

A Conversation with Elaine Turner, Founder of Elaine Turner®, Speaker, Author, and Personal Growth Leader

Q. Let's start with your background and journey here. You're best known to many people as a fashion designer and founder of your own eponymous brand. How did that career start for you—and where did it take you?

A. I went to the University of Texas in Austin and graduated with a degree in advertising and marketing. I didn't have a fashion degree. This was in the early 90s. I had a real maverick, entrepreneurial father, who said, "You need to follow your dreams. Now's the time. Don't get too caught up in what your degree's in. Just go get experience."

So, I got a job in Dallas for a small fashion manufacturing firm—a family-owned firm. And that's what sealed it for me. That's when I knew this is what I want to do. Because they were small—about \$5 million in revenue—it was a place where I could learn and do everything. I started climbing up the ladder there and ended up being head designer. I worked there for about five years.

Then, I went to New York. I met my husband Jim in New York, while I worked for big, private label companies. I did programs for Ann Taylor and other mass-market retailers, and that's really where I gained the experience that would inform what kind of products I was going to make and how I'd do it. I traveled the world with the CEO of Ann Taylor and the design team, as well as Talbots and Marshall Fields, the latter of which is no longer around.

I knew I wanted to create products that were highly accessible for a lot of women—a democratic approach. While working there, I came to understand the "Every Woman." She's into fashion but has a mind of her own as well. She is into value. She wants to know she's getting quality.

Q. That's such a nice balance between boutique and large-scale experience.

A. It was really interesting. My career started with that small, intimate company, where everything was done in Dallas. The entire family worked there together, and it was a real bootstrap team. The New York experience was more corporate, more *America*—all about the consumer and who she is. So I went from intimate to expansive. I think both of those experiences really shaped the Elaine Turner brand that I created. I combined those things—kept the intimacy, elegance, and quality, and blended that with a deep understanding of what women want on a more macro scale.

Q. And then how did your own brand actually come about?

A. So, I married Jim, and then in 2000, I started my company. I began with handbags—a small collection I made in Brooklyn, in the same factory where Kate Spade made a lot of her bags at the time. I started selling my bags to boutiques around Houston on consignment. It was completely entrepreneurial: I didn't have office space. I was pregnant at the time, and I'd drive around Houston, and talk to local shops about them carrying my bags.

My first account was Tootsie's, one of the oldest high-end luxury retailers for women in Houston. The owner of Tootsie's really got behind me and mentored me. And we began to grow. Eventually, I got my bags in Neiman Marcus as a resort vendor.

When I started, my aesthetic was very much resort-driven. What I mean by that is it was vacation-inspired, lots of grasscloth and tortoise. It appealed to that fantasy, that wanderlust. Tropical luxury was a niche I formed. When I was growing up, my family vacationed in the Caribbean every year for three weeks. My mom's home design is also really tropical. So that aesthetic has really deep, personal roots for me. We continued to grow our business, and we ended up in Nordstrom. Our wholesale business was big.

I opened my first Elaine Turner store underneath my office in Houston's Rice Village in 2006. That store ended up shifting my entire business model, from wholesaler focused on clients to independent designers focused on the consumer.

In our stores, I was able to intimately get to know consumers. I used my store as a laboratory, if you will, to really understand what women want. I'd watch them shop, strike up conversations, and just get to know them. I got hooked on that. I loved having that connection with the consumer, as well as that control over my products.

In 2007, Jim and I decided to get away from wholesale entirely and go strictly direct to consumer. We got capital behind us and started opening up stores all over Texas—we ended up with 12. We expanded Elaine Turner into shoes, jewelry, and clothing, all while keeping the handbags. We had the full luxury lifestyle experience in our stores.

Q. When did the business start to change for you?

A. In the late 2000s, we started seeing a shift in the market. Technology was taking over. People had begun to love the ease and convenience digital retailers offered. Our brick and mortar business started to get harder and harder. Women were increasingly shopping online, and we wanted to meet them where they were. We put a bunch of resources into online.

At the same time, my personal life started getting really complicated. I have a special needs daughter, and she began having serious medical problems, including seizures. My son had also just gone off to college.

So, we decided to stop Elaine Turner. We decided to close not just the stores, but the whole business. From every perspective—personal, lifestyle, emotional, physical, and mental—it just wasn't working for our family anymore. We realized that the business was a dream—until it

wasn't. All of the stress created an environment where we just weren't being our best selves. It was too hard. I have this beautiful marriage, and the last thing I want to do is put that at risk. I have a daughter who requires my undivided attention, compassion, and empathy on a daily basis.

So, we closed. As grief-stricken as I've been, I've also discovered a new freedom, outside of the identity that shaped me for so many years—that identity of being the business owner and fashion designer. I kind of feel like I've unhooked shackles. I am able to be who I want to be.

So many people don't realize that when you own and run a company, in some ways, you're stifled by that company's umbrella. You have employees, other businesses, capital, investors—there was part of me that was just squished underneath all the stress that was causing.

I couldn't really contribute all the gifts I think I have. I felt smothered by the pressure of what I was trying to do—and I was trying to do absolutely everything right, to be perfect, and to people-please.

Now, I've shed a lot of that. It's gone. And I realize the freedom that's given me. It doesn't mean I don't have grief about closing or sadness, but I have also come to realize that this is really the way it was supposed to be. I was supposed to experience all of that, but it wasn't supposed to be my forever.

Q. You worked so hard to define your brand. Part of the brand being so well known was due to it being clearly defined—and when you're leading an entity like that, you can't really stray from those self-made expectations. That is a tremendous amount of pressure.

A. Exactly. A lot of people don't really understand that when you create a brand, then by God, you better keep that brand consistent. What you're saying to the consumer must stay very clear. I felt—especially toward the end of my reign over there—like there is so much more to me than who I am in this role.

Luckily, my husband and I were able to get out from under it on our own terms. Now, I feel like we are entering a new period of being able to express and be everything I am, rather than being the symbol of my brand—a brand that I loved dearly but also felt limited by.

Q. Let's talk a little bit more about your realization that you wanted to do something different, specifically, in personal growth and development. How did you get here?

A. It was years in the making. When I was running Elaine Turner, I did a ton of public speaking. I was also constantly out, talking to women in my store about everything from body image to autism to mental health. I was always fighting for those earnest, emotional conversations around those topics—serving the whole human—even though I was confined to the retail concept. I wanted to turn our stores into a third space where women could come and be in community and connection with other women.

I knew I wanted to be a voice for women—a voice that says, this is all kind of B.S. We need to see through it and know that we are enough, despite what society tells us.

My husband has always said if I wasn't a fashion and business person, I'd be a psychologist. I actually was a psychology major at first at UT, but then I opted for something else because I wasn't sure psychology was the right fit for me. He's probably right. If I hadn't been a fashion designer and entrepreneur, I would be doing something with people—healing people, talking to people, educating people.

For me, moving into the personal growth space is very natural because I've always kind of been here. I have always been the one passing out every Brené Brown book and scheduling retreats to talk about much more than business.

The self-growth program I've just created flooded out of me over the last year and a half. This feels right to me, just like fashion did for a long time.

Q. I want to talk more about the program you've created in a minute. But first, when we talk about connecting with and helping women—empowering women—can you explain what that means to you? What does it look like? What does it require?

A. When I talk about empowering women, I am talking about guiding, inspiring, and educating women to understand and embrace their wholeness. Their worth. Their “enoughness.” It all starts there.

I'm not going to talk about every goal you can achieve or habit you can create. That's all great, but I am talking about the roots and seeds of wholeness.

If you know that you're enough as you are, without needing to point to any outside accomplishments or good deeds—if you start to truly believe that you are sourced from a place of abundance, not from a place of scarcity, then all of the empowerment you're reading about on Instagram will happen naturally, because you understand you originate and remain from a place of worth.

So, my interpretation and definition of empowerment is worthiness.

Q. Your book, “[Breaking the Glass Slipper: Debunking the Myths that Hold Women Back](#),” has such an important message—it's even built right into the title. Why do you think that these myths and demands that define women's expectations are so pervasive and hard to shake?

A. I think women are wired to please. I think it's biological. I also think we're wired to serve—that it is a primal thing. It is rare to meet a woman who isn't this way.

In our culture, women are not treated as equals to men. There is oppression that's been there forever, visible everywhere, in all of the systems and structures of our society. Women are trying to figure out how to achieve equality for ourselves without accepting the idea that we need to act like men to get there. Remember the wiring I mentioned earlier? Even as we fight to become

equal, we are still wired to please and serve. This duality—an inner tension—creates such anxiety, confusion, and pressure.

We're saying, and we're hearing, "You've got this! Your generation is the most educated generation of women yet, and you have all the opportunity in the world!" Meanwhile, society's infrastructure is not catering to the complexities of being a woman. Society says we *can* do it, but it hasn't caught up to actually helping us figure out *how* to do it.

Women who are in good positions of balance and self-worth are there because they're figured it out on their own. They've gone rogue and figured out how to work from home or how to ask for help. Meanwhile, the rest of us are still reading books that say, "Lean in!" and "Act like a man!" All of the contradictory messages out there reverberate through our ranks and show up in women as massive anxiety and depression. Most antidepressants are taken by women.

Society says we need to figure out how to be the perfect mom, to earn a sustainable income for our family, and to please our husbands—and oh, by the way, to look good and be gracious while doing it. And *don't get fat!* Holy crap!

I don't think we talk about this stuff enough—and when we do, most of it is glossy, superficial, feel-good talk that accomplishes nothing. We need courageous leaders who are willing to talk honestly about what's happening out there. I do think Brené Brown is doing good work when it comes to urging people to be vulnerable. Don't put your armor up. Show up as your true, authentic self—no matter what that looks like.

I don't have all the answers, but I do believe the biggest antidote to this anxiety and confusion is worthiness—knowing your worth, which exists independently of successes and failures. That's my passion: figuring out how to communicate with as many women as I can that we are all worthy.

Q. That's such a good point. There is no blueprint for where we want to end up, is there?

A. In my book, I talk a lot about how there isn't really any way to be what we think is expected of us. Your version of "having it all"—your wholeness—is totally about you. It is not about anything outside of you. If you have a full-time job and raise three beautiful kids and have a successful marriage, society says you have it all. No. Throw all that in the trash.

Your idea of what creates wholeness in you is completely individualized to you. Discovering what your wholeness looks like begins with you doing some work, including being self-aware about who you are and what you need. What makes you feel complete? This process has to start with self-discovery and self-reflection.

We think we should adhere to and chase other people's ideas of what well-rounded success looks like, but that'll get you nowhere fast. True wholeness is rooted in finding out what kind of meaning and connection you want in your life, whether that's kids or no kids, single or partnered, working from home or running an office.

I think women would have so much more grace toward one another if we understood that none of us have the answer to what someone else should or shouldn't do. Instead, we need to honor and understand that each woman needs to do what's right for her.

Q. You have mentioned body image already, and it's one of the most pervasive expectations for women. So let's pick it apart: Where do our ideas about what women's bodies should look like come from—and where should they come from?

A. (Laughs) Oh, I could just go off here!

Look, I think we give a lot of lip service to the idea of acceptance and compassion toward other women and body image. But if you really look at what society is showing you is beautiful and accessible, you see something very different. Go to just about any fashion website right now, and every model you will see looks like they're one step away from full-blown anorexia.

I am a size 10. I am also healthy. I'm not really thin—but I'm happy.

So why are we showing this so-skinny ideal to our children? Why is that what's considered beautiful? Let me pause here for a moment and say it is not that those women aren't beautiful. Many are naturally thin, and we should honor that. Be who you are. Embrace it.

My problem is that extremely thin is the only image we're offered. It's the only option. There's the commerce side of this, too. If you go into a store and there is not anything over a size 12, society is telling you size 12 and smaller is what's acceptable.

There are a couple of brands that focus on inclusion, but if we're honest with ourselves and look at what the biggest companies and culture tell us, we as a society are not where we need to be. Women want to believe it's all okay—that there is more acceptance now than before. But we've been so brainwashed with these images for so many decades, that most of us don't believe we're worthy if we're not a size 6. If you lined up about a dozen average women, I think every single one of them would tell you she has an issue with her weight.

I also understand the pushback from women who say we should embrace being healthy—that bigger isn't always okay. I get that. Diabetes is no joke. But what we need to understand is that healthy can assume a spectrum of appearances.

Being bombarded with these images creates that feeling of "I'm not enough": *I'm not doing enough. I'm not exercising enough. I'm not eating well enough. I'm not sexy enough. I'm not enough.*

That is all so toxic. Life is already hard. I mean, we're in the middle of a pandemic! Why do we do this to each other?

We have to step up for ourselves. We have to do the work and know that our worthiness is not attached to our body weight.

Q. You mentioned your daughter earlier. How do you balance being a mom of a special needs child with professional needs, aspirations, self-care, your marriage, parenting your other child—everything?

A. I think it's a constant journey of experimentation, self-reflection, and self-awareness. You have to respond to what your family's needs are at the time. For me, this meant that I could not be Elaine Turner, the entrepreneur and fashion designer, and be a mother to a special needs daughter who's going through adolescence and having seizures. I couldn't do that and keep my marriage together and raise my 18-year-old son.

We don't hear enough about this. Sometimes don't we all just wish to God that those we look up to for their seemingly perfect lives would write some incredible, really honest article about how they do all of this? The minute I started speaking my truth, do you know what the response was? Hundreds of, "Oh. *Me toos.*"

On my deathbed, I'm not going to be thinking about handbags. I'm going to be thinking about who I was as a mother, wife, and person of depth.

Nothing is more important to me in my life than my relationships with those I love. Since I know that, every single thing I do must be sorted around that priority. Throughout my career, I've had to treat life like a game of chess. I've had to move pieces around. An example: Six or seven years ago, I took a total year off of work. My daughter was struggling, and thankfully, we were in a position where I could step away from leading Elaine Turner. Every day, I had to be at Texas Children's Hospital with my little girl, who was having so many challenges. I was struggling with my own mental and emotional health.

And get this: I remember feeling shame because of my decision. I felt ashamed that I couldn't do it all. Why was I feeling shame about aligning myself with my core values? Do you see how that's screwed up?

We have to move past these mirages that represent what we're supposed to be able to handle and achieve. To do that, you have to understand who you are and what your values are. Every single day, I recommit to my marriage and am in service to my two children.

During this quarantine, everything has hit the fan. In moments of rock bottom, clarity hits you hard. You start to see things as they truly are. For months—years—people have been able to cope and just move from one task to the next. Well now, there is no just going through the motions. Life stopped. And we have all had to figure out how we're going to spend the time we have left. There are women I love who are changing their entire lives right now—starting new ventures from home, getting divorces. And it's all rooted in discovering or rediscovering individual values.

Q. Okay, now please tell us about this course you've created.

A. It's called "Know Your Worth." I have a one-line explanation of what it is: A framework to guide women to reclaim and build their self-worth.

The entire program consists of three courses: "Discover," "Awaken," and "Manifest."

I designed each course to be taken in sequential order, though that isn't a requirement. I was intentional in creating these courses to be a journey we take to reclaim your self-worth.

"Discover" debuts this September, and it is the first step we take on this journey. "Discover" begins with a quiz that helps you identify your personal processing center - Thinker (mind), Feeler (heart), and Doer (gut). Many of us tend to process our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and beliefs in one primary area. However, some people have combination profiles and process from more than one center. Are you a cerebral person who has intellectualized a lot that's happened in your life? Are you more emotional and see things mostly from your heart and how you feel in the moment? Or, are you a person who has acted on impulses and followed your gut?

This is important because the lens through which we see the world originates in our thought, emotion, and feeling process. Once we understand how we've taken in, filtered, and related to our thoughts and emotions, we are better able to understand why we think, behave, and feel the way we do.

In other words, we begin to realize that it's not about what's happened to us, but it's how we've perceived it to be that matters most. Once we gain this awareness, we are able to redefine our life circumstances and empower ourselves to write a better story for our lives. And, this is the best part- we take action! I end the course with custom, curated tools and practices for your specific profile. These tools allow you to gain more balance and synergy across all three centers.

The second course, "Awaken," requires a little heavier lifting. In this course, we dig deep into our past and the limiting beliefs we have attached ourselves to. Many of us have unconsciously attached ourselves to a false narrative that has become the hidden script that runs our lives. I walk members through a custom, guided exercise to identify this false narrative. Once we claim it, it lessens its power over us. We are then able to rewrite our story and empower ourselves to create a life based on our true self and the immense potential we hold.

In "Awaken," I focus on topics such as shame and redefining pain and suffering. While this might seem hard, this process allows us to develop a kinder relationship with ourselves based on self-acceptance and self-compassion. I end this course with restorative exercises based on reframing life's circumstances, visualizing our best self, and self-compassion.

And finally, the third course, "Manifest," is about what's possible for us now. We get out of our own way and are able to see who we could become. We move from the "I" to the "we." We begin to understand our life purpose and what we can offer the world. We ask ourselves, how can I be of service to others? What are my greatest gifts?

We are finally able to focus on unlocking our performance and productivity because we've done the inner work in "Discover" and "Manifest." We now have the self-awareness we need to move forward with action. I'm a firm believer in the idea that we first must unlock ourselves before we can unlock our performance. That's what this course is all about.

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This course will also guide members to develop and discover the personal habits and goals that work best for them. There is never a one size fits all model to self-growth. In essence, the "Manifest" course will give each member a customized roadmap to becoming their best self.

In summary, all three courses are based on three main tenants: self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-compassion. I believe these concepts are vital to embrace and practice on our journey to self-worth.

This newfound awareness creates space for more self-compassion. I always like to say that the self-growth journey is never really about self-help but instead, self-understanding. Developing a lens built on deeper self-understanding and compassion changes everything. It allows us to treat ourselves and others more tenderly, which leads to a greater sense of worthiness and self-love. Ultimately, that's what the "Know Your Worth" journey is all about.

Q. Wow, that's compelling. So what are you looking forward to most, as more people get to experience this side of you?

A. I'm looking forward to women feeling heard and understood, not only within themselves, but to each other. We need more women telling their true stories. I want to create a community where women show up as their authentic selves and have those "Oh, *me too*" moments. If I could do that, it would be everything to me.

Women have been sold a load of goods, and we need to come back to the truth. That's going to take legions of women having the courage to start speaking it.

About Elaine Turner

Elaine Turner wants you to know that you are worthy. With unfiltered candor, sharp wisdom, humor, and warmth, Elaine is challenging women to be honest with themselves and with the world—and to thus be part of sparking real cultural change. Best known to many as a successful fashion designer and founder of Elaine Turner®, Elaine has a new mission: to help every woman realize she is worthy—and that worthiness is inborn and internal, not determined by any external successes or failures. Through a variety of outlets including her book *Breaking the Glass Slipper*, compelling talks, and her new three-part online course *Know Your Worth*, she is pushing women across the country to connect with themselves, reject false narratives, and upend the status quo. A mother of an adolescent special-needs daughter and a college-aged son, Elaine lives with her husband Jim and their family in Houston, Texas. For more information, please visit <http://www.elaineturner.com/>.

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