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MBS ([00:01](#)): These days, I am spending a lot of time thinking about just what it takes to start a worthy goal. Something that is thrilling, something that is important, something that is daunting. Not only how do you start it, but how do you keep going? How do you finish it? This is 2 Pages with MBS, the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages of a book that has moved them and shaped them. I am that MBS. I'm Michael Bungay Stanier. My guest today is a man who thought really hard about a very particular worthy goal. Writing a book.

MBS ([00:47](#)): Mason Currey is the author of Daily Rituals. It's a wonderful book. It captures how authors and other creatives go about



their day, how they set themselves up for success. That's a book that's been featured in Brain Pickings newsletter, which if you don't subscribe to that, you should really check it out. It's really beautifully written, wonderfully curated. In fact, Mason has another newsletter I subscribe to called Subtle Maneuvers. I'd highly recommend that as well.

MBS ([01:14](#)): He is telling great stories in that particular newsletter. Back to writing and writing books, Mason has finished his own book, of course, but like most aspiring authors when Mason began his writing career, he was honestly a little naïve.

Mason ([01:31](#)): Yeah. Out of college I thought I wanted to write fiction and I thought the way to do that was to get an easy day job and live someplace cheap and write in your spare time. I got the easy day job and lived someplace cheap and then got absolutely no writing done. It's sort of I just have always wondered like, "How do people do it at a really basic level?" Like, "How do they carve out the time and how do they keep up their energy and enthusiasm and resolve?"

MBS ([01:58](#)): Mason didn't give up. He tapped into the power of rituals for creativity in a pretty unorthodox yet quite powerful and simple way. In fact, you could probably duplicate it yourself with a little effort.

Mason ([02:11](#)): When I was first writing the Daily Rituals book, I was living in an apartment that got very cold in the winter. It was poorly insulated and got in the habit of wearing a hooded sweatshirt with the hood up because I was cold. It's like I got used to that feeling. Like if you have the hood up, it's like wearing blinders.



It's just you and the screen or you and the page. I got used to and hooked on that.

Mason ([02:34](#)): Now, even though I live in LA now, and it's not cold at all, I feel like I need something up. Even if it's not the full hood, I need a collar or a scarf or something to create this feeling that I associate with that one productive period.

MBS ([02:48](#)): In Mason's book, he talks about rituals that literally keep artists working, keeps them doing the work, whether it's getting up early or staying up late, lots of coffee, long walks. Honestly, all of those I've done, because really it's whatever works for them. It's important for them to get in the right mindset. One that is both fragile and fleeting. We'll talk more about that. First, Mason's book choice. When he told me what it is, I was like, "Ooh, that's a little heavy."

MBS ([03:23](#)): It's true. It's a philosophical work. It's at least a hundred years old, but what drew Mason to it was something familiar. Hyper-realistic daily routines. He's chosen *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann. The scene he chooses is when the protagonist is jarred out of his own daily routine.

Mason ([03:42](#)): To set it up, this is a scene where the hero, Hans Castorp, and his cousin, whose name is Joachim, are meeting with the sanatorium's director to have their chests X-rayed. They meet in the laboratory, all the lights go off and there's this crackling vibrating machine full of tubes. In this scene, the director is looking at this fluorescent screen in the dark and Hans Castorp is looking over his shoulder at his cousin's X-ray.



MBS ([04:09](#)): I think these are two pretty haunting pages. Here's Mason Currey reading *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann.

Mason ([04:24](#)): "Take a deep breath," the director commanded. "Deeper. I said deep." Joachim's diaphragm quivered and rose as high as it would go. The upper parts of the lungs were brighter now, but the director was still not content. "Unsatisfactory," he said. "Do you see the helium there? Do you see those adhesions? Do you see these cavities here? That's where the toxins come from that make him so tipsy." Hans Castorp was preoccupied with something that looked like a sack, or maybe a deformed animal, visible behind the middle column, or mostly to the right of it from the viewer's perspective.

Mason ([05:03](#)): It expanded and contracted regularly, like some sort of a flapping jellyfish. "Do you see his heart?" The director asked, lifting his giant right hand from his thigh again and pointing an index finger at the pulsating pendant. Good God. It was his heart. Joachim's honor-loving heart that Hans Castorp saw. "I can see your heart," he said in a choked voice. "Please go ahead and look," Joachim replied again.

Mason ([05:30](#)): He was probably even smiling meekly up there in the dark, but the director ordered him to be silent and not exchange sentimentalities. He studied the spots and lines, the blackish ruffles in the chest cavity, while his fellow viewer gazed tirelessly at Joachim's sepulchral form. His dry bones. His bare scaffolding, his gaunt memento mori. He was filled with both reverence and terror. "Yes. Yes. I see it," he said several times. "My God, I see it."



Mason ([06:03](#)): He'd once heard about a woman, a long-dead forebear on his mother's side of the family who is said to have been endowed or cursed with a troublesome talent that she had borne in all humility that had caused her to see anyone who would soon die as just the skeleton, which was exactly how good Joachim now looked to Hans Castorp, although, with the aid and under the auspices of physical optics, so that it does not really mean anything and was perfectly normal, particularly since he had expressly obtained the Joachim's permission. Yet, he felt some sympathy for the melancholy fate of his clairvoyant great-aunt.

Mason ([06:42](#)): He was deeply moved by what he saw, or more accurately, by being able to see it. He was also stung by secret doubts, whether it might not be somehow abnormal after all. Doubts about whether it was permissible to stare like this amid the quivering crackling darkness. A deep desire to enjoy the indiscretion blended with feelings of compassion and piety. A few minutes later, he himself was standing in the stocks while the little thunderstorm raged and Joachim, his body closed from view again, began to dress.

Mason ([07:21](#)): Once again, the director peered through the milky pane, but this time into Hans Castorp's interior, and from his mutterings, ragtag curses and phrases, it appeared his findings corresponded to his expectations. In response to much begging, he was kind enough to allow his patient to view his own hand through the fluoroscope. Hans Castorp saw exactly what he should have expected to see, but which no man was ever intended to see and which he himself had



never presumed he would be able to see. He saw his own grave.

Mason ([07:55](#)): Under that light, he saw the process of corruption anticipated, saw the flesh in which he moved, decomposed, expunged, dissolved into airy nothingness. Inside was the delicately turned skeleton of his right hand and around the last joint of the ring finger, dangling black and loose the signet ring his grandfather had bequeathed him. A hard thing, this ore with which man adorns a body predestined to melt away beneath it so that it can be free again and move on to get other flesh that may bear it for a while.

Mason ([08:32](#)): With the eyes of his great-aunt forebear, penetrating clairvoyant eyes, he beheld a familiar part of his body and for the first time in his life, he understood that he would die. He made the same face he usually made when listening to music, a rather dull, sleepy and devout face. His head tilted toward one shoulder, his mouth half open. The director said, "Spooky, isn't it? Yes. There's no mistaking that whiff of spookiness."

MBS ([09:08](#)): That was fabulous. That was just wonderful. Thank you. I loved how it just felt like were you moving back and forth between different worlds, like reality and the crackling thunderstorm and fluorescent skeletons. You were moving back and forth in time, being present with the director, now muttering and cursing. But also seeing your grave and the future, but also seeing the connection back to the grandfather with a signet ring. It really felt like it's like a



matrix. It's like time and space warping and expanding in that single couple of pages there.

Mason ([09:52](#)): Yeah. Yeah. I'm glad that came across because that's one of the great themes of the book and one of the great tricks of the book, the way time contracts and expands throughout it. One day it takes 150 pages and then as the book goes on, whole years go by in short periods of time. There's a lot of talking about the nature of time and the nature of boredom and how we fill time. Yeah. This is a moment where that comes together with space, with the body. It's also a moment where he's at the sanatorium, he's surrounded by death.

Mason ([10:25](#)): One of the very first things he's told as he's riding up to the sanatorium by his cousin, is when there are dead bodies, they send them down by bobsled in the snow and Hans Castorp was horrified. He thinks it's indecent to talk about that and the cousin is like, "Well, that's just the way it is up here." This is the first moment. It's like the mortality really intrudes into this book that's set someplace where people are dying.

MBS ([10:54](#)): I'm curious to ... I mean, is it that sense of mortality that seems resonant and influential? I mean, in so many of your work, you talk about artists doing their best work, trying to live their best life knowing that we have this short time on the mortal coil before we shuffle off. Was it Andrew Marvell wrote, "At my back, I always hear time's winged chariot hurrying near." I'm curious to know whether that's playing a place in the way that you show up in the world.



Mason ([11:24](#)): Yeah. I guess I haven't really quite thought about it in that way, but that does feel accurate and insightful. Yeah. I mean, why is our ... Our time is valuable because it's so finite. The reason I'm interested in how people use it and organize it is because it's a limited resource and how you protect it and employ your energy plus your time is just a fascinating subject to me. I do think it's mortality that gives it a framework and makes it interesting.

MBS ([12:03](#)): It's related, I guess. There's a writer called Kevin Kelly, who I'm not sure if you've ever come across his stuff. He writes nonfiction and he's influential in the tech sphere as well and other places. He has ... I think he calls it his date of reckoning, which is that you can, through actuarial tables, calculate your date of death. He's like, "Statistically, this is the date I'm likely to die on." I've done that. It's September the 15th, 2043 for me.

Mason ([12:36](#)): Oh my God.

MBS ([12:37](#)): I've done that as a way of going, "All right, Michael. It's 2021. You've got 22 years left technically. Kevin Kelly says you've got one big project every five years." I'm like, "Okay. What does that mean? Four projects left, maybe five, if I'm lucky?"

Mason ([12:55](#)): Wow. Yeah.

MBS ([12:59](#)): It's an attempt to remind myself about what I'm trying to work on and how to have the courage to work on the stuff that matters most to me rather than what just floods in and fills my day.





Mason ([13:14](#)): Yeah, yeah, yeah. I like that. I'll have to look up the actuarial tables. I do think in terms of I can probably complete two big projects a decade, so it's the same thing you're talking about. I turned 40 recently, so I have two, four, six at the most. I mean like it's ... And I think also we're all racing against the dwindling of our energies and concentration power. I mean, I hope that's not the case, but I already feel a little bit less energetic and sharp than I might have 10 years ago.

MBS ([13:48](#)): I felt something in the pages that you read from *The Magic Mountain* about this transition into another world. How does that have influence or cast a shadow in terms of how you think about the work that you do?

Mason([14:05](#)): I think there's a real tie in there. I mean, my books are about how people made the time and the space to do creative work and ambitious long-term creative projects. In particular how they did that on a daily basis, what kind of rituals they engaged in. I think a lot of it is about how you ... I feel like doing this ambitious creative work requires a certain state of mind that is somewhat fragile and fleeting that you can't just be paying your bills and then swivel your chair and instantly start writing a novel or composing.

Mason ([14:49](#)): You've got to walk yourself into that space and you've got to really protect it from interruption and distraction. You look at someone's typical day and you get a sense of their personality and their temperament and just how they used their schedule to combat whatever obstacles were in their way and also how they used it to counteract their own worst



impulses. The procrastination-prone person might have a very strict schedule to try to short circuit that.

Mason ([15:20](#)): This is a book about, in some sense, being transformed through rituals or there's a great ... The scene I thought about reading was all the patients at the sanatorium do these rescuers, where they sit out on their balcony and on these lounge chairs and they wrap themselves in these blankets. There's a very particular way. It's a famous scene. It's two camel-hair blankets, and they wrap themselves from the neck down to the feet and it's very particular practice motions.

Mason ([15:53](#)): Then after you do that, you can sit back and contemplate the view. When Hans Castorp does this, he gets into this other state of mind, the sort of dreamy contemplative state of mind. I think that's what my books are about in a way. It's like how you walk yourself step by step from your everyday prosaic, paying the bill state of mind into this state of mind where you can do this deeper thinking or the experiment and improvise these out of the normal flow of time.

MBS ([16:30](#)): Yeah. There's an interesting book that's just has come out on The Power of Ritual by a guy called Casper ter Kuile, I think is how you pronounce his surname. I think it's called The Power of Ritual. Are there rituals that you use to keep you in this ... I love the phrase you used, fragile and fleeting. That fragile and fleeting state of mind where you're in that penumbral state, in between shadow and light where creativity can most flourish. I'm wondering if there's any structures or rituals you build to help you with that.



Mason ([17:05](#)): I mean, I mentioned the getting up early, which is, like I said, my one dumb trick. I think for me-

MBS ([17:11](#)): And the hoodie. The hoodie is ritual as well.

Mason ([17:13](#)): And the hoodie.

MBS ([17:13](#)): Yeah.

Mason ([17:14](#)): Or lately it's been a scarf.

MBS ([17:18](#)): Yeah.

Mason ([17:19](#)): I mean, for me, I'm always trying to calibrate between forcing the work and not forcing it too much, because you do have to discipline yourself to sit down and do the work. I don't think that you can wait around for inspiration to strike. My research has backed that up that I think inspiration comes through the work rather than the other way around.

MBS ([17:42](#)): I love that.

Mason ([17:43](#)): At the same time, if you're too rigid about it, if you really are forcing yourself to sit down and grind it out, that can produce really bad work and can make you more stuck and just it takes the fun and the improvisation and the ... It sucks the spirit out of it. I think it's all about surfing that fine line. You got to get yourself to work, but you also have to know when to cut yourself some slack and how to refresh, whatever you want to call it.



Mason ([18:19](#)): Your inspiration or just whatever it was that brought you to this line of work in the first place. How do you stay in touch with the enthusiasm and joy of that?

MBS ([18:29](#)): Well, maybe there's a connection there. When do you start showing your work to other people? I've just been in the process of showing people the first draft of this book that I wrote, and it was terrible. I mean, it was useful, profoundly useful, and also profoundly terrible at the same time, because you know [inaudible 00:18:50] like, "This is pretty good." My friend Michelle was like, "I read 35 pages, the first 35 pages of your book, I have no idea what it's about yet."

MBS ([18:58](#)): I'm like, "Ah, that's very helpful to hear and it's the wrong answer." When do you first share writing with people? Again, how do you hold yourself so that you can be fragile and open, but not shattered?

Mason ([19:16](#)): I mean, that's something I've been thinking about recently. I actually recently did this online writing workshop with the Canadian writer, Sheila Heti whose writing I love. It was like a Saturday, Sunday, six-hour total workshop where she talked about how she gets herself out of creative problems. One of the things that she talked a lot about was she shows drafts to a lot of people, like a hundred people and she sends it to everybody.

Mason ([19:45](#)): She'll send something to her mom. She'll send something to her friend. She'll just ask people, "Will you read this?" She shows it to writers, but she also shows it to just like her aunt or whomever, because she doesn't just want a literary



response. She just wants a reader's response, a human response. She said she's had to just really suppress that part of herself that feels like this fragile, delicate writer, who's going to be broken by any criticism. That basically she feels like she had this great thing.

Mason ([20:17](#)): I can't really do it justice, but she feels like art is a material that when it's beaten it gets stronger rather than getting weaker. That all this can only strengthen the work, if you can just stomach it as a person. She basically has found that she can. It gets easier. I have habitually been the kind of person who shows my work to almost nobody. The Daily Rituals book, I let my wife read it when I feel like it's getting close, and then my editor really preferred to just read a complete thing. She wasn't really into reading a lot of-

MBS ([20:55](#)): Many drafts. Yeah.

Mason ([20:55](#)): ... partial drafts. Basically my wife would read it in pieces. Then my editor would read the complete manuscript. I wasn't getting much feedback along the way. It ties back to my newsletter, which I started last year, which is my attempt to be a little bit more in a dialogue with readers. I'm not planning to share drafts of the book, but I am planning to share a bit about what I'm reading and what I'm thinking about and not be quite so precious about the work in progress.



MBS ([21:30](#)): Mason, there's a question I love to ask at the end, which is this. What needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation for you?

Mason ([21:41](#)): I guess what I'd like to say is that *The Magic Mountain* has this reputation as an incredibly difficult book that people might be frightened to pick up. It's really not. It's a fun read. I mean, the writing itself is not difficult at all. It's quite straightforward and it does get a bit dense with ideas and characters who hijack the novel and talk at great length and have these long arguments that can be a bit trying.

Mason ([22:09](#)): But like I said, if you stick with it, I think you really get brought along to a different place than where you started. I encourage people to pick it up.

MBS ([22:21](#)): I mean, it feels like ... The way you framed it right at the start, which is like it's transformative in the same way that the lead character is transformed. It feels like it has a transformative effect on the reader as well.

Mason ([22:36](#)): Yeah.

MBS ([22:36](#)): Also, this may be a leap too far, but it made me think of somebody like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and *A Hundred Years of Solitude* or maybe Isabel Allende in and her *Eva Luna* and *The Stories of Eva Luna*, which are these magic realist set in South America broadly speaking. How those worlds pull you in and seduce you and feel different and separate and real and unreal all at the same time. As you describe Magic



Mountain, it felt a little bit similar in that kind of, this is a new different world.

Mason ([23:14](#)): Yeah. I think there is some influence there or a thread that connects those. I think magical realism might've gotten a bit overdone a bit at a certain point in the 90s or early 2000. When I think of it I think like, "Oh, no, I can't deal with another character who, I don't know, sprouts wings or can see the dead or something." I feel like this book does it in a very controlled way. It doesn't feel magical realist. It's like extra real, super real. You know what I mean?

MBS ([23:42](#)): Yeah.

Mason ([23:43](#)): It's never quite fantastical. It's just like heightened reality, which is I think harder to pull off and maybe more of a special experience.

MBS ([23:58](#)): I really did love how this conversation seemed to move from really big questions around mortality and, what are we going to do on this planet in the time that we have? To, I don't know, should I wear a hoodie or not wear a hoodie when I'm trying to write my next book? If I'm honest, it's probably the mortality that I'm sitting with now. The hoodie I can take or leave that. I'm wearing a hoodie right now, but I've written books with hoodies on. I've written books without hoodies on, whatever.

MBS ([24:25](#)): The clothing is obviously not that important to me. What I'm really sitting with is actually less about me and my worthy goals and what I'm up to with my writing books, although, it's



resonating there as well. It's really the hope and the wish that you hear in this conversation, a call to do your own worthy goal. Look, it might be writing a book. I mean, there's lots of people who say they want to write a book and lots of people never get around to doing that.

MBS ([24:53](#)): Sometimes we inherit that goal, "Oh, I should write a book." It's actually not the right worthy goal for you. I really think that we hold within us this capacity to do a worthy goal. Something that is thrilling, something that is important, something that is daunting. Whilst I hope you don't get too great a shock to your mortality, in COVID times maybe that's a little too close for comfort, but it is true. We have a limited time on this planet and I want you to squeeze the lemon.

MBS ([25:25](#)): I want you to get the most out of this time, and not just for you. This is a selfish request. I'm really committed as my bigger game is to try and get other people committing too to starting and continuing and seeing through their worthy goals for their sake and for our sake. I know my life will be better. I know your community's life will be better. I know your family's life will be better. I know your life will be better if you're willing to look at a worthy goal, something that will stretch you, something that will inspire you, something that will light you up.

MBS ([26:04](#)): Something that will give more to the world than it takes. That's what I'm sitting with after this conversation. A reminder. Thomas Mann was talking about it a hundred plus years ago, which is life is short. Life is fleeting. It's so easy to get stuck into the routines of our everyday lives and that call





to step boldly into something new, something important, something thrilling, something daunting. If you'd like to learn more about Mason and what he's up to, and like I say, I can really recommend his newsletter. I think it's terrific. You want to go to [masoncurrey.com](http://masoncurrey.com). That's M-A-S-O-N-C-U-R-R-E-Y.com.

MBS ([26:52](#)): Hey, thank you again for listening to this podcast, 2 Pages with MBS. I am always thrilled that people are listening to it. I'm particularly thrilled that people are getting to the end of these conversations and listening to me now. If you're that person, if you're into it, like I think you are, I hope you'll consider joining our free community. It's called the Duke Humfrey's. It's named after the coolest library at Oxford University, where I happened to go. It's a library within a library. It's within the Bodleian Library.

MBS ([27:21](#)): When I was there, it was really my favorite library because it was the place where the rarest and most extraordinary books were kept. You had to put on gloves, you had to sign a waiver to say that you weren't going to do anything dangerous. You were led in by a custodian. It's a really special place, as is our online community. It's totally free, but you'll find there transcripts and unreleased episodes and a good deal more. We're continuing to add there on a day-to-day basis. You'll find the Duke Humfrey's and the invitation to join at the URL, [mbs.works/podcast](http://mbs.works/podcast).

MBS ([27:57](#)): Indeed, this podcast grows by word of mouth, so if this conversation with Mason has struck a chord, if you know other people who are looking for ritual, looking to commit to



a creative act, looking to be hungry for a worthy goal, and you think this episode is helpful, please pass it along. Just recommending it to one other person can make a great difference. More subscribers means more ability to get more cool guests, and that helps you, and of course it enriches my life as well. I love these conversations with these interesting people.

MBS ([28:29](#)): If you're willing, a rating and a review on your podcast app of choice is always deeply appreciated. You're awesome and you're doing great.