

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 289: STEVE YOUNG

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. This week, I had the pleasure of talking with Steve Young, the legendary quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. He's a Super Bowl champion and MVP many times over, and he's in the Football Hall of Fame. But as he'll tell you, even just getting out onto the field to play ball and work with the team made him extremely anxious for much of his childhood and early career. He would go days without sleeping before games and threw up right before taking the field. He didn't know why he was so different from his teammates, but facing these struggles head-on allowed him to unlock his full potential on the field, in his businesses, and his family life. I know you'll enjoy the conversation as much as I did.

Whitney Johnson: Steve. Will you share with us a formative experience, something that if people knew what you do today, they would say, Oh, yeah, that makes sense. The dots all connect.

Steve Young: I was going to say that dots don't connect because things that you go through. I always tell a story about because I was shorter as a quarterback and all these tall guys could see over and see the receiver that, that I had to learn how to kind of throw the ball blind and kind of anticipate and see shadows of people and then throw the ball with not much information. And some of my favorite memories are throwing footballs, completed footballs, big passes, big games. When I didn't, I didn't see that Jerry Rice, you know, and so I tell people about that story. And, and in the newspaper the next day, when they talk about the game, no one said Steve Young threw blind. You know, that's amazing. Like so many things that you go through in life, you go through, and not everybody knows it. And so connecting the dots sometimes feels disconnected because when I was a kid, I was during the day, I was amazing. Like, I would go to school and get straight A's and play all the sports and be captain and and did a lot of like just you would think, oh, my gosh, that guy's all put together. And then at night, I was at home and, and if you would have said to me, Hey, come sleep over at my house, or we're going on a weekend trip to the Hamptons or to Cape Cod, do you want to go? Like there was no way ever I was going because I had separation anxiety.

Steve Young: I didn't know it was genetic. My mom's side of the family, and I had it pretty good. In other words, anyone that you know that has that genetic thing, it is pretty strong and real. Like you do not go running around the

country haphazardly. Like it is, you're at home, and that's where your safe spot is. And for me, when you talk about. Kind of a formative experience, really. It's a, it's 33 years of formative experiences until I was actually under very much duress when I was playing for the 49ers had somebody who I finally went to. No one ever said, Oh, that's super weird, or You must have something wrong with you. Is this like, that's Steve. That's how he does it? When I played college football, and I threw up before the game and had, you know, kind of death-defying feelings going on all day on Friday before the games on Saturdays. And all my roommates are like, well, did Steve throw up yet? Because that means he's ready to play, you know? And if he hasn't thrown up yet, we got to, we got to, we got to get going on that. So, I just lived with whatever it was that was making me feel hyper-focused, I'll call it. And so, I guess the one formative experience would be that to lead up to all that was when I'd been playing professional football for a number of years, very successfully, by the way.

Steve Young: But it was equally difficult every week getting ready for the game, all the things that go with it, and the unknown heightened sense of what is, what is, just separation anxiety look like when you're going to go play in front of 80,000 people and 20 million people on TV. It's all that every week. And so, I kind of put up with it over and over, and I got into a really bad spot. And 1991 finally just wasn't sleeping before game, a game. And I, and I was the thing I was always able to do. And so, then it was one night, then it was two nights, and then I called in sick, and like I just the thing was running me over. And I told the people that I family that I was kind of nearby that were dear friends and they kind of knew what was going on. They said, look, you can't go play. You haven't slept in three days. And you've got to, you know, and I, and they knew, everyone knew. Oh, well, this thing has now run its course. It's gotten out of control. And to me I was like, Well, what do you mean, what are you talking about? Like, this is just how I live. So, I promised them. I said, Look, if we win the game, I'll go to the team doctor.

Steve Young: I'll just say, Look, something's not right. But if I lose, I'm not going. You can't go make an excuse, you know, hey, we lost and let me tell you something bad that's happening. So, I went and played and played pretty well, which is another amazing story in itself. And we won against the Atlanta Falcons, and after the game in the locker room underneath the stands at Candlestick, which were kind of a dark, dank thing with stuff dripping down, I don't know what it was. And, you know, just it was below sea level kind of place, you know, and, and then, you know, it was excited and joy after the game. And I was sitting in the equipment room, I mean, the training room with the ice pack on my shoulder with a towel. And I saw the team doctor who was Jim Clint, we called him Reggie. And Reggie had been around for a lot of years and been around a lot of Super Bowls and one of the older guys, you know, kind of experienced guys. And so, he to me, he was not someone to be toyed with like you didn't go, you know, he was a friend. But it wasn't like I was nervous to go talk to him. But I knew I promised everybody that I would, and I took the opportunity, and I actually did it.

Steve Young: And I called, pulled him aside in the corner of the training room. I said, Reggie, you know, I haven't been sleeping. And he asked me some questions about stuff. Then he was like, shocked, like, like you haven't slept? Like, No, I haven't. And I go and I just kind of tell him, I don't know, my whole life I've had this thing. I don't know what it is. I don't know what's going on. And I noticed when we were because we were close to each other, because we were back in the corner, this kind of dark corner, like chatting. And, and I noticed that he was about a foot away from me. And all of the sudden, a big tear ball came out of his eye, and then it just dropped down. And then another and, and I was like, Reggie, are you crying? And then he went on to tell me that Steve, I barely got out of medical school. I've suffered from anxiety my whole life, and I felt like this was. I watched you closely all these years. And I should have known, you know, he was just so upset at himself as a doctor that he knew intuitively that something was up, and he should have been on top of. But when he heard the pain and the agony that, that was going on, it just was really upsetting to him. And for me, I couldn't believe, like I was so nervous and I'm like, How do I do this? And then, all of a sudden, he's crying, telling me about how he suffered through.

Steve Young: You know, for me, I started weeping because I couldn't believe how relieved I was that this wasn't something that was like some crazy thing or like. And the next day I was at a child psychologist going through the questions about childhood separation anxiety and undiagnosed, which is not uncommon, by the way, that kids have that. But if you know a kid like that, he probably is not going to scout camp and not going to, you know, you wouldn't really know that much, much else. But anyway, that's formative for me because getting that, that definition helped for the first time in my life, kind of make sense of all the things that were going on. I always say if you're in the, in the middle of the woods lost and don't know any direction where you're going and a park ranger came by, would you ask the park ranger for directions? Yeah. I would. That's to me when we talk about mental health and

about like questions about anxiety or about insecurity or about every other human being having something that they're dealing with. Like you're in the woods, you're lost. Ask the question. It took me all those years to just ask the question. And I laugh, but that was super formative.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, so you were 33 years old when this happened, Steve?

Steve Young: Well, I just said 1991, so I'd been.

Whitney Johnson: 30, 30. Okay. Everyone who's listening has a sense of what anxiety is, and many people listening deal with anxiety, including myself. But can you define specifically what separation anxiety is?

Steve Young: So, there's something about the genetics that make you feel like anything foreign. Like I remember my dad dropped me off at my, my aunt and uncles when I was living in before we moved to Connecticut and Salt Lake City. They were going to go away for the weekend. And I was, I was eight maybe. No, I was like six or seven. And I remember him picking me up from Metamora Elementary School, and he was going to take me to Uncle Gene's and Aunt Marilyn's for the weekend. And I remember this feeling of my stomach ached, and I thought I was going to throw up, and I just felt like something was like, like a fear response. Like this is this is really bad. This is a bad situation. And I remember what was that ninth year, I don't know, 1969 or so. And on the radio, it was Big Girls Don't Cry. And, and I remember vividly like, oh, what little boys do, man? Let me tell you right now, I'm dying. And I just and he dropped me off, and I remember walking in that house, and it felt it smelled funny, and it looked funny, and it and the people were scary. And Aunt Marilyn looked like she was a monster. And I was like, this is not, and you just, your body is just telling you, get out. Everything about the experience says, don't do this.

Whitney Johnson: You're not safe.

Steve Young: This is dangerous. This is, this is trouble. Where and that's the difference because everyone else around me, my brother and sister, is like, oh, there's a big park behind their house. And they're like, This is going to be so much fun. And she's got cookies and, you know, like everyone else sees it, not dangerous and not fearful. And that's separation anxiety is when you see something new. That's why the separation, like in other words, when you go. So, at home, you couldn't stop me. You would have thought I was the most unbelievable human alive. But you take me, try to send me to college across the country, and that foreign experience, man, it is, it is strong.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. And I'm wondering, I guess, two thoughts. One is what a tender moment that you had with that doctor when he.

Steve Young: It was unbelievable. It just, he passed away about ten years ago and.

Whitney Johnson: Very tender.

Steve Young: At his funeral, they asked me to speak because of our form. Like you think of all the athletes that went through the 49ers and all the famous athletes that went through the of those 20 years that he was there. And, and I was the one that spoke to represent all those people, and they didn't realize why. But I think, as I told them the story of the funeral, it was his vulnerability and his sense of. Guilt. For not being able to like he had to like remember that weeping that he had right away was like, I can't believe I, I, I knew it, I felt it. And I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything because it's such a tough place. NFL locker rooms, NFL teams, like it's just such a tough place that even the doctors, I think, feel like, well, I got to be tough, too. And so, it was yeah, I don't know. It's a heck of a thing.

Whitney Johnson: After you had that conversation with him, what's something that you immediately did differently once you said, Oh, now I know where I am, I'm in the forest, spoken to the park ranger. What changed?

Steve Young: You know, it's funny. Playing football for 80,000 people and trying to be great at it didn't get easier all of the sudden it's like, oh, that, that job is easier. What, what happened is the thing that was really difficult that you're being asked to do. Now, everything around it started to feel like it had definition rather than this kind of feeling, like it was a Wild West. Like it was like, you know, because that coupled with everything else, it was like everything was so hard. It started to define things. And I remember I told my parents and my because I had my relationship with

my parents, especially my dad. As much as we loved each other and, you know, was, was our communication level was not great because he he he had he got fatigued talking to me.

Whitney Johnson: He didn't understand what you were going through.

Steve Young: Like I would, you know, before a game. And I needed to talk to people. I didn't need anyone to tell me anything because nothing was going to change it. I just needed to talk. And he couldn't. He'd get frustrated, like, just, you're playing professional, my dream is to play professional football to you're getting paid to play football. Like, just have fun. And he couldn't. He just got frustrated, and I got frustrated. And so, we just didn't talk as much because it was so frustrating to each other. And so, having that definition allowed for that frustration now to laugh about it and go, Oh my gosh, can you believe it? And then, then in my mom's side of the family, you know, people started to, you know, can we start talking about it? My, my mom's brother, Uncle Bob, said, oh, my gosh, I think I have that. And then his kids, one of his kids was in the Mission Training Center for LDS Mission. And think about that separation anxiety, and you're 19 years old, and you're going to now go to Bolivia. And you're in you're now going to the mission training center. So, go learn Spanish, and you're now going to a place. Can you imagine the foreign like that is the definition of foreign. Right. And that was just, and he had he couldn't go.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And now he understood.

Steve Young: It was so disappointing and frustrating, and like he said, he described being in there and, and just gutting it out. Like just literally, I what I say to people is there has you have no idea the warriors in your midst. Of those that have this, that are gutting it out in doing things that you think are just pretty simple and fun. But to others, it's literally a warrior that you can't like you like, like you're, you're in the middle of some huge conflict. And so, that's what's changed from the moment I found out is having it defined. I named it. And now I could go, Oh, yeah. And I remember Brent Jones was my roommate for the 49ers, for years and years. And he, he walked me through this with neither of us knowing what was going on. He, he literally, he didn't hold my hand, but he figuratively held my hand throughout all those games and all the stuff. And he didn't know. But that's how good of a friend he was. And then we could laugh about it, and he'd go, Oh, there's Bill. And we sort of name it. It's like, Oh, yeah, you know, you know. And that helped a lot because then it wasn't more than what it the challenge was already huge. Now the challenge was more level set.

Whitney Johnson: Once you could name it. It was no longer the dragon in the forest. It was the dragon right in front of you, and you could do something.

Steve Young: Right, and now naming it made it made the, made the tough job in front of you not more tough, I guess. No matter how healthy you are as far as how you deal with new things or like, oh, I don't have that, no separation anxiety with me, but what insecurities do you have? How are you? How were you raised? How do you take in conflict? How do you take in disappointment? How do you those are all mental health issues.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Steve Young: So, when we talk about mental health, please don't say to yourself, oh, that's for someone who's sick, right?

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Steve Young: It's like no. Mental health is really an ongoing conversation with, with in looking for tools to be better and to be better at home, at work, to be better healthy yourself. And if you're thinking, Oh, I'm listening to Steve Young talking about something that I have nothing related to, you're wrong. You might not have this form, but we all have things. So, please be open and vulnerable around healthy living. And ask yourself, because that's what I'm saying. You're in the woods. Ask the question, what would I? I don't think I think I'm the most mentally healthy person that ever lived. But you know what? What if I started to ask myself some, some vulnerable questions? Let's see what happens. I just encourage people who are listening to maybe for the first time you're 80 years old, and you're saying, yeah, maybe I should maybe ask that question.

Whitney Johnson: Steve, I'm really glad that you pressed on that a little bit more because I do you know, as I'm thinking through what you're saying. We, we don't have separation anxiety in our family, but we have real anxiety. And, you know, it's occurring to me that one of the reasons, and you've heard me talk about the S Curve as a way to, to manage through change and manage through growth. And I'm realizing as I'm listening to you, part of the reason why it's been so powerful for me personally is that when I start something new, there's a lot of anxiety. And by being able to say, here's where you are, you're doing this new thing, you're going to feel uncomfortable, awkward, gangly, like an imposter, all those experiences. And now I can normalize it. Like you just said with your experience, it allows me, and I think anybody who's thinking through it is to stay in that place a little bit longer. And not think that there's something wrong with yourself. But just that, Oh, I'm doing this new thing, and it's really hard and be patient and give yourself grace.

Steve Young: Whitney, this is the greatest thing that ever happened to me other than meeting my wife, Barb. And I told my wife Barb yesterday, this again yesterday, just out of nowhere, I was like, You know what? The luckiest thing to ever happen to me was running into you, marrying you. But this is the best thing that ever happened to me. And people would say, Wouldn't you like to go back and not have this beast that you carry around?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Steve Young: And I was like, yes, my life would have been significantly simpler. But now, on the other side of it, living through it, like I always tell people, don't go around it, go through it. And by living through it, just the empowerment that I feel and the growth that I feel and like how much better of a human that I am. I'm like, I don't know if I would have in front of it. I'll trade it away in a second. On the back end of it, I. And I suspect that most everybody, the human experience by going through it, I don't care what it is, by going through it on the other side of it, you'll be you'll say, no, I wouldn't trade that. So, I hold it dear in a weird, like why would anyone hold dear something like that? And that's just where I'm at.

Whitney Johnson: Is there one thing that you can point to, Steve, that you would say if I hadn't had this beast to contend with? I wouldn't be. For example, you've written a book about love. Would you have written this book? I mean, what's something? Okay, so, let's maybe talk about that. How, how did this burden allow you to write a book about love?

Steve Young: When you live in a, a raw place, where deep down, even if you're not in your subconscious, you know, you're vulnerable. As much as empowerment as I have and as much as I think I'm in control. I know deep down there's a big piece of me that's not in control. And that vulnerability. You know, as on the other side when I retired from football. The next day, my life got significantly simpler. Because I didn't have to go perform at this incredibly high level in front of people as a testimony every week of my ability to either be great or not great. There was no hiding. There was. There's a score every week. Every week on the front page of the paper, the environment was such that that's that had its own rigor. And for, for my makeup. People say, Oh, you weren't built for this. Yeah, but if you go through it, it built the way I was. Some crazy things can come out of it, which and crazy good things can come out of it. And that's what happened. I mean, I'm in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. I mean, what the heck? What is that all about? Right. And then on the other side of it, as you start to contemplate other people in vulnerable positions, and then you start to make sense of my wife introduced me to the LGBTQ community.

Steve Young: The community you know through her life, as we got married and, and the vulnerability and the warriorship that I witnessed as I met these brothers and sisters that I. I thought to myself equally that warriorship that I now on the other side of my kind of warriorship I felt akin to what their experience was. It's like I'm not comparing it at all. All I'm saying is, I felt a recognition. Not that I was doing the same thing or that I can even understand it. I can't. What I'm saying is I felt a recognition of the warriorship, and that was a vulnerability. And then I had to start to make sense of my theology. And how? In some ways, it was creating the sense that I'm special, that I'm a special warrior for God, and that I'm apart. I'm set apart from others. And then realizing, no, that can't be right. That can be the end of it. That can't be what we're. My relationship with heaven cannot be a transactional relationship. I'll be really good. And you give me promises of. Of glory like we can't. Because in the end, that's about me.

Steve Young: And what my experience was. It forced me into a place where I could see other people in their warriorship and their challenges. Because I had whatever people could say, Oh, Steve, that's nothing. That's fine. But to me, it was a challenge that it had to be created, some vulnerability. So, I think the, the book, *The Law of Love* is really my journey. To find a profitable place forward theologically that I knew was in there. I knew intuitively that I had sacrificed or challenged myself for heaven, for purpose, that it wasn't. And I think this is the book is a culmination of that. How do I say this? I don't want to be flippant about it, but, you know, people visit. There's a pony, and there's a pony in there somewhere, right? There's this big pile of crap. You know, there's a pony in there. And that's, that's, that's a really crude way to say, I found this the gem that was always there and always has been there. That now can carry the weight of everything that I can see in my, my human experience, and everything I can see from anything else, it can carry the weight of what Christ promised. I can, I can see that. And that's this book in my mind.

Whitney Johnson: If you were to define love, how do you define love?

Steve Young: The one that the book talks about is how God defines love. And there's a scripture. My work and my glory is to bring to pass the immortality eternal life of man. So, if you take that as kind of a mission statement. What's God's mission statement? God's mission statement is to bring glory to every human being. Well, what does God get for doing this work? And, well, nothing. Except the glory that we get, he must receive. Great. That's the, the prize. The love that God gives is selfless. So, in that way, the love that I'm talking about, this heavenly love, is selfless, and that is a state of being. You have to organize yourself in a way to actually see another person and love them without transaction. Without like some sense of credit or some feeling of I'm, look what I'm doing or, wow, I'm a good person. Or no matter what it is, it's, it's a complete divorce from self-interest, and that's it. It's very un. You know, I always talk about the world being entropic like it's we're in a transactional world. That's where we live. Everything we do is we risk and reward like it's all transactional businesses and the ultimate transactional place. Why? How can I live this selfless, godly love in a transactional world? If there's miracles in the world today, the miracles are selfless love in a transactional world. And to me, the results are miraculous because by definition, it's not of this world, it's not of this place that we are. And if we can train our brains to be to live. And I had, as I was describing this to somebody in one of my Sunday school classes, and a woman raised her hand in the back and said, Steve, I think I, I think I felt this thing that you're talking about.

Steve Young: And she described being getting a divorce, and it was an acrimonious divorce. And every time they came together to meet about the divorce, it was just an argument. It was terrible. And she says, and I was coming to this one of these meetings, and I had that feeling like, oh, it's going to be terrible. And everything about it and all that. You can, you know, you can kind of feel that out. She describes, but I walked, and I and I saw him, and for whatever reason, I saw him differently. I didn't. All I can explain is I saw him as I think God would see him. That's how she described it. She goes to see him not just in this moment. And for all the pain that he's inflicted or all the foibles and mistakes, I saw him like from way behind back when we, you know, and way forward, and and like in this unique space. And she said, I started to cry. I had this shard of, of glory come into me. And I saw him in a way that I'd never seen him before. And it didn't change our conflict. It didn't. We still had all this to deal with, all the accountability and all the stuff. But I for a few moments. Just wept over the love that I had for this man. What you described, Steve, I felt. And I wish that I could feel for everyone all the time, but it came and went because it's not of here. But, but you can train in training. We can, we can start to see others.

Whitney Johnson: We can have, we can have glimpses of it. What I think is so lovely, and I've heard you tell the story, and you. I, I plead with you to tell this is that, talking about Bill Walsh, and how he loved in a way that was non-transactional. Can you tell the story about him?

Steve Young: Bill Walsh, first meeting 49ers I've been 1987. They've already won two Super Bowls, Jerry Rice, Joe Montana, Ronnie Lott, you know, Roger Craig. It was all the, all the big wigs and the first meeting and I'm the new guy. And he starts to talk about integration and how I want to integrate this team. And in 1987, of course, you think about integration. You're thinking about black and white guys, like racially. That's how we're going to, we're going to come together. But he said But he went on to describe it, I want to integrate this team in every way possible, not just racially, but we all have differences geography, socioeconomic background, language, religion, where you went to school, what position you play, all the things that form cliques or groups of people and separation. What I want to do is break those down. I don't want separation. I want integration on this team. And I was like, whoa, that is. And

he's talked about I'm going to be in the locker room, I'm going to be in the lunchroom. I'm going to make you force yourself to go speak to someone that you don't know on the team. I am on the planes. I'm going to assign seats where you're going to be with people that you don't know. I'm going to cross-fertilize this team because the more you have shared common experiences with each other, the more love that you share with each other. And I remember him saying love, and I'm like, Oh, it's football, you know? But what he was describing is really revolutionary, amazing.

Steve Young: Because then he said, and you guys are wondering why. I'll tell you why. We're going to be at Lambeau Field in Green Bay. It's going to be 31 degrees and raining, which is you don't know how that's possible. It's going to be raining in 31 degrees and windy, and you've never been colder in your life and wetter. And you're going to be miserable, and you're going to be down by four points with a minute to go. And you go out on the field. And when you get in that huddle, and you look at each other, this feeling that I'm describing, that I'm looking for from all of you, because if we don't do this, you will have. Of the 50 guys in this team, 40, 40 of them, you'll know their name because it's on their, on their back. But you won't know them. You'll have no shared common experience with them. And I want that because, in that huddle, I want you to see each other in a way that's differentiated because that's how we're going to go win that game. So, to him, what he had just described about non-transactional living, like going to see other people and, and love them, respect them. Use the words that you want, shared common experience. We're going to win. Like this was the ultimate transactional game, right? Like there's a score, there's, there's a record 80,000 witnesses. It's the ultimate transactional moment.

Steve Young: You lay the, what I describe the law of love, over the top of it, and you will you'll win. He saw it as a way to go win the game. And I always thought that was an amazing foresight. I still think that it's, it was 50 it might have been 100 years in front of his time, and maybe he's the guy that's never been to be matched. Because Bill Walsh, the way he saw that, because he saw that possibility can articulate it. He could then articulate why he was collecting all of his playbooks and videoed every meeting he ever had. He videotaped every practice. He videotaped himself making speeches. He wrote down everything. He kept all the records, and he put them all in a little physical tool kit, a video-based, audio-based, paper-based box. That he could hand, and he did it, he said it. I'm doing this for my minority coaches because they don't have a fair shake to get head coaching jobs. I want them to be successful. And he'd hand it to his assistant coaches to go get head coaching jobs. And he handed essentially everything that he knew. Knowing, and the last thing I want to say about this, Whitney is that he would yell to them, hey, I'll see you in the championship game. Because he knew with this tool kit, you're going to go be great. And but he knew you were going to come back and compete against him. Who in business?

Whitney Johnson: No. Who does that? Who does that? No one.

Steve Young: Nobody. That's why we should have. To me, we do not appreciate Bill Walsh for his greatness, because the NFL today, 75, I'm going to get a little off track, 75 of the 100 top TV shows last year, dramas, everything on TV. The 75 of the top 100 were NFL football games. I would make the case that Bill Walsh and his influence on offensive football, but also on the spirit and this kind of. How the Patriots saw how, how Robert Kraft saw his partnership with the players was influenced by Bill Walsh and like so much was happening in that time frame that has been passed forward. Bill Walsh is the greatest person to ever be in the NFL because of the impact going forward. How he paid it forward and how it influenced this league that now is a juggernaut. I really do. It stands on the shoulders of this man.

Whitney Johnson: So beautiful. And he, he was arguably one, if not the most important human tutor on the law of love.

Steve Young: As I look back, I mean, as I wrote the book and I started, I said, look, I got to figure out experiences with this law that I knew I'd experienced in business, I knew I'd experienced in football. And, you know, I told it I was with Ronnie Lott on the plane the other night coming back from the Hall of Fame. We got chatting about the book, and, and I go, Ronnie, you're in the book. He goes, I am. I go, He knew that I had told him that before. But, but a story about when, when I joined the 49ers in 1987, I was the interloper. I was the guy that was, you know, these guys were a machine. And here's this who's this person come to irritate? And I got a, I took some abuse, you know, football stuff. And I remember at one point someone I did something bad, and the players laughed and said something rude and. And Ronnie basically came in front of everybody and said, look, you know, my dad when I was

a kid told me that no matter where I went, no matter what happened, I'd have, you know, he'd have my back. And if this team is going to be any good, I want you to know, Steve, that no matter what happens, I don't care what happens. I have your back. And so, him being the leader of the team, you know, someone else could have said that. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But the, the de facto head guy, the one that everyone in the locker room respected and saw as the one as the ultimate leader of this football team. Obviously, Joe Montana, on the offense. But as far as the locker room, like what that personality was like and who Ronnie was. Him doing that. That one statement changed my life with the 49ers.

Whitney Johnson: One more football story and then we'll move on. I remember you telling this, and it was so powerful is you were feeling really discouraged. You're on a plane and you sit next to a guy named Stephen.

Steve Young: This was soon after that, maybe, maybe a month after that. And despite the knowledge that, the new knowledge that I had about the definition. The job and the fact that I still this doesn't just disappear. I had been in a depressive kind of hole for a while. I didn't really realize it, but I was you know. And, and we lost a game against the Raiders. And, and it was in old L.A. Coliseum, when the Raiders played in L.A. And 100,000 people or 96,000 people were in the stadium. And the last play of the game, we were down by a couple of points and we're going to go score and win the game. And Jerry Rice's open in 80, 96,000 people saw Jerry Rice open in the end zone like waving his arms. And I'm running around trying to look for somebody and I never see him. And I got sacked and and lost it. And the game ended. We lost. And like, I just was as low as I could get. So, I decided I was going to run out on a Tuesday to Salt Lake City just to get away. Like I got to I got to regroup. And this is, this is, I'm this is hard. And I got on the plane to come back to San Jose and sat next to Stephen Covey out of nowhere, you know, *Seven Habits*. And I had known of Stephen Covey. I knew some I knew his kids a little bit, but I'd never really had a chance to chat with him. And he asked me, How are you doing? I said, Well, and I spent the next 30 minutes telling him how I was doing and I was explaining how bad football was and how unfair it is because it's too many people.

Steve Young: It's 11 and too many guys and I'm the one that's over invested and no one else is invested and I'm the one that's taken the beating and no one else takes the accountability. And this is not fair, and this is terrible. And I don't know how I'm ever going to get out of this hole. And I'm you know, I'm in a, I'm in a rough patch here. And, and he listened to it listen as, as, you know, he would. And, and at the end, he goes, man, Steve, I just feel the weight of everything that you just said. Oh, wow. I mean, it is. I can I feel it. It's real. But he said, You know what? Don't you mind me asking you a couple of questions? And I said, No, it's fine. He goes, Well, your owner, Eddie DeBartolo, can you tell me about him? And I went look, he's the guy that is building partnerships with players that no one else does play. Owners used to look at us as chattel and still do. He's the one that saw us as family wanted to make an environment that can be successful. Yeah, I'd heard that about him. I really would like to meet him one day. He's really a change maker. You said and your coach, Bill Walsh.

Steve Young: Yeah. He's the guy that I went on about. All the things that you and I just discussed and he's like, Yeah, I kind of wish that I hadn't met him. I want to meet him too, because he seems like a guy that he really would really inform me on a lot of things that I'm working on and really amazing. And I said, and then the last question you ask me is Joe Montana? He's on the team, right? And I go, Yeah, he's hurt. And he sits on the sidelines and he's just sitting there is like, that's the big part of the problem. He said, Yeah, but if you needed mentorship, you needed someone to go talk to and ask questions about what you would do in this situation. Could you do that? And I go, Yeah, I could. He goes, Steve, I got to be honest with you. I travel the world looking for what I call platforms, organizations, corporations, whatever it is that are providing opportunities for the human beings that are involved to be in a situation, to iterate so that they can find out how good they can get. And when I find the qualities of these platforms, I write books about them. And that's what I do. That's my *Seven Habits*. And as you describe your experience with the 49ers today, I got to be honest with you. I don't know that I've ever seen a better platform for another human being to find out how good they can get if that's the goal.

Steve Young: So, I know what you're saying, how you're feeling, but I'm just telling you, this is the most amazing opportunity that I have ever run into. Of all the things that you have at your disposal to go see how good you can get. And then he asked me the question, you know, like Yoda, I remember he was like, Do you want to see how good you can get? Because it's risky. I think it's life's greatest challenge. And the number one thing you should say yes to it. Inevitably, every time, every forever is to find out, because that's the point of life. God's plan is to see you grow and improve. That's the whole point of all the pain and anguish is to see if you'll grow. So, if you're not willing to say

yes, to this challenge, are you willing to see how good you can get? And I said, there's no question that's what I want. There's no question that I want to go find out and I'll take the risks. He says and the great platforms, Steve, allow you to iterate. It's not just one chance and you're out. Like it's a growth pattern, like, go grow. And I said, and I, and I and I remember my, you know, somewhere over Elko or Reno or somewhere there. My whole life turned upside down because he had just taken everything that I was miserable about. He said, I hear it, I hear it. It's real. It's just not profitable. And you're not looking at it, right? And let me show you what how looking at it right will do.

Steve Young: And that changed my professional career forever. And I leave this Whitney, because I just and I only say this to kind of give context. 12 months later, I'm the MVP of the NFL. There's, there's no way to do it other than to see the opportunity rather than the depth of despair. And it's amazing. You can be at the bottom of the hole of a deep, dark hole and not realize that actually, you're in one of the greatest places. That's what happened to me. And I remember being the victim. I was victimized all the way down there. Like it was not like I was in the bottom of a hole, depressed, victimized and yelling to everyone, this is not fair. This world's terrible. This is not. And who knew that at that exact same moment, I actually had the greatest opportunity that I ever would see. I ran to work the next day because Wednesday is the day you get fired in the NFL. And because we just got beat again and my depression and I was miserable, and the players knew it. And it was, I was like, I'm going to lose my job. And I raced down the next day just like, please don't fire me. Please don't fire me. I think I've got a better way to do this. And I started to dig myself out of the hole based on that conversation. The conversation was one of the most important in my life, that's for sure.

Whitney Johnson: So, now today you run a private equity firm, you've got billions of dollars under management. How does the law of love, how does everything that you learn have learned inform how you lead and manage people and work with your portfolio companies?

Steve Young: *The Law of Love* is really about seeing. And I put I always put air quotes around seeing like it's a seeing that's different and it's a selfless seeing. And so, if you think about that as you're kind of North Star, how can I be in a really the ultimate? Again, I went from football, the ultimate transactional world to private equity, the ultimate maybe the ultimate transactional world. How can you be informed by this this interloper called the law of love? And I think what happens is you can to me, it can inform any human relation. No matter what the human relation is, it can be informed by it's a relationship. And in that relationship, the language you use and how you see other people and how you try to define what is a good deal, gets informed by this, by the state of being, by this perspective and getting into that state of being. It changes the conversation around even negotiation, which is obviously transactional. The negotiation, the language of use around the transaction, the what you need to have, what's the have to have is you always know those and what do you need to have? What are the wish you did have? It just changes those values to a more spirit of abundance, like how do I see this person across the table and not a zero-sum game? And just what part of the pie am I going to get? Like, that's a language you can use and has its own result. And that result usually is not definitive.

Steve Young: It it leaves people one one's a winner and one's a loser. And is there a place of abundance where you can come to an agreement and, and really do through your language and your state of being and how you're looking at the world, find this place. And most of it is about the language you used to set up. Because I've been in I've been in negotiations with the toughest negotiator that everything is everything is an argument. Everything has to be won. And the language you use that starts to change the. I've had those experiences at the end of the negotiation with those kinds of people, how grateful they are that they were. They've never been in a negotiation like that. They never thought about it. I don't know that it changed necessarily what was actually transacted, but there was a spirit to it, you know, and, and a relationship that's been born. Like there was a we looked in the huddle. The person across the table is not a competitor. It's we're in the huddle together and we need to see each other. And by seeing each other and shared common experiences, we can find a more profitable way forward. Then in doing that, that that brings people along rather than leaves people behind. And so, you talk about how we manage the firm. The firm is we compensate on excellence. We don't compensate on attribution. Private equity is terrorized by attribution because attribution is self-interested at its core. Right. And all I want to do is get attribution.

Steve Young: I want it, and it's my deal. I did that. I need to gather more of that to myself. And at the end of the fun cycle, I now have all this attribution, and I'll use it as a weapon against all my partners for more. And that's just a cycle of, and I can tell you, the firms that I've been around that are just they're successful make a lot of money. And

that's I'm not saying you can't make money, but people hate each other generationally, hate each other. The kids hate the other kids of those same partners like they hate each other. It's like the Hatfields and McCoys. And, and we try to compensate on excellence. We try to, and by doing that, what you do is you take away this human. We all look for attribution. It's human nature. I'm not going to get attribution out of the system in private equity. It's not going to disappear. But we can, we can modulate it by trying working hard to compensate on excellence so that if you're doing something that's not necessarily attributable to you but is excellent, you still get paid, you still get the credit, you still get a sense of accomplishment. And so, by changing how we look at attribution inside of private equity, I think the next generation's heartwarming to me that they are taking this more than even I am like they love this. They want to be here in our firm because of how we see that.

Whitney Johnson: Could you give one teeny specific example?

Steve Young: You know, we own, we own, we're in partnership. At any one time, 15 to 20 companies.

Steve Young: And all those relationships that go with those management teams, boards of directors and employees, and partners inside the firm. All of that. And you know, attribution in this business is around transaction. In other words, I brought this business to us. I negotiated the terms, I brought it to contract, I negotiated, and now I'm running. Going forward, I am the interface with this business. And so there's all this attribution that comes from that. And what happens in that in private equity is a lot of times there's jobs that need to be done that aren't those forward-facing kind of hero jobs? Some of them are businesses that are struggling. Some of the businesses are not going to be the winners or the big ones in our portfolio. They're going to be the ones that we've got to go dig out and try to figure out a way to, to get them to a place of profitability. And I need someone to go do that work. And at the end of that work, what does that mean? We you know, you try to get your money just to get it back to even or you try to. And that's not a that's hero work. But in the world of private equity, that's not going to, that's not going to get you a big star. And so, in my mind, we need to create an environment where that guy is, is the ultimate or that woman is the ultimate warrior and gets not only tons of credit, but, but the excellence that comes with it like that was to expose how excellent that job. Like, can you imagine the excellence that she or he brought to this thing? And we need to embrace that and give it full measure, and in private equity, that gets lost.

Whitney Johnson: Right?

Steve Young: And that job is usually done by somebody that doesn't I don't want that job. I want to go I want to get the job that I get all the credit for.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. Couple of final questions. So, you have four children, is that right?

Steve Young: I have four, but I wish I had more.

Whitney Johnson: So, the shadow of a successful parent S Curve can loom very large. And so, I'm wondering, how does love play into your making a space for them to grow and develop? How do you make space for them to be their own people?

Steve Young: Whitney, by definition, you are forced not. Look, I always say there's no compulsion in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There's no compulsion. You think about that. That's an amazing statement. And you have to really kind of unpack that really for years. But, but one place I think that there is no choice is in parenting. Kids, children, especially young infants, are completely helpless and have no way to give you that feedback that you're wonderful, you're great. I give you credit. So, by definition, it's a selfless effort and, and it never really stops. So, parenting, by its nature, is one of the greatest. Again, Steve Covey moment. Right. How hard parenting can be is the ultimate opportunity to practice this incredible. And so, the love, the love that you have for your child, and we see it all the time, played out in tragic situations and news. We see the love that we inherent reflexive love that we have for a child is this love that I'm describing. Because by definition, it's selfless. It's like I'm not getting credit for it. And I have such desire incredible desire to see success and fruitful life for my child. That love is, is an amazing gift. And so, to see it that way, that really helps define the challenges. And also, to me, I have to we talked a little bit about religion here. I have to do it. It's like. Our children are not ours they're God's, right? We have them for a season. And so, that in that way that there's no owner like a lot of I think a lot of times you get into trouble when you feel like you.

Whitney Johnson: You own them.

Steve Young: Kids, you own, I own you. And I think that's a bad dynamic for a good relationship. Great relationship. But I think if we can embrace and look, I'm, I'm no, I'm not some expert at this. I'm just telling you; I can describe it if we can embrace. The glory, the miracle of the selfless love that's being demanded. Then I get I think giving it more fruitfully is becomes easier, right? Because you see it as a like this is a gift to me. This is my, this is my, my chance to do something kind of heroic. And in that, and I say the irony of the law of love is that it returns back because of the selflessness, the very thing that you most need. The most the thing that you most need, what you, you might be praying for, only comes when you leave. It's, like I need that. Like, I lose it in something in someone else. That's the, that's the virtuous cycle of the law.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And I love that, that the miracle of what's demanded of us. It's. It's beautiful. Okay. So, at the end of every coaching session I do, I always ask this question, and I'm going to ask this to you as well as in this conversation. What was useful to you? Meaning it might be something you said. It might be something I said, probably not. But it might be something that you thought some, some aha. That you had. So, what was useful for you in this conversation?

Steve Young: I appreciate that, Whitney. What I have, I've told the story about my anxiety more and more in the past years. I never told it before because I didn't really have it in context. I didn't. I imply I wrote a, I wrote a book to, to my kids, essentially, because my kids kept coming home from elementary school and saying, I heard you punched Joe Montana in the face, and he punched you. Like, no, that's not true. So, so much of this, my history is being written by other people. I have to write it myself. And in that writing, this is where this came out. So, in the last few years, I've been able to talk about it more. But you asked me questions that I had never thought of around how that feels like. Okay, that's how that's the anxiety you feel. But how does it feel to how other people relate to that? How does it, how does it mean and feel like people can hear my story and go, Oh, wow, that's difficult or Oh wow, that's interesting or that. But how does it relate back? And I don't I've never done a really good job. You asked me kind of how does it relate back? And for the first maybe better than I have, I tried to explain it in a way that people could take it into their own lives. And I appreciate that.

Whitney Johnson: So good. Any final thoughts?

Steve Young: I obviously don't get out enough because I really love this conversation. And you can tell that I, it's somehow cathartic. And in some ways, I'm paying forward my experience with Bill Walsh, my experience with Ronnie Lott, my experience with Brent Jones, my experience with Stephen Covey. These are all these are not stories to, for credit. These are stories that pay forward. And I appreciate you bringing them out because they don't always, I don't have a script. Like you ask me questions and stuff comes up. But in the name of these great people that are in my life, I have a lot of energy about telling those stories so that people can pay it forward in their own lives. Because I'm sure there's been influential people in their lives as well.

Whitney Johnson: Beautiful. Thank you.

What a fantastic conversation with Steve. Here are my two big takeaways. Number one, recognize your fellow warriors. Steve's perspective on mental health is so refreshing, and he tracks it all the way back to the anxiety of his childhood, something he wasn't able to openly speak about when he could finally put a label on what he was feeling his entire life. It made him hyper-aware that we don't really know what others are going through on a daily basis. Steve says there are countless other warriors in our midst fighting hard to stay on top of their mental well-being. It's not about comparing who struggles are harder, but, as Steve explains, take the time to pay it forward. When we talk about mental health, it's not about identifying people who are sick. It's an ongoing conversation about the tools we need throughout life.

Number two. Selflessness in a transactional world. I really appreciate Steve's take on selflessness, not just as a philosophy but as a goal for its own sake that informs everything he does. Even in the world of private equity, arguably the most transactional space you could imagine. Steve found a way for selflessness to stay core to his business relationships. He says it's about using different language and redefining the parameters of a good deal. Is this deal good for all parties? Is it good for the world? This mindset can change the entire tenor of negotiation by eliminating winners and losers from the equation. Even with tough negotiators starting from a place of love has real benefits. That person across the table isn't your adversary. But to use Steve's football analogy, they're part of the huddle, part of the team that's trying to make something happen.

For more on how a life in pro sports can inform our lives and work, listen to our episode with Danny Ainge, a longtime NBA player, coach, and executive. And also check out the episode with Steve Bullock, who wrote a book about how golfers who break the mold of the game usually end up on top. Thank you again to Steve Young for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening. Thank you to our producer and engineer Matt Silverman, audio editor Whitney Jobe, production assistant Stephanie Brummel and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.