

Doug Smith ([00:06](#)):

Hey leader and welcome to episode number 323 of the L3 Leadership podcast, where we are obsessed with helping you grow to your maximum potential and to maximize the impact of your leadership. My name is Doug Smith and I am your host. And today's episode is brought to you by my friends at Beratung Advisors. If you're new to the podcast, welcome, I'm so glad that you're here. And I hope that you enjoy our content and become a subscriber, know that you can also watch all of our episodes over on our YouTube channel. So make sure you're subscribed there as well. And if you've been listening to the podcast for a while and we've impacted your life, it would mean the world to me. If you'd leave us a rating and review on apple podcast or Spotify or wherever you listen to podcast, that really does help us to grow our audience and reach more leaders.

Doug Smith ([00:46](#)):

So thank you in advance for that. We'll get ready to be inspired in today's episode. You're about to hear my conversation with John O'Leary. If you've never heard of John, let me tell you a little bit about him. He has an incredible story in 1987, John was a curious nine year old boy. And when playing with fire and gasoline, John created a massive explosion in his home and was burned on a hundred percent of his body. He was given less than a 1% chance to live. His epic story of survival was first showcased. His parents' book, overwhelming odds in 2006. Originally they printed 200 copies for friends and family, and now his parents have sorted over 60,000 copies of that book. And it was that book that first invited John to embrace his miraculous recovery and share it with the world. John now inspires over 50,000 people at a hundred plus events each year.

Doug Smith ([01:30](#)):

He speaks to companies and organizations across industries, such as sales, health care, safety, marketing, finance, faith, education, and insurance. And he's consistently described as one of the best speakers we've ever had. He receives nearly 100% of his engagements from referrals. His schedule is a Testament to the power of his message and who he is as an individual, his emotional storytelling, unexpected humor, and authenticity make each of his presentations truly transformational. His first book on fire. The seven choices to ignite a radically inspired life was an instant number one national bestseller selling over 200,000 copies and being translated into 12 languages. John's live inspired podcast is a top rated apple podcast and has more than 2 million downloads. And his second book in awe rediscovered, your childlike wonder came out in may of 2020, and John considers his greatest success to be his marriage, to his wife, Beth, the four children and his relationships with friends and family.

Doug Smith ([02:29](#)):

And I love this conversation. John inspired me and fired me up. And you're gonna hear John not only share his story, some of the lessons that he learned along the way, and of course, I'll take him through the lightning round as well. So you're gonna love this episode, but before we dive in just a few announcements, this episode of the L3 Leadership podcast is sponsored by Beratung Advisors, the financial advisors at Beratung Advisors, help educate and empower clients to make informed financial decisions. You can find out how Beratung Advisors can help you develop a customized financial plan for your financial future by visiting their website at beratungadvisors.com. That's beratungadvisors.com securities and investment products and services offered through LPL financial member, FINRA and S I P C Beratung Advisors, LPL financial and L3 Leadership are separate entities.

Doug Smith ([03:16](#)):

I also wanna thank our sponsor. Henne Jewelers that are jeweler owned by my friend and mentor John Henne, my wife, Laura, and I got our engagement and wedding rings at Henne Jewelers and had a wonderful experience. And not only do they have great jewelry, but they also invest in people. In fact, for every couple that comes into their store and gets engaged, they give them a book to help them prepare for marriage. And we just love that. So if you're in need of a good jeweler, check out, [Hennejewelers.com](#). And with all that being said, let's dive right in. Here's my conversation with John O'Leary. Hey John O'Leary, it's an honor to have you on the podcast. Thank you for making time to do this. And I just want to dive right into your story. I feel like your story's gone around the world. And so you had a very interesting, a very challenging experience when you were nine years old. Why don't you tell us a little bit about that?

John O'Leary ([04:05](#)):

Well, even, even the way you framed that, like traveling around the world, it, it would've been the last thing in the world that I would've expected for this story, because it's the one thing I hope that would not come out of the story. Maybe we can talk about that later on. But the story you're referencing was at age nine, I witnessed kids in my neighborhood playing with fire and gasoline. So I grew up in the Midwest in St. Louis, Missouri, and little boys out here. At least, maybe things are different in Pittsburgh, but out here, little boys are crazy, man. So they're playing with fire, they're playing with gasoline and I assumed if these kids could do it. So could I. So my father's at work on a Saturday morning. I walk into their house, mom and dad's walk into their garage, come over to a can of gasoline and try to model what I'd seen none about a week earlier. And Doug, as I'm, as I'm tipping, this can of gasoline five gallons toward a piece of paper that's on fire. I remember waiting for the liquid to come out. And before that happened, the fumes inhaled my little flame into the container and created this massive explosion. It splits some metal can into picks the child up and then launches me 20 feet against the forest out of the garage. So that's, that's the inflection point, man. That's the very beginning of our story.

Doug Smith ([05:24](#)):

Yeah. And so, so you launched 20 feet. What happened? What happened next?

John O'Leary ([05:29](#)):

Yeah. So I'm in the garage, I'm on fire. I'm covered in gasoline. And when I came to everything around the garage was on fire as well. So it's almost like a movie you see flames, but it's hard to move and identify the fact that like, it's your life like you're on fire. And so what, what happened was I was literally if part in the pun blowing away had no idea really what had happened. And I just remember knowing I was in trouble. You know, like when you fall off a bike and you, you know, it hurts. You're not even sure where it hurts. You just know it's like, oh, something happened here. So I ran on fire through the flames, ran back into my mom and dad's house, ran through the kitchen, the family room and stood on top of this rug. And I rarely shared the story, but I think it's relevant.

John O'Leary ([06:13](#)):

For many of your listeners, you know, I should have stopped and dropped and rolled, but I was so freaked out. I just kept running. He eventually stood on top of this rug, screaming for a hero, praying for a savior. I'll take anybody. And I see my brother, Jim, who was 17, he's the oldest in our family. He was a junior in high school. He had never done anything kind for me in my entire life. And he's the last guy who I thought that day would be my hero. And yet he's the one who had been anointed, man. He's the

one who received a call. And I think there's a lesson somewhere tucked in there for all of us. If we pay attention to it, what he does that day is he comes down the steps a little bit farther runs past me. He told me later on that the flames were leaping three feet off of my body in all directions.

John O'Leary ([06:58](#)):

So it's like a little Inferno burning in this house. In front of him. He picks up the rug and begins beating me with this rug. It took him a couple minutes. Doug burned himself in the process. He carries me outside jumps on top of me, saves my life, runs back into the house chases, the dog out chases. My sisters out calls 911 long story made far shorter, 1987. The lifesaver of the year for the state of Missouri was not a first responder or a police officer or a veteran, not the usual suspects. The lifesaver here of the year was a 17 year old self-centered pimple faced jerk brother named Jim.

John O'Leary ([07:40](#)):

Who changed. And that's the call of your podcast. That's the call of our lives to continually become a better version of ourselves. And, and I saw it in action that day play out in front of me and a whole lot of people, but I saw it very clearly in my brother, Jim.

Doug Smith ([07:54](#)):

Yeah. I, I want to go deeper in the story, but I am curious, you know, fast forward all these years later, what, what's your relationship with him like now?

John O'Leary ([08:02](#)):

Right. Sohe's still a jerk. He's still my older brother. I still love him to pieces.

John O'Leary ([08:08](#)):

He you know, when I was married, I got married a couple years before he did actually. And he was my best man. And he gave a talk a toast that I have, I can almost say to you word for word. It was so powerful. Two years later when he was on the altar, I had the honor of, of being right behind him and then giving him a toast in reminding the audience, those gathered that evening for his celebration and his wives like that. I may be the best man, but I'm only here because of his actions. And that is true. So Jim is far more than a brother to me. He is one of my best friends and he is certainly my hero.

Doug Smith ([08:41](#)):

Yeah. So, so your brother, Jim saves your life. And then obviously the story continues from there. You had to, you ended up in the hospital and had to go through quite a recovery journey. Can you walk us through a little bit about what that looked like and even, you know, I've heard you share your story before the first time you interacted with your parents since the fire, can you just run us through that whole scenario and story?

John O'Leary ([09:01](#)):

Right. So look, I, I usually like race and then anytime you wanna say, dude, tell me more about your brother or tell me more about your dad or whatever. Just feel free to ask. Sure. So here, here's the first person with my last name that I met in the hospital. His name was dad. <Laugh> right. So my dad was a veteran. He's a business owner. He was about 41 years old at the time. He was at the office on that Saturday morning. And that morning, Doug, I just remember laying in the hospital bed after my brother

saved my life. I'm in this bed, in this emergency room by myself, looking down, everything around me is burned. Like it's a hundred percent burned, which is at the time un-seemingly un-survivable. So my entire body is burned and I'm scared and I'm panicked. And clearly the thought I had as I look back on it that morning, I shut in that room was, oh my gosh, my dad is going to freaking kill me when he finds out. I wasn't worried about my body or recovery or what job will I get when I finally graduate university in 50 years?

John O'Leary ([10:11](#)):

Like I wasn't worried about that stuff. I was worried about my dad's wrath. And I would imagine from your listeners, some of us can relate to that. When we let down someone who we loved and looked up to and I let my dad down, man, in a mighty way, he, he told me a million times not to play with fire and gasoline. And here I do this thing and it caused us this devastation, not only to me, but to our house. So that's what I'm thinking. And this is a true story. And I remember my dad's voice down the hall, yelling at some nurse. And the echo coming toward me was where is my boy, John? Where is my boy, John? And this nurse does me no favor. She brings my dad back into this room. She, she should have called security on the old man pulls back the curtain.

John O'Leary ([10:58](#)):

My father walks in his shoulders were back. He marches over to me. He points down and then word for word that day, Doug. He says, John, look at me when I'm talking to you. <Laugh> so in my family, like that's the kiss of death, man. So I look up at my dad and then he says, I have never been so proud of anyone in my entire wife and my little buddy today this morning, I am simply proud to be your father. Okay. Then dad says, I love you. I love you. I love you. And there's nothing you can do about it. And we could spend a lot of time unpacking how I felt. But needless to say, my first inkling was to think that my dad had not heard what happened. Like I, I, I imagine as a nine year old, no one has told my dad what happened to his house.

John O'Leary ([11:53](#)):

And yet what, you know, as a leader and what your listeners know as leaders is, of course he knew. And he also recognized that day, what mattered and the importance of showing up his grace and compassion and love into a situation that is calling for it. So listen, we could spend four of your podcast talking about the recovery in hospital. It was extraordinarily arduous. It should not have happened, but I will tell you it would not have happened. Had my dad not shown up with grace, there's no way. And so I, I, I credit my brother with giving me that first chance and my sisters for what they did in the front yard and then the neighbors for their support and the paramedics were being there on time. But the story ends if my dad shows up differently. So I'm just so, so grateful even to this day for my dad's love.

Doug Smith ([12:37](#)):

Yeah. And I think, you know, as I hear your story and maybe I'll have you share one or two more people, but I just love that God used ordinary people doing somewhat ordinary things to make an extraordinary difference in your life. You know, whether it was your dad's love, your brother's love. And then you had people throughout your recovery journey. My understanding is in the hospital. You know, I heard you share a story of a custodian that made a huge impact on your life. And Jack Buck, can you share maybe one or two of those stories and just impact that, that they had in your recovery.

John O'Leary ([13:09](#)):

Awesome. So back to your point around ordinary people doing extraordinary things to be part of somebody else's miracle like, yes. Yes. So I'm not gonna start with Jack Buck because he's extraordinary. He's a hall of fame, wealthy, known commodity. We expect greatness from greatness. I think we don't expect it for ordinary folks and we sometimes don't expect it from ourselves and that ultimately, man, that's like what? Our work, my work, our organization's work is all about. Yeah. When years ago I wrote a book called on fire. It came out in 2016 and when the publisher first put it in front of us, like this beautiful cover, it was a picture of John Veary on the front of it, wearing a beautiful suit tie, just write arms, cross looking out the reader, like, look at me, I'm extraordinarily successful. And, and if you read this, you would be two.

John O'Leary ([14:01](#)):

So I wrote back and I'm like, Hey guys, did you read the book? Because the book's not about me. And ultimately it's not about, it's not about extraordinary people. So I'm quoting you now, Doug, it's about ordinary people doing extraordinary things. And when they do so faithfully, they are part of somebody else's miracle. That's the call. That's what on, fire's about? So when you look at a picture of, on fire today, what you see is not a picture of O'Leary on the front of it or back of it on the front of the book. And I don't have a copy in front of me, but on the front of the book is it's like the letters O fire below it on fire it's made of what's called foil stock print, which means it looks like it's literally on fire. These letters, it like gives off red and orange and yellow tents.

John O'Leary ([14:45](#)):

But if you look more closely, you see a reflection of the reader, or if you're holding it a, a, a picture of Doug right in front of it. And the idea is that people ordinary people, you and me, in other words, see within these miraculous stories themselves and, and they're called to be part of that for somebody else. So I just wanna be very clear, like, yes, this is a crazy story, a hundred percent burn and all these other things you're gonna hear, but we only share this so that we recognize our role. All of our roles, myself included in being part of somebody else's miraculous story. So one of the individuals who was part of my miraculous story was a janitor named Lael. And, you know, laves a, just about a minimum wage employee. He, from my understanding, he took a couple bus lines to get to work on time.

John O'Leary ([15:34](#)):

And it's a hard job. You're working in a hospital, which is hard. You're working in a burn center, which is extraordinarily hard. You're cleaning floors and emptying trash cans. Like this is, this is grueling work and you're overlooked and underappreciated for the efforts that you put out there each day. So this is part of lava's story. And yet every single morning lavas he got into work would round with the entire team. And this is just beautiful. I, I don't usually share this story either. So it's really cool to, to brag on, on these folks, the guy who would round with lave and everybody else was Dr. Vain, who was this beautiful shortish fellow born in Syria. He was burned as a little boy himself came over to the states for care and eventually for medical school afterwards, and eventually finds himself treating patients in St. Louis.

John O'Leary ([16:24](#)):

And one of the members on his team was a custodial staff member named Lev. And he would round every day, this doctor and his entire team. And one by one, he would bring them in, have them sit on the bed and remind them that they individually were the reason why this little boy, and he would point at me, survived the night they, and he would point at me again, were the reason why this little boy is going to survive the day. And then he would say to them, I looking right into their eyes. Thank you. Like,

thank you nurses. Thank you, CNAs. Thank you. Pts and OTs and other doctors residents, but the first person he thanked every day was Lael the first person. And I, I think there's so much to be said about the least among us. Aren't we, we overlook him so often and we celebrate bolds, you know, tweets from the great leaders who get the other side. We, we love it. When the Republicans get the Democrats or the Democrats, then they punch back at those Republicans. We love it when our leaders yell. And yet what I learned from VCI vain, who was a true leader, was that the least among us never are, they are the most important people on the team. And he would thank them every day for their work. So yeah. What, what a lesson he taught me as a little boy.

Doug Smith ([17:42](#)):

Yeah. And in, in the book, on, on fire, you have a whole section just, and you talk about being a victim versus a Victor, you know, for, I don't even know. I'm just assuming that the natural person, if they went through what they went through, what you went through, they could have given up, they could have played the victim card for the rest of their life made excuses. What do you think empowered you? I mean, clearly, you know, what you're doing now is remarkable. What do you think enabled you to, to come out of that situation and be a Victor and not a victim? I think we live in a culture right now where everyone wants to feel like they can play the victim card and say, poor me. Why me? How did you make that transition? Why, why are you doing what you're doing today?

John O'Leary ([18:22](#)):

Well, it, it's reason number 1,738 that I don't have a picture of me on the book, cuz I, I don't feel qualified to answer that question as far as like what, what I did cuz I know I'm not that good. I, I believe God is big enough to elevate the way I view my life and the way ultimately I came to that understanding was through a conversation early on with my mom and then a, another conversation later on with my dad. And so the one with my mom and there's so many to share, but I, I, I, I think the one I'd like to share with your listeners today is when I first got home from the hospital. <Laugh> this is just such an awesome story. She's such a better parent than I am. I have four kids and I'm a third of the parent that my mother was to me. So I got a long way to go mom and other listeners. How would

Doug Smith ([19:07](#)):

I'm with your kids' age range?

John O'Leary ([19:11](#)):

16, 14, 12, and 10.

Doug Smith ([19:14](#)):

Okay.

John O'Leary ([19:15](#)):

So we're the throws of it, man. Yeah. I'm knee deep and and losing, losing ground in the quagmire of life, but, but grateful

Doug Smith ([19:23](#)):

For it.

John O'Leary ([19:24](#)):

So when I'm nine years old, I spent five and a half months in hospital should not have survived. It's an un-survivable event. So the miracle takes and then eventually mom and dad can take this little fellow home. They do. Our house is rebuilt. Like life is good. Life is good, man. We're back together. As a family, things are different. I'm gonna be burned and scarred for the rest of my life. I'll probably never stand again. I thought I'll probably never go back to school again. Clearly I don't have fingers. They've been amputated, but I'm home. And that night, my mom made dinner for us all. It's just the six, like six kids and mom and dad and a golden retriever named taffy at this table. No one else was around it. It was a really sacred special night for us. And the problem that I had Doug is I, I can't hold anything with my hands, cuz I'm a victim and I've been victimized by this fire.

John O'Leary ([20:14](#)):

This thing that has happened to me. And so my favorite sister, she knows it. She'll probably listen to your podcast. She cuz she just she's avid fan of, of the work we do. So Amy shout out to my, my sister and friend living in Austin, Texas, Amy Ary, Amy grabs a fork. She scoops up potatoes and she brings them for by mouth and ride. As the potatoes are about to enter on in man, right? As I'm about to be fed by someone else. Cuz that's what, when we're a victim, that's what we want. Just feed me. You know, right before my sister feeds me, we hear the voice of my mother coming from my right and it says, Amy drop the fork.

Doug Smith ([20:57](#)):

Wow.

John O'Leary ([20:57](#)):

If John is hungry tonight, he will feed himself.

Doug Smith ([21:01](#)):

Hmm.

John O'Leary ([21:03](#)):

And dude, Doug, what? I knew what Amy knew, what my father and four siblings knew and anybody who car to look over our shoulders and observe would know is there's no way this little boy will ever feed himself. Look at him. He's a victim. He scarred and broken bright red skin, open source, no fingers. Very clear that this little boy is victimized by life. It's obvious to anybody who wants to see it, including me. And so I look at my mom with that kind of face where you're like, you know, gimme a break. And then she doesn't look at me. She looks at Amy and says, Amy, like I said, if he's hungry, he's gonna feed himself. And Doug, I could <laugh> we could spend a couple hours unpacked. What happens next? Because it quiet literally took a couple hours to unpack. But by the end of that night dinner had been ruined.

John O'Leary ([21:50](#)):

A couple plates, had been flipped onto the floor. Everybody else had left the room except for the dog who was still eating the red. But by the very, very, very end of the night, there's a little boy with no fingers, no chance at life with a fork sandwich between two broken, useless, good for nothing. Hands scooping up potatoes on plate. Number three. Now moving them toward his mouth chewing and

looking with great hatred toward his mother. But the key is this he's feeding himself. Like I'm I'm for the first time since being burned, I'm doing something for myself. And I, I believe you're a faithful guy. I mean, Jesus, when he does miracles frequently will say things like pick up your mat.

Doug Smith ([22:37](#)):

Hmm.

John O'Leary ([22:38](#)):

Wash your face. Yeah, take action. Do something, do something. And so often in life, man, we just keep waiting for someone else to pick up our mat or to wash our face. Wow. Or to feed us that next bite of, of potatoes and my bold mother. I would've never done this for myself. I would've never done it for a child cuz I'm not, I'm not that Intrepid, but she was. She is. And that's why I don't know. That's why I just wanna celebrate her today. She's just such an awesome mom.

Doug Smith ([23:07](#)):

Wow. And you you've mentioned faith several times. I'm just curious. Were you always a person of faith? Did that come in your journey later? What role has faith played in your whole journey?

John O'Leary ([23:19](#)):

Yeah. <affirmative> yeah. I mean, so I, I grew up in a Christian home and we prayed before dinner and went to a Christian school and went your church on Sundays. You checked every single box man. And yet at that age it was ultimately a child like faith and the faith of my parents, if I'm real with you. But for me at age nine, it was a real faith. And when I colored a picture of Jesus in a boat and then ultimately outside of a boat, calling Peter onto the water with him as a little boy, I believed if Jesus ever called me out of the boat, I could walk on water. Hmm. Not like, I don't know. It seems to go against everything. Physics has taught me about life. I really believed as a child, if, if the God of the universe called me out of the boat, I could walk on that water too, which was really healthy after being burned.

John O'Leary ([24:06](#)):

And ultimately being told that the way forward is to shut your eyes, take the hand of God and walk onto that water with him, which is what my mom and dad reminded me of daily. And so I, I believe back then that he could guide me into this journey. So I, I think that's a hugely important part for me as a little boy, recovering. However, we're honest about it. As you get older, you recognize that sometimes even with a faith, sometimes you start to sink and even with a strong faith, sometimes the things you pray for don't come to pass. And even though you pray later on in life for me, I had a friend in high school and two in college die in automobile accidents, where was God for them? And where where's God for you when you're seeking love in your life, you've never dated.

John O'Leary ([24:49](#)):

Like, so it, it, you gotta, at some point wrestle with that, that child like faith. And that's when you have to decide whether or not it was just your parents and it was convenient when you're a kid, but now you're gonna figure out your own thing. Or if deep down it is yours and that's a cool thing to wrestle with. So I I've of course wrestled with that. I would would imagine most of us do at some point in our lives and what a great thing that is to do. And now I'm, I'm, I've wrestled. And I've been proven in my life that the God of the universe remains the God of the universe, that he remains faithful, that he is who he says he is. And, and <laugh> for me, it is liberating to know that I don't have to figure out how to solve

the next puzzle. Like I, I know how the story ends. And all I have to ultimately do is to pick up my mat, say yes and shut my eyes and walk. So it is my faith. It happens to be the same faith my parents blessed me into, but it's, it's real, it's been tested and it's been proven. Right?

Doug Smith ([25:48](#)):

So talk to someone who's, who's listening. It's going back to the, the victim role talk to someone who's going through a difficult season. You know, maybe they just went through a divorce. Maybe they lost their job, you know, whatever the situation is. And they just start saying, man, why me, why did I get dealt this hand? I'm never gonna get out of this. What would your encouragement be to that person today?

John O'Leary ([26:11](#)):

I, so the, we just talked about wrestling and I I'm six foot tall and weigh like 150 pounds. So I am not a good wrestler, man. Any of your listeners would not go leery down and hold them on the mat for as long as they desired. But I, I would be okay. Wrestling with the sadness and the grief and the anger and go through all those appropriate emotions. I struggle frequently. And honestly, when I see people going through a storm divorce loss of a job loss of a child and smile at the camera and say, you know what, it's just God's will it's we're okay with this. I think in time that understanding can come to pass and you can recognize how God used, agging me to bring you your family and others closer to him. And I think it's okay to acknowledge that this is this stinks and this feels unfair and it is okay to be mad.

John O'Leary ([27:04](#)):

It is really okay to be mad. Our God is big enough to handle that kind of wrestle match and love us afterwards. So the very first thing I would say to someone wrestling right now in their life is me too. And it's okay. And, and and I would even say this, if I can serve you as a friend, Hey dude, I'm online. Like you Google John O. Lee, you go to the website, my email's there. The phone number is there. Our podcast is there, let us know how we can support you, how we can encourage you, how we can pray for, or with you, what we can do to support you along the journey. So I would encourage people to be okay with that wrestle match, to not try to do it by themselves, and then to ask themselves as they continue the journey forward.

John O'Leary ([27:45](#)):

What can that new vision look like? How can that adversity a job loss, the loss of a relationship that was dear to you ultimately ultimately be used to draw you in a direction that you may not have chosen previously. And, and when we begin to cast a new vision based upon the realities of our life today, not on the life we wish we had had a year ago, 30 years ago before I got burned before God amputated my fingers. No, the life I have today, that's when ultimately we can live not only into the fullness of our lives, but ultimately the fullness that God desired for our lives.

Doug Smith ([28:24](#)):

In the, in the book. You talk about life being sacred. I'm, I'm curious, you know, when you have a near death experience do you find yourself, is it easy for you to, to count life as sacred and just be grateful for every day? Or is that still a challenge for you? I'm just curious how, what your view is on gratitude.

John O'Leary ([28:41](#)):

Well, it's kind of a yes. And so I'm guilty. Like almost all of us have taken things for granted, including breath and heart heartbeats and everything else. That's so often we just ignore, cuz of course we have life today. So what I'm blessed to have experience is not only the hardship of a near death experience and then the agony coming through that, not only during five months, but years of recovery and therapy and surgery. The other piece, Doug, that I seldom share, even in the book on fire, I don't think I write about it. And I don't talk about it often because I don't find it to be super relevant to audiences. But every time I look in the mirror, I'm reminded of it every single time. When I look in the mirror and I recognize most of your listeners are hearing that seeing me today, but I'm burned from my neck to my toes, which means scarred and damaged and broken and quotes less than, but I also experience like wounds and sores. So every single day of my life, when I look in the mirror, I not only see John O leery staring back at that reflection, I recognize how broken the reflection is, which either will drive you to ask the question, why me as a victim or here's the, here's the flip or to ask the question, why me?

John O'Leary ([30:02](#)):

How did I survive that? How am I still here? Why did my wife see something beautiful in this? Why do my kids wanna take this damage hand and hold my hand? When we drive to school, why do I have the honor of traveling around the world as a speaker? Why do I have the blessing of still being able to look up to? And I mean that to my mom and my dad to have a relationship with my brother, who's my hero, four sisters involvement and engagement in the community. I'm healthy. They may not always look like it, but I am healthy. So today, when, when you ask about John, is it a, was it something you received as a kid or do you make the daily choice? And the answer is like, yes, both. Yeah, both. It was something I received as a child and something I receive every time I look in the mirror and my encouragement for our listeners is to, to recognize how unlikely it is for you to have survived.

John O'Leary ([30:57](#)):

Anything you've survived in your life, not just a fire or the car accident or when you're, you know, playing up on the roof, throwing the ABI when you were 11 years old and you, you left like, no, no, not just that stuff. The likelihood of you being born. I, I think the math plays out like this. If you look at your mother's, we won't go through all the biology right now, Doug. But if you want later on, we can do an after hours session with <laugh>. But if you look at the biology, your mother brought to the table and the biology, your father brought to the table, the likelihood of you coming out of that union, just biology wise ignoring the miracle of your soul, but just biology is less than one and 400 to trillion. Wow. So that's not that's million with a tea.

John O'Leary ([31:43](#)):

You have a less biological likely to being born for, to your mom and dad than less than one in 400 trillion. And then we bark about our Starbucks being too hot or too cold <laugh> or the flight. You get a jumbo jet in the point in the air. And you're like, dude, it's 15 minutes late to a air. This air airline sucks. Really your life is a gift. Breathe that one in savor that. And you're about to experience another gift. Hop on a big old jumbo jet and fly from pit to, to Chicago safely. It's a shocking blessing. And many of us, if we aren't careful, we wish it away and we miss it. So rather than waiting, aboard the next flight or hit up the next vacation spot, dude, just put the podcast on pause, look in the mirror and say, God, wow, look what you designed perfectly. Look what you wove together, man. I, I haven't earned this. I don't know how it came to pass, but I'm grateful for it.

Doug Smith ([32:41](#)):

You have a, a quote in the book I think it's by Henry Nowan. It says in our woundedness we can become sources of life for others, which I love. And, and you've clearly done that with your life. Can you walk us through that journey of when did you decide to actually start sharing this story and you know, how did that whole world take off for you? As far as speaking, writing and going around the world, inspiring people.

John O'Leary ([33:07](#)):

So it's beautiful. You bring that up. I have, I've been blessed. I've spoken a couple thousand times now around the world. So that's a lot of audiences on a lot of clients. I only keep a couple trophies if that's what you want to call them, whether it's plaques or glass things or pens, or, you know, those types of stuff. One of the trophies I have, and there's only like four in the entire office, but one of the trophies right behind me is what's called a K bar. And it's a Marine's favorite tool. It is what they use in combat. If it's hand to hand, it's what they use to open up their, their meals. It's what they open. If you use frequently to dig a trench, if those soils really hard, and this K bar is in a glass box up above it has my name on it. And it's given to me by a group of warned winded warriors, who I've been blessed to serve probably 40 different times now. And so it has like some cool little expressions from them below my name, thanking me for the work we do right below that K bar. I have a quote from Henry. Nowan the one you just referenced.

John O'Leary ([34:06](#)):

Wow. Because I recognize why would it group of tough, awesome masculine, beautiful, brilliant Marines, welcome a skinny fingerless, scarred nobody into their presence. And, and then not only welcome 'em in. Why would they love 'em afterwards? How's that even possible? Like how does that, how do those two jive? I don't have a more experience. I don't know what it's like to be wounded. I've never lost a guy in a, a foxhole that I love. I've never been through that. So what is it? And it is that woundedness piece. So your quote's beautiful now and is a brilliant thinker. I love that K bar now you've got a little bit of access to the Aller office. So that's, what's going on behind me in that back right corner. When did that begin? It began in two ways. I was in a church service actually on a Sunday morning and a pastor was preaching about talents.

John O'Leary ([35:03](#)):

And I don't know, a couple hundred people in church, but it looked like he was staring at me <laugh> and he was saying, ultimately, if you've got five talents, multiply, if you've got three multiply and O'Leary dude, I'm looking at you. Now, those of us who feel as if they have one multiply. So I'm 27 years old. I'd never shared with anybody. My story, because I felt as if it was not a story worthy of being shared because why would you ever tell anybody about a, a horrible event in your life? Like what good can come out of, out of woundedness to use that word to use a moment ago? So that was convicting to have to be in church and to be realized, even though you feel as if you only have one, do something, man, pick up the bat, do something with the one you've got, you know, in God's timing, which is always perfect.

John O'Leary ([35:52](#)):

Even if we wish it wasn't two days later, I'm at work and my phone rings and a little girl scout. If you read on fire, you probably heard this story or read it, but a little girl scout called and said, Mr O'Leary. So I remember responding, oh, I think you want my dad. And she said, no, Mr. O'leary before you hang up, Mr. O'leary dad, your dad gave me your number. Would you, would you share your story of being

burned as a little boy with our group? So Doug I'd never shared that story of being burned with anybody in my entire life, but on the heels of being called to, to do more, more with my one talent, it's only one, but I guess I could apply that to a group of one group. And I, I could apply that talent one time. So I practiced this speech for literally 40 hours delivered it.

John O'Leary ([36:43](#)):

It was in a 10 minute presentation to three girl Scouts. It was brutal. It went about as well as you might expect, which is to say horribly, but one of them was moved enough that she told her dad and he was a, a Arian. And he called me and said, Hey, John, I heard what you did for the girls. Say, would you do that for a club? That I'm part of? So I said, sure, sure. And then one of those guys was in Qantas and then one of those guys ran a small bank. This is the way the, the gospel's always spread. It's the way goodness has always spread. It's the way evil has always spread too. It's one by one, one positive act, one evil act at a time, one truth, one lie at a time. It's always how the world has been changed. I think we underestimate our ability to influence change through our lives negatively or positively choose wisely, choose very wisely. You saw an example in Buffalo recently of what evil looks like. It just it's built on the heels of one lie and then one lie and then one more lie behind. Like that's all it takes to change the world negatively. The awesome part though, our calling through your podcast, it can also change positively through our lives. And so I, I was called into this profession seemingly very accidentally, but through God's perfect timing.

Doug Smith ([37:54](#)):

Yeah. So before we dive into the lightning round, I would love to just hear a little bit more about what you've learned. You you've spoken all over the world. You write, we have a lot of people that are aspiring authors in aspiring speakers. What have you learned just about public speaking and, and that whole business or ministry per se?

John O'Leary ([38:12](#)):

Yeah, I like the word ministry. That's a very cool way to look at it because many times people approach me and they say, John, I wanna become a speaker. I'm really good at it. I've got a strong stage presence. I've got an awesome thing up story. I never dangle prepositions. I am. I just think I'm the best. And my mother told me that.

John O'Leary ([38:31](#)):

And then you ask like, well, what's the reason like, well, I just know. And it's, I, I, I, well ministry, not at all about, I it's more like, dude, I don't, I really don't think I'm qualified for this. I've got an ugly face. It's more of a radio face if I'm being real with you about it. And I dangle prepositions. And that that's when you recognize it, dude. So it's not about you. You're saying Doug it's about ultimately the call. Okay, awesome. Now we can talk about it. So the, the very first thing I would say about the ministry of speaking or podcasting or writing or knocking doors and trying to sell anything in life is it ought to ultimately not be about you, but about the audience member that you're in front of. And part of the reason I think that we've become as successful in our career is we have couple thousand audiences, 49 states, dozens of countries, millions of people is because every time ale takes a stage or the team members in this office help 'em do that. None of it is motivated by what we get out of it.

Doug Smith ([39:27](#)):

So

John O'Leary ([39:27](#)):

Good. We don't look for followers. We, we don't chase cash. We track that stuff. Absolutely. But none of it is done for what we get. It's always about how do we influence positively the lives of those we are have with the honor of being in front of next, whether three girl Scouts or 30,000 in a, in auditorium, how do, how do we serve them? Well? So if that's the way you're coming at this thing, then everything you do is you build out the slide deck or you have the pre-calls or you get ready to go on stage ought to be about Lord. How do you want to use me for this group today? How do you, how, how can I be used? And if that's really how you're approaching this so many the other pieces that you might ask around speaking, but you're gonna just naturally fall into place, which means, yeah, you probably should get a coach on how to structure content more effectively.

John O'Leary ([40:16](#)):

You, you probably should practice a lot, but again, it's not practicing for you. So you look good. It's practicing because you have one moment in time in front of a broken group of people, three girl Scouts are 30,000 and they're long in for hope and they're struggling with emotional health challenges. And they're dealing with social injustices, inequalities, and difficulties on families. They're going through divorce, whatever. And then you have an opportunity for 10 minutes or one hour to love them. Well, if that's the call, then you better treat it seriously. So there's a lot of pre-work that goes into getting ready for that hour on stage. But all of that pre-work ought to be done in order to make that hour on stage profoundly powerful for the audience. Lucky enough to hear your voice.

Doug Smith ([41:02](#)):

Yeah. You, you probably just answered this, but I'm always curious, you know, I, I know you've spent time with Dave Ramsey in his organization and you know, the question always for Dave would be, you know, how do you share the same message over and over again, three hours a day for 30 plus years. And you know, for you, I don't know how old you are, but you've been sharing the story since you were 27.

John O'Leary ([41:21](#)):

Sure. Yeah. I'll be day from

Doug Smith ([41:24](#)):

What

John O'Leary ([41:25](#)):

They, Dave would just say, sell the truck, sell the truck.

Doug Smith ([41:28](#)):

<Laugh> yeah. Sell the truck. Is that what keeps you, you I guess I'm just curious, is that what keeps your story fresh? As you've shared it? I have a story as well and you know, I shared it all the time. It's just, okay, here we go. Again. Is, is, is this just simply remembering people are longing for hope. If I show up and share my story today, I can invoke hope in the sea pool, right? Yeah. Okay. That was my

John O'Leary ([41:51](#)):

Question. So and so, yes, it's, it's a beautiful question. And it's actually kind of a difficult thing to do. And I would say utterly impossible. If Dave Ramsey is telling listeners 30 years of, of the same call, Dave got a dad Dodge Ram that I love we're in debt. So then he responds sell the truck. Like how many times can you have the same call before? You're like, dude, I'm done with this. What motivates Dave? What motivates all missionaries? What motivates you? Doug? What motivates me is not, how do I get more listeners? It's how do I make sure the listeners I have the viewers I have the audience that I have are inspired to take the next right step forward in their lives. And so years ago for me, what I, what I created to make sure that I did my work, I prepared better.

John O'Leary ([42:37](#)):

I grew a bigger audience. We met 'em in different ways through books and podcasts and coaching series and all the stuff we've done. How do you do that? How do you stay authentic and all in every day when it's the same thing, dude, same thing. So here's my mission statement for life. My mission statement, the reason I choose to tell people to sell their truck or go on the next flight or get on the next stage or hop on the next podcast, John O'Leary chooses to thrive. So that's the answer you want to answer the question I choose to thrive and here's mine. I choose to thrive because God demands it. My family deserves it. The world is starved for it. Let's roll, no excuses. So I choose to thrive again, this, every stage, big and small seen and unseen because God demands it. My family deserves that the world is star for it. Let's roll, no excuses, no excuses. So what I am motivated by is that expression of truth coming into an audience. And then what I recognize as you do as Dave does is these audience members are clamoring and longing for something that you can share with them. And many of them, if, if we're real about it, well, what, here's what we know, 66% of us feels if we're isolated a little bit more than that feels, if they have no one in their life to share truth with 1.4 million Americans last year attempted suicide.

Doug Smith ([44:05](#)):

Geez.

John O'Leary ([44:06](#)):

So the game you and I play is life and death like this. Isn't like, I wonder if I can get paid. We next? No, no, no people in this room are wondering, should I even be alive? Tomorrow? Is my life worthy? Is my child like, how do I do this thing? Well, so I don't think this is a joke and I don't view it as a speech or a podcast or a book. I view it as mission work. And I take that very seriously as I know you do as well.

Doug Smith ([44:31](#)):

Yeah. And you just shot a whole shot of adrenaline in my own arm to get fired up about the work again. So thank you for that. And speaking of let's roll with the time we have left, I wanna roll into the the lightning round. And so just a bunch of fun questions I always ask. And the first one is what is the best advice you've ever received and who gave it to you?

John O'Leary ([44:50](#)):

Hm Hmm. Gosh. There's so many answers to that. Two, two answers come to mind very quickly. The first from my mom, she had a, a little post hanging up in the kitchen growing up and it said this too shall pass <laugh>.

John O'Leary ([45:03](#)):

And that's a very good thing to be reminded of when you are on the big stage. And Dave Rams is introducing you to name drop for a moment, or you got the following or you have status or whatever the things are that you know may mean. You are all that. It's important to have someone whispering over your shoulder. This too shall pass. Dude, don't get a big head. Don't miss the miracle of this moment. Don't let the days go with these little children that you have the honor of raising. Don't miss anything. This too shall pass, but she hung not only for those moments. She also hung it for the negative moments. The moments when our house would burn down and her little boy would come with an inch of losing his life. This too shall pass. She hung at for when we had a second house, fire years later, she hung at for when my father was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and they lost everything financially as difficult or as beautiful as life might get in front of her, what she knew she needed the reminder of this too shall pass.

John O'Leary ([46:02](#)):

So then hold onto the things that don't pass away. Okay. That's, that's a really key lesson for me to learn as a little boy growing up. And as a man today, the second thing to learn from them growing up my dad's lesson, he taught me I'll go through the story very quickly, but what he said to me when I was really struggling with a question of why me, why me so, so unfair. He leaned into my little wheelchair even closer. And he said to me, John, darn it. This thing has happened to you. And if you want to be a victim to it for the rest of your life, no one's ever gonna blame you, cuz you've been to the bottom of the, well, you've been abused. You've been, you've experienced trauma. You've gone through physical agony and you're always gonna live there. So if you wanna be a victim have at it. And then he said, or you can be a Victor, you can choose John to recognize what God is using this story for. And then every room we rule you into, or eventually when you rise from that wheelchair, every room you walk into, people will look up to you in awe, not at what you have done in your life, but ultimately what they might do in theirs. And then he said to me, victim or Victor, John, your choice.

John O'Leary ([47:15](#)):

And Doug, that was a conversation that my father had with me 35 years ago that I remember as if it happened earlier this morning, victim or Victor, John, your choice. And so that, that those are two great monikers victim or Victor, your choice. This too shall pass.

Doug Smith ([47:34](#)):

This is certainly not a lightning round question, but I think I have to ask it just based on your whole story. Sounds like you have phenomenal parents raising six kids. It sounds like obviously not perfect, but made a huge impact on your life. You're raising 14 teenagers. You're in the thick of it. I'm raising. I have three little ones. We're going for four. What advice do you have for me as a, as a parent raising kids.

John O'Leary ([47:57](#)):

Awesome. <laugh> so we'll start the next podcast with that question because we'll spend an hour unpacking it together as you and I, as I don't dictate how to do it, but share a little bit of what I've learned. I think the more you can teach a lot more, less, a lot less with words and a lot more with your action. That's key. The more we can love. 'em The way a grandparent loves their child. The way Jesus might love a child parents get so stuck up in test scores, being on the a, what do you mean Johnny missed that? He's on the B team. That's not fair. Like he's a great shortstop. All this nonsense. It is utter nonsense and off air. I'll use a far firmer word. It's ridiculous though. So, so often parents care about the stuff that does not matter in, I lotta not even a little bit, not even a little bit.

John O'Leary ([48:46](#)):

What grandparents recognize is the stuff that matters and what Jesus Christ recognized is the stuff that matters. And when he makes the call, let the children come to me. He's not making the call that if you are under the age of 11, let Doug's children come to me. He's inviting Doug's parents and Doug and Doug's adult listeners to get over themselves, to set ego aside and to step open-mindedly. And open-heartedly back to the well to experience again, what really matters in life. And the more we experience what matters in life, along with our children in a place of love and truth, but also accountability and conviction. The more exceptional our par our little ones will be as they move forward into their lives. So what I would encourage all of us to do myself included is <laugh>. In fact, I saw Hamilton recently talk, yes, smile more.

Doug Smith ([49:43](#)):

From Amber, Amber

John O'Leary ([49:46](#)):

Recorded. I talked to smile, MEMS, smile, smile, more

Doug Smith ([49:50](#)):

Love of, were you a fan of the ham Hamilton?

John O'Leary ([49:55](#)):

No, man. I'd never, I have heard of it. Of course for years. I, I hadn't heard a single song before my wife and I went down a couple weeks back and dude, I, I can't get it out of my head. Now. Every song just keeps rolling through in particular, the one where they move uptown. Yep. And they moved through the unimaginable, the unimaginable, losing a child and losing a marriage into the unimaginable of coming back together and offering forgiveness in the midst of the storm. The unimaginable.

Doug Smith ([50:21](#)):

Yeah. That, that whole soundtrack is basically all I've listened to for the past three or four years. So I can't get enough. <Laugh> well, we're just about outta time. I'd love to continue for another hour or two, but as we close. Any, any last words you wanna leave with leaders today?

John O'Leary ([50:38](#)):

Oh gosh. I would remind them that their life matters. I would remind them that frequently, the things they don't, that the things they think matter. Don't I would remind them to view your life in the way you ultimately would wanna view it at the dying days. And that's frequently said, but infrequently lived out. So how do you truly wanna be remembered? And then rather than waiting for it and do it now, like, just start living like that now, like live like that now. And if, if you wanna learn more about the work we do or our podcast or our channel, you can visit me online at John O'Leary inspires.com. So it's John O'Leary inspires.com. There's my email there, our phone number's there there's a 21 day free challenge there to like a hope spark challenge. Our podcast is there free resource that they free resource to love people. So if ever I can be an encouragement beyond your amazing episode today, just let me know, like I'm, I'm in I'm I'm with you through God's grace and because people showed up for me. So I, I want to show up Doug for others. So I go to John O'Leary inspires.com to learn more.

Doug Smith ([51:49](#)):

Yeah. And John, thank you so much for showing up for me today. And for everyone who will listen to this podcast, I know this inspired me and fired me up and I'm sure everyone that listens will say the same and we'll include links to everything that we shared in the show notes as well. So make sure you check out John. So thanks again.

Doug Smith ([52:03](#)):

Well, Hey leader, thank you so much for listening to my conversation with John. I hope that you enjoyed it as much as I did. You can find ways to connect with him and links to everything that we discussed in the show notes l3leadership.org/323 and [leaders always](#). I wanna challenge you that if you wanna 10 X your growth this year, then you really need to either launch or join in L3 Leadership mastermind group. Mastermind groups have been the greatest source of growth in my life over the last seven years. If you're unfamiliar with them, they're just groups of six to 12 leaders that meet together for at least one year in order to help each other grow, hold each other accountable and to do life together. If you're interested in learning more about masterminds, go to [L3 Leadership.org/masterminds](https://l3leadership.org/masterminds). And as always, I like to end every episode with a quote.

Doug Smith ([52:45](#)):

And today I'll quote Dave Ramsey, who said this? He said, if you don't have something in your career that you're aiming at, you'll stall out and your income will never increase. Start dreaming again, start to say, when I'm X years old, this is exactly who I want to be. And when you have a clear vision of who you want to be, then figure out what you need to get there. Guys get fired up about where you are in life. Get fired up about where you're getting to, where you're wanting to go and then figure out the price and then pay it. I hope this episode encouraged you. I hope it inspired you. And as always know that Laura and I love you. We believe in you. And remember don't quit the world desperately needs your leadership. We'll talk to you next episode.