

## 070: Redefining Your Identity Through Action

**J = Jeff Goins**

**A = Andy Traub**

J I think that you can tell yourself, “I’m not really a writer. I’m not really an artist.” “I’m not really an entrepreneur.” “I’m not really successful.” “I’m not really ever going to be skinny,” or any of that stuff. And, guess what? You’ll probably live into those things.

[Music playing]

A Welcome to *The Portfolio Life* with Jeff Goins. I’m your host, Andy Traub; and this is the show that helps you to pursue work that matters, make a difference with your art, and discover your true voice. If someone asks you the question, “Who are you?” How would you answer? Probably with your name. But today Jeff and I discuss the topic of identity, where it comes from, and what happens in our lives when we choose a different one.

[Music playing]

A Jeff, I remember as a child getting a label of being shy; and it was a label that I carried a long, long time. And you are famous, I think, and for those who read your blog, for telling a story about your identity and how you accepted an identity later in life and how it changed really the projection of your career and your family. And that identity was that of a writer.

So, today we’re going to talk about how activity always follows identity. And you actually wrote about this, and you quoted a proverb. And I want to ask you why you picked that out. And that is Proverbs 23:7 which is, “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.” When did you come across that, and, then, connect it with identity.

J Backwards. So, I didn’t like read this proverb and I go, “Oh, this is true, and it’s going to change my life.” Like a lot of things, I had an experience, and somebody came along and helped me sort of decipher that experience. And, then, I found some wisdom on which to sort of base this new belief system which sounds a lot more formulaic and sequential than it really was. It just kind of felt like life.

I was 27 years old. I had a good job. I had a wife. We were talking about starting a family. And there was this feeling that I had where I was imagining myself 10 years from now. So, I was 27, and I was imagining myself 37 – 38 years old really thinking about, “Where am I going to be headed when I’m 40?” So, as I was approaching my 30s thinking about my 20s which, you know, like it is for a lot of



people, I did a bunch of different things. I traveled with a band. We were real big in Taiwan as you know, Andy.

A Huge. I wouldn't say big. I would say huge. But go ahead.

J Yeah. Yeah of national Taiwanese fame as many—

A More in the northern area.

J That's right. Yeah.

A So, huge in the north.

J [Laughing]. Good memory. And, then, worked in a call center for a while. Chased this girl in Nashville. I married her. And start working at this nonprofit. And, you know, you take the job that you can get—

A Yeah.

J —that has nothing to do with your college degree. And, then, you get all this experience. And you get affirmed for things that you didn't know that you could do.

A Yeah.

J Which is what happened to me. And here I was this marketing director, pretty successful at something that I never thought I would be doing. And it was really exciting. My boss had mentored me, and I'd grown a lot as a leader. And I'd done this for about five or six years – as my friend, Paul Agnone recently pointed out to me – “Man, five years and 20-something years is like decades.”

A You're a lifer.

J Right.

A They were really like, “This guy is never going to leave.”

J Yeah, and that's how it felt. And I was thinking about what I really wanted to do with my life. And it wasn't one of those situations where I hated my job which I think is actually a pretty good place. I think we've talked about this before especially when we were talking about *The Art of Work* that if you hate your job that's really good news, because it means that you know that you have to do something.

But what if you kind of like your job?

A Yeah.

J What if it's comfortable? That's a dangerous place to be, because you can end up settling for something less than your very best for the rest of your life. And at 27 years old, I was afraid of settling. And I imagined myself approaching 40, basically approaching a mid-life crisis where I had sort of

settled into this comfortable career and 15 years later I would go, “Oh, man, I missed it. I’ve got to start over.” And I didn’t want to do that.

And, so, I started soul searching. And I started talking to different people and going to conferences that I could afford and just trying to find out who I really was. And I didn’t know. I remember reading a blogpost one time when Twitter was just kind of getting big. And somebody was like challenged all of his readers to give your 140-character identity or your little elevator—

A Yeah.

J —speech. And I couldn’t answer it. I felt like a fraud. I felt like a fraud for two reasons. One, if I said what I did for a living I didn’t feel like it was a good description of who I really was.

A Yeah, it wasn’t enough, right?

J And I think a lot of people feel that way.

A Yeah, a lot.

J But, then, if I were to talk about my dreams, I would have felt like a fraud because I really wasn’t doing those things. And, so, I just kind of felt stuck in this tension of wanting to be this but not really being that. And, so, I eventually had this conversation with a friend which I’ve talked about in a lot of places. But it really was a formative conversation for me. And my friend, Paul, asked me what my dream was. And I didn’t even really know this guy that well. We had just become friends. We were going through this professional coaching group together, kind of like a mastermind group before I even knew what that term meant. And he goes, “What’s your dream?” And I was like, “Pft, who are you to ask me this question?”

A How rude.

J And I said – I said, “I don’t know.” And he said, “Really? ‘Cause I’ve been paying attention to what you’ve been doing online. And we’ve talked a little bit. And I would have thought that your dream was to be a writer.” I said, “Yeah, OK, fine. I guess I’d like to be a writer someday.” And he said, “Jeff, you don’t have to want to be a writer. You are a writer. You just need to write.”

I mean that was so formative to me. I wrote a book about that conversation and everything that happened afterwards. So, I don’t have to go into it here, but that was a lightbulb for me where it made me realize that maybe before I can go do the thing that I need to do, I have to in some way become that. And this is one of the – I don’t know – most paradoxical and even controversial things that I talk about.

A Yeah.

J And people get mad. I mean I just posted this on Facebook and somebody was like, “Jeff, this isn’t what it really takes to be a writer, or anything.” And I wrote a blogpost about this kind of talking about what it really takes to become a professional writer, the real secret.

A Were people saying you were oversimplifying it? Like, that's not enough.

J Yeah.

A Yeah. "It's more complicated—

J Right.

A —than that, Buddy."

J Well, here's what this guy said – and it was a really good point. He said, "This isn't what it takes to turn pro as a writer." This is what I said, "It takes to turn pro." He goes, "Well, it takes to turn pro is you've got to spend four days a writing, and you've got to pump out 2,000 words, and you've got to do all these things. And, then, you can be a pro. And it's really, really hard, and you're making it really easy for people." And great point. I mean I don't want a bunch of people kind of running around saying, "I'm a writer. I'm a writer," and they're not actually doing—

A Right.

J —any writing. But here's the thing. I was doing a lot of writing. And almost every writer that I know is insecure. And they are very reluctant to call themselves writers. And as a result, they play it safe. They play it small. They act the amateur. And they live into this reality. It's a self-constructed narrative that you, then, live into.

A Sure.

J A friend of mine was telling me about his son who moved – his family moved from Virginia to Tennessee. And his son was playing soccer. This was the first time his 7-year-old son – you might be able to relate to this, Andy. I mean you've moved your family from—

A Yeah.

J —South Dakota to Tennessee. His kid is playing soccer in the summer, very hot. My friend goes and picks him up from soccer practice. And his son goes, "Ah, Dad, it's really" – Like he'd seen him lag. And he's just – because it's really hard, and it's really, really hot here. And for a second my friend was like, "Oh, my gosh. Am I exposing my son to Equatorial climates, and it's going to kill him?" But he looked around. He saw all these other kids who were of similar physique and age as his son, and he realized this was kind of a teachable moment for his son. And he says, "You know what, Buddy? You need to drink lots of water. You probably need to do that more than we had to do back home. But it's hot here. And it's really hot in the summer. But those kids are playing just fine, and that's because they're used to it. And you'll get used to it, too." And he said, "OK, Dad."

And, then, the next week my friend goes and picks his son up from soccer practice. And his son runs to the car and is full of energy, totally excited. And he said, "That day it was hotter than the last time I picked him up." He said, "So, what changed?" Well, the story he was telling himself changed.

A Yeah.

J And, so – yeah, I mean, does this sounds like positive mumbo jumbo? I guess. I think it works. I think it's real. I think you can tell yourself, "I'm not really a writer. I'm not really an artist. I'm not really an entrepreneur. I'm not really successful. I'm not really ever going to be skinny, or any of that stuff." And guess what? You will probably live into those things.

A Yeah.

J I have a friend – we have a mutual friend who does this every night. He reads these affirmations to himself and he says, "I'm healthy. I'm disciplined, and I'm financially responsible for my family." And he says those things to him. And, then, every morning he wakes up and they're at the top of his mind. And he lives into those affirmations.

Now, there comes a point where you just keep affirming something that just isn't true. But I think I would rather err on the side of over affirming somebody who might not yet be qualified to be that thing that we think they should be. In other words, they've got to write four hours a day, 2,000 words a day.

A Right. And that may qualify, right?

J By the way, I think because I get paid full-time to write that I might be qualified to be a professional writer. And I don't do that. Of course, there are some days where I do that. But there are many days where I don't. I had a conversation when I was trying to sort through all of this with Stephen Pressfield. I interviewed him, and I wanted to know the answer to this question, because I struggle with it so much which was really when you get to call yourself a writer.

And he said this – and I've never forgotten this – and I think it's true. He says, "You are when you say you are."

A If Stephen Pressfield said it—

J Yeah, I mean, come on. Like it's got to be – that's pretty—

A And it's not – he kind is—

J Yeah.

A —it's like Robert McKee if he says something about story, it's true.

J It's true.

A And if Michael Jordan says something about basketball, it's true. And if Stephen Pressfield says something about writing, it's true.

J Yeah, I don't know – I don't know why we put these capital letters on the front of job titles that don't have degrees or certificates associated with them. Capital W: Writer. Capital E: Entrepreneur. Capital A: Artist.

A Right.

J Meaning, you're not a real entrepreneur unless you've built a million-dollar business. Well, no, that's not what that means. And you're not a real writer until you've written a book. Or you write every day for four hours a day? I mean—

A Right.

J No, you're a writer if you are doing the work of writing. If you are actually writing something, you are a writer.

A And you'll never write – you literally, you will never write until you believe, "I am capable of writing a sentence, a word, a paragraph, a chapter, a book." You will never like wake up and go, "Oh, my gosh, I had not realized for the last 18 months that I became a writer. I was putting together words and sentences, and chapters into a book. But that doesn't happen that way, right?"

J Yeah.

[Music playing]

J As I'm sorting through all this stuff, and I find this proverb, "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he." Like the King James Version of that proverb is, "As a man thinketh, so is he." And there was a book in the early 20th Century kind of around the age where positive thinking and self-help became a genre.

A Yeah.

J *Think and Grow Rich, How to Win Friends and Influence People*. This was sort of the dawn of those kinds of books.

A Yeah.

J And there was a book called *As A Man Thinketh* that was about this, that whatever you think, that's what you become. And I think that's true. I think that that is true. I know it can kind of come across as feeling sort of hocus pocus-y. But I think it's practically true. So, when I talk to somebody, including myself, who is out of shape, or overweight and just can't get disciplined about eating right, or exercise, when you tell yourself, "Ah, I'm fat." You know? And, "I'm out-of-shape and unhealthy." And then there's a bag of potato chips in front of me, like telling myself that I am really out of shape doesn't motivate me to not eat the bag of potato chips.

A Right.

J Quite the opposite. I go, "Well, what's the point?"

A Right. "I'm the out-of-shape guy. That's what out-of-shape guys do."

J Yeah. And when I feel like I'm not a writer or not a real artist, or not a real whatever, and I sit down to do the work of writing, for example—

A Yeah.

J —and I'm telling myself that story, what am I not going to do? I'm not going to write.

A Yeah.

J So, I would rather err on the side of telling people, "Yep, you're a writer. You're a writer. You're a writer. You're a writer. Now, go do this thing that you're supposed to be." And, yeah, I learned it from this guy. I was sort of affirmed by this proverb. And, now, I see it every day with my son. I can help him tell a narrative to himself much like my friend did—

A Yep.

J —that he can, then, live into, or I can let him live into the narrative that circumstance sometimes throws at him. You know? Like he'll do something bad, and he'll go, "I'm a bad boy."

A Yep.

J I'll go, "No, Buddy. You're not a bad boy. You're a good boy, but you made a bad choice. And next time you need to make a good choice." And I think the same thing is we get this if we're parents. We get this if we're talking to somebody who's struggling with a certain discipline. But when it applies to our vocations, I just don't think we think very critically about the things we think about ourselves, how those become real in our lives.

A Where are some places that the person who is listening right now, where do you think maybe they received some of their identities?

J Well, not to get psychological.

A Oh, go. Just go, man. Let's get psychological. Let's do this.

J Well, the first place we start is with our parents, of course.

A Yep.

J You know? And our parents give us sometimes good things. But every parent either intentionally or often unintentionally passes on some kind of baggage to their kids. I remember having a real heart-to-heart conversation with my mom about some tough stuff—

A Yep.

J —that my parents went through and that I saw and 20 years later are having lunch at TGI Fridays. And I go, “Hey, I remember when this happened, and this happened.” And I was like six years old. And it was traumatic stuff. And she goes, “Oh, my God. I can’t believe – I can’t believe you remember that.”

And, so, in spite of her best intentions, there were things just in the environment that I grew up in that affected me. And I think – I want to be careful here, because I don’t think that dooms you to kind of like keep continuing unhealthy things you grew up with or whatever. But you have to address it. You have to realize and recognize that somebody said something to me at one point, and it affected me this way. There are positive and negative instances for all that.

But I think that the bottom line is at a certain point you are no longer a child. You’re no longer just a kid. And I know lots of people in their 30s, 40s, and maybe even 50s who still feel like their parents’ kid. And I just don’t think that’s completely true.

Yeah, I mean, you’re always going to be their baby, or whatever. I don’t really like when parents say that. But there comes a point where your identity doesn’t come from what your parents told you, although that’s where it starts. It comes from the person that you have to become. Your self-actualization comes from experience, and really it comes from accomplishments.

So, our parents tell us things that we don’t yet know are true about ourselves. And, then, we start living into those things. And my parents told me that I was smart. And I started living into that. I mean that was a really positive thing. But there were other things that I had to learn about life and adulthood that I didn’t learn from my parents, and when I was in my mid-20s I was mad.

I was mad they didn’t teach me all these things that I needed to know. And, then, I realized no parent can every fully prepare their kids for the real world.

A Yeah.

J And we have to just kind of continue – I like that word *initiation* – initiating ourselves into real life, into adulthood. But identity, I think, first comes from your parents. Then it comes from other external factors like your environment, friends, peers, ect.

A Yeah.

J That’s very important. So, my parents are telling me I’m smart. I go to school and all of my classmates would tell me that I was fat, or a loser, or whatever, because those things are true. And I lived into that. Right? I didn’t try to become popular. I didn’t want to be athletic. I didn’t want to do these things, because I was given this identity by this community that I lived into. And, then, I think the third place that your identity comes from is your accomplishments. And all three of those you can change.



At some point. You can't change your parents. But you can change the way the words that they said affect you. You can change the environment, the people that you associate with, the community that you're a part of.

A Yeah.

J And you can actually change the things that you do. The problem is, and this is getting psychological and I'll consult Carol Duwac on this who is an expert. I'm not an expert.

A Yeah.

J But Carol Dweck in her book, *Mindset*, talks about this. She talks about the growth mindset – and we've talked about this before. It's a great book for parents—

A Yeah.

J —business people, creatives. There's the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. The fixed mindset says, "If somebody says this about me, then this is always true. I always have to be the smart kid. If I do something dumb, then I'm no longer the smart kid." Like my son saying, "I'm a bad boy." "No, you just did a bad thing. You're a good boy, but you did a bad thing."

And, so, we can sort of rest our identity on these three areas. And they're all kind of not our true selves. We can just be the people that our parents expect us to be which at a certain point is going to be a shadow of who you really are, because you're not just who your parents expect you to be. You're going to do something new, and different. That's a good thing.

You're not just what your community wants you to be, or thinks you should be, because you're more than what people can see. And, then, lastly you're not just the things that you've done. And you can change all those things by doing something different. And, so, when I was a marketing director at a nonprofit, and I'd kind of spent my life writing on and off but never really did it with any sort of steadiness—

A Yeah.

J —is a really scary thing for me to say, "OK, I'm a writer. Now, what does a writer do? He gets up every morning and he writes." And that guy that commented on my blog, he was right. That is what a writer does. But I think I had to start believing it before I could do it. And, then, I started doing it because I was like, "Yeah, I am this thing."

Kind of like the next time my son is in a situation where some kid's pushing him or something, hopefully, his three-year-old brain he's going to think, "I'm a good boy. And what does a good boy do here?" Versus, you know, "I'm a bad boy."

A Yeah.

J But then once you start doing those things, you accomplish new things. There is a confidence that comes with those accomplishments. And, then, your identity can change. Now, I feel very

confident calling myself a writer, because I've written four books, and people kind of know me as this thing. But when I was first starting out, it was really, really scary.

So, I say all that to say, that's where I think identity comes from, and you can change all three of those things, or at least the way they influence who you are and who you become.

A Absolutely. And the idea that activity will follow those things, that essentially you can label your way into it. One time I was reading an article about these guys that actually snuck into the Super Bowl which is a very hard even to sneak into. But one of their strategies was to look very confident as they walked past security guards.

J Right.

A They had such confidence – like I remember as a child, and I was a child. This is like 14, 15, 16 when I was smoking cigarettes. This is like when they didn't card everybody. I remember that my key to getting to sell cigarettes to me was just to look angry, right?

J [Laughing].

A Just, "Look, just give me a pack of Reds, a pack of Reds." And, "OK, angry guy." And the point is that people will – you will fulfill your own identity. But first you have to give yourself that identity. And, so, Jeff Goins is not going to pick you and say, "You are now a writer." Or, "You are now this or that." It's simply identifying yourself internally.

And, yes, the reason we know this is true, Jeff, for those who might challenge you is, if you repeat something negative, we all agree that that's very demotivating, right?

J Right.

A If you woke up every day and go, "I am not going to meet the person of my dreams today," then you might run into someone and you'll go, "They're not the one. It's not going to happen today." Versus, "I might meet the person of my dreams today." Then, you're going to be on the alert, right?

J Yeah.

A So, are we on the alert for activity for opportunities, or have we shut it down?

J Yeah.

A And what Jeff is teaching here is that activity will follow identity. And I think what bears repeating is, the identity that we have to continue to repeat that identity. As Jeff also pointed out, a lot of times we received our identity from somewhere else. It could be an unhealthy, faith situation. I was in churches that gave me identity that they were not accurate. They left me feeling very guilty, and not free, and not excited about life, you know? That was a different identity until I had someone else come in my life and say, "No, no, no. You're this, Andy." And I'm like, "Really? OK. Then I'll live differently."

Jeff, thank you for your time as always.

J Always a pleasure.

[Music playing]

A Find this episode on GoinsWriter.com. Leave us a comment about your identity. And leave us a comment about something that you have spoken into yourself, into your own life, and activity has followed. I think that would be a great place for us to circle around. You can always use the hashtag #AtPortfolioLife on Twitter and mention Jeff @JeffGoins. And let us know. Let us know what you are identifying yourself with, and then the activity that follows.

I'm Andy Traub, and on behalf of Jeff Goins, thanks for spending some time with us. Now, go build your portfolio.

[Music playing]

J And I think the same thing is, we get this if we're parents. We get this if we're talking to somebody who is struggling with a certain discipline. But when it applies to our vocations, I just don't think we think very critically about the things we think about ourselves, how those become real in our lives.

## Resources

- [How to Become a Professional Writer](#)
- [Think & Grow Rich](#) by Napoleon Hill
- [As a Man Thinketh](#) by James Allen
- [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#) by Carol Dweck