

EPISODE 901

“GLH: The dominant culture is telling us a lot of things about what we’re supposed to do with our money and our resources. I like a broader definition of money as just, what are our resources?”

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:44.8]

FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. Our guest today is Georgia Lee Hussey, who is the Founder of Modernist Financial. She did not envision having a career in finance. In fact, prior to being a financial adviser, she was a creative artist and she felt she wasn't supposed to be good with money, right? You're supposed to be the starving artist.

Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. Today, Georgia is helping her clients manage their financial life with values, with progressive values at that. We're going to dive into what that means. A little bit more about Georgia, she found herself at one point struggling with a subprime mortgage during the financial crisis, like a lot of us. That was actually the inspiration for launching her financial planning firm, Modernist Financial, which is on a mission to build a world where progressive people feel permission to enjoy today, while also investing in our common future.

Modernist Financial has been named one of the largest LGBTQ+ owned businesses in Oregon and one of Portland's largest wealth management firms. Very excited to bring on the show, Georgia Lee Hussey.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:59.2]

FT: Georgia Lee Hussey, welcome to So Money. It's been a while since we shared the stage at Goop in Goop Health. Welcome.

[0:02:05.8]

GLH: Thank you so much. I'm delighted to be talking with you today.

[0:02:08.9]

FT: You're based in one of my new favorite cities, Portland. I got the opportunity to visit last winter, or I guess fall-winter and you chose Portland as your now place of residence. I have no doubts as to why. What was your drawing to Portland?

[0:02:27.9]

GLH: Yeah, Portland is a very magical city to me. Large part, because there's a strong commitment community engagement and volunteering and being of service. It's very built into the community. When I first moved here right after I graduated from college, I started a little gallery, art gallery in the corner of this warehouse I was working in. It was amazing, Farnoosh. I spent 7 bucks on flyers at the local Kinko's. We would end up getting 200 or 300 people coming to a show, and coming from New York where that is not how resources work, I was amazed by how easy it was to become part of the city and to have an impact. When I was becoming an adult in my late 20s I realized, I really actually want to be in Portland for the rest of my life.

[0:03:24.4]

FT: Yeah. One of the things that I found interesting about your background is that while today you're the CEO, founder of Modernist Financial, which I want to really dive into, because you've got some unique approaches to money. Your background is not in money. It's actually in the arts. Tell me a little bit about that world that you – was your past life, but also I think very much still alive in the work that you do with money.

[0:03:47.2]

GLH: Yes. I was trained at Sarah Lawrence College where I went to school. My focus was on installation sculpture and creative writing. I was working towards being a professional artist. I did my installation work. I often worked in media that had to do with fire. I'm real into anything that would melt and then become solid again, very alchemical. I was a glassblower, I was a welder, I was in wax casting, metallurgy, metalwork. I really loved the opportunity to express complex ideas in simple and emotionally resonant ways.

Same thing with my writing work as well. I wrote creative nonfiction and fiction. Like many people, I had the realization in my mid-20s is like, "Oh, I don't have a trust fund, unlike many other people that I went to college with." I don't have financial backing for my family. The effort, the things that I would have had to give up in order to be a professional artist, I was just not willing to do. The joy is that I really think being trained as an artist has made me an amazing entrepreneur. Because being an artist is incredibly entrepreneurial, we just never call it that. We never call it by its name in our culture.

I definitely lean hard and to habits of creativity and visioning. If I am thinking about the business, I'm more likely to go to the art museum than I am going to go to a business book. Those things are still alive and well and modernist.

[0:05:31.6]

FT: It's refreshing to hear that, because I've had a number of artists on So Money, and a lot of my friends are artists and I actually have a friend who has a podcast for artists to teach them the importance of thinking like a businessperson, thinking like an entrepreneur, because I think that there is this characterization of artists that you have to be that that starving artist, right? That the struggle has to be real, because the struggle is what creates beautiful art. I don't know. There is that mindset trap actually, that I think is still relevant and out there, which prevents a lot of otherwise really skilled, creative people from becoming financially stable.

[0:06:14.0]

GLH: Absolutely. This is when I really understood the concept of money stories is when I identified for myself that I seem to have this polarity, or this binary idea of who I could be in

relationship to money as a creative person. That was I could either be starving in a attic somewhere, making art and being creatively whole, or I could be a sellout and be successful, and that I would lose all of my creative integrity.

It's very clear that there was not much of a middle path there for me at least, in the stories that I had inherited from the culture at large, from academia, from the arts world in general. It's either you're Jeff Koons, or you're nobody. The nobody is actually preferable, because you're authentic to your creative being. None of that story is very helpful to any of us, let alone in the arts community.

[0:07:08.7]

FT: It sounds to me even at a young age, although an artist probably not making a ton of money, you had what it seems to be a pretty healthy mindset in terms of knowing that there's more out there, that you have to be in control, in the driver's seat of your own financial life. I understand it was a bit of a crisis in your mid to late 20s that actually led you to having a more intense passion, relationship with money. Tell us about that “crisis moment.”

[0:07:38.7]

GLH: Yeah. Homeownership is one of the great myths of finance, I believe; this idea that we need to buy a home and then that shows that we are adults, that we're financially mature. I had that lesson in a relatively dangerous time, which was the subprime mortgage, soon-to-be crisis. I bought a house. I basically moved back from New York to Portland, was like, “All right, I'm going to be in Portland. This is my home. These are my people. This is where I want to start this next phase in my life.”

At that point, I knew that I wasn't going to be able to be a professional artist and support myself. I was also in a searching moment of like, “All right, am I going to dig deeper into publishing? Where was I going to go?” I bought this house because all of my friends were in Portland and buying houses and they made it seem so easy. It was really easy. You will love this, Farnoosh. I had a 550 credit score. I had no savings. I got money back at closing with no down payment.

[0:08:45.3]

FT: What?

[0:08:46.9]

GLH: Here's their subprime mortgage crisis. Luckily, I was a person who, or I am a person who does what they say they're going to do and also had all the privilege that is required to be able to back that up, right? I'd always worked in sales to support my art practice. I realized very quickly that I had this huge mortgage payment every month, I was a single person owning this house and I just started cobbling together how to keep it all going. I quickly realized that I have no idea how to budget and I had not learned those skills in my youth, like most of us, nobody learns how to do that basic day-to-day financial work.

It was definitely a crisis trying to figure out how to pay that bill and on a sales job where I had irregular income as well. I just started learning everything I could from basically blogs, the pre-podcast reality of the mid-arts and started learning everything I could about how to budget. Then I just started becoming more and more interested and then seeing more and more parallels between personal finance. Many of the stories that I had been most compelled by – I mean, my joke is always that Jane Austen is all about crappy estate planning and misogyny.

The world I had lived in as an artist and a lover of literature, it's all stories about money and resources and who's included and who's not included. That's really where the interest was born. Then in addition, looking around and realizing that most of the people I cared about; creative folks, queer folks were not included in the conversation. We weren't only not included, we were intentionally excluded as a person who shows up with femininity, whatever your gender identity. You're not supposed to be good at money, you're supposed to be good at buying handbags and lipstick. We all know the tired tropes, right? That also got me riled up of this – I'm not going to let the patriarchy run this particular show, because there's too much power here.

[0:10:54.8]

FT: Yeah, woman. In some ways, the subprime mortgage was a blessing, because it really transitioned you into now this world that feels very first-nature to you.

[0:11:07.2]

GLH: Yes, absolutely. I mean, in many situations, I don't know about you, but many of my mornings are also my celebrations, right? I definitely am thankful for the incredible learning opportunity. I was also incredibly lucky to be able to sell that house before the downturn started. I was able to use those proceeds to pay for my CFP education and then fund my career transition.

[0:11:35.4]

FT: Let's now talk about Modernist Financial, which is your firm. It is built on a foundation of creativity and collaboration. That's very Georgia. That you are really about when you meet with clients, it's really about figuring out how to line wealth values with progressive values, with our progressive values. It seems like – this is almost personal finance 2.0, where a lot of us are just trying to get to 1.0 like, “I need to budget. I need to learn how to save. I need to get out of debt. Then I can start thinking about my progressive values and how to align that with my budget and my spending.” What do you think? Is that actually not true, or do you think we can do that at the same time as we're trying to just basically learn the ropes?

[0:12:26.8]

GLH: Yeah. I do think we can do it at the same time. Though I have caveats to that. For example, sustainable investing, or ESG investing is nascent. It's a new part of the investing world, right? It's not as easy to engage with as just a Vanguard index fund. Now Vanguard has sustainability portfolios and index funds now, right? It is a little easier. Portland is a place that has an incredible cultural value around supporting local businesses. That's actually incredibly impactful in our local economy to make a choice to buy office supplies from a local office company, if you can find one, versus Amazon. Or buying books, I pay a premium to buy my books at Powell's down the street, or other small bookstores. There's a lot of ways to orient our financial lives around the things that we value.

We became a B Corp, because I don't believe that you have to get successful as a business and then start to do the right thing. If anything, I believe that doing the right thing will actually make us more successful and all the other B corpse and other organizations that are really committed to being a force of good in the business and this business world and not just a force for profit. Not that I don't like profit.

[0:13:45.5]

FT: Right. I mean, let's be honest. Well, tell me a little bit about the types of clients that are drawn to you. For anyone listening, what is the best way to get started with your philosophy? If you're all the way in Portland, we can't all geographically get to you, although you probably work with online clients. What are some of the ways that we can adopt some of these principles on our own?

[0:14:08.8]

GLH: Yeah, great question. We have a ton of resources on our website, because our goal is to be able to eventually serve the entire income spectrum, as a firm we're too small at this point to be able to offer our services across all needs. At this point, we focus on high-net-worth clients. Our minimum for a new client is a million dollars of investable assets. We're not for everyone. Because of that and with our long-term intent to support the whole income spectrum, we have a ton of resources on our website, so that people can get access to these ideas and be able to implement them on their own.

I think it all starts with just talking about money, as you talk about all the time, right? If we live in a world where money is a closeted topic, where we don't discuss it with our spouse, or children, our family, at work, we're not able to even tease out the meaning that we want to find in money. I think the conversations are so important. We practice something called financial life planning, which really is certified financial planning 2.0, where we're taking all of the ideas around behavioral finance and theories of adult learning and family of origin theory, and adding that to all the information about how much do you need to save and how should you do your cash flow, etc., so that people can bring both parts of themselves to the conversation.

I think oftentimes, part of the way that the dominant culture operates is by making money all about the numbers, but telling somebody they just need to save more is telling somebody they just need to lose some weight, implying that that's easy. It's not. We're humans trying to make behavioral change, right?

Engaging in who we are, what our values are helps us be more motivated and paint a bigger vision of who we want to be in this after we've done this work, after we've started this journey. The resources I mentioned, there's a downloadable toolkit on our website that gives you basically three different tools that we use with our clients to help them understand their relationship with money.

One is about their financial satisfaction in about 24 different areas, including am I satisfied with the way I communicate about money? Am I satisfied with the amount of stress that money creates in my relationships? As well as, am I satisfied with my retirement nest egg? There's a life transitions tool, because financial planning is basically a bell curve in which we plot different transitions out on that bell curve of our lives. We're going to retire. We might need to care for our family and our parents. If you have kids, sending them to school, all the various goals we have. Those transitions are really important to visualize on a timeline ahead of us, which is not easy for humans to do. We are short-term thinkers, right?

[0:17:10.8]

FT: It's abstract.

[0:17:12.4]

GLH: Super abstract.

[0:17:14.5]

FT: What is retirement? Am I going to retire? There was a study that found that if you age render your face digitally online to look like you might look in your 80s, you will actually save more for

that person. It's actually a catalyst for saving more for retirement, because it's now something that you can really see.

[0:17:35.2]

GLH: Absolutely. I think, it's one of the reasons I love advance style. I don't know if you know that street fashion blog. It's all about fabulous older people in urban areas and their fashion. I always look at that as a way to think about my future self. I'm like, "Okay, what does a 75-year-old Georgia Lee Hussey want? She wants nice clothes, good food, a fabulous neighborhood in a place that she gets to live, she wants to be able to walk everywhere, she wants to be able to have the ability to walk everywhere."

Visioning as you're saying, envisioning who that 75-year-old, or 90-year-old self is helps me make better choices today. I'm like, "Do I want to go on another trip, or do I want to fully fund my Roth IRA?"

[0:18:19.8]

FT: Ability to walk everywhere is an important distinction, right? That implies you want to start investing in your health and making sure you have the right insurances in place. All right, let's talk about our childhood. I know that when we were together in Goop Health, part of what we discussed with our workshop attendees was our personal money stories, because often, those are the seedlings for how we end up evolving as people with financial relationships, with actual thoughts and feelings around money. Going back in time Georgia, what's a money experience from childhood that has impacted you as an adult?

[0:18:59.6]

GLH: The answer to this question changes over time, which I found really interesting. Recently, I've been thinking a lot about the all-girls Catholic school that I went to. I was not Catholic, but it was the best school that our family could afford for my education. At that time, the sisters were a diminishing population. There were almost no novices coming into the work. As I've become an

adult, I have developed practices in Buddhism and I spend – I try and maintain my meditation practice and part of my personal care is going to quarterly meditation, silent meditation retreats.

I realized that the kernel of that was really, that seed was planted when I was basically 1st grade through 12th grade of watching these nuns with this commitment to educating young women. I would not have answered that three or four years ago, Farnoosh, but I'm realizing how much inspiration I have from this group of people. Also committed to social justice, because there are some extremely left, or radical progressive sisters in America.

[0:20:17.8]

FT: I love that. Sounds like a book, or something.

[0:20:21.1]

GLH: Yeah. They're doing some incredible work around sustainability, investing. They are bad asses. I mean, they will hold a major position in a company and then hold the CEO to the fire around their behavior. It's real hard to tell a sister that you aren't going to listen to what they have to say as a CEO.

I've been thinking a lot about what it means to build intentional and community, what it means to have a life's work and a vow. That doesn't necessarily mean a religious vow, but for me, a vow to do well in the world, to make – hopefully, support the world in becoming a better place in the work that I do on a daily basis, in the work that the firm does.

They were happy as a community. They had each other. They didn't have a whole lot of stuff, but I think there's a great wisdom in that concept, which leads into my meta-life question right now for myself and I think the world at large is what is enough? What is enough? How do we define that for ourselves? They had defined that. Now they had a structure to help them do so, but how do I define that for myself? As a woman who also really likes beautiful clothes and nice shoes and great food.

[0:21:36.7]

FT: I love hearing that. I love hearing that from you, because you're exemplifying that you don't have to choose sides, right? You have to choose a minimalist Buddhist lifestyle, or just go the complete material route. That there's a hybrid version.

[0:21:55.5]

GLH: Right, right. That hybrid version is your version, right? That's the work that we do with clients is helping them as individuals, as couples, as families really define what is important for them, so they can make choices that make sense for them. Because the dominant culture is telling us a lot of things about what we're supposed to do with our money and our resources. I like a broader definition of money as just what are our resources, money is certainly one of them, but time is it as you and I know is a huge resource, right? One that you just have less of at certain portions of your life.

Social capital is an incredible resource. Defining for ourselves when enough is in those different areas of our asset classes is really important work, and I think ultimately drives better decisions, so that it's easy to take a slightly more cumbersome route to buying that printer paper, or that new book you want. If you are clear about why this aligns with who you are, or how you invest your portfolio, or how you do your tax planning, right? Because there's big ways in which the financial planning work we do really pushes back against progressive political values. I think it requires that consciousness and verbalizing, so we can lean into those beliefs and that clarity in moments of decision-making.

[0:23:27.8]

FT: Right. Just be more intentional.

[0:23:30.8]

GLH: Right, right. Exactly. It's not easy to be intentional around money, because a lot of us have anxiety around money. Creating a sense of ease is also an important element there.

[0:23:42.4]

FT: A little bit of a departure here, but wanted to ask you a question given that it's summertime and we want to know how people are spending their time this summer. For guests, our question here is in partnership with our sponsor Chase. We want to know what's one way that you love to save, or splurge when you travel?

[0:24:05.4]

GLH: Well, I just got back from a three and a half week vacation.

[0:24:08.8]

FT: No way. Who takes a three and a half week vacation? I so envy you.

[0:24:13.9]

GLH: Well, a crazy lunatic CEO who should not have done that, but it was really great. It was my 40th birthday and I really need to celebrate.

[0:24:22.9]

FT: You know what? I'm getting myself a four-day weekend for my 40th birthday. I think I'm doing 40 wrong.

[0:24:28.3]

GLH: You can up that time.

[0:24:29.6]

FT: Up that by add a zero to the number of days.

[0:24:35.3]

GLH: I have never done a trip like this that was this full and full of the things I actually wanted to do. We put aside a certain part of our budget for tours, for personal tours. We were in Venice, in Lake Como and London. In Venice, we had some amazing tour guides. I realized that for me when I'm traveling, having context is super important for me to be able to enjoy the space I'm in, because otherwise, I feel I'm just seeing things, but I don't know why and I don't know what it means.

For example, we did a tour of the Jewish ghetto in Venice, which is I don't know if you know was the first urban planned segregation of people into a separate space. I knew about this from my queer architecture class at Sarah Lawrence, because that's how we do. We had this tour. It was so fascinating, Farnoosh, because this was also where banking was started in this little, tiny, literally I don't know. It took us three minutes to walk across the main portion of the ghetto.

We saw the Banco Rosso, which is so when you say that you're in the red, it was because the Banco Rosso, which was from the 1500s was saying that you were out of money. We could have just walked through the ghetto and I'm like, "Oh, that looks like it might be a synagogue, or that looks like it might be a shepherd. That looks old. I don't know." Having an expert there to help us understand was super helpful and made the whole thing a much richer experience.

[0:26:23.2]

FT: In the red, Banco Rosso. Venice, you said?

[0:26:26.7]

GLH: Yeah, in Venice. Yeah, if you look up the Jewish ghetto and the history of banking, the whole area is fascinating.

[0:26:32.0]

FT: Interesting. I've been to Venice. Didn't get that education.

[0:26:36.6]

GLH: Yeah, it's an overwhelming place.

[0:26:38.0]

FT: It is. Sinking, right?

[0:26:41.7]

GLH: Yes. Well, hopefully maybe they'll figure some stuff out, because I feel a lot of the rest of us are going to have to figure out how not to sink either.

[0:26:50.1]

FT: Yeah. Well, I want to spend a little bit of time, just a little bit time before we wrap, because I think it would be important to address your maybe advice or feedback for people who are in the queer community, who want to get resources and help around their money. Because we talked earlier and you mentioned that there really isn't a ton for this population, and in some ways it's intentional. I want to dedicate a little bit of time to talking about that.

[0:27:15.9]

GLH: Yeah. Well, I think in my experience I use a filter to look at the information that I get from the world around me, right? When I'm learning, I have to realize who is teaching me. Unfortunately, until women, queer people and people of color are running the financial world, we need to use the resources that we have available to us, right? I think for me, it's about and a lot of people I know, it's about filtering what we're hearing through the speaker's reality.

That can mean things like, realizing that ideas of saving and investing. The core concepts can be very helpful, but maybe going to a more aligned source for deeper insight. Again, we have a ton of resources on our website, but I would say that conversation can help us take those

resources and make them ours. As we would say in the community, queer that financial education of that personal finance. Obviously, that's my main takeaway is to do the work, but do it in community, so you can have the accountability support, but you can also question is this a misogynistic comment? Is this a cisgendered comment? They often are.

There's a lot of subtext in the financial world around who has access and who doesn't. I think the queer community is important, but I'm actually far more concerned about intersectional access. I know you've done a bunch of stuff around interviewing folks who are making financial knowledge for communities of color. That to me is the even more concerning elements, because I don't know if you know, but around inheritance, a lot of our clients are inheritors. 41% of white college-educated families will receive a significant inheritance, an average of \$150,000. Whereas, 13% of college-educated black families will get a significant inheritance, but the average figure for them is \$40,000.

Now that is really a reflection of historical and racial money stories and policies and institutions. When the FHA came in and created mortgages in the 1930s, basically invented the 30-year mortgage that allowed white people to create as inheritance, people of color were systematically excluded from those mortgages, because of redlining. White families got real estate at super low interest rates and watched that value grow over years, while people of color missed out on this period of wealth, which wasn't allowed to compound either throughout the 20th century. I'm definitely concerned about queer people, but I am far more concerned about people of color.

[0:30:21.3]

FT: Yeah, thanks for pointing that out. I want to mention your website of course, modernistfinancial.com. So many resources on your website. There's a modernist money toolkit. You're doing some really important work, Georgia, and I really appreciate you coming on the show and giving us some context. I'm all about the context too. Next time, it's all about the tours, of more meandering around Venice. Nope.

[0:30:47.7]

GLH: That's good too, though.

[0:30:49.7]

FT: Yeah, maybe save a day for that. Georgia, thank you so much. Wishing you all the best and have a great summer.

[0:30:56.6]

GLH: Thank you. You too. Have a wonderful 40th.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:31:01.0]

FT: Thanks to Georgia for joining us. For her modernist money toolkit, go to modernistuniversity.com/modernist-toolkit. If you want to join her newsletter, go to modernistfinancial.com/newsletter. All these links are at somoneypodcast.com, as well as where you can find Georgia and Modernist Financial on social media.

If you want to get this episode and the transcript, go to somoneypodcast.com. You can grab it there. Also leave me a question for the Friday episodes of Ask Farnoosh. You can also do that on Instagram @FarnooshTorabi.

Thanks for tuning in everybody. I hope your day is so money.

[END]