ridiculed her for putting on a few pounds, with one journalist calling her a “fat cow”. She had won only one grand-slam title in three and a half years and, from the outside, it looked as though she might never win another.

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Yet something had happened in 2006 that changed everything: she visited Ghana and Senegal, handing out polio vaccines, before heading to the coast to see the slave castles. “These were where they held the slaves before shipping them to America,” she told me. “It was unbelievable to think that my ancestors had endured such suffering before they even got to America and were put into bondage . . . it put things in perspective, but it also made me think. If my people could endure that kind of suffering, I could endure anything.”

These words have stayed with me, not least because, later in the interview, she talked with such passion about the horrors of the Middle Passage and the indignities of slavery, and why this had come to mean so much to her. Their adversity was, in a sense, her adversity; their pain was her pain. Tennis suddenly had a deeper purpose: to honour those who had gone before, and to shine a light for African Americans. “Playing tennis is about more than me,” she said.

This sort of galvanising experience is not unusual in sport. Muhammad Ali saw boxing, in part, as a means of representing his people. As with Williams, Ali wept when learning about slavery and was radicalised when reading about Emmett Till, a young black American who had been lynched for flirting with a white woman in Mississippi in 1955. “He saw boxing as a means to an end,” Lonnie, his widow, told me last year. “When he trained and when he fought, he gained energy from a sense of divine purpose.”

This is about more than sport, of course. Multiple experiments have revealed that people are more creative when they are motivated not just by money or self-interest, but for a cause that extends beyond the self. In a famous study by the psychologist Adam Grant, call-centre workers raising money for a university were given the usual motivational spiel about the personal and financial benefits of the job. These were the selfish reasons for doing their job. Another set of employees, however, met an actual beneficiary of their work, a student called Will whose life had been transformed by a scholarship. This connected them with the deeper purpose of the job.

The results were extraordinary. As Grant put it: “After spending five minutes with Will, a full month later, the average caller spiked 142% in weekly minutes on the phone and 171% in weekly revenue. There were no significant gains in effort or performance among the callers who had no contact with him.” To put it another way, we are inspired not just by pay cheques, but by purpose. As Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, said: “Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how’.”

Williams, rediscovering the “why”, was transformed. She won the 2007 Australian Open, and has since captured 15 further singles grand-slam titles. Ali, as we know, had a career that constantly defied the odds, discovering inspiration that seemed to emerge from nowhere, as though he had an invisible battery pack strapped to his body, particularly in that brutal showdown with Joe Frazier in Manila, where he threw an unforgettable flurry of punches in the 14th round when he seemed exhausted.

This is not to say that motivation can’t emerge from self-interest; it is merely to say that once we have covered our basic needs, inspiration is often found elsewhere. We are motivated to do amazing things not when we are within our comfort zone, but when we seek a wider purpose, often (but not always) discovered in adversity. As Orson Welles put it in the Third

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Man: “In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace — and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.”

While this is unfair to Switzerland (which has invented many things, although not the cuckoo clock), it brings to mind Roger Federer, who like Williams, completed a historic victory on Sunday. Perhaps he is a counterexample: he grew up as the son of a chemical engineer in materially fortunate circumstances. He hasn't faced great hardship and it isn't as though he plays for any great social cause. And yet perhaps he too gained inspiration by looking beyond the self; to the travails of his wife, Mirka, whose parents fled communism in Czechoslovakia, then struggled to gain Swiss citizenship.

“When I met her I had zero titles, today I have 88, so she's been on this ride for the whole time,” he said in an interview last year. “She used to train five, six hours in a row. Her parents had to work extremely hard. She was tough and she taught me how to work. I would be at the tennis centre and see her do six-hour sessions . . . [Until then], I'd check out mentally after an hour and go, ‘This is so boring.’ So I'd get kicked out of practice for bad behaviour.”



Williams poses with the Daphne Akhurst Trophy after defeating her sister last weekendCLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES

In much of the corporate world, the “what” is prioritised above the “why”. Motivation is conceptualised through the prism of money, with purpose a kind of optional extra. I wonder if this crowds out the meaning people crave in their work, and obscures a more profound inspiration. As Frankl put it: “Success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself.”

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“When I am practising and pushing myself hard, I now know why I am there,” Williams said in 2009. The appeal in those brown eyes showed that she really meant it.