



**CONTROL THE
CONTROLLABLE,
BUT LEAVE SPACE
FOR THE POSSIBLE**

Jim Fielding

I am a neat freak.

As we enter 2024 and a year full of possibilities, I always think it is important to own your simple truths. I am not really a resolution maker, but I do believe in starting the year with affirmations and with acknowledging my authenticity and a gratitude list.

The question is... Why am I a neat freak?? Let me share my story.

Growing up, I developed an almost OCD-level need for order and control. I could not and still cannot stand clutter of any kind... on kitchen counters, in my closet, on shelves in my office. Junk drawers make me break out in a cold sweat. The Container Store was developed solely for me. (Few understand the sheer joy of translucent boxes in all shapes and sizes.)

I also hate surprises, even on my birthday. I always need a plan. In school, I always colored inside the lines, and no one has ever called me spontaneous. I've spent my life trying to anticipate and control the future.

These traits have helped me in my career in retail and merchandise. I was the living embodiment of the mantra, "retail is detail," and worked obsessively to create the perfect customer experience. Management saw me as proactive and visionary. I was lauded for my initiative and promoted. My bosses had no idea I had been preparing myself for these roles my entire life.

The harsh reality of my Type-A, compulsive, and overzealous control freak behavior for much of my life is that I am a classic Adult Child of an Alcoholic (ACOA).

I was raised in an active alcoholic household. My mother suffered with the disease my entire life, finally entering a rehabilitation program on my 39th birthday. We had severe and regular episodes of “Mom’s sickness.” Vodka was her demon.

The disease drove a wedge between me and my Dad, because I wanted him to “fix” and handle the situation. When he wouldn’t, I would try to do it myself. (As I got older, and after much therapy, I realized my Dad was practicing “detachment” and actually held the family together during these episodes. That is advanced reasoning for a nine-year-old whose Mom is passed out on Christmas Eve with the family arriving in three hours and a frozen turkey and unbaked ham.)

I was thrust into adult situations and decisions way too early. In many ways, I forgot how to just be a child. It also taught me how to operate in crisis mode and anticipate situations before they materialized. I developed a sixth sense for my Mom’s triggers, and I would prepare myself and my sister for what I could see coming. That skill translated into my career—knowing how to read situations and synthesize information quickly.

But when I couldn’t control something, I quickly lost my temper. My anger was legendary. I would lash out at the world and anyone who was nearby. While I never took up alcohol like my mother, I found other ways to cope, mainly pouring my anger and frustration back into my work.

My control issues were exacerbated by the fact that I was a gay man growing up in the 1980s. I lived a double life for 26 years, hiding the truth from my family, my work, and often even myself. Controlling the narrative—and doing anything I could to earn people’s love and affection—became my driving motivation.

This was especially true for my father's love and affection. He was a man's man... a war veteran, firefighter, and local politician. I could tell early on that I wasn't the type of son he had always wanted, but when I learned that he admired and appreciated success, that became my focus.

When I was 11, my grandmother gave me a prayer card: "God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference." It took me over 20 years to understand what it meant (and that it was the Serenity Prayer from Alcoholics Anonymous). She never explained it to me, trusting the message would become clear when I needed it most. She was right.

We are constantly presented with choices, and it's up to us to choose our destiny.

As my career progressed, it became harder and harder to live as a closeted gay man. It was so stressful that I began experiencing migraines and terrible stomach pain. Never underestimate the physical, emotional, and mental toll of hiding your true self. When I finally found the courage to let go of my secret, it felt like a hundred-pound weight being lifted off my shoulders. Not that it was easy... my father did not speak to me for a year. Everything I feared about coming out came true. He did not love me, he was ashamed of me, and I was broken.

But even this dark period ended. I made it end. After a year of ex-communication, I flew down to Florida to confront my dad. We talked until we finally came to an understanding. I learned his reaction was rooted in fear... fear for what being gay would mean for my life and career. He was protecting me in his own way. He slowly came to the realization that it did not matter who I loved, as long as I was loved.

I believe in fate. But I also believe that fate is never a one-way street. We are constantly presented with choices, and it's up to us to choose our destiny. You may not always like the options presented, but you always have a choice.

MAKE EXCUSES OR SURF THE DISRUPTIONS

My life and career flourished as an out gay man. I chose to work at companies that accepted my full, authentic self, and I eventually landed at Disney. That is where I faced my greatest professional challenge and the ultimate test of controlling the controllable.

It was Fall 2007. Andy Mooney, the head of Consumer Products and my boss since 2001, asked me to work on a "secret project." Our licensee for the Disney Stores in North America wanted out of its long-term license agreement, and Disney's new leadership team, led by Bob Iger, wanted to start fresh.

I worked with Andy and a small team to present the board with three options: 1) license the stores to a new entity, 2) allow the stores to close completely in North America, or 3) bring them back into the company as a wholly owned subsidiary of Consumer Products and form a global team.

I worked very hard to present a fact-based and unbiased overview of all three options, but I had my favorite. The board agreed to bring the stores back into the company, and overnight, we formed the Global Disney Store team with me as president and operations based in Los Angeles, London, and Tokyo.

Steve Jobs was on the Disney Board at the time due to the Pixar acquisition. When our new plan for Disney Stores was accepted, my team and I were flown out to Cupertino to meet with Steve and his Apple retail team. They encouraged us to build a fully functional “laboratory” store where we could build and experiment.

With his recommendation, we were granted the time and budget to build a fully operational prototype of the new store design and experience. We also built a world-class team of talent, bringing in the best and brightest global merchant minds and operators. We reinvented the product, the branding, the customer service model, the packaging, and the culture. We created magical moments and elements of surprise and delight throughout the experience. As my father would have said, “We were cooking with gas.” I was so happy and motivated, and would wake up at night to write notes to remember the next day as we pushed ourselves to create something never seen before and worthy of the Disney brand.

We were 90 days into the project when the housing crisis and global recession began in Fall 2008.

Our business instantly dropped off by almost half. The global economy was tanking. Consumer spending, especially on discretionary items or categories (like Disney Store) fell off a cliff. We all felt a sense of panic and dread and had a lack of clarity of what was really happening and how long it would last.

This is when I knew we had to take control of what we could. Fate was presenting me with a choice: to either make excuses or to surf the disruptions. I chose to surf and stay positive. I am grateful my team wanted to surf with me.

We stayed focused on the fact that families would try to protect or shield children from the effects of the recession. There were still birthdays and Christmas and Hanukkah and elementary school graduations to celebrate, and we needed to bring the magic. Our goal was to create “the best 30 minutes of the day” for kids and families, and we had to do it on a fraction of our original budget.

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We adopted a culture of wild creativity and fiscal discipline. Eventually, Disney Stores posted record-high gross revenue and operating income numbers. I have never worked harder in my life, but I have also never been so happy and fulfilled at work.

To this day, whenever I run into fellow Disney cast members (what we called employees), we share stories and recall these moments with fondness. The work we did on “Plush Mountain” and on expanding the costumes and role-play business is still evident today when you walk into the parks or go online. It was such a team effort and a shared commitment to surprising and delighting our guests. I can still see our team’s impact when I enter the flagship stores around the world.

This experience taught me one of the most important lessons of my career: I did not have to be PERFECT to be successful. I made mistakes—more than I could ever count—and there was so much I could not control. But by controlling the controllable, and trusting my team, we met our goals and created magic in the process.

THE SERENDIPITY OF GOOD FORTUNE

My leadership style and philosophy is guided by my own version of the 80/20 rule.

I no longer try to control 100% of everything. Instead, I try to anticipate and plan for 80%, and leave the remaining 20% up to change, surprises, and opportunity. This approach satisfies my need for control but also recognizes the realities of life. It has made me more patient, more serene, and much, much happier.

And believe it or not, I have actually grown to enjoy a bit of uncertainty. I now look forward to that 20% worth of surprises, because that is where the magic of life happens.

If you try to control too much, you'll never experience the serendipity of good fortune. In fact, I sometimes wonder what my career would have been like if I discovered this truth at 30 instead of 50. I will never know what opportunities I missed because I was focused on control, but I don't plan on missing any more.

I love the Chinese proverb, "When the winds of change blow, there are those who build walls and those who build windmills." I was a wall builder for most of my life. Now I try to build windmills—as well as relationships and partnerships that make it easier to weather the storms.

Yes, I will always be a planner and a bit of a neat freak. But when the winds of change blow, I use it to lift me to new heights rather than knock me over. It is a small mindset shift that has changed everything.

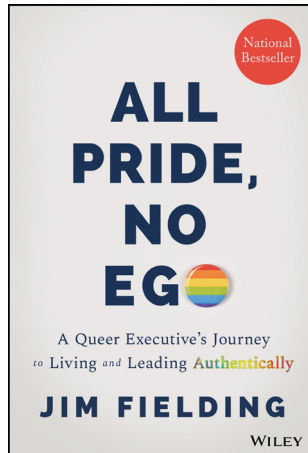
Control the controllable, but leave room for the possible. I enter 2024 with hope and focus, and a healthy dose of necessary realism. I want to work on bringing authenticity and kindness to more workplaces and communities as I travel and meet new people.

I hope to connect with and inspire others to join me on this journey. 🌱





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Jim Fielding is an experienced executive with over 30 years' experience leading in some of the world's most recognized organizations. He is an active angel investor, start-up advisor, and philanthropist, currently serving on the Board of Directors for Indiana University Foundation. He is the President of Co-Lab at Archer Gray and a brand strategist and advisor.

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