

"In the tradition of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, LaNysha Adams has written an inspiring manifesto on taking agency in our lives by empowering ourselves through self-knowledge and principled action."

Andrew Hahn, Psy.D., Founder of Life Centered Therapy & Author of *The One Hour Miracle*

"*Me Power* calls us to recognize our inner strength so we can activate the biggest impact within and around us. Dr. Adams gives us practical tools to see our empowerment as energy – a flow of possibility to spark personal, professional, and organizational change. I'm excited for the possibilities ahead."

Judy Dang, Author of *Perfect Enough*

"WHO DO YOU WANT TO BE?"

We've all heard or asked this question before, yet few of us answer it because identity is not fixed, but ever-expanding as we move through life.

Dr. LaNysha Tufuga Adams, Ivy-League educated linguist and founder of award-winning education consultancy Edlinguist Solutions, challenges others to not only answer this question, but to put the answer(s) into action.

Me Power redefines empowerment, encouraging us to tap into our limitless flow of possibility while connecting with others. No matter the barriers, *Me Power* pushes us to activate the best of who we are and dismiss the possibility that power is something we can authorize, give away, or take from others.

Embracing this book is the first step to activating your *Me Power*. So what are you waiting for?

"*Me Power* is anti-self-help, by which I mean REAL self-help, a way of thinking that comes from within you. It is not written by a guru telling you what to think or how to live your life, but by a fellow traveler. It's a great reminder that what happens to 'me' affects 'we' in a profound way."

James A. Godley, Ph.D., Postdoctoral Fellow, Dartmouth University

"Captivating, raw, relatable, insightful, and encouraging! This is just what those of us from historically marginalized backgrounds need as we face the world and make sense of how we WANT to show up in it."

Evingerlean D. B. Hudson, Ph.D., Founder and President, Evingerlean Worldwide & Award-Winning Host of "The First-Gen Lounge"

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ME POWER

LaNysha T. Adams, PhD

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*To my parents, Janice Brewer, Jalisa Sanders,
Davidson FiaFia, and Donovan Fatu*

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The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.

—JOSEPH CAMPBELL

ME POWER: AN INTRODUCTION

“The Admissions Committee regrets to inform you that we were unable to offer you a place in the doctoral program.”

Reading my second Ivy League rejection letter, I thought, *WTF?* I was 90 percent certain I would be accepted. My prospective advisor Professor Obich and I had spoken several times, discussing collaborative research we could pursue. She seemed impressed and even invited me to join her doctoral-level seminar. Although everyone else had struggled to pass that class, I earned an A.

In an email requesting a meeting with Professor Obich, I wrote, “After reading your rejection letter, I came to realize some shortcomings in my application that perhaps I overlooked. Because I plan to apply again, it might be useful for me to better understand where I fell short.”

I ran down two long, winding hallways that connected my office to Professor Obich’s. At twenty-four years

old, I had my own office in the building where Shirley Chisholm (the first Black woman elected to Congress) and John Dewey (pioneer of the learning by doing movement in education) spent time studying and teaching. I felt accomplished as a master's student and I looked forward to someday earning my PhD.

Before I walked into Professor Obich's office, I took a deep breath and reminded myself she would provide valuable guidance and feedback. I was facing a significant obstacle in my life, yet I felt prepared to do whatever it took to pursue my dreams of obtaining a doctoral degree.

Professor Obich welcomed me into her office, with her head cocked to the side and her coffee-stained teeth exposed. Sitting up straight, I opened my hands, signaling I was ready to receive feedback. There was no small talk and she immediately cut to the chase.

"We need to talk about why people like you aren't supposed to be in the program."

I held my breath, listening intently to every word. Professor Obich had taken the meeting to provide me with much-needed advice.

"You must be shocked by the fact that I said people like you. I meant it. People. Like. You," she repeated as she looked me up and down.

I pointed to my skin and she nodded.

“The work you do is very *applied*, LaNysha. My students and I only work in the surrounding community to receive funding, which allows us to conduct research and publish.” I started looking around the room, thinking there were hidden cameras and someone would jump out shouting that I’d been *Punk’d*.

“Academic research and writing are not done by people like you because you’re most useful doing applied work.”

The more she talked, the more my shoulders hunched. I held my breath, feeling uncomfortably warm and queasy. She paused after seeing the impact of her words.

“I don’t... I don’t. I don’t understand what you’re saying to me. I’m a master’s level student and I did well in your doctoral-level class. You’re saying I don’t belong,” I said, fighting back tears. I would not allow this lady to see me cry, no matter how badly she tore me down.

Obich leaned forward, never broke her smile, and explained, “You’re a hard worker. That’s what you should be. That’s your place.”

If you were to transpose the features of a gremlin onto her real-life face, it would come close to the demonic image imprinted into my mind during this interaction.

I tried to make sense of our conversation as I walked back to my office. When I reached the reading room near my office, I ran inside, slammed the door behind me, and

curled up in a fetal position on the floor, crying. For the first time in my life, an educator tried to keep me from getting an education.

My meeting with Professor Obich cracked the foundation of my belief system about my academic abilities, making me question my entire life. By fourteen years old, I knew I wanted to study linguistics and become a scholar, which would require obtaining a doctorate. My ninth grade English teacher, Ms. Aleen Jendian, suggested I apply for the Gates Millennium Scholarship. At eighteen years old, I was one of one thousand students to receive a ten-year award from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This achievement opened the doors to my lifelong dream and Professor Obich was the only roadblock standing between me and my goal. I felt so defeated, I threw away my only acceptance letter.

That same day, an email arrived from Professor Obich asking, “Did you ever decide what you want to do with your life, LaNysha?”

For a week after receiving Professor Obich’s email, I didn’t know how to respond. Her negative feedback filled me with self-doubt and she robbed me of my confidence. Instead of believing in myself, I accepted her idea that maybe a PhD was too out of reach for “people like me.”

My mother’s repeated advice echoed in my mind as I struggled to respond to Professor Obich: “Think before you act and speak. What you do and say is a reflection

of where you come from, where you're going, and who you are. Know this." It took me two weeks to construct a seventy-two-word response.

This advice transformed my feeling of utter defeat into resolve. Professor Obich would not have the last word concerning my path toward my goal—that belonged only to me. After expressing surprise, I sarcastically thanked Professor Obich for her guidance. I then told her I had accepted a position as the national research director for a nonprofit and would teach as an adjunct professor until I finished my doctorate. I suggested she read Dr. Mark Taylor's *New York Times* op-ed about ending the university as we know it to "make higher learning more agile, adaptive, and imaginative."

Despite my initial reaction, once I internalized her criticism it took years for me to free myself from Professor Obich's discouraging words. Eventually, I proceeded to do what I wrote to her. Six years after our last encounter, I obtained my PhD.

STOP SURRENDERING YOUR POWER

Me Power is a book that teaches you how to tap into the limitless power that resides within, even when circumstances or other people present barriers outside of your control.

Before talking about what *Me Power* is, I must acknowledge the real and disempowering effects of limiting circumstances and oppression. Generally, disempowerment

appears as apathy, lack of hope, and a lack of influence over one's own destiny. Studies have shown when disempowerment is present, individuals believe nothing can be done about a problem. They are convinced their actions will make no difference, so they give up.

My personal introduction to disempowerment began with Professor Obich. I became disempowered when I abandoned my autonomy and authenticity. I let her words keep me in a holding pattern, preventing me from taking the next steps toward achieving my dream. Two years after that meeting with Professor Obich, her words still haunted me. I accepted her belief I didn't belong in any doctoral program. Once I internalized her venomous words, my sense of self-worth was shattered and I started to impose limits on myself. I began making decisions based on her opinions rather than my own.

It is important to understand oppressive situations can create psychological conditions that give rise to debilitating emotions, which can last for a long time after the conditions themselves have changed (in my case, contact with Professor Obich). Internalizing oppression and discrimination is not victimhood, yet it can contribute to one occupying a victimized position. This position is temporary for some of us; for others, it is not.

I already had doubts because of my background. A single teenage mother raised me until she married when I was ten years old; my dad dropped out of high school; no one in my entire family had even completed college. Despite the fact that I worked while completing my degrees, I

spent years believing and internalizing Professor Obich's words—that I was a worker bee unable to produce intellectual material.

Surrendering my future to her judgment made me feel powerless. To summarize:

- I internalized what she said and it became a barrier I could not even see, let alone embrace.
- My focus was off kilter. I wasted too much time and energy lamenting the fact that I wasn't good enough to get into a top-tier doctoral program, even when I was accepted into one.
- I muted aspects of who I was to bury my hurt feelings.
- I was unable to see a path to my goal and I had no guidance until I felt safe enough to share my story.
- I refused to think about my experience with Professor Obich but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't forget it.

What I've learned since then is that we do not have to be victims of our circumstances. We are powerful beings and can cocreate worlds of our own design. I call this (Our) Me Power.

This book reveals how to use Me Power—the potent combination of self-knowledge and principled action—to catalyze change for yourself and/or the learners in your life. I want you to recognize you are capable of more than you think. You're already good at what you do—so good, in fact, that sometimes it's easy for others to take advantage of you or undervalue your work. But if you're willing

to believe in yourself, even when others don't, there's no limit to what you can accomplish.

It's time to recognize your power within. Your inner strength is generative and the best of you will make an impact that reverberates in the world within and around you.

THE MISSING INGREDIENT IN EDUCATION: YOU

Before I met Professor Obich, I experienced school as an empowering context. I attended two elementary, three middle, and three high schools in Southern California because my stepfather was in the navy. I was fortunate enough to find teachers at these schools who nurtured my academic curiosity, inspired me to learn, and encouraged me to develop a strong sense of self. Most importantly, they created empowering conditions under which I knew my life was an autobiography in the making. In high school, I found myself empowered knowing that if I maintained a commitment to self-knowledge and principled action in an ever-changing (dialectical) social world, I could fulfill any dream. It was not until later I realized this feeling was Me Power.

Education is more than schooling. It's a dynamic process in any learning environment that shapes the way we think and interact with the world around us. Our introduction to education as an ecosystem is in school, where we're taught and socialized by our teachers, other educators, and peers. Schools exist to socialize children and educate them, creating an environment where students learn to conform to societal standards.

Social norms suggest you should be able to tell everyone where you're headed next, but this kind of collective knowledge doesn't come without consequences. It often misses teaching you how to learn, unlearn, and relearn who you are over time.

In high school, we are made to feel *who we are* is contingent on the answer to the question, "What is next in your life?"

The question of what to do in life continues into college, where students are often forced to choose a path before exploring their interests, having to answer: "What is your major?"

In the working world, this transforms into, "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

And as we age, the questions become more complex: "When do you plan on having children?"; "What does retirement look like for you?"

The expectation is that everyone can answer these questions with certainty and the answers will fit nicely into a timeline—an education followed by a career.

These questions boil down to a single inquiry, "How will you chart your course through life?" while ignoring the fundamental question, "Who *are* you?"

Choosing to *be* the answer is more important than finding it. Empowerment begins with the declaration, "I choose." To make this declaration, you must know yourself.

What do you remember when you think about the most empowering lesson in your life?

I'm guessing you're probably not thinking about information gained in a classroom.

Let's get one thing straight: the current education ecosystem of K-12, higher education, and workforce development does not prepare students to empower themselves. Whether we work as educators or have only been on the receiving end, we all know there is a serious problem with the state of education in the United States. The gap between what we learn in school and how that knowledge applies to life is so pervasive, it's now a cliché. Michael Hansen, CEO of Cengage Group, correctly asserts in a *Harvard Business Review* article, "There's a direct disconnect between education and employability in the US, where employers view universities and colleges as the gatekeepers of workforce talent, yet those same institutions aren't prioritizing job skills and career readiness. This not only hurts employers but also sets the average American worker up for failure before they've even begun their career."

The way we learn has dramatically changed in recent years, as the Internet provides us with an almost unlimited amount of information with the click of a button.

However, our educational ecosystem has not adapted to this new era. The insights generated through neuroscience about how we learn have yet to be applied to the industrial revolution-esque system of schooling.

The growing gap between the number of jobs in highly skilled fields and the number of workers equipped to fill them illustrates this point well. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a deficit of nearly twenty million qualified workers by 2030, indicating the demand for skilled workers is much higher than the supply. The latest research from the Korn Ferry Institute explains the United States could miss out on \$1.75 trillion in revenue due to labor shortages—approximately 6 percent of its entire economy. As technology advances and businesses become more globalized, the gap between what students learn and what they need to know to compete for good jobs widens. In addition, many schools struggle to provide students with the skills they need to succeed after graduation. Furthermore, over 60 percent of jobs require a degree beyond high school, according to Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce.

It’s time to rethink the current paradigm and create a new one that better serves us.

START WITH WHO YOU ARE, NOT WHAT OTHERS THINK

We must reimagine our education ecosystem so it empowers students to know themselves and take charge of their own futures with principled action. In today’s world, the most important skill to teach children, young adults, students, workers—all of us—is how to take control of their own learning, whether we are in grade school, college, the penitentiary, or corporate training. We can’t rely on others to teach us everything we need to know.

We must take charge of our own learning, continually developing self-knowledge throughout our lives. But most of us aren't taught what it means to know ourselves. As a result, we don't know how to start the process of discovering who we are, what we stand for, and what we're really capable of. Empowerment requires knowing who you are and adopting a state of mind in which you refuse to define yourself by others' unsolicited perceptions, judgments, and expectations.

How, then, do we expect anyone to learn who they are, what they stand for, and uncover what they're truly meant to do? How many would go on to more rewarding careers or even more schooling if they better understood themselves?

In a global economy powered by technology, we must acquire knowledge, competencies, and mindsets that prepare us to continually learn new skills throughout our lives for a future we cannot predict. The outdated notion that we must first pursue knowledge outside ourselves rather than within is wrong. The drive for disciplinary knowledge over self-knowledge is based on an obsolete learning model.

Knowledge of self is the most important knowledge and all other knowledge must revolve around it. The self is like a circle, whose center point is our core identity and whose radius is our external traits. Once we understand the circumference, center point, and radii, we can further expand our knowledge in whatever direction we choose.

Schools, colleges, and universities are the nexus of adolescent and young adult life. Despite spending over fourteen thousand hours in grade school, many of us never learn how to dig deep in an educational system that prioritizes moving quickly through subjects, checking off boxes, and acing tests over self-examination and skill development necessary for success. Many think teachers are the source of all disciplinary knowledge, when their role is best described as facilitators of the complex relationship between teaching and learning. More often than not, educational pathways are too cookie cutter and don't allow for the kind of personal growth and empowered learning many people need. Too many leave school feeling frustrated, disappointed, and unsure about what to do next. This can be a source of friction in the workplace and negatively impact one's sense of fulfillment in life.

You should be living your life on purpose, with purpose, in whatever way you decide. But how do you take charge and choose?

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

My desire to answer this question led me to write *Me Power*.

I am compelled to write about empowerment because we need a new way of thinking and acting that moves us beyond outdated power models. The old models keep us on autopilot, where we do what we were conditioned to do without question. We must stop thinking of power as something we can authorize, give away, or take from

others. Instead, we need to start seeing it as energy—a flow of possibility that can be tapped into.

Me Power is a term I coined to describe the ability to realize and exude one's authentic self to live a happy, productive, and fulfilling life. When we tap into Me Power as a force of energy, we can use that energy to create change in our lives and the world around us. I describe Me Power by using research, anecdotes, and interviews with people who exemplify the concept.

I will teach you how Me Power is a function of perspective and choices and how it can be used as a spark to light the fire for personal, professional, and organizational development. Together, you and I will guide your manifesting energy in the direction of realizing your deepest hopes and dreams. This book is the result of twenty years spent working in education, combined with extensive investigations into how Me Power works and why some people wield it more effectively than others.

These insights led to the development of five guiding principles essential to manifesting Me Power. These principles provide a framework to understand the true meaning of empowerment, so you can design a self-development practice to not only benefit yourself but also the social world in which we all live and operate. I'm hopeful that no matter what your background or situation is, you'll find value in practicing these principles:

1. Embrace Your Barriers (**M**otivated **E**nergy)
2. Focus On Your Strengths (**M**y **E**ducation)

3. Speak for Your Life (**M**yself **E**xpressed)
4. Choose Your Guide(s) (**M**astering **E**xcellence)
5. Ritualize Your Reflection (You Are **M**ore than **E**nough)

These principles are active in your own life, whether you are conscious of them or not. By identifying, understanding, and practicing with deliberation, you will harness Me Power in ways where you transform yourself and change the world around you.

WHY WE NEED A NEW DEFINITION OF “EMPOWER”

Empowerment is a central aspect of how we relate to each other, but it is rarely defined or properly understood. By shifting our thinking from empower to Me Power, we become the active agents that create the change we need and want in the world. Inherent in traditional definitions of the word *empower* is the idea someone else will “empower” us. But empowerment is not something we receive like a gift. It is something we do; it is a process in which we engage in. Me Power challenges the notion that we need to be empowered by others. Me Power must be constructed from within.

Let’s stop talking about empowerment as something that can be given from the outside and instead as something all of us can do for ourselves, by taking ownership of our own lives and learning how to make things better for those around us. Empowerment refers to the power that comes from within, once we choose to control our own lives by believing we can achieve our deepest hopes and

dreams. Therefore, I argue Me Power is what empowerment and lifelong learning are all about.

If you're like me, you've probably had so many moments in your life where you thought about doing something and then stopped because of a barrier. Maybe it's a matter of not having enough time to do what you want, or maybe it's more complicated—you don't know how to do it or maybe a human is blocking you. Barriers can hold us back from reaching our goals, but they can also motivate us to overcome challenges and enrich the experience of what it feels like to accomplish a goal. My experience with Professor Obich illustrates this perfectly.

The best personal and professional development processes help us learn to become better versions of ourselves and create optimal environments for us to fully come alive. We must define and manifest Me Power if we want to live empowered lives. If you are ready to take this journey or want to encourage someone else in their own quest, I invite you to join me.

HOW THIS BOOK WILL BENEFIT YOU

Me Power is about two questions: 1) What is true empowerment? 2) How do people manifest it? I offer a clear definition of Me Power as the answer and an approach to help people excavate aspects of themselves, foundational to their lifelong learning journeys, within or beyond school.

Me Power provides tools everyone can use. You will love *Me Power* if you are an educator focused on how to get students to find purpose, own their learning, and reach their full potential. Whether you are an educator, parent, student, or anyone grappling with the question, “Who do I want to be?” *Me Power* will help you discover your self-identity is not fixed or unchanging, but ever expanding as you move through life.

This book outlines a framework for unpacking this question at different life stages, with *Me Power* at the center of how you or the learners in your life answer it. I address “you” as someone who wants to get in touch with *Me Power*, but I also encourage you to consider how the lessons of this book apply to important learners in your life, including colleagues, students, or children.

The more you interact with *Me Power*, the more powerful it will become in your life. You can always come back to this book as a resource, consulting it when you encounter particular areas that require you to reactivate your *Me Power*. I encourage you to underline passages of this book that resonate with you, write down your thoughts in the margins, and use it as your own guide for living with *Me Power* at the center of everything you do.

Me Power is divided into two parts, corresponding to the two questions that open this section. The chapters build on one another, clarifying misconceptions about empowerment, illustrating how *Me Power* is manifested through the five principles (e.g., Embrace Your Barriers,

Focus On Your Strengths, Speak for Your Life, Choose Your Guide(s), Ritualize Your Reflection), and prompting further reflection on how you can put them into practice in your own life. Each chapter revolves around a central argument: The idea that others must empower us is a fallacy because we have the power to make changes in our lives. While designed to follow a logical sequence, you can read the five Me Power principles listed in Part II in any order. Each chapter in Part II ends with a section called “From Principle to Practice,” where you will find exercises and reflective questions to help you apply what you’ve learned.

No one else is you. That is your power.

PART I

**ME POWER
FOUNDATIONS**

(OUR) ME POWER ACTIVATION

- Empowerment is not what we think it is. Because the use of the word *empower* is ubiquitous, we do not question its meaning.
- How do you define empowerment?
- Misunderstanding the true meaning of *empower* has profound effects on how we view empowerment in our lives and how we think about ourselves as individuals and contributors to society. We naturally assume there is an external owner of power who can give it to us if they wanted to—the person who's in charge of hiring decisions at work, for example, or the manager setting our work schedule, or the person who runs our school system.
- In thirty seconds, list all the words you can think of associated with empowerment's base word: *power*. How many of the words on your list have to do with control and domination?

CHAPTER 2

(OUR) ME POWER DEFINED

Unless we understand our lives as a kind of autobiography in the making, we're likely to take refuge in other people's stories, in ready-made ideologies, and in unexamined systems of belief.

— SCOTT LONDON

The danger of individuals taking action without critical thought has never been more exemplified than by the horrific crimes committed by Hitler and the Nazis during World War II. The Nuremberg trials, a series of thirteen trials held between 1945 and 1949, charged the top surviving German leaders with crimes against peace, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and conspiracy to commit any of these. (Bamford, 2020)

What was the defense?

Obedience.

At the Nuremberg trials, the first international war crimes tribunal in history, Rudolf Höss, the longest-serving commandant at Auschwitz concentration camp, explained, “We were all so trained to obey orders without even thinking that the thought of disobeying an order would simply never have occurred.”

The Nuremberg judges rejected this defense. They asserted a person has a choice whether to follow an order, even if that person does not know the order itself is illegal. The “following orders” defense as justification for murder on a heretofore unimagined scale exposed the depth of legal and moral corruption that permeated the Nazi regime. The court’s findings led to the Genocide Convention, which defined genocide as a crime that can take place both in times of war as well as in times of peace. The United Nations accepted the Genocide Convention as its first human rights treaty and most countries in the world agreed to follow it.

*Lack of self-knowledge + inhumane,
unprincipled action = crime against humanity*

Stanley Milgram, in his now-famous obedience experiments at Yale University in the 1960s, set out to investigate key questions that emerged from the Nuremberg trials: Were these Nazis unique in their obedience because of a single charismatic leader? How easily can ordinary people be influenced by a recognized authority to commit acts they might hesitate or object to carrying out based on their moral or legal understanding?

Participants were falsely told the study investigated the effects of punishment on memory and learning. Milgram organized his research study around three roles: The first role was the experimenter, who stood and provided instructions. The experimenter held the ultimate authority position, providing the structure and setting the norms of how the research participants were to behave. The second role was the actor, aware of the purpose of the study and never actually shocked, but

designated as the “learner,” sitting in an electric chair. The third role was the “teacher,” a voluntary research participant, sitting in front of an electric shock generator with thirty switches ranging from 15 volts (slight shock) to 450 volts (danger to severe shock). The teachers were told to administer an electric shock every time the learner made a mistake, turning the dial to increase the voltage each time.

Out of forty, how many “teachers” do you think dialed up the shocks to the highest level, prepared to inflict fatal voltages on their students?

Almost two-thirds of the “teachers,” or sixty-five percent, pressed every single one of the thirty switches on the electric shock generator.

Despite its many ethical and methodological problems, Milgram’s experiment indicates most people obeying commands feel less responsible for their actions because they do not take ownership over things that are within their control. Over the past sixty years, others have

replicated the experiment many times in several countries, all with roughly the same results. Three factors contributing to this kind of “thinking” are:

1. There’s an authority outside of us that exerts power, to whom we are subordinate.
2. We are powerless to change external forces and surrendering is best for our wellbeing.
3. Your “power” can only be obtained at the expense of someone else’s power. Therefore, when we possess it, we must protect it no matter the cost.

Milgram warns, “The most fundamental lesson of our study is that ordinary people simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terribly destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources to resist authority.”

Me Power aims to equip readers with the resources they need to stop yielding their power to a real or perceived more powerful other.

THE TRUE MEANING OF EMPOWERMENT

Now that we’ve seen the dark side of traditional conceptions of empowerment, it’s time for us to redefine the word.

As I've mentioned before, to get to the true meaning of empowerment, I focused on the inverse of its prefix *-em*: *me*. Grammatically, *me* is a pronoun and functions as the objective case of *I*. In other words, the main difference between the two pronouns is that *I* is a subject pronoun and *me* is an object pronoun.

As you will see, *me* is not only a first-singular object pronoun; it can also serve as an acronym. I emphasize *me* first to remind us of the importance of our uniqueness and the need for self-knowledge and principled action, as we navigate relationships with others. You might remember from middle school a subject pronoun can replace the noun—person, place, or thing—performing the action—verb—in any sentence. For example, *I* electrically shocked my students. An object pronoun, on the other hand, may replace a sentence's direct object, indirect object, or the object of the preposition. The object pronoun receives the action of the verb or shows the result of the action. It's not "me ran" but "my students ran to me." The object pronoun, *me*, receives the action of the running students.

While drier than unbuttered cornbread, these linguistic details are important because my combination of "Me Power" is grammatically incorrect. I'm calling out these technicalities because I took what on the surface looks like a prefix, *-em*, flipped it into a personal pronoun, *me*, and created "(Our) Me Power": a concept that is a noun, not an overused verb implicating people as passive recipients.

Me represents the first person singular so the individual starts with himself or herself. Yet, Me Power doesn't stop at the individual and is not a silo based on some narcissistic conceptualization of inner power.

Unlike empowerment's denotative meaning, I argue *power* in Me Power refers to power within based on one's knowledge of self, manifested as a result of you becoming more of YOU, taking principled action, and working with others to reach your maximum potential. Me Power is the opposite of unthinking obedience.

*Knowledge of Self + Principled Action =
Me Power*

THE ME POWER FRAMEWORK

To explicate Me Power as a concept, I explored several combinations of ideas. After two years of unpacking the concepts through direct and secondary research and interviews, I noticed a pattern of five components: Motivated Energy, My Education, Myself Expressed, Mastering Excellence, and More than Enough. Each "ME" represents one of five interrelated parts of ourselves.

You can develop each of these components through an associated guiding principle and practice: 1) Embrace Your Barriers, 2) Focus On Your Strengths, 3) Speak for Your Life, 4) Choose Your Guides(s), and 5) Ritualize Your Reflection(s). Together, these Me Power principles and

practices provide a framework for people to understand the true meaning of empowerment; in turn, this understanding helps design a self-development practice to benefit individuals, first, and then the social world in which we all live and operate. How you apply the five principles facilitates your expression of Me Power. The Me Power Framework, shown in Figure 1, helps provide a structure to the messy process of learning that is required as we become more empowered.

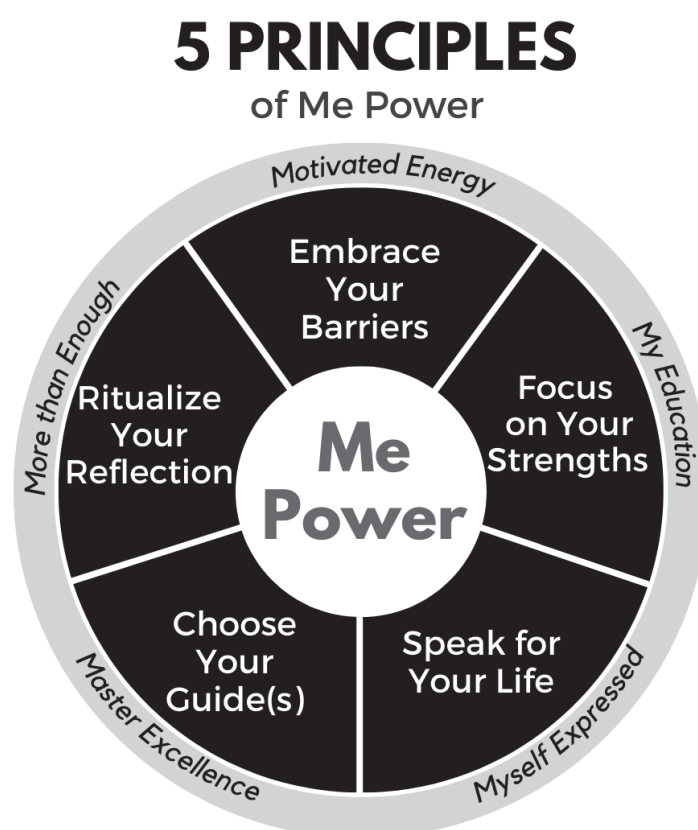


Figure 1: The Me Power Framework

While covered in Part 2 in more depth, the five principles of Me Power focus on aspects of our humanity that emphasize actions we take to become empowered. The associated principle explains the process/outcome and the acronym describes the how-to and vice versa. For example:

1. Embracing Your Barriers is key to how you use Motivated Energy to excel.
2. Focusing On Your Strengths is the foundation of My Education, within or beyond school.
3. Speaking for Your life is how you express yourself (Myself Expressed) and the multiple versions of self you create throughout your lifespan.
4. Choosing Your Guide(s) is essential as you Master Excellence.
5. Ritualizing Your Reflection helps you remember you have and will always be More than Enough as long as you are your own standard.

The manifestation of (Our) Me Power, by definition, is a social process since it occurs in relationships with others. The individual and his or her community are fundamentally connected. Me Power is a journey, one that develops as we work through it together. Yet for each aspect of Me Power, individuals define what ME means and looks like for them.

(OUR) ME POWER = WE-NESS

(Our) Me Power is a play on words meant to get us thinking about the power we each have within ourselves and how we choose to use that power to improve our lives and uplift one another.

(Our) Me Power is the very thing that distinguishes us from primates. Michael Tomasello (2018) builds on Jane Goodall's research, whose groundbreaking work in 1960 disproved the notion that tools were uniquely human since chimpanzees make and use them, too. Tomasello's research reflects more than three decades of work aiming to answer, "How do humans differ from other great apes in cognition and sociality?" On the *Social Science Bites* podcast, he says:

"We-ness" that can mark human behavior is replaced by the "me-ness" of other primates. Humans put their heads together, as a general phrase, to accomplish things that neither one can do on his or her own. So if you look at all the things you think are most amazing about humans—we're building skyscrapers, we have social institutions like governments, we have linguistic symbols, we have math symbols, we have all these things—not one of them is the product of a single mind. These are things that were invented collaboratively at the moment or else over time as individuals build on one another's accomplishments.

Shared intentionality, as shown through social cognition, social interaction, and language, is what makes us human and explains our sense of "we-ness" over "me-ness." We-ness, or shared intentionality, refers to how people see themselves as belonging to a larger whole whose members work together for mutual benefit. Social cognition is the ability to learn from, cooperate, and communicate with others. While unique across cultures, the fact that all humans create social norms and for the most part, live by them, is built into our DNA.

For example, Tomasello and a team of researchers tested how a pair of three year olds split items up. In the experiment, the researchers had the children work together but gave one more items than the other. The “lucky” child then gave some extra to his friend, which researchers found happened nearly 80 percent of the time. For a control condition, researchers had the children work alone, without any prompting, and gave more items to one child than the other. The “lucky” child still gave half of their share to the other child nearly 40 percent of the time. These results, which have been replicated many times, show children have very strong ideas about fairness, even when adults aren’t around to give instructions.

Tomasello’s research demonstrates humans cooperate in ways that are unique to our species. Science proves that chimps are not like humans, despite sharing 98.8 percent of their DNA. When Tomasello and his team conducted the same experiment with chimpanzees, they got completely different results. If a chimpanzee received one treat by himself, he was just as likely to keep it all to himself whether he received it through teamwork or not. Collaboration and fairness did not matter to chimps.

The heart of (Our) Me Power has to do with interdependence more than independence. My assertion is supported by what Tomasello and researchers call the Interdependence Hypothesis, which posits that “at some point, humans created lifeways in which collaborating with others was necessary for survival and procreation.” Interdependent collaboration is essential to understanding

the way empowerment, as defined as Me Power, operates. Based on evidence from our evolution as a species, if people work together, they can do more than they could do alone.

THE WE INSIDE OF ME

On December 10, 1996, a blood vessel erupted on the left side of Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor's thirty-seven-year-old brain. It all started with a throbbing headache that would not go away. When she started to lose her balance and could not stand up straight, she explained her epiphany in "My Stroke of Insight," her TED Talk with over twenty-eight million times. It's also the second most viewed TED Talk of all time. Dr. Taylor recounts realizing, "Oh my gosh! I'm having a stroke! I'm having a stroke!' The next thing my brain says to me is, 'Wow! This is so cool! How many brain scientists have the opportunity to study their own brain from the inside out?'"

As a trained neuroanatomist and an expert in the scientific study of the nervous system, Dr. Taylor worked at Harvard University as a brain scientist. A colleague alerted first responders and rushed her to the hospital after hearing her speak gibberish on the phone due to a stroke. Miraculously, Dr. Taylor survived after experiencing a stroke for several hours. Two weeks later, the doctors "removed a blood clot the size of a golf ball that was pushing on [her] language centers." Ultimately, it took her eight years to recover, with the help of her mother, friends, and chosen family.

Dr. Taylor's TED Talk highlighted the peace she found once she chose to thrive in the right hemisphere of her brain, which controls attention, memory, processing of visual shapes and patterns, emotions, and problem solving. Even though both the left and right hemispheres communicate with each other, because they process information differently, their experience is completely different. Dr. Taylor described a disconnectedness that is characteristic of the left hemisphere: "As soon as my left hemisphere says to me 'I am,' I become separate. I become a single solid individual, separate from the energy flow around me and separate from you. And this was the portion of my brain that I lost on the morning of the stroke."

Dr. Taylor described the interconnectedness she experienced when she lost the ability to speak, read, walk, write, or remember because of the golf-ball-sized blood clot in her brain. When people think of a stroke, they usually think of all the things you might forget. But sometimes when you have a stroke, it can make you connect to things in unexpected ways. Now Dr. Taylor has more connections than ever before. She exemplifies (Our) Me Power because of her poetic description of the interconnectedness, where other people are part of her and she is part of them—what Dr. Taylor describes as "the 'we' inside of me." She questions:

So who are we? We are the life-force power of the universe, with manual dexterity and two cognitive minds. And we have the power to choose, moment by moment, who and how we want to be in the world. Right here, right now, I can step into the consciousness of my right

hemisphere, where we are. I am the life-force power of the universe. I am the life-force power of the fifty trillion beautiful molecular geniuses that make up my form, at one with all that is. Or, I can choose to step into the consciousness of my left hemisphere, where I become a single individual, a solid. Separate from the flow, separate from you. I am Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor: intellectual, neuroanatomist. These are the “we” inside of me. Which would you choose? Which do you choose?

In no way is Me Power meant to be interpreted as an obsessive interest in one’s own power *over* other people. That would be antithetical to the conceptualization of (Our) Me Power described above. As an acronym and first-person singular object pronoun, *me* serves as a reminder to ground ourselves in our uniqueness as we navigate relationships with others in the social world. Me Power is self-knowledge and principled action, coupled with owning one’s inner power, positively expressed in communion with others. Me Power comes from knowing yourself and being true to yourself when in a group. Self-awareness, self-love, and accountability are hallmarks of Me Power. Me Power is flexed by activity.

THE ME-NESS OF IT ALL

Me. Me. Me.

Some people may argue Me Power promotes self-absorption and self-obsessiveness. Based on the use of the first-person singular object pronoun *me* alone, Me Power could be perceived as a homage to the Me Decade, Me Generation, and

the Me Me Me Generation that followed. A *Time* magazine article explains, “In the US, millennials are the children of baby boomers, who are also known as the Me Generation, who then produced the Me Me Me Generation.”

In the 1970s, the young Baby Boomers, most of whom were young adults, wanted to find out who they were. According to psychologist Jean Twenge, a leading researcher examining generational differences, Baby Boomers are the most well defined of the twentieth-century generations, named after the post-World War II birthrate spike that began in 1946. Many young Boomers in the 1970s examined who they were by listening to their bodies and trying different things previous generations never would, such as hallucinogens, like LSD, public workshops where people shared intimate details about their lives, getting naked in public, or streaking, and engaging in shameless sexual revolutions. Perhaps this is why in the August 1976 issue of *New York Magazine*, Tom Wolfe wrote a long piece defining the seventies as the “Me Decade,” which he characterizes as “changing one’s personality—remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s very *self* [...] and observing, studying, and doting on it. (Me!)”

If we go with Wolfe’s characterization, self-indulgence and having an excessive interest in oneself—in other words, narcissism—is the defining feature of any me-centric foci. Unfortunately, narcissism appears to be on the rise. According to Twenge’s and her colleague’s most popular study, a cross-temporal meta-analysis of eighty-five samples of US college students over a twenty-four-year period, found that between 1982 and 2006, narcissism

increased by 30 percent. They examined the responses of 16,475 college students nationwide who completed an evaluation called the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), a tool commonly used by psychologists to identify both clinical and borderline narcissism. At the end of the study, Twenge and her colleagues point to *Time* magazine's declaration of "you" as the Person of the Year in 2006 as indicative of the increase in narcissistic people. Of particular interest is their statement, "The rise in narcissism may have influenced the ways people use technology [because so much of our current technology] permits self-promotion far beyond that allowed by traditional media."

In an article in *The Guardian*, organizational psychologist and *New York Times*-best-selling author Dr. Tasha Eurich explains because we live in an "increasingly 'me' focused society," most people find it easier to "choose self-delusion over the cold hard truth."

In her book, *Insight: The Power of Self-Awareness in a Self-Deluded World*, Eurich expands on this concept by explaining we have a current "cult of self," which promotes a "widespread, low-grade narcissism." This is evidenced by our technological focus—what she calls "Selfie Syndrome"—and the growing "me" focus throughout society at large. She warns, "An intense self-focus not only obscures our vision of those around us; it distorts our ability to see ourselves for what we really are."

While an overt me-centric focus may raise concerns about narcissism, it is the focus on the self that ironically

diminishes self-knowledge. In contrast, Me Power is not *just* me focused. It is what I call me first in its focus. Me Power describes the self-empowering attitude you must have to succeed. If you've activated Me Power, you're willing to look in the mirror, see the good and bad, and accept it all as a part of who you are. You're willing to change what needs to be changed and accept yourself for who you are, flaws and all. Being true to yourself means accepting who you are at any given point in time, being proud of that person, and knowing you have the strength to change if that's what you choose.

To do so, I encourage folks to adopt the following perspective: I'm a human being. I exist in the world, and the world exists around me. Me Power is about what it feels like to live in the world and to experience the fact I'm alive. People experience a sense of Me Power because of their ability to transcend their individual circumstances and experience themselves as part of an interconnected whole, or what Dr. Taylor calls "the 'we' inside of 'me.'"

Self-absorption happens when a person is too wrapped up in their own lives to a fault, while a me-first philosophy is being aware of your unique circumstances and doing what's best for you in relation to others.

WHAT ME POWER ISN'T

Most of us have heard the preflight announcement, "In case of a cabin pressure emergency, put on your own mask first before assisting others."

On a flight to Boston from DC with my first son when he was five months old, I was surprised when the flight attendant tapped my shoulder and emphasized I needed to put on my mask first before I could even think about putting one on the baby. It seemed counterintuitive. Why would I not help my baby first?

I am sure I've heard that message hundreds of times. But this was the first time I sat on the plane and really thought about what it meant, partially because I spent nearly twenty-two hours in labor with my son, Davidson, and I couldn't fathom not rushing to put his mask on first in a plane crash.

"If a plane crashes," I said to myself aloud, "you need oxygen to live. To get more oxygen, you first put on your own mask. Once you have a mask on, you can help Davidson with his mask."

I looked down at my baby boy, with his perfect blonde curls and almond-shaped blue eyes. We locked eyes. He smiled and cooed, while I panicked knowing I would not abide by these airline safety guidelines. I knew conceptually our survival depended on me taking care of myself first, yet part of my brain would not accept that I had to wait to assist my baby.

Then I remembered a YouTube video I saw explaining the science of this very well-established air travel safety rule.

In the video, Destin Sandlin, an engineer who created the *SmarterEveryDay* Youtube channel with over ten

million followers, enters a special chamber with an astronaut to find out what happens if you don't put on your mask first. After three minutes and forty-five seconds, Sandlin starts to lose brain function and cannot identify basic shapes. Soon, he can't even speak or put his mask on and someone must step in and put it on for him to prevent him from dying.

As cabin pressure drops in a plane, oxygen levels also drop and hypoxia becomes a real concern. The effects of hypoxia, a deficiency of oxygen reaching the brain, become greater the longer you go without oxygen. Astronauts and aviators have to undergo hypoxia training so they know when their brain is about to stop working correctly and when they must take immediate action. Sandlin emphasized that at thirty-five thousand feet, you only have seconds of useful consciousness: "You can go from a normally rational person to someone so helpless, you can't even save yourself if your life depends on it."

Between the exhaustion of new motherhood and the thought of potentially having to sacrifice my infant son, a light bulb went off.

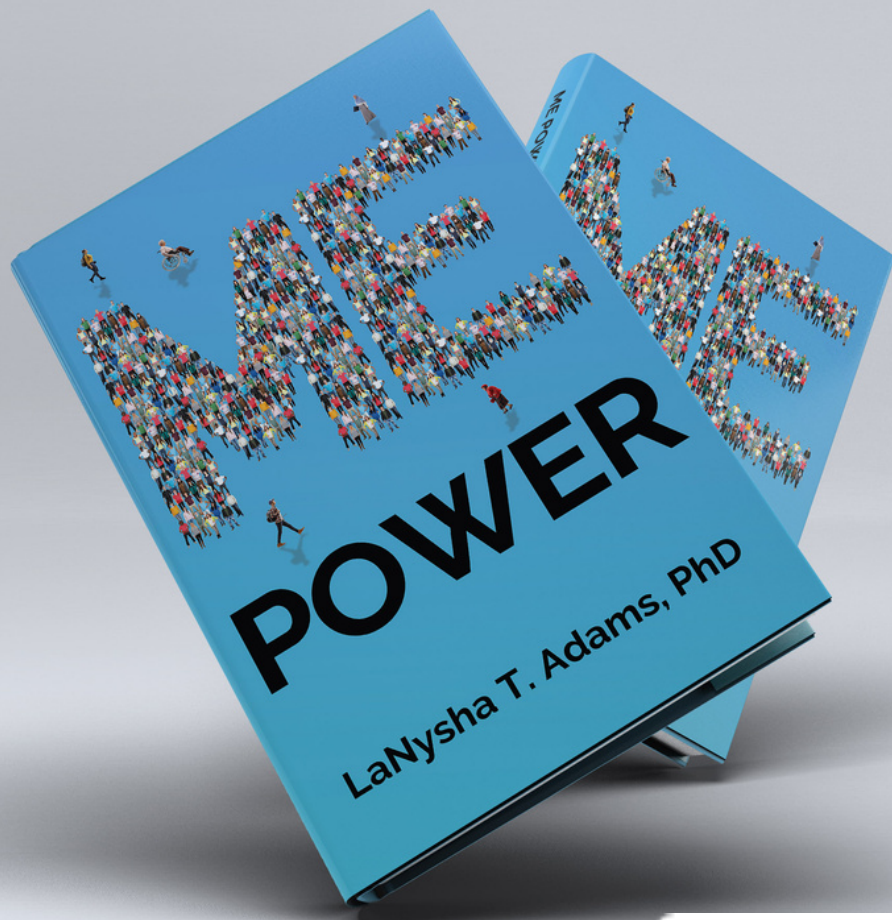
If I run out of oxygen, then I literally cannot help save Davidson.

Self-absorption can be defined as the philosophy of me, first and only, whereas a self-first perspective is always in relationship to others.

Me Power is about putting your mask on first, metaphorically. Yet, you cannot express Me Power without some sense of “we” or community.

(OUR) ME POWER ACTIVATION

- What does Me Power mean to you?
- Where do you feel you could put Me Power into action in your life today?



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