



Join our free membership site, **The Duke Humfrey's**, and get access to full transcripts, past episodes, exclusive downloads and more. You'll find it all at <a href="https://www.MBS.works/podcast">www.MBS.works/podcast</a>

### MBS (<u>00:00</u>):

What power do you have? What power do I have? We know power can be taken, and it can be hoarded, but can power be given away? Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS, this is the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book, a book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them. Now, I've walked streets in protest on and off for many years. I mean, I remember walking here in Canberra in support of the women's movement back in the 1980s. And then, just the other year, tracing almost the exact route as part of the global climate strike. And I've always had mixed feelings about it.

# MBS (<u>00:46</u>):

I mean, on the one hand I'm with people, and we're making our voices heard, and this is a community, or a movement united. And on the other hand, will this



make a difference? Or is this an expression of frustration, and powerlessness? Now, Matthew Barzun has a nuanced understanding of this dynamic. His new book is the brilliantly titled The Power of Giving Away Power. And honestly, the title of the book is ... Well, it's a little ironic. Matthew explains why.

### Matthew (<u>01:20</u>):

In my career thus far, and I did diplomacy as ambassador to Sweden, and then to the United Kingdom, and before that I was in politics, I was national finance chair for Barack Obama's reelection. And before that, I was in the dot-com, early '90s, helped start up a company called CNET. And across diplomacy, business, and politics, I studiously avoided ever using the word power. And now I use it twice in the title of my book.

### MBS (01:47):

To give away power, it first needs to be real. But so often it's disguised, and it's hidden. It's invisible. So, how do you make power tangible? Matthew spoke about many of the leaders he references in the book.

#### Matthew (<u>02:02</u>):

I mean, look, they didn't think power was something that should be lorded over, lorded over others. That's sort of obvious, but worth saying. They also thought you shouldn't hoard it to yourself. And, and this is tricky, they also didn't think power was something that should be divvied up and shared.

### MBS (02:18):

Well, that's not what I was expecting. I mean, the book's thesis is about giving away power. But if we're not divvying it up, what's next?

#### Matthew (02:28):

We talk a lot about power sharing, I think for the right reasons. But they would say, "No, no, no." Power sharing kind of implies division, and that there's ... That power is like a finite, scarce resource that you could mine, in the sense of



M-I-N-E. They think power is something you can make with other people, sitting around a table. And when you make that kind of power it can multiply, and do incredibly powerful, and impactful things.

## MBS (<u>02:55</u>):

Okay, I love an answer that takes you deeper into the problem and uncovers new questions. Okay, so not sharing power, I get it, but collaboratively making it. That's a change in how I've been thinking about power.

## Matthew (03:09):

Well, one of the sort of matron saint of this mindset, which I call the constellation mindset, and we can get into why I call it that later, but is this remarkable woman. Many of our listeners will have heard of Peter Drucker.

### MBS (<u>03:23</u>):

Yes.

### Matthew (03:23):

Harvard Business Review, back at the beginning of ... Back in 2003, they asked 200 business gurus around the world, who was your guru? So, they published the gurus' gurus list. Number one on the list, Peter Drucker. Now, Peter Drucker reveals, towards the end of his career, that he had a guru all along, and her name was Mary Parker Pollett. And she has been largely kind of erased from history. And he said, "All the great leadership ideas today come from her, we've just forgotten the source." We don't have time to get in the full story obviously, but born in 1868 outside of Austin, right after the Civil War, dies in 1933. And she had basically a PhD in meetings. She had been on the frontlines of social work, she had joined about every single subcommittee that the State of Massachusets could throw at her, and she writes this book and she says, "Look, I think there's four possible outcomes of a meeting, and only one of them is worthwhile."



### Matthew (<u>04:22</u>):

Bad outcome number one," and this is answering your question about how you make power, because it's very tactical, and we can all kind of, I think, relate to it. Okay, bad outcome number one, you try to win. Your idea. Say, "Well, why did you invite anyone else?" Number two, you just acquiesce. It's like, oh, John seems super pushy. Let him have his way. No, that's no good because you're denying the group a unique resource, namely you. Number three, and this is tricky, because we're told it's good but she cautions us against it, bad outcome number three, compromise. Yeah. And she says, "Well, look. Compromise is really just a bunch of partial victories and partial losses for everyone involved. And maybe you get a partial victory, but you get nothing more than that."

## Matthew (05:06):

And so, the only outcome, the only reason we should get around together, is co-creation. To make something together. And we all know this feeling. We all know the bad meetings, but those good meetings where you make something, and the magic, and the power lives in the fact that this thing you've made you are in it, it is in you, it is forever part of you. But, and this is critical, you haven't lost your identity to it. You're enhanced when you leave the meeting, and everyone is equally enhanced by that process. So, that's how I think, and she thought, and I learned from her how you can make power.

## MBS (<u>05:41</u>):

That's interesting. I know we're going to come back to this, but I want to take us to learning about the book you've chosen for us to read. What have you picked for us?

#### Matthew (05:50):

So, I have picked two pages from an essay from my grandfather, who was a great mentor to me, Jacques Barzun. And he wrote 40-something books, and he lived to two weeks, I think, shy of his 105th birthday.



### MBS (<u>06:04</u>):

Wow.

### Matthew (06:05):

And he was born in Paris, and came to this country, and went to Columbia University at a young age. And pretty much never left. And I'm reading a selection from his essay that gives a window into what his worldview was. What was his mindset? And I discovered this late, I read all his books, I was a big fan. But I never knew this part of him, and why he wrote about the things he wrote. So, that's what I'll be sharing.

### MBS (06:33):

That's fantastic. I mean, I have a grandparent, my grandmother on my father's side, who was a writer. And who has ... Part of the inspiration for me to write. So, I love that you're reading from your grandfather's book. I'm sure there's some joke around nepotism and power here to be made. I can't quite make it.

## Matthew (<u>06:53</u>):

Oh, yes. Let's not make it together.

## MBS (<u>06:56</u>):

I saw a great cartoon the other day, it says ... It's a New Yorker cartoon. It's like, how can it be nepotism if I'm your favorite son? Anyway.

#### Matthew (07:04):

Oh, that's really good. That's so good.

#### MBS (07:06):

Brilliant, Matthew. I am excited to hear about this ... And tell me again these two pages? Why did you pick these two pages out of the thousands that must be across your grandfather's 40-plus books-



## Matthew (<u>07:18</u>):

Yes. Well, because one of the last ones he wrote, or the last big one he wrote in his life, right at the turn of the millennium, was this big, fat, wonderful book called From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life. And it is amazing, but this is a really short essay called Toward A Fateful Serenity. And it's his worldview, and he was not ... He was a wonderful man, a great grandfather to me, he was not ... He didn't talk about his feelings a lot. I think that's safe to say. He was quite formal by today's standards. And this is a window into what happened, a trauma when he was younger, and how that effected his whole worldview, and his mindset. And what I found in it was it's ... I didn't know it at the time, but ... Well, we'll get there when we get there.

## Matthew (08:10):

But it connects to the work that I'm trying to do, and that was exciting for me to see.

## MBS (08:15):

Brilliant. So, Matthew Barzun reading from his grandfather's essay, Towards A Fateful Serenity. Matthew, over to you.

## Matthew (<u>08:23</u>):

Okay, great. And to set the scene here, he's born in 1907, so World War I breaks out in Paris when he's seven years old, and I'll pick up from there.

## Matthew (08:40):

The outbreak of war in August of 1914, and the nightmare that ensued, put an end to all innocent joys and assumptions. Throughout, poisoning all other sentiments, was the continual outpouring of public hatred. By the age of 10, as I was later told, my words and attitudes portrayed suicidal thoughts. It appeared that I was ashamed to still be alive. Steps were taken, and before the end of the school term in 1918 I was bundled off to the seashore. With beach life, and surrender to a great lassitude, calm slowly returned, helped out by reading



adventure stories. But it was not Gulliver, and Robinson Crusoe alone who restored my will to live. It was also Hamlet. I had taken him off the shelf in Paris, not in secret, but unnoticed. And I brought him away with me. The opening scene promised a good ghost story.

## Matthew (09:33):

As I read on, I discovered that the rotten state of Denmark was the state that had overtaken my world. Hatred, suspicion, spies were seen everywhere, murderous fury, unending qui vive. It contradicted all the assurances of the catechism. But what could be reinvigorating about Hamlet? Well, to begin with, his skill and warding off menaces from all sides. He was the equal of Crusoe in survival. And especially comforting was his ability to overcome his doubts in the terrible murkiness of his situation. His death at the end was a fluke, not a failure. Thus were the trials of my young life, made coherent in a view of Hamlet I have never found reason to alter. My bewilderment and pain were transmuted by a story into a kind of armor. Later reverses of fortune could bruise, but not wound.

## Matthew (10:26):

In any age, life confronts all but the most obtuse with a set of impossible demands. It is an action to be performed without rehearsal or respite, it is a confused spectacle to be sorted out and charted, it is a mystery, not indeed to be solved but to be restated according to some vision, however imperfect. These demands bared down with redoubled force in times of decay, and deconstruction, because guiding customs and conventions are in disarray. At first, this loosening of rules looks like liberation, but it is illusory. A permissive society acts liberal or malignant erratically, seeing which generous youth turns cynic, or rebel on principle. Either option is almost certain to end in waste and regrets anyhow. Disillusion should be a one-time misadventure, not a lifelong grievance.



## Matthew (11:19):

But to avoid resentment requires a clear alternative, some purpose to turn the aggressive reaction away from the self, or from the image of the world as a grand conspirator. The purpose I gradually fashioned took the form of a resolve to fight the mechanical. Such a struggle has nothing to do with popular cursing of machinery. Machines are admirable, and tyrannized only with the user's consent, absentmindedness, or laziness. Yielding to the mechanical is still more culpable when it comes from ignoring the fact that nature, which we are taught to see as a machine, contains the un-mechanical mind of man, which it is a disgrace and a danger to let lapse into automatism. Where, then, is the enemy? Not where the machine gives relief from drudgery, but where human judgment abdicates. Any ossified institution, almost every bureaucracy, public or private, manifests mechanical.

### Matthew (12:16):

So does race thinking, a verdict passed mechanically at a color-coded signal. Ideology is likewise an idea machine, designed to spare the buyer all further thought. The smoothest machine-made product of the age is the organization man, for even the best organizing principle tends to corrupt, and the mechanical principle corrupts absolutely.

#### MBS (12:45):

Wow. There's so much there, I've just written a page of notes right away. What is it about that its so powerful for you, Matthew?

## Matthew (12:58):

It's this idea, again, that I discovered late in admiring his work, that behind it all was this vision, this mindset that he had chosen to adopt, to make sense of the world. And that it was to fight the mechanical. I put I at different way. In my book I talk about these two different sources of American power, the pyramid, the world of top-down, and the world of bottom-up versus the constellation



mindset. And the world of pyramid is gears, it treats people like they're cogs in a machine. And so, it was interesting for me to make that parallel.

## MBS (13:37):

Hey, this is Michael with a quick voiceover interruption. Sorry about that, but the sound quality dips a bit from here on in. But stick with it, Matthew's just as insightful and delightful in the rest of the interview as he's been up to this point so far.

### MBS (13:53):

I want to talk to you about power in organizations, because I'm fascinated by it. But I'm curious to know, is there, either inspired by your grandfather, or just in the work that you do, do you have a sense of purpose? And if you do, where did that come from? How did you forge that yourself?

## Matthew (<u>14:09</u>):

I think it took me longer than it took my grandfather. But I do now, and the process of writing this book, Michael, really helped me see it. If my grandfather's was to fight the mechanical, what I want to devote my time and energy to is the opposite of the mechanical, which I call the constellation. Or put more simply, to help encourage people to see how they can stand out, and fit into something greater so we can make better and bigger things together.

## MBS (<u>14:38</u>):

I love that. How does having that purpose shape the life that you life, and the decisions you make in that life?

#### Matthew (14:50):

Oh, that's a big one, Michael. This is a new-ish realization to me. I think I've been trying to, along my career thus far, figuring this out the hard way. Seeing where all the energy and magic was happening, and then watching, as I know you have, where power and initiative, and human energy is smothered and killed.



Anytime people are gathered. And so, the choice between seeing it smothered and killed, or kindled and created, I am very alive to that distinction, and what are the habits we can do to make it as opposed to destroy it. And so, I don't know if that fully answers your question, but that's kind of how I see it.

### MBS (15:31):

So, what I think is so interesting about your book, is it comes at power in a number of different ways, but particularly as a call to give power away, rather than the more usual thing which is empower yourself, or get empowered, or be in power, where the focus is on expanding your own power. It feels like that's a title that really speaks to me as a privileged, white, straight, blah-blah-blah guy, I've got all those cards, where what I wrestle with is I've got power. So much so I don't even really know it. And how do I actively manage that in a way that kindles rather than smothers, to use your language.

### Matthew (16:19):

Yeah. Well, there's this great story that I put in the book, that I learned from this remarkable woman named Lynne Twist, who-

```
MBS (16:26):
I love her stuff. Yeah.

Matthew (16:26):
... is devoted her life to ... Yeah-

MBS (16:28):
The Power of Money, right?

Matthew (16:28):
... to saving the rainforest ... Yeah, Soul of Money.
```



## MBS (<u>16:31</u>):

Yes, that's right.

## Matthew (16:31):

Soul of Money. And she really changed my life in some important ways. But she told the story when she came to Louisville, where I'm speaking to you from now, and she told the story when she changed her career. She does a four-day trek to the headwaters of the Amazon, to meet the tribal chief of these people who are threatened by deforestation, and she explains why she's there, and how her organization maybe could help. The tribal leader listens to her story, through a translator, and then replies to her through the translator, the following. "Thank you, I think I understand. If you're here to help, please leave." And you can imagine how she felt, just crushed. Like, "Oh, I blew it." And but then the chief continues, and he says, "But if you're here because you think your liberation is inexorably tied up with our liberation, then sit, stay, let's work together."

#### Matthew (17:23):

And that distinction, Michael, between if you're here to help, please leave, and if you think your freedom is wrapped up with our freedom, then let's work, I think is the critical thing to dealing with you and I are dealing with, which is you don't give it away ... You don't give away power to be selfless, you do it because you're going to get it back again with others, and through others, to give back away again, to get it back again, to give away again, to multiply it for something that you need, and they need. And that's the different. There isn't a false choice, I think, between selflessness and selfishness. There's this third thing, which she calls mutual liberation, which is really powerful.

#### MBS (18:04):

I love that. I mean, I love that story. And you realize you started to tell that story of Lynne Twist, what came into my head was I've got to tell Matthew about this



quote I heard, which is about if your liberation is tied up with my liberation, then stay. The fact that you then went on and told that exact story, put chills up and down my spine-

Matthew (18:29):

Oh, that's so great.

## MBS (<u>18:29</u>):

... because I think about that all the time. And this is not just a kind of white man thing, it's also often a ... Just as you told the story, with Lynne Twist, the Western versus non-West thing, which is like we're the saviors, let us come and fix you, solve you, help you, make you better because you can't do it yourself.

### Matthew (18:47):

Well, here's a fun one, to run through Lynne's challenge. You say, "Well ..." Famously Adam Smith, 1776, "You do not rely on the benevolence of the butcher, the baker, or the brewer for your dinner." I'm paraphrasing here. And the implication being that it is not out of their selflessness that you're going to get supper. I got it. We have kind of run with that idea. And by the way, he didn't. It's not fair to Adam Smith, he wrote a whole nother book about why do people feel good when good things happen to people they don't know? So, the theory of moral sentiments, he cared deeply about this stuff. But we've kind of interpreted that narrow view, and well, if it isn't selflessness then a whole bunch of selfishness added up will produce your dinner. And I would argue, and I think Lynne Twist's story tells us, there is this third option.

#### Matthew (19:32):

What is going on between the butcher, the baker, the brewer, and you as the consumer? You guys are all connected together in some interesting way, and the technical word, which is loaded and I'm curious what you think about it, because it turns a lot of people off, although it is the right word, which is interdependence. And active interdependence is what's going on between all of



us. And that's the key, and the habits of how you be interdependent together around a table for being free together, that, to me, is the whole key.

## MBS (20:09):

Yeah. It's funny how, I think words have ghosts. You hear the word interdependence, and the ghosts of those words, for me, are dependence, which is a passive, victim-y state, or co-dependence, which is a therapy-esque, or so, feels like it's a non-aspirational state. But when I hear interdependence, where my mind goes to, Matthew, is around biological systems. So, you read, and I don't know too much about it, but you read about how-

Matthew (20:45):

Two of us.

### MBS (<u>20:48</u>):

... fungi and trees are an interdependent system, that they allow these massive connections. So, they're in fact as much a single organism as they are individual fungi, or individual trees. And it's the structure for a resilient, healthy thing that is good. And what you're talking about is the amplification of power, or something that matters. And it feels like there's a connection there.

#### Matthew (21:20):

That's right. And one way around the traps, and I love the way you said ghosts of interdependence, because if it turns everyone off and their mind shuts off, you're not going to get anywhere. So, I sometimes try to come at it the following. I say, "Okay, here's a little game. Two cars in the parking lot, you have to guess which is the democratic car, which is the republican car, in an American context. And each car only has one bumper sticker with only one word on it. Car number one, the bumper sticker says. 'Freedom,' car number two, the bumper sticker says, 'Together.' Now, everyone gets that right." Freedom is the republicans these days, and together is the democrat these days. And in our adult lifetimes, because we're roughly the same age, we have seen, and it's not



limited to America, but you have seen both of those bumper stickers taken to their extreme.

## Matthew (22:09):

So, freedom becomes freedom from, freedom from, just leave me alone. You saw this in the context of COVID. Get away, get away, get away. Together, in a similar way, has gone to its extreme, which is hey, the individual doesn't matter, we're all one big collective. And I think freedom from, and total togetherness aren't what we need and want. And what we need and want is freedom together.

## MBS (22:34):

Right. The freedom is on the right-hand side of the bumper bar, and the together is on the left-hand side of the bumper bar. You just need to move the positions of the car, so now that the words are together, freedom together, when you read it across.

### Matthew (22:48):

Right? And that's the story that Lynne Twist learned in the rainforest.

## MBS (22:55):

Matthew, you talked about pyramids and constellations, and I remember seeing years ago, the organizational chart for a factory at the start of the industrial revolution. And effectively it looks exactly the same as an organizational chart for most big organizations now. Kind of that classic pyramid. And I'm pretty sure most people are familiar with that. Before you tell me about constellations, tell me what the pyramid says about power, and what's dangerous about that?

#### Matthew (23:27):

So, the most obvious form of the pyramid is what you just described, and let's start there. It is the world of top-down hierarchy. And when you go try to make an org chart in Microsoft Office, literally you pick org chart, and the next thing



you pick is hierarchy. And then all the boxes show up. And it's really hard to do anything other than that. I mean, I have tried, and I'm sure you have tried. That's the default setting. In that software, and I think in our minds, too. So, that's the obvious way, top-down. What's interesting though, I think, Michael, is that when you want to escape that, a lot of us turn to, initially, everyone I know, bottoms-up. But I think bottom-up is no better. And feels better for a second, but think about it.

## Matthew (24:16):

If you look at the world, your organization has bottom-up, that means you are either one of two things. You are either looking at other people around you as beneath you, or you are looking at yourself as beneath someone else. And I don't think good things come from thinking of yourself or others as at the bottom. You have not escaped the pyramid, you are still trapped in it.

MBS (<u>24:35</u>):

Luckily.

Matthew (24:36):

Right? Just in the reverse order.

MBS (24:37):

Same pyramid, different orientation.

## Matthew (24:40):

Exactly. Same pyramid, different orientation. And what I think is even more insidious how deeply we embody this, which is we think it's kind of oh, you can point to the org chart, or you can point to some big organization, but the pyramid lives, not just out there, it lives in us. And the way I love to bring this to light for myself, and for others, is get a group of 10 people together and ask them as a group, "Hey, what's the opposite of winning?" And they all say in unison, "Losing." Then you say, "Okay, that's just to warm them up." And then



you say, "Well, let me ask you a more interesting question. What's the opposite of winning and losing?" Now, nine and 10 of us say ... Try it, Michael. It's really fun.

#### Matthew (25:22):

Nine and 10 of us say, "I don't know, not playing. Sitting it out." One in 10 of us says, "Playing." Or being, or laughing, or learning, or all those other things we actually get value from in life that aren't strictly about winning and losing. And the optimistic part, to me, is that once the nine in 10 of us hear that other answer, we're like, "Oh, right." And you don't win your career, you don't win parenting, you don't win a marriage, even though you could lose one, that kind of thing. So, that's the pyramid. Externally in organizations, and also within us, that world of in, out, up, down, sorting, sifting, ranking, rating. All that.

## MBS (<u>26:01</u>):

Matthew, does this conversation only really ever get had by people like you and me, that have climbed assorted pyramids, and have won on various levels. I'm wondering if it's a kind of ... Sometimes these things can feel a bit like a post-winning indulgence, where we're like, "Now that I've won ..." It's like when you see politicians retire, and they're like, "Now I'm going to talk about climate change." And I'm like, "I think you missed your opportunity." How do you wrestle with that?

### Matthew (26:33):

I think it's a great challenge, first of all. I'm probably not the best judge of myself in that regard. Okay, so one of my favorite business books, and I'm not alone because I think it's like number one, or number two ever, is Jim Collins' Good to Great. So, he famously coined this phrase, "Level 5 Leader," and the reason he called it level five is not because that's catchy, it's because he didn't want to give it a name that was misleading, like servant leadership, or something. And he's like, "It's really weird." He's like, "All these leaders ..." And he didn't write a



leadership book, because he hated, appropriately I think, the sort of CEO worship that was going on back when he wrote this in the '90s. Late '90s.

## Matthew (27:13):

So, he's like, "Well, okay. What do these people have in common, these level five leaders?" Well, it turns out they are incredibly driven for their organization, and deeply humble, and not that arrogant jerk who we can all picture. Now, what is telling though, is he and his team, when they come to describe it in the book, do you remember the picture of how they describe a level five leader?

```
MBS (27:35):
```

I don't, no.

## Matthew (27:36):

It is a pyramid, with level one at the bottom, level two, level three, level four. And there's a quote from one of the level five leaders, who said, "We don't ..." Or, he says about them, "They don't want to be put on a pedestal."

## MBS (27:47):

Right. And there he is, putting them on a pedestal.

### Matthew (27:50):

And they literally put them on a pedestal. So, we kind of can't help ourselves. We always do this. And what they try to do is isolate ... This is my theory, I can't prove this, but my hunch is ... And they said, "Oh, look. I wish we could do a top 10 list of what it takes to become a level five leader," but you cannot analyze these effective leaders in isolation because the magic isn't in them-

### MBS (28:12):

I think that's brilliant.



## Matthew (28:13):

... it is between people. And so, the minute you go to isolate it, you're never going to find it. It's going to be in a group of people.

## MBS (<u>28:22</u>):

It feels like it connects to the sense of constellation. So, tell us about what constellation means? I mean, I know it's a cluster of stars in the technical stargazing sense, but in designing this what does it mean?

## Matthew (28:36):

Yeah, yeah, exactly. But if you can picture the back of a U.S. dollar bill is a good place to start. So, the back of the U.S. dollar bill has a pyramid on the left. It's that pyramid with the little mini, funny pyramid with the all-seeing eye on top. Now, that is technically the back of the U.S. seal, and then the other side of the dollar bill has the front of the U.S. seal. Now, it took longer to design the seal than it did to win the war, but we're not going to get into that. But when the people designed this thing, when they got the back dealt with, and then on the front they picked a motto, [Latin OO:29:10], and they picked an American Eagle, and a shield, and arrows, and all of that stuff.

#### Matthew (29:16):

There was a formula to this stuff back then. And what they had to figure out was what should be the crest, which is supposed to be the essence of the front of the logo. And they chose that weird shape above the eagle's head, which they called ... It's 13 stars, the original design was asymmetrical, with beams of light coming behind it. And they called it the radiant constellation. And it was supposed to ... It did represent for them, how we should think about [Latin 00:29:47]. How can you be one, but also many? How can you be many and also one? Now, you could be one brick-

### MBS (29:53):

Freedom and together again.



### Matthew (29:55):

Exactly. So, it could be one brick ... From many bricks, one pyramid. But that's not it. Right underneath the constellation on the dollar bill it says [Latin 00:30:03]. You are fully distinct as your own star, and you choose to see other people around you as other stars, and what useful connections that are more powerful together than you could do on your own? But you're not losing yourself in it. And that, to me, is basically the symbol for interdependence. And that is the best idea America has had. We've fallen short, obviously. Time and time again. But any band of revolutionaries can declare independence, the hard work was figuring out systems, and the habits we'd have every day to make interdependence work. As an active verb, and a set of habits. And that's what the book's about.

## MBS (<u>30:46</u>):

I mean, you've got system and habits, so both are kind of organizational, structural need, and an individual need as well in terms of behavior that supports that [inaudible OO:30:56]. Habits lead to culture. Matthew, where do you start with systems, and structures? Because I feel like I've been in many conversations where people talk about stuff like this, and they're fired up, and they're committed, and they want to be level five, and they're like, "I know that means me being humble, and driven at at same time." But legacy systems are hard to shake, and that Churchill quote, "We shape our buildings, and thereafter they shape us."

Matthew (31:30):

So true.

## MBS (31:31):

We're living in buildings that are shaping us, and shaping our culture, and shaping our behavior, and creating hierarchy just in the nature of the visible and the invisible systems around us. How do you go about tackling that?



### Matthew (31:49):

I mean, it is the key to the whole thing. It is the language we use, it is the body language as important as language, I think, in many cases. I think this stuff begins, in fact to Mary Parker Follett, and her only good outcome of a meeting is making something together, that you can just begin that. And the expectations you bring to that meeting, this gets to the habits part, of expecting to be needed, expecting to need others, and expecting to be a change ... Expecting to be changed as a result, is really powerful. And if you do that in a meeting, and you really are ... Bring all those three expectations, everyone will leave that meeting a little bit different, and they're going to not want to have the other kind of meeting where people are trying to win, and acquiescing by turns, and compromising.

### Matthew (32:44):

That other thing is so much more satisfying to the soul than the alternative. You could just start there. And I don't know that that's sufficient. It is certainly necessary, because ... And a lot of the great organizations I talk about in the book start with these really simple, but powerful patterns and tone that are just set. And then repeated, and repeated, and repeated.

### MBS (<u>33:10</u>):

And I guess that's almost my question, which is do you have to embed constellation in the DNA from the start? Because if you've started with pyramid in your DNA, is it unshakeable? I mean, is there a story you've seen around an organization that's felt like it's somehow moved from being more pyramid to more constellation?

## Matthew (<u>33:32</u>):

There's a great one, and it's a wonderful study. It's in the book, just because the learning is so compressed, which is ... Because there's plenty of constellations that turn into pyramids. We can think maybe think of-



```
MBS (33:42):
Oh, that's true.

Matthew (33:44):
... a zillion. And I've worked at some.

MBS (33:46):
Me too.
```

Matthew (<u>33:46</u>):

And sort of calcifying, and all that. But the other, the reverse, is a really interesting test. When you have a fight at the dinner table ... I mean, not a fight, a disagreement, and you're trying it settle it. And you're like, "I'm going to Google it." But you're really Wikipedia-ing it. Some obscure blog is not going to settle the dispute. Wikipedia usually pops up first. It is this triumph, it is the greatest, as someone put it, human knowledge transfer engine-

```
MBS (<u>34:13</u>):
It's extraordinary.
```

Matthew (34:14):

... the world has ever seen. [inaudible OO:34:16] It is not what Jimmy Wales, it's co-creator, dreamed up in the first place. He set out to beat the richest company in the world, Microsoft, one of the oldest companies in the world, Britannica, as a commodity trader from Alabama. His first company was called Nupedia. No one ever talks about that. Nupedia was a pyramid. Nupedia said, "Now, the thing that is shared in common was we're not going to pay anyone anything to write for this. Oh, and we're not going to charge anyone to use it, pretty much." So, that was the same. But they made this critical pyramid mistake. They said, "Well, look. We're the new kids on the block, no one's going to take us seriously. We have to be more robust, and more strict." So, they had a 10-step process to get anything published. After one year they had 18 articles.



And you don't have to be as good at math as Jimmy was to be like, "This isn't going to work."

## Matthew (35:02):

So, someone on his team comes up and said, "Jimmy, this isn't working. How about we try this new thing called Wiki, which means quick in Hawaiian." And he's like, "What do you mean?" And he's like, "No process at all. Michael could write a sentence, someone else could write two sentences. Someone doesn't even have to write, they could just come in and edit." And he's like, "Well, okay. I don't know. I mean, we're not going to win at the current thing." And then a year later 18,000 articles, and the rest is history. But what they did was let go of power. And so, that is an example of it started out as a pyramid, and then they embraced uncertainty, and they opened up.

## Matthew (35:43):

And they kept, and this is so important because so many people, like you said, who were skeptical on the kind of stuff that you and I like, they just think, "Look, pyramid ..." And there is a place for it, we can talk about that later, "The pyramid brings order and stability." And I'm sort of like, "Yeah, yeah. It does. Of a type." It's just not the only kind of order and stability. There is order and stability in a constellation, too. It's not chaos. And so, when you look about Wikipedia, the reason it's still so good, and valuable, and pops up number one on most search results, is that they have a rigorous standard for what an encyclopedia article online ought to be like. And it's kind of that self-correcting system, to your point. And so, the systemic way of thinking is really powerful. And important.

### MBS (36:29):

If you work in the middle of an organization, is there a way of creating a counterculture? Like a constellation within a bigger organization? I mean, the story from Wikipedia is inspiring, and it's also talking to the CEO and having the CEO, or the co-founder, create ... Make a decision that radically restructures everything. If I'm a newly appointed vice president of something, some Fortune



1,000 company, and there's structure all around me, and expectations, and systems, and OKRs, and KPIs, and ... everything. Are you able to create a small band of revolutionaries within an organization through using some of this insight? Or does the system always win?

### Matthew (37:29):

I absolutely think you can do it. It's not a Fortune 100 company, but the Obama campaign, it was two young field organizers, Buffy and Jeremy, who had a radical plan how to open up and give away power to volunteers, that the very smart and wonderful headquarters people said no to, initially. So, we all have this instinct to be like, "No, that's weird. No, there might be spies. No, we can't control it." And it's like, yeah, I know we can't control it, but I think we got to give up some power here, and it'll be worth it. So, there's this leap of faith. And so, they did it. Now granted, that's a political campaign, that's not a stodgy hierarchy. But still, hierarchies exist within political campaigns sharp as any.

MBS (<u>38:12</u>):

Of course.

#### Matthew (38:14):

And good ones. But so, the only thing I would maybe change a little bit in your characterization is I don't know that revolutionary it is sort of the right way to think about it. And I mean, that word has positive and negative-

MBS (<u>38:33</u>):

Does, yeah.

#### Matthew (38:33):

... ghosts with it, too. It is groups of people who can get energy from difference. So, you don't need everyone believing the exact same thing, which sometimes ... And sort of have their mind made up in advance. And that's back to my grandfather's passage of that sort of not having to think. The act of



interdependence, and the way you make this change at a big organization is by generating power from difference. And that's why I would say the buzzword in Fortune 100, and Fortune 1,000 companies, very appropriately taken from that wonderful guy in London 2012 Olympics, who was head of diversity and inclusion. And so, he coined the phrase, I'm paraphrasing, diversity is a fact, look around. Inclusion is a choice. Right?

```
MBS (39:22):
```

Yeah.

## Matthew (39:22):

So, that permeated over the last 10 years into corporate life. That's good. But I think Mary Parker Follett, we talked about earlier, she would say that's about half the battle. Diversity is a fact, inclusion's a choice, now you have people at a table. Now what? They're out there, you've got them around a table. Then she would add two more things. Co-creation is the hard work, and interdependence is the prize.

#### MBS (<u>39:47</u>):

So Matthew, when you've put this theory to practice in your own life, what have you found most difficult?

#### Matthew (40:02):

The most difficult thing is that many of us feel, unless you've experienced it directly, you just think it's a bunch of fancy words for chaos. You know what I mean?

MBS (40:18):

Yeah.



### Matthew (40:21):

And you just think it's everyone on their own. And the tricky thing is, if you talk about a constellation, you talked about a literal one, think about Orion's Belt. Once someone shows you Orion's Belt, you will never ... Or the big dipper, just technically I learned, I made this mistake on another podcast, it's not a constellation is a subset of a constellation. But oh well. It's a shape. It's a shape. And you see it, but the lines aren't there. They are not remotely self evident. But if you've seen them, you can't unsee them. And it's the same way with this constellation mindset in the workplace. Once you've seen the power that can be generated by having people co-create together, you never want to go back. But I takes this leap of faith, and you got to kind of ... The more people who do it together, the better it goes.

### MBS (<u>41:06</u>):

Yeah. I mean, I just imagine myself, somebody who is fully on board with this way of thinking, and I'm trying to do it in the organizations that I'm part of, and also going, "Can somebody come to me in Wikipedia and go, 'Why don't we just let anybody edit?" I'd be going, "Yeah, no. Let's not do that." Or if I was in the headquarters in the Obama campaign, I'm like, "Yeah, that is a brilliant idea, and we should do that in 2024. But for this particular campaign, we should probably just stick with what we know."

## Matthew (41:39):

I love that, Michael, because I think ... I'd love to write another book one day, and I want one of the chapters inspired by you to be yeah, no. Too many say, "Yeah, yeah. I get it. Sure, this all sounds right, but no. Not now, it can wait." And the point is it can't wait, and this jumping ... It is this leap. But so many things in life are leaps. And this is where William James comes in, which we don't have time to get into, but what he taught Mary Parker Follett was there are many things in life where your attitude, your mindset about something actively controls the outcome. So, if you decide to withhold love and trust from someone until they



show it to you, you are making that much less likely. If you decide to make the leap and extend trust before it's been extended to you, you are increasing the odds of getting it back.

## Matthew (42:36):

And so, too, with everything we've been talking about.

## MBS (42:38):

How do you think about risk? Because we talk about the upside of the taking the leap around this, but part of what holds people back is what's at risk. And I think part of what opens the possibilities to have the courage to pursue something like this, is understanding how to see risk differently, or how to mitigate risk differently, and I'm wondering if you've got a perspective on how to risk manage? With our little ... Our amygdala, our [crosstalk OO:43:15] brain is going, "Don't do it."

## Matthew (43:19):

Yeah. Look, I don't know that I have a good answer for that one. Where my mind goes is what the ... It's back to the laboratory. What the pyramid loves to do is factor out almost everything in the name of eliminating uncertainty. So, you factored out so many things so that you are now calculating risk within your little triangle, and there's like a false comfort there. But if you can pick yourself out, take off the blinders, you will see that you are ... That risk calculation ... I mean, it's not my language, really, so I'm not ... If you radically factor in more people, and more ideas, you'll see that I would think that the way you're calculating risk is very different.

## Matthew (44:10):

So, back to the campaign example, it's like yeah, yeah, there might be spies from rival democratic campaigns, true, and there is no way that Buffy and Jeremy could guarantee their bosses, "No, no, no, there will be no spies." Or think about what systems you put in place to guarantee there are no spies. It



would kill all the magic in every field office in South Carolina, California, and around the country. So, they're like, "Well, I'm going to risk the spies, but ... Or, the potential spies, but look at the thousands of volunteers who will give a 40-hour workweek to be part of something bigger than themselves." Factor that in

## MBS (44:49):

Love that. I mean, it comes back to the very thing you said at the start of the call, which is the sense of power is a sense of commitment to an amplification of something bigger, and better, something that matters. And with that comes attendant risk, but the upside is so significant that those risks are worth taking. Matthew, it's been a great ... I mean, I love this conversation. I could go on for about another five hours, but I'm going to-

## Matthew (45:17):

Me too. Thank you.

## MBS (45:18):

... manage my own, whatever, need around that. As a final question, perhaps, is there something that needs to be said that hasn't yet been said between us, in this conversation?

#### Matthew (45:32):

We've covered a lot of ground. We really have, Michael. And I love your format, and I love being able to share my grandfather's-

### MBS (<u>45:43</u>):

Yeah, I love that, too.

## Matthew (45:43):

... words with this audience, and how they've inspired me, and how they inspired him. I felt kind of rushed when I said, "If I had to leave listeners with one



thought," and it's the lesson I learned from Mary Parker Follett, the gurus' gurus' guru that we can do this, whether you're in a small organization that almost has no structure, a huge monolithic pyramid, you name it. The whole spectrum. That in your next meeting, if you can expect to need others, if you can expect to be needed yourself, and if you can expect to be changed ... And I want to just end on this note, that third one is crucial, because the third one says, "Yes. Look, you have to bring your own truth. No one else can. That's why you have to expect to be needed. Bring your truth, by all means. Bring your full self."

## Matthew (46:37):

You have, we have, each of us, a reciprocal obligation, do not leave that meeting the same person we entered it. And if you can make that pledge to yourself, and other people see you be changed, because you've made something together with other people, that starts to repeat, and repeat, and repeat, and that's how we can rediscover the lost habits of interdependence, we discover this constellation mindset and start building big things together again.

# MBS (<u>47:01</u>):

And if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. The speaker is Lilla Watson. She is a Gangulu woman who grew up in the Dawson River region of Central Queensland in Australia. And honestly, I love all of that quote. I'm so grateful Matthew mentioned it. But you know, it's easy to miss the last phrase. I mean, they're bound up together as such a powerful metaphor. But that last phrase, then let us work together, I think this is actually what's at the heart of Matthew's insight of constellation versus pyramid. constellation isn't chaos, it's interdependence. It's finding the relationships, it's seeing the dance emerge, like a Matisse paper cut. And then through that, creating the way we work together.

# MBS (47:58):

Well, I don't think we can get too starry-eyed about that. I don't think we can dismiss what's at risk, that's why I asked that last question. And I appreciate that



Matthew wrestled with it. It is difficult. As someone with power, I'm asking myself, "Well, sure. I get the co-creating and having more power, but what am I willing not to have? What am I prepared to give up so that this dance, this constellation can emerge?" I do think this thinking is resting at the very heart, the very edge, of the work that I'm doing these days.

## MBS (48:36):

For more about Matthew, please check out his website, MatthewBarzun.com. I'll spell that for you, M-A-T-T-H-E-W B-A-R-Z-U-N dot com. Or Z, of course, in America. MatthewBarzun.com. And his book is out now, The Power of Giving Away Power, so make sure you grab a copy of that. It's a thoughtful book from somebody who has walked the corridors of power. And speaking of walking, thanks for walking the path with me on this podcast, 2 Pages with MBS. I really appreciate anybody whose given me their time, and their attention, listened to the conversation through to the end, and it allows me just to say, "Hey, good day, nice to talk to you," here at the end. If you're looking for more than just a straight podcast, we've got a free membership called the Duke Humfrey's.

# MBS (<u>49:22</u>):

It's named after a fancy, cool little library at Oxford University where all the best books were kept. There's transcripts, podcasts, unreleased episodes, and more like this so do check that out, at MBS.works/podcast. And anything you can do to wave the flag a little would be wonderful. So, if you know anybody in power, or if you are in power, or if you think about power, maybe this is the episode you recommend to somebody. And of course, if you get a chance to do a little thank you, or a five-star thing, or however many stars you want, on your podcast app of choice, that would be amazing as well. You're awesome, and you're doing great.