

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 365: DONALD MILLER

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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. Meaning, the fundamental unit of that disruption - it's you.

What makes a good story? Characters, plot, setting, sure - you can boil it down to those elements - but what makes a **good** story? Is it the moment where you realize you care about a fictional character? Is it the moment where you're up all night burning the midnight oil, because you're dying to find out how it ends? Is a good story one you believe in?

Our guest today believes in the power of stories. Donald Miller is the CEO of StoryBrand, a creative firm that helps companies clarify their message. Donald's out with a new book, *Coach Builder*, all about how newly-minted coaches can clarify their professional message. How to take what is often a very good story and figuring out how to make it great - how to make it one coaching clients can genuinely believe in. So, what's Donald's story? I hope you enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: So, Donald, we will get to *Coach Builder* in a moment. But I want to start with a more foundational form of building. Early life and the family unit. Can you talk to me about the importance of fatherhood in your life?

Donald Miller: Oh my gosh. You know, I got married at 42 for the first time. Was a happily, you know, preoccupied writer for all my 20s and 30s. And so didn't get married till much later and then became a dad at 49. So, you know, now I'm 52 and I have a two-and-a-half-year-old, and it is everything to me. And I am so glad in many ways there's pros and cons to being a dad later, but I'm so glad because I don't think I would have known how important and how meaningful that journey would have been in my, certainly in my 20s, I mean, my mid-20s, I

wouldn't have known that I would have been out trying to grind out my identity. The way I get my identity is actually just from succeeding in whatever project I'm working on. So, I think I needed to have some projects that I was successful at before I realized this actually isn't as meaningful as they told me it was going to be, or I thought it was going to be, but there is no diminishing return on the fulfillment I get from being a dad. And so, I'm, you know, it is everything to me. In fact, you know, I don't want to offend people who don't have kids. But there was a feeling when I became a dad that I just sort of thought, oh, this is what life is about. You know what I mean? I mean, it's about a lot of things, but, you know, you kind of build your career and you find a, for a man, for me, find a woman that you really love. And you built, built sort of a home together. And you had a kid, and you realize, oh, this is why we fell in love, and this is why we built a home, and this is why I make money, and this is why I have to keep my reputation clean. Because, you know, if I do something stupid, it's going to affect, affect this innocent little girl. Like, everything suddenly was tied together in this two-and-a-half-year-old. And it kind of played into the Stockholm syndrome of our first six months being parents. We were like, wait, we are being trapped by this child that we are in love with. You know, this is, we can't even leave the house. So, you know, I just think at the end of the day, and by that, I mean, on my deathbed, the most important thing to me will have been the relationship I had with my daughter, which only is a good relationship if I had a good, a really great, loving, romantic relationship with her mom. So, I don't know, I, you know, I wonder if I'd have had that thought earlier, but I certainly have it now. And so, I'll try to reverse engineer a little bit of life to, to, you know, reflect and honor that sense of meaning that I've been gifted to experience that so many of us have been gifted to experience. So, at the same time, you know, we have a toddler. So, it's frustrating, you know, not to say it's perfect by any stretch of the imagination.

Whitney Johnson: So, a couple of ideas come to mind when I hear you say that. I, first of all, I remember when we I had my first child and I remember, I think I put this in like our Christmas card that year, back in the days when I did Christmas cards, and I said something like, I feel more me than ever.

Donald Miller: Wow, that's a beautiful thing to say.

Whitney Johnson: And it's very similar to what you just described.

Donald Miller: It is. My dad left when I was two. I did not know him. When I was in my early 30s, I found him and knocked on his door. Literally drove from Chicago to Evansville, Indiana, and knocked on his door and said, my name is Donald Miller, and I'm your son. And he had a warning. I called him the day before and left him a voicemail and said, I'm coming. And he called me back and I didn't answer the phone because I was too scared, but I physically went to him, and it was an incredible exchange. You know, that's not the point of your question, but I wondered whether I'd be any good as a dad because I didn't have, I didn't see one. And then I realized very quickly what I saw were all these mentors and men in my life who were so incredible that it was almost like, you know, I don't want to say it was better, but it was, these were really great men, and I wasn't lacking in a whole lot that I couldn't go figure out. I wasn't sure, you know, I wasn't expecting my identity to become a dad. My identity is a best-selling author and a business owner. And all these wins and these, these worldly trophies that I had. But it was amazing how quickly none of that mattered to my identity as much as being a dad like that was it. My life got very small, as did yours. Winning suddenly had nothing to do with anybody else's opinion about anything or any sort of it. Winning was just connecting with my daughter and making sure she knows that she's loved and she's safe. And quite honestly, those are pretty easy things to attain when you have a toddler because they worship you no matter what.

Whitney Johnson: Because you're trapped at home with them.

Donald Miller: Because you're trapped at home with them, that's right.

Whitney Johnson: So, I'm thinking two other thoughts, and I'm thinking then you might have a few further reflections. You talked about, you know, that grinding around your identity and your 20s and 30s, and I'm thinking about Richard Rohr, who I'm sure you're familiar with his work, which I love.

Donald Miller: Yes.

Whitney Johnson: And how in your younger years or the first half of your life, you're figuring out you're building the container, and then you're filling the container in the second half of your life. And it's interesting because you built the container and then by the time you finished building the container, then you were ready to have children. So, you didn't plan it that way. But it's quite lovely. And then the quote that came into my mind as you were talking is Samuel Johnson, the ultimate result of all ambition is to be happy at home.

Donald Miller: If that's true, I've achieved it. That's really terrific. I absolutely love that. Yeah, I love that, I'm going to remember that.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So now let's go back to, um, your 20s and 30s when you were grinding. So, you started out as a textbook publisher, according to our research, eventually warming up to the idea of publishing your own writing. What was the process like of deciding that you had something to say to the world?

Donald Miller: Well, I did in high school. I think my junior year in high school, there was this youth group speaker who came to our youth group. And he, you know, I'm not sure who he was or what he said, but he, he did ask us to kind of help us, you know, have a vision for our lives. And he said, I want you to sit down and write a letter to explain what you're going to do with your life and have a vision for your life. And I want you to, we're going to pull names out of a hat of other people in these groups. You're going to write the letter to that person, so you're not going to write it to yourself. You're going to write it to that person. You're going to give it to them, and they're going to read what you want to do with your life. So, I lived in Texas, I lived there till I was 21. So, I remember it being very, very hot, very, very humid and I wrote a letter that said, I'm going to leave Texas, I'm going to live in Oregon. And literally Whitney, I wanted to live in Oregon because I thought it bordered Canada. I did not take geography. I thought, this is the furthest you can get from the sun.

Donald Miller: And so, I'm going to go up there. I wanted to be a *New York Times* best-selling author, I wrote in this letter, and I wanted to be a millionaire. At the time, a millionaire was like a millionaire. Today, a millionaire is like a billionaire. You know, gave it to Sandy Whittle, who was my best friend's girlfriend. And let's see, 20, almost 20 years later, she called me. I had no memory of writing this letter. And she called me, and she said, Don, it's Sandy. And I said, Sandy, my gosh, you know, what's going on? And she's married to somebody else and had this great life. And so, we caught up for 30 minutes and she goes, hey, I was moving some boxes in the attic, and I found this letter you sent me. Can I read this to you? Because I find it quite amazing. Well, she actually said, how much money do you have? And I said, Sandy, that's a weird question. How much money do I have? She goes, well, I know you live in Oregon, and I know you're a *New York Times* best-selling author, so I need to know how much money you have. I'm like, wait, how do you like, why does, why are those three things connected? She said, let me read you this letter.

Donald Miller: And I lived in Oregon. I was a *New York Times* best-selling author. I wasn't a millionaire. But like, if you added the value of my house and the equity, you know, it might be able to squeak out something like that, and was, you know, already starting to succeed in business. I said already, I was in my mid-30s, you know, it's not like I was an early bloomer. And, to me that that was like, it was amazing in the sense that I realized, wow, that letter actually determined a subconscious direction for my life. So, I only say that I actually wanted to be a commercially successful writer very early on. In high school, I graduated high school at 17. So, you know, I was probably 15 or 16 years old and then, ended up writing and getting, a buddy came through, he was from Oregon, and he came through Houston in a Volkswagen camping van. He was traveling around the country, and we became friends. I didn't know him, but we became friends then, and he invited me to get in the van and go with him back to Oregon to finish his trip.

Donald Miller: And, you know, I heard Oregon. And so, I was like, well, that's interesting. I'm, you know, I'm supposed to go to Oregon, you know, and for the stupidest reason is because it's not as hot. So, I got in his van and the whole time we were in the van, it was about three months. We ended up the final month just living in the woods outside of a cattle ranch, working on this cattle ranch. And the whole time I'm like, boy, this would make a great book, you know? And then years went by. I tried to write. Terrible, you know, it's hard to do. And I got a job at a publishing company, literally in the warehouse. And four years later I was the president of that publishing company. So, I discovered I'm really just sort of intuitively good at business. And then I interacted with all these authors and interacting with these book buyers. I got to know how the industry worked. And then at night, I went home and said,

I'm going to write this book about that road trip I took seven years ago, and I wrote a book called *Prayer and the Art of Volkswagen Maintenance*. Because I had so many contacts in publishing, I was a textbook publisher, but because I had so many contacts and had been to so many book writing, book conventions and all that kind of stuff, was able to make a few calls and the publishers that I called and sent them samples of the book liked it, and all of them offered contracts.

Donald Miller: So, and there was a slight little bidding war and got a book published. That book failed, sold 10,000 copies, but it was very humbling because I thought, okay, this is actually not easy. And then but I knew how to write a book at that point and had published a book and knew how to sell a book because I was in publishing and started my own publishing company, wrote a book called *Blue Like Jazz*, was my second book, and that book sold more than a million copies. And all of a sudden, I didn't have a publishing company more. I was a writer and a speaker. And that's when Sandy called and said, you know, you won't believe this. So, you know, I don't know what all that means, Whitney. But that's kind of the journey I took. That all, it makes it sound easy, but you got to realize it was like a year and a half to write that book that failed. And then another year and a half to write the book that succeeded, with no guarantee that I was going to be able to make a living doing this.

Donald Miller: And then I say, I had my own publishing company. I would have to call a bookstore and go and drive to that bookstore with a trunk full of books in hopes that they would buy these books that I published so that I could pay my rent. I mean, you know, there was there was no financial success in my life till I was in my mid 30s and had a book on the *New York Times* best seller list, the first time I'd ever made more than probably \$25,000 a year. So, you know, there's a lot of like, and that's the other reason I wasn't married till I was 42. I was just poor. And so, you know, a lot of struggle in there. But I discovered that I loved to write, was just obsessed with literature and how it worked and how books came together and how stories came together. I don't know that it meant much to me. I mean, I guess it meant a lot to be published because, you know, it's a finish line, if you will. But I really liked the writing process and still do to this day.

Whitney Johnson: That is a fantastic story. A couple of thoughts, reflections. Number one is that it's interesting hearing you say that 10,000 books is a failure because we, you've seen the statistics, you know.

Donald Miller: Oh yeah. I mean, well, for me, 10,000 books meant I can't pay rent, right?

Whitney Johnson: Right. 10,000 books mean you can't pay rent, you can't eat.

Donald Miller: And it's a small price to pay to be an artist.

Whitney Johnson: Exactly. And yet we know you know the data. And I'm probably going to get my numbers off slightly, but, you know, 90%, 95% of all business books don't sell more than 5000 books. So that's one thing. But the bigger thing for me is the power of intention.

Donald Miller: Isn't that true?

Whitney Johnson: You wrote in high school, Oregon, *New York Times* best seller make more than \$1 million, and you planted it in your subconscious, those seeds. And then they grew.

Donald Miller: Yeah, that's exactly what happened. And I'm such a believer in that. That story made me such a believer in that. I in fact, yesterday morning, I think it was yesterday morning, sat down and went over a life plan again and just said, this is who, this is who you're going to be. This is where you're going to be in ten years. This is where. And you know so much of that, I mean, that's one story that has continued to be true, that you sit down, and you do it again, and five years later you're like, I cannot believe. I cannot believe we have 30 employees. Right? And, you know, even this morning I was doing a cold plunge in my swimming pool. And, you know, I just started praying and I pray in the swimming pool. It's like, God, I'd love to, you know, have 25,000 coaches in this program that we're building. And I'd love to, you know, do this and do that. And, you know, a lot of it is just future casting and vision casting. And then I take that stuff to God because I'm absolutely convinced God loves to build things with people. I'm just convinced that,

Whitney Johnson: That is so good!

Donald Miller: It sounds like I'm going to him asking for a favor or asking for him to bless me. I'm not. I'm actually going to him saying, can we build a tree house? Can we create, can we do, can we build this business together? Can we build this family together? Can we do this because I don't know how to do it alone. And you seem to know what you're doing. And it's kind of, different people bond with God different ways. I bond with God, working, you know, because I like to work. I'm not a workaholic, but I do, I like to work. I like to build things, and I like the creative process. So, I don't know where I'm going with that, except to say that it's just worked for me. And it's been really fun, and I'm just convinced he actually delights in it. He's like, finally, you're paying attention to me. You want me? I mean, if my daughter comes to me and says, can we, like, build a fort? I'm like, you want me? You want to hang out with me, you know? Yes, we can build a fort. You do whatever the frick you want, I don't care, you know. Yeah. So, I don't say frick to my daughter.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, good.

Donald Miller: Not yet. Wait till she's a teenager.

Whitney Johnson: So, the father son project, and I'm going to make a really bad dad joke, the father/son nonfiction book.

Donald Miller: Yep, very funny.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. I told you it was a bad one. Okay, so, now you are the CEO of your own marketing company. It's called StoryBrand. I went to one of your seminars like, 6 or 7 years ago. It was amazing.

Donald Miller: I love that.

Whitney Johnson: And how were you using the lessons you learned early on? Like, how did how did StoryBrand come about? What was the genesis or the evolution? And if you can pull a few of these textbook publishing writing books through, what's the through line for you if you had to create a plot around that?

Donald Miller: Well, I'll tell you the plot. I'll tell you the consistent thing that has happened to me, and it's literally a consistent process of disrupting yourself, to steal your line.

Whitney Johnson: I like how you did that.

Donald Miller: Sitting down and writing a letter to yourself. By the way, that letter was written to say I was going to accomplish all this by the time I was 35. When Sandy called me, I was 35. So, you know, talk about prophetic. You know, I don't know what it is, but sitting down saying, I'm going to do this by the time I'm 35 is "disrupting yourself". Getting in a van and driving to Oregon with a guy you've just recently become friends with who, by the way, I introduced when we got to Oregon. I introduced him to a pen pal of mine. They are now married, and their daughter is in the other room. She works here. So, you know, it's amazing. Her name is Dagny. I'm going to get choked up. My two-and-a-half-year-old daughter is going to be the flower girl in Dagny's wedding this April. You know, so it's just fun. But I think there's this thing that you do that, you just go, okay, my life is like, is kind of becoming mundane. So, it's time to disrupt yourself, time to get in the van, time to ride out. I'm going to be a best-selling author. Time to start a publishing company, time to do whatever. So, there's this constant, like if there's a constant, the theme of my life is really curiosity about story. I mean, you know, if you could point all the threads, but the curiosity about story is this constant sort of, well, let's disrupt this, let's disrupt this, let's disrupt this again.

Donald Miller: Let's do this and try to do something different. When something starts, when the credits start to roll on whatever you're working on, it's time to disrupt yourself and start a new story. So, I love, I'm a huge fan of the of your controlling idea for your career and the thoughts that you bring into the world is, you know, if I were a therapist and I'm not, first of all, I'd be a terrible therapist. I'd be like, you sound like a wimp, you should just be tough. Leave. You know? Whatever. I'd be awful. But the thing that I would say is, like, you got to stop doing that. You need to disrupt yourself. You need to leave your husband. You need to get out of here. This man is abusive. I don't

know what you're doing, disrupt yourself. Like, get out of this, this mode that you're in. And there's great power to that. So, you know, all that to say, if you look back, it's "disrupt yourself. So, the StoryBrand stuff, what happened was, you know, that memoir, *Blue Like Jazz*, was a success. So, I wrote about six more of those, which would put me up to actually five more, which would put me up to seven memoir-esque books. I say memoirs because they weren't real memoirs. They were like my personal story as it relates to religion or my personal story as it relates to fatherhood, or my personal story as it relates to marriage.

Donald Miller: So, they were topical memoirs. That was, you know, I was kind of done with that. I didn't have anything else to talk about in terms of my life, but I'd been studying story and story structure for so long that I disrupted my life as a memoirist and wrote a book, a business book. And that book ended up selling another million copies, *Building a Story Brand*. And all of a sudden people are calling me, asking me to help them clarify their stories, which, if you think about it, I've been set up for that because I've clarified my own story for so long, and now I can help you clarify your personal brand story, your marketing story for your company. And all of a sudden, I didn't want to write memoirs anymore, but I disrupted that whole system and started over. I call it my second career. My first career was memoirs, my second career as business coaching, really, and especially as it relates to marketing and messaging and, you know, got lucky enough to hit another home run. And it's not that it was easy, you know, it was really difficult. There was no, nobody won the lottery, and wrote about something I was intensely curious about. Now, Whitney, you tell me if I had gone to you five years ago and said, hey, I'm thinking about writing a book about how ancient narrative structures can be laid over marketing ideas to create a messaging filter for corporate entities. That book is going to sell.

Whitney Johnson: When you say it like that...

Donald Miller: That book's going to sell 12 copies, and my mother's going to buy it. But I was really curious about it. I was like, this is very interesting to me. And it's fascinating how these puzzle pieces come together. And, I thought, I don't care if the publisher wants it, I want to write it and was rewarded for that. And so, I, for me, there was a moral in that story, too. And the moral was, chase your curiosity. You have no idea where it could take you. And people also, by the way, get really excited about anybody else who's excited about anything. They just do. People who are excited about something are interesting and it almost doesn't matter what it is. They're just interesting, right? They're fascinated by something. So, people who are fascinated are fascinating. I had the honor, top five people I've ever sat down and had a conversation with. Monday, I flew to Wichita, Kansas, and on Tuesday I had lunch with Charles Koch. Charles Koch dominates 13 verticals of the American economy. 13 of them. He is worth more than \$100 billion. He's 88 years old and I didn't know, I had to have, I think, 2 or 3 meetings before I had lunch with Charles Koch to prepare me to have lunch with Charles Koch. With his team.

Donald Miller: You know, you get there, there's, you know, there's documentaries made because what, you know what? He's a chemical engineer and he's been a little bit in oil and all that kind of stuff. His record on the environment is actually astonishing. But people have used him as a straw man. So, you know, he could be sort of controversial. He is one of the most generous human beings on the planet. He has plans to solve poverty, criminal justice reform. I mean, it's just unbelievable what this guy has done. Sadly, people have, you know, labeled him as some sort of bad guy. And he's just not, he's just one of the most, he's amazing. But anytime, anytime you succeed, they're going to come after you. So, I didn't know what to expect. I expected an extremely powerful man. And what I got was, I walk into the room, he puts me at the head of the table. I said, Mr. Koch, I'm very uncomfortable sitting at the head of this table. And he said, well, you don't have a choice sitting there at the table because we are all here. There's like four of us in the room. We're all here to learn from you.

Donald Miller: And I'm like, Mr. Koch, again, I'm not here to talk. Well, if you're not here to talk, you know, why are you here? And he was the most humble, funny, thoughtful. But the one word that described Charles Koch more than anything else was intensely curious. He was driven by the joy of learning. And I don't think that guy cares at all about money. He's just made a lot of money because he's so freaking curious. And he had zero ego. I can't even explain how little ego this man had, and I loved it. Top five people I've ever met in my life, and super inspirational and just, you know, just so, 88 years old could run circles around me with his intellect and is nowhere near retiring. In fact, he told, he said his wife will not let him retire because she doesn't want him at home. So, you know, he's just great. But I think there's something to be said for the association of curiosity and success. And I don't think it's, you

know, people talk about grit, they talk about salesmanship, they talk about intelligence. People don't talk about curiosity as a strategic advantage. And I think it is.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, is that a new book on the way for you?

Donald Miller: No.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, question for you because I'm looking at the time who are 1 or 2 other interesting people you had lunch with?

Donald Miller: Okay. Well, there's a lot of them that have been, you know, sort of more than lunch. When I think about the figures who have who have been influential in my career, when I wrote *Blue Like Jazz*, I read *Catcher in the Rye* probably 25 times because I liked J.D. Salinger's voice so much in that book. And it would put me in this sort of literary cadence that would give me a tone that I liked. And it was almost like if I pretended to be Holden Caulfield writing about religion, my soul was set free to say whatever I wanted. And I don't know why it worked. And nobody, nobody ever realized that except for Philip Yancey. So that's one book and I'm going to come back to this in a second. The second book was Anne Lamott's, *Traveling Mercies*. So I would read those two books and Holden Caulfield gave me the voice, but Anne Lamott gave me permission to be vulnerable and to tell my truth, especially in the context of religion where nobody tells the truth, everybody pretends they play a role, and they pretend to be somebody else so that they don't get caught being human.

Donald Miller: So obviously I didn't have lunch with J.D. Salinger, but Anne Lamott called and said, can we get lunch? I noticed you're going to be in San Francisco. And so, she took me to Chez Panisse, and we had lunch right there in Berkeley. And she was fantastic. She was just fantastic. And the whole time I'm like, why is this woman, this literary giant, having lunch with me? I don't, I don't understand, but she thought I was funny, and I thought she was funny. And we emailed back and forth, and text messaged, you know, almost to this day. And that was another one. But I'll go back to the Philip Yancey story. I'm opening for Philip Yancey in the first ever book festival I've ever been invited to, and I was a no name author. It was a Portland Book festival, but they were like, hey, who can we get locally to open for Philip Yancey? Because he's selling out this giant theater. And they were like, well, there's this guy, Don Miller. He'll be cheap, and he just has to drive like five miles. So, let's grab him. I walk into the green room. Now, Philip Yancey is a hero of mine. He's written some incredible books. He has just a ferocious intellect, and he's a great writer. I walk in the room and he said, J.D. Salinger and Anne Lamott. That's what he said to me. The first thing Philip Yancey ever said to me. And I said, how did you know? And he goes, it's obvious.

Whitney Johnson: Wow.

Donald Miller: Isn't that incredible? I mean, some people just have loads of, you know, intelligence beyond the rest of us. And Philip Yancey and Anne Lamott and Charles Koch are three of those people for me.

Whitney Johnson: Wow! Great stories. Okay. Now we are going to talk briefly about your next book, *Coach Builder*. And here's the challenge. We'll see if you're up for it. So, one of the things that we find a recurring theme for people who are considering jumping to a new S-curve to disrupting themselves going through our certification is how do I talk about what I do? Meaning I'm now a coach and that's what your book is about and what do I charge? And what I would love for you to do is call upon your StoryBrand chops for just a moment and give us a script.

Donald Miller: Yeah, it sounds like this. It sounds like if you or anybody, you know, struggles with X. I became a coach to solve that. Helped you solve that problem. That's really it. The problem is the hook. So, every coach getting into a coaching business or pivoting their career into coaching business needs to take a sheet of paper, and they need to write down every problem that they are good at solving. And then, you know, as a coach and that may be 20 problems. And then you actually need to circle the ones that people would pay the most to have solved, for instance, like slumping sales or tax, you know, loopholes, strategy. You're paying too much in taxes, you know, what is it that you solve that's worth a lot of money? And then actually ask yourself, do I want to do that for ten years? And if you don't, don't do it. But if you do, you want to pick the top one and that's your territory. And now you're going to go out and you're going to control that territory and you're going to own that territory. For instance, here's how powerful this is. When you actually lead with a problem, all of a sudden when you say, you know, a lot of

people struggle with this, I solved that problem. Anybody you're talking to perceives that your value as a human being is exponentially higher. Because we value people, things, products that solve problems.

Donald Miller: Anything that you value is something that solves a problem and any business that takes off, they figured out a problem that needed to be solved that nobody else was solving, or they weren't solving it well enough. So, I often use this. In fact, I flew into Baltimore not too long ago and I don't usually use that. I don't usually say, you know, people struggle with this. I solve the problem because if I do, the person wants free consulting. So, I usually don't say it. But I got into an Uber, young man named Christian was my driver. My client is national security, cyber security. It's literally two miles from the airport. You can see the building from the airport. So, we have a very short drive. You know, he's morally obligated to let me out of the car. So, this is not going to be a long conversation. He says, what brings you to town? He says, you know, business or pleasure? I say, business. He said, what sort of business are you in? I say, well, you know, a lot of people have ideas or products, but they don't know how to talk about them, to get other people to pay attention when they don't know how to talk about something, they call me. And he turned down the radio and he said, you are a very important person. I mean, can you believe that? I'm like, wow, that worked.

Donald Miller: And he said, Don, I need help talking about something. And I'm like, okay, well, here we go. He's going to want free consulting. He pulls over at the gate of national security, and there are guys with assault rifles all around us because he's not going through the gate. He's just pulling in and I'm like, this is not the place to stop. And he says, Don, you got to help me. I'm like, okay, what is it? You got a side business; you got a side hustle. What are you thinking about? He goes, no, I got to break up with my girlfriend and he wants me to give him messaging advice on how to break up with his girlfriend and we spend like, ten minutes, and most of it's like, nah, Christian, you can't say that man. I honestly think she's better off without him. Anyway, we emailed back and forth a little bit. It was really a fun exchange. But if you actually introduce yourself as the person who solves that problem, and if that problem is something people will pay money to solve, you will never, you will never suffer for money again. You'll also never suffer for respect or for admiration. Now, if you don't like solving that problem, you're going to hate your life. So, it's also got to kind of light you up. But that would be my advice. If you're starting a coaching business, it all starts with what problem do you solve? Your whole brand is built on the foundation of the problem you solve.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, I love it. All right, one more question and then I want you to talk about the gifts that you have for our listeners. So, the question is how do you counsel people on what to charge?

Donald Miller: Well, more than your charging is 95% always true. There's two things. One is, you actually want to understand that if you're a coach, you're not charging for your time. And you're not charging for your wisdom. What you're charging for is for the money that they can make if they take your advice. So, every coach, because we're talking about an economic question here. So, it's an economic answer. You know if you're talking about how much to charge, you're talking about money. So let me talk about money. You know, if you, for instance, I gave a talk recently to 250 sales executives, account executives, sales reps, and I said, hey, you know, I could sit here and talk about philosophy of sales, but the proof is in the pudding. Open up your laptop. We're going to email a client right now. Like, raise your hand if you got somebody sitting on the fence, 250 hands go up because that's their job. And I said, you've emailed these people. They're not closed. They're not closing the deal. Get out your laptop and email them right now. We're going to start with the problem. We're going to position the product as a solution to the problem. We're going to give them a three-step plan from their problem to your product. We're going to give them the negative stakes of what happens if they don't buy from you. The positive stakes of what happens if they do buy from you. And then we're going to ask them to buy. Let's go through it. 250 people did. That took us about 60 minutes. Two days later, the chief revenue officer called my office and said, we closed \$2.5 million worth of sales off that lecture. We've never seen anything like that in the history of the company.

Whitney Johnson: That is a high ROI for them because I'm probably not did not charge them \$250,000.

Donald Miller: I did not charge them \$250,000. You know, my fee for speaking is X, it's not that high. But what I, what they're actually buying is a \$2.5 million return. They're not buying a speaker. And so, when you understand that one it puts a fire under you to make these people money. You are a business coach. You've got to make them money. Now there's all sorts of ways to make money; team alignment, increasing team morale, decreasing turnover, increasing retention. There's some that are not quite as easy to talk about as sales, because sales is like, you can put a

dollar on it. But, you know, I think that you're worth more. You begin to understand your own worth when you realize how much money it's making or saving people. And, you know, a buddy of mine wrote a book about the enneagram, sent out an email that said, hey, I'm doing this spiritual formation retreat. It's 50 bucks, and we're going to talk with the Enneagram as it relates to spiritual formation. I hit reply and I said, man, I love it. You realize that you could give that same lecture to a group of people, building team unity in a corporation and charge \$10,000, not 50. And my phone rings and...

Whitney Johnson: Is that Ian Morgan Cron.

Donald Miller: Ian Cron.

Whitney Johnson: I read the book. It's good.

Donald Miller: Yeah, it's a great book. Yeah. The road back to you. So, Ian, my phone rings because Ian and I are friends. He goes, what are you talking about? And I explained, like, Enneagram is a great tool for team unity. Like, if I can understand everybody on the team and why that person is always mad at me and you know, and why this person, we don't want to motivate them this way. We want to motivate them a different way. You take all that Enneagram stuff; you turn it into team building. He did that. Ian now has a second home in Mexico. And he's got a gorgeous, beautiful house in 12 South here in Nashville. And he, that's what he does. He works with corporations on team unity stuff. And he's freaking good at it you know. But that's a way to take the same product. Figure out how that can make people money and then charge a percentage a very tiny percentage by the way. So, the way I price products is, I guarantee, a ten x return on your investment. If you don't make a ten x return on what you're paying me, I'll write you a check. And the way I always word that to them is I always say the reason I will write you a check and give you your money back is because I don't want anybody ever say to me that I lost the money and I can't afford that. My reputation can't afford that, and I've never written a check.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. Oh, before you go to what your gifts are, what are, what number are you on the Enneagram?

Donald Miller: Three with a three wing. I don't even have a wing. It's just like we need to win. That's all I think about is how are we going to win or how are they going to win? How is my client going to win? Right? How are they going to win?

Whitney Johnson: What are our gifts for our listeners?

Donald Miller: All right, well, I've got a book called *Coach Builder*, and if you go to coachbuilder.com/disrupt, you know, you can preorder the book on Amazon. It comes out in a few weeks (publish date: March 12, 2004). But if you go to coachbuilder.com/disrupt, there's a 90-minute audio summary of the book. So, this means you don't have to buy the audio book. I'll give you basically a 90-minute summary of the book right now. And then there's also a lot of coaches and people who are pivoting their career to coaches are being are thinking about starting a coaching business. They don't know how to sell themselves. And so, I actually put together a PDF of 27 different coaches' websites who are making a lot of money, and you can actually look at those websites and go, oh my gosh, I do that. I could do this, and you can in your mind, you'll start creating your own website and your own sales pitch on how you would sell yourself. So, buy the book. It's 20 bucks or so, 25 bucks on Amazon, and then, go to coachbuilder.com/disrupt and get that PDF. And a lot of you are going to quit your jobs and become a coach. And I hope you do love it.

Whitney Johnson: Three more questions. What's going to be true for you in ten years? What are you manifesting right now?

Donald Miller: In ten years, I'll be in a position to jump into the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary, and South Carolina primary for president of the United States. I don't know if I will do it or even will want to do it. I'm certainly not in a position to do that right now. But if we have 25,000 coaches and I've sold 60% of my company, I do a lot of strategy for politicians and a lot of campaign narratives. And if I don't find a candidate that I can work with to help them get elected, then I'll. I'll run myself. I won't run to win, because I don't necessarily, I mean, I

would take the job if they gave me the job, but it's a very far-fetched idea. But if you jump into a primary and you do decently okay, you know, whoever gets elected, you know, calls you and says, hey, can you... And what I want them to do is call me and say, can you help me organize my entire messaging strategy around every cabinet member? And that's my dream job. I want a job in the White House running communications strategy, for every member of the president's cabinet. Because to me, it's like, that's how you can influence the world and not have to like, pardon a turkey.

Whitney Johnson: I love it.

Donald Miller: Yeah. We'll see. You know, it's ten years from now. So that's the absurd vision and that's it. And also, my daughter loves me, and my wife loves me. My wife says, if you ever run for office, I'm going to throw a press conference for your opponent. So, I've got that to deal with a challenge, quite a challenge.

Whitney Johnson: To StoryBrand her. So, she's bought into it.

Donald Miller: There you go. Slowly lobbying her right now.

Whitney Johnson: So, what's been useful to you in this conversation?

Donald Miller: You know, I think, you know, first of all, the realization and I will take this forevermore with me, the realization that so many wonderful things have happened in my life because I've disrupted myself, and now I have somebody to send them to. If they want to do it, I can send them to you after they...

Whitney Johnson: Become a coach.

Donald Miller: There you go.

Whitney Johnson: All right, so final question for you. What do you want people to think and feel and do when they finish reading your book, *Coach Builder*?

Donald Miller: I want them to feel empowered. Yeah. I want them to say, oh, all I needed was some simple knowledge, you know. And Don showed me how to do it. There's a transition that happens in most people's lives. I remember interviewing Pete Carroll. He was coach of the Seattle Seahawks at the time. This was before he drafted Russell Wilson and won a Super Bowl. And I asked him, I said, you know, what do you love about coaching? And he said, when I was young, I succeeded as an athlete. I was very competitive. And I'm so grateful I succeeded as an athlete early because it taught me there's no meaning in it. I was depressed, I was winning everything, and I was depressed until I started coaching and when I started helping other people win. There is no diminishing return on the fulfillment that you get by helping other people win. What a frickin amazing thing to say. So, *Coach Builder*, the whole movement is basically for people who are saying, I already won, and it didn't fulfill me. So how do I help other people win? Here's my book, *Coach Builder*. Here's how you do it.

Whitney Johnson: Amen. Thank you, Donald.

Donald Miller: Thank you, Whitney. Wonderful to be with you.

We devour stories because we have no idea where the next turn will take us. We dive headfirst into the unknown because we believe in the characters. Donald's reminding us to believe in our own story, too. Think about that power of intention, in writing that letter. I'll live in Oregon, which does not border Canada, I'll be a *New York Times* bestseller, and I'll have a million dollars. And somehow, he found his way to all three.

When I interviewed Tom Peters, he told me this story of soldiers lost in the Alps during World War Two. Hopelessly lost, and the snow's setting in, and all the men are looking to their sergeant. So, he fumbles around in his pack, and finds, miraculously, a map of the mountain range. Following it, they eventually found their way out of the valley and back into warm beds.

But the trick was, it wasn't a map of the Alps. It was of some other mountain range, far, far away. Any plan in a crisis will do. Everything depends on the story we tell ourselves. It would have been easy for Donald to tell himself a story about his absent father, one of the villains, and abandonment and anger. It was infinitely harder for him to write a different story, where he knocks on his dad's door at 30 and asks to be let into his life. What story are you waiting to write?

For another dose of scrappiness and get-it-done attitude, there's my talk with Diana Kander, [episode 340](#). If my talk with Donald has you interested in the coaching profession, I'd point you to [episode 308](#) with Carol Kauffman. And in the spirit of that sergeant with his map of the Alps, there's [episode 241](#) with Tanya Dalton.

Thank you again to Donald Miller 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.