

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 30: Susan McPherson

On Today's Show:

S: Exactly. And I was terrified, absolutely terrified.

W: So why...but you were terrified but you did it anyway. So why did you...

S: I did it anyways.

W: ...why did you do it anyway?

S: I was terrified when I got on the plane to move to California in 1989 and didn't know a soul. I was terrified to get on the plane in 2003 to move to New York City and only knew my sister...if you don't take a risk, nothing's going to change

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, speak and live all things disruption. Today's guest is Susan McPherson, the president of McPherson Strategies – a communications consultancy that develops, amplifies and communicates social responsibility. Before we get to what that means, exactly, I want you to hear her story:

W: Hey, Susan McPherson, I'm so happy to have you on The Disrupt Yourself Podcast. What I'd like to do is...to start off...is to have you share with our listeners—30 seconds, a minute—your Reader's Digest version of your life so that we can have an introduction to who you are. And then, as I ask you lots and lots of questions, people will have a context for understanding more about Susan McPherson and the questions that I ask you will make sense.

S: Well, you know, you get to a certain point in your life and you look back and you cannot believe how many actual different lives you've led. So I guess if I was to give a description to the arc, I'm at about nine lives now and that would be because I've lived many different places, saw myself in many different relationships, and many different jobs, not to mention the last being a business that I started without ever having the intent of starting a business four years ago. I live and work in Brooklyn Heights; I have no children, no parents and no significant other—and none of those are by choice. And I have a 2 ½ year old rescue dog. It gives you a bit of an inkling into my life. I'm a voracious traveler. I'm extraordinarily curious about everything and anything, most especially people and what drives people's motivations.

W: Let's go back to...you just made a comment of no parents by choice. I would really; you have a really interesting personal story about your parents. Would you be kind enough, generous enough, to share that with our listeners?

S: Oh, absolutely. I grew up the youngest of three and, um, I had a mom who went back to work when I was seven. So I was definitely in the early 1970's one of the original latchkey children. And I had a father who was a history professor. Given that my mom went back to work as early as she did, I had maybe a very—how do I describe this—I was very much alone for many years because my brother and sister were many years older than I was. They were in high school when I was still in elementary school. That kind of difference. It wasn't until I was probably 16 or 17 that I finally really gained an appreciation for the reason my mom had gone back to work: number one, so she could help my dad pay for our college education, but also appreciate the fact that she was a professional woman at a time when most moms didn't work. And if they did work they might have been a part time teacher or a teacher's aid or you know, something part time. And the reason I mentioning this is because I lost her to a horrible tragedy when I was 20. Very much felt robbed because there were so many things that I still hadn't learned from her, talked to her about, understood....

W: So you're saying right at the time you started to think, "Oh, my mom has something I can learn from her and I don't need to feel robbed, that she's in fact...." What was she doing actually?

S: Um, she was a serial public...publicist, mainly for public television for many years, for various public TV stations. But at the same time, she'd be doing that, she'd be doing PR for local hotels, for restaurants, for Saratoga Performing Arts Center, for, um, all sorts of hospitality venues in upstate New York. She also was able to get herself on a national board that was made up of people who do PR in the television industry, and she was the first person from public television to be on that board, let alone its president, which she was the year before she was killed. These were big deals in the seventies.

W: Absolutely.

S: Especially from upstate New York too. Not to say upstate New York isn't a wonderful, beautiful place, but, you know, we didn't live in New York City, and we didn't live in Los Angeles, or Chicago. She was killed in the most egregious way that any child could imagine for a parent. And any death is painful; I would never judge in the sense that one way of dying is worse than another. I mean when you lose somebody, you lose somebody. I think what was most difficult for us, certainly my dad and my siblings and of course many of her close friends and relatives—it was the suddenness. She and my dad were vacationing in Puerto Rico when an angry worker at the hotel decided to set the hotel on fire. It was during a labor strife. My parents were not staying at that

hotel but my mom loved to gamble, so my dad dropped her off at that hotel so she could play the slot machines an hour before the hotel was torched. So it was, you know, within a span of 24 hours, your entire life changed. I mean, I guess if you're going to talk about disruption? This completely disrupted my life and obviously everybody else close to her. And I think it started me on this road of resolve, resiliency and, and making things work, because that was all that I knew how to do.

W: So if you were to say...so now it's been over 20 years since you mom passed away...

S: It's 32 years.

W: ...32 years, okay. Giving advice to people who have had personal tragedy, whose lives have been disrupted by that...any advice you have that you'd like to share?

S: You know, years ago we didn't have the internet; we have very limited resources to turn to for grieving, unless you were a religious person—and I wish sometimes I had had more of a religious upbringing because perhaps I could have found solace in my temple, or my church, or my mosque, but that just hadn't been instilled in me. And it wasn't like I could go up to [Modern Loss](#), which is a tremendous resource that many of us are aware of online, so I started to look to books which every third person would hand me and tell me that this book's going to help. And I will say that the one book—and the book is still popular today—that helped me, and every few years I reread a portion of it and that is [When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#). And it can be for any of life's tragedies. It was written by a rabbi but it is, it's definitely not of Jewish faith, per se. But it is that whole notion that sometimes horrible things just happen to the good people, to the bad people, to the whoever people. I will also say that friends became my comfort, my source of just joy and my source of comfort. That is even extended to today, through everything that I've been through. And I'm blessed to have the most incredible friends, some of which go all the way back to age six, and I've carried them with me.

W: So you're saying that there were...it's interesting. So you found that your advice would be to...if you have a religious tradition that could be tremendously helpful. Today, if you don't have a religious tradition there's the website [Modern Loss](#), which I think was started by Rebecca Soffer; is that correct? So, in addition to that then books; books were a real solace to you. And then this book, [When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#). And then your friends are a source of joy and we don't know one another well, but I know you well enough to know you are, um...and it's interesting to me to hear how you have cultivated friendships and it's something you do assiduously and you do it generously and, no doubt, are able to be a source of solace to other people,

and so it's interesting to me, perhaps, that out of this tragedy came this need but also this strength and this ability to be able to be a really good friend...

S: Thank you.

W: ...which so many of us value and want.

S: And need.

W: And need. Yeah, exactly.

W: I think it's interesting that you said that your mom was a PR person and you are too. Would you care to share with us...is that something that you had planned to do? Talk to us about how your decision to become a publicist and PR more broadly unfolded?

S: As a child I wanted to be an astronaut, but once I learned I had to study physics I ran the other way, shamefully. We didn't have Girls Who Code and things like that back then, to kind of get us over our fear of math and science. I loved biology but physics and chemistry were not my cup of tea. But I ended up having a real passion for news and current events, and actually my first job out of graduate school was working in the news media industry; I was working for USA Today, which was very exciting in the 80s cause it had just launched in 82, so I was there not too far after which was an exciting time in the news business. And I ended up moving into USA Today's parent company, Gannett, to do marketing, because I loved news but found I didn't have this long-term skillset of writing. I enjoyed writing, but I didn't want to do writing as my profession. I ended up joining a company called PR Newswire - the center between the news media and the public relations community. And investor relations community. So it gave me this ability into both worlds which was fascinating and you ended up becoming a master of none, jack of all trades kind of person; you knew a little about a lot of things. Which I think has helped me in many, many different endeavors. But I was with PR Newswire 17 years.

W: Wow! That's a long time.

S: Yes. Well, it was two stints with about five years in between. However, I always say I was the original intrapreneur, or an original intrapreneur, because every two years my role would change.

W: I was going to ask you about that because in my, my theory of personal disruption, the personal disruption framework, you end up staying in a role three to four years and then it's time to jump to a new role, and so, you're saying actually that was accelerated every two to three years. You finished up a project and you moved on to the next project. So you were there for 17 years but you had lots, lots of different jobs during your tenure.

S: Exactly. I never could have stayed there that long had it been the same.

W: Alright, so you thought you were going to be a journalist; it turns out that you like writing but what you really like doing is making connections and liaising and just kind of bringing different pieces of the world together. So, when did you finally decide to go out on your own? I think earlier you said this was kind of by happenstance.

S: Oh, it was.

W: Talk to us about what happened.

S: Well my last role at PR Newswire among, you know, too many to count, um—after opening our offices in China, doing cross...as you mentioned, partnership engagement—I was running, um, a new area where we were developing tools and services for people who did corporate responsibility. This was around 2006, when the whole world of corporate responsibility was kind of gelling.

W: Okay, so for our listeners, what's corporate responsibility?

S: Corporate social responsibility is helping business of all kinds, private sector, be environmentally, socially and diversity and inclusion focused. Being the best that they can possibly be for all sorts of reasons that go well beyond hiring, retaining, you know...competing with their peers. Making sure that our planet has a future. It used to be that companies would do this just to be potentially doing the right thing, and it was a nice-to-have. Today, it is a must have. It's sometimes termed as shared value, it's sometimes termed corporate responsibility, it's sometimes termed corporate citizenship, but it essentially covers philanthropic, environmental and social initiatives.

W: So you discovered corporate social responsibility.

S: Yes. So, what I found when I discovered CSR—corporate responsibility—was this notion that business could potentially be a force for good in the world. I saw its power; certainly, it's financial, um, resources, but also its amplification power. And about the same time, or maybe a few years before, I had joined the board of an organization called Business Council for Peace, where it was a network mainly of women that would help and mentor women entrepreneurs in regions of conflict. So I went to Afghanistan and worked with Afghan entrepreneurs to help them scale their businesses—you know, learn everything from QuickBooks to how to market their goods—with the intent of job creation. So this was a little higher up the food chain than microfinance. These were women that could create SMEs—small / medium enterprises that could employ 20, 50, 100 people. If you look at conflict, um, countries that are in

conflict...the more jobs equals less violence. It makes sense. So, between that and also the work that I was doing here, really made me excited about, “Hey, this is something that I could really dive into.” So I left PR Newswire in 2010 and I actually went to a, a boutique consultancy headquartered in New York, known as Fenton Communications and my remit was to build their corporate social responsibility practice. And one of the best things that happened when I was there was that I met you. In that 3 ½ years there was extraordinarily fascinating; I learned so much. I met amazing people and I successfully built a burgeoning business for the company. And it was around 2013—it’s going to be four years in September, or October—I left, and the funny thing was that the only reason I decided to gamble with the start of a consultancy was two organizations said that they would hire me if I left the firm, so....they said they’d hire me on November 1st, so my last day at the company was Halloween, October 31st, which was a Friday and I started working for them on Monday, November 3rd.

W: What I find fascinating and I think our listeners will find fascinating is that when you’re in a place and you want to try something new, oftentimes there’s that fear of jumping to a new learning curve. And you had two clients who said, “I’ll pack the parachute for you. Here you go; just jump.” How did that happen? Did they approach you? Did you approach them? What did that look like?

S: Well, I had to be careful because I didn’t want to go out and tell the world that I was looking for work; we all know that kind of challenge that one faces...

W: Yes.

S: ...and all of our different industries are very incestuous. But there was at that point in time a lot of the best talent that was leaving the firm. And what was happening was I could not be...I was feeling disingenuous; I couldn’t look at, say, a Toyota, or a Nike, and look at them and say, “We’re going to give you the best possible service because I didn’t feel 100% confident about the team that was there at the time. And I don’t mean to say this to disparage anyone, it’s just that the top A level...

W: That was the reality.

S: Yeah, it was the reality.

W: You couldn’t sell what you thought you were selling...what people thought they were buying.

S: Exactly.

W: Right. I get it.

S: Right. And I am the most, to my own probably fault, the most candid, honest person, or one of the most, that you will find, I'd be a terrible poker player. Okay, you can tell exactly what I'm thinking when you look at my face. So I knew I needed to start making inroads but I didn't know what I wanted to do and two people at two different organizations said, "Susan, here's what we'll do. We have work that needs to get done. We will pay you, but you need to move on."

W: Mm hmmm.

S: And I always joke that I would never, ever, ever have named the company [McPherson Strategies](#) if I thought it was going to be successful. Because it is the ultimate in narcissism. And I am the opposite of that. But I really didn't think it was going...it was just a placeholder.

W: You thought it was, like you said, a stop gap solution.

S: No, no. Exactly. And I was terrified, absolutely terrified.

W: So why...but you were terrified but you did it anyway. So why did you...

S: I did it anyways.

W: ...why did you do it anyway?

S: I was terrified when I got on the plane to move to California in 1989 and didn't know a soul. I was terrified to get on the plane in 2003 to move to New York City and only knew my sister. If you don't take a risk, nothing's going to change and I always quote my late father who said, "Nothing is a prison sentence." Meaning, God forbid, if it was terrible, I could go back. Maybe not to Fenton, but maybe I could dog walk; maybe I could waitress. There's certain sayings that chat in your head all the time or talk in your head. And that was something that overcame the fear. But I also want to say, Whitney, you're talk with me also helped me, you know, take the plunge. Cut the lifeline. I'd had a paycheck since I was 15 and to all the sudden be swimming in these waters of 'where's that next...that next fund come from?' And my boyfriend at the time was not the primary, you know, breadwinner. So I didn't have anyone to help me or support me. So I knew I...if I was going to do this, I either had to do everything I could to make it work or just do it for a while until I figured out what was next.

In the end what I think made it okay was...or at least to get me there was, "Okay, this isn't going to be permanent. I'm just going to do this until I figure out what the next step is." If I had probably thought like I was jumping and I was, you know, taking 10 million dollars in funding—I don't know if I could have done that.

W: The stakes were low enough that you...

S: Yeah. Yeah.

W: ...at some level.

S: You've got to remember, every two years at my previous job it changed.

W: Yep.

S: So, you know, that had already become part of my ethos, so that was also part of that nature of taking on risks, um, but again...

W: You were in the habit of doing it. You knew how.

S: Yes.

W: You had practiced disrupting yourself.

S: Yes. Exactly.

W: What's something that you're, you're really excited about—something you see out in the world that makes you very optimistic for the future.

S: Well that's a very good question considering we're in an interesting time right now...

W: We are.

S: ...in the United States, and clearly a time of, of, just...the, the squalor has reached has a new pitch that I certainly was not familiar with in the last how many years of my life. But I think I'm most excited that...I'm not excited that the government is pulling out of social services, which not only are we seeing in the United States but we're seeing in other countries as well, but I am very excited to see businesses stepping up to the plate to be standing for, and fighting for causes that are vitally important.

W: If you think about disruption at a very high level, um, it's a time of upheaval and there's a question of do you cope with it, do you harness it, and, and this disruption in government of it not operating the way it has historically where it's, it's giving—I'm not sure I'm articulate this well—but it's actually creating this breach into which business can go. And so the hope and the dream that you have for business—maybe before they thought, “Well the government, they'll just take care of it.”

S: Mm hmm.

W: And now they're saying, "No the government won't take care of it." And this realization of "Well, maybe I better take care of it." And so, while I do not wish on us a government that is ineffective—no one wishes that on anyone, um, I do think it's interesting that it presents a unique opportunity for you to be able to help businesses see that, in fact, they do need to do it. And now you're able to teach them how to do it.

S: Absolutely. And, they will benefit...there are benefits associated with it.

W: Right. Of course.

S: Right? And, and they have to see that. Because as much as I and many other people would love to think it's just because it might be the right thing to do, there has to be a business desire—need—for it and, you know, certainly if they're publicly traded companies they have to be accountable to their shareholders and I understand that, you know, quite well.

W: Well, it's interesting because at the very beginning of the conversation you mentioned that it used to be a nice thing to do, but now there's a business imperative for corporate social responsibility. Is it a matter of retaining talent? Is it a matter of...sort of, when you think about the business case for corporate social responsibility, what do you typically say?

S: We live in a day that no longer things can be hidden and one of the tenets that, unfortunately, I didn't mention earlier that is part of corporate social responsibility, is transparency. And given the social world we live in, what could be hidden ten, even eight years ago, no longer can be. So, number one, if you don't come out and tell the truth inevitably someone's going to find out that you're not. There, of course, is the attraction and retention of top quality talent, which certainly in major sectors of our economy, whether it's technology, whether it's travel—are fighting to keep and find those people. And then also finally people realize—well, not finally—but I think there's a notion that our natural resources are not just there forever, right? And it is actually more cost effective to use less resources when manufacturing, or when packaging. So in the end, you're actually bringing down your bottom line if you are responsible with the resources that you use. So I think that those are all the reasons why.

Not to mention, it can help you open new markets. If you do a partnership—let's say you're a Fortune 500 company—and you decide you want to open a market in a part of the world where perhaps you don't have a client base or a customer base. Well, maybe there's a partner who works...who's an NGO or nonprofit that you could partner with that by perhaps doing some unique

project with them and funding it could help you open up, open up to new individuals that would never have known of you or know of your existence.

W: Anything you're reading right now that you think is really interesting? And it can be for learning; it could be for escape. Either one.

S: I'm not reading as many books as I want and I made that a priority this summer, to actually tackle the books that are on my newsstand and that so many friends have written and that are sending. But this summer I've committed to reading more books and actually starting the book that I'm writing.

W: Okay! Is that how you're going to disrupt yourself in the next 12 months is by writing a book?

S: Absolutely. I committed to the book producer that I'm working with, just yesterday, that, um, by the end of August we would have the proposal ready to go. So....

W: Congratulations.

S: I know.

W: Can you tell us...can you say what it's about or is that still quiet? I guess you're probably quiet.

S: I want to keep that quiet until I have the proposal...

W: Yeah. Understood.

S: ...but...

W: Congratulations.

S: ...I will say something along the work...the terms of resiliency...

W: Okay.

S: ...is going to be really baked into that.

W: Congratulations. So that, that's definitely a disruption is going through the process of writing a book and codifying your ideas and your processes and just what you're thinking about, so that's a big deal. Very exciting.

S: I know. I'm so, so, so excited.

W: Well Susan, thank you very much for being willing to spend a half an hour with us and tell us your thoughts and who you are. I really appreciate it and I think a lot of people will really be grateful for the insight that you've shared.

S: Whitney, thank you so much and thank you for all you do to help so many people in this world. You're a gift.

W: Ah, thank you. I appreciate it.

I can't imagine what a genuinely disrupting experience it would have been to have my mother die when I was 20. Susan felt robbed, and I suspect all children do. I wonder if she ended up in public relations, at least in part, to pay homage to and because of her mother and because she misses her. Carl Jung said the greatest influence on a child is the unlived life of the parent.

It was also interesting to learn about corporate social responsibility, or CSR. This is a term I hear a lot, but I never know quite what they mean when they say it. So, if it's done how Susan envisions it, it's about business being a force for good, which is, in turn, good for business.

For a list of people, places, publications listed in the show notes at WhitneyJohnson.com.