

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 17: Chrysula Winegar

Chrysula: My name is Chrysula Winegar; I am currently the Senior Director for Communications and Special Initiatives at the [United Nations Foundation](#). Prior to that I ran my own digital media agency for many years, [Wake Up World Communications](#), mostly focused on digital strategy and engagement and campaigns around global health issues: women's empowerment, education, and making the world a better place.

Whitney: What is the most disruptive thing you did when you were in school?

C: In school? Wow. It's actually the year in between high school and, my undergraduate degree. I took a gap year, and I was a Rotary exchange student. This is going a ways back; this was 1986 and I went to South Africa, which was an incredible experience because it was towards the end of the apartheid regime. There were...you know, when I came back after that year I learned all of the political events that were happening that I didn't really know about while I was there because of media suppression and censorship. But even so, I was with very change-oriented families who gave me as much access as they possibly could to what was really happening in South Africa at that time. So that year in South Africa really opened up my heart to social justice issues; it opened my heart to what's possible when people come together and coalesce around, things that are wrong and find ways to act. And, it opened my eyes to what is a lifelong journey of trying to understand race issues and doing that from the perspective of someone who is incredibly privileged—you know, I'm white, I'm well educated, I have had every opportunity thrown my way. And so to try and, spend a lifetime figuring out what your privilege is and how you can use it and leverage it to lift other people up and support that real change of injustice.

W: Do you remember a moment when you were in South Africa where you discovered your white privilege? Was there an event, a moment, something that happened in particular?

C: I remember sitting around the playground with a bunch of girlfriends—I went to a girls' school there, that year. And they were all white; it was a white only school and I remember asking—genuinely asking the question—what would happen if I brought a boy of color to the matric dance, which was like the prom. And within two days I was hauled into my counselor's office and told that if I was planning to bring a black boy to the matric dance then I would be sent home. And so....

W: Home back to Australia?

C: Home back to Australia. And, you know, so there was an unbundling of what had really happened, but for me, that was a smack in the head of 'oh my goodness, this is shocking,' and to my 17 year old mind it was a real wake-up call.

W: One of the reasons that I really wanted to have you on this podcast is, is that, one of the most disruptive things that a person can do in their life is to become a mother. Motherhood is disruptive. And as I've watched you and your career over the past decade, I've been so impressed by how you have really looked at motherhood in its many facets and championed mothers. And that's why I wanted to have you on the podcast today. Now you're at the U.N. Can you talk to us and tell us about what you do? You mentioned it briefly, but give us an idea of what you do for them day to day.

C: So I work for the U.N. Foundation, which is a private foundation that sits to the side of the U.N. The U.N. is basically our best friend. Our job is to help as many people as are in our spheres of influence; understand the work of the U.N. and its critical nature to all of our lives, not just the lives of people 'over there' so to speak, but the lives of every single one of us. The work that I do specifically: I run a community for the U.N. Foundation called [The Global Moms Challenge](#). We do that in partnership with [Johnson & Johnson](#) and the community's role is to elevate the issues around global health, particularly as they impact women and children. One day on Global Moms Challenge, we might be talking about the eradication of polio and how that disease is 99% eradicated from the face of the planet and there's just this last 1% of work that has to get done before we have globally eliminated another disease. The first was smallpox. The next day we might be talking obstetric fistula, which is a birth injury that many of our grandmothers and great-grandmothers experienced, when a child....

W: What's it called?

C: Obstetric fistula. And an obstetric fistula is essentially when labor is obstructed and the baby is applying pressure, the baby's head is applying pressure on the uterine wall, it can cause a hole. And it can often, um...there's a gap between the bladder and the bowel and the uterus, and so a woman can become incontinent after her delivery. More often than not, baby is trapped, because the reason she's experiencing this in the first place is because she's not able to get the emergency care that she needs. So quite often the baby doesn't make it through the birth process and then Mum is left with this horrific birth injury that results in ostracization; she's often rejected from her community and left to die. And it's a fairly simple surgical procedure that costs about \$450 US. One of our partner organizations, [The Fistula Foundation](#), for example, is working on this issue 24/7 and it wasn't that long ago that our ancestors were experiencing these same things. So...and then the very next day it might be malaria, and the next day it might be about the climate impacts on

our health. What indoor cooking pollution is doing to us, the impacts on pneumonia and respiratory illness globally. So it's just a never-ending source of topics that we want to educate our mums—mostly mums—you can imagine with the title Global Moms Challenge that it's mostly mums that are our readers in our community, but certainly non-moms are a big part of our community as well. Taking action on issues is the next step. So first of all it's a 'what is this issue, how do I get involved, what's the scope of the problem, what can I do,' and then we provide easy ways people can take those next steps. So it might be as simple as sharing something on social media because awareness is really powerful and that's the number one reason that my community exists—to educate and give people information.

W: What's the most important lesson your mother taught you about motherhood?

C: Ooh, that's a good one. So my mum always worked, but that work iterated over time as both she and our...the needs of our...the kids in my family changed. My parents helped launch [Tupperware](#) in New Zealand in 1972.

W: Launch what?

C: Tupperware.

W: Tupperware!

C: Yes. So I grew up in the back of a warehouse filled with Tupperware. And my parents would always take us to work and so I...you know, we would finish school and our caregiver would drop us at the warehouse and we would climb boxes and we would go to sales rallies and my parents would throw the four of us in the back of the car—probably without seatbelts back in those days—and we would travel all over New Zealand and we would be with them at work. So I think that one of the first lessons I learned was that it's possible for husbands and wives to work together and it can be very dynamic and successful. I also learned that kids are a perfectly acceptable part of work and that where possible you should involve them if you can. So that was really cool. But then as time progressed my mum actually got really sick and she wasn't able to carry that physical and emotional load any longer. And we actually ended up leaving New Zealand; we moved back to Australia. And so she had a number of different jobs at that point that were more part time and more structured to suit the rhythm of our family. She worked a lot at night, and in the key years, I would say my high school years, she was around a lot more, which I think is counterintuitive to much of how contemporary working motherhood functions in this country. I think we always feel like we need to be there when our kids are really little and that's certainly the most physically demanding time. But what I'm finding, and I think it echoes what my mum showed me, is that some of the biggest needs are now, now that my kids are entering the teenage years.

And figuring out where to be to capture that conversation and how to capture that conversations and, show up at the right time for my kids is probably even more demanding and complicated than it was when they were tiny.

W: I'm certainly finding that to be true, is, you know, I remember when our children were really young people would say, 'Caregivers are to some extent fungible. You know, they want to be held, loved, cared for, um...there's some element that it can be tradeable. But when they're 15 and 16 and 17, the caregivers aren't as fungible; they want to talk to Mom or they want to talk to Dad, and I definitely would concur with your findings and hypothesis. It's also interesting to me about your mother because as I watch your life and your career, it seems that your mother really modeled for you now what in fact what you are doing. You've continually iterated on your career, you're finding ways to balance and work with your husband on a variety of different projects and so it's fascinating to me how our mothers oftentimes really do model for us and we...whether we think we're like them or not, we often end up much more like them than we even realize we had planned on.

C: Yeah, I think that's really true and I think the other message...now my mum would never say she taught me this, because I don't think it would necessarily occur to her, but I also think she taught me that it's acceptable to be ambitious, and it's also acceptable for that ambition to take a back seat and some...at certain points. And so the interplay between, or the yin and yang or the push and pull of those things are acceptable. Lives are complicated. I remember...I interviewed Gabby Blair once; she's one of my favorite bloggers. She blogs at [DesignMom](#) and she and her husband Ben, you know, have a very similar situation to collaborate a lot over the years. I remember Gabby saying to me, "Chrysula, it changes every six months. We completely reassess our childcare needs, our work life needs, who's doing what, whose projects take center page, etc., etc. Literally, every six months." And I don't think we've been far off, as Warren and I have done that same iterative process as our kids have grown up.

W: So what does your husband do?

C: My husband is an art consultant, so he, formerly, was with Sotheby's; he was the head of client services there for many years and also in their education arm. And about eight years ago he decided to go out on his own as an art advisor and consultant. So he helps individuals and organizations manage their collections, maybe strike out in a new direction. Some he's helped start from scratch which is really exciting. So he lives in a very different world to the world that I live in, and yet somehow we find ways to meet in the middle.

W: Very interesting. And there's a wonderful, then, interplay between your, your careers, although now you are fulltime; you were freelancing for a while. What has it been like, going back and working fulltime?

C: Mostly great.

W: Yeah, I mean you were working fulltime before...

C: Yeah.

W: ...but working for someone else as opposed to yourself.

C: Yes, I've worked fulltime for many years but I think there is, certainly, a flexibility level when you're on your own that it's tough to replicate even in the most generous of employment situations.

W: Let's imagine that you have the power to break one stereotype, or one misperception, about mothers tomorrow. You can forever change the world's perception with the flick of a wrist. Which stereotype would you break?

C: There's a particular one which drives me nuts, and that is the way that women do this to themselves, but certainly there's external pressures too, where we roll our eyes and say "oh, it's mom brain." Right? Meaning that I have forgotten something or neglected something or made a mistake or I'm a fool, or whatever negative application is right for that moment. But we blame it on our motherhood. The reality is, it's probably because we're tired or we didn't eat enough or we haven't slept enough or, you know, we are dealing with 66 plates that are flying in the air. Those...all of those forces maybe in part because we are mothers, but it's not our motherhood that is causing our brain to have a little glitch at that moment. It may sound like such a trivial thing, but I believe that stereotype impacts significantly how we are perceived in all levels of society and in all walks of life.

W: What a great observation. The power of our language; just one word, it reverberates and we start to demean and to diminish...

C: Exactly.

W: ...our power.

C: That self-deprecation can be truly dangerous for motherhood globally.

W: I want to tell our listeners about an essay that you wrote, I think it was around 2010 or so, and you were...you had been as you shared in the corporate world and then had taken some time off to focus almost exclusively on your children. And you wrote a piece on my blog called, "[Oh My Goodness, I Left My Voice On the Bus](#)," that ended up being published in my first book [Dare, Dream, Do](#). And it's a piece about how as you were coming back into the workforce you didn't know where your voice was. And you were having to find it

again. And your journey of finding your voice again. Can you take us back to—you're talking about women that you know want to find their voice—can you take us back to that time seven years ago when you were trying to find your own voice again?

C: It was a really interesting period of time, because it was actually only sort of officially out of the workforce for two years; it was relatively short in the scheme of my 20+ year career. And yet it was a big deal. And I think there was a combination of searching for identity and then searching for...if I was going to make all these complicated tradeoffs that I've made over the last few years to be a full participant in the workforce, those tradeoffs had to be really worth it. Right? Because it's complicated; my life is a juggle, it's one constant juggle and so those tradeoffs had to be really, really worth it. So what did I want that work to represent; what did I want it to stand for? Firstly, I feel really lucky to be part of the digital age and to be in a place where I could take a space of the internet and call it my own. You know, it was originally a blog; now it's Twitter and spouting off on Facebook and then still writing for various other places when I can, and so it's easy if those are your inclinations to use just your own community, your own Facebook friends to start shaping a narrative of what it is you care about. Every time you post an article on Facebook you're declaring to the world what matters to you. What caught your eye; what did you think was important enough that your, you know, 500 or 1500 friends had to know that you felt something about this article, or this issue, or this photograph or this story. So, you know, be thoughtful about what those things are because they will inform...as they're informing your community, they're also going to inform you about, "Wow, I feel so strongly about that; I've got to post it. I've got to share it. I've got to add my two cents."

W: I like what you just said. Every time you post something on Facebook you're saying something about yourself. And, I think today...I just sent out my most recent newsletter and I dedicated a whole segment of it to immigrants and refugees, and I thought, "Wow, I feel really strongly about this." And so, you're right, it's what are you willing to put a stake in the ground around in a public declaration. Going back to 2010—do you remember how you felt—what was that period like of not knowing what your voice sounded like?

C: I think I've blocked a lot of it out to be honest.

W: You don't remember. You don't remember.

C: I think that, you know, I'm a naturally loud person, right? It's very easy for me to put my hand up and say "I care about something." You know, for example, this week I posted...Melinda Gates of the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) did an [amazing piece on Family Planning Voices](#). It's at Tumblr; go look it up. And, she talks about the fact that she never expected in a million years that she'd talk about contraception, right? In a public forum. So I'm

spouting and I shared her essay, and I'm spouting my own experience which was six pregnancies in six years. Two miscarriages, four children. And the fact that I fall pregnant at the drop of a hat. Like, I'm crazy lucky or crazy cursed in this department depending on your point of view. And so, I am so grateful for modern methods of contraception that help me stay alive, because otherwise I would have had a baby every year for the last 17 years, just based on how my body works. So, you know, that's something that's really easy for me to do, which seems crazy when I look at it intellectually, like, "Why would I do that? Why would I do it again on this podcast?" But it's just...I feel really strongly about it; it's easy to be loud about that. And so, I think hearkening back to that period of time, I had just been so steeped in the immediacy of three little babies in an 800 square foot apartment in Manhattan and a husband who traveled 70% of the year at that time, and a voluntary assignment with my church that took up 20 something hours a week, and I was like "what am I doing?" I'm spinning all of these wheels and, I'm not sure where it's all going. So there was a real sense of I have all these strong opinions and at that point didn't really have a...it wasn't so much that I'd lost my voice; I just didn't use it. So I had these strong ideas; I've always had my firm opinions on things and, felt the capacity easily to share those opinions and thoughts, but I didn't know what the platform was, or what the forum was when that sort of workplace environment was no longer there. And as much as my lovely mother's groups were...they were amazing women; I learned a lot from them about mothering in general...it wasn't the place for me to fit long-term. So it was finding that forum and that platform and then I was like, "Oh, there are blogs. And there's social media.

W: There's [Twitter](#).

C: Yeah. I mean I met two of my business partners on [Twitter](#).

W: The power of Twitter.

C: Right.

W: I'm going to pull that essay and put it into the show notes so people can read it. I think it's interesting to look at, you know, like you said, you had a voice, you just needed to figure out where you could...a platform for it, a place to talk about issues that matter to you. And so, I think it's interesting that now you're being a Sherpa for many women around the world to talk about what matters to them and to speak up. It's a fun parallel. Which one of your children is the frontrunner for most disruptive?

C: Ooh. All of them are incredibly unique, and it still shocks me that they all have the same DNA but I promise they do, and they could not be more different. My third child, my first son, he is ten and he is a really interesting little human. Possibly on the spectrum; we haven't sort of gone down that road

too deeply, but a very quirky little fellow. Spends most of his life in his own brain. And is deeply into coding and, you know, incredibly thoughtful about how he views the world. A heart as big as the ocean; when he says his prayers at night it's like, "Please bless every single animal that they won't be extinct. And please bless this, that, and the other. He's a very compassionate and thoughtful person. But I think there's a big invention sitting in that head. I think there's something that he will create, that he will share with the world, that could be a game changer. I have zero idea what that might be, but just his personality and his approach to the world tells me that he thinks about the world's problems constantly and he's a solutions oriented sort of guy because he like to fix and play and create. So, maybe that combination could be....

W: **[31:01]** Well I want you to...well I encourage you to go and listen to the, the [podcast with Susan Cain, episode 14](#). she obviously talks about being introverted and she said that from the time she was very, very young she marched to the beat of her own drummer and it...it made me wonder—in fact, I even titled an article that I wrote about her—it turns out that introverts are surprisingly good at disruption. And it sound like your son may be somewhat introverted and, uh, maybe surprisingly good at disruption.

C: We shall see.

W: **[31:42]** Let's play a game. You ready?

C: Ok.

W: Name something you want to be able to do, but you don't have time to learn.

C: Horse riding.

W: Horse riding! That sounds fun.

C: A childhood dream.

W: Name one job that you always wanted to do.

C: I would like to be an elected official at some point.

W: What's one thing people get wrong about you?

C: That I'm impervious. You know, I come across as pretty bold and gutsy and, I think one of the gifts my husband gave me when we first decided that we wanted to be together was the gift of acceptance of the whole of who I am. Lots of guys that I dated in the past were like, "Oh wow, she's so strong and bold;

that's either terrifying or exciting, but she's not allowed to fall apart." And he is able to give me that gift of the full spectrum of who Chrysula is.

W: What a wonderful gift. What's one book you read at a young age that you still think about?

C: Huh. So cheesy. [My Friend Flicka](#).

W: Which is a about having a horse.

C: Which is about the horses. I'm such a cliché.

W: Which is why you want to do horseback riding. Love it. What will you do to disrupt yourself this year?

C: So the biggest process so far is this...kind of getting to grips with my health. And that has actually been very disruptive and there is more to do on that front. and then, I just started singing lessons which has been such a lovely, lovely thing.

W: Wow.

C: Not because I plan on auditioning for anything soon, but because I realized that in the absence of writing, which I really don't have a ton of time for right now—personal writing I'm specifically referring to—then I needed something creative that was just mine. And I love to sing and so that has been a lovely experience.

W: What kind of music?

C: My teacher is a Broadway person so it's show tunes!

W: So you're learning how to belt?

C: Uh, this...the song we're working on at the moment is more of a ballad. It's actually, uh...it's from [the Secret Garden musical](#) which I've never seen. And it's the, it's...so far I haven't been able to get through without crying. It's the story of the mother who dies and she's singing to her husband that she never knew that she would have to leave him. It's devastating.

W: What's the name of the song?

C: It's I Never Knew. [[How Could I Ever Know?](#)]

W: I Never Knew. Wow.

C: Gut-wrenching.

W: Yes. Love it. Well, Chrysula, thank you so much for spending a few minutes talking to us. I know our listeners are going to love hearing what you have to say.

C: It's been a pleasure. Thanks, Whitney.