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

How do you measure time passing? Years obviously. Is it days? Did you know an 80 year old has about 30,000 days? Heartbeats? I mean, apparently we have about 3 billion from go to whoa, but really it's about this. I mean, wherever you are on the timeline, Mary Oliver puts it best, "Tell me, what is it that you plan to do with your one, wild and precious life?" Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS, 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.

MBS ([00:41](#)):

Oliver Burkeman is the author of one of my favorite books. It's called The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking. It's a great, British man's take on self-help where he's skeptical, but also open to the whole ideas within self-help. And in fact, Oliver has a new book, just launched, Four



Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals. Now, Oliver's been writing about how to live a good life for a fair number of those allotted weeks. But does this mean that he's got it all figured out?

Oliver ([01:14](#)):

I will really nail something in my writing on a conceptual level and often in ways that I am given to understand they're very helpful for some people who read it, and then it's like six months to a year later that I start really, really internalizing these things and going through it. So my partner will too often say when I'm complaining about something like, "Yeah, I read a book about this, tells you what to do. It was by you, it's on the shelf over there for goodness' sake." All of which is to say it's a sort of ongoing struggle. And I write about the kind of things that I grapple with, rather than the things that come easily. I think that's probably true for all of us.

MBS ([01:53](#)):

I mean, they do say you teach what you most need to learn, and I'm not sure if that's good news or bad news because I feel like I've got a lot to learn these days. So I guess the upside of that is that, well, stay tuned for more teaching from me coming soon. Now Oliver's book is about time, but it's not so much about time management or grinding out productivity, where you crush all the barriers in front of you. I mean, for me, those are topics that are exhausting and exhausted.

Oliver ([02:25](#)):

What I'm trying to do in this book is not say, look, life is short and that's the reality so you might as well just resign yourself to it and everything sucks. It's that actually seeing the implications of those limitations and working and sort of committing to working with them rather than doing what modern life and a lot of productivity advice I think encourages us to do instead, which is to deny them and pretend they don't exist. Like this is relaxing, it is empowering, it is a



recipe for more accomplishment and more meaningful productivity. I have not done my job if you read this book and decide you've got to spend the rest of your life in a sort of white-knuckle panic about making the most of your time. I think the result can be the opposite of that.

MBS ([03:18](#)):

So how do you reframe your relationship with time away from that white-knuckle panic?

Oliver ([03:24](#)):

At the heart and or the bottom of all this, is the limited control that we have over the extraordinarily limited control we have over how our time unfolds, which is another way of saying control how limited our control is over reality. I unpack that and we can here unpack that in all sorts of different ways, the limited ability to know how the future is going to unfold, the limited ability to know that projects you launch are going to work out well, or that relationship to embark upon are going to prove to be fulfilling. All these kinds of things that if you insist on a level of control that is actually not in the gift of humans to have, you're going to lead to all sorts of kind of pathological relationships with time.

Oliver ([04:22](#)):

That's what causes a lot of procrastination. It leads to a life of constant anxiety and stress. I'm speaking from experience, not from speculation. I think part of what I have found so, a huge amount, I think, of our stress and sort of unpleasant busyness and feelings of emptiness, all the things that afflict people in the modern world, an awful lot of that comes from trying to struggle in a futile way against your limitations, rather that work with them. I think about putting on gloves or a piece of clothing that fits exactly right. It's like you're not trying to make it something that it isn't, but you're getting to the point where you can really work with life, I'm not sure how far that metaphor goes but...



MBS ([05:10](#)):

Here's one way of reacting to what you've just said, Oliver, is to kind of be a bit depressed about it because it sounds like the most extreme reaction to what you're saying is like, so give up because everything's limited, you have next to zero control over anything. So you may as well just kind of go flotsam, jetsam and just drift down the stream of life and bump into a few things and good luck, we'll see you at the end. I feel that's not exactly what the thesis of this book is going to be about though, so how do you pluck me from a sense of nihilism and kind of existential despair?

Oliver ([05:56](#)):

Giving up expecting it to be really easy is actually not a recipe for despair. That's a recipe for finding the point of purchase on life that then enables you to do more and more of these things that really matter to you. To sort of zoom out to the point you were saying about existential despair, there's also a section in the book where I've tried to talk about how understanding how tiny each of us is in the history of the cosmos.

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

Exactly.

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

Or beginning to understand it, I suspect we can't really ever get our minds around it.

MBS ([06:29](#)):

No.

Oliver ([06:29](#)):

This is not a recipe, in my book, for existential despair. This is a recipe for coming to see, I think that a lot of us or certain philosophers, certainly in the past, have



burdened us with a hopelessly unrealistic definition, a standard for what it would be to live a meaningful life. That actually means that all sorts of really meaningful things you can do with your life get defined as insufficiently meaningful, because you've got to change the whole world and almost nobody can.

MBS ([07:03](#)):

Yeah.

Oliver ([07:03](#)):

And just for-

MBS ([07:04](#)):

Unless I liberate India and become Gandhi, somehow I've fallen short of my potential.

Oliver ([07:12](#)):

Right. And then I read a wonderful passage once by the writer, Charles Eisenstein, who writes about environmental issues mostly. I think he's talking about somebody else, not about himself, but he's talking about some sort of leading environmental activist, who's putting all sorts of energy into trying to prevent the cataclysm of the worst versions of climate change, taking like two years off this work in order to just care for and be with his very, very aging, I think it was his mother-in-law, to just sort of be with a single other... and he makes the point that you don't want a definition of a meaningful life that says that was just a stupid waste of time to do that with those two years, right?

Oliver ([07:59](#)):

You don't a theory of a meaningful life that says, "Screw all the actual individual humans that you relate to in your world. All that matters is being remembered in 500 years time." Now it doesn't mean you shouldn't strive for extraordinary



things that will be remembered in 500 years time. I think what I'm saying makes room for that too but it's just like, once you see the scale on which we actually act, I think it suddenly is a recipe for seeing all sorts of ways in which you can or already are spending your life in a really, really important way.

MBS ([08:32](#)):

So Oliver, tell me about the book that you've chosen to read from.

Oliver ([08:37](#)):

I have chosen to read from a book called Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life, How to Finally, Really Grow Up, by James Hollis.

MBS ([08:48](#)):

Perfect. I'm in the second half of my life, I need to hear about this book, but tell me, how did it come into your life?

Oliver ([08:54](#)):

Well, this was really my first encounter, real encounter, with the work of Jung, Carl Jung and Jungian psychology and psychotherapy. James Hollis is a veteran Jungian analyst, who I've had the privilege of meeting in the years since. And this is a kind of very accessible introduction to Jung's thought as applied to real life. I'm not sure I love the title, Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life, for two reasons. One is, I feel like people are going to be turned off by the thought that it's only for people who failed to find meaning in the first half of their life, which is not the point. The point is that... And Jung's point and Hollis' point is that a different kind of meaning is appropriate to the second half of life.

Oliver ([09:46](#)):

And then secondly, actually, the second half of life business is a little bit... is extremely flexible. So on the one end, I think you can probably be in your mid-thirties and be encountering the crises and turning points that Hollis writes



so brilliantly about here. And on the other hand, for sure, there are lots of people who encounter Jung's ideas in their sixties and seventies when they're really not and just entering the second half of life chronologically and they mean an enormous amount.

MBS ([10:22](#)):

I mean, it reminds me of the book by David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, which you may have read, which is the first mountain is-

Oliver ([10:33](#)):

Yeah.

MBS ([10:34](#)):

... you're claiming it for achievement. And then the second mountain, you're claiming for a greater sense of meaning or contribution or something and it may be pointing to something similar to that.

Oliver ([10:45](#)):

Yeah, I think that Jung's idea about the two halves of life is closely related to what Brooks is writing about. I think that the way it gets talked about in Jungian circles is that there are certain ways of living and of approaching life that are appropriate to the first half. Which and absolutely they do have to do with sort of establishing yourself in a career or establishing yourself in a family or a neighborhood or whatever, whatever. But sort of stop working and that one way of understanding what gets called and sort of joked about as a midlife crisis is the realization that all sorts of things that served you well, no longer serve you and that you need to reconfigure and find a new way of being. But it certainly, it also has that feel that Brooks writes about, that it's probably going to be a bit more other focused. It's going to be less about control. It's going to be less about sort of establishing yourself. Yeah, there is certainly some of that too.



MBS ([11:47](#)):

And how did you choose the two pages? I'm always interested to know how people narrowed it down to a particular two pages, which ones did you pick?

Oliver ([11:55](#)):

Yeah, so I don't know if this is allowed in your rules, but I chose two pages from the beginning, I think it's literally pages three and four that sort of give a sense of what's to follow.

MBS ([12:07](#)):

Let me introduce you and then we can hear your two pages. So we have Oliver Burkeman, author of *The Antidote* and his upcoming book, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, reading two pages from *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life* by James Hollis. Oliver, over to you.

Oliver ([12:29](#)):

"What do these quite different people have in common? Each of them experienced an insurgency of the soul, an overthrow of the ego's understanding of self and world, and the rather demanding invitation to live more consciously in the second half of life. But first came the confounding of consciousness, and the sense that each of them had moved, or better, been pulled, from a familiar environment into some darker wood. Who doesn't resonate to this familiar image of voyaging through a dark wood? The poet Dante began his famous, fabulous descent into the underworld with the recognition that midway in life, he found himself in a dark wood having lost his way.

Oliver ([13:06](#)):

Despite our best intentions, we, too, frequently find ourselves in a dark wood. No amount of good intentions, conscientious intelligence, forethought, planning, prayer, or guidance from others can spare us these periodic encounters with confusion, disorientation, boredom, depression,



disappointment in ourselves and others and dissolution of the plans and stratagems that seemed to work the before. What can this apparently autonomous process, which overthrows the conscious conduct of our lives, mean to us, and how can we grow from such upsetting encounters with darkness? If the questions at the beginning of this book speak to you, scare you a bit, challenge you, then you, too, are already in this process, and have been for some time.

Oliver ([13:46](#)):

This movement from the old moorings, perhaps confounding your quite understandable desire for comfort, security, predictability, is a deep emotion of the psyche that has meaning, healing, and wholeness as its motive. In the midst of these psychological dislocations, we frequently consider ourselves victimized and can't imagine that there could be some enlarging purpose arising from our suffering. Often, much later, we're able to recognize that something was moving us purposefully, initiating a new phase of our journey, though it certainly didn't feel like it at the time. We make grudgingly admit that even the suffering enlarged us, and made us more richly human.

Oliver ([14:22](#)):

Acknowledging these deep currents, which initially course beneath our conscious awareness, is the beginning of what we may legitimately call wisdom. Aeschylus, the first great tragedian, observed that the gods ordained a solemn decree that from suffering alone comes wisdom. Such earned wisdom brings greater dignity and depth to our lives, and we are blessed by the spiritual enlargement that is its byproduct. For those in the midst of such suffering, talk of enlargement seems gratuitous, or insensitive, and yet, much later, they often come to realize that they have acquired a more differentiated consciousness, a more complex understanding of themselves, and, greatest of all, a more interesting life. Their lives grew spiritually, psychologically richer, and they



earned this growth. Their own soul came rushing towards them, refusing any quarter, any denial, and demanding greater embodiment through them."

MBS ([15:16](#)):

It's beautiful. He's masterful with metaphor. That's a very eloquent passage. I love that. Thank you. And I'm really sitting with that question around, is wisdom only accessible through suffering? But I'm curious to know what is it about that passage in particular that strikes a chord for you, Oliver?

Oliver ([15:35](#)):

I mean, this book found me at a time when that was the right way to talk about my experience. I don't think I really had a flamboyant crisis where you walk out of your life or do anything particularly insane or disruptive. But that feeling of something in you putting you through something that you need to go through, even though it's not the thing you want to do. You, meaning the small self or the ego or the conscious mind. I mean, that speaks to me and spoke to me then very powerfully and it still does. I think that there's also the sense that I think is something that you find in a lot of Jungian, but also Freudian old school psychoanalysis and depth psychology, which is this idea that the greatest goal is to make life more interesting.

MBS ([16:42](#)):

Right.

Oliver ([16:43](#)):

It seems like, and he says elsewhere, it seems like such a small thing compared to, please could I be happy and fulfilled forever, but to find ways to change and to go with change that is happening in you, such that your life becomes and the people in your life become ever more fascinating to you. I feel like that's all you could hope for. And it's a kind of wonderful... it's a sort of slightly bleak definition of a meaningful life, but it feels very rock solid and true. There's just



this very basic idea which may be new to some people who are not so familiar with these kinds of psychological traditions of understanding that psychological symptoms are messages, right? They're messages from somewhere inside you. A feeling of depression, feeling of anxiety, a feeling of meaninglessness or of grief, these are not things where the main job is just to try to get rid of the feeling as soon as you possibly can.

Oliver ([17:43](#)):

Nobody would ever say that if you go to the... like if you went to the doctor with a pain in your abdomen and the doctor just loaded you up with painkillers and sent you home, making no attempt to ask what the pain means, we wouldn't stand for that. And yet I think a lot of approaches to therapy and psychiatry, at their worst, do take that approach towards psychological symptoms. And what's so great about the Jungian approach, especially for me, is that it says like, okay, these things are real. They mean something, doesn't mean you have to wallow in them or adopt a stance of victimhood. It means let's start being curious about why you feel the way you feel. And it turns out that through that portal lies all the meaning that you could hope for, taking that stance towards what's really going on with you.

MBS ([18:34](#)):

Oliver, do you have a sense of what differentiates the people who are able to travel through the wood and the people who get stuck in the wood?

Oliver ([18:44](#)):

I think that... that's a really good question. I mean, I think we all get stuck in the wood. I think we're sort of messing around with this metaphor here, but in a way, getting stuck is the word.

MBS ([19:01](#)):

Right, right, right.



Oliver ([19:01](#)):

And it can certainly be a much longer and harder journey for some people. I think there probably is a sense in Jungian outlook on life in general, that all of us are growing towards some state of being, doesn't mean you're necessarily going to get there. I mean, I think getting all the way there is probably an impossibility.

MBS ([19:29](#)):

Well, enlightenment.

Oliver ([19:31](#)):

Well, I think within what Jung means, I think it means you would keep having the potential for psychological growth, even if you lived to be 300, right?

MBS ([19:40](#)):

Right.

Oliver ([19:40](#)):

It's not a process that has an end point. I think it's just so hard to predict because I was going to say, and I think it's true in some cases that people who've had especially difficult and traumatic early lives find it especially difficult. But I think it's also the case that people who've had especially difficult and traumatic early lives can be propelled through it more easily than people among whom I consider myself, who sort of need to be like smacked around the head multiple times by the feeling that something might need to change. Because actually, lots of life has been just kind of okay for me for a lot of the time, totally due to good fortune, privilege and whatever. But that I could actually make it harder to see the sort of creeping sense of that something major needs to change in your attitude towards life.



MBS ([20:33](#)):

I mean, one of the words that struck it for me was in the passage you read around, some people claim and then remain victims of the experience. And I can certainly bring to mind people who I'm like, ah, I feel like I've heard this story and seen you stuck in this place forever. And I'm not sure what it will take for you to get traction and get moving again. And then there are other people, they go through that process and they do feel like they evolve to become wiser, if suffering is wisdom. I'm just curious to know, what is it that allows some people to be able to do the work and other people to kind of get stuck because they're unable to make progress? Is there something in your new book around the four thousand weeks, that is connected to navigating this part of the journey?

Oliver ([21:43](#)):

I mean, I don't frame the book around life stages. That's not the outlook, but I think that, yes, there are a number of points in the book when I'm writing about, I do write about midlife. I write about the effect of various, big life commitments to do with work, family, homes, things like that. I think that any kind of commitment that closes off a million other options, which is actually true of every decision you make at every moment in the day, but it's sometimes that you already feel it, that is an encounter with mortality in its way, right? I mean, every time you decide to do something, that means you couldn't do something else. I mean, this is Heidegger, if you want to get to philosophical and a bit Nazi about it. But I do write about Heidegger, he's a difficult character given his-

MBS ([22:39](#)):

Affiliations



Oliver ([22:40](#)):

... politics, but he does capture, I think, in his very confusing terminology, this sense that every moment of an authentically lived life is a kind of an encounter with its limitation and its finitude and with death, because those are the only options, right? You're either understanding that what you're doing with a moment or an hour or a day or a year is instead of an infinity of other things that you are rejecting. Or you're in a delusion about... you're entertaining yourself with the idea that at some point in the future, it's all going to come. One thing I've found very true in my own life, I don't know, it's not such a weighty subject matter maybe, but it's just like, just to realize... I write in the book near the beginning about how I was... it was only like, I don't know, seven, eight years ago or something, sitting on a park bench in Brooklyn busier than... feeling more overwhelmed than usual by all the things I had to do and instinctively planning a new, brilliant, shiny, new productivity system that was going to enable me to take care of them.

Oliver ([23:53](#)):

And just suddenly realizing, this was never going to work. It was never going to happen that I was going to sort of pull myself, there was never going to be a moment in the future when I was fully in command and meeting all my obligations, disappointing nobody, fulfilling every ambition that I... it was never going to happen in the future. And this was at a point in my life when I'd already had contended with certain kinds of big commitments and crises and things. It wasn't first bit, but it was really struck me on this level of kind of time management, which maybe spoke to why I chose the focus of the book. And then just feeling this enormous, fleetingly anyway, this enormous sense of relief that was just like, oh, I don't have to try to do this thing because it is literally impossible for any human being to do, which is to be infinitely optimized, and infinitely capable.



Oliver ([24:55](#)):

I think it's Sam Harris, somewhere, who recalls being in a conversation with a friend where he was moaning about all the problems that he was facing in his life and she just interrupted him saying like, "Hang on." I've written about this in my newsletter actually, so you might've seen this, but she just interrupted him saying like, "Hold on. Do you imagine you're going to get to a stage of your life where you don't have problems? Is that part of what's driving your sort of misery in having these things?"

MBS ([25:24](#)):

I know.

Oliver ([25:25](#)):

And I think this is the same idea that so many of us, especially productivity, geek people are victim to. But like one day, it's all going to be running totally smoothly.

MBS ([25:38](#)):

It's like inbox zero forever. It's like, everything has reached a platonic ideal. And I'm like, it probably's not going to happen. But it reminds me of the title of your newsletter, The Imperfectionist, it speaks to that, which is like the glory is in the messiness and the imperfection, as much as it is in the search for meaning.

Oliver ([25:58](#)):

Yeah, there's a quotation that I begin the book with from Joko beck, Charlotte Joko Beck, the American Zen teacher, who died a few years ago, who says, "What makes it unbearable, is your mistaken belief that it can be cured." Which I just think is... it's a thought that goes so deep because it is this idea, it's like how many problems... I mean, I'm not saying that people don't go through periods in their life. People may be listening to this who are experiencing specific crises, but generally speaking, how many of the things that really stress you out and



that feel like terrible problems are so stressful because you think you need get to someplace where you don't have that kind of stuff in your life?

Oliver ([26:46](#)):

And if you didn't have that mistaken belief, with how much more of a lighter heart could you just dive in to dealing with today's stuff and creating the thing you want to create today, without this kind of idea that you've first got to get to this place where you have the perfect work-life balance. And you have the perfect systems for dealing with it all and you're as optimized as a human could be. How much more genuinely productive is it to let go of that and just start doing a few things that matter today?

MBS ([27:26](#)):

"What makes it unbearable is your mistaken belief that it can be cured." I mean, honestly that makes me laugh out loud and really at myself. I mean, I find that not pessimistic, but freeing. Stop seeking optimization with its focus on an imagined future, where you somehow cross a finish line and start relishing the opportunities here and now. I mean, I remember years ago, hiking in the Himalaya, I'd be schlepping this big backpack up a mountain, avoiding the yaks, charging down the path towards me. And I'd be seeing the peak that I was walking towards. And I'd be so excited as it drew near and I'd finally get to it, and it was never the peak. It was just the brief plateau before the next climb. It's the mistaken belief that it can be scaled, I guess. But do you not want to climb the mountain?

MBS ([28:23](#)):

I think you do climb it. I mean, I hope you do for your sake and for ours and for mine. I want you to be ambitious for yourself and for the world. In the interview, I mentioned David Brooks, he's a New York Times columnist and his book is *The Second Mountain*, so it uses this metaphor. The first mountain is your career and all the stuff that you should do, and then midlife, let's call it that broadly,



you start going, have I climbed the right mountain or what's the next mountain for me? And this is, as Brooks puts it, the quest for a moral life, where you commit to meaning and to impact, where you commit to what I've started to call, worthy goals. And I think that's what Oliver is pointing us to, which is stop optimizing, but start embracing that bigger ambition of worthy goals, things that are thrilling and important and daunting.

MBS ([29:19](#)):

You'll find out more about Oliver at oliverburkeman.com. There's an E in there, in fact, there's two. Oliver, O-L-I-V-E-R, Burkeman, B-U-R-K-E-M-A-N. As I was picking up his book, I really encourage you to sign up for his newsletter. I subscribe and I think it's probably twice a month, he will send out a really thoughtful, interesting article around... it's not really about time, it's really about what does it take to live a great life. As ever, thank you so much for listening to the podcast. If you've given a review in your favorite app, thank you for that. If you've signed up for the free membership, The Duke Humfrey's, named after my favorite Oxford library, thank you for that. You'll find transcripts and unreleased episodes there. And if you've just passed on word of this podcast to somebody saying, "Hey, subscribe to this, it's worth listening to." Well, a big thank you for that. You are awesome and you're doing great.