

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 258: ULCCA JOSHI HANSEN

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the s curve of learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. If you're an avid listener of this show, and I hope you are, you know, we talk a lot about learning, sometimes that's on-the-job training, sometimes that's personal growth that comes with experience. But what about education with a capital E? The institutions of learning where we spent our childhoods and where our kids learn today. We think about them as classrooms and curricula, a place where we sit and consume the knowledge that will help us get the careers that we want. But what if there was a different way, a way that was a lot more aligned with how we apply our skills and what we're passionate about? These are questions posed by Dr. Ulcca Joshi Hansen, a teacher, author, researcher, and the chief program officer at Grant Makers for Education. Her book is called *The Future of Smart*, and it looks at history, psychology, and our current technological moment and asks what if school were more dynamic, more inclusive, and more empowering for all kids? My conversation with Dr. Hansen has some huge ideas for us to wrap our heads around, but it's also full of practical advice for parents, teachers, students, or anyone with the student and their lives. I know you'll enjoy it.

Whitney Johnson: So, Ulcca, tell us, why did you decide to write *The Future of Smart*?

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: Well, this has been a long journey for me, and I'll start by saying I'm a third culture kid. This is not something that I encountered as a concept until a few years ago in my research. But a third culture kid is someone who's raised in a culture that's different from their parents and then at some point in their formative years, lives in at least one other culture. And in my case, between 0 and 30, I lived in seven or eight different countries for extended periods of time. And so, the advantage to this is that you see the world a little bit differently because your identity is more fluid than people who grew up in one culture. And I think for me, that manifested in a couple of things. It manifested in never feeling like I truly belonged. And I think when I became a teacher, this notion of helping young kids feel like they belonged in my classroom and my space was super important. And when I started

to look around and think about what education felt like it should be, I was really drawn to schools that seem to center this notion of belonging. And so, in my 20-year career in education, I've always had a slightly different perspective on what's going wrong in education. And I think in part, that's because I've lived inside of different systems, and can see systems in slightly different ways. I've been thinking about writing the book for almost 10 years, but in 2020, there was just a confluence of circumstances. I had a lot of upheaval in my job as I think many people probably did. But the world around us with issues of race, conversations about systems, and how systems were and were not serving all of us well. To me, those conversations were the same conversation that we should be having in education, which is there are different worldviews that birthed different systems. And the book was my effort to try and contextualize this conversation about education inside a slightly bigger frame than we normally take when we talk about education and fixing it.

Whitney Johnson: Ok, so, the open loop that I'm having right now, you said third culture kid, I'm like, what are the different cultures? You have to tell it to different cultures. So, I know because I read your book, but I just think it's so, for a person who you know, I grew up in the United States. I've had family here for generations. I'm like, it's so boring, and then I hear your background. I'm like, it's so interesting, so tell us what it is.

Ulca Joshi Hansen: So, my family is Indian by origin. But when the British were in both East Africa and India, they took my grandparents and many other people over to East African nations, in our case, Tanzania. So my parents and my brothers were born and raised in Tanzania. My parents immigrated to the U.S. I was born here, but I spent my childhood in Tanzania, came back, and started school. But then during my schooling, I spent time as an exchange student in France and Canada, in Germany. Later, I studied in the U.K., in the United Arab Emirates, and I have family that's scattered across five continents. And so, when I was growing up, just international visits and international living was a really big part of what shaped me.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm. What other languages do you speak besides English?

Ulca Joshi Hansen: So, my first language was Gujarati, which is a dialect of Hindi. I think that's really interesting because I think as a language, it has constructs and ideas and concepts that are hard sometimes to express in Western languages like interconnectedness and the unity of all things. But I also speak French and German.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm. All right. So, everything about your childhood, everything about your upbringing prepared you to take this perspective to look at the system of education in a way that someone who hadn't lived in lots of different places and wondered about this idea of belonging could have done.

Ulca Joshi Hansen: I think that's right. It took me a long time to see it and to really value that part of my perspective, but I think that's absolutely right.

Whitney Johnson: I remember a few years ago when I was writing my book *Disrupt Yourself*, and I came across a quote: What if everything that you thought was wrong with you was actually your superpower?

Ulca Joshi Hansen: Mm-hmm. It's a great idea. I love it.

Whitney Johnson: Isn't that great? Because as a child, everything that we think is wrong with us as an adult almost always ends up becoming a superpower.

Ulca Joshi Hansen: I know, and it's interesting to me that we live in a culture where it's okay to have a midlife crisis right in your mid-30s and 40s, where you come to that realization often, right, that you've been trying to be someone that you're not and then you grow into who you are and that we have a system that spends your entire educational career basically making you do that right? You never see a three-year-old who doesn't think they're amazing, but the longer kids spend in most of our schools, the longer they're sort of told to focus on everything, they're not right? That doesn't conform with what the system says they should be, as opposed to asking them who are you and what are your superpowers and in what ways do those things align with what the world needs and what you can contribute? It would be such a shift

Whitney Johnson: You talk a lot about the factory model of education, so we need to talk about how it is now so that we can go to where we want to go. And how did this factory model come about?

Ulca Joshi Hansen: So, some of the folks listening probably have heard of the factory model of school, the industrial model. It's an idea that over the last 20 years or so has been used a lot. But the whole reason I have the first third of the book is to ask people to spend a little bit of time with me taking a big picture look at what the factory model actually is because I think that if we're going to move forward in education, we actually need to go back to a time that precedes kind of the last 500 years of Western, and therefore world history. So, around 500 years ago or before that time, most human communities had an understanding of themselves. Most human beings had an understanding of themselves that was holistic. That was kind of allowed them to see themselves as connected with the world, with other beings, with other animals. And in Europe, about 500 years ago, that shifted. It was just an interesting sociocultural moment, and it was the only place where this happened in this way. But it was the period of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. And basically, what happened was that this notion of wholeness, connectedness, us as embodied beings was replaced by this effort to kind of break the world apart to understand it. So, scientists started to say, well, we can conceptually intellectually understand the world. What our senses tell us doesn't matter what our bodies tell us don't matter. And so, you fragmented the world. You broke it apart to try and understand it almost like you would a machine.

Ulca Joshi Hansen: And that analogy of a machine ended up shaping lots of different types of social systems, political systems, economic systems, education. And so, when we talk about the factory model, the factory model kind of emerged about 250 years after this shift in people's understanding of themselves. And it wasn't just about creating workers for a new economy. I think that's something that people often miss. But there was a real social, political, economic agenda around mass education. Where the merchant class, right not the landed gentry who were the people who had power and status, but the merchant class said, you know what? We want power. We want to overthrow the landed gentry. And to do that, we need the workers with us. And so, mass education was an opportunity for those thinkers, those leaders, along with religious leaders, to really try and inculcate a set of values, ways of being that conformed to a very particular political agenda. Now they did happen to use the factory model, right? Factories were a part of the industrial revolution. So, this idea that you break things apart, you make them efficient, you make them very linear. They impose that on sort of how we took kids, broke them up by age, broke apart subjects into different pieces, and just kind of fed them to children as they went through the factory line. But there are a lot of underlying values to the factory model. And the last thing that I'll say because I think we'll hit on this as we go on is what's fascinating to me is the overlay of the shift in worldviews, right? The Cartesian Newtonian worldview, which was the new one, and a more holistic, ecological worldview, which was the preexisting worldview.

Ulca Joshi Hansen: It actually mimics the structure of our brains in really important ways. So, in the book, I draw on the work of Dr. Iain McGilchrist, who's a psychiatrist, and he got interested in this because he was treating patients. And he noticed that patients who had damage to one hemisphere of their brain or the other seemed to behave very differently, but very consistently. So, his basic theory, which is part of the theory in the book, is that the left hemisphere is the part of our brain that kind of takes the world, which is whole and tries to break it up and abstract it into concepts and units that are useful, super important part. But our right hemisphere is the part that really, it's an intuitive, body-based, timeless way of being and of knowing. So, it takes in all this information. Ideally, the right hemisphere is the dominant hemisphere because it takes in everything. The Left makes it useful and then we bring everything back to the right hemisphere to be put into context, some people might think of that as wisdom. And McGilchrist's argument, and he just has a series of books that came out about this is that we're in a moment of left-hemispheric dominance culturally as well as across a lot of our social and political systems.

Whitney Johnson: You said ideally, our right hemisphere of our brain will be dominant where it just sort of takes everything and looks at it holistically. Then we use our left side of our brain to break things down. And what I like about that is that what you're saying is 500 years ago, we went to this very mechanistic, let's break things down. Let's analyze it. Let's look at it. And there was a lot of value in it, but the pendulum swung too far. And what we want to have happen is, look at it, break things down, but then reincorporate it and its sort of been disembodied or dis-brained if you will, and bring that back in. And so, the education system, what you're saying is still stuck in that left brain place and what you're advocating for and what we're hoping has starting to happen is that we're bringing that back in so that the right brain can dominate again. Is that is that where you're going?

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: It is. And I would say it's that way on two levels. So one, the work of education that we focus on is too left-hemispheric and all of the systems and structures that currently support our education system are also left-hemispheric. And so, in many ways, to make the kind of change that we want, we need to both reexamine the what of education and the how we do what we do with young people. And we also need to build completely new systems and structures and policies that are right hemispheric, not left hemispheric. And so, it's two levels of work that I think we need to do.

Whitney Johnson: So, not only what it is we're learning, but also the process by which learning is taking place. So, the factory model needs to be disassembled.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: Right. But the factory model goes beyond just a classroom or just a school, right? It has to do with higher education admissions. It has to do with how we define success. It has to do with accountability. So, when I say all of the other systems and structures, they're the things that hold the current system and how we do things in place.

Whitney Johnson: We swung too far; we went to the left side. But then you said there is this period of the romantics, this more expansive view of science, et cetera. You said something which of course, was music to my ears. You said the romantics also believed, speaking of music, that society could only be transformed through the transformation of the individual. So, what got introduced to have people become aware that we needed to reincorporate the left hemisphere of the brain back into the right hemisphere? What happened there?

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: So, if we go back to science, right, you had science that was kind of building theories of physics, biology that were again very mechanistic. So, Newtonian physics is a pretty kind of very accurate yet slightly limited way to understand the nature of the world and what happened around the period of the romantics was that in the sciences, you were starting to get these discoveries of electromagnetic fields. You were starting to get the theory of evolution in biology that showed the world was constantly evolving and that it wasn't just machines being built. And so, you had these ideas and concepts reemerging and I say reemerging because I think people historically have known a lot of this. They didn't have the language and constructs. So, but what those discoveries did was really shake the foundations of some of the scientific assumptions that had emerged during the Scientific Revolution. And what happened in science eventually started to kind of seep through into other systems. So, I talk about just as a simple example, right? Classical physics versus quantum physics, thinking about behavioral classical economics versus behavioral economics, thinking about health as fixing people, as though you fix machines, versus focusing on wellness more broadly. Right? So, these ideas started to move from the purely scientific realm to the social scientific realm as well.

Whitney Johnson: Talk to us about what you're advocating for, two or three basic principles of it just so that people can have in their mind, okay, if they had to, if they were at a party and they had to say, here are the three things that Dr. Hansen is saying we need to do. How would you encapsulate that for people?

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: I think of schools in three buckets, so, on the far left-hand side is the conventional system, which is really the factory industrial model. There's a big bucket in the middle that I call whole child innovative reform, which are programs that recognize that the factory model doesn't work, and we try and bolt-on solutions, whether it's project-based learning or socio-emotional learning, or racial justice initiatives. But we never actually fundamentally change or transform the values of the system. And the third bucket I think of as holistic indigenous learning or human-centered laboratory approaches. And those programs are designed off of the values, the assumptions, the knowledge of that holistic ecological worldview. So, a couple of big pieces, right? They think about the purpose of education very differently. They don't think about the purpose as being to create economic and social units. They think about helping to create persons and to give young people what they need to thrive as people. And part of that is cognitive and academic and about getting a job. It's a whole lot of other things as well. And so, they broadened their sense of the purpose of education.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: They think about human development in this stage. So, we're not just born little adults who really understand that between zero and twenty-five, young people go through very discrete developmental stages, and these programs are organized to try and meet the needs of young people between zero and eight, nine and 13, 14 and 20. So they look really different. And the third is that they really reflect what we know about learning that

learning needs to be about an individual's interests. It needs to be relevant. It needs to be contextualized in the real world that no one's really going to learn anything if it's just a bunch of abstractions. And in all of this, they understand that each individual's pathway is going to be jagged and unique. So, every eight-year-old is not the same. Every twelve-year-old is not the same, and they accept and embrace that. To your earlier point about who are you? What's your superpower? Where are you? And how do we build your education around that?

Whitney Johnson: So, number one is just to think about what is the purpose of education and in your worldview, it's to help develop an entire person. The personhood, I really like that. Number two is to understand and recognize that there are developmental stages, that people are different from zero to eight and eight to thirteen and thirteen to twenty and twenty to twenty-seven, et cetera, et cetera. And then also the third thing you said is to ensure that the learning is actually relevant to what we need to do and watching one of your TEDx talks, you said, the world demands what learner-centric education produces. And so, that I think really encapsulates beautifully. What you're saying is that make sure that what we're teaching people are skills that the world is demanding that they have.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: Well, I think what's interesting to go back to your question about the romantics is the first human-centered liberatory models emerged during that period of the romantic. So, people have probably heard of Montessori schools or Steiner Waldorf schools, and at the time they were countercultural because what schooling for the masses was about, was about creating economic and social units. So, these programs have always been there and they have been countercultural. And what I think we need to understand now is that because of technology, because of artificial intelligence, because the rate of change is so fast, because there is no way for anybody to ever know everything that they need to know what our young people need to succeed in the world, to thrive, and to continually adapt are the things that human-centered liberatory education produces. And so, what the world needs and what it produces are aligned for the first time since the advent of kind of mass public schooling, which is a gift, I think.

Whitney Johnson: Can you talk to us about an experience? I know you've been a teacher. You've done a lot of research. What does that classroom look like when all of these variables are in place? What is the classroom look and feel like for a child and for a teacher?

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: Well, it is going to look different in elementary school versus middle versus high school. So, I don't know if you have a place, you want me to focus.

Whitney Johnson: My children went to Montessori schools. It's easier for me to visualize this. But high school, it's a little bit more challenging. So, I'd love to have you reflect on high school.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: The first thing is, whenever I walk into these schools, I can feel it and I felt like that was a really important point I made in the book is that sometimes it's hard to describe, but I could feel it in my bones. But a couple of things, right? They're deeply grounded in relationship. And so, the relationships that exist between the people are really interesting. The kids, the young people, when I interviewed them said things like. Everyone's not my best friend, but it's kind of like my family, right, they belong to me, and I know them. And so, there are spaces in which you hear really authentic, vulnerable, sometimes difficult conversations. And part of how they do this is they do multi-age groupings. So, you'll have 13 and 14-year-olds with 17-year-olds. They often have advisory structures where there's one adult who will have a small group of students that they are with for four years. The classes tend to be interdisciplinary, so they're often trying to master a certain set of knowledge, skills, mindsets, but they're doing that through real-world problems. So, in many cases, students are doing internships, or they found community partners that need projects done. And so, they are in the real world working. And then you have adults at the school that are helping to translate what's happening in the world back into sort of academic skills mindsets.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: You have young people thinking really broadly about who they want to be and where they want to go after high school so that you're much more likely to hear conversations about gap years or students saying they need to work for a couple of years because they still don't know what they want to do in addition to community college or four-year college. So, the world feels a lot more open. And grades and GPA are not the focus. So, many of these schools are what they call competency based. So, it doesn't matter if it takes you a year or three months to master a skill the way that you demonstrate, you know, it is to complete a project or a work product, and they'll often do sort of exhibitions of learning, which are opportunities for young people to share what they know and what they

can do with their community. And so, it just feels like a much more alive ecosystem in which kids are out in the world. The world is coming in and you can see that students are agents of their own learning. So, it's not the teachers pulling them along to try and get them to complete some assignments. But its young people going, This is my work and the adults are there to support.

Whitney Johnson: It sounds magical.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: It is. And yet it exists. So, that's the good news.

Whitney Johnson: And that was my next question. Yeah, it's magical. That actually exists. So, what are one or two examples of schools that you've been to that you've visited so that if people who are listening wanted to Google and learn more about those schools, they could get a bit more information.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: So, I do talk about them in the school and in the back in an appendix. I have a list of places that I've visited, but one network that I think is really powerful is Big Picture Learning. So, their flagship campus is in Providence, Rhode Island. So, six individual buildings. So Big Picture Learning Model is a really great one, I would say. And I think Big Picture would say some of their schools are more of that middle bucket, that innovative reform, and others are more human centered. Interestingly enough, if you go in your local community, many high school, alternative high schools tend to be human-centered liberatory. Although what I will say is this work is complex, it is really hard to do well. And so, there are a lot of programs that are trying to do this work, and they'll have the basic feel of it. But it won't be of the quality that we know we need to get to if all kids are going to be served well. And then the other place is in the private and independent sector in most communities, and everyone knows that school. It's the place that's often labeled for gifted kids or for, you know, twice-exceptional kids. So, it's in Denver, where I live, it's the Logan School, but in the private and independent sector, you have a lot more of these programs than in the public sector for the system's reasons that I was talking about earlier.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, I have a number of friends who homeschool their children. And do you think that one of the reasons that homeschooling has become so much more prominent in the last two decades is because parents have intuitively had this sense of we need to approach this more holistically, it wasn't happening in the schools. And so from a disrupter standpoint, the parents said, I'm going to figure out a way to create this.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: It's a complicated question because I would say it's perfectly possible to homeschool in a conventional environment, which is you're on Khan Academy all day and you're just rushing through the content, right? So, but in many cases, right, what parents are saying is there's at least some element of I want my kid to have the opportunity to learn and grow and sort of explore their interests outside of it. And there is an effort to kind of allow young people to do more of the driving and the owning of their own learning and to be more expansive than our curriculums in schools have become. So, yes, I mean, I think there is a lot of overlap. It's not a complete, it's not a complete overlap between homeschooling and human-centered liberatory. And this is, I say, as the parent of two teenagers. It is hard for us as parents to one, give up control and to not fear that if our children don't get something that we understand, they're not going to be okay. And so, I think that makes it challenging, even for someone like me who this is my life and I still have to pull myself back at times and go, let them go, let them go. It's okay.

Whitney Johnson: Ulcca, how do you think that the pandemic has accelerated the disruption of education as we know it, in a good way? Well.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: I think the fact that we have not been able to test kids the standardized testing for two years in a row, possibly three, means that a lot of our current accountability systems are not going to work, and it's opening up the question of how do we know whether our schools are serving young people well? And I think in the current social and political climate, there is a lot more conversation about the wide range of things that we want for our young people, their social-emotional health, their identity formation, their sense of belonging. So, I think there's an opportunity for us to get away from some of the, you know, the accountability structures. I think the fact that college admissions has moved away from using standardized testing, in some cases GPA, and is saying, you know what, we need to take a holistic look at who young people are and what they're capable of, right? I think higher ed, unfortunately, has really pushed down into K-12 and anchored it in place because of people's need for their kid to get into the highly selective colleges. And I think teachers, I think educators have always known that they've needed

to know their students and to build relationships. And I think now the rest of the kind of policy world is listening to them right and saying, you need to start with this, you need to spend the time to actually know your young people. And I think that empowers teachers if they are willing and if they are not completely burned out, which I think many of them are right now to kind of shift up how they engage and how they have relationships with young people and with the process of learning. I think more parents and people have insight into just how much our system is not working for their kids. So, to the extent that I think demand is going to drive change, I think there's a lot more awareness now of the extent to which what has been happening hasn't been working for young people for both on the part of parents and young people who I think are much more empowered to speak up.

Whitney Johnson: All right, so in the book, you talk about reform, how to roll that out, you use the change adoption curve, which is based on Roger's work, and our listeners will know you're familiar with the S Curve of learning that we talk about frequently. You do talk about some things that need to happen in order for the reform to take place. And the first thing is, why don't you go ahead? I'll let you give the big reveal. What's the first thing that needs to happen in order for reform to happen?

Ulca Joshi Hansen: The first thing is the conversations like the ones we're having right now, which is how do we really understand what it is we're trying to get to versus the kind of slightly muddled picture that I think we've been operating off of.

Whitney Johnson: The second thing is what I'd love to, and this is where I'd like to really take the rest of our conversation is you talk about engaging with teachers and citizens. This is, as you know, everybody who's listening. You're on the launch point of the curve. You want to be on this curve, you want to do things differently. You're open to change, but you have no idea what that looks like and are not still completely sure that it's possible. And so, what I'd love for us to do is have you talk for a minute to the teacher and or administrator who is listening, who in addition to reading your book because they're going to need to read your book. But as a starting point, what is one thing that a teacher or administrator who is listening can do to start to move this even a little bit?

Ulca Joshi Hansen: So, I want to start there and then at some point I want to just make sure we also back out and get the bigger picture. But you know, for a teacher, I would say, just take this opportunity to give yourself a break and take yourself out of the position of having to be the one who drives learning. So, there are examples of things like Genius Hour, which is an opportunity to say to your kids, what do you want to learn about? And then give them time to do it. And the reality is they're going to flounder because most kids have never been asked what it is they want to do to take that opportunity, to listen, to let them flounder, to keep asking the question. And so, maybe you just take 30 minutes a week in your class to let them devote themselves to their genius hour project and see what happens. You could try something like Socratic seminars, which are an opportunity for your young people in the classroom to be the ones who are driving the discussion, driving the reading, driving the conversation. Again, that's going to require a little bit of a setup and there are a lot of resources. I give some resources in the book for how to do that, but you'll be amazed because whenever I've worked with educators who've tried it, you know one, I had no idea my kids could do that. And two, they are so much more motivated in the other areas that they have to do work once they got a sense of driving their own learning.

Whitney Johnson: That agency. Ok. All right. So, you said we need to back up, so we zoomed in. Why don't we zoom back out before we go to more detail?

Ulca Joshi Hansen: You know the thing I underscore is this is not a three to five-year project. We tend to live in a culture that is about immediate results. And what are the metrics right? This is a 20-year process. And I think it's really important we anchor ourselves in that, and I talk in the book about three types of change. So, I talk about this kind of the big picture this transformational. What are we trying to actually get to at the level of worldview and values? That's going to happen first because otherwise, we don't know where we're trying to go. The second is relational, which is really shifting your relationship with education. So, if you're a student, how are you seeing yourself as the driver of your learning and not just some passive if you're a parent? How are you asking your kid to think about how they're learning every single day in everything they do and not focusing only on schools and tests and grades? If you're an educator, how are you thinking differently about the relationships you're building and about who you're giving power to in your classroom? So, it's about changing how we relate to education.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: And then the third part of the change is structural change, which is for all the people out there who've already been doing this work. And they do have a sense of what assessment has to look like or accountability has to look like, or college admissions has to look like. Those folks need the research and development space to build the new systems and structures that are the only way this is going to become a more dominant part of the system because otherwise, it's just going to remain these little pockets of practice. So, all three of those have been happening at the same time and depending on who you are, where you are in your own journey, you're going to kind of locate yourself in one of those three phases of changes in the first instance. So, there's transformational change, which is just shifting our mindset. There's relational change, which is how do we relate to what education is and what we're trying to do? And the third is structural change. So, what structures, systems, policies do we need to support this very different way of doing education?

Whitney Johnson: Let's talk about for a parent who is listening and, what is one thing that a parent can do? So, understanding that we've got a 20-year time horizon, this is sort of like what's education going to look like for our grandchildren, for example, but what's something that a parent can do right now? You know, you've got children in high school. What would you advise a parent who has children in high school or an elementary school to do?

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: You can ask your kid what they're interested in and what they actually want to be doing. You can focus more and help them focus more on the actual learning, even if sometimes the learning wasn't quote-unquote successful, rather than just what's the final grade or what GPA do you have? The way I think of it is like, am I seeing the child I have? Or am I sort of superimposing the child I wish I had or that I really understand because they were more like me? And to really kind of go going back to the beginning of this, which is, who are you? What's your superpower and how do you help them imagine, kind of who they can become? I think that this is building muscles right that left-right world hemispheric divide, the left-hemispheric way of being so deeply entrenched in our cultures and systems that those are the muscles we all have. And so, we need to build the muscles of a more right-hemispheric way of being, which is about possibility, which is about gratitude, which is about seeing all the things that are there instead of focusing on all the things that aren't. And so, I do try and give some exercises. And one last one, right, as you think about your child's next steps. Just let go for a second about this specific college or maybe even college right away and be open to the possibility that maybe they're going to take a gap year. Maybe they're going to take a couple of years to find themselves. So, all of those are ways you can push yourself, depending on where you are, to kind of go that next step.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, okay. I have a couple of anecdotes to share with you that I think you'll find interesting. So, the first one is a bit more general. I interviewed Mike Rowe on the podcast, Dirty Jobs. That was a really important conversation for me because he talked about people who get dirty on our behalf. He talked about the trades and all of the work that is honest and honorable. And going back to those patterns, those mental models that we have over decades, we said people who do white-collar work or don't work at all are better than people who do honest labor. And so, that was an important paradigm for me, and I recommend anybody who is trying to shift their paradigm even a little bit is to go listen to that podcast because that will help with this conversation. The other one's a bit more personal, and I think this goes to this idea of how do we, as parents stop imposing this left-brain approach on our children. So, our daughter, she just started college, but after high school, she did very well in high school, she got into college. She decided she wanted to take a gap year because she was burned out. Well, she got into a couple, got waitlisted in a couple of very good colleges, and got into also got into the University of Virginia, which is a very good school. She then started at UVA last year, was there for a couple of days, and said, this isn't working for me. I'm going to take another gap year. Now, I have to say that took a lot of courage on her part to have that conversation. For a parent who is very left-brain-oriented, let's go out and accomplish things.

Whitney Johnson: Let's make things happen. But in her doing that, what she did is, she said, I need the space to have education, be about what I want and what it's going to look like for me. And she gave herself that gift, but she also gave us the gift of not, of breaking that open and not making it. What school are you in? And where are you going and what are you doing? She said this is about my education. This is about my learning. This is about my development. This is what I want to do. And so, one of the things I would, I'm going to give everybody completely unsolicited advice right now, but you're listening to your podcast, so maybe you kind of want it. Is allow your children to. If they say they want to take a gap year or say they don't want to go to college, just look inside a little bit. And you started to say this a little bit Ulcca. How much of this is about them and how much of it is about you? Because I know for me a lot of it was about me. Very, very important wake-up call. And if we can stop making it

about us, then to your point, our children will actually be able to tell us, here's what I want to do if we're willing to let it be about them.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: Oh, well, thanks so much for sharing that story, right? It's such a powerful example. And by the way, well done because you raised her. Right, I mean, you could have raised the child but didn't have the capacity to do that. So, well done.

Whitney Johnson: Patting myself on the back right now.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: You should brag about that. But you know, I think that I think we are hearing about indigenous communities, which is indigenous communities, are coming out and saying, you know what? One of the things that we believe is that our children aren't ours. They are ours to sort of hold for a while until they become who they are meant to be. And I think that's just a very different conception of parenting and all that. It's there's a diagram in the book, even what you just said about the crafts and trades versus white-collar jobs. If you overlay the left-right hemispheric framework on top of that, you can see the conversation about, are you supposed to control your children and shape them or mold them? Or are you about letting them unfold into who they become? Those are all sort of like they trickle down from a set of values that are about who? Who are we? What do we value? What's the purpose of the work that we are doing? Is it to shape it and mold it and build it? Or is it to let it emerge in a more holistic ecological way?

Whitney Johnson: Our child is not an object on a conveyor belt. So, something that you said that I really loved as we start to wrap up is that all our descriptions, just as all our designs are influenced by our worldview, vocabulary, and values. So, any other thoughts that you have, suggestions you have for people who are listening right now, and more broadly, I'd say, even sort of zooming out further away from even education, but from a worldview perspective who are saying, I want to have a less mechanistic, less left-brain or, you know, have it in context, more right brain, more holistic perspective. Any final thoughts or advice or practical tips you would give people?

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: So, I'll tell you something about the design of the book. The book is in three parts, and we really tried to structure it. So, the first part was the right hemispheric experience. The middle was a more left hemispheric, and we went back to the right hemispheric. And in each of the chapters, we tried really hard to take this idea of wholeness, connectedness, and embodiment and sort of weave those through. So, at the end of every chapter, right, I give questions and things to do to try this out, to build those muscles.

Whitney Johnson: And there are great questions by the way. Everybody, they're great questions, by the way. Ok.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: But the effort was, you know, it was kind of weird to me that I'm sitting and writing a book when I'm talking about doing things in the world, but that's just the way the world is. But I was like, how can we make this experience as much of what I think we want people to become as we can? But so, first, I find the analogy of muscle-building really helpful. Because it's really easy to be harsh on ourselves, which I think is also part of the left hemispheric cultural stew. Right is to never be gentle. So, understand that we're fighting against a whole bunch of things. Take those baby steps, those small things and really reflect on the discomfort that comes up and just experience it, right? Because that's telling you something about whether it's working, whether it's working for you or not, right? Just comfort me and something's not quite working. So, being metacognitive about that, I think, are probably the two best pieces I can give. This is a journey, and I will say that as you do this work, these are the same muscles that I think all of us right now are talking about in our communities. Whether it comes to race and difference and the ability to build community and communities of belonging across lines of difference. These same muscles are the ones that enable us to do that as well. Which to me, is why, you know, education isn't just about, you know, young people, it's about the world. We want to build the fabric of the communities that we want to kind of weave together. And it's these small steps that get us there. I think scaling and efficiency are these very mechanistic ideas. And instead, I think it's the unfolding and it's the spreading and spreading happens when small things are happening and then get connected.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. You remind me of E.F. Schumacher's Small is Beautiful. And one of the things you're saying is a little bit is you're talking about education and this call for reform in education. But at some level, it's a bit

of a Trojan horse. You're using this as a mechanistic, simple piece of the puzzle that will get people to go into the right brain overall and many social issues. What has been useful for you in this conversation?

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: Well, you asked some great questions and asked me to pull things together in a slightly different order and a slightly different way. And I think your constant pushing back to what does this mean? What does this mean for the person who's listening to this? I can be so meta at times, but it's really important to remind myself as well that this is about who we show up as and showing up as individual actions from moment to moment. So, thank you for that.

Whitney Johnson: You're welcome. All right. So, any final thoughts?

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: The one thing I will say is it's been very interesting to hear from people who have kind of gone well, this all feels very liberal, right? And so, progressive people. This will work for progressive people, but not for small-town America or middle America. And I really pushed back on that. So, first, the right and left is not about political stances. In fact, as I look at the world around us, sometimes I think the far left and far right in terms of how they show up and treat other people are actually doing very left-hemispheric things in terms of binary, either-or, right or wrong conversations. And I think half my family lives in Kansas, Nebraska, so very kind of middle America. And we've had conversations for years about how they feel as though they are not valued. They're like, we can change light bulbs, we can build a house, our kids do 4-H and raise animals, they can run the family business, but none of that is valued in school. And so, I think what's really interesting about this human-centered liberatory approach is, because it's meant to look different in different contexts, it really is an opportunity for individual communities to have conversations about what they want, which means I think that it totally crosses the artificial lines that I think we've created and in lots of conversations, including education reform and change.

Whitney Johnson: Dr. Ulcca Joshi Hansen, thank you so much for being with us.

Ulcca Joshi Hansen: Thank you so much, Whitney.

Three key takeaways from my conversation with Dr. Hansen. Number one, what do you want to learn today? When I asked Dr. Hansen what parents and teachers can do right now to change the trajectory of a child's education, she said, just ask them what they want to learn about. It's so simple, yet so powerful. Everyone is excited to learn when it's something they care about. So, now I'm asking you, what do you want to learn? And can you apply it to your career or a jump to a new S Curve? Even if it seems frivolous, don't disconnect your interests from your drive to succeed.

Number two, get reacquainted with your right brain. Dr. Hansen talks about this at the macro level that we are living in a human era that has shifted toward mechanization and pragmatism. These aren't bad things, but if they're at the expense of a holistic mentality, then we're missing something. We can zoom back down to the personal level too. One good starting point that resonated with me is, is there an expectation of your own children that you could let go of? To what extent are there choices about college or lifestyle about me rather than about them? Giving kids or even colleagues room to answer that question freely can be eye-opening.

Number three, what's your 20-year project, Dr. Hansen never claimed that reinventing education and our entire society would be easy. It's a long-term project that will require lasting investment and commitment. The results we want may not be seen for a generation or two, but this work has never been more important. And if we aren't building for the future now, then when? What are you building today that may take months or years to bear fruit?

Maybe it's a career goal. Maybe it's parenting your own kids. Maybe it's the car that you've been tinkering with in the garage with small and simple steps. Great things come to pass.

If you want to do more listening, check out Mike Rowe, Episode 231; Talia Milgrom-Elcott, founder of 100Kin10, Episode 87; and, or James Altucher, who embodies the idea of human centered learning in Episode 212. Thank you again to Dr. Ulcca Joshi Hansen for being our guest. Thank you to you, for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman; audio engineer and editor, Whitney Job; and production assistant, Cassidy Simpson.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.