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Coffee Story: Ethiopia

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Thank you XX.

BIG PAUSE

To start things off, I want everyone to close their eyes. Really. I'm not going to throw anything at you. Once your eyes are closed I'm going to say a statement and I want you to remember the first thought you have in response to that statement when you open your eyes. Ready? Close your eyes.

Coffee can make a better world.

Open your eyes. Who can share?

Thanks for that. Some say this some this. Let's take the conversation deeper.



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I'm going to focus today on one country in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia, because it's a country I've fallen in love with-- and not just juvenile love, but married love-- with the flaws and possibilities of both of us revealed-- and I want to share that passion with you. I'm going to focus on three stories about Ethiopia that I guarantee will change your perspective on Ethiopia, on coffee, and on your role in the world. Really. Ready?



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First, let me introduce you to Marsha Aday, his wife Gete Tebo, and six of their seven children.

Marsha Aday is the 7th generation leader of the Messa tribe. He lives in Marsha, on the flanks of Mt Yero Wallo in the Amaro Mountains of Ethiopia. I wasn't looking for Marsha Aday exactly-- I was looking for the best storyteller. **I'd traveled by car and foot for 6 hours that day--** and 2 days before that from Addis, Ethiopia's capitol, to get to this Switzerland of Ethiopia. Once there I hiked through shocks of green false banana trees and coffee groves so lush they were sprouting new leaves and cherries by the second. I asked everyone I saw who the **best storyteller** of the tribe was, and soon I knew that the man I was looking for was Marsha Aday.

Marsha Aday has **no front door**. This fact in and of itself signified he was the leader of this tribe. His safety is guaranteed by his status and neighbors, and his vantage point with the valley below him allowed him to know I was coming to him an hour before I even knew who he was.



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Marsha Aday is a farmer in one of the most rural areas in Ethiopia where the average wage is less than \$1 a day, but like many of the poorest farmers in Ethiopia, he **drinks a fortune** every day in coffee. Coffee is so plentiful here, and so important, that everyone has several coffee trees, or **a full coffee forest**, in their back yard. Coffee is enjoyed here all day, every day, and it's safe to say they consume quite a bit – as much as \$75 a **day** at the top global prices – a four months' income to the Aday family. Is Marsha Aday rich by those standards? Perhaps. But is he a poor Ethiopian farmer? It completely depends on how we're willing to look at coffee, Ethiopia, and the world.



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Coffee in the Amaro mountains did not come here from people, but through nature. Ethiopians call this process *Wef Zerash*, the natural seed dispersal by birds and animals. While coffee is accounted for in legend in Ethiopia as far back as the 10th century BC, Marsha Aday's tribe didn't use the coffee behind their homes until almost **3,000 years later in the 20th century**. The story told is that Aday's ancestors thought the seed ensconced in the bright red coffee cherry would burn them if they used it. Eventually, Muslim traders came to the high mountains from the lowlands of Kerdea on camels, seeking coffee, and carrying beans away by the capful. It wasn't until those same traders returned, unburned, that the Messa were inspired to start using the coffee as well as trading it more seriously. Marsha Aday told me this story while chewing on a **fresh coffee cherry himself and offering one up to me**.

I bit into the crisp outer cherry, and I wondered....what if this could be some of the best coffee in the world?



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Marsha Aday lives a half day drive by dirt road away from any town-- assuming one can even drive on the dirt road. I was in this part of Amaro for 4 days and saw zero other cars during my time there. **The roads here are more often used for their flat** surfaces exposed to the sun-- perfect for drying coffee rather than for trucks to drive on. The coffee grown here has largely been consumed here and what has been **traded has been taken to the nearest city of Arba Minch and mixed** in with the other coffees from this mountain area.

The Marsha's land has enough coffee that there are **unique seeds on trees that have never been picked**. The land behind Marsha Aday's house is overflowing with green trees toppling over each other as they stretch up Yero Wallo. The mountain is the final obstacle the Amaro people surmounted when, centuries ago, they came here from Gondar, Ethiopia's Camelot, hundreds of miles to the north, to settle here, in the most fertile part of Ethiopia. This is a place where coffee has been sealed off for so long because, as Marsha Aday says, **there is no way for the cherries to leave the trees**.

Marsha Aday had **never been interviewed about coffee before**, and neither, to the best of his knowledge, had his ancestors. But yet he was adamant that his tribe's coffee was the best in Ethiopia. I have never met anyone who thought differently-- about their own coffee, that is. We were speaking through a translator and by the time Marsha Aday told me his coffee was the best in Ethiopia, three times, he had learned how to say it in English himself.

But Marsha Aday might be right. And he knows what this would mean for him and Ethiopia. Coffee, he says, **"puts our entire country on the world map."**

Marsh Aday and I had spent an hour together by this time and neither of us wanted it to end. He was so excited to speak about his coffee that he offered to slaughter an ox for me, but then we both decided it was a bit late in the day to go to all of that trouble. So instead, Marsha offered to dance.

He left me to go inside his hut and returned wearing a headdress, a cape made from the mane of a lion, a necklace, and a shield and sword. Here he is:



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This was a pre-coffee dance. Imagine what it would be like post-coffee. Marsha Aday finished his dance and welcomed me into his home to find out. We began the ritual of a full coffee ceremony just as thunder echoed from the east. Inside the families home, coffee was taking over all of my senses. Gete roasted two handfuls of dried beans on in an open pan, and I listened to the thunk of the mortar and pestle as she ground them next. Myrth was tossed over the hot coals and sweetly filled up the earthen chamber. My eyes watered from the smoke, my stomach growled, my mouth watered in anticipation of what might be the best coffee in the world.

Gete poured the grounds into a jebena- a thick bellied and thin necked clay pot--and set it on the coals to boil.

I took a deep breath, thunder crashed down and lightening filled the home with a instant glow and then went dark. I took one more breath, held it in my belly

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And then I ran from Marsha Aday's home to try and escape the flash flood. I never had that coffee.



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70% of the land in Ethiopia lies between 2,000 and 8,000 feet in elevation. The soil there is rich and dark and volcanic. It is the perfect place for coffee. The images we are used to seeing about Ethiopia?

A photograph of a caravan of camels walking along a dirt road in a dry, hilly landscape. The camels are carrying large blue and white loads. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting sunset or sunrise. In the background, there are several prominent, flat-topped mountains. The ground is dry and rocky with sparse vegetation.

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Dry, barren, desert? That's only 1/3 of Ethiopia. The rest is a forested jungle where **humanity began 4 million years ago** and coffee showed up in legend shortly thereafter, and in fact in the 6th Century. All of this is Ethiopia.



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Ethiopia has over 10,000 varieties of coffee. It is where **coffee Arabica- the coffee that accounts for 65% of the world's consumption**-- originated. *Arabica* is a misnomer because the Arabs were the first to cultivate coffee and Carl Linneaus, the Swedish creator of taxonomy, named the coffee plant *Coffea arabica* in the mid 1700's (1753) based on this association-- and Ethiopians have never been able to get the name back. But they do have the coffee-- it grows wild throughout this **1.1 Million square kilometer country**-- twice the size of France or Texas. It's been cultivated, traded, and consumed, consumed, consumed for centuries. And still, there are **thousands of new tastes we've never tasted still lying in waiting in the forests.**



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- (PAUSE)

Think about that. So much coffee, so many local varieties, with intense, unique flavors of floral, spice, fruit and others, and most of it is **either drunk on the spot or thrown in a vat to be combined with hundreds** of other varieties and made into average coffee.

That's a **lost opportunity**. It might even be a tragedy. Imagine what would happen if we started to talk about Ethiopian coffee varieties like we do the **chateaux of French wine**. This is not a big ask for the specialty coffee industry-- rather, it's what this industry does best. But... what if we go further and not just ask about the effect on coffee but the effect on Ethiopia?

Financially speaking, small-lot coffee processing and quality differentiation have the potential to change Ethiopia. If Marsha Aday's coffee is remarkable and he and all of Ethiopian farmers get just 10 cents more for each pound of coffee they sell, Ethiopia would have **\$60 Million additional dollars in annual income**.



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Ethiopia is the world's 8th poorest nation. It holds the greatest diversities of one of the globe's richest crops. **That crop accounts for 60% of its foreign earnings.** But I don't think we should all just pay more for Ethiopian coffee out of the goodness of our hearts. I think we should pay more for the coffees that deserve their higher price point. Coffee like wine. It's almost that simple. Reward the work it takes for everyone-- farmer, miller, exporter, roaster-- to distinguish these flavors and possibilities.** Instead of 10 cents to *every* farmer, how about 20 and 30, \$1 for the best coffees? How about a bigger impact for the greatest product?

I doubt many in this room would disagree with me. So what I want to ask you all to do is take the **NEXT** step.

Let's go beyond coffee, beyond commodity, and to culture. Let's start with Ethiopia and then grow to Costa Rica, Rwanda, Panama, Papua New Guinea and beyond.

Why should we start with Ethiopia? Because it is the epitome of going to origin. And it's a country that can benefit greatly from a better story. **Over 1 Billion cups of coffee are drunk every day in the world.** That is connection with Ethiopia if I've ever seen one. Let's make that connection deeper. Let's make that connection deeper **and change the effect of this:**



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Drought, famine and poverty are consummate negative trifecta descriptors for Ethiopia. This has to do, in part, with a legacy of all three, but it also equally has to do with the way in which our world has fixated on those descriptors for this region. Last summer, when my book *Coffee Story Ethiopia* came out, the Horn of Africa was in the middle of a cataclysmic famine-- **and I watched images of death, starvation, and crisis fill big and small screens while I shared pages of abundance and possibility and worked to intersect the two versions of Ethiopia.**



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I told stories like this one:

Picture This: You are devoutly religious. You live in the land of the arc of the covenant. Your country is the birthplace of coffee. And your god says you can't drink coffee.

This is Gebru Kidame. When Gebru was a child he was told that if he drank coffee he would not make it to paradise. The threat came with proof in the following story: According to legend, coffee was the only thing in the world that did not mourn Jesus' death. Gebru told me that when Jesus was killed, the land made great sacrifices in mourning -- the rivers were dry, the wind still, and the trees were barren. There were no flowers, seeds, or leaves.



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Except for coffee. Coffee kept its bright red cherries and plush green leaves, and even sprouted new from seeds in the ground. Coffee was the only plant that didn't cry for Jesus.

Gebru told me this story while we shared a cup of coffee. The irony was not lost on him. When he became an adult he defied the word of his family and started drinking coffee-- all around Tigray, the northern region where he lives, most others did the same.

Coffee is about culture in Ethiopia, and culture often involves religion at some point there. The rules, rituals, and customs for coffee follow deeply along lines set by Ethiopia's varied peoples. This is a country of 80 languages and over 200 dialects that all call coffee a variation of "Buna." How buna is used, however, has endless variations.



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This boy, who has his homework as a hat, can either drink some of the strongest coffee you've ever tasted or be forbidden from it-- depending on what tribe he is from in Ethiopia. Coffee can broker peace, dictate a marriage, solve minor criminal cases and more. It's complex, it's messy, and it's all authentically Ethiopia.

I spent the majority of the last year touring the US and speaking to public -- ie non-coffee industry audiences -- about coffee and Ethiopia, about drought and possibility, about hunger and abundance. People always wanted to know more. Every Ethiopian I met then and meet now also wanted to tell me more, and to learn more. And no matter what coffee story they want to share or which one they love to listen to most I get the same question again and again when a new Ethiopian friend finds out I write about their country-- are you telling a good story, or a bad story?

I tell them the truth-- that I am trying to use coffee to tell a thicker story.

I need your help to do this.

A photograph of a smiling woman with dark hair, wearing a white top and a red sash, holding a small white coffee cup with a colorful design. The background is blurred and warm-toned.

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For me, Ethiopia is a constant reminder that life is better complicated-- thicker. My involvement started simply- of course-- with a free latte.

I was in my hometown, Boulder, Colorado. I was headed to my usual coffee shop when the rival place across the street grabbed my attention because it was offering free lattes.

So I went across the street.

Now would be a good time to tell you that I'm lactose intolerant.

So what was I doing, accepting free lattes?

It might have had something to do with the man who was standing on the other side of the counter at the rival café-- he was pretty handsome.

Anyway, I sat down with my latte and started eavesdropping on the conversation of one of the owners and a barrista behind the bar, wondering why I was there, when they started talking about Ethiopia.

It seemed they were headed to Ethiopia in search of the genetic root of a rare coffee that garnered \$150/pound.

Once I knew that, it was pretty simple. I looked at them and asked, "Do you need a journalist?"

Three months later, I was in Ethiopia.



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Then I was an educated consumer to the best of my abilities. But I showed up in Ethiopia and realized I had a grasp on .03% of the coffee world. It was big and daunting and **too easy to want to hold on to one singular truth like fair trade or organic or local** or commercial, and so I turned away from coffee and toward a different part of Ethiopia. One in which I was far more comfortable.



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In my other life I am a professional climber. I saw these towers and knew I had to climb in Ethiopia. Before long an Ethiopian publishing company caught wind of my plan and asked me to write a book about my expedition. It was going to be amazing-- I'd climb, I'd tell a story of the greatness of climbing in Ethiopia, and, as the publisher put it, **Millions** of climbers would flock to Ethiopia instantaneously thereafter.

Are there any climbers in the group? Anyone know any climbers? Is anyone aware of the millions who flocked to Ethiopia after my book? Hmm, just what I thought.



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Doesn't matter the result-- in the execution I was inspired. Who would not want to "save a country" via rock climbing? So I got right to it and hopped up onto one of those towers, shoving my hands and feet the sandstone cracks, and climbed one of them. But then it got complicated.

A young girl with dark, curly hair is shown in profile, looking towards the left. She is wearing a light-colored, textured shawl over a green top. A small child is strapped to her back. The background is a rugged, rocky landscape with tall, thin rock formations under a clear blue sky. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

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Because the towers were on the whole, horribly soft and scary and unsafe, and none of us wanted to climb another, **and** I was supposed to write a story about the glory of adventure in Ethiopia.

This was supposed to be the safe and known route for me, and I realized that to finish that project I had to learn how to be **comfortable in the middle**- the really scary place where some things make sense, and some never do. Where **complication is the norm**. Where the **adventure potential** of a land is as great as its need for **maternal health care** **and** both are equal to the attention people are paying to more progressive education **throughout the country**.

This is the tower we climbed. This is a 13 year old girl with her 4 month old child. Down the road is a new primary school with some of the most innovative curriculum I have seen in the world. There is no way I could tell a story of one without the other two.



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Back in 2006 I never thought I would spend much more time in Ethiopia. The climbing was not great. It was far away from my life in the US, and there were more places I wanted to go in the world. But after my book *Vertical Ethiopia* came out and I started **telling the story** I saw people who were climbers, non climbers, travelers, thinkers, -- just interested people wanting to know more about Ethiopia.

I would always mention that it was the connection to coffee as what brought me there. And after I talked or after people read the book, they would always ask me, what about the coffee? **Is there more?** I saw something then. **Ethiopia** is powerful in the **global consciousness**. We've been taught to pay attention to it from the ancient Axumite Empire, to Haile Selassie, from it being the only nation never colonized in Africa, to the famine in 1984 and Live Aid and We are the World, from it being the largest recipient of western aid in Sub-Saharan Africa to it in many ways creating the current definitions of aid and now sustainable development in our world. With all of this to consider, it's not much to go one step further and say that Ethiopia may even be the place that **can teach us to be in that middle place as global citizens**.

Anyone here have kids? Kids who have lost a tooth recently? Or maybe you have started losing your teeth? What does it feel like? Yes, it hurts, and it feels good, right?

I talk a lot about mental tooth wiggling. It hurts, it feels good, we keep doing it. I think we can do that with the way we see the world. Identity politics are serious business, especially when it come to branding a nation. Today, in this era, we can do better. Let's **start with one of the places that has the greatest hold on our conscious and stands to gain the greatest with a shift**. And let's do it with coffee.

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Several hundred miles from where I was climbing a story is told that Bishop Betre Mariam established a settlement on the Zegge Peninsula in 1307, on the northeast corner of Lake Tana.

The inhabitants gathered and asked Abuna Mariam what crops they should live on. As an answer, he broke his prayer stick into three and planted each piece in the ground.



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The next day, three crops had grown – coffee, hops, and lemon. The Bishop made the people promise that they would always grow those crops and no others. 700 years later, they still do. And then, as well as now, they transport all of these crops, along with wood, on top of ephemeral Papyrus boats that expire every three weeks and require a replacement be built for the 6-8 hour journey across Lake Tana to market.



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Kaffa Coffee Qahwa



Coffee origin stories abound in Ethiopia.

How many people here have heard of Khaldi?... I thought so.

Khaldi, depending on who you talk to is either Christian or Muslim, a delinquent or a monk, a prankster or a scholar. Either way, Kahaldi saw goats frolicking near a mysterious red fruit and wanted to frolic himself. This tale has been told so many times that today it's everywhere in Ethiopia, though in the 1900's when Paul Merab traveled in Ethiopia from the Republic of Georgia, he could find no one who'd heard the story. I've personally seen sheep eat lots of coffee, but never a goat.

No matter which story you listen to about Khaldi he is usually from the kingdom of Kaffa and at some point coffee is brought the to world and when people ask what to call the bean Khaldi says it comes from Kaffa, which is misunderstood to be that it is Kaffa. It's a great story, onomonpeically, but the truth is that coffee is actually from the arabic word Qahwa- wine made from coffee 17th century.

Then there's **Prophet Mohammed's** grandchildren, who were one day being bathed by their mother. When she finished the day's bath she tossed it out the house and the next day coffee beans sprouted from their bath water. Those beans were then used for prayers, beginning the Muslim use of coffee beans in ceremony. That story dates to the middle seventh century.

There's a story of a remarkably **good smelling ox who was "olfactorally" blessed** from the coffee he was eating.

There is no one right story. There doesn't have to be.



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Throughout Ethiopia coffee represent luck, peace, and resolution. The majority of Ethiopia drinks coffee in a three-stage process, starting with an initial dark brew of coffee and each successive stage being the result of the same grounds re-brewed with new water.

The first cup is the strongest, and it's the most **propitious** time to come into the house where the coffee is being consumed. Marriage proposals have been made – or not made – depending on when during the ceremony a person entered the house. If you arrive during the **second cup your fate is uncertain** and you are treated with suspicion. A **third cup arrival is peace**-- or so it is in Amaro Kele.



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Each time I go to Ethiopia I have to relearn how to take the time to consume three rounds of coffee. Coffee in this way is a gathering and an **ever deepening conversation**. The three cup ritual can take up to 1-2 hours, and can often happen 3 times a day. And that is not accounting for the time to roast and grind the beans. There is an ever-growing culture of espresso and fast cups of coffees in cities, and even in rural towns three-day drives from cities you can find Italian espresso machines left over from the 1940 occupation, but true Ethiopian coffee expression is rooted in the longer three-cup process. **It is how life has been brokered here and expressed for centuries.**

Consider this: **There are parts of Ethiopia where the language spoken can change 4 times in a three mile stretch. Difference is always present in Ethiopia.** I've never been a country where so many different people speak so easily about so many other different types of people. Does that mean everyone in Ethiopia loves each other? Not at all, but there is an acknowledgement of complication that is elegantly expressed here. It has to be-- **it's 60% christian and 40% muslim** and largely harmonious. Is this all because of coffee? I can't say. **But I can tell you that taking the time to explore and converse has been a part of Ethiopia for as long as its varied peoples have been cohabiting in one of the world's oldest lands.**

So: What if we as an industry used coffee to remind us to do this ourselves-- to have a 3 cup conversation-- to be in that middle place of complexity?



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If I could, I would tell you more stories about coffee as proof of absolute happiness, of coffee husks and leaves, and of coffee's twisted etymology to take with you and share with others. But we don't have the time, and that's not the only thing I'm here to do today. I'm here to encourage us all to share more of these stories with the coffee consumer, and then, most importantly, to link those stories to a greater global dialog.

Ethiopia is not always an easy place for the coffee industry. That's a whole other conversation. But it is **the** place where we can most organically start to increase our true global impact-- beyond coffee. It is a time like this-- when it has been the most difficult to get those coffees out, but when tides are changing, when the coffee industry is being pushed to its total limit in regards to Ethiopia--when our collective action can have the biggest impact. So let's rise to the challenge and be part of a deepening conversation about Ethiopia and go beyond drought, famine, and poverty.



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If coffee can show a deeper connection to the current events, culture and happenings **beyond** coffee, then it will be a more vibrant part of everyone's lives. And after all, coffee is most people's main connection to these faraway places. Let's make that connection deeper. A caveat: we don't have to do this with answers. We can do it just by showing the links, what is interesting, what is happening. Let's embrace the complexity of it all and show ourselves, as coffee people, to be leading advocates of a complex world.



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I am an optimist. I think **we all want greater points of connection** and understanding. I think these points can be complicated -- I want them to be complicated. After all this is what specialty coffee is ultimately about-- complexity in the cup that should go hand in hand with complexity in the world.

So let's go beyond the farmer, beyond the coffee. Let's go to culture and all of the rich complications. Every time you see a cup of coffee- it's your reminder. And that means we are all going to be blessed with endless reminders.

I'm going to end by asking you to join me in doing two things: Professionally- ask how you or your company can engage the in the culture of origin coffee countries both with the coffee culture and the life and events outside of coffee.

Personally:

Let's go further in the world and use coffee as a reminder to have 3 cup conversations. Take the time, jump into the hard subjects, and pay attention to what you hear. That conversation doesn't have to be about coffee – it can be about anything you are inspired by or afraid of. Dive in, and then hold the line of complication and enjoy it. \ Let's agree to start connecting with people over 3-cup conversations. **Let's agree to deepen the human conversation.**

Personally, professionally, what I am asking us all to do is go bigger. Let's be the connection. Coffee **can** change the world.

Thank you. Please come find me later today- I'd love to speak more about this now or in the future with you, with your colleagues, employees, and customers. Our world is hungry for complex connections. That is exactly where coffee should come in.



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I'm Majka Burhardt. Thanks Very Much .

-put up on applause