

MASTERS by Winn Claybaugh
October 2025 Classic: Stephen Tonti
Writer, Director, Producer, Speaker, ADHD Coach



Stephen Tonti is a freelance writer, director, and ADHD advocate. He has worked alongside top producers and directors, and he cofounded Vin Fiz Productions, New Krewe Productions, and Attention Different, an ADHD coaching and advocacy company he started after the success of his 2013 TEDx Talk “Attention Different, NOT ‘Deficit’” (over 1 million views on YouTube).

Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Stephen describes his journey of growing up with ADHD, launching Attention Different, the gifts that can come from an ADHD diagnosis, and how companies and schools can embrace those differences.

Winn: Hi everyone, Winn Claybaugh here. This month’s MASTERS classic features ADHD advocate Stephen Tonti. When his 2013 TEDx Talk about “attention different vs. attention deficit” earned over 1 million views, Stephen cofounded Attention Different, an ADHD coaching and advocacy company. In this powerful interview, Stephen describes his journey of growing up with ADHD, the unexpected gifts that can come from an ADHD diagnosis, and how companies and schools can embrace those differences. If you have an ADHD diagnosis, or if you love someone who does, this podcast will change your life. If you enjoy this MASTERS interview, please like and share it with your friends. Visit MASTERSbyWinnClaybaugh.com to sign up for our mailing list. And remember, MASTERS podcasts are also available on Apple, Spotify, and iHeartRadio.

[Music]

Winn: Hi everybody. This is Winn Claybaugh. Welcome to another issue of MASTERS. I, probably like a lot of you, spend a lot of time researching topics and brilliant people who are revolutionizing different messages that I’m passionate about. And of course, one of my all-time favorite go-to are TED Talks and I will sit at my desk sometimes for hours while I’m answering emails or whether I’m focused or not focused, but they’re playing in the background and I gain so much from that, especially with the way my mind works. You know, a 20-minute little excerpt—I can stay engaged for 20 minutes. *[laughs]*

Stephen: Sure, for sure.

Winn: And the information is phenomenal. I can't imagine that there's anybody listening to this that is not aware of TED Talks. Just go to YouTube and put in TED Talks and then any topic. And for some reason I was researching a certain topic and this incredible guy came up and so I emailed him. He immediately emailed back. I love how it works nowadays. Usually you had to meet through a friend of a friend or—

Stephen: Totally.

Winn: It doesn't have to work that way anymore.

Stephen: Or get a number.

Winn: Exactly.

Stephen: You had to have a number.

Winn: This was easy.

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: So I emailed—I'm sitting with Stephen Tonti. Welcome to MASTERS, by the way.

Stephen: Thank you for having me.

Winn: And he immediately responded back. We barely met two minutes ago but we're sitting here doing something that I'm passionate about, and I know that this is a topic that Stephen is passionate about, as well. So, congratulations on that TED Talk, which has had over a million views.

Stephen: Yeah, it's like 1 point—almost 1.3 maybe, still like about to hit 1.3. Thank you. It's come a long way since 2013.

Winn: Yeah. I'm sure that kind of changes the game for you a little bit, to get your name out there, and especially to get your message—

Stephen: Massively.

Winn: —out there.

Stephen: Massively. The difference—and it's shocking the difference between 50,000 views and a million, which I know sounds like a big number, right? Just empirically speaking, but I would have been as internally and personally proud with 10,000, 50,000.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: Over a million is a completely different ball game.

Winn: Right. I'm sure.

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: I'm sure. I learned that when I wrote my book.

Stephen: Right, right.

Winn: I mean, I can stand on only so many stages and I can see only so many people but when you have something that goes viral like that—

Stephen: Right!

Winn: —all of a sudden, it's hitting corners of the planet you would never think to—

Stephen: What did you expect on the book release? Like, what was the number that you were thinking would be, you know, what was your middle—

Winn: Well, I figured—

Stephen: —what was your highest possible?

Winn: I knew that my mom would buy two—

Stephen: Okay.

Winn: —copies. You know, one for herself and maybe one for a neighbor.

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: And then I would have a garage full of books. *[laughs]*

Stephen: *[laughs]* And it was self-published.

Winn: Self-published and it just took off.

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: So.

Stephen: That's incredible.

Winn: Yeah.

Stephen: I think I heard that from the Joe story. I remember—

Winn: Yeah.

Stephen: I recall that from your interview with Joe.

Winn: Yeah, well. Again, thank you so much for doing this. And I'll—

Stephen: Absolutely.

Winn: We'll just tell you right now: the topic that we're addressing primarily, but a lot of things that we're going to address, is ADHD. And if you don't mind, Stephen—I mean, your bio goes on and on, all the things that you're involved in, which kind of plays into the message *[laughs]* of why you're involved in so many different things but I really loved the story that you told—the personal story that you told on your TED Talk, and if you don't mind, if you could just kind of share that with us, as well. I know that that would absolutely reach our viewers—

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: —because not that the primary or the only listener is someone in the beauty industry, 'cause it's not. This MASTERS audience has a far-reaching audience. But I think—and anybody who is tied to the arts, anybody who is tied to something artistic, probably didn't traditionally fit into traditional learning environments. And so—where you're expected to behave a certain way—

Stephen: Mm-hm.

Winn: —and act a certain way and test a certain way, and a lot of us didn't fall into that. *[laughs]*

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: So. Which is why you are where you are today. So just tell us your story, Stephen.

Stephen: Yeah, well a bit—a very short bit on that before I dive in. Artistic expression, as I take it, generally is a rebellious act. It—artistic expression in any form is to, by definition, to express yourself in a way other than necessarily just words or pen and pencil, right? So, I'm never shocked when someone in any art field comes to me and says, "I'm on the ASD spectrum," or "Oh yeah, I have bipolar," or "My brother's bipolar," or "My mom is ADHD," "Well, yeah, I'm ADHD." I go, "Yeah, yeah. That's about right." *[laughs]*

Winn: Right. *[laughs]*

Stephen: Because we, in a very by-rote, assembly-line educational model that we have in the west, the—often the only way to express how you're feeling or what you think, as somebody with a learning difference or a mental condition outside of neuro-typical folk, is through art.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: Yeah. So the story that I told for the TEDx came about—well, through living it, but because I had been pushed, so to speak, to the edge of an argument that I was having—a debate that I was having with my then-girlfriend and still—she’s an ex of mine and still a very good friend and was a classmate at the time, an undergrad at Carnegie. And she was another directing major, theater directing. And she is ADHD but was born and raised in the Upper West Side of Manhattan and had a completely different worldview when it came to therapy and psychiatry and medication and presentation. She was the one of the seven of us—it was actually a large class, even though it sounds small—of theater directors and we all—we had a running gag with her about the fact that how much she harped on presentation, you know, and I’m talking like interview presentation. You walk in, what’s the read that a person has on you? And she put a lot of weight into that in her career because, Upper West Side Manhattan: presentation means a lot more than it did to Dallas/New Orleans, you know, Louisiana and Texas. So I was more comfortable saying very soon into meeting a person, “I have ADHD.” And at the time I was saying, “I have,” not “I am,” and that comes back later. But I was very comfortable to admit to people that that was something that I have. In fact, I celebrated it, at the time. And that was opposite to her. It was just—I was alien, shocking. She would say, “I would never admit that.” You lose a job *[snaps fingers]* instantly, right? The idea that anything could close a window or close a door was a no-go for her at that time. And so the debate went on, it went on, it went on for four years. We were off and on and great friends throughout. And finally, I walked past a TEDx Talk table and it was a student speaker competition signup and I thought, *Well, you know what? If I can’t convince her, then I’m going to talk to my whole class about what I think.* Which was sort of the screwy, Machiavellian way that I went about it. *[laughs]* *Well, I’m going to take this debate to the whole school.* And I don’t know that I was planning on getting through the three audition steps. I just wanted to give my best five minutes at the first one. And after the reaction I got from fellow grad students and panelists on the TED organization—from their reaction, I figured that I might have a chance to be one of the two student speakers. And when I finally got picked, after my third audition, I went to writing, to taking the then 18 minutes and turning it into 20, that would be shaved down to 13—

Winn: Right.

Stephen: —with a grad student who helped me write it, up until March 4th—or March 5th—when I gave it. And the story essentially centers around me growing up as an ADHD kid in a small town in Louisiana, then most of my middle school, high school, et cetera, in Dallas, Texas; and the school that I went to and the types of activities I explored and were interested in; the way my parents handled my ADHD diagnosis and medication and monitoring; how my school handled it; how other schools in the area handled it. And then eventually, college, and what it was like going to a private institution like Carnegie Mellon.

And my roommate, who revealed that he was also diagnosed ADHD but had stopped taking medication entirely because of his parents' choice.

Winn: Okay, I really—I can't wait to address all of these—

Stephen: Amazing, yeah!

Winn: And, you know, a lot of us have been told, you know, "Sit still. Color within the lines."

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: "Stop tapping your foot."

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: Which, you know, my foot's always—

Stephen: Oh, my knee is always—

Winn: —tapping—right, right. *[laughs]*

Stephen: —in between two states.

Winn: "Think—"

Stephen: —locked down or shaking.

Winn: "Think before you speak."

Stephen: Right.

Winn: So all the things that they told us *[laughs]*—

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: —to do, meaning you've got to fit within these parameters for you to be acceptable or for you to fit in or for you to be able to be a good learner. And what we know is there's many types of learners. And oftentimes in a class of 20 people, maybe only 10 of them are actually really learning anything. It's not, "Are you smart?" It's "How smart are you?" Or "How are you smart?"

Stephen: Hm.

Winn: 'Cause all of us are smart, it's just that some people are smart in different ways.

Stephen: Right.

Winn: And how they express that or go through life is different than others. And so, tell us about your personal story growing up and how this was all discovered and treated, et cetera.

Stephen: Absolutely. So, when I was seven, we moved from essentially Madisonville-Covington, Louisiana to Dallas, Texas where my father's brothers and the family company had moved. And I was leaving when a—we were leaving Louisiana when a first grade teacher of mine told my mother and father, "Hey, be on the lookout for ADD." I don't know if she said this was fairly new but I'm sure for her, first grade teacher in a small town, Covington in Louisiana, ADD was kind of probably brand-new on their training at that time in '98, 1998. So my mother and father when they heard, they were like, "ADD? What are you talking about?" For them, you know, "Maybe I read a *Times* article," they had no idea, you know, how that held context or weight in my life. And sure enough, when we get to Dallas—this first grade teacher said, "When you get there, have him tested." And I was screened and then tested positive for ADHD around the time that I was applying to new schools in Dallas for second grade. And there are many little, fun stories in that summer that I was hopping from lower school to lower school to figure out which would be the good fit. And many of those schools that I ended up avoiding were the ones who quite overtly, and maybe in some instances grossly, celebrated this byrote, the teacher is lecturer, you sit, shut up and listen—sort of organically, those schools were weeded out early because I—they just didn't fit me. I mean, there was one—I'm—a school that I'm ashamed to name actually: Good Shepherd in Dallas, who's gotten far, far better. But at the time, they had those teachers who were more strict about behavior, about how their students behaved. And they had a very *strong* faith-based foundation, which I think influenced some of the attitudes of the teachers there. But I had failed this marshmallow test, which I flippantly cast aside in the talk but that was actually one of my mother's favorite stories. It was a summer camp. My brother and sister and I were enrolled in at the same time, different ages. And the older you were, the camp counselors are also teachers and there's sort of a vetting process going on, especially for myself and my siblings 'cause we just moved to Dallas and we're looking for a new school. And the camp counselors were vetting some of the kids: "Is this a kid we want here next year?" And one of the tests they played was this test invented by a man whose name escapes me at the moment, still alive, a forward-thinker in flexible-fluid versus fixed personality. He created this marshmallow test, which is where you give somebody—usually young, a young child—a marshmallow and you say, "You can have this marshmallow now or if you wait for an hour, 10 minutes, 30 minutes, whatever the time is, we'll give you a second marshmallow. You can have two. But if you have it now, you can't have the second one." And this was used to test person—like personality leanings in young kids. And ironically, the guy who invented it has tried—not redact but sort of—renege *[laughs]* on his studies 'cause he now supports the other group, which believes that personality is not fixed and that it is fluid and it adapts to any situation. This marshmallow test is not a part of that camp. It's

part of the fixed personality camp and one that believes that you are who you are at a certain point. And I failed. *[laughs]* I was given a marshmallow—the way the story goes is my sister took the marshmallow and for an hour she played with it and mashed and mushed it and she's also a little bit ADHD. I winked for the mic. But she didn't eat it. So she got a second one at the end of camp, an hour later. My brother is the shining, rule-following middle child. He immediately gave the marshmallow back. He took a moment to think about it, shook his head and gave the marshmallow back. I think at the time he was precious four years old, five years old, and said, "I can't hold onto this. I don't trust myself."

Winn: *[laughs]*

Stephen: In some way. And of course the heavens opened, an angel—you know, a halo appeared above his head, and they said, "You can come here whenever you like." I took the marshmallow—

Winn: So he got into school.

Stephen: Exactly.

Winn: Okay.

Stephen: He got into Good Shepherd. I took the marshmallow and disappeared. And about 54 minutes later, so six minutes shy of the hour, I came back and I said, "It's 4:00." It was the end of camp. "Can I have my second marshmallow?" And the camp counselor said, looking at the clock in the room, "Well, it's not. It's 3:54. It's not 4:00 yet. So if you wait six more minutes." And I said, "Well, I know that clock says 3:54 but there's another clock in a room around the building that says 4:00."

Winn: *[laughs]* You're setting the clock, negotiating, controlling the—

Stephen: I was negotiating.

Winn: Right, right.

Stephen: And she—and the counselor said, "Well, that's not—that's not how the rules work. That's—those aren't the rules of my game." And I said, "Well, I don't like your game. Your game is stupid."

Winn: Right.

Stephen: "I want to play my game." And I ate the marshmallow.

Winn: Wow.

Stephen: *[laughs]* At roughly 3:56.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: So they did not like me—

Winn: Got it.

Stephen: —and did not have a great report on my behavior. But ipso facto, I found ESD, and the Episcopal School of Dallas was without question the right school for me. And because I was the oldest, my siblings ended up following suit and were—my brother is actually an ESDer all the way through graduating. My sister ended up going to a different school for learning differences.

Winn: In your TED Talk, you rattle off this list of titles.

Stephen: They're all true. *[laughs]*

Winn: Tell us that list.

Stephen: The list is—the one at the beginning or all the activities I did at school?

Winn: Oh, both. Both.

Stephen: The one at the beginning was a list of things I've tried. And if I can remember, I haven't given that version of it in forever but it was, "My name is Stephen Tonti and I'm a director, a writer, an actor, scuba diver, soccer player, rock climber, airbrush artist, stage manager, producer—" I went on and on and on and I think I said, "And for a brief period I repaired two stop watches that had stopped working. Stop watch repairman."

Winn: *[laughs]* Right.

Stephen: Then, yeah, so those were all—those were all—it was a list of like 20 or 30 things that were all vocations that I had legitimately tried. Very much like Mike—*Dirty Jobs* with Mike Rowe. I had attempted those things for some period of time.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: Whether or not it was long enough to be constituted as like deliberate practice, that's another conversation. But I have at least been interested enough to attempt any of those things that were listed off, from, you know, scuba diving to skydiving, soccer to snowboarding to repairing stopwatches when asked.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And the activities I listed in school were just all the extracurriculars I was in. Hindsight being 20/20, a lot—I didn't realize the extent of the activities I was doing in any given year in high school until I looked back and was, you know, filling out those college applications and then again, when writing this speech. I mean, I went camping twice a year every year for four years with the wilderness club. I was also in the Risk club, which is the board game, Risk. I was in Youth in Government where we would pretend to be lawyers *[laughs]* and go compete with public schools who did significantly better than our dinky private school. I—yeah, I was in a standup comedy club. I was in public speaking club. I was in the drama—I was in the school, you know, I was doing drama. So I had not only soccer or baseball or, you know, cross country or track, I also had rehearsal after that. And then on Saturdays I would go to Planned Parenthood 'cause I was part of—junior, senior year I was part of TeenAge Communication Theater, which was a high school theater group comprised of kids from all over Dallas and Dallas–Ft. Worth area who got together for four hours on Saturday and developed pieces, theater pieces for Genesis Women's Shelter, juvenile detention centers, churches, high schools, middle schools, some colleges where this, you know, ragtag team of junior—high school juniors and seniors would perform scenes about dating violence or drug abuse or drinking and driving or peer pressure. You name it, right? Abusive parents. And would answer questions in character with one of us as a PA, as an emcee. That was every Saturday, junior and senior year, and the summer.

Winn: So, what do you start thinking, what are your parents and your teachers start thinking about, *Okay, he's involved in everything*, or, *He can't focus*. *He's*—'cause you gave this example that I totally related to in your TED Talk where you said, you know, give you a novel that you're interested in and you'll absolutely get through 500 pages; a one-page article that you have no interest in and you just can't get through it.

Stephen: Mm-hm. So, I can say with confidence and with pride that both my parents are very smart and passionate people. For whatever misgivings they may have as human beings, as fallible as we are, ultimately they are both smart and passionate people. And my mother, through my process—I actually had the distinct pleasure of being interviewed with her by my business partner, Aaron, on our ADHD podcast as she is very recently—as of last year—finally going through the official hoops to get her ADHD diagnosis. But at the time, she was pretty sure she had what I had, especially while watching me grow up. And what they decided early on, whether officially or unofficially, was to allow me to explore those things that seemingly, quote, turn me on, that got me going. Because I believe they had recognized the pattern early on that I was going to do that anyway. At 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, I was already seeking things that struck my curiosity, that peaked my curiosity, and following through on those things. As I got older and more capable with my hands, my face, my mouth, my eyes, my feet, I started to diversify those things and expand. And, you know, airbrush art, that's such a niche thing. It did get a little off the rails

[laughs] when I was asking for things or spending my allowance money on things that had a very short life span.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: But my parents had the foresight to know that the intention was there. The good intention was there. And I think that's what they banked on was that if they could help guide me into certain hobbies or activities that had sort of a textbook benefit, you know, down the line: piano playing, sports, physical activity, right?

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: It is both healthy and good for me to do and also something I can grit my teeth in, you know? They helped narrow down some of the more—not erratic, but more eccentric ideas, like airbrush art, and tried to keep it to like theater or music. I played a lot of music. And, you know, drumming essentially was born out of the fact that my father couldn't stand this *[drums hands on table]* at the table—

Winn: Right.

Stephen: —so he was like, “Take this drum set—”

Winn: [laughs]

Stephen: “—outside and get all of that out.” [laughs] “Get it all out.” And there was a period of time in high school that I was every single day of the week—and I was in a high school band—I was drumming four hours a day.

Winn: Okay.

Stephen: And up until sophomore, junior year of high school, my family thought I was going to go to school for music.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: And again, that was because I had *[drums hands on table]* a passion for something and my parents knew—they saw that I could—I was capable. Perhaps another great example is piano versus the drums. I actually had my piano teacher dump me, which is a story I love to tell. There was no actual dumping. But he was in his late 20s and I was 17 but I refused to learn to read chords, notes on a page. I learned to play by sound, by hearing. And I could listen to him and watch him play and then copy him, and that was how I learned to play most instruments—

Winn: Right.

Stephen: —at that time. And he finally got frustrated after a few sessions with the 17-year-old who wouldn't learn how to play Howie Day's *Collide* [laughs]—

Winn: Right.

Stephen: —by reading the notes. I would listen to it on my iPod and then copy it. And one day he put it to me that when I come back next session, “If you don't read and I don't see that you're reading the notes and following and you're just playing by ear, then I'm—you know, we're not going to keep doing this.” And that's what happened. So my parents saw stuff like that and helped me, you know, pushed me to drums instead, “Okay, you can read those notes—”

Winn: We're going to get into that there's absolutely an upside [laughs]—

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: —to ADHD.

Stephen: Mm, mm, mm.

Winn: And how that plays into the work environment—

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: —but a lot of people think that the face of somebody who's diagnosed with ADHD is a young child and we need to kill it. We need to medicate it. We need to change the behavior. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Stephen: Yeah. Well, I should open by saying very clearly a large portion of my positive experience growing up ADHD or attention different is because my parents come—don't come from wealth but built a considerable amount of wealth on my father's side of the family. I am very, very, very privileged. Now, I don't—I try as—I try as hard as I can to not take that for granted but that afforded them the time to think and observe and watch me and help out the best they could. I, you know, one of the more like amazing things I've heard about certain cultures or certain society like Ta-Nehisi Coates has said that in the African-American culture, “We don't have—it's not about how much money do you have to solve a problem. We don't have time to think about thinking.”

Winn: Right.

Stephen: “We don't—because of our lack of privilege, we don't have time to be metacognitive so that word is a joke in my community,” right? In my growing up, I could learn that at a young age. So, I had—I immediately had a more positive footing because of the privilege. And that brings me to your question. The fear that pushes medications or, you know, “medicate it and forget it,” the fear that pushes that attitude is very real and something that shouldn't be treated with disrespect or treated flippantly because it does negatively affect

tens of thousands of families across the country. Those families not like mine, who can't handle the therapy hours, I mean, the cost of therapy, the cost of medication, et cetera. What I, and Aaron, tried to do with Attention Different is—and many are trying to do with a more positive reframing of the condition—is to actually lean into that problem, right? That lack of resources and say, “Hey, the therapy, the medicating, it's actually expensive. It's hard to get your hand on.” There are a plethora of other things that help the human brain produce dopamine and norepinephrine, the two chemicals that are most important for motivation and focus. And while we're—while we've spent all this time and energy on this magic pill theory, right, this pill that'll momentarily cure this child of his or her frustrating personality traits—which essentially is always right. Whose—the problem in our society with medication and the “medicate it and forget it” attitude is that who is benefiting?

Winn: Right.

Stephen: The rhetoric is that the kid is benefiting. But just like kids' movies, since their inception, have always been about the parent, not about the kid.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: Because who's bringing the kid to the movies? Their parents.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: The medicating, to a large extent—I'm not saying exclusively, obviously—but to a large extent, is about the teacher, not about the kids.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: Because the teacher is the one who's responsible for managing anywhere from 20 to 40 young minds.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And if two or four or six of those kids act out or always are jumping up and out of their seat or shaking their leg or distracting another kid, now you're talking about a community as opposed to the individual.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And who's that medication for? Yeah, you may argue 'til you're blue in the face that medication is so that kid feels better about themselves and that may be true. But I think more immediately it's about the teacher.

Winn: Got it.

Stephen: And so what Aaron and I fight for is, hey, the studies are now coming out. The research now is there to prove that 30 minutes of exercise a day produces brain scans of ADHD kids that look remarkably similar to neuro-typical kids—

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: —as far as dopamine and norepinephrine. That's just 30 minutes of recess. What's the reality? The reality is most public schools have arcane practices of punishment involving removing recess, right? So if a kid acts out in class and he or she is not medicated and what they really need is to go run it off, run a few laps around the house—around the school, the reaction is to remove recess from that kid.

Winn: Right. *[laughs]*

Stephen: When that kid needs to—

Winn: That's exactly what they need.

Stephen: —go outside and get it out. And so that's what—it's—for me and Aaron it's less about—and for me—it's less about fighting medication because medications become a lifesaver for people later on. It's about fighting the system that believes that it's okay to remove outdoor activity from an eight year old when they're acting out.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: And keep them inside or in a corner. It's just like so the opposite *[laughs]* approach.

Winn: I was at my daughter's kindergarten class a few weeks ago and one of the little boys—so again, he's five years old—

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: —teacher's like, "Winn, he needs to run. Can you go out there with him?" And I was like, "Oh," I didn't know what was going on, "Okay, okay, okay." Just went out to the playground with him. He's out there all by himself and just doing laps, doing laps, running, climbing over this and everything. And he's like, "Don't leave me. Don't leave me." But he had to go off and do his little thing, brought him right back—

Stephen: Adorable.

Winn: —to class and he was right—

Stephen: Adorable.

Winn: —there ready to focus.

Stephen: Yeah!

Winn: Yeah.

Stephen: Absolutely. There's this—

Winn: But the teacher understood that clearly. This is what he needs.

Stephen: Yeah!

Winn: Yeah.

Stephen: And what's funny is like when you—I was just in class today, we have a cinematic ethics course over at USC and it's a wonderful course, every Monday. And at the very end of class, our professor brought up a very precious interview that he had with a director you may have heard of, George Lucas.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: But George was interviewing this guy to essentially take over George's seat at USC as the cinematic ethics chair, right? And this professor was taking his chair and Lucas was interviewing him about that process and he said something the professor didn't forget. He said, "Fear is the enemy of man and the antidote is empathy." So, empathy is the antidote to the enemy of man, which is fear. And a lot of our problems with medication and young kids are embedded in fear, are rooted in fear as opposed—a lack of understanding, a lack of knowledge surrounding what that creature needs, what that human, that little human needs. And if people are less resistant to it, if people are more open and accepting of a gray scale instead of black and white—

Winn: Right.

Stephen: —regarding healthy behavior and healthy lifestyle, you'll find the results you're looking for. The results will come because we are an animal first, right? This human being second. We're an animal first. And our body chemically doesn't differentiate—like we have a conscience, our organs don't have a conscience, right?

Winn: Right.

Stephen: So they don't—they don't judge what comes in the body but they just do with it what they believe is correct. And if you put good things in your body, if you treat your body well and you treat your mind well, it'll treat you well back. Little bit of a gross overstatement, but in general, right?

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And, yeah, we have a lot of really nasty, bad habits from decades and centuries ago. They're just old. They're arcane practices, usually punitive, right?

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: That laugh in the face of what the body—the human body—wants or like—or performs well on, right? I think that's the core problem. And the problem isn't understanding, it's a naiveté. It's a group cultural naiveté about what the human body actually needs to perform well.

Winn: You know, when we hear of different companies and organizations that have embraced what we're talking about, who have embraced the creativity that can come from someone who is diagnosed with ADHD.

Stephen: Right. The tech world in particular—

Winn: Exactly.

Stephen: —has taken it and run with it, yeah.

Winn: Because they—I mean, if you can create an ambiance, an environment—

Stephen: Mm-hm.

Winn: —that embraces that and even encourages that type of thinking and behavior, my gosh, the work ethic—

Stephen: Mm-hm.

Winn: —that's there—

Stephen: Mm-hm.

Winn: —in terms of the long hours that they'll put into something. And the ideas, the creativity that can come out of that, which I want to get into. But you mentioned the face of other people who have been diagnosed with ADHD. You mentioned the founder and CEO of JetBlue. You mentioned Robin Williams. Can you share with that?

Stephen: Absolutely. So Robin Williams is my spirit animal and always has been. I may sound cool, calm, and collected on this podcast recording but when I am—according to me—my belief is that when I am at my—I won't even say best—shiniest, when I'm at my brightest glow, it's when I look, sound, taste, and smell a lot like Robin Williams.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: That—even—even—energy even to a manic level, right? But total improv; complete organic flow of incoming information and outgoing information. And I saw it early and caught his vibe back in the *Mrs. Doubtfire* days, even watching *Good Morning, Vietnam* [when I probably shouldn't have been, at an age I probably shouldn't have been. There's something about Robin Williams and the folks like him that I mentioned that inspired me long before I knew the who, what, when, and where from about me. I just looked at those people and I said, "I like you," right? So yeah, I mentioned David Neeleman and Richard Branson and Robin Williams. But Robin Williams is a good one to point out. He officially, I believe, announced that he suffered from depression later on in life but those could have been because of outstanding circumstances, and it was widely assumed that ADHD was a part of his life. But he—I can't say with confidence that he ever came out and said, "I have this official diagnosis." But when you—just watch an interview, right? It's not all the cocaine. *[laughs]*

Winn: Right.

Stephen: He represents a beautiful mind, uninhibited by the filters that many of us normally deal with. And sometimes that can come off as manic behavior in an interview. Other times it comes off as his wonderful performances on camera where essentially ADHDers don't have this filter of incoming information. For a neuro-typical—one of the greater metaphors I've heard is you're fishing and there's a stream of salmon in front of you. And a neuro-typical folk will cast for one fish. There's millions of fish going by, right? But they target one, they hunt that fish and they go for that fish, and if they miss it, "Agh," they take a break, they look for one more, right? The ADHDer is the bear in the middle of the river swatting at the millions of fish coming by, right? And all of those fish are possible.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Stephen: To the neuro-typical folk, "There's one that I will get and if I'm lucky I'll catch it and I'll run with it," right? For the ADHDer, all of these are possible. And in an—

Winn: That kind of describes why you *[laughs]*—

Stephen: Yeah!

Winn: —pursued so many different interests.

Stephen: Pursued so many different interests. Because—

Winn: All of these things—

Stephen: —they're all possible.

Winn: Right, right, right.

Stephen: If they make me happy then it's possible, right?

Winn: Right.

Stephen: So, for someone like Robin Williams, in a vocation that he finally found through his schooling at Julliard and for the rest of his career, was a career that embraces the bear in the middle of the river, swatting at all of these thoughts and trying them out, right? As an actor, he is encouraged to try multiple different takes, to play various parts of lines, right? And to study and watch people, observe them. And kind of the cool thing about not having a filter is you're also observing every single, little detail. I call it sherlocking, like Sherlock Holmes. I love to sherlock. When I sherlock, I'm—all filters are off and I'm taking in every single bit of Winn from the moment I meet you. And I mean within 10 seconds I've got a thousand things about you: small to large. And that is not only possible because I'm ADHD—that's crazy, that's a ridiculous statement—but it is made exponentially more possible with an ADHD brain under the right circumstances. And so those people are very important to me. Those successful folks who—another great point—Simone Biles, right? Simone Biles, the Olympic gymnast, is ADHD and takes Adderall, I believe. Although, don't let me misquote you, Simone. She talked about, a lot, the Olympic pressure, the pressure of the Olympics and their panels, right, regarding her taking an amphetamine. I mean, more than arguably, that's a performance—more of a performance-enhancing drug than marijuana.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: And she has had to fight extremely hard to be allowed to take those medications while performing or at least adjacent to performing on an Olympic stage. But what I find fascinating is not the medication drama that everyone focuses on but that person and that brain type excelling in such a specific vocation and why? Why does her ADHD brain help? Does it help? Is she better than a neuro-typical person on the sawhorse because of her ADHD? Is that possible? And I'm not giving an answer but I at least love asking the question.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: Because how fascinating, right? I just watched a documentary last night—it was very short—about a Taekwondo Olympian, an American Taekwondo guy. And it was filmed by a classmate of mine. Excellently well done and they harp on—I feel like every Olympic documentary has that one moment where they're talking about, you know, some talking head says, "It's not about half a second or a quarter of a second. It's like .0001. It's like one-one-hundredth of a second difference between Olympian A and Olympian B." And they're not making it up but, you know, it's important to include it in these docs so the audience understands we're not talking about the difference in your favorite

NHL player, hockey player, or your favorite NBA player. We're talking about the difference in the two greatest basketball players on the planet. And—or the two greatest Taekwondo, right? For Simone, her brain wiring is one million percent—in my opinion—a factor when you're on that Olympic level because the difference between an ADHDer and a non-ADHDer on the sawhorse is massive, chemically speaking. And I like to believe that there are elements in ADHDers that absolutely give Simone an edge—

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: —that her competitors don't. You might argue the opposite: that her ADHD is an inhibitor compared to a neuro-typical and that she's been fighting that her whole life and then that makes her a stronger Olympian, right? I tend not to fall into that second camp; however, both are tied to her ADHD and both make her a stronger competitor.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: Whether she fights against that brain wiring or she embraces it and uses, you know, elements of hyper-focus or some of the buzzwords you may have heard in the ADHD community.

Winn: Did you make reference to somebody who is an adult, maybe it was a friend or a family member, who is now later as an adult going through the process of becoming diagnosed ADHD?

Stephen: There are many that I've met since giving the talk. Many, many, many, many; especially since being invited to the CHADD and ADDA community. Those are two national foundations for children and adults with ADHD. And going through the coaching training. I'm going through a coaching training to become an associate-certified ADHD coach. It's essentially a life coach but for ADHD folks. And I've met many. Close to me would either be my mother or potentially my current girlfriend, Marly—Marlena. Sorry, Marlena, who is investigating whether or not she is, which we kind of believe that she is. But I don't know if there's a specific one going through it. I could tell you the story about my buddy Cyrus, who was diagnosed very coincidentally about a month or two before I gave the TEDx Talk and he was an actor—

Winn: So very recent.

Stephen: He was an actor—senior—it was senior—my senior year, his senior year. Love Cyrus. He's a very good friend of mine. And he got diagnosed without me knowing it. He didn't tell anyone. I think it was December and I gave it in March, however long that is. And he came up to me—I saw him in the audience with like 10 other of my classmates and, again, I didn't know that he had been diagnosed. I just assumed he came because we were, you know, we were a class of like 30 or something on campus and we were close so a good third or so of my classmates came and saw the TEDx. And I just thought

he was, you know, supportive until afterward, everyone came up and everyone, you know, said their piece and said their nice thing and Cyrus came up to me and said, “I haven’t told you this. I haven’t told anyone this but I just got diagnosed, you know, technically as an adult, 22 now, with ADHD and it has changed everything: my understanding of everything and my understanding of my own brain, blah, blah, blah.” And he was, at this point, started to cry. It was—and he said, “I was so embarrassed when I got the diagnosis. I was—it was—I was challenged by that diagnosis, and your speech today reminded me of all of the things that make me a good person regardless of any challenge. And that this diagnosis might actually be a cool thing rather than a not-cool thing.”

Winn: *[laughs]*

Stephen: And that got—that hit me harder than—and, I mean, like so many of my very close important friends were there watching but the way he phrased that, like that it could be a cool thing. And I’ve been accused by other members in the ADHD advocacy community—some of them, one in particular who’s not ADHD, a woman—an author and a journalist, unnamed here—but I have received angry emails and responses. Not many. Mostly positive reactions to the video but a handful of angry responses from people who are terrified by what Cyrus said, my friend, my buddy, Cyrus. They—that happy, that cool, that ADHD could be cool. They think it’s far too serious a condition to allow it to be positive or cool.

Winn: Well, let’s talk about that.

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: First of all, if you could change and take a magic pill where your ADHD would be gone and then you could be a so-called, you know, normal—

Stephen: Mm-hm.

Winn: —you know, typical person, would you ever do that?

Stephen: Absolutely not.

Winn: Okay.

Stephen: Absolutely not.

Winn: And I knew the answer to that but had to ask it.

Stephen: Yes. But I’m glad you asked it. It is—that actually happens to be the thesis question—that is the big question that Aaron and I ask our interviewees but also people who are joining our attention different community—

Winn: By the way, I've asked that question of somebody—

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: —who lost their legs.

Stephen: Oh, right!

Winn: If you could go back and change—

Stephen: Oh yeah, what was the answer?

Winn: Never. They would never go back and change it.

Stephen: Hm.

Winn: That their life is so much better, so much more profound, and so much more meaningful after whatever the circumstances were, the accident or where they lost limbs.

Stephen: I have to imagine that it's because *[pauses]* a difference—I avoided using the word limitation—but a stark difference in you or your life from whatever we call normal and neuro-typical—although in my opinion it's all a joke. Whatever we're calling normal and neuro-typical, when you have something in stark contrast to that group, you're never let off the hook. So, you know, you've heard the word *mindful* and it's become this buzzword as of late. Those of us who have a personality trait or have a physicality trait—a physical trait—that is in stark contrast to the norm are always practicing mindfulness to some extent because we're never let off the hook.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: We are constantly reminded of the wheelchair.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: We are constantly reminded of—you know, every time I take an Adderall, it's a small reminder that someone else in my class isn't at that moment.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: Right? And that alone, I have to believe, if positively treated, if you lean into that differentiation and you almost like take advantage of it or control that difference in your life, it becomes a creative edge. It becomes the thing that makes you obviously—you know, everyone's trying to stand out like a sore thumb. I mean, like especially in a place like Los Angeles where every Uber and Lyft driver is an actor.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Stephen: You—what makes you different? What makes you stand out in five *[snaps]* seconds, not an hour and a half podcast, right?

Winn: Right, right.

Stephen: And if you know how to—and I somehow I intuited that when I was a senior in college. Somehow I knew that that was par for the course in my argument with my then-girlfriend and best friend is that it's like a spinster thing or like *[laughs]* a lobbyist thing or something but if you can take control of the thing that makes you unique—obviously unique—

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: —and embrace it and celebrate it—

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: People love confidence and they *love* a champion in that way, right? And if you champion yourself, who you are, we're more readily accepting of you. We're more excited by you, we're more interested.

Winn: Well, I'll take it to another level. The other side of that, for those of us who create a space for people who are different or feel different, where we create a safe place for them—

Stephen: Right.

Winn: —then we're going to bring out the best in them. I mean, that's—to me, that's the—

Stephen: Absolutely. I think that is the other side of the coin.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: I think that's—I think one's inward, one's outward. One is accepting the self, and then the flip side of that coin is creating environments for other people to feel safe.

Winn: Well, you—educate me. You started a company or a campaign or organization—

Stephen: Mm-hm.

Winn: —called—it's not attention deficit, it's Attention Different.

Stephen: Correct.

Winn: Is what you're calling it.

Stephen: Correct. So Attention Different is the company that my buddy, Aaron Smith, and I cofounded when I was still living in New York. He's based in White Plains and is a coach. He's a practicing ADHD coach and is himself ADHD. We met in 2014 at that year's CHADD, which is Children and Adults with ADHD. And it happened to be in New Orleans, where I was born, and my mother lives across the lake now in Madisonville. And I had received one of those angry emails I just alluded to from this author, lady author, who—she actually personally attacked me on Twitter and I don't respond. It's a waste of time. So instead I sent her an email. I went to her website. I looked at some stuff. And my girlfriend and I were in bed in New York and we were reading her stuff and my girlfriend was the first one who said it; she goes, "She says a lot of the same that you say." And I was like, "Yeah. We agree on a lot of—why is she calling me out?" So I emailed—I did what I normally do. I called my best friend Logan and he's the future justice of the Supreme Court. And I told him the situation and he said, "Give me 10 minutes." And he sent me a conciliatory email. I mean, it—absolute olive branch, right, and a bow of the head to this older woman author. And essentially said, "Hey, I understand your fears and your anger or your worries. I, you know, when I gave this I was 21 years old and it was, you know, because of this reason, because of my unique, lived-in experience of having ADHD, yada, yada. And I would really like to get to know you. Do you want to meet over Skype or phone or something?" And she sent back an even more ugly email, by the way.
[laughs]

Winn: *[laughs]* Oh wow.

Stephen: So it was like, "And, that's done."

Winn: Right.

Stephen: But I found out she was speaking at that year's CHADD in New Orleans.

Winn: Oh, okay.

Stephen: And I had a little, mini freak out. I called Mommy and I said, "Mom, it's in New Orleans. You're across the lake. Will you come with me? It'd be good for you. You haven't been diagnosed officially and both you and I can go to these lectures and who knows? It could be great." So she said, "Of course." And I walked through the precipice, Mommy in hand, and we went to a bunch of amazing lectures. It was my first CHADD conference. And at that conference, I realized that this woman who had reacted so negatively ends up being sort of an outsider in that community. She had been ostracized by many of the ADHD advocates there for the same reason, for her very aggressive attitude, and the fact that she isn't ADHD but she speaks volumes for people who are.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: Including her husband. So, at that conference I meet Aaron and I was telling everyone—you know, I waited to see if they could recognize me from the TED Talk and I had a mustache. I had a small creature growing on my face in 2013 that I very quickly shaved off in 2014 when I realized how it looked. And so people didn't recognize me—

Winn: You do know you tell about 20 stories at the same time, right?

Stephen: Absolutely. Always, always, always have been.

Winn: That's—and the funny thing is, I can follow all of them.

Stephen: I have gotten really—

Winn: So those of you—some of you right now are probably thinking, *These guys are driving me crazy.*

Stephen: *[laughs]*

Winn: But that's—this is how the mind works—

Stephen: Well, I have—

Winn: —for us, right?

Stephen: I have made it—I have made it an industry almost *[laughs]* in getting all of the details I want to get in while still keeping people with me. And that is because, not me, but my closest and wonderful friends who aren't ADHD who have made it a practice of their own to interrupt me in my monologuing and say, "Wait, now who's the teacher from sixth grade—

Winn: Right, right. *[laughs]*

Stephen: —"that you have also as your mom's sister or whatever?" And I'm like, "Oh, that's Mrs. So-and-so." And they're like, "Okay, thank you. Go back to—what were you talking about?"

Winn: Yeah, right, right.

Stephen: So, anywho—

Winn: *[laughs]*

Stephen: —I was afraid of this woman and met many a folk and was curious about if the TED Talk would read and it clicked with one guy, Aaron, who is older than me by almost a decade but still young compared to the rest of the people there. And so we decided to do what any young dudes at a conference would do and go to a bar. And I knew New Orleans pretty well so I said, "Let me give you a private tour." And on that tour we got a little less than sober and

became very fast friends. He was sort of the spitting image of a dad. He had a dad vibe, right? Coifed hair and glasses and a satchel and button-up—buttoned all the way to the top button. And when he got a little bit less than sober, this fire came out of Aaron, this anger about the negative stigmatization of our condition, and the continued negative stigmatization and fear mongering that's still very alive in the ADHD world. And he had seen my TED Talk and he loved the turn of phrase: Attention Different, Not Deficit.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: And asked me, "What are you going to do about it?" 'Cause by 2014, November of 2014, it had gone from, you know, 10–50,000 to like 400,000. In fact, I think it was 700k by that point.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: And he—you know, he and I both knew there was power behind those numbers. And he was living in White Plains, I was in Harlem, so we banded together and at first it was just a, "What could this be?" For the first year, I'd say, we met between four and eight hours a week—sometimes in Harlem, sometimes in Greenwich—and figuring it out. Figuring out what is Attention Different? And one day—I still have the 35mm film print of when he came to Harlem and we had a burst of ADHD epiphany or ADHD genius and went to my bedroom wall and started taping out literally like a blueprint for our website in painter's tape *[laughs]* and writing the page numbers and the things. And I have this awesome photo of Aaron on his knees filling in this painter tape wall. And from that day, the website, Attentiondifferent.org was born. The dream of the—

Winn: So it's up and running now.

Stephen: It is. It is Attentiondifferent.org.

Winn: Attentiondifferent.org.

Stephen: It is—and it is fully spelled out: Attentiondifferent.org. And we—Aaron, who already had a coaching practice, made it clear to me that he wanted, in the distant future, a brick and mortar location, some kind of hub or HQ where anybody could come in and get coached to be a coach. That was his dream—

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: —was to not only be a certified coach but to be certified to coach future coaches.

Winn: Okay.

Stephen: And I was wild about this idea of what we call accountability partners in the ADHD community. That could be just your buddy or your classmate but it essentially is somebody who comes to do the—I'll quote Eric Tivers here—the “im-bore-tant” tasks: important but boring, right?

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: So those im-bore-tant tasks you have to—you need an accountability partner to keep you in check. And I was obsessed with this idea of creating like an app or some kind of network of accountability partners and gamify it. I'm a big fan of gamification. So I thought, you know, that'd be cool. So Aaron and I sat down, threw together some ideas. It's taken three years and one presentation at CHADD—we were very proud of that last year, actually invited to CHADD to speak—before we are—I think we're currently sitting in what is the—I can say with confidence—the company, which is comprised of online tutorials, public speaking. I do all the traveling and talking. Aaron is the brains behind this train. He does a lot of the research and collecting of material and he works with an assistant that we have to keep the website going. And he has his own coaching clients.

Winn: What does a coach, an ADHD coach, do?

Stephen: Great question.

Winn: Is this somebody who consults with individuals or parents or with companies, with organizations?

Stephen: Both.

Winn: Okay.

Stephen: Could be. So an ADHD coach is, simply put, a life coach but their training—if they're certified under the ICF, International Coaching Federation, I believe is the governing body—it is not recognized by any American government bureaucracy yet, which is good because it means that the price to get your certification is pretty low still. But over a series of about 120 to 150 hours and about six to eight months, you can get your associates—the lowest rung—associate certified coach, which allows you—actually you could be a coach out of nowhere. You don't need a certification. But what it does is provides the education and client practice and mentoring by another certified coach.

Winn: So what would a coach do?

Stephen: Work with an ADHDer or a company that has ADHDers—

Winn: Okay.

Stephen: —to better create an environment for success.

Winn: Okay.

Stephen: For—whether it's an individual creating that world around them.

Winn: So what are some of the challenges that you personally have experienced in the workplace because of—

Stephen: Okay—

Winn: —ADHD?

Stephen: I'll give you a great one. So, the tech industry has been a forward-thinking and forerunner for much healthier work environments; however, that's not always a good thing, right? So one of the work environments I'm sure you've heard of in creating your own company is like trying to include everyone: to get as many employees into one space at a time as possible to just get this like awesome flow of ideas, sometimes literally across the table. One of my good friends—one of my best friends who was just in town worked for a tech company and she's not ADHD but I believe someone at the company was and had this brilliant idea that the—every single person in this company, in this tech startup, would all work around this gorgeous, hundred-foot-long, winding wooden table, custom made.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Stephen: And that was the hub. Like that was where everybody—everyone had a portion of this giant table but it was like for him the King Arthur's Round Table, *[laughs]* except a hundred-foot winding one in a warehouse. And everyone kind of drank the Kool-Aid at first like, "Oh, all of my buddies are here." Like, "If I need somebody from finance, they're at the end of this table," right? What Molly reported to me as a very Type A—super positive, super fun person but a Type A worker—she hated it.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: There was no privacy whatsoever. All—she constant—she described the experience and I was like, "That kind of sounds like being ADHD." *[laughs]*

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: It's like phone calls constantly. She can hear eight different conversations. And I laughed—I laughed and I said, "Molly, that's my head."

Winn: Welcome to my brain.

Stephen: Welcome to my brain.

Winn: Yeah, yeah.

Stephen: All the time.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And she was like, “Well, no one should be subjected to that.” *[laughs]*

Winn: Right.

Stephen: *[laughs]* Like—

Winn: That’s funny.

Stephen: —against their will. And I was like, “You are absolutely right.” And apparently she was one of a few employees who approached the CEO and said, “Yo, we’ve got to quit this.” Like, “I need an office to go have private time.”

Winn: *[laughs]*

Stephen: And he eventually acquiesced. He didn’t think, you know, beyond the table, so to speak. But I have come into similar and opposite issues, right? I have worked for the startup music blog where everyone’s in the same room, right? And it’s usually someone’s apartment. And that’s not always conducive. It’s nice having every member of your company right there but, like Molly alluded to, ADHDers need their privacy, too. And it’s not to say that it comes down to like extroversion or introversion but, you know, moderation in everything, right?

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: Everyone needs a little alone time. Everyone needs a little groupthink. So, the companies where I’ve had—or a school—where I’ve had the more challenging experiences have usually been with a lack of flexibility. It’s when people of authority either (a) lack the tact or the compassion to speak to their employees in a respectful eye-to-eye manner—

Winn: Right.

Stephen: —and when people are more demanding than conversational. So, okay, very important fact about ADHDers and everyone commit this to memory: by and large, ADHDers are—the research shows—more empathetic. And that is not to say that we are better. Not at all. It means that we feel our feelings really hard, right? This is like especially true for folks in the ASD spectrum, autism spectrum, right? We feel our feelings harder and longer than a neuro-typical person might. And what that means is when you’ve got an eight-year-old boy or an eight-year-old girl who does something wrong and, you know, maybe they spilled something or they broke something, we take criticism harsher and we hold onto it longer. So if we eff up *[laughs]*, reprimand stings a little bit

more. So an employ—a boss or a CEO or a teacher who doesn't understand that, doesn't intuit that that child or that employee is going to ruminate—

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: —on that longer than their other employees or their other students, you'll find problems very quickly. And rumination is a word that all ADHDers should tattoo somewhere or put with a giant circle and a line through it. It is one of the top five or top even three challenges we face.

Winn: Which means what?

Stephen: To ruminate is—and it is often used in a negative context—it is to sit in a negative thought or feeling.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And let it envelop you for too long. Rumination is an obsession. It is to obsess over something.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: It's internal. It's usually a negative—it's usually negative self-talk or anxiety or assumptions, paranoias. And the guy, David Giwerc, who's the ADHD coach who started ADDCA—the academy I'm training in—his number one, he tells you when you interview with him and he tells you when he runs the class on occasion: rumination is his number one challenge.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: And it got to the point for him where he had to employ an accountability partner, his wife, to literally tell him at social gatherings if his ideas are cray wackadoo or on point. He would walk into a room and just because of a side-eye from somebody across the room, he immediately, impulsively thought, *That person doesn't like me*. And he would turn to his wife and he goes, "Did he—he looked at me kind of funny. Do we have beef?" And she would go, "Honey, no. That's Bill, and Bill—well, why don't you go ask? Go ask him." And through working with his wife and through making her an accountability partner and practice, now at any social gathering David is happy to point out that if he feels a feeling like that, he addresses it head on. He goes right to the person, he goes, "Hey, I thought I got a look from you. I'm just checking. I didn't offend you in any way or something?" I mean—and you—and he said, "Nine times out of ten, they look at me like I'm a crazy person and say, 'No.'" *[laughs]*

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And then he goes, “Great!” and turns around and goes back to the party, right?

Winn: That’s funny.

Stephen: And that’s to—that’s to confront rumination because if he didn’t do that, he would spend the entire three-hour event or more—

Winn: And days later maybe.

Stephen: And days later thinking about that person who gave him side-eye as opposed to just addressing the problem. And when we—going through the ADHD coaching training and working with Aaron—Aaron is a lifesaver of mine; a brother for life. I’ve been woken up to so many arguably small facts about the brain and about personality that have huge connotations—

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: —for people with mental conditions. I mean, another—for that one I just described, the enemy is cortisol. It’s a chemical that your brain produces in moments of heightened fear or anxiety or anger, right? When you get into a big fight with your partner at home, your brain’s pumping cortisol. And here’s the thing about cortisol: it’s one of the longest-lasting chemicals in the brain. When it gets pumped, 26 hours is the average that it stays in your brain.

Winn: Wow.

Stephen: So when you think about that for an ADHDer, who feels their feelings harder than their non-ADHD peer—

Winn: Huh.

Stephen: —suddenly an 11 year old who was seriously embarrassed by their English teacher—perhaps appropriately, perhaps the student did something bona fide incorrect, but being called out in front of 20 other classmates—

Winn: Right.

Stephen: —that kid’s next 26 hours, more or less, could potentially just have been ruined. I mean, really shot for more than a day.

Winn: Huh.

Stephen: Because of one comment from a professor and could have been totally valid. But the tone, the timbre, the intent behind that professor or that boss may have just wrecked your next full day.

Winn: Right, right.

Stephen: And so once I learned these things that are arguably complex but once you get to the root of these, all these little facts—and ADHDers are really qualified to put a bunch of little facts together and make a big picture—I suddenly started to see the forest for the trees and see how such subtle changes in behavior could dramatically improve how we feel about ourselves and about each other in any given space.

Winn: You know, for a boss, for a leader, for somebody listening to this understanding, *Wow, I've got some work to do to really be able to adjust my thinking, my belief system, as well as my communication and how I talk to one person versus another; how I empower this group of people over a different type of person, so.*

Stephen: I think the mistake that we've made in Western society as of late—especially concerning millennials, the “me generation”—is to over-actively harp on this selfishness. I don't—I don't denounce or disagree with the idea that millennials and my generation is more self-involved than previous generations. In fact, I can see all the reasons why that's probably true.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: But I've watched the *60 Minutes* specials and I've read the online articles and I've listened to the podcasts all discussing, you know, for or against millennial behavior.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And this one in particular, right, that selfish behavior. And I've got to say, at the end of the day when folks from a generation above or two generations above—those running the country, right, or running industry—speak nastily or condemn or, you know, “Oh well, this just me-me-me attitude,” or like, “I can't deal with it.”

Winn: Right.

Stephen: I'm like, well, well then you need to die *[laughs]* because that generation is about to take over whether or not you are here.

Winn: Right, right.

Stephen: And so instead of over-actively harping on the negatives, stigmatizing this generation that seemingly cares a lot more about how it is perceived individually, perhaps honor this awesome movement that there are late 20-somethings and early 30-somethings who demand a level of respect emotionally and psychologically that we have never, ever before.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And it is to say, “Hey, you know what? I am different than Jill. And while Jill likes the group table, I can’t stand it.”

Winn: Right.

Stephen: “And I don’t deserve to be treated exactly like her.” You know the Golden Rule?

Winn: Right.

Stephen: Treat others the way you would like to be treated. One of my favorite speakers—I will never remember her name. It was for a two-week stint in Austria. I was 15; it was a leadership conference, a youth leadership conference. She had two things I’ll never forget: FIDO, which is forget it and drive on.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And the other thing that she taught me—

Winn: FIDO: forget it—

Stephen: FIDO: forget it and drive on.

Winn: —and drive on.

Stephen: Right. Keep calm, carry on.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: But hers was FIDO, which I loved. And she has—apparent—according to her, it’s her license plate and she’s had it since she was in her 20s. The other thing she taught me was the Platinum Rule. And everyone in the room—we were only 15—we were like, *[mumbles] We don’t know*. She’s like, “The Golden Rule says to treat others as you would like to be treated.” She’s like, “I raise you. I see your Golden Rule and I raise you the Platinum Rule. Treat others the way they want to be treated.”

Winn: Oh wow.

Stephen: And at 15—she said that and I was like, *Mind blown [makes explosion sound]*. And kind of a lot of what I do and a lot of my behavior turns toward that, looks toward it’s not about how I feel about this, it’s about how you feel about this or about he or she or whatever feels about this: this moment, this conversation, this topic, et cetera. And I hope I’m not coming off as some like, you know, demigod of the brain and of mindfulness and emotion, emotionality, ’cause I fail at that every day. But the fact of the matter is that my intention is always

set on the Platinum Rule, as to do unto others as they want to be treated, right?

Winn: Wow.

Stephen: And if we can gear humanity more towards the Platinum Rule and away from the Golden Rule, which the intention was good but the Golden Rule ironically created some selfish mentality 'cause you're still—the intention is still about me, how I feel. The Platinum Rule says, "How does that person feel?"

Winn: Wow.

Stephen: That'd be a good takeaway.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Stephen: If you could take anything away from my talks, it's not even my thing, it's somebody else's. *[laughs]* It's from a woman 10 years ago.

Winn: So where do you want to take this? 'Cause I know that you're—you, yourself—you're starting companies and blogs and organizations and you're speaking at this conference and you're certifying yourself—

Stephen: Mm-hm.

Winn: —as an ADHD coach. Where do you see this going for you?

Stephen: It all goes back to that original debate I was having with that best friend of mine and the fear that she had about being found out as having ADHD. At that point it was "have" and I harped earlier on this, I alluded to this like "have" versus "am." I always felt "am" but I said "have." I have ADHD. It's this thing that I have, that I carry. But it was after the TED Talk that I really, and forever secured, "am." I am this. This is my brain. And through that transition, that transformation, I recognized that I wasn't sure how and I wasn't sure about the when or the where, but I knew the why and the what and that was I will always be involved in neurology and in mental conditions and in a desperate attempt to positively reframe diagnoses. So many of them are so negative. And when you don't come from the privileged background that I came from, lack of resources is the number-one challenge. When a mother or a father—often the mom—receives a pamphlet from a doctor—and it's usually a primary care physician or a pediatrician, which is inappropriate. It should be coming from a psychiatrist on its face. Already we make mistakes in the medical practice these days where a mother or father is receiving a pamphlet on ADHD from a pediatrician instead of a psychiatrist, who should be administering that information. It's always—there's a sadness. There's an "Oh, shoot. This is going to be an added weight or an added challenge for my child or for me and my partner." I knew that I had to help. I knew that I had to take my privilege and apply what I was gifted, what I am blessed to have—

this knowledge—toward the so many that don't have it, which recently blossomed into an image in my head, into a metaphor that I included with Aaron in our talk last November. It's about the normal. In a moment I can even look it up and give you the actual quote that you can plug in. But it's about the circle. I recognized as a senior in college and it grew and grew and grew until this very day and it will keep growing, that the folks who define what is normal and what is not normal, whether or not they mean to, draw a circle around the ivory tower in the center of normalcy. And everyone outside the circle—the moment it's done being drawn—is immediately disenfranchised because they are no longer normal. They are, quite literally, abnormal or outside the norm. And double whammy: the people outside the norm, more often than not, were never involved in drawing the circle in the first place.

Winn: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

Stephen: Never had a voice. And I had a voice. I have a very loud voice. *[laughs]* I'm a fast talker and a loud talker and I always will be. The whole speak softly and carry a big stick, I always thought it was the opposite. *[laughs]* I was like, "Speak loudly and often and carry a small stick when necessary." I knew that I had to help and contribute my loud voice, much like a Robin Williams. And, again, I didn't know where and I didn't know when but I knew that I would. And at every step along the way—it's funny that you ask—Aaron has asked me; my parents have asked me; my current girlfriend, Marlena, has asked me, "Coaching *and* USC grad program?" Like, "Film *and* ADHD advocacy? How do you do both?" Aaron actually put it to me in 2015 on a plane flight home from our second conference, CHADD conference, he actually asked me—I was so—I was surprised by his gall—to—like not to choose but if I was going to choose between film and ADHD coaching. And he wasn't being mean. He was just saying, "Yo, like this is a career. My career is coaching. So are you going to commit to that and help people that way? Or are you going to commit to the camera stuff?" And my response to him was, "Listen, man. ADHD or not, I found a camera when I was 11 and my hand glued to it." And I replaced that with theater for a minute but I've always had a device to help me tell stories in my hand: it's a microphone, it's a camera, it's a pen. And that's my reason for living. I know that's my purpose is to tell stories. The stories I'm telling will have changed. It's a constant rotation and I've discovered through my work with Aaron and Attention Different that the stories I wish to tell, whether on the big screen or in poetry or a book or whatever, will probably deal a heck of a lot with the brain, with psychology, and with how we consider the brain and treat people who fall outside of that normal. Yeah.

Winn: All right. I can't believe we have to start to wrap this up.

Stephen: Yeah. I mean, we—I—yeah—

Winn: We keep—

Stephen: —as I start to rev up, right?

Winn: You know, when you and I talked on the phone, I shared this quote with you and it doesn't really matter who said this but I thought it was profound: "If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

Stephen: Mm-hm.

Winn: That was profound. I printed it. It's hanging in my home office.

Stephen: Mm-hm.

Winn: 'Cause it's so easy for us to judge people or label people based on the wrong data.

Stephen: Absolutely. Absolutely. It's one of—so I love that quote and there are many reasons why I love that quote. And Aaron loves this quote vicariously through me because of my craziness. I embrace my crazy. And I love that quote because it's misquoted. It's like one of the bigger misquotes out there. It is often quoted as Einstein, Albert Einstein having said that. And believe me, Einstein has said some of the most amazing things ever and written and thought the most amazing things ever. And I'm sure he thought and agreed with that.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: But what's fascinating is where it actually comes from is a good 40 to 50 years before him from a Tufts professor who—a philosophy professor who was teaching a class arguing against a liberal arts education. And he had structured this lecture around his belief, or the argument for the day, that liberal arts versus a conservatory program or an apprenticeship is not as good and asking too much of humanity. And what he did was he created an animal school. It was a college for animals. And, you know, the bald eagle was the head, you know the president of the school. And you had the snake professor and the bird professor and the reptile class, et cetera. And he went through a full college-length lecture, could have been for weeks, on this school and the students dissected—that was maybe a poor choice of word for the animal school. *[laughs]* The students analyzed the different animal classes and who could do what and which animal couldn't and, you know, how they would grade them and what would the activities that animals would have to do at animal college. And he eventually gets to this point and this quote is taken from that lecture and it has blossomed into this concise and beautiful version of it but it was essentially—at the end of his lecture there was a an exam, a competition between the animal species and chaos ensues because the snakes are expected to fly, and the fish are expected to climb

trees like monkeys, and the monkeys are expected to swim and dive like the—you know? And no one is passing and no one is failing. They're all—they—you know, they suddenly fall right back into their original box.

Winn: Right.

Stephen: And the professor used this to prove if you spend your entire career, if you spend your teaching career, if you spend your working career, et cetera, trying to beat someone over the head with your method—

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: —and that method just doesn't work for that person, (a) you're not going to get what you want, ever, and (b) they're going to spend the entire time suffering, thinking that they can't give you what you want, ever. And that transaction—it's not even butting heads at that point; it's beating a dead horse. It's kicking someone to the dirt. As opposed to have taken just 10 to 15 more seconds and think, *Okay, what would help this person help me?* Right? "How can I help you help me?" as opposed to, "Help me." So yeah, that—I mean, I almost—there are—I'm against quote tattoos but I'm not against tattoos. And there are a few quotes out there that get close to ending up on my body and that's definitely one of them 'cause it gets to this central idea about *[pauses]* going back and rewriting our entire system of education, which is daunting and impossible; pragmatically speaking, impossible. And especially in this government *[laughs]* in the 2018 United States. Utterly impossible. And—but if you could, that's what we should be doing. And I'll raise your quote with another quote, the Wes Jackson quote: "If your life's work is achievable in one lifetime, then you're not thinking big enough."

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: And that's where—enter Aaron and Stephen. We—I know that Aaron and I are not going to probably change the diagnosis. *[laughs]* We—it is not going to be Attention Different in the DSM, the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual*, anytime soon. But if we speak loudly and we keep speaking and we keep hitting the pay dirt, we can shift—even two dudes with a lot of other people in tow—can shift the energy going towards ADHDers at the very least, right?

Winn: Mm-hm.

Stephen: So we're going to keep working as hard as we can to convince people that you shouldn't try and teach a fish to climb a tree. It is a waste of time.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: As opposed to encouraging a fish to celebrate its character strengths—

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: —like swimming. *[laughs]*

Winn: I think that's a perfect way to wrap this up.

Stephen: Hm.

Winn: I really could sit and—

Stephen: *[laughs]* Yeah.

Winn: —and just watch you. *[laughs]*

Stephen: Oh, thanks! Oh, thanks. I mean, I—

Winn: Ah.

Stephen: —that's, you know, encouraging. I, you know, it's all very important to me and I don't think it came into a clear view until, you know, arguably very recently in my life.

Winn: My purpose with this in asking you to come and be a part of this was if there's a thousand people listening to this and if we spoke to one person and gave that one person hope, or gave that one person permission—

Stephen: *[sighs]* Winn, you just said the magic sentence.

Winn: Yeah.

Stephen: I believe that so—I tell Aaron that all the time that—there was a while where Aaron and I were trying to work to get him to more speaking—feeling confident and comfortable in speaking 'cause he's not a natural performer but he can write 40 pages in like 10 minutes. And one of the things I told him was like—we were trying to give him an intention, something to focus on and, you know, sort of like the, “Imagine everyone is naked in the audience.” And I was like, “Screw that stuff. Imagine that there's one person out there and if you can change one person's mind, I don't care if there are 400 people in the audience, I don't care if there are 4,000 people in the audience.”

Winn: Yeah.

Stephen: “Then you won.”

Winn: Yeah.

Stephen: The whole point was that one person who went home not considering suicide.

Winn: Beautiful.

Stephen: Yeah. That's—and that, honestly, for all of your students, the reverse of that coin we talked about is true.

Winn: Hm.

Stephen: If you're not ADHD, this talk is still for you because you have the power to create that environment in the chair.

Winn: Where people are safe.

Stephen: Yeah, where people are safe. And if you can change one person's life—

Winn: Yeah.

Stephen: You can call it, dude. *[laughs]* You change one person's life for the better, successful life.

Winn: Yeah.

Stephen: I genuinely believe that.

Winn: Beautiful.

Stephen: Yeah.

Winn: I can add nothing to that.

Stephen: Great.

Winn: Thanks, Stephen.

Stephen: Yeah, you're very welcome, Winn. And thank you so much, this was awesome.

Winn: Perfect.

Stephen: Yeah.