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MBS:

I actually had the good luck to study at Oxford, Oxford University. And it's an institution that works really hard to maintain this timeless feel to it. So it's not that difficult to look out one of the old windows and imagine that you're seeing Reverend Charles Dodgson walking along the street on his way to somewhere, or perhaps holding a pen and paper because he's got something to do. You may be going well, who's Reverend Charles Dodgson? Well, you probably know him better as Lewis Carroll the author of Alice in Wonderland.

And of course that opening scene is so iconic that the white rabbit scurries by and Alice goes, "What is that? Curiouser and curiouser." Which obviously it's a phrase I totally love. Now at



work, unless you have a particularly specialist job, you're unlikely to see a rabbit scurrying by, but just imagine for a moment that something catches your attention, something in the corner of your eye and you're intrigued so you follow it along and you're barely keeping up. But as you kind of go around a corner, suddenly you fall down a rabbit hole and you come to a foreign land and it's not the Wonderland of Alice in Wonderland. It is nice, but maybe business like you've never seen it or thought about it before.

Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS, the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages of a favorite book, a book that has moved them and shaped them. I'm Michael Bungay Stanier of the forementioned MBS and my guest today is Monika Jiang. And she spends her time in that new world of business.

Monika: That that's an image that I have often where I'm like, "Yes, where is that rabbit hole? I want it. I want to go down and deeper and deeper."

MBS: Now she might think of herself as Alice in Wonderland, but I think Monika actually just might be the rabbit leading us all down there with her. She is a catalyst for powerful change. And while I've gotten away from reading bios normally as part of this podcast, I'm going to make an exception today because Monika's bio reads like poetry and it puts her in a perspective in a way that I never really could. So here we go.

Monika Jiang is the Head of Content and Community at the House of Beautiful Business, a global platform and



community to make humans more human and business more beautiful. A highly intuitive, fantastic soul, temporarily unfinished and forever wanting to play, she reaches to the margins, asks essential questions and gently steps into the reality of others to make more feelings known, more faces seen, more voices heard. Because another world is not only possible, it exists. Isn't that wonderful? I mean, I'm thinking about rewriting my bio, perhaps you should be rethinking about rewriting yours as well. Monika is dedicated to this new vision.

Monika: It is really important for me to reach to other windows of the worlds and to other spaces and to bring those people into the conversation that matters in this world and like all of these different things that are part of this. My intuition, the fact that I just love to play there I feel more like I am a six year old sometimes and sometimes I feel like I'm 16 year old.

MBS: Yeah. I think we all feel that way sometimes. So the question I have, and maybe you have as well, what book would a woman like Monika choose to share with us here on 2 Pages with MBS? It wasn't an easy answer for her, it was a powerful process to figure this out. And really one that opened her eyes.

Monika: I'd put all of my books on the floor as you do and I looked at them and I was like, "Wow." You know, the first few books that would have come to mind and that I'm looking at are all written by men, white men, which just gave me a sense of like similar. So the similar type of men as well and that just gave me a moment of like, no, that's actually not what I want



to present here or what I consider top shelf for now. Because I, myself am in a like always in a transition and this book, Sensuous Knowledge made it so apparent to me and to my own worldview of how limited I myself am thinking into this... Among this sort of Euro-patriarchal system which is a term that Minna Salami coined, which is not, I shall say about pointing fingers at white men or white middle-aged men. It's more about the historical context of how we think about things.

MBS: The subtitle for this book is, A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone. I really do love that as a subtitle. As a author I spend a lot of time thinking about titles and subtitles, and that subtitle is a beauty. So let Monika lead us down the rabbit hole to another viewpoint entirely. One that welcomes us in with open arms. Here, she is reading Sensuous Knowledge by Minna Salami.

Monika: Nigerian composer, Fela Kuti said by contrast, "I consider music to be effective like a weapon to inform people." For black people in modern history, music is one of the first sources through which we learn to think critically. It is through music that we first learned that the educational system does not provide the knowledge of resistance that we need to survive. When we listened to artists such as Bob Marley, Tracy Chapman, Wu Tang Clan, Marvin Gaye, Fela Kuti, Nipsey Hussle, Salt-N-Pepa, and Miriam Makeba, we're not simply bopping along. We're in school taking notes. Music connect us intergenerationally and cross-geographically. What we hear in hip-hop, older generations heard in the soul of



Motown, in the jazz of the Harlem Renaissance, in the Calypso, and the Nyahbingi.

Unplugged belongs to the same tradition of Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* and Bell Hooks's, *Wounds of Passions*, *Sisters of the Yam* and *All About Love*, books that I've read over and over again but in which I always discover something new. Books with that multilayered quality of truth telling, poetry and nourishing that constitutes black womanness. The Cuban-Jamaican poet from Brooklyn, Aja Monet, whose work also consists in the category of art, describes black womanhood as a kind of magic that isn't easily hashtagged in her poem, *#SayHerName*. But insofar as hashtags represent a mode of creative archiving, perhaps we could draw inspiration from Ghanaian poet Abena Busia's poem, *Liberation* for a meaning to black womanness. Busia conjures an image of powerful and fiery women whose tears of knowledge can nevertheless beautify life with laughter.

To inspire originally meant to draw in spirit. Music makes the process of critical learning like a long and refreshing inhale that you draw through spirit. In Swedish, the word for spirituality, *andlig*, reflects this view perfectly. A literal translation of *andlig* means breath-like. Osho, the Indian spiritual guru said, "If a Buddha is not misunderstood then he is not a Buddha at all." A comparison between Ms. Hill and the notion of the Buddha may seem disproportionate. But I am speaking of a buddha, which simply means an enlightened one, rather than the Buddha. There are also



similarities between a buddha and inspiring figures such as the Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, who rejected his appointment as a messiah for more thankless but meaningful work of challenging people to think differently. Or the Afrobeat bludgeoned Fela Kuti, who, like Ms. Hill, rejected the commercialization and commodifying music industry.

In an interview following an 18 months prison sentence, Kuti said, "I'm very spiritually inclined. And prison gave me a lot of time to meditate and think about what this world is really about." He predictively explained that he rejected the industry because, "African music was going to be the music of the future, even in Europe, so I didn't want to participate in the madness of commercialism. I didn't want to participate in the madness of gimmicks. I didn't want African music to belong to the fashion where music comes and goes."

As Osho continued, "The Buddha has to say the unsayable. He has to express the inexpressible. He has to define the indefinable." The Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor aptly said, "Freedom is a very difficult word to pin down." However, there's one thing we can say about it. Freedom is not the absence of suffering. It is the absence of suffering from being yourself. Suffering is part of the human experience, but to suffer from being yourself is a condition that I've tried to convey in this chapter with Ms. Hill's Unplugged album as a companion, is caused to a great extent by the varying ways in which the social system indoctrinates you. Freedom is the ability to perceive and subsequently destabilize the indoctrination. Freedom is not to forget who you are and



what you stand for as Ms. Hill too urges, in *So Much Things to Say*. However, freedom is also undertaking this journey lightly.

In African knowledge systems, a mask often represents an ideal. Masks used by the women's Sande society, for example, represent ideals of female beauty for the Mende. As the African worldview rarely distinguishes between aesthetic and inner beauty, masks also represent spiritual paragons. African masks, like all art, are driven by emotion, but here the art is not the African mask itself but rather the masked performance. Displaying an African mask at a museum is akin to exhibiting Leonardo da Vinci's paintbrush at the Louvre. The product itself is missing. It is when a dancer impersonates the message of the mask that the art is produced.

I mention this because although the mask is typically perceived as a symbol of concealment and insecurity, I urge you to think of a mask differently, as an opportunity for reinvention, awakening and the shedding of the old. The mask reflects one of the important truths of freedom, there is no fixed, authentic self. Who you are today is not who you must be tomorrow. The worship of consistency is a prison. And when you step out of the prison, you can leave the oppressive narrative it imposed on you behind. As Frantz Fanon said, "In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself."

When a clown is in character, they are similarly creating a self that is inseparable from the performance. In the



embodiment of clown, they transcend social expectations and social norms. They break codes and conventions. They deceived to teach. They teach that our lack of self-knowledge and social awareness is dangerous. By giving human form to the clown archetype, the clown becomes kind of buddha that expresses the inexpressible, as Osha said.

In his wonderful book, *The Face*, the author, Chris Abani refers to how the face in Afikpo culture, where his roots lie, "Is a stage, a state of flux, of becoming." In this manner, the face is seen as a performance which gives life to the consciousness of the wearer. Abani continues to say, "It is important to wear the right face." This is how we should think of liberation too. Liberation is a reinvention of the self. It is wearing the right face, masks that peel away layers of dogma to reveal the kernel of who we are and desire to be. It is possible as Ms. Hill repeats again and again, in *Unplugged* and yet as Hughes's clown archetypically returns to say, "We will fall again and again too. But no, not forever like this will I be, here are my hands that can really make me free."

MBS: Oh, wow. That was fantastic. You read that... First of all, you read that beautifully Monika so thank you. You read it with such grace and eloquence. It really did justice to the text. So I appreciate that.

Monika: Thank you.

MBS: But I just love the cacophony of voices in that. There's just this kind of tapestry of different cultures and different voices and different histories all emerging through that. Kind of



making the point, even as it teaches the point. It's fantastic. I barely know where to start with it, but maybe I could just ask so what struck a chord for you in that? What feels like the kernel of truth in reading that?

Monika: I think how she describes because she starts this chapter with this comparison to clowns and how clowns are truth tellers. And that's also why she goes into the masks analogy as well. And she brings examples such as Charlie Chaplin, who also said, "I remained just one thing. And one thing only that is a clown." And that puts me at a far higher plane than any politician. And I just loved that sense of looking at your own face and your own self through all of the different masks that you might be wearing, that you have been wearing, and to see what happens if you strip that down. And what is sort of the most raw and most truthful face that you will want to wear today.

And it struck me at this line that also said, who you are today is not who you must be tomorrow. And I truly believe that we all have so many selves in ourselves, and that there is no authentic or like bringing your full self to work. Like I get the idea, but like I don't know the full self of myself. I don't want to know it, not yet.

MBS: I know. Exactly.

Monika: Because there's so many things that are undiscovered and that's what makes life so livable, and otherwise there wouldn't be a point. So this liberation, the idea of masks or masked realities and masked conceptions that we all have in



our heads that define the way that we go about life and make decisions really struck me. And also I feel like she found the exact right words to describe, for me to feel that way.

MBS: Monika, how do you maintain fluidity? You know because part of what I heard in the reading which is around that we put our masks on to express a part of us that is true, but our mask is not a fixed thing. It's not a destination. It's just the mask you're wearing now and then the next mask will appear for you to choose to put it on. There is no authenticity, that's part of what freedom is. And there's a pressure for all of us and perhaps more so for women of color because that's part of the perspective that this book is bringing to freeze your identity, to play a role, to kind of objectify rather than maintain a subjective truth.

I'm curious to know how you battle that because even as I sit in relationship with you in this call and through our small interactions through the House of Beautiful Business, I can feel me putting a mask on you and God, I'm putting you into this is who I think she is and this is how I think she behaves. How do you keep that flame alive in terms of seeking your own ongoing evolution?

Monika: I think it is through external ideas that I'm presented with and that I seek, people that I meet, thoughts that provoke me and that made me think in a different way, movies that I watch and worlds that are opened and books are wherever we find them. But it's also, I think how I hope to go about my life in general. There is no goal because there is also no finishing line in that sense, like this is how I think about it. This is also



how I relate to business is like why are we so obsessed with the idea that there is this... We set ourselves these KPIs and now that is the exit and that's like the finishing line and then what?

And then that's why we're also running fast and like so obsessed with results and with trying to make a mark, but trying to grasp something that is just an illusion, and it makes sense and it's just excuse for us to make more money, to go faster, to grow more and to all of these things. Which generally I'm not opposed to, it's shift of focus. Why don't you just take the presence of where you are right now and less about making it where you want to reach that goal or go passed that finishing line and rather go more intentionally about all of the small things and all the small interactions that are in between. I don't know if that's an answer to your question, but that's very much how I like to go about my life.

MBS: Yeah. It reminds me of playing the infinite game versus playing the finite game. You know, that's part of the language that's out there and that's another way of framing this. Which is disentangling from the finite game, which means that you end up with a mask you're wearing. And if you're connected to the infinite game, there's a chance for this ongoing freedom and liberation and evolution.

Monika: Yeah.

MBS: Monika, what's the challenge do you think in taking the ideas in this book out into the world? Part of what I can really see is how this book has lit you up and how it is spoken a truth that



resonates deeply with you. And it feels like there's in some ways that's in a different way, but related way, this is part of the work of the House of Beautiful Business. So part of the work that you're deeply committed to at the moment, how do you bring it into the world? How do you overcome the resistance and the confusion that when you bring some of these ideas and you have people go, I don't understand what you're talking about. I like my mask, I like my identity, I like being in this place, I like my KPIs don't freak me out, Monika.

Monika:

It's just fine, by the way. It's fine, if you like your mask and I like KPIs too, if they're a set intentionally. But no, I mean, well first I would say, read this book. Everyone should read this book. Interestingly enough what Minna shared with us is that a lot of men, specifically white European men have read her book, which is really great. And again, not just single out just this one group, but just as an example for what you also said with her subtitle, A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone is really the point of it. It's not to blame, it's not to finger point. It's not as trivial as that. It's a really holistic way to rethink your world view.

So that's the first thing and then the next, how to bring that into this world is very much related to the house is to create spaces for these brave and safe conversations to take that forward, to ask questions like, yeah, what if I want to... I don't really understand that point of masking or I don't understand how I would put that into my world or into my context of business. But to create these and to open these spaces with an invitation to say, okay, you have a point of view and here



are other people who have also different points of views and different histories which are equally interesting and deserve to be heard. And how do we now create this space in a way that we foster dialogue that has dissent but in a tender way, and in a way that is respectful and then to carry that hopefully forward into people's lives and also the work that they do.

MBS: Monika, I've so enjoyed this conversation, it's been enlivening for me, so thank you.

Monika: Thank you.

MBS: Maybe as a final question, what needs to be said that hasn't been said in this conversation do you think?

Monika: Maybe a quote by someone else, actually a Japanese film director, Akira Kurosawa who said, "In a mad world, only the mad are seen." And I so-

MBS: I love it. That's kind mic drop and walk off the stage with that. I'm like, [inaudible] my head just exploded.

Monika: I feel like it's so true. That's how I feel. I feel like, yeah, I am, you know, I feel mad. I feel crazy sometimes, and that gives you the license to be all of that when you choose to do so.

MBS: Yeah. This was a very wonderful conversation for me. I am so deeply inspired by Monika and actually by the vision of the House of Beautiful Business. I'm just going to give them a shameless plug here. They really are doing some wonderful work to rethink, reimagine business, to bring in different



voices, to open up different vistas to encourage new possibilities. They have a wonderful conference, they have an ongoing year long membership community that I'm part of. And if this kind of thinking, if this world is of interest to you, look, I just encourage you to go and check that out because it's really pretty wonderful.

I've thought of myself as a feminist for many years, probably I would say my first university is I started calling myself a feminist really kind of learning about this perspective, studying some of the theorists, writing about it, bringing it into my work. And of course in recent, I've had to have conversations and be thinking about my whiteness because something that I was a bit blind to it, a bit kind of naive about, but now we're in this very rich, provocative, ambiguous, difficult, necessary conversations about who are we and what's the dominant perspectives and how do we bring in other perspectives?

And I think one of the things that struck deeply for me in talking to Monika, but also hearing these particular two pages from Sensuous Knowledge, I'll come back to that subtitle, A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone. There's something so powerful in the invitation that it sets it up as dialogue, it sets it up as community, it sets it up as conversation. It sets it up as a necessity that invites me in rather than compels me. And what I hope for all of us is the courage to invite in different perspectives, perspectives that will challenge us and shake us up a bit and make us uncomfortable particularly if you happen to sit in a place of privilege and power and influence



and status and control and I hold lots of those cards. And that is not easy because that often means giving stuff up.

You can't empower people without giving power away. It's my belief. But it's such a necessary thing. It is part of not just how we make business more beautiful, which of course is Monika and Tim and Till's kind of mission, *raison d'etre* but to make humans more human. And that's the thing for me? How do we allow all of us to have the opportunity to step forward and be more human? And I think Monika is work inspired by books like *Sensuous Knowledge* by Minna Salami is a powerful way to do just that.

Interested in hearing more about Monika? Well, you'll find her on most social media channels with her name, Monika, M-O-N-I-K-A, Jiang, J-I-A-N-G. And you can learn more about where she works at houseofbeautifulbusiness.com. So thank you for listening to 2 Pages with MBS, my podcast. I hope you'll consider joining our free community the Duke Humfrey's. The Duke Humfrey's is named after my favorite library at Oxford, it was where the rarest and most extraordinary books were kept. And at Duke Humfrey's you'll find transcripts and unreleased episodes and much more. And you'll find the Duke Humfrey's at mbs.works/podcast.

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