

InVisible InCourage LIVE with John O'Leary

Saturday, May 30, 2020

Transcription provided by Stacie Valle for Virtual VRI

Wayne Connell: Thank you everyone! We are here for the Saturday edition of Invisible Incourage with John O'Leary!

John O'Leary: Thank you Wayne!

Wayne Connell: We are all getting used to doing these through Zoom from home! We are going to jump right into this. We would love for you to take 4-5 minutes to share your story about why I am reaching out to John O'Leary and what makes you amazing.

John O'Leary: Being born to the right set of parents is part of it. If you had asked me that up to 27 I would have had no idea. Until then I had no idea how to embrace my scars. You see here my hands that were amputated due to a house fire. I was 9 when I witnessed 6th graders playing with gasoline and fire. So I thought it would be fun. I tried to pour some gasoline onto a piece of fire that was burning and the fumes launched me across the garage. I was burned 100% of my body. 87% were 3rd degree. The staff told my parents I had no chance of surviving. That is the start of the story of my 5 months in the hospital and surgeries.

Wayne Connell: Talk about that some. With your family and your siblings and how it impacted everyone.

John O'Leary: Right, it impacts everyone. The effect is profound on everyone who loves that person. For me I didn't realize that until I was 27. My mom and dad wrote a little book and printed 100 copies to give to their church community to say thank you. I read it and for the first time realized this terrible thing hadn't been the end of the story.

But it had been the new chapter of the best story to come. I had always thought the fire happened to me. Poor me. I had gotten burned. Then I read this book and I could not imagine what my parents had been through. And to day after day not know if I would have survived and then to wonder if I would make friends, return to school, find love, etc. And my siblings, I am one of six. It wasn't just me that got burned. But for those 5 lost their home, and my parents were out of their life for 5 months while my parents were at the hospital with me.

So people say I was brave but the real heroes of the story are my parents, my siblings, my medical community from the St. Louis area.

Wayne Connell: Tell about when you were in the hospital and you heard your dad coming down the hall.

John O'Leary: Any little boy or girl can connect with this -- since I had seen the others in my neighborhood playing with fire, I knew this explosion and the loss of the house was on me. I thought my dad was going to kill me when he finds out, and that I deserved it. Then I heard my dad's voice down the hall. He's a veteran and a great dude, and he was a brick and I hear him down the hall and I think he's going to kill me and he pulls back the curtain and he marches to me, points to me and says "John, look at me when I'm talking to you." So I look up and he says "I have never been so proud of anyone in my entire life. Today, this morning, I am proud to be your dad." Then he says "I love you, I love you, I love you." And I am thinking no one has told him what happened. But those of us that have lived longer know it was the power of grace and love and forgiveness. My dad came in that day and him being with me that day was a turning point in my recovery.

Wayne Connell: Some people have been left in their recovery and it is a tragedy. One of the big issues we love to do here is to help people

be loved and believed. To share hope. To say what you have gone through is real. People don't always feel listened to and you can't deny their problems are real.

John O'Leary: I will say what I have always known Wayne is that what I know to be true is that I get underserved praise for what I have been through. When I walk through an airport and people help me out, or I write a book, my disability isn't invisible, but the toughest things to get through are the invisible scars. The ones that people don't identify as being real. The ones closest to you don't even get as real. Some of the people tuning in here don't have support for.

Wayne Connell: So how has your family been impacted by this? Here is something in history your whole family is going through.

John O'Leary: Superficially we have lost a lot of revenue and that is just part of it. For me the greatest challenge is I can't hug my dad. He has Parkinson's and has for 3 decades but I can't hug him and I have to keep my distance. And my mother has some invisible disabilities herself and is caring for my dad and so not to be able to hug them is hard. And we lost my grandmother 3 weeks ago and to be at a grave side and not hugging others was hard. My glass is overfilled, and I see this as a chance for redemption, to pivot and rediscover nature and beauty. I run so fast usually. For 81 days I have slept next to my wife and tucked my kids in and made them breakfast. So to be home and loving my family is a mixed bag but a blessing.

Wayne Connell: My wife was social distancing before this and now there is added pressure from the health standpoint. Now as a world it is added to. I am a hugger and I miss that. But we have to remember these people after COVID-19. They will go back to isolation by themselves. We want to be about that as an organization.

From your book *On Fire* you have 7 choices to an inspired life. What choice do you want to pick right now?

John O'Leary: All 7 work, but the most important is *Own Your Life*. And I get that is so broad, but after my dad left my room that day, my mom came in. She walks in, we're middle class from the middle of the country and had been through nothing major like this in our life, and she comes in and I have no clothes or skin, and she walks in and moves - no breath lost. She takes my right hand and is unafraid. She says, "I love you." Love is chapter 7. And I said mom, "Knock it off with the love. Am I going to die?" I assumed she would say "no, we're going to get a milkshake." But she said, "Baby, do you want to?" And I said no and she said "good. You take the hand of God, walk the journey with him and fight like you have never fought before. Look around, you have the staff here, me and your dad but you have to fight and want this." Had it not been for my mom's bold question and my decision to want to live abundantly and vibrantly - it was a turning point in my life.

Wayne Connell: A lot of people with invisible disabilities live with chronic pain for years and no one believes you and doctors can't figure it out and they keep going and fighting and they aren't giving up.

I am going to ask for a story from *In Awe*. Your mom was loving in what we would call a tough way. Tell us about playing the Piano. Show me your hands again. [No fingers.] Tell me that story.

John O'Leary: For all of us going through a storm and dealing with a challenge in some way, even if you can't see it, imagine what is still possible. I learned from my mom and wrote about it *In Awe*. I was home on a Saturday after 5.5 months in the hospital and the doorbell rings and it was my piano teacher. I always hated piano, and that was before I was burned. My mom walks in the kitchen, I am in a

wheelchair on morphine and wrapped in wrappings and I say "what is she doing here?" And my mom undoes my brakes, pushes me down the hall to the piano, and the teacher puts her arms around me and says "we're going to do this together." She ties a pencil to my missing fingers and has me play the piano. She finally leaves and a week later she kept returning, for 5 years. If you ever visit me in St. Louis you will find me, and I have a piano and we all play. I hit the wrong keys, but I play almost every day. When I speak live or virtually I will play. It gives people -- not only does music heal, but when you see a dude with no fingers jam *Amazing Grace* you feel like maybe you can weather your storm.

Wayne Connell: So many people with disabilities find ways to get around. Its amazing. So many stories of dyslexia where they create something new. Or a technology created to help a disabled person created by someone with that disability. It is amazing. They are incredible challenges for us but we can see. That part of who we are and it creates a uniqueness in us.

So tell me about *In Awe*. Your first book, *On Fire* is incredible. I have friends that love that one, and now you have *In Awe*.

John O'Leary: Well as a speaker so many adults seemed to just be enduring life. Yawning at the sunrise and missing the beauty of the day. I would leave these conferences and walk into school buildings and these little ones would come in with goofy grins. And I would ask questions and all the kids wanted to join in and they had ambitious dreams to change the world for the better. No egos they just wanted world peace, end racism, etc. I saw this dichotomy between adults and kids and wondered what that difference was and how to return to it. So it went from a white paper to a few chapters to a book.

Wayne Connell: A couple things that stood out to me was when I was

4 there was a guy working on our phone lines and I was asking questions. And my mom comes and says "leave the guy alone" and the guy says, "if he doesn't ask any questions how is he gonna learn" and I spent 20 years working in telecom industry.

John O'Leary: If you never lose that wonder you never stop making things better. You get answers by asking questions. It is a good way to go into any conversation, just curious.

Wayne Connell: This is a time to flatten everything. Everything has been flattened. COVID-19 has said, everyone is at home now, now what do we do? I think we have a huge opportunity to love deeper and pay attention to the little things. If your neighbor needs help and you can help them, do it. That's what we love about invisible disabilities. People that have been isolated before and abandoned, told they are faking -- why would they lie about that kind of pain.

John O'Leary: The pain is bad enough, but when you get shunned for experiencing heartache, and then people turn their back on you, it magnifies the pain. When you are a torchbearer for this group and we get it and experience it together I think it breathes hope to people. We have a lot of work to do to go to our community and remind everyone they are loved and worthy.

Wayne Connell: And they have value. Lets look at people based on humanity, not productivity. They have things to give back. Spend time with someone living with chronic pain and you will learn so much.

No we call this Invisible In courage. Spelled with an I. So we love to ask On your darkest days and days when you know it is really difficult. What gives you courage to make it one more day?

John O'Leary: Part is the wall behind me. My family. The

generations before me. I am in awe of my grandparents and the previous generations that provide the foundation for our life today. It isn't perfect but compared to any other point in history we are in the best place so far. It needs work and we can do better but it has never been better and I credit previous generations for that.

My little ones. It is why I work so hard, and why I play so hard.

Also my mission statement for life. I encourage your listeners to develop a mission. Why do you care? And answer it with a statement "I care and I choose to thrive because . . ." My statement is "because God demands it, my family deserves it and the world is starved for it. Let's go."

And finally I look at pain through an eternal lens. I recon that God loves us all equally and eventually we all get to go home. This too shall pass and I try to see things through an eternal lens.

Wayne Connell: John, this is a privilege to have you part of this show. This will be posted up afterwards and we are thrilled. I can't wait to finish *In Awe* and let's get back the excitement of children. We need that. Thank you for being here.

John O'Leary: Wayne, you do such great work and you do it with a humble, great heart. If it was only the work I would be impressed but not moved. But I see *HOW* you do it and I am convicted by the lives you are touching.

Wayne Connell: Thanks John.

[End of show]