

40 Women's Stories of Harnessing the Power of
Growth, Resilience, Intention, and Tenacity



Owning Your **G.R.I.T.**



Compiled by
Jennifer Bardot & Carrie Burggraf

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Jennifer Bardot | Fight for YOU.....1

Carrie Burggraf | Kintsugi7

Katie Boyd | Leaping into My G.R.I.T.13

Stephanie Martinez | Circling Back to Intention19

Jill Scheulen | Intentional Leaders25

Peggy Northcott |
 Navigating Circumstances Beyond Our Control31

Liza Chollet | Nothing is as it Seems37

Karen Scaglione | Game Changer.....43

Lauren Cohen | Self-Leadership is Grit49

Lynda J. Roth | Owning My G.R.I.T.55

Cassy Range | Owning Your Worth61

Maite Nogales | Life Is a Journey, Enjoy the Ride67

Madison S. Smith | Limits of a Title73

Aimee Muirnin Dunne | Brace Your Core.....79

Christa Taylor | The Fire Within Me85

Adrian Bracy | Still Standing91

Kelly Martin | You Have It: G.R.I.T.....97

Fridaouss Nabine | The Art of Resilience 103

Cynthia Siess Kirkpatrick | The Candy Bar Connection 109

Heather Torretta | Now I've Done It 115

Shar C. Smith | A New Life, Intentionally 121

Jane Megown | Fire Ignites A New Flame 127

Katie Maurer	
True G.R.I.T.—Surround Yourself with Good People	133
Shonda Ambers-Phillips You Are Never Stuck.....	139
Reona Wise Trust the Process.....	145
Laura B. G.R.I.T. Reinvention.....	151
Aprille Trupiano I’m Dying, Thanks. How Are You?.....	157
Trish Jensen No Excuses.....	163
Cate Redfern Holding Space with Love	169
Julia Yank Ghost of the Forest	175
Marianne Biangardi	
Unconditional Support and GRIT Got Me Through	181
Carol L. Rogers “What Is the Worst Thing That Can Happen?” ...	187
Angie Minges Greatest Rewards Involve Tenacity	193
Kate Morrison Rock On.....	199
Alice Prince Learning How to Kill	205
Rebeka Garcia Cook Laborious Progress; Intentional Focus.....	211
Susan Dealis Gobbo Rediscovering and Rebuilding Myself.....	217
Jaime Zografos Soaring to New Heights.....	223
Katrina Kerr Pushing through the Pandemic	229
Pat Coleman The BlessZing of G.R.I.T.s	235



LAUREN COHEN

Self-Leadership is Grit

I can recall the precise moment that caused me to rethink everything I thought I understood about grit. I was sitting in the office of a very close and well-respected colleague—let’s call him “Sam.” We were discussing the nuances of a case we were litigating together, as we frequently did. At one point, Sam was talking, becoming more animated and excited by the minute, yet I could no longer hear the words he was saying. I was paralyzed by his energy and exuberance. Five years beyond retirement age, Sam continued to work full time and remained as fired up about the game of litigation as a recent law school graduate. Sam stopped talking and waited for me to chime in about the last thing he had said, but I was speechless. Without thinking, I blurted out, “I don’t think I’ll ever be as passionate about this as you.” His reaction was stoic. He looked down. When he looked back up, he stared at me and then said these five words: “You just need more grit.”

Sam’s words landed hard. An achiever by nature, I had always considered myself a tenacious worker with a fire in my belly. Not only had I worked diligently my entire legal career, but I also had made many sacrifices for the sake of my work, including to my own personal health. Still, I thought, “Maybe he’s right, maybe I just need more grit.”

This is what humans often do. When we feel an inner signal alerting us that something is off, we negotiate with ourselves to get back into some form of alignment. “If I just had more grit, if I was just more disciplined, if I could just get a handle on my life...then maybe I’d feel happy, satisfied, fulfilled, [fill in the blank].”

I continued to analyze the validity of Sam’s statement. Did I really need more grit? I had trained for and competed in an Olympic-distance triathlon, passed

two bar exams, successfully tried cases in federal court, persevered through devastating family challenges, and endured two difficult pregnancies. I could honestly answer with a resounding “no.” It was not grit I lacked. What I lacked was purpose, aliveness, and a sense of alignment and flow. Everything had come to feel like a battle. I had a sinking sense that if I continued on this path, when I was Sam’s age, I would look back on my career and doubt the point of it all.

With that insight, I was able to hear Sam’s words differently. Although I’ll never know what he sought to convey when he said, “You just need more grit,” the essence of what I heard was “Just keep grinding.” I do not remember how our conversation ended. I probably stared at him blankly, nodded my head in polite agreement, and then got up and left. In my heart, I was resolved: “I have plenty of grit, and I choose not to live a life of grind.”

What do you do when you realize that the ladder you are on—the one you have dedicated yourself to climbing—is not the right one? Once I gave myself permission to ask, a stream of seemingly endless questions followed: *Now what? I spent three years studying to be a lawyer. Am I just going to throw away my law degree? After a decade, I’ve built a solid reputation and a successful practice. Why would I give that up now? How will I ever replace my salary? Everyone says you can do anything with a law degree...what the hell can you actually do with a law degree? What if I’ll never be happy?*

Naturally, these questions awakened my harshest inner critics, the kind who rear their nagging voices when a big move or risk is at play. We all have these critics. They serve an important role—to protect you from feeling pain, hurt, failure, or other negative emotions. In doing so, they keep you small, safe, and stuck, furthering the addictive quality of the status quo. The people closest to me asked the same questions I asked myself, further reinforcing the gremlin voices. People are afraid of change. People who love you often are the most resistant to supporting your change. They want what is “best” for you, which usually means whatever is most likely to protect you from risk, harm, pain, or disappointment.

I had a choice (there is always a choice). I could listen to the chorus of voices telling me to just keep playing by the script or I could wade through the dark, scary unknown in the hope that something better was on the other side. I chose the latter.

It was a messy journey, and one without a map. I had become unrecognizable to myself as anything but lawyer, mother, and wife. I was living on the periphery of my life, completely detached from who I was at the core. With a toddler and another baby on the way, I knew things would only get busier. My gut told me I needed to get away (from everything), so I booked a three-day yoga retreat in the mountains of north Georgia. I had never done anything like this before and it felt indulgent; however, this first exercise in listening to my intuition paid off. Something about being in a supportive group of thirty female strangers allowed me to finally see a glimpse of myself again—the real self that was underneath all of the grinding and people-pleasing. Through conversation and exercise prompts, I had an ah-ha insight: the person you think you are often reflects the person you are supposed to be, but not necessarily the person you truly are meant to be. That realization sparked a sense of hope and renewal and catalyzed my quest for further growth and discovery.

What happened next was a non-linear process of self-construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. I slowly collected bits of awareness about myself to create a picture of who I really am, what I really want, and the kind of impact I want to have on the world. To do this challenging work, I called upon a multitude of guides to support me. They came in the form of coaches, therapists, spiritual gurus, and other healers—whose ability to see my unlimited potential was not dimmed by any need to protect me—as well as a dizzying number of self-help books. I also built the confidence that a more authentic and aligned version of myself was possible and within reach.

One of the hardest parts of this journey was acknowledging that my ego was wholly tethered to my occupation. Being a lawyer made me feel smart and powerful—two things I never felt enough when I was growing up. I no longer knew who I was if I was not a lawyer, and I was dependent on my status to prove my worth. This phenomenon is one I have observed in many of my coaching clients. When you are young—too young to really know who you are or what you want—you come to believe in a mirage of success. You naively climb onto the societal treadmill and start running towards that image without stopping. You become addicted to the climb because your worthiness depends on it. Yet, you get

to a point when the climb no longer feels satisfying because it was an illusion all along. That point of reckoning can be soul crushing.

I knew that unless I developed an inner sense of power, I would always battle for my worthiness. Likewise, the law would always have power *over* me and I would forever willingly sacrifice a piece of myself in exchange for that artificial feeling of value. I set out to cultivate my intelligence, strength, and worth disconnected from my profession. It turns out, it was not that hard. In reality, wearing a power suit is never what made me powerful.

When I detached my ego from the professional ladder, I freed myself to consider what my soul really wanted to do. For me, that turned out to be coaching. In the same way that the yoga retreat allowed me to see myself differently, I wanted to hold space for professionals and teams to view themselves more powerfully. The process of self-rediscovery took me into the darkest corners of myself and back into the light. Because I had the grit and wherewithal to lead myself there, I am now living my life on purpose and with purpose, while helping others do the same.

Maintaining the status quo for fear of losing your identity is not grit. Satisfying the expectations others have for and of you is not grit. Continuing to grind just to prove you can is not grit. Doing the hard inner work, tuning into your intuition, leaning into uncertainty, asking complex questions, coming face-to-face with your shadows, cultivating an inner sense of worth, figuring out who you really want to be, and creating the life you deserve (whether you are in your thirties, your fifties, or your nineties)...this is self-leadership...*this* is GRIT.



Lauren Cohen, JD, CPC, is the founder of Lauren Cohen Coaching, LLC, a premier executive and leadership coaching firm based in St. Louis, Missouri and serving clients nationally. Lauren supports high-achieving professionals, leaders, and teams in amplifying strengths, eliminating roadblocks, and cultivating a “play to win” mindset so they can achieve top performance by optimizing engagement, satisfaction, and fulfillment.

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Owning Your G.R.I.T. is a collection of real-life stories written by 40 women who have chosen to face their difficult moments with personal G.R.I.T. — the spark inside which allows us to face-forward and be willing to step into whatever challenge lies in front of us. These 40 unique stories highlight how owning our G.R.I.T. lights us on fire — creating a metallurgy, a purification of sorts — a process allowing us to strip down to our truest and best selves.

We invite you to step forward, and join us as we harness our G.R.I.T.

- GROWTH pushes us forward and keeps us moving in a good direction
- RESILIENCE bounces us back up when we get knocked down
- INTENTION keeps us determined and focused on the objective
- TENACITY will never let us get worn down (for long)

Owning our G.R.I.T. allows us to step into our power.

No matter the shoes you select for the day, we all walk in the footsteps of those who forged a path before us. With each step we take, our G.R.I.T. fuels us to support, encourage, and empower each other as we mold our vision of a fabulous future.

**Grab Your G.R.I.T.
and Join Us!**

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