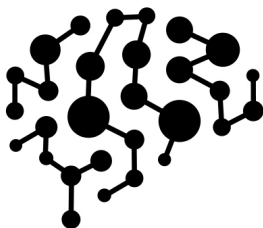


ONE GOLDEN NUGGET



**HOW TO
SURVIVE
AND
THRIVE
VOLUME III**

**JOE FOSTER, FOUNDER OF REEBOK,
RETURNS WITH POWERFUL NEW STORIES OF
RESILIENCE AND INNOVATION, CHANGING THE
WORLD ONE PAGE AT A TIME.**

Joe Foster



HAZLEEN AHMAD

Impact Investor & Neurodiversity Advocate

Challenges have always been opportunities in my eyes. Throughout my time at Reebok, I've faced many, each one shaping not only my personal growth but also the brand's success. So, when Hazleen spoke about how she survived a challenging personal and professional life and made the most of her neurodiversity for five decades, it really struck a chord with me. The way she embraced her unique way of thinking, reframing what others might see as a disadvantage into a strength, is something I truly admire.

When Hazleen reflects on her path, from childhood in a crowded, underprivileged, low-income Malay Singaporean household in Chinatown, to founding a global movement for neurodiverse inclusion, she does so without sentimentality. "I don't believe in breakthroughs," she says. I believe in returning again and again to what matters. That's how clarity grows." Clarity, for her, came slowly — through service, science, failure, ritual, and, most importantly, through resilience forged in community, not isolation.

Growing up in Singapore as one of five siblings with twenty-two aunts and uncles, Hazleen was constantly surrounded by family. Her father worked in the Security & Intelligence Division of Singapore and kept a gun under his pillow for safety, protecting his family while her mother worked in a factory, cooked "nasi lemak" and curry puffs to be sold at her grand-aunt Nenek Kemi's stall in Pearl Bank School where she helped during "recess" for \$1.50. Every night, she and her sisters would sit beside her mother,



rolling and sealing beautiful pastries by hand, making nearly a hundred daily, which she would carry to school every morning.

Her entrepreneurial drive was unmistakable — she was always creating and building. But beneath that ambition was a constant push and pull between thriving under pressure and battling an underlying sense of being misunderstood. Her community, though vibrant, offered few spaces to talk about the complexity of emotion or the inner world. Everything was about doing, not feeling. There were no words for “neurodivergence” or frameworks for difference, just age, language, race, and religion.

By the age of seven, she had created her first business, walking up and down the very steep Pearl’s Hill to the shop, for two kilograms of sugar with the \$1.50 she earned daily, and then making and selling ice lollies to children in the Police Quarters where her family lived. Not for profit, but for purpose. She wasn’t playing at being an entrepreneur. She was simply contributing in the only way she knew how.

From the outside, she was silenced; quiet, timid, obedient, and disciplined, but on the inside, her thoughts ran fast, and she noticed everything. She learned Arabic to read the Quran. She self-taught Mandarin to connect with her Chinese classmates. “I didn’t know I was different,” she says. “I just knew I needed to understand everything — language, culture, people — I needed to find the answers, patterns in my mind.” Determined to make the most of every opportunity, she threw herself into everything



“For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

Nelson Mandela



beyond the classroom. She joined the military band, volunteered as a librarian, signed up for school ballet, served as a school prefect, and attended Quran reading, while excelling in most subjects.

But as she reached junior college, distractions crept in. The stark difference in the school structure (lectures and tutorials), and being immersed in a new social life, stole her focus just enough to shift her trajectory. Whilst she didn't achieve the results she had anticipated to go to her desired university, they were enough to secure her place at Nanyang Technological University/National Institute of Education, where she studied literature and history, child psychology, and education.

After graduating, Hazleen followed the path laid out for her. She began teaching at her father's insistence, and was forced into a marriage in her early twenties to please her mother. But neither path was truly hers. Before long, she left Singapore behind and moved to Dubai in 1996. Divorced with a three-year-old, she finally decided to pursue her ambitions, but breaking free took time. Yet, the moment she allowed herself to follow her passions, everything changed.

At twenty-four, she was offered a role at EMAAR, one of the Middle East's largest property developers. Tasked by Chairman Mohamed Ali Alabbar with building their Corporate Communications department from the ground up, it was a defining opportunity. "For the first time," she recalls, "my mind was an asset. I could connect the dots. See

patterns. Anticipate needs before they are named. It was the first environment in which I felt free to think the way I naturally think.”

After nearly five years, she moved into consulting before eventually taking on a senior executive role at a financial group in Bahrain. She led high-stakes projects across the Middle East and North Africa, working with investors, royal families, and government leaders. She also remarried and welcomed two more children: one born in Bahrain and the youngest in London. It was at this point that Hazleen decided to take a step back from corporate life and focus on raising her children.

Yet something inside her still remained unresolved. Despite the success, she still felt like an outsider in her own experience. She couldn’t ignore the intensity of her inner world. She constantly questioned why it was so hard to sit still. Why she could hyper-focus for twelve hours and then forget to eat, and why she thought of everything in pictorial form, all at the same time. The answer came at the age of fifty-one: ADHD. “I’m not dysfunctional,” she says, “I am neurodiverse. And once I had the language, I could finally begin to build my life around how I worked, instead of trying to squeeze myself into spaces where I didn’t fit and got rejected.”



“Leading differently means embracing the unconventional, questioning the status quo, and creating space for others to bring their truths.”

She returned to school for a master's degree in applied neuroscience at King's College London. She also completed executive leadership programmes at INSEAD, Cornell, and Oxford Saïd Business School. Through neuroscience, she began to understand the wiring of her mind. She studied how the amygdala and hippocampus govern emotional processing and memory; how dopamine shapes motivation; and how executive functions in the prefrontal cortex influence focus, planning, and adaptability. She saw her traits — which others had dismissed as volatility or intensity — as features, not flaws.

This insight was transformational. But it also raised a new question, “How many others were walking through life undiagnosed, misunderstood, and unsupported?” Hazleen decided to build the kinds of ecosystems she wished she'd had access to. Not just for herself, but for the next generation. She founded Neuropower World, a tech, consulting, and education platform focused on inclusion, representation, and systemic change. Its goal is to help organisations become neuro-affirming spaces, where different kinds of thinkers lead with empathy.

On top of this, she was still leading the fully licensed hiking club she had founded ten years prior (now ATC Nation), which combined outdoor adventure with women's leadership. Over the years, almost 3000 women and young people have climbed hundreds of mountains across multiple



continents. For Hazleen, the mountain was never just a metaphor; it was a method. “On the mountain, you can’t perform,” she says. “You can’t hide behind titles or metrics. You’re with yourself. And if you can meet yourself in that space, you can lead others.”

Every trek ends with a moment of pause, to reflect on what they’re leaving behind and what they’re taking forward. These rituals, she says, offer closure and clarity, two things rarely afforded in the modern workplace. Hazleen’s ventures multiplied, but they all carried the same DNA: safe spaces, systemic thinking, and sustainable change.

She also launched World Kindness House, a co-working and community space for women; created Kind World Asset, a blockchain initiative to expand financial access for women and youth-led businesses; and established Youth Culture Tech Nation, providing mentorship and coaching. Most recently, she has turned her attention to micro-community mapping, exploring how localised care networks can be scaled into citywide models of inclusion.





**“We cannot create spaces for others
if we don’t create one for ourselves.”**



All of this, while quietly surviving one of the most difficult seasons of her life. During the the COVID-19 pandemic, Hazleen baked and gave away more than 2000 loaves of sourdough bread. She told people it was a community project. And it was. But it was also a way to cope. At home, her marriage was becoming a site of emotional manipulation. Her multiple talents and intensity, once embraced, were now weaponised. She was called delusional and accused of instability, but cultural norms, legal constraints, and her fear of being judged kept her silent longer than she wanted. “I wasn’t crazy,” she says, “I was in survival mode. And for a while, the world mistook endurance for peace.” Eventually, she spoke up and is rebuilding her life, once again.

Today, Hazleen is proud to call herself a “disruptor.” She serves on a global steering committee, is a Chairperson in Singapore of the Institute of Neurodiversity (ION), and mentors for various women’s groups. She also leads the Dubai alumni chapter for Oxford Saïd. She is developing the *NeuroCulture* podcast, exploring the intersection of culture, identity, and cognition, whilst building partnerships in education, HR, finance, tech, and justice reform.

One of her most pressing causes is the relationship between neurodiversity and the criminal justice system. NIH-funded research has shown that nearly twenty-five per cent of incarcerated people meet diagnostic criteria for ADHD. Many were never diagnosed. Others were labelled as disruptive, difficult, or delinquent — long before they had the language or support to understand themselves. “We are failing an entire population,” she says. “This isn’t about criminal behaviour. It’s about systemic neglect. And early intervention is our greatest opportunity.” She works closely with educators,

clinicians, and policymakers to shift the narrative from correction to compassion. “What if we designed systems around difference?” she asks. “What if we stopped asking people to conform, and started asking what internal and external conditions, when balanced, allow them to thrive?”

A particular leadership style unites Hazleen’s approach to every role she’s taken on — one that is relational rather than top-down, rooted in listening and asking better questions. She believes kindness is not soft, but rigorous, intentional, and measurable. And in a digital world that’s increasingly polarised, it’s the only way to lead and unite humanity.

She often speaks of Indigenous leadership models, and how wisdom emerges not from authority, but from collective knowledge, and how it’s stewarded, not owned. “We’re taught to lead through visibility,” she says. “But the most powerful change happens in the invisible, in how people feel, how they’re seen, and whether they feel safe enough to speak.”

Still, she doesn’t see her life as a series of leadership roles. She sees it as a constellation; each star connected to the next by memory, rhythm, and meaning. She’s not building an empire; she’s cultivating ecosystems. She was told recently by LYP, someone with the highest emotional and cognitive ‘superpower’ she has ever met, that “Every star has the right to twinkle.”

When asked what success looks like now, Hazleen reflects: “Success is when someone who thought they were broken finally says, ‘I’m not just enough. I’m exceptionally different’.” As Hazleen moves forward, it’s clear that she isn’t seeking power or permission, only a different future for all kinds of minds.



**“To thrive, learn to embrace the
essence of true freedom.”**



**“The kind of freedom that honours both self
and others can nurture a foundation where
individual and collective potential ascend
through mutual accountability.”**



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