

[Transcript] My First Million / Rich Roll: How A Vegan Ultra-endurance Athlete Created A Business On Personal Transformation

All right.

Quick break to tell you about another podcast that we're interested in right now.

HubSpot just launched a Shark Tank rewatch podcast called Another Bite.

Every week, the hosts relive the latest and greatest pitches from Shark Tank, from Squatty Potty to the Mench on a Bench to Ring Doorbell.

And they break down why these pitches were winners or losers.

And each company's go-to-market strategy, branding, pricing, valuation, everything.

Basically all the things you want to know about how to survive the tank and scale your company on your own.

If you want to give it a listen, you can find Another Bite on whatever podcast app you listen to, like Apple or Spotify or whatever you're using right now.

All right.

Back to the show.

It was really rough for quite an extended period of time.

We couldn't pay our mortgage.

We had cars repossessed.

I've told this story before, but it was so bad at one point that we didn't have enough money to pay for our garbage collection.

So they took away our bins.

We had to put our garbage bags in the back of this beat-up minivan that we had and look for bins like behind the grocery stores and stuff to like throw our garbage.

I mean, it was pretty humiliating and quite frankly, pretty unmasculating as somebody who's supposed to be, you know, head of household and taking care of shit.

Like I was unable to make sure that my house was in order.

And so we went through a really rough period of time and it was not clear that we were going to be able to kind of persevere.

Okay.

So let's give you a little intro here.

So we got Rich Roll, which is an amazing name.

First of all, I'm sure you get that a bunch.

I feel like the Rick Roll kind of stepped down your corner a little bit.

Do you get, is that a problem for you?

A little bit, man.

A lot of day goes by where, you know, I'm not on the receiving end of some kind of BS about that.

Yeah.

Exactly.

And, but that is your real name, Rich Roll.

That is like not like a stage name.

God-given name.

Okay.

Wow.

My parents are, you know, behind here.

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So, and you have a very, very interesting story.

So I'm going to give the like very layman version of the story.

So your story is, as far as I know, is as follows.

You, you're coming up all, you were coming up on 40 years old.

You were not in great shape.

You were, I think 50 pounds overweight is what you, what you say.

And you were, you know, decided to sort of make a change in your life.

And now you are very, very well known as a endurance athlete who has a plant-powered or vegan diet.

And you have done some kind of amazing things in the endurance, you know, competitive endurance field.

You named one of the 25 fittest men on the planet by men's fitness, which is a pretty dope honor.

And so that is your kind of, that's your claim to fame.

Did I, did I get that right?

Yeah.

I think that's, that's fairly accurate.

That's probably how I'm best known, although I haven't raced in a number of years and I've sort of graduated or I'm attempting to kind of graduate from the limiting parameters of being known as like a vegan endurance athlete and the podcast is a big piece of that, which we can get into, but I would say that's a fair assessment of how kind of most people think of me and, and my association.

And what would be the shift?

So if you were known as like this guy who went from, I guess the full story is entertainment lawyer, you know, struggle with sort of drugs, alcohol, get sober, then you're, but then you're overcompensating by eating not so great.

And then you have this kind of moment, you know, you're sort of your, you know, come to Jesus moment or whatever where you're like, okay, I'm going to make a change.

You make this lifestyle change.

You become this well known endurance athlete who's doing it in a way that's atypical.

So I think you're the first vegan to complete a ultra endurance event, which is like some crazy 300 mile, 300 mile type of event where you're running, you're biking, you're swimming, you're doing all that good stuff.

And now you have businesses that are around this, right?

So you have a meal planning business.

You have kind of like a whole lifestyle and brand and business around this stuff.

And so from going from I'm known for competing in this, what do you think you're, what do you want to be known for now?

And what do you think is that transition?

Yeah, it's a great question.

I mean, I think that, you know, just kind of fill in the gaps on the story.

I do have a history of, you know, alcoholism, that's a big part of my story, alcoholism and recovery that predated the kind of next chapter, which was sort of middle-aged malaise

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and reaching another kind of Rubicon with how I was living my life and making a secondary transition into a healthy lifestyle.

And that led me into the ultra endurance world.

And I was able to distinguish myself in that world as a middle-aged athlete, but also as somebody who was doing it plant-based and that garnered a fair amount of media attention and put me in a position to do something with it.

And the first thing that I did was write a book.

It came out, it came out almost exactly 10 years ago.

It was called Finding Ultra.

And it's essentially a memoir, but it also has aspects of being a bit of a lifestyle guide.

And that kind of put me on the map in a public way.

And in the wake of that book coming out, it became about like, okay, that was great.

I got, you know, an okay advance for that, but I've got four kids.

Now am I going to make a living sort of propagating these ideas or continuing the conversation that that book began because up to that point, I was still a practicing attorney.

And so the transition out of the legal world into doing what I do today, I would say has been a very inelegant and protracted process.

I'm not a naturally inclined entrepreneur.

I was reared in a much more kind of traditional conservative environment, education first, get the good job, get into the good grad school the whole bit.

And hence, you know, became a lawyer, which is, you know, very much a safety seeking type of career.

So my mindset and my thinking has never been oriented around entrepreneurship whatsoever.

But I was suddenly found myself in the position where being a lawyer felt untenable given all these experiences that I had.

And I was given this gift, this opportunity to do something different.

And it really challenged me to upend all of my kind of built in proclivities around safety seeking and kind of doing kind of following this, you know, path that society smiles upon.

Like even though I went to Stanford and was surrounded by entrepreneurship and the explosion of Silicon Valley, for some reason, that never rubbed off on me.

And now I was in a position of like, okay, I need to kind of shed the limitations of how I'd lived my life to date and really start to think about how to do this differently.

And because it's not my natural state, I sought out mentors and I found one mentor in particular who's been absolutely instrumental in helping me forge this new path.

His name is Greg Anzalone and he's CEO of a company out here near where I live called Sideshow.

Sideshow is a pop culture collectibles company.

They create figurines like limited edition, very finely crafted figures from pop culture.

So from the Marvel movies and Star Wars, et cetera, everything from life-sized C3PO's to Darth Vader's and Thor and the like.

And he grew that company from a couple artisans in a garage to now a very large enterprise that employs hundreds and hundreds of people.

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And if you were to go to Comic-Con, they have the second biggest booth at Comic-Con, second only to Marvel.

And there's a whole subculture of people who are fanatic collectors of what Sideshow produces. My point being that Greg is a natural entrepreneur, he's been very successful in a number of businesses.

And he began to mentor me and retrain the way that I was thinking about my life and really helped me create structures around what I was doing and strategies in order to build a foundation upon which we could create a sustainable business that would provide for my family.

The book was the first piece in that, in the wake of the book coming out and in an effort to continue the conversation that that book began, I launched the podcast almost 10 years ago.

I wasn't a first mover in the podcast space, but I definitely was an early adopter and it was a medium that I had fallen in love with.

As an athlete, I'd spent so many hours, so much time alone on the bike and running, listening to podcasts when it was very difficult to even acquire an episode.

It was pre-iPhone, so you had to go to your desktop or your laptop and download a series of MP3s and then bounce those MP3s to your iPod and create playlists.

And I was doing this before anyone else I knew was listening to podcasts and was discovering, as we're all discovering now, how much value there is in this medium.

And so, with that love, and I think a lot of, not practice, but I was very acclimated to what a good podcast could be because as a listener, I'd consume so much of this media that when I started mine, I felt like I was in a situation where I had something to say, I knew some interesting people in my life, and importantly, there wasn't any competition at the time.

People were not clamoring to start podcasts in 2012.

I think, aside from Adam Corolla and Kevin Smith and maybe Joe Rogan, nobody was even monetizing these things.

So it was less about it being a business proposition and more about an opportunity to continue to build a platform with the trust that at some point, something could come out of this that could sustain my family financially.

And so I started the podcast.

I immediately was able to rise to the top of the iTunes rankings because, as I mentioned earlier, there was no competition at the time.

And in the health and fitness and wellness space, there really wasn't very much good content at the time.

So from that, I was able to build an audience slowly and gradually over time and did the podcast for a number of years before monetization was even anything to consider.

And now, of course, it's doing incredibly well, but again, that wasn't really the plan.

But because the podcast has become and continues to this day to be the tip of the spear in terms of all the things that I do, it's been the most profitable, not just financially, but also in terms of engaging the most number of people around the ideas that I care about. And this has been a very long-winded way of getting to the point of answering your question,

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which is, how do you want to be seen today?

Very early on, I made a decision, actually, from the outset of the podcast, that I didn't want it to be a podcast about specifically just being plant-based or being an athlete.

I didn't want it to be a triathlon podcast.

I wanted to cast a wide net, which is why I named the podcast after my name because I wasn't sure if I was going to continue to do it, where my interests might find me.

But I knew that I probably wasn't going to change my name.

So I just did the easy thing and named it after myself.

And it's allowed me the flexibility to move in whatever direction inspires me.

And so, although I would say that the core kind of themes of the podcast are around personal transformation, healthy lifestyle, eating, and, of course, fitness, running, the sports that I care about, it's also allowed me to host conversations with just a wide diversity of people who I can continue to grow from in other ways beyond how I've been traditionally known.

Because for me, this is my growth accelerator.

And I think we're all here on the planet to grow in our various ways and overcome our challenges.

And so it's given me the opportunity to sit down with people who can help me grow and work through my kind of limiters in all areas of life.

And so as a result, it's allowed the audience to be very diverse, although there are plenty of kind of vegans and runners and stuff like that.

It's really brought in all walks of life and I think has been a big reason why the podcast has continued to grow and flourish because it's not limited to one specific theme, topic, or kind of heading.

And how big is it today?

So I see on YouTube, maybe like 700,000 subscribers, their podcast, I'm not sure what that would be.

I don't know if it's bigger or smaller than the YouTube stuff.

And then the top videos like David Goggins, Huberman, those will get like five to 10 million views on YouTube, which are great, kind of like the perfect storm of like overlap of interest, the right guest who already has their own audience, people search for their name in YouTube, that sort of thing.

So how big is the, give us a sense of how big the kind of the content side has gotten to now.

Yeah.

So YouTube has been something that we're relatively new to.

I think we started filming the podcast in earnest, maybe two and a half, three years ago at this point.

And like you said, we have outlier videos like the Huberman, initial Huberman podcast I did, I think has like 11 million views.

Some of the Goggins interviews have a lot of views, but a lot of them don't have that many views.

They're very hit or miss.

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And as you know, YouTube is all about the algorithm.

And what's great about YouTube is that it's amazing at discovery.

So it allows people who are not subscribers or people who are not familiar with what you're doing to kind of by happenstance, stumble onto your content and allows you to then bring them into your universe.

But YouTube is still a very small piece in our content engine.

The vast majority of our audience is audio only.

So through Apple podcasts, Spotify is a very small, very tiny slice of our audience.

So the vast majority are people who are listening on Apple devices or on platforms that are outside of Spotify and YouTube.

But I believe in YouTube because even if somebody doesn't watch our video, that thumbnail might come across their screen and it almost works as a billboard to enhance visibility of what we're doing.

And so we continue to invest and double down in YouTube, although the core of what we're doing really is audio first, at least now.

I'd say it's probably anywhere from 90 to 95% of our audience.

Oh, wow.

Okay.

So this podcast is probably very huge then.

So like, you know, probably getting, I don't know, half a million, you know, listeners per thing then, something like that.

Yeah.

It's in that range.

You know, like on an audio, it's fairly predictable how large the audience is going to be and how many people are going to listen.

You know, there's going to be some variation there, but it falls within a tight range.

Whereas in YouTube, it's just all over the bat because the algorithm gods can smile on you as they did with Huberman and it goes wild.

That doesn't happen in audio.

So yeah, I mean, you're correct.

It's about in that range on average.

All right.

A quick message from our sponsor.

You know, I was thinking about the shortest day of the year earlier, and while we technically had the same amount of time as every other day of the year, the lack of daylight makes it feel so much shorter, which is exactly the same kind of feeling as working with disconnected tools.

Our work days, the same length as always, but before you know it, we spent three hours just fixing something that was supposed to be automated.

Thankfully, HubSpots all in one CRM platform can serve as a single source of truth for managing your customer relationships across marketing, sales, service operations with multiple hubs and over a thousand integrations and easy to use interface HubSpot lets you spend less time managing your software and more time connecting with your customers.

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And so, so I have this theory with content, which is that people will ask me a lot like, okay, you know, how do I do better?

How do I do a good podcast?

How do I grow my content?

How do I grow my audience?

And I say, well, there's some like, you know, they're kind of looking for the, what do I write in my title or thumbnail or like, you know, something there and there's definitely things that are better or worse.

But I would say you're an example of the core fundamental of what works.

So let me say three, I'm just going to point out three things of what you gave a kind of good story.

I'm going to point out three highlights that, that of why this worked.

Number one, you were early to a platform that ended up being big.

If you're late to a big platform, it's tough.

If you're early to a platform that never gets big, also no bueno, you got to have early to a platform that's big, that is one of the best things you could do to increase your odds of success.

You were basically listening to podcasts just when it was RSS, you know, only or whatever, maybe even, you know, there's no players or whatever.

Okay.

So the second thing is you, you have a, you had a niche where you built authority.

So like, let's say initially it might have been vegan lifestyle or endurance training as a vegan, something like that, right?

Like the overlap between two hyper-passionate niches, which is like, you know, plant-based lifestyle and, you know, performance, you know, athletic performance.

And so that overlap was like a niche that you could kind of dominate and own and become the authority there because there just weren't that many people who were doing it, you know, in general.

Forget even about podcasting.

Now on top of that.

In addition to the kind of addiction recovery piece is also a core aspect of that as well.

And so that's what's going to go next, which is I think you have an innate understanding that story is what gets people hooked.

Like, for example, when you came on, I was kind of describing you with just like some labels, like, here's some descriptors, you've accomplished this, you're known for this.

And you were like, you brought it back to story and what's the story?

A story of some transformation or change, you know, the protagonist, the hero goes through something and they started one way and they change into another way.

They started thinking one thing and then they realized another, you know, they started single, they ended up happy and love, right?

That's the basis of all story is some change, some transformation.

And I think as I heard you talk about, like, whether it was from risk averse lawyer to

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reluctant entrepreneur who learned to shed that limitation, that's change, you know, meat eater to plant eater, change, overweight to, you know, endurance athlete, change. And so I think you're really good at framing change because the fundamental thing people want more than learning how to, you know, whatever swim 100 miles is like everybody, a broader thing is everybody wants to remove some of their limitations and hit that transformation that they crave, whatever that is, and they could take inspiration and knowledge from your story.

So I think that's another one.

The last little element I like that you said is I think you have what I call the red pill, which is you have opinions or beliefs that might be might run counter to like the consensus opinion.

Right.

I think in general, vegans have a belief about diet and lifestyle that is counter to the mainstream behavior.

And so when you have that, like, you know, that point of view that is a different thing, it grabs people's attention and it gets them hooked and the people who for whom that resonates kind of like, you know, they become attracted to that.

So I don't know.

I'm not saying you intentionally architected these things, but just out of your story about how you built this pretty remarkable kind of content franchise, I just wanted to point out some of those elements that I've seen be common elements for people.

What do you think of some of those?

Yeah.

I mean, I think that's fairly accurate and astute.

The only the only one that I would bristle out a little bit is the red pill, red pill thing.

Of course, like to be vegan and to be an athlete, there is something contrarian about that. The only kind of nuance that I would add to that is that I'm not somebody who's out there seeking to kind of game the system by being contrarian.

I'm not, yeah, I'm not inviting controversy or trying to get into debates with people.

I share my experience and I'm always very careful and this is something that I've learned in recovery to not be overtly telling people what to do or how to live their lives.

It's always back to story as you point out because I think that people learn through stories.

You could tell people, here are the five things you need to do or you can have a guest on who says, here's the roadmap to achieving XYZ and I've just learned for myself and in terms of how I've conducted this podcast over the years that although we can intellectualize those answers or those principles, we're very remiss in putting them into action unless we can emotionally attach with them and that's where story comes in.

I think as content creators, we're all storytellers and it is our job to refine our ability to tell a story well and if we can do that and do it in a way that allows us to be relatable and also make the guest relatable such that an emotional attachment, not just to the outcome of the story, but to the individuals who are participating in that story, that creates

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a level of engagement that actually does result in powerful and sustainable change because the mission of the show really is to help activate transformation in the audience member. Whether it's going from addiction to recovery or changing your diet or lifestyle habits to go from unfit to fit or to accomplish a hard task.

All of these are just metaphors, analogies or examples of transformation.

I think everybody's looking for some kind of transformation in their life so it's not about like how do you go out and do an ultra endurance race.

That's just one vehicle for transformation.

It's my personal story and I'm happy to tell it, but I'm really about getting to the core tenets of why some people change and others don't and trying to find a means by which I can communicate a path for people to rethink the ceilings on their own limitations and invite a little bit of challenge, discipline and kind of goal setting into their own lives so that they can experience some version of the transformation that I've been lucky enough to experience in my own life.

Then the final thing that I would point out, you kind of launched into this question with a little treatise about titles and how you kind of position your content on the internet to try to game it for success.

Of course, there are kind of tenets and rules around like, here's if you want a lot of people to click, you say it this way or you have this crazy thumbnail and I'm not saying we're immune from experimenting with that, but I think the core principle that I would like to communicate to you and your audience is that in my opinion, over the kind of long arc of time, quality is what wins and so I try to opt out of a lot of these trends of the moment and just focus on creating the most powerful, the best content with the best guests that I can find and kind of put it out there and trust that it will find the audience that it needs to find.

Now, that's perhaps a little bit of a Luddite kind of approach to this and it certainly isn't going to create viral moments, but as somebody who's been doing this for a very long time and has kind of seen and weathered all the changes in media that seem to take place with even greater increase in rapidity, like what are the things that you can control and you can play around with titles and all of that, but honestly, it's like, how good are you at what you're doing and I think when you place your focus on just creating the best content possible, that's the long-term strategy that I've sort of adhered to and believe in and as a result, it's taken me a long time.

I didn't come out of the gate swinging.

I didn't have a New York Times bestseller.

It's been kind of a very plotting path of just slowly brick by brick, like building something that is sustainable over time and meaningful.

You talked about storytelling and I get this question a lot because we tell a lot of stories and I think now we're pretty good at it, but I definitely was not a storyteller growing up.

I was the quiet kid at my group of friends in my house.

My sister was the, if something happened to me and we wanted to, at a party, we wanted to tell the story, it'd be like, let your sister, like basically, sister tell it.

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It'll be, it'll be, that's when it'll be good and so I was definitely not a storyteller kind of like naturally, but I've tried to get better at it because I think it's a really powerful tool.

You talked about the same thing, like if you'd like to convey information, if you'd like to inspire people, if you'd like to educate people, you're going to want this tool in your tool belt called storytelling and work on that craft because it will help you.

Can you teach me a little bit about storytelling?

Tell me some things that you've learned, either how you learned it, what you learned.

Help us be a better storyteller in a couple of minutes here.

What are some things that come to mind?

Yeah, that's a great question.

I think storytelling is a skill.

Like I'm a naturally quiet person myself.

I didn't grow up telling crazy stories around the campfire and regaling my friends or anything like that.

I really learned, I think my kind of education around storytelling began as somebody who has attended thousands, if not tens of thousands of AA meetings and being somebody who had the privilege to bear witness to people get up in front of groups large and small and really bear their soul and tell their personal story, warts and all of the hardships of that they've endured and how they got better and arrived at the life that they enjoy today. That requires courage and it requires, most importantly, vulnerability.

If you've been to any AA meetings and you see people up and they get up and they tell the most horrific stories about the things that they have done, things that would provoke a shame response in any normal human being, and they laugh it off.

You realize how powerful that is to be so confident in yourself that you can share this tale of something that you did and it holds no power over you.

I think that is a powerful kernel of transformation for other people when they hear that.

To the vulnerability piece, what it taught me was the courage to be vulnerable myself so that I could get up in front of groups and tell my story with that level of honesty and vulnerability and also to notice that when you do that, you create trust and connectivity in the person that you're speaking to.

If you're willing to get up and tell them this crazy thing that you did as an opener, it gives the other person permission to do the same and that exchange then becomes one that is much more intimate than the typical conversation that we're going to have.

That's a key piece.

I always try to lead with vulnerability.

The second thing being that everybody has their version of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey.

We're all on our own hero's journey of some sort.

To really study and understand the principles of what makes a great story helps you extract it out of the person that you're speaking with and also helps you learn how to figure out what that is in your own story.

That just comes with practice.

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Listen, if I'm sitting across from a doctor and they want to talk to me about the microbiome, maybe that's not a hero's journey story, but maybe how they got interested in that is.

I'm always trying to find some version, mini or macro that I can tell that will create engagement for myself and also for the person that's listening.

I've also had the privilege of, and these are some of my favorite episodes where I'm sitting down with somebody who was really broken in a certain way and then rebuilt their life and became something else entirely.

That's a great template for doing a full-blown Joseph Campbell arc of the hero.

I think those stories are powerful because when somebody can see that type of transformation and somebody who had it way worse than they have it, it raises their own belief in themselves.

I think to really specifically answer your question, it's just a practice.

I've been doing this for 10 years.

I would be horrified to go back and listen to some of my first episodes.

I've learned in real time in a public sphere, but just like anything else, you have to practice it and figure out also what works for you.

It's not, oh, I'm going to follow this person did it and they were successful, so I'm going to do it that way.

What speaks to you?

What is natural and authentic to who you are?

I think the more that you can bring your own intuition and sensibility and honesty into whatever it is that you're trying to share with the world, that's going to be the demarcation that will distinguish you from others.

Who do you think are great storytellers?

Like, are there any people or books that you learn from where you look at it and you sort of have picked up things from them?

Sure.

I mean, I think Malcolm Gladwell is a master storyteller.

We had the privilege of just having him in here a couple of weeks ago and nobody can tell a story like that guy.

He can take people off the street and in five minutes figure out something absolutely fascinating about them that will become an episode of revisionist history.

I mean, I think he has a talent that we can all aspire to that probably we can't reach, but I think he's fantastic at it.

I think Adam Grant is a phenomenal storyteller.

Some of the authors that are working in social psychology right now are pretty great at storytelling, but those would be the two that come to mind.

I'm going to read a quote from your story and I want you to basically take me there and then where you came.

So here's the quote, we had four kids, we were so broke at one point, not long after my book came out, we had nothing to go on.

We ended up going to Kauai and living in Yurt's thinking we may never come back to LA and we were going to lose our house.

So what was that?

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And then how did you get from there to here?

Yeah, man, that was rough.

So it was very disorienting because I had the opportunity to write this book and I got, like I mentioned earlier, like a decent advance for a first time author, but four kids and the way that publishing advances work, they dole it out in increments over a good deal of time and then taxes and agent cuts and all of that, it turns out to not be that much.

So the book comes out, we're shoe stringing to be able to pay our bills.

And a big theme in the book is this idea that when, and it's my story of transformation, that when your heart is true, the universe will conspire to support you.

It's something I believe, it's a principle I've seen come to play in many people that I know and it's something that I believed was happening in my own life and would continue to happen.

And when the book came out, I decided I'm not renewing my bar membership, I'm going to step into this new thing and I don't know what it's going to, what kind of opportunities are going to come, but I need to be 100% available for them and I was trusting.

I was like, my heart is true, something is going to happen.

We're going to figure this out.

But you know, I was running a household with a relatively high overhead at the time, four kids, a mortgage, and you know, the problem with that equation is there's no timeline on it.

And you know, my edict has borne out to be true over time 10 years later, but it was really rough for quite an extended period of time.

We couldn't pay our mortgage, we had cars repossessed, I've told this story before, but it was so bad at one point that we didn't have enough money to pay for our garbage collection. So they took away our bins, we had to put our garbage bags in the back of this beat up minivan that we had and look for kind of bins like behind the grocery stores and stuff to like throw our garbage.

I mean, it was pretty humiliating and quite frankly, pretty unmasculating as somebody who's supposed to be head of household and taking care of shit.

Like I was unable to make sure that my house was in order.

And so we went through a really rough period of time and it was not clear that we were going to be able to kind of persevere.

We did get an opportunity, a friend of mine who's a high net worth individual had a property on the North Shore of Kauai, he was trying to figure out how to turn it into some kind of community space and he had read my book and had been inspired and he said, why don't you come out and help me figure out like what I can do to transform this property into something more meaningful than where I live.

And I don't know why he thought that I would be somebody well suited for that job.

It's not like I have any kind of experience in that, but essentially, you know, in retrospect looking back, like he threw my family a lifeline.

And so yes, we moved to the North Shore of Kauai.

It was an operating mango farm at the time and the kind of woofers who were working the farm were living in these yurts behind the main sort of dwelling on the property.

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And we moved into these yurts with these young kids who were working the land and spent a couple of months where I was trying to help this individual figure out what to do with his property, but mainly he was paying me such that we could pay our bills.

And when we went to Kauai, we thought there's no way we're going to save our house.

We haven't been able to pay our mortgage in so long, like it's just not possible.

We may just be here and this is where we're going to live.

And after a couple of months of living out there, I started to get a creative itch.

Like I had written this book and I was trying to get some energy going around like these ideas that were important to me.

And I was feeling a little bit of island fever and disconnected and stuff.

So that's when the impetus to start the podcast happened, like I needed to do something creative for myself.

And, you know, I'll always look back on that experience quite romantically because it created the perfect storm of events to create this thing that has now, you know, been successful beyond my wildest imagination.

And so let's break down the business side of things.

So you have the content, which is like you said, the tip of the spear or the top of the funnel where people, they sort of, they discover you, they start to like you, they start to trust you and love you and say, oh, wow, this is content that can really help me.

But then you have these like really interesting businesses, right?

So you have, you know, you have the meal planning business.

So like, I don't know, meals.richroll.com or something like that.

And so you have, you have a meal planning business, you charge, you know, I don't know, a hundred bucks a year or something like that, you help people, you know, go sort of plant base it in a way that's gonna work for them.

You have this thing called the epic five challenge, which is five, I don't know what it is, five Ironman triathlons or something like that in five, like in five days.

What is it?

What is the exact thing for epic five?

Yeah.

So just to be clear, I don't have any financial involvement in that race, but yeah.

So one of the things I did as an athlete was this thing called epic five where Jason Lester and I did five iron distance triathlons on five Hawaiian islands.

The idea was to do it in five days.

It took us a little bit longer.

But in the wake of that experience, it's become an annual event that I'm not affiliated with professionally.

Okay.

It's part of my story.

I would have been a part of that.

All right.

So basically it's like mostly the media company and then it's the meal planning business.

Talk to us about like how you kind of like you mentioned your mentor friend who helped

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you kind of structure this and set this up and figure out how to actually build a like a like a full like, you know, thriving lifestyle, going from living in the yard on the mango farm to like, you know, actualizing this idea, what is that business, what's the business brain part of you?

Yeah.

How would you explain that to the next person who maybe they don't have that mentor?

Maybe they, they see what you do.

Can you explain it here?

And maybe there's out of our audience, some people out there who can take that blueprint or that idea and say, okay, I'm in a totally different vertical and I have some differences, but I can learn from how he's architected this business.

Sure.

So first of all, that mentor then became my business partner and that's a key piece in all of this because without him, I probably would have never gotten out of the gate and he's been my business partner ever since and it's an amazing relationship.

And what he brought to the equation was not only a sense of possibility, but like I said earlier, like structure and that structure has always been grounded in real business fundamentals and being patient and growing only incrementally and not getting too excited about new stuff and taking on too much.

So it's been a slow growth curve, but in retrospect, we've, we, I think we've made really good decisions about how we've invested our time and our energy.

And yes, it's now a very diversified business that is fundamentally media oriented, but we have a lot of different verticals.

So yes, the podcast is the tip of the spear as I mentioned earlier.

It's the thing that, that drives everything else and it's also the thing that generates the most, the most income.

The meal planner does very well for us.

I love that it's a low cost entry to something I think can be really transformational in terms of people changing their habits around food.

So that's a, you know, an integral piece in all of this.

And then there's the books I mentioned Finding Ultra, but we also have three cookbooks.

The plant power way, the plant power way, Italia.

And then my wife wrote a book called this cheese is nuts, which is about how to make plant based cheese.

So we have the publishing end and, and she's gone off.

Cookbooks are good business.

I feel like I've heard that cookbooks could be a good business.

Books may not, books in general may not be, but cookbooks specifically might actually be a good business.

What teach us about that?

Cause you know, you don't run into too many people who have done this.

Cookbooks are a very good business.

It's, it's hit or miss, but if you hit, they can be massive.

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They're difficult to put together because beyond just the written words on the page, there's photography and there's recipe testing and all of that.

So there's a lot that goes into creating a great cookbook, but they're great businesses.

And a big reason for that is that if you do hit it, they're perennial sellers.

So they'll sell year after year after year.

And how does that work?

So a hit means what you get picked up with like brick, good brick and mortar distribution, or is it mostly direct to consumer?

What, what does it hit?

What does it look like when you get a hit?

I think it depends on what your goals and motivations are.

So our cookbooks we've done with a major publisher Avery, which is part of random house.

And we got really nice advances for those books and those books continue to sell and do well for us.

They weren't, they're not, neither of them were, were New York Times best sellers or anything like that, but the real mark of success I think in publishing is whether or not you create something that is perennial.

So Finding Ultra, for example, we just hit the decade mark on that and it continues to sell more and more every single year.

So even though it wasn't huge out of the gate, it continues to find audiences and then it becomes, you know, just a revenue stream for you, for you quarter after quarter.

So those are those books, but now we have, we have two other books that we've self-published called Voicing Change, which are coffee table versions of the podcast with excerpts from our favorite guests with amazing photography and essays contributed by myself and some of the guests that really act like keepsakes or marketing tools for the podcast.

Like it's a, it's a, it's a collectible item.

These books, our motivation or our definition of success for these books is very different from the other books because they're not intended to go out and sell to make the New York Times bestseller list.

They have a very specific audience in mind and the fact that we created them in-house means that it's a different revenue model as well.

So we don't need to sell as many of them to do well.

And I'm really proud of those books.

We're going to do another one this year and create a box set.

And also when we work with brands, which is a big piece of, of our business as well, it's great to be able to send them the book and show them that we're executing on a quality level that I think no one else is doing in the podcast space, which helps distinguish us from, you know, the zillions of other podcasts that are out there because it's very crowded right now and sends the message that, you know, we're, we're trying to elevate a certain, you know, we're, all of our content is very elevated and that, you know, we're, we're operating from a very professional perspective in everything that we're doing.

So that's the books.

And then we have, sorry, go ahead.

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On the books one second.

So I'm fascinated by the books thing.

I think it's really cool.

I think it's a really cool art.

My wife is vegan also.

She has, we have maybe at our 10, 15 really high and she, you know, she loves the kind, it's like a coffee table book and a cookbook at the same time.

Like it's got to have the like premium sort of finish and photography.

It's very aspirational and as a guy who barely, you know, knows how to use a frying pan and like, you know, I don't know, I eat like, I eat like a college kid sometimes.

It's like, I see this to do so different for me.

So I started getting curious about this cookbook she was buying and this, who are these people behind this?

Now, are those perennials just because you have a growing audience and so like your audience grows every year and it's like 1% of your audience buys your stuff and you are the sales as well as the, and so that's why they keep climbing or is it kind of like independent in a way?

Like obviously that contributes, but like, is there a separate engine that lets those continue to grow?

Like just your main engine of like, my podcast grows, therefore, 1% of people will go buy the cookbook every year.

Yeah.

I think it's a little bit of both.

I mean, with Finding Ultra, which is a memoir, I think the continued sales of that book are really due to the growing platform that we've created here.

The cookbooks are a little bit different.

It's of course, you know, in part because of the platform and we use the platform to, you know, sort of occasionally, you know, promote the books.

But I think in tandem with that, we've seen a real mainstreaming of plant-based lifestyle in a way that didn't exist back in 2012, 2014, more and more people are interested in this lifestyle and diet, which means that those cookbooks retain relevancy.

And have you, like, have you done, have you launched any businesses or products like this that have just flopped?

Like, you know, the version of the cookbook that like you were excited about, you even maybe liked the product and it just didn't work, or have you been pretty high hit rate with what you guys have launched outside, like, you know, like in additional products?

Yeah.

I mean, I think, you know, early on in this process, we launched a couple supplements like a protein powder and I thought maybe like nutraceuticals might be something that I would be interested in doing.

And I quickly lost interest in that.

It was modestly successful, but I realized that it was a very crowded marketplace and there were people who were doing really good work in that area.

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And I was more interested in the media.

And if I was not at the plants, like at the manufacturing location overseeing all of this and really being detail oriented around it, there was too much risk of shenanigans because I was not in control of the manufacturing process.

And there's a lot of weird stuff that goes on in that world when you're licensing these labs to create something for you.

And it felt like my risk exposure was too high.

And I just realized I didn't want to, unless I was going to go all in on that, it didn't make sense.

And so we abandoned that.

We have other, we sell some swag and some t-shirts and things like that on the website.

They don't do fantastic, but it's nice to have them there.

So not everything is a huge smash success, but sometimes some of these smaller verticals still make sense nonetheless.

If you were doing a pie chart, is it like the meal planning and the cookbooks and all that stuff that's cool, but like in reality, if we drew the pie chart, is it like the media side with the sponsors, is 90% of it anyways, or is it fairly like Deverside Beyond That? I would say the podcast is maybe, I don't know, I should do a pie chart so I know this better, but it's probably around 80 to 85% of it.

But the other revenue generators are public speaking, which is growing a lot.

So we do quite well there.

You know, the podcast model is an advertising model, so that money comes from sponsors.

But I also have relationships with a handful of sponsors outside of the podcast context where I'm represented as an athlete, for example, like with Solomon.

So that's another kind of way that we grow the business that isn't necessarily directly related to the podcast itself.

And then we have retreats.

So we do these COVID really sidelined as part of our business, but we're getting back to it next spring, where my wife and I take groups of people to a location in Italy and have a week-long experience with food and meditation and running and such stuff like that.

When we have guests on the pod, I find that they typically fall into two buckets.

And both I admire.

There's what I'll call the kind of like expected bucket, like on a business-oriented podcast, person comes on, they have a product or a story so far that's exciting and momentum.

And what's admirable about them is their ambition.

They basically, they never stop dreaming bigger and they see no limit and they are chasing that sort of limitless vision where you walk away from the podcast and you feel like, oh, man, I've been thinking small, right?

And that's a great feeling.

It's not a negative feeling.

It's, oh, wow, the pie is even bigger than I could have imagined.

The possibilities are different than what I had been kind of come to accept.

An example would be buddies with the founder of Calm.

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And I remember even very early on when that app, it's a meditation app and now it's very, very big.

It's probably a one to three billion dollar company.

But early on when they could barely get an investor to give them a check, it was like just a couple of guys in their apartment, there really wasn't much to going for it.

Even back then, I remember Michael talking about like, we're going to have an island someday, like a calm island, like Coachella festivals, but instead of craziness, like instead of rowdy, we're going to be selling calm as a festival and we're going to do it on our own island and it's going to be like Disney World for Calm.

And we're going to build a Nike level brand.

And he was talking about that back then.

And when he said it back then, he seemed a little nuts and now he says it now and he's a visionary, but he's been saying the same thing for like 10 years.

And so that's an example of the high ambition path that I admire.

And the other one is the person who's, you know, sort of like high contentness and they're like, well, I really love what we're doing.

I don't know if we'll do more, haven't really thought about it.

Maybe we will, but you know, here are my principles and, you know, they're, they're admirable and how grounded they are and that they have found, you know, some version of enough for them and they are not like, you know, trying to take over the world.

Which part of that spectrum do you lean more towards when it comes to business?

Yeah, that's a great question.

I lean more towards the latter, but maybe not all the way on that side.

I mean, I'm certainly not the guy who's dreaming about islands and private jets and things like that.

People ask me all the time, like, what's the vision?

Like, what, you know, where do you see yourself in five years?

And I always feel weird or guilty because I don't have a good answer for that.

And I, and I realized like, oh, it's just because I don't, I don't really think that way.

Like I'm focused on how I can be better today than I was yesterday.

I'm focused on how to enhance the quality of what I'm sharing with the world.

And I'm focused on trying to be grateful and content with what I have and not be jealous or envious of what other people who have more than me have.

Because that's just a dangerous place for me as a recovering alcoholic and just as a human being.

So I am competitive.

Like I'm not averse to looking at the rankings on Apple podcasts and getting, you know, frustrated because somebody's ahead of me who I don't think is deserving of it.

Like, you know, I can be incredibly petty that way.

But honestly, like for the most part, like I'm just so grateful to be in the position that I'm in and I'm not doing this to get to another place.

Like if this is all that it is, like it's been a pretty fucking good ride and I'm stoked

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to be able to wake up every day and come in and talk to amazing people.

And if I can continue to do this and that's again, like all that it is, like that's a damn good run.

Now there are, you know, creative things that I want to express and they're not about chasing money.

They're like, you know, just inspirations that I have, like, oh, it would be cool to do this or can I carve out enough bandwidth so that I can explore this other thing that is interesting to me right now.

So it's much more of kind of an artist's path of following my gut and what gets me excited rather than here's a new business.

Because I think we could easily, we could have easily complicated what we're doing right now and created a network and, you know, started, you know, having other people create podcasts and, you know, building an entity that we could sell to Spotify or something like that.

But that's not really where my heart is or where my head is.

So I don't know if that answers your question, but that's how I think about it.

You know, one thing that I always like to talk to different guests that come on about is like, you know, you live in a different world than me, therefore you see different things and you see different problems and opportunities and trends that me over here I'm not saying because I'm just focused on other things.

And so I'm curious either and you can take it in either direction.

You can either take it in a trend.

So like, let's say maybe 2012, maybe you might have said, you know what, there's a really passionate community of plant based, you know, around this plant based lifestyle.

And I think this is going to get bigger.

I think people are going to more people are going to think this might catch on and more people are going to, you know, wander this way.

So it's either a trend you notice that like, oh, there's a group of people who really care about this or there's a movement happening that I find very interesting, but ultra marathons, whatever it is.

The second option, the second thing in a direction is just here's a gap I see.

So whereas our audience is heavily entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs, people who they live to solve problems and, you know, I like to bring their attention to problems worth solving or, you know, things that are missing from different parts of the world rather than maybe, you know, the 10,000th to do to do list app or whatever you could you could go build.

And so take it in either direction.

What comes to mind when I either say, what trends and movements have you been noticing or what gaps or opportunities do you see in your in your world?

Yeah.

I mean, I think I to answer that question, my head naturally goes to two polarities, young people and people that are getting older.

So I'm a little bit older than you.

So my interest is going to be around areas of longevity and meaning in a way that maybe, you know, you're not in a position to really have to entertain in a meaningful way yet.

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And then with young people, it's equally about meaning.

So what I see happening right now on a macro level is a whole generation of young people who are coming up into a world and thinking about their professional trajectory in the context of meaning in a way that was not really part of the thought process of my generation being Gen X.

They don't want to just find the best job that's going to pay them the most.

They want to plug into the thing that feels like it's making a difference in the world in a positive way.

And I think that's really cool.

It's easy to make fun of Gen Z and, you know, a lot of the kind of tropes around, you know, where young people are at right now.

But I'm very inspired by that sensibility because it was lacking in, you know, kind of my, you know, the ennui of the Gen X, which was to not, what was cool was to not care about anything and to be cynical.

And so, you know, I'm very refreshed by that focus that I see in so many young people.

And I think on the other extreme with people that are, you know, more in my age bracket who have kind of been in the professional world, done whatever they're going to do, and are realizing to some degree or not like, how happy am I?

How much meaning has this path that I chose for myself given me?

And whether or not I stay in this path or find something new, how can I bring more meaning into my lived experience both professionally and socially for the decades to follow?

And I see shared DNA between that young cohort and that older cohort.

And what I make of that is this groundswell of interest in happiness, contentment and the pillars of what it means to pursue a life that will not just sustain you, but really allow you to feel authentically expressed in who you are.

I like that.

And if you were kind of like, it's not the sort of question like, if you were 21 again today, what would you go do?

But sort of like, how would you act on that?

So you observe this behavioral mindset shift in both, let's say, the older generation and the younger generation, what do you do with that?

How would you, what is the rich role approach to acting on that insight?

As a young person.

Yeah.

As a person with time on there.

Yeah.

Let's say it doesn't matter how old you are.

It's just as a person who, if you didn't have like a thousand things to do and you weren't already committed to XYZ job or project, so you had some freedom and you were interested in that, you saw that observation, what would you do to act on it?

How would you approach it?

Yeah.

I mean, I think with young people, one thing I always tell young people is to invest in

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experience and opt out of the pressures of the rat race to plug right into some kind of career trajectory because there's an undue expectation with young people that they're supposed to know who they are and what they want to do with their lives at an age when their brains are barely formed.

And I think it's important for young people to go out and have as many experiences as possible before they make a certain particular choice about how they want to live their life because how can you make that choice until you've been exposed to a lot of different things, until you've traveled and spent time with all different kinds of people.

For the older people, I think it's about reprogramming you.

Like if you've been on a certain path and trajectory for a very long time, we become very calcified around who we think we are.

And we have to free ourselves from that narrative or that story and begin to build the muscle of connecting with our intuition and starting to bring expression to the things that I think innately bring us joy, that perhaps we've kind of repressed or put in the rear view mirror because we haven't had the time or the energy or the money or whatever to indulge them.

And on the subject of indulgence, to just abuse people of the idea that it is an indulgence or that it is selfish.

So the path, I think, for that person is to really start paying attention to themselves, to what gets them excited, to things that they just find themselves naturally inclined towards and to start to water that garden or feed that energy.

Because I think in doing that, it kind of leads you on a path towards some form of expression that will ultimately bring meaning and greater fulfillment into your life.

Well, I think that's a good place to close it.

Rich, thanks for coming on, man.

I really appreciate it.

Give people a shout out where they should find you or subscribe to the podcast.

Where do you want to direct people if they want more?

Yeah, sure.

Thanks for having me.

It's just richroll.com.

R-I-C-H-R-O-L-L.com is my website where you can find everything, the Rich Roll podcast, which is available wherever you listen to podcasts and the YouTube channel, richroll.com.

Those would be the places and you can learn all about me there.

Awesome.

Thanks so much.

Cool.

Thank you.

Thank you for talking to you, that was super fun.