

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 354: CHIP CONLEY

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you grow your people, to grow your organization because organizations don't disrupt; people do. And the building block of that growth, well, it's you. Do you know that feeling when you're cooking, and you've got all your ingredients chopped and ready to go, spices measured; oven preheated? All that's left is for you to spin your magic as a cook. In the kitchen, the French call it *mise en place*, everything in its place. In that same vein, to disrupt yourself, your strategy and support need to be in place. You need to give yourself the room to roam, so to speak, to realize your full potential. Otherwise, you're just the fastest horse in a tiny pasture. Our guest today is all about creating spaces that let you realize that potential. Chip Conley is the former founder of Joie de Vivre, a boutique hotel chain. He's worked with Airbnb as a "modern elder" and now Chip's, turning his attention to the potential of midlife, a word so laden with stigma he's building regenerative horse ranches to change that. So, what kind of space creates radical change? I hope you enjoy.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Chip, one of your first real estate deals out of Stanford was an old Masonic Temple. Is that correct?

**Chip Conley:** Oh, wow. You've done some good research. Yes, yes, it was a Masonic Temple at the corner of Van Ness and Market.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, the question that I have for you is, how did it feel taking on the challenge, this challenge?

**Chip Conley:** Well, I was 23 years old. I graduated from Stanford Business School quite young, and I there was a looming real estate recession in San Francisco, and it was 1984. And this was an ill-fated project. So, I was a youngster taking on a project halfway through its redevelopment that was going to be turned into an office building at a time where the odds were against me, both for this project as well as the economy. So, I think, you know, what I felt more than anything was I had to think differently. There was just no way I was going to be able to just operate in

a conventional way. So, I did a bunch of things that were sort of unusual. I threw a grand opening party that was like a festival. It was not, you know, normally, like when you open an office building, it's like, okay, like, let's have our, you know, our wine and cheese, and it's really boring.

**Whitney Johnson:** Cut the ribbon.

**Chip Conley:** We had. Yeah. Because it was a Masonic Temple. It had lots of interesting history and lots of interesting. So, we had, you know, a magician in one room and a musician in another room. And it was, it was fun. And it really actually, it actually helped our marketing efforts because people actually people kept coming back and saying, hey, could we throw our party there? Um, but what it what it really did was it actually it gave attention to a building that was, you know, sorely in need of it because we were in a very secondary location. But we also created a, you know, like a sort of a WeWork space. This is 1984. A space where we had it was, you know, it was like a, you know, a shared office space kind of space, but it was way ahead of its time. And so I, you know, the bottom line is I did everything I could. And, I also realized, wow, I was put in a very difficult situation by the people I went to work with because I didn't know how difficult of a project it was. But it succeeded against all odds.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. I was going to ask you how that came about, so it's not like you actually chose this. You were in a job straight out of b-school, and they're like, hey, Chip, guess what? You're on the temple.

**Chip Conley:** Well, I wanted what I really wanted to do was I wanted to, um, I wanted to go work for a real estate developer who does maverick projects in San Francisco. I had worked the summer before at Morgan Stanley in New York at their real estate division, which was called Brooks Harvey. And I, that was interesting. But institutional investment banking for real estate, commercial real estate wasn't. That's not what I wanted to be when I grew up. What I knew I wanted to be was an entrepreneur and a commercial real estate developer. So, I figured, okay, instead of taking the job out of business school for \$100,000 a year, which, you know, back in 1984, that was a lot of money. I took a job for \$24,000 a year, um, truly like \$2,000 a month with bonuses available. And within a year, I'd become a partner in the company. And I said, look, I'm going to roll the dice. I'm going to go for that. And, um, you know what? In retrospect, I'm glad I did. It was definitely a good path for me to become an entrepreneur soon after that. Because that was two and a half years after I took that job that I actually started my boutique hotel company.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right, so another question is coming up for me. Where do you think your risk appetite came from? Because that's a lot of risk at 23. Where did that come?

**Chip Conley:** Yeah, I, I've had a, it's very interesting. I don't, I'm not, I'm not risk averse I tend to be risk seeking. But it's what's strange about this, though, Whitney, is that it's not like I'm like, you know, parachuting or skydiving and, you know, motorcycling all over the world. I can't say that when it comes to my physical life that I'm the biggest risk-taker. I'm an athletic person, but I'm, you know, but I think when it comes to my career. The worst thing I can ever imagine in my career is to be bored. That would be the ultimate jail cell for me is to be bored because I can lose interest quickly. And so, I really need something that's gonna got a little bit of adrenaline attached to it. There's that. Secondly, there is my desire to try things that haven't been done before to be a disrupter, and I would never have called myself a disrupter along the way. But of course, given my career now, I'm often called a disruptor. But I like the idea of being a rebel. My first book that I ever wrote was called *The Rebel Rules Daring to Be Yourself in Business*, and Richard Branson wrote the foreword to the book. So, I mean, I've always had that streak in me that says, I don't want to regret later in life having said I should have done this, or I should have done that. No, I'm going to go do that. So, the regret of the thing that you didn't do, that you wish you'd done, is twice as painful as the regret of the thing you wish you hadn't done. So, for me, that has meant I've spent my life doing some things that maybe afterwards I will regret that I did it. But there aren't very many things that I say, oh darn it, I wish I'd done that. And I didn't do it.

**Whitney Johnson:** So good. Something that I'm wondering about is that you have been in, but I would argue, are still in the business of where people live, at least for a couple of nights. And so, when you think about home, what does home mean to you?

**Chip Conley:** So, I've hung out in some interesting meditation spaces, and they say, home is where the om is. Because in the middle of home is an om, om. I think for me, home is where I feel safe. And I feel like I'm being

nourished and regenerated. And that can be just about anywhere. So, my definition of home is probably much looser than the average person's in the sense that, you know, like, I'm right here in Santa Fe, New Mexico, right now where I have a home, but I'm not here all that much. I'm here partly because of business reasons. And I love Santa Fe as well, but I tend to travel a lot. So, being able to be in a place where, you know, if I'm on a plane and I close my eyes, and I can meditate for a few minutes, I actually can feel like I'm coming back home. So, it's less about the physical space, it's more about the spaciousness I feel in that place. It definitely can be a place where there's love, there's no doubt about that.

**Chip Conley:** I mean, I grew up in a family that was you know, my parents are still together. They've been together for 64 years. And so, I, you know, am fortunate to have had a relatively safe, normal upbringing. And so home. Home was not a place that I, I didn't like. But I will say that home was a place that I got bored with. So, back to that boring thing. So, I, I, you know, I, my parents and my family were relatively conservative, and I was had a little bit more of a, I don't want to say a radical streak in me, but that rebellious streak in me. And so. So, home for me has got to be nourishing, and nurturing, and safe. But it also has to be a place where I feel inspired. And, I would say that my upbringing didn't inspire me a lot. And that, you know, is why I try to be a little more inspired in terms of the places I live now and the homes I live in.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's interesting hearing you say that. I've heard, you know, some permutation of learning to be home wherever you are. And as I hear you talk; it sounds like your parents gave you a place and space where you felt attached. If you think about attachment theory and you felt a sense of safety, emotionally and spiritually, so that you could do some of this, you know, adrenaline junkie kind of things and, and do these emotional bungee jumps that you do in your career, in your life. Because there was that sense of groundedness.

**Chip Conley:** I think that's true. I think that's a very good point. And it helps to amplify that even though I might have been bored at times, I felt safe, and I did, I did, I did feel nurtured. Now I, on one hand, on the other hand, man, um, my parents had a very specific idea of what Chip Conley was going to be when he grew up.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, tell us more.

**Chip Conley:** Very narrow path. Like, you know, it was like, okay, well, maybe president of the United States by my late, late 30s, um, I mean, I, I, my parents are both first born. I was the first born, you know, my parents went to Stanford, I went to Stanford. I mean, I was really sort of on this path to just be a better version of them in terms of what they were looking for. And, in many ways that was quite limiting for me. Um, and it was in my early 20s when I really needed to break out of that and just say, listen, I'm going to be different in all kinds of ways. And, and that process of breaking out, and then, but also not running away from. So, I didn't, it's not like I broke out and said, listen, I hate you guys. You know, it was more like, hey, let me, I think I'm on the right path. Let me let me go on this entrepreneurial path. Let me go. Go live in San Francisco. Let me go, do, let me do a thing. Do things that maybe you didn't do. But that, you will appreciate where it takes me. Yeah. And I think at the end of the day, they feel that completely. So, they have been very proud of me.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, I love that. It's this idea of individuation. And I remember someone saying to me when my children were young that, and it was a kind of a spiritual mentor, that your children will do things that will surprise and delight you and inspire you. And, yet, as you've described it, your path to be able to do that where your parents are like, wow, Chip, what a good life you're living. It was very different than the path that they would have prescribed.

**Chip Conley:** That's correct. Yeah, that's definitely. And so, in some ways, I got comfort in my early 20s with breaking away, and I was in therapy, and I was going to the Esalen Institute down in Big Sur to like, go to personal growth workshops. And, I was, I was really doing a deep dive on who I was. And in some ways, it was, you know, I, it allowed me to get clear on my identity at a younger age than the average person.

**Whitney Johnson:** Absolutely. And so, while you're talking about therapy, three cheers for therapy, everyone. I think everybody, everybody, no matter how healthy you think you are, would benefit from both therapy and coaching in your life. So, I know I'm talking my own book a little bit, but, I think, you know, I started therapy in my 20s as well. And it was it was really a game changer for me in my life and being able, to grow up. Okay. So, let's, we

could talk about this all day, but let's continue on in your journey. After you went and did this maverick redo of the Masonic Temple, your entrepreneurial juices continuing to flow, you decided to do what?

**Chip Conley:** Yeah. I decided, you know, I was fascinated by hotels. And this was the mid-1980s, and boutique hotels were just getting off the ground as a sort of a subtype, of hotels. And I was really intrigued by them, like, you know, local localized, hotels with a design-forward kind of look. And a local restaurant that, people, not just the hotel guests, would eat in. And so, I decided to create Joie de Vivre. It's a terrible name for a company because it's hard to pronounce, hard to spell. Most Americans don't know what it means. It means the joy of life. And that was our mission as well. And for 24 years, I was the founder and CEO of a company that grew from one person, me, to 3,500 people, with 52 boutique hotels around California. Now, I loved it, and I learned a lot about leadership during that time. I, you know, ran the company from age 26 to age 50, but it was in my late 40s.

**Whitney Johnson:** Wait, wait, can we just pause for a second? That's amazing. That's amazing. Let's just I just want to celebrate and acknowledge. Okay. Keep going. Yeah.

**Chip Conley:** Well, and what I will say is that as I learned how to be a leader during that time, I started writing about it and speaking about it. Because I don't know, I mean, I was I was a young CEO and, and we were one of the fastest growing. We became the second-largest boutique hotelier in the US. And so, we were, we, you know, people were keeping an eye on us. And so, as I. So, I was able to really take my leadership lessons and then turn them into books and writing and speaking. And I loved that. And it was in my late 40s that I wrote my third book, um, called *Peak How Great Companies Get Their Mojo from Maslow*. And I talked about how we use Maslow's hierarchy of needs to create an employee, a customer, and an investor hierarchy of needs. But what was going on at that point in my late 40s was my whole life was melting down. Lots of stuff was going wrong. Um, I what I now, what I would now call a mid-life chrysalis was also could be called a midlife crisis. I realized also that I didn't want to. I didn't want to be running that company anymore. Now, I never set it up to sell it. I'd never said it. I mean, I really hadn't created a succession plan, and it was around that time. Also, I lost five friends to suicide. All of them men in their between 42 and 52. So, a lot was going on. I had a flatline experience during that time where I had an allergic reaction to an antibiotic, I was on because of a broken ankle and a septic leg, and I was giving a speech in St. Louis, on my book *Peak* and I, I died. And fortunately, there were paramedics. Soon after that, I went to the other side nine times in 90 minutes. They had to paddle me back to life with the electric paddles and.

**Whitney Johnson:** Wait, wait wait wait wait wait wait. Wait wait wait wait wait wait. You're on stage.

**Chip Conley:** Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** And you?

**Chip Conley:** I'm on stage. I finished my speech. I was signing, sitting down, signing books, and all of a sudden, I slumped over in my chair and. Yeah, they put me on the ground. Who knows whether my heart stopped during that time? It's hard to know. But what we know is when the paramedics showed up, like five minutes later, I had come to, I was conscious. We got me in a gurney, and then I went out again, and I did. They had heart monitors on me, so they knew I had flatlined. So, um. So, you know, long story short, is I really came face to face with death and face to face with like, wow, is this how I want to live the rest of my life? And it was during that time that I, I came clear, like, okay, I'm going to figure out a way, even in the bottom of this great recession, to sell this business. Not the best time to sell it and figure out what's next. So, that's what happened. And Hyatt now owns what used to be called Joie de Vivre is now called JDV. So, they shortened the difficult French name there.

**Whitney Johnson:** I still like Joie de Vivre, but okay.

**Chip Conley:** I did too. You know, it's like you got to be sophisticated enough to know what it means.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. I just need to take a moment. I think one of the. So, this is all information that you have processed because you are not 50 years old anymore. But I just want to just pause for a moment of, you really did have this experience of five of your friends took their life. You are on stage. You then sit down, you almost die. And so, this put you in that place, that stark reality of what am I doing on this planet?

**Chip Conley:** Yeah, yeah. It's, um. There's a Mark Twain quote, which the, I think it's Mark Twain said, "the two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the and the day you realize why you were born."

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Chip Conley:** And, I think for me, I wasn't really clear yet with that experience of death or an NDE, a near-death experience of why I was here on earth, but I was clear that the chapter of my life that was defined by my identity as the founder and CEO of this company. Was coming to a close, and that was, it was hard. And for the next two years, I had to process that. And fortunately, one of my best friends is a coach, and she was really helpful for me during that time. So, that when I did announce two years later that, you know, this John Pritzker, whose family started Hyatt, had bought the company. Um, my process of moving on had happened.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Chip Conley:** But others were shocked by it, and it was that was the hard part. But there's a quote from the movie Robert De Niro in the movie *The Intern*. He says, "Musicians don't retire. They quit when there's no more music left inside of them."

**Chip Conley:** And so, I knew I had music inside of me. I didn't know how to define music. I would, you know, today I would call it I had wisdom, but I would never have called it that back then. And it was I took a couple of years to just I wrote another book called *Emotional Equations*, and it became a New York Times best seller. It was really telling a little bit of my story of this emotional journey I'd been on. And, you know, I did a few other things that were just amazing, but I had spaciousness. And then, I got a call out of the blue from the three founders of Airbnb. Now, I really, even though I was a hotelier, and I didn't know much about Airbnb, this tiny little company, this is two, 11 years ago, and most people had never heard of it. And I, I took a call from Brian Chesky, who was the CEO and co-founder, and he said, the first thing he said to me was, Chip, how would you like to democratize hospitality? I was like, wow, what an opening line.

**Chip Conley:** So, he came and spent the afternoon with me and convinced me that I should be his in-house mentor and that I should help this tech company become a hospitality company when it grows up. And so, what was supposed to be 15 hours a week became almost overnight, 15 hours a day. And that's when I really said, okay, Brian, I'm, I'm all in. I'm gonna have to change my life. I've not. I wasn't prepared for this. I'm gonna have to, like, clear the decks, drop off a bunch of boards, etc.. I'm here for this, but I, you know, let's try this for six months. And we didn't. So, we didn't announce any of this publicly for six months. And so, I was in-house as his mentor. I became the head of global hospitality and strategy. I reported to Brian, which was weird. He was 31. I was 52, reporting to someone who was my mentee. So, I was mentoring him, and I reported to him. So, that was, it was fascinating. It actually worked. It worked pretty well because we had, I was a mentern. I was a mentor and an intern at the same time because I'd never worked in a tech company before. So, I was working in an environment amongst a boomer, amongst millennials, who, I needed to be as curious as I was wise; they ultimately called me the modern elder. And I didn't like that at first. Like you're making fun of my age. And they said, no, a modern elder is someone who is not about reverence, it's about relevance. And you're very relevant because you're as curious as you are wise. And I said, wow, uh, the perfect alchemy of curiosity and wisdom. That's what I would love to be. And so, I owned it. And for seven and a half years, four years full-time, and then three and a half years as a pretty active part-time strategic advisor, I helped take the company up to its YPO, its IPO.

**Whitney Johnson:** YPO too, probably.

**Chip Conley:** I'm a YPO member. So, that just slipped out of my mouth. Um, and it took it up to the IPO. And, you know, the founders would have done fine without me. I mean, they had a good business. It was doing great. But I think I, I think there are 3 or 4 areas where I really helped. One was to, help them to see what this company could be in the long term. And, and so, one of the things that Arthur Brooks wrote about in the book, *From Strength to Strength*, is the idea of crystallized intelligence. And when we're young, we have fluid intelligence. It's very fast and focused. We make decisions quickly. Sometimes they're wrong, and, but we're quick processors. As we get older, we process a little more, a little bit more slowly. But we actually think holistically, a little bit more, um, we, we use like

four-wheel drive of our brain. And in doing so, you can sort of access lyrical and logical left and right brain, you know, more quickly. And or, I'm sorry, more adeptly. And I think that, in many ways, I helped the company see its long-term potential. I definitely helped it become a hospitality company and go from, you know, having a very strange, you know, quality standards for their host to like building some, some, some standards there, helping build the culture. But I think more than anything, just helping build an emotional intelligence. I learned digital intelligence from Brian. But he learned he learned emotional intelligence from me, and I. Emotional intelligence is such an important leadership quality. And we have to remember Brian started the company when he was 26. He was, he was a student at Rhode Island School of Design, and he'd never really started he'd never started a business. And he, so he was, he was a, but he was a quick study. And what I loved about him was he had a voracious appetite for learning about leadership. So, boy, I told him all about Clay Christensen. I told him about, you know, what.

**Whitney Johnson:** Did you teach him about Clay Christensen? Let's just do a little homage to Clay.

**Chip Conley:** Well, because. Because, um, Brian was a disrupter, and I had been a disrupter. I was a disrupter as a boutique hotelier. I was a founding board member of Burning Man, so I was a disrupter in that way. So, I have disruption built into my DNA.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's your DNA.

**Chip Conley:** So, what I had him read, um, some of Clay's work, but I also talked about the fact that. Wouldn't it be interesting? I said, Clay was fascinated by disruption, but he also was just a gracious man. And it wasn't like he thought disruption was about being a jerk. And I. And I said, you know, let's recognize it. 2 or 3 things. Number one is that. It's almost like every media article that came out back then was about Uber and Airbnb, the two sharing economy darlings. We don't even talk the language of sharing economy anymore. But back then, we did. And I said we need to disengage ourselves from Uber. Uber has, we don't want to have the same culture or reputation as Uber. They are a transactional company. We are a transformational company, and as such, we will be a disrupter in the hospitality space. But let's be a gracious disrupter. Let us let us go out and build relationships with the hotel industry, with destination marketing organizations that are marketing cities, and with corporate travel managers. Instead of them seeing us as the villain, let's, let's actually build relationships. And, I think it helped a lot, because, and also, let's pay taxes. Let's pay occupancy taxes, just like hotels do. Let's actually get regulated. Like how many companies say, like, hey, I want to be regulated. Well, I said, the only way we're ever going to get the valuation your VCs want, or RVCs want is for us to be legitimate. And we will not be legitimate without regulation. And this regulation will actually diminish some of our revenue potential, but it will also legitimize the fact that we are a serious business.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Chip Conley:** And, um, so, in terms of Clay, I mean, I, I really helped Brian to see that, you know, we. I thought of myself as a disrupter when I was a boutique hotelier. But in order to have true disruption, you need technology, in my opinion. And I think that was one of Clay's points of view as well. So, I could be an innovator as a boutique hotelier. But a disrupter has the scale at which the disruption can occur is so much faster when there's technology involved.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Chip Conley:** And so, that meant that the decisions we were going to make. Were exceptionally important because they were going to go viral quickly. And so, I slowed us down a little bit, and I said, listen, Brian, I've joined the company. We have 30 strategic initiatives. We're going to do an offsite retreat with the top ten of us in the company, and we're going to come up with four for this next year. And we're going to focus on those four, and we're going to do them really well. And if we do that, we are going to be in a much better place. Plus, we will not be so scattered just in terms of everybody running in too many different directions.

**Whitney Johnson:** I love that to the gracious disrupter because Clay really was so gracious. So, you're putting together the boutique hotelier, the technology we're disrupting, but we're going to do it graciously by partnering with people. Really beautiful. All right, so, that brings us to, you're a mentern and the idea of modern elder. And you

have a book coming out shortly called *Learning to Love Midlife*. Tell us about the book. How did it come about?

**Chip Conley:** Well, it came about because, uh, toward the end of my time, full-time with Airbnb, when I was going to part-time. I decided to go write another book, down in Baja, uh, a book called *Wisdom at Work: The Making of a Modern Elder*. And while I was writing that book, uh, I was going for runs on the beach. And one day, I came back from a run. And I had a Baja, Ahhah. And Baja, for those who don't know, it is in Mexico. Baja California Sur. We're about an hour north of Cabo San Lucas, on the beach. And my Baja ahah was, why do we not have midlife wisdom schools? Um, why don't we have a place where people go to reimagine and repurpose themselves in midlife? Because we're living longer. And actually Clay, Clay has been very clear about the fact that higher education is in trouble. And, you know, said ten years ago that, in the next 15 years, half the universities may go out of it, go out of business. And so, I started thinking, well, what if we created, like, a midlife wisdom school that ultimately, as more and more universities realize that they have to have lifelong learning or what I like to call long life learning built into their program in order to stay alive, we become a model for that.

**Chip Conley:** And so, the Modern Elder Academy (MEA) came to be. And the world's first midlife wisdom school. And you've been there.

**Whitney Johnson:** I have.

**Chip Conley:** We'll talk about that.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Chip Conley:** And I, I started becoming an expert, uh, by working with social scientists all over the world around the topic of midlife. And in some ways, it was such a, it felt like the perfect through line for my life because I had had a really crummy midlife, you know, between 45 and 50. And then my 50s were spectacular. But I'd never heard of something called the U-curve of happiness. And the U-curve of happiness basically shows that. You know, our life satisfaction drops from our early 20s. Bottoms out between 45 and 50. On average, 47.2 is the low point. Your mileage may vary. And then from your 50s on, with each decade, you get happier and happier until you die. And that was so out of that, out of coming from left field. Because our message that we sort of get from an ageist society is like, oh my God, if you can survive your midlife crisis, all you have to look forward to is disease, decrepitude, and death.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right?

**Chip Conley:** And in fact, and in fact, life gets better after 50 and life begins at 50 in some ways. So, I was really curious about this. I wanted to study it. And, and we created this workshop center where we do workshops around the clock, around the year. Um, weeklong workshops down in Baja. And that led me to writing the newest book, which is called, as you said, *Learning to Love Midlife*. It's like learning to love brussel sprouts or learning to love classical music. *Learning to Love Midlife*, and the subtitle being, *12 Reasons Why Life Gets Better with Age*. Because we're very familiar in our society about anti-aging products. We're not as familiar about pro-aging products, products that actually give you a sense that aging is not a bad thing. It's aging and growing are the same thing. Becca Levy at Yale has shown that when people shift their mindset on aging from a negative to a positive, they gain seven and a half years of additional life.

**Whitney Johnson:** That's amazing.

**Chip Conley:** Which is amazing because it's more additional life than if you stop smoking at 50. Which gives you four years. Or if you start exercising at 50, which gives you three years. So, shifting the mindset makes that kind of difference. But in talking to Becca, there was no laboratory like a real-world laboratory, mainstream laboratory, where people could go to like say, okay, how do I make this shift and how do I, you know, cultivate my sense of purpose at this age and how do I navigate my transitions? And, and most importantly, how do I own my wisdom? Because we're I think we're moving into a wisdom economy. We've been in a knowledge economy. The knowledge economy is now defined and owned by AI, and I think we are going to move into a wisdom economy

because that's where the scarcity will be. The knowledge is, you know, at our fingertips and all of it's in our iPhone. But wisdom and learning how to create wisdom management and wisdom practices on leadership teams and just in your own personal life is essential. And that's, so that's sort of what I'm doing, and that's what we are doing as an organization. But what I, what I do quite a bit in terms of white papers I write and things like that.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, that's really powerful that the AI is going to take care of um, remind me. So, Arthur Brooks is the crystallized intelligence. And what's the first part of your life intelligence?

**Chip Conley:** Fluid intelligence.

**Whitney Johnson:** Fluid intelligence. Okay. So, AI is going to help us be even more robust on the fluid intelligence, which is going to put the crystallized intelligence at, at an even greater premium. That's very interesting. And I love that you're talking about this idea of a wisdom economy. A couple of quotes that I found really interesting was, you had a favorite quote from David Bowie, which was a little bit of, I think a send-up of George Eliot is that "aging is the extraordinary process where you become the person you might have always been."

**Chip Conley:** Yeah. I mean, I think if we are, I think if we're living a full, comprehensive life, not compartmentalized, we are all the ages we've ever been. So, I'm the 12-year-old who's scared to, you know, go play on the basketball team. I'm the, you know, 14-year-old who had his first kiss. I am the 21-year-old who walks into my first business school class and feels like a youngster because I'm the youngest person in my business school class, and I have all of those experiences that I can call upon. And sometimes those personalities, those parts of my personality from those ages can come out, and I think. So, I don't think the crescendo of our life is to just be the wise sage who has no sense of humor and no, no youthful spirit. I mean, look at the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama has an incredible youthful spirit, wise soul and youthful spirit. And I think that is what I aspire to be as I get older is that mixture that combination of, um, being all ages I've ever been in, in one human.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's beautiful. You talk in the book about a midlife atrium, so could you just do some quick definitions of like, what is the definition of midlife right now, and what's the midlife atrium?

**Chip Conley:** Sure. So midlife, first of all, midlife has a bad brand. Let's be clear about that.

**Whitney Johnson:** You're changing that, though.

**Chip Conley:** Yeah. The first word that comes up when you say midlife, is crisis. And, you know, I say, okay, maybe it's chrysalis. It's like the midlife where the butterfly was the chrysalis caterpillar, chrysalis butterfly. And so, you know, it's a dark and gooey place, but it's also where the transformation happens. And so, midlife is, um, it's an era that now, sociologists say runs from age 35 to 75. Now, not all, not everybody says that. And if you do a Google search, you'll probably see 40 to 65. Um, but 35 to 75 is a growing number of sociologists are saying that. And so, it's a very long-life stage. It is a marathon. And so, it's an era where people need to sort of like say, okay, how do I let go of what's no longer working for me? Because I think the first half of our life is about accumulating, and the second half of our life is about editing. So, it's around midlife we start to learn how to edit things, which gives us space to learn something new as well. So, um, so I think that, you know, it's a, it's a life stage that I really wanted to give some attention to. The word adolescence didn't exist until 1904. And so, we thought of a person's teen years as being an adult. So, when you hit puberty, you were an adult. And then a guy named Stanley Hall wrote a book called, you know, *Adolescence* in 1904. And he was the president of the American Psychological Association. And he pretty much helped people to see that. Hey, 18 is when you become an adult. And that led to child labor laws that led to public junior high schools and high schools in a more significant way.

**Chip Conley:** Well, there's a word called middlescence that has not gotten much attention, but it's a relatively new word, and it's the adult corollary of adolescence. It's when you're going through hormonal, emotional, physical, and identity transitions, but they're happening in the middle of your life. So, I want to give attention to this middlescence, this midlife era. Um, because the truth is that, you know, if you're 54 years old, which is the average age of people coming to MEA, and you think you're going to live till age 90, and that's the average age of our 4,000 alums from 44 countries who've come to MEA. So, 54 is halfway between 18 and 90. So in essence, 54 is halfway through your adult life. And wow, most of us at age 54 would not say that. Because we'd say like, oh, I'm, you know, going out to



pasture or I'm sort of on, you know, I'm. You don't think of that as being halfway through your adult life. Because so much has happened between age 18 and 54. So, when we help people wake up to that fact and have some longevity literacy, we help them to then ask the deeper and bigger question of, gosh, ten years from now, what will I regret if I don't learn it or do it now? And that's a profound question that most of us don't ask ourselves in the second half of our adult life. But it's a question that led me to learn how to surf at 57 and learn Spanish at 57.

**Whitney Johnson:** Wow. Como estas?

**Chip Conley:** Muy bien. Uh, si? Uh, yeah. Me espanol es muy malo. Uh, is, uh para estoy mirando.

**Whitney Johnson:** Exactamente estas aprendiendo.

**Chip Conley:** Si. Gracias.

**Whitney Johnson:** And so, this idea of you're only halfway through your life, the mid-lessons. And so that's where the atrium comes from of, like, you're at this place where you can.

**Chip Conley:** Yes.

**Whitney Johnson:** Kind of.

**Chip Conley:** Yes. Back to the atrium.

**Whitney Johnson:** Stand above and observe and see where you are. So how does that pull together for you?

**Chip Conley:** Thank you. So, Mary Catherine Bateson, actually, it's her quote. She was a Harvard professor. Her parents were Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. And so, she said that with the additional longevity that we've earned in the last hundred years, we sort of think as if we have more life at the end of our life. It's like we've added two bedrooms to the backyard. But she said, it's really, you know, the blueprint of our life is different than that. It's like we have a midlife atrium. We've completely rearranged. We should rearrange how the home is built such that there's this spaciousness in the middle of, of the home, just like there's a spaciousness in the middle of your life to ask the deeper, bigger, reflective, contemplative questions of how you want to live the second half of your life. So, in many ways, just like MEA has taken Becca Levy's work about, you know, at Yale, the seven and a half years of additional life and tried to make it real. We've tried to become a midlife atrium using Mary Catherine Bateson's work to say, we are a place where people come in midlife. And it could be, you know, one-sixth of the people who come to MEA are millennials. So, it's not just older mid-lifers, it's younger mid-lifers. Um, so, but people come with the idea that they want the space to reimagine and repurpose themselves, and that's professionally, but also personally.

**Chip Conley:** The thing that's interesting is we go through so many transitions in midlife. We go through a lot of transitions in adolescence, as well as middlecence, and whether that's menopause, or our parents passing away, or empty nest, or divorce, or changing careers, or where you live, or a newfound spiritual curiosity. So, Richard Rohr, who you and I both admire, is a student of MEA. He came down at age 78 and actually came to a workshop, and he's actually teaching with us next year, at our Santa Fe, New Mexico campus. And he said very, you know, impressively that, you know, the first half of our life, the primary operating system is our ego, and the second half of our life, it's our soul. But nobody is issued operating instructions about this new, you know, operating system and how you're going to live and drive that operating system the second half of your life. And so, MEA offers that, too, because there are a lot of people around age 50 who start to feel this. They may have been somewhat dormant in their spiritual or religious life, but something starts to actually bubble up. And, of course, that's not everybody. And, but that's a lot of people. And I think some of it has to do with just meaning and purpose becoming just so much more present for them.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know, a question that just came up for me. And then I want you to share with our listeners about the three campuses that you have. Do you ever find yourself? I'll share my experience I sometimes find

myself feeling impatient of. Or frustrated because I'm not moving from ego to soul fast enough. Do you ever feel a sense of like, oh, I want to get to the place of soul faster? I want to shed the ego faster.

**Chip Conley:** Yeah. I mean, I think I've come to look at it as a dance. The ego and the soul. Not at war with each other, but dancing and me observing and laughing at the ego trying. The ego trying to be the man in the dance. When, in fact.

**Whitney Johnson:** Well played.

**Chip Conley:** Yeah, I mean, again, excuse the gender traditionalist here.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, please.

**Chip Conley:** But the ego really actually learning how to be led by the soul and that the ego never goes away. It's always there. It's going to be. Yes, yes, there are the enlightened beings who like, like, completely shed it. But I think the ego is always there. Being able to laugh at your ego, man, that that's when you know that you're in a you are in a maturing process as a human. You are an old-growth human, not just an old-growth redwood, an old-growth human. And I love to be able to laugh at my ego, because my ego does crop up every day in one way or another.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. I just thought of the pasodoble, right, where you're the man is the bullfighter, and then the woman is the bull. And like that is a great metaphor. Okay, so tell us about these. You're, so I've obviously been to Baja, and here's, here's what I wrote about it in my newsletter after coming back. It was a magical setting, one where the customer experience is off the charts. NPS score of 99. One of the founders is hospitality guru Chip Conley, former founder of Joie de Vivre boutique hotels. It was a master class in how to put on an event and an experience. So. So tell us about these.

**Chip Conley:** You have a high standard. So, I appreciate that.

**Chip Conley:** Yeah. You know, well, first of all, to be in a place in your life where you feel like it's just the culmination of your different interests and your talents taking hospitality with wellness, with education. Um, you know, and I love teaching. And so, it is all of those things. Our first campus is in Baja, and it's, you know, in a rural fishing and, and farming village. It's beautiful. It's it's only an hour from the airport, which is nice. But it doesn't feel like you're in Cabo. Um, it feels like you're.

**Whitney Johnson:** Very remote.

**Chip Conley:** Yeah. So that's good because we like the remoteness, because, you know, you want people to feel like, okay, I don't have a lot of distractions other than nature and beauty. The second campus, which will open in March, is in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It's a 2600-acre regenerative horse ranch, and quite beautiful. And it's, uh, we'll have two, two retreat centers there. And the third campus is next to Saint John's College, right in the town of Santa Fe. And that is going to start construction next year. It's a historic property. And so, we're going to take it to the National Historic Register. And so those are the three various campuses. We also have, um, a residential community, a regenerative community where people live. 26 people have homes around a regenerative farm. And we'll be doing that in Santa Fe as well. And then we have online programs. So, a lot of people, first, people who can't make it to a campus, a lot of them say, wow, I, you know, I'd love to try the transitions course or the reframing retirement course or the purpose course. So, we have those as well.

**Whitney Johnson:** So good. All right. So, the final three questions. If a listener listening right now is scared to take on something new like midlife, in my parlance, jump to a new S Curve. What would you tell them? What words of encouragement would you give them?

**Chip Conley:** You don't have to do it alone. I mean, that's I think we live in a society, especially for those of us who are from the US on the pod, on this podcast, where the rugged individualist is, is just so woven into our fabric, particularly for men. I mean, for women are socialized at an earlier age, where they're girls to, you know, to look for support and have an emotional vulnerability. Whereas, but let's just say across the board, everybody in the United

States has a bit of a rugged, individualist, mindset built into them. And so, just you don't have to do it alone. And, I think for so many of us, we think that what we're going through is abnormal. Especially some of the things that happen in midlife. And, and we could talk about it with other people and realize, oh, you're going through it too. And when you feel that all of a sudden, not only do you feel a little reassured and not feel so badly about yourself, but you also can start sharing best practices. One of the things we say at MEA is wisdom is not taught, it's shared. And so, how do you create the environment for people to share their best practices and their wisdom?

**Whitney Johnson:** You know, when you said that you don't have to do it alone? I could feel this immediate sense of calm, come over me. Just that reassurance that comes of just like you're not alone, you there are other people around you that you can do this with. Really, that was really encouraging. Something that I tend to do in my coaching, well, not tend to, pretty much always do in my coaching. And, but also like to end these conversations with is, what was useful for you in this conversation? It may be something that you said, it may be something I said, but it's probably just an idea or a thought that you had as a consequence of this time that we got to spend together. So, what was useful for you?

**Chip Conley:** Whitney? I think it was actually something you said to me early in the podcast about the safety and comfort of my home. You know.

**Chip Conley:** The fact that I grew up, you know, in a middle to upper-middle-class family, I went to high school in the inner city. So, I was they called me the curious white boy, because it was a predominantly nonwhite school. But I loved it so much. But I grew up with a family that gave me a sense that I was supported. Now, yes, they didn't love when I wanted to do something totally different. But the fact that I felt that soil, the soil, the soil that I was brought up in felt fertile, for me to be able to do that. I mean, I had good soil. Some of my friends in high school who grew up in the inner city did not have good soil, and so, they had to figure out how to replenish it. And I had good soil. So, my parents provided me good soil. There's a Notre Dame theologian who, Tom Morris, I think is his name. And he says, "The thing for us to do in our life is to be good soil." And I love that.

**Whitney Johnson:** Any final thoughts?

**Chip Conley:** No, I think my final thought is, I hope I'll see some of you out there in the world. Um, I hope you'll check out the book *Learning to Love Midlife*. I think it's a, it's a really good book for a book club.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes, I'd say that. Agreed.

**Chip Conley:** Because people are going to have different ideas about the 12 different reasons why life gets better with age. I think it's really well suited for a conversation. And so, I highly recommend that you buy the book and then create a little book club around it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. I have to say, I guess my final thought for you is that this is a big idea, like a big idea. And I nominated you for Thinkers50 on it, because I do think it's such a big breakthrough idea of that. Again, like you said, and quoting Becca Levy, if we can reframe middle age, we add seven years to our life. That's a big idea. So yeah, Chip thank you. Best of luck with the launch.

**Chip Conley:** Love you. Whitney.

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In order to disrupt, you have to know you have the potential to disrupt. Otherwise, the S Curve is just a nice LinkedIn post. Real change in how we see the world comes from seeing that we have that potential, whether it's unlocked through extreme stress or growth. The trouble with accepting our potential to disrupt is getting out of the ruts of everyday life. The mundane can seem so inescapable. It's taken for granted along with our ability to change those things.

But that's where Chip's love of space comes in. He's seen firsthand what changing your environment can do for you. Whether it's the Masonic Temple revitalized as a party venue, pioneering boutique hotels as a viable business model, or these new midlife atriums. Chip knows that the easiest way to start disrupting yourself is by changing what's around you. Nothing could be more disruptive to your environment than the near-death experience Chip described. But even that he's harnessed into positive change a new S Curve to climb, a little more potential shown through after that day, that premium of crystallized intelligence as he described.

For more on crystallized intelligence, listen to Arthur C. Brooks, [episode 294](#). On becoming a leader in your own health, to face midlife in the best condition you can there's my recent talk with Dr. Bill Kapp, [episode 346](#). And for a touch of humility on the far end of midlife, there's my [bonus episode](#) with Tom Peters. Thank you again to Chip Conley and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's show, hit subscribe so you don't miss a single episode. Thank you to our producer, Alexander Tuerk, production assistant Etta King, and production coordinator, Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this has been Disrupt Yourself.