

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 369: RUTH MCKEANAY

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Welcome 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.

Ask a thousand people how to make a house a home, and you might get a thousand different answers. Some will say it's family; others say it's all in the interior decor - neighborhood pride, or a furry friend, maybe. Regardless of how you answer the question, you can't just sit back and wait for it to become a home - everyone agrees that **something** needs to be done. But when you get a thousand answers, it's hard to choose a course of action that feels right for you, and your home.

Our guest today is an expert on making that transition from house to home. Moving every 18 months or so, Ruth McKeaney raised five kids alongside her husband. Move into a fixer-upper, fix it up with the family's help, sell it, rinse and repeat. It was only a matter of time until Ruth's ability to structure her family's systems came to the attention of book publishers. *Hungry for Home* is Ruth's manual on building a home, everything from home restoration to frozen cookie dough.

I hope you enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: We're recording this right after Easter, and you just had a very large Easter egg hunt. Tell us about this.

Ruth McKeane: Oh, I have to first clarify. It's not an Easter egg hunt, but it was the 50th year, which is so much fun. My mom started something when I was five where she would write riddles, and we would spend the day going from riddle to riddle to find the treasure. That is lasted for 50 years. We have gone through cities, capitals, amusement parks, zoos, museums. This year was at the Philadelphia Zoo, and my mom died, probably, I think, now 18 years ago. So, my dad took it over. We've had up to 70, 75 people join us. We start out with an archery contest and an ax throwing contest. So that determines which team gets to start the big hunt first. And then it all ends in a huge Mexican meal at some restaurant. So, it was it was fantastic.

Whitney Johnson: Wait, an archery and an ax throwing contest every time.

Ruth McKeane: Because there's multiple teams, to determine who gets to actually start first, you have to do a competition. So, I mean, in the past it's been three legged races. We've raised up and down the, you know, Rocky steps at the Art Museum in Philadelphia. You know, but this year it happened to be, you know, ax throwing.

Whitney Johnson: Have you ever thrown an ax before?

Ruth McKeane: I have, but not everyone had. And you're divided into teams, and I think each is given three chances. And, that team gets to go first.

Whitney Johnson: Wow. And Ruth, what was the treasure?

Ruth McKeane: It's always the same. Well, the first person who sees it, it's an individual prize. And that's a, you know, it's \$100. The first team that finds it. It's just a huge bag of candy. That's not the point of it. It really is about competition. A very competitive family. So.

Whitney Johnson: So, Ruth, that leads me now to my next question, which is, where did you grow up and what did you want to be when you grew up?

Ruth McKeane: Oh, I love this. Actually. We were packing on one of our moves and I ran into, you know, when you write in elementary school what you want to be when you grow up. Well, I found it, and it's exactly what I did, which was really fun. And it was third grade, third grade. So, I grew up all over the country, first of all, so I don't even know where to say I'm from. But I always wanted to be a lawyer and then I wanted to be a judge. So, I became an assistant attorney or Assistant DA. And in Virginia, they're called Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney. And then I became an Assistant Attorney General. But I never got to be a judge.

Whitney Johnson: So, you wanted to be a lawyer from the time that you were eight years old?

Ruth McKeane: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: Do you know where that came from, or did you have people in your family that were lawyers?

Ruth McKeane: Dad's a lawyer. I have an uncle that's a lawyer. I don't know that it was from that. I have this innate justice thing going on and right and wrong and I don't know where it came from. But you know, when I went to college, I knew that I was going to do and I mean, I was just always known.

Whitney Johnson: Mhm.

Ruth McKeane: So, um, where the criminal side of it came in, I'm not even sure, except that it was very good practice for trial work.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Fascinating. Okay. So, you're a child, you want to grow up and be a lawyer. And unlike most people, you actually do end up doing the thing that you thought you wanted to do. We're going to talk about in a minute, though, how you massively disrupted yourself. But before we get there, I would love to hear, are

there 1 or 2 people that, as a child that you really admired or looked up to that weren't your parents necessarily? Does anyone come to mind?

Ruth McKeaney: Yes, they do. My grandfather was one. He was an evangelist all over the world. So, my dad, you know, they grew up in China with this, my dad and his five siblings. So, they were willing to your point to always Disrupt themselves and be courageous in a variety of areas. The second person was one of my uncles, my Uncle Hubert.

Whitney Johnson: Mhm. Mhm. Say more. Tell us more about him.

Ruth McKeaney: I don't know. He is, he is just one of my heroes as far as he challenges people to think, to not be afraid to think, to be self-reflective. And yet at the same time, he's your cheerleader. He's your biggest support, you know? So, he's just one of those people that challenges you to be better than you are and to think bigger than you do.

Whitney Johnson: What did he do professionally?

Ruth McKeaney: He was a professor. He also wrote a number of books. I think there is even an award in DC in the political science kind of realm about him.

Whitney Johnson: What was his name? Hubert what?

Ruth McKeaney: Hubert Morken.

Whitney Johnson: Mhm. So good. Okay. So, the sense of, and I think it's interesting you said that your, your grandfather, he was an evangelist and this idea of traveling around the world and wanting to have people live better lives and be better people. And so, as I listen to that, it's not such a surprise or such a leap that you want it to be an attorney like it was, that you wanted to do good in the world, and you saw an attorney being an attorney as a means of making that happen. That's what I'm hearing.

Ruth McKeaney: Yep.

Whitney Johnson: Mhm. All right. So, you're the assistant attorney general. So, your dream did in fact come true for the Commonwealth of Virginia. But then you stepped away. So, what was that like and why did you do it?

Ruth McKeaney: Oh, my goodness. Heading to the first disruption. So, I actually got married. I was 30 and within a couple of months of getting married, my new husband asked if I would move to Pennsylvania, which I didn't even belong to the bar there, so it was a completely new thing. But you know, you're still in that newlywed phase of I'll go wherever you want me to go, like it's all going to be great. And it's so interesting. I had lunch right before I left with my mentor at the time, who, what at the time, was a Virginia Court of Appeals judge. He's now become a Virginia Supreme Court judge. But he took me to lunch, and he threw out on the table the *Newsweek* magazine at the time, which the cover of it was basically it had to do with family businesses not surviving passing generations. And my husband was asking me to move to Pennsylvania to work in a family business. And my mentor, this judge, said, does your husband know what you're giving up? And he's, he knows what he's walking into. And I can honestly say at the time, I had no idea to the answer of either one of those questions. But life has a way, you know, it's like my dad often gives that example of gold, right? How do you really purify gold? You apply a lot of heat to it and the impurities come out. And I think we are getting ready to enter a time period of a lot of heat and pressure.

Whitney Johnson: That conversation with your mentor, did you share that with your husband? And what did he say?

Ruth McKeaney: Oh, yeah. But we both laughed. And actually, he had gone to breakfast with somebody who said, "Your wife is going to have a real identity crisis. And he came home, and he said, yeah, they think you're

going to have I mean; I always knew eventually I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom. So, to me, what are you talking about? This is exactly what we've planned for. And I had no idea what I was talking about.

Whitney Johnson: And did you have an identity crisis?

Ruth McKeane: Oh. Oh, that would be my first disruption. That I can really look back and know. It was a pivotal point for me.

Whitney Johnson: Mhm. Mhm.

Ruth McKeane: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So do you remember, I want to just tease this out a little bit more, and then I want to go to that next S curve that you went on, is when you started to have that identity crisis, because I think that that is true. It's interesting, I interviewed a few years ago, a woman by the name of Jennifer Petriglieri, who wrote a book called *Couples at Work*, and she talks about the power dynamic in a marriage and how when you first get married, you're making some decisions. And then when you have your first child, you're making some decisions. And then when you have, you're an empty nester, you're making some decisions. And these are, these milestones or checkpoints. And there's always power within that marriage. And we don't recognize it or see it, but it is in fact there. And you make that decision and your decision to leave Virginia, leave the law. That was a massive, massive shift for you, especially because you thought you wanted to be a lawyer from the time, you're eight years old. So, I'm curious, Ruth, if you remember, because I think it would be really helpful for people who are listening, are there 1 or 2 things that you did to help you adjust to that identity shift of jumping from one S curve to the next?

Ruth McKeane: I wish I could tell you there was something I'd done, I did, I think I did everything wrong.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, well, that's instructive as well. Do tell.

Ruth McKeane: And when I say wrong, I didn't even recognize what was happening, except I was incredibly unhappy. You know, we used to say, Bobby used to joke me when we lived in Richmond, and I was working. He was working that; he was known as Ruth's husband. When we moved to Pennsylvania and I didn't know a person, and we lived in nine places our first year and I didn't, didn't, hadn't waived into the bar, so I didn't have a job. I became Bob's wife. And you already feel kind of this anonymity like I'm not known by anyone anymore. And that sense of productivity and profitability and fruitfulness that you've had about yourself, that's all left. And then you find yourself pregnant with your first child. It is like, what in the world has happened? So, I don't think I, I didn't know to what to prepare myself for. I didn't think this was going to happen.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Ruth McKeane: Because I thought, well, I always intended to do this. I mean, my mom did it so beautifully, so well, so seamlessly. At least I thought, and, you know, so I don't think I did it right.

Whitney Johnson: You know what? I really appreciate your sharing that because I think that, you know, again, if I universalize this, when you jump to a new S-curve, when you disrupt yourself and you're doing something new, which for you, again, moving to a new state, changing profession, having your first child, working in a family business, that is a lot of new at one point.

Ruth McKeane: And my mom has just found out she has cancer, and my brother needs a heart transplant, it was all of it. So, everything.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, so question for you. I'm wondering how the decision to start renovating houses plays into this. So, what was the calculus that you were doing of starting to do this?

Ruth McKeane: I think I mentioned we lived in nine places our first year.

Yeah.

And our home in Richmond hadn't sold. And I was waiting to waive into the bar, and I was newly pregnant. And we found the area. Okay, let me back up. Bob's business was in a certain part of town. He really felt for the, for the health of our family and marriage, it would be wise not to live right near the family business. So, we found an area we wanted to live in, and we met with a realtor. And right off the bat, she asked what we could spend, and we told her, and she burst out laughing. I would highly recommend if you're a realtor, you never do that. But she said you can't afford to live here. So, we left that meeting, went home pretty, you know, very unhappy. She called us two weeks later and said, are you afraid of hard work? And not knowing what she was talking about was, of course not. We're like the hardest workers we know. So, we met her at a house that was 150 years old. It was sliding off the foundation. I don't know if you're familiar with the movie *Philadelphia Story*, but it's about the Montgomery Scott estate. And on this estate are these six homes. It's called Banjo Town. It's where the help originally lived. So, she takes us to this house. One little bathroom, I mean, Martha Washington's staircase. So, you couldn't take any furniture upstairs? They had, like, literally a mattress on the floor upstairs. So, we had to build an addition just to get furniture up. But she, we walk into this, and she says, this is what you can afford, and I, just tears pouring down my face.

Ruth McKeaney: And Bob looks at me and says, oh, we got this. Let's go to Home Depot. Now, mind you, started working for his father, you know? So he's working so many hours and he started to learn. I didn't think I had a creative bone in my body, really. And I had to learn. I mean, I was very linear. I was a lawyer, I was, I didn't decorate, I didn't cook, I served him cereal for dinner. I, I just didn't do all this stuff, so I had to. I wanted to do my part. But with that comes a lot of insecurity because you're out of your lane. And, what happens is we do this first house within 18 months, we were approached by a realtor who said, I can now double your money. We sold it. Got another fixer upper. She came to us. I can double your money. We sold it within 18 to 24 months. We did this over and over and over and we had five children. All five were born in different houses. And, I mean, our first four were born in five years. So, I'm telling you, it was like, bam, bam, bam. And we're working. Bob would come home from work at 6:00, say good night to the kids by 7:30, and work till one in the morning and leave at five in the morning. So, it was a grind for years, and I just figured out how to hang wallpaper, how to determine what walls I wanted to come down. I painted, that's how we did it.

Whitney Johnson: So. Ruth. So, you're at this launch point of a new curve. You think linearly, you don't know how to wallpaper, you don't know how to paint, but you start doing this, you're able to double your money. Do you remember over and over again? Do you remember a moment where you started? You know, where you started to say, oh, I think I'm kind of good at this. And it is. No, I think I feel pretty good. Oh, my sense of self efficacy is back. Do you remember which house you were in where you were living? Describe that place in time for us.

Ruth McKeaney: I think it was around our third house. I mean, our second house we did had the largest open house they'd ever had, and it was in the middle of a rainstorm. But people wanted to see what we had done. And I had insisted that my husband brick the whole kitchen floor and build a fireplace in the kitchen. And he had really doubted me, and I had insisted, but it became I mean, it's, I just found that I knew what people wanted. And, we have certain signature things we've done in each house. I put a fireplace in every kitchen, and part of that was to me, the kitchen was the center of the home. It's where I lived. It's where my kids lived. And, to have that kind of space connected to it was important to me. So, you know, I think I've talked about this before and other things, but doing a home with a spouse is a very difficult thing to do. And, you know, especially when you're talking about having five children doing the work yourself. I mean, there was one home Whitney where, I mean, we wouldn't have a kitchen for months at a time.

Ruth McKeaney: So, whoever was took a bath had to wash all the dishes in the bathtub first. So, it literally and I tell you, we lived through it. We lived through it. Bob was babysitting for me one day. I mean, I say babysitting by his children, but I made him watch the four girls and remember, they're under five. And he didn't know what to do. He was in the middle of working. He threw all these nails down on the kitchen, the wood floor, which at the time was just plywood, handed them each a hammer and said just play. And he laughs to this day that that floor never creaked like he, you know, they became a part of whatever we were doing. And as they got older, they would demo the houses with us. They would lay the hardwood floors. I can have my older girls, you know,

completely demo a bathroom in hours, and lay hardwood floors. So, it's been so fun. And that's part, you know, I can get into that later in the story, but to involve the family, but initially we had to make sure that our marriage could survive this kind of pressure.

Whitney Johnson: So, what did you do? Because it is a lot of pressure. I mean.

Ruth McKeane: It is a lot of pressure. And I think that applies to a lot of different things. So, what we would do, because remember we didn't really have any money. Because we were also dumping everything we had into the, the renovation. So, we would go to home, I mean to Barnes and Noble because they had a coffee shop, and they had that whole row of magazines. That you could look at for free and then put them back on the counter. So, we would get our coffee, and Bob and I would each have a yellow legal pad of paper, and he would look through home magazines. I would look through home magazines, and we would make a list individually of our no compromises, our desires. And then we would compare. And my list usually was a few pages long of, you know, you're not going to change my mind, and this is my space. And his was like 2 or 3 things. So, I think but what it did was I would then know what he really valued and mattered to him. And we could, I could move around that. Instead of in the middle of a project, him wanting to change something that I found, I mean we just, we eliminated all of that. Yeah. And we were on the same page before we even started the project.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. So, kids are growing up. 16 years have passed since you've flipped that very first house. It might be time for a new S curve. Talk to us about how one of the, your sixth child, the Hillside Farm, came into your life.

Ruth McKeane: So, we land on a property. It's called Hillside Farm. It's 305 years old. William Penn deeded the first, to the first person. We are the fourth people on the deed, so every family is kept at 100 years. This home, I mean, there's stone walls everywhere. Stone walls had fallen, there was a 10,000 square foot barn that burned down in the 50s, and all that was left was the stone rubble. It has some guest houses, but those were completely in horrible shape. We had trees growing into the main house. I mean, it was, it, we initially, I initially said no. And the reason being not even because of the house, but the property itself was I mean, Bob and I spent years buying the biggest house on the smallest lot we could find because we did not enjoy outdoor work. And this was a whole beast. And it was 12 acres where the woods encroached up onto the house it had overgrown. I mean, the person selling it had sold off anything that wasn't nailed down. And even the nail down sold off the shutters. I mean, they were down to no money. There were no photos of it online, which should tell you they didn't want you to see what it looked like before you came. And...

Whitney Johnson: Beautiful historic property.

Ruth McKeane: Beautiful. But, you know, I know. That's how we were.

Whitney Johnson: Were you looking for a house or did someone introduce it to you? Like, how did how did this property come into your life?

Ruth McKeane: We had been living in our prior home, I think about two years at this time and time for, a long time for us. And somebody had left a letter in our mailbox and said, can I buy your house? So. We then looked. My mom had just died, and I wanted or actually she had died several years before, but I had wanted a place that had a guest house for my father, you know. At this point, he hadn't remarried. He still hasn't remarried, but I just wanted a place that he could have as a home. He had gone through a great deal. My mom had had 50, I think, I mean, over 50 surgeries.

Whitney Johnson: Wow.

Ruth McKeane: So it had just been a really, financially depleted, just everything. And I wanted just to have a place that I could provide for him. So that's why this home came up. But again, we had to grapple with our kids are now all teenagers, for the most part. I guess they weren't all teenagers, just the oldest one was a teenager, but they were older, and the cost was greater. And I don't mean cost of project, I mean cost to our family. And so, we

had to sit down and say is this worth the loss of time. And we determined that as long as we did it together as a family, it was not. It was worth the time. So that's what we did. Literally everyone participated.

Whitney Johnson: All your children. And what did the what did the debate or discussion sound like for your for your children? How did they weigh in?

Ruth McKeane: I know, it was part of life at this point.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. This is just what your family does. Yeah.

Ruth McKeane: Yeah. And I think it more than anything, we had to balance the play time as much as the work time. And that was something Bob and I had to do. But I'll tell you when my oldest got to college she approached us and said listen I have \$5,000. Can we, can I put my money in with you, buy a house, let me be the general contractor and learn and then let me pay for my own college? So, I had kids that began to understand that this wasn't just about flipping houses. It was making using your money to work for.

Whitney Johnson: Right? To build wealth.

Ruth McKeane: And before that girl graduated, which was two years ago, she bought her first house and she and my husband redid it together. So, it's been so much fun to watch my kids be willing to "disrupt themselves", do the hard things.

Whitney Johnson: So good. Just tell us a little bit about what the farm looks like now before I go to the next question.

Ruth McKeane: It's awesome. In fact, we've rebuilt the barn, and we rehabbed both guest homes and our house. It's a large stone colonial. It's on 12 acres. My husband's built me a huge herb garden outside of the kitchen, and I have a cutting garden for all the flowers that I could want. We put in a sport court for the kids with pickleball and basketball. We've put in a zip line. We have two bikes. So, my husband's made it to be where everyone wants to go.

Whitney Johnson: Wow. Yeah, I have to say, I was in Philadelphia two weeks ago and I'm kicking myself that I didn't call you. I was still because in my brain, you were in Virginia. Still.

Ruth McKeane: Oh, yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So anyway, in the future. All right, so you shared with me the very first time we met. So, thank you to Wendy Rogers for introducing us. So, we have to give her a shout out that you had refused to write the book that would become *Hungry for Home*, refused it multiple times. You felt like you had nothing to say. Where did that feeling come from, Ruth?

Ruth McKeane: Well, this whole thing started with Uncle Hubert. I would have never considered a book. So, do you want me to get into his visit?

Whitney Johnson: Yes, I do.

Ruth McKeane: Okay, so we are entering disruption number two, and we had been living in this home for several years. And my oldest had gone to college. And for those parents out there who have had a kid leave, your identity unknowingly has become your children and being a mom. So, I felt the earth begin to literally, like the tectonic plates moving underneath me. And I think for everyone, that's different. For me, it had to do with her leaving. And what, who am I going to be? All of a sudden it dawned on me; they're all going to leave. And, you know, I think as moms, you think your kids are there forever. They're not. You have more life after than you do with them home. And so, it began to dawn on me. Oh my gosh, try a lawyer flipping houses. I'm getting kind of tired being a mom. What is that next step? Well, I mean, you can say it's serendipitous or fate or God,

providential. Yeah. My uncle was visiting that same uncle, and he called me into my living room, and he said, May I ask you a question?

Whitney Johnson: I like how your uncle's holding court in your living room.

Ruth McKeaney: I'm in the kitchen cooking. And he says, Ruthie, join me in the living room. And he literally pats down on the couch and says, sit with me. And he said, "I have a question for you. And I said, sure, Uncle Hubert. He said, what are you 100% depending on the Lord for right now? And I said, besides raising the kids, he said, yes, I said nothing. He said, I know. He said, you and Bob are so good at what you do that you don't leave any room to depend on the Lord. And you know I need to also say this. This was my, this was our story. And it's not going to apply to, you know, everybody's circumstances. But he then said, "I have a challenge for you. And my uncle knew me well enough to that, to challenge me gets me moving. And he said, "I challenge you to ask the Lord to give you a vision beyond your resources, beyond your financial means, your personal capital and your education so that you have to depend on him. So, I began to pray that all the time. And I had gone to a women's conference up in Connecticut, and the whole thing had to do with what's your purpose, plan and passion? And I was sitting at a table with, you know, the C-suite. I mean, these women rock stars in every industry. And one of them, you know wrote *The Storybook Bible*. She's English. One of them. I mean, just huge, just very accomplished women. And we were listening to some women on the panel and who were leaving their areas of expertise to go into something new. And one had said, you know, I can do a spreadsheet in my sleep. I don't even know how to make a cheeseboard. So, I'm in the car, driving home in tears with my best friend, and I said, first of all, I don't know what I'm passionate about anymore other than my family. I don't know my purpose anymore because being a mom is going to end. So, I definitely don't have a plan. And she started laughing and she said, but at least you know how to make a cheeseboard. Now that added some levity to the conversation, but the points were real. You don't even realize those things are changing until you're faced with disruption. And I went to another conference a few months later, a Women of Legacy conference in DC, and I met a woman who invited me to London. She had a passion for properties as well. And she had a place outside of London. And I went to her home. And our other friend Sally Lloyd-Jones, who wrote *The Storybook Bible*, came as well. And we were at lunch one day, at this, she had wanted us to go to this little farm for lunch. So, we're sitting at lunch, and they asked me, why do you flip houses? And I said, you know, they said, why do you even bother unpacking if you're going to pack back up in a couple of months? And I said, everyone's hungry for home. Both of them pick up their computers, and one looked at the other and said, it's not taken. And I said, "What's not taken? And they said the name and I said, the name is for what? And she said, for the book you're supposed to write.

Ruth McKeaney: And I said, oh, no, no, no, I'm not writing a book. To your point earlier. A lot of books or several books have been written about people in my family, or they had written books, and I just. It was the one thing I said I would never want to do. And in particularly at this stage of my life, I didn't feel like I had anything to offer. I knew the one thing I was passionate about; I think given I mentioned, you know, my grandfather being an evangelist growing up, we had people in and through our homes constantly and it was formative for me. I learned that our family wasn't just blessing those people by giving them a place of respite and feeding them, but we were changing. By our exposure to people from all, every walk of life and in our home. There have been years we've had company more than not. Had company. And so, I knew that what I was passionate about was how do you use home? Whether that's cooking your family recipes, gardening, entertaining or decorating, how do you use those things to be a blessing to other people? But I didn't know how that would translate into a book.

Whitney Johnson: Got it.

Ruth McKeaney: Because I'm not again, I'm not a chef. I'm not a decorator. I'm not, you know, an expert in any of these fields. So, there were a number of things that happened after that event that really, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt. I was supposed to do it.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. You said there were a number of experiences that you were like, oh no, I so, I don't want to write this book. I don't have anything to say. But you've had all these life experiences that other people are saying to you, hey, Ruth, you do have something to say. What happened that caused that feeling to flip and say, not flip houses, but flip your feeling. I need to do this. What happened?

Ruth McKeane: Remember, I'm continuing to pray this entire time, vision beyond my resources, right? I get home from this trip to London and I'm talking to my sister, and I said, you're going to laugh but they think I need to write a book. She bursts into tears on my back porch and said, you're supposed to do this. You have no idea. Your understanding of creating intentionally creating family culture is something people need to hear. It's not, it's not about the house. It's family and culture. So, she said, would you talk to an author that I know? And I said, I'm happy to do that. I'm not writing this book. This author flies to my house and we meet for a number of days where she kind of interviews my family and she said, Ruth, at the end of the week, she said, I'd like to collaborate with you and write a book on how to how to create a healthy family and, and use that family for, for basically people. And I said, I'm not going to do it. This is so far out of my lane. I didn't feel equipped. I didn't feel capable, I didn't feel like, nor did I even have a desire I didn't anyway. So, the last day before she leaves, she and my sister went shopping all day. They come into my living room. I'm sitting on that same couch I had been sitting with Uncle Heber.

Ruth McKeane: She ran, hands me two wrapped presents, and I opened the first one and it was a teapot. And she said, whenever you're wondering what that next step is or that vision beyond your resources, I want you to have a cup of tea. I burst out laughing and I said, oh, Jess, I don't drink tea, and I'm not writing a book. I mean, because it had become a joke, like, yeah, yeah, yeah, she said, before you open your second gift, your sister and I looked all over the city. We went to a number of home stores, bookstores, gardening stores. If we ever saw a book, what would it look like? In my estimation, knowing now who you are, what would it look like? And this is the book that came up with I was like, this is interesting. I open the packaging. And I said, where is this place? And she's like, I don't know. We turn it to the back of the book. It's the farm outside of London. When I tell you Whitney, it was like getting struck by lightning. I mean, the chances of that they didn't know where I had gone, right? They had no idea of all the places in the world. And I literally burst into tears and said, I will do it.

Whitney Johnson: That's beautiful. Okay. One of my favorite pictures from your book.

Ruth McKeane: Yes.

Whitney Johnson: All the hydrangeas, the whole book. I love it, I love it. I was reading through it again the other night and just reading through it. Creates a sense of happiness and helps you feel less hungry because it feels like making a home where people feel loved and seen and valued is more possible. You know, we talk a lot about workflows and hierarchies and structuring relationships. And, you know, as you're describing this, a household is also a system. And I'm just wondering what are one you talked about this idea of people being able to come in and be vulnerable and safe, creating a system of belonging. What are 1 or 2 things that you do probably very instinctively, such that when people come into your home, they do feel that way.

Ruth McKeane: I absolutely love that question. And the reason why is it didn't start out being instinctive it wasn't, okay, I'm a bit of a perfectionist in that. Or originally, I wouldn't want people to come unless everything was perfect. And my mom said to me once, it was before she died, um, Ruth, it's not about perfection or performance. It's about making people loved. And I have found that to be so true. Even if I go into someone's house where there's nothing out of order. It is an immediate sense of you need to remain in order. I go into a home where there's disarray or, you know, the children are running around or, you know, just things aren't even clean. I can put my feet up and be me. But I had to get to that understanding that that is what makes people feel loved. It isn't about the host. And I think that's what she was trying to let me know. People know when the entertaining is about the host as opposed to the guest. And so, my focus has been about how does the guest know it's about them. So, you know, whether I'm cooking my Ruth's Barely-Baked Cookies", and I have you know, several hundred inches my freezer already in balls that I immediately take out when someone arrives or I find out if you're staying with me, all your favorite things, and try to have those put in a basket, I am wanting them to know it's about them. If that makes sense.

Whitney Johnson: Completely. It's interesting that you say that. So, you're making the person who's coming into your home the hero of the story. You're not the hero of the story.

Ruth McKeane: I don't even want you to see my house.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. You just want people to feel welcome. It's interesting. I remember, I don't know if you're familiar with Donald Miller's work. We just had him on the podcast recently. He's the Story Brand fellow, and he said he talks about the idea of when you're selling or marketing. If you, there's such a tendency for a person who's selling to be the hero, as opposed to making the person who you are selling to or talking to or whatever, that they're the hero. And so, I think that's really beautiful of going to that place of, this is not about me. It's about serving and helping you feel welcome. And I love that idea of creating a gift basket for people. There's a lot of intentionality with that.

Ruth McKeaney: There is. And, you know, I was talking to one of my cousins once because my sister asked me once, why does everyone go to your house? And I made a joke and I said, oh, it's because I cook well for them. But my cousin overheard that, and he said, and he or he is in his 50s. He looks at me. He said it has nothing to do with that. They know they're loved in your house. And that is an intentional, we've raised our kids that way. They're the ones doing the dishes, clearing the table, making conversation with every adult that walks through the door. But yeah, to your point on the baskets I, I try to find out everyone's favorites and have that in their room and bring you into our family as opposed to you being separate? Does that make any sense?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, it makes complete sense. And I think I want to just make another observation and then ask you about your television show.

Ruth McKeaney: Yeah, yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So, the observation that I'm having is that you described the experience that you had as a child of people from all over the world coming into your grandparent's home and probably by extension, your parents' home, so that welcoming people into your world is actually part of your DNA.

Ruth McKeaney: It is. And I'll tell you, because you asked me at the very beginning, where are you from? We moved so much. That place did not represent home to me. But my family's culture and the traditions and the traditions are a big part of my book. I do our family traditions all year throughout the whole book. How do those things create your family culture? And if you don't, you know, someone said, I don't have a family culture. Everyone does. Be intentional about creating it because it's going to happen. So how do those things help? And you're right, you know, we lived with my grandparents for a time. And so, and by extension, people, I mean, my mom would bring in the homeless people into our house. It didn't even matter. But it was formative for me.

Whitney Johnson: So, tell us about your television show.

Ruth McKeaney: Okay. This is...

Whitney Johnson: Another disruption. Unexpected new S curve, right?

Ruth McKeaney: I know I was asked on another podcast last year. She said, "So what is your fourth chapter? I said, what are you talking about? She goes, it's coming. I said, what are you talking about? She said, the law, flipping houses, the book. What's the fourth? And I had started, because when I wrote the book, I didn't have any social media. And I'm sure what you know now is everyone's demanding that authors or anyone bring something to the table, social media. And I started in Instagram. I didn't know what to do. I hate social media and I don't, again, I don't like the focus on me. So, I started doing something called Tip Tuesdays on my Instagram, on my Hungry for Home Instagram, where I would give tips of family traditions or gardening or cooking or things like that. Well, I was called about a year ago by a show called Homeworthy, who had heard about my house, and I looked them up and I knew from the website that they go into, you know, top designers worldwide into their homes and get their story. And so, I told her, you don't want to come to my house. I mean, Bob and I used to go take the kids and go to garage sales and estate sales. I, it is not a designer home. Let me interrupt this one little story. They were putting my home in a book called *Stone Houses*. And they had a photographer come from New York City and like photograph for over a week. And when he initially came in the house and I knew who he was and I knew the type of work he had done.

Ruth McKeaney: So, I was very nervous. He was silent when he walked through my house and he gets into the kitchen and I said, sir, is everything okay? And he said, “I have one word to say. And I said, what's that? He said, “I'm home. And I thought you couldn't give me a better compliment, you know. You know.

Whitney Johnson: Wow!

Ruth McKeaney: So, back to the show. She called and she said, “I'm interested in you and your story and the home story. So, she came. That was their first show to ever hit a million views. And they did it, you know, relatively quickly. And they called me and said, would you be willing to do a few other things for me? So, I did. I hosted an entertaining episode in someone else's home, and then they called before Christmas and said, “we'd like you to design your own show. So, it's, and I said, again, I'm out of my lane. So, courage, the courage to step out. And I think that that's what I would recommend people in those times of disruption is, to have courage. And to surround yourself, I have my own little wisdom circle of people who have more courage for me than I do for myself, and that are willing to push me when I don't want to be pushed. And so, this was one of those things. So, I'm doing cooking and entertaining and gardening, and I just did an Easter episode. And so, we'll see. I've signed a year contract with them.

Whitney Johnson: So, are you enjoying it, Ruth?

Ruth McKeaney: I am, but, you know, I think I've had so many people reach out to me saying how, what a blessing it's been to either the woman who's going through similar things that I've gone through, or to the family, who I think as a nation, we are moving so quickly and our children are involved in everything they can be involved in or we want them involved in, and there's no time for family and to develop family. And, you know, we read out loud several nights a week as a family and.

Whitney Johnson: Even now, even now?

Ruth McKeaney: Even now. And it might be outside by the fire pit. We're reading *Boys in the Boat*, or you know, but it's 15 minutes. We can't always, I had five athletes, we can't always sit down at a meal. But again, to the intentional portion, I had to intentionally say we are setting aside this time to be together. And there's something about reading out loud in front of a fireplace or a fire pit that it quiets everybody. And then we have a conversation about, okay, what are you doing today? What are you struggling with? And it's kind of taken the place of the family meal that we can't always all be at.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, I was going to ask you for a tip, but I think that's your tip. That's it? That's your tip. And so, I would add to. So, you said *Boys in the Boat*. I think you mentioned *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Ruth McKeaney: I, we've done all of them, Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, we've done World War Two novels. We've done my, one of my sons is a, he just loves all sports. So, we'll pick a favorite, whether it's Tom Brady or Tim Tebow. You know, somebody that he loves and will read about them. And again, when they were younger the younger kids would do their Legos and listen. But they knew what the time meant.

Whitney Johnson: So good. All right.

Ruth McKeaney: It can look very different. It doesn't have to be...

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, but again, it's something really concrete that most people can do. So, I love that. So, I would, you mentioned, I was going to ask you about a favorite recipe, but you mentioned your cookies. Is that a favorite recipe?

Ruth McKeaney: Everywhere I go, they're called Ruth's Barely-Baked Chocolate Chip Cookies.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, I've got to make them. So, my question for you, Ruth, is, I was thinking about this before we started about this idea of home is when, by my hosting you on this podcast, I actually invited you into

my home, which is interesting. It's an interesting metaphor. But I guess the question I would ask for ask of you as you sort of sign that gift book of what did you what did you learn about yourself? Did you have an aha? Did you have, just what was useful for you about this particular conversation?

Ruth McKeane: I think any time you take the time to reflect on your own story and those points of disruption, it's a reminder particularly if you're in a bit of a disruption currently, which I am with doing the show. It's that reminder that I'm going to get through it and what it took to get through it and how to do it. And that was a good reminder because I look at you know, for me God's faithfulness in my past and the importance of being on the same page as my husband and how to ask for help in places that I'm uncomfortable. And I'm in all of that right now. So, that was helpful for me to, to just kind of walk through that again and know it's going to be ok.

Whitney Johnson: Okay to look at your patterns and like, oh yeah, I've actually got this muscle. And you just did a little, you put in a few reps by thinking through it, I love that. Okay. So, what are your final thoughts that you would like to share with us?

Ruth McKeane: I would say, don't be afraid of disruption. I think people have a tendency not to want to be uncomfortable or press, let the heat rise. Right? And when you realize that it's actually strengthening you. And, you know, it's kind of like people say, don't be afraid of failure. The people don't like to do hard things. Leave them in their comfort zone. And I think one of the things I really pressed in with my kids is you don't get stronger, that muscle memory will not grow without pressure. Yeah, and without hard things. So, I would say, don't be afraid of it, because it's going to end up ultimately to be used for your benefit.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Not even not only not be afraid of it but seek it out is what you're saying.

Ruth McKeane: Yeah and press into it. Yes.

Whitney Johnson: Ruth, thank you so much. It's been lovely.

Ruth McKeane: I've loved it. Thank you so much. Whitney.

Systems weave their way through every corner of our lives. We're surrounded by systems, some of which are obvious – who reports to whom in an office, for example – and some of which are so subtle as to almost be invisible. Think about all the history your family has, and how that shared system plays out in subconscious ways every time you get together.

When it comes to our systems and how they scaffold our lives, we can either be passive architects, or active architects. Ruth is the perfect example of an active architect. She had this family system, that she so carefully built up over the years of moving, flipping houses and raising her family. It sounds about as good as it gets – and then Ruth's mom passed, and Ruth realized her system had to change to incorporate her father.

So, Hillside Farm entered the picture, and the rest, well, you heard. But that plot of land entered the picture because it had a guest house for her dad, not because Ruth knew she'd go on to write a book about it one day. Sometimes we impose systems top-down – sometimes, they grow into our lives naturally, from the bottom-up. The two intertwined are where you find those moments of serendipity, when the back of the book is the same farm, you visited in London all that time ago.

Here's my action item from today's conversation. As I think about creating an ecosystem that makes growth possible, one of Ruth's strengths is tailoring the experience – whatever that is – to the person. If you're doing this at home, over a dinner party, that's one thing. But at work, you can still be intentional. How well do you really know your team members? Their favorite band, their late-night fast-food order, that kind of stuff. At Disruption Advisors, we start our Monday meetings with an icebreaker question, every time, no matter how long we've known each other. We have to intentionally build these systems of trust and connection, even with something as seemingly silly as your weekend plans.

For more on learning to love the person you're becoming, or hope to become, there's [episode 339](#) with Hal Herschfield. There's also [episode 354](#) with Chip Conley, addressing head-on the journey of finding purpose later in life. And for a good reminder of where we came from and why that's important, there's [episode 304](#) with Mbali Maseko.

Thank you again to Ruth McKeaney 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.