

EPISODE 766

[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: Say, what if we all just stop trying to be our best, but if we just stop trying to achieve, achieve, achieve and climb the ladder. Stop trying to get that corner office and the title and whatever. I mean, what if we believe that true success existed outside of “being the best?”

Welcome back to So Money, everybody. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. Our guest today is going to blow our minds, so I hope you're ready. His name is Srinivas Rao, and he is an author, a speaker and podcast host of the hugely popular podcast called the Unmistakable Creative. Maybe you're already a subscriber.

He's interviewed over 600 creatives, thought-leaders, authors, entrepreneurs and rebels. Srinivas believes that being unmistakable in your creativity is actually far better than being the best at what you do, so we could obviously talk about that. What does that mean, unmistakable creative?

We'll talk about his upcoming third book, *An Audience of One*, and why he believes there's a very big difference with what we want to do for a living and what we want to do with our lives. Yeah, deep stuff. Good stuff.

Here we go, Srinivas Rao.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Srinivas Rao, welcome to So Money. It's a pleasure to finally connect with you.

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SR: Yeah, thanks so much for having me here. It's a pleasure to connect with you as well.

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FT: You go by Srini, right? I can call you Srini?

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SR: You can absolutely call me Srini. That's what I think everybody calls me. Yeah, I wonder at this point if people who listen to me actually even know my full name.

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FT: Well, we do now. So Money listeners, we are excited to learn from you. You are on a book tour right now with your third book launch, *An Audience of One*, which I was telling you earlier I really appreciate the message and I want to dive into that with you. We should also mention you're a very popular, well-respected podcast host. Unmistakable Creative is your podcast. Going back to even before the podcast, you or somebody who maybe like 15 years ago, 10 years ago was on a different trajectory, right?

You definitely did more than one or two pivots and it was a combination of recession and just figuring more out about who you are and what you want out of life as opposed to just your career. Take us back to that place. I always to go back to the beginning-ish of people's aha moment pre-pivot. I understand you had the MBA, Berkeley on the resume, but it was the recession, so in some ways you had to make a change out of necessity.

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SR: Yeah, so I had to make a change out of both necessity and to call it a pivot would assume that it was entirely deliberate choice. Despite Berkeley on the resume and an MBA from Pepperdine, what didn't come out and which you may not have found, or maybe you did in your

research is my pivot is the result of the fact that I had been fired from just about every real job that I had ever had.

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FT: I read that, but I was hoping you would bring it up.

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SR: Yeah. I can take you back to that. I got out of Berkeley at almost as bad a time as when I got out of business school. I got out of Berkeley December 2000. If you remember at that time, the three or four years prior was the –

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FT: Dotcom crash.

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SR: - first dotcom boom. The way I described it was if you were at Berkeley during that time, it was like watching the greatest party in the history of the world happening across the bay in San Francisco. When you got there, it was over. I had this really bad job working in inside sales fresh out of college, got fired from that job and then got fired for another job, and then I got fired from another – I think the third job I actually didn't get fired from, but I left before I was about to be fired.

There's only one job that I ever actually quit and ironically, I'm going to be back in the building where that company was doing an interview with Chase Jarvis, which is really surreal. Then I got to business school and I ended up graduating April 2009. If you combine both times graduating into recession and getting fired from every job you've ever had, that's not a pivot, that's you really screwed up, or you've got to start making some different choices.

In my mind I thought, "Okay, I've ended up here at age 30. If I want to end up somewhere different by 40, I've got to make radically different choices, many of which will be questioned,

many of which will be unpopular and many of which will require sacrifices that people in their 30s usually don't make, or should be embarrassed about making, like living at your parents' house for a really long time." That meant giving up a lot of different things. For example, the ability to start a family and to do all the things that many of my friends had done.

What most people had done in their 20s, I used my entire 30s to do to build a career to get to this place. It's still not perfect by any stretch of the imagination. I was having this really interesting conversation with a writer named Danny Shapiro yesterday and we're talking about the fact that when you build a career in the arts, when you have a life that is – you have a creative career, or a life that is creative, it is inherently uncertain. It doesn't have an outline, it's not going to medical school, or law school, or business school for that matter, where you are given a set of steps to follow, and based on following these steps, you'll achieve a particular outcome.

Getting to do creative work for a living doesn't work that way. There are no guarantees. There's no guarantee if you're patient, there's no guarantee if you're persistent. This is what I said in the first self-published book was that art that rewards its creator long after the average person quits is admired, but it's rarely encouraged, and particularly in the culture that I grew up in. I think that that is something that really has to be taken into mind.

Fast forward to where we are now; 2009 I started a blog. A blog led to the podcast. It started out literally as a weekly interview series on my blog called Interviews With Up-and-Coming Bloggers, was then subsequently spun out into a site called BlogcastFM, which was the podcast for bloggers. Then 2013, we gutted the whole brand and rebranded it as Unmistakable Creative, where we interview bank robbers and drug dealers and performance psychologists and billionaires and everybody you could possibly think of.

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FT: Unmistakable is a key word. Define that for us in the context of creativity.

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SR: Yeah, absolutely. I define something being unmistakable as something so distinctive that nobody else could have made it but you. It's immediately recognized as your work. You don't even have to put your signature on it. If that's the case, then you really have no competition. The example that I think is the most exemplary of this is my friend Mars Dorian, who's a visual artist, who does a lot of our art work it Unmistakable Creative. He doesn't do our album covers, but a good amount of the brand was based on his visual insight with my ideas.

He told me, it's probably four or five years ago that one of his goals with his work was that he wanted it to be so unique and so distinctive that when it rolled through your Facebook newsfeed, or when you saw it anywhere, you could take one look at it and you could say, "That's a Mars Dorian piece." He doesn't even have to put his name on it. That's unmistakable.

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FT: That's quite the aspiration. I think one of your pieces of advice is as you are developing your creative channels is to actually have the – I want to use your words, like a tribe of adversaries, or am I getting it right? Basically, a group of people who will tell you, well, will be the opposition, which is good because it informs you of how to continue being different.

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SR: Yeah. I think that the desire to please everybody is a recipe for mediocrity, as well as obscurity, particularly in a world where we're competing with a great deal of noise. Everybody has a platform, everybody has the ability to broadcast their ideas. We are all effectively media companies to some degree, and that being the case, if you're trying to cater to the lowest common denominator, that is a losing battle. I think that yes, you absolutely need people who disagree with you. I think that –

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FT: Team of rivals, right? Is that what it is?

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SR: Yeah. Well, I think that the worst thing that somebody could be to your work is indifferent. If they hate it, that's not a bad thing. That means you've realized who you're not for. I've noticed this pretty consistently with book reviews. I make it a point very rarely to read my book reviews, especially after I read this review. That's the first self-published book through a series of freakish coincidences became a Wall Street Journal bestseller. I remember the first few days, I would go and look at the reviews, and then I went and looked at one of the two-star reviews, and this is the only review of any of my books that I can quote to you by memory. This woman said, "I hope this guy is a better surfer than he as a writer."

There have been hundreds of five-star reviews and that is the only one that I remember by memory, and that is the one that I always reference when people ask me about book reviews. I think that it's important that your work is polarizing to some degree, because when you're polarizing, it becomes very clear that you are not catering to the audience, that you are not willing to let somebody else's opinion dictate your values.

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FT: You're also hitting a nerve. You're saying something that is potentially controversial and nobody wants to talk about something that everyone agrees with, because that's not really interesting.

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SR: Exactly.

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FT: Okay, we all agree. Next, you know.

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SR: I realized even when I come across things online that piss me off, I almost always have to take a moment and say, “You know what? This pisses me off, because it hit a nerve. There's something about this that's a reflection on me and what I'm dealing with, not just on the person who wrote this.”

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FT: In *Audience of One*, in *An Audience of One*, which is now your third book, congratulations, what – I think, I've also published and I feel like every time you come up with a book idea, it's a real process. The idea you actually end up publishing is not what you want it up initially thinking it was going to be. How did you arrive at the ultimately *An Audience of One*? Was it like an audience of three and then you're like, “No, I think it's more like one.”

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SR: No. I think what really happened was – the funny thing about this book is that we didn't even have a title for the overwhelming majority of the process of writing it, which was really strange. The Google Doc basically just said, “Book two.” Every day, we're writing. This genesis of this idea was based on this piece that I wrote for Medium, where I wrote about this idea that writing a thousand words a day had changed my life, and that piece ended up going viral, that was the piece that ultimately led to a book deal two years after it was published.

The thing that was interesting was that I developed this habit. At a certain point, it stopped being about having this habit specifically to get things done. The reason it started in the first place was because of the fact that I had suddenly the demands on my content production went up. I was advising a startup where I was doing content for them. I was writing content for my own newsletter and I was also doing freelance writing for this website called Search Engine Journal.

I knew that there was no way that I could count on something unreliable, like inspiration to hit all of those – basically meet all those demands. Somebody named Julian Smith who's a blogger and author and now founder of venture funded startup called Breather, turned me on to this habit. He said, I write a thousand words every day. Well Julian Smith also had one of the most popular blogs on the entire internet at that time, and had written a New York Times best-selling

book, so I thought, “Okay, this guy writes a thousand words a day. He has achieved something that I want to achieve, so let me try it.”

Eventually, it led to all these different things, but at a certain point, it stopped being this thing that was an item on a to-do list and it became something that I looked forward to every single morning. It's something that I still do to this day. I jokingly said the only two reasons to avoid bad ritual are sex or surfing, and those are valid reasons in my mind.

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FT: What do you write about? Anything that comes to your mind, or is there actually –

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SR: It's what comes to my mind. What's interesting about this process is that, I think subjects tend to reveal themselves as you actually go through the process of writing. We have this really beautiful animated short, where my friend Sarah Peck describes us, if you do a search for Sarah Peck Unmistakable, we partnered with the Soul Pancake team to produce an animated short based on her episode.

It's really funny, because she describes this process in such eloquent and vivid detail, where she – sometimes, she basically is just whining on the page, writing coffee, coffee, coffee three times. I think the key is really just to get your hands moving and what ends up happening is 3, 400, 500 words into it, an insight suddenly sparks. Because what happens is when you're focused on one thing for an extended period of time, you move into what Steven Kotler and many of the people have done this work call a flow state. From there, you not only achieve significant increases in productivity, but suddenly creative insights come in flurries because you're focused entirely on this one thing.

If I'm writing an article for example in the morning, I might start off with just absolute nonsense. I get to 500 words and within 30 minutes, I've written another 1,400 words, and it's taken less time, it's more eloquent, and it actually is something that I can use. I think the part of this process that's interesting to me is that – my joke is that I very rarely write anything worth reading. I just write a lot. Some of it ends up being worth reading.

I think that I'm not alone in this. If you look at people who are professional creatives, they create on a schedule. They create on a schedule because of the fact that if you create on a schedule, it liberates you from the pressure to be good with what you do every single time you sit down, because that's a tall order to think, "Hey, every time I sit down I'm going to write the next great American novel, or the next piece of content that's going to go viral on the internet." Whereas, if you're consistent about it, it doesn't matter if today sucked because you'll be back tomorrow.

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FT: That just inspired me. I'm doing these stand-up comedy classes at night as just a delineation of my – the order of my life, or the disorder of my life at this point as a mom of two and business owner. It's been really fun. Trying to find time to write jokes, it's on my to-do list, it's actually a bullet point, write jokes. It's hard. I'm usually writing on the subway on the way to class and of course, genius does not ensue when you're on a train, or maybe sometimes it does, but you just inspired me. I'm going to just get up every morning and write for 10 minutes and like nine times out of 10, it's going to be unusable stuff, but then that one great joke is going to probably happen.

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SR: Exactly. That is great. I'm glad you mentioned 10 minutes, because I think that's the place where most people go wrong is they try to write a thousand words a day when they've never done this in their life. That's why I always encourage them to get into the habit of doing it first. You basically – you can increase the scope as you get better at it and more consistent.

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FT: Let's talk money a little bit.

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SR: Sure.

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FT: How often does money come up in your in your conversations with your guests, as far as the ways that they – with as far as with what's important to them, or what's influenced them, or what's holding them back?

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SR: Yeah, quite frequently actually. It's a question that I ask a lot, I think personally because I grew up with a pretty challenging story about money, because of the fact that my dad is a college professor. While I was growing up, he was primarily doing postdoctoral work. Often, I got denied a lot of things that my sister got with ease. She got to go on trips to Europe while she was in high school, when she needed a \$100 genes, there was no question that this is what you need in order to be cool. When I needed them my dad said, "You're out of your mind," and I got made fun of in seventh grade for not having nice clothes, which need seventh graders are idiots anyways you know.

All these things are insignificant when you get older, but the thing is that they do have an impact on the way that you think about money and the choices that you make. It's not that I don't value money. I like nice things and it's nice to have money. Money makes life a lot easier. It gives you choices. We can't really neglect that. I love what Zig Ziglar said about it. He said, you really don't notice a lack of – money is like oxygen. Until you're deprived of it, you don't notice its absence.

It definitely comes up with a lot of people and it's interesting to hear how people's story about money and how they define success changes with age and how that changes with time. I think that if you're lucky enough to make money doing what you love and do the things that you want to do, for me, that list is actually really minimal. I want to be able to surf in snowboard, because of my two biggest passions. I want to see my friends and I want to do creative work for a living.

I think that often the thing that happens in this, I got from one of our guests, was that we don't really understand the essence of our goals. We don't understand why we want the thing that we

do. It's an arbitrary decision, because of the fact that it is a socially programmed decision. We put billionaires on the covers of magazines and place celebrities on pedestals, so that becomes the standard by which we measure our success by, even though maybe you don't need a billion dollars.

I certainly don't need a billion dollars to snowboard and surf as much as I want, and to keep writing books. It's an interesting topic. I think we're at probably one of the most interesting times we've ever been in when it comes to money, because of the fact that there are so many changes being made with technology that are going to fundamentally change how we work. I only know this, because I've been doing a deep dive into all sorts of tools that are AI-based. Some of the things that I've seen in the last week have blown my mind, in terms of not only the jobs they're going to eliminate, but the power that they're going to give every individual to do things at scale, like never before.

A perfect example is SEO is now basically being driven almost entirely by AI, because of the fact that SEO, when you think about it is really almost all data analysis-driven. Suddenly, this thing that you needed a \$100,000 a year your employee for is in the hands of an individual like myself who can go in and optimize content without it being this incredibly technically difficult thing. That's going to fundamentally change how we deal with money.

In fact, I'm going to be interviewing a 2020 presidential candidate who is running on the platform of universal basic income, because of the fact that there's a real danger that we are headed point where this is not going to be an option, but a necessity.

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FT: Who is this person?

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SR: His name is Andrew Yang.

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FT: Oh, yeah. They pitched me too.

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SR: He's the founder of Venture for America.

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FT: Should I interview him?

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SR: Yeah, absolutely. I'd be really interested to hear what your own listeners have to say. I wanted to talk to him, because I saw his book in the store and I read it. I think there are numerous things that are interesting about his story. When I choose people to interview, my default filter is am I curious about this person? That's it. It doesn't matter if they're famous, doesn't matter if they're rich, doesn't matter if they have a million followers. That's how you end up with bank robbers and drug dealers as your guests.

It's always, does this person's story rivet me in some way? I remember getting his book. I happened to be in a Barnes & Noble, I saw his book and I picked it up and I thought and I took a picture. I sent him a tweet, I said, "Okay, I want to talk to you." I think, there are so many places that you could go with this conversation with him, because of the fact that he's an Asian-American running for president. I wonder what are the challenges that he's going to face, because I mean, if it took us 50 years to get to a black president, then how realistic is it?

I'm saying this as an Indian American, how realistic is it that we're going to put an Asian American in the White House? That's not an unreal thing that this guy is have – going to have to deal with and I really want to ask him about it. Like how are you going to navigate that complexity?

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FT: Right. Oh, boy. Yeah, so I'm going to look back and see about getting him on the show. Thank you for sharing that. Well, let's go back a little bit more to your childhood. I want to learn more background on how you were raised and the financial influences that you had. One of our sponsors, our headline sponsor Chase Slate has done this study looking at conversations that families have with their children around money.

I always want to ask guests, what is a conversation, or a significant impact that your parents had on you when it came to money. You already shared the story about your dad and your sister and the differences, but was there ever a talk that they had with you, or a lesson learned that was very intentional?

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SR: No. I think that actually is probably one of the more unfortunate things that my parents didn't have the foresight to do was to instill a sense of financial literacy in me when I was younger, because I think that as a result of not having that, I made a lot of bad decisions when I was young.

My first job was working at McDonald's when I was in high school. I didn't have the insight to think, "You know what? Let me put just a tiny chunk of this away every week and I'll have a lot of it after 10 years. Even if it had been \$20 \$25 dollars a week that I would not have missed." That simple insight was never passed on to me.

I think, that the other thing that that I think I saw was that we made choices based not on how to create wealth, but rather how to survive and how to basically ensure that you got security and stability, because my dad is a for all intents and purposes as a government employee, he's a college professor. Particularly in the system that he's in, in the University of California the retirement benefits are insane. You basically get the 90% of your salary for the rest of your life if you're a tenured professor.

That I think really is a very different world than the one that I'm living in. I'm in this really bizarre generation of not millennial, but right in between. Plus, you add on top of that, graduating into

two recessions, you could not have planned something to go that wrong in terms of your adult life. Inevitably, that leads to some major financial challenges. I think the things that weren't talked about are more important here, and I feel that money is one of those things that we should be teaching in school and we don't.

I think that every person in high school, and for that matter college. It's ironic. People go to colleges like Berkeley, there are dozens of classes about accounting and finance, people get MBAs and there's not a single class about personal finance.

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FT: Nope. Well, part of it is because I think no one knows how to teach it. There are studies that show that just learning about it in school is not really going to make a difference, really. Because, I learned a lot of things in school, I don't remember anything, other than the relationships I had and how school made me feel.

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SR: Absolutely.

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FT: I'm exaggerating, but I think that they're wondering what's the ROI really? Because if this is not going to – I think that doesn't mean we should abandon the topic altogether. We need to get more creative and thoughtful about how we do bring it to the classroom, because I do think that's the perfect incubator, a place to bring it in. Because if it's not happening at home, it's got to happen somewhere, because our society depends on it.

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SR: Absolutely. Yeah. It's one of those – Exactly. I mean, it's one of those things that you really – You're right. I mean, it does have to be taught somewhere.

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FT: Yeah. Okay, let's discuss, given that you have also experienced two huge recessions at pivotal times in your career in life. Where are you right now as far as your mindset around money? How you think about spending it, saving it, are you risk averse as a result of seeing two big market downturns?

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SR: I'm not risk-averse as much as I am deliberate about my choices on what I will spend money on. I'm very intentional about what I choose to spend my money on. It's funny, because I would say if you look at even my apartment, the overwhelming majority of things that take up space are books. Books, travel, surfing and snowboarding are where my money goes. I wouldn't say that I'm risk-averse per se, but I am more mindful than I was in the past. I think that, like I said, I've been fortunate in having these conversations with all these people that have really helped me have a different understanding of it.

I think the thing that you look at when you built a creative career is you think to yourself, "Okay, well I don't have the 401k, the pension plan, or the retirement benefits that my dad has. I'm staking my future on my mind effectively." The upside of that, I think Michael Ellsberg, my friend who wrote a book called *The Last Safe Investment*, he said one of the greatest ways to extend your earning potential is to extend your working life. When you don't have the guarantee of retirement, or you happen to have a creative career like I do, you have that capability to extend your working life. I don't really like the idea of sitting around retiring. Writing is something I can do when I'm 90 years old.

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FT: Yeah. Maybe you're not writing, maybe you're speaking it into your artificial intelligence.

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SR: Yeah, exactly.

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FT: Tech device. Have there been books written about like, stop what you're doing, because it's not going to be relevant in 10 years, because it'll be replaced by AI.

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SR: It's, you would be – Last year, about last year at this time AI was really clunky. It wasn't quite working perfectly. Some of the things I've seen in the last week, I just downloaded an app and I don't remember the name of it. I'll find it for you and you can include it to your listeners. It's an app for using in meetings. Not only does it capture the entire transcript of meetings, it basically uses context to create to-do lists and give everybody reminders. Literally, if you and I had a conversation in a meeting and we had all these things we talked about that we were going to do, the app apparently will basically send you an entire recap with the recommended tutors for each person. That's insane.

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FT: That threatens all interns everywhere.

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SR: Yeah, exactly.

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FT: What will interns do – They can always go back to getting you coffee, I guess. Srini, thank you so much. This has been a lively conversation to say the least. I would love to stay in touch and we're going to reference everything that you have been putting out in the world, all the good stuff, including the Unmistakable Creative podcast. Everybody go subscribe. You've interviewed everybody from Simon Sinek, to Ryan Holiday, Seth Godin. Your latest book, *An Audience of One* recently came out, and you even talked about how Oprah inadvertently used this strategy you talked about. Do you know Oprah?

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SR: I don't.

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FT: I'm sure she would love what you have to say, because she practiced what you're preaching. As a result, she's Oprah. It works. Thank you so much and hoping you have a great rest of your summer.

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SR: Yeah, thank you.

[END]