

[Transcript] The Diary Of A CEO with Steven Bartlett / Airbnb CEO: "IT WAS SO DARK WE NEARLY DIED!". I Was Lonely, Deeply Sad & Wanted To Be Loved! [INSPIRING!] Brian Chesky

You lose 80% of your business in eight weeks.
And I knew there were questions.
Is this the end of Airbnb?
Will Airbnb exist?
Brian Chesky, founder and CEO
of a \$100 billion company.
Airbnb, one of the most successful
and most disruptive companies in the world.
Arabian and Breakfast was just a way to keep paying rent
before we came up with the big idea.
We did not think Arabian and Breakfast would be a company
where 4 million people a night would use.
Don't focus on the mountain top.
Focus on the first step.
A lot of breakthrough ideas don't seem breakthrough
at the time. They seem crazy.
People tend to overestimate what they can do in a year
and underestimate what they can do in 10 years.
10 years is a profoundly long period of time
to get your discipline and focus.
And you can have a small idea, a small dream,
and you can build something vast.
Airbnb is going to IPO and then disaster strikes.
And the coronavirus emergency.
Stay at home. Stay at home.
You lose 80% of your business in eight weeks.
And I knew there were questions.
Is this the end of Airbnb?
Will Airbnb exist?
We had to make some incredibly difficult decisions.
So I write this letter to the entire company.
Here's what I said.
So how do you read that?
Yeah. Yeah, no, no.
I get a little emotional reading that.
Why?
Why?
Brian, I'm a fan believer that our external world
can change and evolve and look different.
But it tends to be the case that our internal world
is much more stubborn, which is who we are at our core.
And I also believe that who we are at our core

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is often shaped by our earliest experiences
that's been supported by a lot of the psychologists
I've sat here with.

To understand you the way you think and who you are,
I think it's best to first understand that early experience
and how it's shaped the internal Brian
that remains regardless of how everything else
in your life has changed.

Well, yeah, thank you for having me on.

I came from a pretty normal nondescript background,
but in parallel to sports and all the regular things kids had,
I had this other interest.

And it was a thing that most defined me,
and that was that I was an artist.

I would be drawing and drawing and I have these pads of paper
and I go through hundreds and hundreds of pages,
almost compulsively drawing,
both trying to learn how to mimic an environment
and reproduce it in reality.

And when I was 10, I could probably draw like an adult.

And when that time I was in high school,

I could draw like probably akin to a professional artist.

I love design worlds.

I wanted to design an escape.

And at the age of 17, I decide I'm going to design school.

So I've already taken like 100 opportunities in life.

And now I'm like, okay, I'm gonna do this.

I'm not gonna be like a politician, a doctor,
a lawyer, a astronaut.

I'm gonna be an artist or designer.

Halfway through freshman year,

they tell you to declare a major.

What kind of artist and designer?

I'm like, I'm still 17.

And I gotta tell you what type of artist and designer?

This guy comes in and he pitches an apartment
called industrial design.

It just sounded cool, industrial design.

And I was like, what is industrial design?

I remember him saying something like,
industrial design is the design of everything
from a toothbrush to a spaceship

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and everything in between.
To design a physical object,
you have to understand three dimensions.
You can't just design an object.
You have to understand how to make the object.
If you were a graphic designer,
you didn't really have to know how to make anything.
If you guess, you have to know how to print it.
But you had to know manufacturing.
What kind of materials is it?
Are the materials sustainable?
Where do you manufacture it?
Well, how much is it gonna cost?
Because like, how much is gonna cost
like has implications on how you design it?
Well, how much is gonna cost depends on who's the audience?
How are you gonna market it?
You see, when an architect designs a building,
no one like blames the architect
if the office building doesn't get leased out.
But in industrial design,
you can't design a product, it not sell,
and you say it was a good design.
I would have never imagined
that would have come to use to run a tech company.
It turns out industrial design
was one of the best educations to run a tech company.
But I had no idea I was gonna do that.
I'm gonna walk back through that.
Cause there's a couple of words you said across the way
that really stuck out to me.
The first word you said
when you were talking about wanting to design your own world
is I was trying to design a world that I could escape to.
Yes.
The use of the word escape is quite intentional
but quite a strong word.
What were you trying to escape?
Great question.
I think I was a very sensitive child.
I think I was a very idealistic child.
And I think I was trying to escape

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what one might describe as
the numerous challenges of childhood.
I think child is really hard for people
and I think for me especially like
I was young, small, undersized.
I had trouble fitting in at school.
I remember just having a really intense environment.
And I remember when I was a kid,
I would watch like the ABC where they were like a Disney,
you know, they had this thing called
the wonderful world of Disney.
And I would see these old videos of Walt Disney
on television from the 80s
but it was from him in the 60s.
And he described these like magical worlds.
I was just so obsessed with designing a world
that was different and better than the one I was in.
I just think I had a lot of kind of anxiousness as a kid.
And I never really,
I didn't really feel like I was at home.
You know, I felt like I was searching for home.
And I, there's this great Bob Dylan quote.
He said, it took me a long time to find my way home.
And I think it did for me as well.
I feel like I never found my way home
until I was surrounded at school with other creatives.
But other before that, I was just,
it's kind of an outsider
and things were very challenging and painful.
So am I right in thinking that your desire
to design a new world was also a desire
to design a home where you might fit?
100%.
If you design the world as well,
you get to control the world and you get to...
I think I want to design a world that I could live in,
that I could fit into
because I probably didn't think I fit quite into the world
that I grew up in.
Absolutely, that's 100% the case.
You said in some of your interviews
that you are a hyperactive child.

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Hyperactive, impulsive, difficulty concentrating.
I was never diagnosed with ADHD.
Maybe today, if I was growing up,
somebody may have said that, but I don't know.
But I had an intense energy.
I was always trying to do things differently.
I remember in junior, middle school,
I would try to redesign the school curriculum
or something just kind of interesting,
frankly, kind of bizarre things.
I was a bit of a performer.
I wasn't into acting or anything,
but I did a lot of public speaking
and I would do a lot of creative writing.
But I remember I always was like, I was always different
and different wasn't good growing up.
That was maybe the core thing.
I think the core thing is I was different.
I was different in almost every way
and different wasn't good.
I sat here with a therapist and she said to me,
there's two things at a very human level.
I mean, her clients are royalty and CEOs
at the top of the world and athletes and gold medalists.
She says, all my clients come to me with one of two things.
And it's usually both.
Either they don't believe they're enough
or they feel like they're different.
And those two things really haunt people in the world.
You know, we're tribal animals.
As you know, I've watched Airbnb's IPO video
and this idea of connection really coming through strongly.
We want to belong.
We want to be in our tribes.
And feeling like you're different,
I was thinking about the super lens of a tribe
means that I don't belong in the tribe.
Feeling like I'm not enough
means I'm not valuable to the tribe.
A hundred percent.
And I would think both of those identified.
I felt like my entire life,

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many people have like turned to addiction
and if I turned to one was work.
And luckily my addiction was very productive.
And so no one ever called at that.
Like no one says that somebody's working all day and night,
especially if they're doing something creative.
If you're an accessory entrepreneur.
And it was mostly, I mostly was made me happy.
But the challenge is that if you are doing something,
hoping to become something, hoping you become something
and then therefore you're gonna feel a certain way
cause people are gonna treat you a certain way.
It turned out that what I wanted was love
and what I was actually retracting was adulation.
And so the problem is we try to seek conditional love.
We do something great.
We get noticed.
And then people show us love and admiration,
but it's probably not love or adoration.
It's probably adulation.
And adulation I think is like a cup
with a hole at the bottom.
And the problem is you fill up the cup
but then something leaks out the bottom.
And so it kind of comes down and down and down.
You have to keep filling it and keep filling it
and keep filling it.
And the problem is that like anything,
you can't just do when you keep doing the same acts.
You must do even bigger acts.
You have to go bigger to get the feeling you had before.
I think this is incredibly typical of people,
like I know tech entrepreneurs,
where a lot of them had challenged the authority,
didn't fit in, wanted to be loved,
and were really good at something.
And it's not to take away any of that,
but just to know where it comes from.
Now that I know what it comes from,
I've been able to have a much healthier relationship with it.
I still love what I do,
but now it's really interesting.

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My motivations have gone more internal, more intrinsic.
Instead of wanting to be super successful
to feel a certain way,
part of me says, well, if I have not felt that way,
I probably never will.
And again, if I know amount of additional status or money
or anything, it's gonna make me feel good better
because this amount hasn't actually changed how I feel.
It turns out that like when you go on a rocket ship,
you initially, the success and the status
and everything makes you initially probably happier
because it's new.
There's a novelty and it's distracting.
And at some point you adapt to it.
And the moment of adaptation is the moment
you probably go back to reverting
to the way you felt before all of it.
You're not worse, but you're presumably not better.
Life is so much more than just climbing a ladder
and getting the top and realizing
you're not much higher than you ever were before.
That the world is, you had everything inside of yourself,
mostly to be happy before the journey started.
And probably what you needed most is purpose.
You have that health and relationships.
And I think that, you know, a lot of people take
the last one for granted, those relationships.
And that's kind of probably been my journey.
The cost of your addiction to work.
In hindsight, you can maybe point at the cost
and say, this was something I sacrificed
at the expense of happiness because of that addiction
to my work.
What are those things?
Let me first say that like it was mostly worth it.
And so I want to be clear about that,
that I wouldn't have done it dramatically different.
I am, let me just say, I am, it's like the journey
of Airbnb, of being able to build Airbnb
has been unbelievable.
It's been the great joy of my lifetime.
And if people could experience what I had experienced,

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I would say to them, it would be the most unbelievable ride of a lifetime.
And I wouldn't want to change a ton because it's been amazing.
But if they're about, somebody's listening
and they're about to go on this journey,
I would forewarn them about some things that no one told me.
And no one told me when I started this journey
is two things.
The first thing is how lonely it would be.
And it doesn't have to be.
But it's almost like by default.
You see, when I started Airbnb,
I started with my friends, two of my friends.
Then we hired people.
And those people, they were our employees,
but they were also kind of our friends.
And this notion that I was the boss,
there was a power and balance.
Well, we're all like broke working
at a three-page apartment.
So what does it mean that I'm CEO?
Like that's kind of just a title.
And so I felt really connected.
We weren't a family, but we were more like a family
than a business if it was one or the other.
And then as we got successful,
then it became more of a corporation.
There was a chain of command.
There were more boundaries.
Like you started hiring people that had families.
And people with families don't hang out with you
on nights and weekends.
And then it just becomes more formal.
And that's the moment that your employees
become your employees and less your friends.
And that gets more and more isolating.
And then people start looking at you
a little bit differently and it feels really good,
but you can just find yourself working more and more
to live up to the responsibility.
And you feel like you're never working enough
and you're working 60 hours a week,

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then 80 hours a week and 100 hours a week.
And you just almost feel guilty any second you're alive
and you're not working.
And again, I'm huge pouring it
and pouring your life into something.
But I think that what I thought was every incremental hour
would make me more productive,
but it turns out that like we need to step away from work.
We need to be happy.
We need to have some healthy relationships
to probably make good decisions.
I don't, lonely leaders are probably not the best leaders.
And when you're lonely, you're probably less empathetic.
You're a sense of vigilance is up.
You don't necessarily see problems really clearly.
You don't have people to bounce ideas off of.
When there's a challenge, you could feel like you're alone.
You don't have as much resiliency.
And so I remember going from being incredibly happy
to feeling incredibly isolated, not having been prepared.
Now I was prepared for all the business challenges.
People told me what it's like to scale a team,
hire executives, but we weren't really well prepared
for the psychological and emotional journey
that we would go on.
That turned out to be some incredibly intense journey.
So that was the first thing.
The first thing that I didn't know,
no one forewarned me about and that I've now learned
is about the lonely journey it can be.
And I would just tell people it doesn't have to be lonely.
Keep in touch with your friends,
meet other entrepreneurs.
Like you've got to almost fight
the world as you go on this journey
is going to isolate you into a bubble
that's gonna completely detach you from reality.
And if you're not careful, you can lose a sense of yourself.
And you have to fight every single day,
like a person in the ocean without a life jacket,
just staying above water.
And that staying above water is fighting

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the temptations of isolation
so that you can remain connected.
And if you're connected, you're gonna be okay.
But it's not gonna just happen.
Most people don't have to think about breathing.
You just breathe.
You have to think about staying connected.
The other thing is you can't try to be successful
to think it's gonna solve something inside of you.
Being successful other than maybe a sense of purpose.
It turns out having a purpose and serving others
and being focused in something,
that's generally good for you.
Beyond that, no amount of status and power
is gonna fill something inside of you.
Whatever is inside of you that you're missing,
you need to probably fill through introspection.
Like we might call it solitude, connection to self.
Or maybe like many of us grown up were kind of lonely.
And so we wanted to be loved.
So we decided to pursue these things
so that people would be connected to us.
But then by working, we're just lonely
or more and more isolated.
In fact, maybe the thing we had to do the entire time
was reach out and bring people in.
Maybe that was the thing we were missing.
And that was probably what happened on me.
If I could speak in,
if you could talk into Brian Zia in October, 2007,
when you were 26 years old
and you arrived in San Francisco,
and you could say, Brian, listen,
here are some practical things I'm gonna do.
Here's how I'm gonna change your schedule
for the next 10, 15 years.
I'm gonna add one extra hour of something
to your schedule every week.
What would that one hour be?
It's completely obvious to me
that I would make time for the people I love.
Who is that?

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I would start my family, especially my sister.
I'm now really close to her,
but there were a bunch of the Airbnb journey.
We would go weeks without talking.
For no other reason, I was just busy.
And like, well, like, and there's this paradox
that when you go on this crazy journey like I do,
a lot of people don't reach out to you
because they're afraid to reach out to you
because they think they're bothering you,
but you're so busy that you're dealing with inbound
from the business that if no one,
like you're just reacting all the time.
So if your friends don't reach out to you,
you're not gonna reach out to them
because you're just reacting to everything.
And they're like, well, they're so busy
if they want to talk to me, they reach out to me.
You see how you end up in this like,
drift and drift and drift?
I would have stayed connected to my high school friends.
I would have, I have high school friends.
I now do an annual trip with
some of them I didn't talk to for almost 20 years.
I graduate, I didn't keep in touch with them.
It's one of the great regrets I have.
I had college friends that I lived with after RISD,
but every year as I went on my Airbnb journey,
we talked less and less and less
and I drifted more and more away.
And I could go down the list.
I actually, I had this thing I've said,
I talked about it once before,
but it was 2021.
It was like May or June
and I had developed a, at this point,
long relationship with President Obama.
He had left office and he became a bit of a mentor to me
and he mentored me on like leadership and business.
At one point he took a personal interest to me.
And I remember I was single, got out of a relationship
and I kind of felt lonely.

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And I remember telling him,
I think I need to be in another relationship.
And he said, I don't think you yet need to be in a relationship.
I think what you need are friends.
And I thought to myself, but I have friends, what do you mean?
But then he explained that he had these 15 people in his life,
many of them before, mostly before he was president,
and they were totally connected.
And I realized I had all these people in my life,
but if I called them, first they go, what's going on?
What's new with you?
And I have to get them all up to speed in my life.
And if you have someone in your life
where if you were to call them or text them,
you have to get them up to speed, then you're not connected.
People you're connected to are already up to speed.
And I actually think that most of us being alone
or being lonely is an illusion.
Or maybe the illusion is that like people don't love us.
And the fact is we have all these people,
but we're not reaching out to them.
And they're also not reaching out to us.
And everyone's waiting for someone else
to take some initiative.
And it seems crazy cause we're just a text message away
from our entire life.
And yet, what do we do?
We open the phone and instead of texting people
or FaceTiming them or like seeing them,
we, what do we open social media?
So opening social media is like going to a dinner party,
except you don't go inside, you're looking in the window.
And you know, like it's great if it's a way station
to meet people, but if you're just looking in the window
and that's your social life,
then you're gonna feel really sad.
So knock on the door and walk in
and start talking to people, start hanging out.
So this is, that would be the thing I would do.
I wouldn't have been totally isolated.
I would have stayed connected to my family,
my close friends and really the only other thing I'd say

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is I'm now friends with a bunch of other entrepreneurs,
including you said you had Daniel Ech on the show
and I would call him a friend
and I'd spend time with him and others.
So in other words, I would have old friends,
I would keep my old friends
and I would be friends of people in my situation.
So Daniel Ech doesn't know the Brian before Airbnb.
So maybe he doesn't know the real me, that me,
but he does know a different real me
that my childhood friends can't know.
Because my high school and college friends
can't possibly know what it's like
for me to go through what I'm going through.
And I can tell it to them and they can have compassion,
but they can't possibly know what I'm talking about,
but Daniel can.
And Daniel can know what it's like
when an executive leaves you
where everyone's kind of the walls are caving in
and you feel like you're not scaling
and you're like drowning in this.
There's all these things I can describe.
We have a shared experience.
So I think those two groups are really important.
Your roots and your friends from the past
and your friends from your present day shared experiences.
And there was a period of time
where I didn't have either of those really.
As you were saying that,
it reminded me of a phrase I had many years ago
in a book I read that said,
the things that are easy to do are also easy not to do.
And as you're talking about the,
just sending the text is so easy to do,
which is also why it's so easy not to do it.
Because we're always just one text away.
So what's the point in sending it?
But also it reminded me of why I have that sand timer
on the shelf over there because it's funny.
I think I've lived so much of my life believing
that I could do life later.

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Like I could pick up the relationship
with my family later.
And then that's, it's almost like we're living
through the frame of that we're gonna live forever.
Like when you look at our decision-making,
you think, fuck, you're giving like three decades
of your prime years to building this thing.
And we're assuming that we can pick up the rest later
and it'll all be there.
And that's what I learned.
I tried to pick it up later and there was nothing there.
I think that metaphor of the hourglass
with the sand slowly dripping every day of your life
is a window and every day that window gets a little narrower
and a little narrower and a little narrower.
Should I say the difference though just with the sand timer?
Tell me.
Is you, you know it's dripping
but you can't see how much you have left.
Oh, that's a really good point.
So it's, and that's why you should almost cover it up
because we can, you know, with the sand timer,
we can see how much sand we have left,
but in life I could live for another six minutes.
And so could you, or it could be six months or 60 years.
Yes, that's a profound thought.
And you're right.
We don't really live our lives imagining
if we had a limited time left, how would we live?
I like to, an exercise I've done is imagining,
you know, at a young age, 10 years left.
Because if I had one year left,
I might be so dramatically different
that I might not do something sustainable.
I might like not work and just only spend time
and that's not sustainable.
But I think we always go about life
thinking we have many decades.
And I think that creates a sense of procrastination.
And if you say to yourself, you have this decade,
what would you want to do?
It gives you enough urgency,

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but also it long enough to have routine
to build towards something.
And I think that like one of the most important things
people can do, two thoughts come to my mind.
The first thought is that you've probably heard this saying
you can, people tend to overestimate
what they can do in a year.
And I'm gonna say we think we can do it 10 years.
That 10 years is a profoundly long period of time
in some ways if you're disciplined and focused.
And you can have a small idea, a small dream, a small goal,
and you can build something vast.
And may have only done Airbnb for 15 years.
Do you think about what 10 years is?
You wouldn't have hired me as your intern 15 years ago.
The other thing about 10 years though,
is think about the amazing life experiences
you can have with other people.
And I think life is about experiences,
but the best experiences are the ones
you share with other people.
Like on Airbnb, 80% of our trips are with other travelers.
Like 80% of people travel with other people.
And I think as I think about my memories growing up,
I rolled the school bus like 180 days a year,
or more than 10 years, that's thousands of days,
and all those memories blend together.
I don't really remember those.
But I remember basically every vacation I've ever taken.
I remember the first time I went to this city,
the first time I went to that city,
and they're burned in my mind.
And I think that when I look back on my life,
I'm gonna remember all the experiences I went,
all the places I saw,
the friendships and the people I loved and who loved me,
and what I poured my heart and soul into.
And I think that that is an important way
that I've thought about my life.
And I made time for some of it,
but I think the pressure of being successful
made me so focused on trying to climb a mountain

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that maybe I didn't focus enough on who I was climbing with
and who was along the way with me.

Brony Ware interviewed palliative patients on their last days
on Earth, so she interviewed people in their deathbed
and asked them what their biggest regret was.

Hypothetically, if you had six minutes left,
and I was interviewing you

to find out what your biggest regret might be,
now you had six minutes left, what might you say to me?

I think my biggest regret would be
the time I didn't spend with people I love,
maybe making sure those people knew how I felt about them.
And then I'm 42.

I've created many great things.

The one thing I haven't created that I've always wanted
was probably a family.

I just couldn't even explain exactly rationally why,
but we all think humans, many people have an urge
to create a family, maybe to feel like they've created
something and they can leave something behind.

I will have left a company behind,
but maybe I could leave more than that behind.

So those would be the things that I would regret.

But importantly, I'd also like to say,

I feel like in other ways, I've lived multiple lifetimes
and I would be filled with so much love and gratitude
for what I've been able to experience
because I never thought in my lifetime,
I would be able to experience what I've experienced
right now up to this point.

The amount of people I get to meet,

the amount of work I get to do,

I get to come to work every day to obsess
with some of the most creative people in the world.

And most people, they don't get to be surrounded
with the people they choose.

When you're a CEO, you get to pick
the people you're surrounded with.

There's something really special.

And I've gotten to select some of the most creative,
kind, compassionate, intensely driven people in the world
making some things that I'm so proud of

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that have effected millions of people's lives.
So, but I tend to think we regret the things we didn't do,
not the things we did do.
And I think we tend to regret the people
we didn't spend time with,
the people we love that we didn't tell,
or the people we could have met and didn't.
I find it incredibly fascinating
that when we look at the back end of Spotify
and Apple and our audio channels,
the majority of people that watch this podcast
haven't yet hit the follow button
or the subscribe button, wherever you're listening to this.
I would like to make a deal with you.
If you could do me a huge favor
and hit that subscribe button,
I will work tirelessly from now until forever
to make the show better and better and better and better.
I can't tell you how much it helps
when you hit that subscribe button.
The show gets bigger,
which means we can expand the production,
bring in all the guests you want to see
and continue to do in this thing we love.
If you could do me that small favor
and hit the follow button,
wherever you're listening to this,
that would mean the world to me.
That is the only favor I will ever ask you.
Thank you so much for your time.
Back to this episode.
This sacrifice involved in everyone's journey,
especially when it's a great journey
and you're talking about being, I think, 25 years old
when Walt Disney inspired you.
Yeah.
Neil Gaibor, I read this book twice.
Yes, I've read this book twice.
This book, okay, so this book had a big effect on me
and there's two chapters that really affected me.
So this is the Neil Gaibor book.
It's the definitive biography and it's pretty extensive.

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It's like over 600 pages, you can see it.
The Walt Disney's biography.
Yes, the biography about the Man-Walt Disney
and there's two entrepreneurs
that I've always looked up to more than any others
and those are Walt Disney and Steve Jobs,
partly because they built companies
that have lived beyond them,
but more importantly, they were creative people
that were basically running tech companies.
I mean, Apple was clearly a tech company.
Disney was at the time very much like a technological marvel.
The first chapter that really affected me
was this chapter, I think it's Go-Getter.
It describes the period of time
where he moves from Kansas City to Los Angeles
and he's early 20s.
He moves to Los Angeles.
He convinces his brother Roy Disney,
Roy Disney, who I think has like,
Kimber what ailment he has,
but he has like this horrible ailment
and they don't think he's even gonna live.
And Walt says, come to California,
it's gonna be good for you.
And Roy, they were literally brothers.
And I always thought of Joe, my co-founder,
as like brothers, if we were like non-blood related brothers,
but when you're a co-founder, you're almost like brothers.
And him going to LA in the 20s, I think it was the 20s,
was like me going to San Francisco in 2007.
The gears of the world felt like they were turning there
in some really important way.
So this book I read right before I started Airbnb,
I'm living in Los Angeles.
I read this biography and I thought to myself,
I don't have to work for someone like Walt Disney.
I can try to become something like that.
Even if I don't get to that level of scale of success,
that's okay.
I can do something much smaller,
but I can do something like this.

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And then there was another chapter four years into Airbnb called Folly.
Folly.
Folly is the title of the chapter about Snow White.
And they called it Folly,
because they named it Disney's Folly.
And the reason they named it Disney's Folly is because he bet the entire company on this feature length animated film.
And everyone thought it was this terrible, the company's going to out of business.
And I thought, I was reading that chapter and that's when the light bulb went off.
He basically invented the storyboard for that movie because the movie was so long, right?
No one had done a feature like anime film.
They had a storyboard out the scenes.
And I remember thinking to myself, once I read that chapter, I said, what if we created a storyboard of the perfect vacation on Airbnb?
From the time you book to the time you check in, and what if we literally designed the end to end journey?
You might call this service design.
And this became a guiding light to how we design our service.
We didn't just design the screen, the apps, the emails, we designed the experience, the end to end experience.
Kind of like when I was in industrial design school and we were like designing a ventilator or some product and you're trying to put yourself in the shoes of the user.
So this book became very influential for me.
I mean, the final thing I'll just say is like, somebody once said numbers are the language of business.
And I remember thinking to myself, no language is the language of business.
Numbers is just the only way we have to measure them.
But that you ever notice there's 500 companies in the forge of 500.
How many of them are creative people?
I don't know how many, but like I might be one of the only ones that went to design school.

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They have boards of directors.
Let's say there's 12 or 10 people per board.
So that's like 5,000 board members.
How many of them are creative people or designers
or people from the humanities?
Not many.
How many CEOs have creative people reporting to them?
Not many.
And so we have this world now
where many people are just satisfied
with the way the world is.
We are often given two bad options.
We tend to be fighting zero sum
when we could imagine something better.
But we don't have a lot of people in business of power
that can take creative leaps of the imagination
and really understand how to design something better
that we're in right now.
And I think creativity is kind of being systematically
squashed from maybe corporate America.
You know, Pablo Picasso said,
it took me four years to learn the paint like Raphael.
But a lifetime to learn to paint like a child.
I think that childhood curiosity is something
that creative people are able to typically,
I think, hold on to.
And I think that's being a little bit lost.
And what I loved about Walt Disney,
and I also liked about Steve Jobs,
was that since they were truly creative people
that had truly creative companies,
they empowered them and they had an intuition.
They didn't just paint the company by numbers.
And that's the kind of company I've always tried to do.
I've had this dream of creating one
of the most creative places on earth,
like Disney or Apple.
We may not get there, but at least we'll have the ideal.
I wanna talk about that moment where creativity won out
over what a CFO or the numbers might say.
But taking a step back to that,
what something else you said there,

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which is kind of alluded to this idea of creating for,
creating for yourself,
being the path forward to creating for others.
And I saw that, it's actually one of the big things
as an entrepreneur I've taken away from the Airbnb story
that you don't have to sit there
and think about what a million people want in a product.
You just have to solve a problem
for like you and your best friend.
And you can build an amazing business out of that.
And that's really like the genesis of Airbnb.
If you go right back to-
And that's almost every company in the world, by the way.
Almost every company in the world.
Maybe enterprise companies are not that.
People have this thing, people forget,
take any giant company in the world,
nothing large started large.
They always started small.
It started with a few people, one or a few people.
And many times they were making something
that looked like a toy.
It looked like a hobby.
I remember one of my first investors said,
Brian, don't worry about people stealing your idea
because if it's any good, everyone will dismiss it.
Everyone will dismiss it.
Everyone will dismiss it.
It turns out that a lot of breakthrough ideas
don't seem breakthrough at the time.
They seem crazy or they seem unserious
or they seem like hobbies.
They seem something small.
Airbnb, we did not design a way for a millions of people
to stay in the homes.
Airbnb started one weekend.
It was October, 2007.
A design conference come to San Francisco.
All the hotels are sold out.
And we had this idea.
We said, what if we just turned our house
into a bed and breakfast for a design conference?

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We can make enough rent.
I think I actually have that email.
Oh yeah, you have the email that Joe sent me.
Yeah, yeah, you have the email that Joe sent me.
And I thought of a way to make a few bucks,
turning our place into a designer's bed and breakfast,
offering young designers who come into town,
a place to crash during the four-day weekend.
This is September 22, 2007.
We thought we were just creating a way
to create a bed and breakfast for the conference.
Unfortunately, we didn't have any beds,
but Joe had air beds.
We pulled the air beds out of the closet
and we called it airbedandbreakfast.com.
Now I can assure you,
we did not think airbedandbreakfast
would be a company where three,
four million people a night would use to sleep in.
We did not think I'd be doing podcasts
and I'd be a giant public company.
We thought it was gonna be a way for three people
one weekend to stay in our apartment,
sleep on some air beds, pay us money.
We'd have a cool weekend adventure.
We'd go about our lives.
And a funny thing is we thought it would pay the rent
while Joe Nate and I, or Joe and I at the time,
thought of the big idea.
We kept talking about the big idea.
And airbedandbreakfast was just a way
to keep solving our own problem,
paying our rent before we came up with the big idea.
But when I joined Y Combinator,
it's a very well-known startup incubator of sorts,
the founder, Paul Graham, used to have a saying
and it's the most important vice ever guy
and it's what you were saying and it's counterintuitive.
He said, it's better to have a hundred people love you
than a million people that just sort of like you.
If you have a hundred people that love your service,
they, when they love something,

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they'll tell everyone they know.
I remember talking to somebody, she loved Airbnb.
I'm like, how many people do you've told Airbnb?
She goes, I probably told 10 or 20.
And their friend standing next to her go,
no, she's told like one or 200 people.
And I started realizing people who love something
become your marketing department
and they'll tell other people.
And if they tell other people,
that grows by what we call word of mouth.
So how do you get somebody to love something?
I don't know how you get a million people
to like something at the same time
when you're starting from nothing.
But I do know how you could get one or two people
to like something.
You can meet with them.
You can understand what their needs are.
And you could design something so perfectly spoke
just for them.
And you could literally think of them
as recruiting one person at a time.
If you have a business idea,
you don't need to get to a million.
Before you get to a million, you need to get to 100,000.
Before you get to 100,000, you get to 10,000.
Before 10,000, you get to 1,000.
And before 10,000, you get to 100.
So all you have to do in all roads lead to 100.
Don't focus on the mountain top.
Focus on the first step.
Don't focus on a million.
Focus just in 100.
And as you do that,
you make the problem small and manageable.
Because a million has to build systems
and you start developing complexities you can't deal with.
So all you gotta do is get to 100.
Once you get to 100, now you get to 1,000.
And while you do is when you get to 1,000s,
you just keep going in orders of magnitude

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and the job changes.
But people get paralyzed
because they think they have to make something big.
And they're like, well, Apple wasn't like this
or Google wasn't like this.
Well, actually, Apple started by selling these blue boxes
in the back of like a trunk of a car.
Google was this like research project
that we're gonna sell for like low millions of dollars
and they didn't really know what they had.
These things all start as unprestigious toys
that seem hacked together.
And they're only made for you and your friends.
That's almost always how it starts.
And that question about creativity beating rationality
from like a corporate America standpoint,
the Airbnb story is riddled with moments
where you chose creativity and customer experience
over scalability and profits.
But that wins out over a long period of time in a story.
It always does, doesn't it?
I think it's in our soul to be creative.
I think most entrepreneurs are creative.
It's funny, almost every business is conceived intuitively.
Maybe sometimes people have a business plan
and they have some like statistical insights and data,
but most people in the start company, they have no data.
Like they have no customers
and even no customers, you probably have no data.
And so everything is started with intuition,
with insights and understanding.
And then the problem is,
as you get more successful, you get more data.
And as you get more data, you get more reliant on the data.
And as you get more reliant on the data,
you get more derivative, you get more iterative.
And data is good.
It's what we might call necessary, but not sufficient.
But why, if something made you successful,
would you abandon it?
If you follow your intuition, if you follow your heart,
if you had ideas, why would you seize to have them

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the bigger you get?

You don't just have to found a company,
you have to continue to refound it, to rebuild it,
continue to have new ideas.

And I think the difference between Airbnb
and a lot of other large multinational corporations
is you think of a company like a body.

Most companies, it's like they're cut off at the head,
they're disconnected from their heart,
and they're kind of cut off and they're focused
on the one more analytical side of their brain.

I think what most companies need is more creativity
and maybe a little more heart and soul.

Most people at companies are loving, well-meaning people.
They just don't act that way.

You know, like the HR and legal departments
are mostly really good people,
but the departments sometimes work
where the groups overly defer to these groups,
they're very risk-averse, they round the edges off it,
they seize to take risk, not realizing the biggest risk
is we don't change and the world that we know will change.
But no one wants to be the one to make a change,
to take a risk.

The organization starts focusing on itself
rather than why it exists to serve other people.

So all these things start happening
and you start appointing more and more analytical people
and then pretty soon you wake up
and the only people on your board
are only analytical people
and they only value what can be measured
and the only things you are measuring
are measured on a short-term horizon.

So the quality of your product, the brand,
how happy people are, the vision,
whether you're moving in the right direction,
are you about to be disrupted in latest technology?
These things are all hard to measure.

There's an old sighing by a Nobel Prize winner
named Linus Pauling who says,
not everything that counts can be counted,

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not everything that can be counted counts.
So we tend to have a bias
towards short-term financial measurements.
It doesn't mean they're unimportant
but if you only optimize for them,
then you're gonna be imperiled
and it's a pretty damn good guarantee
that you're gonna be irrelevant in the future.
So I feel like there needs to be more heart and business,
more creativity and business
and not for the sake of the creative people,
for the sake of the businesses,
for the sake of the world we live in,
don't we wanna live in a world that's more interesting
than more exciting?
We need to bring the creativity,
the artist and scientists come together to bring
and it's that marriage of artists and scientists
and operators all coming together
that I think can design a significantly better world
than the loan we have and now.
We have all the technology we need
to design a better world.
We believe it when I have all the money we need.
We can say we need more money
but actually we could be more efficient
and more productive with the resources we have.
This is gonna require creativity though.
We've got an exciting new sponsor on this podcast
and I couldn't be more excited to announce
that we're now working with Shopify.
And if there's one tool
that I use pretty much every single day in my businesses,
that is certainly Shopify.
I'm sure you've all heard about Shopify
but for some reason if you haven't,
then Shopify is the commerce platform
that is revolutionizing millions of businesses worldwide.
Whether you're starting a side hustle,
a new project with a friend
or a global business, Shopify has you covered.
You guys may know that we recently sold a product

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on this platform called the Diroverseo Conversation Cards which featured questions from the guests in these episodes. And from start to finish, from launching that product, we used Shopify, a total game changer, makes life incredibly, incredibly smooth when it relates to business and a tool that my team have absolutely loved using which is not always the case with technology. We couldn't have launched those conversation cards without it. And if you guys haven't tried Shopify out for yourself, then I highly suggest you do. Head to [Shopify.com slash Bartlett](https://Shopify.com/slash/Bartlett) to take your business to the next level today and let me know how you get on that [Shopify.com slash Bartlett](https://Shopify.com/slash/Bartlett). Let me know how you get on. As you may know, this podcast is sponsored by Huell. If you're living under a rock, you might have missed that. I discovered Huell's RTD about four years ago. Huell's RTD is basically a meal in a bottle. It is nutritionally complete. It contains 26 of your essential vitamins and minerals. It's got your protein in there, 20 grams of protein. It's got slow release energy in there in the form of those slow release carbs. It's just nutritionally complete. Not only have I got a good relationship with it in terms of health, but it saves my life in terms of those busy days where there's a higher probability of me reaching for something I might regret. If you haven't tried Huell's RTD, you could probably see it in a couple of supermarkets, but you can order it online and the link is in the description below. Let me know which flavor is your favorite and also tell me if it ends up adding value to your life in the form of making you nutritionally complete on those difficult days. At the very beginning, I saw this email, which I think is really important

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because maybe it's the most important thing
because there are gonna be people starting companies now
that are getting a lot of emails like that.

This is from August 1st, 2008.

By the way, so let me give the context this email.

So Joanie and I were trying to raise money.

For everyone trying to raise money,

I want you to know that Airbnb

was trying to raise \$150,000 at a \$1.5 million,

I think, post-money valuation.

I'll give you that right now.

Exactly, and here's one of many rejection letters.

Hi, Brian, apologies for the delayed response.

We've had a chance to discuss internally

and unfortunately don't think that it's right

for fill-in-the-blank investment firm

from an investment perspective.

The potential market opportunity

did not seem large enough for a required model.

Now, I want you to just put in perspective,

Airbnb handles nearly as much money

as the entire GDP of the country of Croatia today.

One in about every \$1,500 spent in the world,

about \$1 spent on Airbnb.

That's a pretty large market.

In our business, it's pretty much the same idea

as the idea that we proposed that person

who said our market opportunity wasn't large enough.

So there's probably a myriad of lessons in that,

aren't there?

And I think that it's a reminder

that the world doesn't just change,

or at least it doesn't just transform

towards our dreams, ideals, and ambitions

that require certain types of people.

We might call them entrepreneurs, inventors,

all sorts of people in different domains

that believe the world could be a little different

than the one that they live in.

They have the audacity to believe that they can do it

and they have the ability to convince other people

to go on that journey with them.

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But along that journey, everything's gonna be different.
You're gonna get lost, you're gonna be cold,
you're gonna have like obstacles,
things are gonna attack you, you're gonna fall down pits.
And the question is when people are cold
and they're shivering and they're not sure what to do
and you're running out of resources and rations,
can you find your way up that mountain?
Do you know why you're going?
Can you invent all these different apparatus
like there's a stream, you can't figure out,
you can build a bridge to cross the stream
with the limited resources you have.
Can you recruit people along the way?
And can you beat the drum?
And when people are tired and they say,
I wanna sleep, you say, yes, we're gonna rest,
but we gotta go, just 500 more steps.
I know it's right over the edge,
I think we can do a little bit better.
And can you push people outside their comfort zone?
Not enough to hate you, but enough to feel like a trainer,
you're like three more reps and you don't wanna do it.
And then that very moment, they're not your friend,
but at the end of the workout, you're like,
thank you for pushing me that hard.
This is that kind of person.
And can you take divergent ideas
that no one's ever seen before
and just continue to reformulate them?
Could you store these ideas in your head?
A thousand competing ideas
and just reformulate them in your mind?
That turns out this stuff is difficult,
but you can work your way up there.
Most people watching this have the skill set
to be an entrepreneur.
Not everyone has a skill set
or the desire to run a giant company.
I don't think everyone needs to do that,
but a lot of people have the skill set
to do something, to start something.

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This is what you need to get up the mountain.
And the problem is, imagine we got up the mountain
and then somebody was dropped from a helicopter
having never walked up the mountain
and you tell them, okay, now you lead this group
up the next mountain.
Can you imagine how hard it'd be for that person
to drop from the sky?
Or maybe they joined a third of the way up the mountain,
but they weren't there at the very beginning?
You see, a founder brings three things
that a professional manager doesn't have.
The first thing a founder has is,
they're the biological parent.
So you can love something,
but when you're the biological parent of something,
like it came from you, it is you.
There's a deep passion in love.
The second thing a founder has
is they have the permission, right?
Like I can't tell another child what to do,
but if they were my child, I probably could.
I have the permission.
And so you have a permission.
I could rebrand the company
and a professional manager would probably come and say,
I can't do that, but I know how he named it.
I know how we branded it.
So you know what you can change.
And the third thing that a founder brings
is you built it so you know how to rebuild it.
You know the freezing temperature of a company.
You know what temperature it melts.
You know what this looked like before it was tooled,
where it came from, the alloys,
where they were sourced from.
You're not just managing it, you're building it.
And the problem is professional managers
typically don't have any of those three,
at least not in the abundance of founders.
But the problem with founders, there's two problems.
The first is most of them cannot scale

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to run a giant company.
And even if they do, the last problem is
they don't live forever.
And companies, great companies,
usually want to live longer than humans do.
And so therefore you end up with the inevitable challenge
that Disney and Steve Jobs had,
which is succession planning.
And actually both of them died prematurely
and didn't maybe Steve prepared more than Walt did.
And that's the last step of the journey.
But I think there's something really special
about founders and founder-led companies.
And I think that if you want the world to change,
we need more entrepreneurs.
We need more founders.
If you want to empower more women,
you should make more women entrepreneurs.
If you want to lift up more economies around the world,
you should lift up entrepreneurs in those economies.
It's one of the greatest ways to create wealth,
to change the world,
and to just change the trajectory of society.
So powerful, Brian.
It made me think about what Steve Jobs did leave behind.
And that's maybe where the word culture comes in.
Because I would have bet against Apple surviving
and flourishing in the wake of Steve Jobs's passing,
because Steve was so, so special.
But he clearly left a set of enduring principles behind.
Culture.
You know, I spoke to Dan Yulek as you said,
as a friend of yours.
He said to me, 20 years old, didn't care about culture.
30 years old didn't know what it was.
At 40 years old, I think company culture
and team culture is the most important thing.
When you think about culture, how important is that?
What is it?
How does one go about creating it?
It's funny you asked this question,
because last week, I sent an email to the entire company

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to all 6,000 people.
And my email was about culture
and why it's important and what it is.
Can I read you a portion of it?
What a privilege.
So the context of the email is I hired
a head of people and culture,
like a different name for HR.
Jonah and I have always believed
that you must design the culture you want.
Otherwise, it'll be designed for you.
And you might not like what emerges.
The people and the culture they create
at the heart of Airbnb.
Simply put, culture is what creates the foundation
for all future innovation.
In the long run, the culture is the most important thing
you will ever design because it's the engine
that designs everything else.
All good designs start with a vision.
And I want working at Airbnb to feel like
working at the world's largest startup.
I believe we can grow into one of the largest companies
in the world without feeling large.
A company that's still run like a startup.
With the best people in every discipline
collaborating at high speeds with intense focus,
all more maintaining mental bureaucracy
and communication layers.
And to make this happen,
we're gonna reimagine the HR function.
Because too many companies have lost sight
of what HR was originally designed to do,
reducing it to merely an administrative function.
Yet at its core, HR is about people and culture.
And it's one of the most strategic functions
within a company.
That's why we don't call it HR.
Because it should be about bringing out
the very best in people.
Most of all, I want us to feel like we're building
one of the most creative places on earth.

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A company that brings together some of the best people of our generation to dream up new products and services that capture the world's imagination.

A place where years from now, people would say, if I was alive during that time, that's where I would have wanted to work.

I literally wrote that email last week about culture.

It's so incredible.

It's so incredible because the greatest leaders that I've met all arrive at the same conclusion about culture, even if it takes them 10 years or 20 years or whatever, they arrive there.

The question though, because so many CEOs could send that email, right?

Everyone could just, they just heard Brian say it, so they copy and paste and send it to their team.

The question is, how do you actually create that?

It's so great.

So big, huge insight here, okay?

I used to think you talk about the culture and you talk about how important it is.

And you write out a list of, well, what is your culture?

Well, our culture are a bunch of principles or values we live by.

So what makes us most unique?

Let's do a session, let's write out a list of our values.

Now let's tell everyone the values.

Let's print them on the walls.

Let's have people repeat them.

Let's keep telling people culture is important.

And that stuff can help a little bit,

but it's not how you build culture.

So let me give you a few thoughts.

Your culture is the shared way you do things

and often they're based on lessons you've learned.

And the lessons you tend to remember the most are the ones that are seared in you.

They come from trials and tribulations from your most difficult times.

It's the way you rise the occasion in the face of adversity.

Your culture is the behaviors of the leaders

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that get mimicked all the way down every single person.
Your culture is every time you choose to hire someone,
every time you choose to fire someone,
every time you choose to promote somebody.
It's the way everyone does everything.
And the way a leader designs the culture
is not by writing out a list of values.
It's by basically leading by example every single day
and taking a survey of every single thing happening
and constantly shaping it, pruning it, like a gardener.
And you don't just allow the culture to happen.
You design the culture.
You have an idea of what you want to do
and you're just constantly getting this group together.
You know, you might have a culture of excellence
and a culture of excellence means I review all the work
and I say not good enough, not good enough, not good enough.
And eventually I could not join the meeting
but people know what I'd say.
They'd say it's not good enough.
This is our standard.
And the moment I can not be in the room
and the same action happens as if I was in the room,
that's the moment it goes from management to culture.
So it's like a golf swing.
To teach a golf swing, you gotta like probably,
I don't play golf, the instructor has to watch the person.
And at some point the person learns how to swing a golf swing
without the instructor there.
That's the difference between management and culture.
And culture is something that people learn
to develop these shared instincts.
And it's so important because it's your ultimate
intellectual property, not your technology,
not your recipes, not your exclusive contract vendor,
relationships, the way you know how to do something.
That is the most important thing a company has
because all a company is is a bunch of people,
a bunch of money and a direction that those people
are using those resources to go towards.
People resources strategy and the culture is a thing
that bonds those things together.

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You're the smartest person I'm gonna get to throw
this idea of culture at.
So I wanted to throw it at you
because I've just, again, a week ago,
I started thinking about it
when I was asked the question on stage.
People, because in a post pandemic world
they're now trying to figure out if they're remote
or in office or whatever else,
trying to figure out their company culture.
And I came to the conclusion that you shouldn't,
you shouldn't try and create your company culture.
It is already there if you look closely
and try and figure it out.
And here's what I kind of concluded,
that if someone's trying to figure out
what their company culture is,
think about the problem you're trying to solve in the world.
Then from there, reverse engineer,
the behaviors you need to solve the problem.
Then from there, reverse engineers,
the philosophies and values you need
to create those behaviors.
Then from there, implement the fucking things.
Hide the people.
So through the lens of this podcast,
how do we become the best in the world at what we do?
Best podcast in the world.
The behavior we need
because we're dealing with algorithms
that changed all the time is this experimental mindset.
We need to constantly be leaning
in every time something changes.
That's the behavior we want.
So one of our values is what we call 1%.
What means that we obsess over the smallest details.
And then how do we implement that into the business?
What we had of a head of experimentation
in this podcast, full-time.
We have a full-time data scientist.
If you said about the vibe in the room,
and I said the sense that the AI thing glued under the table

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recording the conversation with the trackpad.
So that's like our company culture.
It was the behaviors we needed,
the philosophies that created,
and then the systems, processes and people,
we then hide through to make sure that we achieve that.
Does that roughly,
you're the first person I've ever said that to,
that roughly makes sense.
And please interrogate it for flaws
because I need to improve my thinking.
I think it's essentially correct.
And I think the one thing I would add
is when we say behaviors,
because I agree with the word behaviors,
but I want to like round out behaviors
because for just a second.
I used to think behaviors as the things
we used to say the what and the how.
This is something I always got wrong.
There's what you did and how you did it.
And people tend to think of the what as competency,
how well you did your job.
And culture is how you went about doing it.
And like, so were you a jerk?
Were you nice?
Did you make people around you better?
And I don't think that's accurate.
That's what I used to think, there was the what and the how.
It turns out the how you do something
creates the what.
In other words, you can't break the core values
and succeed at making something,
but like trample on people along the way.
Your values, your culture is how you do something.
So for example, let me take our example.
Like one of our, we don't even really have
codified core values.
We have old codified core values,
but like our culture is at its strongest
when it's just like one shared consciousness.
So the best cultures is one shared consciousness

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where everything in your head, everything you care about
is permeated throughout the people
and they can finish your sentences
and people would do in a room without you
what they would do if you were there.
And that's when you create this collective consciousness.
So my thing is the culture starts with the intersection
of what your vision is and what your personal values are
and how you wanna lead.
And to use this, I just wanna give one very concrete example
where I left this out.
I'm a perfectionist.
I am the people who work for me will watch
that actually laugh
because that's kind of like a classic understatement.
I want every part of the product to be perfect.
I want our product to be perfectly designed.
I want it to look like one person designed
to completely cohesive.
I obsess over simplicity.
I wanna make sure that it's about reducing something
to its essence.
I want there to be this sense of heart and imagination.
And the problem was the way we were running the company,
I was running it the way I thought everyone else
wanted to work.
And they wanted to work
in autonomous separate groups and divisions.
They wanted to do lots of experimentation.
And for me, I like to be creative and experimental
but I not wanna do micro-experimental optimizations
for software because what that meant,
let me use an analogy.
Let's say we're making a car.
One team is expiring me on the tires
and then another team is experimenting on the wheels
but it turns out those two things don't fit together.
And they fit together, they invent this new wheel.
Now it's gotta fit on a bigger car body.
So now they gotta go to the car body team
and change the shape of the car.
But that makes the car, I don't know, maybe heavier

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and they need a different battery.
So now they go to the battery team,
the battery team says we need to manufacture a new battery.
But now they need to actually capitalize that.
So they go to the finance team
and the finance team goes we have to go to the IR
investor relations to say we need to explain,
we need more money.
It's just a metaphor.
The metaphor is that you're all in one team roaming together
and I realized that we need to be totally integrated.
So I did some things that no one else did.
I said there's no more divisions.
We're gonna be run like a startup.
We have a design department, a marketing department,
engineering department, the sales.
And this is how every little company is run
and almost no large companies in the entire world
are run this way.
People say you can't run a giant company like a startup.
But I wanted to do that and I know Steve Jobs
had done it that way.
It's like I'm gonna try to do the same thing.
The next thing is people tend to do measurement
and you get really big.
And you do small tactical micro optimizations
but then you tend to bias towards performance marketing,
towards AdWords, towards small optimizations
and you don't take big creative leaps
because big creative leaps require the entire company
to organize work together.
You don't obsess over things you can't measure
and it's hard to measure quality.
If this pixels off, if that doesn't feel quite right,
if this thing's complicated, it may be hard to measure.
So maybe that doesn't matter.
I said no, that matters.
That's our culture.
And somebody once said, but we can't measure the impact.
I said that's exactly why it's our values.
Because our culture and our values are we do something
when nobody notices and we can't even measure it

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and we don't even know if it works.
But the reason we do it is because that's what we believe.
It's like this table, we want it to be a certain sheen
but I can't prove to you that more people
wanna sit in this room but I want it that way.
It matters to me.
I always joke to people the most important customer
is yourself.
You have to love it because real artists
wanna sign their name to work.
And you have to be willing to sign your name
in the bottom right quarter of that thing
to make it perfect.
So this is just a metaphor.
So it starts at you, your values.
And then the last thing is your behaviors.
Those behaviors aren't just how you act and behave.
It's your capabilities.
It's how you make something.
And maybe like your values
are we're constantly trying new things.
And that has to be rigorously detailed and documented.
And I think you wanna show by example
and I tend to skip level, work with a team
and watch them and keep meeting them.
I meet every team in the company that works on projects
that I see, I meet them either every week,
every two weeks or every four weeks.
And I have them show work.
It's like watching a golf swing.
I'm the chief editor or the orchestra conductor.
I don't push decision-making down.
I pull it in.
By pushing making decision down,
I'm pushing the company to be fragmented.
By pulling decision-making in, it's like a solar system.
The planets are coming closer to sun
and at some point we're all one collective consciousness.
We're totally integrated.
We can row in the same direction
and we all have the same values.
Every single thing you care about in your head as a leader,

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your culture is as strong as everyone else caring
as much as you do about every one of those things.
They may never be a carbon copy.
Individuality is good.
But the further away from you,
usually it's like carbon copy of a carbon copy
of a carbon copy.
And so I think your job as a leader
is to flatten the organization
to make people feel as close as possible to you.
By feeling close to you,
they're gonna be close to the values
because you as a leader, you are the values.
And then disaster strikes.
And then disaster strikes.
And then, you know what?
When disaster strikes, whatever you do
in your darkest hour, that becomes your culture.
Because your culture, people think is the perks,
the yoga, the free food.
No, culture is like, when everyone said,
you were gonna fail in your darkest hour,
when you didn't know how to get out of the situation,
when you were in this incredibly difficult position,
maybe you're in a difficult negotiation,
maybe you're about to run out of money,
maybe you're in this horrible situation with a competitor.
Whatever you do, and that difficult,
or in our case, the pandemic,
and you're about to go public,
and you're working on one of the biggest IPOs ever
at that point, and then suddenly,
you lose 80% of your business in eight weeks.
That's what you lost.
80% of our business, and we had a business larger,
we were handling, our gross sales
were probably higher than Starbucks.
I think at that time, it was \$35 billion.
I think Starbucks is like \$25, \$30 billion.
So this is gross sales through the platform,
gross revenue, gross booking value.
When a company that big loses 80% of its business

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in eight weeks, it's like an 18 wheeler
going 80 miles an hour and slamming on the brakes.
Nothing really good comes out of that situation,
at least not initially.
Was that your darkest hour?
100%.
It was so dark, at least professionally.
I mean, my darkest personal hour,
I'll talk about in a second,
but my darkest professional moment was,
I remember there were news articles.
Is this the end of Airbnb?
Will Airbnb exist?
And this is eight weeks after we were preparing
for one of the highest IPOs ever,
how could we go from this noun and verb
that we used all over the world
to suddenly people were worrying,
who will we even survive?
And I knew there were probably some questions.
Not only could we survive,
but could I, could I, Brian, lead us through this?
I think no one doubted I knew how to build this.
I did, I mean, that happened.
But was I enough of an adult and a grown-up and a leader
to be able to manage through a crisis?
And that crisis occurred on March 15th.
That's when the world shut down, the Ides of March.
And I remember holding emergency board meeting.
And I remember there was a quote by Andy Grove.
He was one of the founders of Intel, I believe.
And he said, bad companies are destroyed by a crisis.
Good companies survive a crisis.
But great companies are defined by a crisis.
And I told their board
that we're gonna be that third category.
See, everyone was like, oh my God, why us?
And I was like, no, no, watch us.
And I told myself, at that moment,
this is our defining moment.
I had no evidence that this was our defining moment.
But I said, this is our defining moment.

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And I said, what's about to ensue over the next six months will be the best six months in the company's history. We are gonna redefine every part of our company. So I learned a lesson in a crisis. You make principal decisions, not business decisions. A business decision is you make a decision predicting the best possible outcome. A principal decision is irrespective of the outcome. Maybe you have no idea how the outcome is gonna play out. How do you wanna be remembered? What's important to you? I wrote a bunch of principles. Some were pretty simple, like act decisive and fast. By the way, data oriented people really struggle in crisis because the data's changed and they don't know what to do and they are uncomfortable making intuitive decisions. You better do that in a crisis. The second, as I said, act with all stakeholders in mind. A lot of people suddenly, they don't think about everyone and they get really cold and heartless. I mean, that's a temptation and you should not do that in a crisis. Always imagine how do I wanna be remembered in history? Maybe history won't remember you. Maybe we're not important enough to be remembered. But pretend like we are. If we had to be remembered, how do we wanna be remembered? Act decisive with all stakeholders in mind, preserve cash, win for the next travel season. People said travel may never come back and may not come back forever. I said it will come back and we're gonna win. And I think the final thing is to remember that a crisis is a terrible opportunity to ways. If you tell yourself, this is my defining moment, then that creates an optimistic mindset. And that optimism is what everyone looks to because in a crisis, the hardest thing to, you know what the hardest thing the manager in a crisis is? This is what I learned. It's your own psychology.

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It's not the employees.
It's not the financials.
It's your own psychology.
Because if you think you're screwed,
people see it in your eyes and they say,
well, you have the most information
so we must be screwed.
But if you're optimistic and that optimism is rooted
in reality, some basic facts
that people still want us to exist.
And here's why.
Then that optimism is gonna be the conditions for creativity.
And you damn well need creativity in a crisis
because in a crisis, you often have like two bad options
and you sometimes want that third path.
And that's what creativity is.
Oftentimes in life, creativity is that third path.
That third road that doesn't exist that you pave
with all the components that weren't ahead of you.
So that's what we did.
We rallied the company together.
We got in a foxhole basically
and we rebuilt the company from the ground up.
We had to make some incredibly difficult decisions.
We had to reduce the size of our company by 25%.
History will always remember how you did that.
I hope so.
And I hope they remember it well.
I remember it.
I read it one hour ago before you came here.
I read every article about it and you were helped.
Did I read the ending of it?
Yeah, yeah, yeah.
So I wrote this long letter when I never thought I would.
And I just wanna read the ending of it.
So I'm gonna read just the close, the last three paragraphs.
So I write this letter informing the company of a layoff.
This is obviously very difficult.
And actually in a pandemic, it's pretty traumatizing
because it's uncertain.
You're isolated.
You're by yourself maybe.

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And you don't know if you're laid off in a pandemic
who's hiring because economy slowed down
and we were in a recession.
So I go through this email.
I write out all the benefits.
I'm not gonna read the whole thing.
I wanna just fill the gap for you though.
Because the benefits you gave, I read it upstairs.
The benefits you gave people were unlike any other company did.
The way you looked after their mental health,
the way you offered to maintain their healthcare
and the US people lose their healthcare
if they lose their job.
I looked at it and thought, fucking hell.
We created an alumni directory where if you were laid off,
you could opt into a public directory.
We'd publish your information
and we'd point recruiters to your information.
And we ended up getting like hundreds of thousands
of recruiters and people ended up visiting those profiles
and a lot of those people got rehired.
I was even calling CEOs.
And I remember this is how I wanna be remembered.
I only remember that when I'm imperiled,
we're in our darkest hour.
I'm not just worrying about how we will survive.
I'm trying to call CEOs of other companies
to see if they can hire our people.
But I wanna read you what, oh sorry.
You made a long-term decision in that moment.
Yeah. It's so clear.
Well, I asked how do I wanna be remembered.
CFOs wouldn't have made like,
I'm not saying CFOs in general,
but finance focused data people
would never have made those decisions.
It's nothing, yeah.
And the lesson isn't that finance isn't good
or data isn't good.
It's that making,
just solely on a financial basis.
Yeah, yeah. Are Juicy not good.

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Finance is an input.
I appreciate my CFO and the finance team
that are gonna be more than I ever have before,
before the pandemic.
Before the pandemic,
I did not have nearly as healthy relationship my CFO.
I saw them as somebody trying to control me
and say no to me.
And once the pandemic heard,
I said, thank God, there are constraints.
But you should never only make a decision
based on purely financial reasons.
So I end the letter and here's what I said.
As I've learned these past eight weeks,
a crisis brings you clarity
about what is truly important.
Though you've been through a whirlwind,
some things are more clear to me than ever before.
First, I'm thankful for everyone here at Airbnb.
Throughout this harrowing experience,
I've been inspired by all of you.
Even the worst of circumstances,
I've seen the very best in you.
The world needs human connection now more than ever.
And I know that Airbnb will rise to the occasion because,
and I believe this because I believe in you.
Second,
I have a deep feeling of love for all of you.
Our mission is not merely about travel.
When we started Airbnb,
our original tagline was, travel like a human.
The human part was always more important than the travel part.
What we're about is belonging
and that the center of belonging is love.
To those of you staying,
one of the most important ways
we can honor those who are leaving
is for them to know that their contributions mattered
and that they will always be a part of Airbnb's history.
I'm confident their work will live on
just like this mission will live on.
To those leaving, I am truly sorry.

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Please know this is not your fault.
The world will never stop seeking the qualities and talents
that you brought to Airbnb
that helped make Airbnb.
I wanna thank you from the bottom of my heart
for sharing them with us, Brian.
That was...
It's a hard for you to read them.
Yeah, yeah, no, no.
I get a little emotional reading that.
Bye.
Because of the thing I said,
I had a deep feeling of love for all of them
and even the ones I hadn't met,
like I knew them through the work
and I knew how much sacrifice they made.
You know, the burden you have in your leader
and you say, we should do this.
And it turns out somebody actually does that thing
and that person who does that thing,
they might sacrifice personally
so that you can do that thing.
And maybe you know them and you would delve a deep bond.
But if you don't know them, they know you
and they delve up a deep bond for you.
And then in the darkest of hours,
in your dark hour, it's their dark hour
and you tell them that we can't be together anymore.
And that's difficult.
And imagine breaking up with somebody.
Now imagine breaking up with 2,500 people or 2,000 people.
It's very difficult.
And sometimes some people think
don't get emotionally involved
in cloud decision-making.
I would say the opposite.
I say get as emotionally involved as possible
so you understand the consequential decisions
and now try to make a decision
but seeing the entire picture,
the emotions, the financials, the strategy,
you're a whole person.

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Bring all of it into the place.
That letter was one of the most defining
moments of my life and my career.
And something remarkable happened right after that letter.
I got hundreds of thank you letters
from people who were laid off.
It was the most unexpected,
one of the most unexpected things in my life.
And I think what they were thanking me for
wasn't just the benefits we gave.
I did say something.
I said, we have great people
and other companies be lucky to have them.
In other words, people had,
even when they got laid off, had to have dignity.
And Dignity required me to elevate them
and remind people that these people are really good.
And if I said people are really good,
other people might want to hire them.
And the last thing is that I think many people
just thanked me because they felt like
we had created a very special place
that a special place in their heart.
And many of them said,
we still want Airbnb to exist
because there's no company quite like it.
And it doesn't mean we're better than everyone else,
but it means like every person,
we're a little bit different.
There's something different about us.
And those that left that remained Airbnb,
I think after that letter,
I think they came to work even harder.
And something happened after that.
Those that remained 4900 of us
against all odds, on Zoom, in the middle of a pandemic,
we rebuild the company for the ground up.
We reorganize every part of the company.
We rebuild all the products.
We redo how we do marketing.
Then something miraculous happens.
Our business starts recovering

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because people start getting in cars
and staying in Airbnbs like a tank of gas away.
And then our bankers who put our IPO on hold say,
you should dust off the S1.
And then we decide to go public.
And we go public at a valuation
that probably valued us at \$48, \$50 billion.
And by the time within an hour of opening,
we're \$100 billion.
And a huge amount of the tax measures emails I got
weren't just current employees,
we're former employees.
Some of the ones that were laid off
were people I'd been along the journey with.
It was the most unbelievable seven or eight months
of my life.
And by the end of it, I remember saying,
I think I was 39 at that point.
I said, I'm 39 going on 59.
Because I've lived like 20 years this year.
And I think that's the moment I really grew up.
How did you feel in that moment?
Your company's worth \$100 billion.
It's IPO'd.
How does it feel?
I had a lot of feelings.
Mostly great feelings and some sadness.
Sadness.
A little bit.
I'd say it was 70% pride and exaltation
and sense of accomplishment.
And I think why is, I think obvious.
I think the more insightful thing is that
it wasn't, I wasn't sad in the IPO or post.
I was mostly happy.
But I had 20, 30% sadness in a part of me.
And it emerged after the high of the IPO started going down.
And then I went about my daily life
because the IPO was December 10th and December 17th
and December 20th and January 1st and January 10th.
And you know what happened?
The thing that shocked me was my life day to day

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was exactly like it was before the IPO.
It was as if nothing had happened.
The IPO and us being a public company
mostly existed in my head as a consciousness.
Yes, we were now public and yes,
we now had a quarterly earnings report,
but like I'd wake up on Monday
and nothing was really different.
And the point of the story is that
if your goal was to be public,
so you could say you're a public company CEO,
you made people all this money, you became a public.
It's kind of like saying I became a doctor.
I won this gold star.
I did this thing.
These things have merit.
They're great to accumulate,
but they're not gonna fill you the way you think they will.
The thing that's gonna fill you is not what you achieve.
It's gonna be what you do every single day.
If you do things you love
and you sound so happy with people you love,
you're probably gonna be happy
as long as you don't take those things for granted.
And if you isolate yourself doing things that are painful
or you don't love or you do,
but along the way,
you don't make time for people that you love,
then you might not be happy.
Why is this so simple?
I don't know, but that seems to be the case.
You talked about your professional low moment
being the pandemic,
your personal low moment over the last 15 years.
Was this leads into it after the IPO?
Because 2020 was 24 seven.
And it was the weirdest thing.
In 2020 people,
I would get a lot of condolence messages before the IPO,
like when we were down and out.
I would get condolences.
I'm so sorry, I feel for you,

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and people felt bad for me.
But I wasn't unhappy at that point.
I was on adrenaline.
I was working 24 seven.
And I wasn't at least professionally lonely
because 24 seven, I was in constant contact.
I'm on the phone with my board members,
my executive team, my employees.
I'm on this rush.
I have a purpose.
Maybe I'm totally isolated.
Maybe I'm totally disconnected from friends,
but I'm in the field of battle.
So I'm not thinking about that.
And it's okay that I don't have time for that
because we're sheltering in place and everyone's working.
And I don't feel like there's something I'm not getting.
Like, of course.
And then we become a hundred billion dollar company.
We go public.
We're no longer in crisis.
Suddenly I have weekends free.
I have evenings free.
I can choose to fill it with work,
but I know I don't have to.
And that moment, that's when I don't have the rush,
the same level rush.
I don't have the adrenaline.
I'm at the top of a mountain.
And now I say, what do I do now?
And who do I do it with?
And that was that moment of isolation
that I had been working for a year and a half
from probably March of 2020
to like May, June, July, August
or some general period of 2021.
And I was working basically 16 hours a day,
seven days a week.
I knew it was a singular period of my life.
I don't regret a minute having done it.
I'm thankful I did not have like professional responsibilities
like a family at that point.

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And I could dedicate.
I don't want to do that again if I don't have to,
but I wouldn't do anything different
about that period of my life.
But the moment that period ended,
this deep sadness came in because now I'm like,
well, I can't just keep filling it with work.
And that's when I realized that I can,
I don't want to say like overly,
and I don't want to say I designed my personal life,
but I can, what I could do is design how I spend my time.
I can be intentional.
And I can be intentional about spending time
with people that I love and people I care about.
And that's when I started reaching back out to people.
And that became the beginning of everything
that was changed how I felt personally.
How are you doing on that front, on the personal front?
I still struggle with it.
I can't say I don't struggle.
I'm doing much better.
I've made so much progress.
I feel pretty healthy.
Like I exercise pretty regularly.
So I'm like pretty healthy.
I don't really drink alcohol very often ever.
So I'm pretty healthy.
On the friend side, actually this is a funny story.
When I was turning 40,
I was going to throw a big birthday party.
And then because of COVID,
I think it was the Delta strain,
or I ended up not throwing a giant party,
having a small party.
But for the first time in my life,
I had to write who all my friends are.
Because I had to send an invite list.
And I never, it's kind of like,
if you're like going to get married,
people have to create an invite wedding list.
Maybe in your life,
you've never written who all your friends are.

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Why would you?

And the crazy thing is, as I wrote a list of my friends,
I started realizing how many I hadn't kept up with.

And so then I literally went down the list
of like dozens and dozens of friends.

And now I'm pretty disciplined
about staying connected to people.

But romantic relationships.

I was in two relationships over the course of nine years.

They were very long relationships.

So I spent most of my 30s in two very long relationships.

I'm single now.

And I've dated some,

but that's probably something I need to make more time for.

And it's definitely like more complicated for me today
than it was when I was in my early 30s, like, you know.

Is it hard for someone like you to meet someone?

I think the part that's kind of interesting is like,

yes and no, I think you have a lot of,

like you encounter a lot of people

and you have a lot of access,

but at the same time, like, you know,

there's a pretty big infrastructure around me

and my life is like pretty structured and organized.

And there's not maybe as much spontaneity.

Like I'm not just gonna like bump into somebody

at the grocery store as frequently as I used to.

Like not to say that's where you meet somebody.

But you know what I'm saying?

Like there's a little less spontaneity.

It's definitely not the easiest.

It's not the easiest thing,

but I'm not sure it ever is easy.

I think there's always this happenstance that occurs.

So, you know, I kind of said like,

my job isn't to like try to find somebody.

My job is to, it's kind of like,

I think I wonder finding a partner is similar

to finding what you want to do with your life.

Some people say follow your, like follow your passion.

And I always say, but what if you know what your passion is?

I think the better thing is to follow your curiosity.

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But your curiosity is something
you must actively participate in.
You must actively put yourself out there
in situations to discover what you love,
what you love and who you love.
And be open-minded.
And be open-minded knowing that you might not predict
what you want and that you might not have a type
because to have a type is to be so prescriptive
that you think you know exactly what you want.
Well, if you knew exactly what you want,
you'd probably already have it.
You said a second ago,
the vision really actually starts with the founder.
You've gone through a lot of personal changes
over the last couple of years.
And that's sort of inspired the next chapter of Airbnb,
it seems about connection and being more than just
people renting out their houses.
What is that next chapter for Airbnb?
So I think when people see Airbnb on the surface,
they see homes, most of those homes are empty.
And the reason you book them is cause you can save money.
Maybe you can live like a local.
You can have these really cool, memorable vacations,
but you know, it's a space.
And I think that the center of gravity of Airbnb,
over time, I like to shift from the spaces to the people.
I think at the end of the day, we're not just a service.
We're not just a product.
I think what I like everybody to become
is more of a community,
more of like a global travel community.
And I think in that community,
I imagine that everyone will have
this really robust profile
and with this rich identity system.
So we know who everyone is
and everyone knows who everyone else is,
which I think is the foundation of trust.
The profiles are really rich with public information
and personal information, like preferences.

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And you come to Airbnb, not just to find a space,
but because Airbnb, the app, the brand, the company,
you feel like it really knows you
and understands who you are
and really what you want.
And maybe initially for travel,
but eventually you could go beyond travel.
And then our job is the app, the brand, the company,
is to be like the ultimate host.
And what a host does,
like what does a host at dinner party do?
They don't just offer you food.
They like, oh, hey, meet John, meet Sally,
like meet each other.
And so you can start to connect people
to places, homes, experiences,
service all different types of things.
And that we can use great design
in the latest technology
to really be able to match and connect people
all over the world.
And if we're successful,
then I think we can push against
this dark cloud of loneliness
that has been cast to anything,
shadows over society all over the world.
I mean, literally right before this,
I was at, the reason I'm in a dress shirt,
I took my jacket off was I was at 10 Downing Street,
but I wasn't being the prime minister.
I was meeting some of his members of his staff,
including the minister of loneliness.
They have a minister of loneliness.
The fact that the United Kingdom
needs to have a minister of loneliness,
and probably many countries do,
tells us that it's not just older people that are lonely.
In fact, some of the loneliest people
in the world are teenagers.
This is crazy.
And why is this?
It's because the mall is now Amazon,

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the theater is now Netflix,
the office is now Zoom,
and it's not the fault of any of these things.
I think these are all great inventions.
I had this vision once,
like what is my purpose at a professional level?
At the most fundamental level
is to help bring people together.
That's kind of what we do at Airbnb,
the most fundamental level.
Maybe we bring you together with your friends to travel.
Maybe you bring you people from other cultures
you've never met before.
If we can bring people together,
I think we can reinforce these two core ideas
that we've had since the day we started.
The first is we believe people
are basically fundamentally good.
Like children, most children are good.
You were born creative, curious, open-minded, loving,
for the most part.
I think that we have the ability for goodness
in the outside of us.
And the other thing is I think you said this
in the beginning of our discussion.
People are basically 99.9% the same.
In fact, genetically speaking, that we know that's true.
And the thing I'm surprised by
is not how different we are as I travel the world,
is how similar I am, we are.
And that 0.1% that makes us all different,
we might call that diversity and culture and heritage,
and we use all these different words
to describe that 0.1%.
But as you spend time with those people,
you're gonna realize the shared humanity we have.
And if we believe that 99.9% of the people were the same,
then it would be really hard to hate someone else,
because how could you hate someone
that's 0.1% different than you?
That would seem kind of pointless.
And then suddenly you would find this common bond.

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So that's kind of at a conceptual level,
where I'd like us to go.
I'm not saying that's who we are,
but that's saying at a conceptual level,
where I'd like us to go.
The direction of travel.
The direction of travel.
And maybe even one day beyond travel.
No pun intended.
Exactly, oh, I like that.
Brian, we have a closing tradition on this podcast,
where the last guest leaves a question for the next guest,
not knowing who they're gonna leave the question for.
Oh my God.
So they've left this in the official diary of the CEO for you.
There's a question we are often asked
that we usually gloss over or lie about on a frequent basis.
Will you answer this question and answer it honestly?
The question is,
how are you?
I would say the feeling that I have right now
is one of the feeling loved.
Because the last, you know, this journey I've been on
has been so intense.
And by the way, like I,
this isn't the first podcast I talked about this stuff.
I was on a couple others.
And after I started talking about this,
I had a lot of people in my life
who I love who reached out to me
and it's been a basis for some connections.
And what I've realized is I was never as lone
as I thought I was.
And I had so many more people in my life than I realized
and they loved me more than I ever knew.
It's kind of funny.
We often wait till after people die
to tell them how much we love them
at these like services, hoping maybe they're watching.
And sometimes there's a reminder
that we should tell them
how we feel about them while they're still alive.

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And I've gotten the benefit of people telling me that.
And I've been able to tell them that I had a cold
and sometimes I have these temporary feelings
of a little bit like a little tired here and there.
But those feelings come and go.
And the feelings that stick with you
are like really basic feelings.
And I think the most important feeling
that I have is love.
And it's, and I make my best decisions
when I'm feeling that.
Because that love is like the light.
And it's like a true North Star.
And that's how I'm feeling right now.
And also, the more I think about it,
the more I let it in, the better it feels.
And the more it's true.
Brian, thank you.
Thank you very much.
You are, I mean, you are one of a kind, that's for sure.
And you're one of a kind in the most important ways.
Because those people that are different,
that think differently, that see the world differently,
that are able to go back to first principles
and design a new world
and believe in the ability for us to design a new world,
end up doing that.
And just from sitting here with you over the last two hours,
whatever it's been,
I see someone who has the potential
to do exactly that,
design a new and better world and also believes in it.
And in doing so inspires others to believe
that that's possible too.
That is a truly special thing.
I've interviewed a lot of people.
Not everybody has that, but you're born with it.
And the cost of that so clearly to me
is the feeling of being different.
Yes.
It's also probably a struggle to form connections
in other ways where other people might do it so seamlessly.

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Yes.

But from a societal perspective,
the sacrifice you make in being different
is one that society will owe you for long after you're gone
and it's a worthy, worthy sacrifice.

It's a truly worthy sacrifice
because if there was ever a time, as you said,
with the loneliness saw that Theresa May appointed,
that we needed someone to be thinking
about bringing people together and designing a new world
as you tried to when you were a young boy, it is now.

So thank you.

Well, thank you so much for having me here.

It's been an incredible conversation.