

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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Ep 65: Creating the Life You Want (Before It's Too Late): Former President of Hearst Magazines Michael Clinton

INTRO male voice: welcome to the 3 Takeaways Podcast, which features short memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hey, everyone, it's Lynn Thoman, and welcome to another episode. Today, I'm delighted to be with Michael Clinton. Michael helped start several magazines, including O, the Oprah Magazine, and Food Network magazine as President of Hearst Magazines. Today, he's going to give practical advice about creating the life you want. He's just written a book called Roar, about how to create the life you want at any age.

LT: Michael himself has created an extraordinarily rich and multi-layered life. He's an author, a photographer, a traveler, he's been to 124 countries, and he's run marathons on seven continents. In addition, he's a pilot and part owner of a vineyard in Argentina. Welcome, Michael, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

Michael Clinton: Lynn, so great to be with you, and thank you for the invitation. I'm excited to have this discussion.

LT: Me too. Michael, what does the acronym ROAR stand for and what was the inspiration behind it?

MC: Well, the first R of ROAR is Reimagine yourself before others do it for you, and I think there is this whole new group of people who I call the reimagineers who are in this constant state of reimagining. Some of them start in their 20s, some of them start in their 30s, some of them don't start until they're in their 60s, but determining what is your favorite future and how you get there and the steps are really critical. O is Own who you are, own where you came from, own your numbers. I like to say own your health numbers, your financial numbers, own your final number, which is, we're all going to leave this Earth some day, and are we prepared for it, and we can talk about some of the practical things on that front.

MC: A is the action plan and a chapter devoted to what I call life layering, which is a life-long process I've used since my 30s to build a very diverse and excited life, as you just described it. And then R is Reassess your relationships, because the people around you, your family, your friends, your colleagues are the ones who are going to ultimately be the facilitators to let you move and grow and expand into new ways.

MC: So the genesis of the idea really came from a lecture that I gave to my management team at Hearst Magazines, when I wanted to leave them with some thoughts and wisdom about their professional and personal lives, and it kind of took on a life of its own and it turned into a book and

is now turning into a speaking circuit. And so I think that many people, especially coming out of the pandemic, are going through a lot of introspection as to what might be next for me in any part of their life, we're all in this collective rethink. And so I think this ROAR is really the manifesto.

LT: The timing is extraordinary. Michael, what does it mean when you say reimagine your favorite future?

MC: One of the things that a lot of people don't do is put in the work to decide what is it that they want. And a good example of that, I'll just go for a moment to people who are about to retire, and you say to them, what are you going to do? And they say, I'll figure it out when I get there. Which is the wrong answer. All of the 40 people who I interviewed all put in the time a year plus to think about what was it that they wanted to do, what did their favorite future mean to them. And it could be professional, it could be personal, it could be lifestyle, but they really put in the work to really self-identify the things that were important to them, and also what they were good at and what they weren't good at. And so you have to spend the brain power to really think about it, and I think that was a real important key in all the various interviews that I did.

LT: You say imagine yourself as a 90-year-old looking back and did you live the life you wanted to. Can you elaborate on that?

MC: Yeah, I mean, I think if you're 30, it's probably hard to go to 90, so I always say, let's start by going to 50, because you're going to be on a life journey, but if you're 50 and you go to 90... Here's the thing, Lynn, if you're 50 and you're healthy, based on life expectancies and projections, there's a good possibility that you can live to be 90, so what are you going to do with that incredible gift of time that our parents' generation and our grandparents' generation didn't have? And that is an enormous amount of time that we're going to be able to spend in productive things that are important to us. So if you go to 90 and you say, I'm going to write my own obituary, what do you want them to say about you? What contribution have you left, what lessons have you left, what things have you done for your community, your family, your world at large, and I think it's a good way to map out a plan based on the end game of 90, pick a number is a good long-lived life.

LT: Michael, you did so much research on this, on how to reimagine and actually live the life you want. You interviewed 90-year-olds. What did they wish that they had done differently?

MC: The thing that many people did, if they were a little later in life, is the number one thing that always comes out is I wish I had been more true to myself, I wish I had made decisions about my life that were true to what I wanted to do versus what my parents wanted, my spouse wanted, my community wanted, my neighborhood wanted. A great example is a fellow I interviewed who his father said, "I'll only pay for college if you study business," and he really wanted to be a social worker. And at 50, he sort of had a meltdown and said, "I'd spent 25 years as a business man, a successful one," but he was totally unsatisfied. So he took some time off and he ended up going to Peru on one of his travels and he did the Ayahuasca ceremony, which you might be familiar with, it's a hallucinogenic drink that Peruvians do.

MC: And he said he had that drink and he looked across the pond and he saw his 16-year-old self, and he said, "I'm so sorry that I abandoned you." And that was this sort of a-ha moment, he came back to New York, quit his job, and he started a non-profit, and he works in the social justice, social work space, and he's now seven years in. He said, "I've probably spent all my savings, but it doesn't

matter, I absolutely love what I do every single day."

MC: So I think being true to yourself and what you really wanted to do is critical, and by the way, you can course correct at any time in your life, and if you're 50 or 60, you might in the past have said, "Well, I can't course correct now," but you're going to have this long life ahead of you, assuming you're healthy and you're in good physical shape, you can course correct at any time, so that was probably the big lesson.

LT: When is the best time for people to assess their life goals and direction? Is it an ongoing process or is it an intermittent one? How do you think about it?

MC: I think you start wherever you are right now, whenever you are. I think you can start that in your 20s, you can start it in your 50s, you can start it in your 70s, but if you haven't done it, and if you can start it younger and it becomes a lifelong process of constantly reimagining, that is a great tool and skill that will serve you well. My mother was an amazing woman, we lost her just before the pandemic, she was about to be 89, she had many iterations of her life, that at one point she was a nun, she was then in the Air Force, she then had six children with my father, she then decided at almost 50 to become a travel agent and learned that from the ground up, it was really her first job, really, of any meaning. After raising children, she was a homemaker, she was a high school graduate.

MC: At 64, she decided she wanted a divorce from my father because she was going to live a different kind of life in her mind than what he wanted, so she was constantly reimagining who she was and she didn't have a big education, but she had a great imagination, and she's inspired all of us in our family, but I think you can do that at any time in your life.

LT: Wonderful to have a mother like that.

MC: Yeah.

LT: Michael, so the R is for Reimagine your life, and the next letter of your acronym is the O for Own who you are. What do you mean by that?

MC: So the O is really Own where you are right now, own your realistic moment in terms of where you are. We've all made good decisions, bad decisions in our past, and there's not much you can do about that, but you can own what your present situation is. And many people think they're somewhere in a realistic way, but they really aren't. So you have to go through that assessment, you have to own your health numbers, it's amazing to me when you talk to people who are 50-plus, don't know their blood pressure, their heart rate, their cholesterol numbers, those are fundamental things to a well-lived life and an important good life.

MC: Own your financial numbers, because especially for younger people where there are no more pension plans and who knows about the future of social security, the 401Ks you should take advantage of, but how do you want to live your life after your main earning years and will you have enough money and cash flow to do that, so what's your prescription that you have for yourself. And then own your final number. At some point, especially those in mid-life have to think about, well, if I leave Planet Earth some day, what's important to me? Do I want a party? Do I want something more solid, do I want a do not resuscitate? Do you have living wills, do you have power of

attorneys, all of those things that we like to not think about, but are important to really make sure that we're putting into its proper focus.

MC: So owning yourself and owning all the things about yourself are really critical, I think, in order to move forward.

LT: So R for Reimagine yourself, reimagine your future; O for Own where you are. Now for how to get there. A is for Act. Can you tell us, how does someone get there? How do they drive an action-oriented approach so they actually can achieve the future that they are reimagining?

MC: The action plan is obviously the critical piece of all of this, and there are a lot of tools and resources that allow you to develop what you want is your own personal action plan. And that takes courage and that takes editing out the extraneous things in your life that no longer matter, that takes a deep focus on what it is that you want to change. One woman I interviewed wanted to change everything. She wanted to change her career, her lifestyle, her love life, she wanted to change everything. That was a big order. She called it the year of change, and she did it all. And she does tell the story, but I like to say, pick the one thing that you're focused on and go very deep on it and examine what it is and commit yourself to that.

MC: One of the practical ideas, this was an interview with a woman who was a working mother, who was a single mother, and she had gotten divorced and she had shared custody with her ex-husband of the kids, and she had a free weekend every other week, and she was in her late 40s, and she had 48 hours every other week and I was like, "Wow, what a gift. Now, what are you going to do with that? Take those 26 weeks times 48 hours, and what's the math, 1278, something like that, and call that your project 1278 for the year. What are you going to do with that time that you have now, that's just for you, because the kids are with the father and you're on their own?"

MC: And so some practical steps that go through that process in terms of using time in an effective way. I also like the idea of every year, at the beginning of the year, I have a physical journal where I write down all the things that I'm hoping to accomplish that year in all aspects of my life, and the first week of every month, I go check that journal and see how I'm doing. It keeps my own feet to my fire. So if it's in July and in January, I said I want to learn how to speak Spanish, and I've done nothing to learn how to speak Spanish, then I go a-ha, I'm really... Who else can I blame it myself? So there are different tools and different approaches you can take, those are just some off the top.

MC: And the other thing is the layer of life, which is this notion of life layering, where you build out layer in areas that you're really interested in, and that becomes a life-long pursuit of that layer. So you treat that layer as if you would treat a business or a professional career, whatever that layer might be. For me, it was travel, adventure travel, it was photography, it was philanthropy, and you never give up on those layers, and then you end up building this big, beautiful, delicious layer cake, I like to say, of life.

LT: Right. So basically what you're telling people is, don't have a single layered life, don't be 100% focused on your job or your marriage or any one thing, but build in different layers, different parallel lives, I guess.

MC: Absolutely, because if one of those things goes away or implodes on you, the example I always like to use is the seat that we all sit in from a professional standpoint is generally a rented

seat. You are a person who is a hired hand, regardless if you're the CEO, or you're an assistant, you are a hired help. And too many people have their identity wrapped around their professional seat, and when that seat goes away they get lost, and if you have multiple layers, then you have an identity that you've created for yourself where you self-identify in lots of other ways. And I think that is a great way to build a rich life, because you have... When I stepped out of my day-to-day seat as the president and publishing director of Hearst Magazines, I had a whole other self-definition that I had created, so that was a great professional experience, but now I was an author and a runner and a traveler and a pilot and a this and a that and I was able to segue into a very different kind of life, and I think that's an important takeaway.

LT: Michael, I think you have one of the most richly layered lives of anybody I've ever met. I think you have at least 10 layers, and the key seems to be to spend time thinking about each layer and then slowly building it out. Is that right? What are the keys to building those layers?

MC: That's right. Let me use an example. It wasn't until my early 40s that I really started really thinking about photography as a hobby and a layer. And so I started taking some classes in New York City at different institutions and started to learn photography and the photographic techniques, but at the same time, I also studied the great photographers. I went to the photography auctions, I went to photography galleries, I ultimately got involved in the International Center of Photography, of which I'm on the board of trustees today, and so I really jumped in head first. And I started, when digital came along, I taught myself digital photography and started producing digital photography, and through all of that process, I had a friend who was an artist and she said, "You should do a photography show."

MC: And I said, "Well, I'm not a great photographer, but I'll do a pop-up, if it can be a fundraiser for a board that I'm on," which was the Starlight Foundation, which is like Make A Wish. And we did it, and we had a great evening and we raised a lot of money and sold 150-plus photographs, and I was like, "Wow, this is interesting." And that led to some other shows, which ultimately led to someone asking me if I would consider doing a photography book, and I was sort of not on my radar, but another friend, and I think this is relying on friends who know you're interested in a subject, connected me with a fine arts publisher, and I did my first book of photography, which has now become eight books of photography, and other photography shows and selling prints to people. But this was over an arc of 20-plus years, 25 years-ish.

MC: So if you stay with your layer and you keep mining it and expanding it and molding it, you end up having a very rich experience within your chosen area that is of interest to you. So that would be a good example of how I would describe it.

LT: So the final letter of ROAR is R for Reassess your relationships. And you say including personal, professional and community. Can you tell us about that?

MC: The influences that we have in our lives change and more as we live longer, don't they, and we all know those college friends that we had, who now 25 years later, may or may not be the best influence in your life, and those relationships may have... May be sunsetting, may have to be finished off because they're toxic and it's a hard decision to make, but you have to find the people during the course of your life who are supporting who you are, what you want to do and what you want to achieve.

MC: I always say, I've met great people in every decade of my life who've become great friends, and those people are needing you at a point in time that is not your 25-year-old self. It might be your 45-year-old self. And so it's important to have people that are constantly coming into your universe, taking people out of your universe, and by the way, that includes family, which is hard to do, but we all have got to do it because we know family members who drag us down. That posse of people that you create around yourself are the ones who are going to be allowing you to move into the next phase of your decisions and what you want to do.

MC: And so I did an interesting interview with a psychologist, and she talks about how oftentimes in mid-life people get really bogged down with negative self-talk, because, "Oh, I didn't get that promotion, or I lost that love in my life, or I should have done that, and am I really as smart as I think I am," and etcetera, etcetera. And this negative self-talk can get amplified. And one of the techniques she says is to surround yourself with those people who give you positive talk, the people who... It doesn't matter who it is, it could be your neighbor, it could be someone in your community, it can be someone at your office, who you just say you are the greatest. Surround yourself with those people, because they're the ones who would help you get out of that negative self-talk and move forward. And so the relationship piece of this is really important in terms of your desire to evolve and change, and that's what those subjects are about, those topics.

LT: Michael, what is the best advice that you received?

MC: Wow. The best advice I ever received was, I'm going to go back to the seat, because when I was a young success... I was the youngest publisher in the magazine industry. At 34, I was the publisher at GQ, incredible, fun magazine. And I had just come back from a trip to Europe, and I had been having dinner at Giorgio Armani's house, and I'd been meeting Cary Grant, who was on our cover, and he'd been shot and others, and a very wise person who was older than me said, "You have to remember one thing. The only reason you're experiencing all of this is because of the seat that you sit in, it's not because of you."

MC: And I was like, "Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. Absolutely." And at that point, I always knew that I had to keep my feet on the ground and not drink the Kool-Aid of my intoxicating seat, and I could tell you many, many, many incredible experiences that I've had, but it was because of the seat I sat in, versus who I am as an individual. And that was really a huge piece of advice that I've always followed since those early professional years.

LT: That is wonderful advice. Michael, if I can ask, what mistakes did you make?

MC: Hmm, let's see. I'm a very thoughtful human being about decisions, and so when I make a decision, I've really put in the time to think about it and not necessarily think about, was the decision right or wrong after I made it. So I'll give you an example of something that, it's not quite a mistake, but when I was in my late 20s, I was offered the job of being the European advertising director for a company that I worked for at the time, and I would have to live in Paris and travel all over Europe, and you can imagine how that appealed to me just based on my own interests.

[laughter]

MC: I think I was all of 29 years old and I was like... But I was going to graduate school at night, I had a focus on wanting to become a publisher, and I knew that if I took that lifestyle choice, which

is really what it would have been, there was no formalized path in two-three years I would come back and become a publisher, it was sort of a side experience, and plus I would have to give up the graduate school program, etcetera. And I made a decision to turn it down. And at times in a wistful moment, I always say, "I wonder what it would have been like to go live in Paris for a few years." So it wasn't a mistake per se, but it was a choice that led me to the life that I have, and who knows where that path would have taken me. So I would use that as an example.

LT: Michael, before I ask for your three takeaways, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already discussed?

MC: No, I think you're great, Lynn. I think we've covered so much. I think you have the opportunity throughout your life to always engage and change your circumstances, whatever they are, if you put in the time and put in the thought process. And once again, I'll say these 40 stories really inspired me and inspired so many to say that it can be done; regardless of where you are, how old you are, what your circumstances are, there's always a way you can do it. And so I think that would be the message.

LT: And it's a powerful message. What are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

MC: The three takeaways, I think the number one is always be true to your own north star, regardless, you can take a left turn and you can take a right turn, but at the end of it all, being true to oneself is really the north star. And that's a very personal individual decision, so stay with your north star.

MC: The second thing I would say is, don't identify yourself by the professional seat you sit in. Build that multi-layered life that we talked about, and really create a multiple sense of who you are, because it will serve you well in all periods of your life, but particularly as you're outside of your first career and you're thriving and living a different kind of life.

MC: And then the third thing I would say is own your life. Own all of the dimensions of your life and be your own captain of your own ship, and make sure that you're making the right decisions about your health, your financial well-being, and all of the things that are important for owning your own life. And so I really pulled out three things that are the core messages from Roar the book, and I hope that your listeners and viewers will enjoy reading about all the stories that these 40 amazing individuals told us.

LT: Michael, thank you for our conversation today, and thank you for doing all of the work on Roar, and the practical advice for people who want to reimagine their lives and live their life to the fullest. This has been great.

MC: Thanks, Lynn, I've really enjoyed it, and thank you for inviting me.

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