

[00:03:23] Nichols: Oh my goodness, just salt of the earth background and just good solid values. I couldn't agree with you more, I love, I love the Midwest, I love where we live. In 1987, you had something happen in your life that was a pivotal point for you. For those two or three people that don't know your story, I want you to tell your story, if you would.

[00:03:46] O'Leary: Yes. The background to the question because it's such a beautiful question is this though, it took me 20 years after the story I'm about to share with you to even begin to embrace the simplicity and the complexity and the challenges and blessings of what happened to me on this day and it is this.

I had witness little boys in my neighborhood playing with fire and gasoline in early January 1987. They would sprinkle gasoline on a sidewalk, they would strike a match, stand back two feet, throw a match on top, and it would just jump to life and we were little boys, man growing up in this community that's safe and nobody was watching. As I'm looking at these boys, I'm thinking if they can do that and get away with it, so can I and so that weekend, my father was at work, my mother was out with two of my sisters, the house was mine. I bent over a can of gasoline in a garage, it was five gallons completely filled to the rim, lit a piece of cardboard on fire, bent down next to it. The plan, Lisa, was to pour just a little bit of gas to watch it spark to life like I'd seen these older guys do.

Before the liquid came out, the fumes rushed out of that container, it created a massive explosion. It split the can into and it launched a little boy, John O'Leary 20 feet against the far side of the garage. That is a mighty inflection point and just the beginning of a very difficult and yet in time a very blessed story.

[00:05:08] Nichols: But at the time your brother maybe that came and got the rug from the foyer or something, is that what happened?

[00:05:16] O'Leary: Yes. It's a pretty remarkable story that I seldom share live. This one I'm glad you asked about because it's worth sharing. A lot of times people who hear a story like this, or they hear about a business owner that grew a huge top-line revenue and bottom-line profitability and they think well that's them, that's John O'Leary's story of being burned or that's Tom Hill's story of growing the business or whatever it might be. What about the ordinary people like you and me though?

I would consider myself extraordinarily ordinary, and where I get my strength is in the ordinary heroes who showed up for me. The very first hero who showed up for me on January 17, 1987, was not a firefighter or a police officer, or some heroic combat veteran, it was my brother. He was sleeping in the basement, he heard the explosion that he heard the screams for help, and blasted out the windows throughout our entire house.

This was a mighty explosion. He came from the basement where he slept, he ran into the front hall and on top of the hall rug, stood his nine-year-old brother John. I had flames Lisa, leaping three feet off of my body. I'm an inferno. I'm slowly burning to death, and my brother sees this, and he's not ready for it, and I see my brother Jim, and I'm not ready for him. Jim's my older brother, he'd never done anything nice for me and our entire lives together.

When I was on this rug praying for a hero, it wasn't exactly Jim I was hoping and praying for, and yet, this was his day. This was the moment for him to wake up. You need to hear that listeners, and John O'Leary and everybody else. You need to wake up and embrace where you are and what's possible in your life going forward from this moment. Jim, embraced the moment, he picked up a rug, he ran over to me though the flames left three feet off of me. He burned himself in the process.

He wrapped me in that little blanket, he carried me outside, saved my life, rolled around on top of me. He called 911. Makes sure that my sisters are out of the house, make sure that our pets are out of the house. The lifesaver of the year 1987 was a 17-year-old who changed, who embraced where he was and what he could do in his next step, his next breath. It's an opportunity I think, for all of us every day of our lives.

[00:07:21] Nichols: Yes. Thank God for him. John, I remember you loved baseball. You wanted to be a Cardinals' baseball player because you watched so much baseball, you knew the sports announcers voices, you knew all this. I want you to tell the story of Jack Buck because I still remember that story. I tell that story now.

[00:07:42] O'Leary: For the listeners who may not know baseball, or they may not know the Midwest, or they may not know the voice, or the name Jack Buck, he was the voice of the Cardinals for almost five decades. He's a Hall of Fame announcer, he's a Hall of Fame human being. He's a guy that I'd never met as a child, but I went to bed every single night listening to his voice. My mom and dad would tuck me in and we'd say our prayers, they turn off the light, walk down the hallway, and about halfway down the steps, I knew they weren't coming back.

That's when I would grab my little radio from a drawer, plug it in, turn it on, and listen to the baseball game.

I knew baseball, and I knew Jack, and I also needed some encouragement after being burned on all fronts. One of the most significant is I was burned on 100% of my body, 87% of the burns for third degree, I'm wrapped from head to toe with bandages, I'm tied down to a bed, I can't breathe on my own, so they put a respirator into my lungs. Now I can breathe, but I could not eat or drink and I could not talk. I got a lot of challenges.

Also due to the swelling, my eyes are swollen shut. As a nine-year-old boy going through this difficult journey physically, emotionally, and spiritually, it affects you in all areas. I'm dying, and I need hope. The day after I come into the hospital, the door opens up into this hospital room and I'll truncate the story a little bit, but I hear the footsteps, I hear a chair and then I hear a voice and it's the voice of a guy named Jack Buck, the Cardinal Hall of Fame announcer.

He says to me, "Kid, wake up. You are going to live, you're going to survive. keep fighting. John O'Leary day at the ballpark, we'll make it all worthwhile." Then he goes, "Kid, are you listening?" I tried to nod my little head and he goes, "Good. Keep fighting. John O'Leary day at the ballpark, we'll make it all worthwhile." He stood up he walked out of the room, Lisa, he left me tied down in darkness by myself. When he left me though, he left me changed completely, wholly. He left me not full of despair but full of hope and this very crystal clear view of John O'Leary day ballpark, I'll never forget the buzz I had internally have something to move toward.

Jack came in one time, I learned later on that he walked out, he started weeping as soon as he made it into the hallway. One of the doctors or nurses told him that the little boy was going to die, that there's no hope. By the way, we're being fed this lie all the time, if you read any headline ever these days. This is not new to COVID-19, it's not new to race relations, it's not new to a daunting recession.

94% of the news stories, according to Harvard Business Review in 2018, were negative. During a period of time when everything was good, supposedly 94% of what you read, and what you witnessed on news was negative. We get told stuff all the time, what do you do with that stuff? Because the future is not yet determined. Jack was told that the little boy was going to-- He takes it home, he cries he prays and he reflects, "What more can I do?" It's a powerful question. "What more can I do?"

The following day, Lisa, the man stepped back into the darkness of my little hospital room and I heard the voice cut through the darkness one more time saying, "Kid wake up. You're going to live. Keep fighting. John O'Leary, day at the ballpark, we'll make it all worthwhile." Those visits went on the five months that I was in hospital.

[00:10:48] Nichols: What a story. I still get really teary-eyed just hearing that story, and I've heard that story so many times, John, but I remember I think your mom was trying to get you to start writing. He had told you, he said, "If you will write a note to a Cardinals baseball player, I will bring you back a signed ball."

[00:11:08] O'Leary: That's right. I think you were in cahoots on this one. Kids are easily tricked into doing whatever you want to do if you motivate them appropriately.

[00:11:17] Nichols: [chuckles] Yes.

[00:11:17] O'Leary: By the way, that's also true for team members and executives and boards. Find what turns them on and then get out of the way. My mom was doing it, she was saying, "Baby, when you learn how to write again, you'll go back to school." I don't want to go to grade school, and then comes along Jack Buck and says, "Hey, if you want to baseball, write a note." So I do. My first note goes out to Ozzie Smith, I get the baseball and a couple days later I send another note and then I get another baseball. Then another note and then another baseball. By the end of 1987, and it's a remarkable story, we were fast-forwarding through some of the emotion, but I hope you're getting the leadership capabilities that this man is modeling.

In 1987 the man sent me 60 baseballs encouraging me to write 60 thank you notes, not only filling a dresser with balls, that's nice, that's success, he taught a little boy how to write. He taught a little with no fingers and no chance at life how to write, how to take a big mighty step forward toward possibility.

[00:12:15] Nichols: Such a wise man. I want to give a shout out to Julie, happens to be a friend of mine. I want to give a shout out to Julie I told her I love your dad because of what he did for John.

[00:12:25] O'Leary: Are you talking about Julie Buck?

[00:12:26] Nichols: Yes.

[00:12:27] O'Leary: You give Julia Buck a second shout out from her friend John. It's been a while since I've seen Julie but Julie, I tell your dad's story almost every day, I never tire of it. I hope it does half the justice and half the generosity to those who hear it that your dad gave me and so many others and now that you are a blessing to others through your own life, Julie. How cool to have Julie Buck as a listener.

[00:12:49] Nichols: Yes, absolutely. I want to read something because when Jack died, you said you went to the funeral but you ended up turning around because you said you got there and you saw the who's who of St. Louis and you're like, who am I? You said, "I'm not going to live my life any more less than I actually am. I can allow this thing to beat me down of who I wasn't and what is lousy I was or I can allow it to become a redemptive moment." That was another pivotal point for you.

[00:13:23] O'Leary: That's a moment by moment decision whether you are a lousy friend to a Hall of Famer named Jack Buck while he's in hospital for five months, the exact same amount of time that I spent in hospital. I never visited my friend Jack because I never felt worthy to go down there. Then when my friend passed away I did not feel worthy to go to the funeral but was invited by the Buck family to attend.

I put on my nicest \$84 suit and tie threw it on, hopped into my old beat-up Jeep, drove out to this big beautiful Presbyterian Church in St. Louis County. Got my tie a little bit more tightly around my neck, looked to my left and saw this big beautiful car pull up next to me and a Hall of Fame football player get out of it. Then to my right was another celebrity and then I looked in the mirror behind me and I saw the ownership team for the St. Louis Cardinals.

Like you said, Lisa, the who's who, real people, real stars, real celebrity, people who actually belonged. As a 24, 25-year old that was not me. I was missing my fingers, I was scarred from my neck to my toes, I had little confidence. Don't be fooled by the shoulders back and the guy walking up the goofy grin. I lacked confidence either way. I didn't belong in the many of the rooms I stepped into and I certainly did not belong that day, I thought, at that funeral.

I made this decision to pull out of the parking lot, I drove about three miles down the street and then I just pulled the car over onto the shoulder and, man, I had an ugly cry. The kind where you are using the sleeves out of your sport coat and then you tie out on that side, you switch sides. It

got messy for a while and by the time the tears finally dried up enough that I could drive again, I was going to go back to the funeral and say, man, I'm going.

It was too late, I'd missed my chance. It had already been more than an hour. I made a decision like you were saying that day that you can either continue to live in the shadows or you can be redeemed through these experiences. I don't think we realize in real-time what's about to happen but in making that decision it changed the entire rest of my life. The way I felt about myself, the words I spoke, the words I chose not to, who I said thank you to, who I chose not to invest time with any longer, where I chose to serve. I became a hospital chaplain, I started volunteering in the same way that Jack served me.

I became a big brother through Big Brothers, Big Sisters, an organization I'm still highly involved with because I think you touch one person's life, you can change the world. You do that at scale with enough other people, you can really change the problem and make it into a blessing. I started speaking around the world. It was a slow embrace of what happened, but it began by recognizing that no longer do I need to hide out away from who I was, I need to embrace it full tilt.

[00:15:52] Nichols: Absolutely. We're in a time now where it could be a pivot point. We can say, we're just going to hunker down or we can say, what are the blessings. I love this analogy Francis Chan uses this about the treadmill that we've all been on. We're on this 200-mile an hour treadmill, it's time to step off maybe and be a little introspective and do, I say, a reset. I want to talk about that because I know that's going to help our listeners but we need to take a quick break and we'll be back with John O'Leary.

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[00:17:01] Nichols: Welcome back. John, we are in some unprecedented times with the pandemic that we're all going through terrible things. Health concerns for people, people have lost loved ones, people have lost jobs. This is not the first crisis that we've gone through.

However, this is a global crisis. We're all in the same boat and obviously you have faced crisis yourself. What would you say to the listeners about say if you've been lost your job, how do you even start to navigate?

[00:17:31] O'Leary: The very first thing when something tragic is happening is not to sugarcoat it. I think it's okay to be sad, it's okay to be angry, it's certainly okay to be disappointed with the way things might be trending, whether it's societally if that's something that rubs you the wrong way. With economies, that's something that affects all of us or specifically if you've lost a job, that's something that affects currently I believe, 40 million United States citizens but it's affecting a lot more than that around the world. This is a crisis experience for all of us. We need to eventually do as though to come out of that rut and start to imagine what remains possible in front of us. There's some ways we can do that.

This is going to sound trite possibly and maybe unhelpful during a time of crisis, but I don't believe it to be so I think it's actually critical. It's the first step toward resiliency and grit. It's actually to show some gratitude for what we already have. When the life seems to be falling apart around us, it's very easy to only see the things that are out of place and it's very common. If you read any headline these days this will back you up and reinforce that very emotion. For me what I do every single morning is I wake up early, I go outside, I grab a cup of coffee, I look east while it's still dark outside and I wait for the light to cut through the darkness.

I think it's the coolest experience of the day and most of us oversleep by a couple hours to get as much sleep as possible and as little life as possible. If you want to get a little bit more out of yours, I strongly encourage you to wake up a little bit early.

[00:18:57] Nichols: What time do you wake up, 5:30?

[00:18:59] O'Leary: 5:30 will ensure that you see the best of it. I take a list of things that I'm grateful for. Every morning I make an inventory of what I have. Sometimes I write a gratitude list, sometimes I write love letters to family members, parents, siblings, wife, people you overlook because they're just so close to you, kids. Write love letters. When John? That's hard. We're all busy. Get up a little early and it will set you apart, it'll also set you on the right path. That's one thing that I've done that I found to be incredibly effective.

Lately, we can talk about having an infinite lens on what remains possible. But if you have a longer-term horizon on what life looks like, not just today or next week or what can I get

accomplished between now and the end of 2020. If you look at it through a life lens, by the time I turn 85, what really matters? One way to understand this exercise, I used to serve as a hospital chaplain for kids, but I got my training with an adult hospital system.

I walked into a patient's room one time and the gentleman said to me, "John if you'd see me years ago, you would have met a man on top of the world. I had it all. Great job, I was running my own business, but John as I raced forward I lost the very things that ultimately mattered most to me. I worked so hard that I lost my marriage. I went through so much stress, organizationally, professionally, that I turned to drugs and alcohol, which affected my relationship and then eventually cost me and my relationship with my three daughters." He said, "I lost everything including my health."

He took a deep breath, Lisa, and he said, "John, I've reached the end of my life. I've climbed the ladder to the very tippity top only to realize I had the thing leaned against the wrong darn wall." As our friend Francis Chan has said, nothing in life would be worse than to become successful in things that just ultimately don't matter. I have a feeling as we race through life, many of us are becoming wildly successful at things if you really add them up don't matter at all, not at all.

It's important as we go through life that we take inventory, that we take pause at the things that matter. I'm not telling you not to climb, I want you to race, I want you to achieve as much as you possibly can, but I don't want you to trade significance for success. I think life is far too short and sometimes these periods of abrupt change like losing a job or getting into diagnosis or being burned can force us to recognize what ultimately matters. If that is the season that you are currently in rather than racing away from it I say embrace it.

Learn the lessons from the season, take inventory of what you have that is good, and then reset and pivot into this change because I've remained convicted that the best days remain in front of us.

[00:21:27] Nichols: I love that. Well, that reminds me your grandfather said that. I think he said something like, "It's the lessons that you learn that you apply."

[00:21:36] O'Leary: That's right. We weren't the greatest generation because we went through all that. We're the greatest generation because we went through all that. We learned from that, and now we're doing something because of all that. Whether it's COVID-19 or injustices of the marketplace, headwind with recessions, challenges with your job, or your relationships at home

or addictions. If we can learn the lessons through these crises that we face, and then apply them going forward, these won't be wasted.

[00:22:03] Nichols: Right. They're too hard. [laughs] Lessons are too hard, don't waste them. I want you to talk just a little bit about your latest book, another bestseller, *IN AWE*. I'm not all the way through the book, but everything I've read so far, I'm captivated. One of the things that you talk about it's really to inspire people to go back to the way we were as children, and to awaken the senses, maybe that have died, like wonder.

Talk a little bit about your book, and I really want you to tell the story really quickly about Ms. Martello, [laughs] because I thought that was really-- Your mom was a very wise woman.

[00:22:44] O'Leary: Thank you for that. You can't pick your parents, and I was blessed to have remarkable ones. I'll end your question by sharing the story of Mrs. Martello and how I became familiar with her surfaces. The book is called, *IN AWE*. It's a second book that I've written. The first one was called, *On Fire*. I found myself, Lisa, all the time on the road speaking to these wonderful organizations, these fancy conference centers, these five-star hotels, man.

Yes, they're people who are yawning. Yes, I got up and we weren't even going out to the beach to see where we were in paradise, and we were mad that the cell phone reception wasn't working perfectly in the conference center and, that the jet was going to take 20 minutes late, and really disrupt our days and, how mundane and difficult our adult days were. That's what I saw in that part of my life.

When I'm working, I like to not only speak to organizations, but I like to in that community, wherever I am also going to schools. I would always take a little day trip away from the fancy Ritz Carlton's or wherever they might put me up and then hang out with some kids. I would notice with schools, that these kids would come skipping into the classroom, not walking with their shoulders slumped, bummed out of how miserable their lives are. No. Shoulders back, humming, singing, playing, laughing, smiling, eyes looking up, eyes giving off joy.

When I ask questions, their hands would all pop up. They were exuberantly, passionately, optimistically, living their lives. Then I would come home, and I would see it in my own children, four little healthy kids who are so fired up for life in awe of everything. I wondered as a dad, what is it that they have, all kids, not just mine, not just the ones I was lucky enough to speak to. All kids. What is it that they have that we have lost sight of as adults, as we endure the misery, the

monotonous of these days that we must somehow whether together? What have we lost? If we return to who we once were, what might happen?

Through three and a half years of research, we really figured this thing out I think and unpacked what the DNA is of a child. They have five senses. That we have lost sight of the sense of wonder. That's when you talked about this idea of being inquisitive about everything. They're fully immersed in whatever they're doing. It's very hard to get their attention from whatever they're doing because they're completely doing that one thing. Multitasking is what we adults do, but all research says it's actually completely ineffective. They don't multitask. They're highly effective at doing one thing at a time.

They also belong to not only themselves but to one another. They have this incredible connection to each other into themselves, to life. Then finally, they live through their lives with a sense of freedom. They're just completely free. What a gift it is to be free. Those are the five senses that we unpack in the book, *IN AWE*. I share stories, the research, some of the ideas, and some of the outcomes. If we chose to do this as adults, what might happen?

[00:25:31] Nichols: Well, I highly recommend everyone get the book. I have it on my Kindle. Like I said, I'm captivated. You'll have to get the book. We're just going to give you a little teaser. You need to read the story about Ms. Martello [laughs] because I just laughed my head off.

[00:25:47] O'Leary: A core Lady.

[00:25:48] Nichols: Yes. You got to read that story. You got to get the book so you can hear the story. John, this is called, Something Extra. It was inspired by our daughter, Allie that has Down Syndrome. She's got an extra 21st chromosome. She's got a lot of something extras, but we all do. What is that something extra that you believe every leader needs?

[00:26:07] O'Leary: Because of the way you form the question, I'm going to go in a way that I would never have gone under other circumstances, but something extra and talk about your daughter. One of the stories I unpack and sense number four, that's the section on belonging, is a coffee shop in South Carolina that hires only people with special needs.

There was a woman there at one time who was carrying in a baby who was also diagnosed with Down Syndrome and the woman was really struggling with this. Really, really, really struggling with, "My gosh, what curse is this? Should I even take this pregnancy all the way to full term?"

Should I do this?" She goes to this coffee shop. She orders her coffee without caffeine. Her husband gets his coffee with a lot of caffeine. They sit down, and they just take inventory of what's happening around them.

Then the mom of this child, this is their first child, comes up to the lady behind the register and says, "Hey, I want you to know that we are expecting a daughter." The little girl behind the register goes, "Oh congratulations." Then the mom goes, "But here's something extra. You need to know that our little daughter is going to be born with Down Syndrome just like you."

With that, this little girl comes in, the little girl's 23 years old, comes from behind the register, puts her arm around the mom and the dad, and says, "Hey everybody. Everybody, I need your attention. These guys are expecting a child." The coffee shop explodes with applause. Then the little girl goes, "One more thing. She's going to have Down Syndrome." The entire coffee shop again erupts with applause.

As we're looking for something extra in our lives, as we go through it, organizationally, or as a family, or as you're expecting a child or not, because it's sometimes it's the thing you're not expecting. That is, there is something extra that you ought to be grateful for. I think my something extra today is to be grateful for what shows up. We always want to control what happens. We want to stand on a lane and influence our teams and lead effectively and all this stuff, and that's fine. We got to do that at some point.

But gosh, can you imagine going through life with your hands completely open, just giving pure thanks for what you got, and then being able to celebrate what those who aren't even sure if that's a blessing or a curse until they see you? Then they realize undoubtedly, what a blessing this indeed is. I encourage you to recognize this something extra today is to be grateful for what you got.

[00:28:21] Nichols: I love that. I've never heard anybody say that John, but that is so poignant. It really is. Thank you so much. Well, I usually give people the opportunity to pitch something [laughs] or to talk about something. Tell our listeners about something. Unless you wanted to talk about something else, I'm thinking, we need to tell people how they can get your book.

[00:28:42] O'Leary: You can learn more about John O'Leary and the work we do. It's a collection of people. I've learned throughout my entire life that I'm all not that good. Mrs. Martello, when people get the book, they'll learn about her, and they'll realize how little John

does by himself and yet how much we have done collectively. It's an incredible story. You can learn about that story and all the other stories if you go to a read, inawe.com. That's where our social media links are, that's where our podcast is, and that's where the link to the book, *IN AWE*, and *On Fire* are as well.

[00:29:10] Nichols: Very good. Well, John, this has just been such a delight. I am so glad that we were able to make this happen because I just know that your story is going to mean a lot to our listeners. Thank you so much for sharing your story.

[00:29:23] O'Leary: Well, give your daughter, a big, huge hug, a little something extra tonight when you get home. Tell her John O'Leary loves her and tell her, thank you for teaching the rest of us how to live and lead because in the business of life, we forget.

[00:29:33] Nichols: Absolutely. Thank you.

[00:29:35] O'Leary: Thank you, Lisa.