

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 42: Rolf Potts, Part 2

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Tim Ferriss: Hello, ladies and gentlemen and welcome back to the Tim Ferriss show. What you're about to hear is part two of a multi-part conversation with Rolf Potts, author of *Vagabonding*, world traveler extraordinaire, one of my favorite people. If you didn't catch the first part, you might want to do that before venturing in. But if you don't mind your stories as more of a jigsaw puzzle then by all means, keep on listening. We bounce around a lot. It's a very eclectic conversation, so you could certainly listen to these things to of order. This episode if brought to you by 99designs. So you can check out a bunch of my competitions that I've run at 99designs.com/tim and *ExOfficio*.

And if you want to see some of my favorite pieces of travel gear as well as a video on rapid ultra-light packing, then you can visit exofficio.com/tim. And I almost forgot, of course, there are a ton of resources and links and websites and books mentioned in this episode. All of it can be found in one place in the show notes. So you just have to go to 4-hourworkweek.com, all spelled out [/podcast](http://4-hourworkweek.com/podcast). 4-hourworkweek.com/podcast, you can find the show notes and resources and links for this episode as well as every other episode like those for Peter Thiel, Tony Robbins, Mike Shinoda, you name it. So you don't need to scribble furiously unless you want to. But fourhourworkweek.com/podcast is where you want to go.

Without further ado and further Porky Pig imitations, please enjoy part two of the Tim Ferriss Show with Rolf Potts. What are some of your favorite books or commentaries on writing?

Rolf Potts: Well, this is funny because I teach writing in various contexts. I teach at a summer writing program in Paris. And then I've been doing a class at Yale the last couple of years. And so I've been reading a lot of crafts books recently and I realized that I had crossed my carrying capacity that I needed to stop freaking reading books about writing craft. That like I had a learned all the metaphors there were. Um, and so, I mean, there's some journalistically minded books like Roy Peters Clarke has the *Writer's Toolkit* I think it's called. And Phillip Lopate has a book

called – a collection of essays about the writer’s craft called, To Show and to Tell, I think.

Because you know, the old adage goes show, don’t tell. But he’s a believer in the idea of strategic telling and he’s brilliant essayist himself.

Tim Ferriss: How do you spell his last name?

Rolf Potts: L-O-P-A-T-E.

Tim Ferriss: Got it.

Rolf Potts: He’s sort of the modern father of the belletristic essay, the personal essay. And he actually came up from New York to talk to my Yale students in person earlier this year. And his kind of writing is very different from what you and I do. And he might sort of frown on it to a certain extent that he’s really about that old going back to Montaine, high art of the essay. But he really has some good advice on writing. And jumping back to screenplays, the breakthrough for me in my writing—when I took my first vagabonding trip and thought I was going to be the new Jack Kerouac and tried to write about it and realized that one chronological retelling of what I did was not going to work regardless of how beautiful the sentences were—was stumbling into screenwriting 20 years ago.

And learning the importance of structure. And so those classic screen [inaudible] like, you know, the Syd Field screenplay book or Robert McKee story, which is actually ridiculed in the movie adaptation.

Tim Ferriss: Right. Yes, it is.

Rolf Potts: Right. Where Brian Cox actually plays Robert McKee in that movie. I think that those are useful because they go back to the very core of how we communicate as humans, how we tell stories. And you can get tired of the three-act, the screenplay structure or the needs of the audience. But the audience is damn important. And I’m a big believer – and you know, I’m not a believer in cultural hierarchy. I think that high literature is important and good. But I mean, I just wrote a Pope E. B. movie. I think that it’s good to know how Raymond Chandler structures his narratives in the same sense that it’s good to know how Montaine structures his narratives as well.

So I would say, if people are looking or writing craft books, don't be afraid of any kind of book that just talks about how to tell a story. And I think that movies are great metaphors for how to tell a story. And there's crappy movies out there and you know, adaptation is sort of a lampoon of how we invariably tell stories in movies. But just because you learn a very basic and formulaic way of, say, telling a cinematic story, doesn't mean that you have to use that every time. It just means that you understand the rules and then within the structure of those rules, then you can shine as a writer.

Tim Ferriss: I very much concur. I have an embarrassing confession, which is I've been agonizing over a screenplay for several months now. And I think partially because I've loaded the expectations and the burdens so large on my shoulders. It's roughly and adaptation of the 4-Hour Workweek and a lot of the back story. And it's intended to be comedic but instill or at least convey a lot of sort of philosophical take-aways that hopefully will spur viewers to do interesting things in their lives and make big changes blablabla. But I've been agonizing over it. Then one thing that did help me to at least get started – and I have a quite a lot on paper – was Save the Cat. I thought that was – I don't know –

Rolf Potts: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: – if you've seen this book but I found it so helpful because I also read – I took McKee story seminar actually. Which was a – quite an experience in and of itself. Yeah, the portrayal and adaptation's not far off the mark.

Rolf Potts: Interesting.

Tim Ferriss: But a fun experience nonetheless. I really found Save the Cat to hold your hand and walk you through at least getting things down on paper by saying, all right, by this page and this minute you should have this type of element. And really allowing you at least to get – I wouldn't consider what I have a first draft – but a skeleton structure down that I can use to fill in the blanks with all these random ideas that I have. Totally agree. And I've become recently interested in Joseph Campbell, had a passing familiarity with Joseph Campbell, watched a few documentaries. But the Hero's Journey and the Monomyth –

Rolf Potts: Right.

Tim Ferriss: – I find very interesting just as a way of getting started if you can sort of lay out these markers for different stories that you're considering telling. But you know, another thought that I had, which we don't have to go too deep into unless you have thoughts on it – but is that that beginner's mind that you mentioned, which is an achievable through travel or vagabonding is also, I think, one of the primary benefits of what you might consider therapeutic use of psychedelics.

And that's, I mean, part of the reasons that people often describe, with the right set and setting, a psychedelic experience as one of the best experiences of their lives is, I think, the same reason that many people would describe their first vagabonding experience as one of the best experiences of their lives. And that's the present state awareness and the beginner's mind and the appreciation that both of those experiences tend to catalyze. But –

Rolf Potts: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah.

Rolf Potts: Well, I touch on that a little bit in vagabonding. I sort of gently dissuade readers of the necessity to say, smoke marijuana when they travel. Because reality is giving you this present state awareness. You know, if you allow yourself to be bored or you allowed yourself to be lonely or just if you allow yourself to have experiences by accident then suddenly you're having, you're discovering things in a vivid way that don't need artificial enhancement.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. One of the pieces of advice that you gave – I'm pretty sure that you age this advice, feel free to correct me – but was getting lost, the benefit of getting lost. And heading out of your housing, whatever that might be and just walking off in one direction. Maybe with a map, maybe without a map and just walking and taking random turns for a few hours. And I have found that so invaluable, not only while travelling quite frankly but even in San Francisco and places where I've lived or live, exploring by foot a terrain that you might otherwise, for the sake of convenience use taxis for, for instance.

And it's been, I think, a major priority for me when I travel, not for business but for this type of experiential reflection and exploration to try to catalyze discomfort whenever possible. And that doesn't mean a pebble in the shoe but to – for instance – to purposefully go out of my way to encounter language difficulties. And one of my

favorite ways to do this – I'm typically a night owl, like I mentioned. But when I travel I try to switch it up. So I like to try to wake up, in some cases, very early. And I did this in Greece, my first trip to Greece I was travelling with a close friend. And I started waking up really early, I would just leave the blinds open and I'll wake up as early as possible.

And my habit was to go for a walk and just hand wave and try to ask the locals – these were on some very small islands – where I could find a café or a bakery. And inevitably, I would go to these bakeries or coffee shops and there would be a small group of really old Greek guys sitting outside, debating whatever old Greek men debate. I would imagine it's probably complaining about politicians and so on and so forth. Much like every other sort of gaggle of old men early in the morning everywhere else in the world. And then I would just proceed to kind of sit down and try to have a conversation with these guys. And it was always hilarious and extremely fun.

And I ended up being basically the court jester for these guys for a period of time in the morning and they always got a kick out of it. So I think that – I mean, I've said it, that that seeking out of mild discomfort or uncomfortable situations I think is really one of the main values and benefits that I've taken away from travel in the last – certainly in the last ten years or so.

Rolf Potts:

Yeah, this ties in to a lot of ideas that are really close to my heart and that I've sort of embraced even since I discovered vagabonding. And it's funny that you talk about the old Greek guys because as a travel writer, one of my biggest strengths, and it could be an accidental strength, as a person who wanders out with the purpose of getting lost is that whatever town I'm in, inevitably the town weirdo finds me, like the most eccentric guy. And if you read my second book, *Marco Polo Didn't Go There*, like one third of the stories are about me with a really strange dude in Lebanon or Burma or some place. And it's sort of connected to the idea of the old Greek guys sitting there, it's that they see each other very morning.

But the chance for an American to stumble in and sort of have a semi-comical exchange with them is the most exciting thing that's happened to them all week. You know, it's like their wives have stopped listening to them, their children have stopped listening to them. And so they can take you under their wing and just the things that you learn from these guys is amazing. And so that's funny, that's very relatable because I feel like, for whatever reason,

I don't know if I – if it's my mid-western tendency to talk a little bit less and maybe listen a little bit more, something that I always meet these guys who just have the weirdest view of the world.

But you were talking about walking out and getting lost. In Vagabonding I talk about how if in doubt just walk until your day becomes interesting.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah.

Rolf Potts: And this is sort of tied into a concept that I've discovered since then and it's a concept that I teach in my Paris classes because we're in the city where it was invented. And it's idea of the flâneur. Are you familiar with the flâneur?

Tim Ferriss: The only reason I'm – in passing, I want you to expand on it – the only reason I recognize that word is because a friend of mine named Nassim Taleb, who's very famous for having written The Black Swan –

Rolf Potts: Sure, yeah.

Tim Ferriss: – and a number of other books describes himself that way.

Rolf Potts: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: And so maybe you could expand on that because I would love to hear more. Quite frankly, I don't know much about the term.

Rolf Potts: It's a wonderful idea that – in a sense, when I was walking until my day become interesting, I was being a flâneur before I knew what it was. But it goes back to Baudelaire in [inaudible] in the – you know, over 100 years ago in Paris. And it's connected through French ideas, through the situation of the 1960s. And the idea is that – and flâneuring is something that I use in travel but was really invented as a concept in your own home town. And the idea is that you become so used to and inured to your home town that you're not seeing it anymore, that's it's become a purely utilitarian space. And between point A and point B, you've [ceased] living.

That in your routine, you're not really living your routine, you're just sort of – and this is a paraphrase – but you're sort of zombie walking through your day. And so being a flâneur, a flâneur is not someone who walks through his own city in a utilitarian or pragmatic way. A flâneur is someone who goes out in search of experience. It's also tied into the idea of psycho-geography that

instead of walking through a city with the idea that you're going to see tourist attractions or that you're going to go to visit your friend on the other side of town, is that you're going to walk through the town psycho-geographically and you're going to collect the color red.

And you're just going to see how many forms the color red can take. Or you know, look for every parking meter in town. Or you're going to look for license plates with the letter Q on them.

Tim Ferriss: Cool.

Rolf Potts: Or you're going to look for every immigrant restaurant. And that that is going to organize your day. That's psycho-geography. But being a flâneur is even less structured, in that you're just wandering. And it's a wonderful – it was invented to be done in your hometown, to break out of your own habits. It's a great thing, it's a great way to break out of your tourist habits where you go to a city and there's a 100,000 things you can do any given moment and you do the obvious thing which is go to the tourist attraction. And I'm not going to knock that, there's a reason why they're tourist attractions. But people talk about how, oh, there's the beat and path, everything's been discovered, everything has already been done.

And it's like, actually, that's not true. You know, Paris is the most touristic city in the world but you wander for ten minutes and pretty soon you're going to be finding something that's unique to itself. Even along the [inaudible], even, you know, the Champs de Mars where the Eiffel Tower is. If you just embrace the idea of the flâneur and walk until something catches your eye and stay open to experience instead of your plans, then you're going to be living in a way where you previously had only been consuming most moments.

Tim Ferriss: And flâneur is F-L-A-N-E-U-R, is that right?

Rolf Potts: That's right, with a little hat over the A.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. God my Fr- I've – of all the languages I've attempted, although this one very half-heartedly, I just cannot seem to get a grasp on French because I panic when it starts to – erase any of my Spanish or confuse anything else that I've studied. But Paris, what is it like to teach in Paris and what type of students are you teaching?

Rolf Potts:

Well, I teach at the American academy. I mean, I'm actually the course director and it's sort of become my baby. I've been writing this writing workshop for the last ten years on rue St-Jacques, in Paris. And my students are like age 18 to age 70. And it's just, it's a large number of people. And I mean, some people are there because they know Vagabonding or my writing or they know some of the other writers who teach there. I have two – one other non-fiction teacher and two fiction teachers. It's not just travel writing they can study poetry or screenwriting or short stories.

It's sort of a bucket list thing for them. It's that they want to come to Paris and be a writer for a month. One of the exciting parts of the program is that it – you're there on the Left Bank, you're in the university district of Paris and you're – you know, you're firing on all cylinders. That you're writing all the time, you're interacting with writers, you're reading a lot and you're being a flâneur. It's funny that I discovered the flâneur in the context of Paris even though I'd already been doing it. And even when I'm not teaching travel writing, the flâneur is such a great creative exercise for my students who might be writing a poem rather than a travel story.

And Evelyn Waugh talked about how a city like Paris is sort of like a house that's been wallpapered over so much that the only thing holding it up is the wallpaper. Everybody's written about Paris and so you have to find a way that is against expectations. And the only way to find that is to get to and wander and find your own interest. You know, and I've had students who have brought their skateboard and through skateboarding in Paris have discovered sides of it that nobody else is seeing. And they've discovered, you know, the French skateboarding culture. And so yeah, my students are just there for the romance of Paris. And the great thing is that it's a great – you know, July in Paris is a romantic place to be but it's a great place to deliver.

You know, you can walk outside of a classroom and in 90 seconds you're where Victor Hugo lived when he was 11 years old. And in three minutes you can go to a place where Hemingway got shit-faced, you know. Like we're literally – we're on the street that he disrobes, you know, in *A Movable Feast*. I mean, it's like we could teach the same thing in North Dakota and it would still be very professionally and I'm very proud of what our teachers are doing. But it's almost like a catalyst, Paris puts people in a mental state. Almost like an athletic performance thing, is that people are in Paris and they're not going to blow it, you know.

Tim Ferriss:

Right.

Rolf Potts: They don't live in Paris, they're going to come to Paris and they're going to do something special. And it creates this energy that amazes me every year, of people just uncorking some really good stuff. Going back to Time Wealth just an experience that is very specific and very Parisian but very unique to themselves. So I've really loved my association with that city.

Tim Ferriss: That sounds amazing. How many students are in the course?

Rolf Potts: It varies from year to year. We've been averaging about 24, it's capped at 32. And so probably anywhere from 18 to 32 students.

Tim Ferriss: God, I feel like I should take the course, it sounds amazing. I've fantasized fairly frequently about going to graduate school or attempting something like an MFA for creative writing. Because I really haven't ever explored fiction outside of elementary – doing some exercises in elementary school. Of the students how take this course, what are the shared characteristics of the people who get the most out of it? And I'm going to leave that open-ended on purpose.

Rolf Potts: I think it's an earnest desire to do their best combined with sort of a humility, almost a beginner's mind type humility towards writing. And sometimes I can get a very young and brilliant college student who will come in sort of a leg above maybe sort of a mid-career professional. But because the college student has not quite cultivated – it's a strange thing to think but there's a sort of confidence and self-assuredness that college students have that like a mid-career professional doesn't have. And that can get in the way of the beginner's mind. And so that sort of-know-it-all is the wrong word but like the over-confidence of a brilliant college student might impeded his or her advancement.

Where like someone who's 35 or 45 and is just there to soak in everything and work as hard as they can – I think it's the person – going back to the beginner's mind – it's the person who's willing to embrace the beginner's mind and work hard. And synthesize the creative aspect with the parts of Paris that you can't overlook. You can't just come to Paris and sit in your room and write all the time any more than J.P. Morgan should've been reading teletexts the whole time he was in Egypt. That that interactive going out and having fun and having a bottle of wine by the Seine and flâneuring through the city and discovering things by accident is going to feed what's happening when you're alone in your room.

And so I think it's the students who can find that balance and the students – I think to a big extent it's the students who have been almost like vagabonding. Who've been saving their money and this means something, you know, that they're not just gathering from their limitless pool of resources to pay for their month in Paris but they have earned this with their sweat. It's like a chapter in *Vagabonding*, I talk about how the work you do makes your travels meaningful. I think it's the people who come in and know the value of what they have in Paris, that this one month is a special time that can catalyze them into a new creative state, those are the people who are going to get things delivered for them.

And you mentioned MFAs, I got a mid-career MFA. And I don't know, there's some advantages to that sort of thing but I think there's an extent to which that creatively, a one-month program like this, can cover a lot of those MFA basis, without compromising two years of your life.

Tim Ferriss: Right, right. Agreed. I mean, I'd love to hear your thoughts. I mean, my basic feeling is that the benefits would be – and I mean, it's – maybe sounds ridiculous that – you know, I feel very isolated writing, a lot of the time.

Rolf Potts: Mm-hmm.

Tim Ferriss: You know, the access to more people than I've ever had access to in my life, yet I spend a lot of my time feeling quite isolated and lonely. And I don't know many writers in San Francisco. That's not in my social sphere, which maybe is a good thing, maybe it's a bad thing. But the idea of being in a group of people, going through the same experience... having that sort of shared study experience, I'm sure with some degree of commiseration every once in a while, with a structure that actually facilitates experimenting with new types of writing is very appealing to me. So maybe the month, maybe that's a great solution as opposed to two years like you said. Which I don't think I could – I think that will remain a fantasy in my head.

Rolf Potts: Yeah. I think they're both good for that social – that 'community of writers' situation. Just like this – the friend that I'm swapping houses with, who lives in Brooklyn, is a grad school friend. And I just, you know, in my late thirties I was able to make very, very dear friends through my two years of grad school. But there was an extent to which I – that that – like MFA programs aren't really designed for 38-year-olds who are already successful as writers.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah.

Rolf Potts: And then that month program, I mean, obviously I have a vested interest in my own one-month program. But a one-month program can deliver both the community and a more concentrated spark of inspiration. Without having to go through a two-year cycle that isn't necessarily tailored to someone in your situation. One thing a two-year program can give you is structure, like monthly deadlines. But if you've already written a book, I think there's an extension to which like that exposure to poetry or fiction or screenwriting and just 30 other people who are gung-ho and are locked in on that similar creative openness, that that one-month catalyst can be more useful in both sense than a more extended, you know, certificate program that lasts two years.

Tim Ferriss: You know, I am happy that you misspoke for a second and said, youthful. Because in a way, I think it's almost appropriate because, like you said, the charge of a group in Paris recognizing for most of them it's a very unique opportunity that required a lot of sacrifices to make happen, would charge it with a certain youthful energy. Which I'm trying to reinfuse into a lot of what I do because – and I don't think this is purely a function of age. Maybe it's exposure to just the doom and gloom of just general internet bullshit but I'm trying to beat back my own cynicism with a club. And really try to prevent myself from becoming apathetic.

That's a very strong word but there's just – there's a lot of instability and craziness in the world if you go looking for it or if you're sending a lot of time on social media, for instance. And I want to combat that with a positive and charged, youthful energy. So this is every interesting.

Rolf Potts: Well, I think that that goes back to the idea of success versus lack of success. And that a certain kind of success is more meaningful when you're 30 than when you're 40 because you have a different relationship to that success after you've been steeped in it for a while. So finding the screenplay that you can bang your head up against or embracing poetry or ay – or you know, samba dancing or anything else with that vulnerability, that beginner's mind that youthfulness, I think that that is so useful, to use the right word this time, in rejuvenating your relationship with yourself. Just like when I started out as a travel writer, there were certain bylines that were really important to me that aren't now, you know.

Tim Ferriss: And by bylines you mean publications and credits and such?

Rolf Potts: Yeah. Yeah, I'm going to write for the San Francisco Chronicle, I'm going to write for National Geographic Traveler. Good publications, they do good work. But I realize that once you took away the thrill of that initial success of having a major publication acknowledge the quality of your work then it shifted. You know, what I was doing with the content I guess transformed a little bit. And so now I'm writing a screenplay with zombies in it. Not that I'm going to become a B movie screenwriter now. But it brings me joy, you know, sort of that child-like joy in the creative process that doesn't exist anymore with what I've already become professionally successful at.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Rolf Potts: And so I think you get into that pattern, and it sounds like you're experimenting with this already, that you become successful in a certain manner of creative expression and a certain manner of expertise. And then I think a way to keep yourself fresh is to try activities that you might fail at. And I think if you aren't failing at something fairly substantial once a year, then you're not pushing yourself enough. And of course, travel is a great venue for inviting failure and you know, mild humiliation. But sure, you know, I think it's great that you're bashing your head against a screenplay that might not work out.

Ten years ago, or maybe eight years ago, I sort of had my vagabonding screenplay where I was sort of expressing the philosophical ideas of vagabonding through a coming of age story. And it didn't quite work. You know, maybe I'll go back to it but it was a good thing to have tried and not quite succeeded at. And I'm not saying that that's where your screenplay is going but that process, I think, is important for keeping yourself sharp and keeping a perspective amid the certain jadedness to other kinds of success.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. Well, the adjective successful has come up a couple of times. When you think of the word successful, who's the first person who comes to mind? And why?

Rolf Potts: Oh, man, I don't know if a person comes to mind. You know, I think when I was 28 I may have been able to name like a travel writer that I wanted to be, like Pico Iyer or Tim Cahill.

Tim Ferriss: Mm-hmm.

Rolf Potts: And I think the reason that a person – when you ask that questions, a person didn't pop into my head because I have that different relationship to success. You know, that the hunger to be like Peko or Tim um, played itself out in a very – in a great way. It became part of the energy that made me a travel writer. And so now I don't think – you know, it's funny I feel like our backgrounds are fairly similar. I'm from Wichita, Kansas, you're from Springs, right? Long island?

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, that's right.

Rolf Potts: Bullseye middle class families, it feels like.

Tim Ferriss: That's right.

Rolf Potts: And you had your Ivy League experience right out of high school and I didn't. I taught at Penn and then Yale for a couple of years really recently. A part of me felt like I needed to measure myself against that standard and it was a great experience. But now that has also been folded into my idea of success. And so I think this might be a little bit tied into talking about the creative process and sometimes it can be difficult. That what my motions of success are slightly different and has a different energy. So I'm not thinking about someone I want to be necessarily but it's back into that – I think it's more about appreciation.

Like my role models – and I'm still blanking on who I might point out – are not achievement people but appreciation people. You know, people who have found the success and are synthesizing it in sort of a good life kind of way.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. This is just somebody who comes to mind – I've asked this question of a lot of folks. And more than a few times Steve Jobs comes up. But he's actually not, in many ways, exemplary to what you just described. And I think Steve Wozniak, as co-founder, very much is. I've met Woz on a number of occasions and I even gave him little tango class prior to his Dancing with the Stars experiment.

Rolf Potts: [Interesting].

Tim Ferriss: And he really savors and loves life. And has built a life for himself where he is able to enjoy or experience the joy of discovery and is a genuinely happy human being. And this is going to sound funny, but despite all of his material success, be I think that the material success – not to say that that's a bad thing – I think it enables more

than it disables but it can become a – it can make people very defensive where they spend the vast majority of their time managing the protection and growth of their assets as opposed to the growth in other areas of their lives. I mean, I don't have hundreds of millions of dollars or anything like that.

But I've been very fortunate to have enough success with publishing and elsewhere that I don't have to worry about where the next month's rents coming from. But I've witnessed that in myself. And I think that there's a possibility – and maybe this isn't true but I'd be curious based on your observations if you've noticed this – you know, coming from a very middle-class background where there were many, many times when money was tight in the family and we weren't able to take certain trips or get certain birthday presents or whatever it might be, go out to certain restaurants, that my inclination is to be very – to focus on the defense and protection of assets more than perhaps those people I met, for instance, at Princeton who grew up as Blue Bloods.

Where money is a known quantity, it's an element that for multiple generations, the family has become comfortable with. So I'm not sure if that's worth exploring but that's something that I try to be very cautious or aware of. Because I think it's a terrible inclination that I have.

Rolf Potts:

Well, you touched on a couple of things, a couple of new concepts I've come – I've sort of wrestled with very recently. And it actually made me realize how my role models are going to be, to your earlier question. But yeah, like teaching at Yale, i.e., which is such a good institution, you know, I came into Yale in my early 40s. and my excitement at being at this institution after all these years, you know, after being a person – when I was 17 at the college fair in Wichita, Kansas, I remember looking at the Yale table and feeling sorry for the guy how had to come to Kansas and not even going there, you know.

Just because I came from a family that you don't spend money on an Ivy League education, there's more practical ways to get your education. It wasn't an expectation. But me sitting as teacher in a class at Yale – and this is very recently – who's excited about being at this institution in a way that the 18-year-old student isn't. You know, the 18-year-old student is just relieved to be there because they've been expected to be there for years and it's part of their socio-economic status and they didn't have to go to their safety school sort of situation.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Rolf Potts: And so in a way that's sort of a gift of middle-classness is that you're not – you don't have those expectations. Nobody's going to be disappointed if you don't end up at Yale. And then you can actually have this beginner's minded experience of being a 42-year-old who's over the moon about being a Yale professor all of the sudden. And actually the other thing you asked about when you think of success, who do you think about? Actually, I've been really fascinated just like in the last couple of months of the stories of Dave Chappelle and John Hughes. Dave Chappelle being the comedian who had turned away \$50 million and society sort of said, oh, what's wrong with him? And then John Hughes, who in the 1980s made all of the best teen movies ever and the just sort of disappeared to become a quiet person.

Tim Ferriss: Did he make Home Alone or am I making that up?

Rolf Potts: He made Home Alone. He made all of those brat pack teen movies. He made Home Alone.

Tim Ferriss: Mrs. Doubtfire, did he also make that one?

Rolf Potts: He may have been involved as a screen –

Tim Ferriss: I might be making that up but yeah.

Rolf Potts: He had involvement with movies through the '90s and then just sort stopped doing that altogether in the 2000s. And I'm still in the process is researching this personality type because I'm really interested in the relationship that these guys have to success and they were both judged sort of harshly. And I think that these are guys who are really trying to wrestle with the idea of who they were versus who their success dictated they were supposed to be.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Rolf Potts: And so Dave Chappelle, we live in a society where you have to be insane to turn down \$50 million. People were questioning Dave Chappelle's mental health.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, that was a very prominent feature of the whole discussion. Yeah, whether or not he had gone literally insane.

Rolf Potts: When in fact, it could've even – and again, I'm still researching these guys – that could've been a radically sane thing to do. A friend of mine Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, who's a great up and

coming journalist, wrote a piece, profiled him for the Believer, where she went to his hometown in Yellow Springs. And talked to his mom – Yellow Springs, Ohio. Talked to his mom who's a professor and actually ran into him at a coffee shop but sort of wanted to respect his, you know, privacy sort of thing.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Rolf Potts: And Dave Chappelle is fit, happy guy living on a farm in Ohio, hanging out with his friends. And it feels – again, I need to do some more research – but it feels like he's a guy who decided what would make him happy and he realized that \$50 million and getting locked into a show wouldn't. And similarly, John Hughes is a beloved guy. And these are two examples, there's other examples that one could throw in. But he was beloved for his teen movies but I think there came a point at which – especially by people of my generation – there came a point at which he didn't want to be beholden to the Breakfast Club and Sixteen Candles anymore.

That he's a family man and a guy who was passionate about his creativity. And I think he chose being happy in a city that he loved, Chicago, with family members that he loved over making, you know, the Breakfast Club 3 and making another \$10 million. And so while I wouldn't say – while these guys didn't pop into my head as examples of success, they're guys that have sort of captured my attention. Because I think the sort of public perception of oh, here are these guys who've disappeared, with these two examples, these guys aren't disappeared – they're not people who disappeared but they returned – they realized that they had the structure in place to live the lives they wanted to live. And they quietly have been doing that.

Tim Ferriss: I love it. It makes me want to immediately start researching both of them. But if you're on the job then and given that I enjoy your writing so much, I'll probably just wait.

Rolf Potts: Well, actually, you know, it's funny that I'm not researching it from a writing point of view, so go ahead and take it. It's just like from an intellectual point of view, you know. At all points, Heraclides has said you never step into the river, the same river twice because it's a different river and you're a different man. And that's probably not a direct quote but you're always trying to make sense of how you're living and how other people are living. And suddenly this is just a random intellectual thing that I probably wouldn't have thought about in the context of success

until you brought it up. And here's two guys that I think, you know, were crazy like foxes.

You know, that said, no, thanks American idea of success. We're going to take real success, we're going to take time wealth and live in ways that make us happy instead of trying to live up to artificial ideas of success. So I would – actually you can have it, Tim. And I want to read this, I want to read this book or article on success management. You know, because it –

Tim Ferriss: Success management, I like it.

Rolf Potts: – it feels like an important topic.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. Yeah, I agree. Especially because it's such a nebulous term that I think there's a lot of insidious potential for such a heralded, pressured, nebulous term in particular. Interesting. All right, I'm going – I'm sure that seed will just sit in my head and not go away. So I might have to scratch that itch.

Rolf Potts: I mean, there's so many ways of looking at perspective and success. But in dental terms, we're all more successful than the kings of Europe 500 years ago, you know.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Rolf Potts: So there's that – the keeping up with the Jones' idea of success, you know, that comparing yourself to other people idea of success, is useful to an extent but it's also toxic. And so it's part of this idea of success management, which is a phrase I only just now said. But it feels like it's the other half. There's a million books about how to become successful but perhaps there's not – perhaps on the idea of how to manage one's success in an enriching and life-enhancing way is something that more thought needs to be, you know, addressed –

Tim Ferriss: I think so.

Rolf Potts: – on that topic.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. Well, this has been a fantastic conversation. I have just a few more questions I'd love to ask. I want to be respectful of your time. But –

Rolf Potts: Sure, go for it.

Tim Ferriss: – I think I'm very hopeful that people will enjoy this and they should definitely let us know if they want a round two at some point, if you're up for it. Because this has been a blast. But the –

Rolf Potts: Absolutely.

Tim Ferriss: – the questions I have, so they're a couple of rapid fire questions. You walk into a bar, what do you order from the bartender? What are your drinks of choice or drink of choice?

Rolf Potts: I have turned into a whisky guy. And I'm actually giving myself a little vacation from whisky just because almost like internet connectivity it became too easy to like have a night cap that compromised my morning productivity. And you know, being the middle-class guy I am, you know, I love Woodford Reserve and I'm talking about the bourbon types of whisky. But Evan Williams Black Label makes me happy. But I'm taking a little vacation from it because it became my – you know, my booze version of the internet, where it just became unnecessary for me to be having, you know, another Evan Williams. And you know, I like the single malts and stuff like that too. But as far as something – like I needed a freedom app for my bottle of Evan Williams.

Tim Ferriss: Just duct tape over the mouth, right.

Rolf Potts: Exactly, exactly.

Tim Ferriss: Like an anti-booze pacifier. I should sell one of those.

Rolf Potts: Exactly. And it's not alcoholism because I've been on my whisky fast for about two weeks now. And I never think about it, I just needed to get my monkey brain off of my whisky night cap because it was delightful and necessary and completely, you know, counter to my own creative life. You know, it was a very lazy – it was like checking my Facebook feed for the third time in 20 minutes, you know. Anyways, eventually I will return to whisky with pleasure but I'm on a little mini-retirement as it were from whisky.

Tim Ferriss: I understand. I just took a – recently took a month off of booze entirely for similar reasons. Do you have a favorite documentary or documentaries?

Rolf Potts: What popped into my head is Verner Herzog's Grizzly Man.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, boy yeah.

Rolf Potts: Have you seen this?

Tim Ferriss: No. I've heard of this. This is the one with the-I think part of the reason I may have avoided it with a horrific – Epilogue, if I'm not mistaken, is this the same movie that?

Rolf Potts: The Epilogue, it's –

Tim Ferriss: Well, let me rephrase that. Are people eaten by bears?

Rolf Potts: Yes. Yeah, it's about this guy – this eccentric fellow named Timothy Treadwell who spend 13 summers – I believe it's 13 summers – in Alaska with grizzly bears. And the 13th summer, he's actually eaten by a grizzly bear. And it's something – this is not a spoiler because you know that from the beginning of the movie. And one reason I like it is that it's such an interesting experiment in story-telling. And I use it as an example with my students about how you infuse narratives with mystery, with the idea that you're going to get certain information later on in the narrative. And Herzog gives us the answer to the mystery almost immediately, which is the what, what happens?

Timothy Treadwell gets eaten by a bear. But then it's like the how get answered. But then it's the who. It turns into this who the hell is this guy that would hang out for grizzlies for 13 summers? And I'm not saying – it's not my favorite or it's not one of my favorite documentaries from the standpoint of like sort of life-changing model for how I want to live or even how I want to make a documentary. But it's such a brilliant use of narrative. Verner Herzog is just so good – literally yesterday I was looking at like these spoofs of like Verner Herzog reading Curious George. It just killed me, it just – it was so funny.

If you've seen Grizzly Man with his sort of Germanic voice-over and then you hear this spoof of him reading curious George, was a curious monkey, it's so uncanny. Anyway, that's sort of an aside is that he's another one of these role models of someone who is so brilliant, he is sort of unreplicably (sic) brilliant in the way he uses narrative. And it's such a subtle and simple and brilliant way of telling the story of Timothy Treadwell, mostly through Tim Treadwell's own video. But it's just a fantastic documentary. And it doesn't really tie into lifestyle design but as far as using it as a model for using found footage and existing resources for telling a really, really profound story about human nature and the people

who sort of go against human nature and nature itself and the assumptions of nature.

It's just fantastic. And yeah, a guy gets eaten by a bear but it's less macabre than you might think.

Tim Ferriss: This is a random one but we mentioned adaptation earlier. If Nick Cage came to your house for dinner, what would you cook him?

Rolf Potts: Oh, God. Well, I'd probably go to Aldi's and find some cheese bratwursts just because that's sort of how I roll, you know. It would be the same if you showed up at my doorstep or any number of friends or celebrities. That's an interesting guy. And this is another complete aside but I'm a little bit obsessed with the movie Con-Air.

Tim Ferriss: Okay, that requires some elaboration. Okay.

Rolf Potts: Because I saw it in a bus in Syria. If a computer took every action movie cliché and it into an algorithm and spit out a movie, it would be Con-Air, you know. With a cast full of Indie actors. I mean, Steve Buscemi is in that movie and John Malkovich is in that movie. But I watched it on a bus full of Syrians and they didn't have any of the snarky, self-aware, judgmental, hipper than now attitude towards it. And they cheered at the end and they cheered in the middle. And that became part of my emotional experience of Syria, which – and this has been 14 years ago – which is this amazing place.

And it's become this heart-breaking place because I know that the people I met there and who were so wonderful are living hard lives now. And so I want to write an essay about this, at some point, about my emotional relationship to Con Air that is somehow tied into the experience of travel along with – for – like the helplessness of [inaudible] was going on in Syria. And sorry for this to take a serious turn but it's one of those limitations of travel, you know, for all of the beauty of humanity that I experienced in Syria, which was such a wonderful place years and years ago, that I have this dumb Nick Cage movie tied into my emotional experience of the Syrian [people], so.

Tim Ferriss: You should absolutely write that. I think that'd be a fascinating piece. Roger that. So cheese bratwurst.

Rolf Potts: That's it. Come on over [inaudible].

Tim Ferriss: Sign me up. What is the most gifted or the few most gifted books in your life? Meaning, aside from the books that you've written and of course, people who've followed me for a while know that I've given away hundreds if not thousands of copies of Vagabonding but –

Rolf Potts: And thank you for that.

Tim Ferriss: Of course. Yeah, of course. I view it as a must read. Of course, you know that. Aside from your own books, what books have you gifted to other people the most?

Rolf Potts: Well, you could probably guess Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely.

Rolf Potts: And this is especially a young adult to mid-30s gift. And this is going to sound funny but I probably gave it to every woman I dated for like six to ten years. Not because I was some sort of jaded pick up artists but because I felt it was so true to my own, you know, joyous attitude towards how I wanted life to be and just sort of the openness. Like this 19th Century gay dude, you know, capturing these Rolf, straight guy emotions towards, you know, the joy of life. And so I apologize if I sound dated to my ex-girlfriends. But there was a point at which I felt so connected to that book, you know, that I would give it to people I was falling in love with, you know.

Tim Ferriss: Mm-hmm.

Rolf Potts: And so that continues to be a book that, especially for young people who are just sort of coming into wrestling with what's in store with them for life. Leaves of Grass is this great reminder that joy and openness to experience and inclusivity is something that is going to – is going to be that catalyst that makes every experience more exciting.

Tim Ferriss: Great, I love it.

Rolf Potts: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Any others? What have you been gifting to your girlfriends for the last while?

Rolf Potts: Let me think. You know, I have so many writer friends now that I – like we – I have really good friends from my grad school

program who are poets. And you have a poetry best-seller if you sell 150 books of poetry, right.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Rolf Potts: And so I've been buying a lot of poetry by my friends or even just by poets I respect. Simply because that one purchase and hand-off is meaningful to them in way that other people might not be.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Rolf Potts: And this is something we haven't touched on but poetry is useful for non-poets in the way that it uses language. You know, there's nothing purer and distilled in the way that every single word operates in poetry. And so my friend, Ellie Burrell, just came out with a book. I've been buying that for friends. My friend, Heather Dobbins-Combs, had a book that came out with poetry. And I think poetry is a good – and hopefully my friends who are receiving these books are reading them – is just a good reminder about how important language is and how much you can do on a single page with language. Leaves of Grass is poetry too, so somehow this prose writer who's besotted with poetry for the last 20 years, that's a big thing too.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely, I need to read more poetry. I've never been much of a consumer of poetry partially, I think, because I dealt with a lot of holier than thou liberal arts majors at Princeton, who seemed to imply that if I understood – if I insisted on understanding the poetry that it was above me. That I was lacking the intellect or somehow if I couldn't appreciate what I considered to be nonsensical –

Rolf Potts: Right, yeah.

Tim Ferriss: – prose that I just didn't get it. And that, I think, gave me bit of an allergy to poetry that I should probably revisit. Besides, Walt Whitman, any other poets that you would recommend to the intrepid reader of poetry?

Rolf Potts: Well, a guy who speaks most every summer in Paris is a guy named Stuart Dischell.

Tim Ferriss: How do you spell his last name?

Rolf Potts: D-I-S-S – D-I-S-C-H-E-L-L. It's very dude-like poetry. Meaning it –

Tim Ferriss: Is it like a country song about the pick-up and the dog or what are we talking about?

Rolf Potts: I mean, he's from Jersey, he's from Atlantic City. And it's not dude like in bro-like poetry. But it's just like if you're a – you know, like a straight male who's encountered bigger question in life, there's something very relatable about it.

Tim Ferriss: Got it.

Rolf Potts: Penguin publishes him. Also a guy who was born in Kansas and who is sort of out there and his poetry is really infused with a lot of pop culture is Michela Robbins who write a poetry book called Alien Versus Predator. That's just sort of a trip to read. In fact, yeah, it's a fun book to just read by and reread out loud to your friends because there's so much. He's like using these strange meters and rhymes with poems about Axl Rose, you know. You know, where I mean Axl Rose with something else. Really interesting guy who's also published by Penguin. So those are a couple of dude poets that I think would be accessible or at least appealing to people who aren't usually vested in poetry.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Rolf Potts: Billy Collins being another example. These are all men. Actually there's a woman named Amy Nezhuku Matitil, N-E-Z-H-U-K-U M-A-T-I-T-I-L, great woman, I've spoken with her at a writing and environment conference. And very accessible and beautiful poetry. One recommendation I might have for people who are interested in poetry which I would imagine for your and my audience both is maybe not a huge priority of people who read our books, just get an edition of Best American Poetry. Any time in the last 20 years. And read through the poems and the ones that you don't like, forget about them. And the ones that are appealing, find other poems by those authors. And that's how I found some of my favorite poets.

Tim Ferriss: That's great advice. And I just wanted to raise also one other poet. And this is one of the rare poets who broke through my probably unfounded bias against poetry. Naomi Shihab Nye, S-H-I-H-A-B N-Y-E, two words. Her father was a Palestinian refugee and just I really enjoyed – have enjoyed her poetry and kept it quiet. This is so stupid but it just goes to show how early bruising can affect how you behave as a supposedly mature adult.

Rolf Potts: Right.

Tim Ferriss: I enjoy her poetry because I understand it. It's beautifully written but I get it. There's sort of a message being conveyed or appoint or a description of something concrete. And I suppose I was – based on the condescending lectures that I would get from people at Princeton who were probably very similar to the guy in the bar in Goodwill Hunting who's reciting, you know –

Rolf Potts: Right, right.

Tim Ferriss: – plagiarized classics. Just like imagine that dickhead and multiply it by a couple a hundred people. I guess I've never really talked about it. But Naomi Shihab Nye is a poet I've come to really appreciate. So I need to read more poetry, I'm glad that you're sort of lighting a fire for that.

Rolf Potts: And those poets are out there. Major Jackson is another guy that occurs to me. African-American guy from Philly who actually taught at the MFA program. I didn't study poetry but he was there great guy. And you know, for very completely abstract poem that's playing with language in a way that's almost meant to be pretentious, you have poetry that's very soulful and accessible and great. Well, people deeply vested in poetry might bag on the accessible stuff but there's a lot of it out there. And again, the Best American series or other anthologies might be a good way to find it.

Or even just going to poetry daily and ignoring the poems that seem completely inaccessible and following up on poems that seem to really be delivering something relatable. Daniel Hall is another great one. He's pushing 90 now but he's wonderful, wonderful poet based up in New England.

Tim Ferriss: Well, Rolf, I want people to continue exploring your thoughts. What is the best way for them to learn more about you, find you online, etc.?

Rolf Potts: My author website is rolfpotts.com. That links to all aspects of my travel writing career and also my career as a journalist and an essayist. If they want to know more about Vagabonding, hey, they can buy the book. They can also go to vagabonding.net, which I can – should probably remind them, has resources that go in tandem with the Vagabonding audio book that you published and are also more updated than the print book that came out 11 years ago. So vagabonding.net/resources will allow you to follow up on

a lot of the stuff that we've talked about today, a lot of these websites like bootsnall. And then finally, anyone interested in my Paris course, which takes place in the month of July every summer, is pariswritingworkshop.com.

Which is also linked from my author website. But pariswritingworkshop.com will give you all the basics about that. And Twitter is @rolfpotts. So there's many ways to find me.

Tim Ferriss: And that is Rolf with an F, for those people who might be wondering what the spelling is.

Rolf Potts: With an O and an F, R –

Tim Ferriss: With an O and an F and an R and a couple of Ts as well, yes, Rolf Potts. And for you folks who are interested in the book club, so I do have a book club. And *Vagabonding* was the very first book used to launch that book club. And you can hear a sample of the audio book and check it out at audible.com/timsbooks. So you can get a scope on some of the books that have had a huge impact in my life. And I'll thank you one again because *Vagabonding* certainly hit me at a very important time in my life where I could've gone many different directions and I feel like it steered me in a very positive direction.

And if I hadn't read *Vagabonding*, quite frankly, I don't know if the *Four-Hour Work Week* ever would've been written. So thank you once again for having that impact on me and many, many thousands of other people as well.

Rolf Potts: Well, I appreciate that and I appreciate you championing the book too. It's really gotten to people who may not have found me otherwise, so it's a great synergy happening there.

Tim Ferriss: For sure. And I will continue to champion it. So Rolf, thank you so much for the time. And I would love to continue this sometime when you're available and not taking a sabbatical from electronics. And until next time, thank so much for taking the time.

Rolf Potts: All right. Thanks for having me, Tim. Talk to you soon.

Tim Ferriss: Thanks, Rolf. Bye.

Rolf Potts: Bye.