

**EPISODE 1627**

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**FT:** So Money episode 1627, navigating the fear of bringing your whole self to work, with Regina Lawless, author of *Do You*.

*‘RL: We have societal expectations that go beyond even the struggles inside the workplace. So I know what it's like trying to balance the pressure, and you're dodging microaggressions possibly at work, and you're always trying to be on to make sure that you're perceived as on top of your game. And then you have to come home, and you might be not only the breadwinner for your immediate household, but you might be having to help extended family. You are oftentimes trying to be a leader in your community or your church. So there's all these other things that layer on and the way black women are socialized to be the strong black woman.’*

[INTRO]

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**FT:** Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. It's Monday, February 5th, lots of people joining the So Money Members Club. If you haven't heard about this, it's my exclusive monthly membership where you can connect with me and other like-minded financial peers. We're going to have live financial trainings every month, live office hours with me, a whole ton of resources and, of course, the community. I would love to see you there. You can go to [somonemembers.com](https://somonemembers.com) to join. I am limiting this first enrollment. If you want to be a founding member and get in at the lowest price ever and grow with us, go to [somonemembers.com](https://somonemembers.com). Learn more and, hopefully, sign up.

All right, today's episode is about how to bring your whole self to the workplace safely and successfully. I touch on this a little bit in *A Healthy State of Panic* in a chapter called The Fear of Exposure, this idea of being vulnerable and transparent everywhere, including at work. Well, I can appreciate that. I think sometimes you have to be very careful. Not every workplace is

conducive to that. While we wait for the world to become more accepting, how do we navigate the potential backlash when we expose our differences?

Our guest today is Regina Lawless. She's the author of a new book called *Do You: A Journey of Success, Loss, and Learning to Live a More Meaningful Life*. Regina's mission is to help high-achieving black women find purpose beyond their paycheck in order to experience more bliss in their lives and sustainable success at work and at home. Here's Regina Lawless.

[INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Regina Lawless, welcome to So Money. Congratulations on your new book. I love the title, *Do You*.

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**RL:** Thank you, Farnoosh. I'm so excited. I'm excited to be here, and I'm doubly excited for the book.

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**FT:** Yes. Well, I know books are a journey. We were talking offline like you write the book and you think, "Okay, I'm done. Hands folded." No, the journey has only begun. That's a huge milestone I will say, writing a book. But then there's a whole up – more to come. More good things, I think, and on the other side of writing a book. I firmly believe that. Your book is really, really special. The subtitle is – as I mentioned, it's called *Do You*, and the subtitle is *A Journey of Success, Loss, and Learning to Live a More Meaningful Life*.

As I was learning about you and reading up on your work, your primary audience, who you really love to help, high-achieving black women like yourself. Before we get into the pages of the book and some of the stories that were so powerful, tell me a little bit about your audience, these high-achieving black women, and why you want to serve them.

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**RL:** Yes. It's important for me to serve the audience that's not only near and dear to my heart because I've walked this walk. But I think, ultimately, I understand the challenges so deeply. When I was thinking about being a DEI practitioner, I always want to help everyone. I feel like I want to share my gifts and talents, and be inclusive, and help everyone that I can, which I think the book, in many ways, is for everyone.

When I thought about building a community, I really wanted to focus on high-achieving black women leaders because I think that I know that we have additional pressures when it comes to often being one of few or the only person in leadership at our companies. That in and of itself is a challenge when you're the lonely only, but then we have all of these additional familial obligations. We have societal expectations that go beyond even the struggles inside the workplace.

I know what it's like trying to balance the pressure, and you're dodging microaggressions possibly at work, and you're always trying to be on to make sure that you're perceived as on top of your game. Then you have to come home and you might be not only the breadwinner for your immediate household, but you might be having to help extended family. You are oftentimes trying to be a leader in your community or your church. There's all these other things that layer on and the way black women are socialized to be the strong black woman. That adds extra pressure.

I want to help us decondition and learn to still be successful, still be driven and strong. But strong doesn't have to mean self-sacrificing. Strong can be whole, and strong really is about finding your joy and your purpose.

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**FT:** I just got back from the ROI Millionaire Summit in Puerto Rico, run by Rachel Rodgers. If you don't know Rachel, I –

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**RL:** She's fabulous.

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**FT:** Connect you. Yes, I was in this incredible room with high-achieving, mostly black women. I will add another reason why it's important to serve them because they are phenomenal. They are –

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**RL:** Awesome. Thank you.

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**FT:** The work that they're producing, the way that their minds work, the visions, I was so inspired. I was texting a friend of mine who – she and I started once upon a time a pop-up museum, financial independence. She's like, "I love making black women rich." **[inaudible 00:06:56]**.

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**RL:** I love her.

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**FT:** She's a white woman from Idaho. She's, "I just love it. I love it. I love it. I love to make all women rich but especially black women." As you point out, you have so much to give. You have your families you're taking care of, your parents or others. You're caregivers at large. I think I'm also hearing from you that there is this underlying fragility that is unique as well, where even as you are maybe at the helm of your career and all the cylinders are turning, that when there is a crisis, that it can be even more difficult to pick up the pieces.

You yourself experienced an incredible crisis that you open the book with. You were very generous in bringing us into your life in that way. But the story of your husband passing all too quickly from a heart attack, you tell this story right after you tell us a story about leading an incredible meeting at Instagram, the head of Instagram. I have to believe that those two stories being told in succession was very intentional. I want you to tell us why you chose the positioning of these two stories, first with the success and then with this incredible loss.

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**RL:** Yes. Absolutely intentional. I wanted to juxtapose being at the height of my career. Instagram was my dream job. So I had landed that job. I was six months into it, and I was loving, loving my life at that point. I felt like, “Ah, I finally made it, all of these years of striving.” I’ve been in HR for 18 years or almost 18 years at that point. A lot of hard work went into getting to that level. Then in an instant, my husband died, and he was 45 years old. You don’t expect that. I was 40, so to be widowed at 40 was not even in the realm of possible options that I thought for my life at that point.

I wanted to set the story there, just to, I think, help anchor that, A, life happens in an instant, and part of how we grow is figuring out how to pick up the pieces. I hope that can be a point of relation for other people who are going through – it doesn’t have to be the death of a spouse like I experienced, but we all have these unexpected things that happen and knock us off our path. *Do You* is really a compass for people to get back to their true north.

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**FT:** You talk about picking up the pieces. What were the pieces for you? I know you have a child. You are a mom. So that in and of itself is in some ways the only piece that matters in that moment. But as you are grieving and reflecting, what are the thoughts that are coming to you and the ones that specifically led you down to the path you are on today? What were the whispers, as you talk about in the book?

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**RL:** Yes. There were a few things going on. First and foremost was my kid. He was 15 when his dad passed. He's 18 now and in his first year in college. Hallelujah. Yes. I was worried about him because that's a pivotal age to lose a parent. Then other pieces that I had to pick up was my career. When you lose someone so close to you so suddenly, there's – the shock is so disorienting. Then you layer on the grief and the depression and all of these feelings of guilt, of what could I have done, and just a whole litany of emotions that I was trying to process.

I needed to pick up my career. I needed to pick up myself. That was really the first thing that I was so disoriented. I didn't even know who I was anymore. I had been with my husband for 21 years. We met when I was 18. My entire adult life was with this person, and so I didn't even know how – like which way was up in the beginning.

What ended up kind of leading me to this path was, first and foremost, going on this journey of rediscovering myself. Who am I at my core without work, without a partner, even without necessarily being a mom? Who am I first? Because I believe you have to take care of yourself first before you can be these other roles and do these other things for other people. That's the first step was to heal myself, get back in touch with who I really was.

Then the other steps became more apparent of like, “Oh, I like this. Oh, I remember I love dancing. I remember I love – I want to travel.” I did all of that self-discovery and came back to myself, which led me here.

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**FT:** In that process, you, I'm sure, were remapping success. What's your advice for someone, and maybe, again, bringing out your own journey here, but advice around defining success or redefining success? You've done now the work of maybe centering yourself. That can be scary because it could look very different, and we don't like change, and that might involve bringing others on board with that like, “I want to change careers.” That not only affects you but maybe others you're taking care of. I guess the question is how do you know you've landed on the right idea of success and then how to pursue that safely.

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**RL:** Yes. Oh, gosh. I don't know if it can ever be truly safe. That's part of the challenge is we do get stuck, I think, in our comfort zone. For me, my original definition of success was what we're taught particularly in America. It's that "American dream" that you get. You land a corporate job, and you chase this paycheck so that you can pay for the house and the – you can have kids and the dog and the fill in the blanks.

I, especially coming from – growing up as a kid, I didn't have or my parents didn't have a lot of money. So all they really could give us was love and then work ethic and value of education. That was my idea. You just work really hard. You put your head down work really hard. Then you move up the corporate ladder and then tada. One day, you've arrived. I did all that and found that I was not fulfilled. It was like, "Oh, that's it. I'm here and that this –"

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**FT:** When we get bored.

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**RL:** You get – when my husband passed away, and let me even take a step back because you mentioned the whispers that I talk about in the book, I had known even before he passed away that I wasn't fulfilled. There were points in time where I would just hear this voice in my head, "Ah, gosh. This isn't really fulfilling. This isn't what I thought it would be. I don't feel like I'm using my talents. I don't feel passionate about the work anymore."

When he died, that was the final straw to really reexamine it. When I started to think back about those whispers, that really led me to understanding that success is really about aligning with what you're really strong at, what you're passionate about. Then thirdly, I think it should be you should find a way to be in service to others. Do something that's bigger than yourself. If you can align those three, I think you're on the path.

Now, that doesn't mean it's going to be easy because, to your point, you're usually at a point where you are making – if you're successful, you're making a comfortable living, or you have other people relying on you. Once you decide to change your career, that affects everybody around you. That's what kept me stuck for a long time. I was a breadwinner in my relationship, so I couldn't just decide to quit my job.

I would encourage people to lock in on that vision and then start to take steps towards that. Don't let other people or even the feeling of comfort keep you stuck because I promise you, you're going to be happier and more at peace once you align to what your purpose and your passion is. But it could take time.

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**FT:** Yes. Anchor it and then small steps because the risk is that you could burn out, and you have to make an immediate change. That can also be costly. It becomes this fulfilling prophecy.

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**RL:** Yes. Do it before like it's done for you, the whisper and before the whispers become a shout.

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**FT:** When you have worked at major Fortune 500 companies, and I was reading in your book that often you were the one minority black woman, and there was one scene where you were just picking out what I was going to wear was always like top of mind because you're in a room full of white men. How do you dress for the occasion? More importantly, where do I – what do I do with my hair?

I just want to touch on this a little bit because it opens the door to, I think, a bigger conversation about bringing yourself to work. Your book is called *Do You*. How do you do you in a world where you're the only, the other in the room? That can – while we want to feel like we can do whatever we want and show up however we are, there could be a cost associated with that that



is not our fault. That's just because the world is the world. There's racism. There's sexism. There's ageism. There's everything. It's micro, and it's macro.

I would never want to tell someone, "Go in and just be you and be you 100 miles an hour," if then it ends up costing them. How do we protect ourselves? Not everyone needs to know your truth, first of all. Can we just also agree to that? Those white men don't need to know how beautiful you look in your hair because they –

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**RL:** Or they don't need to touch your hair because that's also happened. It's like, "Please don't pet me at work or outside of work." Yes. It's a really – I'm so glad you asked this question because I think the conventional or the aspirational wisdom is to be yourself 100%, like warts and all. But I'm pragmatic, and so I do say that I like to encourage people to get to an environment where you can be the best version of yourself.

If you're in an environment – I was in mostly male, mostly kind of older white men were kind of the role models, as I describe in the book because that was the makeup of the leadership team. So I had to eventually get myself into positions where it was not as stodgy, if you will. I worked at a bank, and it was super conservative in terms of how people dressed and how they spoke. Instagram is almost the antithesis of that.

Eventually, I made myself to a place where I could be a truer version of myself. But while I was in that version, I did. I think you have to make a calculation. It's like the saying when in Rome. You have to make a calculation of what are you trying to achieve in your career. With that, if you're aspiring to be into leadership, there are some written and unwritten rules for how – whatever company you're with or whatever organization you're with, how you are successful. That comes with what the culture is, what the style of dress is, what the jargon is, how do people talk and interact with each other.

Now, I do believe you can bring parts of yourself into that. I feel like I over-rotated. Because I was fearful, I over-rotated into just being this cookie cutter. I was telling in the book, I wore a wig instead of wearing my natural hair because I was so afraid that I would be perceived as

unprofessional. Or people would not see me as competent because of their own biases. I think I went to the extreme. I think there's a medium ground where you still can be – you can present yourself more authentically. You can actually bring more of yourself.

That also comes with an environment that allows that, too. That's why I'm saying like try to get into an environment where you can, where they value difference, where they value unique perspectives. Then that gives you the permission to be a little bit more. But until you get there, yes, there are some trade-offs that have to be made.

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**FT:** It's interesting to hear you say that as someone who ran DE&I at Instagram. Even you yourself having these calculations, I think it says a lot about – well, where does that leave everybody else who may not have the leadership, the stature, and also the background, and the education in this? Can you give us an example of when you were in this leadership role in DE&I? What are the complexities? What were you hearing a lot from your women employees, women of color employees in terms of like whether it was just the HR problems? What were the HR problems that you were solving or trying to help solve?

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**RL:** Oh, that could be my next book. There are so many but –

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**FT:** [inaudible 00:21:10].

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**RL:** Generally speaking –

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**FT:** Tell all. Yes.

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**RL:** Correct. **[inaudible 00:21:16]**. I'll have to change all their names.

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**FT:** HR confidential.

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**RL:** Right.

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**FT:** That's a thing. Yes.

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**RL:** The root issue that we were trying to solve or what we got feedback from people experiencing is this notion that people were – whether it was overtly or mostly it was unconsciously having their work and kind of their credentials or their expertise discounted. Oftentimes, what we would see and what we would hear from employees is that if you were the person that looked different on your team, oftentimes you're getting overlooked for assignments. You're not getting the same development. Your manager is not spending the same amount of time with you.

That has a lot to do with similarity bias or affinity bias. We are naturally tribal creatures, right? We've learned over evolution that we kind of stick together. If you conform to the group norms, you don't get kicked out of the group and then are left roaming –

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**FT:** Eaten by a woolly mammoth.

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**RL:** Yes, right. That dynamic is still at play in our modern era. That's why you see the pressure to conform. Part of it is because like attracts like, and people tend to give more opportunities to people who are like them. They are overly generous. They tend to have this – there's this halo effect of, “Oh, my gosh. Well, Matt is awesome, and Matt is just like me.” The just like me isn't often recognized, but that's really why the person thinks Matt is awesome because Matt is just like them.

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**FT:** Because we're narcissists now.

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**RL:** Right. At our root, right? That's what people were facing all from entry-level, all the way up even to the leadership level. I would find myself in meetings still having to fight for my voice to be heard or my ideas in certain circumstances because I'm coming with a different background, a different perspective. I don't talk, look, and act like the norm. That's really the fight to get managers to be more cognizant of you almost have to work twice as hard to trick your brain so that you're being more equitable and inclusive to people who aren't like you.

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**FT:** Yes. It's the tribal stuff always gets me. I talked about this at ROI when I was there. Imagine, we're still so hardwired based on eons ago, the way that humanity worked. Can you imagine how you may be influenced by something that happened to you a year ago or 20 years ago? Recency bias is also a thing. So, yes, we have a lot of human conditioning to sort of overcome.

As you're looking at this year, 2024, now we're, I can safely say, maybe two years from the thick of COVID. I think this – we've had a lot of – not a lot. We've had some time now to kind of reacclimate. People are still working from home. A lot of people have moved and have stayed, relocated. Our lives have just been, in many ways, upended sideways. It's just everyone's kind of like living a new version of themselves from the before times.

What do you as some of the trends that we don't even know about that are on the horizon that might be positive, that people who are interested in moving up and journeying through their career, moving into leadership positions, particularly again women of color? What's your guidance or advice for them, things to look out for, things to get excited about?

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**RL:** I'm really excited and encouraged by this paradigm shift of people realizing that there is life outside of their careers. Now, companies may not like this, as we're seeing. The companies are like, “No, no, no. Come back in the office. I want all the butts in seats, so I can watch everybody.” But I'm encouraged by you can't put the genie back in the bottle, if you will. People have now experienced life outside of –

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**FT:** I'm sorry, but CEOs who are still griping about stay at work – oh, sorry. Work-from-home culture. It's going to lead to depression and a lack of connection with your team. I'm like, “Nope, I think it's great.”

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**RL:** Exactly. I am team it's fantastic.

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**FT:** To my office every day is like 12 steps from the kitchen to my desk. I think that's a good thing.

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**RL:** Yes, because you can get so much more done, and you can have a more integrated life. I used to be so stressed out commuting two hours each way to work. Then by the time you come home, and if you have to cook dinner or, for me, sometimes I'd be helping my son with homework or a project. Then all the other stuff you can't get to during the week just piles up on the weekend. It was a recipe for always feeling tired, overwhelmed, stressed out.

I love this new era that we're in, and I think that gives – I think particularly for women of color who have all of these other responsibilities outside of work, it gives us more opportunity to rise up the ranks in leadership within companies that embrace that work-life integration. I think it also opens the door for people like myself to say maybe there is life beyond corporate, and maybe I want to start my own thing and follow my passions that way. Now, again, we've gotten a little taste of this alternate universe now that you don't have to be in an office 50 hours a week. Wow, there's – it's nice out here. The air is fresh.

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**FT:** Yes. To bring it back to your book, I think this new era that we're in and, hopefully, this new normal with more flexibility and more choice when it comes to how I work and where I work and what I do, it really allows for your framework to thrive, this framework in the book, where living a meaningful life means, as we talked about, redefining success, reconnecting to your heart, restoring the body because now I have time.

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**RL:** Right.

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**FT:** I'm sorry. You need time to –

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**RL:** You need time.

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**FT:** Pay attention to your body, reframing your beliefs, renewing your spirit. You also talk about reinventing your routines. What was a routine that you squashed, and what did you replace it with in this new life design of yours?

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**RL:** Yes. My morning routine has been the biggest reset for me. I used to get up and just immediately – when I was commuting. This is pre-pandemic. I would just immediately get up and have to start getting ready. There was no time for mindfulness. There was instantly get up, get in the shower, get dressed, get on the road. Then during the pandemic, I just replaced that commute with work. I would just get up, maybe throw on a nice top if I had to be on Zoom but still have my PJ bottoms on or yoga pants. Just jump into work.

Now, I've replaced that with having, first thing in the morning, time with myself, so whether that be yoga, stretching, meditation. I then will walk my dog. I used to have that in reverse. I would even put the dog before me. I would go and walk him and set out his food. I was like, "Time out. Okay. He can wait. Let me tend to myself, and then I will go and walk him and do all the things."

Switching that morning routine and just having a space to just – even if I can only do it for 10 minutes or 5 five minutes, just having a space, just me. I go into my office and sit with myself quietly. Even for five minutes, that sets me up for a better day than when I was just waking up in chaos.

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**FT:** I can't wait to finish your book. Regina Lawless, thank you so much for stopping by. Everybody, check out Regina's new book. It's called *Do You: A Journey of Success, Loss, and*

*Learning to Live a More Meaningful Life.* You also have other offerings. Tell us about all the ways we can work with you.

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**RL:** Yes. Through my company, Bossy and Blissful, I offer one-on-one coaching for women who are looking to do them, to do you. Then I also – coming this year, I'll be starting some courses. We'll be actually blowing out the offerings for group coaching for Bossy and Blissful, and retreats are coming.

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**FT:** Retreats. I think that's going to be a huge trend this year, as it has always been something people enjoyed. I think the in-person gathering there, it's irreplaceable. I think now more than ever we really want to do that. That's where we're going to be putting our money, I think.

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**RL:** I agree. Yes. It's needed. It's really.

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**FT:** Regina Lawless, thank you so much. Congrats again.

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**RL:** Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Thanks so much to Regina for joining us. Her book, again, is called *Do You: A Journey of Success, Loss, and Learning to Live a More Meaningful Life*. That link is in our show notes. Also, if you're interested in joining my So Money Members Club, that link is placed for you in our show notes. We are quickly filling up. So if you're interested in coming on board and becoming part of the community behind the scenes with me and others, this is your chance. I'll see you back here on Wednesday, and I hope your day is So Money.

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