

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPIISODE 92: DONNA HICKS

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write speak and live all things disruption. My guest today is Donna Hicks, an associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. Donna is an expert on conflict resolution, and she's the author of the recently published book: *Leading with Dignity*.

Whitney: Donna, thank you so much for joining us. We are delighted to have you on the podcast today.

Donna: Well, it's my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

Whitney: First question for you is, where did you grow up and what did you think you would be when you grew up?

Donna: I grew up in upstate New York in a tiny town outside of Albany. Um, it was right on the Massachusetts border and, um, I was, uh, I grew up in a town that had maybe 2000 people in it, maximum - Stephentown, New York. And, you know, at that point, you know, I was, I had such a limited experience growing up because, uh, we know we lived in the country and we weren't very, we were kind of on poor side, lived, you know, lived well, but, but we didn't have a lot of money. And so I didn't really think big in those days but, um, there was a, there was a time when I was in high school and I was introduced to a language teacher and he was so worldly and he was so, uh, international that he inspired me. And I said to myself at that time as I was, you know, graduating from, from this high school, this really tiny high school with 42 students in the graduating class, you know, I said, you know, "I, I want to do something in the international world. I want to just go out there, I want to learn languages, I want to ..."

At that time I was thinking, "I wanted to work for the UN," but what did I know, you know? So I had aspirations later on in my life because I was exposed to this one teacher. Isn't it amazing what one teacher can do.

Whitney: What's his name? Let's give him a shout out. Do you remember?

Donna: His name is, uh, Urbano. I don't even know, you know, I don't even know if he's still around but, uh, Luis, Luis Urbano, uh, his name was. And, um, yeah so he, he was my inspiration.

Whitney: Do you remember, um, Donna prior to that, prior to high school, do you remember what you wanted to be at that point or were your dreams and ambitions pretty vague up until then?

Donna: Yeah, you know, I don't even think I thought about that to tell you the truth when I was really young, I was, I was just always a very curious student. You know, one of the things that, um, sort of got me through my, my early childhood was, was being a good, you know, good little girl and a smart student and the teachers all liked me um, but honestly I don't really have any memory of saying, "Oh, I wanted to be a nurse or a doctor or, or a teacher." Um, I just don't remember having any, um, any specific thing in mind at that point.

Whitney: Until high school.

Donna: Yeah.

Whitney: What did Mr. Urbano teach? What was the subject?

Donna: He taught French and Spanish.

Whitney: Hmm, do you speak French and Spanish?

Donna: I do, a little bit, I mean good enough to get by.

Whitney: Un piquito.

Donna: Un piquito.

Whitney: (laughs). So you, um, all right, so this fire gets lit within you in high school, you grow up in a small town, Stephentown, New York, and then you go to college. What did you study in college and how did you decide on conflict resolution as a career?

Donna: Well, there, there's a big gap between when I went to college and, and, and when, when I decided on this career. Um, I mean I went, I lived in Japan for a couple of years, um, I lived in Texas in the, in the desert of Texas for a few years. Anyway, once I finally got into-

Whitney: Wait, no, no, no, okay, sorry. Back up, back up. Why ... Okay, what did you study in college and then why did you live in Japan and why did you live in Texas? Maybe fill in the blanks a little?

Donna: Yeah, well, uh, what happened was I, I, I ... This was during the Vietnam War, I was, I graduated from high school in 1968, met a guy who was, um, going to be enlisting in the Air Force, um, and he was, uh, assigned to, um, an Air Force Base in, uh, what, what is now Japan but the, the Island of Okinawa. And so he said, "Look, if you marry me, I can, uh, I'll ... you can come with me to Okinawa." And I thought, "Oh, you know, again, this wanderlust that I had for Italian ... Not Italian, for international, um, ex-, exploration. So I said, "Sure, I'll do that." And so we, we, I mean it was a crazy, you know, married, both of us 18 years old. It was just crazy, crazy times, you know, uh, during the Vietnam War. And so we lived in, uh, in, on Okinawa for two years and then we lived in, um, in Texas and then it became really clear that we, we, that we had to get this marriage annulled, it was just not working out.

And anyway, so, um, we, we did, we, we got a divorce and I actually ended up, uh, going to Madison, Wisconsin, uh, for my undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin. And it was at that point where I, I was studying to be a psychologist in as an undergrad and a French major. But then once I got into grad school, I realized that I

was really interested and wanted to focus my attention not only on psychology, but on international affairs. So I put my dissertation together which focused on the social psychological dimensions of international conflict. Also, uh, so I got my PhD after about 10 years and I had written to a famous professor here at, at Harvard University who was doing work on the social psychological dimension, his name was Professor Herbert Kelman.

And he, long story short, he invited me to come and do a two year postdoc. So for two years, I worked with this wonderful, wonderful man who was, was my mentor and still is my mentor, um, and then after a two year postdoc, he offered me a job to work with him doing international conflict resolution. And I've been at Harvard ever since for 25 years.

Whitney: Wow, yeah, 25 years, okay. So let's fill in the blanks, I, I want to just kind of connect a few dots. So it sounds like you didn't start college until you were 22, 23?

Donna: 24. Yeah, 24, yeah.

Whitney: Which I think is important because for some people that are listening to this, they might think, "Well, if I didn't go to college when I was 18, then we're done or even 19."

Donna: Right.

Whitney: And you didn't start till you were 24 and it sounds like if I'm doing the math properly, you didn't get your PhD until you were 36, 37?

Donna: Yeah, I was almost 40. Yeah, it was almost 40, almost 40. And, um, in fact, uh, when I went to left Madison, Wisconsin and went to Harvard, I was, yeah, I had, I had turned 40 that, uh, that year before. No, no, no, I think I turned 41 when was, uh, um, at, at Harvard. So, but it was, um, I mean, uh, even though it seems crazy that half my life was over and I was just starting in some ways, just starting my career. But I, I, looking back at it, Whitney, I don't think I'd do anything differently because it was, I was so ready. Once I got, you know, to the point where I was at, at ... It, it didn't even matter, I mean, I don't think about age that much. Um, in fact, I still feel like I'm just starting (laughs) you know, uh, after 25 years, I feel like I'm, I'm, I'm still learning, constantly learning and, and shifting my focus of my career.

Whitney: Well, one of the things I think is so exciting about that Donna is I, I... There are so many, um, individuals who feel like if I haven't done anything by the time I'm 40, then I haven't done anything. And for five years, uh, Christina Vuleta and I did a list of 40 Women Over 40 to Watch.

Donna: Oh.

Whitney: And part of the rationale for doing that list was that we believe that oftentimes, and women in particular, don't actually really start to hit their stride until they're over 40 years old. And I think you and your experience is a great example of that and super exciting and I hope that as people are listening, they feel incredibly encouraged because I know a lot of women who will get to be 40, 45 and are like, "Oh, well, I haven't done anything so I guess I can't now." Because they've been rearing children and they feel like they can't do anything with their career and you're like, You are a great role model for individuals to say, "No, it's not done, we're just getting started."

Donna: Exactly, and, you know, just last week, um, I teach a class at Columbia University, uh, and I, uh, actually was maybe a couple weeks ago, uh, there was a woman who was probably in her early 40s, she took my class and at the end of the class, you know, she came up to me and she said, "You know, Donna, um, I'm just really inspired to study this topic more, you know, more intensely." And she said, "You know, I, I just I'm thinking, I, do you think I could get a PhD at this point in my life?" And I said, "Are you crazy? Of course you could." And she said, "Well, my boss, my boss at work told me that, um, oh that it was too late and that I could, I should never start." Of course, this was a guy and she said, "I should never start a career, um, you know, at this, at this point." And I said, "Don't you listen to that person." I said, "You are ready right now, I can hear it in your voice, you are really preparing yourself and you know."

And the other thing was she knew what she wanted. So many young kids start a PhD program and don't even really know what their topic, you know, what they want to do with their topic. But when you've lived through, you know, a good portion of your life and you, you realize what your passion is and you, you can really focus in on it and get it, beco-, have it more clear, um, and tweak it. And so I, I just, just want to underscore everything that you've said about that. I would never in a million years discourage anybody, from starting out, um, you know, in, in a sort of mid-career, um, path. I just, I just think it's absolutely fabulous to do it that way.

Whitney: All right, so now let's go back to, you've done your PhD and then he invites you to come to your postdoc. Can you talk actually just for a second about that? Because I think that oftentimes again we're looking for opportunities, what did ... and, and would think, "Oh, well, you know, opportunity didn't come to me but it went to that other person."

Donna: Yeah.

Whitney: But you were proactive in reaching out. Can you talk a little bit about what that interaction was like and led to your getting this invitation if you remember, which of course I'm sure you do?

Donna: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes, I remember. What happened was I went to a conference, uh, an International Studies Association Conference and presented a paper, um, uh, you know, it was an academic paper on, um, an aspect of psychology, uh, in the international, in, in international affairs. And it just so happened that this Professor Herbert Kelman was in the audience, and so after I delivered my paper, he actually came up to me. This venerable, you know, professor from Harvard came up to me and said, "Donna, that is an absolutely fascinating paper that you gave, would you send me a copy of your paper?" And I thought, "Oh my gosh," at that time, I was like I, I was stunned, because here one of the most eminent thinkers in this field came up to me and said, "You did a great job with that paper, would you send it to me?" So, um, I, of course I did and then, uh, fast forward about, you know, six months, I finished my dissertation and I'm trying to figure out what my next steps were.

And I could never get that out of my head, that notion that Professor Herbert Kelman came to me and asked me for my paper (laughs). It just seemed like such a, just an astonishing, um, you know, surprise and, and recognition, uh, from, from him. And so I decided, I'm going to call up Professor Kelman. I'm going to call him up and I'm just going to ask him to tell me, uh, what he thinks I should do. You know, here I am finished and I want to do International Conflict Resolution. So what do I do, Whitney? I pick up the phone, dial his number, sure enough, his assistant answered and sure enough he was in the office, and sure enough, he was willing to talk to me.

So we got on the phone and I, and we, you know, we started the conversation and I said, "Look, I'm kind of, I don't really want to, um, I'm not really sure what my next step should be." And he said, "Well, you know, there's lots of programs around where you can do a postdoc, there's one in Emory University, there's one in, um, George Mason University in Washington D.C., Fairfax, Virginia. And he was going on about all these other places and then he said, "Well, Donna, you know, if none of those work out, you could always come here and work with me (laughing)." I was like I dropped the phone, I literally dropped, it was one of those cordless phones at the time. I literally was so shocked that I dropped the phone. I picked it up again, I said, "Professor Kelman, excuse me, would you repeat that, please (laughs)?"

And, and so he said, "Yeah, of course, you can come with me, come here, if, you know, if you don't want to go into all those other places." And he said, "Well, can you be here in, um, you know, in, in, in mid-September because that's when our program starts up?" And this was, by the way, this was like the third week of August.

Whitney: Wow.

Donna: And I said, "Oh, yes, I can be there, no problem. I can do that. I'll see you in the third or third week of, uh, September." So that's how it happened. I mean, it was that fast, um, it was that, uh, you know, sort of like a fantasy come true and, um, so that, that was the, that's the backstory.

Whitney: Hmm, what a great story, what a great story. All right, so done Conflict Resolution. That's now you said you've been doing this for 20 years, over 20 years, right, roughly?

Donna: Um, 25, 25.

Whitney: 25, okay. So you, talk to us briefly, because I want to focus most of our conversation on, um, your life's work now, which is dignity and focusing primarily on the workplace. But before we do that, just for some big color for people to really have an idea of what you've done historically, talk to us about one of the most interesting conflict resolution situations you've been in, in the international sphere

Donna: Oh, there's so many, um, but I'll, I'll tell you a story about Libya, because this is, this is one of the most, um, beautiful, touching, um, you know, impactful, uh, experiences I've had. You know, I've worked in the Middle East and the Israeli Palestinian conflict, I've worked in Sri Lanka and Cambodia, in Colombia, Northern Ireland. I mean, you name it, uh, wherever there was an intractable conflict, my organization was, was there and I was involved in some way. But the most, the most meaningful, um, uh, p-, project that I had was with an organization in Rome called Ara Pacis. And they, um, I'm a member of this organization, it's a non-governmental organization that does conflict resolution work around the world. And the, the woman, uh, who runs it, her name is, um, Nicoletta Gai-, Gaida.

And Nicoletta invited me to go with her to Libya because it was right after Gaddafi was, um, you know, was assassinated and, um, it was right after the NATO had bombed and, and Libya was a, a mess, an absolute mess. And her organization was asked to go in to give, um, present, you know, some ideas about how moving forward that, that conflict could be addressed and how reconciliation could take place. So I was invited along with a couple of other people. We were asked to, uh, uh, as part of the conference, we were asked to train some of the, the new security people, so-, some of the new police force. Um, and we, we, uh, uh, we said, "Of course, we'll do some dignity leadership training with the police. Of course, we'll do this."

Because they had hired all new police, you know, since Gaddafi left and so when we got to this place where we were supposed to be doing this training with the police, it turned out that there were about 15 men who were just sitting there in the, you know, in the, in the room. And this one guy came up to us when we walked in, he said, "Oh, you know, I'm so and so," I don't even remember his name at the moment. But he said, "I am, um," you know, whatever his name was," and he said, um, I represent these 15 men here who were all political prisoners under the Gaddafi regime." And he said, "We heard that you were doing a dignity leadership training and we want to be a part of it. Could we do this because now that we've been released from prison, we want to give back to Libya. We want to make this, um, you know, uh, we want to just contribute to peace and reconciliation."

Whitney: Wow.

Donna: So we, so, so Nicoletta and I stopped, we were like, "Holy smokes, now what do we do?" Because, you know, we thought, we didn't prepare for 15 extra people. And then we both looked at each other and we said to this man, "You said you have been in prison and you just recently got out, you and your colleagues here?" And he said, "Yes, most of us have been there for about 25 years." I swear to you, and he's, he said, "Yep, we are just determined, we want to put, you know, more, more dignity into Libya. We want to contribute to our only building, rebuilding this country, um, in a, in a loving way." He used that word, he said, "We want to rebuild it in a loving way." So Nicoletta and I looked at ourselves and each other and we said, "You know what, we're not going to do this dignity leadership training right now, what we're going to do is we're going to give these men, these 15 men the opportunity to talk about what it was like for them being in that prison for 25 years and, uh, we're going to do it."

We thought this was the perfect time training for these young cadets sitting there listening to this. So what we basically did, Nicoletta and I, we, we engaged them in a sort of a mini truth and reconciliation discussion. You know, the way Archbishop Tutu did it in South Africa, we let them tell their stories, we let them just say whatever they wanted. And, and I honestly-

Whitney: Wow.

Donna: ... it, it lasted several hours and there wasn't a dry eye in the place. I mean, the, the interpreters, the people who were interpreting for us, they would get so choked up, they would just have to say, "Wait, wait, we can't ..." But there was such a healing, it was such a healing moment for these men, they got the recognition from, you know, two Western women, one from Harvard, the other one from, you know, this NGO from Rome. And there was something about our being witness to their stories that was so healing for them. And it was, I mean, to this day, I, I, you know, I, I think this is probably some of the best work I've ever done in that, in that moment.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Donna: And so what they did, what they did was they, they wanted us to, to come to the prison because the prison had been turned into a kind of a, a museum. And so they invited us to come to the prison to show that, show us everything and it was, it ... and then, you know, of course, then they had food and they were we celebrated their, you know, their resi-, resilience and their ability and their conviction to move forward. It, yeah, it was just the best.

Whitney: Oh, Donna, yeah. Wow, I just got chills. I mean, what an amazing, amazing experience that you got to help do that, that you got to bear witness to their trauma, and wow, what, what sacred ground you were standing on in that moment.

Donna: It really felt that way.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative), thank you for sharing that. I, I really appreciate that. So I think this is a perfect time to ask you to talk about what you mean when you say dignity. What do you mean when you use that word and how has that come to be your life's work?

Donna: Well, if, if, if you would allow me, there's a slight backstory that I need to tell before I ... because it makes the context is everything-

Whitney: Please, absolutely, go ahead.

Donna: And, and when I was sitting at these negotiating tables, because what, what we did at my organization at Harvard, what we did was we brought parties together for dialogue, you know, in hope that they would be able to work out their differences there at the table and we, um, you know, we've facilitated those discussions. And it was, as I said, I worked all over the world in, uh, many different conflicts but it ... while we were sitting at those tables and listening to how they were going back and forth about how to settle the political issues that divided them, it became very clear to me and to my colleagues that there was another conversation taking place at these, uh, in, in these negotiations. It wasn't just about the political issues that divided them, but they were, they were having, uh, an, an emotional conversation as well.

And this conversation never had any words because nobody ever really talked about it but you could see in the room and you could feel the intensity, you could feel the resentment, you could feel the anger. And I thought, "You know what, we need to have a conversation about what this emotional turmoil in the room is about. We need to give them an opportunity to talk about that." And so for a while, you know, we thought, "Well, what if we just say to them, you know, I can see that you're very emotionally upset, would you want to talk about it?" Well, Whitney, no, no high powered negotiator wants to talk about emotions, they think it's ridiculous. And so, okay, we didn't use that word and then I finally, I finally after several tries, I, I realized that what this was about, this emotional, you know, turbulence that was, we were seeing firsthand was really about their dignity.

About how they were being treated as human beings, and so when, once I, I, that word came to me in a sort of flash, you know, this is about their dignity. And so I, uh, that's how I, uh, came to this realization that these conflicts under-, underlying these conflicts are a whole, you know, a whole layer of unaddressed dignity violations and we should be having that conversation.

So fast forward, I decided to use this word dignity, I was working in Colombia in South America and I had these two parties that were having a conflict and I, I said, "Look, if you, if you don't mind, I've recognized that your relationship is broken down. Um, really, you know, I could see it how, how destructive it is and how much trouble you're having, you know, trying to find some resolution. I said, "If you don't mind, I would really like to shift the conversation about the conflict away from the political issues and I would like to have a conversation about times in which you felt your dignity has been violated in this conflict."

And they looked at me and they paused and then so I said, "How many people, would anybody be willing to do this?" And Whitney, after I asked that question, every single hand went up, every hand went up, they said, "Yes, we do want to talk about this." And I mean it was astonishing that, that, just that word, the word dignity, and I have a very simple definition of it. It's about our inherent value and worth, it's our inherent inborn value and worth, all of us, we were all born with dignity. And, and, and when I just that there's magic in that word, it opens doors.

Whitney: I love that word.

Donna: I love them.

Whitney: I will never, I will never hear that word the same again-

Donna: Yeah.

Whitney: ... after listening to you talk about it and reading your book. So, okay, so keep going.

Donna: Yeah. Well, no, I mean, so we, I said, "Would, would you be willing to talk about times when you have your dignity was violated in this conflict?" And everybody had a story, every single person had a story. And not only that, they had a story about their ancestors who also had their dignity violated. And, you know, this, this, these, some of these conflicts go back centuries, right?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Donna: And so, so it was just a word that, that, uh, that people felt, you know what it was Whitney, they felt validated in talking about times when their dignity was violated. It felt like a, sort of (laughs), it's sort of crazy but it felt like sort of an honorable way of talking about what happened to them. Because, of course, you know, I would say to them, "Of course you're upset, of course you would have this emotional reaction, it's your dignity, it's your inhe-, your sense of worth as a human being." And so it was, um, and it continues to be. You know, even though when I wrote my first book, it's called *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*. I thought that book was going to be for the international conflict resolution community and, and then, you know, the Community of International Affairs. But it turned out people in healthcare, in the corporate world, in schools, faith communities, people read that book and said, "Donna, you have named our problem."

The reason that we're having these conflicts is people are feeling like their dignity is being violated. So, honestly, I felt like I, I really felt like I touched on a universal human truth, um, and about dignity that we all want to be treated as if we matter and we all want to be treated as if we're something of value and worth. And when we're not, number one, conflict ensues but we just engage in so much suffering around it. And I realized, I realized, Whitney, that with this word, dignity, that it was one way of addressing these conflicts that people didn't feel embarrassed about, they didn't feel the shame around admitting they've been treated so badly. It was a way, as I said, of sort of legitimizing their experience. And when they would talk about it, um, you know, there was something about getting that story out that helped them heal from those indignities.

Whitney: I think that's one of the things that's so powerful about that word where you just said, you know, if someone says, "You made me feel bad," I think there's oftentimes a lot of

shame around that. But when you can say like, and I can feel it when you, you use that word is, "It feels, you know, my dignity has been violated." There's no sense of shame when you say that, like when I say that, I don't feel it. But when I say you made me feel bad, I do feel a sense of shame. Like just those, those words, and so that's so, so powerful to me. Um, so, can you talk for a moment about you have the three Cs of dignity, what are the three Cs of dignity?

Donna: When I was teaching my class at, uh, Columbia I was, um, there was an older woman who came and, um, you know, and, and took the course and she was an, uh, an HR executive. She, you know, she was, you know, in her mid-career, uh, one of these 40 something women who were getting her PhD. And she, um, she sat in my class while I was going over all of the dignity material, because it was all about the dignity approach to conflict. And for some reason, she didn't say anything for the first, I don't know, couple of hours of the class and everybody else, all the students are ... you really typically engaged and they're telling their stories, and, and so I, I made a personal note. I thought, "Okay, I'm just going to kind of go up to her during the break and see if everything is okay."

So I went, you know, I was planning on doing that but then right before I took a break, her hand went up and she said, uh, "Donna, you know, um, I'm sitting here, I haven't contributed anything yet because I'm really trying to figure out how I feel about what you're presenting." And she said, "First of all, I, I just feel, uh, it's wonderful, you know, it's great. This, this idea that we all have dignity and it's a part of our inherent value and worth and, and she said, "Now, the problem is, I think dignity is bigger than you think it is." She says it's way bigger and I said, "Well, tell us, you know, please help, help us. Explain to, to everybody." And she said, "Well, you're focusing on individual dignity and how we all have inherent value and worth."

But she said, "Honestly, I think of it this way," she said, "I think dignity was given to us in a sacred trust when we were born and it is our duty to be the guardians of dignity, not just our own dignity, but the dignity of everyone." You know, we have to be, to be the caretakers, we have to be so careful to, you know, to protect each other's dignity." And she said, "And, and also .. So it's not just about my dignity and the dignity of others but it's also about the dignity of something greater than ourselves, something bigger, something that it's the dignity of the greater good." And so she said that and I just was, you know, I was, it was just astonishing insight I thought. It was such deep wisdom and that, you know, that let ... Oh and then she said and you know, "Donna, it was given to us in a sacred trust." And she said, "To, to tell you the truth, you know, it's, it's so big that I think that it's all it's about life itself."

It's dignity, life has all dignity in all different manifestations and we have to educate ourselves about how, how to get along in the world in a way where we are all the guardians of that bigger dignity. So, okay, you can, you can imagine how I felt after that. It was just, it was such a powerful intervention that she made. And I, after months thinking about her intervention, I decided that dignity was about dignity consciousness. If you wanted to achieve dignity consciousness and really understand dignity, that it was about three things. It's about connection, connection, and connection (laughing)

Whitney: Do tell.

Donna: Yeah, Yes. And so the first connection is to our own dignity, we have to have a direct link and connection that we have to know that we have inherent value and worth. We also need to have a connection to the dignity of others because if we are born with it,

so is everybody else. And so that connection to others, seeing it in others and honoring it in others and protecting it in others. And the third, third C is to something greater than ourselves, right? So it's, it's, uh, you know, some people who are religious say it's their connection to, you know, creator, their god. Um, I, I tend to think of it a little more practically in my practice because, you know, I, I say to people, "Well, look, you know, it's great to be connected to your dignity and the dignity of others and treat others well, but it's also important to have a purpose in your life.

It's also important to do something to contribute to the greater good, and to be mindful that life isn't just about us here, it's there's there's a whole world out there including the environment, right? Including nature, we need to protect nature and the dignity of our, our planet.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Donna: And, and, and so when I work with young people, especially, who are, you know, trying to figure out what they want to do with their lives I say, "Look, just make sure that these three Cs are, uh, in alignment. Make sure you're connected to your own dignity, you treat other people with dignity and, and that you have some kind of connection to the greater good." What can you be doing to contribute to the greater good and they say, "This is what we want to make our lives meaningful." They say, "We, you know, we're searching for meaning. We don't want to just go out and get a high paying job and buy a house and live." We wanted to contribute, you know, Millennials are great that way. They, they really, I mean I don't want to over generalize, but my students they all feel that way. They understand that there's something greater than us, uh, out there and that we have to be the guardians of that.

Whitney: Yeah, so thank you for explaining that. What I'd love to have you do is, um, as we start to wrap up is two things. Um, actually, I'm going to ask you a question and think about a story that you might want to share. Um, one thing that you, you said in your book, which I thought was really interesting and intrigued me as you made this statement, "one sure way of recognizing when we are confronting our limits to the way we make meaning is to notice how often or when we experience problems in our relationships." And so I would love for you to talk a little bit about that because that's such an interesting, um, idea to me that if I am starting to have problems in a relationship with any given person, it's telling, it's giving me information about possibly my blind spots, possibly opportunities to develop.

Donna: I can tell you a story about, um, a, uh, supervisor who was, uh, uh, a great guy, wonderful guy. And he had just a terrific team of people, um, working for him. And ho-, honestly, that this person was so, um, so open and vulnerable and willing to, you know, to, to practice some of the dignity feedback and the exercises that I had, um, suggested to them. Oh, he said, "Sure, I will, you know, I'll definitely, um, have a sit and then have my direct reports, you know, talk to me about, you know, any difficulties they're having? And, uh, because, of course, there were rumblings among the dec-, the direct reports and they were too terrifi-, they told me about it, but they were too terrified to go to their supervisor.

So I, I thought, "Okay, this is a perfect, this is a perfect opportunity." And one of the women who, um, who was, uh, one of his direct reports, it was an older woman, he was probably in his mid, mid 40s and she might have even been closer to 60. And she had worked for this guy for years and she told me about how she kind of didn't trust that, didn't trust him. And I was shocked because he's such a great guy and I said,

"Really, why not? Why don't you trust him?" And she told a story about one time where, um, she said something and he kind of made a joke about it and, uh, in front of the whole, all the rest of her colleagues and everybody laughed, right, at this sort of a sarcastic kind of joke that he made about this woman. And she was the only one who wasn't laughing, right? She was standing there just feeling so embarrassed, so humiliated.

So she, I said to her, "Okay, will you tell him this story when we go in to do our session, the feedback session?" And she said yes she would. And, um, so she told him the story and while she was telling the story, she got all choked up too and because this was maybe 10, 15 years earlier. But she still felt that, you know, and that's why she didn't trust him. She, she thought maybe he was going to do something like that again. So here it is, 15 years later that she goes to him in this, in this safe space that we've created and she tells him about what it was like for her when he made that sarcastic joke in front of everyone and everybody laughed. And she's, she's kind of, you know, she's crying and looking at him, I turned to him to see how he was receiving this and he's in tears.

And he said, "Oh," I can't remember what her name was but you know, "Oh, Mary," let's just say it was Mary, "Oh, Mary ..." He, he, he got so upset thinking that he had hurt her for so long that all these years she had been, you know, walking on eggshells with him and you know he, he just ... because he thought of himself as such a good guy and everybody, you know, he was a good guy but it was that moment when they both sort of made themselves completely vulnerable that in rebuilding that relationship. Once they did this and of course he said he was so sorry and he, you know, he, he just couldn't say enough about how, you know, he wasn't aware that his sarcasm actually hurt people. And he ended up saying to her, you know, "You have really helped me see something in myself that I, you know, that I wasn't aware of."

Because he is a sort of a jokester, you know, and the woman, Mary said, um, and she accepted her, his apology and thanked him and he then said to her, "You know, that must have been so difficult to hold that in for so many years, you know." And, you know, he, he was just doing all the kind of acknowledgement that was important and necessary. So those two became such, so much closer, as I said, the intimacy that gets created once these things have been out and aired out and healed from. And those two became so, they were such a ... they were an inseparable bond from, from that point on because they finally trusted each other.

Whitney: Yeah, as we start to wrap up, are there any final thoughts, um, that you would like to share that you feel like, "Okay, you want to make sure that people understand or have a sense of?" And, and maybe what could be helpful if you've got one or two practical tips as people are walking away from listening, our audiences listening to this really interesting, fascinating conversation that they'll think, "Okay, what's one or two things that I can do to be more connected to my own dignity, more connected to the dignity of others around me?" Any thoughts? Any final thoughts?

Donna: Yes, I, I think what's most important and then and it's always the first order of business that I engage in when I work with groups of people or work with an organization is just understanding, that the simple truth is about human beings that I've discovered is that when human beings are treated badly, we suffer. And on the other hand, when we're treated well, we flourish and I think it behooves any leader, anybody in a position where they're, you know, they're needing people to understand that simple truth and to leverage that truth. Because the most wonderful things happen in an organization when people feel their dignity is honored, it increases

employee engagement and increases productivity, loyalty, all these wonderful things and people feel like they're in a work environment that is, is meaningful to them and makes them, you know, feel a, a sense of belonging. And all those wonderful human, um, feelings that we all want, we all want to experience, especially, in our workplace. So leveraging that, knowing that simple truth when we're not treated well, we suffer and when we're treated well, we flourish.

So that leads to the second point that I would make, Whitney, and that is that you know this pure dignity, it is so central to the human condition. We all want to be treated with dignity, I think it's our highest common denominator as human beings. And even though we're all born with dignity, we're not born knowing how to act like it. So we really have to learn this stuff, we really have to educate ourselves, um, in, you know, some of the basic fundamentals about dignity.

And once we do, I, I, I swear it has helped people improve their relationships, even relationships that are already good when people learn how to honor each other's dignity and learn how to take responsibility when they have violated someone else's dignity. It's, it's just, it, it is such a powerful way of, um, healing and reconciling relationships and we all want it, you know, it's what we all want. So, yeah, and, and just put in the time, do it, whatever it takes to learn about this and make it a priority.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, Donna, thank you so much. This has been really enlightening. Um, you've given me a lot to think about and I am really appreciative. Thank you again for being with us on the Disrupt Yourself Podcast.

Donna: You're welcome, Whitney.

So much to think about in this episode.

First, I'd love to echo what Donna said about taking on a mid-life switch of careers or deciding to pursue something new. She said, "when you've lived through a good portion of your life and you realize what your passion is, you can really focus in on it." It's never too late to jump to a new learning curve. We are designed to learn. Don't talk yourself out of going after something you're interested in trying.

And now I love the word dignity. Don't you? Everything Donna spoke about just rings so true for me. What I believe about who we are as human beings and that we have inherent worth. That as we make sure we are connected to our own dignity, we're connected to the dignity of others and we have some connection to the greater good, we will bring meaning and value to our lives and the lives of others.

For our practical tip, keeping in mind that when human beings are treated well, they flourish - is there a person in your life that you can treat well so their dignity can flourish? Is there someone you can help see their dignity through your eyes?

If you haven't already subscribed to the podcast, please do so now. We are going to release a number of episodes this year only for subscribers. Also, don't forget to [sign up for the newsletter](#) where we occasionally do giveaways, like we will be doing with Donna's book [Leading with Dignity](#).

Thank you again to Donna Hicks for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.