

Seth Godin: Taking the Leap . . . and Picking Yourself

TS: You're listening to *Insights at the Edge*. Today, my guest is Seth Godin. Seth Godin is a bestselling author who is well-known for his books on marketing, the spread of ideas, and managing both customers and employees with respect. He's the founder of squidoo.com and the author of one of the most popular blogs in the world. In fact, back when the algorithm was interesting, Seth's blog was ranked by Technorati as the number one blog in the world written by a single individual. Seth's most recent book is called *The Icarus Deception*. In it, he argues that we've been brainwashed by industrial propaganda and he pushes us to stand out, not to fit in.

In this episode of *Insights at the Edge*, Seth and I spoke about resistance and how there is no art-making without it. We talked about what he calls "the connection economy" and how there's no guarantee you'll make money connecting with people through genuine self-expression—but how you need to do it anyway. We talked about how taking a leap is a requirement of the creative process, [as well as] the power of picking yourself and not waiting to be chosen. Finally, we talked about faith and what a life of faith might mean to Seth Godin.

TS: I wanted to start off by having you describe for our listeners, if you would, what I would say is a development in your publishing work. Meaning—from the outside, from my perspective—it looks like your focus has gone from writing about external challenges of strategy and marketing to more addressing yourself directly to what we could call "internal challenges" of creativity, expression, risk-taking, vulnerability. So, how would you describe that progression in your work?

SG: Well, I was a book packager for a long time. I did 120 books. [When I was making books,] my focus was to find the right combination of expertise, topic, and audience. So, we would do books on stain removal, gardening, and business. Almost all of that work was about things you could see and touch.

In 1999, I published my first "real" book, called *Permission Marketing*. That book was about a fundamental shift in the way that stuff—all stuff—was going to be brought to market and sold. I was fortunate that it struck a chord and became a bestseller, and I was off to the races after that. [I] wrote a series of books that followed in that model of, "There are new rules—there's a new way of being in the digital world—and we need to learn them fast. Because everything that we do—whether we run a tea company, a massage parlor, or an insurance company—everything is going to be changed by all of these rules."

What I discovered as I went on the road, talked about it, gave speeches, and tried to help people I cared about deal with this was that it didn't take very long for people to learn the new way of thinking. It's not that complicated. It took a *really* long time for people and organizations to actually do something about it. You can teach someone how to write a blog—all the technology and all of the technique—in about 25 minutes. But to get that person to write something worth reading takes weeks or months.

What I discovered was that the real failure—the weakest link in the chain—was our internal dialogue, the noise in our head—”the resistance,” as Steve Pressfield calls it. We have been brainwashed from birth—our grandparents, all the way back—to be cogs in an industrial system, to look for the right answer, to have a guarantee, and—most of all—to depersonalize everything.

The digital world and the changes all around us—I could talk about that forever, but it’s not appropriate today—changed all that. What we are rewarding today is not industrialism, but connection. The important ideas of our time—the important organizations of our time, the change that we seek to make—is getting made by people who have trust and people who are connected, not by people who can figure out how to make a widget for 10 cents less.

I discovered that I had something to say quite passionately about that noise in our head. You know this because I’ve told it to you, but you had a huge impact on me because your journey and the work that you have published for all these years goes right to the heart of what I’m talking about. When we find someone who is mindful and someone who is real, vulnerable, and present, we are much more likely to connect with that person. It’s these connections that enable us to make the changes that we need to make in the world now.

TS: Now, I want to talk some about [how] this “resistance” that you’ve identified is the hard thing in people to change and the hard thing for us to work with. In your book, *The Icarus Deception*, you write at one point: “Resistance is not something to be avoided. It’s something to seek out. And that’s the single most important sentence in this book.”

So, of course, I actually took special note when you said, “This is the single most important sentence in this book.” I thought, “Pay careful attention.” I also realized that I wasn’t quite sure I understood—at least not fully—what you meant. “Resistance is not something to be avoided. It’s something to seek out.” So, can you explain that?

SG: I’m glad I wrote it was the most important, as opposed to you just guessing that, because I really do believe it’s the most important sentence. In fact, [it] unlocks for so many people a chance to be doing meaningful work. Here’s my take on this:

We learned from an early age to run away from fear and to avoid the things that we are afraid of. If you are afraid of spiders, don’t hang out with spiders. If there’s a thunderstorm, don’t go outside and play golf because you might get hit by lightning. Fear has a good evolutionary reason for existing. We carry these fears through generations. People who aren’t afraid of saber-toothed tigers don’t have grandchildren, and that’s the end of that line.

So, we really have a good response to things that we fear. We bargain with fear and we argue with fear, and we try super-hard to create a life that doesn’t have too much fear in it. Recently, that has turned out to be a really bad idea.

The reason is: the work that we are looking for when we seek to connect—the ideas that we spread, the people that we sign up to connect with, the things we buy and talk about—are all the product of human beings doing things that frighten them.

I'll give you a simple example from the world of painting. Everyone knows the work of Jackson Pollock. Jackson Pollock—if you want to look at it commercially—his work is almost priceless. If you want to look at it in terms of the evolution of painting, it changed many things. Most people don't know that Jackson Pollock had a brother. Charles Pollock painted as Jackson Pollock did, but he painted just like his teacher, Thomas Hart Benton. So, it turns out that Charles Pollock wasn't an artist—he was a painter. He was a copyist. And it also turns out that no one's ever heard of him, and he changed nothing. The reason is simple: because Charles avoided his fear and Jackson danced with his fear.

Fear is now a compass. The noise in our head—the resistance—is a compass. It tells us when we are onto something—when we are about to do something important or personal or real; when we're about to do something that might make a difference.

So, if every time you hear that inkling in your head, you run away, you will become a wandering generality—somebody who doesn't make the impact you're capable of. But—and I've talked to people who choreograph ballets, I've talked to directors, I've talked to people who have built companies, people who have done things that don't necessarily feel artistic but have worked—and all of them tell me the same thing. Which is: that feeling is when they know they're about to do something important.

TS: OK. And yet, I'm sure many people experience that feeling and then go into some type of paralysis. They don't move through it. They're paralyzed. They're afraid of rejection, afraid of humiliation. That kind of thing. So, what have you learned about the people who move through it versus the people who become paralyzed?

SG: One of the myths that we have come to believe is that the most important part of business is the grand opening—that the way you become a success is overnight. We get picked, we show up on the red carpet, we are anointed, we are funded. You win.

So, it's easy to default to hiding or paralysis because you're waiting for the tooth fairy to show up, because that's the way it always works. But in fact, it's not the way it ever works. The way that it works is that people who get through this—who push through this—do it in the tiniest of ways.

So, you work in an office with 18 people in it. You make a habit of helping your coworkers without being asked—teaching them how to make something work in Excel or pointing out a way that they can do something that works. It's scary to do that. You're not supposed to do that. You're supposed to stick to your own.

And the person who does that—the person who becomes indispensable—that person has more conversations, gets more resources, tries new things. Gradually, step by step by step, all of those little, tiny things they do end up transforming the way they relate to fear. It's not that they went up and gave a TED talk in front of 1.4 million people. It's that they stood up at lunch and shared an idea with three people.

It's similar to the idea that you don't have to meditate by going to a silent retreat for two weeks. You start by meditating for a minute or two minutes or four minutes. This step-wise progression of dancing with your fear is something that people learn how to do. It's not something they are born knowing how to do.

TS: Now, Seth, would you be willing to share with us a fear that has been real for you—alive for you—in the last handful of years, and how you “danced with it?”

SG: There are many of them. They show up every day if I’m lucky. Let me see if I can think of a couple.

One of the things that I do is I give speeches. Over time, I’ve given maybe 700 of them. Now, a speech to 10 people, 50 people, or 100 people doesn’t feel like too much of a big deal to me, because I’ve sort of pushed my way through it. But I still have anxiety—which, in my definition, is experiencing failure in advance—when it’s a bigger venue than I’m used to, if I can’t see the people in the back of the audience, or if the people who organized the speech are really uptight when I get there.

The easy thing to do is memorize my work, act a little bit like a diva, and figure out how to shut down until it’s over. Instead, what I try to do when I feel these feelings is: figure out how I can allay the fears of the organizer; [or] figure out how I can go off my script when I’m onstage and do things that make me even more nervous, because that moment isn’t a moment I’m going to get again. It’s in those moments when we are on high alert that—at least, I find—I can do some of my best work.

I’ll see a video of a speech I’ve given afterwards and I don’t remember some of the things I said onstage because it came from a different part of me. It didn’t come necessarily from the part that copy-edited what I needed to say before I got there.

So, that’s one sort of item. Another one—which is maybe more common, in that not everyone is a speaker like that—is this idea of teaching one-on-one with people who feel stuck. It is very frightening—at least, for me—to find the gumption and the guts to look someone in the eye, be open to their experience, and to share my experience. It’s much easier to say, “Here are the six steps. Do what I say,” and much harder to let some silence sit there between us—to have both of us experience an intimacy that comes from when people are challenging something that maybe makes them feel a little bit uncomfortable.

TS: That’s interesting to me. What do you think is challenging for you in that situation—in that silence?

SG: Well, every once and a while, the person doesn’t want to respond to that void—that gap between the frames—by stepping into it. They use that as an opportunity to recoil. One of the ways to recoil is to challenge the teacher and say, “You have no right to be pushing me this way. You have no right to be presuming that I’m going to step forward and dance with you in this moment. Just go back to teaching the way you’re supposed to teach.”

That happens sometimes, and that is the risk that one takes. You’re not going to have a whole dialogue about it. You’re just going to feel a little bit hurt because you exposed yourself. Your soft tissue was right there, and someone didn’t accept what was offered. I think a lot of us would prefer it if people would accept what’s offered, and then we can move on to the next thing—as opposed to having it be a dead end. It’s like a stubbed toe. It’s a moment when you extended yourself and it wasn’t accepted.

TS: Now, you ask this interesting question towards the beginning of *The Icarus Deception*. You ask, “Do you think we don’t need your art? Or are you afraid to produce it?” So, we’ve been talking about how someone might be afraid to produce it. But what about this first part of the question? What if someone has a sense that, “You know, I don’t know if the world needs my art. It’s all been said—especially, gosh, when it comes to spiritual teachings. It’s been said for how many thousands of years. My voice—is it really needed? Maybe not.”

SG: Maybe not. I’m not going to argue with, “Maybe not.” But how do you know? And: how selfish is it not to find out?

We are talking about teaching something so vitally important, in the case of spiritual teaching. Or we’re talking about helping a third-grader learn how to read. Or we’re talking about helping a struggling business not go under, [not] lose its employees, and keep its payroll going.

You’re right: it might be that your contribution won’t help. But I think that we have so many levels of obligation as humans, citizens, and as partners to try. If it doesn’t work, I think we have to try again until it does.

TS: Now, Seth, you take such a strong position in your work of encouraging people to make art, to take a stand, to express themselves, to overcome their fears. I’m curious: how is it or why is it that this is such a passion for you—that this motivates you? What’s behind it?

SG: I wonder sometimes why everyone doesn’t feel this way. For me, it is the thing that almost all the great moments have in common. When I think about the support that my mom gave me all the years before she passed away; or when I think about watching a 12-year-old do something [that she was sure she would never be able to do] for the first time; or I think about a politician who finally stood up and told the truth—when we think about those moments that make up our lives, for me those are the moments.

So, I use the word “art” very distinctly to mean “the work of a human when the human does something that might not work, and when a human does something that touches another.” So, a painting could be art, but maybe not. And an opera could be art, but maybe not. But I know that when I go to the right museum in the right frame of mind—and I see these artifacts of what individuals did when they were willing to confront ridicule and failure—I look at those things and I think that, in that moment, the universe is opening a door for all of us. I get way more out of that than I do watching a *Gilligan’s Island* rerun or buying a pack of paper at Staples that’s cheaper than it used to be.

I think that industrial bounty is a wonderful thing. I’m glad that most people on Earth are richer than they’ve ever been before. But I think we’re not going to be able to advance the cause of industrialism of much more, but we can certainly advance the cause of humanity and art.

TS: Now, [Seth,] I’ve mentioned a couple of times your recent book, *The Icarus Deception*. I’m wondering if you can explain the title to our listeners.

SG: I'm betting most people have some knowledge of the story of Icarus. It's been told to us like a fairytale. Daedalus was banned by the gods to an island with his son. Daedalus said to his son, "I've figured a way out of here." He made him a set of wings, and the instructions were, "Do what I say. Don't fly too high, or the wax on your wings will melt from the sun and you will surely perish." [Icarus] did not obey his father and he died.

The message there is pretty clear: No hubris. Don't get too big for your britches. And most of all, listen to authority. But the fascinating thing about this myth is, in 1850 and 1750 and 1650 and for a thousand years before that, that's not what it said. What it said was, "Don't fly too high, but also do not fly too low—because if you fly too low, the water and the mist will weigh down your wings and you will drown."

My argument in the book is that the systems of our culture are pushing us to fly too low, and we are guilty of flying too low. I do explain the book why it's in their interest for us to fly low—that the consumer who goes into credit card debt, needs to solve every pain by buying something new, and needs to keep their obedient, compliant job in order to make enough money to pay off the credit card bill to buy ever more stuff—that's a happy outcome for an industrialist. But it's not what I think we are capable of doing.

TS: So, it's clear there is a danger in flying too low. Do you think there is any danger in flying too high?

SG: Probably, but I don't know very many people who have experienced a bad outcome because they did. I think that we can all find the exception of the person who spoke up too many times at work and was fired. Or the teacher who invested so much of her life in students that then didn't repay her in kind.

Yes, of course those things happen. But on average, most of us go to the end of the show with our songs still in us. I don't think our songs are still in us because they don't deserve to be in the world. I think they're in us because the system and the place we are growing up pushes us to not believe that we're welcome—that the world needs us to say these things and do these things—because the system has taught us that what the world needs us to do is go to a famous college, then get a good job, and then do what we're told.

TS: It's interesting to talk about the system being potentially the cause of someone's lack of making an attempt to fly higher. I think a lot of people blame themselves. "There's something wrong with me. I'm a scaredy-cat. I'm too terrified." That kind of thing.

SG: We tell ourselves all sorts of stories. One of the things that often happens if I do a podcast is people want to know, "How did you end up being creative? What did you eat for breakfast? What is your secret, because clearly people like you are different than people like us."

I believe that Michael Jordan is different than people like us. I believe that there are certain things that people are born with and are trained to do over the course of many

years that most of us have no shot at doing. Dunking a basketball in the NBA Finals being one of them.

But I don't think it's true when we talk about singing and writing and teaching and connecting and being human. I think those things are available to all of us, but a lot of organizations and people would like you to believe that that's for other people. *Other* people are born with this talent, right?

But the data that we see—the experiments that we do—show that that's just not true. Everyone who's listening to this did something with finger-paint when they were three that was original, they told a joke when they were five, and they came up with an interesting idea when they were seven. All of us—when we were younger—did acts of art and acts of genius and acts of compassion.

Then, over time, we believe that professionals don't do those things. So, we don't measure how many times did we change things for the better. We measure how many times I pleased the people who I work for.

TS: So, Seth: when I think about this artistry that we all have in some form, the connection economy, and your hypothesis here that connecting with other people comes from standing in our truth, expressing our art, being vulnerable, and that we all have the capacity to do this—the question that came up for me is I know people who I think really take a risk in expressing themselves. Maybe they're poets. Maybe they're musicians. And yet, they have day jobs because they're unsuccessful in today's economy supporting their families [with] their artistry.

I thought, “Well, that part of the logic doesn't quite hold up for me.” I think of many of my friends, and they can't support themselves expressing themselves, even though they spend a lot of time doing that.

SG: No question about it. I don't think I have ever said that people are entitled to make a living doing what they love. Or that if they do what they love with full abandon, the universe will take care of them.

What I am saying is that we start there. We start there, A.) because it makes us better humans; but, B.) it is necessary but not sufficient to be willing to do this dance to get to the place where you *can* do it for a living. There are way too many underemployed poets and artists of all stripes. But when you see one who does start being able to build something on their art, it's because of the commitment they've made to go down that path.

So, it's entirely possible that you will have a day job for 40 years and never make a great living doing those things you do in the evening and on weekends. But I don't think that people who do those things regret them. I think that they wish that we lived in a culture where it was more permeable and more open to someone who is that mindful and that heartfelt. But those are two unrelated things. We ought to get paid for it, but even if we don't, we ought to do it.

Most of the best work that I do and have done my entire career, I've never been paid for. It's in those quiet moments where one person is connecting with another person—or helping another person—where I feel like I'm doing my best work.

But that's not necessarily what the marketplace is going to pay me or you for. They're paying for something else. They're paying for souvenirs. They're paying for stories. They're paying for things that feel scarce in the moment. They're paying for a different sort of tribal connection. All of which we can go about creating if our goal is to make a living. But I need to argue that if you're not willing to do the internal part, don't even bother trying to do the external part, because it's not going to work.

TS: Fair enough. I'm with you.

Now, I want to talk a little bit about the entrepreneur as an artist. What special elements, if there are any, do you think are required for an entrepreneurial artist to be successful?

SG: OK, so the word “entrepreneur” is really tricky. Someone who builds a business that is a local replica of a business that already exists—someone who buys Subway Franchise Number 784 or the equivalent—we could call that person “an entrepreneur.” I think it's more appropriate to call that person a “small businessperson” because it's important, it's profitable, but it's not the field of endeavor that we talk about when you and I are talking.

We're talking about someone who is inventing—who is going into that gray area in-between crazy and proven to work. Somebody who is at a frontier of the way they're interacting with their customers, or the product they make, or their employees.

It's that dance where humanity meets the marketplace that I think [makes] fascinating things happen. Most people who make a living on their own are either freelancers—who are not necessarily entrepreneurs; they're people who have many bosses—or they are small businesspeople. We can talk about both of those things, because they're both great.

But this other category of “entrepreneur who's not sure it's going to work:” What we see here—particularly because the Internet makes it so easy for ideas to spread—is that act of creating a new reality in a marketplace is ever more interesting and ever more likely to lead to all sorts of impact that leaves a legacy and has meaning for the people you're doing it for.

TS: It seems to me that it's almost as if we could say a different variety of artistry, let's say, than fine art. And that's kind of what I'm curious about. What do you think are the elements that make someone successful in that particular form of entrepreneurial artistry, if we can call it that?

SG: I used to be that kind of entrepreneur. There were elements of it that were completely thrilling to me. It was a little like that very rare moment in the otherwise-boring sport of football, where someone runs 97 yards back all the way. During that 97-yard run, there's no path to follow. There's no instruction manual. Every sense is

on high alert, because you don't know from which direction opportunities and problems are going to come from—and there are a lot of people depending on you.

So what I am talking about is somebody who—in real time—sees the market, sees the opportunities, [and] sees the risks; figures out how to combine technology, money, people, and stories to create an outcome that customers are glad they engaged in.

What's fascinating to me—I started as an entrepreneur when I was 14—is this is legal and it is open to huge numbers of people. The talent that you need for it isn't particularly obvious. If you see someone who plays the violin at a high level, you know exactly what it is to be a good violinist. But it's not clear to me—having studied and worked with literally thousands of entrepreneurs—what they have in common other than the fact that they care enough to do this dance.

Some of them have one employee. Some of them have ten thousand. Some of them have insulated themselves from the risks. When I was doing it, every single risk and problem felt like an arrow to the heart—because I wasn't able to be mindful about it, because I had told myself a story of risk and fear and people depending on me, et cetera.

Which is the main reason I stopped doing it. It's consuming if you let it and thrilling when it's working—but also, for me, thrilling when it wasn't working. You are able—like in a fencing match—to be completely present in the moment when you're having these interactions. You never look at your watch and say, “Oh, two more hours and then I get to go home.”

TS: Now, it's interesting to me, Seth, that you're describing this entrepreneurial part of your life as something in the past. Do you feel that's just over for you?

SG: Well, I made a deliberate choice when I sold my company. How many years ago? Fourteen years ago. [I made the choice] to become a freelancer—to say, “I'm going to write. If there's words in this book, they were written by me. And I'm going to figure out how to make that noise in my head subside a bit—at least enough for me to be able to breathe and be present more than I could be when I was inventing the Internet.” Those days, when there were 50 of us trying to find different frontiers and go as fast as we could: it was compelling, it was addictive, but I needed to stop doing it for a while.

So, yes. I run a business now and I'm a freelancer now. But when I think about what someone who wants to go full speed is capable of doing today—which is so much different than just 10 years ago. So many tools available. So much leverage available. So many chances to change everything. It's not a young person's game, but it is something that you ought to go into with your eyes open.

TS: Do you think it's possible to be engaged in that all-consuming and thrilling work, but not to be taken over by it? To maintain that quality of composure, mindfulness, heartfulness, balance, et cetera? Do you think that's possible?

SG: Yes! I do. And I think that if I do it again, I'll be better at it. I think that one of the things that often happens—not just in this arena. If you ever talk to an author

who's busy watching their status on the bestseller list or reading their reviews on Amazon.

What we do is we get confused about what happens to our work versus what happens to us. Our work can be judged without us being judged. It is possible for someone to say, "I do not like this organization. I do not like what you made," without it meaning, "I do not like you." Getting the distance between those two things, I think, is an essential step in being a productive artist and contributor.

TS: Now, I'm curious about these "alternative MBA incubator programs," if you will. I don't know quite what you call them, but you get hundreds and hundreds of applicants. You pick a few people. So, I'm curious first of all [about] the selection process. And then, what are you doing in these small groups, helping people learn these entrepreneurial skills?

SG: I have another one next week, and the worst part is the selection process. I wish I knew how to just have it happen without the selection process. Nothing good comes to me or my experience in the world by having to say to hundreds of people, "I've picked someone else." So, I'm trying to figure out how to make that part go away.

The goal is to—because I sit in an office by myself all the time—to create a summer camp for grown-ups, where instead of having canoeing lessons, we are able to create some real intimacy and growth around the projects that are important to the people in the room.

I've found that this is extremely scarce—really rare. I wish someone had done it for me when I needed it—which is one of the reasons why I do it. I don't charge people to come to these things. The longest one I've done lasted six months. The shortest one is three days. We sit in my office around a big, beautiful, Norway maple table that I built and I put people on the spot. We tell each other the truth.

We talk about what it means to ship our work into the world—not just to imagine it. But if it doesn't ship, it's not art. If you paint a thousand paintings and keep them in your attic and no one sees them until you die, I think you were a painter but not an artist. Part of what it means to be an artist is for the world to interact with your work and be changed by it.

I think that if you are running a letter-press company or running a nonprofit or trying to launch a company that sells garage-door openers, it's all the same. You're trying to make change happen in the world—change that you are proud of, change that means something. Too often, the people who are doing this feel alone because they can't really talk to their employees, they can't really talk to their spouse, and they need peers where they can say, "This is the thing that I'm afraid of. *This* thing. This story. This legend that I have in my head. That's my boogie monster. Let's figure out why that is keeping me from shipping my work. Or why I use every excuse to criticize myself to support that monster."

TS: It seems that an inherent—and you point this out in your writing. There's something that we could call "the leap." There's some kind of leap that we have to take when we ship our work—when we launch the website; when we post the blog

piece that we have written that really says something we care about and we're not sure how people are going to respond. I'm curious if you could talk about that moment of "leaping."

SG: These are such great questions. OK. So, Yves Klein—one of the great conceptual artists of the previous generation, famous for inventing a certain color of blue—did one famous photo in which you see him leaping off a three-story building in Paris. This was long before Photoshop. But the photographer he worked with took two photos—one with him leaping without the people holding the mattress or net below him, and one with. So, he just double-exposed it and got rid of the net. So, it really looks like he's leaping into the street. The name of the picture is "[Leap] into the Void."

I look at this picture every single day. I was in Paris a couple weeks ago, and I got on a commuter train. I went to the little village where he took this picture. It was a 45-minute ride. [I] just stood on that street, 50 years after the picture had been taken, and that was an interesting communion for me to do that.

What Klein was trying to show us was not a picture of someone ending it all. When you look at his posture as he leaps off the building, he doesn't have the posture of someone who is leaping to his death. It's the leap into the void full of optimism, full of opportunity, full of, "What is going to happen next?"

He needed to do it over the street, not over the water. If he had done it over the water, it would have merely been a picture of someone diving off a diving board. We see that all the time. It doesn't mean anything to us. That's normal. But he was trying to touch the little narrative we have in our head that says, "Oh, no no no no. Don't do that. Something might not work."

His point was [that] we are confused between what feels dangerous and what *is* dangerous. The narrative in our head—the cycle, the noise—keeps confusing those things and pretending that things that aren't dangerous are, as a way to keep us from doing them. I view part of my job as being a crossing-guard, someone with a lantern, someone who's walking down the street saying, "That's not dangerous. That's not dangerous. That's not dangerous. That's not dangerous." Maybe if you hear it often enough, you'll take a tiny little step and discover it's not dangerous.

I'll give you a tiny little example: Two days ago, I spoke for an hour to two-dozen interns at a pretty famous investment bank in New York. These are masters of the universe. These are 21-year-olds who have everything going for them. They went to famous colleges. They got this A-list internship. They're going to have a job. They're going to do all these things that their parents think will make them successful—and they refuse to ask a question. They refuse to make eye contact. They took plenty of notes, but they didn't want to engage because they're afraid. They go to work every day afraid. They leave work every day afraid.

I turned to the person that had asked me there, and I said, "Brittany! In the history of this company, how many interns have been fired?" She said, "Never once had an intern been fired. Why would we fire an intern?"

So, the narrative that we tell ourselves—”Better not come up with something creative. Better not say something to the boss. Better not organize a lunch, because you’ll get in trouble, then you’ll get fired and then you’ll lose your home and then you’ll be homeless and then you won’t have anything to eat and then you’ll be dead.” We go instantly to, “Then you’ll be dead,” because, as you know, fear of death is underneath all of this.

But no one’s ever been fired. So, why not use this summer to make real connections? Why not use this summer to do actual leadership? Why not use this brief window to be the one they’ll never forget, because why not?

Even people with 26 safety nets, tons of privilege, [and] tons of opportunity in the future—they’re still just as afraid as everybody else because it’s so much easier to imagine it’s dangerous.

TS: Now, Seth, I want to underscore something you just said. You said, “Fear of death is actually underneath all of this.” You talked about this image “Leap into the Void,” and of course the void is what I think most people fear—something like nonexistence. So, tell me what you mean by the fear of death being underneath all of this.

SG: Evolution teaches us an enormous number of lessons. Why are wild animals wild? They’re wild because they’re controlled by their amygdala—a little, tiny, almond-sized part of their brain that worries about survival and reproduction. That’s all.

Well, there’s a reason for that. If they didn’t have it, they’d be dead. We are programmed by our genes to not die before we have kids. This ever-present fear of running out of food, being eaten by a saber-toothed tiger is one of the most basic—if not *the* most basic—emotions of all species, including humans.

So, then we built a culture. We learned how to talk. We learned how to write. We learned how to read. All of these things are built on top of the fact that we are still humans. So, we thrill ourselves by going on a rollercoaster, which is merely a tease for that thing that we are afraid of. There’s nothing good about a rollercoaster except the fact that we survived something that, in the moment, we think we might not. We create all sorts of life-and-death narratives around the things that happen to us. It’s all built into our language too, right?

So, every bit of fear that we’ve got—the bill collector brings that fear and the traffic cop brings that fear. If you’re going through customs or get stopped at the border, that’s the same fear. That, “I’m going to get caught with something. I’m going to go to jail. No one’s going to know I’m there, and then it’s all going to be over.” It’s all the same flavor.

What we get to do as civilized human beings is breathe a little bit [and] be mindful of where we are in the moment. As my friends the Zanders say, it’s all invented. We invent what it means to get an A. We invent what it means to not get into Harvard. We invent all the drama that comes with the things around us, and that invention belongs to us. That means we can get rid of it if we want to.

TS: OK, I'm going to pause at something here and see how you respond. Do you think that if we leap in our everyday life—you mentioned that this picture of someone leaping out the window is something you actually look at every day. So, here's what I'm positing: that if we leap on a regular basis, when the actual time of our death comes, perhaps we'll have confidence to leap then as well. We might not be as afraid on our deathbed. What do you think about that?

SG: There's some profundity in that that I feel is currently above my pay grade, but I will give my unsophisticated answer. Which is, I think that if you are walking around with all of your music inside of you and you believe that your job is to play it safe enough that you will live unmolested forever, death certainly feels to me like it will come way too soon and be really frightening. You haven't ever danced with the things that truly scare you.

Some of the people who I have been introduced to by you talk with authenticity about the fact that they are more ready for it than that. They have done things in their life that let some of the water, song, and dance flow out of them. They've experienced the void, and when you do that, it feels to me like it's more likely you're going to be ready when it's time. Not eager. Not even prepared—but I think willing to be mindful of what's happening to you as opposed to fighting something that you can't fight.

TS: OK, there are two teachings that I got from your work that I want to make sure we share with our listeners—because they've both really helped me. The first is something you mentioned before, but I want to underscore it—which is this idea of “picking yourself.” Not waiting for someone to pick you. When I encountered that in your writing, I realized that I was waiting in a certain part of my life—waiting for some broadcast television partner to pick me or something like that. When I read that, I thought, “You know, I'm going to stop. I'm actually going to make the next steps.”

So, I'd be curious for you talk about that, because I think it's really powerful to examine where they're waiting to be picked.

SG: I'm so thrilled that it resonated with you, Tami. The essence of what I'm saying is that—40 years ago, when we were kids—Ed Sullivan and Dick Clark did a lot of picking if you were in the music business. Johnny Carson picked who would be the next famous comedian. Sonny Mehta at Knopf picked who would have the next bestseller. The founder of Sounds True picked who would be the next person on audio.

This “picking” mantra really fits in beautifully with the regime of public school and our desire to hide. So, if you get picked by a famous college or you get picked by someone who interviews on campus, you are being given entry into the industrialized system.

So, we get this great excuse, which is, “Well, I don't have to be on the spot. I don't have to stand up in front of people. I don't have to take risks, because no one picked me.” It's easy to just blame it on the fact that you didn't get picked.

But now, if you want to sing, sing. If you want to dance, dance. I have a friend who has the same complaint of every actor and actress, which is, “She's not working

enough.” But you can make your own show and put it on YouTube, and no one can stop you. If you don’t get into a famous college, you can learn everything they teach at that famous college for free [and] on your own at the public library, using the Internet.

We can pick ourselves, both from the external point of view of saying, “Now, I am claiming this.” But mostly, then, for the internal way to say, “From now on, I am now seeing myself as a professional at X, and no one can tell me I can’t see myself that way.” That’s a huge shift, because what it means is the pickers—the authorities—have left the building and the people who are thriving are the ones who are picking themselves.

TS: I love it. Pick yourself. If you’re listening, pick yourself!

OK, the second thing that I learned from your work that really impacted me had to do with not needing everybody to like your work—not needing *everyone* to become your audience, but being happy if a section of the population likes your work. So, I wonder if you could speak to that.

SG: Sure. Well, let’s break that into little bits. First of all, if it’s up to you to be happy or not, let’s just start by being happy. Because giving someone else to decide whether you are happy or not doesn’t feel like a good plan to me.

The next step is to say, “Well, how do I know if I’m making good art? How do I know if the art I’m making is something I should be pleased with, or do I just have to completely go back to the drawing board?”

This leads to the discussion of weirdness and the long tale. Basically, it’s this: if you look at the bestselling items on Amazon, all of them have one-star reviews. Everything—once it becomes popular—has people who do not like it [and] who do not like it a lot. If your goal in whatever art it is you are making is universal acceptance, then the only way to achieve that is not ship it or to dumb it down so much that it doesn’t matter.

On the other hand, if your goal is to make a difference, if your goal is to matter, if your goal is to be missed when you are gone, you have to start with the understanding that that doesn’t mean for everyone. It means for *anyone*. One person who feels like you did something that mattered to them—that’s enough. That means you are onto something.

Then, if you want to get more commercial—if you want to get more externally successful—you’re going to figure out how to get from one person to ten people, and ten people to a hundred. Amanda Palmer—who ran the most successful music Kickstarter ever (1.2 million dollars in 30 days) then did a TED talk that became one of their most successful ever—started and spent three years in a white wedding dress, wearing army boots, standing on a milk crate with white makeup on her face in Harvard Square, frozen like a statue. Every day, 500 or 1,000 people would walk by her statue—and 20 would put some money in the bucket.

That's enough. Twenty is enough. Over time, they come back. Over time, they bring a friend. For all the people who heckled her and all the people who walked by—those people aren't who it was for. It's not for them. It's for the other people.

TS: OK, Seth. I just have two more questions for you. Here's the second-to-last one: I've heard you, in some conversations that we've had, mention a couple of times Zig Ziglar as a mentor for you—someone that you really respect and that you've learned some really important things from. I'm curious to know why.

SG: Zig started as a sales trainer. He was a door-to-door salesman. He then moved on to teaching door-to-door salesmen. So, I first encountered Zig because I needed to learn how to sell. I think everyone should learn how to sell. It was a huge growth experience for me. I was able to take the lessons I needed and ignore the other stuff.

But what was really fascinating was Zig then shifted and started teaching about goal-setting and staying motivated—he was one of the first people to do this—intentionally using audio to feed persistence and positive thought to people who were doing work that wasn't working yet. [They] were doing work that maybe was facing resistance in the marketplace.

So, I would listen to two or three hours every single day, the same way now I listen to people like Pema. If you're just feeding yourself rejections—and I got plenty—and you're feeding yourself cash-flow problems and failure, you're going to give up. But if you've got someone in your ear telling you stories, giving you examples, and mostly sharing enthusiasm about what is possible, that voice—even though Zig didn't meet me until shortly before he died—means the world to the person who's hearing it.

I think that the work you're doing at Sounds True is so important because this medium—brand new; *way* after Gutenberg—is super powerful. Something changes when you listen to an audio five times or ten times. Not just once, because the tenth time, you're not listening for the plot. You've heard the plot. You're listening because it's going to a different part of your brain—the part of your brain that is easily manipulated by fear. If you can feed it with a narrative that can counter and help dance with that fear, I think that's an immense gift to give somebody.

TS: And my final question, Seth: I don't think I've ever heard you use the word “spiritual.” I'm curious if you have an association with that, and if living a “spiritual life” means something to you. If so, what [might it] mean?

SG: I think that there is a really significant difference between faith and religion. I think that religion was invented by people to get other people do what they want. It is a useful tool when it provides a construct that reinforces our need for hope and faith.

I think faith is something fundamentally different. There are no words that go with faith or practices that go with faith. Faith is something deep within our genetic code that brings with it hope. It's faith—the practice of believing, connecting, and being open—that is what I think of when I think of spirituality.

So, for me, I would like to think I am living spiritually whenever I am doing my work. When I do my work better—when I do my work that involves dancing more with fear, and mostly when I do it more generously—I feel like the person that I hope to be.

I don't have a lot of patience for someone saying, "You are doing this religion wrong," or, "You are not like us. Therefore, we do not like you," or, "We will not give you dignity or respect." I think that those things are really hurtful, dangerous, and some of the worst things that people do to one another.

But when we do the opposite—when we live mindfully and find space for ourselves to connect with other people—that's what I call spirituality.

TS: Well, Seth, I want to say you've been a very generous friend to me and to Sounds True. I want to thank you so much for that. Thank you for being a guest on *Insights at the Edge*.

SG: Thanks! Are there snacks?

TS: We'll have to send you some!

SG: I thought like when I came in there would be that little bowl of strawberries and everything.

TS: From a distance, from a distance.

SG: I'm kidding you. You are awesome. This was super fun. I hope that the people that are tuning in get something out of it, and I really appreciate the work you do, Tami. Thank you.

TS: Seth Godin, bestselling author, speaker, blogger, a wild creator, and someone who inspires and encourages other people to step out, be generous, speak up, and create. Thank you so much.