

005 - Chris Brogan: How to Embrace Your Inner Freak

Grant: This is the How Did You Get Into That? Podcast with Grant Baldwin, episode five.

Voice Over: Welcome to the How Did You Get Into That? Podcast. Each week we want to bring you an inspiring interview or encouraging message to help you find and do work you love. Now here's your host, Grant Baldwin.

Grant: What is up, my friends? Thanks for hanging out with us for the How Did You Get Into That? Podcast. My name's Grant Baldwin, and today we have a killer interview, I think you're really going to dig this. This is guy many of you may be familiar with, maybe you've read some of his books or read his blog or his newsletter. Really good dude, Chris Brogan of www.ChrisBrogan.com is going to be here with us today and I'm really excited about just sharing his story.

He's got a really cool new book called The Freaks Shall Inherit the Earth, you can find it on Amazon, we're going to have links in the show notes as well, but a really cool journey about—just his own journey and story of becoming comfortable with the idea of being a freak, what exactly that means, how you can embrace your own inner freak. Not like that, get your mind out of the gutter, that's disgusting.

But we'll talk about how he's also gone from helping big corporations like Disney and Coca-Cola to really just helping entrepreneurs and solopreneurs at any level, so I think you're really going to be able to identify, I think you probably listen to this in part because you feel like that freak, you feel like that outsider, like you don't want to just exist, you don't want to just live in cubicle land for the rest of your life, but I believe that you listen to this, that you read blogs and sites that are out there like this because you want to do something unique, you want to do something interesting with your work and with your life. And so I hope that Chris' story and his journey will continue to encourage and inspire you.

As always, you can find all the show notes, links, and anything that we talk about, again you can find the link to his book, The Freaks Shall Inherit the Earth, all of that can be found on www.GrantBaldwin.com/ChrisBrogan. Alright, so without further delay, here is Chris.

Grant: Alright, I'm here today with Chris Brogan. Chris, how are you doing, man?

Chris: Best in the world, Grant. How are you?

Grant: I'm doing delightful, thanks for hanging out, man. Well I know you're an author and you've got your hand in a few different things today, so what exactly is it that you describe that you do?

Chris: That's a really great and shifting question. I'm a bit of a business strategist and continue to work with owners right now in helping them with growth in a couple of different ways, one was capabilities and the other is connections. The other thing I do is I run a magazine called Owner Mag.

Grant: Got you. So is this something that you had always aspired to? It seems like you've done—just kind of looking through your history and your trajectory it seems like you've done a lot of different things. Is this something that you more kind of aspired to do or something that you just stumbled in to?

Chris: No, you know this all kind of—I could draw a bunch of circles and then some lines and you'd go, "Ohh."

Grant: I see.

Chris: What I've always felt is this, I've always felt is business really needs to work harder at helping people feel they belong, business needs to stop treating people like they're numbers, and the people who are going to succeed in this kind of evolving next economy are the ones who really serve a community or marketplace in such a way that the people feel they belong to something, and that they feel like they're being served and not sold to.

Grant: Got you. So as you're doing this how does this play out in terms of format? I know you've got the blog, you've got a newsletter, you've got the book, you do speaking, am I missing anything there?

Chris: You're missing everything there, because all of that is just my media empire and that's how I actually get the message out. But I sell courses on how to do and execute parts of what people I think need to do to make business happen. I also do a little bit of limited coaching, and I have a very private, small mentoring group where what we do is we work on a lot of stuff around business growth in a lot of different ways, one is sharing our resources, another is sharing what our extended capabilities are, and then also through some education and what not internal to that.

So I was doing a lot of consulting with really big companies, companies you'd know like Disney Corporation, Google, or Microsoft, Sony, and those kinds of companies. But as much as I really love working with those kinds of companies in one way, it's also a little tricky because I'm often dealing with the people who don't necessarily—I mean they're the day job side of that, they're the person who is told by their boss' boss, "You've got to do this thing because Brogan told you to." And it's just never as fun as working with an owner, because the owner themselves has a lot more in stake in making something work.

But all of those things, Grant—I mean especially "career paths" go, I've always had the mindset that I needed to work with people that had a sense of ownership, even if they're just owning their own cubicle and that they're an employeepreneur, but that's who I thrive the best with.

Grant: Beautiful. Let's backtrack a little bit. So tell me, born and raised, where are you from?

Chris: I am born and raised in Maine. I was born in Waterville, Maine just randomly and lived mostly in Augusta, which is the capital, which is nowhere near any of the parts of Maine that anyone ever visits. It's not near Portland, it's not near the ocean where everyone goes to get their lobsters, and it's not in the north where all of the trees are, which you know Maine Lumber Industry used to be very big as well. Instead, no, it's just the capital where like you know health care and government all was.

And then I moved down to Massachusetts, I've lived in and around the northern part of Massachusetts for the whole rest of my life, and I do a lot of travel, so I always like to tell people I do my laundry in Massachusetts, but I'm based out of an airplane.

Grant: There you go. Life on the road, I understand that glamorous life that we live. So you grew up in Maine, what did you want to do when you were growing up? What would appeal to you?

Chris: Very early on I knew I was going to be a writer of some kind. I mean around age five I told people I was going to write. I really felt I was going to write comics, you know I was going to be a Marvel or DC guy and I'd write Batman and everyone would know me for what a great Batman writer I was, but it

hasn't quite turned out that way just yet, but I've written seven books in the last five years, and one of these days I'll convince one of these guys to let me write a comic at least once.

Grant: There you go. Did you go to college? What did you study?

Chris: Seven different colleges, never finished, but I really enjoyed all of them. I studied all different kinds of things, very general type courses, psychology, and I did a lot of English courses for a while, some law. What I found is that you know college is great for some people, what I found was that because I was sort of working on the edges of innovation and what was coming next, it was really hard to go to a course that was teaching me something that was six years old from the minute I sat at the desk.

So I have some regret over that, but not most people. Most people just say I should have got a degree and they don't even have a reason why they say it. I wish I had a degree in either journalism or law because those are both skillsets that would help me, so would sociology, which is just you know—we're never going to get away from humans being the guts of business, so we should know a little bit more about how they interact.

Grant: Sure. So you try seven different places, was it more that you just were never—you weren't really sure what you were looking for or you'd just try something, realize that's not it, let's grab a different plate and go back to the buffet?

Chris: You know it was a mix of both. It was—one, I mean I live in Boston area and there's 28 different colleges, so why not? It seems like everyone thinks that they need to go get their degree in a very specific way, but I thought, "Gee, I bet all of these places have something kind of fun about them." Two, I also you know really wasn't sure how I wanted to apply everything I was seeking to learn. I had very much a "choose your own adventure" mindset, but that is not the way any of these systems are built.

Grant: No, for sure.

Chris: They're all built, you know, "You must do this," and I just kept thinking, "There's got to be some other way to make that different," but I was too immature to know the tools to get what I wanted out of—I probably could have just sat at any of these colleges and figured out what I really want to do. I mean Lesley for instance, which is a Boston area school, allows you to do individually guided study and I could have really laid out the curriculum I wanted, but I guess I wasn't equipped for that.

And along the way I just kept earning all of that experience that people say that you need in their resume in telecom and wireless telecom so that it was just less and less that I needed to be there.

Grant: So you're bouncing around seven different places, what are you friends and family thinking along the journey?

Chris: You know, I have a very supportive pair of parents. My mom and dad has always been very much loving and supportive of me and I would say that they never—I'm sure they worried a bunch of different times, "Is he going to make it?" But they've always been very encouraging and they've always had that sort of you know, "My guess is he'll figure it out as he goes along," kind of thing.

Friends you know, some of my friends stuck through the path, a lot of my friends all went their own ways to get to what they were doing, especially the kids I hung out with in high school. We were all misfits in some way or another and I would say that when I came out the other side I landed in any old

cubicle kind of a job and no one cared. Years later, you know now that I'm at the position I'm at and that I get to go and speak to guys like Bob Iger who runs Disney, I find one of two things: that people have still some sort of anxiety about whether or not they should have had a degree, and then I find out that a lot of people that I care about and that I learned from also don't have a degree and it didn't ruin their lives.

And I would say that it just becomes a choice at some point and it just becomes what tools do you want to have? And I say, the regrets I have are I think those tools I would have earned through some of those degrees would be helpful, but I just compensate it with other systems, so it didn't matter as much to me.

Grant: Nice. So you kind of pulled the plug on the college tour, bouncing around and different options there. So where do you land next? Where do you kind of figure out, "Ok, forget this college thing, this maybe isn't the path for me. I learned some stuff, I've got a few experiences under the belt." What's the next step?

Chris: Yeah, I was in corporations for a while, so I worked for Ma Bell, the phone company for some time, and then what I also did along the way was I, in that space, went from the mainstream phone company to a wireless telecom, which was a startup-type company and learned a lot there. And then some time in the midst of all that I had been doing all this online stuff in one way or another back way early, like bulletin board services and back when AOL was a thing.

And I blogged starting in 1998 when it was called journaling. And so at some point you know in 2006 when I realized I was a little tired of what I was doing in my wireless telecom business, I started an event with Chris Penn called Podcamp and at that event one of the guys who showed up was Jeff Pulver who was famous for cofounding Vonage, but he was running this series of conferences called VON, which was for Voice On the Net, and he had just started this thing for video on the net.

And he pulled me aside at that conference and said, "You know, I really have no idea what you make or anything like that, but I want you to come work with me and come run this video conference with me."

And I said, "Uh, ok."

And so I joined the circus and I just started figuring out entrepreneurial pursuits with Jeff. We only were able to work together about a year because the conference was just a little too soon, it wasn't—big enough companies that needed to be part of it just didn't find it disruptive enough or they weren't worried yet about internet and its impact on video at that point. So we were just a little too early in our timing, and so we—you know I went on to do other stuff, Jeff of course you know had all kinds of other interesting successes and investments and things.

And so in that whole process I just started getting picked up to start working with really huge companies and so it just never was a career after that. It was just always the chance to work with interesting companies on stuff that was helpful and that really helped me push through my big point of view which is just that companies need to treat humans a lot nicer.

Grant: Was this something that you were seeking out? Trying to find some of these opportunities? Or did they just seem to kind of stumble into your lap?

Chris: A little of both. I mean I had a very strong point of view and I was writing very intently on my blog, and as people would come along to my blog I would say that it's a scenario where people would see what I had written and hire me based on something I had just written, even though I didn't necessarily have the experience to actually officially say it in front of a room full of people, but they didn't care.

I would just go in and you know Coke would say to us, "Hey, we're about to do this. Does this sound smart?"

And I'd say, "Well, almost. Here's a couple things I'd do a little different."

And Coke would go, "Ok." And you know a lot of times they'd take what I had to say and integrate it in some way and other times they'd just smile and go, "Ok, I hear what you're saying, but I'm not going to do it anyway." Not Coke, but other companies, and that was fun, and either way I was getting paid, so I didn't feel so bad. But professionally I just started wanting to work more with owners because I would work with the senior teams like you know talking to Bob Iger at Disney was always a lot different than talking to the poor marketing manager who ended up having to try to breathe life into the business idea that I had.

So ultimately Grant, what I found was that I could start helping other people who wanted to do things their own way and the message that I've to sort of understand after all this bunch of years is that there's a couple different kinds of folks out there. There are people that are willing to fit into the systems that exist, and then there are a bunch of us sort of freaks and weirdos who—we have to kind of find our own version of a system and then it'll be ok.

Grant: Why is that not accepted though? Because I think a lot of people that are listening to this and a lot of other people that I've interviewed have said the same type of thing where it's like, "I bounced from career to career just trying to figure out what it was that I was supposed to do, because I didn't fit the mold, I didn't fit that traditional path." Why do you think it is so many people have a difficult time really honing in on that?

Chris: Well because I think the only answer they're after is must-fit mold. And if that's true then you're going to be really unpleasant and unhappy, and instead what if it's must-make own business. The way the economy has worked, in really broad brushstrokes, has been that there was this sort of farming environment that happened after hunter-gatherer farming lasted for many, many years. Then we decided factories were the way to go, let's just swing this over to the US for instance. So farming to factories, so suddenly it wasn't cool to be on a farm anymore, then you had to be in a factory.

Then factories to cubicles because the factories just weren't working. You and I are talking right now, my bed, my house, my everything is inside a factory building because those jobs went elsewhere. So then the cubicles were the unit of measurement and those aren't anymore either, you and I could go to New York City and we could go to any skyscraper there and find floor after floor of emptiness because that doesn't exist.

Where did all of those people go? They're back inside these factory buildings and they're starting startups and things like that because they don't—you know the other thing didn't work either. A lot of people who have run into the same challenge that I did said, "That's weird, I can't seem to find the place

where I fit." Maybe that's because none of the places that pre-exist are the way that you fit, maybe you need to do it yourself.

So you look at you know some of these weird things like you know artisan pickle makers in Brooklyn and Bre Pettis, who's a friend of mine who—maker stuff, so he's MakerBot industries and suddenly 3D printing is a thing everywhere. Like all of this stuff just didn't exist and we just didn't feel like we had permission to make it.

But now in a land where Kickstarter exists and Square and Airbnb and Uber and all this kind of stuff, there's all these tools that allow us to be whatever business we feel like we want to be and we don't need to wait for someone's permission anymore.

Grant: And you seem to have done a good job with that, with kind of helping bring some of those people out of the shadows and help indirectly or directly give them permission to do something. So as people are starting to come out and realize that, "Ok, maybe I am a freak and maybe I am embracing that," what kind of fears, insecurities, and doubts are those people trying to overcome?

Chris: Oh, I mean there's tons. A lot of people think, "If I don't have a degree I'm not going to make it," I've proven that wrong, so has Bill Gates, so has Richard Branson, so has so many other people. The other kinds of ways that people run into this problem is that they're waiting for someone to give them permission.

There's a lot of people out there, they say something like, "Well no one's told me I could do something like that."

I say, "You know there's no permission fairy going around with a wand. You have to take it." And so I would say that there's that. And then there's just all kinds of other things between us and what we're going to do that the challenges are all internal to us. I mean most of everything that's in our way is our self and we just need to make some better choices and we're going to get out, through the experience a lot better.

But my God, Grant, it's really what—you know crabs in a pail they say, you know you put a bunch of crabs in a pail, you don't have to put a lid on it because they'll pull each other down. We are just all sitting around looking for excuses why we're going to not succeed, so no one has to worry about it yet.

Grant: Looking back to your 25 year old self and you're trying to just figure out what that thing is and you're kind of looking for permission and not really sure what the clear path is, what advice would you give yourself today?

Chris: Just really to look for—look past the structures. I mean the biggest thing that caused me so much time in wastage was worrying that I had to fit into some existing mold. And I always tell people that a job is a unit of measurement in that work is what you want. I mean work is different than a job, a job is something that an employer hands to you, work is something that you know you exchange value for some service or product or something.

So if I had spent a lot less time worry about what kind of role I needed to solve the things that I wanted, I would have had a lot more time to deliver and create the stuff that I thought would be useful to other people.

With that said, I mean I'm a very big fan of just—you know I always tell people that I paid for my own MBA by just breaking a lot of things and making bad mistakes. So now it's fine, now I'm just sort of in this boat where I keep learning every day.

Grant: Nice. You've kind of directly or indirectly given everybody permission in a recent project you had come out, The Freaks Shall Inherit the Earth, new book that just came out recently. So give us a quick snapshot, what's the book about? Who's it for?

Chris: It's an entrepreneurship book and it's very much entrepreneurship from the ground up. And the idea is basically—there's a lot of other books that have been written about how to be an entrepreneur, but they're written by the kind of people who maybe also have a Harvard MBA or who are the kind of shirt and tie kind of entrepreneur or the ones that want to create what's already existing or who want to follow very simple molds, like you know how to be a mobile app person or something like that.

Mine is basically all the way down to your soul and your guts and what do you need to think about and what kinds of skillsets do you need to have. And you know for instance I tell people you have to fall in love with not knowing, because a lot of times what stops us is we think, "Well I don't really know this answer, so I can't be ready to try anything."

I learn everything by not knowing how to do it and I always tell people, "Unless you're a surgeon or a commercial airline pilot I think it's great that you don't know, and you can learn a lot in the field." I don't really want a surgeon to cut me open and go, "Where's that kidney again?"

Grant: No, I prefer not.

Chris: No, but other than that that's fine. And then—so the whole book is very brief, it's like not even 200 pages and it's just full of instructional information on what to do. And then furthermore, there's a lot of examples of all kinds of random people like Tony Hawk and Kate White who ran Cosmopolitan for a while and all kinds of just interesting people who have picked up the mantle and decided to be who they are.

And the reason it's "the freaks shall inherit the earth" is I just call freaks those people that are just passionate beyond belief about their thing that they're interested in serving the world and it sometimes—this new economy that I think is coming, this personal economy is sort of a smaller scale system. So a thousand—you know Kevin Kelly's 1,000 True Fans comes into play. If I had 1,000 great customers it would be way better than trying to find 100,000 not-great customers. And so I think that's what's coming and I think how we equip ourselves for that is learning how to run our own systems.

Grant: Do you think people are more and more being open to the idea of being a freak and not being something that—I'm going to hide in the shadows for, but I'm something I'm very proud of?

Chris: You know not by title. I mean a lot of people are sort of kind of wrestling still with whether or not they think they're that phrase "a freak". But I will tell you this sure, that there are absolutely lots more people finding that they can make their life happen. My friend, Doug Quint—so I went to seventh and eighth grade with this kid and he was a bassoonist for the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and you know interesting role in itself, I mean half—if I asked you what a bassoon is you might know, but most of your listeners wouldn't.

Doug was looking for something to do during the summer, he decided to do an ice cream truck, which you know seems pretty pedestrian, but he decided he didn't like any of the existing franchises and he was going to make his own; he thought, "How hard can it be?"

So he goes a lot further and he launches what he calls the Big Gay Ice Cream Truck. And Doug is quite gay and he immediately has a huge built-in fan base, because he couldn't be any more, "Hey look, I'm very gay," and everyone's like, "Oh, I'm gay too, I will buy your ice cream because I'm glad that you're a gay business."

But it's ice cream. You don't have to be gay to like ice cream, you have to like ice cream to like ice cream, and he makes these incredible flavors, the Bea Arthur, the Twinkwich which is an ice cream sandwich that has bacon on it. And I'll tell you, people wait in huge, long lines now in New York, I think they have a San Francisco store now and all this, and he's going to do just fine for himself, but no one gave him permission to do that and he's going to sell just great to a marketplace who used to be very shadowy and unsure and not sure how he could even approach them and, "Should we even say that, because maybe straight people will be sad?"

You frankly, if—whichever you love most in the world and would love to spend your time around would be your best customer anyway, so why keep trying to find everybody when you already know some somebodies?

Grant: Well said. I'm going to be in New York next week, so I'll be on the lookout for that bacon-infused ice cream, for sure.

Chris: Oh, it is the delicious.

Grant: Delightful. Deal, man. Hey, where can—as we wrap this up, where can people find the book?

Chris: You can go to www.CallingAllFreaks.com and that'll give you links to everywhere you can buy it. It's anywhere out in the independent bookstore world and the mainstream stores and all over the US and the rest of the world is just getting their copy this week, and of course online.

Grant: Beautiful. And if people want to find out more about you, who you are, what you do, where do we go?

Chris: I guess easy enough to just go to www.ChrisBrogan.com and thank you.

Grant: Delightful. Man, I enjoyed talking with you, appreciate the time, hopefully we can connect again soon.

Chris: Perfect. Thank you so much, Grant.

Grant: Thanks, Chris. Alright, there you have it. A little interview, a little snapshot into the world of Chris Brogan. So again, all the links, all the show notes, everything that you want to find out more and just a little snapshot or summary of this interview and this episode, you can go to www.GrantBaldwin.com/ChrisBrogan, make sure you stop by and check that out.

Also if you haven't already, we're running a little contest right now, you can find all the details at www.GrantBaldwin.com/Contest. Again, www.GrantBaldwin.com/Contest. And what we're doing here is as we start this new podcast, as we begin this new endeavor we want to be able to help promote it

and just share the content with as many people as possible. So if you found this interesting or valuable or useful, I'd love for you to be a part of this contest. We're giving away some cool prizes, giving away an iPad, giving away \$100 to Amazon, just some cool stuff I'd love for you to be able to win.

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So thanks for going on this journey with us, we'll talk to you again real soon. Peace out.

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