Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 357: SPENCER COX

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? It's you. How many of us think of ourselves as leaders? What does it take day in and day out to lead a group of people effectively? It's not easy, that's for sure. On a very granular level, leading is balancing a thousand decisions, huge and small, every day. So, what guides your hand? How do you build your morals into each of those decisions? Republican Governor of Utah, Spencer Cox, is an anomaly in a time of waning bipartisanship. He starred in a campaign ad with—not against—his opponent in the governor's race. His vice chair in the National Governors Association is a Democrat—and a close friend at that. He's also been a bit of an anomaly in how he's charted his life, turning down Harvard and a cushy lawyer job for his family farm in Fairview. But Governor Cox is an anomaly we can learn from. How do you build a belief system as a leader and strengthen it when it seems like the political winds are blowing against you? How do you find success and stay true to yourself? I hope you enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: So, governor, I want to start with the practical role of being a governor. Most of us have these preconceptions about how much influence you have. But in your experience, how does a governor contribute?

Spencer Cox: Well, there's lots of ways the governor contributes. And by the way—this is a question I ask myself all the time. How much influence do I have? How can I use that influence in positive ways? I got to serve as lieutenant governor under Governor Herbert and got kind of a front row seat to watch a governor and the way he was able to influence and use his position of authority. So obviously you have kind of the duties and roles of a governor, the checks and balances that the Constitution always imagined, and the state constitution. So, I have influence. I get to propose a budget to the legislature, and that sets out my priorities, the things that I think are important. I get to sign or veto any piece of legislation that comes forward, and that's a way to exact influence. We have over 23,000 employees in the state of Utah, and I'm the CEO of those employees. And that's a way to use influence in a positive way. But then there's just—governors get asked every day—questions. We have press

conferences. We're expected to weigh in on things that are happening in our state and in our country. And so, I get those questions often.

Spencer Cox: And I think that's where you use influence and can use influence. There are certainly different ways to do this. I look at governing the way I look at coaches. I'm a sports guy at heart. There are different coaches out there. There are coaches who get their teams to win by throwing chairs and assaulting their players, right? And they win games. They do. They're effective. You can use fear to do that. But the coaches that I admire most are those who help their players understand what they're trying to do, why they're trying to do it, who bring the team together, who get the team to play for each other instead of themselves, who are able to take kind of the selfishness out of it and find that higher level of competition. I think those are the governors that I admire most. There are several in this country that I love and adore, Republicans and Democrats, who are really, really good at this. And I've tried to pattern myself after those. There are others who try to use fear and divisiveness to get their way, and I think we can do better.

Whitney Johnson: So, you opened the door. Who are some coaches that you admire?

Spencer Cox: Yeah. So, I've been I grew up a fan of football, obviously. So, here in the state of Utah, when I was growing up, LaVell Edwards was the coach of coaches. Everybody, you know, all kind of admired LaVell Edwards and so he's somebody that I, you know, I grew up with. Jerry Sloan was a coach of the Utah Jazz. Different guy. Kind of rough around the edges, tough guy, old school guy. But again, someone who players just admired and adored. And I have to give a shout out to coach Will Hardy, the coach of the Utah Jazz right now. He's my kind of coach. He's a player's coach. Everybody loves him, responds to him. A young guy who's getting it done.

Whitney Johnson: Tell me about some governors you admire.

Spencer Cox: There are several governors that that I just love and adore in our country right now. Governor Gordon in Wyoming, somebody I've worked closely with. Governor Sununu is fantastic up in up in New Hampshire. Governor Asa Hutchinson, he's not a governor anymore, but he's somebody who was very influential on me. I should probably name some Democrats, since I mentioned that already. I think that's important as well, the relationships we have there. Governor Wes Moore is a new governor in Maryland, a good friend and his predecessor, who was a Republican, also somebody that I admired and worked very closely with. And Governor Shapiro, new governor as well. There's a new crop of Democrats that are all very impressive. I've watched what he has done in Pennsylvania. They had a bridge collapse, some major infrastructure challenges that he had to respond to. He's been dealing with anti-Semitism in his state. And then Governor Polis, who is a Democrat, my vice chair of the National Governors Association in Colorado. We've worked very closely together on some things. We have major disagreements. I do with all three of them. Governor Maura Healey in Massachusetts as well. So, I'm lucky to be able to work in a bipartisan group with good Republicans and good Democrats who are trying to do things the right way. Even when we disagree.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, you mentioned, National Governors Association. You are the chair. And then Colorado's Governor Polis works with you. Tell us a little bit about that collaboration. And you mentioned something called #disagree better.

Spencer Cox: Yeah. So, we, in the National Governors Association, we rotate every year. So, a Republican and a Democrat as chair and vice chair. I was the vice chair to Governor Murphy, Phil Murphy—again, another great Democrat who I've gotten to know well in New Jersey. And now I get to be the chair and Governor Polis was elected as the vice chair. So, we chose this this idea of Disagree Better. Every chair gets to run an initiative. Usually there are things like, you know, infrastructure. I was looking at health care and energy policy, immigration, you know, all of the hot button issues of the day. But just had this epiphany that we can't solve the biggest issues facing our country if we hate each other. And so, I pitched it to my fellow governors. I pitched it to Governor Polis, and to his credit, he jumped right in and agreed with what we're trying to accomplish. Again, he and I disagree on lots of different things. We've had debates about abortion. We've had debates about who has the best skiing, Utah or Colorado. I mean, the really important stuff. Right? And yet, we've tried to model how we can disagree without hating each other, how we can find common ground in some areas and find ways to work

together. And so, he's been a great example to me on this very issue, as he's worked with Republicans in his state. Very interesting, his first major initiative was an all-day kindergarten initiative, and he worked with a Republican to run that bill. His first major bill was run by somebody of the opposing party. And that interested me as well. And so, it's been a great partnership. We just had a big convening—spent a couple of days in Colorado working with him and Colorado State University and other institutions there—on how we can depolarize and disagree without tearing our country apart.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, what doe disagreeing better look like when you are the chief executive of a state? I mean, how do you ensure that others can disagree productively with you when you are the one in power?

Spencer Cox: Yeah, that's an interesting question. I'm a fighter by nature. I'm an attorney. I am a, well I say I'm a recovering attorney, but a litigator, you know, spent time in court. And one of the things you get really good at is, is tearing the opponent apart. Right? And fighting back. It's an adversarial process by design, on purpose. And so, it's again, it's something I have to work on constantly. And there's a couple ways to do this. One is tone. It's the way we present our ideas, the way we treat our opponents. Do we treat them with respect? Do we treat them with dignity? I talk often about we should attack ideas and not people. And I think our country certainly needs more of that. But even how we attack the idea, do we do we look for the good in those ideas? Do we assume the worst in people or not? So, I've had to be better at that. Another way is through process. Sometimes we have the ability to get our way and to kind of skip steps in that process. And I found that even though that, it's easy to do and I've been guilty of it sometimes, it's not healthy. People get less angry and less frustrated if they feel like they've had an opportunity to be heard, if they feel like the process is fair, even though, you know, sometimes there are winners and losers, sometimes we can find common ground.

Spencer Cox: But sometimes in politics, a bill passes, or it doesn't pass. And so, do we give people an opportunity to muster their opposition, to make their argument, to feel like the deck is not stacked against them? I do think that's really important. And one of the things I've tried to do is make sure there's a seat at the table for people I disagree with. So, when we do have a controversial issue or topic—an example of this was transgender health care for youth and banning some of the surgeries and some of the hormones that had been prescribed to young people. Knowing that was going to happen, invited transgender youth and their families right here to the to the governor's mansion to meet with legislators. We could have that conversation so that going into the legislative session, there was at least a mutual respect and understanding that these are real people who would be impacted. And it certainly changed the tone and tenor of that debate. It changed the outcomes in some ways. Again, not in ways that the LGBTQ community wanted, but there were some changes to the bill that that made it a little more palatable. And that would not have happened if we hadn't had some of those discussions.

Whitney Johnson: What I hear from you when you're talking about this is dignity. Treating people with dignity.

Spencer Cox: That's a word we use often. The idea that that all of us have dignity and that we should treat people with that kind of respect, that dignity—kind of get rid of the animosity that we see out there, the hate. There's just too much of it. And so yeah, I'm a big fan of dignity and treating people with dignity.

Whitney Johnson: All right. I want to get really practical for just a moment. So, let's say that I'm a person who's not very good at being disagreed with. I'm in a position of relative power in any given situation. What can I do in that moment so that when you disagree with me, the next time you disagree with me, you'll actually tell me that you disagree with me. What's one very practical thing I can do? It might be what I say, my body language. What's one thing that I could do?

Spencer Cox: So, my favorite thing—and it's something I actually practice, I practice on my kids, I practice on my spouse, I practice on my constituents—it's a simple phrase. It's a simple request, and it changes everything. All you have to say is, tell me more about why you feel that way or why you think that way. Now this does a couple things. One, it helps me calm down because again, my first reaction is I want to fight back. I want to punch back. I want to tell you why you're wrong. Tell me more about why you feel that way gives me an opportunity to take a breath and calm down. Then the second thing it tells you, the person I'm disagreeing with, that I actually care about what you think and why you think it. The third thing that's important is it forces your opponent to actually articulate why they believe that. Far too often, in I believe both parties in our society today, we just respond

because this is what our party thinks or this is what we think we're supposed to think, and we maybe haven't even gotten deep enough to understand why we feel that way. So, it's helpful to articulate those reasons.

Spencer Cox: Sometimes I have to ask the question 2 or 3 times. I have to keep digging. Okay, so tell me more. Tell me more about why you feel that way. And the fourth reason it helps, and it's so magical—ultimately you get down to a core belief, and most human beings have the same core beliefs. We love our family. We love our community. We love our country. We love other people. We want to help make the world a better place. We disagree on how to do those things, but if you can get down to a core, then then we can start to find common ground, right? The fifth thing that that helps is in giving you that opportunity, you're much more likely to give me that opportunity. Right? So, then I can say something like, can I tell you why I feel the way I do? And that leads again to dignity and respect, even if we don't ever come to an agreement, we'll at least understand why that person, they're not crazy, they're not irrational - usually, sometimes they are. But usually their life circumstances, their education, whatever it is, has led them to a different place or a different outcome.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, I want to flip this really quickly. What if I'm not very good at disagreeing? What's something I can do to practice?

Spencer Cox: Well…

Whitney Johnson: Because you do encounter people like that.

Spencer Cox: You do.

Whitney Johnson: They're not good at saying I don't agree with you.

Spencer Cox: Yeah, they're just not. And that's where patience I think is really, really important. It is one of the reasons I'm trying to elevate this, is to make it an issue. It's something, it's always been below the surface with every other issue, but I want to make it the issue. And there are some people out there who are just disagreeable, right? They don't want to do this, that the incentive structure is lined up. That's why we got here and how we got here. I do think it's important to understand human nature. And there is some of this inside of all of us, and it's something we have to battle constantly. One of my favorite quotes, actually comes from President John Adams. And John Adams, he, second president of the United States, said this and I'll probably butcher it, but I'll get it close. I'm going off the cuff here. He said, without the political virtues of humility, patience and moderation—I think those were the three patience, humility and moderation—we are all ravenous political beasts. Or, you know, we're all these, these ravenous beasts. Now, I want you to think about that. That's kind of the natural man, the human inside all of us. We slow down for car wrecks, right? A train wreck is entertaining for us. There's something inside of us that makes us these tribal, ravenous beasts. And he said then we need the virtues, these political virtues. We all need them of humility, patience and moderation. Now, part of that is we need those to be less disagreeable, but we also need them when we're engaged with someone who is disagreeable, right?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And building on that is the question of someone who's disagreeable. For example, you said you like to challenge, right? You were trained as a lawyer. That was something that you're good at. Some people are not good at challenging.

Speaker3: Right.

Whitney Johnson: So, what advice would you give to them?

Spencer Cox: That's okay. It's okay. So, I tell people I want you to stay true to who you are, to what you believe in. I'm not trying to get people that, Disagree Better is not just about, it's not another civility initiative but it is about disagreeing. And so, I want people to have the confidence to stand on their values, to be able to share what they believe. And again, the reason they don't do that is they're usually afraid of just being attacked back, being torn down. And you can present your views in a way that can be noncontroversial. And again, I do that by just saying, hey, you know, again, I just want you to share what I think and why I think it and what I feel and keeping an open mind. I get—I have to say because I think this is relevant to your question—I get two different types of

attacks on Disagree Better. Generally, from the right I hear, you're just trying to get us to go along. You want us to give up our principles and just agree? I'm like, no, no, no—that's not what I'm talking about at all.

Spencer Cox: Generally, from the left I get, I don't even want to have a conversation with those people. Those people are awful, and I don't want to engage with them. Now, that's a little different than your question, but I, we chose Disagree Better those two words on purpose. There is healthy conflict and there is unhealthy conflict. We always think of unhealthy conflict as people fighting and yelling at each other. And that is unhealthy conflict. But another version of unhealthy conflict is a refusal to engage at all. That is also unhealthy. Now, that refusal can be because you hate the other side so much or you think they're so terrible you're not going to engage. It can also be that I'm just terrified to engage because I don't want any part of this. And because as we get more polarized, more and more people are just disengaging completely. And that's bad for democracy, that's bad for our country. And so, we need people to care. We need people to share their views. The exhausted majority needs to engage again. They're no longer the silent majority. They're just tired of it. But I think if we can practice these principles, it can help all of us.

Whitney Johnson: And that's the moderation, the humility and patience. That was really the question I was asking. And one of the things that you're, I'm thinking of as you're talking through this, is the is the nonviolent communication framework of, here's how I'm feeling, here's the experience I'm having. You may not agree with me, but I just want to tell you about this is how I feel about this. And that, I think goes to the question I was asking you. How do you disagree better when you're uncomfortable disagreeing with people?

Whitney Johnson: So anyway, very interesting. Okay. What are some of your hobbies?

Spencer Cox: Do we get hobbies? Is hobbies a thing?

Whitney Johnson: It could be disagreeing better, but do you have other things that you like to do?

Spencer Cox: Yeah. This is this is definitely my hobby. No, I love to read. My wife and I are both voracious readers, so we always have 2 or 3 books that we're reading at the same time.

Whitney Johnson: So, what are you reading right now?

Spencer Cox: So yeah, I actually just started today or last night. I started Tim Alberta's new book on the evangelical movement in our country and how politics has kind of infected religion. And I want to say it's called, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*, something like that. Wonderful book. I just finished McKay Coppins's book on Mitt Romney. Inskeep has a new book, I think it's called Disagree We Must (*Differ We Must*). It's about Abraham Lincoln and interactions that he had on, and again healthy conflict and disagreement. So, you'll notice some patterns in my life. I'm not a real fiction reader. I care about this stuff. Abby and I like to golf. We're, I'm not a good golfer. She's a better golfer than I am. But it is an opportunity for us to do something together to get outside and enjoy this beautiful place. We love to hike. We're runners. And so, we just enjoy living in this beautiful state and the great outdoors and taking advantage of the beauty that's all around us.

Whitney Johnson: So, let's jump back. I'd love to explore your road to leadership. So, you came out of Utah State University, turned down Harvard Law to go to Washington and Lee—which is just a few miles from where I live currently.

Spencer Cox: It is.

Whitney Johnson: Then you come home to Utah as a counselor. Talk me through the making of some of these decisions.

Spencer Cox: Yeah, we've made a lot of poor decisions on paper. I will tell you.

Whitney Johnson: Tell us more.

Spencer Cox: Well, you know, saying no to Harvard. Coming back and working for a big, prestigious law firm and deciding to leave that to go back to the little town that that I grew up and next door to the town Abby grew up in. We went to high school together. To raise our kids on the family farm, to go back and help manage the telephone company that my great grandfather started—took a huge cut in pay to do that. Terrible decision. I got appointed to the city council because nobody else wanted to do it, and they needed free legal work because they had this huge lawsuit and knew if I was on the city council, I would do the free legal work for them. And running for mayor and then county commission after that. All terrible decisions that eventually led me to the legislature. And then I was only there for nine months. Another terrible decision. Governor Herbert asked me to be his lieutenant governor unexpectedly, when his had resigned. So, I left my wonderful job and career building this company that was growing rapidly and started commuting 200 miles round trip every day to the capital for seven and a half years as lieutenant governor. So, these are some of the crazy...

Whitney Johnson: 200 miles every day?

Spencer Cox: Yeah, 100 miles up, 100 miles back to the small town because we wanted to keep our kids on the farm. And so, again, on paper, almost every one of those decisions was a bad decision. It meant making less money, more time, more discomfort, you know, less of the things that the world tells you are important and more of the things that aren't. So, Abby and I have never made decisions based on, you know, based on money. We've always tried to do what we felt was best for our family and our community. We were both raised from an early age. My dad was the mayor of our little town.

Whitney Johnson: Town of 1200 people.

Spencer Cox: 1200 people, yeah. There were probably only, you know, 900 when he was the mayor, but we've had kind of this ethos that we need to give back and that driven us. We're religious people. And so, we believe in prayer. We believe that God cares about all of us in our own lives, and that he will direct us into the things that we're supposed to do. And so almost all of the bad decisions we've made were made because we felt like that's what we were supposed to do, even if we didn't know why or couldn't explain it at the time. All of that being said, I'm a...

Whitney Johnson: Before you go on.

Spencer Cox: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So, one could argue that you were disrupting yourself over and over again, because if you look at the theory of disruption, what does it say? You basically make a decision. You're at one point on the y axis of success. You can call it a 12 and you move down that y axis of success. However, you're defining it because you believe in the future that the slope of your line will be steeper than it was before. And so, you've disrupted yourself over and over again, because you were doing a very different calculus than other people were doing.

Spencer Cox: That's exactly right. And in fact, that's a framework that I've used in my life. A big Clayton Christensen fan, read his work early on in my, actually started when I was running the telecommunications company.

Whitney Johnson: You read, *The Innovator's Dilemma.*

Spencer Cox: I did read, *The Innovator's Dilemma* and purposely started disrupting our company in a way that made us wildly successful. And it tripled the size of the company in just a few years using that framework. And he wrote a book about how to live your life as well. And we made every one of our managers read that book, and it was very influential. I should also point out that we are making leaders in rural Utah read that book every year. We have a cohort of rural leaders that I think this is the third cohort this year, that we're helping bring together. And that's the book.

Whitney Johnson: You're reading, *How Will You Measure Your Life*?

Spencer Cox: Yep. *How Will You Measure Your Life*? That's the one.

Whitney Johnson: Wow.

Spencer Cox: And so, I've used that framework. We're constantly trying to disrupt what we're doing, making sure we're still doing things for the right reasons. When Governor Herbert asked me to be lieutenant governor, we almost said no for all the reasons that I just mentioned. And it was my wife that changed things. She said maybe the fact that we don't want to do this means that we should do this. And she said, there are too many people in politics that really, really, really want these jobs. We need more people who don't want these jobs, which is a very disruptive, oriented way of thinking. And that led us to saying, yes. We went through the same calculus when we ran for governor. Do we want to do this? No. Absolutely not. I know it's weird when I, when I share that, most people don't believe me. Like that's something politicians say when you really, really did want to do this, I can assure you that we did not. And we decided that if we ever really, really, really wanted this job, it would be time to be done. And so, the discomfort is comforting.

Whitney Johnson: Why did you not want it?

Spencer Cox: Because I knew what it entailed, right? Everybody, when people think of being a governor, you see the good parts of that, right? You get to live in a mansion, right?

Speaker3: A beautiful mansion, by the way.

Spencer Cox: This beautiful home that is not ours. It's the, you know, it belongs to the people of the state of Utah. By the way, it's more like living in an upstairs apartment in a museum. It's weird, people walking around all the time. But we're so blessed and lucky. You know, you see them giving the speeches and you see kind of the glorious side of that. As lieutenant governor, I got to see the weight that Governor Herbert faced every day. I got to see Covid and, you know, and what happened there. I got to see the polarization that was happening in our country and that was starting to happen more in the state of Utah. We've been a little more immune than everywhere else, but there's certainly a threat of that here. I got to see the death threats. I got to see I got to see the pressure on family members, you know, on kids and grandkids and that your, you know, you never get a vacation. Even when you go on vacation, you're still the governor and it's still there and it's constant. And so I, and again...

Speaker3: You saw the cost.

Spencer Cox: I saw the cost. And I'm not complaining at all. But I had no desire for any of that. But again, I have a desire to try to make the state a better place. I think that I had a very unique background. We've never had a governor that had been on a city council and a mayor and a county commissioner and a legislator and a lieutenant governor. So, I had that background, and again, you know, we try to seek divine guidance and see if this is something we're supposed to do. I always have to give a caution there. I don't believe that God wanted me to be governor. I don't say that at all. I do believe that he wanted me to run and that that was the path that we were supposed to. The people get to decide that. I think there were many of my opponents who prayed and felt that they were supposed to run as well, and if we had lost, I would have been just as satisfied with that. And so, but again, it's so important to find your path. Sacrifice is another virtue that I think we've kind of lost a little bit as a society. Something that we used to uphold as something that is worthy. Sacrifice is a good thing. Putting off the things you want now for later gratification or to help someone else. And so, we feel so blessed to be able to do this.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. We'll circle back to this. So, you mentioned your opponents, how they had felt really good about running for governor as well. And I think that's an interesting question of like, it's important to be in the race, you don't know what the outcome is going to be, but you're going to be in the race. But it was interesting too, because during that election you put out an ad, not against one of your opponents, Chris Peterson—but you appeared next to him. It's a delightful ad calling for a cooling of the political temperature. And what was the outcome of that when you did that ad together?

Spencer Cox: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: How did people respond?

Spencer Cox: Wow. It was very unexpected. It's something that happened kind of on a whim. A friend of mine was really worried. We run in the same cycle—Utah's a little different than most states—we run in the same cycles as a presidential race. So, this is 2020. I'm running for governor. I've got the nomination. I'm running against a Democrat. And its now late September, early October and Trump-Biden is getting vicious and you can see the nation fraying. We've had riots in the streets over the summer, George Floyd. We had you know, on the left. On the right she was concerned that, this friend of mine, that if Biden won that, that the right would do something terrible. January 6th ended up happening. She was prescient there. She's like, can't you do something? And I thought, what am I supposed to do? I'm just, you know, running for the governor of Utah. And so, I had this, I couldn't sleep all weekend, I had this crazy idea that I would call my opponent and say, let's do an ad together. He's a great guy. And he agreed. And so, we did it. The outcome was that it went viral in a way we didn't expect. We knew it would get attention here in Utah, not across the nation and across the rest of the world. For like a week, we were asked to appear on every major news show, including in Europe.

Spencer Cox: I mean, the BBC and others were reaching out to us. Millions and millions of hits. I don't know what the largest projection was, but it was tens of millions of views of that ad. And it helped me to understand that this exhausted majority is real. Ultimately, by the way, it led to Disagree Better. A professor at the University of Utah submitted our ad to a major research project that was happening at Stanford. Stanford took, they looked at hundreds of ads or hundreds of videos. They called them interventions. They chose ours and 24 others. They took these 25 interventions, and they tested them on over 30,000 people to see if they helped to depolarize people, asking them questions before and after. And our ad worked, completely unintentional. We didn't design it that way. It just seemed like, I mean, a friend of mine and I wrote it, wrote the ad, and so we've taken that, and we've asked other governors to do ads together or with, someone in their state. We've now got about 15 governors that are participating. Governor Polis and I did one together about disagreeing better around the dinner table.

Whitney Johnson: It was delightful.

Spencer Cox: Yeah. Your woke uncle, or your MAGA uncle and your woke niece. We've got governors of Missouri and Kansas doing one together. So good things are coming out of that crazy idea.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Doesn't sound like it was so crazy.

Spencer Cox: It turned out better than we expected.

Whitney Johnson: You grew up on a farm. How does that affect your leadership?

Spencer Cox: So, growing up on a farm is interesting. Obviously, there's a work ethic that goes along with that, right? We were milking cows when I was young. My dad sold the cows later, but we were still raising hay for other farmers. And you just you have to get up early in the morning and you go to bed late at night, and you have to do the hard physical labor. So, I think that that's obviously...

Whitney Johnson: You know how to work.

Spencer Cox: I know how to work. Yeah. We said that when we were running for office. There may be smarter people than us in the race, but nobody's going to outwork us. And I think we've proven that. It helps you. There's a humility that comes from relying on the elements, relying on, you know, divine intervention. You know, if it doesn't rain, it doesn't snow, you're in trouble. So, you have to rely on things that are outside of your control. And so, I think those lessons are important. You also have to rely on other people, right? We help each other out when things go wrong. The farming community, we're there for each other. I would help my friends haul hay. You know, we would go take care of each other, move each other's sprinkler pipe, whatever it took to ultimately get the job done and that kind of collegiality and community building, I think is so, so, so very important. Thomas Jefferson believed that that we should all be a nation of farmers, of ranchers and agriculturalists because of the great lessons that can be learned there. Obviously, that was never possible. But I encourage anyone, if you get an opportunity to have your kid go work on a farm for a summer, you should do it. It's good for their souls.

Whitney Johnson: Well, it's interesting because I remember reading in preparing, you said that when you were applying for jobs out of law school, every law firm that was interviewing you, they didn't want to talk about your credentials. They wanted to talk about the fact that you'd grown up on a farm.

Spencer Cox: Yeah. It was crazy. In Washington, DC, major law firms, sitting in a corner office with, you know, one of the most prestigious partners…

Whitney Johnson: Tell me about bailing hay.

Spencer Cox: Yeah. And that's what he wanted to know. He wanted to know about the farm work and not my grades in law school, you know, not the law review paper I had written. He just wanted to know about farming and offered me the job right on the spot because of that.

Speaker3: I have to ask—so why did you choose not to go to Harvard and to W&L instead?

Spencer Cox: Well, so.

Whitney Johnson: You had a scholarship?

Spencer Cox: So, money was part of it, for sure. I got a scholarship to Washington and Lee which was a top 20 law school at the time, so that that certainly mattered. If I had gone into debt and gone to Harvard, I don't know that I would have been able to come back to Utah. I probably would have had to have taken that Washington, DC job or a New York job, San Francisco, something like that. But that wasn't really weighing on my mind. Again, hard to explain, hard to describe. I'd always planned to go to BYU Law School. That was the plan. When my wife made me go to Utah State for our undergrad, and I had planned to go to BYU—great decision, by the way, I loved Utah State, and she was right. I loved her, too. So that made it a very easy decision. But again, this was one where we prayed, we looked for some divine inspiration. And one day we were reading the Old Testament in a Sunday school class and there was a verse that just stood out to me.

Whitney Johnson: What was the verse? Do you remember?

Spencer Cox: Well, yeah, I've got to think about it. I haven't told this story for a long time. There's an interesting story in the Old Testament about Balaam and Balak, and I'm probably pronouncing those wrong, but I think Balak's the bad guy in that and Balaam was the prophet at the time. And Balak was trying to convince him to curse Israel and he promised him wealth and prestige and he thought, this is great—so I'm going to go curse Israel and get all this wealth and prestige. And every time he went to do it, he ended up blessing Israel instead, which made Balak very mad.

Whitney Johnson: And wasn't there a donkey in the story?

Spencer Cox: There's a talking donkey too. Yeah, it's the Shrek story, if you're interested in that. Good memory. But ultimately, Balak says something like, I don't remember the exact verse, but something like, I thought to promote thee to great honor, and your God hath kept thee from it, or something like that. And you know, I'm barely paying attention at this point. You know, we're going through the motions and it, something hit me in that moment, that felt like that was for me, that for whatever reason, I was not supposed to have that great honor of going to Harvard, and I, you know, I don't know really why. I mean, I think I figured it out. When I got to Washington & Lee, we immediately fell in love with the place and the people, not just the law school. The law school was amazing and gave me every opportunity I could have wanted. I still got the same job offers at big prestigious firms; except I didn't have the debt. I got to come back to Utah.

Spencer Cox: But there was more than that. And that's, I guess, my message. And on the disruption piece, there's more to life than making money. There's more to life than just climbing the ladder. You know, I know, it's easy to say, I'm the governor. I climbed all these ladders, right? But I climbed those ladders by making the opposite decision that people would have expected me to make to climb those ladders and what we found in Lexington, we

found a community of amazing people, in our faith and our church, lifelong friends. We had an opportunity to serve in ways there that we probably wouldn't have gotten anywhere else. And there were a whole bunch of members of my faith who went to Washington & Lee for like a three-year period. There were dozens of us. And so, we had those ties as well. And it all just led to a more joyful life for us. I don't know, again I will never probably know exactly why I wasn't supposed to go to Harvard, but it turned out pretty well for us.

Whitney Johnson: And you just, and I think this goes back to one of the questions I was going to ask you is, how does your faith guide your decisions? And basically, what I'm hearing you say is that it guides pretty much every decision.

Speaker3: It does. Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: And sometimes we say, well, I can't explain it—but we can explain it because it's how we feel. Which goes back to the Disagree Better, when you hit that question of tell me more why you feel that way. Our feelings are valid data points. In fact, there's a wonderful, you know research says that emotions are the data that predict what people are going to do. So, it's really important to know how do you feel about something.

Spencer Cox: Yeah. Being in touch and being willing to meditate, to again, whatever your faith, tradition or lack of it is, that idea that the universe is conspiring in your favor is so important. Brené Brown talks about this a lot in her resilience work—that people who are resilient, who overcome difficult situations have a belief, whether it's a faith system, a religion, or again, just karma, the universe conspiring in your favor that helped to carry us through those difficult challenges. And we've all had them. And so not ignoring those feelings but incorporating them, including logic and feelings together—that's the sweet spot.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, the universe conspiring in your favor. Penultimate question is, what was useful to you in this conversation? And this is a bit of a meta question, which is, as you reflect, as you observe on the on sort of the arc and the structure of this conversation that we've had, what's sticking out for you?

Spencer Cox: So, I think what's sticking out for me, it's been a helpful reminder to me that we do need to take time to look back over the course of our lives. It's very easy, and especially in my job today, but I think it's true of all of us to get caught up in the now. And sometimes when we're in the now, we don't see progress. We don't see, because progress is rarely linear, right? It ebbs and flows. It's two steps forward and one step back. And if we look back, take time to reflect, which I haven't done—and I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to reflect back—we can see the hand of God in our lives. We can see the trajectory, the hand of other people in our lives, people who made a difference, who took a chance on us when we probably didn't deserve it ourselves. This whole idea, this kind of uniquely American, I think, ideal of the self-made man. Right? That we, I got here. I'm a poor kid from Fairview who grew up on a farm and I became governor. You know, I lifted myself up from my bootstraps. That couldn't be further from the truth. There are, as I look back at that farming experience, the people who cared for me. My teachers in elementary school and middle school and high school who saw something in me that I didn't see in myself.

Whitney Johnson: You're gonna make me cry.

Spencer Cox: No. It's these, we all have these, right? And so, I hope that reflection will help me be a better person, especially this holiday season, and look for other opportunities to do the same to, to give back to, to lift others, to mentor, to be kind when somebody doesn't deserve it. Those are the things that will ultimately impact a life.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts?

Spencer Cox: Well, thank you again for giving me this opportunity.

Whitney Johnson: Thank you.

Spencer Cox: I just, I feel like the luckiest person on earth. I feel like I've won the lottery every day. I'm so grateful for your mentor, for Clayton Christensen. I was just with his brother a couple days ago here in Utah. A wonderful family who have given back so much. But we are living in very dark and difficult times. And my message always is we need people who care about each other, who care about our country, who care about our Constitution, who understand that our differences should not be dividing lines. We should not be at war with each other, but we should be looking for ways to heal our nation, to bring people together. And we all have a role to play in doing that.

Whitney Johnson: Governor, thank you very much.

Spencer Cox: Thank you.

I loved what Governor Cox said about not turning away from what you feel, but instead dissecting it and incorporating it into your belief system, because what we feel is not something we can run from. As much as the governor couldn't run from his desire to go home to Utah and the farm. What bubbles up in our spirit is as close to a true North Star as we can find, and the further we run toward what others want of us, the further we run from ourselves. What others want? That could be a political party asking for your vote. A coworker that needs the report they forgot about, or a boss who wants you to fudge the timesheet just this time. What do you want? What do you feel is right? Governor Cox says follow that compass. There's another takeaway I want to touch on. This idea of bringing everyone into the process. Treating others with dignity is something we need to practice. It's easy to fall into the trap as a leader, where there's an asymmetry of power to get very out of practice. And yet, as a leader, as the governor of a state, it's our job to lift others up. And as he advises, tell me more about how you're thinking. For more on challenging ideas, not people, there's episode 281 with a former candidate for governor, Jonathan Johnson. For a dose of humility as a leader of others there's episode 245 with General Stanley McChrystal. And finally, on building frameworks that last long enough to create change, there's my episode with the ambassador from Saudi Arabia, episode 325. Thank you again to Governor Spencer Cox and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's episode, 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.