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MBS (00:00):

How do you head for the heights and not lose yourself? I mean, is it even possible to be ambitious, strive for worthy goal and still be humble, still stay grounded? 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. Brad Stulberg has just published the third of, I think a trilogy of books. The first is called Peak Performance, the second, The Passion Paradox and now, most recently, The Practice of Groundedness. Now, as a researcher and a writer, Brad's something of a Renaissance man. He looks for convergences in academia and ancient wisdom and then teases out the patterns within.



Brad ([00:47](#)):

I believe that by highlighting patterns and themes, we get very close to truth with a capital T. So, that is the sweet spot that I'm interested in with my writing and my research.

MBS ([00:59](#)):

The first fundamental patent he uncovered is really one of the engines of personal growth.

Brad ([01:05](#)):

It was this notion that in my first book, Peak Performance, I've gone on to call the growth equation and it is that stress plus rest equals growth.

MBS ([01:17](#)):

Okay, well, I get that in theory, but how does that work in practice? I mean, how do we balance both sides of the equation, stress and rest? I want to live a long, healthy life, but I also want to maintain the flame I have to make an impact in the World.

Brad ([01:35](#)):

So, what I have found in myself and in my coaching practice, is that there is a big difference between doing the work itself and the amount of energy that can go into thinking about basking in, despairing about the results of the work, what other people think of the work, what the work could turn into, what happened in the past. So, in my own mind, I have three buckets and I talk about this all the time with coaching clients. I have, doing your craft where you can have an impact or crafts, plural. I have true unplugged, rest, recovery, family. Hiking out in nature without your phone, sitting down to dinner with no devices and every time you have a thought about work, you realize it, you don't judge it and you're back to dinner and then that third bucket is what I call getting swept up into



everything that surrounds the work. And I think the more that we can work on minimizing that third bucket, the more fuel we have for the other two and the better we feel and the more sustainable it becomes.

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

I know just a few weeks ago, there's such a prime example of this on the world stage in the Olympics with the amount of athletes that really are struggling with getting so swept into everything around the sport and it encroaches on their ability to enjoy the sport. Again, this isn't a switch that you turn on, this is a deliberate practice, no different than the investment banker that is refreshing the stock market or the founder that is constantly updating her email to see if the VC got back to them. For me as an author, it's checking the book sales rank. Hence, the more that you can separate yourself from those inclinations the better, and eventually you just forget about them. So I'm a huge, huge, huge proponent of immersing yourself in joyous activities where it doesn't take effort not to think about that. If you're out in a beautiful hike in nature, or you're at the gym training with your friends, or you're playing fetch with your dog, whatever it is, it's a lot easier not to obsess over all the other stuff because you become meshed in the moment.

MBS ([03:53](#)):

A previous guest on the podcast interviewed high achievers, particularly endurance athletes, people who take that to the very edge of what's possible and she noticed that many of them found it was quite difficult to actually identify activities that are purely pleasurable and you're there for the joy because you're like, "I'll just do this for the joy." And then you go, "oh, I could write a blog post about this." Or, "I could turn this into a lesson" or, "This is great and by the way, I should ask this person if they want to be on my podcast or collaborate or do something." Have you found a way to access activities that are goalless?



Brad ([04:41](#)):

Yes and no. So, I don't believe in work-life balance. I think that you're here for X amount of time and everything is work and everything is life. That is just my perspective. I think trying to separate the two is intellectually dishonest, because as you said, you can't turn off your brain. Look, if you're trying to read beautiful fiction that has nothing to do with your work as an accountant, but the book makes you think of something for your accounting practice, okay, that's just a human brain. So, I don't try to separate the two, I don't judge myself, I don't tell my clients to judge themselves when that happens. What I do, is become aware of and realize how external tools in ways of sharing make it more likely that that kind of thinking will happen.

Brad ([05:36](#)):

So a very concrete example, I love strength training. Everyone asks me why I'm not on Instagram. The reason is, because I know if I was on Instagram, I would probably get caught up in making videos about strength training and then suddenly, that area of my life would become quote unquote, work or out for judgment. It doesn't mean to say that when I'm strength training I'm goalless of course not. But, my guess is it feels a lot more light and free and if I felt I needed to post about it.

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

Right. Tell us about the book that you've chosen. I'm very intrigued by this.

Brad ([06:14](#)):

So, the book that I've chosen, I'm looking down is called, The Sane Society, it's by Erich Fromm, who was a predominant, really polymath. The main hats that he wore were his research psychologists, sociologist, and practicing psychoanalyst. He was born in 1900, he did most of his best work between



1935 and 1965 and this book is a post-World war II book, it was first published in 1955 and it's called, The Sane Society.

MBS ([06:49](#)):

How did you come across that?

Brad ([06:52](#)):

I began reading Eric from, shortly after graduate school. My introduction to his work, I was at the time thinking about proposing marriage to my then girlfriend, who's my now wife. So, he didn't turn me off the idea.

Brad ([07:09](#)):

[crosstalk 00:07:09]

MBS ([07:09](#)):

[inaudible 00:07:09] It would go okay.

Brad ([07:10](#)):

He has a beautiful book called, The Art of Loving and I read that book thinking it would be a book about love in the romantic sense between two people. It definitely was that, but it was so much more. It was about thinking of love as presence and concentration and caring and responsibility in how a loving orientation is something that we don't just need to bring to other people, but we can bring to everything that we do and it's one of those things where not only does it make you feel good, but it certainly powers your work and I would argue, it makes the world a better place. So from there, that was probably his most famous commercial success, but he's got this whole array of books that were not as commercially successful, but I think even richer with intellect and ideas. So I went on an Erich Fromm binge and I've probably, still only read 60% of his work because there's just so much.

MBS ([08:14](#)):



Right. When I knew that you were going to read from Erich Fromm and I'm like, "I know that name, but I don't know his work." I kind of poked around Amazon, I'm like, "He got, a, a lot of work and, b, there are so many good titles, like The Art of Being and The Sane Society. There's so many things where I'm like, "Oh, I want to read that. Oh, I want to read that as well." So, how did you decide what to read? I mean, knowing that from as a big influence on you.

Brad ([08:41](#)):

So I went to my bookshelf and I pulled out from, which is nine books on my shelf, and I take meticulous notes as I read with little three by five cards that...

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

[crosstalk 00:08:54]

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

I want to see that, yeah.

Brad ([08:56](#)):

I label to areas to come back to. And I found the passage that is most on my mind right now across all nine books, it happened to come from The Sane Society. It was in close competition with another beautiful book that he wrote called Escape from Freedom, which has a lot to do with the inclination towards authoritarian movements, which here in the states is unfortunately something that...

Brad ([09:23](#)):

[crosstalk 00:09:23].

MBS ([09:23](#)):

We've never had that.



Brad ([09:23](#)):

Well, more than we'd like, but this book is very much related to my own big project that I have coming out really right now and it just is one of these things where nothing is really new. There are some timeless truths and you'll see as I read, the concerns that Erich Fromm was investigating in 1955 are the same concerns that I'm investigating in 2021.

MBS ([09:51](#)):

Yeah. I often use the phrase, the work I do is old wine in new bottles, and it feels like we are working in the same vineyard.

Brad ([10:02](#)):

I love it. Wow. That is nicely done.

MBS ([10:07](#)):

Thank You. Well, let's hear this Brad, your two pages from Erich Fromm's book. Thank you.

Brad ([10:10](#)):

Okay. And I'm going to bounce around a little. It's two pages total, but I think it comes from more than that mark, from four pages.

MBS ([10:16](#)):

Perfect.

Brad ([10:17](#)):

Okay. Again, this is 1955. Man today is fascinated by the possibility of buying more, better, and especially, new things. He is consumption hungry, the act of buying and consuming has become compulsive and irrational because it is an end in itself with little relation to the use of, or pleasure in the things bought and



consumed. To buy the latest gadget, the latest model of anything that is on the market is the dream of everybody in comparison to which the real pleasure in use is quite secondary. Modern man, if he dared to be articulate about his concept of heaven, would describe a vision which would look like the biggest department store in the world, showing new things and gadgets and himself having plenty of money with which to buy them.

Brad ([11:09](#)):

He would wander around open mouth in this heaven of gadgets and commodities provided only if there were ever more or newer things to buy and perhaps that his neighbors were just a little less privileged than he. One of the most striking examples for this kind of pleasure consumption is the taking of snapshots, which has become one of the most significant leisure activities. The Kodak slogan, you press the button we do the rest, which since 1889 has helped so much to populize photography all over the world, is symbolic. It is one of the earliest appeals to quote unquote, the push button power feeling. You do nothing, you do not have to know anything, everything is done for you all you have to do is press the button. Indeed, the taking of snapshots has become one of the most significant expressions of alienated visual perception of sheer consumption.

Brad ([12:01](#)):

The quote-unquote tourist with his camera is an outstanding symbol of an alienated relationship to the world. Being constantly occupied with taking pictures, actually he does not see anything at all except through the intermediary of the camera. A note for me, you could replace camera with social media. The camera sees for him in the outcome of his, quote unquote pleasure trip, is a collection of snapshots which are the substitute for an experience which he could have had but did not.



Brad ([12:31](#)):

Man is not only alienated from the work he does and the things and pleasures he consumes, but also from the social forces which determine our society in the life of everybody living in it. At its worst, his body, his mind, and his soul are his capital and his task in life is to invest it favorably, to make a profit of himself. Human qualities like friendliness, courtesy, kindness are transformed into commodities, into assets of the personality package conducive to a higher price on the personality market, my mind goes to Twitter, Instagram, Facebook. If the individual fails in a profitable investment of himself, he feels that, quote unquote, he is a failure. If he succeeds, quote unquote, he is a success.

MBS ([13:20](#)):

Wow. As you said, 1955, as far as prescient. What particularly strikes a chord for you there Brad?

Brad ([13:31](#)):

I think you hit the nail on the head and I reiterated it twice, 1955. I feel these are the biggest themes that we're wrestling with today. It's not a Kodak camera, it's social media, it is cable news, it is to a large extent even the internet that's shaped so much of how we experience the world and there's a line in there that I tried to emphasize that it also alienates us from the society in which we live.

MBS ([14:04](#)):

Right.

Brad ([14:05](#)):

And I think that there's a real tension that people are experiencing and feeling. I think COVID has made this so much worse because whatever momentum was going in the direction of actual community and actual engagement for many people, has become unsafe.



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

So, this notion of alienation from our work, from our communities and from ourselves is something that I think every bit as ripe now as it was when Fromm must've written this in 1955. And then the second thing, is the struggle to live, thrive in a society that is capitalist. And I am not a pro capitalist, I am not an anticapitalist. There are pros and cons to all systems, capitalism is one and it works really well for some things and not so well for others. But this notion that everything has to work in service of something else, modern scientists call this, the arrival, fallacy that if I just got this promotion, if I just saw many books, then I'll arrive. In my book, I call this, the goalpost is always 10 yards down the field. And the goalpost was 10 yards down the field in 1955 too perhaps.

MBS ([15:27](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Brad, is there any danger that this is you and me kind of sitting on our front porch going, "Oh, get off my lawn," to young people? Because, where we've navigated capitalism, where in the middle or kind of middle end of our careers and we've had success, is this a kind of a luxury of I'm already done and I've done my work and now society is going to hell because I'm an old person and society is always going to hell if you're an old person?

Brad ([15:59](#)):

Yeah, I'm only 35, so I'm not that old. So I still...

Brad ([16:04](#)):

[crosstalk 00:16:04].

Brad ([16:04](#)):

I've got [crosstalk 00:16:07] skin in the game here and I have a son and I want him to grow up in a world that is more loving and that is really human where these kind of experiences can happen. And I try to put on my research, writing,



reporting that to avoid that very problem and we live in an area with a lot of kids age 11 to 14 and without trying to be like the awkward dad, I ask them about this stuff and they're feeling this pressure too, and they don't like it. So, I also think that this is a timeless problem. Many of the ancient wisdom traditions were trying to answer the question of how to solve the arrival fallacy. The cultivation of presence of being here now, that underlies so much of Buddhism, Taoism, Stoicism, the more spiritual aspects of Christianity and Judaism, is really to me about superseding the notion to always think ahead or have what's next.

MBS ([17:15](#)):

Right. Brad, your first book was *Peak Performance*, which feels like it's about... Is a goalpost and I'm heading up that mountain and it feels like you've come down from the mountain because your new book is about the practice of grounded-ness. What do you know now that you didn't know when you wrote your first book?

Brad ([17:33](#)):

Oh my goodness! A lot. So I stand by the work in *Peak Performance*. It is a beautiful user manual for operating when everything is clicking. Everything in there is evidence-based, it is a very commercial title, but it is not a book of hacks or quick fixes, it is, when you are performing well, how do you sustain that?

MBS ([17:56](#)):

Right.

Brad ([17:57](#)):

My second book, *The Passion Paradox*, is all about, how do you cultivate drive and motivation and how do you keep it on the right track? So that to me is the way up the mountain. This third book, is the foundation of the mountain and you can get by on the first two books when everything's going well, but when



rough weather comes, if you don't have a strong foundation, then the whole thing's going to collapse. And I experienced a really bad bout of depression related to obsessive compulsive disorder and my mountain kind of collapsed and it took a lot of healing, it took help, it took therapy to learn and get interested in some of those foundational skills. And I think that I had to write the books in this order, because I hadn't had an experience like that so I couldn't know. But now, I would tell readers to read them the opposite way that I wrote them. To start with, *The Practice of Groundedness* and to build that durable foundation.

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

As somebody who was having success and understood success at a disciplined, intellectual, research-based, evidence-based way, what did you learn about navigating struggle and failure?

Brad ([19:19](#)):

Yeah. So, I don't like the word failure because I think it depends on what the goal is and I've done a lot of work really starting when I was young, I'm very fortunate to have had coaches and teachers and mentors that have helped instill this mindset in me, to try to have the ultimate goal of being a kind, strong, wise person. So if that's my north star, that I'm never going to reach, but I can shoot towards, then I'm never really failing because everything is grist for the mill.

MBS ([19:54](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

Brad ([19:56](#)):

I think the second part of what you asked was more like challenge or struggle and there, I learned the importance of being able to ask for help, and really practicing deep acceptance. So, not resisting something that's happening, not



passively resigning to it but accepting it, seeing it clearly so then you can work on it and also have relationships in community, which has become a big theme in *The Practice of Groundedness* is that, and I'm channeling from, which is why I'm so glad I was able to read that book, but my sense if Fromm was here he would agree with me. Although he'd say it more elegantly, that today what we called optimization or efficiency or a hustle culture, it crowds out and cannibalize is time for cultivating deep community and it's the deep community that really is your safety net when hits the fan but it's also the deep community that when you're succeeding provides gravity for you.

MBS ([21:06](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

Brad ([21:08](#)):

And it's the deep community that becomes the fabric of a society. So, I think really understanding the importance of those two principles or practices of acceptance even if it's something that you don't want to be happened, here I am a best-selling author of a book called *Peak Performance*, happily married, I have no reason to be feeling what I'm feeling and thinking what I'm thinking, but the more that I resist it, the worse it becomes and acceptance was a whole new skill to me.

Brad ([21:34](#)):

I was born and raised in Western religious kind of secular household where you think positive and you power through things and you like you take control and all of that can be true, but there has to be an acceptance of what's happening first. And then yeah, the second lesson is really around the importance of deep community and how it's so easy to get caught up in the frenetic pace of modern life and have, quote unquote, success. And even before COVID, a coffee date becomes a phone call, a phone call becomes a text message, text



message becomes a quick email because it's faster, it's more convenient, it allows you to be more efficient. But efficient for what?

MBS ([22:19](#)):

The phrase, deep community is a powerful one, because I think loneliness is a force that is present across all ages in all sorts of different ways. How do you think about deep community and how do you nurture it?

Brad ([22:37](#)):

So, deep community to me has two elements and the word deep community was just the language that I used because it feels like it's both of those things. There's a depth and a breadth and you think of deep as depth and then the community part is breath. So, the first element of deep community, is a sense of belonging. And that can be to a group of people, it can be to a religion or spiritual tradition, it can be to a physical place, it can also be to a lineage or a craft. I feel I belong to my local community I feel I belong to my neighborhood, but I also feel I have a sense of belonging in the lineage of humanistic thinkers like Erich Fromm.

MBS ([23:30](#)):

Right. Right.

Brad ([23:31](#)):

So, it need not be physical. The second element of deep community ,is physical and it's the physical connection. There's all sorts of research that goes to show that the act of being with someone in the present, is wholly different than not. These are very bizarre times with COVID. I think a lot of people are unfortunately viscerally realizing this.



MBS ([23:59](#)):

Right. What it means that, this through the video is not the same as sitting next to you on a seat.

Brad ([24:04](#)):

Right. And it can be pretty good. I mean, thankfully technology has gotten us this close and yet it's not the same. So, carving out time once COVID passes or even now when it's safe to perhaps meet outdoors, for that sense of in-person connection and belonging, that is such a big part of having a strong foundation. And again, it is the very stuff that gets crowded out right in a life that is just focused on rising in conventional definitions of success or achievement, because belonging generally takes reflection. You have to know what you belong to, or it takes work, you have to be a part of the lineage or a part of the craft, and then we already talked about all the reasons that connection gets optimized out of people's life.

MBS ([24:56](#)):

So how do you, yourself and how do you help others find this balance between the short term demands of progress and success and the longer term commitment to presence and belonging?

Brad ([25:14](#)):

Through his philosophical and rich language is everything I just said to describe the idea. The actual practice is very concrete. I'm a big believer that if you've got M&M'S in front of you and brown rice in front of you, you're always going to choose the M&M'S.

MBS ([25:33](#)):

For sure.



MBS ([25:34](#)):

[crosstalk 00:25:34]

MBS ([25:34](#)):

I'll pretend I didn't even see the rice. I'm like, "There was no rice here there are only M&M'S."

Brad ([25:40](#)):

But the issue is, when you eat M&M'S everyday, all day, you start to feel sick. And the cultivating of presence, the prioritization of deep community, it's the brown rice in our life. And realizing that you are always going to choose M&M'S, there is the boundary setting, there is the carving out time, the scheduling of these things that you do come hell or high water and that gets you so far. And then the second step, is to pay really close attention to what you get, because the mind body learning system is very, very efficient and effective. So, a personal example that makes this super concrete, my first book, Peak Performance, I mentioned that I just had no idea what to expect and I thought I was doing well, my coauthor on that book thought he was doing well too but at the end of that week, we felt like we had just come off of a bender.

Brad ([26:35](#)):

We'd felt just disgusting, hung over, irritated, tired, empty, like you need just some greasy eggs and bacon to fill your gross stomach. And presumably, that's because we were running all over New York city and Boston doing all these interviews, refreshing our Amazon sales rank in between, hoping that we'd hit the New York times bestseller list and on and on. And that didn't feel good. And the second book came around and you remembered when we said, I don't want to feel gross like that. So for the second book, we said, "Nope, we're going to launch it in one of our hometowns." So either the San Francisco bay area where I lived at the time or Houston, where Steve lived and we're going to have a



launch party with just our close friends and family that we invite and then that first week, we're going to set aside three hours of time, every day to do the publicity, to do the checking, whatever it is, but no more than that and it's going to be on us and our team to make sure that we prioritize what we do and then in those other five hours, we're heading out for hikes without our phone.

MBS ([27:39](#)):

Nice.

Brad ([27:40](#)):

It was a completely different experience. And, it took a lot of paying attention to what we got out of the first time and, a lot of boundary setting, because if I would have brought my phone on that hike, it wouldn't have been the same hike. So, I think that the knowing and the intellect is what can motivate, but for all of these things, I think the actual practice, the doing has to be really concrete otherwise, it breaks down very easily.

MBS ([28:09](#)):

So, help me with this. I would like to be more connected in my community, I'd like to belong more, more woven into the fabric here, and I've done the sort of things to try and do that and many of them have been just a bit underwhelming where I've gotten, you know what, I get more of a short term, little hit of nice chemicals in my brain when I'm honestly answering email or thinking about ideas or reading a book or stuff that is not all short-term, but often entangled in my kind of the stuff I love to do, which is work and stuff related to work. It's a little bit like, I don't mind. I mean, the brown rice is okay, but how do you get through the first few underwhelming mouthfuls of brown rice?

Brad ([29:04](#)):

I think that you have to realize that they might be a little underwhelming at first. And it's not an automatic thing, I mean, I don't know where you live and I don't



know how much of that was representative versus actual, and you don't have to share, but let's pretend for someone listening it is actual, then maybe that's okay. I'm just saying, you should at least try it. If you live in a super small town and you are a PhD in cognitive science and no one speaks your language, then you're right. You might not find that much there, but if like most people, you don't in a small town and there are neighborhoods and there are bookshops and there are cafes, again, it doesn't have to be heroic.

Brad ([29:47](#)):

So, a simple act for the Michael or Michael like person, just make it a point and let's assume this is COVID safe, hopefully at a time in the near future and if not now, depending on where you live, work in a cafe, don't go to different cafes, work in the same cafe. Ask the barista how they're doing. You go for three weeks, they're going to know your name, you're going to know their name. That's community. That's a sense of physical connection of rootedness.

MBS ([30:16](#)):

Brad, it's been a wonderful conversation. Thank you and congratulations on the new book as well. As final question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

Brad ([30:29](#)):

I think that all of this stuff is a practice. There's a reason that the title of my book is, The Practice of Groundedness instead of just grounded and that was a fight and it will probably sell less copies because of it but you don't just become grounded. It's not just a switch that you flick, it is an ongoing practice and you have highs and lows and you remember, and you forget. There's a reason that I read Erich Fromm today, and The Art of Loving, could have been called The Practice of Loving, he chose the art. I should've probably titled my book, The Art of Grounding.



MBS ([31:09](#)):

No, don't. Too late.

Brad ([31:11](#)):

You actually his book, and what he's saying is that love is a practice.

MBS ([31:16](#)):

Right. Right.

Brad ([31:17](#)):

Love is something that you do and I think that the more that we can realize that the kinder to ourselves we can be, because we realize in those moments when we're not grounded or we're not loving, that everyone has those moments and it's just practice and the more right-sized our expectations will be for this sort of stuff. That it is a path, it is a journey. You have a coaching practice, you care deeply about it, you bring attention to it, you learn as you go, there are times when you probably resent your clients and want to quit and there are times when you feel like you're the luckiest human on the planet and that is everything that we do. And it's not the message that we get in our consumeristic society, you should feel good, you should be happy, you should look good on Instagram, but I think it's a much more accurate way to conceive of life and I think you get more fulfillment and wellbeing as a result.

MBS ([32:24](#)):

The breakthrough for me in this conversation was how I think about groundedness and in particular depth. I mean, before the conversation, if you'd asked me, I might've said that groundedness and maybe humility, I think they're related, are about keeping my feet on the ground, staying humble, being true to who I am and all of those are very self-centered, individualistic. But now I'm thinking about grounded-ness and its connection to being more entwined with



those around me, my family and my friends and my community. I mean, honestly, the image I've got in my head is from that guidance of the galaxy movie where Groot, that's the wordless tree alien, envelops the other guardians to protect them or from impending disaster. How do I do more of that, is what I'm asking myself and I'm curious to know of course what your practice is for staying grounded.

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

If you enjoyed this conversation with Brad, I've got a couple of other suggestions for you. You might like to listen to my chat with John Zeratsky. The episode is called, How To Focus on What Matters. I thought that was a really interesting dive on the discipline of staying focused but doing it with a lightness and a joy. The other one you might want to consider is a conversation with Mason Curry, entitled, Fragile and Fleeting, all about the transience of life and how you got to be here now to make the most of it. If you want to learn more about Brad, you can of course, by his new book, Practice of Groundedness anywhere you'll find books. The easiest place to go and find more about Brad in person, is his website, Brad Stulberg, B-R -A-D- S-T-U-L-B-E-R-G.com. And his most active social is Twitter, so @BStulberg, B-S-T-U L-B-E-R-G.

MBS ([34:17](#)):

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