

## MASTERS by Winn Claybaugh, September 2025

### Michael Swanson: Don't Be a Pop-Tart; You're a Soufflé!



**Michael Swanson** is an Emmy award winner, Hollywood TV studio executive, and film producer. He is also a visionary entrepreneur and president/CEO of the Los Angeles-based production and distribution company, Faith Filmworks. Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Michael proves that his formula of kindness, gratitude, and cultivating a connection with co-workers can set the tone for success in all business environments. You'll love his wise advice, including "fail early," "have a servant's heart," "rock-bottom riches," "unemployed birds," and a favorite, "you're not a Pop-Tart; you're a soufflé!"

**Winn:** Hi, everybody. Winn Claybaugh here, and welcome to another MASTERS Podcast interview. I am just so thrilled for this opportunity. And you gotta sit back because as I introduce this brilliant man, it's gonna take a bit. Okay? It's not like he's been sitting around and—you know, I always say that when people ask me, *Well, I called that mentor. I reached out to that mentor, and they didn't respond back.* I'm like, *Well, that's because they're busy.* You know? If they were sitting around doing nothing, you probably wouldn't have much interest in hearing what they have to say. And this man has a lot to say and a lot to share, because of who he is, because of what he's accomplished, and so I gotta share all of this with you. So, bear with me while I read all of this. So, first of all, I'm sitting with Michael Swanson. So, Michael, thank you straight up for saying yes to doing this. I'm just so, so grateful.

**Michael:** My pleasure. It's always great to spend time with you, Winn, and I'm really honored to be your guest today.

**Winn:** You're a sweet man. So, this is who he is. An Emmy award winner, Michael Swanson is a Hollywood TV studio executive and film producer. He is also a visionary, entrepreneur, and president and CEO of the Los Angeles-based production distribution company, Faith Filmworks. As a senior vice president of production at Universal Studio Group, Michael is the studio executive responsible for the production of Universal Television's Emmy award winner for Outstanding Comedy Series, *Hacks*. Love that show. I love her. *Parks and Recreation*, *The Good Place*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *A Man on the Inside*, *Never Have I Ever*, *Community*, *Good Girls*, and Emmy Award winner *Master of None*. Throughout his distinguished career in entertainment, Michael has produced movies to critical and audience acclaim, including *Albany Road*, which we're gonna talk about. That one just—man, that one moved me. Also, *All About You*, *All About Us*, *For the Love of Ruth*, *To Hell and Back*, two seasons *Notre Dame First Time Fans Legacy*, *The Wayman Tisdale Story*, and *Fanny*. Among its numerous accolades, *Albany Road* was selected by

the African American Film Critics Association as one of their top 10 films of the year for 2024. Wow. *Albany Road* also garnered two NAACP Image Award nominations for Outstanding Independent Motion Picture and Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Motion Picture for Lynn Whitfield. On Broadway, Michael has been involved with the Tony award-winning hit musical, *Ain't Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations*, which was brilliant, as well as the first Broadway revival of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enough*. This celebrated work garnered seven Tony award nominations, including Best Revival of a Play. Michael is also helping to bring *Hippest Trip: The Soul Train Musical* to Broadway. Oh my gosh, I wanna talk about that one. Early in his career, Michael was invited to join NBC's "Must See TV"—and all of us were sucked into that, right?—national primetime sales team in New York that sold commercial space for top-rated NBC shows, including *Seinfeld*, *ER*, *Friends*, *Frasier*, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. This sales team became the first in broadcast television to book over \$2.2 billion in upfront advertising revenue. Earning his Bachelor of Arts degree in film, television, and theater from the University of Notre Dame, Michael was chosen by the Notre Dame Alumni Association as the Reverend Arthur S. Harvey award recipient—wow!—acknowledging his achievements in the arts. Michael serves on the board of directors for Wedgwood Circle and FEAST and is a member of Notre Dame's Performing Arts Advisory Council, the Coalition for Faith in Media, the Hollywood Black Film Festival Advisory Board, and the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. A South Side of Chicago native, Michael resides in Los Angeles with his wife, filmmaker Christine Swanson, and their four children. You know, I just have to ask you. So, you get to work with your wife. And, again, *Albany Road*, wasn't that written by your wife, Christine?

Michael: Yes. Christine wrote and directed *Albany Road*, and we've been working together on projects for about 28 years.

Winn: What's that like, to be able to work with your wife, with your spouse?

Michael: It's not as hard as people think, actually. You know? We have fun. We love making movies. And I think because she handles all the creative—meaning she writes these wonderful scripts and is a fantastic storyteller and director—and then on the other side, I handle all of the business. We really complement each other very well.

Winn: Isn't it funny—and maybe you've heard this, too—that people will always counsel against that. “No. Don't work with your family. Don't work with your spouse.” Why do they say that? I don't get that.

Michael: I don't know why they say that. You know, when we made *Albany Road*, we actually had all four of our children spend at least one week, some as many as, you know, two or three weeks, on set because this is our family business. We pulled them out of their high schools or out of their colleges, and we shot *Albany Road* in Chicago and Champaign, Illinois. So, they came to town and they worked on set in different departments. And it was important for us to

have our children see what we do, what we've been doing since they were babies, actually. I remember when they were babies, we would wait until, you know, summertime when they were out of—not babies, but, you know, school age. Wait until summertime when they were out of school so they can be with us, and we can all be together as families. And we would create our production schedule so we would wrap in time for them to return to school. We especially did that with the movie called *All About Us*. I remember, you know, we shot that movie so quickly because we had to get back home to get them into school. So, I think you have to have the right philosophy around working together as family members. You know? It's not as difficult as maybe—for us as it has been for other people, perhaps, But we enjoy what we do, and this is something that all of our children now are interested in. And Winn, let me tell you, we were reluctant to have our children pursue careers in the entertainment industry because it's hard. There's a lot of rejection and, you know, we just want to say, “Hey, go do something else.” But we realized that this is the family business. And I remember my oldest son who's now almost 25. But when he was in fifth grade, he created—he wrote, directed this short film. He cast his classmates and showed it at school, and it was phenomenal. It was just a little short film, and I think that was the first time I realized that there is something there. Now granted, he's been around this his entire life. We found out we were pregnant with Cole one day before we started shooting our first feature film, *All About You*.

Winn: Wow.

Michael: And talk about bad timing. You know, we weren't planning that, but he has literally been around this business and us making movies all of his life. You know, being nursed in the editing room, attending film festivals with us, being in the Baby Bjorn during Q&A's. But he has grown into a wonderful talent, and now he's a filmmaker in his own right.

Winn: Wow. Congratulations.

Michael: Thank you.

Winn: Okay. So, let's jump into this. I really want you to share your personal story so that people know who is Michael Swanson.

Michael: Well, I am a little boy from the South Side of Chicago who had big dreams, who wanted to make his parents proud. And, you know, in Chicago, I was surrounded by a lot of either ministers, you know, like Reverend Jesse Jackson, for example, and my pastor, Reverend Wilbur Daniel. Or—and, I should say—I was surrounded by a lot of politicians, Chicago politics. My mother was, Julia, was a precinct captain for Charlie Hayes, who was a congressman for Chicago, and we got to work on his campaigns. And I was also around and worked on the campaign for the first Black mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington. And those were exciting times. You know? And I studied politics as a little boy. And as I grew up, I had the aspirations of one day becoming a senator from the state of Illinois. So, I knew the pathway to get me there would be to work on different campaigns and to study how different

public servants served our community. And I was inspired by Charles Hayes. I was inspired by Harold Washington and other public servants from the South Side of Chicago. And then Harold Washington became the mayor, and Charles Hayes replaced him in the House of Representatives. I had the opportunity, after my first year of college at the University of Notre Dame, to become an intern, a summer intern on Capitol Hill. And I worked for Congressman Hayes, and I had a first-row seat that summer to see, to really see how politics works. And I was kinda turned off, Winn, because, you know, I saw the deal making. You know, this was in the early nineties, so just imagine how politics has become from where I saw it back then, all those years ago. And I was kinda turned off and I realized then, you know, I want to be a public servant and give back to my community and create scholarships and jobs and all those things. And perhaps the best way for me to do it is not as an elected official, but perhaps as an entrepreneur, as a business owner in the private sector. So, I did a little pivot after that summer internship on Capitol Hill, and I said, "I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna become an entrepreneur one day." And that was what I set out to do.

Winn: Now, how did the entertainment industry play into this? How did you fall into that?

Michael: Well, I'll tell you, when I started my sophomore year after that internship, I thought I was going to major in political science, of course. And then I said, "Oh gosh, I have to figure out a whole new thing." And that fall, the film director, filmmaker Spike Lee came to the University of Notre Dame to talk about his most recent work. And at that time, it was *Do the Right Thing*. But Spike focused on behind the scenes a little bit more during his presentation, and that intrigued me. And it made me understand that there are so many jobs behind the camera. And so, I decided to change my major to film and television production with the intent, however, to become an entertainment attorney. I said, "Well, maybe I can have an entertainment law firm one day and be involved in the entertainment business that way." But because that was my major, I still had to learn how to edit, to direct, to, you know, shoot and crew on my classmates' projects. And I had that training to make projects. I got into some law schools, but by that time, years later, I was a little older, a little more wise. I had a better understanding of what an entertainment attorney does, and I realized that I would be miserable—

Winn: [Laughs]

Michael: —basically, just reading contracts all day. So, I decided not to go to law school. After I graduated from Notre Dame, I moved to the East Coast. I worked at a nonprofit organization. And then eventually I had a little pit stop at Princeton Theological Seminary, moved there after we got married. And I knew still that I wanted to do something in entertainment that was business related. When I left Princeton Theological Seminary, Christine decided to apply to NYU: New York University's graduate film program at Tisch School of the Arts. And the only reason she wanted to go there was because Spike Lee attended NYU Tisch. I should also mention that Christine was my girlfriend at

the time, and she was sitting next to me at that Notre Dame assembly where Spike, you know, inspired us. And we actually both changed our majors to film, to film and television and film theory and critical studies, and we were all in. So, she got into NYU, and that's when I was invited to work at NBC. And it just worked out well because we're both in New York, we're both young, we didn't have children yet. We could—the world was our oyster. What got me into producing movies was, I would take vacation time from NBC and produce Christine's NYU graduate films. I realized—and I didn't know this, I just kinda stumbled upon it, but I realized I had a great temperament, I felt, to be a producer. I thought outside of the box. I was very creative in the ways I raised money to produce these films. I got in-kind donations. For example, shout out to Banana Republic and to California Pizza Kitchen. You know, I just called people and say, “Hey, can you give us wardrobe for this this short film we're doing? And I'll give you a thank you in the credits.” Or, “Can you give us food to feed our cast and crew?: And so that was a way that the money we did have, I knew I didn't have to spend it on those things, but I can maybe buy another lens or rent a better camera. So, the money I had, I wanted it to appear on the screen as opposed to, you know, going toward wardrobe or lunch. So, I did things like that. And more importantly, Winn, I really enjoyed—I really enjoyed being a producer and putting things together. I always joke that, you know, either I can be a producer or I would be a great wedding planner.

Winn: [Laughs]

Michael: You know? Because what it is, is you're organizing, you're motivating your crew. Sometimes it could be 20 people. Sometimes it's 200 people. But we're all marching toward this goal, and we're trying to execute something together. And it's fun. It's satisfying. And so that's what I did. And so, that was many years ago, and we started our company, Faith Filmworks, in 1997, and we've been doing it ever since.

Winn: You know, you mentioned being an entrepreneur, and you actually gave us a very, very good definition of what an entrepreneur is: somebody who, whether it's getting behind 20 people or 200 people, that you can get everybody moving in the right direction. A lot of people think that an entrepreneur means that, you know, *I'm the boss. People will do what I tell them to do. I can show up when I want. It's my way or the highway.* And that ain't leadership. That ain't entrepreneurialship.

Michael: No. The best entrepreneurs are servant leaders.

Winn: Oh, thank you for saying that.

Michael: Yes.

Winn: Well, now I have to ask you to expand on that. You know? To have a servant's heart. Really? That's leadership? That's entrepreneurship?

Michael: That is the best kind of leadership is to have a servant's heart. To see people, to validate people, to encourage people, to have a sensitivity, to know that

maybe they're having a hard day today. What can you do? Also, the best entrepreneurs, you know, can step into any role in the organization or the company and do that role. You know? And so, you have an understanding or perhaps even sometimes you have to empathize with your employees, but you have to be kind. You know? It's important to be kind and to be loving, believe it or not. Right? You have to be loving because any business that you have, any film production that you're a part of, any company that you're in, you know, it's really important to be a leader because people are looking to you to make decisions, to give direction. That's really important. But you also have to be willing to listen, you know, and understand that maybe you won't always have the best ideas and you can reach out to your team. And no matter who that team member is—you know, maybe it's a newly hired employee or someone who has been with you for 10, 12 years. But great ideas can come from anyone. And so that's why I use the words: it's important to see people and validate people. I think true leaders understand the fact that what we do is a collaborative process. You know, you're working with all kinds of people and it's important to get them involved and make them feel valued. Because it makes the company, the business, the production, whatever you're doing, it just makes it that much stronger. And so, I embrace that. I really believe it to be true. And I like working with people who can feel joyful about what they're doing and understand that it's not just another paycheck. *Oh, I gotta get up and go to work.* No. I want you to come to work or I want you to be a part of this experience because it means something to you and because you mean something to us.

Winn: Wow.

Michael: So that's really important. I think if we had more of that, Winn, you know, maybe there would be less burnout and, you know, less stress. You know? We can talk about that more, too, but that's really important to me. Being a servant, a servant leader is very important.

Winn: In coaching my brand-new students attending my school on—because, of course, they have high dreams and they wanna do incredible things with their career. And one of the pieces of advice that I give to them, which is along what you're saying, is to never have the attitude of “that's not my job.” I'm like, “Wipe out that sentence from your vocabulary: that's not my job. It's so ugly when somebody says that.” But for a leader, for an entrepreneur, for somebody who truly wants to rally up everybody around them because it's not just one person's energy that creates all the success, it's a whole team of people

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Winn: You know, to have that attitude that *everything* is your job. Do you find that that's kinda your role as, especially being a producer, that everything is your job?

Michael: Yes. Yes. And you can step into any situation and help out as needed. But yeah. Because, as a producer, you are responsible for everything. You're

responsible for everything. So, if there's a piece of trash on the floor, you don't say, "Well, I hired, you know, this great janitor. He or she is gonna come along and clean that up later. You know, I think they're making their rounds in about 20 minutes, so that's not my job." No. Everything you see—if you see something wrong, your job is to fix it.

Winn: If you see it, you own it. Right.

Michael: Right. I think it's important, Winn, to encourage people within the organization, the company, the business, the set, to function as owners, to take ownership, to give them permission to function as an owner and make decisions. Sometimes, Winn, many people may not be around but empower them to make decisions that are the best decisions for all of us instead of waiting to be told, "Oh, can you do that? Oh, can you pick that piece of trash up?" And so, I think when you empower people, they will rise to the occasion. They will step up to the plate. And, you know, I think that's also important. You don't want people to feel so paralyzed or boxed in that they're afraid to make decisions. I'm gonna give you an example of what I recently read about, and this is the Four Seasons Hotel. They have given permission to all of their employees to make decisions that would make the guests very happy. If they're asking—if the guest is asking for something, they don't have to go back and, "Oh, can we do this for Mr. and Mrs.—?" You know, they are already empowered and they can make decisions. And I believe the number is, I think, is 20,000 bucks or something like that.

Winn: Wow.

Michael: Yeah. Or maybe it's 2,000. I'm sorry. But they have been empowered to make the decision up to a certain dollar amount, to make that guest feel accommodated and happy, and more importantly, remember that experience. You know? It's something very simple that you can do that can really change people's whole outlook. So, I think that's a great thing.

Winn: How would a leader, a producer, make people feel like they're paralyzed or boxed in? Like, what's the mistake that they're making? And then, of course, the flip side of that is I'll ask you, you know, what it is that you do to make those 20 people or those 200 people feel like they have ownership. Whatever their title is, whatever their role is, their duties, their responsibilities: what is it that you do to make them feel like they have that empowerment?

Michael: Well, you may have read in the trades or have heard stories about some producers who walk on set. I have some in mind. But they instill a lot of fear in people with whom they work. And sometimes they do that—I think those producers want others to fear them because they think that is power. That's having power. And as a result, it's a lot of tension on sets. People often make mistakes. They're not relaxed. And so, I don't subscribe to that at all. What I do is I set the tone. Despite that long bio you read, and it's embarrassingly long; I think I'm gonna trim it up some. You know, people can read all that stuff about you and then when you show up, "Oh my gosh. That's him." You know? And I like to set the tone early to let them know I'm a regular person.

I'm laid back. I appreciate you. Thank you for being here on this job with us. And it really settles them and centers them, and it makes them want to work even harder for you because you're relatable, you're kind. You know, you ask them about family or their background or, "Oh, what school did you attend?" You try to find some kind of connection. So, those are the things that I do. And I feel like those things empower people, and they do their best work. It's really a win-win. And they're comfortable. Right? Who wants to work on a movie set for 12 to 14 hours being all stressed out and tense and tired. You know? That's no way to have a healthy, fun work environment.

Winn: Such, such great advice. Thank you for that.

Michael: Yes.

Winn: Now in getting ready for this interview, and I really appreciate that you worked with me to help prepare. You know, there's topics that you said that you love, that you enjoy discussing, and the list was just such a breath of fresh air. The things that you said that you love discussing. One of them is, failure is your friend. What do you mean by that?

Michael: Hmm. It's important to fail. I say failure is your friend because you will learn so many lessons from those failures, from those mistakes. The key is to fail early, learn as much as you can, and not repeat those failures. But we're all gonna have failures. We're all gonna make mistakes. We're all gonna have, you know, setbacks and disappointments and frustrations, but we're also gonna have some victories along the way, some triumphs, some good news that will fuel us to keep going. But don't be afraid of failure. Some people don't start out pursuing certain goals they have because they're afraid of failing. But everybody fails. You know? It's because those are such rich lessons, and you can learn so much from the failure. So that's why I say it's your friend, and it's important to learn from them, to get back up, brush yourself off, and keep going.

Winn: Do you have any story in particular that maybe you and Christine have early in your career or early in your marriage that you like to, "Yeah, we failed early, and this is what the story was, and here's what we learned." Do you have any of those stories?

Michael: I have plenty of those stories, and they're not all early in our career. There's even, you know, recently, you deal with big things and, you know, the failures at this stage are not so devastating where they set you back, but it causes you to pause and be like, "You know, what could I have done differently? Or maybe I should have thought that through a little bit more." So, you're always fine tuning and making adjustments even, you know, while you're soaring. You know, on the outside, everybody's like, "Wow. That is great. Oh, that's so impressive." But you're still learning, and you'll always learn. You always want to learn. Looking back, there are some things when we made *All About You*, our very first feature film that stars Renee Elise Goldsberry. We had a great cast. I mean, we can talk about that later.

Winn: I love her, by the way. Thank you for introducing me to her.

Michael: Oh, yes. You're welcome.

Winn: I just have to brag on you a little bit because, you know, we were doing a gala and I was panicking because we didn't have any talent. You know? We're getting close to—because, you know, I'm super cheap. I'm really, really cheap because I'm trying to raise money. And so, you know, I'm really proud of the fact that the money that we raise, we don't spend it. You know? And so, I have almost no budget. And I reached out to Michael and she said yes and flew out. And I have to say something about her. You know, there are people who are on stage who have incredible talent, and, of course, that's why she won the Tony award for *Hamilton*. Right? That's why she is who she is. Right?

Michael: Yes.

Winn: And so they're brilliant on stage, but then you meet people who are brilliant off stage. You know, off stage where they are these things that you just mentioned: they are personable, and they are kind, and they're gracious, and that just makes them that much more attractive. So, you know, thank you for that introduction to her.

Michael: Oh, you're most welcome. Renee is just a breath of fresh air. She is even more beautiful inside as she is on the outside, and I'm just so blessed to call her a dear friend, even really a sister. We're like siblings now. We've known each other for 25 years. She's the godmother to all my children.

Winn: Oh, wow. Wow.

Michael: Yeah. She's just so wonderful. I love Renee. But, yeah, some of the things we did early, making our first feature film, we made a lot of mistakes. You know? It's very different to go from producing several short films to now a feature film. And now we're dealing with unions, and we're dealing with—just all these things that that are just magnified that I had to learn on the go. You know? I was the first—this was my first feature film that I was producing. So, yes, I learned a lot, but more importantly, Winn, I did not make those mistakes again. Those are hard lessons and I learned very quickly. And every other production, I'm like, “Okay. I learned from that mistake, and that won't happen again.” I also think it's kinda cool to learn from your own mistakes. It's important to have mentors, and I have some great mentors. And you can hear their stories and hear about their mistakes or their failures, or you can read a biography or autobiography. You can listen to a podcast, and you can have access to all these great men and women who have created wonderful things and listen to their mistakes. But it's something about learning from the mistakes that you've personally made that really stick. And so, I made them and I learned from them and I kept it moving.

Winn: So, I'm thinking that by making those mistakes, that's what has guided you to become the type of boss that you are, the type of producer you are, of these things that you just shared. That, again, that you are kind, that you form a connection, that you're transparent, that you listen. The best ideas don't come

from you. Right? Some of the best ideas come from the team members, and maybe some of those team members who are being paid less than anybody on that entire set

Michael: Yes.

Winn: Part of that entire production, maybe that's where you—and so I'm guessing, I'm thinking that some of those earlier mistakes maybe knocked you down a few notches and thought, *Okay. That was a mistake. I need to listen to my people more.*

Michael: Yes. Yes. That's right. And I also learned very early from one of my, you know, wonderful mentors that you wanna surround yourself with people who are very, very good at what they do, who are smarter than you in certain areas. It's important to have, you know, what he would say is have a great board, you know, a team of advisers who are running companies or doing things in your field, because they've seen so many things already. They've seen what you're about to go through 20 years ago, and they can impart wisdom and knowledge and advice. And so, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Surround yourself with people who can be a great team of advisors or a board of directors or can give you wise counsel. And so, I learned that pretty early, too. They've seen the situation and sometimes they're looking through a different lens because of their experience. So don't carry—I've learned not to carry such a heavy load by myself. There are so many people who wanna help you, who wanna see you succeed, who want to see you win. And it's important to be vulnerable enough, you know, to say, “I need help. I need guidance. Hey. What would you do in this situation?”

Winn: I love this conversation. I could probably divide my life, or especially my career, into two parts. The first part was I have to know it all. I have to be the smartest. I have to be the prettiest. I have to be the most talented. If I'm gonna be successful, I have to be all of those things, which, of course, I was none of those things. And so, then you fake it. Then you show up with ego, like maybe what you were talking about. And when you show up with ego, what does that do? That creates fear. That creates, you know, division. Right? And that was the first half. And then the second half was surrender to all of that. Oh my god, I'm not the smartest. And I don't have to be.

Michael: You don't have to.

Winn: Thank goodness. I can let this go. I'm not the prettiest and I don't have to be anymore. I'm not the prettiest anymore. So, gosh, what a relief to have that transparency.

Michael: One of my favorite words, Winn, is *surrender*. It's important to surrender. I have to surrender. I surrender to God. And when you surrender, it takes you to a place—surrendering is not a weakness. You know? When you surrender, it takes you to a place of, to your point, I don't have all the answers. Yeah. I may need a little help, but that's okay.

Winn: Mm-hmm.

Michael: Yeah. I need some advice. But in that surrender stage, when you are vulnerable. You know, there's a scripture that says, "When we are weak, he," meaning God, "is strong. We are made strong because of his strength, and his strength is perfect." And so, it's really kind of a cool place to be: not being a narcissist and prideful, full of ego, and I know all the answers, and nobody can tell me anything, and these are my decisions, and everybody has to follow them. No. Just take a step back. Humble yourself. You know, because the exalted will be made humble, and the humble will be exalted by God. And just take a step back, be vulnerable, and surrender.

Winn: I wish you could, like, see my notes, you guys. So, as he's talking, I'm like, I'm over here. I'm supposed to be controlling this interview, and instead, I'm the learner taking a lot of notes. And, you know, you used two different words. One word was *control*, and then the other word was *surrender*. So under the word *control*, you know, I could write down—when you're trying to control everything, under that word comes fear, comes mistakes, comes struggle, comes uncertainty. And then when you use the word *surrender*, which you said is actually a sign of strength, of power, under that word comes kindness, love, connection. God, what a shift from one mindset to the other, from control to surrender. You know? And you also, I know you love this theme of trusting God no matter what. How often do you have to remind yourself of that?

Michael: It depends on the season I'm in.

Winn: What do you mean by that?

Michael: So, we all go through seasons, and I'm not talking about the four seasons: winter, spring, summer, fall. I'm talking about the seasons of life. You know, sometimes there's a season of great loss where we may lose a loved one or we have hard times financially or we might be dealing with a health challenge. You know, that's a season. There are seasons when everything is going great. You know? You just got your dream job or you just got a raise, a promotion. Or you just had a baby, you know, or you just got married. There are highs and lows, seemingly highs and lows, and these seasons that we go through change. You know, sometimes we're on the mountaintop and then sometimes we're in the valley or the wilderness, you know, or the desert. And it's okay to be in those places just like it's okay to be in the mountaintop. But I've learned in my life, in my career, that we don't always stay there all the time. We go through seasons.

Winn: Mm-hmm.

Michael: And I think it's important that we go through those seasons because we learn so much. You know? You learn so much if you are the number-one-selling pop artist in the world. You learn so much when you have the highest grossing movie last weekend in the world, and you're the star of that. You know? You can think of these names I'm thinking about. Right? It's like—and so people might watch *Entertainment Tonight* or *Access Hollywood*, and you see these stories of, you know, wow, look at that actor. Look at that celebrity. Look at that musician. Look at that singer. World tours, money, breaking

records. And you're sitting at home in your living room and you're just like, *Wow. Nothing is wrong with that person's life. Everything seems to be perfect. They seem so happy.* And then you might compare their lives to your life. It's like, *I'm looking for a job. I got laid off. You know, where am I gonna eat?* You know, grocery bill is—but let me tell you something. Nothing lasts forever, first of all, good or bad, and that is the seasons that I'm talking about. And also, things that we see, especially in the entertainment industry, all that glitters is not gold. Right? This industry spends millions of dollars to frame something, to market something, to look like what it is. So, you'll be enticed to go out and buy that ticket or buy that concert ticket or movie ticket or stream that album or you know, it's all designed. So, first of all, take everything that you see, especially coming out of the entertainment industry, with a grain of salt. Two, I work with a lot of celebrities, a lot of famous people, a lot of rich people in entertainment, and they may not be as happy as you think, unfortunately. Sometimes things aren't going as well as it seems on *Entertainment Tonight* or *Access Hollywood*. Sometimes there's a loneliness and a brokenness, and a hurt, a painfulness that they have. Because, yeah, seemingly, they have the world. They have everything they want. But sometimes they may lack peace. You know? Or they may feel like a prisoner. Right? So, I wanna say that, first of all, if you're watching this and you're like, *Why don't I have that?* When you're going through a valley or hard times or wilderness, you know, or desert, it's gonna feel so lonely. You know? You may feel hopeless. I've been in the valley. I've been in the wilderness. It's like, *Why am I here? What did I do wrong? Where are you, God?* You know? But I've learned in the valley, you can learn so much. First of all, when you're off the mountaintop, when you're out of the spotlight, when Hollywood is not calling, it's like the lights are turned off and you're alone. But I say, sometimes that's the best place for you to be because you are alone with your thoughts. It's uncomfortable for a lot of people. You're alone with God. And sometimes we go through that so God can get our attention, and he can talk to us and say, *I'm still here. You're going through a dark time right now. You're going through a season. Seasons change. But just know that I will never leave you, and I'll never forsake you, and I'll provide all of your needs, and I will protect you from the storms.* And we have to be there to have a perspective of, *Wow. I can go through the fire, and I can come out of the fire not smelling like smoke.*

Winn: Mm-hmm.

Michael: And, also, in those periods, you realize the friends that you thought you had, some of them left. It's not fun being around you anymore because, you know, you're not at the mountaintop. And so, it's this pruning. It's a season where you're allowed to surrender, to be vulnerable, to cry out for help, and cry out, you know, just to keep your mind intact because you don't know how you're gonna make it.

Winn: Mm-hmm.

Michael: And more of us are going through that now than ever before. But I've been there, and you will make it, and you will get out. And then trouble does not last forever. It's a season. That's what I mean by season.

Winn: I love that.

Michael: And so, life is hard and can be challenging and has ups and downs. And so, you can only really appreciate the ups and the highs if you've been through the valley.

Winn: Mm-hmm.

Michael: And the wilderness and the lows and the downs. You have to have both. It's not punishment. It's not punishment. It is to make you a whole person with a perspective that can be helpful to other people who are going through the same thing.

Winn: Wow.

Michael: And where you start is not where you're gonna end up. So stay encouraged, is what I like to tell people. And value those seasons of wilderness because it's important.

Winn: Wow.

Michael: And, you know, in the valley is where the water is, is where the nutrients are.

Winn: Wow. Beautiful.

Michael: It's where things get developed so that they can grow. If you're in the mountaintop, the air is rare. You might have trouble breathing. The sun is blasting on you. You know? It's not much water up there, you know, unless it's like snow, but the valley is where it is. Don't despise the valley. The valley is good for all of us because it's going to make us stronger when we have to go back up.

Winn: Beautiful advice. So there's a couple of belief systems that you have that I I'm curious about because I I'm not exactly sure what you mean. You talk about rock bottom riches. What does that mean?

Michael: Well, again, when you hit rock bottom, when you go to the valley, there's some richness down there. And the things that you learn creates richness in your life. That's what I mean. It's okay to hit rock bottom. Because when you hit rock bottom, you just learn so much. It it's the whole thing like failure. Right? You learn so much. Everybody thinks that when you are successful, that means that everything is—not everybody; a lot of people who've gone through it know the truth. But when you go through successes and successes, that maybe they don't see hard times. That's because by the time they make it to the cover of that business magazine or by the time they make it to, you know, that television interview, you just see that side. You see the other side of their success.

Winn: They have wisdom.

Michael: Yes.

Winn: They have something profound to say because they've been through it.

Michael: They've been through it. But you don't always see the struggles. You don't see that, man, they couldn't pay for their mortgage. You know, they had a struggle just paying for the car. Maybe they had to sleep in their car. Right? There's so many stories, and that's why it's important to know that things take time. Right? Overnight successes don't just happen like that. They happen over at least 10 years. And sometimes, it's at least 10 years of struggle and hard times and hitting rock bottom, but getting up again and struggling. But overcoming the struggles and the challenges, that's a part of the journey. That's a part of the journey. And those things on that journey will equip you and prepare you for where you are headed, for where you are going, for where you will be. You'll get there. You will get there.

Winn: Such great advice.

Michael: Again, the race is not given to the swift or to the strong. It doesn't matter how long it takes. The race is given to he or she who endures until the end.

Winn: I remember a mentor years ago saying that everybody wants the spotlight. And for people listening to this, the spotlight could be fame. It could be money. It could be a new car. It could be being the boss. It could be becoming an entrepreneur, it could be finding that true love. Everybody wants the spotlight. And then she would say, "And the truth of the matter is, if some of you got the spotlight today, you would probably make a total fool of yourself."

Michael: Yes.

Winn: You're not ready.

Michael: Not ready. Yeah. [*Laughs*]

Winn: You're not ready, and that's okay. You know, you've used the word *wisdom* several times and one of my favorite, favorite quotes—I can't remember who said it, but I use it and I steal it all the time—is "You can't Google wisdom."

Michael: Amen. That is so true.

Winn: You can Google lots of things, lots of facts.

Michael: That is so true.

Winn: Watch a YouTube video on how to do makeup. Doesn't mean that Warner Brothers is gonna call you next week for their next feature film.

Michael: That's so true.

Winn: Right? But you can't Google wisdom, and wisdom takes time, and it takes those rock-bottom riches, as you talked about.

Michael: Good for you.

Winn: Okay. Now you also mentioned, this one I didn't understand either, unemployed birds. What do you mean by that?

Michael: *[Laughs]* Yes. You know, when I was going through a very, very difficult time financially—basically, just broke. Right? And had a business, had young children I had to feed. And you wonder, *Am I cut out for this? Am I supposed to do this? Is this really my purpose?* And, you know, you can get discouraged if things aren't working well or they're taking longer than you thought they would take. It can be discouraging. You can even, if you're not careful, slip into depression. You know? And so, the one good thing—I may not have had a lot of money and bill collectors were calling and we're trying to get the career off the ground. And the one thing about living in Los Angeles is I can hop in my car and drive to the Pacific Ocean, and that's what I would do. I would put a beach chair in the trunk. I would take my Bible and read it, and I would take my headphones and listen to—I love Cece Winans, but I would listen to Cece Winans and other gospel artists and praise and worship music. And I would sit there on that sand, you know, billions of grains of sand. Right? And I would look at that Pacific Ocean, and I would say, *Wow. On the other side of that water is Japan.* You know? And I would see the seagulls flying around me. Right? And I said, *Wow. They're beautiful birds.* Right? And they don't have jobs.

Winn: Unemployed birds. Okay.

Michael: They don't have jobs. And if God's eye is on the sparrow and God is taking care of these seagulls that I see, and they're being well fed, they have shelter, they're enjoying life flying around, they're joyful seemingly. How much more is he gonna take care of me?

Winn: Wow.

Michael: So unemployed birds are okay. They're fine. They're thriving. They have food. How much more is your God, who loves you so well, gonna take care of you and your concerns and your needs, and he's gonna provide shelter? You know? He's going to provide food. He's going to provide clothing. How much more does he love you? He created you. He loves you more than the sparrow. He loves you more than the seagulls. So, that was an epiphany for me. It centered me. It gave me peace. It brought tears to my eyes to know that he has not forgotten me. He sees me, and he's going to carry me when I don't have the strength to walk or even crawl anymore. But more importantly, he loves all of us.

Winn: That's awesome. And the thing I love about this is that you were the one who took action to have that mind shift, to have that heart shift. You didn't just continue to wallow. You didn't just continue to, you know, you did what you were supposed to do. You know? And a lot of people, they want the results, but they're not willing to do the work, take the steps. And the results could just be that I wake up with hope. Okay. Well, what did you do to wake up with hope? Did you reach out to somebody in need? Did you provide hope for somebody else? Did you do some self-care? Did you go to the gym? Did you

get eight hours of sleep? Did you go to the beach and set up your chair and listen to some great music and watch the seagulls and reset your mind?

Michael: Yes.

Winn: We have to do our part here, too.

Michael: Yes.

Winn: Okay. So, here's another one. You're a soufflé. What does that one mean, Michael?

Michael: Oh, I love this. I came up with this one day, and I was like, *Wow, that's so awesome*. It goes back to: things take time, and the vision that you have, the purpose that you have in life. You're not a Pop-Tart.

Winn: A Pop-Tart.

Michael: Pop-Tart. You can throw a Pop-Tart in the toaster or in the microwave for, like, I don't know, fifteen sec—for the record, I have not had a Pop-Tart in maybe 25 years so I don't know how long, but I know it's quick in the microwave. Maybe ten seconds, fifteen seconds.

Winn: *[Laughs]* It's quick.

Michael: Right? You're out the door. A Pop-Tart is full of all these artificial flavors and coloring and preservatives, and it's just not good for you.

Winn: Right.

Michael: So, I submit that maybe things are taking a little longer for you because you're a soufflé. A soufflé is a special French pastry dessert. It takes a lot of care. More importantly, it takes a lot of time. If you go to a really nice French restaurant, you're gonna have to order that soufflé even before you figure out what you want as an appetizer.

Winn: This is awesome.

Michael: You know, you gotta put the order in because the pastry chef in the kitchen of that restaurant needs to begin preparing it even before your appetizer is ordered. Right? So that it'd be ready by the time you're done with your entree. A soufflé has to have the best ingredients for it to taste the best, the purest ingredients. It has to be prepared in the right kind of oven with the right temperature. You know, you can't be running all around the oven or it'll fall. Right? It has to be done with care. You can't take that soufflé out of the oven prematurely, too soon. It's not ready yet. It won't taste good. And so, like a soufflé, you are special. Anybody listening to this, just know, be encouraged that you are special. And as a result, it takes time for you to be prepared so that the world can enjoy your gifts and talents.

Winn: You know, every time I do an interview, I'm always thinking, *Okay. What's the title? What's the theme? What am I gonna call this podcast interview?* Now I'm thinking we're gonna call it "You're not a Pop-Tart, you're a soufflé."

Michael: *[Laughs]*

Winn: Oh my gosh. That was just—that was so good. Okay, I wanna shift gears here a little bit. You know, people talk about work-life balance. First of all, I don't know that there's really such a thing as balance in anything in life. You know? You swing the pendulum towards your career and, you know, focus on making the money, which is a good thing. Providing for your family, you know, having that purpose in life. And then you realize that you're out of shape and so now you're swinging the pendulum toward spending hours in the gym and now your spouse is complaining that you're never home. And then you're swinging the pendulum towards your relationship, and you haven't done volunteer work for a long time, so you swing the pendulum toward, you know, spiritual gifts and that activity to bring that kind of balance. And now you're not making enough money, so you get a third job. My gosh. Is there really such a thing as balance? But how do you handle, if you could answer this, how do you handle work-life balance?

Michael: Well, I handle work-life balance by not calling it work-life balance.

Winn: Okay.

Michael: I handle it by switching those words. I handle it by prioritizing life first and calling it life-work balance. Because most of these jobs we have, as much as they love you at that job, at the office, what you're doing, if something, God forbid, were to happen to you, something were to happen to your health or something happens that prevents you from being able to come back to work, do you know how quickly you'll be replaced?

Winn: *[Laughs]* Yeah.

Michael: Especially at these big corporations. Right? They won't shut down because—oh, even if you're the president and CEO. They won't shut down.

Winn: And quickly they have to replace you.

Michael: Right, right. And so, I was able to understand that. And I also—again, this goes back to having mentors and listening to people who have walked the paths before us, who are wiser, who have more experience. And they always say, you know, nobody complained on their deathbed or had regrets that they spent so much time on the job or working. But the things they do talk about at that final phase in their life is that, “Man, I wish I had more time to spend with my children, or I wish I took that vacation, or I wish I didn't work 80 hours a week, or I wish I had just had stopped to smell the roses more, or reached out to my siblings, or visited my parents or loved ones.” Those are all the regrets that that people have when they're on their deathbed, when they're at the later stages of their lives because you can't get that time back. So, you're in that time right now. So, now is the time to make a concerted effort, on purpose, to spend time to create memories with your family, with your children, with your siblings, with your nieces and nephews and cousins, with your best friends, with your loved ones. They're not gonna be around forever. Don't take it for granted. And so, life comes first. God created us to live and to live life more abundantly. Work, work is kinda—look, we have to work. There's

a scripture that says if you don't work, you don't eat. But the balance comes in to say, "Okay. I'm gonna work, but I'm not gonna work 80 hours a week just so I can make more money." You're killing yourself.

Winn: Mm-hmm.

Michael: You know? So, the balance is, you know, get out there, go for walks, go to the beach or body of water if, you know, a body of water is near you. Go see a movie. You know? Go to the park. You don't have to spend money to do things. You have to have balance in that you can go to a park and, you know, take some binoculars and watch birds, watch people, but just be there with your thoughts and take time for yourself. Self-care is so real. There's so many mental health issues that we have in this country. But take time for yourself. You don't do that when you're on the hamster wheel, when you're in the rat race, and there's no time for you. So, I would really strongly recommend that we all in this society just flip it to life-work balance instead of work-life balance. And you have to do it on purpose. Nobody's gonna tell you, "Hey, Michael. You have two week's vacation that you haven't taken yet and, you know, it's December." They're not going to remind you about your vacation time.

Winn: Right. Right. Wow.

Michael: Right? You have to do it. You have to be responsible for your own self-care.

Winn: Mm-hmm.

Michael: And you are entitled to that vacation time, but more importantly, it's necessary. You will come back to your job more refreshed and rejuvenated and happier and well rested. You have to take time. God rested on the seventh day. You telling me you don't need rest? So, it's important to remember that. And then, really quickly, Winn. One of the things I do is, if my children have, you know, as they were growing up, if there's a concert or, you know, if there's a play, a school play, or if there's some—I would put that on my work calendar, on my schedule, so no other meeting could get scheduled around that time. I'd block that off. Because if there's a soccer game, you know, if there's a playoff game, whatever it is that they have, I'm gonna be there because that meeting can be moved to another day, another week, another time, but you only have those few opportunities to be there in the audience cheering on your children.

Winn: Such great advice. And, again, such a simple solution to it. Because we'll put everything else into our calendar.

Michael: Oh, yeah.

Winn: All the work-related stuff and, you know. I mean, I'm grateful that I'm an older dad. You know, I'm 66, and my daughter's 13. And so, I did have some of this wisdom and knew that scheduling everything—her horse riding or her school functions—that was just as much if not more important than all the other meetings related to work that I had to put into my calendar. So, thanks for that advice.

Michael: Yes.

Winn: You know, a good friend and mentor, Patrice Washington, she talks about her funeral. She said, you know—how, as a mom, you know, she was just so focused on keeping a clean house. You know, she said, “You know what? At my funeral, my clean house is not gonna walk up to the podium and say, ‘Oh my gosh. She was so wonderful. She kept me so clean.’”

Michael: *[Laughs]* Yes. That's right.

Winn: Yeah. Okay. My gosh. I could just go on and on, Michael, with the wisdom and the life lessons that you're sharing with us. But, of course, you're in the entertainment industry, so there's some questions I have to ask.

Michael: Okay

Winn: So, you work with a lot of celebrities. Do you ever get starstruck yourself? Can I tell you, the only person I ever got starstruck with was Betty White, you know, because I love *Golden Girls*. And I love *Golden Girls* for many reasons, you know? That was my mom; that was our thing, me and my mom watching *Golden Girls*. And it was so funny because my dad would walk into the room and he'd be, “Haven't you guys seen this episode already?” We'd look at him like, “Get out of here. Yeah. We've seen it a hundred times. What's your point?” You know? That was just—and so to meet Betty White and actually do work with her and shoot a video with her, my—

Michael: Oh.

Winn: You know, that was probably the best and worst day of my life, doing that video with Betty White. So that's really the only person that I was ever starstruck with. Who have you been starstruck with?

Michael: You know, there is only one person for me, too, Winn, and it's Stevie Wonder.

Winn: Really? Wow.

Michael: Stevie Wonder. And I've gotten to meet him three times, three separate occasions, and got pictures with him. And the reason why—you're right. I meet so many celebrities, but the thing about Stevie is his music. I just feel he is a vessel. His lyrics, his music, his perspective, his outlook, his vision. Right? His vision is so powerful and loving and has influenced me so much that when I do get those times to meet him—I've been to several concerts and all that, but when I was able to meet him and talk with him, I was just like, this is Stevie Wonder. You know? And Stevie has been around seemingly, well, definitely all of my life but he's been a fixture in our culture and in our lives from Little Stevie Wonder, Ed Sullivan Show to, you know, he gives a concert here in Los Angeles every December for his House Full of Toys charity benefit for children. And he's just a kind and loving man. You can just study his—especially those songs that he created in the seventies and the eighties. You can study that and just be so full and understand just how deep he is.

Winn: Wow.

Michael: He's a treasure. And so, that's the only person I've been, you know, like geeked-out over.

Winn: Oh, that's a good one. I remember when the double album came out, I wore that album out. I probably was, I don't know, 13 years old.

Michael: Yeah. God. That I mean, that's still a—I mean, it's just a classic.

Winn: Yeah.

Michael: Yeah.

Winn: Okay. What was your favorite TV show or movie that you've worked on?

Michael: Well, for television, I would say *Parks and Recreation*. That was Parks and Rec because it was such a fun family atmosphere. The cast and crew were so close. And, you know, I get the scripts ahead of time before the table read as an executive. But for that show in particular, I would never read the script ahead of time. I always waited until the actual table read to hear the script for the first time because I wanted to hear the script read in the characters' voices, you know, and those actors. And it was so hilarious. I never laughed that much with any other comedy I've worked on. And then I got to travel a lot with them, which was fun. Parks and Rec, we shot in Washington. I remember one time there was an episode, and we shot inside the Naval Observatory in Washington, DC, which is the home to the vice president. The reason we were there was because then vice president Joe Biden and Dr. Biden, his wife, were in the episode that we were shooting in Washington, DC. And it was so much fun to spend the day there. And then we shot in Chicago. I mean, we shot all over the world, but it was just, we're such a close-knit group.

Winn: That's awesome.

Michael: That's television, Parks and Rec. On the movie side, I would have to say my most recent feature film. My most recent movie is *Albany Road*. And for a lot of different reasons, that is a special film to me. And it's a beautiful film, and it's, you know, we had a lot to conquer with that. You know? And I learned a lot, and I'm proud of what we were able to do with it. So, I would say those two are my favorite to date.

Winn: It's a beautiful film. And by the way, you made, I think, over \$10 off of me because I rented it twice.

Michael: [Laughs] Oh, okay. Thank you.

Winn: I streamed it twice. So.

Michael: Thank you. Well, let me tell you. For those, you know, tuning in, if you have not seen *Albany Road*, it's going to be on every Delta Airlines flight starting in October all over the world. October through February, you can catch it on Delta Airlines, every Delta plane. And, and it's still on demand. So, if you wanna watch it on Amazon Prime or Fandango at Home, Microsoft Store,

Google Play, it's there. And we're also working on bringing it to a streamer so more people can see it.

Winn: Congratulations. It is a beautiful show. It really is.

Michael: Thank you.

Winn: Wow. And, again, to be able to do that with Christine, with your wife, that had to be, to have that kind of victory together is pretty sweet, I'm sure.

Michael: Yes.

Winn: Okay. So, as we start to wrap things up, you know, first of all, anything, you know, coming up that we should all be looking out for? Any shows or movies that you're privy to that we should be keeping an eye on?

Michael: Well, I am in preproduction for season five of my show, *Hacks*.

Winn: Congratulations on that. Thank you. You know, *Designing Women* was one of my favorite shows. I just loved that movie. I'm sorry. I just loved that TV show. I mean, I could quote that in different scenes and everything. And so, to see her so successful in your show on this one is pretty exciting.

Michael: Yeah. Jean Smart is phenomenal. And just, just to watch her work, it kinda goes back to—and I'm a big Carol Burnett fan, too.

Winn: Mm-hmm. Me too. Oh my gosh.

Michael: And Carol Burnett was in, she was in an episode in season four. And to see Jean Smart and Carol Burnett sitting there, you know, acting together was wonderful. But Jean is just such a trooper. You know, she is such a seasoned veteran actress, and they don't really make them. They don't make them like Jean anymore. Jean's a trooper. You know? She's on Broadway right now, in fact, doing kind of a one-woman show.

Winn: Is she?

Michael: Yes, and then she'll be back to shoot with us. So, season five, I'm excited about that because their lot—it's very ambitious. It's a very ambitious season, and it's gonna be very special. So, look for that. I guess it'll start streaming. We'll start shooting in September through February, and then it should be on HBO Max by May of 2026.

Winn: Congratulations. Yeah.

Michael: Thank you.

Winn: Michael, you're again, it resonates from you, this humility and this kindness. And, a big theme that I'm also feeling from your message is just this idea of hope. You know, that that is what we do, whether it's in producing messages through the entertainment industry or it's just our day-to-day interaction that we have with coworkers or with our employees and customers, just to be this beacon of hope and that's the word that kept on coming to mind for me as I listened to you. So, thank you so much for all of that. Do you have a final message for our listeners, Michael?

Michael: My final message would be to remind you not to worry. Don't worry. Don't overthink things. You'll get to where you're supposed to be, exactly when you're supposed to be there but continue to enjoy the journey. Enjoy the ride on the way to where you're going, and be joyful. Life is short. Tomorrow is not promised to any of us, so enjoy today. You know? Sometimes we can worry so much about things happening or the timing that we forget to enjoy today. And so that's what I wanna encourage everybody to do, and you're gonna be fine. God bless you. God bless all your listeners.

Winn: We need lots of reminders and people like you that come along and keep us on that track, and I need that a lot. And so, I appreciate that. Hey, will you also give my love to Christine because knowing that I was gonna have this time with you this morning, I wanted to watch *Albany Road* again last night before I went to bed. And, you know, my daughter was out with friends at a movie theater late. I can't believe she was up that late. And so, I fell asleep with happy tears. Again, happy tears last night. So, tell Christine.

Michael: [*Laughs*]. Oh, I will. I'll send her your love. Thank you.

Winn: Thanks, Michael. You're amazing.

Michael: Thank you. Thank you for having me, Winn. I really appreciate it.

Winn: My pleasure.