

Virtual Campfire S7 Ep329

Michael O'Brien [00:00:01 - 00:00:20]

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Todd Churchis [00:00:21 - 00:00:37]

People always talk in HR about having a career path, but it is not a path. A path makes it sound like it's some laid out for you, stroll in the park, right? I say it's not a career path. It's usually, for most people, a career roller coaster with ups and downs, twists and turns, exhilarating highs and terrifying plummets.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:00:37 - 00:00:46]

Does your work actually connect to that calling, right? Are you connected? Does what's on your email and your to-do list and your calendar actually matter? Does it get you closer to your calling?

Tony Martignetti [00:00:50 - 00:01:23]

Around every campfire, stories have shaped who we've 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. The fire is lit.

Tony Martignetti [00:01:24 - 00:02:01]

Let's gather where stories spark transformation. None of us plans for the moments that change our lives. Not every one of us will face them. But the question isn't whether setbacks will come. The question is who we become because of them. Our first guest understands how quickly life can change. In a single instant, everything he thought he knew about the future disappeared. What followed wasn't simply a story of recovery.

Tony Martignetti [00:02:02 - 00:02:10]

It became a story about perspective, about choosing how to respond when life refuses to go according to plan. Here's Michael O'Brien.

Michael O'Brien [00:02:12 - 00:02:28]

Things would've looked really, really good, Tony. Like, yeah. Great gig, marketing director, making more money than I ever thought I'd make coming outta college. Sort of bettered my parents, if you will. I could stay in hotels, not motels. Yeah. I could provide for my kids. It looked good.

Michael O'Brien [00:02:29 - 00:02:38]

2 amazing daughters, healthy and smart and beautiful and great marriage. But I was so stressed inside.

Michael O'Brien [00:02:39 - 00:02:56]

I was just chasing happiness. I was on the hamster wheel. I was grinding it out. I didn't know how to run my finances coming outta college, but I didn't know how to process my stress. So I just packed it inside. Avid cyclist still, I was trying to get back into racing after the birth of our second daughter.

Michael O'Brien [00:02:56 - 00:03:13]

And I brought the bike out for the meeting thinking I'd get some training in cuz a race was coming up. And that morning on July 11th, 2001, a Ford Explorer crossed the center line of the road and hit me head on going about 40 miles an hour. I was going about 20-ish. So then it's everything you learned in high school physics.

Michael O'Brien [00:03:14 - 00:03:38]

When something's going 20 and something's going 40, it makes for a powerful energetic collision. And I remember everything about that morning. Yeah. The sound of me hitting his grill, the sound of me going into the windshield. I still can remember vividly the sound of the screech of his brakes. And I knocked, got knocked unconscious, as you would imagine. Regained consciousness. When I did, I asked the question that only another cyclist can really appreciate.

Michael O'Brien [00:03:38 - 00:03:45]

I asked them, hey, how's my bike? You know, I was in the worst pain, worst pain of my life. And I was like, I'm cracking a joke.

Michael O'Brien [00:03:45 - 00:04:21]

Because that was how I dealt with like hard moments. I would try to use humor to like defuse it because I was not comfortable with some tough moments. And they were like, your bike's fine. Total lie, by the way. The bike is totally destroyed. They were like, just try to

focus on you and breathe. And I knew, I knew by their reaction that my life was sort of in, in question, actually not sort of, was in question. And when they put me on the medevac, which I tried to convince them that wasn't wise to do because I was scared of flying back then, I was like, I don't want to go on the helicopter.

Michael O'Brien [00:04:21 - 00:04:31]

I've never been on a helicopter. Like, sir, like Mr. O'Brien, we need to get you on the helicopter. We're too far away from the hospital. We had to fly to Albuquerque, 19-minute flight.

Michael O'Brien [00:04:32 - 00:05:03]

It would've been like a 45, 55-minute drive, far too long. They were wise because I broke a whole bunch of everything that day, Tony. But what was really life and death was the left femur shattered. And when it did, it lacerated the femoral artery of my left leg. So I was, in essence, I was sort of bleeding out in the middle of New Mexico and got on that helicopter. And when I got on the helicopter, I made a bargain with myself that, hey Michael, if you live, you're gonna stop chasing happiness. It was one of those bargains you make when you've, feel like your end's near. Like, I had no idea how to do it.

Michael O'Brien [00:05:03 - 00:05:31]

I'm like, all right, sounds good. Well, let's do this thing. You're going to stop chasing happiness and be present and all that jazz. But I had no clue how to do it. And they flew me to Albuquerque and first surgery lasted about 10, 12 hours depending on when you hit go. And he had 34 units of blood product for that first day. And then I spent the next 4 days and change in the ICU. The doctors told my wife, hey, your husband's been in a very bad accident.

Michael O'Brien [00:05:32 - 00:05:56]

We did the best we could. The next 72 hours are going to be critical. We're really not sure how he survived. If he was 10 years older or not in shape, he would've died before he got to the hospital. And she was like, what? And then all of a sudden our world— that was a flashpoint for all of us. Our world got turned upside down. And then what do you do then? We had a 3-and-a-half-year-old daughter, 7-month-old daughter. And now your husband's fighting for his life in Albuquerque.

Tony Martignetti [00:05:58 - 00:06:18]

There are moments in life that divide everything into 2 chapters, before and after. For Michael, the accident changed more than his physical life. It changed the questions he began asking himself. Not how quickly can I get back to where I was, but who do I want to become now?

Michael O'Brien [00:06:20 - 00:06:34]

And a lot of folks will ask me like, well, do you need to go through something like you went through, Michael, to wake up? And I'm like, no, no, no, no. I'm like, no, you don't. I'm like, what I'm trying to share with people is that you don't need that moment. You can avoid your SUV, if you will.

Tony Martignetti [00:06:34 - 00:06:34]

Yeah.

Michael O'Brien [00:06:34 - 00:07:05]

But you have to live life with awareness. And I wasn't living life with much awareness. I was just like, woke up, got on the hamster wheel and grind it out. And you, you miss your moment. So I completely believe Although I don't have the data points specifically, but I completely believe this, that I had plenty of moments that led up to my accident where the universe, God, or Mother Nature said, hey, hey, hey, hey, Michael, Michael. Yeah, not good. Yeah, not good. Here's a choice.

Michael O'Brien [00:07:05 - 00:07:31]

And I was like, yeah, yeah, yeah. God, universe, Mother Nature, too busy. I gotta grind it. I gotta do more to be more. I don't have time for you. And I blew past it until they were like, had a conference call, maybe on Zoom, and said, hey, this character O'Brien down there, he ain't getting it. Maybe we want to give him something he can get. And so they sent me that SUV and it forced me to pause.

Michael O'Brien [00:07:32 - 00:07:39]

There was no way around it. But I totally believe I missed plenty of smaller moments.

Michael O'Brien [00:07:40 - 00:08:02]

where if I had awareness, I could have made subtle shifts before and avoided the whole accident. And then I'll also say, I'm grateful that I missed those because the accident has shaped me into the person I am today and has given me a little bit of a different platform to spread this message.

Michael O'Brien [00:08:03 - 00:08:18]

To help others that had it not been for my accident, I might not have this opportunity to connect with you today, Tony, and your listeners, or with anyone else. Yeah. And share this important message about how we're living our lives.

Tony Martignetti [00:08:19 - 00:08:42]

One of the things I appreciate most about Michael's story is that he reminds us we don't need a life-altering event to begin paying attention. Every day offers us small moments, small choices, Small opportunities to pause. The challenge isn't waiting for life to wake us up. It's learning to notice what life has already been trying to teach us.

Michael O'Brien [00:08:44 - 00:09:05]

I'm going to quit my corporate job. It's corporate America. That's the evil. I'm going to work for a nonprofit. I was like, well, that doesn't seem right either. And so I went through like all these different options of what do you do? Okay. Again, we didn't have Google to answer this question for you. What do you Google? What do you do after you almost die? We didn't have that.

Michael O'Brien [00:09:06 - 00:09:38]

And so I thought about all that and, you know, I was like, you know what, the work I do, because I, the field I was in was Alzheimer's disease, was meaningful work. I thought I was making a difference. So I made a determination. I'm going to go back to my job, but I'm going to go back to my job on my own terms with a new script. A new way of showing up, a new way of handling my stress, a new way of not letting a bad moment turn into a bad day. Mm-hmm. Another way of like connecting with others. I was gonna rewrite my story.

Tony Martignetti [00:09:40 - 00:10:18]

Michael's story reminds us that a setback can arrive without warning. One unexpected moment can change everything, but once the dust settles, another challenge begins. How we choose to see what happened. Because our perspective often determines whether a setback becomes a stopping point or a turning point. Our next guest has spent much of his career helping leaders change the way they see themselves, others, and the challenges in front of them. Ironically, many of those lessons came through his own unexpected setbacks. Here's Todd Churchis.

Todd Churchis [00:10:19 - 00:10:43]

People always talk in HR about having a career path, but it is not a path. A path makes it sound like it's some laid out for you stroll in the park, right? I say it's not a career path. It's usually, for most people, a career roller coaster with ups and downs, twists and turns, exhilarating highs and terrifying plummets, right? So that's how I describe my career. So when I trace back how I got to where I am, it's kind of interesting to me because I never would have predicted where I ended up.

Tony Martignetti [00:10:43 - 00:10:44]

It's powerful.

Michael O'Brien [00:10:44 - 00:10:44]

It really is.

Tony Martignetti [00:10:45 - 00:10:57]

And it is interesting because it's like what you just described is how most people feel when they do that reflection back and they say, yeah, it wasn't like that easy path into my life.

Todd Churchis [00:10:57 - 00:11:24]

Yeah, my students think like this whole thing was just laid out, like I was on this journey of just where I'm just taking one step after another. But I've had many setbacks. I've been laid

off more times than I could count. I was fired a couple of times and things, jobs that I took that I thought I would love, I hated and jobs that I thought, including the last one before I formed my company, I was really hesitant about taking and it changed my life and it was one of the best jobs I've ever had. So you literally never know.

Tony Martignetti [00:11:26 - 00:11:48]

It's easy to look back at someone else's career and imagine it unfolding exactly as they planned. Todd reminds us that most meaningful journeys don't look like straight lines. They twist, they turn, sometimes they force us to begin again. And often those unexpected turns become the experiences that prepare us for what comes next.

Todd Churchis [00:11:49 - 00:12:18]

First job out of college was at Ogilvy& Mather Advertising. In New York, the only jobs— I wanted to work in TV and I thought advertising was a step in that direction, which it was. And it was a good experience with a great company, but it was as a media buyer. And that was a very numbers job. That was the farthest thing from a numbers person. I would've liked an account exec role or something, more creative. So I was calculating ratings and shares and dollars, and I did that for a year. I always make my students guess.

Todd Churchis [00:12:18 - 00:12:25]

Can you guess what would you guess in 1985? Not to age myself, but what would you guess my starting salary was? My first job out of college with a master's degree?

Tony Martignetti [00:12:26 - 00:12:30]

Oh my gosh. I would say it's like, it was probably \$40,000 or \$50,000.

Todd Churchis [00:12:30 - 00:12:43]

\$12,000 was the starting salary in 1985, and the average was \$15,000. In those days. So how do you live in New York or anywhere on \$12,000 a year, which is \$1,000 a month before taxes?

Tony Martignetti [00:12:43 - 00:12:45]

You can't even buy water for that much money.

Todd Churchis [00:12:46 - 00:13:06]

Yeah. So it's interesting is all these years later, it's like, it's right. Your reaction was like, wait, what? Are you kidding? It's like \$12,000 a year. But that was considered a decent entry-level starting salary in those days. And with overtime, I got it up to \$15,000, but I was commuting 2 hours each way from my parents' house. And I said, I just, I can't do this for the rest of my life. I don't know. I was kind of stuck.

Todd Churchis [00:13:07 - 00:13:39]

And again, I wanted to do something creative. And as an introvert, I wasn't the type to raise my hand or speak up and speak out. So I just kind of like did my job and hoped to be, you know, I applied for a few internal jobs, but they're like, oh, you're a media guy. What do you know about creative? It's like, I've been doing this for 6 months. But people label you, right? You're this. And that happened a few times in my career where I got labeled as you're just a this. What do you know about doing this? So after a year, I actually took— you got one week vacation that you earned after being there for a year. So literally no vacation for the first year, which is crazy also in this day and age.

Todd Churchis [00:13:40 - 00:14:13]

So I went out to visit my college roommate who had moved to LA, and I saw that Hollywood sign and I'm like, I am hooked. So I did the single hardest thing I'd ever done in my life at that time because I was not a risk-taking person, leaving my dog and my parents in New York and packing up my bags and, and my cape, my Superman, Batman, I packed my cape. There you go. And I flew out to LA with no money, no contacts, and I moved in with my college roommate. We got an apartment together and there I was in Hollywood saying, all right, now what? So what are your thoughts there? Like what's going through your— I'm just curious as you're hearing up to, that's like one phase of my, the first phase of my career.

Tony Martignetti [00:14:14 - 00:14:34]

Yeah. I mean, it's here you are being Clark Kent up to this point and it's been like that, you know, the person who's hiding behind just outside of the what you want and cowering behind the real who you are. And I think so many people do. And fitting into that box so well, but knowing there's so much more in life that you could have.

Todd Churchis [00:14:35 - 00:15:03]

So there I was in LA, no job. So I took some part-time jobs, temp jobs, anything I could get to make some money. And speaking of Clark Kent, I got a night job as a bouncer in a nightclub. So I'm 6'4, but stick figure thin, or I was back then. I put on a little weight since then. So I was not the bouncer type, but you put a suit on someone, give them a clipboard and a velvet rope, and all of a sudden, You know, you become the role. So it was, again, as an introvert, so out of my comfort zone. So that was the irony.

Todd Churchis [00:15:03 - 00:15:36]

There was a club in Burbank that I used to go to all the time and just hang out there, but I was too shy to talk to anyone, any of the girls, or so I would just hang out and leave. When I applied there for— I actually applied there for a waiter job. They said, we don't need any waiters, but we need a door host/bouncer. And I'm like, all right, I need a job. What's interesting is as soon as I took on that role, I took on the persona of that role and I started feeling more confident. And I was talking to girls and I ended up meeting someone that I dated for 3 years who I met by checking her ID at the door. So you just, again, never know what's going to happen or where things might lead. So that was completely out of my comfort zone.

Todd Churchis [00:15:36 - 00:15:58]

My bouncing career ended, just so you know, when I was throwing out some drunk guy one night and he punched me in the face and broke my glasses and I went down and I dropped everything I was holding. I'm like, you know what? It's just not worth it anymore. So I've had a few incidents, but that was, you know, you talk about, you know, defining moments or crucible moments, that was getting punched in the face. I think Mike Tyson is the one who said that, right? We all have a plan until we get punched in the face, right?

Todd Churchis [00:16:01 - 00:16:22]

That was— so anyway, I had a series of jobs. I, I worked for, I dunno if you know Michael Nesmith from the Monkees. That was my first job out of college, was working for him at, for his video production company. And then I was an intern at Aaron Spelling. I just put scripts together for Dynasty, but you know, there I was sitting around and Joan Collins and Linda Evans are walking around. So those were my first brushes with Hollywood. It's like I'm starting to see stars. And so that was kind of cool.

Todd Churchis [00:16:22 - 00:17:08]

And then my friend got me a job at Columbia Pictures. television and casting. So just doing contracts, but again, I was around it. So just being able to drive onto a studio lot was so thrilling and exciting, and to walk in and watch tapings and things like that. And then I got laid off because the writers went on strike, and I ended up in the temp pool at Disney where my friend Seth was working. And so I was temping in 8 different jobs over 8 different weeks. So I temped in legal one week, finance one week, marketing one week, and it was amazing to just experience it. And there you are on the Disney lot, and like, you know, I would meet someone for lunch at the corner of Mickey and Goofy, 'cause all the streets there on the lot are named after the characters, and to see Mickey on your paycheck was kind of cool, and it was just an amazing learning experience, but again, even though as an introvert, each of these experiences pushed me out of my comfort zone and made me a little more comfortable.

Todd Churchis [00:17:08 - 00:17:48]

We expand our comfort zone as we get comfortable with our new surroundings, and I started to get comfortable, but talk about just as people overlook hidden talents, I was temping one week in the PR department, and they needed someone to— edit a press release and all the PR people were out to lunch or out at a meeting. And the head of the PR department was annoyed at me and like, where is everyone? She was yelling at me, where is everyone? I'm like, I'm just, I'm answering phones and filing. I don't know where everyone is. And I said, she said, I really need this press release edited and proofread and sent out by 2 o'clock. So I said, I could, you know, you want me to take a shot at it? And she's like, what do you know? You're just a temp. And she actually yelled at me. She's like, I was Todd the temp. You know, what do you know? You're just the temp.

Todd Churchis [00:17:48 - 00:18:07]

I was sitting there with nothing to do, so I just put it in my typewriter. Again, this was early days of, you know, pre-Microsoft Word. And I did a revision, and then when the PR guys got

back, I said— I won't mention her name— but I said, here's the original, here's a revision. I didn't say I did it. I just said, here's a revision. The guy looked at it and said, oh, this is amazing. This is great. Send it out.

Todd Churchis [00:18:07 - 00:18:14]

So here I was, a hidden talent. She didn't care that I had a bachelor's in English and a master's in communication. I was just labeled as the temp.

Tony Martignetti [00:18:14 - 00:18:14]

Yeah.

Todd Churchis [00:18:15 - 00:18:23]

So again, we never know what our hidden talents are. And I had no risk. There was no downside to my doing it, but it proved to myself that I was capable of more than what I was doing.

Tony Martignetti [00:18:24 - 00:18:41]

One thing I love about Todd's story is his confidence didn't arrive all at once. It grew one uncomfortable experience at a time. Sometimes setbacks don't simply change our circumstances. They reveal strengths we never knew we had.

Todd Churchis [00:18:42 - 00:18:49]

A friend of mine rescued me. I actually interviewed for a job as a personal assistant to Pee-wee Herman. So that was one of my other claims to fame out there.

Michael O'Brien [00:18:49 - 00:18:50]

Oh, no.

Todd Churchis [00:18:50 - 00:19:22]

My friend called me, who is friends with the producer of one of Pee-wee Herman's movies, and he needed a personal assistant. So he said, is this something you're interested in? And I was so desperate to get out of CBS, so I interviewed for it. So I got to spend a half hour one-on-one with Pee-wee Herman. So that was one of my other highlights of my Hollywood years. So I didn't get that job, but I So I left television altogether and I took a job as a project manager for a theme park company. And they said— I was supposed to be a project coordinator, but they needed someone to manage this project. And they said, oh, by the way, you're going to have to go to China to oversee the installation. And I talk about that in my TEDx talk.

Todd Churchis [00:19:23 - 00:19:53]

I was terrified of flying, first of all. So not only was I flying New York to LA as I normally did, they're shipping me across the Pacific Ocean, which I was terrified of. Yeah. I had never been outside the country before. I didn't even have a passport. So I actually did everything

possible trying to get out of it, and I finally forced myself to do it, and that transformed my life, that one trip, because it was not only—I could spend hours talking about it, but I talk about it in my TED Talk. That's the catalyst of my visual thinking, which is my specialty now, is that we were there, just me and my 2 crew members. Everyone on that side spoke Chinese.

Todd Churchis [00:19:54 - 00:19:57]

We spoke no Chinese. They spoke no English. Even the translator didn't speak English.

Todd Churchis [00:19:57 - 00:21:08]

Literally no way to communicate. So what I did was I picked up a pen and paper, and anything we needed to do, arrows, or if we needed a hammer or screwdriver, I just drew it. So the light bulb went off that, not right in that moment, but when I got back and I was debriefing and reflecting, that I got a lot done through pointing and nonverbals and drawing an illustration. And my mantra now is, how do you get people to see what you're saying? How do you get an idea out of your mind's eye and into someone else's? And a big part of the way of doing that is visuals, not only visuals as in pictures, drawing, PowerPoint slides, and mental models and frameworks, But visual language, storytelling, metaphor, and analogy. So that's the foundation now of all the work that I do in my coaching and my training and my teaching is using visualization techniques, using visual thinking and visual language and visual tools to get others to see what you're saying. So often we talk about leadership, it's about the word visual leadership. The meaning behind it is that it's joined together because you can't— who you are and how you lead is inseparable from how you view the world. And how we view the world is a result of our upbringing, our experiences, our values, our life experiences, both good and bad, right? So that's the lens through which we see the world.

Todd Churchis [00:21:08 - 00:21:33]

And also, as a leader, we always talk about having a leadership vision. We talk about leadership visionaries. It's about seeing a future that's different from and better than the current reality. And part one is formulating that vision in your mind's eye. Part two is communicating that vision in a clear and compelling way so that other people can say, I see what you're saying. And then with that, you can implement or execute that vision. So the idea of flipping the I is twofold. One, it's looking internally at yourself and self-reflecting.

Todd Churchis [00:21:33 - 00:21:49]

So turn the I on yourself and look inward, say, what do I believe? Why do I believe it? Is it true? Is it valid? Is it distorted? We all have biases and assumptions, right? Preconceptions. So that's one aspect. And the other component of flipping the I is, can I see the world through the lens of other people who are different from me? Yeah.

Todd Churchis [00:21:50 - 00:22:00]

And that's especially in this day and age, it's more important than ever. So that has really resonated with people, those 2 ways of using the eye externally, looking outward, but also being inward focused.

Tony Martignetti [00:22:01 - 00:22:45]

One of the gifts that Todd offers us is a reminder that setbacks don't simply change our circumstances. They change the way we see. Sometimes they challenge the assumptions we've carried for years. Sometimes they reveal strengths we never knew we possessed. And sometimes they invite us to ask a completely different question. Not why did this happen, but what is this making possible? Our final guest discovered that some of life's greatest opportunities weren't found by following the plan she'd carefully created. They appeared the moment she found the courage to let that plan go. Here's Laura Gassner Otting.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:22:46 - 00:23:26]

I wrote a book called Limitless: How to Ignore Everybody, Carve Your Own Path, and Live Your Best Life because I was set on a path by a mother who I think probably wanted to go to law school and again didn't have that choice because it was, you know, the '50s and the '60s and there were not a lot of lady lawyers being turned out by colleges. I had a 4th grade teacher who told me that I was really argumentative and maybe I'd make a good lawyer. I watched Ally McBeal on TV and LA Law. And I was like, wow, Susan Day is so glamorous. And she's dating Harry Hamlin, man. I'm going to be just like her. And so I had this idea that maybe that was the right direction. And at the same time, I graduated from high school in 1988.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:23:26 - 00:24:33]

And I watched as a young child lines at gas stations when oil prices were skyrocketing, and there was the oil embargo and the Iran hostage crisis. And I remember thinking, like, somebody needs to solve this problem. I remember being righteously indignant that we are the greatest country in the world, and yet there are a bunch of people in some other country that are holding guns to the heads of our citizens and they can't be freed. Now, I was much younger and way more naive, and I didn't understand the sort of geopolitical, like, let's keep them hostages until Reagan becomes president so he could let them be free. And all of a sudden, huzzah! You know, Reagan, yeah! Okay, like, I didn't understand all of that was going on back there, but in my head I thought the leaders are the ones who fix things, right? They're the ones who fix things, and there are problems in the world and I want to fix them. And for the most part, a lot of those people— ironically not Carter or Reagan— are lawyers who run for office and end up fixing things. So I was like, I'm gonna go, I'm gonna run for Senate. Again, this was 1985 when I was planning this idea, and the idea of a woman in the White House seemed crazy.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:24:34 - 00:24:55]

We still have to fix that, by the way. But it was one of those things where I was like, well, I'm going to run for Senate. I'm going to be the first female Democratic senator from the great state of Florida. So I set myself on this course to go to law school. And then I ended up in

law school. On the very first day, I looked around and I was like, I don't want to be here. I don't like what we're studying. I don't— not interested in any of my peers.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:24:55 - 00:25:08]

I don't want to be like my teachers. Like, what is going on? I've made a huge mistake. And so I did what most people do when they find themselves in a place in their life where they're very unhappy is that I dated somebody who was absolutely terrible for me.

Tony Martignetti [00:25:10 - 00:25:10]

Perfect.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:25:11 - 00:25:11]

Yes..

Laura Gassner Otting [00:25:12 - 00:25:46]

And I used to ride my bike to campus, and that day it happened to be raining. And this guy said, well, I'll give you a ride home. We'll just stick your bike in the back of my IROC-Z, which tells you everything you need to know about this guy. But first, we have to stop at this guy's campaign office. He's running for president. Now kids, this is what you used to do before the internet, right? You have to go to like a strip mall in your local town and like go to some local office and like get a printed piece of paper and get like a list of issues and where the candidates stood on the issues. So I was like, okay, fine, whatever. Governor who? From where? Arkansas? Not a chance in hell.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:25:47 - 00:26:10]

But whatever, fine. Your car's dry. I need a ride home. So we do it and I walk into this office and in the corner of this little teeny tiny strip mall office in little teeny tiny Gainesville, Florida is then Bill Clinton. And he's talking about this idea of service. And he's saying that there is nothing that's wrong with America that can't be fixed with what's right with America. And boom, flashback to like 12-year-old me is like, yes, greatest country in the world. We can do it.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:26:10 - 00:26:37]

We can fix things. We can fix these problems. I'm going to fix problems. And then he says, and I'm offering as a solution, service, service of ourselves to our country. You go for a couple of years, you help fix a community that is not your own, and through it, you not only improve the community, but you improve yourself by serving someone else. And as a result, you get college tuition. Improve yourself while you're improving other people and everybody wins. And I was like, that needs to happen.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:26:38 - 00:27:08]

And it was in that moment, this is what I gave my TEDx talk about, that I switched from the like, I can do it and I can help and I can solve all the problems to what needs to happen and who needs to be in the right place to get there. Now, I ended up becoming a headhunter

years later. So like you can see some of the little threads already starting to form. But that really, I think, like those moments were probably some of the most formative in my life about sort of who I am and how I respond to problems and how I think about solutions to those problems.

Tony Martignetti [00:27:10 - 00:27:27]

When we hear the word setback, we often imagine something happening to us, but sometimes the greatest setback is realizing we've been living someone else's definition of success. And while that realization can be unsettling, it can also become incredibly freeing.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:27:29 - 00:28:18]

So, I've just finished this 3-year study on what actually makes people happy at work. And obviously, it's all based from the work that I did in recruiting and the book I wrote, *Limitless*. But one of the things that we found, you know, if you've read the book, you know that I talk about this idea of consonance, where it's not the pursuit of happiness or success, it's actually the pursuit of consonance. What's alignment? What's flow, when the what you do matches the who you are. And that consonance is made up of 4 parts: calling, connection, contribution, and control. Calling, the gravitational force that gets you out of the bed in the morning, the inspiration to build the business, grow the bottom line, nurture the family, solve the problem, whatever it is. Connection. Does your work actually connect to that calling, right? Are you connected? Does what's on your email and your to-do list and your calendar actually matter? Does it get you closer to your calling? Contribution.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:28:18 - 00:29:24]

Are you building the life that you want? Does this work contribute to your ability to manifest your values on a daily basis, to have the career trajectory you want, to have the lifestyle you want to live? And then control. How much agency do you have to affect the projects that you're working on or the teams that get assigned to you or how your work is actually judged and how you're rewarded for it? And it's interesting because I would have thought that pre-pandemic versus post-pandemic, we would have a whole lot less control and we'd want much more control. And actually what I found is that most of these metrics, calling, connection, and contribution stayed the same, but we actually all got more control. And I think part of what that is is because we are working. I mean, and people listening are like, what? I feel totally out of control. But insofar as our work is concerned, so much of the nonsense fell away, the busywork and the stuff that didn't really have a purpose and the work that we were just doing because we've always done it. When all of a sudden we were like, we are in survival mode. How do we connect to each other? How do we make sure we really see each other? How do we care about each other? We lost ourselves in serving the higher purpose of like, we're all in this together.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:29:24 - 00:29:41]

But we also found something else, which was that we actually had more control about doing the work that actually mattered to us. And I think a lot of us asked ourselves that question of like, when life goes back to normal, is the life I'm going back to really the normal I want?

And for a lot of people, the Great Resignation is showing us it's like, it's a resounding hell no.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:29:42 - 00:29:55]

So I do think that you can lose yourself in serving others, but I think that there is so much to be found as well. And I think it's in that growth that, that we really get to become the people who we are meant to be.

Tony Martignetti [00:29:56 - 00:30:20]

What I love about Laura's story is that she doesn't encourage us to chase success. She invites us to pursue alignment, 'cause there are moments when achieving everything we thought we wanted Still leaves us wondering if we're where we, we meant to be. Sometimes navigating a setback isn't about getting back to where we were. It's about discovering a place we never expected to go.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:30:21 - 00:30:24]

So, you know me, you know that I'm a runner and a rower.

Tony Martignetti [00:30:24 - 00:30:25]

Yeah.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:30:25 - 00:30:35]

And both the, you know, long-distance running and rowing, whatever distance you're rowing, are very painful sports. It's just, there is this idea of the pain cave.

Tony Martignetti [00:30:35 - 00:30:36]

Right?

Laura Gassner Otting [00:30:36 - 00:31:11]

Where you go deep into the pain cave and you have to figure out what you're made of in that moment. Like when things get really hard, that's when you figure it out. And I, the very first marathon I ran was in 2012 and it was 92 degrees on Marathon Monday. And you know, it's Boston, it's not normally 92 degrees, but if you remember that day, it was 92 degrees that day. And I have this very unexciting condition called vasovagal syncope, which means I tend to pass out. often. I have very low blood pressure. And if I get anxiety spikes or dehydration, if you will, I tend to pass out.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:31:11 - 00:31:37]

So, OK, it's 92 degrees. I've just run the first mile of my life when I turned 40, as I mentioned. And I've found this inner athlete in me. And so I decide to run the marathon. And I get to Newton Center, which is half, 3/4 of the way up Heartbreak Hill. And you've got just a little bit more to go. You're at mile 20. So you've got like an hour, if you're a slow

runner like me, to cover the next 6 miles, or if you're a faster runner, people do it in like a half hour.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:31:37 - 00:31:53]

I'm never going to do it in a half hour. But I get to Newton Center and a friend of mine holds up his iPhone and shows me 92 degrees and says, Wesley Correia just finished. And he finished at like a personal best, like some ridiculously fast number, even though it was 92 degrees.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:31:54 - 00:32:18]

And I remember thinking, I'm never going to be able to finish this. I've basically limped up Heartbreak Hill. I'm so tired. I don't even know my own name. Somebody complimented me on the ice The bags of, like, Ziploc bags of ice I had in my jog bra at mile 17 that my husband gave me at mile 16. But at mile 17, I couldn't even remember where they came from. Like, I was like, when did these get here? How did this— what a good idea. I was just— I didn't know my own name by the time I finished it.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:32:18 - 00:32:34]

But in retrospect now, you know, a decade later, I think about that moment and I think about what it took for me to finish that marathon. And it took me like 5 and a half hours to finish that marathon. So, you know, not fast. But I think about what it took for me to finish that, and I had to go deep into my pain cave and figure out what I was made of.

Tony Martignetti [00:32:35 - 00:32:35]

Yeah.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:32:35 - 00:33:25]

Here's the thing, Wesley Corriere, in order for him to finish that marathon in 92 degrees at his personal best, also had to go deep into his pain cave. And in the depth moment of like the deepest, the darkest hole of your pain cave, whether you are Wesley Corriere or me or you or anybody listening to this, looks and feels exactly the same, right? The hardest, like, it is the hardest you are ever going to work. Still feels like the hardest you're ever going to work, regardless as if you're doing it at 4.5-minute miles or 12-minute miles. It's still, you are giving it everything you have. So even though it took him 2 hours and 15 minutes to finish the marathon, it took me 5 hours and 12 minutes to finish the marathon. We still both found the depth of our pain cave. And it's in that depth of the pain cave that you realize that it's not actually a cave. It's a tunnel and you can come out the other side.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:33:25 - 00:34:06]

And when you come out the other side, you're like, oh, I'm actually made of more than I thought. Like, I learned something about myself in this place. And now the next time I go there, I can go a little farther and a little farther and a little farther. And so it's this ability to be comfortable being uncomfortable that I think makes a huge difference. And when we are in service of other people or when we are lost and we don't know what we're doing, or

when we feel completely out of control, those are the moments where we sort of go back to this idea of your fundamental state of leadership. I read about this in Harvard Business Review, like, I don't know, a decade ago. And it's like, who are you when you're at your very best? You're firing on all cylinders. You're making it rain.

Laura Gassner Otting [00:34:06 - 00:34:29]

You're closing the deal. Or maybe you're having this quiet moment with a loved one. You're helping a colleague through a hard situation. You are in this moment where you can walk through fire. You can leap over tall buildings. You are at your fundamental best. It's in these moments where if you practice that person, if you practice being that person, you can find that person deep at the bottom of your pain cave and you can go into it.

Tony Martignetti [00:34:30 - 00:35:08]

Every setback asks something of us. Michael reminds us to pause before allowing one difficult moment to define an entire day. Todd challenges us to look at our circumstances through a different lens. And Laura encourages us to trust that even when life doesn't unfold according to plan. New possibilities may be waiting just beyond the next turn. None of these stories suggest setbacks are easy. They aren't. They can be painful, unexpected, even life-changing. But they also remind us that setbacks don't have to become stopping points.

Tony Martignetti [00:35:08 - 00:35:59]

Sometimes they become turning points. And perhaps the art of navigating setbacks isn't found in avoiding them. It's found in choosing how we'll respond when they arrive. Because the path forward may not be the one we originally imagined, but it just might become the one that leads us exactly where we're meant to be. I want to express my deep gratitude to Michael O'Brien, Todd Churchis, and Laura Gassner-Otting for sharing their stories, insights, and experiences so openly and generously. And to all of you listeners, Thank you for joining us on this journey around the virtual campfire. It's been great to have you with us. If you'd like to learn more about today's guests, connect with their work, or explore their books, organizations, and resources, you'll find links for each of them in the show notes for this episode.

Tony Martignetti [00:36:00 - 00:36:45]

If this conversation resonated with you, I encourage you to reflect on this question: what part of your world are you being called to create now? Next. Before you go, please subscribe to the Virtual Campfire Podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, I'd love to hear from you. Leave a comment or review and share this episode with someone who would benefit from listening. And if you're ready to take the next step in your own journey or would like to learn more, 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, and keep showing up for the life you're meant to create.