

Purpose

Speaker 1: It's time to look for and act on purpose. Welcome to the Purpose Up Podcast, with your host, Ben Stein.

Ben: Hello and welcome to episode five of Purpose Up. In this episode, I interview filmmaker, Joshua Seftel. We look at how purpose has evolved in his career from his early documentary about saving orphans in Romania to his latest film, *The Many Sad Fates of Mr. Toledano*. Which is an exploration into the fear of death.

We discuss how his purpose has evolved over time from a need to save the children with every project he did, to now being able to have more fun with his projects. Like his web series with his mother, or taking on projects that he knows will allow him to provide for his family. Please do yourself a favor. Check out the show notes on purposeup.com, and check out his latest film, *The Many Sad Fates of Mr. Toledano*. I hope you enjoy. Thanks.

Hello everybody and welcome to the Purpose Up Podcast. I am very excited today to have with me, Josh Seftel. A filmmaker who I've known for many years. Welcome Josh.

Joshua: Hi, Ben.

Ben: Josh, thanks so much for being on the podcast. I really appreciate it. I've been a fan of your career and your trajectory over time, and I'm very excited to get a chance to sit down and dissect that a little bit, and look at it through the lens of purpose, so thank so much.

Joshua: Sure.

Ben: When you're at a cocktail party, when people ask you, what do you do, what's the answer that you give?

Joshua: That's a hard one actually, because I've done a really unusual range of things. Which is sometimes works to my detriment. Recently I was talking with an agent, and he asked me this question. It took me a while to answer it.

Ben: Didn't have the elevator pitch down.

Joshua: I said, I make documentaries. I've directed movies. I direct commercials. I've done radio. I've done *This American Life*. I've directed reality shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. It's really hard to classify, with all those things it's hard to say it quickly. In the world of entertainment, that can be confusing to people. After I told this agent that what I did, he said, "Oh, huh." He said, "So, you're kind of a jack of all trades." Which I don't necessarily take as a compliment.

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Ben: Right, it sounds like you're doing a lot of things, but not necessarily doing them great.

Joshua: I hope that's not true, but that's what I think people are used to specialization in this field. People are used to the idea of the auteur. The person who just makes mob films, like Martin Scorsese or someone who, like Wes Anderson who just makes [twee 00:03:32] films like that. Yeah.

Ben: Tell us about how you got started in the film business. It was a documentary many years ago right?

Joshua: Yeah, the first documentary I made was called Lost and Found. It was, I had an opportunity at age 22 to travel to Romania. At that time, it was 1990. The story of the abandoned and orphaned children of Romania was just breaking. I had the opportunity to go to Romania with a non-profit foundation who was bringing aid to the children.

I brought a video camera and documented that conditions in the orphanages. Lived in orphanages in Romania for a couple months. Brought back a ton of footage that was quite disturbing, very powerful, images that I think Americans and people in the west weren't used to seeing. Which was images of white children who are living in terrible conditions. I think that was very shocking to people to see that. I made this film, Lost and Found. It was on public television. It was a great experience for me, because it was my first film and when it was broadcast, it led to the American adoption of thousands of Romanian children.

Ben: That's amazing that through a film you changed thousands of lives. That must be fantastic and huge, emotional thing to feel. Hard to put into words, right?

Joshua: Yeah. To me, I'll give you a little back story. In college, I was intending to be a doctor. My father was a physician. I always viewed the world as through, with this idea that you choose a career that's going to help others. That's going to serve others. That was essential. When I decided to become a filmmaker, at least try to become a filmmaker right after college. I put my medical school plans on hold. I felt that whatever I did in the film world, it needed to be the equivalent of what a doctor could accomplish. It needed to help people -

Ben: Needed to save people.

Joshua: It needed to save people. It needed to change the world. It needed to heal somehow. I felt that pressure. In fact, I always, it's funny because I love movies. I loved watching movies, but the idea of directing or creating a narrative film, like a comedy or something that wasn't going to directly in a tangible way help people, seemed so excessive to me.

It seemed so wrong, at that time, when I was 22. The idea that people were spending

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millions of dollars to create some silly movie with comic actors. It just seemed criminal almost. I was really stuck on that idea, and that's why I felt like everything I did at that time had to be have huge impact. Had to be life changing for people. That's a lot of pressure, but definitely felt that.

Ben: That's intense. Once that documentary came out, you impacted all of these lives, and you still got this pressure on you. Where do you go from there?

Joshua: The truth is that it's really virtually impossible to keep doing that, to repeat that. First of all, just to find the kinds of stories that are that powerful is a challenge. Then to immerse yourself in those kinds of worlds takes a toll as well. Coming back from Romania, I was, it probably took me six months to -

Ben: Get your head straight.

Joshua: To get my head straight after what I had seen. I had seen really, really challenging things. People really suffering. Children suffering. That was hard to overcome. I remember I felt so guilty about what I had, and I didn't have that much at the time. I was living in a house in Somerville, Mass where I was renting a room in a house with five other people, and paying 250 bucks a month or something. I didn't have much, but I still felt like I only need one pair of jeans and one shirt. That's what I did for a year after that, during the making of that film is I wore the same pair of pants and shirt everyday.

Ben: Just wash them at night?

Joshua: I think I must have had one other pair. I would wash them and wear the other pair, but I really just felt like all I need is the bare minimum. That was pretty gratifying though. I wasn't missing anything. I didn't feel I was missing out.

Ben: I mentioned before the interview, I feel like some of my life decisions have been made around fear about not making enough money or not being able to provide. Once you live that simple, bare bones experience, you have confidence that that's not that bad. You're just fine of it, so that fear doesn't drive you as much.

Joshua: I guess you see that it has little to do with happiness. Although I think that can change as you grow older, I think that can change. I was 22. I don't think I need that much. Maybe now, I feel like maybe I need more now that I'm in my 40s.

Ben: I know I'm a big fan of the Tim Ferriss podcast, and he's a big fan of the stoics, and they've got this philosophy of about practicing having nothing regularly. Like the practice that you had. He does that regularly where he eats simple things and wears simple clothing and does that regularly. It's an interesting practice. Make this film your very bare bones, but then things over time, and your aspirations change over time, so what does that look like?

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Joshua: I think I got a lot of confidence from making that film, because it also got nominated for an Emmy award.

Ben: That's amazing.

Joshua: I was like, "Wow, this is pretty cool. I should keep doing this." I made a few more films, documentaries. The third film I made was about a political campaign. It was actually, I was following this doctor that I had met in Romania who was there helping the orphans. He was running for US Congress against Ted Kennedy's son. I made this film where I followed him for six months behind the scenes. I called the film Taking on the Kennedys, because it was really his experience, this doctor I was following.

That was really different in a way. It was a more nuanced story. It was a story about our political system. It was very sad. It was very funny. There was room for a lot of humor and tragedy. Looking beneath the surface of how our elections work. I guess it had purpose, it did have purpose. I think that film meant a lot to people in terms of what it had to say about the state of electoral politics in this country at the time. I think it's gotten worse since then, but it was all about negative ads and the way that the issues don't really get discussed. Why we vote for who we vote for and the role of money.

What it made me realize was that, I felt like I was getting closer to my voice, finding my voice as a filmmaker. It was much more nuanced than my first film. My first film was very grave and serious. That was appropriate for the topic. This film was funny and playful and irreverent and sad. It was a lot of things at once, and I loved that feeling of being able to be funny with my film work. To be able to make people laugh and use that to make a powerful point. That was something new for me.

Ben: Is that pulled out in the direction, the editing, the scripting, all of the above?

Joshua: I would say the editing. I think documentaries are written in the edit room. Especially a vérité documentary where you just go out and shoot a ton of footage. You have to be at the right place at the right time, but you come back with 200 hours of footage, and you're going to cut it down to one hour. You're talking about making a lot of tough decisions. You're writing the film in the edit room. I was choosing the things that I thought were the most powerful and a lot of them made people laugh.

That was a revelation for me. It was suddenly there was, it was like writing music and suddenly you felt some new notes that you didn't know existed before, that you had never used before in your work. That was really a breakthrough for me. It was real excited and very addictive. From that point forward, I always wanted to find a way to be funny with my work, even if it was very serious, a very serious film, I wanted it to be funny if it could be.

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Ben: Nice. Then bringing it from fun in your voice to today would give us where you've been and what you're working on presently.

Joshua: I guess what I would say is that, I feel like I got seduced away from my original purpose. I would say that when I was starting out and doing the work in Romania and thinking about being a doctor. That all my work had to be helping people directly. Over time, I had other opportunities. One of my first, I guess you would say, mainstream opportunities, I was a producer at CBS News in New York. I got to produce pieces for Dan Rather, and Bryant Gumbel, and Harry Smith and people like that.

The first thing that struck me was, oh my God, there's money. There's money here that we have resources. We have equipment, and we're staying in hotels, and not on peoples couches. We're flying in planes and not driving across country. It was a totally different kind of approach. Which was very comfortable and appealing. I remember one of the first pieces I did for CBS News. I did it with Michael Lewis, he's the writer who wrote Moneyball, and Liar's Poker, and The Blind Side and stuff like that.

Anyway, he and I went to Russell, Kansas to cover Bob Dole who was running for president at the time. I remember that there was another CBS crew coming. They were staying in a nicer hotel, and they had all this gear. Then Barbara Walters was coming, but she decided not to come because they didn't have a nice enough hotel. I was thinking, oh my God, this is the real world. This is people are -

Ben: Are you serious?

Joshua: I was like, aren't we hear to just tough it out and be in the trenches. I realize that's not what a lot of people are interesting in, or at least they want to be comfortable. That really struck me. At first I thought, this is wrong. It shouldn't be this way. Over time, I started to really like it. I was like, hey it's nice to stay in a nice hotel with high thread count sheets, and what's it called, the little bar, the mini bar. It's sweet. There was also a seduction in terms of being part of something. You're part of an organization that has a lot of power, like CBS News and you can say that You can tell people you're part of it and they respect you. They'll answer your call. Being a documentary filmmaker before that, I was used to being blown off all the time, or not being treated with respect. It was like, wow this is really different.

Ben: Were people like, "Get a real job, kid."

Joshua: Yeah exactly, and I was seduced by it, and I was making more money. I don't necessarily think my work was better. I don't think it had the same level of purpose to it, because there are a lot of other factors. When you're making something for a large news organization, like hey, are people going to really watch this, and how do we make sure that they don't change the channel. That's really not necessarily what news, I think journalism is meant to be about. Obviously we know that it is and is probably become

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more so.

Then I had a chance to direct the show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. I was seduced by that too in a different way. It was like suddenly, I worked on it during the first season, so I was there when that show hit. I was there when they were on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*. I was there when -

Ben: You had the taste of glamour, reality glamour.

Joshua: Yeah, it was crazy. We would be on set and there would be people lined up taking pictures, and trying to get close to the set. Just wanting autographs and it was so, I just never really quite been at the center of something like that. It was really exciting. It was really exciting to be a part of that. To be able to open the entertainment pages, and see your show, and see that everyone was talking about it. That's seductive, and addictive, and fun to be a part of. Did that show have the same level of purpose as some of the other work I was trying to do at the beginning of my career? Probably not, but it did have a purpose I felt.

Ben: Changing people's lives.

Joshua: Making people look better. Judging their clothes.

Ben: Did you ever get a makeover yourself?

Joshua: I picked up a few tips for sure. I definitely picked up a few tips. Carson told me that I should never wear a hat, because I have a very nice shaped head. It was still a show that was about consumerism. It was about changing your image, buying things to make your life better, to look better. In a lot of ways I think that show was about getting laid. It was like, hey guys, if you, I think for guys it was like if I watch this, and I do these things, I might get laid. For women I think it was, maybe I can change my man. I think both of those things are appealing.

Ben: Very aspirational for both people.

Joshua: Exactly. There were good things about that show, that I think that show was important, ground breaking show in some ways. It wasn't like saving the children.

Ben: It wasn't making your moral heart sing -

Joshua: Exactly. Over time I've gotten older and I directed a Hollywood movie called *War, Inc*, which started John Cusack, and Marisa Tomei, and Ben Kingsley, and Hillary Duff, and Dan Aykroyd and all these stars. Again, seduction. Suddenly you're in this world where, again, there's paparazzi. There's fine dining and limousines. It's just comfortable in some ways. I liked that. It was fun. I think that film had a purpose, I think that film is about

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something. It's not a perfect film, but it's trying to really say something, which may have been part of why it didn't succeed as well as it could have. Is that it was maybe trying too hard to have a purpose. Which I think that's possible too. Sometimes when you try too hard it's not appealing.

Ben: What were you trying to convey?

Joshua: War is bad. That this particular Iraq war was bad. That the Bush administration was committing crimes. If you go too on the nose with things, I think that that -

Ben: Its too overt?

Joshua: People can sniff it out, and they don't want that. They want to be entertained. That's why I think when I was talking about finding humor in documentaries, finding that early discovery of using humor, like in my film Taking on the Kennedys. I think that film worked well, because there was a message, but it was in the background. In the foreground was a very entertaining and heart wrenching story with protagonists that you were invested in. That was primary. Secondary was the message, and I think that generally works better.

Ben: In your purposeful journey, I know I've been a big fan of your web series that you've done with your mother, My Mom on Films. I think there's something very human and touching about that, and each of them almost seem Zeitgesty. How did you come up with that idea. I know it's been received well, but did the reception surprise you?

Joshua: Yeah. What happened was, my father passed away in 2009. My mom was widowed, and she didn't really know how to use a computer, and she was getting isolated. My sisters and I bought her an iPad. We were urged that that was a bad idea. That she wouldn't be able to learn how to use it. I went to Florida and taught her how to use it. She really liked it. Suddenly, we were facetime-ing. Which was something totally new. I just thought that some of our conversations were hilarious, so I started recording them. I edited one into an episode, and put it on YouTube.

Then I started doing more and more of them. Somehow we got, started getting press attention. It's never been a hugely popular series, but it's critically acclaimed or something. I don't know. People seem to enjoy it. It all came out of me wanting to find a way to connect with my mom, and perhaps to record her and have that forever. It was really, I guess in a way there's a lot of purpose there. I think it was good for her. We still do it. We've made over 70 episodes. She got to be on her favorite TV show, CBS Sunday morning, because they covered our series a couple times. We actually do speaking engagement together. Which is really fun.

I think my mom loves doing it, and so it's been a really special experience. I think honestly the reason that I decided to, one of the reasons I decided to do the series,

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besides the things I mention is that, they've been so many things, I think this is true for anyone who's creative. That there are lots of things you want to do, that you never do. You have all these ideas. All these screenplays you want to write. All these projects you want to do. Documentaries you want to make.

The older you get, the more of those things pile up that you never did. I have these files that I can go through of all these projects that I never pursued, or just never got off the ground. It's kind of depressing. This was also just something that I thought, you know what, I'm not going to wait to do this. I'm just going to do it. It's easy. There's no excuse. All I need is to figure out how to record a video on my computer.

Ben: I think that's awesome. This podcast for me is one of those, I was like, I'm not going to think about this, I'm just going to do it, so I can get it out there. As I was walking to your studio today, I thought about being back on Jay Street and Dumbo. At that time, when I first got to New York. I had my camera and I started filming a documentary about two sets of friends of mine in Brooklyn that were, one was doing bluegrass and the other was making hip hop. I was going to do this juxtaposition about trying to make music in Brooklyn at that time. Never ended up doing something with the footage, but it is one of those projects that fell by the wayside. I think there is something to be said for making it happen, and pursuing it to the end.

Joshua: Yeah, it's a good feeling. Like I said, there's so many projects I haven't pursued. This was just something, I was like, I have to do this. It's so easy and not getting any younger. I was waiting for some other projects to happen at the time. I just did it. Whenever I have time now, I still do these episodes. All it is is me calling my mom, which is nice. It's turning into something really good for us.

Ben: That's awesome. Bringing it back a little bit to purpose. You've threaded the needle to saving the world to tangentially helping guys get laid, to -

Joshua: It's an important purpose.

Ben: It is, it is. God bless. To connecting with your mom in a meaningful way and helping to bring you guys closer together. How do you think you define your own purpose. I know it's something that's evolved, but how do you think about that when I ask you that question.

Joshua: I think about Siddhartha. The story of the Buddha. That's a story I really like. I love the book Siddhartha. In that story, the Buddha loses way, but in his middle age, he becomes very attached to things. He starts to have money and success in business. Wears fine fabrics and scented oils in his hair and things like that. In some ways, it's the story of all of us, or many of us. We get into middle age, we start making money, we forget about our idealistic selves that when we were younger. In the case of the Buddha, he eventually went full circle and came back to those things that he was interested in when

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he was younger. Let go of a lot of the attachments.

I think about that a lot and wonder maybe I'll move in that direction at some point. Maybe I'll find a way to live that path a little more. Now it's like I have a kid, I have an apartment in New York. I have relatively expensive lifestyle. I enjoy it. I love going to great restaurants, and staying in nice hotels, and traveling. All of those things are great. It's fun, but it's really different from the kid who was living in a room in Somerville, and making, and sleeping in orphanages to make a film about, I can't imagine doing that today. Things changes.

Ben: I think as you talk about being a new father, the priority definitely change, you couldn't do that today and stay align with your purpose of being a father.

Joshua: Unless I had a very understanding wife. Not that she's not understanding, but I think that might be pushing it a little bit.

Ben: I hear you, I hear you. Do you have any, I think the Buddha example and coming full circle is a great story and resonates with me. Do you have anything else for me and our listeners in terms of people who may be lost on the path, or trying to get back in touch with their own purpose. Any recommendations or insights?

Joshua: There is a bit of a trap there, right. When you start to like these things that cost money, then you are required or feel that pressure to earn money, which effects your decisions about what you choose to do. I don't really know to avoid that. Perhaps, like you were talking about Tim Ferriss. I don't really know a lot about him, but it sounds like maybe there's a way to think about living simply, so that you can make decisions that are fall in favor of what you really want to be doing.

What I've done, or tried to do in the last few years. I direct commercials. I enjoy it. I don't do it all the time, but I do it frequently, and I can make more money that way than I used to. Then I've actually used some of that money to make projects that I care about. For instance, I made a documentary last year about a guy who's obsessed with his mortality. I didn't have any funding, so I spent my own money on it. I used the money I was making on commercials to pay for it. That film is called The Many Sad Fates of Mr. Toledano. It's actually going to be released this fall.

That film, I couldn't have done it if I hadn't found a way to make money and still have the lifestyle I want to have. I think perhaps, that's one way to do it. Is to figure out a way to make more money than you need, and then you can pour that into your passion projects. I think in other ways to maybe try to simplify ones life, and realize here's the bare minimum of what I need. Then you might realize that you can do some of the things you really want to do. I haven't gone that route lately. I think, again, like I said, I've been seduced by fine things. Not that I live that extravagantly, but certainly more so than I used to when I was 22.

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Ben: I get it. I get it, I think I'm in the same boat in many ways too. Where can people find out more about you and your work online?

Joshua: I have a website. It's my last name, which is Seftel. S-E-F-T-E-L.com. That has a lot of my films there, or at least information about my films. That's probably the best place.

Ben: Awesome, I think, it's been great chatting with you. I think it's been insightful in terms of understanding your early career, very idealistic, and your continued search of purpose as you have evolved from news producer, to reality director, to feature film, to web series star and maker. You've got such a great variety. I think the jack of all trade moniker, you've earned it and you've earned the best version of what that means. Look forward to seeing your future work and seeing how this, *The Many Sad Fates* does when it's released. I've seen the film and it's very good, so I encourage everybody out there to check it out. Any last words for the audience before we say goodbye?

Joshua: I think just thanks for having me on. It's fun to talk about this stuff. The thing is I never really have time to think about, so it's a nice opportunity to muse and look back and thing about where have I come from, what's next. Thanks for giving me the chance.

Ben: No, it's my pleasure and I love the podcast medium as a space to create those conversations. It's my pleasure. Thank so much, and thank you all for listening.

Hello again friends. I hope you enjoyed that episode. If you got something out of it and think others would too, please go to the iTunes store, and give me a rating and review. That's the best way for others to find about the podcast. I'd really appreciate it, so thank you. If you're looking for other ways to connect, please find me at purposeup.com, on Twitter @purpose_up, or you can find a link to my Facebook group on the website. Lastly, I'll leave you with a question. What are you going to do today to look for or act on purpose?