The Virtual Campfire — Episode 338

Chapter 9: Stay Curious and Evolve as You Grow

Edited, speaker-labelled transcript | Tony Martignetti, Steve Hoffman, Hal Gregersen, Jeffrey Shaw

Steve Hoffman: Yeah. I want a confusing life. I don't want routine. I want to wake up and not know what I'm going to be doing next year. That is my perfect life.

Hal Gregersen: And now I've come to realize, like you just said, Tony, that shadow actually is a friend. It's not a foe.

Jeffrey Shaw: I'm one person. I'm a whole person.

Tony Martignetti: 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 Martignetti. Together, we'll explore powerful conversations inspired by the themes of campfire lessons for leaders, uncovering the moment of transformation, courage and growth that shape who we are and who we become. The fire is lit. Let's gather where stories spark transformation.

Tony Martignetti: What if the greatest opportunities in our lives aren't found by knowing exactly where we're going, but by remaining curious about where we might go next? We often think of growth as a journey toward a particular destination. We set goals, develop expertise, and build an identity around what we've accomplished. But sometimes the very things that brought us success can become the things that hold us back. In chapter nine of Campfire Lessons for Leaders, I explore the importance of staying curious in allowing ourselves to evolve as we grow. Today, we're visiting three remarkable conversations that bring this lesson to life. Steve Hoffman reminds us that an unconventional path can lead to extraordinary possibilities. Hal Gregersen reveals how the questions we carry can shape our lives, often without our realizing it. And Jeffrey Shaw shows us what becomes possible when we stop limiting ourselves to a single version of who we are. Their stories remind us that growth isn't about having all the answers. Sometimes it's about finding the courage to ask a different question.

Steve Hoffman: It was a long and twisted journey, and as you mentioned, I have had more careers than cats have had lives. I've been everything from an electrical engineer, game designer to a Hollywood TV development executive, voice actor, manga rewriter you name it, I've done it. What I love about that is that it keeps life interesting. It adds flavor to life. Some people might say, oh, that's misdirected and like really confusing, but it keeps life interesting. And yeah, I want a confusing life. I don't want routine. I want to wake up and not know what I'm going to be doing next year. That is my perfect life.

Tony Martignetti: So you're my people?

Steve Hoffman: Yes. So I can tell you how I got to today. I run this global startup incubator. I am also a venture investor. I've also been an entrepreneur. I did three venture funded startups in Silicon Valley and two bootstrapped. So as you can see, it's a lot of different things. But how I began was when I was a child, I had a passion for games. I just loved games, board games, role playing games, you name it. Games. I loved computers, I'd code my own games, and I loved making movies. I would make movies. So I thought my best friend was going to film school and I thought I should go to film school. But my dad, who is, uh, literally he's a rocket scientist from MIT, of course. And he that's what he and my mom was a crazy artist. So I got both of those genes and my dad said, son, nobody makes it in the film business. You should study computers. Computers are going to change the world. And this is a while back. And he was absolutely right because he's a smart guy. I took his advice against my own judgment, and I went and studied electrical computer engineering. So what do you do? So what I did was I got

a thing called the Hollywood Directory, which listed out the contact information for all the top TV executives in Hollywood producers, the ones who run the studios, all of them. And I literally sent off one hundred and fifty printed letters to the top executives in Hollywood and hoped that someone would reply to me. I had my master's degree. I was ready to go. I had no other prospects. I actually ended up getting three replies out of one hundred and fifty, which is Hollywood is pretty decent, right?

Tony Martignetti: Yeah, that's pretty good.

Steve Hoffman: The first one who called me on the phone, I pick up the phone and he goes, hello? And it was the producer of Star Wars Empire Strikes Back. And he was like, I really liked your letter and I don't have a job for you. I was like, oh, no, but I just wanted to talk to you. And we had a conversation. I was really nervous because I was a shy guy. But we talked and talked and talked, and then I said, thank you. And that was it. I come in to the head of development. She's sitting there and I go, oh, where's my scripts? And she looks up at me and her eyes are shooting daggers like daggers out of her eyes, like she is so Angry. And I was like, what? And she stands up and through gritted teeth. She says, you got me fired. And literally picks up her stuff and storms out of the office.

Tony Martignetti: Oh my gosh.

Steve Hoffman: I'm standing there and I'm like, what is she talking about? Like, I have no clue. Yeah. And moment later, Chuck's assistant calls me and says, Chuck wants to see you. Chuck wants to talk with you right now. So I go into his office and I'm just, like, very confused. And he goes, Hoffman, you're my new head of development.

Tony Martignetti: Wow.

Steve Hoffman: And I was like, what? I didn't even ask for that job. I wanted to be a writer.

Tony Martignetti: What strikes me about Steve's story is that he wasn't following a carefully designed career plan. He was following his curiosity. Each experience gave him something new to work with, even when it didn't lead where he expected. Did. And I think that's an important distinction. We sometimes assume that moving forward means knowing exactly what comes next. But growth often happens when we are willing to explore something before we understand where it might take us. And for Steve, that willingness would eventually lead him in yet another unexpected direction.

Steve Hoffman: Yeah. And he was an American who was there after World War Two, founded it, and Sega had just surpassed Nintendo to become the number one video game company. At the time, it was the nineties. And I said, you know, I love games. And it's like my second favorite thing. And I'd love to be creative. Can you hook me up? And he introduced me to the chairman of the company, his cousin, and he offered me a job in Japan. I was like, how cool is that making games in Japan? So I went to Chuck and I said, Chuck, I'm going to quit and go to Japan and like games. And he was like, Hoffman, are you crazy? You're off to a good career in Hollywood. What are you doing? And he was right. I mean, I was sort of crazy. I thought I could make games myself. I don't have to work for this giant company doing games for them. I could just do this. Like, I have an engineering background. I have all these ideas. And so I quit my job, I quit, and I moved back to my home area, which is San Francisco. Yeah. And I launched my first company and that's how I became a tech entrepreneur. I was literally coding my own games. So I came up with this idea. I had this vision. I wanted to do non-violent games because I thought there are too many violent games out there, but my mission was to make them as fun as any shooter, like any shooter game out there and educational, but not feel educational. Like they would teach you something, but you didn't feel like you were playing an educational game. You were playing a game, but you were learning. So my first idea was, I will make this game called Gazillionaire. Gazillionaire. And you can see it on Gazillionaire dot com. It's out there today. Still nice actually, after all these years, the game is still super popular. It's on steam and huge number of people play it. So it's one of these classics. So basically I was coding the game. I coded it myself. I did a lot of the artwork draw myself, so it was really awesome. A job where I got to be totally like creative, like I wanted to be. We'd start casting about for ideas, like we have this technology in search of an idea and we hear through the grapevine, MTV wants to

do an interactive TV show and we're like, oh my God, MTV, we could do that. We haven't built the technology to synchronize broadcast television to online, but we can figure that out. We can figure that out. So we call the vice president of MTV and we leave a voicemail. And guess what? He doesn't call back. So we call him again and again and again doesn't call back. So we're like, oh my God, he doesn't know who this crazy company spider dance is. He's like, what are they? And then my friend who I started the company with, she gets the opportunity to speak at CES. And because of her previous job, the whole Microsoft Project and everything. And so she goes and speaks at CES. And after her talk, she mentions, oh, we're doing interactive television, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Like this is our vision, even though we hadn't built any of that.

Tony Martignetti: Steve's journey reminds us that our experiences don't have to follow a straight line to have meaning. His background in engineering, his love of storytelling, and his passion for games all became part of a larger picture. None of those experiences was wasted. But curiosity isn't only about exploring the world around us. Sometimes the most important discoveries happen when we turn that curiosity inward. We begin asking why we make the choices we make, why certain patterns keep appearing, and whether the beliefs that once protected us are still serving us today. That brings us to my conversation with Hal Gregersen, whose understanding of the power of questions emerge from a deeply personal journey.

Hal Gregersen: My father was a construction worker. My mother was a stay at home mom and sometimes elementary school teacher, and I moved seven times before I was five years old. My father would we would travel to construction sites across the United States. So imagine a family of five. I had an older brother and sister. Two of us had legitimate ADHD and my other sibling has ADHD. Inside of this thirty by eight foot tin can traveling across the country, we were full of energy. I can't imagine what my parents were like, especially my mother dealing with us. But, you know, I have rich and fond memories of that life when I was young, young. But I quickly learned that in our home, pretty much everything revolved around our father. In today's language, it would be emotionally abusive, sometimes physical, but he was the center of everything. Everything revolved around him, and if you didn't please him, sometimes it became dangerous and it felt that way. And it was that way at moments. And so imagine you're this little kid growing up in that world with this dangerous being around you. You learn really fast how to make sure that you do things, say things, even think things that would somehow calm down that dangerous force in your life and keep you safe. And so all of that leads to, you know, me growing up with. Now, in retrospect, a very legitimate question for a four year old. How can I make this person happy so that they don't hurt me in some way, shape, or form?

Hal Gregersen: Yeah. Now again, when you're young and you don't have a good understanding of how the world really works, that's a legitimate question. It's like, okay, how can I make this dangerous adult happy? Well, when you grow up that way and all those memories get laid deep physiologically into your head, then you become this thing we call an adult. And whether you know it or not, I didn't know it when I was younger. I kept living that question.

Hal Gregersen: Mhm. And instead of my father, it was, how can I make this teacher happy? How can I make X happy? How can I make my boss happy? How can I make my co-workers happy? And that question had its upside, which was an enormous commitment to working hard and to trying to please other people by doing things and doing things with impact. And so that's the other side of the question. But the downside is, as you well know, Tony, there comes a point at which you're either doing too much for too many, and at some point it hits you smack between the eyes. So that was, I would say, my first flashpoint, as you call it, which is just growing up in that world and what I call a shadow question, that how can I make someone else happy? I've dug deeper and, you know, the fantastic work by Bob Keegan around hidden, competing commitments. As I unravelled that myself and with colleagues and councillors over the years, the underlying question really was will I ever measure up and matter?

Tony Martignetti: I find Hal's story incredibly powerful because it reveals something we don't always recognize about ourselves. The questions we ask aren't always conscious choices. Sometimes they're shaped by experiences we've carried since childhood, and those questions can influence how we work, how we lead, and

how we measure our own worth. How that pattern of constantly trying to meet other people's expectations eventually came at a significant personal cost.

Hal Gregersen: And I'll never forget when I was a teenager, one time point blank saying to my dad, are you a workaholic? You know, because I was that teenager, late teenager, like, please pay attention to me. I'm more important than your work. And yeah, and legitimately there was some truth to that. But it was like, you know, when I had teenagers, I realized, dang, I'm doing the same thing my dad did. And then, you know, that message came home like bam In twenty fourteen when I was living in Boston working for INSEAD, a French based university, my work commitments were all over the world, traveling Intercontinentally two to three times a month for two years at that point, and getting up in San Diego, getting ready to give a speech. Feeling pressure on my chest, thinking it was anxiety, setting up the talk, then going down to actually get ready for the talk in the big auditorium in the hotel, feeling the pressure, still going outside, saying a little prayer, getting some fresh air, giving a ninety minute speech, coming back in, giving the coming back in, giving the speech. And then the pressure comes back with intensity. I get achy, I'm nauseous. I want to get out of there. I go back to my hotel room at the quickest break I could find again. I'm trying to be nice to people so I don't leave or say anything. And my wife's like, well, what's going on? You don't look well. And I told her what I just told you, and she said, are you having a heart attack? And I said, I have no idea, Susie. Let's check. So I pulled my computer out and typed in heart attack symptoms. And I'm like, check, check, check, check, check all these things. I'm like, Susie, I'm having a heart attack. And she's like, well, I just exercised, can I shower? Then we go to the hospital. I was like, no, no, no, we're going now. And so we went. And when I got to the hospital, I was I was so emotionally overwhelmed, I couldn't even talk. And woke up the next day with two stents, three stents in two arteries that were eighty to ninety five percent blocked, depending on the artery. And it's been a fascinating journey because it was probably three years ago. In conversations with Roger, I finally realized I have been trying to completely shut down that shadow question. You know, I'd been working really hard believing that if I just work really hard, it will go away. It will no longer be part of my life be gone. You know it will never be there kind of thing. And you know, it's it's Rogers friendship and professional expertise and a lot of conversations. And I find the the door and window and spark finally came, which was like, it's not going to go away. Yeah. And that was the moment in which I started down a path of purpose and what I call a keystone question. But to myself, my purpose is why do I do what I do? Is I'm an instrument of inquiry. Mhm. Inspiring others to see the dark. Seek the light and embrace the hidden wholeness. And that last part I had never really done. I had all, you know. I had resented that shadow. I had hated that shadow. And that shadow was me. And now I've come to realize, like you just said, Tony, that shadow actually is a friend. It's not a foe. It's a friend. If I'm aware of it. And let it be my friend. In the moments when actually I do need to be safe and otherwise let it, you know, sit in the passenger seat and go along for the ride.

Tony Martignetti: What I appreciate about Hal's journey is that he doesn't describe growth as simply overcoming a weakness and leaving it behind. Instead, he talks about understanding that part of himself and learning to relate to it differently. And that requires a different kind of curiosity, not the curiosity that asks, what else can I accomplish? But the curiosity that asks, what am I not seeing about myself? When we become willing to examine those questions. We create space for a different way of living. And sometimes that means giving ourselves permission to become more than the identity we've built.

Hal Gregersen: I always see whether it's a group of fifteen people in a room or ten thousand in a stadium. It's like, I can always sense at least ten percent of the people who are like, Gregerson, I get what you're asking me to do, which is to turn to my neighbor that I don't know next to me and tell them I have a problem, and then let them and me ask all the questions we can about it. They're like, I can see it in their eyes, Tony. It's like, no way am I doing that. Yeah, I'm afraid I'm vulnerable. That's just way too dangerous. And so, you know, they're given their ten minutes to do the question burst process. And I can just see them talking back and forth. And I know they're not doing it because you're right. You know, when you follow those rules in a conversation, if you and I were to do it right now, it's like, okay, just questions only no answers, no explanation of the questions. We're going to have quiet space. We don't like that quiet space. Sometimes.

Tony Martignetti: Steve showed us how curiosity can open doors to new possibilities. Hal reminds us that it can also help us understand the things we've carried with us all along. But there's another part of this journey. Once we've explored new possibilities and questioned our assumptions, we have to decide what we're willing to do with what we've discovered. Are we prepared to change the way we see ourselves? Are we willing to let our identity evolve? My next guest, Jeffrey Shaw, faced that very question even while enjoying a remarkably successful career.

Jeffrey Shaw: Well, you know, it's actually kind of poignant that you're asking this question. I hadn't really thought about it until just a moment, like one of those flash points that I would point out my home in Connecticut, which was a home that I bought for myself and my three kids after divorce. I'd been married for nineteen years, had three kids, divorced, and this was a house built in seventeen ninety, super quaint. And I just sold it. So I was up last weekend. I was in New York, uh, wrapping things up, uh, the closings yet to come in about a week, but I had to go up there one last time. I've rented it out for the past ten years to a wonderful family. And, uh, this is my time to go up and, you know, and kind of bring closure to the house and make sure everything was ready to sell and bid my tenants farewell. And while I was there, I had that flash. I had a flashpoint moment where I recalled the Sunday morning where I sat in the little garden in the Adirondack chair that that I created at this house. And I can remember that moment so specifically every detail of it, because I was battling what so many of us battle. So to set the stage at that point. I had been a photographer for twenty five years, full time portrait photographer for very affluent families. I had a Tony. I had a ridiculously good business. Like it was just it could not. It was the easiest way to make money in the world, I think like it was just I loved what I did every moment I got to be creative. I photograph entirely on location, so I'm outside. My clients all have multiple homes all over the world. So they flew me everywhere over the world, and I'm out with beaches and estates. I mean, it's ridiculous how good it was. And here I was, twenty five years in reaping the benefits and rewards of this wonderful career as a photographer and having this nagging feeling that there had to be more for me. I felt like I had that feeling, like there has I have to contribute something more to the world. Although, you know, now I look back and think, what more can you contribute than family memories? Memories, right? But at the time it just felt like, what more can I offer the world? and I had on the side I had started doing receiving some training as a coach. And I remember thinking to myself, I feel like I'm having an affair with myself. Like it was this weird way that I didn't want my photography clients to know I was. Interested in doing something else. Right. As. Because why? Because we've always been told in the world we have to focus on one thing. We've been told we have to, you know, have to pick a niche in business. And I had a very niche business serving a very demanding clientele. So I didn't want them to think if I was doing something else, I couldn't be as good for them because that's what I've been told my whole life. Right. We're always told that, you know, the classic phrase Jack of all trades, master of none, which is my biggest pet peeve in life. I'm like, who said? Right. Why? Who decided we can only be good at one thing? And I've since learned to compare this to love. It's like I have three kids. I love my first child immensely. When he was born, did I not have as much love for the second and third child? Of course not, right? Because your love capacity expands to fit what to include, what needs to fit into it. So why can't our talents? Why can't our skill sets? So that Sunday morning I was battling and battling this. I had two websites going. I had a website for my photography business, a website for my building coaching practice, and feeling like I'm having an affair with myself, feeling like I don't want anybody to know that I'm running two businesses at one time because that's exactly what I've been told not to do. And that Sunday morning I gave myself permission to, I'll say it nicely, screw it, and be truer to who I am. And I got up from the Adirondack chair. I walked into my little office in that house and I shut down my coaching website and just said because my. My photography domain URL had been Jeffrey Shaw dot com. I had owned that since the beginning of the internet. I was like, I'm one person. I'm a whole person. I happen to be somebody who photographs, who runs a business, who wants to help other people run their business, who wants to be a coach? I'm one person, and I'm tired of living life in a way that people are telling me I should fragment myself and hide one piece for myself, for another. So that was a major flashpoint moment in my life, where I gave myself permission to be true to who I am as a business person. Now, as it turns out, all those years later, now we're twelve years later from that point. That's the number one advice I give. And what I do for my coaching clients every day is to help them build a business model of multiples, where they are building multiple income streams and serving multiple audiences.

Because not only is it what sustains you and keeps you excited about your business every day, it's also the smartest business model.

Tony Martignetti: There's something wonderfully liberating about Jeffrey's realization he didn't have to choose between being a photographer and being a coach. Both were expressions of who he was, and I think many of us struggle with that same limitation. We become so attached to a particular role or title that we forget we're capable of growing beyond it. But evolving doesn't mean the person we were has disappeared. It means we're finding new ways to bring our experiences, talents, and perspectives together. And Jeffrey discovered that the very skills we developed in one career would become a powerful advantage in another.

Jeffrey Shaw: I come from the school of hard knocks and experienced thirty thirty six years of experience. The fact matter is my brain as a photographer sees what other people can't see, right? I mean, that is the truest definition of being a photographer. I think that there is that especially as for myself as a photographer who always photographed on location, you could drop me any place in the world. And I'll see beauty. I'll see. Composition. I'll see something that can. I don't photograph in a studio because I have the entirely opposite reaction. I walk into a studio to a blank background. My brain can't figure out what to do with that, right? I work better with what's there, which is why in my coaching process, I explain to my clients, look, I'm going to kick up a lot of dust. Like, bring on your chaos. That's why my I'm best with clients who describe themselves as a hot mess are all over the place. I'm like, bring it on. Like that's ideal. That's the environment I thrive in because it has all these disparate pieces that seem like they're all over the place. I see and can compose how that comes together. And I think this idea of tapping into, again, just like your, your whole, your show, your transformative tales, like when we can connect the dots, there's so much information in, in your past that makes you unique at what you do today. Because I'm by far not the only business coach. I'm by far not the only branding coach, but I tell you what. And I feel this way as a speaker. I pitch myself as a speaker, as a photographer, teaching business from the stage. Why? Because I'm probably the only photographer teaching business from the stage. Right? It becomes your differentiator, and I can help audiences see what they can't. They haven't previously been able to see. So when you're able to tap into your storyline, your transformational tale, when you can tap into that and the dots, that's exactly what translates to making you marketable. So that's and that's part of the translation process that I do for my clients. Like just like my first coaching, my first client with a call with every client, they're like, well, how do I prepare for our first call? I'm like, don't I want you to come as a complete lost soul, blank slate, whatever it takes, right? Because that's the environment that I thrive in, because the information is all there. And it's, I look at it as capacity. And that's how I teach personal development. It's, it's, it's raising the ceiling and it's, it's perfectly aligned with my TED Talk to my TED Talk, is fundamentally on the idea that often other people can see more in us than we can see in ourselves. I just suggest to anyone just, you know, work on being true to yourself. Be in business the way that you instinctively feel best about, because you're probably right. I call it the filter of discernment. Like take in the world, take in other advice, but have the discernment to decide what's best for you. Because a lot of what you hear probably isn't right for you and your size business and make decisions otherwise. So that continues to help me just to, to kind of life has the world has a lot to offer. And I'm a big believer in joining your trade associations and your professional organizations. You have to go to them with a strong filter of discernment, because what works for others doesn't work for you. But there's, there's information there to take in and then decide what works for you and what doesn't.

Tony Martignetti: As I reflect on these three conversations, I'm reminded that curiosity is so much more than an interest in learning something new. It's a way of approaching life. Steve Hoffman showed us what happens when we remain open to possibilities, even when the path ahead doesn't make sense to everyone else. Hal Gregersen reminded us that some of the most important discoveries happen when we turn inward and begin questioning the beliefs and patterns that have shaped our lives. And Jeffrey Shaw demonstrated the freedom that comes when we stop defining ourselves by a single role and give ourselves permission to grow into everything we're capable of becoming. Three very different journeys, but one powerful lesson. We are not finished products. And perhaps that's something we should celebrate in campfire lessons for leaders. I talk about the importance of embracing and explorers mindset. It's about being willing to experiment, to challenge what we think we know, and to

recognize that every experience has something to teach us. Our past doesn't have to limit our future. In fact, when we look at it with curiosity and compassion, it can become one of our greatest resources. So here's something I'd like you to consider. What part of yourself have you stopped exploring? Is there an interest you've pushed aside, a belief you've never questioned, or perhaps a new direction you've been reluctant to pursue because it doesn't fit the person you've always believed yourself to be? Maybe it's time to get curious again, because growth isn't about arriving at a place where we finally have everything figured out. It's about remaining open to what we might discover along the way. And that is how we continue to evolve.

Tony Martignetti: Thank you for joining me around the campfire for another chapter of Campfire Lessons for Leaders. I want to extend my sincere gratitude to Steve Hoffman, Hal Gregersen, and Jeffrey Shaw for sharing their experiences and insights. Their willingness to reflect openly on their journeys continues to inspire me. You can learn more about each of them and explore their work through the links in our show notes. If these conversations have sparked something in you. I invite you to explore my book, Campfire Lessons for Leaders, where we go deeper into the lessons that can help us move forward with greater intention. Until next time, stay curious, keep exploring, and remember that your story is still unfolding. This special series of The Virtual Campfire is produced by. It All Works.