

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 363: PETER SIMS

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Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you build high performing people and teams, -- because organizations don't disrupt, people do. The fundamental unit of that disruption? It's you. When's the last time you felt out of place? Sometimes folks call it feeling lonely even in a crowd, this internal sense that you just... don't... belong to the people around you. I'm sure a lot of us have sat with that feeling, whether that's professionally or personally. It can hit you just as easily in a boardroom meeting as when you're out with friends. So now that you feel like an alien that's crash-landed, what do you do? Our guest today has built his career around finding community for these so-called "black sheep." Peter Sims is a former corporate investor who became disillusioned with the high-powered world of finance and left to form his own creative firm - appropriately named Black Sheep. It's also the name of his new book, out in May, subtitled *The Quest to Be Human in An Inhuman Time*. What can we take away from Peter's journey, to help us better navigate those moments when you feel the need to find a new tribe? I hope you enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: So, Peter, London comes off in your book as a trial by fire, a look into the white sheep world that sent you spinning. Let's start there. What does your day to day look like?

Peter Sims: Well, a typical day in London in my mid-twenties, when I was working as a venture capital associate at Summit Partners, was I would wake up in my apartment, which is a junior one bedroom in Holland Park. I actually lived on the same street as Richard Branson. He had two buildings, and I had a small junior one bedroom, but still very, very lucky to be there for a kid from a small town in California. And I would get up dressed in my suit and tie and head out to the tube and make my way down to Mayfair, where our offices were, and I would get out at the Bond Street tube station, walk down New Bond Street, which is full of fashionista type shops and stores of, you know, the Louis Vuitton and the Fenty is like a really fancy shopping street. So that was quite something. In fact, on one of my first days in London, I walked past a supermodel. I mean, it was a very different existence than where I'd come from and in my background. And ended up taking a left onto Clifford Street, where our offices were at number eight, Clifford Street, just off New Bond Street, and it was in an old restored 1800s townhouse. It was a

beautiful townhouse and kind of make my way to the back of that building and take the elevator to the fourth floor, which is where our little tiny 600 square foot office was, which we were kind of renting from the law firm, which was the main tenant in, in Clifford Street. And I would see our assistant and I was usually there before the assistant and my boss, who was the partner I moved over to London with to start the office originally.

Peter Sims: But then, you know, over time we, we gained a few other colleagues. And the job itself, day to day was to basically at the start of my time there was to try to find investments, try to source deals. So that process was interesting because I would look through trade publications and the internet and populate those leads into our CRM system. And then every day at around 9 a.m., I would start cold calling companies in Europe, trying to reach the founder's CEO. And the idea was that if we got in touch with a company that had been self-funded and was growing and profitable, we would then introduce ourselves and our firm as a potential investor in that company. And I was the front line of that process. And then if there was an interesting lead or an interesting deal, then I would bring in my colleagues, other vice president or the partner, and we would try to make an investment, and usually it would take, for an entire year of, of sourcing to find one deal that we'd actually close an investment in. So, the first investment we did in Europe was a deal that I got in from a broker and we invested in the company. Eventually, after going through a whole process of getting to know them and doing diligence and that, that investment made the firm \$100 million. So, we had established the London office with that one deal, and it took two and a half years to find it and actually close it and get it done and everything else. So, it was a lot of pain and suffering in between. But that was my associate job at Summit Partners.

Whitney Johnson: How many hours a day did you work, Peter?

Peter Sims: It was, I usually would get into the office around 8:30, and I would leave around ten, but I would take a break for lunch, and then I would take a break around 5 p.m. and I'd go for a run, usually out to Hyde Park, which was one of the highlights of my day. And then I'd come back for the evening shift and have dinner, and then go home. And I would do that usually Monday through Wednesday. And then on Thursday I would go out and socialize more, and then Friday, you know, 5 p.m. we were in the pub.

Whitney Johnson: So, you choose this. And it was what you now describe as a white sheep life, a bit of a grind. But what were the benefits of that life?

Peter Sims: I mean, I came out of college wanting to be successful in the business world. I had never had any business experience other than working at the local savings and loan in my hometown when I was, you know, coming out of high school. So, I really had no concept for what the business world was like. But when I was in college, I was friends with, got to know some people on the board of trustees of my college, Bowdoin College. And the people who were really making sh** happen were, tended to be investors. And so that was my very limited perspective, such that when I got out of college, I worked in a consulting firm for a very short amount of time. And then I went to work in this firm, Summit Partners. And I was lucky to get the job. So, you know, when we say the white sheep world, what does that mean? Well, I mean, I was just one of herds of people, trying to get this type of job, right. I mean, I think there were 200 people or so who would apply for every opening for the associate role at Summit Partners. And so, to just get the job was amazing. And then to get the opportunity to go to London was like an even bigger opportunity. So, I was a good soldier. And I think that any time we go into jobs where we're reduced to being in a suit. And our identity is reduced to being a part of a firm that has certain prestige associated with, there are tradeoffs. And I think I just didn't know who I was at that point.

Peter Sims: I didn't know much other than where I came from and what my education had been and what my interests were to some extent. But I really didn't even know myself in terms of my interests at that stage. And I just wanted to succeed. And so, you know, resume building and, you know, getting the prestige value of a firm was really important to me. And I don't think I realized until maybe, maybe a half of the way through my experience with Summit in London when I realized, like, look, I'm just this is I'm supposed to be living the dream I'm in. I'm living in Holland Park. I've got a beautiful French girlfriend. I'm like, walking past Richard Branson and he's reading the *Financial Times* and it's like we're neighbors. And yet I wasn't fulfilled at a deeper level. And I think that happens to a lot of us. And so, yeah, I had to just go through a lot of soul searching, for longer than I anticipated. But it's, I think it's just something that affects many of us.

Whitney Johnson: So, you decided to leave London after you were in London for a few years. Talk to us about, you know, how you made that decision. And then what did what did the first couple of months after leaving London look like?

Peter Sims: Yeah. So, when I came out of college, I intended to go to business school. That was kind of the next, one of the next big prizes. And by the way, I use this term in the book, "Insecure Overachievers". I was a very insecure, overachieving type person. Things like going to business school at a place that was known was really important to me back then. And so, by the time I had kind of made it halfway through my time in London, I was there almost three years, I had applied to business schools like, you know, wanting to, to get into these business schools so badly. And I spent all this time on the applications, and really, what I just wanted was a break to be able to reflect and just try to understand what the what the hell was going on in my body that made me just shut down so much, on the inside and made it so difficult. I mean, I would wake up in the mornings and the BBC would go on as my alarm went off and I would just say, you know, sh** , I gotta wake up and do this again. And I just gotta, you know, it's like the same old Groundhog Day over and over again. I got to go call these freaking German companies and Swedish, you know, all these different companies. Well, it was awesome to interact with entrepreneurs every day. And I loved investing. I mean, the mindset of investing was really cool. It's just like, there's got to be something out there that may be better than this. You know? That was the feeling I had. And when I left summit, I ended up going coming back to California, my where I grew up to go to, to business school at Stanford.

Whitney Johnson: Mm hnm. All right. We're going to jump around. You helped put together Giving Tuesday. You assembled a brain trust. You generated your own grassroots support. What do you carry from that? And how many years was Giving Tuesday after this experience of starting business school? So, coming back from London and what lessons from that do you continue to carry with you?

Peter Sims: Yeah, I was lucky to be involved with the team that started Giving Tuesday, and it happened very fortuitously. After business school, I accidentally became an author. I was asked by Bill George to coauthor a book that became a best seller called *True North*, and it was really an interest I had had in business school to try to be more authentic and try to find a path that was more true to myself, that that led me to this notion of authenticity and authentic leadership. And Bill had written a book about that, and he asked me, after we gotten to know each other for about a year, if I'd be interested to coauthor this book. So that opened up a new kind of horizon, an unexpected one. And then I wrote eventually, after *True North* came out, then I really struggled to really figure out, well, what do I want to do next? And it was a real struggle. It was about a year of feeling lost. And I found the school of creativity at Stanford, the design school, and it felt like just a godsend to find a place where I could just be myself and feel like it was speaking to a deeper part of me that I wasn't quite fully aware of yet more of a creative side. Ended up writing another book called *Little Bets* about that experience and that mindset, and how we all have that inherent creative inside us. And when I was on book tour with *Little Bets*, I was down in Brazil and I got cornered in the green room of this event by a gentleman, Aaron Sherinian, who was part of a group of people, a few people who were wanting to start this day of giving annually called Giving Tuesday.

Peter Sims: And there were just, you know, a few people involved at that stage. And Aaron said that he really wanted to get me, and the Black Sheep involved, because I had started to build a different entity called Black Sheep at that time, really just with hats and t shirts and a community. And I said, yeah, all in, that sounds great. And, you know, from that point on, there were six of us at the core team, basically all in our own lanes. Henry Timms was the person who envisioned it and was kind of our conductor, as we called him. Asha Curran was his right hand at the 92 Street Y at the time. She project managed things and kept us on track. We had Sharon Feder from at the time she was the chief operating officer at Mashable. She was our kind of operating lead and (Adam) Hirsch, her husband, developed the social media strategy. My job was to really try to catalyze a bunch of influencers and partners, including the White House, to get behind it. And that first year, people thought we were crazy. I mean, it was really interesting in hindsight, given the success that giving has had to think that, you know, I was at the White House trying to persuade people that Henry was a legitimate person. He was just a mid-manager at the 92 Y at the time, and he's since become the CEO of Lincoln Center. He's gone on to all kinds of amazing things, but nobody really took it seriously, took us seriously.

Peter Sims: It was one of those classic stories. And in the first year it raised \$10 million. And I think the thing that I learned from Giving Tuesday was that movement building is a lot like entrepreneurship. You just try to build win

after win. That builds momentum, that builds from one key partner to the next key partner. So, when the White House endorsed Giving Tuesday at the very end of the process the first year, it was a huge stamp of approval and credibility for building to the next phase, which the next year we went into the international front with partners and Giving Tuesdays. And it was fundamentally an idea that was a partnership model. And so, the core problem that we were solving that ended up being the most influential in its growth was that nonprofits had not had much experience being able to raise money on social media and online. And so, we were giving them tools. We were giving them an excuse to be able to do that a day with its own hashtag, where nonprofits could just say, hey, on this day we're going to raise money for Giving Tuesday. And now it's the point where everybody gets those social announcements or the emails on Giving Tuesday. And I think it's raised something like \$13 billion for social impact causes to date in its just over ten-year history. So, we're a very proud team. But also, it's almost like nobody really claims Giving Tuesday. It's just sort of was an idea that was ripe for the times. And it was a very open-source movement, 100 countries.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. It's amazing. It's absolutely amazing. So have Peter, have you always been a black sheep?

Peter Sims: So, the notion of a black sheep really struck me at a heart level when I was trying to find that part of me that was more creative. When I found the Stanford Design School and was learning product design. And at Pixar, they called people the black sheep, who are the artists who thought differently and had a different way of solving problems. And the Pixar culture, and it's like it's hard to describe. But when I walked into the building for the first time, the building was designed by Steve Jobs to really promote creativity and collaboration. And so, the building itself is exposed brick. It has a very large atrium that has that has light coming in from the roof. It's a glass roof. There, you know, life size characters of Pixar, characters that greet you at the door and you just sort of feel like a kid again. It's almost like going to Disneyland. So, I didn't think of myself as a creative person until my 30s, which I feel like is an indictment on our culture and on our education system. And it's part of the main reason I wrote *Little Bits* is I think it's kind of bullsh** that so few of us tap into that creativity from a young age. but I did very much feel like, kind of like, different. In my youth, I definitely was, I didn't feel like I ever fit in. You know, even though I grew up in kind of an all American, small town, rural town, where I feel very comfortable today, I don't, I didn't at the time feel like I fit in. I didn't naturally. So. Yeah. The notion of being a black sheep. It does, it did feel natural from the start. Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, so what I would love for you to do now is go get your hat, because I'm going to ask you about your company. Do you have the hat nearby?

Peter Sims: My Black Sheep Hat.

Whitney Johnson: Of course you do. Okay, here we go. We're going to do the big reveal. So when was the exact moment that you decided to start Black Sheep? I feel like there was symbolic that you put your hat on at this moment. And what did you feel? What was it like to make that decision?

Peter Sims: Well. Black Sheep started as hats and t shirts after being inspired by the Pixar notion of black sheep. I just, it was a way to not feel alone, to be wearing the hat and to have the shirts with people who also felt like black sheep. And we would go to the Black Sheep Bar on Polk Street. This is back, you know, 2012, 2011, 2012. And around that time, we had a, I was just bringing groups of people together for dinner who were black sheep type people. And by black sheep type people, I just mean people who were taking paths less traveled is really a simple way of putting it. It didn't matter if they were, you know, architects or investors or entrepreneurs just bringing those types of people together who were willing to take a less traveled by path, but who really would benefit from being in a tribe of those types of people, like-minded people. So, one of the dinners we had was in Los Angeles, and I had interviewed Frank Gehry, the architect for *Little Bets*, and he had gotten some PR from this when the book came out, because the *New York Times* featured some of Gehry when the article on *Little Bets* came out in the *New York Times*.

Peter Sims: So, he came to the dinner, and he was there with his chief of staff, and the dinner was at a place called Bar Primitive at the time. It was on Abbot Kinney. It's no longer open, but you can still see the entryway for it. And he arrived 30 minutes early. So, he was in that spare amount of time. Drawing on his placemat, his journey to becoming a black sheep. And for Gehry, his journey is really interesting because while he is the most renowned architect of his generation at the moment, and certainly one of the most famous. Known for his buildings like the

Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, and Disney Hall, Los Angeles. When he was in his early years, 20s, 30s and into his well into his 40s, he was designing traditional homes and suburban homes in LA and shopping centers and whatnot. And it was in when he was in his mid to late 40s when he really started to try some different things on his own house in Santa Monica, and one example he shared with me was that one morning he was shaving and he didn't have enough light, so he took out a hammer, and he banged a hole in the ceiling of his house and created a skylight there eventually.

Peter Sims: So, he was kind of a wild, artistic guy at heart who ended up in a field that kind of made him feel quite confined. And he broke out of that by literally building another house around his house in this Dutch colonial house in Santa Monica that's now a historic landmark. And if you go to see it today, it's got chain link fence on it, it's got plywood, it's got all these different influences that he used to create this house. And then those elements became the basis for his career post his late 40s, so 50s 60s. He's done his enormously prolific career of his work that really started with these little bets on his own house. Anyhow, that night Gary was really skeptical, and he was asking me, you know, Peter, what the hell is this black sheep thing anyway? And I said that I didn't know but, we're trying to figure it out. We're having fun. And he ended up having a great time at this dinner. I mean, there were just a lot of good energy at the table, filmmakers and entrepreneurs and what have you. And then he just started pounding the table and saying, well, you know, I think America needs an artistic renaissance. And when he said it, we just we just sort of stopped and we were like, wow, that's a really interesting, important idea.

Peter Sims: And, you know, the whole Giving Tuesday intention was to try to address this culture of greed and, you know, individualism that had become so rampant in the US. Could we be part of the solution going the other direction? And so Black Sheep started as basically like a foundation to support this notion of a new renaissance. But then there was no business behind it. There was no business model, there was no resources. So, I was like, well, how do we get resources for this thing? And so then, you know, again, back in that, that 2012, it's like, well, if we had businesses that could fund the foundation and support it, maybe, you know, a bunch of thought leaders, maybe we could actually be a part of a movement that could be some something like a creative renaissance eventually. And so that was the dream. And the business started really, for all intents and purposes, back in 2015, 2016, where we identified the black sheep in the corporate world, who were the, you know, the misfits, the ones who are trying to rage against the machine and who were the innovators, you know, the ones who wanted to be pushing against the systems and they were able to pay us. We had a membership fee model at the start where some of these people could pay us \$50,000 a year, which was enough to actually have a real business.

Peter Sims: And then eventually we developed out a creative services arm. And this was all kind of like a means to an end of trying to be a part of this creative renaissance. And, you know, eventually, like in that sheet of paper back in 2012 was like, it'd be cool if we could have an investment arm. So I always kind of knew intuitively if we could actually have an investment arm, that would be a way to create a platform and resources to be able to fund the foundation properly, to be able to actually support the people in the grassroots who are the heroes, you know, the people who are the, you know, the craftsmen and the teachers and the entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs who are doing God's work, but often just feel disconnected and feel like they don't have enough resources and they just need a little bit. So that was always the dream. And, you know, we're getting closer. Although it's hard. You know, it's taken ten years to be able to now get to the point where we can actually really think about building an investment arm.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And we'll come back to that in a few minutes. So let me ask you this. What is your day to day look like at a creative company like Black Sheep?

Peter Sims: I'm a morning person, so I try to, I try to work 7 or 8 hours a day, but in a really focused manner. So, I will usually get going by 5 a.m. And this morning I was up a little earlier because we had an early meeting with a partner. So, I was up, you know, 4:30, which is early, obviously. But then we had a breakfast meeting in Silicon Valley with our partner at Google X, who we're working with to develop a very substantial partnership. And then from there, my colleague and I, kind of chief operating officer, president of our operations, we went to the house of our chairman, and we had two hours of meetings there, and we had a conference call with, you know, the founding team, basically of this investment vehicle, and then literally just got back, haven't had time to eat lunch and doing this podcast. This is unusual that I would work this late in the day, though. I would usually be watching ESPN or movies at this at this point in time just because creatively, which my life is very creative, I find that if I'm just relaxed and

connected with my intuition, then I'll know what the next thing to do is whether to send an email or make a call to someone or just do nothing or go for a walk. So, it's a very unusual, very unusual job and life that I have now, especially compared to being in that very structured job that I was in, in London, which is, you know, in many ways the complete opposite.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, I want to come back to that intuition piece in just a second. But before I do that, because I want to ask you a question that will lead into that, which is, so in your book that you've just written (*Black Sheep*), you tackle the idea of defining being human by what it is not. You look at systems and webs that make us inhuman instead. So where does the inhuman creep into your life today?

Peter Sims: Well. Yeah. This book really began as a curiosity. I didn't think I'd write another book after *Little Bets*. And then I was in the lockdown of Covid. I just felt like, oh, gosh, there's something that needs to be, to come out, and I don't know what it is. And I, I think for when I've learned as a writer, which I don't ever consider myself a writer, but it's a good way to process what you're trying to think. And so, when I started to put just pour out on paper what I was trying to think, it was that, why is it so hard to be human in America today? And it may not just be America, but I think... The subtitle of the book is, "The Quest to Be Human in an Inhuman Time. And when I think about it, whether it's working in the capital markets or navigating the health care system. I was on the phone, last week with Blue Shield, my health care insurer, and I was routed to, like, 4 or 5 different people to try to answer a simple question. And all the people I spoke with were bemoaning how frustrated they were with the system that they were in. And I think, you know, for people who work in, in structured organizations, you know, you have to give away chunks of yourself here, there and everywhere. And part of that's okay. Just because you're trying to be a part of a culture that's not just about you and that's a healthy thing, but a lot of it is like systems that are inhuman and that make your life soul crushing or harder than it has to be.

Peter Sims: It's weird that we live this way. It's like, why do we do that if we know that it's not going to lead to happiness or fulfillment? And if we know that it's not really the best way to solve the problems that are either inside the company or inside the organization and for the customer. So that was a kind of thread that guided the book, and it ended up taking me and kind of the story ended up taking me into like the grassroots of America back where I grew up and, you know, tracing the footsteps of my uncle, who's a logger, was a logger for his entire career. He just retired a couple years ago. Just understanding, like, what is the system doing for him, or why is he frustrated with the system and why is that leading to all this turmoil in our culture? And it was just an interesting exploration to see. Why did he feel so neglected and resentful of the way modern capitalism has affected him at the expense of, you know, others who do extremely well and create enormous wealth? That's just interesting.

Whitney Johnson: And definitely I mean, I think one of the lovely pieces or aspects of your book is that it does definitely feel part memoir. So, it's part memoir, part manifesto. I would say, as you think about what you've written, and one of the things that you talk about is or this idea of fighting inhumanity is that, um, yeah, fighting inhumanity. It's about centering ourselves in our bodies and like, physically grounding ourselves. Are there any indicators when you know that you are somehow estranged from your own body? Like, what does that look or feel like for you?

Peter Sims: Yeah, I think it happens to all of us every day, because we're so rewarded from being in our heads and for being in our ideas of what a vision is for an entity or, you know, a problem we're trying to solve or we're just living in our heads trying to solve it. What I do is I have two meditations. One is I spend as much time as I can in nature. Usually, every day. There's a redwood grove near my house, and I go out for a hike every day, and I insist that I'm not doing anything other than just listening to nature like the birds and looking for the coyotes. There's a couple coyotes I come across frequently, and it's very grounding to be in nature. And then the second is I listen to a lot of music, and I find that those two things just chill me out and take me out of my head and my ideas.

Whitney Johnson: And put you back into your body.

Peter Sims: Yeah. And then that allows me to hear my intuition. If I can hear my intuition, which, by the way, at the start of this journey, which is now, you know, 15 years ago, I only heard the faintest whispers of the direction I should be going. And it's very hard at that stage to know where should I put the next foot? And it's like, I went to the Stanford Design School. I was so inspired by the vibe there, by the culture there, by the people I was meeting there,

that I knew that that was important, but I didn't know why. And so, I just kept going back to the Stanford Design School, and it was hard to hear, like, what should I do with my life? That was a very difficult phase, and I wasn't making any money or anything. And I did the same thing with people. If I met somebody who I really liked, I would follow up with them and I would keep in touch with them. And one of those people was Astro Teller, who, we were both going through a lot of difficulty at that stage. And we met and we met at a political fundraiser event, though neither of us knew why we were there really. But we met and we ended up going to lunch after that, and he became a great friend and now a great partner. And, you know, we're now hatching this massive collaboration together that all grew out of just that faint intuition back then. But it gets easier now that more comfortable and fluent with just staying kind of in my natural self, I guess you'd say.

Whitney Johnson: So, I want to just want to play with that for a second. So, you've talked a lot about that, that intuition and the course of your day. Here's what I'm imagining. So, you said you work 7 or 8, you know, really concentrated, focused hours. But then once you finish that, you try to just be open to your intuition. So do you just do you have a sense of calm and then you allow for. Huh? I just got this idea a little bit unexpected. I'm not going to dismiss it. I'm actually going to write it down and act on it. Like what, what is, can you give us an example of maybe something that's happened even in the last couple of days, what that sense of intuition and inspiration feels and looks like for you?

Peter Sims: Yeah, absolutely. Well, we've been we're starting a new investment venture platform, and there's a question of how should we name it. And I had an initial intuition for what it should be named. And the initial intuition I had was that it should be named Ten X. And the reason for that is because it's kind of growing out of a long-term relationship that we've had with Google X, and it's an outside platform that would help incubate new companies that kind of need scaling help. So, there's a relationship with Google and Google X, and Ten X is an intuitive next phase of that. And then one of my colleagues said, well, why don't we call it Ten X by Black Sheep? And that was then the name. And then, today, we had a discussion as a team. We said, actually, why don't we just call this Black Sheep Ventures? And it was at each stage, it was a clearer and clearer intuition that this made sense, because it was going to click across the different stakeholders that we're going to be working with. And also, I didn't, it's not my idea. I think the key with intuition is like when you're writing, a lot of the writers like Steven Pressfield, who talk about the writing process, or Anne Lamont, they talk about, you're just a vessel for these ideas. And musicians I know are the same way. You're just a vessel and oh my God, this song came to me and I'm Paul McCartney and it just came out of nowhere. And, you know, you just sort of keep following the intuition that comes to you. If you're a creative and in a truly artistic lane like that, I think is the same way as an entrepreneur. It's like there's little pieces that come in. They're not my ideas, they're ideas that kind of come in usually through relationships with other people. You know, there's usually a collaborative, oh, yeah, that's a great idea. But it's not mine. It's not theirs. It's ours. And so, I don't know if that answers your question or not.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, it does. It's the like you said, this idea of being a vessel, but also just being open to those ideas and not always being aware of where they come from. They just sort of like you said, they come.

Peter Sims: And it's like this Whitney. It's like, I'll just I'll walk around my house or I'll go for a walk in my neighborhood and I'll just chill out. I'll just try to listen to music and just relax. Bill Murray has this great saying, which is that the best ideas come to you when you're relaxed. So, I do that. I try to get into that zone as much as possible, and it's not easy when you're trying to solve problems and you're trying to be on calls with people and analyze things. I mean, you got to be in that side of you as well. But, when I just give myself space, take a bath, for example, go to the beach, whatever. Then it's like I usually get these, like, intuitions that add more value than I would have added an entire day when I was at Summit Partners, because it's like, Holy cow, that's a huge, big way of thinking about this problem or a way of thinking about this partnership that is going to add a lot of value. And that's the most I'm going to add more value just with that one thought, then working for a week or two weeks if that makes any sense.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So, as we get to our, start to wrap up and you've been alluded to alluding to this the entire conversation. So now I want to actually talk about it. So, we're building momentum. First of all, how does a story of black sheep intertwine with Pixar and Ed Catmull? And then let's go to this Black Sheep ventures, tell us what it actually is and how this is the realization of what is really, at this point, probably a 20-year dream.

Peter Sims: Well, this is like, you're the first person I've spoken with publicly about this, and I probably have to be careful about saying too much, but the story with Ed Catmull is really cool because Ed Catmull is the co-founder of Pixar, although he was really the first person to have the dream to make a full length digitally animated film, and he became the person who recruited the technical and the creative talent to do that. So, he recruited in people like John Lasseter from Disney, who had been fired from Disney Animation, and John Lasseter became the chief creative officer at Pixar when it was named Pixar. After it had basically gotten its life from Lucasfilm's, where it was the technical division of Lucasfilm. So, the sequencing was, you know, Ed kind of assembled the group of people. He was the head of the technical team at Lucasfilm, recruited more people like John Lasseter, and they started to use hardware that they had developed in house to do very sophisticated digital imaging, to be able to make short films of a couple minutes in length at the beginning. And John Lasseter would develop those. And then George Lucas went through a divorce, and Ed Catmull and John Lasseter had to hopefully find a buyer for this entity. And Steve Jobs was the person, the only person, the only buyer who remained standing after a process that they went through. And so that troika of jobs in last year and Ed were the ones who basically created and invented an industry.

Peter Sims: I mean, it's an incredible story. The industry is \$400 billion now, and Ed was kind of the culture and systems builder and president of the company, Steve Jobs, did this amazing Steve Jobs skill set except in a much nicer way, I think, than his reputation may have been at Apple. He was much more collaborative with Pixar and kind of ran as the chairman of Pixar, did the deals with Disney and whatnot. And then Lasseter obviously anchored the creative side. And so, I ran into Ed. Well, I had the intuition that Ed was an important person to know when I was in the middle of that creative journey. And I went into Pixar and was so blown away by it, but I couldn't get a hold of him. And so, we met briefly at a Stanford lecture after he spoke, and I asked if I could give him feedback on his ideas, and he gave me the business card to his assistant. And at the time, I had no money. I was living in a small apartment-that's all relative. I had the means to live in San Francisco, but I didn't have much to like. I was, you know, eating very modestly and very, very budget conscious and I wrote him a long memo with feedback on his ideas from this lecture. And then eventually we were connected in the context of him writing a book, which became the book *Creativity, Inc.*, and I sort of helped advise him on doing that book.

Peter Sims: And we, we even then, after that happened to live in the same neighborhood in San Francisco, which was news to me, and we happened to go to the same gym, which was this gym called Crunch on Union Street in San Francisco. So, I ran into Ed on the street, and it was like, I couldn't believe it. I was like, oh my God, I'm running into Ed Catmull on the street as I'm walking down to the gym and he's walking back up the hill and his, you know, his headband and his weightlifting gloves, and he's like, sweaty. And he's just like, looking up the hill at me and shading his eyes from the sun beating down on him. And he says, oh, hey, Peter. So, it ended up like as Black Sheep was starting, Ed Catmull was like very supportive of the idea, and he thought it was cool. He thought it was like good values and all this. And since we were having fun, he was very supportive. And he ended up becoming a friend and a mentor. And then when he left Pixar, I helped recruit him to become an adviser at Google X. So, we worked together at Google X, which is this kind of semisecret invention innovation hub at Google. And we just ended up, you know, for the past 5 or 6 years, we've worked very closely together and now can work together on this new venture called Black Sheep Ventures as co-founders with a couple other dynamos.

Whitney Johnson: And what you can say, it sounds like, is you're now finally building out that investment arm that you had envisioned ten years ago that will allow you to fund.

Peter Sims: Well, just yeah, hope...you say envision like I sometimes I have the original drawing of the dream and I sometimes look at that and I say, well, that's just ideas. I mean, that's just some scribbles on a piece of paper from 2012, but. I do think it's good to dream, and I do think it's good to, try, you know. What is it that, there's a great quote that Howard Schultz, the founder of Starbucks, shared with me after I interviewed him for *True North*. He said, believe, follow your heart and believe in your dreams. And I think that was great advice for that young person to receive when I was, you know, just considering being an entrepreneur at the time. Follow your heart and believe in your dreams. And, you know, there are many moments when it just feels like all is lost and, you know, then you kind of put an important piece in place and another important piece in place. And then all of a sudden, there's the basis to actually do something with it. And that's where we are now. We really have a chance to make a big impact and create wealth for our foundation and, you know, live that dream towards being a part of a creative renaissance. And that is an incredible place to be. But it took a decade of scrapping and, you know, struggles and trying to learn how to be an entrepreneur and trying to develop self-awareness and a lot of in between before getting to this place.

Whitney Johnson: A lot of liminal space. I'm going to ask you a question. I don't know if you have the answer, but I want to ask it anyway. And I would love for you to reflect on this. So, one of the things I have observed about you over the decade that I've known you is that you have a superpower of helping people see what could be. And galvanizing people around that future. Do you have any sense of where that superpower came from, or what are some things that you do that make that possible?

Peter Sims: Well, that's very kind of you to say, Whitney. I feel like you've always been so curious, and I really appreciate your interest. I think we all have superpowers, and I think the tough part is we just don't know what they are for a long time in life. And I, like I say, I didn't think of myself as creative until my late 30s, really. And Frank Gehry didn't think of himself that way, perhaps until his late 40s or into his 50s. And so, I think the growth for us all is like trying to figure out what we can do uniquely. What are our, as Gay Hendricks, the author calls it, what are our lanes of genius? What are our zones of genius? And I think about that a lot. My colleagues think about that. And look, we don't have to be good at a lot of things in life, but if there are a few things that we can do, and we can focus on those things with working with people who are very complimentary and collaborative, and especially if there are people you really enjoy, then that's the dream. And I just always wanted to be doing creative work with people I really like. That was it. That was my main goal, and I would never have been able to dream that what's happening today was even remotely possible because I didn't know what my talents were. I had no idea how the world and the universe would interface with, you know, with what was, an opportunity space, right. So, I've learned that there's like 3 or 4 things I'm really uniquely good at. And one of them is catalyzing. And vision is usually good as well. And storytelling. And so, I just try to every day spend as much time in those lanes as possible. And if we are, if we do that and we're able to create that value with others, then. Then you know you can fund a foundation.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, exactly. All right, so, what's been useful for you in this conversation? What have you observed about yourself? It may not be anything that you said, or I said, but something you just observed or learned. What's been useful?

Peter Sims: I mean, I just haven't done an interview in ten years, so just to be able to cover so much ground is a testament to your questioning. I always enjoy being with you Whitney, and I feel really like you're just an incredible interviewer. So, I think it's just nice to get through an interview for a, for a new book. And I really, I wrote this book for my daughter, and I didn't want to publish it for a long time. My publisher convinced me to publish it, and so I really have no idea where it will go. But I do think I'm proud of it, and I hope that there's something useful here for others.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts?

Peter Sims: No. Thank you.

Whitney Johnson: All right. Thank you. Peter.

Sometimes we achieve great heights, only to find out we don't care about the summit. Even worse, we accomplish these things and discover we were just doing it because we felt we had to, because the crowd had urged us on. I was thinking about the 200 or more applications every associate position received at Peter's firm in London. How many of those who made it looked back in five or ten years and could admit they were fulfilled, to say less about being happy? Who could be, under such backbreaking, frontlines work? But that map to the summit is admittedly one that does promise high salaries and health insurance. Everyone's analysis of marginal cost and marginal benefit is going to be different. When we decide this trail, this map isn't for us though, how do we start to hike somewhere new? What I'm taking away from Peter is this idea of a compass of authenticity. Compasses used to be revered as these mystical artifacts – the earliest ones in China were tools of divination, because we had no idea what they

were pointing to, just that whatever it was... was strong. Sometimes we don't know why we feel like an alien in a crowd, but it's still a biological signal from somewhere inside you. It might seem insane to leave this job that so many others are climbing over each other to get, but because you feel it, there's truth to it. That can be a hard thing to internalize when, like Peter said, so much of our environment is dedicated to dehumanizing us. Dedicated to making us question all of our internal signals and desires. Your identity, reduced to this vague idea of "corporate prestige." But if we follow our human compass, we can take back some of our sense of self, because yes – I can't tell you how much money following this compass is going to make me, and I don't really know what's moving the needle, but I can see its power. For more on turning that creative spark into a real fire of action, of course there's my talk with Ed Catmull, who at this point needs no introduction – he's in [episode 328](#). On leaving behind your ego when you're drawn to summits that others have marked out for you, there's my recent episode with Meta's Sam Coopridger, [episode 360](#). And to better understand how we can surrender to our internal compass, there's [episode 315](#) with Kute Blackson. Thank you again to Peter Sims 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.