

Global Spa and Wellness Summit speech at Aspen Institute— June 2012

By Deborah Szekely

This conference has been a delight. I've enjoyed meeting old friends and making new friends. I've enjoyed listening to all of you who spoke and sat on panels. It was fun to watch you innovate while you were discussing innovation!

The highpoint for me was listening to Jose Maria Figueres who said all the things I believe in as he gave us an early warning of the Tsunami that will engulf us all if we do not change our ways. I was also delighted when I checked and learned that Dr. Carmona, who is so brilliant, is a Democrat; we need his voice in the Senate and I will happily support him.

“Innovation.” When I first heard that this was our conference theme, and was asked to be the wrap up speaker, I waited to see what happened in my thought process. This is usual for me. I like to go to bed with my mind like a garden prepared for planting. Innovation itself is a gardening process, from soil preparation and amendments to seeds, water, waiting for the first green shoots—and eventually harvest ... you hope. Sometimes the birds get to the seeds first and nothing happens. But as Thoreau famously said, “Hope is a seed!”

As usual, I was rewarded at 5 a.m. I awoke and started writing off the top of my head. I couldn't write fast enough! I wanted to talk with you right then about the qualities that propel people—especially me—to be a perpetual, serial innovator.

If I had the time, I'd explain that roughly every decade since I was in my sixties I have started a new career, and I'm proud to say that each of them was successful: Never exactly as I planned, but successful. Sometimes I succeeded only in that people began thinking in alternate ways, and always thinking of the *consequences* of their proposed activities.

In each case, my new project began with the thought “Is there not a better way?” I've always claimed that curiosity should be my middle name. I'm perpetually wondering, “Why this way? Why not another way?”

That's step one: Walk the new path that either leads to the summit faster, or gets you there via expending less energy, or (perhaps most important), blaze a trail that makes it possible for EVERYONE to reach some new summit, some new level of productivity, happiness, safety, or simple satisfaction.

Step two is when the seed sprouts. At this point intuition must guide you, because the impulse, the idea, is too strong to be fully rational. Trust your intuition. I always say that I “Trust my angels,” but that’s really just a romantic way of saying I trust my intuition.

Step three is that first dark moment when the possibility of *im*possibility sneaks in. The scent of failure. Yet we innovators don’t give in—we let our tantalizing intuition draw us onward.

During this early part of the journey most innovators are introverts. I know that I am a persistent, stubborn introvert. In other words, you need to have time to think. I don’t watch TV, and I don’t go out much. I read a lot to learn a lot. I’m not an engineer, so I don’t have a garage and workbench, but I retreat (*escape* might be a better word) like a tinkerer into my garage of ideas. There I keep jar upon jar of ideas and influences, like the nuts, bolts and screws you can’t bear to throw away.

My friend Aldous Huxley, during his lifetime a frequent Ranch guest, used to say, “Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him.” You can gather experience all your life, but you aren’t experienced until you do something with it. Not everyone feels compelled to take an experience and do something with it, but innovators do!

Throughout my lifetime I’ve felt blessed and perpetually in awe of my good fortune. I always say that what I have done with my life has been what I was meant to do. But when I am asked what I would do if I was 18 again, I’m stumped. I don’t think anyone could ever repeat my life, even if you believe in reincarnation...

I was born in Brooklyn in 1922. My vegan mother moved our family to Tahiti when my brother and I were very young. There my parents met Edmond Szekely, a healer and philosopher who created a school of mysticism based on the wisdom of the ancients...he wrote about things few of his contemporaries thought about or cared about—including how to have a healthy body in balance with the mind and spirit.

I married him when I was 17; six months later we stood in Mexico under the shade of two giant oak trees, intertwined to form an arch, talking about our health-camp-to-be. How did this come about? It’s a very long story, but here’s the short version:

My husband and I are Jewish. He was Hungarian with a Romanian passport. He and all his fellow university graduates who were abroad at the time were ordered by Romania to return to Europe, report to the army, and fight on the side of Hitler. We were living in Hollywood and he was married to me, an American-born citizen ... so

we felt safe. We tossed each letter, until one day a letter from the U.S. government arrived that we could not ignore! It advised us that if my husband was in the United States on June 1, 1940, he would be arrested as a felon and returned to his country of origin.

Within days we had packed and drove south to Baja California, Mexico. Our only asset, other than a 1928 Cadillac overflowing with our personal belongings, was the commitment of some two dozen of his students to arrive in three weeks to attend his annual summer school. He held these camp-like summer gatherings each year in a different country.

This time the announcement we mailed said “Sorry – change of location ... now Tecate, Mexico...new fee \$17.50 per week ... and, by the way, bring your own tent.”

My first experience with innovation back then came, quite frankly, out of pure necessity. It was up to me to make it happen, to welcome our first guests, figure out how to feed them, and keep them entertained and active in-between my husband’s lectures.

From these beginnings emerged the first fitness spa. Our good fortune was location. One hour

from San Diego. The gods had smiled on us. The piece of land we rented was located on the bank of a beautiful river, had the best climate on earth, and a great mountain for hiking. Conditions, however, were primitive. No running water (but we had a well). No electricity—in fact we did not have power for the first ten years. Our first construction was an outhouse.

Within two weeks we had started our vegetable garden and purchased two goats for milk. We operated much like a commune, except we presented every activity to our guests as a learning experience, with me as the sole teacher. I may have only been 18, but I was the right person – right time – right place. My five years in Tahiti had prepared me well. I knew all about primitive conditions, including cooking over an open fire. Had I been a young woman straight out of Brooklyn, we would have failed.

Strangely enough if you examine each of your lives, you will discover how well prepared you are to be innovators. I was. And I think most of you are, too, because you have excellent powers of observation. It’s the hallmark of our service business: observation leads to innovation.

In my case, my first acute observations came when my parents dumped me in a school in Tahiti where the mother superior was the only one who spoke a bit of English. I had to learn French and how to fit in... fast. It was a weird world for an 8-year-old...an Alice-down-the-rabbit-hole experience ... and the only way I could figure out how to fit in was to be an excellent observer.

My brother and I were the only Anglo kids on the island, and the Tahitian children watched us closely. It occurs to me that entrepreneurs today are in the same situation. They're like aliens. People wonder what they're going to do next. Look...Steve Jobs kept us guessing for 30 years!

Again, unlike a computer geek, or an engineer or scientist, I innovate through imagination. I'm very good at walking in other people's shoes. I imagine what they want...before they want it themselves.

OK, step four. You gnaw the bone. You have the idea and keep it nearby. Sometimes your plan doesn't happen because it has been subtly, inexorably replaced by another similar but better idea. This usually happens when you begin to share your idea.

When I share ideas, I must confront others who automatically think bottom line, "How is this going to make money?" I have NEVER been driven by the thought, "Wow, this is going to be a money-maker."

Example: About five years ago, while teaching our guests the importance of quality food – fresh, local, seasonal – I found most of our guests either had seldom cooked or felt they just did not have the time. Their idea of dinner was to dine out in a restaurant, or buy "take out" from the local market. I decided that in order to transform our guests' way of life we must teach them how easy and pleasing, relaxing and satisfying it was to prepare and serve a healthy dinner.

I knew that building a million-dollar culinary center at the edge of our six-acre organic farm would not be profitable, but I hoped that in time it might be self-supporting. Today it is, and it has been a huge hit with the guests. They go home inspired to start cooking again.

Many times in my life I have watched people who venture out with the idea of making money fail, and I have watched the dreamers, the idealists, the people who follow their north star ... succeed. Let me reassure you—even though not many of you need reassurance—that the global spa movement is not simply a business. It is a cause, and for many a calling. Without our health we—and our guests—will never have the energy to pursue innovation...the energy to change the world. I take great satisfaction

in knowing that our guests leave renewed and fully empowered in mind, body and spirit. They are prepared to redirect their lives to fit their new knowledge.

Step Five is our willingness to acknowledge how both timing and good luck play big roles in any success. When they happen – and they do – they are cumulative. They are confidence builders. Going out on those limbs becomes less perilous. When your stars don't align, you go back to the garage, put the leftover parts of your failed idea into storage, and start work on the next innovation.

The first known use of the word innovate was in 1548 – *Novus*, the Latin for “New” was its source. Over four centuries later we still wake at 5 AM and wonder, “I have an idea. A new way”. A *novus* idea. A better way.

We here today have been told that the path we are on is not sustainable, we are plundering our planet, and in the pursuit of money we are making people ever fatter and sicker. My mind is overflowing with “what if’s”...

What if we adapt as our motto Arab Spring and show the world our spa power? We can create a *wellness* spring with Mother Nature as our mentor and guide. In the name of humanity, we can reduce the pain and suffering of people caught in the web of ignorance and marketing slogans spun to promote “big Ag” and “big Pharm.” We can challenge our government to quit subsidizing much of what makes us sick and penalizing all that keeps us healthy.

Change will come ... the day when speak in the past tense of factory farms that subject animals—sentient beings!— to a life of unspeakable horror. Animals’ suffering, and the unnatural food and pharmaceuticals given to keep them alive, taint their flesh and contribute greatly to the diseases that plague our population.

Change will come ... when 47 percent of fuel consumed in this country does not go to fertilizer, machinery, trips to the landfill, transporting eggs, flying in strawberries from New Zealand and grapes from Chile.

Spa power can be harnessed to advocate eating only that which is grown locally and in season. Backyard and community gardens, farmer’s markets, restaurants that feature farm-to-table—all of these trends will thrive and in time each city will be green and sustainable, boasting its own eco system that feeds its own people. Utopian visions? Why not! These dreams are within reach once we unite and become a powerful force for change.

Innovation does not stop at 90. I have dedicated my tenth decade to bringing together—via the Internet — tens of thousands of wellness activists and organizations who will share best practices and work together to create small wellness neighborhoods.

I seek a million friends who will each invest \$10 a year to support a lobbying organization devoted to walking the halls of congress and protecting the health of our people and planet from the greediness of the marketplace.

When you get home, turn on your computer and click on *wellnessspring.org*. Although the website is still a work in process, and will soon shift to the name *wellnesswarrior.org*, it will give you a glimpse into my dreams of change.

Imagination and innovation surround us. Nowhere are they more evident than at this gathering, which is the brain child of one innovator who I wish to honor now. Susie Ellis – please come on stage so that we may thank you for creating the Global Spa and Wellness Summit ...

I applaud everyone here; I wish you a safe journey, and hope that when we gather together next year we will be celebrating your innovations. Thank you.