



Service Is Just What You Do

**Gary Hirshberg
New Hampshire**

As a young boy, Gary Hirshberg loved every minute he spent on top of Mount Washington. He went hiking and ski-racing, breathing in the cold, fresh air and feeling the warm sunlight on his face. He especially enjoyed the breathtaking view from the mountain top: on clear days he could even see the Atlantic Ocean far off in the distance.

When he was in college, and he returned to the summit of the mountain he knew so well, he noticed a big change. "You couldn't see the ocean anymore," he says. The change was for a well-known reason. "Air pollution and atmospheric changes from climate change."

As a child, the importance of giving back to others had been deeply ingrained in him by his mother. "She lived by that example," Gary says. "She worked in soup kitchens, volunteered for presidential candidates, helped at the local hospital, or at the Boys and Girls Clubs," Gary says. He pauses, remembering. "I can't remember a dinnertime conversation where my mother wasn't saying that it's up to us to give back."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was another big influence on Gary. The King family were friends of Gary's family, and when Coretta Scott King and her children visited the Hirshberg's vacation home, Gary spent a lot of time with them, just hanging out, talking over meals, listening to Coretta. Then, in 1968 Dr. King was assassinated. "I was just 14 at the time, so it really became cemented in me, that service wasn't an option. Service was just what you did."

When Gary was in college, he worked in an environmental education camp for high school students in Maine. He and his fellow camp guides were responsible for managing 26,000 acres of wildlife refuge, and teaching students about the importance of environmental preservation. But sadly, all around this amazing forest, they could see that the timber industry was cutting down trees.

"While we were putting our hearts and souls into wildlife and conservation, all around us we could see these clear cuts, with herbicides and everything else," he says. "The refuge was surrounded by about a million acres of pulp and paper land. I got the message that "This is bad. We need to work on alternatives."

Coming up with ideas for viable, more sustainable alternatives was something Gary had to do often at the family dinner table. His grandfather was a successful banker with rather conservative views. "More often than not he would slay me with some economic argument; I really didn't have the answers then," Gary says. "But I learned that business is where all the polluting happens, and that while business wasn't the only problem, it was very definitely not part of the solution. So I was really seeking alternatives."

Gary understood that if there was going to be change, it needed to come from within the business community; and it needed to come in the form of viable alternatives. So when he was 23, he joined the think tank New Alchemy and immersed himself in the emerging renewable energy industry of wind power.

New Alchemy was a small start-up: it needed lots of investments to get off the ground. Fortunately, very quickly Gary discovered that he was a gifted fundraiser. Within two years, at the age of 25, he became the executive director of the company.

Gary put his fundraising skills to good use for small organic farming school, the Rural Education Center in Wilton, New Hampshire. It wasn't easy. In the 1980s public funding for environmental projects had dried up under a new administration, and competition for the little funding that was available was fierce.

Gary enjoyed the fringe benefits from the school's farm. "My partner was producing this incredibly delicious, wonderful yogurt, which we would sit around eating," Gary remembers. "And then one day somebody—we're still not sure who it was—said, why don't we start selling this yogurt?"

That was the beginning of Stonyfield Farm, which would become the world's leading producer of organic yogurt under Gary's leadership.

Turning Stonyfield from the little farming school it was initially into the national organic yogurt company it is today, took a lot of hard work and dedication. They started out by selling their yogurt at only five stores.

"Night after night, even after milking and after making yogurt, one of us—whoever wasn't milking—would go and do a demo at the store," Gary remembers. "We would stand there, and we'd talk to consumers, and we'd simply not let them say no."

Soon, they were able to sell their yogurt in 10 nearby stores, then in 35. Eventually, they were the third largest brand in all of their stores. From the very beginning, Gary and his business partner, Samuel, used the packaging of their products to educate customers. "It was very simply our way of being able to tell our story," Gary says. "The early packages were like mini lessons in where people's food comes from."

As their brand grew into a real company, Gary and his colleagues at Stonyfield Farm started using their profits to support all kinds of special projects. Early on they decided that 10 percent of their profits would be spent on initiatives to fight against climate change. Since then, the company has spearheaded many measures to minimize its carbon footprint and to support environmental efforts. Some of Stonyfield's newest initiatives include the OpenTEAM project, the StonyFIELDS #playfree initiative, and a new goal of reducing carbon emissions by 30 percent by 2030.

As CEO of Stonyfield, it was important to Gary to incorporate the values that had been instilled in him during his childhood - and to reconcile his entrepreneurial spirit with service to his community. "I realized that we needed a real strategy, an economic strategy," he says. "Creating an actual economic enterprise whose mission is to save family farmers, and try to slow down the urbanization of rural land, providing healthy food, all of that: it was very appealing."

Gary used every imaginative way he could think of to educate the public about sustainable farming.

In 1989, the company introduced the Have-a-Cow Educational program, through which customers were invited to "adopt" one of the Stonyfield cows. Then they would receive regular updates about the cows they had adopted, along with information about the issues that small-scale farmers were facing.

But Gary and his team realized that it wasn't only the public that needed to be educated—farmers, too, needed information and training on how to run their farms sustainably. Stonyfield also noticed that the population of organic dairy farmers in this region was aging. More and more farmers were getting close to the age of retirement with no plans for who would take over the farm when they retired. So in 2015 Stonyfield partnered with Wolfe's Neck Center for Agriculture and the Environment to establish a first-of-its-kind residential organic dairy training program where younger generation of farmers could learn about regenerative farming practices in a two-year apprenticeship program. Additionally, over time, starting in 2014, Stonyfield built up a network of direct supply organic dairy farmers, and they were able to start supplementing their milk supply with milk from other local organic farmers. So, first they supplied local farmers with the skills and technical assistance they needed to make their businesses grow sustainably: then they bought their milk. It was a win-win situation.

With his hard work and dedication, Gary has managed to grow Stonyfield Farms into a national enterprise that is also giving back to the local community—just like he had learned to do from his mother and his childhood friends.

"I always say to folks that determination is the most important and underappreciated characteristic needed to be an entrepreneur," he says. "Nothing takes the place of hard work and passion."

*It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated.
We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,
tied into a single garment of destiny.
Whatever affects one destiny, affects all indirectly.*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Call to Action: Find the nearest local farmer's market to your home--it's fresh food, locally produced, and 100% good for the environment. Or find a CSA (community supported agriculture) to support: they'll deliver fresh organic food right to your home.

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