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First Interview

Tim Ferriss [TF]:

Hello you sexy people out there. This is Tim Ferriss and this episode of the Tim Ferriss Podcast has a special guest: Josh Waitzkin whom I met in 2007 after reading his spectacular book “The Art of Learning”. Josh you may know from “Searching for Bobby Fischer”. He was the subject of both the book and the movie.

He’s thought of as a chess prodigy, although that term “prodigy” I don’t believe applies to him at all because he has a method for learning, mastering, refining any skills whether that is chess, whether that is [T’ai chi ch’uan](#) in which he’s multiple times world champion, [Brazilian jiu-jitsu](#) in which he’s a black belt under the phenom, the [Michael Jordan](#) of this sport [Marcelo Garcia](#).

He’s worked with people ranging from [Mark Messier](#), 6 times [Stanley Cup](#) winner to Carl Hopkins Jr. to the top hedge fund manager in the world. He is a performance specialist and also a very dear friend of mine now at this point. I ended up loving his book “The Art of Learning” so much that I acquired the rights to his audiobook. If you want to check that, it’s read by Josh himself, you can go to <http://tim.blog/2014/03/20/the-art-of-learning-joshua-waitzkin/>. Without further ado, let’s go straight to the meat of the interview.

[Intro music]

TF:

Josh, I figure that we might as well start at the top and do a little retrospective. What led you initially to write the “Art of Learning” and of course that’s how I was, in many ways, introduced to your work and then to our mutual friend Max and ended up connecting. So what was the reason you decided to write that book?

On Playing 30-50 Chess Games Simultaneously

Josh Waitzkin [JW]:

Hey you know, I initially started thinking about the idea of the book about 2 years into my martial art life. So I transition from chess, into studying, into meditating, into studying [East Asian philosophy](#), then I started getting into T’ai chi ch’uan and ultimately into the martial application of it called “[push hands](#)”. And I start to experience this very interesting transition from the principles, my love in chess began to translate directly over into the martial arts.

I think it was primarily one experience I had, something around 2 years into my t’ai chi training I was giving a simultaneous chess exhibition in Memphis, Tennessee at a fundraiser, and I was playing 45 or 50 boards at once. So I’m walking down the middle of this big square of chess tables, everyone is playing one game and I’m playing each one of them. And about 40 min into the simul I had this experience that was so interesting. I began to feel like I was riding the energetic wave of the game like I was in my “push hands” training. I wasn’t playing chess, I wasn’t thinking in chess language, I wasn’t calculating variations.

I was feeling the flow, feeling the space laying behind like I would in the martial arts. I had this realization: I was playing beautiful chess but I wasn't consciously playing chess. The barriers between these two different arts had dissolved in my mind. And that's when I conceived of the idea of the book and a lot of the process – I spent 5 years taking notes 500 pages of notes – before I actually sat down and wrote it. A lot of that process was deconstructing what I've been doing rather intuitively. So essentially, what felt like was a translation of parallel learning, these are two rather abstract terms (that's the language I was using internally), when I was first thinking about the book.

Because it felt like I was just taking the essence of one art and translating it over into another and the process of writing it involve deconstructing what I've been doing somewhat abstractly into something that could be replicated more systematically.

TF:

The question that jumps out of my mind, which is a bit of a side note perhaps, is “simuls”: playing 10, 20, 30 boards simultaneously.... I'll try to ask a better question than “how does someone do that” but at what point, what happens to chess players when they go from an inability to play multiple boards simultaneously to being able to play multiple boards simultaneously? What is the sort of framework of thinking, or experience, and so on that allows them to do something like that which, to the average person seems like a Rain Man-like feat?

JW:

Well I think it's different for every chess player. One of the beautiful thing about chess is that you can approach it in so many different ways. To be world-class, what you need to do essentially is express the core of your being through the art. I think that this is true of many arts.

So you can have a very mathematical person that plays chess mathematically, you can have a very musical person who plays chess musically. Someone might be much more kinesthetic like myself and sort of have feeling for flow and harmonies and almost have a physically energetic relationship to chess. When I first learned to play chess, when I was 6 years old at Washington Square Park, it was a battle. I loved the feeling of just going into a fight with someone and finding these hidden harmonies and finding where these animal passions mix with this technical complexity.

And much later, when I got much better, playing simuls, it was sort of a higher level manifestation of that same kind of dynamics. For me, playing simuls was, it was something akin to juggling a lot of balls: I wasn't playing 40 different games for example separately. The flow of all 40 games would sort of coalesce into one larger sense of flow. It was actually very interesting: often, I'd give a simul and there'd be a youth competition and the winner of that competition would play against me. And so sometimes kids would cheat – they'd really want to beat me so they would cheat – and I'd be walking around this big thing and then I'd get to the table and they had moved chips into positions to try to win because if they could win that would be a big thing.

My experience when that happened was of if you had, imagine 40 balls in the air, and suddenly they all crash on the floor. I would know that they would change the positions not by reaching the board and remembering what the positions where and then seeing they changed it. It was initially be this feeling of the energetic flow that had been interrupted, then I'd have to reverse engineer myself back to that one game, that one component of the flow and then I'd remember the game and then I would remember exactly the positions and say “hahaha! This is the position”. And then it would take me 2 or 3 turns going back around to get all the “balls” back up in the air to get back into the energetic flow.

Actually, for me giving simuls sort of felt similar to playing chess, one chess game. But that was my own relationship to it, I think that probably if you ask 10 different very strong chess players they'd all give a different answer.

TF:

Got it. You know what blew me away was spending time with a friend of yours, Maurice, when we went to Washington Square Park and see him play a game – at least for the first portion – without looking at the board. And I won't give away too much of the punch line since we captured it all on film it was pretty amazing. His ability to track the board – it seems like that by chunking portions of the board into sort of larger pieces... I don't know if that's the best way to express it but it seemed like his ability to seemingly remember all these disparate pieces was because he had the board broken down into component chunks as it were.

But I don't want to take us too down that fine line... Let's shift gear, I'm very curious to know, is at this point – I know of course a little bit of background about you – but I want to dig into the details. What type of people do you personally work with these days and why do they work with you, what type of things that you do with them?

Who Josh Works With and What He Helps Them With

JW:

Well I have 3 major dimensions to my creative life right now... well maybe 4 because my most important one is my son Jack who is little over 2 years old and the love of my life, so that's maybe the most important part of my life, no question about it.

I run a non-profit organization educational foundation called the JW Foundation – the Art of Learning Project and we have a couple hundred programs in schools around the country and internationally as well. This is about integrating these principles that I've been developing in schools, working with teachers, parents and children around this individualized and thematic relationship to learning that I've been developing. So this is one dimension. The other one is a martial art school: a Brazilian jiu-jitsu school with [Marcelo Garcia](#) who's 9 times world champion. You know him well, Tim. He's the Michael Jordan of the grappling world. So this is world-class athletes training there.

And then, I run a consulting business where I'm training people who are at the cutting edge of the finance world. And this is very interesting work because we're focusing on that last 1 or 0.1 percent of the learning process which is really my specialty. It's highly individualized, it's cutting edge work on their learning process, their idea generation, their creativity, their performance psychology, their resilience. Fascinating work. You know, what that I've discovered... it's interesting, because I wrote this book called the "Art of Learning" years ago and so people are always coming to me to speak about learning but much of what I've been focusing on in recent years has been unlearning.

When I think about that last movement: from the equivalent of being from number 10 to number 1 in the world, to number 5 to being number 1 in the world, it's much more about finding subtle, obstructions, finding friction points and releasing them. I then define cognitive biases that are blocking your way. It's the movement toward unobstructed self-expression. If you think about your creative process has a hose with a big crimp in it. If you release it, there's just unbelievable pressure that can be released.

And a lot of what I'm doing with people is trying to move them from very good to great or from great to truly elite by just deeply individualized work and helping them really to find ways to express the core of their being through their art. That is, as you know a big theme in my life and when I played chess at my highest level that's what I was doing. When I had a period of being really locked up in my chess career – which we can go into in more details if you want – I was doing the opposite: I was trying to fit into someone else's mold.

And then ultimately when I transitioned away from chess and into the martial arts, I returned to that experience of self-expression. And that's when I really started to understand it very deeply. I think it was the crisis toward the end of my chess career which really laid the foundation for the work that I do today with brilliant mental performers trying to make that move to the equivalent of world champion.

On Marcelo Garcia: His Kinesthetic Overdevelopment and Mastery of Transitory Positions

TF:

To jump back to Marcelo Garcia for a second. I've of course met Marcelo, and he's just...

JW:

.... and you've gone to war with him and I've watch you...

TF:

.... and I've gone to war with him which, if there's anything at stake, I don't recommend. [laugh]

JW:

[laugh] He's a tough guy, he's caused me a lot of pain over the years.

TF:

He's a tough guy but also a sweetheart of a guy. And he's so fluid... What I'd love to hear from you, of course because in the "Art of Learning" – which some people might be familiar with – you read about your experiences in chess, your experiences in T'ai chi and the parallels between them and this sort of overarching framework for optimizing mental and physical performance, if that's a fair way to put it. And this is the "Art of Learning" with these different techniques and strategies.

What have you learned through this 3rd art of Brazilian jiu-jitsu? What are some insights or strategies that you've had since moving from T'ai chi which is in some ways similar but also very different from Brazilian jiu-jitsu, which a lot of people will be familiar with through the UFC and mixed martial arts.

JW:

To put it in context relative to my life: the "Art of Learning" ends with the 2004 World Championship. It ends with me describing the narrative of that. It was just absolutely a crazy experience. I won't give the punch line but it was really intense. And after this, I decided that I wanted to become a beginner again, to put on a white belt, literally and figuratively.

And so I took on this 3rd major mountain in my life, Brazilian jiu-jitsu. I was training out in the west coast for about a year while I was actually writing the “Art of Learning”, I was training Brazilian jiu-jitsu twice a day. This was after I spent 5 years taking notes, then I had the 2004 World Championship, then I was writing it.

I started training with [John Machado](#) and I came back to New York and it started training with [Marcos Santos](#) and then I started this relationship with Marcelo, who’s just the greatest grappler to ever live. And we were doing a lot of private lessons, we developed a friendship. Then he moved to Florida and I would travel to Florida to work with him. ultimately I made the decision that I wanted to bring him to New York, mostly because I was at that point to make a run for the World Championship in this art.

And there was no better way to do it then to get my ass kicked by the very best that ever lived in this sport. He’s just a wonderful guy and he’s just an unbelievable martial artist. And so we opened up this school together and I’ve been on the mats with him, other than when I was injured, and it’s been a lot of injuries in these sports all the time.

And it’s been a fascinating experience, Marcelo is so profoundly different from me. I’m a really conceptual guy, I think abstractly, of course because of my foundation in chess. Marcelo is one of the most, or the most kinesthetically overdeveloped person I’ve ever met and of course, overdevelopment and underdevelopment tend to come hand in hand conceptually.

TF:

Can you give me an example of that?

JW:

Of overdevelopment and underdevelopment?

TF:

Of kinesthetic and what it means to be kinesthetically...

JW:

His physical intelligence is mind-boggling. I mean when he come fishing with me, you throw him on a stand-up paddleboard in 3 foot chops and everyone just flies off of paddleboard on which you just stand up on them. And he’s just beautiful, he just find the balance points and I’ve never seen someone learn so quickly how to handle waves, boats, and a fishing line, being free-diving, being on riding waves on paddleboard.

When you’re on the mush... I’ve been a stand-up fighter for many years, when I’m doing stand-up training with Marcelo, I caught him with most of the throws in my repertoire one time. I don’t think I’ve ever caught him with a throw twice.

TF:

Wow [laugh]

JW:

And I have guys who were world-class who I was training with, you know, I caught them thousands of times. This is a guy, he just... you almost never see Marcelo get caught more than once with something. And it’s amazing to see how he relates the world to his kinesthetic intelligence. For example, when we were looking for a space for our

school, we've walked into a big room and I was thinking about the dimensions, the square footage, where this would be, where that would be, etc. Marcelo would know if it felt good or felt bad.

If he meets you, he's gonna know whether he feels good about you or bad about you. And his intuition is incredibly dead on. He navigates the world through this kinesthetic intelligence. And it's been a really fascinating having a school with him, diving deep with him because we've been having conceptual dialogues during these 3 and a half years or so. He's really deep conceptually. But I've learned even more deeply the importance of the lesson that there are many paths to greatness.

To take a guy like Marcelo and to try to fit him into a chess player hyper-conceptual mold would be terrible. He's so great because of his unbelievable commitment to doing it his way. He's done things in extraordinary ways, for example: you know how in these competitive arts everyone is very secret about their repertoires?

TF:

Yeah

JW:

When we had this program, which you know well, where Jiu Jitsu guys from around the world login to watch all Marcelo's training sessions, his sparring session, his lessons, everything. When he was competing in Abu Dhabi, when he grabbed the world championship in Mundials, which is Brazilian Jiu Jitsu world championship, we were streaming his sparring sessions every night. He was basically showing his competitors what he was about to use against them in 2 weeks, 3 weeks, 4 weeks [Tim laugh]. And his attitude about this, which is completely unique, is "if you're studying my game, you're entering my game and I'll be better at it then you". [Tim laugh] It's so simple, so pure, and if you think about it, it's really deep. It's the opposite of what most chess players would do, and most Jiu Jitsu guys would do. So he's wide open to constant learning.

The other beautiful thing about Marcelo is, you know people call him the king of scramble, and if you watch his training style, he's always in transition, which is a really interesting idea to think about in a cross-disciplinary manner. Most people get their ego involved in their training and they're trying to dominate all the time. And to dominate in almost anything, you find that there is no dominance, and you keep it.

But Marcelo always let the pond move and he's constantly playing in transition. So, if you think about what world-class martial arts means, and you brought up for example Marissa Ashley and play chess at Washington Square, it's similar. If you're in a much higher level as someone, you can always seem mystical because you're doing things which are outside of their conceptual scheme. The way that operates in martial arts is, if you think about it through the lens of frames, if you and I are looking at a position and in your mind there's this position, this position and this position.

So there are 3 positions. In my mind, if I'm constantly training at the transitions between these positions, these actually expand and these transitional frames become positions to me. So if I'm seeing 100 positions and you're seeing, say 2 then I can play in your blind spot and it could seem mystical to you because you haven't trained there. And that's what Marcelo does by expanding all of his time in transition he's cultivated the art of play in the in-between. And that is really what level is all about, one of the core thing that high level, world-class martial arts is all about: playing in transition, in gaps, in your opponent's side pattern.

TF:

Observing and practicing with Marcelo, say on the guillotine, or the “Marcelotine” just blew me away because if you look at it as an uninformed spectator or even just a moderately informed spectator you’re blown away by how fast he is, how effective he is. But the nuance of eliciting movement, allowing space to open, manufacturing space by say applying pressure and leaving it is so subtle and so incredibly effective and then you start to notice it from these principles you carry over to many many hundreds of possible positions. It’s really amazing. It reminds me of something I heard once from a musician... I don’t know who the original quote is from but he said: “Music is the space between the notes”. I was like: “huh, this is a really interesting way to look at it”. But what were you gonna say?

JW:

I was gonna say, I think it’s just a gorgeous quote. I think that most creative arts are defined by that space in between.

TF:

Yeah, well it’s like: writing is the same way right? You know, “when in doubt, leave it out”.

JW:

Beautiful, beautiful. And the thing about Marcelo is that he can often seem initially that he’s moving so fast, but what’s incredible is that he can also move very slow. That’s 2 things that you don’t see. Just like a great artist who’s practicing the art of illusion when we’re not practicing. It’s amazing what can be done with intention, with controlling someone’s intention. And this is a lot of my training in “push hands” related to finding ways to essentially control someone’s intention, so that you’re ahead of them, even if they were ultimately moving first. You were there before they arrived, and this is a fascinating psychological component of high-level training in anything.

TF:

Well I remember an interview with one of the top K1 fighters back in the day. And they were talking about [Peter Aerts](#), the “Dutch Lumberjack,” a huge guy. And he seemed fast and I remember what people said, what a number of opponents said that he’s actually not that fast, he’s kind of a big lumbering guy. But he’s so good at predicting timing that he sees you telegraph before you even have the thought to throw the punch. And he beats you to the punch as a result of that because, but it’s because he picks on the cues faster than other people. And I thought that was very interesting.

To try to bridge this to something else, you work with – of course I’m not going to mention names – but you work with some of the most stunningly successful and famous traders and people in finance. I mean some real master-of-the-universe type folks. What have you found unique about that group of people? Let’s just start with that... I’m curious to know what you’ve noticed, being as observant as you are about that group of folks.

JW:

That’s a big question.

TF:

It is a big question [laugh]

On Being Proactive vs Reactive, Cognitive Biases, and Unlearning

JW:

[laugh] First of all, as a core principle start with “there are many paths to greatness”. I mean each one of these guys who is really world-class is doing things his way. And he’s harnessing their eccentricities; he’s cultivating his or her strength as a way of life. There is not an excessive focus on weaknesses, there’s just an embracing of deep deep studying of the precondition of someone finest moment of expression. And their lifestyle surrounding it. And this is a lot of what I do is help people understand what makes them tick on a very very deep level relative to the cognitive biases, where they’re locked up and where their greatest intention come, what kind of external condition, what kind of external conditions, etc.

The ones who are really at the top are people who have mastered this art of deep introspection and taken results of these introspective prophecies and turned them into training systems and into a way of life. This is fascinating how this process works. What I do with these guys is – after I do my initial diagnostic process – I have ways of revamping their daily architecture, the way they live their life.

So that they’re, for example, aligning their peak energy period with their peak creativity work. They are building lifestyles that are just relentlessly proactive. As opposed to reacting to inputs, they’re building a daily architecture which is based on maximizing the creative process. When you think about this relative to most people – a simple case in point – is email checking.

Most people when they finish a break, and even top guys in the industry, and they finish a break, whether they wake up first in the morning – what do most people do? They check their emails. When they come back from a workout, they check their emails. When they come back from lunch, they check their emails. So what you see is whenever they’re coming back from something after a break, they’re soaking in input and they’re living this reactive lifestyle. Their creative process is dominated by external noise as opposed to internal music. And a lot of what I work on with guys is creating rhythms in their life that really are based on feeding the unconscious mind, which is the wellspring of creativity, information and then tapping it.

So for example, ending the work day with high quality focus on a certain area of complexity where you could use an insight and waking up first thing in the morning, pre-input and applying your mind to it. Not so much to do a big brainstorm, but to tap what you’ve been working unconsciously overnight, which of course is a principle that Hemingway talked about, when he spoke about the 2 core principles in his writing process was: one was ending the work day with something left to write and...

TF:

Yeah, often mid-sentence, even.

JW:

Right. Not doing everything he had to do, which most people do because they feel the sense of guilt because they’re not working. You and I have discussed this at length. But leaving something left to write... and then 2nd principle: release your mind from it, don’t think about it all night. Have a glass of wine and wake up first thing in the morning and reapply your mind to it.

And it’s amazing, because you’re basically feeding the mind complexity and then tapping that complexity, or

tapping what you've done with it and this rhythm, the large variation of it is overnight, then you can do microburst of it throughout the day: before workout, pose a questions, do a workout and release your mind and after your workout return to it and do a creative burst. Before you go to the bathroom, before you go to lunch, before anything. And these are ways of systematically training yourself to generate the crystallization experience, the high moment, that can happen once a month or once a year.

A lot of what I do is work on system that help it happen once a day or 4 times a day. When you're talking about guys that run financial groups of 20 to 30 billion dollars for example if they have a huge insight, that can have unbelievable value. So if you can really train people to get systematic about nurturing their creative process, it's unbelievable what can happen. Most of that work relates to getting out of your own way, at a very high level. It's unlearning, it's the constant practice of traction, reducing friction.

TF:

What would be an example of – you've mentioned cognitive biases a few times – for those people who may not be familiar with that term, what would be an example of cognitive biases and how someone might work on them?

JW:

Right. Well there are a lot of cognitive biases that are specific to certain disciplines, like chess, finance, or philosophy. But if we just think about it in terms of everyday life, let's say we make a decision and we then feel the need to justify that decision. And we make more decisions to justify that initial decision. And we basically get ourselves into this deep wormhole which is caused by the attempt to justify...

TF:

The "sunk cost fallacy"

JW:

Exactly. So this is, in the financial group, when the world talk about is "sunk cost fallacy". Right. But this is very interesting for example a chess player, who makes a certain decision and there's a certain emotional and intellectual and time component to the value we put into the thought process behind that decision. What we often have to do is to release it because the position changes shape. A very interesting way that this manifest in chess, which you can think about rather universally is: let's say there is a certain evaluation of the positions. You and I are playing, Tim, and I have a slight advantage in the position and I'm nurturing that advantage, I'm nurturing, I'm nurturing it. There's a lot of complexities and then I make a slight error and suddenly the position is equalized. Right?

So if I'm holding on to the past evaluation, emotionally, where I had the advantage. Then when I'm gonna do very subtly is I'm gonna rejects positions that don't give me that advantage. But if objectively I no longer have an advantage, then I'm going to be reaching too far. Right? And then I'm going to be rejecting the positions you accept which will make my position split more and more and more and you fall into what I call a downward spiral. So this relates to a lack of presence which really connects to a cognitive bias: an addiction to a past evaluation as opposed to a present one.

So that's a very simple example of a cognitive bias, a mental addiction, a thought construct. It's something that we hold to be true because of some complicated twist in our mind that is no longer actually true. And so of course, a very simple antidote to most of this is presence. If we can look at a moment or chess position or an investment decision or any decision with very clean presence outside of emotional inertia, then we can often slice through just

amazing amounts of fat with just very very simple decisions.

If you think about the learning process, for example – this is one thing that I love about your approach to learning – a language that you and I use: “i call you a master of deconstruction”. You look at the way people approach different sports and you find the biases, the false constructs and you find a way to learn a very straight path to learning as opposed to people getting mired in all sorts of tangled webs of complexities which are essentially caused by cognitive biases. Isn't that how you put it?

TF:

Yeah. I think that's true, and honestly I appreciate the kind words. I think you and I have very complementary approaches, like I think you've said before. I tend to focus on the 80-20 analysis as it applies to people getting on and off the ground as quickly as possible to say be on top 5 to 10% of the general population.

What is so cool about our conversations and what I enjoy so much is that you're really focusing on that final leap: how do you go from being great to being the best. They're very complementary skill-sets. I think that what I'm looking at is a way to unearth cognitive biases. And just as a side note to people who want to look into these, you can just go to Wikipedia and search “cognitive biases”. There's a long list which is pretty fun to read. And there are a number of books about these types of things too. “Think Twice” is one.

The question that I ask myself and I'm always interested in the questions that people ask themselves because I find it – to my mind – that those, that internal dialog is what defines your day-to-day thinking and what you think you become. And so it's so critical that you ask yourself the right questions. In my mind, when I'm trying to deconstruct, let's say a sport, all I'll ask is to start with: “what rules are people following that are not required?”

Outside of the law and science and even within science and within law, reality is kinda negotiable”. So I mean, a good example of that is the high jump, the Fosbury flop. Dick Fosbury was really the first guy to go backward over the high jump and up to that point, there's been the straddle kick, and all sorts of different approaches. He was ridiculed at first and then he was called a cheat because he won the gold medal and now everybody uses that approach.

Having a list of questions like “who's good at this but shouldn't be?” is another one that I love to ask because you might find someone... For instance, you were talking about the different styles in chess or Jiu Jitsu, sort of a reference to the first book: you have attacking chess players, then you have very different stylistic differences, you have very quantitative players. For the TV show, “The Tim Ferriss Experiment”, I did an episode on poker. I've avoided poker my whole life because I viewed it as a game of chance and I had a former computer science guy that said “no no no, I'm not going to teach you to be lucky because I can't teach you to be lucky. But I can teach you to run some probabilities and only bet when you have a good likelihood of a positive outcome”.

What was so fascinating, is you look at a guy like that and you'll find a highly quantitative hedge fund manager for example, or investors of different types, tech investors who go to the World Series of Poker and they run the numbers and that's how they play. There are other guys that are completely, seemingly flying by the seat of their pants, they are very kinesthetic, they're playing intimidation game, they're very physical. So asking myself for instance “who's good at this but shouldn't be?” if the assumption is that you have to be very good at math to be good at poker. Who admits to using no maths, which might be miss-information, but let me look into how they do it.

And then the 2nd question is “have they replicated their results? Are there other people they’ve taught to do what they do?” to try to separate out the nature from the nurture where possible. But I want to come back to the finance guys just a second to ask you about rituals and routines then I’m gonna ask you about your own. What are some habits – and it doesn’t have to be across the board for all these guys because they have such different personalities and approaches. With some of these really super-high level finance guys who are managing tens of billions of dollar, what are some of the habits that you’ve observed that you find interesting, or rituals?

On Meditation, Ending the Day on a Good Note, and Stress & Recovery

JW:

Let me answer that by describing some of the keystone habits that I recommend to people to internalize in the field. First of all, meditation. I mean we’re speaking about this theme of cognitive biases or by observing your mental dictions the moment they set in. Meditation is as deep and as powerful a tool as I can possibly describe. Six or seven years ago when I was first talking about meditation with guys in the finance world, it seems like some woo-woo strange thing for them to take on. But as more and more people are integrating it into their process, you wouldn’t believe how many of the most powerful “players” in the world are meditating very deeply.

It’s just an amazing way of deepening the creative process, deepening presence, expanding your energetic relationship to the world, gaining insights and realizing that most of the thinking that we do, basically springs from mental addiction. Much of people’s lives are spent in an emotional swirl which is a reactive one. And having a relationship with presence which allows you to see through the illusion of that emotional swirl, or those mental addictions.

Meditation is an incredibly powerful tool. I know you know that I’ve been meditating since I was 17-18 years old, and I know it’s a big part of your life as well, Tim. So that’s a very very important habit. The idea of waking up first in the morning and turning your mind to creative work pre-input as opposed to checking emails and getting reactive. Open up your channels to the unconscious mind first thing when you wake up in the morning, doing the same later on: ending your workday with quality is hugely important.

I remember when I went skiing with [Billy Kidd](#), who you might recall is one of the greatest downhill racers back in the 60’s Olympics ski team. Awesome dude, now he skis out in Colorado wearing a cowboy hat, just a timeless guy, brilliant dude. You know, he was saying to me years ago when I was first skied with him: “Josh, what do you think are the 3 most important turns of the ski run?” I’ve asked that question to a lot of people since and those people will say “the middle because it’s the hardest, the beginning just to get momentum”... He really describe the most important turns of the ski run are the last 3 before you get into the lift. And it is a very very subtle point. So those of you who are skiers, you know that’s when the slope is leveled off, there’s less challenge, most people are very sloppy and they’re taking their weight off the muscles they’ve been using and they have bad form. The problem with that is that on the lift on the ride up, unconsciously you’re internalizing bad body mechanics. As Billy points out, if your last 3 turns are precise than what you’re internalizing on the lift is “precision”. So I carry this on to the guys who I train in the finance world.

For example. Ending the work day with high quality, which opens up... for one thing, you’re internalizing quality

overnight and we're nurturing themes as well as skills. It's one thing to learn skills but higher artist learn themes and meta-themes that will ultimately spontaneously open into the internalization of hundreds of what I would call local habits. And so if you're practicing quality, you're deepening the muscle of quality and you're also focusing the unconscious mind into an area of complexity which will then be tapped first thing in the morning. This is a core habit.

Certain postmortem processes, ending your day with a reflection on the quality of the work, one of the cores of complexities that you're wrestling with. Hugely important.

TF:

Would you do that immediately after the end of the work day per say or before bed? How would you time that, if someone wanted to try this themselves?

JW:

I time it at the end of the work day... the problem with doing these things right before bed is that then you're sort of consciously going into bed thinking about these things. A very core idea is that, when you go home, as best you can unless you're red-hot inspired, release your mind from the work. It's very important to give yourself some stress recovery. Core habits. You want to be turning it on, turning it off. And teaching people to turning it off is a huge part of teaching it on much more intensely. So stress and recovery workouts, intervals training, meditation together are beautiful habits to develop to cultivate the art of art of "turning it on, turning it off".

So if you're undulating your heart-rate for example between 170-172-174, then say 144 – the practice of lowering your heart-rate over the course of say 45 seconds is akin to falling asleep, releasing your tension and then as you're pushing your heart-rate back up, you're learning to turn on. You're using a physical metaphor to train at the art of turning on incredible intellectual energy, and then turning it off.

Marcelo Garcia that we were talking about, one of my most beautiful memories of him in the World Championship, right before going into the semi-finals. He's sleeping, he's sleeping in the bleacher. [Tim laugh] He wake him up, he sort of stumble into the ring, you've never seen a guy more relaxed before going into a world championship fight.

Then he can turn it off so deeply and man, when he goes to the ring, you can't turn on with more intensity then he can. His ability to turn it off is directly aligned with how intensely he can turn it on. So training people to do this: have stress and recovery, undulation, throughout their day, and then thematically this ties in to again this internal proactive orientation. Building a daily architecture which is around understanding your creative process as opposed reacting to things, feeling guilty that they're not working, really teaching people to tap into their internal compass. So these I suppose are the core themes and habits of that I would bring on first. I could spend 3 hours talking about this stuff [Tim laugh].

TF:

Let's do it! The meditation, I wanted to touch on for a second and as you know I've been taking that very seriously for particularly the last 6 months or so. I received an email the other day from the teacher that I use for transcendental meditation and there are many different types of meditation.

I'm gonna ask you about how you format your own meditation in second but in many different types, I have my issues, my likes and dislikes as it relates to almost all of them. So I received an email with a link to an article and the title is "Bridgewater founder, [Ray Dalio](#) credits transcendental meditation for his success". For those of you who

don't know, he's the founder of the world's largest hedge fund, Bridgewater Associates, they have a hundred billion plus under management I think. His quote is "Meditation, more than any other factors have been the secrets to whatever success I've had". And that is a hell of an endorsement.

For me, it's been getting over that resistance to what I perceived as sort of a "woo-woo new agey" type of thing and the ability to sort of view it as sort of a warm bath for the mind where I'm taking a mini vacation from my own brain in a way. That may or may not, depending on who you ask, be the most helpful way to look at it. But I found that to be a very useful lens through which to view it.

How do you – if there is a particular type of meditation you follow – what is it? Or how do you personally meditate? What do you think of or not think of? How long do you do it, etc?

JW:

When I was 17 or 18, I started studying very simple, contemplative buddhist meditation where I would focus on my breath. So this is when I was a late teenager. Then I started to getting involved with T'ai Chi and I started studying East Asian philosophy very deeply. This is where I got increasingly into moving meditation which is the practice that I have personally done the most deeply. The T'ai Chi form of meditation. So the meditating form of T'ai Chi is sort of the essence of the art and then the fighting application is what I was competing in.

I spent many years meditating 4-5-6 hours a day with T'ai Chi. Today, I combine my T'ai Chi practice with sitting meditation again. Most people, when they enter meditation, what I suggest is they practice very simple sitting meditation, following their breath. It's a practice which doesn't have to be very complex. They can for example just sit either cross-legged or comfortably in a chair and follow their breath. This is very interesting because they'll notice after one or 2 seconds that their mind starts racing off.

Usually what happens when you have really driven guys that starts to meditate for the first time and their mind races off, they get all pissed off [Tim laugh]. Angry, frustration... They feel like they're failing at meditation and one of the most important thing to do is to embrace the fact that meditation isn't about perfection, it's about the return to breath. So when you find your mind racing, you observe that and you return to your breath. That's a tough emotional hurdle for a lot of guys. It's very interesting because over time – you know the metaphor of "the mind is a wild stallion that over time you're taming" and you ultimately learn to still it. It's racing, it's bucking, it's pulling against any kind of line you put on it, but ultimately, the circles gets smaller and smaller and you learn to observe when your mind is getting caught up in some kind of mental or emotional addiction more and more quickly and fluidly. The return to breath becomes easier and easier.

It's very interesting by the way, as a competitor, because I relate to the theme of channeling emotions or fear, whatever rising in as a world-class competitor in very much the same way we speak about meditation.

I spoke at a conference on grit recently and it was very interesting for me. It is a core educational principle in a lot of charter schools these days. It's hugely important to teach kids to be resilient. And it's very interesting because when I hear people speak about resilience from – and we're moving a bit aside of meditation but we'll bring it back – the focus is on overcoming difficulties, suffering, learning basically to push through. What people don't realize is that world-class performers have reoriented their relationship to suffering, to the point of resistance, they have learned to embrace it, they've learned to see the beauty in these moments where there's pain because there's incredible room for growth. I think that a lot of what you learn to do in meditation is observing the addictive way you might be defining something. If you want to, you can simply alter that definition and you can change your

relationship to pain, the rain, a huge storm, or fear, or anger.

For example, people from “the outside” will use the term “fearlessness” but if you speak to any great soldier, or SEAL team member or fighter, or UFC guy that are world-class fighters. They’ll tell you that they feel fear, they just know how to sit with their fear and how to work with it and how to channel it. So the idea of fearlessness is sort of a false idea which is imposed by the outside by a spectator. When you observe world-class performers, what they’ve learned how to do is harness fear, nerves, anxiety, bring them in, embrace them, have a working relationship with them and channel them into intensity.

Meditation is an incredible form or vehicle in which you can do this because you learn to observe where you have addictive relationships. And you realize that they’re not absolute and you can actually transform your relationship to any of these thought patterns, thought constructs, cognitive biases or emotional patterns.

TF:

I was looking up at a quote as you mention that, which is one of my favorite quotes from [Cus D’Amato](#) who trained boxers like Floyd Patterson, José Torres and most famously perhaps Mike Tyson. He would say that “the hero and the coward both feel the same thing but the hero uses his fear and projects it onto his opponent and the coward runs”. It’s the same thing: “fear”, but it’s what you do with it that matters.

I started meditating and gave up meditating many many times because I had the response that you mentioned about type A personalities. I’d be sitting there and I thought that the objective was to quiet my mind – and I’ll come back to that in a second – and so when I failed at quieting my mind because I’d be ticking off the todo list or be like “ah that f*cker who said A, B and C to me the other day” and I would just like harp on these ridiculous things and then I’d get pissed and then I’d get pissed that I was pissed and [Tim laugh] I would get up and have a cup of coffee and then storm out of the house [Josh laugh] which didn’t seem like a productive meditative sessions. I actually started doing it consistently when I kept it really short and a friend of mine recommended this where I would #1 be comfortable so I would sit down but to avoid back pain, I would lean against the wall, which is very commonly thought of as a big no no.

So I was leaning against the wall to keep my back straight and I would listen to one music track, one song every morning, the same song as a cue and I would just pay attention to my breath. I would focus on being an observer of my thoughts but not trying to control them at all. So all I did was think about my to-do list the entire time, that’s fine, as long as I’m paying attention to my breath. That non-attachment to an outcome, i.e. Controlling my thoughts, was very helpful. The format that I followed subsequent of that – and here we can have a longer conversation about the why it finally clicked, but the short answer is accountability: I had a teacher that would give me a hard time if I didn’t do my meditating and then report back – was 10 to 20 minutes, twice a day.

What I found was that by allowing the thoughts to occur and not judging myself because let’s say I’m thinking about email, or the grocery shopping and the to-do or whatever, just letting that happen but getting good at observing it, I was able to then have more emotional awareness which would prevent cognitive biases and bad judgments.

What I mean by that is, as a concrete example: I’m an impatient guy. I always have been, ever since I was literally a little kind of 12-13 years old. If I was at the restaurant with my mom and dad, and the server didn’t come over and pour water after we’ve been gone dry for 5 minutes I’d just get up and walk into the kitchen and grab a pitcher and walk out. [Tim, Josh laugh] I’m really impatient and I get angry about things that I view as deliberately slow and

sloppy. And that anger can be harnessed sometimes in a really productive aggression but it also wears you down at both ends.

What I found is that after meditating consistently for even a week or so, when that anger would start I was better at observing “Tim” as a 3rd person “Oh look at that, Tim is getting angry at something really small and stupid” as opposed to simply becoming angry and then causing problems for myself whether it was just internal or interacting with people. Yeah, so I agree with you completely on meditation...

JW:

I love that image of you as a 12 year old racing into the kitchen and bringing up the water. That is a great metaphor for your life. [Tim laugh] You find different examples of that as a process, you race in there, you get the water and you slice right through. That’s beautiful, I love it.

TF:

Let’s do a couple rapid-fire questions that are all tied into this stuff. We can just do short questions with a complement of short answers. Complete the following statement:
“My favorite time of day is BLANK”

Start of Rapid Fire Questions: Josh’s Favorite Time of Day and Morning Routine

JW:

My favorite time of day is holding my son in my arms after I’ve woke him up after I’ve done my 20-30 minutes session, I get my son, I bring him downstairs, I give him his bottle of milk and I hold him and I look at him in the eye and I tell him how proud I am and we talk about what he’s thinking about, what he’s working on and I think it’s the most magical part of my day, these days.

TF:

And that’s in the morning?

JW:

Yeah, I wake up about half an hour before him, I do a big creative burst. You know as a parent your sleep pattern change pretty dramatically. But I found this rhythm where I wake up and I do that first and I just love that first morning energy time with him and we have this deep connection when he’s having his milk.

TF:

I love it. What time do you wake up?

JW:

I usually wake up around 7 and usually I wake him up at 7:35.

TF:

I'm endlessly fascinated by morning routines, so this might seem really like I'm digging into the minutia but when you wake up, it sounded like you wake up and you have 30 minutes to journal before bringing your son downstairs. Do you brush your teeth, drink a cup of coffee, any of that before you journal or do you roll out of bed and walk into the office and sit down to write?

JW:

my routine is that I roll out of bed, I brush my teeth, I go downstairs and I sit down with my journal and I start writing. I immediately apply myself to a reflection that I sort of targeted in my mind in the evening or late afternoon before. I just let it rip: I have a big creative surge. And then once I hear my son, I go get him, then I have my breakfast usually after he has his milk and then I have a cup of coffee a hour after that.

TF:

Cool. You strike me as a happy guy. Obviously we all have our challenges then and again but like the place I'm getting remodeled at the moment, which I won't go into dire tracks in the moment. I'm very excited about it, but it's my 12 year old Tim wanting to go get the water pitcher, it's not been very helpful right now. What are 2-3 things that you believe you need in order to be happy? I could be for you or it could be for people in general. I'm just curious how you would think of that question or answer that question.

JW:

One of the great things about you and I being dear friends and having conversations is that you tend to be very good at thinking into bullet points and "list of 3 things" [Tim laugh] and this is just not how my brain works. I can tell you the essence of how I relate to that question. I'm not gonna give you a 3 bullet answer because that's just not how this brain operates.

[Tim laugh] I mean I've built a lifestyle around being true to myself, largely, maybe because my mom used to always tell me as a kid to follow my heart, follow my dreams. I never made decisions for money or for external things and I always trusted that if I was true to myself these things would follow.

So, my professional life, my foundation, my school, I only work with people who I feel are ethically aligned, who have a good energy, who I feel really good about intuitively. I keep empty space in my life, I rarely have more than 1 or 2 meetings per day. My life is about quality, and not quantity, it's about depth and not breadth.

My business is based on doing very very deep and very excellent work with just a handful of people. And so I really like to cultivate quality as a way of life. I believe that when you're not cultivating quality you're essentially cultivating sloppiness. And so the idea of building the musculature of quality and being like a heat-seeking missile. And I take great pleasure in observing the beauty of the little moments in life. And so for me, my lifestyle is based on working out every day, I am just focused on structuring to allow my creative process to be rich.

I'm present with my son, I have my office in this home, I'm with him in the morning, I'm with him and I see him throughout the day, I'm with him giving his bath and reading stories. I've eliminated almost all travels that take me away from my boy. I'm going to a conference this weekend and I'm taking my wife and my baby are coming with me. I really build a life around being true and I don't build it around anything material. And that's really the essence of how I personally relate to that question. Of course there is a different solution for everybody, but that works for me.

TF:

This is something that is – being true to oneself – I think that most people struggle with. I think it's a goal that most people have, at least in the abstract, but I'd love to dig into some concrete details of that and perhaps you can share an example of something you changed. Like maybe where you got slightly off the path and you made a correction to be true to yourself and what that look like.

JW:

Well for me a very clear example is my public life. So I was a young kid and fell in love with chess, I won my first national championship when I was late 8 early 9 years old. When I was 11, a book came out: "[Searching for Bobby Fisher](#)" and then when I was 18, a movie came out about my life based on the same book that my dad initially wrote so I was really tossed under the spotlight without me wanting to. I was just a young, passionate kid, I loved playing chess and competing in chess. I was put out there and I had paparazzi following me everywhere. I was really living in the spotlight in a way I wasn't necessarily emotionally prepared for. And I felt in my teens how that challenged my loved for this art because my art for it was so pure.

That tension, that fight to stay true to my art taught me some very deep lessons and then after I finished high school, I took off and I left the country largely to study chess very deeply undistracted from publicity. I moved to eastern Europe. My girlfriend at the time was from Slovenia and no one knew me out there and it was a beautiful life and I just left the public world. Since then I have, when I came back, I had these periods where I've been exposed publicly and I've been in periods where I've been deep in a cave and moved away from it. And I think this is a very clean example. Other than you, very few people drag me out to public eye.

TF:

Throw a net on the bear and drag him out of the cave. [Tim laugh]

JW:

You have a way of doing that to me, but in a beautiful way. I've found that the privacy of my life, not doing things, not being caught up in the swirl of fame, or seeking external adulation is a very important thing for me personally. And everyone is different.

But for me, I mean maybe I have little bit of an oversensitivity to this because of my youth because I was out there so intensely as a young guy. I think it really challenged my love for the game. So this is an example of the kind of decision that I'll make. I think it's very important for me to live the vast majority of my life privately. I don't do very much that will allow me to be recognized in the street or live my life as a celebrity because I've gone down that path and I love my privacy.

And I've also built a career around, my businesses, working with people who are similar, who are not seeking the limelight, who are not out there on television every day, who are world-class but no one around them, other than people very close have any idea that they have been so incredibly successful from a monetary way. They try to raise their kids not to be spoiled, the kids are gritty kids, they're great philanthropists, you know really good people. I love, I'm very drawn to people that have been enormously successful but don't get caught up in the external crap that comes with success. And they're real, you know, living their life tapped into the love.

Books That Having Formatively Impacted Josh

TF:

What are some of your books, let's just stick with books for a second, that you've either most gifted to other people or most recommended to other people. Because there are many people listening to this probably who won't necessarily have the opportunity to interact with the types of high-level folks that you and I are so fortunate to have the chance to interact with but they can do that vis-à-vis books or narrative or documentaries etc. What are some books that have had a formative impact on you?

JW:

So if we go back to when I was 17-18 years old, [Jack Kerouac](#) had a huge impact on my life "On the Road", "The The Dharma Bums"... His books originally tapped me in the idea that life could be ecstatically beautiful.

And then I moved to studying [Taoism](#) so the "Tao Te Ching", hugely, just unbelievably deep. But of course translation of that will be deformative and my favorite translation is by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" is I think is one of the most important book ever written by [Robert M. Pirsig](#) who has become a very dear friend over the years. When "The Art Of Learning" came out, my publisher asked me "who would you love would read this book" and I said that the one person that I'd really want to read that book is Robert M. Pirsig. To me, that was just – you know, he lived a deeply secluded life – but they somehow managed to get him a copy of the book and he read it and he contacted me and I was so honored that he was moved by it. And over the year, he and I developed a really interesting dialog.

So "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" I think is one of the most important books in the world that focus on quality, dynamic quality, on learning to find art in anything. Deeply deeply brilliant philosophical book. "Shantaram", one of the most beautiful novels I found. And [Gregory David Roberts](#) is also someone I got to know very well. Just an ecstatically beautiful beautiful book. And you know I'm also a lover of fiction, I mean [Ernest Hemingway](#) has been, is probably one of the most important writer in my life.

TF:

Any particular novel stand out for you?

JW:

I think "For Whom the Bell Tolls" is just an exquisite novel, "Green Hills of Africa" is amazing. His short stories are utterly magnificent. I think "Green Hills of Africa" is one of the most underrated book that he's written. His complete collection of short stories is one magnificent gem after the other. Of course "The Old Man and The Sea" is the one everyone thinks about and a beautiful book. I guess that if I had to have a favorite it would be "For Whom the Bell Tolls".

TF:

Yeah, for those people listening that also want insights into his writing style: "A Moveable Feast" is...

JW:

Oh, magnificent book! That one really speaks to his writing process.

TF:

Yeah, so fascinating.

JW:

Oh there's a great book, by the way, Tim, which I think you've read: "Ernest Hemingway on Writing".

TF:

Yeah, I did read it. I also read that...

JW:

Ahhhh! I mean if someone would like to know Hemingway, it's just a fantastic compilation of all of Hemingway's writing, his letters and his books and his articles everywhere put together thematically. Basically Hemingway on the writing process. I think it's one of the most important little collection on creativity that I ever ran into, absolutely brilliant.

TF:

And it's really short, I remember I read it on Kindle on a short flight that I had and just jammed through the whole thing. One of the recommendations was: "write drunk, edit sober" and I realized that "write drunk, edit sober" does not translate to podcast very well... The last podcast that I did with my buddy Kevin Rose... if you record drunk and edit sober, it doesn't really actually work the same way. [Tim laugh]

Let's do a couple more questions because this has been fun. If you had to run out of your house and just take a handful of things with you – but obviously your family is accounted for – what would you take and why?

If You Had to Leave Your House in a Rush, What Would You Take With You?

JW:

In what kind of situation? In a very dangerous situation?

TF:

No, you don't have to fend for yourself with weaponry or create fire with flint or anything like that. There's a fire in your house and you just have to get out in the street and then you'll obviously sort things out later. But assuming your family is safe, what would you take with you? Just what you can carry basically.

JW:

That's a really great question, I actually had that experience years ago when I was playing chess and it speaks at how crazy it was. I was studying chess with this brilliant grandmaster named [Yuri Razuvaev](#) who actually wrote about my book and I was on the 5th floor of a walk-up. This was a one-bedroom I had, my first apartment. We were deep deep into chess studying and suddenly there was a huge fire and there was 5 fire engines and dudes screaming at us and we had to go out by the fire escape and ended up going back in just to grab my computer with all my chess notes. It was just a random thing to do, it was so unimportant.

[Tim laugh] It speaks out how different I've become. Then it ended up being seconds from being in an updraft and blowing the whole building up. So yeah, I wouldn't do that. I don't know man, when you ask me that question now and I'd think my family is safe, I have nothing material that I would grab.

What Did Josh Want to Be Growing Up + What 3 People Would You Pick to Help You Make Decisions

TF:

That's great man. That's a very stoic response in the most positive way. Alright my man, I'm gonna ask you one more... actually, I'm gonna give you a choice between 2 questions... let's do that.

So the first option: What did you want to be when you grew up? So that's when you're a kid and now how do you answer that question.

Question number 2 is: if you had a committee of 3 people living or dead to help you make decisions, who would you choose and why?

JW:

These are great questions man.

TF:

oh thanks! By the way I'm borrowing them really from every good interviewer I've ever come into contact with.

JW:

You want me to answer both or you want me to answer one of them?

TF:

You can answer them both.

JW:

These are 2 very different questions I mean this is though man.

TF:

I'm just trying to be reflective of your time... But if you have time and you have some thoughts on both then let's go for it.

JW:

When I grew up I wanted to be a professional baseball player. There's something about sport, and I spent a lot of my life as a competitor from the age of 6 until 35 I was basically a professional competitor. My mom always said to me that she felt like that was a phase and that I was a healer. That was always her language. And a lot of what I do today is try to figure out how to help people express themselves in as pure a way as possible artistically in a way that give them joy.

I think that my plan is sometime in the next 4 or 5 years – I'm 37 now and I'm thinking about when I'm 40-41, well that's 3-4 years now, I'm getting close [Tim laugh] – to turn my mind to taking everything I've been doing, these different laboratories and apply that to a world changing education initiative, helping children fulfil themselves in a very deep way. I think that's an essential calling. I'm not going to say it's my end game but that's the next major

chapter I think in my life that I'm building toward.

I've been running my foundation for many years now and we do beautiful work but I have an allergy to scale that's gonna dilute quality in any way. So I've been sort of building up the ground work to ultimately be able to do something hugely important in education. So I think that that's gonna be the core of how I'm building toward that for the next few years.

In term of the committee of 3 people...

TF:

Just to interject for a second, that's also, I think, my calling and of course we've spoken at length about this. So if you need a co-conspirator, count me in for that one, certainly.

JW:

Yeah dude, let's team on this. Say in 4 or 5 years let's team up and take the world.

TF:

Sounds like a plan man.

JW:

I love it, I love it. Sort of it taps that movement away from self. As a competitor, you're constantly fighting in many ways, there's something about the focus inward, on one self. I have definitely felt this movement away from that. My son is just... my love for him so transcends anything I ever felt before. It's been very important to experience. When you become a dad man, we're gonna have some fun. All those sleepless nights.

TF:

Oh man, yeah, you gonna see a battle weary Timbo. I need to work on my polyphasic sleep. So committee of 3 people, what are your thoughts?

JW:

Well one person who would be on that committee is someone who I know, a very deep friend of mine who happens to be in the finance world. His name is Dave – I can't speak about what his last name is – and he's just a deeply meditating spirit, with great wisdom, as insightful a human being as I've ever known in my life. I think that he would definitely be on that list. Can I say outrageous characters like Gandhi?

TF:

yeah yeah yeah, go for it

JW:

I think about Gandhi, Lao Tzu, the Buddha. I don't know man... I don't know if I can answer this question very intelligently...

TF:

that's the perfect way to end! [Tim laugh]

JW:

I don't know.... and Tim of course you man, you give me so much crap in life that I'd have to call you because you'd be the one to slice through all the nonsense. And my mom, that's the most important one, my mom. She's giving me the most deep advices in my life. I mean my mom is the one person who has really embraced these crazy decisions that I've made when I left arts, when I was at the top of those fields because of some strange things like that. My mom has to be on the top of any list like that, she's my hero. My mom is the greatest person I've ever known in my life.

TF:

awesome man. Well this is been a lot of fun. Obviously we're going to have a lot more conversations. Is there anything you want to add, any parting thoughts, advices, suggestions, anything like that that you'd like to impart. If not, we can call it a day, but the mike is yours if there's anything that you'd like to add.

Closing Thoughts

JW:

No I love this, this has been really interesting to me. I guess that if I'm gonna close with a thought, it would be... you know one thing that I've been doing in the last years, since writing "The Art Of Learning", is I've been exposed to the most brilliant thinkers from different fields, I've studied the patterns behind them and I've studied the people who study them. And one of the things we have to be weary in life is studying the people who study the artists as opposed to the artists themselves. Robert M. Pirsig, the author of "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" that I mention, he uses this great term: "the philosopher and the philosophologist".

The philosophologist are the ones who basically philosophy about the philosophers as opposed to doing philosophy. And the vast majority of philosophers today actually are philosophologists. Similarly, you and I have discussed: there's the writer and the literary critic, there's the artist and the art critic... And I think that we need to be very careful when we study excellence and we're thinking about our own past excellence that we're studying and then we're tuning in the direct experience of the people that have actually been there as opposed to armchair professors who are talking about it. Because, you know, if we spend our life in the trenches and we spend our life studying that last 0.1 % of the learning process, what we see is that that final passage to excellence is really about navigating that razor's edge where we have to be willing to go right up against a potential blunder (in chess).

You have to improvise for example: trust your intuition in moments when all the objective, mathematical faculties you've developed tell you something else, but your intuition is operating at a higher level. You have to really be willing to go up to the brink of disaster to succeed in moments when you're for example fighting in the finals of the World Championship or in the very last seconds of a Super Bowl or NBA finals.

And in navigating these things, the armchair professors will often have the exact opposite of good advice and so, what I would say is, for one thing listen deeply, internally to the core of your being and build your game plan from there, trust your gut and then build your lifestyle around listening to that and cultivate the love... and that's the other thing I'd say: whether you're talking about the beginning of the learning process or the very final surge or surges, it's about the love, think about parenting, cultivating resilience, cultivating excellence, cultivating creativity. With the armchair professors they all forget about the love and that's what I see consistently with the people who have found the most pleasure, the most happiness, is that they have a profound passion for what they do.

Not only in the big moment but the small moments that others would call pain, they learn to love practice, they learn to love the point of resistance. I still forget about the love, I guess that's what I need to say.

TF: Well that's a beautiful way to end this man. Well Josh, I'm sure that we'll be talking. Next time we'll have some wine and...

JW:

Sounds good Timbo

TF:

yeah, I hope everybody checks out "The Art of Learning" and really keep an eye on what you have coming when you decide to push stuff out of the cave.

JW:

Thanks this was a blast, really enjoyed it.

[Outro]

Second Interview

Tim Ferriss [TF]:

This episode is a fun one. Ever since episode 2 of the podcast, we're probably around 140 or 150 now, you've been asking for a round 2 follow up with Josh Waitzkin and this is it.

Josh Waitzkin was the basis for the book and movie Searching for Bobby Fisher. He is considered a chess prodigy, although we'll consider why that term doesn't necessarily apply to him because he has perfected learning strategies that can be applied to anything, including his love of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. He's a black belt under the Phenom, 9x world champion, Marcelo Garcia. Or Tai Chi push hands, he's a world champion.

These days he spends his time coaching the world's top performers, whether Mark Messier, Cal Ripken Jr., or investors whose names you'd recognize or whose assets under management would blow your mind.

As context, I initially met Josh through his book, The Art of Learning, which I loved so much I helped produce the audiobook. You can find that as a part of my book club: Audible.com/timsbooks.

This episode is deep. Josh is always deep and he walks the talk in the best way possible. We talk about flow, achieving flow states, near death experiences, use of slackline, training elite performers, cultivating sensitivity (and don't mean that in the most woo woo way, but the most practical way imaginable using heart rate variability training, high intensity interval training, breath awareness, etc.), intuition and its application to investing...and it just goes on and on and on. So please enjoy my conversation with Josh Waitzkin.

TF:

Joshua!

Josh Waitzkin [JW]:

Yes, Timbo!

TF:

Welcome back buddy. I'm so happy to be here hanging with you and I thought we could start with a complete non sequitur which is a book you just mentioned to me which I know nothing about, which is, Dreaming Yourself Awake. Can you talk about this?

JW:

Ohh, I didn't think we were going to begin here. It's a book that I explored a couple years ago. 20 years ago I started studying Tibetan dream yoga and lucid dreaming. Not deeply, but exploring. And this was during a period where I was getting involved with East Asian Philosophy. And then a dear friend of mine recommended this book.

It's actually funny. We kind of made a mistake together. I recommended another book that he texted back confirming that it was the name. He texted me back that name, that I didn't intend, but that I then picked up and

read and it was extraordinary. It's just a phenomenal and very systematic discussion on the art of lucid dreaming in this way that fuses East Asian philosophy with Western science.

TF:

And you were competing at the time?

JW:

2 years ago you mean?

TF:

Oh, this was 2 years ago. I thought you said 20 years ago.

JW:

20 years ago was when I started studying East Asian Philosophy. I was competing then, chess and then into the martial arts.

TF:

[laughs] I need a little more caffeine.

JW:

You've had a rough night.

TF:

[laughs] And I wanted to thank you...this is like Tim's stream of consciousness podcast intro. We're looking at a slack line. This is an indoor Gibbon Classic slackline. It's about 12...no not even...10 feet long maybe. It's surrounded by kettlebells and indo board and a triceratops [laughs] which I don't think is yours. Got the Bosu ball there. And I want to thank you for actually making me bite the bullet and grab a slack line which I set up on Long Island.

JW:

Yeah, absolutely. I've had some fun on your slack line on Long Island too. Right now I'm in the period of...and I kind of oscillate between these...and my son Jack who's 4.5, we have a great time. I'm on the indo ball, he's on the Bosu ball and we're having a catch back and forth while on these things.

We're always integrating these physiological awareness trainings.

Cautionary Story: The one place to not do the Wim Hof breathing method

TF:

Speaking of which, I feel like we should kind of throw a cautionary tale into this follow up podcast. We obviously trade stories and findings all the time. Would you like to talk about your recent experience with Wim Hof and breathing training?

JW:

Wow. Yeah. Well, I had an extremely scary experience. So I'm a lifetime meditator and kind of an "experimental

subject" like yourself.

TF:

You tend to have better self-preservation.

JW:

[laughs] I tend to. Although, I've had a lot of close calls in life. When I heard you speak to Wim, I was extremely intrigued. Actually, it was when I heard someone mention Wim to you on your podcast. And then we spoke about it and then you spoke to Wim, I thought he was a fascinating guy.

I started digging into his work. It's so powerful. And then I started going through his online course. I loved it. I mean the energetic feeling, the electric surging through the body. Ah, I'm also a lifetime free diver; since I was 4 or 5 years old I've been free diving. And so..

TF:

Just to put that into perspective, you spend about a month per year in the water.

JW:

Yeah. Used to be 3 months when I was younger. Now it about...diving, yeah about a month out of the year. I spend a lot of time now stand up paddle surfing, swimming, diving...the ocean is a huge part of my life.

We gotta talk about our stand up paddle boarding adventures together. Those are pretty hilarious. Timbo and I have been having some fun with that.

But I started playing with the Wim Hof method and I thought it was incredibly powerful. The intensity you're experiencing internally, it's very similar to training in tai chi chuan moving meditation for 10, 15, 20 years and then being an hour long into a session and you have this feeling of energetic flow inside your body.

With the Wim Hof method, you do a few rounds of his breath meditation and you're experiencing these things. The gains in strength were incredible. The length of the breath holds were fascinating.

But then I made a big technical error: I ignored all the warnings on Wim's site and that you spoke about: **DO NOT DO THIS IN WATER**. Which were all over the place, but I thought, "Freediving is a way of life for me. No problem."

And the major technical error was not realizing, which was absurd after a lifetime of freediving that it's carbon dioxide build up that gives you the urge to breathe and not oxygen deprivation. Hugely important thing. Please, everyone burn that in: it's CO2 build up that makes you want to breathe.

And so after a long swim at the NYU pool a few months ago, I started doing my Wim Hof breathing and did a series of underwater swims. I did eight 25 meter swims and I think I was on my fourth 50 underwater and I, this was after a long workout, and I went from this ecstatic state to unconsciousness. And I was actually on the bottom of the pool from blacking out from shallow water blackout for 3 minutes before someone pulled me out.

And doctors have told me it's usually 40 seconds to a minute to perhaps permanent brain damage or death. I got very lucky. My body saved my life. And they said that if it hadn't been for all the training that I've done for so many years, that I would have been gone.

TF:

And more specifically you, and this strike me as so odd, you didn't have the reflexive inhalation of water. Is that right?

JW:

I didn't take any water into my lungs which was hugely fortunate because fresh water in the lungs can be terrible. So my lungs had no water in them pretty much. After they pulled me out I was unconscious for 25 minutes; I started breathing on my own though. When I came to 25 minutes later, I was blue everywhere else because my body sent all the blood to my brain and my heart.

Saved my life, and I'm here. And it was a life changer, on a lot of levels. The idea that my 4 year old boy sitting four blocks away waiting for Daddy to come home and me, I'm unconscious at the bottom of the pool, blue. That's the kind of experience that's shattering.

TF:

How did that change how you think about training or those types of experiments or life in general? I know that's a very broad question.

JW:

Well, first of all, how it influenced my life in general, is I've never lived with such a consistent sense of gratitude, beauty, and love in my life. It's just flowing through my body. Presence to exquisite levels of beauty in everything I do. And a sense of gratitude for the little things.

It sounds cliché but it's embodied and I really feel it. And that's something I'm really grateful for; it's exquisite. My wife is pregnant with another son coming in June and it's made me rethink those questions of risk.

But on the other hand, it's been very important not to over-steer. And one of the most important lessons I've learned for myself in training elite mental performers is that people over-steer all the time...they over-calibrate. And so I've been very careful to sit with this and draw the right lessons out of it and not the wrong ones. And not too big a lesson...and not too small a lesson.

So for example this is a huge technical oversight I had. I didn't realize I was taking a big risk here. And that a lot of big risks I've taken in life, [laughs] some with you, and I think I'm pretty good at navigating those, but I've been thinking about them quite a bit.

The Importance of Risk Awareness

TF:

And being cognizant of the level of danger or risk.

JW:

Right. But of course it's very important for me to be cognizant in a group risk as we've discussed, it's important to be present to your own level and the level of everyone else around you.

But I've been really sitting with this. Since I was a really young boy, I started playing chess when I was 6 years old

and by the time I was 7 I was the top ranked player in the country.

So I had all this pressure on me. My therapy was flow.

TF:

Can you explain that?

JW:

Yeah. Like when I was under huge pressure, external pressure for this little boy, my style as a chess player was to create chaos. I loved the game. I loved the battle of chess.

TF:

Attacking Chess [Josh's book]

JW:

Right. Attacking Chess. And most players when they have a lot of pressure on them in the scholastic chess world for example, and it's true in many fields, they learn how to memorize their way to victory, right? They find shortcuts to getting good fast and controlling the game all the way. They think about points. They think about rankings. They think about winning. They have parental pressures. They have school pressures. They have, sometimes, publicity pressures.

So they want to control their way.

I had a different approach.

I liked to mix it up. I drew up playing in Washington Square park with the hustlers who taught me to battle. It fit my personality. And it was a core part of my competitive style to create chaos and find hidden harmonies and find flow in chaos.

And as I've reflected on this in recent years, it's been a big part in how I've dealt with stresses, has been to put myself into a flow state and this is an element of risk that I've been thinking about.

It's different when you're 20 and 25 and 30 years old as a competitor or professional fighter. Now I'm 39 years old...[also] a dad. Which is the most important thing I've ever done in my life, being a father, and I'm so committed to it.

So I have to be quite cognizant of the distinction for example, between risk competitively and risk mortally. When you're playing chess it feels like life and death. It really does feel like life and death. When you lose a chess game it feels like you've been shattered on the most fundamental level.

So I was quite comfortable mixing it up profoundly. Creating chaos. And I'd be willing to take those risks. But actually it isn't life and death, right?

And then, when you're a professional fighter, and martial artist...you can break arms and legs in a second if you're not in deep focus. You can break your neck.

But again, the stakes are, it's you out there, right? And then when you're a dad, it's a little bit different right, than when you're surfing or rock climbing or whatever you're doing that's an extreme state.

So it's very important for me to be clear about the distinction between what felt like life and death as a chess player and what actually is life and death.

TF:

Right. The metaphorical and the literal.

JW:

Right. And then there's the state of being someone who has found deep flow as the ultimate therapy.

Triggering Flow State, Somatic Awareness, and Cognitive Biases

TF:

How do you ... There are a number of different questions I want to ask related to everything you just said...

The first is how do you initiate or facilitate a flow state and how would you describe it?

Maybe we can hit that first.

JW:

Well I've had a lot of different ways of playing this over the years. For me, I can describe it in terms of myself and then we can go into when I train people how I'd work with them.

TF:

Great.

JW:

For me, love has been a huge part of flow. You know, I feel in love with chess and I found flow in the self-expression through an art form that I absolutely loved.

And I think this is really important with children: to find something that they feel connected to and that they can express themselves through...that they can bring out the essence of their being through some art.

And then there was tremendous competitive intensity and of course stretching yourself is a very important pre-condition to flow. I was always playing with people who were at my level or above, and so I was always stretched.

And then in my teenage years I started integrating meditation into my practice. So I got very good at increasing my somatic awareness, my physiological introspective sensitivity. I began to feel the subtle ripples of quality in my process. I could feel when I moved from a 10/10 back down to a 9 or an 8.

TF:

You're talking about in the meditation itself?

JW:

No, I'm talking about through my meditation process...

TF:

You became more tactically sensitive when doing push hands or some other type of practice?

JW:

Chess initially. And then to push hands.

TF:

Why is the tactile component important in chess?

JW:

I think it's hugely important in mental disciplines. So for example in chess today, a lot of what I do today is, I have this laboratory of training elite mental performers, largely finance investors. And a huge part of the training is in their physiological introspective sensitivity.

So that's their somatic awareness. That's the foundational training. Why?

Well first of all, we can't just separate out minds and our bodies.

TF:

Right. Cartesian duality.

JW:

But we can intuitively feel things way before we are consciously aware of them, right? The chess player always senses danger before he sees it. Just like the hunter will sense the shark or the jaguar before he sees it and then he'll look for it.

So a chess player's process is often to be studying a position to sense opportunity or danger, and then to start looking for it, deconstruct what it is, and find what it probably is and then start calculating. But that sense comes before.

Or if you're a great decision maker or great investor, you can sense danger, right? You can sense opportunity.

But you need to have stilled your waters before you can feel the subtle changes inside of you that would be opportunity or the crystallization of complex ideas or danger or the onset of a [cognitive bias](#) for example, which is hugely important as an investor or anything else.

You know this is one of the areas where, we've had this ongoing dialog in our friendship around what I call "Arm-chair professors"

TF:

Philosophologists.

JW:

[laughs] Right. Philosophologists. That's a term of Robert Pirsig, the author of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance which is one of my favorite books and thinkers and friend of mine.

You know, the difference between the philosopher and the philosophologist, or the writer and the literary critic. Or the man in the arena and the arm-chair professor.

TF:

Or Remy from Ratatouille and Anton Ego

JW:

[laughs] OK, I don't know that one.

TF:

Who's the food critic. [laughs]

JW:

Yes, there it is. And so when we of, for example, cognitive biases...the academics who study cognitive biases speak about them...

TF:

And just for people who have no context on cognitive biases, an example would be the Sunk Cost fallacy: "I've spent this amount, therefore I should put good money after bad because I feel like I need to somehow salvage this money that I've put into a given position."

I just wanted to give people some examples. And who um...we've had a number of meals with him...there's a gent...Think Twice...who was the author of that again?

JW:

Michael Mauboussin is who you're thinking about...

And so, one of the interesting things about the academic dialog of cognitive biases, is that there's the idea that the biases have to operate completely separately from the intuitive process. As if we have an intuitive process and then we have to go through a checklist of cognitive biases.

In my experience, really high level thinkers can integrated cognitive biases or an awareness of cognitive biases into their intuitive process. So this is a constant process...we've discussed this a couple years ago actually...where you're deconstructing technical awareness into something that...

This process for example, of building a pyramid of knowledge, we have a certain technical foundation. We have a high level intuitive leap. We can then deconstruct the intuitive leap into something we can then understand technically and replicate technically.

And we end up raising our foundation up, higher and higher levels of intuitive leaps. This is this pyramid of knowledge, which in my process, is built upon by...the intuitive leaps are what's guiding it.

Similarly, we can learn how to take tactical material and integrate it into our intuitive understanding. But we aren't going to intuit the cognitive bias. We're going to intuit the feeling...

TF:

that corresponds...

JW:

that corresponds with a bias being present, and so we think about this relative to language again, Robert Pirsig, I like the language of dynamic vs static quality.

If you think about the timeline in a competitive state, for example, a chess game. There is a certain objective truth to a chess position. Think of that as a timeline which is moving. Think of Pirsig's terminology of being at the front of the freight train of reality.

The freight train is pushing through. Dynamic qualities are at the front of that freight train. Think about that as a timeline.

Then the other is the chess player's mind...studying the position. When the chess player is present to the position it is continuing, you are running parallel to the truth of the position, to the dynamic quality of the position.

But let's say the position changes, you move from having a slight advantage to a slight disadvantage. But you're emotionally still connected...attached to having the slight advantage.

Then what's sort of happening is you're stopping. Your dynamic quality is becoming static. But the timeline of the position is continuing, the game is continuing.

And what's going to happen then is you're going to subtly reject positions that you should accept. And you're going to stretch for positions or evaluations that you can't really reach. And you're going to fall into a downward spiral.

So that's the onset of a cognitive bias. In that case, the cognitive bias would relate to, the emotional clinging to a past evaluation.

TF:

But if you had the present state awareness, which you had trained through different tools and approaches that you use with these elite performers for instance...you would sense the feeling of that cognitive dissonance and not get caught up in sort of the "slipstream" of that dislocation?

JW:

Exactly. And the way you would sense that, is in this case, you would feel a slip away from dynamic quality. And then you would deconstruct that feeling. And then you would see what the bias is that's setting in.

So this is really important to say. It's not that we're going to intuitively develop the ability to know exactly what bias might be setting in at the moment, but we're going to cultivate the ability to have presence.

I think about the idea of cultivating quality as a way of life, cultivating presence as a way of life in little moments. When we're holding our babies, when we're reading a book, when we're having a conversation with a friend, when we're meditating...

TF:

How do you help people to identify that feeling? To become more sensitized to it?

And just as maybe as an example of not listening to intuition or instinct: so we were both in Costa Rica recently paddle boarding. Last meal of the trip, we go out to celebrate. We go to this seafood restaurant. Food comes out, it's a Sunday and I leaned over the plate, smelled the food and immediately knew that it was something that I shouldn't eat.

And despite that, everybody's ordering drinks and celebrating, went into the food and about a third of the way through I stopped. And I just pushed the plate away. And lo and behold, everybody gets severe SEVERE food poisoning, except for two who. I guess we tried to narrow it down whether it was the garlic dip or any number of other things...

But yeah, we were on the toilet each like every 5 minutes for the next 12 hours minimum.

JW:

[laughs] And the great part was you and I had adjoining bedrooms so we were sharing the same toilet. That was one hell of a night.

TF:

And we never saw each other.

JW:

But I heard those flushings happening. That was a brutal experience.

I remember you sniffing and this expression of concern come over you at the dinner table. I saw that moment. Maybe I wasn't present enough to you. It's a great example of you not fully trusting your gut. But you were right on.

TF:

Or I felt a sort of social pressure to conform and not rock the boat. So how do you help someone, say, in the world of investing for example, develop...not only develop the sensitivity to separate that signal from the noise, but also to actually listen to it?

Meditation and Developing the Ability to Sense the Present of Cognitive Biases

JW:

These are 2 different points. So let's talk about developing it and let's talk about listening to it. Because they're both hugely important.

And I'd frame them both thematically in different ways. And I build training systems around both that would be quite different.

So when we're thinking about cultivating the awareness, I think that a lot of this relates to a return to a more natural state. This isn't so much about learning as unlearning.

Getting out of our own way.

Releasing obstructions.

I think about the training process as a movement toward unobstructed self-expression.

We have so many habits that are fundamentally blocking us:

- phone addictions
- people are constantly distracted
- people don't have the ability to sit in empty space any more
- people are bombarded with inputs all the time
- they are in a constantly reactive state

So one way you can frame this as, is cultivating a way of life which is fundamentally proactive. In little things and big.

And you can build [inaudible: day?] architectures that are fundamentally proactive. But then getting into the weeds a little bit more, I think it's most foundational to develop a mindfulness practice: to cultivate the ability to sense the most subtle ripples of human experience.

Now I'm been trying to onboard people, specifically in the finance space, into meditation for a bit over 8 years now. And initially I would just try to get guys to meditate and they would just look at me like I was crazy.

Then I had this breakthrough, I realized that if I had them start doing stress and recovery interval training: so oscillating heart between 170s and 140s say.

So let's say someone does a 6 or 8 or 10 minute warm up and they are on a heart rate interval doing some kind of cardio bike or whatever, moving their heart rate up between 170s and down to 140s, when they become aware of the quality of their focus on their breath during the recovery intervals...enhancing their ability to lower their heart rate more quickly, and then they start to feel their heart rate, listen to it.

When that awareness would kick in, I'd layer in meditation. And the on ramp was just much more successful. And then what I started to refine that with was biofeedback.

So now what I'll have them do is the stress and recovery interval training, then I'll have them do some form of biofeedback. Often with heart rate variability through Heart Math or with a specialist. And then when they begin to have a certain kind of consistency of their ability to observe...to enhance their emotional regulation.

To observe these subtle ripples between stress and coherence. And you can see their biometric data, then you layer in meditation, and then the onramp is even more powerful.

So then they layer in meditation practice. I think [Headspace](https://www.headspace.com) is a wonderful tool for layering in meditation.

TF:

I agree. And I think for a lot of people also, starting with headspace before bed, is another kind of “gateway drug approach” to them building into or leading into the morning meditation which a lot of people have trouble with because they wake up they feel rushed. It’s another thing to layer in on top of the brushing the teeth, getting the kids ready, etc. and

JW:

I think you’re absolutely right there. I think it’s really important to have a core meditation practice, which is, at least in the beginning...the conditions in your life that are most conducive to deep focus but not being distracted.

Later in life we want to be able to tap your meditation in chaos. But initially, we want to cultivate it in the most peaceful time possible. If you have kids, waking up before the kids are up. Or in the evening once they are asleep. Or if you don’t have kids...life is much simpler.

TF:

Or during your commute. I’ve found a lot of people, who will just throw on Head Space or some song that they meditate to when they know they have 20 minutes on the subway.

JW:

Right. Yeah. I enjoy meditating on the commute a lot personally. You’ve been meditating for a long time...what...I’m not sure how you feel about this...I find that if people can have the first 2 or 3 months of meditation practice in a quiet room, then if they do it on their commute, they’ve sort of built the foundation of it in this really quiet space.

TF:

I think that, from what I can tell, it appears to depend a lot on what type of concentrator you are. And what I mean by that, if you look at writers for instance, there are some writers who want to be in a quiet environment in order to hear whatever the muse is whispering. And they’ll go to a library or something like that.

I can’t do that. For whatever reason, I thrive in noisy environments. Because if I have the noise, it forces me to focus inward.

So for me, studying languages even, in a loud environment, writing in a loud environment, for whatever reason, is a forcing function for me.

But I can definitely see why, for even perhaps the majority of people...it would be...I think it’s partially due to the fact...for instance, I’m looking at your wall right now and the fact that that picture is tilted like 5 degrees to the right is making me totally bonkers.

JW:

should we fix it? [laughs]

TF:

This is training for me.

But the same is true auditorily [sic]. So if I have a controlled noise like music or the [sound of subway car moving over tracks] of the car in the subway, I can focus on that repetitive noise. But if I’m sitting in a space I want to be

quiet and I have that controlling aspect of my personality trying to impose itself on something I can't control, and then there's somebody hitting reverse on a truck and I can hear that outside it will drive me nuts.

Long observation to a short comment, but I do think that if you can drop in in a quiet environment, the point being to "stack the deck" as you said, in the beginning.

Yeah, learn how to do this in a controlled unstressful [sic] environment and then you can ratchet up over time to when you can use it in the most stressful of environments.

JW:

Right. Because ultimately we don't want to be meditating in a flower garden, we want to be able to meditate and have a meditative state throughout our life...in a hurricane...in a thunderstorm...when sharks are attacking you...any moment.

TF:

Like when you're paddle boarding the last day on a first trip and Josh is like "You'll be fine," and then 3 leashes snap and all hell breaks loose [laughs].

JW:

That's a long story. So a little context here. Timbo and I had been on this great adventure, stand up paddle surfing, taking it on together.

And we got a great friend in Costa Rica, Erik Antonson, who has the other podcast other than yours that I listen to...

TF:

The [Paddle Woo podcast](http://progressionproject.com/podcast-episodes)

JW:

Erik's awesome. He's a great dude. Runs [Blue Zone Sup](http://bluezonesup.com). He's a brilliant teacher. Really fascinating mind deconstructing stand up paddle surfing on increasingly small boards for us and we've been going out there and having some hilariously close calls.

Our last trip a couple weeks ago, we almost destroyed each other.

TF:

Yeah. There was this one witching hour where the juju was really weird. Almost everybody almost got decapitated, impaled by a board or a head-on jousting collision, which is what...

Embracing Your Funk. Become Wary of Teachers Who Only Teach The Way They Learned Something.

JW:

But the point that you bring up, I think is right on about meditation. When you're building training programs for elite mental performers, the most important thing is to understand them so deeply and build programs that are

unique to their funk.

Embrace their funk. That's a term of a buddy of mine, Graham who's a dear friend of ours who comes on our surf adventures with us. He's a brilliant thought partner.

TF:

"Embrace the Funk," can you explain that?

JW:

Yeah. We have to embrace our funk. We have to figure out...you think about the entanglement of genius and madness. Or brilliance and eccentricity. Understanding that entanglement is always a precursor to working with anybody who is trying to be world class at something, because that entanglement is fundamental to their being.

And they have to ultimate embrace their funk. Embrace their eccentricity. Embrace what makes them different and then build on it.

So when we think about self-expression, it's not trying to take everyone and put them into the same mold. It's trying to understand someone very deeply and build a training program...a way of life that helps them bring out the essence of their being through their art, whatever their art is.

I mean, that's how relate to the path of excellence in chess, martial arts, in different arts, and very actively in the investing space, when I work in the education space with children through my nonprofit. Again, the movement to unobstructed self-expression.

But the problem is the teachers don't listen. They don't know how to listen. They don't know how to (or parents) in empty space and observe the nuance of their child's mind or their student's mind and then build a way of life around that. People are used to teaching the way they learned.

Think about martial arts instructors. Almost all of them trained a certain way and then teach that way, which alienates 65-70% of the students by definition. It's very rare that you have someone who can take the time (and it takes a lot of time) to know someone deeply enough to build a training program and a way of life around who they are.

I mean for me, I only work with 8 teams and I don't take on new clients. Very seldom do I take on new clients. I won't work with more than 8 people.

TF:

You also don't do a lot of PR. For everybody listening, I always get these emails and texts that are like, "Hey, could you introduce me to Josh, I want to have him on my show," and I'm like, "He's not going to do it." [laughs]

JW:

You're the only person...once a year or two...the one guy who brings me out of my hermetic cave.

I've lived a bit of a strange life because I'm not on...doesn't feel strange to me...it feels completely natural. I'm not on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or any of these things. I don't even know the names of most of them.

I have an email account though. I do have that.

TF:

[laughs] box crate

JW:

I cultivate empty space as a way of life for the creative process. So Timbo you're the one guy who brings me out of the cave but we have a lot of fun together.

TF:

So you were talking about these top performers and getting to know them on a very deep, subtle level that you can help them express the combination of their madness and genius or at least embrace it, among other things.

How do you think about parenting?

Josh Waitzkin on Parenting

JW:

Yeah, let's dig into this one [laughs]. And then let's remember to loop back after this to finish this discussion of how to cultivate somatic awareness and then go back to how to train to listen to it.

OK. Jack. Well he's the love of my life and this kid is such an awesome dude. And parenting has been the most fantastic learning experience I've ever gone through.

So from when he was born, I tried not to go into it with a lot of preconceived ideas and to be attuned to him. To listen to him. When he was just days, weeks old...he was teaching me.

You know, you talk about "teaching presence," our eyes would be connected and if I would think about something else, his eyes would pull back. If there was any distraction, he would pull me back.

And as he got a little older, he would just take your face and pull it back in the sweetest way. And so the depth of connection, being deeply attuned to a young spirit that hasn't become blocked, that is in that state of unobstructed self-expression, that is just this unbelievably-game learner. Unblocked learner. Jack is the gamest little person I've ever known in my life.

But of course I've been thinking about learning and education for a lot of years and so I had some thoughts. And so, I think that control...the need for control is something that inhibits people in life. The need to have external conditions be just so in order for them to [laughs] Timbo's pointing at my Grandmother's painting.

It's a great painting. Stella Waitzkin. That's her self-portrait. We're going to leave it messed up. We're working on control.

So, from a young age when I started playing chess, I would create chaos on the board like I described. I would play in chess shops with people blowing smoke and music. I'd play chess with loud Gyuto monk chants bursting into my head from speakers.

When I play cards, like Gin Rummy I would keep the melds out of order. I would never organize my hand. I would keep everything out of order so I'd have to reorganize it in my mind. I'd keep my room messy...

TF:

I see. So you wouldn't move your cards around to organize them

JW:

Right. I was creating chaos everywhere to train at being at peace in chaos. That was kind of part of my way of life and I found it to be a huge advantage that I had competitively.

Antifragility Training: Reframing Small “Problems” As Opportunities To Strengthen Your Mindset and Perspective on Life

One of the biggest mistakes that I observed in the first or two year of Jack's life, with parents, is that they have this language around weather. Weather being good or bad. And whenever it was raining it'd be “bad weather.”

You'd hear moms, babysitters, dads talk about “It's bad weather, we can't go out,” or “It's good weather we can go out.” So that means that somehow externally reliant on conditions being perfect in order to be able to go out and have a good time.

So Jack and I never missed a single storm. I don't think we've missed one storm, other than maybe one where he was sick. I don't think we've missed a single storm, rain or snow from going outside and romping in it. And we've developed this language around how beautiful it was. And so now whenever it's a rainy day, Jack says, “Look DaDa it's such a beautiful rainy day,” and we go out and we play in it.

I wanted him to have this internal locus of control; to not be reliant on external conditions being just so.

And he's 4, he's getting older and we've been playing with these things. We began meditating together when he was a little over a year and just doing breath work.

Initially we started doing meditation work when he was in those most pure states: when he'd be taking a warm bath, when he was lying on his back and being completely relaxed blissed out...we would just naturally breathe together.

I wanted a habit to be formed in something where the initial experience were in conditions that were most conducive to natural peace.

And then we have, in recent months, been taking it to an interesting funky place. So he would watch me do the Wim Hof training and I'd be putting my hands in ice buckets and doing this interesting breathe work in cold water. And he would initially watch and then come over and stick his finger in, put his hand in.

So there's this great moment a couple months ago. We were out romping in this huge snowstorm, and Jack about 10 minutes into it...we'd just gone on this long search for the right carrot to put on it, to make the snowman with, for the nose.

And then Jack, he was in this huge drift and he got his boots just loaded up with snow, and he looked at me and he said “DaDa my feet are cold. My boots are filled with snow, but that’s OK I’ll just do the Wim Hof and make them warm.” And then I looked at him.

And we played for an hour and a half after that. Feet just covered with snow and he was completely fine, never mentioned it again. And then he got increasingly interested in this internal terrain, and we would take hot baths together. We take a bath together every night and then he would want to turn on the cold shower and get in it.

And then we’d play what we called the “It’s so good” game. So we kind of reframe this thing...you know I have this...people tend to bounce off of discomfort whether it’s mental or physical. Whether they run into internal resistance, whether it’s in meditation training or someone exposing a weakness or if they are training and someone might be better than them. Whatever it is, they bounce away from things that might expose them.

TF:

They’re repelled from it.

JW:

Right. Right. So the flip side of this is to learn...the way I talk about living on the other side of pain. Pain being mental or physical discomfort. And much of life that’s so rich, comes from being on the other side of it. The other side of challenge. Internal or external challenge.

And with Jack, of course I’m not using that, but it’s a little child’s embodiment of it. We started to play with him turning on the cold water and he’d say, “It’s so good Dada,” and we’d kind of be in the hot bath and be in the cold and he’s play in the cold and he’d say, “It’s so good. It’s so good.”

And he began to have this gorgeous blissful smile meditating through it. And he’d say, “I’m meditating through it, it’s so good.” And we were reframing cold; cold was a metaphor for something that you bounce away from. It’s something you can learn to sit with, to be neutral in, to find pleasure in...just like the weather.

And then we had this experience the other day where he said to me, “DaDa will you tickle me slowly?”

TF:

[laughs]

JW:

I always tickle him and he laughs uproariously. But we were lying in bed and I was tickling him very slowly and he said, “I’m going to do my meditation” and then he would meditate. And then the next day he said, “DaDa will you tickle me slowly,” and I did it, and then he said “A little bit faster.”

And I didn’t suggest this to him, he suggested it to me. And then we played this game where we said 1 to 10. And I would tickle him slowly and he would start doing his meditation. And we’d move it from 1, 2 and we’d go up to 8 and he’d be doing his meditation and finally I’d be fully tickling him. Normally he’d be in hysterics, but he was sitting there meditating and not laugh. He found this so interesting.

He’s now guiding the process in this beautiful way. And now we’re turning it into talking...

TF:

Question, just to interject: did you at any point condition him to be proactive in that way or was it just an organic, “Now I’m in the driver’s seat?”

JW:

I think I encourage him to grab the wheel all the time. A huge part of my relationship to parenting, and this is from my mom, and I watch my mom with Jack, and I think this may be the greatest gift that my mom gave me, is having this sense of agency in the world. The idea that having...having a sense that I can impact the world and that my compass really matters.

So when I grew up I wasn’t “Seen but not heard.” When I was 5 or 6 years old they were having adult conversations with friends and I was part of it. They wanted to hear my ideas and I felt that they mattered.

That’s a big part of how my wife and I believe in raising Jack. And so he plays an active role in really everything that we do and so it was sort of a natural thing. It was all fun and play; I wasn’t pushing any of these things on him at all. This is stuff that he wanted to do.

But I’ve been kind of blown away by how he’s been transferring this stuff over. I mean, lateral thinking or thematic thinking, the ability to take a lesson from one thing and transfer it over to another...I think it’s one of the most important disciplines that any of us can cultivate or “ways of being.”

And that’s something that Jack had from a really young age. We began to cultivate this from when he was really small around this principle of “Go around.” The first time it happened, he was really tiny. He was trying to get in...we were in a little singular cottage on Martha’s Vineyard. Tiny little cottage in a big field, and he was trying to get in one door and he couldn’t, but he could get in the other door. And I said, “Jack go around.” And then he looked at me and he went around.

And then “Go around” became a language for us physically: if you can’t go one way you go around to another way. But then it became language for us in terms of solving puzzles, in terms of any time you run into an obstacle, go around. And then, working with the metaphor of go around, it opened up this way in which we would just have this dialog around connecting things: taking a principle from one thing and applying to something else. We’ve had a lot of fun with that.

So it’s fascinating to see this game little dude have this thematic driven dialog, principle driven dialog, cultivating somatic awareness, cultivating the ability to feel these little ripples inside. Jack’s telling me his dreams in this beautiful way. He tells me how his emotions feel in his body.

It’s a great journey. I’m learning so much from him.

Fixed vs Growth Mindset

TF:

There’s a book you’ve mentioned to me a number of times. Or at the very least, it’s a researcher and I’m probably going to massacre this name as well...is it Carol Dweck? Mindset

JW:

Yeah. Mindset by Carol Dweck. Fixed or entity theories of intelligence vs incremental or growth mindset. Carol Dweck's one of the most important foundational developmental psychologists I think, around this distinction of a fixed perspective on how good somebody is...

Let's frame it like this: most children are education, unfortunately, to believe that they have a certain ingrained level of ability in things

TF:

[like] "You're smart, you're dumb, you're average."

JW:

Right. And they're told...and the sad thing is even when they are praised, they are told how smart they are or "You're such a good writer. You're so good at math."

And the kids will say, "I'm smart at this," or "I'm dumb at that." [The fixed perspective is that] But if you're very smart at one thing, then that means that if you fail then that means that you must be dumb at it.

And so it becomes very static. And the kids are often quite brittle. They have a fixed mindset. Or an entity theory of intelligence.

Well a growth mindset or a mastery oriented mindset is one where we understand that the path to mastery involves incremental growth, right? We don't have an ingrained level of ability at something we're going to have successes and failures, we're going to work at things. It's work. It's practice. And it's an open-mindedness to life experiences that makes us succeed.

TF:

How would the praise differ?

JW:

You would praise a kid for the process vs the outcome. And so you would say "I'm so proud of how hard you worked at your math," not "You're so smart at math."

Or if someone has a failure, the other side of it is not to say "Don't worry about it, you're just not good at math you'll do something else," it's to say, "How can we practice at this to get better?"

And so we're focusing on the process and not the outcome. That's like the fundamental principle. And it's so easy to say it, but it's very hard for people to live it as parents, especially if they don't embody it themselves.

What you see often with parents and kids is that the parents are fundamentally fixed. They have an entity theory of intelligence themselves. They're fixed. They're stuck. But they've read the material of Carol Dweck or somebody else and they want to parent their kids around the growth mindset, but the kids see what they embody not what they say.

So we have to embody it. I mean, one of the most important things I think that we do with my foundation, and I work with schools and programs around the world, is that when we're working with teachers, it's not just "This is

the material you should teach your students. It's working with these core principles and embodying them [yourselves] first."

And then, through that embodied intelligence, working with the kids on how they can embody it. They have to walk the talk.

TF:

Let's go back to what you said we should go back to at some point, which is somatic sensitivity. Those sort of dimples of light in the darkness that most people overlook.

How do you train that?

Training Somatic Sensitivity

JW:

Well, thematically the first thing I would say is that when you're thinking about cultivating an internal locus of control or an internal orientation vs an external one...

...So an artist we have all these external pressures on us. Let's say for example... let's talk about investors again. Let's say an investor is running a \$1 billion investment vehicle and they have partners, people who invest in it.

They have to write investment letters. They have all their partners, say they have 30 or 40 or 50 partners who are institutions, maybe endowments, educational endowments, charities or whatever...who have put their money into this investment vehicle.

And maybe that person has his or her own money as well in this investment vehicle. Well for them to be successful they have to operate from the inside out. They have to bring out the essence of who they are, as a performer, like we're discussing.

Or as a human being, they have to bring that out through their art. But if they are constantly feeling pressured, by what others expect from them, what others want from them, how they'll be perceived, or how people are looking at their Facebook posts or how their tweet is being responded to.

Tweet...that's what is it is right?

TF:

[laughs] That's...that's right.

JW:

I mean, it's so interesting for me, watching people watch their Instagram accounts. I see it with buddies all the time. And it's natural, it's completely human. But then we're aware of how we're perceived.

One of the major reasons I stay away from these things is that I can feel how susceptible I am to this stuff. You publish a book and it's on Amazon, it's so hard not to go look at the Amazon numbers, right?

And then a book comes out, and you're tracking them, even if you know it's ridiculous and you shouldn't be doing it.

Now someone like you, you're such a world-class... and you've so systematically trained at and cultivated the ability to market these things. This is actually a very important scientific input for you, it's not for most authors.

For most authors, it's an addiction. It's a completely different point in my opinion. You're actually gathering data and using it. Most people are just constantly feeling...

TF:

Tapping the vein.

JW:

Right. Tapping the vein. So with investors, what this often relates to is P&L checking. Profit and Loss checking.

So most investors are checking P&L hundreds of times per day. In fact it's constantly because it's on their screen all the time. And so it's like having these little adrenal hits all the time.

Whether it's dopamine or cortisol. Whether they are making money or losing money. They are constantly bouncing off of these things. The ultimate external orientation.

So if you think about internal + proactive vs external + reactive...this is how I(would tend to frame this out. We want build a proactive life that fundamentally moved from the inside out. Versus a reactive way of life where we're constantly reacting to all of these inputs which we may or may not want and where we're constantly beleaguered by or oppressed by a sense of how we're going to be perceived. Social pressures.

And so then you're talking about a really high level artist who might have a really subtle intuition about something and they should listen to that intuition. Or they should deconstruct that intuition and investigate it and see if it's the right way to go.

But they're aware that intuition might not be perceived as impressive by others. The problem is, the others usually aren't world-class artists, they're the arm-chair professors. They're the philosophologists.

And so you have the man in the arena who compromised by a self of self-consciousness by how the critics are going to perceive him or her.

Which is ridiculous.

It's like an A-player thinking about the approval of a C-player.

And that's disastrous.

That's external orientation.

That's like thinking that we're going to get food poisoning from something, that something's off and then dismissing it because of...

I mean first of all there's incredibly subtle sense just how strong the intuition is, right? I mean no one else at that table there...and we had some high-level dudes sitting at that table...had that feeling that we were about to eat something that had food poisoning. So it was very subtle.

You had a very subtle sense, it wasn't banging you over the head. And then there are the feelings of the social pressures and everything, right? Just an interesting subtle example.

But the subtle pressures were louder in that case, than the really subtle intuition that you had.

And then there's the attitude of, "I don't care about the social pressures." That's really hard, right?

TF:

Which I was able to do a third of the way through, but not before.

JW:

But you did. I think you're actually really, in my observation, you're really evolved with this. I mean you have so much external pressure and external awareness on you. I consistently find it stunning and impressive how you're able to embrace your funk and to live a live attuned to your inner ripples.

I think it's actually rather unique. I think it's a core strength of yours in my opinion.

TF:

Thanks man. I think that one element that's been very helpful in trying to mitigate the risks and dangers in the sort of paradox of trying to be introspective while having a very public facing life... is stoicism.

And I remember reading at one point, I want to say it was Cato who was considered by his contemporaries and his kind of, "successors in Stoic thought-leadership" to be the perfect Stoic in a lot of respects. And, I'm going to get the colors wrong here, but he would purposefully wear a blue tunic as opposed to a purple tunic to encourage people to ridicule him because he wanted to be embarrassed about those things only worth being embarrassed about.

So [he was] training himself not to be overly sensitized to the critiques of the C-players around him. And so I constantly...I remember for instance, this is such a silly example but...[laughs]...I was just in Montana and I went into the ski shop to get some light gloves just for walking around in, not for skiing.

And I looked at the whole rack and I went "Ooo I like these" and they were the most ridiculous Dr. Seuss striped nonsense gloves you've ever seen. Just like...they will not match with anything. Just ludicrous looking.

And I ask the woman at the front desk, I'm like "What do you think of these or should I get a different one?" And she's like, "Neh, I think you should get the black ones."

I thought about it. I sat there and I thought about it. I was like, "Nope, I'm getting the Dr. Seuss Gloves." And so I got the Dr. Seuss gloves. And that expresses itself for me in a lot of different places because I will for instance do (and this is not something I recommend to everybody. So Caveat Emptor you're in control of your own life. So if you do this, you can face some dire consequences) but I'll do drunk Q&As on Facebook. I'll have a bunch of booze and

I'll go on and I'll do a Q&A. And something will come out that will embarrass me, but it's not going to be life destroying.

And so it's kind of systematically creating an environment in which I feel like I don't have a reputation to protect, which is another reason I talk about the psychedelics and I'll talk very openly about monogamy vs non-monogamy.

And I'll throw these things out there to basically ensure:

A. That I never become a politician and

B. That I don't feel like I have a fixed identity to cling to that I need to protect

Because I see how disastrous that can be.

JW:

That's really powerful and you know, the fire of competition plays that role as well. When you look at people who compete. Let's talk about martial artists.

So I own a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu school with Marcelo Garcia. We've discussed Marcelo a lot.

TF:

And just as a side note, you mentioned creating chaos and training yourself to operate optimally in chaos compared to others. And of course Marcelo, who is 9x World Champion, is the master of the scramble.

JW:

Yeah, they call him the King of the Scramble. He is the greatest transitional player in the history of the sport maybe. He's incredible.

I mean the essence of his game is to not hold and allow people to move, and to again, embrace the chaos and get there first. He has just cultivated the transition so systematically that he has 10 frames in transition where somebody else will just be moving from one position to the next. And that transition itself, is something like...that's his ocean. It's a beautiful thing to see.

But if you look at the school, Marcelo runs the school so beautifully. And we've got at this point, a lot of world-class competitors. A lot of the school tends to win pretty much all the tournaments.

A lot of the guys who you've trained with...

TF:

With the Tim Ferriss Experiment. [Laughs] that was hilarious. Day 1 I'm like, "OK, I think I broke my rib"

JW:

[laughs] You did great man. You did great. I was proud of you. Guys you should check that out.

TF:

the TV show. If you want to see me get my ass handed to me and have a great time training with Jon Savata who is an incredible athlete and teacher. That's a TV show worth checking out.

JW:

Yeah Jon is fantastic. Well, if you look at the learning curve of the people in the school, the ones who put themselves on the line as a way of life just learn much faster than the ones who are just protecting their egos.

At most schools, what happens is, someone gets good and then they have to win to protect their status as being very good or dominant. Usually happens with martial arts instructors.

Which is that they reach a certain level, they open a school, they get a little bit older, they get a little fatter, and they have a reputation so they stop training because they don't want to be exposed by the young students who are coming up so they sit on the sidelines.

But their egos get increasing large but riddled with insecurity and this brittleness tends to then splay down to the students and then the whole school becomes a joke.

Versus Marcelo. The way Marcelo runs our school is so magnificent. Everyone is on the mat training so hard, as a way of life. Everyone is on a world-class growth curve. And it's very interesting to observe who the top competitors pick out when they are 5 rounds into the sparring session and they are completely gassed.

The ones who are on the steepest growth curve look for the hardest guy there. The one who will beat him up or who might beat him up. Others will look for someone they can take a break on. And so there's that constant search for exposure.

And that's kind of a parallel in terms of what you're describing about not having an ego to protect.

TF:

Or rather, a fixed identity [to protect].

JW:

Right. So this is a way as a competitor to constantly put yourself into the fire.

TF:

Here's a question I have for you, because I feel like particularly in jiu jitsu I could get better at this. You remember when we did that one day when we had the gi on and then you're like "Timbo, you're lips are purple." I thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to have a heat stroke and have to be carted off.

But do the guys...so is it correlation or causation...meaning...are the guys who on round 5 pick the hardest guy in the room, have they already self-selected by coming to this school in a sense, or did they start off perhaps, when they walked in the door, the guy who would pick the easiest person in the room at round 5 and have been converted into the guy who will pick the hardest person.

JW:

You see both.

TF:

You see both. In the latter case, how do they cultivate that transition?

JW:

I think that Marcelo is a great role model.

TF:

Because I think it's a fantastic metaphor for life right? I mean you need this everywhere.

JW:

100%. We think about this principle of cultivating quality as a way of life in the big things and little things.

[If] you look at the way that Marcelo runs that training environment, it's pretty exceptional.

TF:

He puts his ass on the line all the time.

JW:

His ass is on the line all the time. And he's getting a little bit older. He has 2 kids and he's a wonderful dad. His life is not just 100% jiu jitsu anymore.

He has all of these young 20s, at this point, world-class students who want to go at it hard with him and he goes at it hard with them and he wants to. He doesn't mind getting exposed.

He living it, but he's also creating an environment where people are present to quality in the little things. If someone doesn't have their gi on straight, or they haven't tied their belt, if they are sitting in a way that's sloppy...

TF:

What happens?

JW:

He tells them to straighten their gi

TF:

I love that.

JW:

When people are running and doing the warm up...if they are cutting the corner a little bit, he tells them to run the full circle.

If people are doing a certain drill in a sloppy way, he refines it. So it's the little things, right? If you watch Marcelo doing the warmup, there's a way he'll have his hand and just brush against the mat as he passes it. You can feel him engaging his tactile feeling for room.

He's someone who embodies and teaches quality as a way of life. So if you are in your 4th or 5th round and you are looking for a way out, you feel that you are fundamentally violating this principle which you've been cultivating.

TF:

a tenet of the school.

Fundamentals of How Josh Trains Someone

JW:

Right. And this is so important. A core part of how I train people is around the interplay of themes, principles, and habits.

The habits are what we can actually train at. The principles are what we're trying to embody. And so we'll train at 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 habits which are the embodiment of a core principle. But the idea is to burn the principle into the hundreds of manifestations [until] that principle becomes our way of life.

So in this case we're talking about Marcelo embodying the principle of quality in all these little ways. These little ways you could say don't matter but they add up to matter hugely.

TF:

Oh, I think the little things are the big things. Because we're a reflection...this might sound cliché but, it's like "How you do anything is how you do everything."

JW:

It's such a beautiful and critical principle. Most people think they can wait for the big moments to turn it on. But if you don't cultivate turning it on in life in the little moments (and there are hundreds of times little moments than big) then there's no in the big ones.

TF:

Yeah. So if people listening don't take anything else from this interview...I think that's so key to who you are and so key to why you've been good at what you've been good at. There's it right there.

I'm going to mangle another name since that seems to be one of our themes for the show this episode...Archilochus. But it was a quote (gotta be a Roman, maybe a Greek, who knows) who said:

"We do not rise to the level of our hopes, we fall to the level of our training"

So you can't just do one every 5 years waiting for the big event. You're not going to have the training necessary.

JW:

You know, as a principle that I've been thinking about a lot around parenting...you see so often, people with their second child are not as present, right?

And unfortunately people are often not present with their first child either. I was taking a walk yesterday with a dear friend of mine I central park at dusk and we were just talking about all the ideas we've been thinking about and we walked past this woman who had 3 children in a stroller, and was walking her dog, and the children were all talking to her and she was on the cell phone having a conversation with a friend.

And it wasn't a quick...it was like a long gossip conversation and I was just watching this. We were in this exquisite external environment...and the embodiment of distraction: 3 children and a dog, children all trying to pull her, but she was just in this other world.

We think about the distraction of parenting. And then you think about what often happens with parents with the first child, they are completely tapped in because this is all new; they are present.

And the second child, they just relatively neglect. We see that all the time. I'm thinking about this a lot because we're about to have our second child. And so I'm thinking about how important is it to not take for granted the things that you've done right and think they'll just be there. Because they're not going to be there unless you're equally present.

And we see this in the martial arts. As someone who trains twice a day as a way of life for 10 years, training until they drop, and doing external training as well with strength and conditioning and stretching and everything else. And then they get to a place where they're consistently winning and they think they can train 7 times a week instead of 10 and that it'll be the same.

It's not the same. That slippage shows. There's something incredible about going into competition knowing that there's no way that anybody else trained as hard or as good or as smart as you.

So I'm not talking about training quantitatively, I've talking about training qualitatively. The confidence that comes out of knowing, in any discipline that you're at, that you gave it your all.

When I work with someone I say that one of my many filters is looking at someone in the eye and saying that working with me is living as if you're training qualitatively as if in a world championship training camp.

Qualitatively.

But I look at them in the eye.

And some people you see a fear.

You see the fear of exposure.

Other people you see a lean in. An eagerness. A gameness. A hunger.

For what that exposure will lead to.

Those are 2 very very different paths.

Maintaining presence to that quality, even after we've assumed that we've got it nailed....

You see this with people around presence. There's so much bullshit in the meditation world, for example.

Because people might have meditated wonderfully for 4 or 5 or 8 or 10 years, but then they get ego involved with it. And then they put together schools and...they're not embodying it anymore.

And then it becomes hollow.

And they've kind of slipped from the philosopher to the philosophologist without even knowing that it happened.

They weren't even present to the question.

Firewalking Process

TF:

Firewalking Process.

JW:

Yeah, that's important.

TF:

What is the firewalking process? This is new to me too, I'm not sure I've heard you discuss this.

JW:

Yeah, this is something I've been really, for the last year and a half or so, developing intensely.

I think it's been a core part of my process for a long time. But training people I've been on this really intense learning curve on how to work with people on this.

So the core to the principle is that people tend to learn from their own experiences with much more potency than they learn from other people's experiences.

And the firewalking process is what I call, that's my term for a gateway to cultivating the ability to learn with the same physiological intensity from other people's experiences as we learn from our own.

For example, if you're a jiu jitsu fighter and you slightly overextend your arm and you get arm barred in Mundials, in the world championships. Your arm is being separated from your body. You feel like your shoulder is disconnecting, your arm is breaking. If you don't tap you're going to break.

So you have the combination. And often guys will fight it, right? They won't want to tap because it's the Worlds [championships].

So they'll have the combination of huge disappointment, all the adrenal reactions to being caught and wounded and maybe torn ligaments or tendons depending on how the injury sets in. Maybe a bone. And they will burn that lesson into themselves and they will not overextend their arm that way again, right? That's been burned in on an animalistic level.

But if they watch somebody fighting and they watch them overextend and get caught in an arm bar, that's just like nothing. It's an intellectual knowledge that has no impact on whether they'll overextend.

But if we can cultivate the ability to learn from other people's errors or experiences with the same intensity as we can learn from our own, it's unbelievable how that can steepen the learning curve.

TF:

What would be an example of that beyond jiu jitsu?

JW:

Well, for example, a really interesting live example that I'm playing with today is that we're working actively with investors...

A brilliant investor really used a term "The Pavlovian Impact" or the "Pavlovian influences" of growing up in a bull market. So most relatively young investors grew up in a post-2008 world. So all of their subtle responses have come from growing up in a bull market...

So for the most part they've experienced pleasure when they put their foot on the gas and they've experienced pain when they've taken their foot off the gas...for the most part. That's a bit oversimplified.

It's really interesting to sit down and think about all of the cognitive biases, all the subtle associations that come with growing up in a bull market. Now traditionally what people will say is that you have to live through certain business cycles...you have to...School of Hard Knocks, right? We have to learn from the pain of the other side.

But can you take a highly talented young investor who has grown up in a bull market...and give them the wisdom...you think about the journey from pre-consciousness to post-consciousness compared around a certain theme, and give them the wisdom of living through many market cycles when they haven't?

So then you can deconstruct systematically what does a bear market look like. Now I'm not sure if we're in the beginning of a bear market now, but let's just say we are maybe in the first or second inning of a bear market now.

Maybe we're in 8th or 9th innings of a bull market. Maybe we're in the 9th inning of a bull market and we're going to see some huge round of [inaudible: intervention? Invention?] and we're going to go into extra inning of a bull market. No one really knows. Maybe there is some other dynamic at play. Even the great macro-economists don't know.

But they have a sense through deep study of either macroeconomics or valuation. But we are, at one point someday (relatively soon), we'll probably enter a bear market. So it's going to be very important [having the wisdom of living through many market cycles].

And so if you haven't lived through one, one thing you can do is to deconstruct what a bear market looks like and you can have them firewalk it.

So what that means is, suddenly all of the...

And a bear market doesn't just mean going down...

It also means the subtle undulation of going down for 3 weeks and a really steep 2 week rally and then going down for 3 weeks and then a 2 week rally.

So people often... even bear... people who are betting... think the market will go down get really hurt in bear markets because it's violent. There's a volatility to it.

TF:

Volatility. Yeah.

JW:

Right? So the question is, how can, in this case, an investor who's grown up in a post-2008 world firewalk market cycles so that he can burn that wisdom into himself or herself.

And then the question is how do you do this, right? So a lot of the things that we discussed around physiological awareness, somatic awareness, and cultivating sensitivity to what's happening inside of us...what comes with that is the ability to switch state, emotionally, adrenally.

And so if we visualize (with tremendous potency) something very painful to us, we can have a physiological response to that.

TF:

True even of exercise training. People who take a 10 minute meditation or visualization session, they get the benefits of the exercise (in large part) just from the visualization over 10 minutes.

[Brief break, Josh has to go pick up his son from school]

TF:

Firewalking. Visualization. Casts. Let's continue with firewalking.

JW:

Yes. You were just bringing up the physical dynamics that are possible with intense visualization.

I had this formative experience; I wrote about it years ago, where I broke my hands 7 weeks before national championship when I was training the Chinese martial arts push hands and I was in a cast for 6 weeks until up until, I think, 3 days the nationals and the doctor said I couldn't compete because everything was going to be atrophied.

But I was committed to doing it and it was really interesting because I was just doing all of my training one-handed and visualizing the weight work that I was doing on the one side passing over to the other.

TF:

Weight work? [You mean] resistance training?

JW:

Yeah. I was [also] doing my martial arts training one handed which was fascinating on its own to just work on being able to do with one hand what you can do with 2. That was tremendous.

But I was also visualizing the resistance training I was doing on the one side passing over to the other.

But really intense visualization, not just thinking it, but burning it into my...it's kind of what I mean by firewalking. The distinction between thinking about it intellectually sort of trying to visualize it versus burning it in...

TF:

With every sensory simulation.

JW:

Yeah, like with your whole spirit burning it in deeply. And it was fascinating to see when I took off the case I had basically not atrophied. And I competed the next 2, 3 days later and won.

The doctors, they were pretty surprised by it. A lot of Western medicine was pretty surprised by it. They are close minded about these kinds of things.

TF:

What would you do to translate that to something less obviously physical? Like we were talking about training people who have never been through a bear market, to have the wisdom or lessons learned of those who have been through it.

So pragmatically, how do you simulate that? Do you have then interview someone who has gone through it and then try to have them relive those stories through visualization or what would the process potentially look like?

JW:

Yeah, so cultivation of empathy, to be able to do what you just described, very deeply, is one thing. To be able to, you know, live someone else's experience profoundly.

First of all we have to really be clear about the distinction between intellectual knowledge and somatic knowledge. When we're having something burned in, there's an adrenal response. So there's a physiology to having an experience very intensely.

We have to learn how to create that physiology. So we can do biofeedback training...undulating between states of physiological coherence and states of extreme stress so that we build up the ability to kind of move between them at will.

And then when we're studying the experience of, for example...somebody getting burned extremely, intensely time and again in a bear market (during the volatility, the ups and down of a bear market). You can look at it and it can feel like...like a chart. Or you can experience the anxiety that comes with it; the pain that comes with it. Like the shattering of your previous conceptual scheme.

You can almost firewalk the experience of the Pavlovian Influence of growing up in a bull market and then having that shattered. You can firewalk that shattering and then open your mind to the reality of the broader cyclicity over the long term.

And in terms of how you do it, well the foundation is in a lot of things we've been discussing:

- Intense mediation training
- Ways of becoming increasingly attuned to these subtle ripples inside of body
- Stilling your waters
- Having a lifestyle that is less reactive and less input addicted
- Being really aware of how we fill space addictively in life.
 - Whenever there is empty space we just fill it as opposed to maintaining the emptiness. And the emptiness is where we have clarity of mind and the perception of these little micro-ripples inside of us.
- Cultivating the ability to observe (in us and in others) the subtlest undulations of quality or of physiology

The Importance of Building and Maintaining “Slack”

TF:

You and I talk a lot about maintaining slack. Trying to build slack into the system. And how important that is.

I was told by someone I respect a lot recently, “find the silence because you have to listen from the silence” and that might sound very vague, but I found that if you really meditate on it, it can apply to just about anything.

I mean if you really want to separate the signal from the noise, you need the space to do that.

JW:

Right. It’s such an important principle.

[Brief break to tend to Josh’s son]

JW:

We’re talking about slack while the slack is running out of the system here.

TF:

[laughs]. Very impassioned cries from upstairs.

JW:

Yeah, our aim was to do this while Jack was in school.

TF:

And fortune intervened. Changed our plans

JW:

Yes. You know, this principle of slack is so interesting. For me, a lot of it relates to the empty space for the learning process. In my way of life...I’ve built a life around having empty space for the development of my ideas for the creative process. And for the cultivation of a physiological state which is receptive enough to tune in very very deeply to people, to people I work with.

And so I see how I could triple the amount of people I work with very easily with the systems that I have, but my growth curve would change fundamentally. My internal physiological training would take a hit. I wouldn’t have enough time for meditation, reflection afterwards...for the development of thematic takeaways from every session that I have.

In the creative process it’s so easy to drive for efficiency and take for granted the really subtle internal work that it takes to play on that razor’s edge.

TF:

I think in part it comes back to the limiting of inputs and selective ignorance that you talked about. Because if you

triple the number of clients you have in a high-tech and high-touch business you're going to have to juggle 17 chainsaws instead of 2 chainsaws.

Quality's Effect on Navigating the Razor's Edge and Big Waves

JW:

Right. Then *I'm* reacting and I'm not embodying the core principles that we're working on. And so much of really high-level training, I find, is sort of somatic transmission. You're embodying a certain state and then you're helping someone embody that state as well.

TF:

Totally agree. And I think that if you want a good example of that, just as a relatively new dog owner as an adult, you can look at dogs or children who are fundamentally unblocked I that somatic reading ability and you can see just as you said...that apparent transmits their state of being to their child. Despite, or with the assistance of, whatever they might say.

Similarly, if you're interacting adult to adult, you need to return to that state to be maximally effective, and what you do in particular.

JW:

Right. And then when we're talking about sort of dancing on the razor's edge...when you're moving up the growth curve in a certain discipline, there are a lot of things you can do to reach the first 80th or 90th or 95th percentile of something.

When you're talking about the last .001%, you're talking about these arenas where the greatest insight will be right next to the greatest blunder. And you have to be willing to go RIGHT ON that razor's edge.

I was having this great conversation with a sports psychologist Michael Gervais a couple weeks ago, and he used the language of "thrusting into big waves." [This was] the experience he had to go into to push himself as a surfer to thrust into big waves. I love that expression.

But of course if you're thrusting into big waves, then you can easily push yourself into the wave you shouldn't take. So big wave surfers have to be able to navigate that most finely tuned...in the moment just...intuitive decision making process of whether the moment is just right or whether it's the moment that will kill you.

And then if you're working with people as a coach or a trainer of people who are navigating that terrain...you have to be in a state where you can navigate that terrain. You have to have an embodied state there.

And I think that's a mistake that a lot of people make in everything that they do...they just scale...scale and dilute quality. And then when you lose quality you lose the ability to successfully navigate the razor's edge and then, by definition you're probably more destructive than you are helpful.

And so when I think about training people who are in that place, it's like 99.9% listening and ideally you can make the most potent suggestions with the lightest touch feasible.

Using Scarcity As A Discipline To Improve

TF:

So the notes...I took some notes beforehand here...and one of them touches on the principle of scarcity in A) habit creation and B) the learning process and C) the creative process. I don't know if we'll have time to get into all of these right now, but could you just elaborate on the principle of scarcity.

JW:

So if we think about the idea of subtraction or essentialism or scarcity... You frankly, are as good as it gets in my opinion at harnessing the principle of scarcity in your learning process, learning how to deconstruct something and focusing on absolutely what's most essential and zone in on it. As opposed to just throwing huge amounts of resources at things and just having diluted quality of approach.

Most people, when they become successful they have the opportunity to have more resources and they keep on layering more and more resources on things, so they're not very potent in how they go about things.

If you cut those resources down 99%, then you find yourself just zoning in on what's most essential. And then if you can learn to add resources incrementally [while] maintaining that potency, it's incredible that you can do.

But it takes a lot of discipline to maintain that principle of scarcity. So in habit creation, taking on the right amount and not too much. Not too little but not too much.

People tend to think about layering on...they get excited when they realize.. If I go through a diagnostic process with somebody and we realize there are 10 areas they could take on, they want to take on all of them at once. You can really only take on 1 or 2 things at once. Ideally it's 1 theme and you take on 2 or 3 manifestations of that theme to burn that theme on and then you keep on layering.

In the creative process, we've been talking about limiting inputs...

TF:

Positive constraints, yeah.

JW:

Positive constraints. Listen, me speaking about this principle to you, I mean you embody this principle profoundly.

What are your thought on it?

TF:

Well, there are a few things, just to maybe add a couple of anecdote to what you just said.

The first thing that came to mind was a quote (and I'm going to butcher this, but) it's from Jack Ma of Alibaba who said, "In the beginning, we had an advantage. We ad no experience, no business plan, and no money. So it forced us to make all of our decisions very carefully."

And I do think that people tend to (and I'm also borrowing this) overestimate what they can accomplish in a week and underestimate what they can accomplish in a year. Which leads to theoretically appealing decisions like trying

adopt 10 new behaviors at once that are kind of “hour wise and year foolish” in the sense that they are doomed to fail from the outset in many respects...

And to your point also about scaling. I have friends who call this the S-word because it’s a romanticized, sort of worshipped notion in Silicon Valley. “Scale scale scale. Gotta be bigger. Hire more people. Ship more product.” And if you are looking to optimize your craft, your art, that may or may not be the right path to doing that.

To my mind, you can look at exemplars, or example of people who have scaled and are still critics of scaling. In the sense that Bill Gates I believe said, “If you add people to an inefficient process, it just makes the problem worse. You have to add people to an efficient process.”

To that end, whether you are looking to build a “lifestyle business,” a healthy cash flow based business that represents in some way, your craft...let’s just say that you make (and this is a real example) 20 customized rifles a year and that’s all you do. And you sell to the top .001% of marksmen in the United States and you never ship more than that; that’s the constraint you apply.

Whether you’re trying to do that or build Microsoft, that lesson can apply. Whether it’s adding 1% or the next 1,000 people.

So for me, I think it’s very easy to create a false dichotomy in your mind, when you look at, say...a small scale craftsman who’s perhaps making oil paintings in rural Alaska vs a startup in Silicon Valley with a 1,000 employees and think of them as totally different, but in fact if you look at the top performers in either environment they’ll have a lot in common with each other.

And I think one of those commonalities is applying a lot of positive constraints. Even when you have an embarrassment of resources available.

JW:

If you think about this in terms of the creative process, one of the most important things to train is the ability to ask the right question; to know where to look.

If you look at people in most creative fields who extremely high-level vs incrementally lower fields, it’s knowing what the most critical area is for thinking.

[Break to get Jack something to play with]

The Importance of Surfacing to Reflect on Thoughts, Actions, Patterns, Beliefs, etc.

JW:

Continuing to think about this principle of scarcity, one of the ways that I have myself trained at this in the creative process, or harnessed the principle of scarcity is (and I have everyone who I work with, live in this routine) is forcing yourself at the end of each day, is to think about what the most important question is, in what you’re working on.

We discussed this last time. It’s really interesting because you’re studying complexity all the time and if you’re a

really high level thinker, you're slicing through it like butter but there are usually 1 or 2 or 3 areas of stuckness.

And most people I find, tend to live in the creative process by kind of "surfacing," deciding where they want to go, putting their head down, and just grinding their way toward it and just surfacing later on...

But they don't surface enough to reflect on what's the most potent direction to go. Think about the human vs the computer playing chess 10 years ago, now the computers are getting really good at knowing where to look but 10 years ago the human knew that 1 or 2 or 3 of these directions was the right essential direction. Intuitively we sensed that and we cultivate the ability to know where to look...but the computer had to look at everything.

If we look at everything, then we're operating like really really bad computers. But if we cultivate the ability to ask the most potent question systematically...so how do we do this?

Well we have a routine where we end each work day thinking, "What's the most important question in what I'm doing right now?" Pose the question to the unconscious and wake up first thing in the morning and brainstorm on it.

TF:

Do you have then pose it again?

JW:

No. Actually I think it's pretty important not to do that because then we are kind of consciously ruminating on it. Hopefully they haven't thought about it for a few hours before they go to bed. This is something that Hemingway wrote about in his writing process really beautifully.

TF:

Yeah, Hemingway would stop writing mid-sentence and provide a foothold for continuing the next day.

JW:

Right, which we could also look at from that "Internal vs external" framing. If you're kind of held by a sense of guilt whenever you're not working, then you're going to feel like you have to write everything that you can write. But if you're nurturing your creative process from the inside-out you're going to be comfortable stopping with a sense of direction, even when you're mid-sentence or mid-paragraph.

TF:

When I talk to people who have started journaling successfully for the first time, the most consistent pattern that I see is, "I write less than I feel I can each day."

They are never pushing to max capacity or feeling like they are pushing to max capacity. They always write less than they feel they should write.

JW:

Right. That's very interesting. And then...if we think about taking this and then turning it into a systematic training of the ability to be potent in the creative process...[for example]...if we're working on a given project and reflecting on what's the most important question here and then we're journaling on it in the brainstorm in the morning...

We're doing a lot of things. We're opening the channel systematically between the conscious and the unconscious mind. We're waking up in the morning and beginning our day proactively; all of these things which we discussed in the past.

But then if you sit back, after say, a month and look back at your 3 or 4 or 5 journals, brainstorm, Q&As on a given subject...and you think about, "So in the moment this is what I thought was most potent, but now I realize THIS in fact, would have been most potent. What's the gap?"

Deconstruct the gap between your understanding then and your understanding now; then design your training process around deconstructing that gap and [then] training at what that gap revealed. It's a really powerful way for individuals...

TF:

...Right. What assumptions underlied [sic] that gap...the creation of that gap or that blind spot?

JW:

Right. That misconception about what was most important. So you're training yourself, day in and day out like water, to be an increasingly potent thinker. And this is manifesting scarcity in that we are forcing ourselves, no matter how many resources we have to think about what is the most important question we're working on right now.

TF:

Do you journal every day?

JW:

Yes.

TF:

When do you journal?

JW:

Well I journal throughout. So I'll wake up in the morning meditate...take a cold then hot cold undulation shower, meditate and then I will journal.

I've had periods where I'll move right...especially when I was working on lucid dreaming...where I'd move straight from sleep into journaling. But that's my rhythm today [the above paragraph is].

And then when I have insights throughout the day, I'll do quick journals about them. And then after I have sessions with clients I'll do a journaling session on the most important takeaways.

TF:

Do you do that in a notebook or do you do it digitally.

JW:

I do it on Evernote and then I tag everything thematically, which is hugely important for me. I have all of my journals and all of the resources that I find valuable, tagged thematically and [tagged] through habits in the

language of my training process.

So this is incredibly powerful for being able to give people resources, for me reviewing the ideas without having recency bias impede how I communicate.

TF:

Can you say that one more time?

JW:

So if I have a client who I think has to work on a certain theme and I want to give them resources they can read on it, I can just click on the tag in Evernote and all of the resources—things that I've written and things that I've read, circling that theme, are right there.

TF:

Got it.

JW:

And it's also really powerful because it's really hard to overcome recency bias.

TF:

I see, recency bias...meaning like the primacy and recency effect. So you're recalling what you read most recently not necessarily the best resource.

JW:

Right, and not necessarily [recalling] my foundation to the theme and you want to communicate it from what someone has learned from the foundation up. So it's really powerful, the tagging on Evernote...I'm not a big tech wizard as you know but...

TF:

Just to put this into perspective, Josh was looking for Dinosaur Train for like 10 minutes and he's like, "You know what, I think I'm going to search this thing" [laughs] and then I say, "And you say you're not good at tech."

JW:

[laughs]

TF:

[Laughs] That was a big discovery. And then Jack goes, "There goes dinosaur train." Amazing how this search function works.

Ahh, should we talk about thematic interconnectedness?

Thematic Interconnectedness

JW:

Yes, let's talk about it. I'd love to talk about it in the context of education a little bit. This is one of the...

Thematic interconnectedness is...maybe that's the essence of my relationship to the world or beyond. I think you and I, in some of our eccentric conversations all over the world, on surf boards and wherever else, this has been a big topic for us.

TF:

Constant topic.

JW:

And it's been a huge part of how I've approached learning; from my foundation in looking at the relationships between chess and life, learning about life through chess, then in transferring that over from chess into the martial arts; first Chinese martial arts and then into Brazilian Jiu Jitsu.

And then when I work with people, it's really how I learn and how I found it's really powerful to help people amplify their growth curves; to teach them to be able learn the many from the few or from the 1. To learn the macro from the micro. Breakdown the boundaries between disparate pursuits or parts of life between the personal, the professional, the technical, and the psychological.

And if we have an experience where we're on surf boards and we have some little thematic breakthrough and we can apply it to every other aspect of our life, it's really interesting what can happen, because we're pretty well calloused over in our areas of strength. But in areas where we're less advanced, we can be more raw and [it's] more conducive to breakthroughs sometimes.

TF:

Oh, 100%. I mean, you can see things with [Beginner's Mind](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoshin) because you have no other choice [laughs]. You don't have to try to simulate Beginner's Mind because you already are a beginner. It's like the race to the bottom experience.

So for those wondering what the hell that means, the "race to the bottom," is an expression that Erik of Paddle Woo, our paddle surfing instructor, uses to refer to constantly dropping in board size often measured in liters for buoyancy purposes.

And Josh and I, and everyone who was there really, very quickly realized, to use your experience, that you are "dancing on the razor's edge" and trying to find a balance between the race to the bottom but also maintaining motivation so you're not just slipping on banana peels for 5 hours straight and to what extent do you focus on the board size and the race to the bottom vs which gives you more maneuverability in surfing vs actually working on say...the footwork and the other technical aspects on a board that you can manage.

JW:

And it's very interesting to think about this theme of the "race to the bottom" combined with this other wonderful principle that we were all talking about with Erik, which is, the swapping of boards between.

So he had these camps where he had the 18 top stand up paddle surfers in the world together with him, all riding these ridiculously small boards that are deep underwater when you're standing on them and it's incredibly hard to balance on these things.

So they've internalized this race to the bottom theme deeply which we are working on [laughs]. And then they

also...they had this experience where they were all together and initially it was sort of competitive but then it became much more collaborative and they were just sharing ideas. And then they began to swap boards.

And they began to have this interesting experience where every surfboard kind of carved its own lines. There's the practitioner who carves his own lines and then there's also the board that has a unique rocker who finds new lines in the wave. And what these guys would find is that swapped boards they could see new lines in the wave if they listened to the board.

Some guys would swap boards and try to force the new board to carve their lines. Others would sort of be open to what this new board could do. And then they would learn from it. And then they'd go back to their boards and their minds would open up.

So that's another way of thinking about this Beginner's Mind. The new board forced them...helped them see new lines if they were open minded enough.

So this is an example of thematic interconnectedness. So when I came back from our previous trip where we were talking about the swapping boards theme and I came back and I was red-hot on fire with how to apply this theme in the investment process with my guys.

So you have these teams that are so private and so magnificent at what they do, but if you could get teams to mix and share ideas with abundance...For example if a world-class portfolio manager could swap analysts with another PM for a week or 2 or 3 would be interesting...if they were both open truly...everyone was sharing openly...you'd be able to do the equivalent of swapping boards and seeing new lines.

It's forcing the beginner's mind. But forcing the beginner's mind not only with an open-mindedness but also tapping someone who is truly exceptional at a very different style of what you do.

So there's an example of just having an experience in surfing and applying it to something else.

TF:

And converting it potentially into a simple question right? Like "where can I swap boards?" ...Could be something that is used for fodder, for people listening, in a journaling exercise. Wake up, meditate, have your coffee, sit down and drop that question at the top.

JW:

That's a magnificent brainstorming question to journal and riff on. I love it.

TF:

So how do you apply that to education?

JW:

So this thematic interconnectedness, I don't think that we can do much more important work with children than helping them [to] love learning, help them learn to bring out the essence of who they are in the learning process [which is to say] to express the core of who they are through learning, which obviously will help them love learning.

And then help them discover thematic interconnectedness...how the world is interconnected via principles, themes...people are silo'ed right now. People think about disciplines in an increasingly data-driven...

TF:

Segregated way

JW:

...Segregated way and a close-minded way and it's kind of heart breaking. And so...I have this non-profit I've been running for a lot of years and a huge amount of what we do...

And a huge amount of what we do...all of our work is in education. We've got hundreds of programs around the world, most in the U.S. but internationally as well. www.TheArtofLearningProject.org is our website. The programs that are most exciting to me are the ones where we really are systematically working with schools to help children experience thematic interconnectedness.

And so the way that we'll do this, for example, is that we'll be working with 5 teachers in 5 different subject matters...well 4 or 5 or 6 or whatever the number is, in the same age group...

You're smiling at me, what are you thinking?

TF:

[laughs] Sorry guys, I was just looking at the URLs, theArtofLearningProject.org and I was laughing because I remembered when we filmed the TV show and we were walking up the stairs to the Marcelo Garcia gym and you kept on saying "TAOL this, TAOL that" and I thought you were saying towel, t-o-w-e-l and I'm like, "What the f*** is TAOL?"

And you're like, "It's my godd*** book!" And you got all upset and I'm like, "Oooh, The Art Of Learning...how did you expect me to piece that together?"

Anyway that's why I was smirking. [laughs]

Now I know the acronym and I won't anger Josh any further.

JW:

[laughs] You didn't anger me.

TF:

I know, I'm just f***ing with you.

JW:

So anyway...I don't remember that conversation

TF:

TAOL, TAOL, TAOL for like 5 flights of stairs and I'm like, "What the f*** are you talking about?" [laughs]

Anyway...My bad.

JW:

So the way that we do this is, that we have, for example, 5 different teachers in different subject matters working with my team to weave the same principle of learning into...for example...math, English, history, social studies, volleyball, soccer...at the same time.

So you'll have kids who are studying their subject matter but they are studying also the way a principle of learning or the creative process of performance psychology in each of these disciplines at the same time. And so they are by definition, breaking down the walls between these different pursuits.

And it's really interesting systematic way of doing this. So they will be studying the same principle in math, then they move to the next subject and they're experiencing it through another lens and then through another lens... And they are experiencing it in sports.

TF:

Are these borrowed from The Art Of Learning book? In so much as you're talking about smaller and smaller circles, you were talking about learning the macro from the micro...

JW:

Yes. The root of these are in core themes of learning, creativity, performance psychology that I wrote about in my book and that I've developed since. Yeah, absolutely.

And we've spoken about a lot them together. And so it's a kind of combination of individualized self-expression, well a lot of these themes that we've been discussing today and last time.

TF:

And so can people learn more about this at TheArtOfLearningProject.org?

JW:

They can. So everybody please come check out the site. We've got some really wonderful programs around the world and it's good timing for this right now because I'd love it if any educators out there... we're on the verge of launching about 10 really high level programs (is what we want to launch) all thematically driven. We're preparing them in the next months.

And so, anyone who is in the educational world who would love to touch base with us about applying for this kind of program, Katy on my team can be reached at katy@jwfoundation.com. JW Foundation is the name of my non-profit that houses The Art of Learning Project.

TF:

What type of educators should check this out and email her?

JW:

Teachers. Or people running schools or school systems.

TF:

Any minimum number of students? Or any other parameters?

JW:

Well the essence of these programs would be a school system that's open minded around, for example, engaging teachers in different disciplines working at the same time in a collaborative way so that the kids can be embodying the same principle in a wealth of disciplines at the same time.

So that's the essence of it. It's a bit of a coordinated program. We've had wonderful success doing this and it's what really excites me when I think about education. How to build systematic training in creativity through thematic interconnectedness into the way kids learn these days.

Because kids get so excited when they see connections. This is a big part of what I'm experiencing as a dad with Jack is how red hot he gets when can he learn something and then can apply it to many other things.

This is a core part of my approach to learning and it's maybe my biggest strength: the ability to find hidden harmonies between disparate parts of life.

TF:

Seemingly disparate.

JW:

Right. Seemingly.

TF:

Well Josh, this is always so much fun, to drag you kicking and screaming out of your cage. [laughs]

JW:

You did it.

TF:

Or cave [laughs]

JW:

[laughs] I like cave more

TF:

...Cave more, I don't know why I was thinking cage. I guess that's my inner primate coming out, but people have asked me often about education following my TED talk, where at the end I talk about tackling different facets of education...

...And I feel like your approach and principle based lens through which you can not only spot but teach interconnectedness, is just so incredibly valuable in an educational system where fields are increasingly silo'ed and viewed as separate and you have political turf wars between departments and what not only exacerbates that's problem and I feel like this is a massively powerful step in the right direction.

So #1, thank you for that and #2, educators listening to this (or if you're just curious to check it out and might be able to help in some way): TheArtOfLearningProject.org and then if you get a taste of that and it seems compelling

and you want to try to apply or jump into the fray, then [katy\[at\]jwffoundation\[dot\]com](mailto:katy@jwffoundation.com)

[Talk about finding that info and more in the show notes]

But Josh, I would usually ask where people can find you online, but they can't find you so I won't ask that.

Is there anything you would like people to...besides visiting the resources we just mentioned...anything you would like people to take away, consider, do...any action...anything that comes to mind that you would like people to walk away with just as a closing comment or question?

JW:

That's a big question. Yes, absolutely. It's funny, as I sit with this now, for so many years my primary identity was as a fighter, a competitor. And I've transitioned in recent years and I find my primary identity now (self-identity), the way I experience myself, is as a nurturer of people: my family, the people I work very closely with, and children as I work more broadly in education.

And when I think about it through the context of nurturing people and nurturing ourselves, I think that we're living in a world of so much noise and so much distraction and of the space being constantly filled...that it's rather remarkable what can happen if we cultivate a mindfulness, a stillness of the waters as a way of life and we find the beauty in that.

There's so much beauty that can come from silence, we can learn so much by feeling the inner ripples of our internal experience.

And as parents, embodying what we want our children to embody. Living it. Walking the talk. Putting away our phones. Living a life of deep presence with our children, our student, with whoever we work with. Cultivating empathy. Cultivating compassion.

It scares the hell out of me how powerfully I see the world moving in another direction from this. And there's so much that we can learn from the speed of what computers can do, where AI is headed, what big data can reveal. It's thrilling to me...as long as we stay in touch with the essential parts of our humanity.

And when I experience what happens working with people...with adults or with children...when we're just completely present and we cultivate that presence as a way of life, it's incredible what can happen between people.

And when I experience the scars in children, that I see everywhere that comes from the anxiety, that comes from lack of secure attachment, the lack of the attunement of the parent, the lack of the embodiment of the parent or the teacher in these things that are spoken about...it's heartbreaking.

So maybe I'm really really old school, but there is something about the cultivation of deep presence and quality as a way of life which just rings all through me.

And honestly the other thing I'll say is that, after having the experience I had a few months ago, coming as close as you can come to dying...

First of all, on a tactical level , please...if anyone is experimenting with different forms of breath hold work like the Wim Hof method, which I think is very interesting and quite powerful...PLEASE don't do it in any water, even an inch of water. Because if you go out [unconscious] you don't want to be in water.

TF:

I should say, if you practice this stuff enough and you're a type A personality, you are going to go out. It's not just a high probability, it's almost a certainty that you're going to go out...and to think otherwise is really courting disaster.

So DO NOT do it in or near water.

JW:

Yeah. And when we talk about firewalking: living and learning from other people's experiences with the same physiological intensity that you can learn from your own...there's something about when you go over that edge, over that cliff...

If I could take the experience of love, gratitude, and beauty ever since I've had that experience and I could give it to my brothers and sisters, holy smokes. I mean what a beautiful thing.

So if there is any way that we can live with that deep sense of beauty, it's a rich place.

TF:

To find the still...cultivate. Not just find, but create that stillness and practice, like you said, the calming of the waters...I think is, underestimated because of its perceived simplicity.

And just as not all things that are simple are easy...not all things that are simple are low in value. Sometimes what's right in front of you within grasp is most important to grasp onto and make use of. It doesn't have to be extremely esoteric.

JW:

And it's so easy to think we've got it nailed, you know? Like, we can meditate for 15 years and think that we've got presence now, then we stop meditating, 6 months pass and we're distracted.

It's...there's a constancy to it. And a presence to the real sense of danger that it can slip.

TF:

And speaking for me personally, it's also building it in as a habit, just like brushing your teeth (for those people who brush their teeth [laughs])...

...In so much as, for me (and I know this is true for many of my friends...meditation doesn't really work well as a batched process.

In other words, meditating 10 minutes a day for 10 days is much for valuable than meditating once in 10 days for a 100 minutes.

And for most people it would be less painful too once you get into that habit and it becomes an ingrained part of your being and your practice. You will see the value, particularly once you have a critical mass. For me, it's typically 5 to 7 days.

And then I think, "I cannot believe I wasn't doing this." Or, "I can't believe I stopped for 4 weeks" It's incredibly valuable.

...And brother Josh...

JW:

Thanks brother, this was a blast.

TF:

Thanks buddy.