

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 124: HAL GREGERSEN

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption.

My guest today is Hal Gregersen. Hal is executive director of the MIT Leadership Center and a senior lecturer in leadership and innovation at MIT Sloan School of Management. A Thinkers50 globally ranked management thinker, he has authored or coauthored ten books. His most recent book *Questions Are the Answer* examines the fact that while people are pre-programmed to look for answers, the real catalyst for innovative change is questioning.

Whitney: Hal Gregersen, welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, we're delighted to have you.

Hal: Whitney, it's a thrill to be in a conversation with you on your podcast.

Whitney: Will you tell our listeners about you, about where you grew up, and what you thought you wanted to be when you grew up?

Hal: My father was a construction worker, so I was born in Ogden, Utah, and a month later moved to Plattsburgh, New York, where my father helped build missile silos during the Cold War. And then there was a huge construction project in Salt Lake City, Utah, and we ended up, when I was in kindergarten, moving back to Utah, and ended up staying there.

I think, initially, in ninth grade I wanted to be a master accountant, because I liked my typing teacher and thought I was going to be an accountant like her. And then when I was 16, I got elected to be the ... 17, elected to be the Mayor of Murray City, Utah for a day, and had an amazing experience with, um, the local Mayor learning how governments work. And, at that point, decided I was going to the United States Senator, Senator. So then about four years later, I did two internships in Washington, D.C., and, um, quickly decided that power and that kind of power wasn't for me; and there's a great story around that actually.

And in the middle of all that, I, um, ended up shifting away from politics, and fell flat out in love with photography. And, um, that was the way that I paid my way through college.

Whitney: Okay, you opened the door, so I'm going to walk through it. What's the interesting story about power?

Hal: Um, here's this 21, 22 year old intern, we were investigating a quasi-governmental agency, I'll leave it unnamed, that had, uh, purchased some very expensive office space for their new offices in the Georgetown area, and we were investigating the, the legality of it all.

And I ended up, one day, calling the chief legal counsel and explaining what the investigation was and why we were doing it. And I will never forget this sort of youthful glee I felt inside with, I had power with that telephone in my ear. And, um, I almost relished the silence on the other end of the line when he realized that they might be in trouble.

And I hung up the phone, and I looked out the window, and I'm like, "What did you just do?" And in the midst of all this, Whitney, I'd been studying power and politics, and the abuse of power in organizations in my master's degree program. And I realized I had just done what I had been studying other people, and being quite critical of other people, had been doing in abusing power. And I'm like, "This is not good."

And I talked to my boss then, and we talked about it at length, and he said, "This place within the Beltway in Washington, D.C. is, it's just really easy to become cynical, and to let power take you over." I'll never forget, I still have the note I wrote to myself, "I, Hal Gregersen, will never, knowingly, abuse power for the rest of my life." And I signed it, um, and then I walked away from politics; I was done, at least that kind of politics.

Whitney: Wow, that's amazing. Thank you for sharing that story. What did you do after college?

Hal: I was a late baby in our family, and my father was old, and a construction worker, and it was crystal clear that I had to go to college; and I really didn't want to 'cause I didn't like school. In fact, I'd been kicked out of school six times before I was 14 years old. But I just didn't like that structured learning environment, unless it was something I really loved to learn.

So I actually went to college and chose the easiest degree, business management, just to get through it. But when I was 15, my parents gave me a used 35 millimeter camera; I absolutely fell in love with photography, um, and ended up doing wedding and portraits.

And then, towards the end of college, my last semester, I ended up taking the wedding pictures of my two best friends on the same day. And I, my camera was broken, it's what they call 'medium format camera', and I borrowed another professional's camera, went to pick the pictures up after these two weddings a few days later, none of the pictures, Whitney, exposed. In other words, they had no pictures of both of the weddings.

I'll never forget the old rotary black dial phone, that clickety-clack rotary dialing my two friends and saying how sorry I was that I, that, um, they did not have any pictures of their wedding. And what I'd done with this borrowed camera is a thing called 'a dark slide' between the lens, and the film to be able to switch backs of film. And I, frankly, never changed the back and completely forgot to take the dark slide out; so none of that film was exposed.

Uh, it was a dark, dark day and, um, I had, I was too young and too incapable of processing the emotional intensity of that. And at the same time, I was taking a class on leadership in my senior year, and found it deeply intriguing. And it was, literally, a 180 degree shift of energy from photography to this fascinating thing we call leadership.

Whitney: So it was really traumatic for you when that happened with the pho-, photographs?

Hal: Oh la, la. Um, yes, um, another short but long story is about 16 years ago, my first wife passed away from cancer, and ended up remarrying and, um, Susie, my wife now, saw some of my

photographs. She's like, "Why don't you take pictures anymore?" Because Whitney, I had literally sold off all my equipment and stopped taking photographs.

And, um, she said, "You should do this again." So I, I was in Singapore, and I actually bought a camera, brought it home, but did not open the box for a month. And I'm in my mid-40s at this point, because I was still feeling that anxiety about opening the box, and doing it again.

Whitney: The trauma.

Hal: Yeah.

Whitney: Wow. And what's exciting, for me, is as I read through your book, *Questions Are the Answer*, which we're going to talk about in just a minute, is you have a lot of photographs. And so I want to come back to this idea of images, and photography, and it seems like it's really a prominent, prominent theme in your life, so I'm really ... I want to touch a little bit more on that in a minute.

Let's, let's get to, um, the main idea that I want to make sure our listeners are able to hear from you, which is I want to ... You've made the statement, and then I'd love for you to comment on it. You said, "Questioning is an innate behavior that's actively subverted and shut down." Will you talk about that?

Hal: All of us, Whitney, since the moment we were born, we were born to ask, we were born to inquire, we're born to be curious. Unless children grow up in horrible situations, or abusive situations, we all were questioners when we were young. And three or four year old's, we all know, ask tons of questions because they're intensely curious about the world.

But in the U.S., the average child, in a six hour class, in an entire month, sitting in class for six hours every day, asks six questions total about any of the content during that month period.

Versus the teacher pummels the students with, uh, 50 to 100 questions per hour; imagine that. So pretend you're the student, Whitney, and I'm the teacher, I ask you a question, I give you one second, on average, to answer the question. If you don't get it, I'll give you a follow up question with a half a second response time.

And if you don't get it, I turn to the next student, and these curious, inquisitive first graders sitting in class, are now getting rewarded for quick answers instead of thoughtful questions, they shift their questioning skills very fast to, "How can I give this teacher the fast right answer to be promoted and move forward?" And the tragic part of it is, that data of six questions per month in a six hour class are no different when you're in high school, and actually in college.

And so most of us, in traditional education settings, go through that sort of process, learning that answers are far more important than questions; and that's all we care about. And then we go into our first job where, often, it's a structured environment, and in organizations that, frankly, often don't care about innovation; the first job is no different than first grade, where you ask a tough question about, "Why are we doing this around here?" And you're likely to get a lot, "Wh-, wh-, what are you even caring about that for, just get to work." Response, um, from the people around us.

So that's the spirit behind questions getting crushed is for most home-cist, home place, the home, education, and first jobs, they are not designed to foster inquiry that can lead to insights that produce some kind of positive impact.

Whitney: You know it's interesting when you were talking about the, the child and the six questions they ask, and they're getting pummeled with questions by their teacher, and you include this quote from Clay Christensen, who's a, a mentor for both of us. And you say, or he says, "Questions are places in your mind where answers fit. If you haven't asked the question, the answer has nowhere to go." And so what I heard you saying just then is that you have these precious little six year olds, or five year olds, or seven year olds who are getting all these answers, but there's nowhere for them to put the answers. And so it's almost like they're just ricocheting off their minds, and their hearts; because there's just nowhere for that answer to go. Just interesting; because they didn't ask the question yet.

Hal: Absolutely versus, you know, the, the third of the people who grow up either going to educational systems like Montessori, or International Baccalaureate schools, or they happen to have parents or grandparents who get it, that life is about projects, and challenges, and engaging their children, and grandchildren.

And, you know, "What are you trying to figure out, and let's figure this out together, and what do you need to know to do that?" In those sorts of learning environments, be it at home or at school, it's the exact opposite where the questions are purposeful, because these children, or young people, they're trying to figure something out.

Whitney: I love the quote that you shared from Bill McDermott, who's the CEO of SAP, where he said, I'm paraphrasing, "That a CEO, or leader, needs to be able to take a difficult situation and bring it to its knees with questions." And that just encapsulated, to me, so well what it is you're trying to convey in your book.

Hal: Given that we grow up, Whitney, with this predisposition that answers are the only thing that matter, it's certainly counterintuitive, and definitely counterproductive when we are operating on the edge of uncertainty of the unknown where we really don't have an answer. The quickest way to get one is ash-, actually by asking those questions that bring the situation to its knees.

Yvon Chouinard, who founded Patagonia. Here he is this young man, um, born in Maine, moving to California, a bit socially not into the whole scene there, takes up falconry, learning how to care for and fly falcons; which does not seem like a normal California high school activity.

But he loved it, and learned an enormous amount from the falcons, and then he took up rock climbing and surfing. And he's wrestling with this challenge which is, "I love doing these things outdoors, but there's no way I could make money doing it." And so he's stuck.

You know, "What am I going to do? How am I going to survive going forward?" And as he's wrestling with that stuck-ness, he ends up formulating a question that changes his life, and creates Patagonia, which is, "How can I make a living without losing my soul?"

It's a paradoxical question where it creates, and sustains, this tension inside of Yvon Chouinard. This, "I've got to both make a living, but I don't want to lose my soul and my values, and how do I do that?" And so that's the beginning of him starting to make climbing equipment, and then it starts growing into a bigger Patagonia where he's wrestling with, "How do you create an organization that honors that tension as we're going forward here?"

And so, literally, these sorts of questions ... My word for them is 'keystones' like that stone in an arch that holds an archway all together. Um, they're foundational, they are guiding, almost like a North Star, and they're powerful in terms of centering the energy, in this case, of the founder, Yvon Chouinard. And then creating an organization that pulled in the current CEO, Rose

Marcario, who, frankly, was wrestling with the same sort of question, 15 or 20 years ago, when she was working in finance and doing big finance deals.

Whitney: So what makes a good question? I mean, you talk in the book about a catalytic question. What is a catalytic question? What makes a good question? What job does a catalytic question do?

Hal: To me, there are all sorts of questions out there, but I'm very curious about, and have been, for decades, Whitney, with leaders 20 years ago who were taking companies global, and dropping into countries without knowing what they were doing, to people like Lou Gerstner at IBM, a decade or two ago, trying to transform an organization from selling boxes of mainframe as solutions. So the last 10 or 15 years, it's been totally focused on innovation and how do you create the sustainably innovative organization? And what I've realized is in all of those situations, transformation, innovation, globalization, these leaders who are exceptional were asking questions that other people didn't; and they were of a unique character.

They figured out a question that would challenge a fundamentally false assumption that people were living and working by, but they would do it in a way that would invite others to not only question the assumption, but to do something about it together. So it's both ... These catalytic questions challenge fundamental assumptions, but also they, at the same time, provide energy, an action orientation, to actually do something about the question.

The other part about catalytic questions for specific contexts can never be found in somebody else's book; they're created in context. And so, Marc Benioff's question 20 years ago, "How might we sell enterprise level software on the internet like Amazon sells books?" He, he, he could not wander around and have somebody else tell him that question.

That was 15 years in the making, with all sorts of interactions, with all sorts of Oracle clients who were large enterprise, and small, and medium enterprise. It was a lifetime of searching and try-, and bumping into, to people giving him feedback that, "Here's what's working and what's not."

And him trying to wrestle with, "How could medium and small enterprises actually use this stuff and afford it?" And it's, you know ... I'm shortening this like radically, but it took him a good 10 years, and a focused couple of years to figure that inevitable, obvious question out which, back then, people thought, "You're an idiot, Benioff. No self-respecting organization's going to put their data in the internet." Um, but, but that's where it came from. It is created, um, by conditions that foster these questions.

Whitney: "What's a great question?" is very context specific. It's the question that needs to be asked right now and I think you just said something, and you wrote this in the book. "It's the question that, um, is inevitable, or it seems inevitable, but at the time for ..." Well how did you say it? It ends up being inevitable but, at the time, it didn't seem inevitable?

Hal: So, Benioff's systematic, habitual, purposeful, intentional engagement with the world trying to sell enterprise levels, large enterprise level software, not just to big companies but, potentially, to medium ones, sized ones and not working. He was, he was getting in situations, over and over where he got data that said, "You're wrong, Mark, and so is Oracle."

And he got data that made him uncomfortable about being so wrong. And Mark is actually quite good about letting that data settle in so that assumptions can be challenged. He's good at creating this reflective quiet, a beginner's mindset like, "Oh, I didn't see that before."

And you collect these conversations, and these observations, and these data points, you're actively collecting those passive pieces of data sitting out there. They aggregate up into a condition where this question surfaces, "What if we sold large enterprise software like anabon, Amazon sells books?" At that point, it looks and feels inevitable. And it's like, "Obvious, duh." But what we, what we forget sometimes is to get to that moment is, usually, a five to 10 year intensive quest, which is what questions are all about.

Whitney: Exactly. So, you have, um, created something called 'The question burst methodology'. Can you tell us what that is?

Hal: Well think you for a moment you, just like I, right now today, we have either professionally, or personally, some issue that we're fundamentally stuck on. We care about it, it matters, but we just, we're like trapped in a corner, and we don't know what to do. Well, imagine being in that situation, 'cause that's what I was in 20 years ago, co-teaching a class about an issue of gender diversity, 20 years ago, trying to create better gender equality in an organization.

And we were stuck like, "What do we do?" And the energy level was low in the room. And I just thought to myself, "Wh-, what are we going to do?" And I remembered some reading and work I'd done about Parker Palmer, who was an educational theorist, and had relied upon Quaker philosophy in practice, and they have what they call 'clearing committees' where all you do is ask questions.

And I thought, "Let's just do that." And I said to the class, "Let's just ask nothing but questions for the next 20, 10 minutes, 15 minutes about this issue." Fifteen minutes later, this was the days of chalkboards, they were covered in the room with questions. The energy went from negative to positive, and I watched that happen with this amazing sense of wonder, and I'm like, "What just happened there?"

And I realized, having now done that exact same process for the last 20 years with, literally, thousands of leaders, is that it works in moving people from 'stuck' to 'progress and movement'. And so it's simple, it's, uh, called a 'question burst' because it's a rapid burst of questions, like a brainstorming session, but it's nothing but questions.

Every sentence that comes out of anyone's mouth has a question mark at the end. And sometimes I do it in, literally, four minutes segments, myself, or with somebody else, or with a trio of people about an issue that is important, and there are rules that are crucial in this process.

Number one, you do not have to answer any of the questions; which is our knee-jerk response when we're asked a question, especially as leaders. Don't answer any of the questions. And the other part is don't explain anything, no reasons for why you're asking the question.

So you have this question sitting there in space, and the demands of the question burst is "Don't fill in the space before and after the question with information, no preamble, no answer." And when you strip those two things out of a conversation it, frankly, creates a bit of awkwardness, because we don't talk that way with each other. (laughs)

But it also creates these conditions where we suspend our convictions, and if we followed those rules - no answers, no explanations, in about four minutes, we'll get 20 questions, and we regenerate those as fast as we can. And at the end of that four minutes, 80 percent of the time, we're going to feel better, 80 percent of the time, we will have reframed at least slightly the challenge, and 85 percent of the time, we'll have at least one new idea to move it forward.

Uh, those data come from several thousand data points that I've systematically collected and it's like, "Whoa, this works." And, Whitney, I don't know about you, but I think we both went through some educational experiences where, where these sorts of methods are almost tricks that consultants play on people, and I just have this bias against doing that my whole life. But all I know is this one moves people forward; it makes progress.

Whitney: Alright so let's do this right now. Let's do a mini question burst, but we'll do it in like 30 seconds. Um - So I'll create, create the scenario and then I want, I want you to guide me through it.

So I'm at the top of the learning curve, and time to do something new, you're like feeling that you want to unleash this person's innovative capacity. They insist that they're still in the sweet spot, they're moving up the learning curve, but you can feel that they're so good at what they're doing, it's become easy, they're chunking, it's on automatic, you need their brain, you need them to start asking questions again.

So, but they're insisting that they're still in the sweet spot. So if we were to use the question burst in this particular situation, can we do it for 30 seconds? I actually cheated, 'cause I have three wo-, questions written down already.

Hal: (laughing)

Whitney: But, um, how would we do it, what would you do? Set it up, set it up for us.

Hal: So I, basically, say, "I, in, in, two minutes or less ..." Which is what you just did, explain to me the challenge, "If you take more than two minutes to explain the challenge, you've over information-ed me, and I'm stuck like you are." So you did a great job, Whitney, I get I think what you're talking about. Now explanation of the challenge is done, we set a timer. In this case, it's 30 or 60 seconds, and we ask nothing but questions. You and I both ask questions, and one of us would write them down, word for word as we ask them; that's the rules, no answers no explanations as we do it.

Whitney: Okay, so let's do this. I'll do the first question, and then you do the sec-, let's just do a total of six questions, and then that'll approximate 30 seconds.

Whitney: So I'll go first. Um, what does it mean to you? I've just said to you that you, I think you're at the top of the S curve. What does it mean to you, or what are you hearing when I say that to you?

Hal: What are you most afraid of if you leave your current S curve and start searching for a new one?

Whitney: What does it mean to me when I'm asking you, or encouraging you to jump to new learning curve? What, what are you thinking I'm thinking about you in asking you to do this?

Hal: What part of your identity is caught up, perhaps, trapped in your current learning curve?

Whitney: If you disrupt yourself and jump to a new learning curve, how do you think you'll feel?

Hal: What is the scariest feeling you might encounter in that jump?

Whitney: Okay, that was awesome. (laughing)

Hal: (laughing)

Whitney: You're right, it creates so much energy.

Hal: Yeah, exactly.

Whitney: It does.

Hal: Yeah.

Whitney: It created, I could feel the energy.

Hal: Yeah. Exactly

Whitney: That was amazing. Like I could feel the energy that came in asking those questions.

Hal: Right.

Whitney: And that always happens, doesn't it?

Hal: It always, always ... well not al- ... Okay, I'll back up. (laughs) If, it, so sometimes I'll ask a group-

Whitney: Almost.

Hal: I'll, sometimes I'll ask a group of people to do a common challenge, and if they don't care about the challenge, it doesn't work. And so you've got to have skin in the game-

Whitney: Right, okay.

Hal: When you deeply care about the issue that you're doing the question burst on, it works 80, 85 percent of time, absolutely. So, I mean, recently the World Economic Forum asked me to do, do this with 110 chairpersons from their committee of chairpersons from companies all over the world. And what's fascinating with senior leaders is they are jaded against any kind of method like this. They've been around the block, they've been in management consulting, they've been in these kinds of programs, and they just like, "Right."

But all I know is, even there, I put them in trios and asked them to tackle the tough, tough challenge, and you could feel the energy rising in the room in a very positive way. And what's so beautiful, Whitney, at the end of these brief four minute question bursts, when the dust settles and breaks come, and lunches happen, you can feel a connection, a communion, a conversation that's going to continue; and that's the beautiful thing.

Because questions are not end points to a conversation; they're starting points, they're sparks, that's what it's all about. And that's where it's just so ... It's, frankly, wondrous to watch strangers in a room, helping each other tackle their toughest challenges this way.

Whitney: Mmm. So powerful.

Hal: Yeah.

Whitney: Thank you for playing that game.

Hal: (laughing)

Whitney: That was very fun. Um-

Hal: That was fun. What we just did worked for you and me, but 50 percent of the people I ask to then do it again back at work, on their own, are scared to death to do it. It sounds so simple, but, but the fears come from, number one, in, in telling someone else, "I don't know what to do here." They're vulnerable.

And they've got to face that in the mirror. It's just like, "Yes, it's vulnerable to say, 'I don't know', but that's the starting point to insight." And then, you know, there's this worry of, you know, "What are these people gonna think or ask?" But my invitation is, "Get beyond those concerns, and just take that leap of faith into trying it."

I'm just want people to know it sounds simple, but my suggestion is, if you're worried, start close, start small, do it with yourself alone, perhaps. Then invite trusted others into that space, and then start reaching out. And as you do that, you not only start asking better questions, but you start building momentum with a group of people who care about you and what you're trying to do. If, that part is additionally powerful.

Whitney: When you meet someone, um, for the first time, and you're about to work with them, um, in any capacity, whether you're consulting or coaching, and it sounds like you're doing a combination of the things, or even doing some speaking for them. What is the typical first question that you ask people?

Hal: Hmm. What's your story? That's it. What's your story?

Whitney: Okay.

Hal: You, you get a whole range of responses from, "Well, what part of my story do you want to hear?" And, and that tells me a lot about the person, (laughs) you know, whether they're open or reserved, and how they approach the world. So my starting point is trying to create a connection with who is this person? What is their story?

Whitney: So that leads to another question I thought was really interesting. You had interviewed Tony Robbins in your book, and who, obviously, is a leader, if not the leader, at this point in the world in terms of personal improvement and human potential. And you said that he talks about the primary question. And, and so I wanted, you know, what question is unconsciously driving your thinking? So I wanted to ask you that, what's your primary question, Hal, and what question is unconsciously driving your thinking?

Hal: That conversation with Tony was impactful in the sense that it highlighted something that I've been discovering in these interviews with 200 people. Is that many of them had a 'primary', in Tony's terms, or a 'keystone question', in my terms; it's the same thing. It's, it's the centering, singular often, question that defines who we are, what we're about, and where we're going. And so for Yvon Chouinard at Patagonia, it was, "How can I make a living without losing my soul?" That was a primary question.

My, my, my primary keystone question actually emerges from something I didn't write about in the book, but I'm exploring right now, Whitney, which is what I'm calling 'a shadow question'. And it actually is, is not necessarily negative, but often comes from difficult experiences in our life growing up. And, and that, then, can open the window to what might be a keystone, or primary question in our life or work that we're doing.

And so in my case, the shadow question that I discovered, um, in a very profound way a few years ago was, "How can I make people happy? How can I be nice to this person?" And through a lot of work, discovered and realized that growing up as a little kid, we lived in a trailer, it was small, it was contained. And, um, my siblings and I, all of us had ADD or ADHD.

Our father was a big, massive, pile driving, steel worker sort of guy, and, um, his attitude towards life was largely revolved around him, and he was, in our terms today, emotionally abusive, and at times, physically so to the point that I was just always in fear of my father as a little boy and growing up. And when you don't have any other way of coping with the world, you start asking yourself with these immature minds of little kids, "How can I make this big person, that's dangerous in my world, happy?"

It's a very con-, context specific, powerful question that actually helped protect me, I think. And it worked in that moment, to create a little bit of a safe space in a place that didn't feel very safe.

But the problem, Whitney, was I didn't realize that shadow question was not only there, but it was powerfully etched there with these childhood memory banks. And then as an adult and professional, for decades, I was living that question. And that turns into a lot of ambition, a lot of importance around, you know, doing things to, to, to accomplish stuff, and, and, um, you start living a life like that, and there comes a point at which it can easily implode.

And, and for me, it was a heart attack in 2014, unexpectedly so, that, um, caused me to step back, be very quiet, pull into my shell, ended up talking with a counselor that we had about the situation. And she just looked me spot on in the eyes and said, "Hal, if you don't stop being nice, you're gonna gift yourself a second heart attack and die."

And that's when I had to like, "What's going on here, what is this question that's consuming?" And it was the one I just described. But once that became obvious, it's like, "What do I do with that now?" And what I'm realizing is sometimes, if not always, but at least often, these keystone, powerful, energizing questions are actually related to these shadow questions.

And so the transition, for me, is one that I've actually held on to for quite some time. And it's, basically, "How do I create a psychologically safe space for inquiry questions to lead to insight, things we never saw before, that then leads to impact that makes a difference?"

And, and so my shadow question of, "How can I make people nice?" Was born of a place where nothing was safe. And this keystone that's been anchoring and guiding, actually, for the last number of years in my work and life is ... Whether it's home, or whether it's in a classroom, or in a coaching context, "How can I create this psychologically safe enough space where questions can flourish and not be crushed, um, and do it over and over in a way that leads to something good at the end of it?"

So I, my hunch is if, my hunch is, Whitney, if you were to think about defining your work into a singular question, whatever that might be, um, there's a high probability there is a shadow question sitting back there that, that is connected to it. And I used to think, and want to put for me, that dark shadow question for the last few years into a tightly locked safe space and not let it be part of my life.

And I've come to realize, through some conversations with some amazing colleagues, um, it's not, a-, probably a healthy way to look at it. And a much richer, whole way to look at it is acknowledging, there are those two sides to who I am and who we are.

And that shadow will always be there, it's just a question of will I not let it control, and will I choose a different question to live today, as an adult, that's more appropriate to the context in this question that worked when I was four years old, inside of a trailer with an intense dad?

Whitney: So I wanna bring that question, that story that you just shared, um, which was just so beautiful, um, back to the experience that you had with photography, and with your friends, when you forgot to take out the lens, and the thing; it went dark. It feels to me like there's a broader metaphor in that experience, um, with the story that you just told me. And I'd love to hear what ideas or connections are popping up for you as I ask that question.

Hal: Hmm. Uh, I have always been on a quest, Whitney, to try to get more like light, more truth, more knowledge, in whatever I've done in my life. Sometimes it's worked, sometimes it hasn't, but, but that's been the quest at the core.

Um, photography early on, I loved the artistic element, but to be very honest, in high school, as a school photographer for my high school, that camera was also ... It was a protective, safe space in a vulnerable, awkward high school world. The camera made me feel safe being behind it, instead of being exposed to interactions and other people, and so on.

Now I'm 60, 61 years old, the camera is a different entity in my life, it's no longer this protective thing in a very dynamic, vulnerable high school world; the camera becomes an opportunity for connection.

And so there's a, there's a, there's a series of photographs that aren't in the book, but one of the photographs is. Here I am in Santa Fe, it's the first workshop I did with a National Geographic photographer, it was called 'Leadership in the Lens.'

Three days, the end of the third day, I'm down in Santa Fe taking photographs in this middle of the city, and a bunch of antique cars roll up. And I'm fascinated by one of them, and I get behind the antique car, and I'm looking through the back window, through the front, and I'm trying to find something really interesting through the back window, happening in the front window, out there on the sidewalk.

Sixty-eight pictures later, 15 minutes of hard work and sweat, nothing's working. (laughs) And I hear this voice behind me that says, "You might get better pictures if you get inside the car. Would you like to get in?" And, Whitney, I honestly turned around to him and said, "No, thank you." And kept taking pictures, (laughing) because I was trying to be nice.

Whitney: (laughing)

Hal: And then I realized 60 seconds later that, "You don't have to be nice with this guy, he was being nice to you." And, and I turned around, and he let me in the car. And when I got inside, it was like whoa, the vista, massively old miss-, this red, this velvet, purple velvet, beautiful velvet inside the car. Shiny knobs, and dials, and a beautiful view of the front window.

And I settle into the backseat, and I get the composition right with all the window showing with a wide angle lens; and I just sit and wait. About 10 minutes later, I see this couple on both windows one on one side, one on the other sneaking up. The man looks, and he sticks his head in, and he says, "Do you come with the car?"

(laughing) And, and we both started to laugh, and it was the perfect moment, because it was an inevitable moment; I'd worked hard at it. And I was connected to those human beings who stuck

their head in the car, and I felt a bit vulnerable, but connected, and I was connected to the owner of the car who let me in.

And it may sound like a simple example, Whitney, but it was moving multiple layers into a social setting where there were human connections being made through this beautiful vehicle of a camera. And I don't think the car owner ever would have let me if I'd not been committed to his car, and trying so hard to get a good picture. And I know those people ... I would never of crossed their paths if I'd not been committed to waiting for them to come.

And so, for me, it's a powerful metaphor for life, and work which is, "Am I creating conditions where people can stick their heads into my world and be provocative, ask me tough things, make me a little bit uncomfortable?" Um, because those are the moments, those are the windows into the depths of our minds, and our souls, and our careers, and our lives, and our work that we start seeing things differently.

Whitney: You've talked about one of your really, your keystone question is, "How do you make it safe for people to ask questions?" And, actually, as I was reading through your book, and, um, talking about it with my daughter, who's 18, she had two questions that she wanted me to ask you. So I'm going to ask you these questions - one of them is, how do you make it safe for people to ask questions? How do you, you know, you talked about that that's a keystone question for you, and that's one, your life's work. But what are one or two suggestions you would have for making it safe for people that want to, to be able to ask questions, as you're 18 years old and feeling like it's safe for you to ask those questions? What's one or two tips?

Hal: Um, the, the first would be take ... Do three diagnostic questions of how you interact with the world quickly. When was the last time someone asked you an uncomfortable question? If it's been more than a week, frankly, the world around you isn't safe.

When was the last time you were dead wrong about something? And if it's been more than a week, there's some barrier, there's some element of un-safety around you. And if, if we don't wait more than, at least, two or three seconds for a response from somebody after a question, um, we're probably enforcing answers, reinforcing answers, not inquiry.

And so, if I come up with three blanks to those three questions, I probably have an unsafe context around me, which means people aren't coming to me with their tough questions; the elephants are in the room, folks. And so then, the way to move beyond that is actually, from my perspective, get up, get out, get into the world, and make a commitment to the people that you want to feel safe, the way I was committed to that silly antique car in downtown Santa Fe.

And what that looks like is, it might be with your 18 year old daughter, Whitney ... And I bet you already do this, and you work at creating that safe space. But it's knowing what makes her eyes light up? When does she just have that sparkle inside, and what are her points of unique independence from you?

And, you know, those sorts of things knowing that, you don't get that by being a stranger in their world. It's being an intimate person in their world, where you understand their goodness, their badness, the, their concerns, their issues, their excitements, their, their hopes, their dreams. That's a commitment that creates the safe enough space that people then start exposing themselves with, "I'm, I'm worried about this, or I'm wondering about this."

I asked Deval Patrick, Deval, Deval Patrick used to be the, um, the ma-, the Governor here in Massachusetts. And I asked him in one of these interviews, I just said, "You know, how do you ask the better question?" And he said, "It's the power of the pause, Hal."

Whether it's, as a politician, or business person, if you just wait after you ask a question for that extra two or three seconds, it signals to someone you're next to, you care, you're there, and whatever they have to say, or ask, will be heard. It's sometimes simple things like that, that can make a big difference.

Whitney: All right. What is the hardest question you've ever been asked? And what was the answer? That's from my daughter, too.

Hal: I did a question burst, in my own personal work context, with some other people. And the challenge I shared with them was, "I'm having difficulty trying to figure out how to work better, and well, with an administrative assistant. It's just issues of, you know, how, how can I give this person better things, and engage them better in it, and so on?" So that was my challenge, and there were two other administrative assistant people here, within the system in my question burst trio. The first question out of the box, Whitney, "Do you have control issues, Hal?" (laughing) And like, it was like-

Whitney: (laughing)

Hal: Oh, dagger in the heart moment, man. But, you know, she'd been around, she'd-

Whitney: (laughing)

Hal: She'd seen, she'd seen it enough. And I had to admit to myself, "Yeah, I may not want to say it, but I do." And, um, you know, that's that moment. You know, I realize I'm wrong, my map of the world is, has some error to it, and it's not comfortable; but I'd like to do something better about it.

Whitney: Love it. You talk in the, the book about waiting to get a great photograph, and, and some mentoring that was done around that. And I think the answer to this question, but I wanted just confirm is, I was going to ask you how does one wait to get the great question? You talked about waiting to get a great photograph, how does one wait to get the great question?

Hal: I think being fully present. I mentioned Rose Marcario earlier from Patagonia. Twenty years ago, she was an incredibly successful, high flying, big deal making finance person. She's being rushed down the streets of Manhattan in a limo to a big deal, an older woman starts crossing the sidewalk against the light.

Her limo screeches to a halt, she's mad that she's not getting to her meeting, she's mad that this woman is crossing the street when she shouldn't be. And she could've just ignored all the signals and data that were sitting there in the moment, but somehow she didn't. And she noticed that woman crossing the street was moving erratically and awkwardly.

And it triggered a memory of her own mother, who had a lot of psycholog-, logical issues when she was growing up. And then she got a bit of empathy, her impatience level slipped a little bit, slowed down. She looked out the window and saw her reflection in the window and then the question came to her, "Rose, what have you become? What have you become that this woman safely crossing the street outweighs your big deal up the street?"

And, um, it was sobering. And she got out, walked through Central Park, thought a lot about it, got back in the car, went to the deal, didn't quit her work in finance for five years, but she was wrestling with a question that, for her, was provocative and, um, life changing.

And that was the starting point of the journey, for her, to then hook up and become part of Patagonia. In part because you've got the founder, with this question, "How can I make a living without losing my soul?" Still decades later living that, and Rose's question found their question and they've done some amazing things.

Whitney: Hmm. All right, Hal. Last question and then I'll, I'll let you have the final question.

Hal: Okay.

Whitney: Um, what's something ... You talk about this, um, something that you've taken for granted, a question that you stopped asking a long time ago that you started recently, or you think it would make sense to start asking again?

Hal: Hmm. Wow, that is a good question. So what question did I ask a lot, long ago, that I've started asking again? Hmm.

A number of years ago, I ran across the story of Alexander Papaderos, who grew up in Crete, um, an island, um, in the Mediterranean. And it was during World War II, the Germans invaded Crete, and long story short, the Cretans fought back, and the Germans came back and massacred some villages. And for decades thereafter, there was deep hatred between a lot of the Cretans and the Germans.

And when Alexander Papaderos was a little boy, during the war, he found a crashed German motorcycle and a crushed broken up, uh, mirror from the motorcycle. And as a little boy, he was intrigued by a piece of that mirror that he, sh-, he was able to grind down into a round, quarter like mirror. And as he, he used it like any little kid would to shine light into dark places, and just be curious.

When he became an adult, um, someone, at one point asked him, "What's the meaning of life?" And his response was, "I don't know what the meaning of life is, but I know what the meaning of my life is." And he essentially told them ... He pulled out this mirror, even as an adult, and he's told what I just told you as the background of the story. And then he said, "As an adult, my life's meaning is to shine light into dark places."

And that's a question that I often ask myself, you know, and it ebbs and it flows, and when I'm, either professionally and personally, in one of those deep crunch spaces where it seems like it's everything's going to implode, that question of, "How can I reflect light into dark places." Um, gets lost in the rush, in the busyness, um, in the demands to deliver, and all that sort of thing.

But, gratefully, that image, that metaphor of that man's life continues to hold power and sway in my heart. And if there's any one question that when those windows of not being quite so, um, full of things to do open up, there's a reminder that comes back, and that question just speaks in volumes to me, "How can I shine a little more light into a few more dark places?"

And sometimes it's into your own heart but, hopefully, sometimes it's into other people. And, to me, that's what questions are doing; the ones that are honest and just trying to make the world a better place. They're often the toughest ones, but they're also the ones that help us take on these really, really tough challenges that we face collectively in this world.

But they're also tremendous opportunities, and, um, and that's where the light comes back, and whenever I engage and re-engage with that question, it (laughs), it not only helps me shine a little bit of like into dark, light into dark places.

Whitney: Shine light in dark places, I love that. All right, Hal Gregersen, any final words, or questions, etc. that you would like to share as we sign off?

Hal: What is, what is one of the most transformational life changing questions that you've engaged with Whitney?

Whitney: Hmm. The one that comes to mind, for me, that I continually ask myself is ... Should have thought about this. I'll give you the shadow question, and I'll give you-

Hal: Okay.

Whitney: A keystone question. So the shadow question is, "Can I do this, am I capable of doing this?"

Hal: Hmm.

Whitney: Will I be able to do it, can I pull it off, do I have the capacity?

Hal: Hmm.

Whitney: Um, am I, am I competent enough?" So that's my shadow question. And my keystone question is something along the lines of, "How can I be better, and how can I make it safe for other people to be better too?"

Hal: That's a powerful combination. Your shadow, another version of my shadow is, "Will I ever measure up, Whitney?" (laughing) Um, and um-

Whitney: (laughs) There you go, they're good questions. (laughing)

Hal: And, and, and that's where you move to the other space and, I think, I think what you and I are talking about with this shadow and keystone dynamic is that, as we uncover and embrace the better question, and that's what we're talking about here, um, it enables us to keep the shadow in its rightful place.

And, um, and, and, that's the powerful moment. And, uh, for me, this conversation we, this conversation we've had is just been a reminder of, of how important it is that inquiry questioning is a choice; choose your questions well. They, they create the path that you walk, choose those questions well.

Whitney: Hal Gregersen, thank you so much for being with us.

Hal: Whitney, thank you very much.

What most fascinated me about this conversation was the energy I felt as Hal and I were asking each other questions. I want to make sure I point it out, because while I hope that came through for you as a listener, the energy was overwhelming for me as a participant.

In thinking about the question burst, I've wondered what it was about the seemingly simple exercise of asking questions about a problem we were hypothetically trying to solve that generated that kind of energy. Here's what I

think - energy comes in the doing. We were actively asking each other questions. Building on each other's questions to ask the next question, and we were committed to the end goal of finding an answer.

Energy comes in the doing. We think we have to wait to get motivated to work toward a goal, but the motivation comes when we take action toward that goal. When we move. When we do the pushup. Make the phone call. Open the book. Put on the running shoes. Move up the curve.

Practical Tip:

I'd love for you to answer the same question I asked Hal near the end of the episode - what is your keystone question? What is that question that is unconsciously driving your thinking? And if you don't have the answer right away, think of what your shadow question is - a question that has come because of your difficulties? Once you zero in on either of those questions, let them be the filter for what you're doing with your life. Shine the light into the dark places.

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

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.