
Book Review

Sonia Sotomayor: Role Model of Empathy and Purposeful Ambition

Reviewing *My Beloved World* by Sonia Sotomayor (2013)

Rebecca K. Lee[†]

It is clear that Justice Sonia Sotomayor takes seriously her roles as both a U.S. Supreme Court Justice and judicial role model, as reflected in her purpose and message in writing her memoir, *My Beloved World*.¹ As an individual who rose from challenging beginnings to a federal district court judgeship and ultimately to the Supreme Court, she expressly acknowledges that she is a public role model and embraces this responsibility by aiming to make herself accessible to a wide audience.² She does this by sharing in book form her life story before becoming a judge, and the experiences and influences that shaped her as she made her way to her initial judicial post. Offering a deeply personal history of one's life may not be expected of a Justice, given that on the bench Sotomayor focuses on hearing other people's stories rather than on telling her own. In light of this role reversal, in the preface to the book she notes that although in her judicial capacity she judges the actions of others, she realizes that she herself "will be judged as a human being by what readers find" in her book.³

[†] Associate Professor of Law, Thomas Jefferson School of Law. B.A., University of Chicago; M.P.P., Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government; J.D., Georgetown University Law Center. My thanks to Shruti Rana, Sandra Park, and Therese Leung for their very helpful thoughts on this book review. Copyright (c) 2013 by Rebecca K. Lee.

1. SONIA SOTOMAYOR, *MY BELOVED WORLD* (2013).
2. Jodi Kantor, *On Book-Tour Circuit, Sotomayor Sees a New Niche for a Justice*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 3, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/04/us/politics/book-tour-rock-star-sotomayor-sees-an-even-higher-calling.html?pagewanted=all>.
3. SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at viii.

But as someone who was thrust into the public spotlight as a Supreme Court nominee and now Justice, Sotomayor takes the opportunity to share the story of her own life journey, told in a straightforward prose, thoughtful as it is succinct. Seeing her experiences as instructive for others who want to know how she achieved all that she has, she reveals scenes of her life from early childhood into adulthood with touching vulnerability and reflective candor. Coincidentally, the opportunities she describes being able to pursue as the beneficiary of affirmative action in college at Princeton⁴ provide further meaning to the interests raised in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*,⁵ a case recently decided by the Supreme Court that kept intact, as earlier held in *Grutter v. Bollinger*,⁶ the constitutionality of the use of race in university admissions to achieve a diverse student body, subject to strict scrutiny with the necessary judicial review.⁷ As Sotomayor's example compellingly demonstrates, when one works hard for and makes the most of opportunities broadened through affirmative action, such opening of doors does change one's life and also informs the perspectives of others with whom one comes into contact.⁸ Keeping in mind the real benefits that flow from chances earned and chances given, Sotomayor's story serves as a hopeful reminder that one's starting point need not limit one's aspirations.

Although her memoir ends just as she begins her career as

4. *Id.* at 119–37, 144–49, 161–64 (recounting her undergraduate experiences and opportunities at Princeton).

5. 133 S. Ct. 2411 (2013). In *Fisher*, a white college applicant to the University of Texas at Austin sued the University after being rejected for admission, arguing that the school's use of race in admissions violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment under the U.S. Constitution. The University in response asserted that it permissibly engaged in race-conscious admissions to reap the educational benefits of having a diverse student body, consistent with the Supreme Court's decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

6. *See generally* 539 U.S. 306.

7. *Fisher*, 133 S. Ct. at 2419–22. But the Supreme Court in *Fisher* concluded that the appellate court below did not apply the correct strict scrutiny standard as laid out in *Grutter*, and thus vacated that court's decision affirming the district court's grant of summary judgment in favor of the University and remanded the case for further consideration. *Id.* at 2421–22. *See generally* Rebecca K. Lee, *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin: Promoting Full Judicial Review and Process in Applying Strict Scrutiny*, 4 HOUS. L. REV. HLRE 33 (2013).

8. *See* SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at 133–52, 161–64 (describing how her college experience contributed to her future success, and how she and her Princeton classmates—who came from very different backgrounds—learned valuable things from one another).

a judge, we are given a window into her way of thinking, perceiving, and feeling that offers us a sense of how she may continue to approach her work as a Supreme Court Justice. For instance, she raises the significance of perspective-taking—or empathy—in understanding others’ situations and viewing the larger world. The relevance of empathy for judging became a point of controversy during her Senate confirmation hearings,⁹ after President Barack Obama mentioned empathy as a desirable trait to have in a nominee for the Supreme Court.¹⁰ During her hearings, Sotomayor, who was Obama’s first nominee for the Court, had to defend against charges from Republican senators that she would be less than objective when deciding cases; as a result, she tried to dissociate herself from the image of an empathetic jurist.¹¹ But no longer constrained by the politics that dominated her judicial confirmation proceedings, Sotomayor reintroduces the importance of empathy in life and in work in her book. Her faith in the law, coupled with her empathic understanding of others and their individual situations, conveys yet a further hopeful picture—not only of “happy endings” already reached,¹² but also of her ongoing work on the bench and contributions to come.¹³

Part I of this book review discusses the importance of having a role model as well as serving as one, something that Sotomayor realized in finding her own professional path. Part II explores her recognition of the value of empathy and emotion as a way of communicating with and understanding others, even as she remains influenced by the traditional view that separates emotion from rational decisionmaking in the law.

9. See generally *Confirmation Hearing on the Nomination of Hon. Sonia Sotomayor, To be An Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States Before the S. Comm. on the Judiciary*, 111th Cong. (2009), available at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-111shrg56940/html/CHRG-111shrg56940.htm>; see also Rebecca K. Lee, *Judging Judges: Empathy as the Litmus Test for Impartiality*, 82 U. CIN. L. REV. (forthcoming Winter 2014) (discussing the empathy question raised during Sotomayor’s Senate confirmation hearings for appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court).

10. Alec MacGillis, *Obama Expands on Criteria for New Justice*, WASH. POST, May 24, 2009, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-05-24/news/36782429_1_common-touch-common-sense-federal-appeals-court.

11. See generally *Confirmation Hearing on the Nomination of Hon. Sonia Sotomayor*, *supra* note 9.

12. SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at viii (“Most essentially, my purpose in writing is to make my hopeful example accessible. People who live in difficult circumstances need to know that happy endings are possible.”).

13. See Lee, *supra* note 9 (arguing that empathetic judging is required for impartial adjudication).

And in further thinking about Sotomayor's story and message about pursuing her highest aspirations, Part III examines the question of ambition in striving for one's dreams, and the need to infuse ambition with a sense of purpose and service when directed toward positions of public authority and influence.

I. CONCRETE ROLE MODELS

Sotomayor's interest in a career in the law was piqued early.¹⁴ Although she had not yet personally come into contact with any legal professionals, the child Sotomayor discovered that she liked the workings of the legal and sleuthing mind as depicted on television shows and in fiction books.¹⁵ It is remarkable that she, without access to lawyers or many professional role models in her family and community, aspired as a youth to become not just a lawyer but a judge, long before entering law school and before anyone planted this thought in her mind.¹⁶ Her ambitions came naturally to her, but having fictional role models was not the same thing as having real-life ones in order to anchor her dream in reality. It was not until law school that she found her first in-person example of someone whom she aspired to model herself after in her chosen profession, someone who also resembled her in ways that made her goal seem more possible than before. As she put it:

When a young person, even a gifted one, grows up without proximate living examples of what she may aspire to become—whether lawyer, scientist, artist, or leader in any realm—her goal remains abstract. Such models as appear in books or on the news, however inspiring or revered, are ultimately too remote to be real, let alone influential. But a role model in the flesh provides more than an inspiration; his or her very existence is confirmation of possibilities one may have every reason to doubt, saying, “Yes, someone like me can do this.” By the time I got to Yale, I had met a few successful lawyers, usually in their role as professors. José [Cabranes], the first I had the chance to observe up close, not only transcended the academic role but also managed to uphold his identity as a Puerto Rican, serving vigorously in both worlds.¹⁷

14. SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at 79–81 (discussing her emerging interest in the law as a child, discovered while reading about fictional detective Nancy Drew in books and watching fictional lawyer Perry Mason on television).

15. *See id.*

16. *See id.* at 81 (describing how she would eagerly watch the Perry Mason show and think, “I could be a great lawyer, I decided. But a part of me, I knew, would have preferred to be the judge rather than Perry Mason. At the time, with no knowledge of what either aspiration might entail, the one didn't seem any more outlandish than the other.”).

17. *Id.* at 178.

Sotomayor was fortunate to have eventually found her professional role model—an actual person she could relate to, interact with, and study closely. Role models can be hard to locate, whether near or far, for individuals who seek to accomplish but who do not see aspects of themselves or their backgrounds represented in the images of those who have achieved success. Sotomayor wrote this memoir in no small part to help fill that void.¹⁸ Having experienced the benefit of meeting role models in person, of seeing how they conduct themselves in everyday life, she now wants to serve as a model for others who might be able to relate to her and her story. By sharing her own dream of becoming a judge, which she nurtured long before she became one, she wants to awaken this idea in the minds of others and let them know it is possible to reach beyond the narrow expectations of one's initial circumstances.¹⁹

And it does seem that Sotomayor especially wants young people to consider a career in her mold as a judge, although the opportunity to become a Supreme Court Justice of course is rare.²⁰ It perhaps makes sense that she would want to encourage others to take the path she knows best—particularly those who are members of underrepresented groups, given the largely homogeneous make-up of the federal and state benches.²¹ But

18. *See id.* at vii-viii.

19. *See id.* at viii. (“As I tell in these pages, the dream I first followed was to become a judge, which itself seemed far-fetched until it actually happened. The idea of my becoming a Supreme Court Justice—which, indeed, as a goal would inevitably elude the vast majority of aspirants—never occurred to me except as the remotest of fantasies. But experience has taught me that you cannot value dreams according to the odds of their coming true. Their real value is in stirring within us the will to aspire.”).

20. *Id.*

21. For instance, on the federal bench only 18.7% of all currently sitting federal judges are racial and ethnic minorities. *History of the Federal Judiciary: Biographical Directory of Federal Judges*, FEDERAL JUDICIAL CENTER, <http://www.fjc.gov/history/home.nsf/page/judges.html> (last visited Nov. 6, 2013) (follow “Select research categories” hyperlink; then limit query to all sitting judges) (indicating that there are 1,334 sitting judges at the federal level); *History of the Federal Judiciary: Biographical Directory of Federal Judges*, FEDERAL JUDICIAL CENTER, <http://www.fjc.gov/history/home.nsf/page/judges.html> (last visited Nov. 6, 2013) (follow “Select research categories” hyperlink; then limit query to all sitting judges by race or ethnicity) (indicating that of all sitting judges at the federal level, 132 are African American, 1 is American Indian, 25 are Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 92 are Hispanic). Also at the federal level, only 23.5% of all currently sitting federal judges are women and only 6.1% are women of color. *History of the Federal Judiciary: Biographical Directory of Federal Judges*, FEDERAL JUDICIAL CENTER, <http://www>

she stops short of actually explaining how one becomes a federal judicial nominee, perhaps because in her case she was readily presented with this particular opportunity.²² Likewise, she also does not discuss the political planning and lobbying that may accompany the process of trying to get nominated.²³ Moreover, it would be fair to say that not everyone's calling is in the legal realm, let alone in the judicial realm, and to better divine a person's career fit, it may be more helpful to encourage individuals to explore "the why"—that is, the substance—behind one's professed dream, rather than simply deciding "the what" with its focus on status and title. Nonetheless, the larger message found in Sotomayor's memoir concerns the steps one can take to construct a self-made or alternative route to one's wished-for destination, and the importance of finding sources of support and guidance along the way. In this regard, the broader themes that emerge from Sotomayor's life account will speak to readers with a range of aspirations, both legal and non-legal, and provide reasons for hope and optimism for all alike.

II. EMPATHY AND EMOTION, IN LIFE AND IN THE LAW

In addition to sharing her in-depth perspective on events in her life, Sotomayor shows that she tries also to envision the world as it appears to others, taking into consideration their individual life circumstances. She describes that as a teen, she observed how a streetside fruit-cart vendor let a police officer take two shopping bags filled with fruit without paying.²⁴ When she asked the vendor why he did not want payment from the officer in exchange for the produce, he replied that he had to give the fruit in order to be allowed to sell it.²⁵ This vendor, who had a makeshift cart in a crime-ridden neighborhood, knew that he needed the police's protection and permission to contin-

.fjc.gov/history/home.nsf/page/judges.html (last visited Nov. 6, 2013) (follow "Select research categories" hyperlink; then limit query to all sitting judges by gender and race or ethnicity) (indicating that out of a total of 1,334 judges who currently sit on the federal bench, 313 are female and that among the female judges, 44 are African American, 0 are American Indian, 10 are Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 27 are Hispanic).

22. See SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at 286–94 (describing how she was given the application form to apply for a federal district court judgeship and urged to fill out the application, and then contacted for an interview with New York Senator Patrick Moynihan's judicial selection committee soon after submitting her application, leading to her selection as a judicial nominee).

23. *See id.*

24. *Id.* at 95.

25. *Id.*

ue his modest street business.²⁶ But it troubled Sotomayor that the vendor, to be able to make a living, had to readily give away some of his fruit free of charge.²⁷ Thinking about the vendor's small supply of goods and his impoverished circumstances, she wondered why the officer could not imagine what the loss of those bags of fruit would mean for the vendor's income that day.²⁸

Sotomayor understood the harm that could result when one failed to empathetically consider how one's actions would likely affect another. This lesson was demonstrated to her again as an adolescent, when working with her aunt at a clothing store for a summer. One evening at the store, she saw her aunt and other female coworkers entertain themselves by making prank calls, dialing unknown numbers from the phonebook.²⁹ If they reached a woman on the other line, one of them would pretend to be having an affair with the woman's husband, laugh at the woman's reaction, and then hang up.³⁰ Sotomayor, viewing their activity as "pointlessly cruel," afterward asked her aunt, "Titi, can't you imagine the pain you're causing in that house?"³¹ Her aunt responded, "It was just a joke, Sonia. Nobody meant any harm,"³² but Sotomayor again wondered how her aunt could not imagine.³³ She then made the following realization: "I was fifteen years old when I understood how it is that things break down: people can't imagine someone else's point of view."³⁴ As these episodes show, she began to demonstrate at a young age her ability to empathize, to imagine what another person thinks and feels, in relating to others in society. And if people do not imagine another's point of view, it usually is not because they cannot, but because they do not try.

Empathy may have come more easily to Sotomayor, who, while growing up, learned to carefully listen to and observe others in order to discern what they were trying to communi-

26. *Id.* at 94–95.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* at 96–97 ("How could the cop not imagine what two large shopping bags full of fruit might measure in a poor vendor's life, maybe a whole day's earnings? Was it so hard to see himself in the other man's shoes?").

29. *Id.* at 96.

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.* *Titi* is a term of endearment for "aunt." *Id.* at 312.

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

34. SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at 97.

cate.³⁵ She understood early on that what an individual is truly thinking or feeling can be picked up through more than what is said, and that emotions must also be taken into account.³⁶ As an adult, she became adept at “translating the mysteries of other people’s minds” and “open[ing] [her friends’] eyes to what the worlds looked like to their husband, their boss, or their mother.”³⁷ And as a Justice, her empathic ability continues to inform her approach to judicial decisionmaking, at least to some extent. In assessing a case, she recognizes the need to view each individual’s situation according to its particular circumstances, and to give each individual due concern for her or his views, apart from her own perspective.³⁸ As she puts it:

I have never accepted the argument that principle is compromised by judging each situation on its own merits, with due appreciation of the idiosyncrasy of human motivation and fallibility. Concern for individuals, the imperative of treating them with dignity and respect for their ideas and needs, regardless of one’s own views—these too are surely principles and as worthy as any of being deemed inviolable. To remain open to understandings—perhaps even to principles—as yet not determined is the least that learning requires, its barest threshold.³⁹

Related to her empathic approach to understanding others, Sotomayor also came to realize the value of emotion in reaching and persuading people.⁴⁰ But she seems to make an unclear distinction between emotion and logic, and in this respect maintains the traditional and not entirely accurate view of rational thought and emotional engagement as belonging to separate spheres.⁴¹ When describing her early training as an advocate while on the high school debate and extemporaneous speech team, she saw that the team coach “was utterly untainted by emotion” in making his arguments and admired his “unflappable, rational cool.”⁴² But she took note of emotion’s place in advocacy as well, further observing that “[c]onstructing a chain of logic was one thing; building a chain of emotions required a different understanding.”⁴³

35. *See id.* at 111.

36. *See id.*

37. *Id.* at 279.

38. *See id.* at 301.

39. *Id.*

40. *See id.* at 210.

41. *See Lee, supra* note 9 (explaining the conventional view of rationality as something separate from and devoid of emotionality).

42. SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at 109–10.

43. *Id.* at 111.

Later, as an Assistant District Attorney (DA) in the Manhattan DA's Office, she learned to effectively use emotion to reach jurors during trial, a discovery that "amounted to nothing less than a breakthrough" and allowed her to never lose a case—specifically, never lose a case by acquittal—from that point forward.⁴⁴ She candidly reveals, though, that as a prosecutor she was perceived as being rather harsh when conducting cross-examinations, explaining that her questioning tended to take on that character when she found herself concentrating and thinking quickly.⁴⁵ Because of her easy ability to focus with a laser beam-like intensity, useful in many instances but at times disconcerting to those unfamiliar with her style, she continually tries to be mindful of how she may come across to others when absorbed in a task.⁴⁶

As gleaned from her observations and actions, Sotomayor impressively demonstrates a high degree of emotional intelligence in life and in aspects of her work. Yet when it comes to the job of judging, she perhaps remains somewhat conflicted about the relevance of emotional understanding in legal decisionmaking, referring to the "figure of the judge" as one who presides over the law's purposes "with dispassionate wisdom."⁴⁷ Emotion is not actually absent in judicial assessment, however, and nor should it be for impartial and full adjudication.⁴⁸ Recognizing this, it would be better to unequivocally acknowledge and embrace emotion as a source of information to improve decisionmaking by legal actors, including by judges.⁴⁹

Empathizing in particular includes both thinking and feeling elements,⁵⁰ and, as Sotomayor displays in her own life, requires exercising one's capacity to imagine another's situation and viewpoint from where that person stands.⁵¹ This type of

44. *Id.* at 210.

45. *Id.* at 267.

46. *Id.*

47. *Id.* at 255.

48. Lee, *supra* note 9.

49. *Id.*

50. See Lian T. Rameson et al., *The Neural Correlates of Empathy: Experience, Automaticity, and Prosocial Behavior*, 24 *J. OF COGNITIVE NEUROSCIENCE* 235, 235 (2011); Jean Decety & Philip L. Jackson, *The Functional Architecture of Human Empathy*, 3 *BEHAVIORAL AND COGNITIVE NEUROSCIENCE REVIEWS* 71, 73 (June 2004) (explaining that empathy requires the ability to both emotionally and cognitively understand another person's experience).

51. Lee, *supra* note 9; Thomas B. Colby, *In Defense of Judicial Empathy*, 96 *Minn. L. Rev.* 1944, 1958 (2012) (viewing empathy as "the ability to see a situation from someone else's perspective—combined with the emotional ca-

imaginative understanding is needed for objective judging because it allows for full consideration of all sides in the dispute—especially the side the judge does not identify with as easily.⁵² The outcome in a given case will depend on the relevant facts in light of the applicable law, but to fairly and completely comprehend the facts, judicial empathy must be used to see all there is at stake for the parties involved.⁵³ Empathetic understanding of individuals' different life experiences is important in order to understand the facts they share in court, and serves as the antidote to one's otherwise potentially partial vision when judging.⁵⁴ Rather than strive for "dispassionate wisdom," our judicial figures ought to strive for a wide-ranging wisdom that aims to consider different perspectives with feeling and imagination.

III. AMBITION AND PURPOSE

Sotomayor's career goals undoubtedly reveal her ambition and larger life purpose. In reflecting upon this, one might ask a related but general question, broadly applied: what is the purpose of ambition? Does ambition lead to overconfidence, when instead a good dose of humility is needed, especially when one aims for a position of power and influence? Rather than embrace ambition without much thought, Sotomayor considers this question with respect to herself:

I know that my competitive spirit—my drive to win, my fear of failure, my desire constantly to outdo myself—bubbles up from very deep within my personality. It's rarely directed at others; I compete with myself. But if ambition only feeds the ego and self-regard, what does it avail?⁵⁵

capacity to understand and feel that person's emotions in that situation"); Lynne N. Henderson, *Legality and Empathy*, 85 MICH. L. REV. 1576, 1578–79 (1987) (asserting that empathy involves "understanding the experience or situation of another, both affectively and cognitively, often achieved by imagining oneself to be in the position of the other").

52. Lee, *supra* note 9.

53. See Martha Minow, *Justice Engendered*, 101 HARV. L. REV. 10, 60 (1987) ("The process of looking through other perspectives does not itself yield an answer, but it may lead to an answer different from the one that the judge would otherwise have reached."); Catherine Gage O'Grady, *Empathy and Perspective in Judging: The Honorable William C. Canby, Jr.*, 33 ARIZ. ST. L.J. 4, 10 (2001) ("Empathy in judging is not predictive of outcome—it is part of a process, but it does not carry the day").

54. See BARACK OBAMA, THE AUDACITY OF HOPE 66, 68 (2007) (remarking that by empathizing with others who are different from us or disagree with us, "[w]e are all shaken out of our complacency" and "[w]e are all forced beyond our limited vision").

55. SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at 253–54.

We might further ask: how does one strive to achieve, all the while remaining humbled by one's achievements? How does one stay grounded, while reaching for the sky? Sotomayor provides an answer: by staying focused on the importance of serving, and not taking for granted one's positive luck.⁵⁶ In her words:

What . . . driv[es] me arises from a different kind of aspiration: the desire to do for others, to help make things right for them. Strange ambition for a child? Some might say so, but I've been aware of it for as long as I can remember. . . .

. . . .

. . . Things that might easily have happened to me somehow did not; things that were not likely to happen for me somehow did. This seemed like luck with a purpose.

I was under no illusion of having been singled out, chosen for some particular destiny. But I did come to recognize in my good fortune the work of a blessing; a gift that made my life not entirely my own: I was not free to squander it if I chose. . . . And though I was not given a mission, I had to find a worthy purpose, to earn this protection. . . . [S]uffice it to say, somehow a synergy of love and gratitude, protection and purpose, was implanted in me at a very young age. And it flowered in the determination to serve.⁵⁷

In writing her memoir, Sotomayor was influenced by President Obama's personal monograph, *Dreams from My Father*.⁵⁸ But some of the lessons found in her chronicle may have more in common with Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*,⁵⁹ in theme if not form, as Obama's latter work squarely raises the question of ambition as it relates to competitive public service work. In this second text, written while he was a U.S. Senator, Obama admits that individuals who pursue the position of Senator possess "a certain megalomania."⁶⁰ This, and the fear of losing an election—a fear of failure in those who have not encountered much failure in their lives and who have always been told they were not meant to fail—create a powerful storm of motivations in wanting to succeed at practically any cost.⁶¹ In

56. *Id.* at 254–55.

57. *Id.*

58. Kantor, *supra* note 2. See generally BARACK OBAMA, *DREAMS FROM MY FATHER* (2004).

59. See generally OBAMA, *THE AUDACITY OF HOPE*, *supra* note 54.

60. *Id.* at 104–05.

61. *Id.* at 107 ("I'm not suggesting that politicians are unique in suffering such disappointments. It's that unlike most people, who have the luxury of licking their wounds privately, the politician's loss is on public display . . . [N]o matter how convincingly you attribute the loss to bad timing or bad luck or lack of money—it's impossible not to feel at some level as if you have been per-

essence, the desire to win may actually be more about the desire to not fail, something that Sotomayor also seems to express in pursuing her own goals.⁶² Admittedly, Obama reminds us that the political arena is unique in that “[i]n politics, there may be second acts, but there is no second place.”⁶³ But as Sotomayor imparts from her own experience in the public arena, public service ambitions generally should be focused on just that—serving the public, and accomplishing important things not because one is important, but because the times and circumstances create the need for important things to happen.⁶⁴

Individuals would do well to grow up with the message that Sotomayor internalized: that they can do great things to help others, rather than simply that they are destined for greatness. And yet it still may very well be true that success requires believing in one’s abilities to achieve; accordingly, some degree of self-assurance (but not overly so) may not be such a bad thing. Sotomayor herself provides a healthy example of an ambitious individual who engages in much self-questioning, of someone who does not simply rest on her talents but who seeks to master what is needed for each new challenge or job.⁶⁵ But even as she harbors a measure of self-doubt, she also sustains some measure of self-confidence in taking on new responsibilities, knowing that she possesses the fundamental skills for the job and deep motivation to do the work and to

sonally repudiated by the entire community, that you don’t quite have what it takes, and that everywhere you go the word ‘loser’ is flashing through people’s minds. . . . Imagine then the impact of these same emotions on the average big-time politician, who (unlike me) has rarely failed at anything in his life—who was the high school quarterback or the class valedictorian and whose father was a senator or admiral and who has been told since he was a child that he was destined for great things . . .”).

62. See SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at 253–54.

63. OBAMA, THE AUDACITY OF HOPE, *supra* note 54, at 108.

64. See SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at 253–55. Further, even among Senators, Obama remarked that he “was usually struck by [his colleagues’] basic sincerity—their desire to get things right and leave the country better and stronger; their desire to represent their constituents and their values as faithfully as circumstances would allow.” OBAMA, THE AUDACITY OF HOPE, *supra* note 54, at 104.

65. See SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at 144 (“I’ve . . . come to recognize a personal tendency. . . . The first year that I face challenges of any new environment has always been a time of fevered insecurity, a reflexive terror that I’ll fall flat on my face. In this self-imposed probationary period, I work with compulsive intensity and single-mindedness until I gradually feel more confident. . . . I have gone through this same kind of transition since becoming a judge, first on the federal district court, then on the appeals court, and finally on the Supreme Court.”).

learn from it.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

Sotomayor ends her memoir at the point she first becomes a judge, twenty years ago, because she states “by then . . . the person [she is] was essentially formed.”⁶⁷ But she adds that her personal growth has not ceased, and she strives to continue to develop as a Justice by learning from all those around her.⁶⁸ It is to her credit that she remains thoughtful and open to absorbing new knowledge from others, and hence it appears quite possible that important aspects of her “self” and self-understanding may still be evolving in some ways.⁶⁹ For one thing, an individual’s new and ongoing work can continue to shape the person, just as Sotomayor’s work as a prosecutor helped shape her approach in trying to effectively reach and persuade individuals.⁷⁰ New and ongoing interactions with others can also prompt changes in a person’s thoughts and behavior, and in Sotomayor’s case, she describes how the ways in which she relates to family and friends have taken on new meaning as an adult.⁷¹

Sotomayor’s life journey reveals amazing strength and resilience forged from unlikely beginnings, and accomplishments attained from not-quite-perfect starts. In pursuing her dreams, she also sought to keep her feet on the ground, questioning the meaning of her ambition so that she could direct it toward positive ends. It is indeed heartening to know that even with all the detours and obstacles laid out in her path, she neither gave up

66. *See id.* at 298 (“Looking back today, it seems a lifetime ago that I first arrived at a place of belonging and purpose, the sense of having a heard a call and answered it. When I placed my hand on the Bible, taking the oath of office to become a district court judge, the ceremony marked the culmination of one journey of growth and understanding but also the beginning of another. The second journey, made while I’ve been a judge, nevertheless continues in the same small, steady steps in which I’d taken the first one, those that I know to be still my own best way of moving forward. . . . With each of my own small, steady steps, I have seen myself grow stronger and equal to a challenge greater than the last.”).

67. *Id.* at ix.

68. *Id.* at 301.

69. *See id.* at 299 (“My highest aspiration for my work on the Court is to grow in understanding beyond what I can foresee, beyond any borders visible from this vantage.”).

70. *See infra* Part II.

71. SOTOMAYOR, *supra* note 1, at 279–81 (discussing how, over time, she learned to be open with her friends about her diabetes, and about her ongoing efforts as an adult to improve her relationship with her mother).

nor gave up hope, and with careful effort and determination, ended up travelling the perfect course to her sought-after landing place.

There is, however, more to her story. Her memoir also gives us an important view of Sotomayor as an accessible role model, empathetic life observer, and purpose-filled public servant. In all of these ways, Justice Sotomayor is helping to strengthen the judicial function. And in doing so, she provides a further promising picture of future important contributions as she continues her work on the bench.