

How Discovering Your Own Genius & Creativity Will Unlock Your Full Potential – Ozan Varol – #1039

Dave Asprey:

You're listening to the Human Upgrade with Dave Asprey.

I love to look at pretty much everything that gets written about making your brain work better. I've got a bookshelf, actually more than one bookshelf, full of all the books that I've read about this because people who think about thinking are some of the most interesting people out there. The trendy term for that is meta-awareness or metacognition. But the idea here is our brains do things to save energy, including they make thinking shortcuts that are actually really effective for not getting eaten by tigers but maybe aren't very effective for creating nuclear reactors that don't put carbon in the atmosphere. So they're just different things. What do geniuses actually do, it's interesting. It's one of the reasons Jim Quick is a good friend. He's been thinking about thinking and learning and things like that.

Today's guest, if I didn't foreshadow to that clearly enough for you, is going to talk about exactly that and how to awaken your genius. Even if you think, "Well, I'm not a genius," there's very likely some parts of your brain that you aren't using the right way or that you just didn't know how to turn it on. If the universe was fair, when you were born, or maybe when you were five years old or at some point, you'd wake up one day and right in your visual field there'd be a little button that said, "Genius" and you'd press the button and then it would work. But since our user interface is crappy and isn't labeled, we have to figure out how to do that. Our guest today is an expert in creativity, innovation, critical thinking, and literally a former rocket scientist. His name is Ozan Varol. Ozan, welcome to the show.

Ozan Varol:

Thanks so much for having me back on, Dave. It's great to see you.

Dave:

It's been quite a while since you were on the show. And I'm wondering, Upgrade Collective, our live studio audience, do you remember his original interview, episode 738? And we're above 1,000, so yeah, it's been a little while. It's interesting to talk to especially engineers who think about thinking because it's just really cool. Our last interview was called Think Like a Rocket Scientist, if you guys want to look it up, episode 738. That book is now in 25 languages and became a major bestseller because it turns out not everyone wants to think like a rocket scientist if you ask them, but if everyone could think like a rocket scientist, some things that seem intractable in your life would probably work really well.

His new book, and the reason I asked him back on the show, is called Awaken Your Genius. It's about escaping conformity, which is really important. The primary thing we're going to talk about today is that resisting the status quo is probably a bad idea and that there's a different path forward. I'm just going to jump right into it with you because you're a returning guest. I mean, fight the power, isn't that how you do it? I mean, famous songs, I'm channeling Rage Against the Machine but wearing triple A masks to be safe. Why would we not resist conformity and idiocy in general?

Ozan Varol:

The word resist for me gets in the way because often resistance becomes a different way of conformity, as in you're resisting something but you're not really offering a new path forward. So resistance becomes its own end in and of itself. In my view, the goal should be re-imagination.

Dave:

Fighting the patriarchy is a bad idea, is what you're saying?

Ozan Varol:

Re-imagining it I think would be better.

Dave:

Exactly. re-imagining instead of fighting, because anytime you fight something, you know what it does? It gets stronger. What I want to know is, okay, so you're a rocket scientist, you were the youngest tenured law professor ever earlier in your career, and you're a smart dude, but what makes you qualified to know this?

Ozan Varol:

I think I spent my entire life in many ways getting ready to write this book because I grew up in Turkey, which was a very, very conformist society. I love the culture, I love the people. My parents still live there. But in terms of the way that the society operates and particularly the way that the education system operates, it's extremely conformist. I'll just give you one example which I included in the book too, but when we started primary school, each student got assigned a number like in the Netflix show, Stranger Things, like 11. Our principal would call us by that number instead of our first name.

Dave:

How dehumanizing. As a westerner, I'm like, "What the hell? Why would you do that to kids?" I would've said, "If you want to be called after your favorite type of dragon or something," but to have no choice, and if you didn't like your number, that was that, right?

Ozan Varol:

That was that. You're just stripped of all individual attributes and you treated a herd of sheep in many ways as supposed to act the same way, behave the same way, dress the same way, look the same way during a school assembly. I was not a fan of haircuts. I thought they were a giant waste of time. I was channeling my inner Einstein when I was growing up. The principal noticed my longer than standard hair do during one of his inspections, and he pulled me in front of the entire school. He grabbed a hair clip from one of my friends and stuck it in my hair to shame me publicly as a retribution for not conforming.

Dave:

Did it work or did you like-

Ozan Varol:

Oh, it worked in the sense of I never skipped a haircut again.

Dave:

I mean, isn't this book just you fighting back?

Ozan Varol:

No, I start from a place of, "Here's how conformity works." By the way, those who are listening, those who did not grow up in such dire conformist education systems still have experienced this to some extent, of the compulsion from society to conform, to suppress what makes you different, to go along

with the herd in so many different ways. And so, my goal in writing the book wasn't just resisting conformity, but it's also just finding a new way forward, reimagining who you are, going back to your first principles and your origins, figuring out who you are and what you think before the world told you who you should be and what you should think.

Dave:

I believe that would be really beneficial because teaching conformity without thinking, which by the way that's an intellectual shortcut to save electricity in our brains. Okay, so you're saying conforming, we're all trained to do that. In your book you talk about how you can uneducate yourself, so what is uneducation?

Ozan Varol:

One is it all begins with realizing that we have been conditioned to think like our teachers, to think like authority figures, to think like our parents, to think like the textbook authors, to think like really anyone but yourself. A lot of that comes from the education system, which is the first book. The first part of the book is about, as you said, uneducate. It's realizing that the school system is designed in a way to make conformity or genetic wiring toward conformity so much worse because in schools, schools are a series of right or wrong answers. And those right or wrong answers were determined by someone far smarter than you. As a student, your only job is to just memorize them and then spit them back out on a standardized test somewhere.

And then you go out into the real world and you keep doing the same thing that you've been taught, which is to look to other people for answers, to copy and paste what they're saying, to copy and conform to what your colleagues or competitors are doing. And so, life becomes this race to the center in many ways, and so much of that can be traced to the imprint that the education system leaves on many students. And well-meaning teachers, by the way, are totally crushed under these structures that require them to teach to the test, to use standardized tests, and to teach to these outcomes that rob students over their just natural curiosity and following their own interests and picking the name for a dragon instead of a number to call themselves by. It's about uninstalling some of those methods of unnatural programming.

Dave:

That sounds great, but how do you do it, how do you uneducate yourself? What's step one?

Ozan Varol:

One of the things you can do, we are all, as you said, operating on autopilot, which is so much easier to do than questioning everything you do, but there's so much value in stepping back and asking, and this is one of the strategies I talk about in the book, is just a simple question, "Why am I doing this?" Just get up in the morning and go through your day and every now and then check with yourself and ask yourself, "Why am I doing this?" Often you'll find when you begin asking yourself that question is there's really no good reason for why you're doing something aside from the fact that you've always done it this way for years and years and years.

For me, one of the things I realized, this was maybe five, six years ago, but one of the first things I did first thing in the morning, I would just grab my phone and check my email. Immediately, my mind would be polluted with requests from other people. It's basically like opening your inbox is tackling somebody to-do lists. It's just all of these action items that other people have put on your plate. By the time I was done, I was just exhausted, and I realized I was wasting basically the most creative part of my day on

sending these emails and then also putting myself on defense versus beginning the day from a posture of, "What do I want to actually accomplish today? How do I want to express my creativity today?" And so that simple question, it's like, "Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this?" and there was no reason for it, that was just what I had always done. And now I don't check email before noon, and I reserve my morning for thinking in creativity, and it's made an incredible difference in my life.

Dave:

How many people have died because you didn't check your email before noon?

Ozan Varol:

Yeah, zero.

Dave:

Exactly.

Ozan Varol:

Zero, exactly.

Dave:

But it sure feels like that, which is something that we all do. But do you have a habit like you walk through a door and you ask why or when you do something? How do you know to trigger that? Because constantly asking why is part of my life, but I don't think most people have that kind of a thing going on. [inaudible 00:11:31] doesn't ask why all the time learn to ask why when?

Ozan Varol:

Yeah, that's a great question. I don't have a trigger in myself, but that certainly might be useful to someone who's just starting this. And so maybe setting an alarm clock that goes off every three hours or every time you walk through a doorway as you said or every time you find yourself doing the same thing over and over and over again. It might help to journal about it in the morning. That's one of my regular practices is like, "Why am I doing this? What kept me up last night? What are the things in my life that need reevaluating?"

And then another piece of this, which goes back to something you asked me, which is, "How many people died because you didn't check your email in the morning?" and the answer, of course, is zero. But we assume that if we change how we're doing things, especially if it's a thing that we've been doing for a very long time, life as we know it is going to come to an end. It's just all of these horrible consequences are going to ensue. I encourage people to experiment with change. This is what I did with checking email too, I was like, "Okay, this seems silly," but instead of saying, "I'm just not going to do this ever again," I said, "I'm just going to experiment with this for two weeks. I'm going to experiment with it for two weeks, not check email before noon, just to see what happens." And that experimentation mindset reduces the threshold for entry, reduces the barrier to entry because now you're not necessarily making a permanent change, you're just acting like a curious scientist and you're saying, "Let me just see what happens if I try this." I tried it, and nothing bad happened, of course. And then if good consequences come from it, then you can make that change permanent.

Dave:

Makes a ton of sense. I'm going through your book, you talk about that idea that says, "Okay, you're going to uneducated yourself by just asking yourself, 'Why am I doing this?'" But then you break it into these phases, which is cool because building a framework for understanding of a new process or a new habit or a new way of thinking is really difficult. That was why I did the roadmap for the Bulletproof Diet, for instance, because I'm like, "How do I teach the algorithm for the thinking so it's easier?" But you move into something you call it a discard phase. What is discard in your model?

Ozan Varol:

Discard is trying to figure out what doesn't belong to you. These could be habits, routines. It could be identities. I think when it comes to discarding, identity is something that gets in the way of a lot of people. We tend to confuse identity with self, but identity actually often obscures self and gets in the way of the self, because once you call yourself, "I'm a Democrat. I'm a Republican." or "I'm a lawyer" or "I'm a doctor. I'm an engineer," then you end up structuring your life to feed that identity versus changing the identity to serve you.

One of the examples from my life is I was a university professor for 10 years. That was an integral part of my identity, I was professor of a role. Shortly after I got tenure, this was back in 2017, I realized that academia was no longer for me. I had been teaching the same classes at that point for seven years, attending the same types of committee meetings, answering the same types of student questions. This career that I absolutely once loved was now beginning to confine me. Even though there were signals coming from within me saying, "Look, you should do something else. Instead of spending a year of your life writing an academic article that only 10 people or 20 people in my subspecialty field read, why don't you write articles and books that can reach a much bigger audience and have a bigger impact?"

But I resisted that change for so long because my ego was kicking and screaming and saying, "Dude, you've been a professor for seven years. What are you going to do if you let that go? And more importantly, who are you going to be?" And so, when you tightly wrap yourself around an identity like that, which so many of us do, it becomes really hard to change because changing means getting rid of the identity and that for most people becomes non-negotiable. That's why discarding is so important. Before you can find yourself and figure out what you think and what you want to do with life, you have to discard what no longer is you.

Dave:

How many identities would you say you've had?

Ozan Varol:

Oh, so many. Tens, right? Also, if you think about it in terms of not just your career but your political beliefs, the way that you structure your relationships or the bands that you like or like, "I'm a Cross Fitter" or "I'm Paleo" I'm this or that, there's so many identities that we unwittingly incorporate into our lives that we don't even realize they're there until you put yourself under a microscope and start examining them and you realize how cluttered your identity space is with all of these labels that end up suffocating you.

Dave:

If you could have only one identity right now, what would it be?

Ozan Varol:

Work in progress.

Dave:

If you could have only one identity right now, what would it be?

Ozan Varol:

Work in progress. Like that, perpetual work in progress.

Dave:

Yeah, I was thinking about that. I would say, yes, I identify as a biohacker, but I imagine that one from scratch, so I'm good. If I'd do one thing, I'd be I'm a superhuman who's continuously improving. I choose that because I believe that by choosing an identity consciously, it actually changes your biology. Your body and your mind will start to build themselves to that. And so, you might as well choose to identify as an absurdly healthy, absurdly attractive, absurdly energetic person who can actually see through other people's clothes. I don't have X-ray vision yet, but I'm going to identify as having it because it would be fun. I'm like, "Whatever. I'd rather have that." Is it a good practice to identify as something that doesn't exist yet?

Ozan Varol:

Totally. I guess it depends on what the thing is, but as long as you're doing it, and I love what you said, Dave, there, as long as you're doing it intentionally and you're choosing this thing and that choice is up for revision. You're that today, but you may not be that tomorrow. Then you can be whoever you want to be. And as you said, I think the moment you start saying, "Look, I'm a healthy person," then you begin acting in ways that actually support that versus hinder it. But I think that the important part for me is to see all of these parts of me as perpetual works in progress, continually being revised. I mean, people are in a rush to get clarity and figure everything out, but everything all figured out is the end. That's when the credits roll and that's when the lights go out. But the movie or of your life is it's still ongoing, you're still in the middle of the action constantly evolving and expanding. If you permanently define yourself as this thing, then you're going to stop that evolution from happening.

Dave:

It's interesting, you say the lights go out and you figure everything out. Are you saying that you figure everything out before you die or are you talking about Buddhist enlightenment, like you figure everything out so now the lights go out because you no longer reincarnate in Samsara?

Ozan Varol:

Yeah, I mean, it's more in the sense of you are learning every day as long as you're alive. And so, everything you all figured out is a time that comes when your life is over. Because if you're still living, that means you're constantly evolving and expanding, hopefully, and learning and growing and changing and evolving in many ways and transforming yourself. And so, if that's happening, then everything all figured out is always going to be somewhere in the distance. With that mindset too, you can lean more into curiosity because you're not so focused on this outcome of, "Oh, as long as I got perfect information and perfect clarity about what this particular path is going to look like." You can let that go and you can just lean into the breadcrumbs of curiosity that are coming up and follow them and see where they lead you and act like a curious scientist and run little experiments with your life and experiment with different possible futures to see which ones have promise and which ones don't.

When I was thinking about leaving academia, I didn't settle on what I'm doing right now. It was one of many possible paths, and I tried a number of different things. I tried consulting and I hated that. I tried coaching and totally wasn't for me. But what was bringing me alive was writing about the ideas that I had and speaking about them on stage. Many people are deathly frightened of being on stage. I come alive when I'm on stage. When I can feel the lights on me, my body just comes alive in a way that it rarely happens in other settings. And so-

Dave:

Yeah, you're in a flow state-

Ozan Varol:

Yeah.

Dave:

... when that happens. Some people get that from public speaking, for sure. I do as well. But most people just get terror.

Ozan Varol:

I would rather speak to a crowd of 2,000 people than 10. I probably get more terrified talking to a group of 10 people than 2,000 in many ways. But so experimenting with those and then seeing, "Okay, this is bringing me alive and there's an audience for this that's really demanding what I'm leading into." The intersection of that ended up happening, the path that I'm currently on, but I don't know what my life is going to look like a year from now or five years from now, and that's awesome.

Dave:

I really like that perspective. You talk in the book about how persistence backfires. So tell me, why is persistence a bad thing, not a good thing?

Ozan Varol:

Persistence can backfire. It's not always a bad thing, but I think we place too much emphasis on persistence, particularly in the American culture, this idea of winners never quit and quitters never win. If you started something, you have to finish it. If you start walking down a path, you have to follow that path.

Dave:

Even if it leads into a volcano.

Ozan Varol:

Yeah, exactly, exactly. Regardless of where it's going, put your head down, nose to the grindstone, keep going in the same direction, even if all these signals that you're getting from within saying, "This is not you. This is totally aligned with who you are. You're not great at this." I wasn't great at coaching. If I'd put my head down and said, "Oh, I'm going to keep doing this," then it would've led nowhere. I would've ended up miserable, and the people that I was trying to help would've also been in a similar boat. I think we need to do more quitting. That's said, some people need to persist because they give up too quickly.

But there is just so much emphasis on persistence that I included the section on the book about, no, sometimes you need to quit because the path you picked isn't the right one for you.

Dave:

We fetishize persistence in our culture, especially in the West, because our biology is lazy. That's a core theme in *Smarter Not Harder*, in my new book as well. Because we know that our bodies will make quitting look more attractive than it is, so we build habits and thought structures to not allow our lazy hardware to get in the way of what we're trying to do. How do you know when to quit because it's not working?

Ozan Varol:

I think your body and your mind are constantly sending you signals. When something isn't working, deep down you actually know that it's not working. It's all of this external noise, so trauma might be part of it, external conditioning from society, the voice that says, "Winners never quit, quitters never win," fetishizing grit and persistence will keep you on keto or we'll keep you exercising to an extreme even when that is not good for you. You know that's not good for you because your body is screaming. Your body is constantly telling you that that is not good for you in ways of you wake up feeling exhausted every morning, you're not losing any weight even though technically you should be. Your blood work is completely sq. I mentioned my habit of checking email. There's now this condition called email apnea, which refers to people holding their breath, literally bracing for impact and holding their breath while they're checking email or texting. I realized that I was doing that too.

And so, the more you get in touch with those signals from your body. Just being attuned to your body is so important because, again, your body is sending you these signals that what you're doing in the morning, every morning, starting the day with email, is stressing me out. I made a habit of checking in with myself to see how I was feeling after certain things. You feel tired after exercise or weightlifting, but I was feeling better afterwards as long as I did it in balance. Email left me feeling completely depleted. One of the reasons I'm not active on social media is because I realize after repeatedly checking in with myself that I would reach for social media to get a sense of adventure, to distract myself, to seek novelty. But every time I tuned in, I would actually end up feeling worse than I did before.

If you're listening to this conversation, pause, go check your favorite sources of distraction for 10 minutes, come back to the interview, and before you click play again, just check in with yourself to see how you're feeling. Are you feeling elated? Are you feeling delighted? Or are you feeling this low level buzz of stress that wasn't there before? That's what I was picking up when I went to these sources of distraction. It's not through discipline or persistence that I taught myself not to resort to them, it was just after days and months of checking in with myself that I realized they were making me feel shittier than I did before. Once you make that realization, once you come to that realization, it becomes easier to give something up.

Dave:

It appears to be a major problem in society in socioeconomics where the most powerful way to make money is to sell something that does the opposite of what you say it does. Diet sodas make you fat, which means you'll buy more of them. These corn and canola oil is things that are supposed to be healthy, they make you less healthy, so you'll buy more of them. Social media is supposed to make you happy, but it makes you less happy, so you'll use more of it to make you have the connection that it's promising. I'm not sure how many of those are born out of evil, although some of them probably are. They're mostly born out of economics where there's a stable equilibrium where in a complex system,

well, okay, if profit was the goal, you did that. By the way, I am absolutely pro profit and pro capitalism. I'm also pro measuring human happiness and making sure that what you do is ethical and makes money. Those situations are unethical, but they're emergent from the system.

What you're talking about here is understanding what it is to the point that they don't become attractive anymore. I learned that about fast food a long time ago. The stuff actually, especially when my biology was really weak, it just made me feel so bad that I stopped seeing it as food. A friend said, "Oh, that's the place by Taco Bell." I'm like, "Where's Taco Bell?" He was like, "Dave, it's two blocks from my house, you drive past it every day." I didn't know there was a Taco Bell there because I don't see it because it's not food. Literally, it's like, I don't know, it could be some kind of plumber or something that I didn't need a plumber. It's just not in my visual map. But for most of us, if you had EEGs on your brain, if you like fast food, it would light up every time you look at it as the reward system in your body doing it. So you can change your reward system, which is a really powerful practice. But it takes time, especially for addictive things like social media.

Ozan Varol:

Yeah, exactly. It all begins with just being attuned to what you're feeling, how you're actually feeling after you consume Taco Bell or after you binge on social media and then coming back to yourself and realizing that there is this unmet need that whatever this is is clearly not satisfying it. That unmet need might be a sense of adventure, a sense of intrigue, a sense of excitement. And once you realize what the unmet need is and also realize that the thing you're going after isn't satisfying it, then you can step back and ask, "Okay, well, Twitter is not satisfying my need for adventure, it's actually making me feel worse. Where else can I get adventure? How do I go out into the world and actually satisfy this innate desire and human desire for intriguing excitement and adventure in ways that are actually going to feed me as opposed to suck my soul?"

Dave:

What's the best example of an activity that feeds you instead of sucking your soul if you're trying to get off the social media crack pipe?

Ozan Varol:

Spending time with my wife and our dogs. Playing with my dogs brings me such delight. I always wanted a dog when I was growing up and I never got to have one. And so when I play with my dogs, my inner child just comes alive and we're running around the yard and chasing each other. Sitting outside in our hot tub, even though it's not really adventurous, but just getting fresh air and being in that body of water, that hot water, is really, really satisfying for me. Playing soccer, again, something that I... Now that I'm saying these, I actually talk about this in *Awaken Your Genius* too. But a lot of the activities that we enjoyed doing as a child before the world told us what we should be enjoying are the ones that are still going to bring us alive in many ways.

And so, I loved playing soccer when I was growing up, and I recently joined a soccer league in Portland six months ago. It's been so much fun to reconnect with that part of myself and also to have the sense of community with your team and interact with other human beings. So yeah, those are some of the things that I do to get me outside, away from my screen, and go have some fun in the world. And travel, that's also a big part of what I do for adventure, particularly international travel. We talked about how do you change habits and routines, there's nothing like being in a foreign country to just completely turn your world topsy-turvy, right?

Dave:

Yep.

Ozan Varol:

You become a young bull again.

Dave:

It wakes up your brain in a different way. I totally agree, that's the most powerful stuff you can do.

Ozan Varol:

Yeah. And-

Dave:

I got to know-

Ozan Varol:

Yeah, go ahead.

Dave:

... your dog's name, is it a number or a name?

Ozan Varol:

Of course it's a name. There's two of them. Einstein is one of them, and Sputnik is the other.

Dave:

Love it. Of course, there you go, genius and rocket scientist. I see how you think. I love it. Okay. You talk about what our most scarce resource is. What is our most scarce resource?

Ozan Varol:

It's not our time, it's not our money, it's our attention. It's our attention because attention doesn't scale. You can only pay attention to one thing at a time. This is why, we already talked about this, is Silicon Valley companies have recognized the value of that extremely, extremely valuable resource and scarce resource and have turned it into a commodity. The way that social media works is you give your attention to Instagram or Twitter for free, and they sell your attention for a fee. Your day-to-day reality is defined by what you pay attention to. If you pay attention to junk, your life will become junk, just like if you eat junk, your life will become junk.

If you pay attention to junk, your life will become junk. But if you're intentional about how you use that scarce resource, it's like they say in the movies with a gun, "Be careful where you point that thing," it's the same thing with your attention. Be careful with where you point that thing because the more you consume, the more you direct your attention towards unhealthy sources of information, those sources of information are toxic in the same way that M&Ms or Taco Bell might be toxic for you. They're going to, in many ways, pollute your mind, conceal or reduce or hamper your ability to think for yourself. In the same way that eating a bucket of M&Ms for breakfast might damage your health, the same thing will happen if you keep paying attention to the wrong sources of information.

Dave:

I like that. I want to challenge it though.

Ozan Varol:

Please do.

Dave:

What about energy? If you have enough energy, you can actually have more attention. In fact, I'm joining the advisory board for a company that can provably increase your ability to pay attention for long periods of time. It's the kind of technology I've been using for 12 years. So if attention is malleable and trainable, it's what you need to have attention that's the ultimate resource.

Ozan Varol:

Attention might be trainable. I guess what I was saying was that you can't pay attention to more than one thing at the same time. I think we tend to think of ourselves as-

Dave:

[inaudible 00:35:14].

Ozan Varol:

... multitasker. Exactly. You certainly might be able to increase the span of your attention and the longer that you can pay attention to something, but you can still pay attention to only one thing at a time. And, if you are pointing that attention, you can have a really long attention span. But if you're pointing that really long attention span in the wrong direction, it's still going to be really harmful for you.

Dave:

I like the stages because you think very linearly and rationally because of your rocket scientist and your legal background. Both of those lend to structured thinking models that are good for learning, which I love. After your section where you talk about your attention as a scarce resource, that's the detox where you insert a mental speed bump between you and the impulsive things and how to prioritize it, but then you get into a new phase, the spectacularly you part of the book where you talk about discovering your edge. What does that mean?

Ozan Varol:

Discovering your edge, discovering your first principles, your core components, the consistent themes across your life, the basic Lego blocks of who you are, which again, for the reasons we already discussed, is just really difficult to do because you spend decades of your life being conditioned to look externally for answers and to think other people and not for yourself. And so, I share a number of strategies in that section about discovering your core components, what you're actually good at, your superpowers. I'll give you an example from my own life.

One of the questions I ask is, "What has been a consistent theme across your life, something that you started doing at a relatively young age and that theme has remained constant throughout?" One of those themes for me has been storytelling. From the year that I started to read and write, I would grab my grandfather's old typewriter, and there's a typewriter over here actually to remind me of that, and I would write stories. I would write screenplays. I would write stories. I'd started a magazine that only my

parents would read. And that storytelling theme, that interest, that curiosity continued across my life even as I picked these very different professions.

When I was a lawyer, as a lawyer, you're essentially asked to tell a story. You take the facts and you tell a story on behalf of your client. Later as a professor, I was storytelling in the classroom. I taught these big classes, hundreds of students in them. There were required classes so a lot of the students just didn't even want to be in the room. And so, I taught myself how to tell stories, to captivate audiences, to bring alive people even who did not want to be there. And then when I started writing books and speaking on stage, a lot of what I do is storytelling. Human beings are storytelling creatures. You can give them all the principles and strategies that you want, but they'll tend to remember the underlying principle or strategy much more clearly if there's a captivating story that's attached to the principle or the tactic that you're using.

That's why I tell a lot of stories in *Awaken Your Genius* from extraordinary thinkers. I find these stories in sort of you going back to the '80s and '90s. I find these stories in places where people don't tend to look. And so that's been one theme across my life. The dish that I create with it has changed, but that one ingredient has been there all along. We all have them, and I think the challenge or really the delight, the fun is discovering what those are. And then once you discover your Lego blocks and fresh principles, then trying to figure out what you can do with them, how you can combine them and recombine them in these rare combinations to create things that didn't exist before.

Dave:

Love it. Members of the Upgrade Collective, our live studio audience, are asking me to go a little bit deeper with you on how to ignite creativity. I'm thinking about how I do it. Forbes named Bulletproof as one of the most innovative brands in the country a few years ago, which is a sign that I'm going to think there's some creativity in there. For me, I know where it is, and it's up here into the left, is where I go and I grab something up here and it's effortless, it's just right there. It doesn't matter, it's always on top. But I think I'm a mutant. How do you do it? Do you go somewhere in your field to do it? Is it in your body? Is it a structured process? What is it, and what do you say about it in the book?

Ozan Varol:

I share lots of strategies in the book. Two just pop to mind right now, so I'll share them with the audience here. Number one is think before you research. Again, we're so conditioned to jump immediately on Google, when a question comes up, when you're curious about something, to immediately jump on Google and just start dreaming up searches to try to figure out the right answer and then try to sift your way through these awful SEO-optimized results that come that often give you junk information, is to think before you research. Before you jump on Google, so next time you're curious about something, before you jump on Google and try to research and read what other people have written on a subject, let's just say, you want to research where good ideas come from, there's lots of books on the topic. Instead of reading those books, first think for yourself.

So jot down ideas, however you do them, it might be on a digital note-taking device, or it might be like I do in a... Well, I actually do both a notebook and a digital note-taking device. But think for yourself and just jot down ideas about where you think, where you are hypothesizing that good ideas might come from, or whatever it is that you're researching. Because what happens is when you research before you think you become anchored by other people's opinions. So other people's opinions end up exerting this, to use physics analogies, this gravitational pull on you. And so, the ideas you end up generating end up being only marginal improvements, and this true in many cases, only marginal improvements over what other people have said.

The only way to reach escape velocity is to first come up with ideas yourself and then certainly go to the research and read what other people have written on it. But if you reverse the order, if you begin with the research first, you're not going to be able to reason from first principles and you're going to miss a lot of insights that exist within your depths because you went to seek other people's opinions way too quickly.

Dave:

Amen. That is so critically important because it's a big and useful shortcut. If you just want to solve a problem quickly and see if there's an existing solution so you can plug it in, that's cool, that lets you get things done. But if it's a problem that's hard to solve, that there isn't an easy thing for, or maybe you just don't even know if it's an easy or hard one because you just thought of it, think of at least for a minute to do it.

What I found is I will oftentimes look through existing solution sets and to be like, "Oh, none of those can tell me why it works, so they don't look like they're very effective." So I discard them and then look for, "Well, what are the questions that no one asked?" The thing that drives me probably the most crazy is when you see a paper and they say, "We have controlled for all variables." And you're like, "What was the gender, age, and luteal phase or some other phase of the person feeding the mice?" I'm like, "What, we didn't control for that?" I'm like, "Well, here's a study that shows that that's actually an important variable in how mice behave because they show a stress response when men feed them.

And [inaudible 00:43:45] matter, like, oh no. Right? You read the stuff online, a lot of it is garbage. And even worse, if you use ChatGPT, now it's going to be recycling garbage. It's like the opposite of creativity, right? Because there can be nothing new that's going to come out of that. So I'm a little concerned that that's going to destroy creativity and it's going to pollute the field with recycled information written slightly differently the way high schoolers do their essays. What are your thoughts on AI and what it's doing to helping people with creativity or harming creativity?

Ozan Varol:

Yeah, I'm also a little hesitant or reluctant for the reason that you mentioned. I think thinking is already something that people don't do. If you have this really easy shortcut where you just can type something into ChatGPT and get an answer right away, I'm afraid that people are going to immediately settle on that answer versus exercising their creativity muscles themselves.

One of the other things I do just relevant to that is actually devoting time to thinking, which most people don't do. I think most people don't do it because when you're thinking, it seems like nothing is happening. Whereas, if you're in your email inbox, with every email you answer, you're getting visible progress toward inbox zero. But when you're just sitting there and thinking, nothing seems to be happening. You let your mind wander or you're daydreaming, nothing seems to be happening, but appearances deceive. Your subconscious is actually hard at work. It's consolidating memories. It's making new associations. It's marrying the new and the old to generate new ideas that weren't there before.

That's why most people, if you ask them, "Where do your best ideas come?" most people will say they come in the shower. They come in the shower because it's one of the few moments of your day when you're just by yourself, you're free of distractions, you're in this pleasant environment, and you are letting your mind wander. You're letting yourself daydream, something that most of us were chastised for when we were growing up. Imagine what source of amazing ideas you might be able to generate if you just replicate those shower-like conditions throughout the day. Putting yourself on airplane mode

and sitting and staring at the ceiling for just a few minutes, it's incredible what happens. It's so simple, but most people don't do it.

Dave:

Those thinking times are super powerful, and I think we've lost it as a society because we're so eager to fill it. Even on this show, I ask oftentimes listeners, "Look, decide if this show is where you want to invest an hour. You want to spend it with me, you want to spend it on one of the other thousand episodes that might have a higher ROI for you, that's totally okay. You can turn it off and stare at a wall. I dare you to stare at a wall for an hour. It's really hard." But if you can get into a cold shower or an ice tub and spend a few minutes there, it's as hard to sit and stare at a blank wall for an hour and maintain your focus without going somewhere else, leaving your body because you're bored. They're equally hard, but more people will jump in ice than we'll just sit and do nothing for an hour, so it's an interesting challenge. I'm glad you brought us down that pathway, Ozan, thank you.

All right. The final part of the book, and there are some we're not going to get into just because it's a very well-structured book, it's the power of play. This is something you mentioned a little bit with soccer and with your dogs and things like that. Talk about creativity and play, what do you share in the book? What do you know about that?"

Ozan Varol:

In that section of the book, I open with this idea, which harkens back to the discussion we had on persistence and grit, of deliberate practice. There's a certain fetishization involved with that too, of deliberate practice is really important, you got to get in your hours. Practice is great for performing the same task in the same way. So deliberate practice is awesome if you want to perfect your golf swing or if you want to master an opening move in chess where you're doing the same thing over and over again, it's a repetitive thing that you're trying to perfect, deliberate practice is great.

But what if your goal isn't performing a repetitive task but is to generate new things, is to create new ways of existing, it's to generate new ideas that weren't there before. If that's the goal, then practice is not going to help, because practice is backward looking. You're looking back at this checklist, "How do I do this thing?" and you're just doing it over and over and over again. But if your goal is future looking and changing the rules of the game, creating new ideas that didn't exist before, then play becomes really, really important, because play is just doing something with no outcome in mind. You're bending the rules, you're abandoning the rules, you're picking up a different instrument, in many ways.

I tell the story in the book of REM, the band. The way they came up with one of their most popular songs of all time is the guitar player, Peter, was tired of playing the electric guitar. He'd been just doing the same riff on the same guitar for years and years and years. He sets aside the guitar and he, just for fun, for play, picks up the mandolin. He starts riffing on the mandolin and he comes up with this melody that he shares with the band. The rest of the band members also, they also switch instruments. And then the lead singer who would normally sing about political themes begins to play around with love and other themes that he hadn't done before. So they set up this playground and then totally unscripted, unpracticed, Losing My Religion comes out in one of these play sessions.

When they go back to actually recording the song, they go to back to their native instruments, but in that moment of generation, they set aside performance and they totally improvise. The moment they improvise, one of their most popular songs ends up flowing through. And so, I think there's so much value in that of if you're stuck in a rut, if you're operating on autopilot and if you're too ingrained in the way that you've done things in the past, setting aside your native instruments and picking up something just for play, just for improvisation, it becomes really important.

And so, in my life, the way I do this is sometimes, because I write non-fiction books, to play. You can think about this as warming up. To play, I'll write an outline for a novel or I'll write two pages of a screenplay. That's not going to go anywhere. I have no intention of writing a screenplay. But just devoting 10 minutes to this warmup creativity exercise where you're just playing right, there is no outcome in mind. You're just playing, when I go back to writing my nonfiction book, I end up bringing that playful, imaginative mindset over and I become a lot more creative as a result of that.

Dave:

That sounds like part of Rick Rubin's new book on creativity. Have you seen it?

Ozan Varol:

I haven't seen it, no. It's on my reading list, but I haven't read it yet.

Dave:

It's a really good book. There's a couple other nuggets, I said that was going to be our last thing, but a couple other nuggets I wanted to dig in on with you and we have to talk about it.

Ozan Varol:

Yeah.

Dave:

Talk to me about self-promotion.

Ozan Varol:

Yes. As a non-native speaker of English, I learned English as a second language and my parents didn't speak any of it, still don't, there are certain phrases that strike you as weird. I remember the first time I heard the phrase shameless self-promotion. I was taken aback, I'm like, "What does that mean? Shameless self-promotion as in promotion is normally shameful, and if you're promoting yourself and putting your ideas into the world, you must be shameless?" To me, that never made sense. Because if you don't promote yourself, then no one else will. Life isn't Field of Dreams and you're not Kevin Costner. If you build it and you do nothing to promote it, no one will come.

I think it's really important because one of the ideas that I talk about in Awaken your genius is this outer journey. You come up with ideas from your own depths and then you need to share them with the world. And most people are reluctant to share their ideas and creations with the world because they think of promotion as something that involves shame. But it's not shameful at all. It's actually, from my perspective, it's selfish and shameful to create ideas and not share them, to write poems and hoard them, to come up with business ideas and not execute on them. Because you're depriving the world of something that can be really beneficial to people who need it, but you're hoarding it, why? To protect your own ego. Because you might be embarrassed. Because you might go to people and say, "Here, I made this," and might get rejected as a result. But it's only by overcoming that. If there's any shame, it's not promoting something that can enrich other people's lives.

Dave:

You go so far in the book as to say self-promotion is an act of love for others who want what you created. I just want to say you nailed that. Because throughout my career, especially in Silicon Valley,

and actually even in the world of biohacking, I come across so many inventions that are world-changing, that are better than what's out there, and nine out of 10 of them fail because the inventor did the fun part, which is inventing, that's play for inventors. And then as soon as the hard part, which is telling people how good it is so that they'll actually use it, they fail because they don't even try or they don't know how to do it or they didn't consider it to be important.

Look, if you make something and no one sees it, why'd you bother making it? It was just masturbation, it felt good, nothing productive happened at the end. I would encourage people, anytime someone says, "Shameless self-promotion..." I don't practice shame. Shame is about something you are about not being good enough. Guilt is about something you did that was wrong. You can get rid of guilt. You apologize and you make it right. But you can't get rid of shame because it's built in your tissue. So anytime someone tries to shame me, I don't do shame, I just do me. And if you want to try and cast a spell of shame on me, I will shame you for it because that's your own reflection of yourself. I just wanted to say that you called that out as an act of love. Yeah, you build something great, you better shout it from the rooftops.

Ozan Varol:

That doesn't mean you spam people. You promote with kindness, you promote with respect-

Dave:

And integrity.

Ozan Varol:

And integrity, of course. By the way, promotion can also be playful. You mentioned invention of the thing is play, but marketing and promotion can also be playful because it's just another way for you to express yourself creatively. Again, if you're doing it with permission, then there's so much delight to be had in promoting something that you created. A lot of authors complain about, "Well, I wrote the book and now I have to go and speak about the book and say more words about the words that I just wrote," but to me, there's so much delight in that. I'm so grateful to have a life where I get to speak about ideas and to share the ideas that I wrote about in this book in platforms like this one. There's so much delight in play to be had in that. And instead of despising it and saying, "Marketing is dirty" or "Marketing is unplayful," if that's the story you're telling yourself, then you're going to act in ways that reinforce the story. But if you change the story and if you say, "Promotion is not shameful, it's actually an act of love. I'm going to this from a place of love and delight and play," then you'll act in ways that reinforce that alternative and much better story.

Dave:

Who knows, you might build a \$100 million company that way? Who would ever imagine? Now, something else that popped up, I had a lot of notes and so I'm just going through and picking out some of the other really cool ones, what does post hoc ergo propter hoc mean?

Ozan Varol:

It's a fancy Latin term. It's a logical fallacy that says, "After it, therefore, because of it." As in, you did A, B, and C and became a billionaire, and therefore, A, B and C was responsible for making you a billionaire. And the implication also being that if other people go out and do A, B and C, they also will become a billionaire. It's a logical fallacy because that's not how the world works. There might be other factors like X, Y, and Z that might be responsible for that outcome that you're not thinking about.

Dave:

It's funny, even in the world of nutrition and all, there's a famous guy named Dean Ornish from UCLA, who said, "Well, I'm going to have people exercise, meditate, and eat a weird diet that's unhealthy. And when they improve, I am just going to talk about the weird diet that's unhealthy." Right? And therefore because of it, he even discarded some of the things he had people do. The sum total of what you do is something that I talked about in a recent interview with Jane Metcalfe, who is one of the founders of Wired Magazine and runs a really cool newsletter now, just a very worldly person. We talked about that similar mindset, about how it makes problems in the world when people have these false assumptions and they get baked into reality. And then, of course, with ChatGPT, if those false assumptions have been baked into whatever ChatGPT learned on, it will repeat those throughout history as if they are true.

So this is a big risk, I think, to society that we have so many beliefs based on that after it therefore because of it that if you then just look for a solution to a problem, they're going to tell you, like you say in your book, "Follow this morning routine." I have to say there's one carve-out exception that's guaranteed to make you a billionaire no matter what, and that is clearly putting butter in your coffee in the morning. You do that, oh my God, there's no way you can fail, okay? Just so you guys know.

Ozan Varol:

Shameless self-promotion.

Dave:

There you go, playful at the same time. I'm learning. I'm learning.

Ozan Varol:

Exactly.

Dave:

All right. Your website is ozanvarol.com. I am really enjoying Awaken Your Genius, which is your new book, and I appreciate coming on the show today. Any final words for our followers?

Ozan Varol:

No, thank you so much for having me on the show. The book is available wherever books are sold. If you go to geniusbook.net, that's geniusbook.net, you'll not only find the purchase links, but I've got a free mini course that's based on the book that shares actionable strategies that you can watch in 30 minutes that will help put these into action right away. Like I said, I'm not active on social media, so if you'd like to keep in touch with me, the best way to do that is through my email list. I write one email that goes out every Thursday morning, shares one big idea that you can read in three minutes or less. You can sign up for that by texting my first name, Ozan, O-Z-A-N, to 55444.

Dave:

And it was geniusbook.net, right?

Ozan Varol:

Yes.

Dave:

Okay, good deal. So there you go guys, Awaken Your Genius is the main title. I would love it if you would pick up Smarter Not Harder at the same time that you pick up Awaken Your Genius if you order online, because then they'll be paired together by merciless algorithms, and that way everyone will know that, hey, these go together, because they actually do. Upgrade Collective, I'll see you all for the next one, and for listeners, I'll see you all... At least I'll imagine that I'm seeing you all for the next one as well. Thanks for listening.