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MBS ([00:00](#)):

The Perseverance Rover landed recently on Mars. You probably heard the kerfuffle about it and here's what's cool. They named the landing site in the Jezero Crater after the Sci-Fi writer, Octavia Butler. Now there's a literal and a metaphorical connection to today's guest. Literal, because our guest is actually reading from Octavia Butler's classic book, *Kindred*. Metaphorical, because arriving and navigating alien and potentially unforgiving territory is at the heart of this guest's most important work.

MBS ([00:40](#)):

Welcome to two pages with MBS. This is the podcast where brilliant people read two pages of a favorite book. I'm Michael Bungay Stanier, the aforementioned MBS. And today's guest is Minda Harts. Minda is the author of the book, *Memo*. What women of color need to know to secure a seat at the



table. Minda, of course, has had to fight hard to secure her own seat at the table, and it actually took a while to get there. There were several moments in her life that led her to that point of defining that fight. And one of them stands out in particular.

Minda ([01:15](#)):

She said, "We hired you because we thought you had thick skin. I know that these racial grievances are happening, but the person that's causing them, they've been here for 30 plus years and they add to the bottom line. You're new. So, we'd like to have you, but nothing's going to change in..." I realized that... Another writer, Audrey Lord, she said, "Be aware of feeling you're not good enough to deserve it." And I deserved a environment where they cared that there was no psychological safety.

MBS ([01:44](#)):

So, Minda left that job. She knew she deserved to work in a place that humanized her experience and Minda said, "This is exactly why so many people of color leave positions in the workforce. There aren't many allies or leaders who are willing to be courageous." Minda has always had to deal with these micro aggressions and even outright racism, but this one hit her particularly hard.

Minda ([02:09](#)):

I was really shocked because even though she was a white woman, I thought from a gender perspective, she understood what it's like to be another woman in the workplace. And so I thought that maybe she would be a little empathetic to the situation, but she wasn't. And she acknowledged that these things were happening, but I often think maybe had I been a different color, maybe my career in my experience, might've mattered more to her.



MBS ([02:35](#)):

Can you imagine the isolation, the sense of betrayal, sense of anger, the sense of frustration that you might feel if you were the one sitting across from HR and were just dismissed, like Minda was?

Minda ([02:49](#)):

You sometimes think you're an isolation, that it's only happening to you. And the more that more women started to read the book, they realized, "Wow, this was my experience too." And I think just to be able to say, "Hey, I've worked in environments where I haven't felt seen. I haven't felt like I belonged." That's where the real work can begin. Because so many times we don't even acknowledge that some of these things exist.

MBS ([03:14](#)):

I asked Minda when she realized she needed to write her book, *The Memo*, because it seems like the perfect book at the perfect time.

Minda ([03:22](#)):

It's interesting because prior to becoming an author, I had spent 15 years in corporate America. And I was always the only one, the only black woman, the only woman of color. And it gets really isolating when you're the only one of anything. And Tony Morrison said, "Write the book you want to read." And I had been reading so many books about career development, but I never had read any career books about what it's like to be a black woman in the workplace. And so that's what I decided to do. I'm like, "You know what? I want to be able to write so that we could shake our heads up and down, so we could talk about what we're dealing with and our managers can also understand what good could look like if you understood what it's like to be one of the only ones."

MBS ([04:03](#)):

Yes, for sure. What does the phrase, *Seat at the table*, mean to you?



Minda ([04:09](#)):

It means so many things, but I think most importantly it means equity. It means that even if I am the only one seated in the boardroom or I'm at the table, or the virtual room, that you hear me, that my peers hear me. That they take what I have to say seriously, my experiences as the only, seriously. And I think that when we talk about equality, that's great, but equity is even better. That means everyone has an opportunity to share their ideas and have advancement as an opportunity because there's access there. And so in corporate America, in many spaces, black and brown women don't always have the access to the table so that we can have equity. And so I'm hoping that we can disrupt what leadership looks like to make sure that it has the faces of many people.

MBS ([05:02](#)):

It's such important work. When you have that experience of being the only, what's the debate that's going on in your head between how to react, how to respond, how to show up? What are the voices that you're hearing going back and forth in terms of choices to make?

Minda ([05:21](#)):

So many voices, and so many [inaudible 00:05:23]. But mostly you're questioning did that happen to me? Did I take it the wrong way? Because oftentimes when you are the only, and you may go to say, "You know what? What you said to me, I took offense." And then we're often met with, "Well, you took it the wrong way. Oh, that's just so-and-so being so-and-so." So we never get a chance to really... Nothing's validated. And when you're the only one you're like, "Well, maybe it wasn't that." Or, "Maybe it was just me reading into it."

Minda ([05:53](#)):

But at the end of the day, we all know when we're being disrespected, regardless of the intent. Two things can be true at the same time. Yes, that person might not have meant to micro or macro aggress me, but it still caused





harm. And I think we still have to create a space to be able to share those experiences. And so I think that just being able to voice that sometimes there are these racial aggressions that happen in the workplace, oftentimes we were met with, "Well, don't play the race card." It's like, "Well, I'm a black woman in the workplace. It's not a card that I want to play." [inaudible 00:06:28] There is no play. I don't want it to be this. I just want to be able to do my job like everybody else.

MBS ([06:33](#)):

Yes, exactly. So Minda, tell me about the book you've chosen to read for us. What are you reading?

Minda ([06:40](#)):

Yes. I'm really excited about this. I'm reading *Kindred*, by Octavia Butler. A big fan of her work.

MBS ([06:47](#)):

How did this book come into your life? How did you discover it?

Minda ([06:51](#)):

So it's funny. I have a good friend and they're a big... I guess you'd say Sci-Fi fan. And many years ago she had mentioned Octavia Butler and I thought, "Oh, well, I'm not into Sci-Fi." And she's like, "No, it's a different type of Sci-Fi. I think you'll really enjoy it." And she was absolutely right. And the more I started to dig in, and what I love about *Kindred* is this being able to go back and forth into the past and the present, and I think that we're in a time period right now, where we have the opportunity to live in the past, live in the present, or make changes for the future.

MBS ([07:26](#)):

I love that. And it's so great. Octavia Butler is having this resurgence at the moment. Literally, the Perseverance Rover that's just landed on Mars, they



named the landing side after Octavia Butler, which is... She must be thrilled. I know she's dead, but she must be thrilled up wherever she is to see that moment of recognition. Actually, let me just introduce you and then you can start reading the two pages. So Minda Harts, author of *The Memo*, is reading from Octavia Butler's book, *Kindred*.

Minda ([08:06](#)):

He glanced at the door again and changed the subject. "Dana, can you read?"

Minda ([08:11](#)):

"Yes."

Minda ([08:12](#)):

"Kevin said you could. I told Mama, and she said you couldn't."

Minda ([08:15](#)):

I shrugged. "What do you think?"

Minda ([08:17](#)):

He took a leather-bound book from under the pillow. "Kevin brought me this from downstairs. Would you read it to me?"

Minda ([08:24](#)):

I fell in love with Kevin all over again. He was the perfect excuse for me to spend a lot of my time with the boy. The book was *Robinson Crusoe*. I read it when I was little, and I could remember not really liking it, but not quite being able to put it down. *Crusoe* had, after all, been on a slave-trading voyage when he was shipwrecked. I opened the book with some apprehension, wondering what archaic spelling and punctuation I would face. I found the expected f's for s's and a few other things that didn't turn up as often, but I got used to them very quickly. And I began to get into *Robinson Crusoe*. As a kind of castaway myself, I was happy to escape into this fictional world of someone else's trouble. I read



and I read and I drank some of the water Rufus's mother had left for him, and read some more. Rufus seemed happy to enjoy it. It didn't stop until I thought he was falling asleep. But even then, as I put the book down, he opened his eyes and smiled.

Minda ([09:24](#)):

"Nigel said your mother was a school teacher."

Minda ([09:26](#)):

"She was."

Minda ([09:27](#)):

"I like the way you read. It's almost like being there watching everything happen."

Minda ([09:32](#)):

"Thank you."

Minda ([09:34](#)):

"There's a lot more books downstairs."

Minda ([09:36](#)):

"I've seen them." And I've also wondered about them. The Weylins didn't seem to be the kind of people who would have a library.

Minda ([09:43](#)):

"They belonged to Miss Hannah," explained Rufus. "Daddy married her before he married Mama, but she died. This place used to be hers. He said she read so much that before he married Mama, he would make sure she didn't like to read."

Minda ([09:59](#)):

"What about you?"



Minda ([10:00](#)):

He moved uncomfortably. "Reading is too much trouble. Mr. Jennings said I was too stupid to learn anyway."

Minda ([10:08](#)):

"Who's Mr. Jennings?"

Minda ([10:10](#)):

"He's a schoolmaster."

Minda ([10:11](#)):

"Is he?" I shook my head in disgust. "He shouldn't be. Listen, do you think you're stupid?"

Minda ([10:18](#)):

"No." A small hesitant no. "But I read as good as Daddy does already. Why should I have to do more than that?"

Minda ([10:26](#)):

"You don't have to. You can stay just the way you are. Of course, that would give Mr. Jennings the satisfaction of thinking he was right about you. Do you like him?"

Minda ([10:36](#)):

"Nobody likes him."

Minda ([10:38](#)):

"Don't be so eager to satisfy him then. And what about the boys you go to school with? It is just boys, isn't it? No girls?"

Minda ([10:47](#)):

"Yes."



Minda ([10:48](#)):

"Well, look at the advantage they're going to have over you when you grow up. They'll know more than you. They'll be able to cheat you if you'd want them to. Besides," I held up Robinson Crusoe, "Look at the pleasure you'll miss."

Minda ([11:00](#)):

He grinned. "Not with you here. Read some more."

MBS ([11:03](#)):

I love it. That put a little shivers up and down my spine. Minda, thank you for reading that. Because it took me to two places. First of all, I'm literally recording this in my parents' house in Canberra, in Australia, because I'm here visiting them. And this is the bedroom where my dad would come and read stories to me at night. So there's an amazing confluence of things happening. Sometimes he would make up stories. I have two brothers. Sir Michael, Sir Nigel and Sir Angus, we'd go off and have great adventures together. But, that's just the opening. What you're really opening up is the invitation to access wisdom and knowledge and the authority and status that comes with that and how easily that can be denied. And that really struck a chord for me as well. I'm wondering what's at the heart of this for you Minda?

Minda ([12:02](#)):

You hit it on the head, Michael. I really thought about this idea of sometimes the perception people have of us. They might think that we can only do something, we can't do something. And sometimes because we see ourselves through the eyes of someone else, we might say, "Well, we can't do that either." And just like Rufus, he had this desire to read, but he's like, "Well, they think I'm stupid. I don't necessarily think I'm stupid," but you hear it enough times, you might. And so Dana then encouraging him to say, "Hey, if you keep where you are, you're going to be what they think you are. But you have the opportunity. I'm here to help you. Success is not a solo sport. I know you might be scared, but here's the



access. And I want to help you get there." And I think that we have the ability to do that for so many people.

MBS ([12:51](#)):

Those two pages, how does that show up in the work that you do now, Minda?

Minda ([12:56](#)):

Yes, they definitely inform the work that I do in terms of access. Because I think even when we talk about the face of leadership, often when we say leader, we... Even myself, automatically think of a white man. And I think because we haven't been able to see other faces of leadership as well, then that keeps us with this certain idea. And I think that the access to the opportunities would allow us to expand what the table looks like for leadership in the faces. And I think that that requires us to dig deeper. Even those who consider themselves leaders have to say, "Wow. Yes, there could be other faces to leadership. And how am I creating that access for someone else to dig in as well." And so for me, that access is everything.

Minda ([13:41](#)):

Lastly, I'll say when I was in corporate America, it was a white male who saw something in me. Saw that, "Wow, she's really good at her job. She just needs the access to shine. She just needs the opportunity." And he gave that to me, and it really changed the trajectory of my career and I'm forever grateful. And so for me, access is so important.

MBS ([14:02](#)):

Tell me about that person. How did you feel seen? How did you feel supported? How did you feel encouraged by him? What did he do to open that door?

Minda ([14:15](#)):

Yes. I was in my former life, and I was... Oftentimes, many of us get this advice of work hard and keep your head down. And so I was working hard and keeping



my head down, but I realized that I needed to be building social capital in the workplace. And even though I didn't work with anybody that looked like me, and I was one of the youngest people at the company I worked at, I thought, "Well, maybe I could find some people with similar values. Maybe we don't have to look the same, but maybe there's some other area of intersection that I could lean into." I worked on the floor with the second most senior man at the company, and I thought, "Well, I know that he's probably never going to come over to my queue and tap me on the shoulder and say, Hey, what's going on?"

MBS ([14:58](#)):

Right.

Minda ([14:59](#)):

So I realized that I had to start to build relationships with him with the different points of entry that I had. And over time of building this relationship with him, I was able to talk about the work I was doing, and I was able to tell him some of my career aspirations. And one day, Michael, he was in a senior staff meeting with everyone who looked like he did. And there was an opportunity that was on the table. And he said, "I think Minda could do this." And everybody in the room was like, "We don't know her. She's too junior." All of the things. And he's like, "I vouch for her. I think she could, she just needs the opportunity." And everyone in that room said, "No, no, no, no." And he said, "No, if it doesn't work out, it's on me."

Minda ([15:41](#)):

I got this call, Michael, out of the blue and he's like, "Kid, here's your shot. Don't ruin it." And so I nailed it. I hit it out of the park, and my career changed from that moment forward. Three months later, I was promoted, had these different opportunities that I didn't have, because he saw me. Even when people said, "No, she's too this, she's too that." Just like Rufus. But we have someone who said, "Hey, prove people wrong."





MBS ([16:11](#)):

How would you coach someone like me to be an ally to support women of color in particular, because that's your key focus, to have more opportunities to take that seat at the table? What should we be doing or not doing that we might be missing at the moment?

Minda ([16:28](#)):

Exactly what you're doing, is building relationships with each other. I think sometimes we might say, "Well, I don't have anything in common with this person." Or, "I don't know how to talk to this person." I hear a lot of leaders will tell me, "I don't know how to manage women of color." I'm like, "It's just like managing anybody else. You just have to... But you have to get to know them." You have to ask the questions. There might be some different cultural nuances that you need to educate yourself on so that you can have these certain conversations. But I think three things. Listen, which people have the opportunity to do through our conversation. Number two, educate. Read books like *The Memo*, read other books that talk about people who don't identify the same way as you do. And then third, activate. After you've educated yourself, how do you activate some of the things that you've heard? And I think part of that is building those relationships because once you get to know people, you can show up for people better.

MBS ([17:25](#)):

Right.

Minda ([17:26](#)):

But oftentimes we don't have these relationships and it's hard to show up where you feel like, "Oh, I'm overstepping." But there are ways that we can start to build those relationships. Just with the gentleman that I mentioned in my story, he didn't know everything about me, but we started to... He knew my work, he knew enough to be able to say, "Oh, I think we should give her an opportunity."



And I think that we all have the ability to speak someone else's name in the room.

MBS ([17:51](#)):

I love that phrase. Speak somebody else's name in the room. Bring somebody who's not in the room into the room so that they can begin to build a presence in that room. That's powerful.

MBS ([18:04](#)):

Minda, how about on the other side of the conversation, to take from the two pages you read, plenty of people who've heard all their life from a storyteller, from teachers and other people in authority, "You're stupid," or some other framing that brings an internal narrative that is just hard to shake. And it shows up I think in even subtle ways like that, "Keep your head down and work. That's your job." And there's all sorts of research about how great men and white men in particular, are at self-promoting. Ensure they claiming the space, regardless of whether they've got the talent or the experience or whatever else. How do you help women and women of color hear a different narrative... Overcoming a narrative that might've been in their head for quite a long time?

Minda ([19:05](#)):

Yes. I think that that's a great question, definitely for women of color, but anyone who's been othered, or told that they couldn't do something because X, Y, and Z. And I think we have the ability to redefine what success means for us. An author that I read, and activist, W.E.B. Du. Bois, he talks about double consciousness. Oftentimes we live our lives through the eyes of somebody else. And so what would it look like if you lived your life through your own eyes.

MBS ([19:35](#)):

Right.



Minda ([19:36](#)):

If you took the narrative back, if people been calling you, "Oh, you can't do this because you're this or that." I'm only five feet and not a lot of people know that, so my whole life were like, "You can't do that because you're too short." All of these different things. And I say, "Well, I identify as a six foot plus person, there's nothing that I can't do." And I redefine what the narrative is, even though other people's perspective is, "I can only do so much because I'm vertically challenged or whatever." I say, "Actually, I might be that, but I also can do other things." And I think that it's telling ourselves a new story about ourselves, even though we've been in environments where maybe we haven't seen ourselves in leadership, or we haven't been promoted for the fifth time, asking ourselves, "Maybe this isn't the environment for me. Maybe I need another environment or I need to surround myself with new mentors or new new managers that would help me see myself in a different way."

Minda ([20:38](#)):

But I think so much of what we have to do is unlearn those negative stereotypes because that creates imposter syndrome that creates that negative self-talk. And I really had to shift from that negative self-talk to a more positive self-talk about, I can make it anywhere, but maybe these are the spaces that are not for me. Just like the environment I told you about with the woman, I realized, I can't change this toxic work environment by myself, nor should I have to. So I have to figure out where I need to be so that I can thrive and not just survive. But you have to see yourself and know that you deserve more.

MBS ([21:14](#)):

Where did you find the handholds to start that climb? In the story you read, you have the woman reading the book going, "Do you think you're stupid? Are you stupid?" And providing a mentoring role and another perspective, an alternative lens on a dominant narrative. I'm curious to know how you found your way out of old stories.



Minda ([21:40](#)):

Actually, after I left that woman's office that day, Michael, I was pretty fragile. When I got to her office, I was already really in a bad space internally about being in the workplace I was in. And I remember going to my car, it was a Friday, and I was sitting in my car and I started crying because I thought about my grandmother who experienced racism in the workplace. I thought about my mother who experienced it and now me, the third generation. And I said, I'm the first person in my family to graduate from college. I'm the first person in my family to go from low-income to middle-class. I've done everything that the dominant culture says to do to get ahead. And I was so sad because I'm like, "What else am I supposed to do?" And I remember sitting there and I was in my car just really sad. And I turned the radio on and Whitney Houston's song, Where do broken hearts go? And I thought, "Where do you broken hearts go?"

Minda ([22:38](#)):

I said, "Where do the broken hearts go of women of color when we can't take it anymore in the workplace?" And it was in that moment that I was the handhold for myself. I said, "Minda, I don't know what this looks like, but you are going to do the work to make sure that the workplace works for women who look like you, that we don't have to be forced out of the workplace." And that was 2013, Michael. I didn't end up putting The Memo out till 2019, the first version.

Minda ([23:05](#)):

And so it took some years for me to figure out, but I had made a decision that I'm going to use my voice for good, so that we can change the way the workplace works. And I had to be that for myself. And some of us have to be that for ourselves to reframe the decision. And so I used to say, "Oh, I'm more in my former career of the seat at the table," but now I actually have a better seat at the table at many companies, and I can be even more impactful than I could be. So reframing really helped everything, and we can be our own Dana.



MBS ([23:40](#)):

Minda, I've really enjoyed this conversation. It's been so interesting. I love that you went with Octavia Butler, and how [inaudible 00:23:47] because I love books and I want people to read more books and I want them to read more fiction. And there's just this way that people who go, "I don't know, fiction. Weird stories that's not for me." But there's so much wisdom and often empathy to be found in fiction, so brilliant for choosing that. I've got a final question I want to ask you. It's broad ranging. You can say nothing to the [inaudible 00:24:13], but here's the question. What needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

Minda ([24:21](#)):

For those who think that they don't have a voice. And I think sometimes when we've been told a certain narrative that's counter to who we know we could be, we often shrink and we think, "Oh, I don't have a voice." But I want to remind you that we all have a voice, we just have to decide how we want to use it. And once I've decided how I wanted to use it so much more opened up for me.

MBS ([24:48](#)):

"Do you think you're stupid?"

MBS ([24:52](#)):

"No." A small hesitant no.

MBS ([24:59](#)):

Those are the lines from Minda's reading that really struck a chord for me. There's just that moment that catches an exchange that makes all the difference in people's lives, in your life, perhaps. But how we're seen or we've been told, it just seeps into us. We hear that. We receive these messages. And of course, it's really helpful for you to be able to step back and go, "Well, what have I been told about who I am, and how much of that is true, and how much of that is useful, and how much of that serves me, and how much of that



nourishes me?" And perhaps the thing I want to take your attention to is to think, what if you could be on the other side of that conversation? What if you could be the person who sees and who names the best in people? The person who says, "Look, it isn't just what you're doing or what you've done, it's who you are. You are brave, you are insightful, you are committed. You are kind, you are generous, you are trustworthy. You are courageous."

MBS ([26:06](#)):

I had a boss once who said, "Michael, you are a force for good." And 25 years later, that's basically all I can remember about that entire job, because those words resonated with me. They struck me very deeply. They fuel me, even today. What if you could be the person who sees and names the best in those around you?

MBS ([26:31](#)):

If you're interested in Minda and her work, you'll certainly find lots of what she's up to at [mindaharts.com](http://mindaharts.com), [M-I-N-D-A-H-A-R-T-S.com](http://M-I-N-D-A-H-A-R-T-S.com). You can follow her on LinkedIn. Her book, *The Memo*, has been a big hit. I know she's got a new book coming out in the next little while, so you really want to keep an eye out on what she's doing.

MBS ([26:53](#)):

And thank you again for listening to Two pages with MBS. I really appreciate people who not only start the interview, but get to this point, and hear the outro of the interview. If you're here, it means that you're committed, it means you're engaged, it means you're awesome. So perhaps you'll consider joining our free community at Duke Humfreys. It's named after my favorite library in Oxford. This is the library where the rarest, the coolest, most extraordinary books were kept. They were literally chained to the shelves, they're so precious. And of course, in my Duke Humfreys, you'll find transcripts, you'll find unreleased episodes, some cool downloads and more. You can find the Duke Humfreys at



mbs.works/podcast. And this podcast grows best, most generously, most fruitfully, by word of mouth.

MBS ([27:44](#)):

So if you think my conversation with Minda has struck a chord for you, can you think of one person in your life who'd also be intrigued by just what it takes to be seen and to step up and to claim the place that might be rightfully yours? If you can think of that person, let them know about this episode. They might like to listen to it. And of course, there's something in this for me. More subscribers means that I have more chance of landing extraordinary guests, talking to people who inspire me and I hope will inspire you as well. And if you're so moved to give a rating or review on your podcast app of choice, well, that is always deeply appreciated.