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

Imagine this image for me, an index card. The headline is We're Just Getting Started. Underneath that headline is a big circle with the phrase, "Deep Truth," written within it. And then within that first big circle, there's a small circle, and this has a different phrase attached to it. The phrase is, "What we're aware of." Oh yeah, how little we understand about life.

MBS ([00:29](#)):

When I think of philosophy, I think lots of words, mostly humorless. So it's extraordinary to me when someone can make me think more wisely, more gratefully about life in a visual way, with a visual impact. There are some places I go, The Oatmeal is one for me, it's a brilliant comic, xkcd.com, just uses stick figure and it's equally brilliant. And also Jessica Hagy, the creator of that index card chart.



MBS ([01:02](#)):

And by the way, if you want to expand that little circle, that little circle of what we're aware of, well, this is the podcast view because this is 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.

MBS ([01:22](#)):

Now, I've loved Jessica's work for many years. 10 years ago or so, I put out a book called End Malaria. It was a philanthropic project, it raised \$400,000 for malaria and more. I did it in partnership with Seth Godin, and we had 50 or 60 contributors. One of them was Jessica, who did a series of great cartoons for the book. She has a very well-known blog called Indexed, and a number of books. And her new book is how to be fearless in seven simple steps.

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

Now, she must've been asked a thousand times because her drawings are so smart and so funny, and so wise, how do you think like that? Because she actually has an answer on her website, "Subversive librarians taught me everything I know." Now, there've been plenty of those in her life.

Jessica ([02:13](#)):

It's one of those things where I could go into that space, and I can say, "I don't know anything about this, or I feel like I need to know this, or I'm small and lost, help." And they pointed me in the direction of books that explained everything from what drugs are, to what sex is when you're 12.

Jessica ([02:34](#)):

And they introduced me to my favorite authors, and they just opened things up. And honestly, having access to a pile of books is having access to a pile of people, because every book is somebody else's brain on paper.



MBS ([02:50](#)):

Now, I happen to be married to a subversive librarian, so truly, I feel like I'm living the dream here. Now, where does her humor come from? It's such a big existential question, where does humor come from?

MBS ([03:02](#)):

How do you consistently, daily show up and create something that's funny and insightful? The pile of books must help with input, but what are the mechanics of it?

Jessica ([03:13](#)):

I really think my sense of humor is really grammatically based, and that might be the nerdiest way to break down what a joke or a sentence could be. But it's a half between a real joke and how puns work. And if you see the difference between words and the difference between context and how people talk, I think those subtle differences are where all the fun lies, and I don't think that's examined enough.

Jessica ([03:38](#)):

And I'm lucky enough that I can do it in charts and graphs, and sort of put all of those juxtapositions out on a page for people to pick apart in their own brain.

MBS ([03:47](#)):

I've seen people come to humor through language, for sure. And I've seen other people come at it through charts and illustrations, but it's rare to see both of them on the same page. Now, the genesis of this unique combination was being a copywriter for Victoria Secret.

MBS ([04:05](#)):

So churning out advertising copy? Well, as you might guess, that wasn't quite working for her.



Jessica ([04:11](#)):

I realized my brain was sort of liquefying, doing that over and over again. And so I went back and got my... I was getting my MBA and everything in MBA world is presented in those PowerPoint bullet points, slides, charts, graphs. And I realized people can lie with graphs, they can joke with graphs, they can do all of that. And I just thought, "This is a new grammar and I can say all sorts of things," and I just started playing with it, then I found a lot of new things to say.

MBS ([04:39](#)):

I love this. So charts and graphs as a new grammar, a new language to see the world. And in some ways, this brings us to the book that Jessica is sharing with us today because it's not about charts and graphs. It's not about new languages, but it is about new and different ways of seeing the world. And this is about where you stand in relation to others. It's about being an outsider.

Jessica ([05:03](#)):

I have picked *The Stranger In The Woods, The Extraordinary Story Of The Last True Hermit*, which if you are familiar with at all, is absolutely wonderful and charming. And it's like an alternate, modern Wilden.

MBS ([05:20](#)):

When you sent through that, that was the book you were going to read, I was like, "I've read an article about it, maybe in the *New Yorker* or somewhere."

Jessica ([05:26](#)):

Yes.

MBS ([05:26](#)):

So I read a bit about the book, but haven't read the book itself. How did the book come into your life?



Jessica ([05:34](#)):

So I think I read the same article you did, that came out a few years ago. And I was just like, "Oh, I have to read that. I have to know all the details." And then I got it and I was playing with it and reading it again. And the entire idea of hermitage and being locked away, and then being forced back into society, just felt so timely because we're all going through a sort of subtle version of that.

MBS ([06:00](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([06:00](#)):

And because just who would live in the woods for 10,000 nights without talking to anyone else? And just because I personally wouldn't do it, or even remotely try to understand it, it doesn't mean it's not an absolutely viable way to be. And it makes me think of visually, every adjective you can use to describe a person, is on a spectrum of 7,000,000,000 data points. So what is our hermit?

MBS ([06:30](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([06:30](#)):

And this guy is like way far to the side, but everyone else in this last year has been on a spectrum of hermitage more than they would want to be. So I thought this book really applied to a lot of things everyone's going through.

MBS ([06:42](#)):

That's perfect. It feels like it's a tale of the moment as we all discover what loneliness and isolation, and togetherness, and not togetherness actually means. And which two pages have you chosen for us? How did you end up picking which two pages to read? I'm always curious.



Jessica ([07:01](#)):

So going back through this book, trying to find a really good, just summation or set, and I found two pages that really begin and end with what it means to communicate with your face, and because we've all had the masks on and because the sky was hidden for so long, it all felt perfect. It would really get people to say, "Perhaps I've been there too."

MBS ([07:30](#)):

Well, look, I'm excited to hear the two pages.

Jessica ([07:32](#)):

And so in this spread, the author, Michael Finkel has just traveled from Montana to the middle of Maine to interview the hermit. The hermit's in jail and so they're talking on the opposite sides of a pane of glass through a phone.

Jessica ([07:49](#)):

He explained the lack of eye contact, "I'm not used to seeing people's faces. There's too much information there. Aren't you aware of it? Too much, too fast." Following his cue, I looked over his shoulder while he stared over mine. We maintain this arrangement for much of the visit. "I don't like people touching me," he added.

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

He was able to endure the occasional pat downs by guards, and that was all. "You're not a hugger," he asked. "Are you?" I admitted that I do at times participate in embraces. "I'm glad this is between us," he said, tapping on the window. "If there were a set of blinds there I'd close them."

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

The jail authorities have given him the option of a contact visit, but he'd chosen this style instead. "I prefer a meeting of the minds rather than a touching of the



bodies. I like my distance." Knight seemed to say exactly what he was thinking, raw and true, unfiltered by the safety net of social niceties.

Jessica ([08:51](#)):

There was no little white lie mechanism in him. The one that deems the meal at a dinner party delicious, no matter the taste, the one that keeps the gears of human interaction well oiled. "I'm sorry about being rude, but it gets to the point quicker," he said.

Jessica ([09:09](#)):

Here's what he had written in a letter about an author photo of mine that he'd seen in the sample packet of writing I'd mailed to him. "You look particularly nerdy next time, have your wife pick the picture." When I mentioned during the visit that my son's name is Beckett, he said, "Ugh, terrible. Why did you name him that? He's going to hate you when he gets older."

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

He said that when I told him I'd come to the jail, his first instinct was to turn down the visit, but we'd already formed an epistolary relationship, and my presence might allow him to practice holding a conversation, a skill that it's so far alluded him in jail.

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

Also, I'd simply shown up. I don't think any other journalists had, including the documentary crew. And he knew I lived far away. It would have been rude of him, he felt, to refuse my visit, so he accepted it. And then he was rude to my face.

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

Mick had seemed prickly. He is prickly, but he also said that since his capture, he'd found himself emotionally overwhelmed at unexpected moments, "Like



TV commercials have made me teary. It's not a good thing in jail to have people see you crying." He wondered how he was being portrayed in the media. "Is it like at the end of the radio broadcast, when they have the weird stories? World's largest pumpkin grown, man emerges from Maine woods after 27 years."

Jessica ([10:32](#)):

He asked if everyone really was calling him a hermit? And I told him they were. All the local papers, The Candidate Journal, The Morning Sentinel, The Portland Press Herald, sometimes referred to him as the hermit. "I don't like the term, but I understand," said Knight.

Jessica ([10:50](#)):

"There is a certain accuracy to it. Hermit does fit the bill. It's not like I could stop it anyway." He saw a strategic opening here. The media was apparently clamoring to view a real-life hermit from it, and Knight, by growing out his beard wildly had provided the character they envisioned.

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

His facial hair served not just as a calendar, but also as a mask, absorbing the stares of others while allowing him a little privacy in plain sight. "I can hide behind it. I can play to stereotypes and assumptions. One of the benefits of being labeled a hermit is that it permits me strange behavior."

MBS ([11:33](#)):

What a story that is. 27 years not talking to another human being. Three minutes away from civilization, but still incredibly isolated, is a parable of the times really, through COVID. What about that struck a chord for you, Jessica?

Jessica ([11:52](#)):

I really think that just someone on the extreme end of what we assume is normal, it can be really illuminating, or really just... It makes you feel more



attuned with everyone else, because if someone can do that, what are we all capable of? It's like watching an Olympian or something, only the sky was like the Olympian of hermits and he just went for it, and the capabilities and the possibilities, and the potentials of people who do strange and wonderful things or strange, but not wonderful things,

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

Do those role models, those people who are on the kind of edge of what normal is, or on the kind of extreme about what's possible as a human, how does that influence, if at all, how you think about your life and how you show up in the work that you do?

Jessica ([12:48](#)):

I really do think that the more people you can be exposed to, be it either literature or real life, or movies, or any kind of media, the more understanding you'll be of yourself. So I can look at the stranger in the woods and say, "Maybe I can sleep in a tent outside, and an owl won't get me," or I can see someone run 150 miles and I'm like, "Maybe I can walk 14." And just the nudges that extreme stories give you, it moves your Overton window and what you can do.

MBS ([13:25](#)):

Connected to this, I love this visual image that you're creating for us around inviting people into your life, through books and the like, different people, different perspectives. I feel for myself as I get older that my echo chamber gets louder and smaller. I get more of the same stuff kind of rattling around.

MBS ([13:50](#)):

How do you manage to... Because this is what I make up about you, Jessica, how do you manage to kind of keep drawing on diversity? How do you keep not just... You've been doing your index thing since 2006, but at least 6,000 of these amazing little drawings done...



Jessica ([14:07](#)):

Oh, yeah.

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

How do you keep that diversity coming in?

Jessica ([14:11](#)):

I think in one way I try and look at it is every example I have is just one data point on 10 or 12 different levels. And if I need someone frightening or strange, or horrible, then that's one point, and they're also on a spectrum of wonderful and fantastic, and helpful and why?

MBS ([14:33](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([14:33](#)):

And people are flexible and we all move through time, and I really do think the more I get to read and explore and see things, the smaller humanity gets as an idea because we're all just sort of wiggling around within our spectrums...

MBS ([14:52](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([14:52](#)):

And no one is extremely anything. It's just what they choose to do with their sort of whiplash between the points.

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

And where do you find your different points of input from? I used to wander into libraries because we both love libraries, and I drift along the shelves, kind of running my hands over books and kind of pulling out things that looked



interesting. And it created a serendipity of stuff showing up in my life that I wouldn't have otherwise have planned.

MBS ([15:25](#)):

And now, it feels like it's harder to do that. And I'm wondering how you find the structures or the discipline to keep these different perspectives coming into your life.

Jessica ([15:37](#)):

I find that too, because once you sort of like eat through the cannon, you're sort of in the cannon, and that's its own weird echo chamber.

MBS ([15:44](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([15:45](#)):

And so finding new things...

MBS ([15:46](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([15:47](#)):

My husband got me a subscription to Granta a while ago. And there was some weird typo online about, "Oh, it's my prescription." And I'm like, "Subscription, prescription, same thing because it's sort of a medicinally delivered, take this at this schedule, sort of fuel for yourself," and I can get into that...

MBS ([16:08](#)):

Right.



Jessica ([16:08](#)):

And I can read it, and then I find the authors in it and I find the people behind it. And then I follow them out through their tendrils of that contact, and find more new things.

Jessica ([16:18](#)):

So that's sort of my gateway to keeping myself fresh, along with random things on the internet, because you never know who's going to email you what?

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

Because it's not like there's a lack of random things on the internet, that is very true. What's the connection between staying fresh and being fearless?

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

I think the more I played with the idea of fearlessness, it was, okay, I can get very specific with this. I can talk about some people are afraid of spiders or the dark, or heights, or vampires, or very specific things. But the main idea of fearlessness is that sort of heavy, dark cloud that sort of twists in with anxiety and just weighs on you.

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

And the way out of that is not to be okay with spiders or okay with the dark. It's, "I'm going to find some light and some kittens, and the opposite of whatever it is that's bothering me," and finding that is exactly the freshness, because fear is always built by something old and wet, and gross, and sort of miasmatic.

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

And the opposite of fear is sort of a good morning and a good opportunity, and, "I'm going to go do this," and an enthusiasm, and articulating that difference was really the crux of the book.



MBS ([17:45](#)):

One of the lines in the reading you gave us about the hermit, Christopher Knight, is he talks about growing his beard out and how that fulfills people's fantasies of him as the hermit, and becomes a master he can hide behind. I'm not sure what my question is even, Jessica, I'm just saying if there's a tension somehow between the mask that we inevitably put up and we build around ourselves, our old image of ourselves and our protective image, and the sense that I get from you talking about fearless and fearlessness, which is around an exploration to where the edges are, and a kind of a journey and a quest towards something.

MBS ([18:26](#)):

I'm wondering how you think about masks, maybe your mask and how you manage that when you've also got this quest for the new as well?

Jessica ([18:37](#)):

Yeah. I have always been on the internet. I drew one little avatar in 2006 and I've never changed it.

MBS ([18:46](#)):

Exactly.

Jessica ([18:46](#)):

It is a weird little elf and that's me, and I don't post selfies, I don't reveal me. You might find an author photos scattered here and there, but that's not really my way of being. And sort of the face I put forward is not one that's very polished and well-made up with nice mascara. It's the work that I do.

Jessica ([19:10](#)):

And so I can be fearless with my work. I can be fearless with the things I share, but at the same time, I'm very careful of, am I identifiable? Am I stackable? How



many people will come to my house? Sort of a thing. So it's not that I'm working with a point of fear, it's that I'm working in a place where fear can't get me.

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

And I think we all have different sort of avatars and slivers of what we put forward...

MBS ([19:37](#)):

Indeed.

Jessica ([19:37](#)):

And slivers of what we keep personal.

MBS ([19:41](#)):

Do you feel... Maybe let me ask you an even bigger question, which is what your work makes me do, which is what I love about it, which is you make me think about my life and how I view my life, which is what have you learnt about what it means to live a good life?

Jessica ([20:00](#)):

Yeah, the more people I meet and the more things I read, and the more bits and pieces I know, is that everyone wants to do things that personally matter to them, and those things can be vastly different.

MBS ([20:15](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jessica ([20:16](#)):

I'm never going to be the best heart surgeon in the world, I don't have that inclination. I just don't.



MBS ([20:22](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([20:23](#)):

And some people look at what I do and say, "I would never want to even touch that." And really, the sort of natural, this is what I want to be, what makes me happy is the main question. My husband, when he works with new people he says, "Okay, so what do you want to be when you grow up?" And they're always like... they give a job title.

MBS ([20:47](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([20:47](#)):

Or they give a role, and he goes, "No, you want to be happy. It doesn't matter what your role is. You want to be happy. How can I make you happy?" And I think that leads to more artistic and personal and professional satisfaction, than striving for anything short term could really get you.

MBS ([21:07](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative) So if people are listening to this and how to be happy feels a related title almost, to how to be fearless, or is that true? Is part of the quest of being fearless really... what we're trying to do is actually trying to be happy, and a degree of fearlessness is one of the routes to get to a sense of happiness?

Jessica ([21:38](#)):

I could say that, but the more... So a few years ago, there were just so many books on happiness and there were all these studies on the word, and really digging into it, you found that, that was always a side effect of doing something meaningful.



MBS ([21:54](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([21:54](#)):

Happiness isn't an end into itself. It's sort of the icing on the cake of, "I did something important."

MBS ([22:02](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([22:02](#)):

And importance is what keeps you too busy to be afraid when you're doing something that matters.

MBS ([22:11](#)):

Well, I love that. And it's one of the... I think as a Canadian/Australian, I look at the US. Is it the constitution where you say it's about the right for the pursuit of happiness, not of happiness itself? I think that's one of the great nuances of writing that is a brilliant psychological truth expressed in a legal document.

MBS ([22:34](#)):

How do you know for you, that something's worth pursuing? How do you decide to write another book? How do you decide to take on another project? How do you figure out what to say yes to?

Jessica ([22:48](#)):

I think I am extremely prolific and I fiddle and doodle, and riff a lot. And so, I'll go through maybe a 100 different riffs of what makes sense, or a 100 different drawings before I have two or three that are fun. And I think it's really just sort of that riffing and curation. And over time, I've started to get a sense of, "This is a good idea. These other 99 are not."



MBS ([23:14](#)):

Right.

Jessica ([23:15](#)):

"And this idea has legs and these other 99 do not." And just playing with the ones that stick in my brain and look right and feel right. And it's sort of an artistic practice, I suppose, something that's developed over time.

Jessica ([23:32](#)):

But yeah, it's not like I can just be told, "Okay, tomorrow, come up with something." I'd have to go back and say, "Well, I have all these ideas from the past year and a half, and I've got this one over here that I think I want to work with."

MBS ([23:47](#)):

It's interesting and really helpful for me, just to remind myself of the waste involved in creation, which isn't really waste, but it just means that it's an iterative process. You just have to... I've said it to other people and I just need to remind myself, which is you have to write a bunch of bad drafts before a good draft starts hovering onto the horizon. And you're like, "oh, I can see. I can see that there might be something that's here."

Jessica ([24:19](#)):

Yeah, there's an essay length book called The Value Of Useless Information, or The Absolute Preciousness of Useless Information. And they talk about letting NASA scientists just sort of explore for a few years, and investigate what they're curious about. Not with any end of, "We need to blow up the Russians, but please tell us something interesting that you find."



Jessica ([24:44](#)):

And it's through that sort of exploration that really neat innovations come out, as opposed to, "Here's your goal, try and get there." It's, "Here's some space, see where you go." And that's why all information is very useful because it informs everything else.

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

Part of what I think is so clever about the work you do, Jessica, is you often use similar forms in which to process new and different information. So you've got a great form where you call on a Pentagon or a hexagon, where you've got different points and then you make connections between all the points.

MBS ([25:23](#)):

You've got a classic X and Y graph, you've got Venn diagrams with circles. What's the importance of a structure or a form like that to help give your work shape?

Jessica ([25:39](#)):

Well, I think in one way, it's a creative constraint that if I only have a set number of formats, then I can't veer off and suddenly do that insane, "Here's the conspiracy theorist wall with all the yarn and the points."

MBS ([25:55](#)):

Yes.

Jessica ([25:56](#)):

And also, people have an innate understanding of some shapes and formats. And if I can speak in my weird way, in a way that other people will get quickly and really grok fast, then that's a format that's useful. If I steer too far outside of what's the familiar, then the idea isn't as fast.



MBS ([26:19](#)):

I love that. That's a really nuanced understanding of communication, which is I have to find a doorway of familiarity for people to step through, so they can understand the view that they're seeing on the other side of the door quickly, in a way that will strike a chord. If it's too weird, it's just too hard work, and my brain is just not going to make the connections that you're looking for.

MBS ([26:42](#)):

Jessica, what needs to be said... Kind of as a final question, what needs to be said about fearlessness, that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me? What haven't I asked you that you want to tell me?

Jessica ([27:00](#)):

I think the one reason that fearlessness really just sort of bubbled to the surface for me for the last year or so really, is not just the obvious, "Oh, we have this pandemic fun, which is really interesting and throwing everyone all out of whack," but we've been in this modern age where things are changing so quickly and we're overwhelmed, and what is the answer to that overwhelm?

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

And the overwhelm, I think is a form of fear, where we just get frozen and finding the antidote and the thought to that was, I think really important.

MBS ([27:42](#)):

I loved how this conversation ended. When first Jessica was talking about the power of creative constraints, how her limited number of forms, she uses the X-Y axis graph, she uses Venn diagrams. There's one of those models where the arrow from A to B, and then another arrow back from B to A, all of that actually helps make her work accessible, because you don't have to figure out the form, you're able to more quickly get to the heart of the content, that insight about life in society that Jessica is so brilliant at.



MBS ([28:14](#)):

But then there's that second point she was making, the final point, which is how fear is triggered by the pace of change and by the pace of overwhelm. So I'm asking myself, "All right, how do I combine this? What are the forms and the structures, the lenses that I can use to manage my fear and my overwhelm, to better understand this shift in this world?"

MBS ([28:38](#)):

Jessica's work is part of it for me, but also questions ways of holding lenses up to a world. Is this moving me forward or is it moving me back? Is this a short-term thing or is it a long-term thing? What am I making up and what's actually true? These are some of the key questions that I use to really think about my life, to stay calm in my life and to stay focused on what really matters in my life.

MBS ([29:07](#)):

If you'd like more Jessica, and I hope you do, you want to check out thisisindexed.com. That's her blog where she continually posts. She's posted more than 6,000 of these drawings now, it's extraordinary to me. She's on twitter [@jessicahagy.com](https://twitter.com/jessicahagy), and of course, her new book is out wherever you buy books.

MBS ([29:25](#)):

Thank you for listening. I love that you do. I appreciate that you do. Quickly, if you want to give the podcast a review and you haven't yet done that, I thank you. It's a small thing to you, perhaps. It's a big thing to me. That's one of the ways that I get to prove to the world that this is a podcast worth listening to, and make it easier to find for people.

MBS ([29:45](#)):

If you love Jessica's work, maybe not only check out her website, but reference and refer this conversation to somebody in your life. We do grow best by word



of mouth, and if you want a little bit more, check out the Duke Humphry's, our free membership site, where you'll find transcripts and downloads, and unreleased episodes. You'll find that [ombs.works](mailto:mbs@ombs.works), just look for the podcast tab.

MBS ([30:07](#)):

Thank you for listening. You're awesome, and you're doing great.