

S01 - E18 - Rooted & Unwavering - April 7 - Hylke Faber & James Christense

Presenter 00:03

Welcome to rooted and unwavering a podcast and radio show which features leaders from all walks of life in conversations about courageous connectedness. How do we stay connected to our best selves, especially when we are challenged? What becomes possible when we truly stay committed to our own and others rightness also when we don't feel it, join hosts Philco, Faber, transformational coach, facilitator, and award winning author of taming your crocodiles and his guests as they explore leadership greatness in today's episode of rooted and unwavering

Hylke Faber 00:43

Welcome to root unwavering broadcasting live from Phoenix Business Radio x in Phoenix, Arizona, where we help leaders connect more deeply to their innate potential. I'm your host, hookah Farber, and this is the 18th episode. I'm here today with James Christensen, president of Gateway bank. James, how are you today?

James Christensen 01:03

Hi, I'm excited to be here. I appreciate the invitation. Well,

Hylke Faber 01:06

I feel very humbled to be here with you. And in a moment, we'll find out more about why I feel so humbled. But before we talk about James, I want to talk a little bit about this podcast series to get us off centered in the intention for what we're doing here. So Rudan unwavering is a podcast series that is about helping to connect each of us to connect more deeply to what's true about us. In essence, whatever that is for us, however, we describe that can some be something to do with our values, with love with compassion, with truth with wisdom, whatever we call that it's not prescribed, it's an experience. And these conversations are to become inspired to hear from different leaders and learn through their stories about maybe I get a pointer, just like when we're on a hike, like I'm inspired by that tree or by that view, or by that water into a maybe a taller version of myself. So that's what we're about here. And today, we're going to have a conversation with James Christensen, he is the president of Gateway bank, it's the only community bank in Mesa, Arizona, it's also a very thriving institution. I understand it's one of the strongest performing financial institutions in its peer group. And you've led Chris James, through ups and downs. And through to a very strong performance. James is not only a CEO, and a banker. He's also amongst many other things, a father and a very active community contributor, so much so that he was nominated and achieved the Mesa Citizen of the Year in 2023 Award, which is I think, something that just happened. And he advocates for small businesses, marginalized groups, people in need. And he does a lot in the community, including being on podcasts



like this doing one on one presentations, and inspiring different audiences to greater well being and financial health. And I was very intrigued by that combination. James and I met a few weeks ago, I introduced by our mutual friend, Karen, a wiki, Head of Business Radio x in Phoenix. And one of the first things that struck me about was how honest you were about your path with me, James, it didn't take very long before you told me about your path and how that's informed you. So thank you for being here today.

James Christensen 03:46

Absolutely. Oh, it's been, it's been quite the journey and, and took a took a while to get comfortable with sharing the journey. And, and now I'm open to it. All right.

Hylke Faber 03:57

I love that. So question to get us into the conversation is connectedness, connectedness, with our true self with each other with what's truly important. Tell us a bit about your journey in connectedness in your own life connecting more truly what what's important to you?

James Christensen 04:18

Yeah, it's, you know, when when we chatted a few weeks ago, one of the things that came up and for me my my life changing moment, one of many life changing moments was was was really kind of working until the point I completely broke and had a nervous breakdown. And it's it's really interesting when you're out in the public a lot people think Oh, you're so well connected. You have you know, you have so many friends you have all this and and you know at that point in life, it feels incredibly lonely. Whether that you know, it may not look like that from the outside but from the inside, you're just you're just going and going and going and and I you know that that can Next piece I would have described as solely business connections at one point. Now, I think the most important for me is being connected to who I am. And, and really kind of coming full circle to, to, to being who I wanted to be or who I was when I was younger. And not, you know, trying to be something I thought everybody wanted me to be. And, you know, I was I thought I had to have a family hat and a work hat. Now I just have one. And, and it's a little terrifying initially for everybody to see who you really are. And I think closest of friends may know that, but but really, what's been amazing to me is how that has drawn people to Gateway, whether they're employees or new. I don't know, I don't really want to call them customers new friends.

Hylke Faber 06:02

Yeah, I love that story. And in that you're leading with that, in this conversation. I sense it's very important that you share this, I sent, it's important. And,

James Christensen 06:17

well, I've had, you know, unfortunately, I've had several friends that went down the same path and aren't here to talk about it anymore. And I was I was at that stage just a little over three years ago. And it, you know, really a shock to probably most people that knew me or knew of me. And, and I was just, you know, at that particular point in life, you're just like I had, you know, not that I think all your values



are that had changed that much, but it's really trying to be something that you're not. Yeah, and I was, you know, some of the things you you know, you make fun of as, as I think maybe a stereotypical man is not talking about your feelings. Yeah. Not really digging in. And, and, you know, now my wife and I, we, you know, we've been together almost 40 years. So she's tolerated tolerated lots of Jas so far. And, you know, it's, it's been a, it's a learning journey. And even after this many decades together, we still learn from each other. And the one thing from her and she's, you know, my wife's name is Anita and she is definitely the reason that I'm still here. And, and she's the one that put up the hand at the last minute and, and it was, you know, one of those moments that it was right, right time, right place, and then she really kind of guided my guided didn't kind of did guide my care for a couple months until I started getting back on the, on the right track. And, and, you know, initially, I think with mental health issues that it you know, for me, initially, I was looking at it from a point of, well, probably even more than guilt more like shame and, and, and I don't look at it that way at all anymore. It's, it's a journey that, you know, I think a lot of folks that have battled depression and anxiety, you just haven't talked about it. And I've been amazed at how deep, much deeper of a relationship you build with somebody, when you're really authentic with them.

Hylke Faber 08:14

That's amazing. How much more deeply you built relationships with others, when you're authentic, and with yourself, I am struck by so much of what you said already in this conversation, James, right. Like I used to be connected to my business relationships first. And basically only my sense is also you're living something that was over there, but not you there was a work James and a real James maybe. And I also love that you talk about coming full circle from a place that's not you to a place that is you that you remember from being a child now. My sense is that's a journey that many of us are on are taking are at some point on that trajectory. I know for one that I've been on that one. And sometimes it's a spiral that keeps going. So tell us a little bit about what drove you to basically lose connection with yourself. How did you get to that point? Because my sense is you weren't doing it was saying James was saying, oh, you know, I'm gonna get disconnected from myself and feel really bad. That's probably wasn't your motivation. What was your motivation that got you to the place off a breaking point.

James Christensen 09:37

You know, it's a combination of things. You know, the work piece of it was really probably just the drive to succeed. And my thought was how you do that is you just endlessly work. And, and I've come in to prove that's not true either. But it's been really interesting on the business side is as I've achieved more balance and I have to say I, you know, for you know, talking about work life balance isn't a new issue. But and until three years ago, I, I was very open, I didn't think that was a possibility I just said work life balance is there's just no way that can be achieved, that we're at the level I'm at right now. And I'm I was completely wrong, you know, you almost wear it as a badge of honor that, oh, I didn't use half my vacation, oh, I didn't take any days off. And, and now even and talk about, you know, being president, you don't get, you know, when I could go on vacation, I was tied to my phone, I was, you know, I still didn't get a break. And even then I didn't get him enjoy the moment. And the other thing, there's just personal issues that come up in everybody's lives that I think can can weigh heavy on you. And if you



have, you know, I'm somebody that feels very deeply. So if I have a friend that's hurting, I hurt, and it's, you know, I'm, I can usually, one of the things I found out is I could carry that for them fairly well, but I couldn't do it for me. I could give grace to anybody but myself. Yes. And, and so many things I've learned about, you know, everything I thought in my head that was selfish. Is not it was more self care and getting healthy. And you know, we've at the bank, and not that it was the intended effect at all, but we've grown significantly. I work less hours. I take all my vacation, I take plenty of time to relax. And and my team feels that. And, you know, I was I was really adamant that my team did not work overtime. But I did. And and it was just, yeah, it's just, it's just things I wished I had learned 3030 years earlier in my career.

Hylke Faber 11:51

Yes, yes. Yes. Well, thank you so much for sharing that. That sense of striving, always having to work not thinking there's such a thing as work life balance, especially not that your level being a CEO of a bank. That's like, that's not happening. This is not a possibility. So I'm never resting. What did that feel like inside of James? Let's say before the transition, what did that feel like? What was it like to be you back then? Yeah,

James Christensen 12:22

it just an incredibly high level of anxiety. And I, I literally went decades of sleep deprivation. And I had just kind of got to the point where I'm like, Okay, three to five hours is normal. If I got five, I was thrilled. And it was usually broken up into two or three pieces. And it was just always always anxious that you know, I think, even in the toughest of times, there's moments of joy. But to really, like, when I started getting better, my wife's like, she's like, it's good to have you back. And, and, you know, it's like, it's really good to be back. And I you know, you know, you're, you know, you're you're not President, you're not there, I'm not feeling like I wasn't feeling much of anything, and, and one of the big things I've learned over the last three years is really that, you know, I thought I could just like turn off an emotion. Right. And what I found out is I pretty much turned them all off. Yes. And just got to the point where I survived. And, and in, you know, sounds very stereotypical, but I feel like I'm thriving now. And I feel like my team is thriving. And I'm like, wow, this is way better than just trying to get through the day. Yes, yes. Yes.

Hylke Faber 13:41

The reason I'm, I'm pausing a little bit on the darker side of the story is because I sense some of our listeners may be there, or some of us, I know, I have still have a tendency to be on that darker side from time because we're not from time to time because we're not like a computer that just gets reprogrammed, and it's all over. So actually hearing your story. James, for me, personally has been very helpful to hear about your overworking and feeling disconnected from yourself. Actually, my husband sometimes says that to me when I'm overworking. And it's Friday night and said, Helga, are you there? And my sense from you is that Anita is so welcome. So happy to have you back.

James Christensen 14:27



Yep. And and I will definitely get the art are you here? And, and yeah, but it's just it's just so interesting that so many of the, of the things that were taught when we're young, I do think we everything we need to know we learned in kindergarten, now by kindergarten, and it just getting back to the basics and and really, you know, the everyday is not good, everyday still not good. But But I have tools to deal with that now. Yes, and I Um, you know, like one that I really spent a lot of time on, as you know, for decades of working, you know, been a banker for 37 years is, is people are like, well, if you're having a bad day, don't bring it to work. And I'm like, you know, if you're having a bad day, it's okay. Yeah, it doesn't mean you're going to treat everybody poorly. But if you're struggling, it's okay to share that. Yeah. And it's also okay, if there's one day that it's just too overwhelming, it's okay to go home, too. Yeah. And, and I think that's, and that's not just for me, that's for my whole team. And I think that's been a, I don't know, the relationship, I talked about deeper with friends that deep, you know, I've always I have an amazing team. And, and they have been so supportive. And when I was out of work for six weeks, they literally stepped up and did everything. And I'm like, I don't think many folks could get get their team to back on like that, but they were backing, it was more of them being okay with what I was going through. And after that, you know, some folks sharing, you know, either their experiences or family members experiences, and it's like, Okay, now that you've talked about this, let's talk.

Hylke Faber 16:12

So part of what the leader does it, it sets you set the stage, and you create a context for people to feel safe to actually share more of their true self as well. And whether that's, I'm so happy, or I am really depressed, and it's it's all welcome. It's all welcome, is what I'm hearing, in essence, from your energy.

James Christensen 16:35

Yeah, when we have you know, it's, it's the, the good times are great, because we were dancing in the lobby this morning. So we were, we were having fun, I had my hip hop music on it was a good morning. But you know, there's mornings or, you know, yesterday, one of the team was having a tough day, and, you know, there's a time to celebrate, there's a time to, there's a time to, you know, just be a little more quiet, and reflective and, and just, you're leaving that space for somebody come in and have a conversation with you. So I feel like my office is kind of like the therapy office. But really what's even cooler than that, is it spread throughout the entire team. So that, I mean, everybody's been what I would say what I would call the Brene, brown moment vulnerable with everybody else. And there's not near as many. I don't know if secrets is the right word, or just not being fully authentic. But I had one of my team come in a couple of months ago. And she's like, and she basically made the comment, this is what family feels like, like real family feels like. And I'm like, you know, I told her I'm like you just made my whole year?

Hylke Faber 17:40

Yes, yes. This is what family can feel like, yeah, when we're really close and really open with each other. That that is very beautiful. It's very beautiful. I would like us to just take a brief moment, if you like, if you're willing to do that, just to share with us a little bit about how you went through your Valley. Like so you my sense was, you were in a place of very great darkness inside, like a lot of depression.



That tell us a little bit about if you're willing, how you went through that. And, and because I think all of us can learn whether you know, we have the same experience, or whether we have an experience that is maybe experience light, or experience more intense. It's, I think it's really helpful for people to hear that. So if you're willing to do that, I'll be really good.

James Christensen 18:32

Yeah, it's how authentic Do you want me to be is Are you okay? You know, there's some things that are tough to talk about. But there's, you know, like, when you start talking about, you know, suicidal ideation, I don't want to overly stress out your, your listeners, but but really, for me, it was, you know, when kind of right when all this happened, I had, you know, I didn't sleep very well for years, but then I hadn't slept at all for three days. And your mind starts doing all kinds of crazy things after three days of no sleep. And that's when, you know, to me and one of the things just, it's been, it was incredibly difficult to talk about a suicidal ideation with my wife. My kids have, you know, now that they've heard dad a few times they know what happened, they didn't right away. And it it was in trying to explain suicidal ideation and what it meant, what it was for me, and, you know, at that particular point in my life, it was a comfort which sounds really screwed up and backwards. But it was, was like, hey, if things are too overwhelming, this is this is an option. And you know, and now I you know, looking back on it now, I mean things I you know, I would have missed my youngest daughter graduating college, I would have missed my 35th anniversary with my wife to finally make our first trip to Hawaii. I would have missed those moments that just appear Joy That seems to be way more and but really at that, at that very bottom I was I, it was leading up to it probably for about six, six months to a year. And I mean, I would have days where I literally the every hair on my body was standing up, and I'm like, I have to go home, I just have to go home and I'd want to curl up and like go to the guest room, shut the door, turn it shut all the blinds and just nothing. And it was it was, you know, you'd have a good day and then a bad day, but it was just there seemed to be getting more and more bad days. And then in my you know, in my mind, things were really starting to add up. And you know, the tough thing when if you're talking to somebody that's never struggled with depression or anxiety, which I assume a lot have a lot I've talked to you have. But it's it's there's not a logical reason for the depression. Usually, sometimes there is. But it's just like, Mike, this is where this is where whether this is all reality in my in my head, this is this is all reality. Right? And, and then trying to figure out how to talk through those issues. So instead of you know, the probably the big difference between that then and now instead of just holding it, holding it holding it, it's like, let's talk about it.

Hylke Faber 21:16

Let's talk about it. So you're you are even in that suicidal ideation. And I'm grateful you're able to say that, right? Because there's so many words in our lives that are sort of off limits, but they're still there. You can't sort of cut them off. They happen. They're here. So the question is not whether they're here, the question is, what do we do with them. And what I appreciate about you is that you are speaking about that, and therefore bring light and awareness to this. So I'm very grateful that you that you're doing that, too, for myself and for my senses, many other people that are not willing or able to use certain words, because you don't get followers for that in this in this society. You know, there's a,



there's many things that that we think we should be. Yeah, but not that, but that's also part of us. So in the in those in that moment, as you were going through that you had that suicidal ideation what happened?

James Christensen 22:21

Well, when, when, so it was a Sunday, it was a Sunday morning. And when I kind of when I hit the rock bottom, and I had, I had figured out how to end it, what I was gonna do, and right before I was getting ready to leave the house, my, you know, my wife walked in, I was thinking I was changing in the closet, and my wife came in and I just literally complaint you know, I not that I don't have an issue with crying at all, I just don't, and I just completely broke down. And, you know, my, my, my wife's first thought was, oh, did I cheat on her? And I'm like, that's not it. So that and I bet you know, I can understand that, from that kind of that my reaction. And I was just right or wrong emotion for me at the time, my emotion was ashamed. And, and I knew what I was getting ready to do and just seeing her and, and I broke down and she's just like, you know, I remember just I literally fell to the floor in the closet, and couldn't stop sobbing and she's like, tell me what's going on. And, and I did. And then she's like, we can, you know, we'll figure this out. And so as that day and the next couple of days came she literally fought to get me into a hospital and did and then tracked me through group and, you know, intensive outpatient and partial hospital of back to partial hospitalization. It's like, oh, I'm going backwards. He's like, No, you're just learning more. And, and it was she was she drove me every day I didn't draw, I didn't drive for two months. Even after I went back to work, she still drove me I just was to a point I couldn't for a while. And you know, and it was I wished I didn't have to go fully into the wall and hit it before I decided life needed to change. But for me, that's what happened. And and but you know, that moment was it's hard to tell the person that you love more than anything that you were thinking about calling it a day. Yeah. And my calls that could go through my head with my wife and my daughters was that they weren't good enough for me to stick around for and that's that wasn't true. I never looked at it that way I was, you know, I would assume a selfish way to look at it at the time for me, but I was just like, it just felt like there was so much pain and sadness and depression and anxiety. It's just like, I don't want to have it anymore.

Hylke Faber 24:49

Right. Right. It's very, very clear, very clear. Thank you for for sharing that. And thank you for sharing that so clearly so that we can undo Stand and also find the places in ourselves that visit the same place similar places, different places. So that, you know, your, your wife, or Anita was like, had some influence on you, as you made the transition towards living again. So what have you learned in that process?

James Christensen 25:24

You know, really, the big thing is just, I would have always told you that my wife and I were well connected. And we loved each other for a long, long time. And, and, but they were just things I felt were, number one is a man that you weren't going to talk about. And for a couple of reasons, partially just feeling that that's what I was taught not to do, but also that I need to be the strong one. Always.



And, and, and I don't, and it's, you know, I just, there was so many things, I was running through worst case scenarios in my brain, if I tell her this, if I talk about this, and I didn't want to put any more burden on her and you know, thinking that as, you know, ending your life would not have an impact on her as crazy. But in my mind, that wasn't something I was thinking about I write, but, you know, I would just that, that connectedness to her, the connectedness to my friends, has made a big difference, even, you know, just even at work just to show that, you know, I can have, you know, I have a bad day. You know, before when I in the funny thing is, when I thought I was hiding a bad day, I really wasn't, isn't that true? And, you know, I'm like, nobody, nobody understands that. And, you know, when I shut my door, and I'm like, turn on my turn on my meditation, music, and literally just, I'm trying to stay sane enough to stay at my desk, you know, they can see that, you know, if I'm dancing through the lobby with my hip hop music, I'm probably pretty good mood. But you know, really just just being real and the word. When I was going through all my treatment, the one word that came up over and over and over again was authentic. And, and my last day of group so we would put fill out sheets of paper and throw them in a bowl, and then we need to pick one out. It's still on my desk and and the one I picked up my final day of group said to, for James to inspire others by Being Well, not Virginians, but just says to inspire others by being my authentic self. And, and so my, my first tattoo I picked up after after group was to get my Be authentic tattoo. And it just meant so much to me. Ah, so

Hylke Faber 27:44

my sense is that what pulled you through was something about being real, being authentic, being reminded by life, by Anita, your wife, with by your friends, by your colleagues, who James truly is, which help you to heal, maybe loosen your attachment to those thoughts, these are my words, I'd like to explore that more after the break to those thoughts. And I heard that I heard you say many things, I thought that but actually, that wasn't true. That wasn't true. So we're gonna take a break in a moment. And James, I'm sitting here with tears in my eyes, as you can probably tell, as I'm listening to your story, it stores a lot in in me, and also gives me a lot of hope as I listen to you. Because it's very clear to me that you sit in your seat with a lot of authenticity, and also even talked about this compassion for yourself and for others. And at the same time, you're contributing a heck of a lot, to your family, to your brother community to your company. So when we get back after the break, I'd like to explore more about the part of your healing journey, what tools you used and learned. And you talked about hip hop and meditation, I love the combination of that. Dancing in the office, listening to meditation music, I'd love to hear more group I'd love to hear more about some of the tools you use. And also what your connection is to do then being of service because I can easily remember are actually I said remember that was a Freudian slip because I've been into a situation that was not that different from you. I also had sometimes I not to compete with you but a week I didn't sleep at all that this sense of like, I'm gonna keep this world towards me. Like that's please keep it contained. And I see you out there in the world. So that's another thing we're going to explore after the break. James, thank you so much. If you've been listening and just tuning in now you've been listening to router unwaivering, we've been talking to James Christensen, CEO of Gateway bank, who is sharing with us his transformational and truly transformational journey capital T, capital J, about really facing some of the harder things of being



human. And finding a way to be honest with those. And thread honesty finding a way through, see you after the break.

Presenter 30:33

You are listening to rooted and unwavering presented by growth Leaders Network, the leadership team and culture development company. If you would like to learn more about working on connectedness for yourself, your team or organization, please contact growth leaders network on LinkedIn. And now back to the show.

Hylke Faber 30:58

To router unwavering, we've been talking to James Christensen, CEO of Gateway bank and James, you've been talking to us about a truly transformational journey. So tell us a little bit about the tools you've been using.

James Christensen 31:18

So I can give you a little bit more process on the journey, and then what kind of exactly what I'm doing now. And, you know, so, so for me that this, this whole journey started with, you know, you learned so much kind of in hindsight. And every stage is different, I was in the hospital for a week. And I look back on that, and I learned a lot there. The one probably the biggest thing I learned in the hospital was, you know, this group of people you spend time with, that are going through the same thing that you're going through, literally from every walk of life from from homeless to incredibly wealthy, I'm not that person. And, and everything in between male, female, LGBTQ veteran, not everything you can think of. And after a couple of days together and sharing in group or doing yoga together, the love they can show you is just mind blowing. And you know, at that, in that point in your life, where you don't think anybody could love you hear this total stranger who you've probably never would have met under any other circumstance showed that. So that was, you know, that was one of my big takeaways from the hospital. My other was, that was the first time in my life I ever did yoga, and I found out how amazing it was. After that, I went into I went into group intensive outpatient, which is three hours a day. And I did that for a couple of weeks. And I had a really good therapist in that group and, and was having some good discussions, but I was really stuck. And, you know, she's after a couple of weeks, he's like, I think you need to go to partial hospitalization and in my mind that was going backwards. And, and I was, you know, every stage of this journey, the first day was terrifying, because it was all new. And, you know, then I went to, you know, my, my partial hospitalization was a very, it ended up being a very small group, we were right at the very beginning of COVID. And my, my lead therapist I had is just a couple years older than my oldest daughter, and she, for whatever reason, just found a way to connect. And we started in you, you know, there was revelations in that, in that period of time that that I'm like, Wow, it's amazing what your brain does to protect you and then a memory can get buried that deep. And, you know, some of the things I thought are all the major issues, some of that was true, but some of it was much deeper than that. And then And then really the step beyond that was just you know, they gave me a really nice handoff to a therapist afterwards. And I was with her until about six months ago and then she's like, I think I've taken you as far as I can take you and so I moved on to another one where we've



done some somatic therapy which is really been interesting where your body carries stress and and so I feel like each stage of that journey I've learned more and more and more and I'm like why don't they teach this to people this is amazing. And but really for me now I've tried so many things I've you know, probably one of the first things I tried that I really enjoy and I still enjoy is progressive muscle relaxation. Really just kind of going head to toe and and feeling that relaxation set in. You know I have meditation is is part of part of the daily routine. Meditation is an interesting one as you talk to talk to friends about Are they they? The probably one of the most interesting things with meditation is it sometimes it's perceived as, you can't have faith and meditation in the same space. I don't agree. And I don't, you know, and I, it's like, well, that's relying on something else. And like meditation is just absolutely incredible. And for me to be able to figure out, and I think it's gonna take me a lifetime to get really, really good at it. But for me, a 10 minute meditation can take me from where I'm just like, you know, basically claws on the ceiling to send it again, and just like, Okay, now I can handle the rest of the day, I'm good. Just attend. I mean, it's not like I have to go away for an hour, it's 10 minutes, I go upstairs, I shut the door. And it's just me and it's quiet. And, and that really helps. I've got some, I've got all kinds of ways to relax the muscles that I really like I have, I have one machine I have called the swing master. So we joke and call it the swing Master 2000. And where I just put my feet in it, and you know, you basically just go back and forth for 15 minutes, and it just kind of works, that works all that energy out of the body. And it's just after it's over, I fall asleep on it multiple times, I also have something called a spook mat, which is like little spikes. And you're like, Wow, this is like torture delay on it. It's absolutely incredible. And it just kind of changes your your focus, and I fall asleep there too. And it's just like, for me finding things that relax me or call me. And then once I'm calm, then I can go right back and accomplish what I need to.

Hylke Faber 36:37

So much in what you just said, I I was making mental notes in my mind, what we'll do after this podcast is we'll make a list of all these tools, and maybe quick put some links so people can find those resources, if they're interested in that. I want to visit a few of those in more detail, that the first one that struck me was this group experience you had in that very beginning of being loved very deeply by others, who are on a similar journey, maybe from a different station in life, but able to fully receive you. And to me, that is such a healing experience, one that I get to partake in myself in healing work that I do. And I see it in teams that I work with, were just simply spending a little bit of time sharing stories with each other about what's really going on. And there's something that opens miraculously of a certain connection that sort of goes beyond the day to day, that then carries us forward to do amazing things. So can you say a little bit more about what you learned? Being in a group like that?

James Christensen 37:59

Couple of experiences, I can I could come up with a whole bunch but there's a couple that just immediately came to mind when you ask that and, and one of them was right. You know, right before I left the hospital, somebody that I had met we had there's some free time it's pretty structured, but there's some free time and and so we I ever said business owner that was there and he and he says like hey do you want to talk and and we did and he just kind of unloaded and then the next couple



nights as we finally got to the end of the day and had a little free time we talked some more and then on my you know and I'm I would assume he told me more in a week than he probably told some of his closest friends in our lifetime. And we just felt really connected. We were walking to lunch and I was going home right after lunch. And And as we're going it's one of the there's there's definitely some rules and you're not supposed to touch or anything and he just we're walking around and he just literally turns around and gives me an enormous bear hug. And I you know I had a couple of the texts that were right behind me and I just looked in there like it's okay, like thanks. Because I am the key you know, I'm just like, you know, you know and you there's a hug and then there's a hug you know where you can feel it and you could almost feel the the pain kind of disappear. And you know, the hug was as good for me as it was for him. But just that really deep connection he and I stayed in contact actually for quite a while he's the only one I had any information on and and one of the others that I really really got close to was somebody that was the age of my youngest daughter and I was my had several experiences that week but the first day she got there she was the day you show up as terrifying because you're like you don't know anybody you're coming in. You're talking to a psychiatrist. They're like, Okay, we're gonna put you here and here's this big group of people and you're just like ah, and and so I'm I was sitting in in kind of the family room area coloring and she just came down inside and so can I color with you? And I'm like, Sure. So we really didn't talk a lot. We just color it. And I finished, you know, she finished hers. And then as she finished coloring it, she, she flipped it over. And she's like, what's your name and so and then she wrote me a note, and gave it to me. And then so I got hers did the same. And either was a couple of times during that week, and she's, you know, when she would have a down moment, people would be like, you know, kind of give you a, you know, I'll give you a hug. And she's like, I don't need a hug, I need somebody to just to listen to me and be with me. That's it. And, and I'm like, wow, that's just, you know, our family is a hugger. And, and are huggers. And I'm a bit just to, basically, I took that I just need to connect with somebody and somebody to see me for who I am right now, even in my bad moments. And so I still to this day, and and we have that, that picture at home, my wife has it somewhere. And when we came home, I just we took it out. And she's like, Oh, who does and I flipped it over. And I just literally cried like a little kid again. And I'm like, she's like, what's wrong? And she's like, I didn't mean to, you know, to have this harm you? And I'm like, No, I said, I just I said, when I see the picture, that time, all I could see was all the pain behind it, even though it's a beautiful picture. And so that's something that three years later, I still haven't seen, but I hope you know, I'm sure I will at some point. And it was just that, you know, you don't connect with everybody. But there's a handful of folks that you're just like, wow, this is like, so deep, and one of the homeless people that I sat and had lunch with every day. He and I were just it was just like, you know, we joked about the two of us would never be together and then to start sharing these experiences, and everything we had in common was pretty amazing.

Hylke Faber 41:56

Thank you for sharing that. Thank you for sharing that. I, I know that I can talk to you for hours, just listening. It's just really nourishing to hear your stories. Where my mind's going is, I can imagine listeners thinking, so what does this have to do with being a leader? Right? What does this have to do?



Because so tell us a little bit about what this does this have anything to do with leadership? And from your perspective, how has it shaped you how you lead?

James Christensen 42:31

I've always had the compassion piece has always been strong. But the the showing weakness has been something Well, I don't even showed as a weakness just having a bad day. Or, or my struggles. And, and I think a deep part of that connection with the team is you're just like me, I struggle like that. I have days like that. And, and, you know, I just don't hide that part of myself, that part's open now. And we definitely attract you know, folks that like, you know, some folks want to go to work, do their job, go home, don't really want to connect people that that that like want to have their work family or even some folks that that maybe home life has been hard. And it's like, wow, this is what I have here is amazing. And, and just having that space to watch everyone succeed. And grow has been, there's been so many side benefits that have happened is the one I one of the things I just thought of when I very my very first day in the hospital, I went up met the psychiatrist. And I'm just I'm a complete mess at that point. And she just put her hand on mine and she's like, this is gonna be the best thing that ever happened to you. You know, and at that point, you're like, Yeah, I don't think so. And now I'm like, wow, this is it's too bad. It went to that point. But, but I am so grateful for having gone through what I did, and now I can you know, I think there's things that your team are like God, you know, and James has probably never had you know, you don't have the anxiety you don't have the depression and it's like I do and I have and I have those moments where I think I'm completely worthless. And then I have those moments where I feel incredibly strong and and you know, the one I had that I thought everybody wanted their leader to see as the are always always strong. And you know, I think you you know when you're the leader, you do need to guide the ship, but I think it's okay to say this is who I am.

Hylke Faber 44:39

This is who I am. So leading from a place of this is who I am, who are you? Let's be real, not hiding. And I hear you speak about the connection, the meaning the fulfillment that happens at work. Can you to speak a little bit about what's the impact on the quality of the conversations, the quality of the decisions, and your performance as a business because you are one of the strongest performing businesses and community banks in your peer group. So can you say more about that? Yeah, it's just it's

James Christensen 45:23

or not. Instead of walking into the morning and saying, Hey, Helga, how you doing? You're like, Good, fine. We don't really have that conversation. And it's, it's more of, hey, look, I know, you, I know, you were this was a concern, how's it going? Or How's your mom? Or How's, you know, how's your husband? How's any? How's this in? And? And you get a full answer? And, you know, and I get the same and, and I think that's, it's just, there's the part, just sharing your authentic self draws that deep, deep connection. And, and it's not like, I'm, you know, the team's asking those questions, because like, Oh, this is what James wants us to ask. Now. It's like, No, I'm asking because I genuinely care.



Hylke Faber 46:06

Yeah. That's great. So there's, there's a genuineness? How does that translate that into how the business operates, how teams work? How they disagree, how they go to conflict, how they make decisions, how they commit to stuff? How does that work?

James Christensen 46:25

There's always conflict. So but it's that it's, it's, it's different, it's healthy. And you know, when you're all trying to make a decision for what you think is best. Yeah, you may come at it from a different direction. And that's something we've been very open with the team, whenever we have our planning or work sessions, or anything else, I'm like, assume there's no limits, assume there's no boundaries. And you know, not if we throw 50 things on the board, some of them may not be achievable. Let's just start with everything. And, and what's been really cool, and we have our planning sessions with the entire team, some of the folks you know, some there's always people in your organization that are more outgoing and some that are more introverted. And but some of those folks that are introverted and quiet, have some of the most amazing ideas. And you know, sometimes you have to draw that through, you know, where you're basically putting things on a post it and they really don't know where it came from, and others times are willing to share it openly. But when it's, you know, even if it's been shared behind the scenes, I'm always like, do you can I tell everybody, are you okay with that? And they're like, Oh, now you can. And it's like, this was this person's idea. And they're like, Wow, that's amazing. And I'm like, they're like, How'd you get that? I'm like I just asked,

Hylke Faber 47:37

I just asked, and I can imagine that the capacity to just ask, and to just say, is assigned, we're really deeply healthy culture. And that includes all of your emotions, emotions, ideas, whatever it is.

James Christensen 47:57

Yeah, I had, you know, you have those. When I was at my worst, the gratefulness piece was non-existent from my life, regardless of anything, not that there was nothing good happening. I just couldn't see it. And yesterday, one of our one of our longtime clients was at the bank, and he'd already walked out the front door, and I'm just like, I just had this really giant feeling of gratefulness. And I went out and I'm like, I'm like, I really appreciate your support over all the years. And he just stopped and he's like, he's, like, you know, he said, I appreciate support from our side, but I'm just like, I don't know, it just seems like we don't take the time to say thank you. And really feel it and be like, Wow, even in you know, whether it was my good times, my bad times, you were there to help me and you were there, supporting me as a client and really the growth as a bank has come. As you know, as our brand has been more authentic, more open. It's amazing how many people can relate to real and not that it's just gateway or it's just me, it's like, if you if when you think of an organization with really good culture, and openness, people are drawn to it. That's the coffee shop you're gonna go to, that's the mechanic you're gonna go to, and you're just like, you don't see companies with really good culture go away. They don't and just people were when I walk in the door, I feel safe. I feel comfortable. I feel like I can come in and you know, I can have a customer come in and cry and it's okay.



Hylke Faber 49:25

I'm just getting another motto for gateway bank. It's like being real together. Like really being real. The the question that was on my mind before the break, I want to just ponder for a second which is I'm just I'm I'm amazed by your change, just in case you didn't notice. Because you're integrating so many different parts ready, parts of the deep healing the part of being a CEO of leading a thriving business and it's all part of this thing and then being in the UK admit to being of service. Can you say a bit more about that last piece about being of service in the community? You've been nominated? And got to know the Mesa 2023. Citizen of the Year award. So, what drives you to serve? And how is that related to you being real?

James Christensen 50:22

Yeah, the the recognition part of it's a little embarrassing, but the fun part was I got to have for that particular event, my you know, you can pick who you have speak on your behalf. And it was our two daughters, and they're just incredible. And that's, it's an, you know, I told my wife when it was for that night, when we got there. She's like, What do you want tonight, I want I just want to enjoy the night. And, and be there and I did. As far as service, it really comes from both sides of our family have Methodist pastors, so we kind of grew up serving it was what we did, whether it was a church or you know, whatever organization it was, and for the longest time, I would, you know, and, you know, the majority of the nonprofits are all excellent and do amazing things. But I was really to the point where I, I had overcommitted and, and couldn't and you know, I'm involved in several boards right now, but they're all ones where their mission is amazing. And its service is what makes our life better here, in my opinion. And it's, you know, that I get when I serve, I almost feel guilty when I leave, because I'm like, the people that you serve fill you up so much. And, and maybe maybe a piece of it is that that they're like, thank you. And you're just like, you know, when you can, you know, when somebody says something that you feel it on the inside, and you're like, that's service fills me up. So I think service gives me the energy to do what I do at work.

Hylke Faber 52:00

Service fills me up, it gives me the energy to do what I need to do at work as a soap putting it upside down. Because I can imagine, for people considering being of service thinking this like, first day at the group therapy, that's like, I don't have the time, I don't have the energy and you're actually putting it upside down, you're saying this is something that that gives me energy. We're getting towards the last bit of our conversation, which again, from my perspective could go on for a long time. I want you to think about people who are maybe in the midst of it in the midst of maybe being lost, or having those two personas, and just not knowing how to bring work and home or work in real person together. But what you want to say to them?

James Christensen 53:04

Oh, that's a really good question. You know, it's I was fortunate to have somebody around that could guide my help. Not everybody has that luxury. That's one of the things we try to put out in, you know,



when, when, when I speak or, or when we have an event is that and I feel it with a lot of our clients is that you are I mean, yes, we're your bank, but we love you as well. And, and, and I think for the people that are are doing well or have been on the journey. You can not always but you can usually see it in someone and even if you don't, it's just you know, having that for me and and now like if I if I'm at a coffee shop or I'm somewhere and you know, I just express deep gratitude regularly. And, and you know, when you tell somebody you love him and then when you ask him, What can I do for you? And if you wait a second and hold eye contact, they'll probably tell you and I think that's just that trying to really connect on a one on one level. I'm you know, when I have people that speak to me about something a deep issue or that they're going through, I mean, I'm like, I'm like I'm pushing my stuff off my desk, I'm like, Okay, I'm all in my phones off. I'm I'm here and it's just I think being fortunate enough to find some way that's gonna say, I've walked your walk and and and you're not the only one. Right and and is it is it at the time it feels like you are? Yes. And it feels like you're on that journey by yourself. And I think it's just being more self aware of what's going on around you. And being able to a conversation you may have with with somebody you walked by on the street, Hilda may have just made a life changing, and may have been a life changing moment, you won't even remember it. And I think it's just showing that kind of love.

Hylke Faber 55:27

Again, paradoxical. Thinking about when you are in the midst of it, meaning on the darker side of the journey, you feel anxious, depressed, what I'm hearing from you, maybe that's a time to express gratitude, and to be of service? Because, am I thinking about what you said before this, and then this is like, it's how you connect back to an energy that gives to you

James Christensen 55:55

know, the connectedness wherever you find that that's, I mean, I don't think we can do this journey on our own.

Hylke Faber 56:03

Right? Right. Right. I'm also very struck by what you said about the being in the group, having people from very unexpected walks of life, the homeless person, the therapist, who was your youngest daughter's age. Even your wife, when you in the closet, just show up. And what I sense in you is an openness to that. And, and literally, bat metaphor, but allowing yourself not to stay in the closet. And just get out. And, and however you do that, it's very meaningful. As I'm reflecting on this conversation, James, and I'm having many, our hearts and some of them already have words, and some of them are brewing. So they will be brewing with me as I as I reflect on this conversation, but one of the things that I think will stay with me for probably the rest of my life, is how you so decisively break down the barrier of openness. It's like, let's be real, let's just be real. And then the strength that comes online, it's it's such that this has been a conversation about paradox. My ego, we haven't talked about that, but my thinking mind, doesn't think I can do that. And then, paradoxically, on the other side of what I don't think I can do lies, grace and gratitude, and energy and healing and unexpected sources, you would have never met those people that you that you celebrate in this conversation. So those are some of the



things that I'm taking away for, for my own life, and that I will share with others as I as I talk to them. What are some of your final reflections from our conversations, James?

James Christensen 57:59

You know, it's just most of what we've talked about today, I didn't even have as a thought as far as what I wanted to talk about. It's just so I appreciate the free flowing conversation and, and, you know, I feel like I've learned a lot from your comments, as well this morning. And it's just, you know, really, for me, it's wear one hat during the day, be you be authentic, show love, be present, enjoy the happiness, feel the love, feel, you know, if you're having a sad day, feel it and share it. And, and just, it's, you know, trying to bottle that all up inside, doesn't work very well. It's just a matter of time before it's going to come out. And however it's going to show itself. And, and, you know, it just seems like we're a society where we're just trying to get through life and I think to enjoy the people you spend time with and you meet during the day, and thank them for who they are and what they do. And you will get back away more than you give.

Hylke Faber 59:05

Thank you. Thank you. I have an image of you jumping in the pool every second. I'm just going to jump in and and the water is going to hold me thank you for that James, sir. been incredibly moving and meaningful to to be with you today. If you've been listening today to ruído unwavering this was a podcast with James Christensen he's death CEO of Gateway bank. He practices realness, authenticity and shared with us his healing journey that brings great stillness in me as I reflect on it, an awe for the human experience and people like you who are willing to move through it. Hope you heard something you find helpful if if this kind of conversation appeals to you and you will Want to continue listening you can find James James Christensen at Gateway bank. He's available at different networks and also coffee shops, I understand absolutely. And you can also connect with router unwavering if you can subscribe to this podcast on Spotify, apple on other places, you can watch it on LinkedIn. And you can also connect with Gln. And with me wherever you like. Our next episode will be with Beth founder hook, who is a person from the Netherlands. He's the CEO of the chrimbus Institute, which is an institute for Mental Health, National Mental Health, probably quite related to what we've been talking about here. And today, we've been talking with with James Christiansen, again, talking about realness. And we'll be here again next week. And until then, I hope you take good care of yourself. I hope you took something from this conversation that helps you to be more connected. And being real definitely has helped me. Until next time, this was router unwavering, where we connect leaders of all walks of life to connect more deeply to their innate potential. See you next time.

Presenter 1:01:22

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appreciate something that is great about you. Celebrate the gift that you are and enjoy connecting more deeply to your best self today. See you next time on rooted and unwavering

