

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 146: ANGELA BLANCHARD

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S curve of learning in your professional and your personal life, disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host Whitney Johnson and today our guest is Angela Blanchard, a globally recognized expert practitioner in community development, disaster recovery, and effective long-term integration for immigrants and refugees. She stands in the gap to help rebuild communities and people when the unthinkable happens.

Angela and I have been friends for years now. We first connected via [Saul Kaplan](#) from the Business Innovation Factory, who has also been a guest on this podcast. I just love her heart. I'm inspired by the work she has devoted her life to. She studies and then takes action when people's lives are disrupted in the most profoundly devastating ways. I hope that you're as captivated by her and her story as I am.

WHITNEY Angela Blanchard, welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast.

ANGELA Thank you, Whitney, it's so good to be with you again.

WHITNEY Question for you is, where did you grow up, and what did you want to be when you grow up?

ANGELA So I grew up in Beaumont, Texas, which is a refinery town, really, an oil and gas refinery town in the southeast corner of Texas. And when I was young, I only thought women could be teachers, and nuns, and nurses. There were limited examples in my arena. So my aspirations grow, for growing up, had to do with how to make things work better, how to heal people, how to share what I knew. I ... Those were the examples I had, really, nurturers of the world. Moms and such.

WHITNEY So is that what you thought you wanted to be when you grew up?

ANGELA Actually I just think I thought much more about just growing up and leaving. I think I started planning my escape around 14, because reading was really my salvation. It was going to the library and making my way through book, after book, after book. And, the stunning realization that the small world I live in, lived in was just a tiny part of the world, and realizing how much was out there, and how many different ways of living, how many different ways of approaching life there were. How many different cultures, countries, peoples that in their own way had, sort of, solved the big challenges of- of being human. So, I was fascinated, and I thought let me out.

WHITNEY Out there.

ANGELA That, yeah, let me get to that.

WHITNEY Where did you escape to? Where? Did you go to college? What did you do?

ANGELA So, hanging on my wall right now in front of me is a postcard, and it shows a woman, and she's holding up a sign, and uh, the sign says, "Away." And, so, for me, I wasn't that picky about where I went, but I had friends that were moving to Minnesota, to the twin cities, and that was 1350 miles from Beaumont, Texas in a pretty direct hitch out, hitch-hiking route. So it seemed like enough distance to put between me and that which I was running from, that I might find something, uh, different there.

And in arriving at the Twin, in the Twin Cities in 1972, after, you know, 12 years of Catholic school, and 18 years in Beaumont, Texas, I wasn't the most ignorant person there, but I was pretty close. And, I think the great thing about being there at that time the 60s and 70s were always described in all kinds of terms. But, really for me, there were many of us that were awakening to a sense of responsibility, uh, for and to the world, the ... we were supposed to be the change we sought, and- and certainly, naively, we thought it was our responsibility to work for a fair, more-more just world. And, so, landing in the middle of that, and beginning my work, uh, actually continuing the volunteer work I had done in high school with children, and then moving onto all kinds of social justice issues and causes, you know, that was my, that was my- (laughs) that was my launch.

WHITNEY So you moved to the Twin Cities. And it sounds like ... Okay, so what did you end up studying in college? Because I want to get to what you've done, you know, what you're doing today. But what did you study initially?

ANGELA So, first, uh, I saved money for three years to go to college because I didn't have, really, and I wasn't even sure I was smart enough to go to college. So I saved my money, then came back to Texas and went to UT. And a friend of mine said you need to enroll in this thing called Plan II, which was an interdisciplinary honors program. I didn't know what an interdisciplinary honors program was. But when she said that classes were smaller, I thought that would be good, because I was intimidated.

And, so I made an application and they took me as a, I mean truly an experiment because they largely took students that were valedictorians from, you know, they just graduated from high school. They didn't take older students. And then they told me you also can't work (laughs) while you're in this program. And I thought, "Well, I'm going to be extremely hungry." (laughs)

WHITNEY (Laughs)

ANGELA So I was just an anomaly. But the wonderful thing was, just like, I had this huge intellectual curiosity and hunger, and Plan II was that program that, you know, kind of, extended my curiosity about the world, and the interdependencies and interconnections between disciplines, and people, and places, and all the rest. So it was a wonderful thing. And I was able to go to UT for three years with my own, sort of, resources.

WHITNEY So quick question for you. We tend to not judge people on their potential, certainly not women. So, what was the data point that they had that they were willing to take a bet on you?

ANGELA There was an essay I wrote and-

WHITNEY Ah.

ANGELA ... I still have it, because, you know, at that point I had a, what I view now, is almost an astonishingly fully formed philosophy about how the world worked, and how our responsibility in terms of how we showed up in it.

WHITNEY Hm.

ANGELA You know, the essay was fundamentally about what the role, the role of helpers in the world, and how compelling, how appealing and seductive this role could be. So you're the person with the answers, and the power, and the resources, and feeding your own self by helping. And what a negative formula that could be, that the absolute obligation you have, if you're going to be a helper in the world, to maintain yourself so that you're actually serving people not you. And, so, I think they thought was a bit of an advanced, uh, view (laughs) for-

WHITNEY A 21, or 22 year old.

ANGELA ... 21 year old, yeah. But I had learned it by ... Really in the work with children, you keenly ... You ... It's just so raw and pure. So what we do with kids, because we do have all of the power. Really, it's such a mirror, because what angers you with children, what frustrates you with children, what-what makes you discouraged or ... You know, these are all just giant mirrors about your own views of the world.

So I had, in my work with children, they had pushed me to look at myself, and to look at how I grew up, and, um, and to see it with the, with the eyes of a healthy self-perception, and self-awareness. Own your- your-

WHITNEY That's interesting.

ANGELA ... own your own shit. (laughs) It's like-

WHITNEY Yeah-

ANGELA ... the shorthand.

WHITNEY ... exactly. Exactly.

ANGELA Oh yes, go ahead, and changing one liner, "Own your own shit."

WHITNEY (Laughs) There you go. So, all right. So, that's fascinating, you write this paper. And I was thinking, "Wow, that was precocious, a piece to have written as a 21, 20 year old." But, actually, I think it's just a wise piece regardless of your age.

I don't know if you have published that anywhere, but I think it would be very interesting for you to publish it and do, kind of, a- a here's what I'm thinking now editorial, sort of, um, uh, approach to it, I think could be very interesting.

ANGELA And that's a fun idea.

WHITNEY Yeah.

ANGELA Oh, you ... And as you know, I went back to school, and then got ... I had to get out of school because, you know, I used to get around by hitch-hiking. I had a little hitch-hiking accident, I- I referred to it. It was, you know, the moment when the universe said to me, "Maybe you should quit doing this if you want to live." And, um ...

WHITNEY Are you going to tell us what the hitch-hiking accident was?

ANGELA Oh-

WHITNEY At least in three sentences?

ANGELA ... yeah, I was on Lamar, I was on Lamar Boulevard in Austin, Texas. And I got in a car, and there was a man in the back seat. And he pulled a knife on me, and he stuck the knife between me and the window, and the door on the passenger side. And he said, you know, "Roll up the window, don't make a sound, and we're not letting you out." And, you know, I looked out the windshield and thought, "If I stay here I don't really know what's going to happen to me, and these guys will be in charge, and so I'm getting out."

And, so, I jumped out of a moving car on Lamar Boulevard in the middle of the day in Austin, Texas. And thank God my feet hit first, then my butt, and then my head. But as my head bounced off the concrete, um, I thought, "I'm going to die trying to (laughs) get a college degree." Um, I need to ... I've got to reexamine the ...

WHITNEY How you're funding the school.

ANGELA ... yeah, uh. Yeah. And- and- and, you know, so recently I was talking to a young person who said to me, "Oh and I can't believe you're laughing about this." And I thought, "Oh, my God, what else would be laugh about, except-

WHITNEY (Laughs)

ANGELA ... your brush with cata-, catastrophe and death, and- and, you know, uh, that I didn't ... I, you know, didn't die that day." (laughs)

WHITNEY Yeah.

ANGELA Yay me, I got out of the car. But I think that I thought, "Well, you've got to rethink how you're going about this. And then I spent a couple of years working again. And then when my family was in much better shape ... Um, I've shared with you I'm the oldest of eight kids, and my parents were still raising the other seven, and I was ... My father thought at 18 you're launched. You know, it's up to you, the rest.

WHITNEY Yeah.

ANGELA And, but- but then they had more resources. My father was in recovery from alcoholism. All of the rest of us were, uh, too. And, so, he said, "Well if you want to essentially go to college, it's something I can understand," because he didn't have any idea what Plan II was. (laughs) You know he- he needed ... He thought college was, sort of, vocational school, you know? You should go get something that sounded like a job.

And, so, I went back to school and got a degree in accounting. And it was wonderful because it was the piece of the power in organizations that I didn't have. And, you know, women are often- often in organizations, and, uh, especially ones they don't run are spoken to as if they're 1950s housewives on a- a tight, um, you know, domestic budget and told what there's money for and what there's not money for. And that's absolutely true at that time in nonprofits.

I wanted to know what there was money for and when there wasn't. And this mysterious thing, called a budget, was something I saw as a powerful advocacy tool. 'Cause, uh, if ... As I share with my students now, if there's no dollar sign in front of it, we're not doing it. So people can talk about something all day long, if it's not in the budget it's not happening.

We don't go to work for places without reviewing the financials.

WHITNEY I love that. Okay, so, speaking of owning, speaking of understanding the budget, speaking of being able to advocate-

ANGELA Yeah.

WHITNEY ... you are the President Emerita of BakerRipley Center. Tell us, briefly, about what you did there, because that sets us up to the work that you're doing today.

ANGELA This purpose that had shaped me from when I was very young, this sense of if we work at it we could, we could, uh, better allocate resources. We could help people realize potential. That this was really, essentially, what we should all be doing, trying to do.

So when I landed at BakerRipley, which was then called Neighborhood Centers, it was a struggling, uh, a struggling nonprofit. On the balance sheet, had anyone bothered to look at it really clearly said bankrupt.

WHITNEY (Laughs)

ANGELA A little more than you had, that's a, that's the definition. It was on the- the balance sheet bankrupt, but in the history, and in the values, and ethics of the organization where all of the things that really resonated. It was a tune that was familiar to me, in that everyone matters. That the leaders we need are already here, that communities are best strengthened when they speak for themselves, when they're heard, when they're listened to.

Essentially, uh, a settlement house just offering the possibility that there could be a life different than the ones, the one that the person might be born to.

And I was seeking, I was, had always been seeking that for myself, you know, born poor, born ignorant, born isolated, born all of those things is not a life sentence, it's a start. And, then, where do we go from there? So, for me, this was an organization that, sort of, said, you know, "We're about making those stories happen. We're about organizing for that purpose. We believe in the people we serve."

That was the ethics, that was the aspiration. But, then, on the ground there were these decrepit buildings and of terrible lack of resources relative to the demands that had been placed on the organization. And that looked like an opportunity to me still.

WHITNEY So quick clarifying question. When you say settlement house, what do you mean?

ANGELA So settlement houses were ... In the late 1800s, early 1900s, the immigration story in the United States ... In fact, for many years, you know, decades, the United States has owned the aspirational story. You know, the American dream was the universal aspirational story. That's not true now, but it was. And in the late 1800s, early 1900s, that aspirational story involved people coming here who were never going back to the countries from which they came. That wasn't an option. It was a practical impossibility, it was a political impossibility.

So settlement houses were meant to be landing places. Here you are now, washed up on an unfamiliar shore, now what? How does one navigate democracy and capitalism. How- how do we participate, how do we become good citizens? These are the things that were taught in settlement houses. The workers then, who taught those were early, now, what we would now refer to as social workers, or social justice workers, or community organizers, or community developers. They were, essentially, people there to shepherd this human capital across the smaller bridge of now you're here and now how do you come to belong here?

So, what was taught were language and how to, how to find a job, how to find others like you, how to organize and have your voice heard. Um, the responsibilities of citizenship. So, the roots in settlement houses, that's a rich, and that's an international movement. And the people, Alice Graham Baker who had founded what's now called BakerRipley, uh, she was the, both the embodiment and an adherent to that, the values of that movement-

WHITNEY Okay, so, if I look at what you, what you were running for 30 years, it was, basically, a modern-day settlement house [crosstalk 00:29:35].

ANGELA Yeah. Like on ste- ... I would then describe it as a settlement house on steroids-

WHITNEY And just to give our listeners some idea of the scope of- of the work that- that BakerRipley was doing, is when you left, and I don't know what it is today, the operating budget, annually, was around three hundred million dollars. Is that-

ANGELA Yeah-

WHITNEY ... accurate?

ANGELA Yeah. And, uh, there aren't many nonprofit community development organizations of that size and scale, but a reminder that we grew in response. So, one of the values of the organization was responsiveness, that was there.

So, in response to a region and a state that was growing, and changing radically, a radical, one of the most profound, uh, one of the largest demographic economic shifts in the history of modern American cities was happening in the Houston region, in the Gulf Coast region. So we were evolving in response to that, being driven in with the aspirations of the people that we serve. And that adherence to what they hungered for, shaped the way we grew, and, also, what we designed as programs and as responses.

WHITNEY So, Angela, what's the measure of a great city?

ANGELA So, for me, the measure of a great city is, can it quickly turn desperation into aspiration, and aspiration into participation? Because now, we live in one of the most disrupted, one of the periods of greatest upheaval, mass migrations, mass displacement.

And cities are magnets for people hungering for some sort of realization of these fundamental hungers, which I refer to as the hungers to earn, learn, belong. So cities magnetize for these hungers, and people come into cities. And the best cities are the ones that have landing places and on-ramps. These are the cities that don't create artificial pockets of isolation and desperation. These are the cities that embrace, um, people who are coming as assets and who welcome the aspirations, and see those aspirations as the fuel for the growth of that city and the evolution of that city.

So, world-wide, we see cities stepping up to tackle these challenges, and to face- face these realities created by these forces, these dynamic forces. And we see-

ANGELA ... leaders increasingly with the responsibility to, uh, craft responses that we once thought of as- as federal or international. And- and- and now it's really cities closer to home.

WHITNEY So what are some cities that you have found? I know you travel around the globe-

ANGELA Uh, yeah.

WHITNEY ... doing this work. What are some cities that you have found that are doing this exceptionally well? That measure up as a city, a- a place that's welcoming others?

ANGELA Um, so first, uh, there's a, the Cajun part of me right now is thinking, Cajun girl from Beaumont-

WHITNEY (Laughs)

ANGELA ... seek moral. You know, like, uh, there's still a part of me that says, "What am I doing here-

WHITNEY (Laughs)

ANGELA ... in Brisbane?" (laughs)

WHITNEY We'll pretend-

ANGELA Yeah.

WHITNEY ... pretend like you're not-

ANGELA Yeah.

WHITNEY ... for just a moment.

ANGELA I know. I have this, sort of, Forest Gump feeling about, all right, well, uh, here I am again. But I think it, I think it, the ... It's not so much which cities are doing it all well. It's within the cities of the world are people who are crafting responses who have been willing and brave enough to look at the- the hard things, look at 'em square in the eye. Wade into the storm, whatever analogy you want, you want to use and say, you know, "How can we constructively respond here?"

ANGELA So, in Brisbane, uh, one of the organizations there that I ...

WHITNEY Brisbane, Australia, for our listeners.

ANGELA Australia. Yeah-

WHITNEY Okay just to be ...

ANGELA ... um, that I have high regard for is the multi-cultural development association. It's one of the largest refugee resettlement organizations in Australia. So they're facing the challenge of creating some, sort of, welcome and on-ramp there, which they've done in a- a variety of healthy ways. Just a tiny example, and these are what I'm looking for.

I go city to city to say, "What's working here? What are the things that have been crafted by the devoted and caring leaders so that we are not creating artificial pockets of isolation and desperation. But we are welcoming, we are seeing the potential in people, and creating the means for them to express and evolve."

So, in Brisbane that looks like The Multicultural Development Association has done many wonderful things. But, they created welcome residential, which allows people who are over-housed. For example, I am over-housed. My son is grown, he lives in his own house. I live in a big house and I, you know, sort of, roll around in it all by myself. I use three rooms in it and it's got three times that many. So, an over-housed person in Brisbane has now the possibility for making the part of their home they're not using, whether it's their one building, or an adjacent building, or

a small garage apartment, they have all, the possibility of making that available to someone at a discounted rate and realizing a, kind of, contribution for tax purposes.

And then, also, that's a form of integration now, because someone lives in proximate, proximate to you, different than you. That you not only have the opportunity to, uh, ma- make a- a home for them, but you have the opportunity to be the means of welcoming them, to be their friend.

Why that example matters, and a dozen other examples in Germany and- and- and in, and Beirut, and, you, those matter is that you see some common elements here. You see people that deeply care about their cities. They're willing to be welcoming, that are crafting responses out of existing resources.

What we're not seeing is these grand federal programs working. We're not seeing these giant massive structures we created in the 80s and 90s, somehow becoming responsive. No, we're seeing people craft solutions on the ground, out of what's available. Nurturing that, feeding it with both those that are generous in spirit and willing to help, and the aspiration of those who are coming.

We would have dismissed those in, um, in the ... You know, when we were ... During that era when we were one internal thing. Well this is just one anecdotal thing. These are not anecdotal one-offs. They're, actually ... There's a pattern across the world, a buzz forming solutions in this improvisational way that really does speak to what's gonna be required of leaders in the world, as the world we're in now, and the one that will be leading in for the next couple years.

WHITNEY I'm getting chills as you're talking about that. It's beautiful.

WHITNEY If you had to describe your purpose, what's your purpose or your- your ... We just had, Simon Sinek on the podcast. So he talks about, to start with why. What's your why? What's your purpose? Why are you on this planet Angela?

ANGELA Well, this reminds me of why I ... As much as I like you, sometimes I don't. (laughs)

WHITNEY (Laughs)

ANGELA This- this kind of question Whitney! Why do you have to put a person on the spot? I- I think I get up every single day, uh, and I think my son has made me aware of this multiple times. He said, uh, "Mom the one thing that really angers and frustrates you is the waste of human potential." And, uh, I'm sure he- he has felt that, you know, that personally in some ways.

WHITNEY Uh-huh (affirmative).

ANGELA Um, uh ...

WHITNEY As parents do with their children the world over.

ANGELA Like I'm, like, look at you, you could be-

WHITNEY Yeah-

ANGELA ... this-

WHITNEY ... ex-

ANGELA ... you- you know-

WHITNEY ... exactly.

ANGELA ... all right. Maybe just yourself and what you're meant to be. But I think the, I think for me it's just this great, uh, you know. There's nothing- nothing more beautiful than, um, an individual, and a community in touch with its own aspirations, or a working, construct and creating a world that they want to live in. And, um, that's, also, terrifying. And you know, the, (laughs) you know, there are people creating a world they want to live in that, really, none of the rest of us do, or we wouldn't necessarily be included in that world, and that's, kind of, scary. We have the capacity for both.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

ANGELA But, I think what keeps me, uh, just riveted is, and where I feel I have a special aptitude, is to work with those people doing that when they've faced the unthinkable.

WHITNEY Let's build on that. Let's talk a little bit about what you're doing now. What you're excited about. What- what are you focused your energy on- on now that you, um, have left BakerRipley after 30 years. What are you doing now, and what does your research look like as you're thinking about this idea of facing the unthinkable?

ANGELA So, what- what, uh, has to be said, is, once Katrina hit New Orleans, it hit the, it actually hit the Louisiana, Mississippi Gulf Coast in 2005. From 2005 on, I used every available spare minute, every vacation day, every midnight to 2:00 a.m. moment of sleepless, uh, hours of sleeplessness to think and write about disasters. Because I was traveling back and forth between Houston and New Orleans, and I was watching two stories, profound stories unfold.

One, it was in New Orleans less than a month after Katrina, and repeatedly, over a period of two years. And then I was watching this story, so the story in New Orleans of the unthinkable, what had happened. And now, so many things that we didn't expect have happened. But what had happened in New Orleans at the time, that we knew, we knew one day that event would occur, we were not ready.

WHITNEY And when you say that event-

ANGELA Yeah.

WHITNEY ... just to be very specific-

ANGELA Um-

WHITNEY ... what was that event?

ANGELA ... to be very specific, it was the hurricane and the collapse of the levies. The failure of infrastructure to protect New Orleans, a city that is valuable and important, culturally, economically, socially in every way. And then the utter failure of response. And we were measuring that failure by what we expected. What we thought response should be, what it had been, what we thought was possible, and then what happened.

At the same time I was in Houston, where we were ... I- I mean I feel awkward saying ... We were gleefully welcoming people. Because in Houston, we were thinking this is a really big challenge, worthy of our considerable intervention and endless supply of can-do. So, yay us, we- we got it. And there was, also, a sense of welcoming, despite what anybody says, or reads, or any of the rest of it. There was a sense of welcoming people that were fundamentally family members and neighbors.

Houston and New Orleans are connected by culture, and oil and gas, and economies, and- and companies, and this is, the Gulf Coast is its own world, uh, in terms of, um, economic, cultural, social world, and we were, uh, deeply connected as cities. So, you- you know, these two things made me ... And also I got profoundly scared, because I saw how much we were clinging to old ideas about preparation and response, and I knew we were done with that world and it was never going to be that way again.

And I began to think as fast as possible. What can we learn, how fast can we learn it, for the world that's coming? And then we had this hiatus. I mean, but, uh, my ... Just to be clear, I've worked long-term recovery. Allison, Katrina, Rita, Ike, this a little bit on Gustav, Harvey, and now we'll be doing some work with people who were impacted by Imelda. I've been to Puerto Rico after Maria. I've been ... But, you know, so I- I just am well-versed in what happens after these storms.

But, these are not the only storms. I was in Kinglake, in Australia, after the fire that burned, Black Saturday fire, which was their Katrina moment. And, so, all of that I said to myself, like, you have to pay exquisite attention to this, because you live, and everyone you love is in a region, incredibly vulnerable. And there are places all over the world, around the world, and people like you, who are really trying to figure out how people go on.

And we need to understand what happens after the unthinkable. Not in the immediate heroic aftermath, which as Americans we are so addicted to. We're just hysterical over the dramatic helicopter fast water rescue, and completely uninterested in the five-year recovery path afterwards when people are trying to rebuild their lives and rebirth themselves and communities.

WHITNEY And that's the part that- that ...

ANGELA Um, yes.

WHITNEY That is your life's work.

ANGELA I'm spending all my time on that. That ... Which means spending all of my time with people, um, who are all described as traumatized and displaced. I mean we have all these terrible terms we use to talk about tragedy and loss. And, um, and a lot of those are othering terms, because in some way, if you have never been one of those people, you don't want to be you don't.

WHITNEY Wait, so that's interesting. You just said, "Tragedy and loss are othering terms."

ANGELA No, I said the terms we use for people who have suffered tragedy and loss are often other ... You know, when I, when I was running the shelter during Harvey-

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

ANGELA ... one of the rules I established ... You know, we set it up to accommodate up to 10,000 people. And I think at its peak, 8,000 had moved through. One of the early rules I establish is we were only going to refer to the people in the shelter in Houston as either guests or neighbors. We were not going to use survivors, refugees, because they were, in fact, our guests. We had opened up, um, a very basic hotel, and in fact, they were our neighbors in every sense of the word.

So, it was a reminder that- that the only thing separating, um, the people coming through the front door, and people coming through the back door to volunteer in Houston was, sometimes, just a block or two where the water hadn't reached. I fight for these words, and I fought for the words in the shelter so much that even media folks cleaned up their act, and everybody began to use those terms, and it reshaped the way we treated people.

WHITNEY Hm- hm.

ANGELA It was my intention. So, we're living in a world now where it's unlikely. Not that many people will live their whole life without some, sort of, catastrophic and fundamental disruption. And if you're one of the ones who manages to make it through the whole journey without having everything you care about under threat or question, I, actually, to be really honest, you're not that interesting for me. I mean you know, good on, good on you, but you're not my people. You know, my folks are the ones that, you know, got up the next day and looked at a scorched, and barren, and um, wrecked landscape and, um, went on.

WHITNEY Hm. All right, so you're at Brown University, you're now a professor there. What are you teaching? What are you ... As you do all this- this life's work as a practitioner, and now as an academic, what are you teaching the students? What- what do you hope that they will do with everything that you are submitting-

ANGELA So Whit-

WHITNEY ... to them.

ANGELA ... so, Whitney, really, bless your heart, but nobody's ever going to say I'm an academic. (laughs) I mean, not real- really. Uh, I can just-

WHITNEY Well ...

ANGELA ... I can just imagine the faces of the actual academics thinking, "She is not one of us," and they're right. I'm a practitioner that teaches and writes now. I am not an academic. But the beautiful thing about Brown is, in making me a senior fellow, they have allowed me to take what I've learned, and they've given me an environment, or a container, essentially, for having really meaningful and important conversations with people. Maybe either aligned with my interest, or tangentially interested in what I'm pursuing. And, then, allowing me to craft courses that matter a great deal to me, so that the course that I teach in the screen, the graduate school course and public policy, and it's called Disaster and Displacement.

And, um, I think my students are on to me 'cause (laughs) one of my students said, "This is a course in life and leadership, disguised as a course in disaster and displacement." And I took that as a really high complement. I think that what I'm looking for amongst students are those that are brave, willing to stare at the most difficult circumstances, and imagine, in an imperfect world, without an ideal set of resources and policies, how you would craft a response out of what's available. That's the first principal of improvisation.

One of the examples I offer, and deeply love New Orleans, of course. You know, when you visit New Orleans, there are all these performers on the streets. And a musician might walk out of his or her home, go out on the street, put their instrument case down, open it up, and start to play. They don't wait for the money, the audience, the program to be printed, the playlist to be generated. They start. And using the talents they have, they begin, and this is, this is what I see in millennials.

I get so excited by millennials. I hang out with them all I can. I feel like I've been waiting for you guys! Because they know that, that's the way to begin. They don't have these illusions of, "Oh, we need a monumental transformation in, uh, of the entire educational system in the United States."

No, they start the- the do what you can, with what you have, where you are right now. That's the second principle. Have the ability to scan the environment, find the assets, resources, and strengths within the people around you. And then much like a gardener, how do we nurture and cultivate that into something larger and greater that includes and- and feeds more people. So, you know, those things, in addition to, uh, a rec, thi- this- this necessity of knowing that no one's coming.

Honestly, there are times when I say things, and they become the stickiest, most popular things I say, and I don't understand why. But, no one is coming. Um, people walk up to me and say, "No one's coming." And I, and I think of all the things to be associated with. But, you know, the no one's coming is not a message of despair. It's- it's to, it's saying to everyone, stop being a child.

There's nobody bigger, better, stronger, faster, better educated, better trained that's going to show up in the middle of this disaster and fix it for you. It's up to you. If you're standing there, the person who cares deeply, with front row seat and knowledge, it's up to you. And that's a starting place.

So these are the things that I'm teaching. No one's coming, do what you can with what you have, um, you know. And still, you can't build unbroken. That, um, you know, in the world of, in the academic world, I have such regard for scholars and for their willingness to just persist and you know, trying to get their hands around something true and provable and- and so forth. We need them.

And then a balance to that is, um, really this understanding that critique, comparison, all of these things were taught, those are only a set of lenses to look at the world. The most important lens as a leader is what, who's here, what's here, or what strength, skills, resources, and assets exist within this, and how do we work to expand, uh, the possibilities for people?

WHITNEY

Hm. All right. As we start to wrap up, I just have a few more questions for you. You wrote an article, and I think it was in Medium, where you said, "The power of I'm sorry, is to open the door to a different relationship with the past, with another one today. Deep regret is not a quagmire, it's a solid foundation on which new structures of togetherness can be built."

Talk about that. Talk about those words, I'm sorry, in the context of the work that you're doing.

ANGELA

There's a lot of conversation now, in, uh, in- in political, social justice arena, about how do we come to terms with the brutalities of the past? How does ... How do any leaders now, stand in front of any group of people and talk about what's possible without acknowledging what's come before.

I'm seeing more and more leaders willing to open the conversation with I'm sorry. We know that that is in, all by itself, insufficient. But not- not being willing to say it, means that you're no kind of leader for today. You just aren't. Because leaders have to, they have to accept this. I may not be at fault, but I am responsible. If you're going to hold that spot today, you have to own everything that happened on the ground you stand on. You don't just get to pick up, say, "Oh I just liked to own the part of the story that started yesterday when I got here." That- that's just useless.

Wherever you are, it was built out of somebody's dream and aspiration. And, so, when you dismiss it, ignore it, failed to acknowledge it, failed to welcome those that are, now, here for the first time, who should have been here for many years, you can't be takin' seriously.

When I get the leaders that have trouble saying, I watched this one set of foundation leaders in a city that had been divided by a previous notion of progress. Meaning, we just decided to plow through everything you valued, and put up a freeway 'cause that was our idea of pro- progress, then you didn't really care about you and your neighborhood.

And I watch these foundation leaders get up and say, "I'm sorry." Now they weren't at the table when that plan for that freeway was approved, but they had the courage and they had the honor, an old-fashioned word. And they had the honor to own it, and open up the possibility for doing it differently in the future.

When people struggle with this, I say, "When you go to a funeral, is it really that hard for you to say, 'I'm so terribly sorry for your loss.'" You didn't kill the person. You didn't, you're not, weren't responsible for the- their death, but you find it within yourself to express this deep sadness and regret. And if you had any part in any suffering associated with it, most of us can- can own that, we should.

WHITNEY Yeah, I love that. All right, almost to the last question. This might be it, but it's probably not. Are you writing a book? And what will the book be about? Presumptive close. I'm not going to say. In fact, I'm going to back up.

ANGELA Oh- oh- oh.

WHITNEY What is-

ANGELA Okay.

WHITNEY ... the book that you are going to write, going to be about?

ANGELA I don't know, Whitney. How much are you going to help me with this, because-

WHITNEY (Laughs)

ANGELA ... well I don't have the attention span that you do. So, um, I think the, I think here's what I'm, feel compelled to do. I'm- I'm obsessed with the stories, the stories of people who face the unthinkable, and the lessons that have come by knowing them and seeing how they rebuilt their lives. And I do believe that the stories need to be told. And, largely, my intention is not to give some how-to book. We're all vulnerable creatures on this same journey. It's more of an offering of stories to allow us to look to this disrupted world to face the prospect of catastrophic upheaval with some sense that we're all descendant from those people that survive the genocide, the wars, the plagues and went on.

So, it's to remind us of our humanity, because, you know, the kind of, essentially being shipwrecked here, we all are on one planet trying to figure it out together, and that to remind people that many- many people before you have faced the unthinkable, and gone on.

So in that spirit, I- I don't know ... I've I- literally have no idea what's the best way, or even a way I'm capable of, uh, actually getting these stories out. I- I have almost too much now, so much I don't know what, I don't know how to work, to organize, to do this.

I jokingly said, you know, "I'd rather ... I'd- I'd rather try to stand up the city after a disaster than write about standing up a city (laughs) after a disaster." I don't know the answer to that. Um, I do know I want the ... I think these people on both sides, those that have arrived shipwrecked, on the unfamiliar shore, and those that have welcomed them, I think both of those stories, and the why of that needs to be shared.

There's a great, um ... It's a, it's a bit of struggle on the telling of the men, the Hamilton "It's Quiet Uptown." That story is just ... That's, that piece of music and the lyrics are beautiful. And it says, "There are moments that the words don't reach. There is suffering too terrible to name. You hold your child as tight as you can, and pushed away the unimaginable. The moments when you're in so deep, it feels easier to just swim down."

So, for me, it's the study of all the people whose, who were in so deep, and didn't swim down. Um, they found a way to rebirth their lives, their communities, and they worked at it. And they have something to say to all of the rest of us, because one day it will be us.

WHITNEY Angela Blanchard, that was such a lovely way for us to end this conversation. Thank you for being with us.

ANGELA Thank you. Thanks for sticking with me. I'm glad we've been friends through this big transition. It's meant a lot to me.

What an inspiring woman. Angela not only marshalls resources to help people through hard things, she guides us through.

I love what she said about teaching her students. Helping them see the importance of crafting a response out of what is available. To do what they can, with what they have, where they are right now. Leveraging the accelerants of disruption (like embracing constraints) to build those who have been disrupted.

The measure of a great city – well, can it quickly turn desperation into aspiration, and aspiration into participation? When everything is lost, everything stripped away, we can be measured by how we love others. How we help them and welcome them in. How we inspire them to try again and then by how we help them rebuild. We can each stand in the gap and help stabilize those who have been disrupted in unthinkable ways. She is living a well-lived life.

And how do you measure a life? Here's what Clayton Christensen had to say.

“While many of us might default to measuring our lives by summary statistics, such as number of people presided over, number of awards, or dollars accumulated in a bank, and so on, the only metrics that will truly matter to my life are the individuals whom I have been able to help, one by one, to become better people. When I have my interview with God, our conversation will focus on the individuals whose self-esteem I was able to strengthen, whose faith I was able to reinforce, and whose discomfort I was able to assuage -- a doer of good, regardless of what assignment I had. These are the metrics that matter in measuring my life.” - Clayton Christensen (*How Will You Measure Your Life?*)

As we end this episode, I want to pay tribute to [Clayton Christensen who passed away on January 23, 2020](#). Outside of my immediate family, he has been the most influential figure in my life. A sponsor, a mentor, a teacher, a doer of good who helped me better. And I will miss him.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.