

Virtual Campfire S7 Ep330

Transcript

Kelly Wendorf [00:00:00 - 00:00:09]

Who are we really outside who we've been trained to be, who we've been taught we should be, who we think we need to be for others?

Whitney Johnson [00:00:10 - 00:00:16]

I disrupted my thinking and I started to really think about what's possible and what do I want?

Tony Martignetti [00:00:17 - 00:01:02]

What if the assumptions shaping our lives aren't actually truths? What if they're simply stories we've learned to believe? And what might happen if we are willing to question them. Around every campfire, stories have shaped who we have become. They remind us we're not alone. They challenge the way we think, and sometimes they change the direction of our lives. Welcome to this special series of the Virtual Campfire. I'm Tony Martinetti. Together, we'll explore powerful conversations inspired by the themes of Campfire Lessons for Leaders. uncovering the moments of transformation, courage, and growth that shape who we are and who we become.

Tony Martignetti [00:01:02 - 00:01:53]

The fire is lit. Let's gather where stories spark transformation. There are ideas we choose to believe, and then there are ideas we've believed for so long we don't remember choosing them at all. Ideas about success, about leadership, about who we're supposed to be, About what's possible for our lives. Eventually, those ideas can become invisible boundaries. And sometimes growth begins with something surprisingly simple. A question: is this actually true? In this episode, we're exploring what happens when we're willing to challenge familiar assumptions, step outside the patterns we've inherited, and imagine something different. Because sometimes changing your life doesn't begin by changing what you do, It begins by disrupting the way you think.

Tony Martignetti [00:01:55 - 00:02:28]

Our first guest began questioning the world long before she had language for what she was doing. As a child, Kelly Wendorf traveled with her archaeologist father to Ethiopia. There, an unexpected friendship exposed her to a way of seeing humanity that collided with many of the assumptions she had grown up with. That experience would eventually influence nearly every part of her life. And it began with a connection between 2 people who couldn't even speak the same language. Here's Kelly.

Kelly Wendorf [00:02:29 - 00:03:24]

My father is an archaeologist. He was quite, quite well-renowned. And when I was a small child, we did a lot of traveling around the world. When I was 7, he took us to Ethiopia and we spent several, I would say several weeks there. And it was the 1970s Ethiopia. So, you know, my brother and I, 2 tiny blonde white children in the bush of Ethiopia, was a target politically. And so my father hired an Oromo— Oromo people are the indigenous people of Ethiopia— and he hired an Oromo warrior to take care of us while he was in the field doing his work. this warrior's job was to kind of be alongside my brother and I while, while we were in the desert there to protect us from baboons and to protect us from kidnapping, I guess, although my father didn't make it that explicit.

Kelly Wendorf [00:03:25 - 00:04:38]

So this man became really a friend to me. And even though we did not speak the same language, we were not from the same culture. We were, of course, you know, I'm sure he was easily 20 to 30 years older than me. We shared a silent language together and he, he took good care of me, but there was just something underneath the word, underneath words, underneath everything that was true between the two of us. And as a small child from America to have this kind of companionship, it collided with the way I had been conditioned as a child in America. in things that around what it means to be human and, you know, race and class and all these sorts of things that we take on when we're socialized as children. This man was not any of the things that I had known or understood before. And it kind of broke a spell of what it means to be human because he lived as a free man in so many ways, right? And our connection was so outside of societal norms.

Kelly Wendorf [00:04:38 - 00:05:51]

When it was time for us to leave after these weeks, I was waiting for him to see us off and he was sort of sitting alone in a chair and it was dark because it was early morning. And he, I jumped up on his lap because he was, I could tell he was very sad. But what I didn't notice until, you know, a few moments later was that he was just weeping and weeping and we were holding each other and It was the first time I'd seen a man cry. You know, these are, these kinds of experiences, they sort of break open our hearts and our minds. And that's what happened to me in the embrace of this beautiful man who loved me so completely as his own, as if we belonged together, even though we had, you know, we were just, we were not family. We were, we, we did not know each other in a traditional sense. And I think that that was the seed that— because when I left Ethiopia, I felt different than the other children. I felt like I had seen a goodness in humanity that wasn't available in the protected layers of modern man, right? Modern humanity.

Kelly Wendorf [00:05:52 - 00:07:21]

And it set me on a trajectory from that point forward to be a little bit of an outsider. You know, kind of the weird kid. Much more comfortable in nature, much more comfortable with traditional people where I could find them, much more comfortable with animals and places where that kind of communion is possible. And I wasn't finding it, you know, in school, you know, in college, at work later, that, that there was some incongruence to the

way we were being socialized to be as human beings and this true, deep, heartfelt, free capacity to love and deeply care for one another, right? So I would say that that was a real pivotal flashpoint and it led me to unconventional places to seek my answers. I spent many years in India studying with spiritual teachers. I was, as a mother, I had both my children at home. So I was doing that differently and looking at the science behind raising children and birthing children and really deciding to color outside the lines, not because I was running rogue, but because again, what we're told is the way to be. isn't necessarily that, right? And then I met a really important teacher.

Kelly Wendorf [00:07:21 - 00:08:30]

His name was Uncle Bob Randall. He is the listed custodial elder of Uluru, which is Ayers Rock in Australia. The real name is Uluru. And I was working with him to transcribe some of his teachings. And this meant that we spent many, many days together, many, many hours, weeks and months. over a long stretch of time where he basically downloaded lots of information from their 60,000-year-old culture around right relationship to ourselves and right relationship to the earth and right relationship to each other. And their people are, you know, oral tradition based. So it was really quite an opportunity to record his words, transcribe them, then go back to him and say, okay, so what did you mean when you said this? And how does this connect with this? And really dive deep into, you know, these ancient, ancient teachings, which were very resonant with my first experience with this Ethiopian man when I was 7.

Kelly Wendorf [00:08:30 - 00:09:26]

And this is what informs my work as a coach. It informs I'm a lifelong horsewoman. It informs how I work with my horses and, and inspire them to partner with me and the clients like yourself who came. And it's about deconstructing oppressive mindsets and ideologies and structures that we all live inside because we're modern people who have been socialized. And deconstructing those so that we can find what our authentic way is of living in the world. Who, who are we really outside who we've been trained to be, who we've been taught we should be, who we think we need to be for others? Who is that authentic, amazing, gifted, bright light of a human?

Tony Martignetti [00:09:28 - 00:09:57]

Sometimes disruption begins when something simply doesn't fit the story we've been given. Kelly was only 7 years old, but that experience introduced a question that would follow her throughout her life. What if the way I've been taught to see the world isn't the only way to see it? And once we begin asking that question, it becomes difficult to stop because eventually We have to turn that same curiosity towards ourself.

Kelly Wendorf [00:09:58 - 00:10:44]

It's a challenge every single day. I can absolutely assure you. And, but I mean, in all seriousness, I say that because, you know, when you're in the transformation business as you're in, Tony, so if you and I were, you know, destined to be electricians, we would have gotten lots and lots of teachings and education on electrician things. voltage, light switches,

wires, you know, whatever you have to learn when you're an electrician and you'll keep learning things, right? Well, that's not what we signed up for. We signed up for something else. Well, I mean, if you're in the transformation business, then that means you're going to get a ton of teachings on transformation. And it, when, when would that stop? Like, when do you ever stop transforming?

Tony Martignetti [00:10:44 - 00:10:44]

Never.

Kelly Wendorf [00:10:44 - 00:12:00]

Ever, never. You know, we're verbs. We're not nouns. We're verbs are always I'm coming. And so, so every day is a challenge, but not in that sense of like, oh God, poor me, but oh wow, there's a whole, you know, unconscious incompetence that I didn't realize, and now it's conscious incompetence, and now I get to, right, learn about it. Uh, case in point, for example, like all this stuff that's coming up around becoming an ally and Being an anti-racist and all the things that are emerging that are calling me as a human to learn so much and see so much about myself that I had not seen before, right? Just for example. So there's always a kind of equal part fulfillment, equal part challenge, equal part inspiration and joy that kind of walks with me every day. But to go back to maybe the spirit of your question, Of when it's really been like hard challenging, right? I would have to say it's when I have somehow veered off path and started living my life outside of my integrity.

Kelly Wendorf [00:12:00 - 00:12:58]

When those kind of lessons are not, those are hard lessons to learn, right? That's when suffering and a lot of heaviness because you're in territory you really don't need to be in. And so if I'm aligned with my purpose, my work, my integrity, my values, challenges can come, but I'm building towards something. But if I'm kind of like, okay, so just like, just an example is coming to mind. Like in college, I joined a sorority to please my mom, and it was just like the worst place on earth for me to be. Like, you know me now, right? Like, what am I doing in a sorority? And it was horrible experience for me. And of course, I was a terrible sorority sister and just awful. And being an awful sorority sister, you get a lot of lessons, but those weren't the ones I needed to learn.

Kelly Wendorf [00:12:59 - 00:13:10]

So, I mean, that's a kind of superficial example, but it shows how there's a visceral sense of the difference between good challenge and useless challenge.

Tony Martignetti [00:13:11 - 00:13:35]

We are verbs, not nouns. I love that because the moment we decide who we are permanently, we also begin deciding who we can never become. Disruptive thinking asks us to loosen our grip on those definitions, not because everything we've believed is wrong, but because some of it may simply be too small for who we're becoming.

Kelly Wendorf [00:13:36 - 00:14:59]

This is just my opinion, but you know, as the world gets faster and more technologically driven, the messages of how we're meant to be socialized are coming thick and fast and more and more, way more than say if you were born in 1720, right? And so we're told by media and by social media and by all these things that are coming at us about how we should be, who we should be, how we should do it, when we should do it, all these things. And I believe there's so much anxiety in the space because we are not in alignment. We're living into what we think we need to be, and then we feel anxious, and then we take medications for the anxiety. But really often, probably not always, but often, I think that anxiety is telling us something. Hey, this is too tight. This little box you put yourself in, this day that you have to live to get to the other side, to have your glass of wine at 5, it's too tight. And so deconstructing where we started at, deconstructing all these little tiny micro messages that tell us who we need to be so that we can live Freely authentic, as you say. Really important.

Kelly Wendorf [00:14:59 - 00:15:29]

Really important. Like this idea of retirement. Like everybody's like, oh, retirement. Like you're a certain age and then you retire. And then what does that mean? And just that one word. Think of all the like constructs that are around that one word that people suffer around, whether they have enough money for retirement, that they're old because they're retiring. Now they need to go play golf and they can't, you know, like. And they, you know what I mean? Just to use one little word that's like out there that creates so much limitation.

Tony Martignetti [00:15:30 - 00:15:48]

And it's funny how, like, to use the term, like, words create worlds, but funny, that word then just created this, like, poor energy around that, that then people say like, oh my God, I'm not able to do that. And oh my God, what am I doing wrong? Oh my God. The anxiety just starts to kind of like ramp up around that.

Whitney Johnson [00:15:49 - 00:15:50]

Just don't like it.

Kelly Wendorf [00:15:51 - 00:15:53]

So let's take that out of space. No, no, it's—

Tony Martignetti [00:15:53 - 00:16:07]

I'm glad. It's a great thing to think about because it makes you think about how can you make it more empowering for you to be able to say, wow, like, I'm moving towards this next chapter, which I'm so excited about, and I'm ready for whatever comes next.

Kelly Wendorf [00:16:08 - 00:16:43]

Right. And maybe not even have that word in your language if that serves you. You know, I think our bodies are really great barometers for when we're a little off course. I know when I start to feel tight, diminished, anxious, subdued, that somewhere I'm entertaining something that's too small for me. Some belief patterns, some habit patterns, some

something. So rather than drug those things or dull those things, I'd rather be like, oh wow, I could, I would like to listen to it.

Tony Martignetti [00:16:45 - 00:17:23]

Kelly's story asks us to question the beliefs we've inherited, who we're supposed to be, what success is supposed to look like, even the identities we've created for ourselves. But questioning an old way of thinking is only the beginning. Eventually, another question appears. If I don't have to remain who I've always been, who could I become? Our next guest has spent much of her career exploring exactly that question. And what's fascinating is that before Whitney Johnson became one of the world's leading thinkers on personal disruption, she had to disrupt herself.

Whitney Johnson [00:17:25 - 00:18:05]

When I was about to graduate from college, I wanted to be a flight attendant, and I was so excited. And I went to American Airlines and I interviewed for the job, and it was so cool. 'Cause they flew you in first class, right? I'm, you know, 20-something years old and it just felt so— and this is in the '80s where being a flight attendant was still super glamorous. It's not quite as glamorous today as it was back then. And they didn't hire me. I didn't even get a second interview and I was so disappointed. But in retrospect, I'm so grateful that I didn't get that job because I wouldn't have enjoyed it. I liked the idea of traveling, but I wouldn't have enjoyed it.

Whitney Johnson [00:18:05 - 00:18:48]

So that's a flashpoint for me in the sense that it's kind of a short little interlude before I go to the next story, in the sense that there are sometimes things in the moment that we desperately want. And the reality is, is I was qualified to do that job, but I didn't get it. And for whatever reason, I didn't get it. And how grateful I am that I did not get it. It was the thing that, you know, sometimes there are things that we really want And it's really good that we don't get them because it's not what will allow us to be happiest and make our greatest contribution in life. So that's a quick little interlude. So how did I get into this? So I had now graduated from college. My, I had gotten married because I got married in college.

Whitney Johnson [00:18:48 - 00:19:35]

I know lots of people don't do that, but I did. And my husband and I had moved to New York and he was getting his PhD at Columbia and in microbiology. We needed to put food on the table and I was the person, I was the designated food breadwinner. So I start working and I didn't have, remember I'm a music major. I didn't really have any qualifications to speak of other than I'd done well in school. I was a female, we're in New York, it's Wall Street. And so my first job was as a secretary. And so I did this, but I think the next big flashpoint for me was, is that I was going to work every day and My mother had always worked and my mother was actually very ambitious.

Whitney Johnson [00:19:35 - 00:20:11]

She's basically a contemporary of RBG. And so I'm very grateful for RBG because I, I can see RBG through my mother's eyes and realize what RBG did for women. And she made my life possible and our daughter's lives possible. But my mother was always very ambitious. So as soon as I started working and now I had the anchor of being married, so I didn't have to worry about, am I going to get married? Is someone going to want to marry me? Am I desirable? All those things that happen, or at least happened for me. And so I felt secure enough to go after the brass ring. So here I am going to work every day. I'm feeling secure at home.

Whitney Johnson [00:20:11 - 00:20:45]

I need to work because we need money. My mother always worked. I'm going to work and listening to people in these, you know, bullpens saying, throw down your pom-poms and get in the game. And I was a cheerleader in high school and kind of offended by that. Not really, but sort of. And all of that just kicked in and I thought, If I'm going to work, why would I make X when I can make 10X? And just something flipped for me and I was like, I'm going for this. And it was against a lot of odds, but I just started taking classes at night. And then I had a boss who believed in me and promoted me from being a secretary to a banker.

Whitney Johnson [00:20:45 - 00:21:18]

And so that was a really important flashpoint for me because I started to, I disrupted my thinking and I started to really think about what's possible and what do I want? And I allowed, I think for the first time, for my ambition and what I wanted to accomplish to not be hidden behind being a cheerleader or popular or a flight attendant. It was like, no, I want this. I want to work on Wall Street. I want to do this thing. So that was a really important turning point for me.

Tony Martignetti [00:21:20 - 00:21:47]

Nothing about Whitney's circumstances suddenly changed, She was still a music major, still starting at the bottom, still facing these same obstacles. What changed was the story she was telling herself about what those circumstances meant. And sometimes that's where disruption begins, not by changing the world around us, but by changing what we've decided is possible within it.

Whitney Johnson [00:21:48 - 00:22:21]

So here I am working on Wall Street. I've worked very hard to be successful. I was a— after being in banking, then I was an equity analyst. So I would pick— basically, I worked at Merrill Lynch and I was responsible to say this stock's a buy, this stock's a sell, and was good at building financial models and picking stocks. And it felt very powerful and very rewarding, and I, I really liked it. And I was good at spotting momentum. And then I ended up co-founding the Disruptive Innovation Fund with Clayton Christensen, who some people will know. He wrote a book called The Innovator's Dilemma.

Whitney Johnson [00:22:21 - 00:23:23]

If you've heard of disruptive innovation, that's basically his term. So I ended up co-founding an investment firm with him and his son, and we were investing in both publicly traded securities and privately held or venture, you know, doing venture investing. But one of the things that I had discovered while I was still working on Wall Street in New York, not now in Boston, is that I was realizing that I was more interested in people and the momentum of people than I was in the momentum of stocks. So there was starting to be this pattern of, you know, I'm working on Wall Street and I'm not thinking about what stock's going to go up. I'm thinking of people like stocks. Well, how do I help this person build momentum? This is when American Idol was really popular and Tom Peters came out with Brand Called You. So, I'm now having this experience of like people, momentum, stocks. Then when I read Innovator's Dilemma and I'm thinking about disruption, I start thinking, oh, well, you can apply this to people too.

Whitney Johnson [00:23:23 - 00:24:07]

Like people can disrupt themselves. So, now I'm applying disruption to people and then I'm taking the S-curve and I'm thinking about not, you know, how do groups change and how do innovations get adopted, but how do people change? How do people grow? And so, for me, I kept taking these ideas that were theories and thinking the way to operationalize these are for people and apply them to us as individuals. So here I am, I'm working with Clayton. It's, you know, 2010, 2011. I've now written an article in Harvard Business Review on Disrupt Yourself. And Clayton keeps saying to me, Whitney, I really think you should go do this other thing. And I kept saying, no, no, I want to be here. I want to invest.

Whitney Johnson [00:24:07 - 00:24:28]

And We finally were just like, no, you need to go do this. But it was hard to do it. It was really hard to do it. And I think because my ego was wrapped up in still doing this thing, and yet this was my gift. This was my calling. This is what I was supposed to be doing. But it was hard to do that. It was hard to walk away from that.

Whitney Johnson [00:24:28 - 00:24:58]

It was hard to make that decision to do that. And so I think that's the other flashpoint. And we're definitely sensing a theme here is that. Sometimes the things that we are called to do in the biblical words, we're a bit like Jonah and we run away from them. And we need to just be aware of the truth tellers around us, be aware of the people who are telling us, no, no, that's your gift. You need to use that gift. You're a cheerleader at heart. You care about the momentum of people.

Whitney Johnson [00:24:58 - 00:25:14]

Now figure out what that's going to look like. Figure out how you're going to do that. Figure out how. You are going to do that. And so I think that for me was that next flashpoint of recognizing that I didn't really wanna do stocks. I wanted to talk about people and how people grow.

Tony Martignetti [00:25:15 - 00:25:42]

Sometimes the hardest thing to disrupt isn't failure, it's success. Because once something works, once we've built an identity around it, once other people recognize us for it, Walking away can feel irrational, but growth doesn't always ask us to abandon what's broken. Sometimes it asks us to release something that's working because something else is calling us forward.

Whitney Johnson [00:25:43 - 00:26:35]

So my prior 2 books, there was Disrupt Yourself. So that was applying the theory of disruption to people. And then there was Build an A-Team where I was looking at it from a team perspective. But in both of those books, so this basically Smart Growth is the 3rd in the series, although, I mean, it's, you can read this without reading those books, but there was this This idea of this S-curve of learning was always in the background, like kind of running this script, but it was never the lead actor in the play. But as I would talk to people about this work, I remember actually one conversation I had gone on Dan Pink's Pinkcast and he does these short little videos and he said, well, you know, what do you want to talk about? And I said, what about this? What about this? But he finally said, you know, the S-curve, that's it. Let's talk about that. And I kept on having people say to me, oh yeah, I want to talk about the S-curve. I've been telling all these people about the S-curve.

Whitney Johnson [00:26:35 - 00:27:05]

And I realized that disruption, while very valuable, it's the mechanism. It's the thing by which we make growth happen. I start the book by saying growth is our default setting. And I think that, that I have always, always, always wanted to grow. I've always wanted to make progress. It's just this hunger that I have, and I actually believe that everybody does. We all want to make progress. We all want to learn.

Whitney Johnson [00:27:05 - 00:28:16]

And if I, I think about that, you know, the story of the music, the story of, of being on Wall Street, the story of, you know, disrupting myself and moving on from investing to thought leadership and building this, you know, Disruption Advisors— all of those moments were all about wanting to make progress, to grow. And so I think that one of the things that I'm continually thinking about, and my husband said this to me the other day, he said, you know, Whitney, you have a superpower of wanting to grow and you have a superpower of you have this incredible work ethic. And he said, just remember that that might not be everybody else's superpower. So it's important to be patient with people. And that's the other thing that I know I'm digressing, but hey everybody, if there's something that, you know, people tell you yours is your superpower, well, If you find yourself being impatient with people, that is probably a pretty good indication that you have a superpower. So you have to figure out how to be patient, but then also recognize that you have a superpower. So I think that's the one thing is that this idea of growth. And then the second thing I would say

is that we don't— one of the chapters is ecosystem and this idea that you and I need people around us that help us grow.

Whitney Johnson [00:28:16 - 00:29:36]

We all have keystone species, the people without whom we couldn't grow. I mean, it's been really interesting interviewing people because so often they've been teachers and bosses that make growth possible. But I think the other thing that I'm thinking more and more about as I grow and as I mature is this idea that I am a keystone species for people around me, for my children, for my husband, for every single person that I work with, for every single person that I come in contact with. And so how do I make sure that as I am drawing resources from people around me, whether it's time or money or energy or attention, that whatever they are giving to me, there's an ROI in the sense of I am giving back into the ecosystem, that I am a keystone species within the ecosystem of people around me. And so those are 2 things, because if you look at that story of being a child, of learning to play the piano, of my, you know, start on Wall Street, of Clay, there were all people there that we're encouraging and saying, you need to go do this. But I'm also very well aware that there are people around me that I can either encourage them or discourage them. I think the older we get, the more aware we become of how much influence we do have on other people. And it is a sobering responsibility.

Whitney Johnson [00:29:36 - 00:29:53]

I remember this one quote from Clay, and then I'll stop. He said, management is the noblest of professions. And it's true. It's true. When we manage people, it is a responsibility. And so what are we doing to make sure that we are blessing the lives of the people that work with us?

Tony Martignetti [00:29:54 - 00:30:33]

Kelly Wendorf reminds us that some of the beliefs shaping our lives were handed to us long before we ever thought to question them. Whitney Johnson reminds us that even after we found success, growth may ask us to question ourselves again. And maybe that's the real invitation behind disruptive thinking. It isn't about rejecting everything we know. It's about staying curious enough to ask whether what we know still serves who we're becoming. Because our patterns can become comfortable. Our identities can become comfortable. Even our success can become comfortable.

Tony Martignetti [00:30:34 - 00:31:25]

But growth rarely asks us to stay exactly where we are. Sometimes it begins with a question, sometimes with discomfort, sometimes with a quiet realization that the life we've built has become too small. And in those moments, perhaps disruption isn't something to fear. Perhaps it's something to listen to. Because before we can become something new, we may first have to question what we've always believed.

Tony Martignetti [00:31:26 - 00:32:27]

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to Kelly Wendorf and Whitney Johnson for sharing their stories and wisdom, and for challenging us to question the assumptions that can quietly shape how we see ourselves and the world around us. And to all you listening, thank you for joining us around the virtual campfire. It's been a privilege to have you with us.

If you'd like to learn more about today's guests, connect with their work or explore their books and resources. You'll find links for each of them in the show notes. As you reflect on today's conversation, I'd like to leave you with one question: what belief about who you are, or who you're supposed to be, might be ready to be questioned? Before you go, make sure to subscribe to the Virtual Campfire Podcast. If this episode encouraged you to think differently, I'd love to hear from you. Please leave a review, share it with someone who could benefit from today's conversation, and continue the journey with us. If you'd like to learn more or take the next step in your own leadership journey, visit tonymspeaks.com. This special series inspired by the themes of Campfire Lessons for Leaders is proudly produced by It All Works. Until next time, keep leading.

Keep growing, keep questioning, and remember, sometimes the first thing we need to disrupt is certainty.