

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson
Episode 33: Luvvie Ajayi

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. My guest for this episode is Luvvie Ajayi, author of the New York Times best selling book [*I'm Judging You: The Do-Better Manual*](#), a book that will be adapted as a comedy series by Shonda Rhimes and Betsy Beers in 2018.

L: I'm Luvvie Ajayi and I am a writer, a speaker, a professional troublemaker. What I do is a lot of things. I, I write about the world and give social commentary. I try to use my gifts to make the world a better place and I also try to make people laugh while I'm doing all of it.

W: You were born in Nigeria; you immigrated to Chicago when you were about nine years old, and I'm wondering, what was the situation in Nigeria like at the time that your family came to the United States? Or to America, as you said in your book; you didn't call it the United States, you said it was America. So what was the situation like in Nigeria at the time?

L: My my older sister who's six years older than me, was actually about to start college and my mom didn't want her to start...to go to college in Nigeria. So, we moved here. Um, nobody told me we were moving; I thought we were going on vacation.

W: Really?

L: Yeah! We'd been to the U.S. before on vacation, so I was thinking it was just another vacation and then I got enrolled in school, and I was like, "Oh...and then I came into this really foreign place. I had this strong accent, um, and it was the first time that I'd ever been the new girl anywhere, so it was a big adjustment for me in that, all of the sudden, my name was strange and the way I sounded was strange and I kind of had to adapt like kids...so I did.

W: So paint the picture for us. You talk a little bit about this in your book, *I'm Judging You*, which is a fantastic book. Um, you talk a little bit about how you were brand new; nobody could pronounce your name. Um, what did you...and by the way, I'm going to try to pronounce your name—let's see if I can get it right. Efuluaya

L: Oh my God, very close.

W: How do you...

L: Very close.

W: How do you actually pronounce it?

L: Efuluaya.

W: Efuluaya. Okay...

L: Yeah. Oh my God...

W: Alright, okay.

L: Nice! You might be the first person who's ever been that close the first time they said my name.

W: I practiced, Luvvie.

L: Yes.

W: So...and I love, um, I love what you said it means. Is it "God with us" or is it...no it's not exactly that, but what did you say it meant?

L: It means God's love.

W: God's love. Okay.

L: Yeah.

W: Okay. Alright, so here you are, you're brand new. You have...you talk funny to everybody; they don't know quite what to make of you. Do you remember how you felt at all?

L: Yeah. I felt very strange and put on the spot, because my principal walked me to my classroom and was basically like "introduce yourself." And here I am being, like "Um...okay, how do I do this?" And I didn't introduce myself as Efaluya, which is what I'd always gone by; I introduced myself as Lovette, which is a nickname that my aunt used to call me. Because I knew that the kids wouldn't be able to say it and I knew that it was too different. So I...yeah. I introduced myself as that and then went on with school and, you know, kids would bring sandwiches to school for lunch and I would bring white rice and stew. So, it was one of those things that—and I'd try to hide it as I ate it cause they'd be like, "What is that?" And I'd just be like, "Um, mind your business."

W: One of these things does not look like the other one, right?

L: Exactly. Exactly.

W: Right.

L: One of these things is not like the other. So I was basically, um, I was basically very protective of who I was and my culture.

W: So, you come on vacation to America and quickly find out that this is an extended vacation...

L: Right.

W: ...and, um, you grow up here and then you go to college; you went to college in Chicago. I think you went to the University of Illinois—Champaign/Urbana?

L: So yes, not in Chicago. I actually went to...so Champaign is three hours south of Chicago.

W: Ok.

L: I went to a Big 10, the University of Illinois, so....

W: Oh, the Fighting Illini.

L: I'm Fighting Illini, exactly.

W: Okay, got it. And you studied psychology. How did you choose that major and what did you think you were going to do with it at the time?

L: I took a Psych class in high school and I loved it. I loved it and I was like, "Ooh, I could totally major in this." When I started college I was psychology/premed, because I wanted to be a doctor, like that was my goal was to be a doctor. I had been told since I was little, like, "Oh my God, you're so smart; you should be a doctor." So I was like, "Yeah, I should be a doctor." So when I started college with the psych/premed, I took a chemistry class my first...I took a chemistry class my first semester and ended up getting a D. And it was the first D of my academic career. Mind you, I actually studied, I went to office hours, I got help from my TA. And I was used to coasting. Like I was an As and Bs student all my life without much effort and then here I am putting in effort and I still got a...and I got a D? Oh my God, I was like devastated. And I basically had a come-to-Jesus moment with myself where I was like, "You know what? You don't even like hospitals. This whole doctor thing is not going to work." So I dropped the premed piece and I kept the psych piece because I still loved it and I then I was like, "You know what? Pivot—I can be a psychologist." So that was the goal; I got my degree in psychology and I was actually a peer counselor—I was a trained peer counselor for 2 ½ years while in college. I worked at the counseling center. So that was my intention. I thought I was going to get my Master's degree in either counseling psych or industrial organizational psych. As you see that didn't happen.

W: Yep, so what happened? You went into marketing and digital strategy—I can't even pronounce it; I can pronounce your name but I can't pronounce strategy. How did you...so what happened? First job, you...what was it?

L: So I...when I was in college I had a marketing internship my sophomore year. And I loved it. I was like, "Oh this is really cool!" And then I did other marketing internships; I was a columnist for the school paper. And then I also started a blog while I was in college because my friends were like, "Hey, we should...we should all start web blogs." And I was like, "Okay, that's cool." And that's how I started blogging. So all of that together—I was doing it through college and so when I graduated I was like, "Well, I'm not ready for grad school yet so I'm just going to go get a marketing job and yeah, that's what I did.

W: So what was your first marketing job? Where were you working?

L: I was a marketing intern for a nonprofit in downtown Chicago; um, it was a journalism nonprofit. Actually I worked for two journalism nonprofits. So I went from marketing intern to marketing coordinator in nine months.

W: What year was that approximately?

L: 2007.

W: Okay. So not too long ago.

L: Yeah, 2007. So ten years ago

W: Okay.

L: I was there for about a year and then I went on to another place, so I was like an event plan...events and marketing manager and then I ended up as a marketing coordinator at another, funny enough, journalism nonprofit. Um, and then, yeah, as all this is happening I'm still blogging.

W: Okay, so here...here's the big question for me—do you remember how old you were when you—I have lots of big questions, but this is one of my big questions—how old you were when you discovered that people thought you were funny?

L: Probably high school.

W: What happened?

L: Me and my friends are a bunch of goof balls and basically we used to just crack each other up, all day every day. So I've known I was funny since at least high school, but I didn't set out to write funny. I just wrote in the way that I spoke, so when people...when I other people found my writing funny, I was, "Okay, that makes sense."

W: Did you...did you find that, um, I don't know if you're going to remember this, but did you find that you were clever before you arrived in America or Chicago or did you...do you think that maybe this sort of...this ability to find the humorous in a situation was honed because you found yourself in this fish out of water situation?

L: I think I'd been clever for a while. I've always had a sharp tongue, like, even as a kid...

W: Your mother will attest.

L: ...right, like I've always been the girl like who had quick comebacks and just had to have the last word and was not to be silenced. That was me. Um, and also, honestly, Nigerians are really funny people, right? They're real...like, I find them...Nigerians are really funny people. We're very shady. We're super observant of stuff, we....So it's also kind of like, innate, but then it probably got honed when I got here...

W: Yep.

L: ...and I realized that being funny was a way to make friends and a...was a way to also, like, no matter if you're making fun of me or not, if you realize that I'm quicker than you, you're probably less likely to make fun of me.

W: Fascinating. So it was something you did naturally; you got yourself into a fish out of water situation and it got honed further, and then you just found that it was something that you gradually had this super power and you've just been building on it ever since it sounds like.

L: Yeah, I feel like it's one of those things that I just kind of perfect—I haven't perfected it—but it's one of those things that I've worked on over the years just because it's kind of been innate in me, like, I've been the same person since I was young.

W: So I'm going to completely change gears for a second and tell you about an experience that I had over the last couple months. So when I was a teenager I sang this Stevie Wonder lyric, um, from [Songs in the Key of Life](#), and it was about this family who wanted to buy a house to which the seller said, "You might have the cash but you can't cash in your face." And...um, shall I say that again, just to catch it?

L: Yeah, please say it again.

W: You might have the cash but you can't cash in your face.

L: Ouch!

W: Yeah. And so I, I kind of sang along to this song, you know, blithely as a teenager, and then, over the last....

L: I've never noticed that!

W: Oh, yeah. It's amazing. It's from [Songs in the Key of Life](#); I don't even remember what song it is, but it's from that amazing, amazing, amazing, brilliant, genius album that he recorded in the seventies. So I had kind of that lyric and then over the last couple of months I read your book and then I read—or actually listened to—[The Warmth of Other Sons](#) by Isabel Wilkerson, which is about the Great Black Migration in the United States from the south to the north. And over the course of reading those books—actually reading and listening to those books—I had something that just hit me right in the gut...like super in the gut, which is my white privilege.

L: Mmmm.

W: And you know, it was interesting for me, because there are lots of things that I haven't gotten in my life, in my professional life, because I'm a woman and probably partly because of my religion and things that I'm really deeply aware of. But when I read this it was like I was seeing it for the first time, and so one of the questions I wanted to ask you—because I think that everybody listening to our conversation experiences some type of privilege. It's going to be different for every person that's listening but probably everybody experiences some type of privilege that's listening—and so I would love it if you could give me and give everyone who's listening just some

advice for what you've discovered as you've been thinking and writing and observing, um, for ways that we can get outside of our privilege and, um, move beyond it.

L: So why do we hear 'privileged' and feel like it means that they haven't worked for anything they've gotten?

W: Okay.

L: And I always want to get people to switch that idea that privilege is more of the things that we were...that we have or that we were born with that we have nothing to do with. So, I wrote about it in my book in terms of talking about the privilege exercise that I did in college that kind of changed my idea of how much power I walk into a room with. Um, but also kind of humbled me, and so, like I said I was a counseling center paraprofessional 2 ½ years in college and our first semester of training was all about us getting to know who we are and the space that we take up in the world. And one of the things we did was a privilege exercise. And the exercise that...actually, I've actually done it at different conferences too and it's really, it's really heart changing. Um, I've done it with groups of 50; I've done it with groups of 20. And everyone stands in a straight line across a room and you read off statements and people either step forward or step back. So a statement would be like 'Step forward if both your parents have college degrees. Step back if people can't pronounce your name. Step back if you've ever worried about where your next meal is coming from. Step forward if you feel like your...step forward if you feel like you can walk safely at night by yourself.' You know, things like that. So, after 20 or 30 statements are read off you stop; you look around the room and see where you are in relation to other people. You see who's behind you, who's in front of you, who's next to you. You figure out...you see if you're surprised by any of it. Did you expect to be further up? Did you expect to be further back? So when I did this in my CCP training, I was thinking because I'm a black woman, I was going to end up in the back pack after this exercise was done. I was thinking, "Yes, for sure I'll be in the back." When the exercise was done I was in the middle.

W: Mmm. Interesting.

L: Some of my white classmates were behind me...

W: Interesting.

L: ...and I was surprised why, because my class privilege, because I'd never been poor. I'm Christian, I am straight, I am able bodied, I am...

W: Educated.

L: ...gender. All of that pushed me forward—further than I thought I would. And I...it clicked in my head that "oh, I walk in a room with way more power than I was giving credit for." The person behind me who was white ended up behind me because she was poor, she was lesbian, atheist, um and had a chronic illness. So, that exercise kind of helped recalibrate, and it for me it really perfects the idea of privilege. Because we think privilege means you're lazy; you haven't done anything. No. Privilege means

you have a start...there's somethings about you; you are in a starting line that you didn't even walk to, to get there.

W: Right.

L: You got there because of something you had nothing to do with. So when we talk about white privilege, a lot of people who are white are also straight, are also able-bodied, they're also Christian—are walking with so much power and get a lot of opportunities and they take credit for it as a personal thing, not realizing that, hey, maybe you were able to get that house because, if you were black, you might not be even given the choice to look at that house, just because people think you can't afford it.

W: Right.

L: You know, you might be able to get that job, your first internship, because your dad placed a phone call and you were able to get in quicker. Or, the fact that you can just walk in a room and people don't throw incompetence and project that upon you just because you're white is a privilege. So I always say that it's important for us to want...acknowledge what these privileges are in our lives.

W: Yeah.

L: That's important.

W: Yeah.

L: Once you know it, that's a good thing...way to start. But also using the privilege that you walk with to pull people closer to you, people who are further behind. So, if I'm the most powerful person in the room, my job should be to make sure I'm speaking up for somebody who's less powerful than me. Like if I'm in a space—position of authority—I should make sure the person who's not is still being treated fairly; I should make sure I'm using my voice for that. I should make sure, hey, um, this person who happens to...your intern, for example, can't speak up for themselves cause they don't have the power to do so.

W: Yeah. It's interesting. So every time you walk in a room or into a situation, really, is to do this mental calculus and not to do the mental calculus which sort of, the tendency for people to do is, "Ok, good, this means I've got more power than other people." Say to yourself, "Ok, I've done this calculus; now I know there are people here that I can help, that I can pull up, so completely switch that. And also recognize that there are all sorts of things that we have that we don't deserve and so just to be aware of that and not somehow move into this self-aggrandizement simply because of where we happened to be born or who we happened to be born to, etc.

L: And you know, some privileges are more powerful than others. You know, class privilege and racial privilege are huge. Huge!

W: Yep.

L: And they trump a lot of other things, so the reason why white privilege gets a lot of attention is because that is the biggest piece of privilege that gets people forward. And being able to know that really puts you in a space of being like, alright, so what...how can I use that? It's...when a whole room is just full of nothing but white people, or a whole conference is nothing but white people, you should question why.

W: Yeah.

L: Why, why are we the only ones in here? And the person...the people who are in a place of authority should be the ones to be like, "Why are there no black people? Why are there no Latino people here? So, you know, that's one thing we've got to..."

W: Interesting.

L: ...we have to deal with.

W: One of the things that I talk about is this idea of personal disruption, and one of the first tenets of that is this notion of playing where no one else is playing, or playing where no one has thought of playing. And I think when you started writing, in many ways you were doing that. You weren't looking to see where other people were playing; you just sort of said, "My friends and I are doing this; let's just do this." There was no identity wrapped up in it so you couldn't fail cause....So, interesting. And now you have people like [Susan McPherson](#) and Nisha Chittal who are saying, "How did you get to be the coolest person on the planet?" Which I thought was so cute when I put out in Twitter that I was going to interview you and in your book you talk about fame and so here you started out playing where no one else was even noticing that you were playing, but now, you've achieved some modicum—and I would say even more than a modicum—of fame and you write in your book—I'm going to quote you: "They say money and fame make us more of who you already are. I am judging us for being fame-obsessed. Our pathological narcissism and dehydration for prominence leads us to do some shady and desperate things. Fame is expensive and many of us cannot afford it." I'd love to hear your thoughts. What are your thoughts on that?

L: Um, yeah, I feel like we are living in a world that is super obsessed with being...people are like, "I will do whatever I can to be known," as opposed to just doing the best work they can. I've never been driven or motivated by fame. How I write is not because I want to be famous. How I engage in the world is not because I want to be famous. And for me, I think, especially now that we live in this 'likes' culture—everything has to be like, "How many likes can you get?" People are not being themselves because they're trying to play this role. If you're not being intentional about what you want to do, you can get...you can get carried away by all of this...the likes, and the retweets, and the shares. So it's one of those things that I've always kind of made sure I kept my feet on the ground...

W: Yeah.

L: ...and keep my feet on the ground.

W: How do you keep your feet on the ground? Is it that you have people around you who just remember you as Luvvie from when you were ten years old? Is it...is it based

on your faith? Is it...you know, how...is it just that you're aware of it and being aware of it then it sort of quashes or diminishes its power? Is it a combination of all three?

L: It's a combination of all three. Like, I still have the same friends I had in high school and college—the ones who knew me before the Awesomely Luvviness. Like I still roll with them; we still go to brunch. So they still have all my pictures and know where all the bodies are buried. And...and then, most importantly, is my faith in that I'm a Christian—lifelong Christian—and I, I know that a lot of what's happening...because I work really hard and I know I'm talented but I've been elevated to levels that some of my peers haven't been to because...not just purely because of my talent and my gift and how hard I work. I think I've been elevated because of a higher power ensuring that I happen to meet the right people, be in the right rooms. So that keeps me humble because I don't take credit for my success. Like I don't take full credit for my success. That's also a piece in this.

W: Your book has been picked up by Shonda Rhimes and Betsey Beers for a book to comedy series. Does that mean it's fictionalized content? Will you play...will Luvvie play Luvvie? Tell us more about when this is happening and the process in general.

L: So, yes, I...Shonda Rhimes, [Shondaland](#), has optioned my book to be turned into a cable series and where we are is we're developing it right now, writing what this world looks like, what this character's up to, her random adventures. I will not be playing this character, because...that's what's funny is that's actually the first thing Shonda asked me was like, "Do you want to act in it?" and I was like, "No, that is not my ministry."

W: What, what's...what are you looking at in terms of release date at this point?

L: Uh, sometime next year.

W: Okay, 2018.

L: Yeah, TV's weird, so sometime next year.

W: You talk about your definition of feminism and I just thought this was really great, so I'm going to read it quickly and just would love to hear if you have any additional thoughts. So feminism to you is "a woman becomes a CEO of a Fortune 500 company or she stays at home and raises her children. She keeps the name she's always had or changes her name to her husbands, hyphenates it, creates a new name for her family, refuses to cook because she hates it or cooks every single day. Has some big-headed children, doesn't have any kids, is an accountant, is Martha Stewart, Oprah, Jennifer the Random, wears short shorts, wears a cloak, wears heels, wears flats, whatever it is you're doing right now, you are a feminist if that is what you want to be doing." So Luvvie, are you a feminist?

L: I am. When it's boiled down to its very simplest, simplest definition, it means a woman who is...well, one, somebody who believes that women can live life in the way that they see fit. So it means if she thinks staying at home to raise her kids is what she wants to do, that makes her a feminist. If she wants to be a CEO—cool.

W: If you could choose a place to speak in the future, um, that would be really important to you, where would it be and what would you talk about?

L: The United Nations.

W: Mmm. What would you...?

L: I would love to talk at the United Nations about the importance of speaking truth to power. The importance—especially when it's difficult, because you know, that body is charged with basically keeping the world standing upright and I feel like oftentimes they basically watch things happen that shouldn't be happening that they have the authority to possibly stop. So I would be...it would be really cool to speak at the United Nations.

W: Where would you like people to find you?

L: I am all over the interweb. So, I'm Luvvie on every network—like L U V V I E, one name. On every social network, my blog Awesomelylurve.com is where I go to muse about life and randomness and culture and television, so that's always a mainstay if you want to know what I'm up to at any given time, you know, my blog typically. And of course I have a newsletter because I must; because I like to give my audience kind of like a sneak peek. You know my audience calls themselves Luv Nation...

W: Oh fantastic.

L: ...so Beyonce has a Beyhive; they're like 'we need a name' and they actually put it on Luv Nation.

W: That's great. L U V N A T I O N?

L: L U V V N A T I O N.

W: Okay.

L: So I actually...my newsletter actually is called the Luvv Letter L U V V L E T T E R

W: Wow, that's....

L: So I write a Luvv Letter every two weeks for my audience that lets them know what I'm up to, where I'm going, random thoughts, what's going on and I do giveaways, cause I like to give people stuff.

W: So I'm going to read you one last quote and then ask you one final question. So this is on page 238 of your book. You said, "If you have a microphone plugged into an amplifier it is wrong for you not to sing. If you have been placed in a sphere of influence, I believe it is wrong for you not to use it to better the world. If you do not feel like it is your duty to leave this place better than you found it then you are taking everything around you for granted. Don't squander your social currency; don't squander your wealth. And if people stop supporting your work because you dared to

do something then good riddance.” So how will you disrupt yourself in the next 12 months?

L: How will I disrupt myself—I feel like I already...I just recently disrupted myself by buying a house. (laughing)

W: Ah, ok. Why was that disrupting yourself?

L: I disrupted myself because it was the first...it’s my first home and it disrupted my, my previous comfort. I’ve had like mini freak outs about it because I’ve been like, ‘I can’t believe I’ve done this really adult thing and like committed to this thing in such a big way and for somebody who is kind of change averse sometimes, it’s huge. Huge.

W: It’s so funny. It’s interesting how it’s different for everybody. Because for a lot of people they think, ‘Wait, wait. You mean speaking at the White House, speaking in front of the United Nations wouldn’t be disrupting yourself?’

L: No.

W: Buying a house is disruptive for you? That’s fascinating.

L: Yes, yes, actually that’s funny. Absolutely. That feels more disruptive than speaking at...yes, at the White House. The White House didn’t feel disruptive, but...

W: Will you write more books?

L: Yes. I will.

W: Do you have one in the works?

L: I have one I need to figure out.

W: I guess you’re probably so in the throes right now of working on your television show that it’s...does it...is it hard to kind of get the creative bandwidth to do both?

L: Well, honestly, I took the month of July off to get the creative bandwidth to just function in general. Cause I’ve been going, going, going for such a long time that I was like, “Okay, I’ve got to take a month off to kind of recharge my batteries across everything.”

W: Okay.

L: So in July I actually put a pause on everything.

W: Will you do that every year now? Take a month off?

L: Absolutely. If I can take even more than a month off I will. So I need to figure out my pockets.

W: What do you mean by that? Your pockets?

L: So the pockets of time that I need to take...

W: Okay, your pockets of time. Alright...

L: Yes. I've got to figure that out.

W: So you took the month off. You figured out how to recharge and then you'll focus on your next book, your television show and I'm going to dare you, Luvvie, to find a way to speak at the United Nations in the next two years.

L: Alright. I'll take that dare on.

W: Okay. Awesome. It's wonderful to talk to you. Take care.

L: Gee. Thank you.

W: Okay. Bye bye.

I didn't know what to expect when I interviewed Luvvie. Sometimes when people are well known for something – like being funny – that's all they are. Or in fairness, all we expect or want them to be. Luvvie is much more. She is, at heart, an activist who uses her sense of humor to help us hear things we may not be able to hear otherwise. She inspires us to change.

So, I suppose it's really not all that surprising that of all the stages she thinks she'd like to be on, she'd like to speak at the UN. She definitely should, and no doubt will. And I'd like to see her do a guest appearance on Madam Secretary. What about you?

Finally, it's interesting. Money – it's not the only thing that people can squander or waste. We can also squander social currency. Every single one of us has a microphone plugged into an amplifier. Do we use it? And how do we use it?

Thank you again to Luvvie Ajayi for being our guest. Thank you to Noreen Ali and Henry Hays who gave the podcast a shout out on social media. Not that we care about likes, but if you like what you hear, will you like it on social media, leave a review on iTunes (link in the show notes) or share it with someone you like?

Several people that I like are our sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager and editor Macy Robison, content contributor Heather Hunt and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson, and this is Disrupt Yourself.