

## Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

### Episode 79: Shawn Askinosie

Whitney: Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think write, speak, and live all things disruption. My guest is Shawn Askinosie, the founder and CEO of [Askinosie Chocolate](#) and author of the number one Amazon best selling book, [Meaningful Work: The Quest to Do Great Business, Find Your Calling, and Feed Your Soul](#). Shawn, welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. We're so happy to have you here.

Shawn: Oh thank you, Whitney. I'm glad to be here.

Whitney: I'd like to start by asking you where you grew up, and what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Shawn: I grew up in Springfield, Missouri, southwest Missouri, and um I always wanted to be lawyer. My father was lawyer so I was really exposed at an early age to the courtroom and just that life of a trial lawyer, and so it's what I always wanted to be.

Whitney: Do you remember how old you were when you first walked into a courtroom?

Shawn: I was probably seven or eight years old when I started going to the courthouse with my dad, but I, but I remember probably my first um chance to watch him in trial I was in the sixth grade.

Whitney: Oh, tell us a little bit more about that. How it felt-

Shawn: Well. (laughs) It was a, it was a murder trial, and my dad was a defense lawyer after he left he prosecutor's office, and I remember um that I got out of school for it and brought my two best friends with me. So um, which I can't imagine that happening in this day, but anyway so we sat on the front row during the entire week of this murder trial, and it was just a ... I mean it was just an energetic, um exciting thing to watch. Of course it was sad. It was uh, uh a bar fight case, and my dad was appointed to represent this man, and uh I mean it was electrifying, and I was, I was deeply interested in that kind of work, um I think starting out because, because of my father.

Whitney: So you know what image is coming to my mind. Do you want to guess what image it is, or shall I just say it?

Shawn: No, say it.

Whitney: *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

Shawn: I've never thought about that. I'd never, I'd never thought about that.

Whitney: Ever?

Shawn: No.

Whitney: That's so-

Shawn: And no, and then gosh. Now I'm, I'm gonna ... I'll, I'll, you're, you're gonna ... You're probably gonna bring me to tears on this, but um that, that's a striking image of course. I, I spent a lot of time, even before that trial, with my dad. He started legal aid in our community and so people who could not afford a lawyer would line up in the courthouse down the hallway, and he would sit in this room and give them free advice and help them, and uh I remember going with him and listening in on those conferences as a young person, and so um that's a great memory, and he was a champion of social justice, and, and human rights, and of course this is back in the 60s and early 70s, and it was quite a time to, to watch him in action.

Whitney: Such a powerful, beautiful image and memory. So your father was a prosecutor turned defense attorney, is that right?

Shawn: Yeah. He spent 14 years in the Marine Corps, and he was a tough guy, drill instructor, and he wanted to go to law school. They said no, so he quit after 14 years in, and uh, and then yeah. He started in the prosecutor's office and then moved to private practice.

Whitney: Wait a second. He quit 14 years in? Isn't sort of you go to 20 years, and then you're like a lifer? So for him-

Shawn: Yeah.

Whitney: To quit 14 years in, that was a big deal, right?

Shawn: It was a big deal, and he, he had been in combat and had served them faithfully and lived all over the world for the Marine Corps, and they did, had other plans for him, and he, so he really, really wanted to go. He gave up a lot to do that.

Whitney: Alright. So, Shawn grows up, and he becomes a lawyer, and I read in your book that you wrote that you had never lost a criminal trial, which I think to say you've never done something or always done something is really, really interesting and compelling. Can you just tell us about what you did as a lawyer, and what that meant never losing a criminal trial? What did that look like?

Shawn: My specialty area of practice um was criminal defense, and in particular, I represented people accused of upper grade felonies. So those are A and B felonies mostly where people are facing, you know, 15, 30 years or life in prison in many cases, and then I guess if there was a sub-specialty uh for my practice it was the defense of murder cases, and um, and for whatever reason those kind of came my way, and I was a criminal defense lawyer for almost 20 years, and I loved my work, and I really believed in it. It didn't feel like work, and I, I had no hobbies or anything like that, just preparing for the courtroom, and it was um, it was just uh a time in my life when I felt like I was in the right place at the right time.

Whitney: So you were a defense attorney. So I'm, I'm thinking like you really um were able to watch your dad, and there's a wonderful quote by um Carl Yung who says, "The greatest influence on a child is the un-lived life of a parent." And I wouldn't say this is necessarily the un-lived life of your father, but it is really fascinating to see that you went on to become a defense attorney and were very, very good at it.

So one of the things I'm wondering is how did you end up being so good? I remember reading in your book about some binders. Can you tell us a little bit of a story behind that?

Shawn: First of all, when I got out of school at the University of Missouri, I applied to 11 law schools and was rejected from all of them. I had this mistaken idea that my extracurricular activities working in politics and all of those things would help get me into school, and they didn't because I had a really low GPA and LSAT score and couldn't get in anywhere. So I went to work just the commercial real estate business in Dallas, and uh, and I retook the LSAT, and then really worked hard on it and got into the University of Missouri, and then I graduated high in my class because, and this is an answer to your question, I worked really, really, really hard.

And it was the kind of work that because I wanted to do it so bad it didn't feel like work, and I remember during law school, I didn't skip class. I loved taking finals. I loved the bar exam. I was very organized in my studies. I timed myself often during finals in law school to see how many hours in a day I could study. And so I really carried that through in my preparation for the courtroom.

A typical murder case might take 2000 hours to prepare for, and I had a team of people that I worked with, and uh investigators, forensic analysts, and people like that who really prepared me for what might come in the courtroom and the real, the real key for me was to work so hard and to understand what the um witnesses might say and any possible response to that that there were no surprises. And I can say that in all the years that I practiced, and there were very, very few surprises for me in the courtroom, and I think that was the secret, and I think they sort of just ... Sheer will to win, um and do it um ethically and within the bounds of the law, and have no fear. I had death threats. Many, for many years of my practice, and my wife and I had to take combat handgun training courses and learn how to do hostage rescue in case something happened to my daughter in her bedroom downstairs in the house, and um even though that was of course very serious. Uh, I just didn't ... I carried out this, this work that I did with no fear uh of anything. And-

Whitney: How is that possible? How did you do that? I mean I'm like sitting here thinking you're like no fear. I mean do you realize the, the um ... I don't know if the right word is magnitude, but for you to say you had no fear. There were death threats against your family, but you're like I'm doing this 'cause I ... So, can you unpack that first, a little bit?

Shawn: I believed in it. I believed not only in it, so that is the overall I believed and believe in the practice of law, and I believed in the power of the courtroom, and in particular I believed in the power of cross examination, and how that one constitutional right that we have um when representing somebody accused against the government that has all

of the power, all of the resources, and literally uh everything on their side besides the presumption of innocence which we all know really doesn't exist in today's day, and so I um, I had this sense that I was fighting for the underdog, and that in order to do that I needed to harness that power of cross examination. I had, I had such a belief in that power that it um overshadowed any fear that I might have that one of those witnesses might try to do me harm.

I would say most of the instances in which I might've been harmed were threats from law enforcement and police officers over the years, and uh one time I went to work, and I had a deer cut up with its legs and head um spread all over the front porch of my office building and blood smeared on the door and ... the thing is, I, when you-

Whitney: Wait a second.

Shawn: Yeah.

Whitney: Wait, wait, hold on.

Shawn: (laughs)

Whitney: I go to work. There's a deer cut up, spread out-

Shawn: Yeah.

Whitney: Blood splattered everywhere, and then you're like-

Shawn: Yeah.

Whitney: So yeah. Wait, hold on.

Shawn: Right.

Whitney: What did you do?

Shawn: Well uh, well the first thing is just to treat it like a crime scene, and uh so that was during a particularly high profile murder case, and um, and so we called the police, and I believed that it was actually a police officer responsible for it, and um, and so I could, there wasn't a chance for me to get help from really any um agency because I never knew who it was that might be trying to scare me, or something like that.

And uh, but this was a time when Court TV had the, the uh, they had the budget to put trials on the air, and so a couple of my murder trials were live on Court TV, gavel to gavel. Um-

Whitney: Wow.

Shawn: And, it sounds in fact as I'm listening to myself talk. (laughs) It sounds like a lot of work.

Whitney: Yeah.

Shawn: And it was, it was a lot of work, but it just didn't feel like it. In other words, I liked it so much and felt that I was doing the right thing that um, and I'm sure you have been in this, and maybe are right now, in this situation where it just doesn't feel like work.

Whitney: Yeah.

Shawn: But the problem is, and I know we're gonna get there, but the problem is that's great. It's lovely until it isn't, and then it can be this weight that bears down on you with the full force and fury of years of doing that. Um and then not loving it anymore, and then so

Whitney: So let's talk about that.

Shawn: Sure.

Whitney: Let's talk about that. That, that's the moment, right?

Shawn: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: The moment where you said, "Okay, we're done." Um it was really interesting to me to read and hear. I think it's very ... You said in your book um, and I want you to talk about this 'cause you mention, you say, "The stress and discomfort began to manifest themselves physically. One day I had some chest pains and went to my doctor who sent me to the hospital for an overnight stay. It turned out there was no problem with my heart so I was sent to a psychologist. Um I occasionally had little panic attacks manifesting as a punch to my sternum though I did not know what they were at the time."

What happened? What, what caused this big ... What was this ... It's not an epiphany, but this moment in time.

Shawn: Upon reflection, I know there was a moment after a murder trial that I, that I um ... It was just really, really emotional, and a very um high profile case that the jury was sequestered. It was just this big deal, and it was really sad. Every part of the case was sad, and I'd worked on it for a long time, and at the end of the case this uh, the judge who had been threatening to hold me in contempt and send me to jail, um um, he decided right before closing arguments, and I was just exhausted. I was ready to give closing arguments to the jury, and right before closing started, he asked to see the prosecutor and I in his chambers, and so we went back there, and I had no idea what he was gonna say. I thought he was just gonna give us sort of an admonition before closing about what to do and what not to do.

And he said, "Okay, well. Here's what we're gonna do. Um Shawn, I'm gonna let your client plead down to second degree murder from first. Mr. Prosecutor, you're gonna give her probation, and I'm ... Or you're gonna recommend probation, and I'm going to

agree to that." And um I was in shock because that doesn't happen in a first degree murder case, and so he said, "Go back and talk to your clients."

So I went over to this little ante room off the court room to speak with my client, this woman who had been accused of killing her little girl, and um, she believed that her ex-husband was sexually molesting her little girl, and for years she'd protected her against him, and the day before she was required to give her daughter up for the first unsupervised visits in years of her life. Uh, she decided it would be better for both of them to die then for her to suffer this fate of going with the ex-husband.

And so in the ... They both went into the garage, and, and uh the little girl died from um carbon monoxide poisoning, carbon dioxide poisoning from the car, and um the woman, my client, almost died. She was in a coma, and anyway so I told her at the end of this trial, I said, "Well here's what the judge said, but I'm ready to keep fighting for you." That was ridiculous. I mean, I mean I'd won the case.

Whitney: Right.

Shawn: I didn't even know what I was saying. Oh I'm ready to give closing argument, and you're going to lose. But, and she, and she said to me, she said, "Shawn, it's over. You did a, you did a good job." And she was just this little woman who had really had preferred to have been dead, and she hugged me, and it was ... And I started to cry, and that's not the way it's supposed to work. I'm the protector. I'm the advocate. The roles were dramatically reversed. I mean dramatically. And like the Earth stopped spinning in that moment, and so when I look back on that moment, it was the moment that things shifted for me, but it took a while for me to um feel those in my body like you described. And I ultimately started getting these little um feelings in my chest and having trouble, not trouble, but I could see a change in my breathing just walking into the courtroom on a really simple case, on just nothing.

And, and uh just a routine appearance. And my partner at the time, said she noticed this, and that's when I went to the doctor and went to the hospital, and then ultimately a psychologist, and for a time I did uh get on anti-depressants and took Lexapro and did that for several years.

Whitney: How long did it take you, Shawn, when you had that moment um with your client in the courtroom where she was comforting you? That was, that was the moment, but how long from the time you had that experience was it, when you actually left the law? How many years did it take for you to make that transition?

Shawn: Between five and six years of me searching for my next passion.

Whitney: Okay. Um so you said you uttered a prayer every day for five years. What was the prayer?

Shawn: Dear God, please give me something else to do, and that was it. And it's a simple little prayer, and um it's ... I, I said it sometimes many times a day, and then I became desperate.

Whitney: And then what happened?

Shawn: Well um, what happened is what you might think happened. The more desperate I became, the further away it was. Um from my reach. That is, finding my next passion, my next inspiration from, I mean from what we've been talking about for the last minutes. You could see, I mean I loved it. I mean I was driven to, to this work of, of trial law, and then to just look for another business or look ... I knew I couldn't practice law anymore. I just knew that wasn't going to work, and I couldn't find anything. I looked for uh you know, was I going to start a donut franchise? Or was I going to um start making cupcakes, or was I going to, you know, or was I going to buy a business?

I couldn't. I just ... Nothing, nothing was opening my heart. You know, nothing was fulfilling that place, and so I got pretty desperate about things, and what happened, of course I had no idea that this was going to ... But what happened is that I started volunteering in the palliative care department of one of our local hospitals, and palliative care is essentially end of life care, and I would, on Fridays, go visit patients who were dying in the hospital. Maybe oncology, neurology, cardiology, these were patients most often alone, and no family or friends maybe, and they'd requested a visit from a volunteer, and so I did that. I did that for several years, and that's the thing that ultimately um tripped the trigger for me. That was it. That was the thing,

Whitney: Did you quit the law? Like after five years did you say okay, I'm quitting? Like what did your family do when you decided to, to change and move on?

Shawn: The, my wife and I now have been married for 31 years, and when I told her that I wanted to quit and um open a chocolate factory, she thought that I'd lost my mind. Um as did a lot of my friends, lawyer friends, and people. Um but I didn't quit the law until after I'd started the chocolate business, but the starting of the chocolate factory took me over a year, and it took a long time to do two things. One, wind down my law practice. You can't just turn the lights out, and say goodbye 'cause I had, you know, a whole lot of cases in process. So I took on a partner to help me unwind that practice, and then back when I started, no one was doing bean to bar chocolate. There were two or three of us in the country, uh starting up and not really talking to each other, and, and, and there were no books really. No places in the country to go.

So it took me a long time to acquire the equipment from around the world, to learn how to make chocolate, to learn how I was gonna buy beans, and all of that, while I was practicing law. And that was really, really hard to do. And uh, but then I'm still a lawyer. I still, I still keep my license active, um but I haven't practiced for over a decade, and uh-

Whitney: Okay.

Shawn: So yeah. It was not easy in the beginning.

Whitney: There are all these, there are all these interesting threads going. So I wanna come back to the palliative care in a minute or in a few minutes. So-

Shawn: Sure.

Whitney: So do you remember when you had the moment of like I'm gonna, you know, I'm gonna be Charlie in the chocolate factory.

Shawn: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Do you remember when you had that ah-ha of like this is what I'm gonna do?

Shawn: I sure do.

Whitney: What was happening?

Shawn: I was driving to a funeral of a distant relative, and by myself in my car, and I ... At that point, started, I started grilling on my, on a Big Green Egg, and that's kinda what got me my first hobby, and then baking and then making chocolate desserts. I had no idea where the chocolate came from, but as I was driving to this funeral, I thought you know, I think I'll just make chocolate from scratch. And I had no idea what that meant. I just thought, oh I'll, I'll just start from the beginning point, not knowing. And I remember. I remember where I was driving and thinking that, and um a lot going on kind of during that drive. Maybe an hour each way, and it was pretty powerful, and, and when I got home from that, I found this trip, and within three months of that little light bulb moment um I was in the Amazon and studying how farmers influence the flavor of chocolate by how they harvest the cocoa beans.

And uh that's ... And then of course that really accelerated everything as it often does, right? I mean when we take a step toward the thing besides just reading about it or thinking about it, then it's kind of funny how the universe conspires to help us, and that's what happened. I mean me going to the Amazon was accelerant.

Whitney: I find myself really um curious about this whole process because you were in this state of, of ... I don't want to use, the word that's coming to my mind is despair, and I'm not sure that that word is quite accurate. Um, but this place of certainly wandering in the, wandering in the wilderness, wandering in the desert-

Shawn: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: For years and years, and, and something then just kind of ... And then you had to continue to experiment 'cause you said you were baking, and you were, you know, cooking and then you just had this kernel of an idea that just popped into your head, and you just said, "I'm gonna act on this." And then you went to the Amazon, and then things started to accelerate, but it wasn't ... There was a flash of inspiration, but you still had to really act on it, start on it. It wasn't, it wasn't, you know, kind of the choirs and

angels singing. Like you still had to take a lot of initiative on your own. Is that, am I, am I representing that correctly? Or am I hearing that correctly as you're talking?

Shawn: You are. That's, that's exactly right. This, this was a faint whisper in my head, and often we sort of all have those, but the question is whether or not we recognize them or hear them for what they really are, and I just happen to be lucky that day, and be in the right place at the right time to hear it. And so no. It was not loud. It was not the voice of God, whatever that voice sounds like. It was probably my own voice. And um, and so and it was faint. And but it was also kind of uh part of a process, and it just, it just, like I said, happened right place, right time and then I acted on it.

And I've never been one to not act, and so all through my life I've been one of those kind of people that will take risks and you know, I'm ready for the next adventure, and I don't have that kind of fear. I have a lot of other fear, but not that.

Whitney: Not the adventure.

Shawn: And so that really ... Yeah, no. The adventure I'm ready for it, and I was then, and so I was ready to act, and of course be careful. I wanted to be careful, but I knew that I wasn't gonna be able to get to the next place if I didn't leap.

Whitney: And so you did, and you went to the Amazon.

Shawn: I did. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: And that was the start. Alright, so now you own a chocolate company, the Askinosie Chocolate Company. First question, really important question, what is your favorite kind of chocolate?

Shawn: Yeah. Well that's hard.

Whitney: (laughs)

Shawn: You know I just got back from Tanzania. Uh man, probably I don't know, five or ten days ago, and um, and so it seems like the last place that I have been is my favorite. So um, but it's kind of like with our children, you know, we can't pick a favorite, and uh, and I travel to these four origins that we source cocoa beans from every year and have for almost 12 years now, and, and so the people mean so much to me it's hard to separate the people from the chocolate. And the hard work that they provide to make these beans what they are. So it's hard. It's hard for me. But um, you know were-

Whitney: Alright so, but that's okay.

Shawn: Yeah.

Whitney: So since you were, you were just in Tanzania, what kind of chocolate do they make? So we'll just, we'll just-

Shawn: They make cocoa beans.

Whitney: Okay.

Shawn: These, these farmers, they grow cocoa beans. This is a cooperative lead by a woman.

Whitney: Yep.

Shawn: Mama Impoke is her name, and um, and so the beans that they make are ... You know, we make a single origin dark chocolate from Tanzania, and then we make other chocolate products with the cocoa beans from this little cooperative, and, and um so yeah. That's, that's what they do.

Whitney: I'd love for you to talk a little bit about um your ... So the way you go about doing the chocolate. Because you treat cocoa farmers, you source your beans very differently than most people do. Um, you do something called [direct trade](#). Can you talk to us about what that, what that is, what that means for how you um, how you manufacture your chocolate?

Shawn: Sure. Well thanks for asking because this is to me a really important um topic, and [direct trade](#), unlike fair trade, is not a regulated word. It's not a trademarked phrase. Um and I was inspired by [Intelligentsia Coffee](#) based in Chicago. Um, they really pioneered direct trade coffee and Jeff Watts, for Intelligentsia was the person who really pioneered this worldwide, and many years ago I contacted him and asked if he would help me with some questions I had about how we could set up direct trade. So from the very beginning, the first contract that I had with cocoa farmers in 2006, we have used these, this practice of direct trade, and direct trade, it can really be defined by the person who's saying they're doing it, and that's what we do on our website and what I did in my book.

But it kind of breaks down like this. The first thing related to direct trade is the quality, and we want to make sure that we're buying high quality beans, and one of the best ways for us to determine that is for me to go there, or for one of us to go, and that's why I go every year. In this trip I just came back from was my 40th origin trip since I started the company. Um the second thing is financial and transactional um transparency, and we profit share with our farmers, and open our books to them in their language.

So a couple of weeks ago when I was profit sharing with the farmers in Tanzania, our financial statements were in Swahili, and we've done this now with them for so long, they understand it. They understand the calculation, and they expect it. Um the third thing we want to do as a part of direct trade is practice um ecological and economic um sustainability, and it's important to us that the farmers are not using chemicals and pesticides. It's important that um they are using a technique called intercropping and shade growing and pruning their trees. Um and when we profit share with them, we don't paternalize this money that we're giving to them. They decide what they want to do with it, and if they seek our counsel, then we may help them come up with ideas and

facilitate the visioning process for them, which we do in Tanzania of facilitating vision plans for these farmers is a big, big part of what I do.

Um the fourth thing is that we want to make sure that they have a socially sound business. That they're not using child slave labor or anything like that, and of course none of our farmers do that, and then the final thing is, like I mentioned earlier, is traveling there. Just going. And that's one of the things I love the most. I still, to this day, do not tire of traveling to meet farmers, and it takes me between 50 and 60 hours to get to this place in Tanzania, and this last trip I had 15 students in tow because we have a program called [Chocolate University](#) where we engage local um students in our business to teach them about business and how we um practice direct trade.

So we had 15 local high school students with us, and we've been doing that for almost 10 years. So that adds a whole other layer of responsibility to the trip, but we want them to have this understanding about this question that you just asked, what is direct trade? And to see how we treat farmers and uh what's possible in that relationship.

Whitney: Yeah, it's really interesting. Um and listening to you, I remember reading in your book, and you said that um, "Direct trade doesn't stop with the farmers. It means um you want a connection with the farmers. You want a connection with your customers." Um, and then one lovely quote is, "It's not about the chocolate, but it's all about the chocolate." Do you want to say more of what you mean when you say that?

Shawn: That, that I did not make that quote up. I, it was first said about beer. Um, but it's not about the chocolate, it's about the chocolate. So for us, it's not about the chocolate. When I'm taking students and work so hard to bring students to Tanzania, right now or when we're feeding 1000 kids a day, which we are in the Philippines at a school where we have a partnership, or um as we are working with people in our local community and on our street and working on community development projects with the farmers and working with empowered girls, starting an enlightened boys program ourselves, and funding it, and working to make sure that the girls um in our empowered girls program have feminine hygiene products so they can go to school.

This is not about chocolate. It's about humanity. It's about shared humanity, but on the other hand, it's absolutely about chocolate. Because we are so laser focused on the quality of the chocolate that we make, and try to make sure that we have the best beans that we can get, and that we can win awards all over the world even now with all the competition that we face. It's so important. It's of absolute importance that we focus on the quality of our chocolate, and so it's kind of this non-dualism, if you will, that we approach our business with. In not just this but in many other aspects.

And so that's what I mean when I say it's not about the chocolate, it's about the chocolate. And we could substitute that for anyone's business regardless of the product or service they provide, and uh it's this sort of inseparability between who we are as people and the thing that we do or make.

Whitney: Such an interesting paradox here. You know, for me having um grown up on Wall Street and being really focused as a capitalist, it's just fascinating. I'm like wow, like he's really ... You're blowing my mind a little bit which is fascinating of like you're saying okay, yeah. We want, we want to, we need to make money because we, because we're a business, but the money is only part of the equation. And I remember reading in the back of your book, I mean you're paying your farmers a lot more than most people are paying their farmers, et cetera. And so the whole equation, the calculus of what you're doing is you're just, you're playing a completely different game than I suspect the rest of the industry is. Is that accurate?

Shawn: That is accurate, and the industry, the what we call big cocoa, um they are largely responsible for the, the overwhelming majority of cocoa beans purchased in the world, and most of their cocoa beans come from Ghana and Ivory Coast. About 60 to 70% of all of the cocoa bean supply comes from there, and the big companies, the ones you have heard of and some you haven't maybe, or no you probably have, but um who are buying, there are eight companies that essentially control a majority of all cocoa purchases. And when we adjust the price for inflation, the commodity price of cocoa has remained unchanged for 30 years, and so you know we read all the time about the demand of dark chocolate and the prices going up, and companies are ...

But the price of the commodity is essentially unchanged, and really what, what ... If in my own little way, what I'm trying to do is um, inform and educate about why it's important that the commodity price go up for farmers around the world, and that companies understand that it will not have a dramatic impact on margin. And it just doesn't. And so what it means is, is that, that all of us in the industry, you know, could no. Will it impact cash flow? Yes, it will – it will affect mine too. But my little company, you know we only have 16 people total in the company so we're tiny. But the message is that these farmers, all farmers, not just the ones who produce high quality cocoa beans. I'm talking about the farmers in Ghana and Ivory Coast who are living beneath the United Nations definition of extreme poverty, and so some of these farmers when the commodity price was around 2000 bucks a metric ton, that's six months ago, they were living on a dollar a day. And yet when people go to the convenient store they fill up with gas and they see this, you know, one dollar, three ounce chocolate bar, and they're like man that is a great price. I'm gonna buy that. That's a good value.

No. It's a terrible value. Why? Because we are buying that on the backs of farmers making a dollar a day, and it's, that has to change. It has to change.

Whitney: Yeah. Are you seeing um the big cocoa I think you described them as big cocoa, are you seeing them change or shift behavior at all as a consequence of people who are doing work and running their businesses as you're running your business?

Shawn: Yeah. I'm seeing changes. So there's consumer facing programs. Building clinics, building schools, and but the problem that I have with that is, is that who would ... I mean who could argue that building a clinic in Ghana near where cocoa farmers, who could say that's bad? That's awesome. But what I'm suggesting is, is that it, it sort of disguises the true need of the person, which is of course they need access to medical care, but what they really need is to make more than a dollar a day.

Whitney: Right. It's dealing-

Shawn: That's what they need.

Whitney: With the fallout. It's dealing with the consequences as to saying-

Shawn: Yes.

Whitney: Let's be differently knowing that our actions are having a consequence.

Shawn: Yes. Yes. And so that's why one of the things that I talk about in the book and some of my blog posts that I write about um to my three followers is that um we have to be very careful when we're using our CSR, our corporate social responsibility platform as a marketing tool. We are held to a very high standard. We must be, we must hold ourselves to a high standard. We must hold each other to a high standard when we use our corporate social responsibility departments and programs as a platform to get people to buy our stuff.

That's, those are matters of the heart, and I believe we have a duty to be very, very careful with that.

Whitney: When did you realize that it wasn't your goal to be the biggest chocolate company, but the best tasting direct chocolate available? When did you have that, have that realization?

Shawn: Before I opened the doors to the company.

Whitney: You knew that before?

Shawn: I did.

Whitney: And how did you know that?

Shawn: During this time, you asked me about how long it took from that particular uh trial until I knew I wanted to make chocolate, and that was about five or six years. That was a path, that was real period of struggle, of depression, of anxiety, of self-discovery, spiritual um practice, and all of those things you know just kind of wrapped in to a messy recipe of my life. And but, but the great thing about those times in our life is we, we can really um, if we can bear it, you know if we can bear it and we can pull the threads of those troubling times through to see how they can make us better, kinder, more compassionate, then it's worth it.

And so during that time of struggle and really suffering in my own way, um I also was able to loosely formulate in my mind what I wanted to do, and I knew that I didn't want to have a big, huge company. I knew that I wanted to have connection, and I knew specifically that I wanted to have connection with farmers, that that would be a vocation working directly with farmers. I also knew that um working with students in my

community would be a vocation, and I knew that all of that together would have to be um executed in a way that made relationship important and that I couldn't lose it.

And so I sort of intentionally built it so that it would be dependent on me, and um I built it in a way that growth would not be too fast because I knew that I didn't wanna lose the relationship, and I didn't wanna lose my connection to those vocations of farmers and students. So I said 10 days ago I led this trip of these young people to meet cocoa farmers in Tanzania that are like family to me, and there's no way I could do that or have time for that if I was focused on um accelerated growth and scale.

Whitney: Do you disclose what your revenues are?

Shawn: Yeah. They're right at \$2 million a year. Um and you know, we're growing in between right below double digits. So we're growing eight or nine percent a year.

Whitney: K. You know it's just interesting listening to you because, and reading through your book, and I would recommend that people do read it and um and dive in because one of the things that's interesting is that you set out with this very direct intention of you were going to be a direct trade company that you had-

Shawn: Reverse scale? Are we thinking of reverse scale?

Whitney: Well and I just-

Shawn: Yeah.

Whitney: It's fascinating to me as I look at that because I think you have had the siren song. You have had people come to you and say, "Okay Shawn, this is amazing. Let's make this big, big, big, big." Right?

Shawn: I have, yeah.

Whitney: And um, and so I think that that has probably at times tested you know ... You said earlier this idea of no fear, and I suspect this is same sort of sense of uh sense of conviction um has had to come into play here of when you got this siren song of hey you could go do this. You could be really big, and you're like, well no. This isn't actually what I've set out to do, and so I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about how that's been when you've had that conviction tested.

Shawn: Often the, the conviction is tested. We're all tested in different ways, but we're all tested. Mine has to do with um notoriety and recognition, and so it's not so much money. That's not really, you know, my place of obstacle and fear, and so when the big money and big scale comes my way, the temptation is well Shawn, this, you would be known worldwide if we could take Chocolate University and have it all over the world in all of these programs, and you would be feeding so many children, and you would be well known for this, and you would have an invitation to speak at TED, and then you

know it was like all I could hear was the TED intro music and me walking out on the stage. You know I could see it in my head.

So that's my temptation. Even though I knew, even though I had this blueprint of what I wanted to do and the discipline to not color outside the lines um as it relates to this idea of scale. Knowing that, going in, I still was tempted by it, and had to reel myself in because it built my ego. You know, it made me feel good, and so I recognized then as the business progressed and as I had these experiences like I describe in the book, and I even had, had this happen just 10 days ago, and that is this. My practice of reverse scale, this discipline has permitted me, and I believe it's, there's a direct correlation. It's permitted me to have experiences in my work day, particularly traveling, of seeing the divine.

I don't mean like for an hour or two or, I mean for a split second, a glimpse of heaven. And I can't really tell you what that's like. I mean it's, it's essentially indescribable, but I'm saying, I'm telling you that I've experienced it, and I did just 10 days ago, and so the more experiences that I have like that don't necessarily drive me to have more experiences. What they drive me to do is stay true to my mission, to stay true to this practice knowing that if I will, if I will stay true to this, that I will have the opportunity to transform me, and open my heart more, and really we could boil our discussion down to this. I grew up with a broken heart, just probably like you, like many people. Mine is no different than anyone else's, and our broken hearts will drive us to a lot of things. They'll drive us to work hard. They'll drive us all over the place, and so what I now recognize is that my broken heart is good. It's good, and I don't need to fix it, and so one of the ways I express that is by recognizing this experience that I have - that work of the divine. And I don't want to lose that, and so I'm careful about letting the siren song of notoriety and fame sweep me away from that, and I, I ... That's my practice.

Whitney: That's really beautiful, Shawn. I think um just to wrap up um because there's not really much more to say after that. Um. Two final questions uh, you've been able to write this book with your daughter, to be able to work with your daughter, could you share a little bit of what that experience has been like for you to be able to share this with her?

Shawn: Sure. The um ... Lauren's my coauthor in the book and thank you for mentioning her, she's our chief marketing officer and has worked for me for 10 years um full time, and started working for me when she was 15, and um so she's been involved in every aspect of this business, and um it has been uh a dream come true, and with writing this book with her was um an experience of my life that I know won't be duplicated, and it's one of those things um uh that I treasure in my heart. Uh it's one of those things that I hold dear, and um I wouldn't trade it for anything, literally anything, and of course for those of you listeners who have worked in family business, uh I will say, you know, it's not the easiest thing in the world sometimes. Um but it's definitely worth it, and a dream come true for me because my dad died when I was young, and I never got to practice law with him, and to work with my daughter and to sort of carry that tradition through um and working on all the issues that we work on together of social justice and telling these stories is really meaningful to me.

Thank you for asking about that.

Whitney: You know I never thought of this, but I did now, and when you just said this is you um, you quote Khalil Gibran saying, "Our greatest joy is sorrow unmasked, and joy can be found through any knowledge of our sorrows." And as I read your book, and I was thinking about you and preparing for the interview I kept thinking okay, so he's done the chocolate business, and that's been a way to see joy on the other side of the sorrow, and how you had done the work in the palliative care, and that had started to open you up and working with people who were healing or dying or suffering, and that started to reconnect you and acknowledge the sorrows so that you could start to feel the joy. But it had not occurred to me until you said just now is that one of the joy that's come in unmasking the sorrow is being able to have this wonderful, tremendous um experience with your daughter. That like you said you hadn't been able to have with your, with your father, and unexpected um I'm thinking of the uh wonderful C.S. Lewis quote, "Surprised by joy." And it sounds like that's been a surprise for you. Um Shawn, as we wrap up, any final thoughts that you would like to share with our audience?

Shawn: Well I would just encourage your audience um if anything, I would just ask that they, if they're struggling, you know, like I was during that time to sort of counterintuitively think about somebody who needs you and serve them. Don't wait. Don't wait to serve someone who needs you not because you're going to find yourself, that the ends justify the means. But because you will find yourself. As Gandhi said, "The way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." And I think even though our darkest times, if we can roll up our sleeves and think about someone else who might need us, we'll be saved ourselves.

Whitney: Thank you, Shawn, so much. It's been an absolute pleasure having you today.

Shawn: Thank you, Whitney. Thank you for asking me such great questions.

One of the things I hear a lot in coaching is "I don't know how to connect what I did to what I want to do. What are my transferable skills?"

Shawn provides a great case study for how to do this. Like his ability to deal with death threats as defense attorney. His sense of conviction helped him overcome his fear. This may not seem like the attribute of a chocolate maker, but it certainly is an attribute for the kind of chocolate maker that Shawn wants to be. He wants to be connected to his customers and suppliers. So despite the siren song of fame and fortune, he's a small company that does direct trade. For him, chocolate is a spiritual practice. Build the kind of business you want to build and stay true to your vision. This takes conviction.

All that said, I love his willingness to share the struggle he feels. It reminded me, actually of our [conversation with Peter Bregman](#). Here's what he said, "Feeling small and insignificant after years of feeling important is a winding road of emotion that never really ends. This is also called humility. It is not something we "do" actively but instead it happens to us whether we seek it or not. Most of the time I am grateful for this smallness, consider it a gift and make it a practice. I don't have it all figured out by any stretch. But some days I see glimpses of my true self when I recognize that it's in my smallness that I am most connected to humanity and able to see Divinity."

Practical tip: For all of you who are thinking, “I want to do something new. I’m at the top of my learning curve, I need to jump,” notice that once Shawn decided he didn’t want to practice law anymore, it took him about five years to make the shift from the law to chocolate. So have patience with your own journey. And bonus tip? Go buy some of his chocolate. [We’ll include a link in the show notes](#). It is delicious!

If you’d like to learn more about building an a team, whether it’s large, or small, like Shawn’s, check out my book with Harvard Business Press. You can download the first chapter at [whitneyjohnson.com/ateam](http://whitneyjohnson.com/ateam).

Thank you again to Shawn Askinosie for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributor Emilie Davis and art director Brandon Jameson.

I’m Whitney Johnson  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.