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

All right. Here's a saying I heard once. It used to be hilarious. Now I guess it's just a little painfully true. Inside every old person is a young person wondering, "What the hell just happened here?" I am that person. I mean, I'm in my early fifties. I'm not totally sure why I need to tell you why it's my early fifties, but whatever. The game just seems to have changed.

MBS ([00:30](#)):

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. When you hit mid-life, whenever that is, is it just a slower creakier version of being a 30-year old or do things actually shift? I mean, what is contentment? What is ambition? What matters? Kieran Setiya is a professor



of philosophy at MIT in Boston and the author of *Mid-life: A Philosophical Guide*.

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

Now Kieran is mainly concerned with what they call ethics, which is, broadly speaking, how to live a good life. But how do you even become a philosopher? Well, apparently, it starts early.

Kieran ([01:20](#)):

Even at seven or eight, I was asking philosophical questions. I remember standing in the playground at school, looking at tree trunks thinking, "But why does anything exist at all?"

MBS ([01:31](#)):

Now, my vision of a philosopher is somebody locked away from reality, debating nuances of reality I don't really care about. Honestly, I know that's probably a little harsh, but I've read books by philosophers and most of them I really struggled to understand or make relevant. But this is not the philosophy that Kieran's about. He is actually about building a bridge between philosophy and practicality.

Kieran ([01:58](#)):

For me, what happened was that there was a career mid-life crisis in which I was feeling very profoundly the disconnection between my professional life as a philosopher and the humane humanistic interest in the good life that had got me engaged in philosophy, and also a sense of the repetitiveness and the narrowness of certain parts of academic life. And so, I didn't want to give up academic life, but I wanted to explore the good life in a way that might reach a wider audience.





MBS ([02:27](#)):

That's the Genesis of his book, mid-life: A Philosophical Guide. Now does that mean that I can finally ask Kieran the question I really wanted an answer to, which is how do you know when you're in mid-life?

Kieran ([02:39](#)):

Well, I feel like there's a huge variation in how people self-identify. And so, when the phrase mid-life crisis was coined, this is in an article by Elliott Jacques in 1965, Death and the mid-life Crisis. Unlike a lot of cultural tropes, there's a specific date. We can trace it to its origins. He was thinking mid to late thirties. When I started to feel a sense of crisis and no longer being young and uncertain of what the next stage was, I was in my late thirties.

Kieran ([03:12](#)):

I think a lot of people resist that, that particular age classification. I have a lot of friends who are 50, who are like, "Well, I guess I'm entering mid-life." So I think the question of when exactly mid-life is in terms of numbers in the end is not going to really tell us that much. For me, there was a cluster of problems that come into focus around mid-life about like the shape of human life. I think they tend to come into focus roughly when you're 40, but you could be thinking about them precociously when you're 20, or really only start to struggle with them when you retire.

Kieran ([03:48](#)):

So I think, for me, from the point of view of the philosophical interest of mid-life, the number is less important than worrying about the meaning of your life and the proximity or the shape of your life pointing towards death and what you've achieved and what else is important.



MBS ([04:08](#)):

I remember reading years ago, I think Robert Bly has a quote where he says, "When a man turns 35, he realizes his life isn't working."

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

Yeah. Right.

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

That's a resonant statement around what mid-life is. But also just talked to my niece who's 18 and she's like, "Oh my God, I'm so burnt out." It felt like I was talking to somebody having mid-life who has not yet hit 20. And I was like...

Kieran ([04:32](#)):

Yeah. People talk about the quarter-life crisis.

MBS ([04:34](#)):

That's right.

Kieran ([04:34](#)):

There's I think a certain kind of acceleration in this and that I was fortunate to grow up at a point where I didn't have to think so urgently about my career or how I was going to make a living when I was 20. I mean, that was partly a matter of the times, partly a matter of economic circumstance. I think that the current generation is facing an economic world more worrying, more difficult, more challenging than my generation did.

Kieran ([05:02](#)):

And so, I suspect that some of these anxieties about what's actually important in my life and how can I balance what I need to do in order to get on with my life and what I actually really value are hitting people with urgency at earlier ages.



MBS ([05:16](#)):

Kieran, can you tell us about what you've chosen to read from today?

Kieran ([05:21](#)):

Yeah. I'm going to be reading from Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle is one of the great figures in Western philosophy.

MBS ([05:32](#)):

He's the philosopher, right?

Kieran ([05:33](#)):

Yeah, exactly. In medieval philosophy, he's just referred to as the Philosopher with a capital P. He was taught by Plato who was taught by Socrates. This is the origins of Western philosophy and in ancient Athens, 4th century BCE. I suppose there are two things to say about this before I read the passage. One is a kind of apology. Plato is known for his beautiful dialogues, and apparently Aristotle wrote beautiful dialogues too that Roman art is praised for their grace and the sweetness of their style.

Kieran ([06:05](#)):

The tragedy is none of Aristotle's dialogues survive. So all we have are Aristotle, the entire body of work that we reconstruct his philosophical thinking from his lecture notes. When I think about the only thing that survives of my work is lecture notes, it's a chilling prospect. So what we have, it's not the most beautiful prose, it's dense. It's challenging. It will take a bit of unpacking, but I think it's very rich.

Kieran ([06:37](#)):

And then, I suppose the other thing to say about the Nicomachean Ethics is that structurally, it's a very surprising book, very surprising work, because there's a kind of bait and switch. The majority of the ethics, the first eight books out of 10



books, the chapters are called books, are devoted to the practical life, the practical virtues, Aristotle's thinking of this as a matter of being a politician or statesman, or being a general fighting wars.

Kieran ([07:05](#)):

And then, suddenly, in book 10, Aristotle says, "Well, by the way, that's all second rate. The best life is the life of contemplation." It's this huge swerve that is a kind of puzzle about the structure of the book and about what Aristotle is up to. And so, the passage I want to read is the heart of that swerve, the passage in which Aristotle lays his cards on the table and says, "It's a life of contemplation that is really the best life for a human being."

MBS ([07:37](#)):

Brilliant. Kieran, this sounds intriguing. Are you reading from the 10th book?

Kieran ([07:41](#)):

Yes.

MBS ([07:41](#)):

That's lovely.

Kieran ([07:42](#)):

Book 10 of the Nicomachean Ethics. Yes.

MBS ([07:45](#)):

That's fantastic. Brilliant. Well, Kieran, over to you. I'm looking forward to this.

Kieran ([07:50](#)):

And happiness is thought to depend on leisure, for we are busy that we may have leisure and make war that we may live in peace. Now, the activity of the practical virtues is exhibited in political or military affairs, but the actions



concerned with these seem to require trouble. This is completely true for warlike actions, but no one chooses to be at war or provokes war for the sake of being a war. One would seem absolutely murderous if he were to make enemies of his friends in order to bring about battle and slaughter.

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

But the action of the statesman is also unleisurely. And apart from political activity itself, aims at positions of power and honors, or at all events, happiness for him and his fellow citizens, a happiness different from political action and evidently sought as being different. So, among virtuous actions, those in politics and war are distinguished by nobility and greatness, but these require trouble aimed at a further end and are not desirable only for their own sakes.

Kieran ([08:53](#)):

But the activity reason, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in serious worth, and to aim at no end beyond itself and to have its pleasure proper to itself, which augments the activity and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness, so far as this is possible for us, and all the other attributes ascribed to supreme happiness are evidently those connected with this activity, it means contemplation. Hence, this will be complete happiness if it'd be allowed a complete term of life, for none of the attributes of happiness is incomplete.

Kieran ([09:25](#)):

Such a life would be superior to the human for one lives at not in so far as he is a human being, but in so far as something divine is present in him. And as much as this divine element is superior to all composite nature, so is its activity superior to that of the other virtues. Thus, if reason is divine in comparison with man, the life according to reason is divine in comparison with human life. And we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things and being mortal of mortal things, but must so far as we can make ourselves



immortal and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us, for even if it'd be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.

MBS ([10:18](#)):

That's great. That was beautifully read as well, Kieran, so thank you.

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

Thank you.

MBS ([10:23](#)):

You've got a great dramatic flair for reading. What is it about this passage that strikes a chord for you, Kieran?

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

Well, it's a passage that I've puzzled over and read and re-read probably more than any other passage in any philosopher. That's because I think there's something deeply right about it. But I've also come to feel very wary of it. And so, maybe I could start by saying what I think he's really on to, what the deeply right point he's making is. The question is why does Aristotle suddenly reject the life of practical activity in the life of practical virtue? The answer is that, as he puts it, it requires trouble.

MBS ([11:06](#)):

Right. It's a great phrase.

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

These activities really matter. It's not that they don't matter, but they're responses to problems or needs that we would rather not face. That's why we go to war. That's what politics is about, for Aristotle. It's solving problems. So in a



way, the value of these activities is a double negative. It's negating or getting rid of something bad. I call these ameliorative activities. Part of what-

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

Right. You only rise to the challenge when there's a challenge that needs to be risen to.

Kieran ([11:37](#)):

Exactly. Yeah. And-

MBS ([11:39](#)):

Do you even want that challenge?

Kieran ([11:40](#)):

In an ideal world, you might think, "Well, we wouldn't need armies in an ideal world. But given the world we're in, it's important to be able to defend the city or whatever it might be.

MBS ([11:50](#)):

Yeah.

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

Aristotle's point that I think is really deep and right is that if those were the only things that were of value, it wouldn't be clear that anything in life had positive value, and it wouldn't be clear that life was worth living at all. I mean, there has to be something more than solving problems. And so, that I think is a really important point. I call the values so that the activities that have value that isn't just problem solving, and I call that existential value because the value that makes existence makes life worth living.





Kieran ([12:27](#)):

I think this has an application to two cases like the mid-life crisis, because I think one way in which mid-life can be characteristically challenging is that the press of things that need doing, the problems at work, the fires to put out, the difficulties with kids, the dealing with your aging parents, all the-

MBS ([12:45](#)):

Just the relentlessness of it all. Yeah.

Kieran ([12:47](#)):

All of that is worth doing. So it's not that it's not worthwhile, but there's so much of it that you could get... So much of your life can become consumed with just preventing bad things, that you lose touch with the things that make life worth living in the first place. Aristotle's pointing in part to the fact that it's the non problem-solving activities that in some sense make life good to begin with, and that we have to recognize that. Um, and so I think that is a really important, important point and one that has the deep resonance for me and I think for a lot of people.

MBS ([13:27](#)):

I think I understand what falls into the categories of problem solving. But what sort of activities are in the category of not about solving the problem, that are for the sake of themselves rather than for fixing something that isn't working as well as it could have?

Kieran ([13:43](#)):

Yeah. This is where we were starting to get into the bits of Aristotle that are a little bit more worrying. For him, the paradigmatic example of this is contemplation. Really the only example of this right is contemplation. By contemplation, he means contemplating the structure of the world and God as the final cause of the world. And so, he's not thinking of scientific or



philosophical inquiry, which are in a way problem solving. He's thinking of, as it were, after you've figured it all out, you sit back and reflect.

Kieran ([14:16](#)):

Maybe that is an activity that has profound value, and maybe it is a value that's not problem-solving. But I think it's a mistake to focus on that exclusively. I think art and literature, telling jokes and stories with friends, listening to music, swimming, or sailing, hobbies, playing games with family and friends, those are all activities that have the kind of existential non problem-solving value that Aristotle is pointing us towards.

MBS ([14:43](#)):

Yeah.

Kieran ([14:43](#)):

I would say, I mean, this is a more complicated case, but I think an important one. He, in a way is thinking all of our needs are ones we will be better off without. As it were, the ideal life will be one in which we didn't need to eat or build shelter for ourselves.

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

It's enlightenment.

Kieran ([15:00](#)):

Right. [crosstalk 00:15:01]-

MBS ([15:01](#)):

Sit under the Bodhi tree and then let life sort it out for you.



Kieran ([15:04](#)):

Exactly, and that might not be right. I mean, I'm inclined to think that there were regrettable needs, the need to defend the city in war. I wish we didn't have that. But then there are needs, things we need to do, that are not really regrettable in that way, like the need to eat, or the need to build our own environment. And so, that makes room for a wider range of activities to have existential value. I actually think a lot of work can have existential value.

Kieran ([15:34](#)):

If there are things you're doing that you would call work, that aren't just solving problems you wish you didn't have to deal with, but as it were, the work you wish you had, then I think that too has the kind of existential value Aristotle is pointing towards. I think that's something he missed.

MBS ([15:53](#)):

Where do you find work like that? Because it's true that for some people it's like... Actually, you may not have that much choice because you're overwhelmed by kids and parents and too much work and worry about money and worry about whatever else. But it's also true that for many of us, there's a space where we're like, "Actually, I have some agency in terms of where I put my time and my focus and my commitment." But I do wonder, it's like, so where do I start? Where do I find the thing that speaks to a life of meaning for me?

Kieran ([16:36](#)):

I think that's a hard question. I think you're right to say that people often have relatively limited control of the basic structure of the work they need to do in order to live. And so, I don't want to downplay the non-work activities. I think often the way to find existential value is to find it with friends, and family, and hobbies, and things that extra vocational, things outside of work. I mean, in work, I don't know if you know that there's a book by David Graeber called *Bullshit Jobs*. If I'm allowed to-



MBS ([17:05](#)):

Yeah.

Kieran ([17:05](#)):

If I like to say bullshit on the podcast.

MBS ([17:06](#)):

Yeah. It was one of the books read out by one of my previous guests here. So you're right on point.

Kieran ([17:12](#)):

It's a terrific book. Part of what he points to is that one of the terrible things about contemporary work is that people often find a lot of what they're doing worthless and they can't even see the point of it. So I think bullshit jobs are the hardest. I think to the extent that your job isn't bullshit, you should be able to find in it something you're producing or contributing to producing, or someone you're helping.

Kieran ([17:35](#)):

I think a lot of jobs are fundamentally about service to others or helping others or making other people's lives better. In those zones of your job, if you look through what you're doing, problem solving day to day to the outputs that make something, or make people's lives better, that's the first place to look for existential value at work. But I think it really depends from case to case.

Kieran ([18:07](#)):

One way to think about it is just it makes sense to do an audit, to look through your week of work and say to yourself, "Okay, of the things I'm doing, how much is just dealing with problems that I wish weren't there in the first place, and where can I find in my own work week or work month, the threads of things that



made me want to do this job to begin with?" You may not be able to find them. It may be that the job is just ameliorative. It really is just about solving problems.

Kieran ([18:41](#)):

But I think most jobs have something in them that has a kind of value that isn't just dealing with problems in that way. But yeah, I think it's a personal thing to, as I said, audit your own experience at work.

MBS ([18:59](#)):

One of the tensions, I think, that appears when you're seeking a life of meaning, is the question around, how much do you settle and how much do you disrupt? Because there is a sense that in settling and accepting what's around you and stopping resisting it, there's a way that potentially there's a path for happiness there. But I think also there's a way that we find meaningful work, and in some ways, we unlock our own greatness by taking on the hard things, which is both exciting.

MBS ([19:36](#)):

It's that Csikszentmihalyi flow state, but it's also terrifying because you're like, "I have no idea what I'm doing here. I'm just making this up as I go along." But it feels like it's the edge of who I am and the edge of my own growth. What, for you, is the way of navigating this tension between the call to settle and the call to disrupt yourself?

Kieran ([20:02](#)):

It's really, really interesting to me that you bring this up because the other part of the passage from Aristotle that I've been really obsessed with recently, and that points towards some of the work I've been doing during the pandemic, is about precisely this. The passage ends with Aristotle's answer to that question. His answer is we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things and being mortal of mortal things, but must so far as we can



make ourselves immortal and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us.

Kieran ([20:35](#)):

And so, he ends with this rousing call to aim for and focus on existential value. He's saying, "Find the things that aren't problem-solving, but that you truly value as sources of meaning in life, that make life positively good, and devote yourself wholeheartedly and exclusively to the pursuit of them." That can seem inspiring, but actually I've come to feel very wary of it. I think there's a fantasy there, that it's easy to fall into.

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

I think the idea of aiming to live your dream life, the power of positive thinking idea, is dangerous because sometimes the dream life just isn't available and it involves a denial of reality to try and pursue it. And sometimes trying to pursue it is distorting. And so, the thing I've come to think, and this is getting closer to a direct answer to your question, is I think the first step is realism about what's hard in your life and what the problems are in your life and not turning away from them or looking too quickly for solutions. I think the idea that we can just positive think our way out of any kind of problem is a real-

MBS ([21:59](#)):

Or get a vision board. That's all I need.

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

Exactly. I think there's a little bit of that in Aristotle, unfortunately, in this passage. Then there's the question, once you've got a sense of what's difficult in your life and you have to figure out like, which of these problems do I, as it were, lean into, which do I retreat from, there I think it's very hard to come up with rules. I mean, this is another thing that Aristotle is really wonderful about in the



Nicomachean Ethics and very influential in saying, is there is this temptation to want simple rules that will apply to every circumstance.

Kieran ([22:36](#)):

But very often, once you've figured out your circumstance as well as you can, it's really a matter of judgment, and it's really personal and particular. And so, looking to a simple rule that's going to tell you an algorithm that will tell you how to solve your life is unlikely to be the way to do it. It's going to involve close attention to your life yourself, and really talking to friends and people who know you and know your life is often going to be a much more illuminating and reliable way to figure things out than looking to a list of 10 rules that someone who doesn't know you has produced.

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

And so, that's part of what Aristotle has this idea of practical wisdom as uncodifiable. It's a kind of ability to judge your circumstance, and to judge other people's circumstances that you can convey and you can give rules of thumb, but there aren't going to be simple principles for it. So it really is a matter of drilling down into your own life, and ideally, with other people.

MBS ([23:39](#)):

See, Aristotle just wouldn't have made it in the 21st century if hasn't got the capacity to do clickbait, 10 Guaranteed Rules To Make You Happy By Tomorrow.

Kieran ([23:51](#)):

That's right. That-

MBS ([23:51](#)):

You won't believe number seven.





Kieran ([23:51](#)):

Yes. He is the enemy of clickbait. It's not that there aren't ideas that you could turn into clickbait in Aristotle. I mean, even this idea of existential value, I feel like one of the things I like about it, and one of the ways in which I gravitate towards it, is that I feel like there's a slogan there, that it is useful to just bear in mind to...

MBS ([24:13](#)):

Yes.

Kieran ([24:14](#)):

Every so often during my day, I think about, is there a little window in my day to do something that I don't have to do. I like having that as a motto, even if I don't always manage it and they all... Either to remember to recite the motto or to live up to it. So I think you can get-

MBS ([24:33](#)):

I like that.

Kieran ([24:33](#)):

... if not clickbait, you can get ideas from Aristotle, but yeah, they're never going to be simple guaranteed rules.

MBS ([24:41](#)):

Kieran, at the start of the conversation, when we were talking about what is mid-life and you, almost as a throwaway line, said something along the lines of, "Death becomes more real to you." Suddenly, you move away from that sense of immortality you have when you're younger to going, "Oh, actually death is a thing now." I'm curious to know, what is the role of death in helping to shape a meaningful life?



Kieran ([25:10](#)):

That's a great question, and a hard question, because I think one way in which philosophers have often wanted to respond to the prospect of death is by trying to argue that death really isn't bad for you, or isn't harmful, or isn't really something to fear at all. There's an argument from another ancient philosopher, Epicurus, that, well, when you're dead, if you don't exist, you won't feel any pain. So what's to be afraid of?

Kieran ([25:45](#)):

It's tempting to go for that kind of consolation, but actually, it doesn't really make sense. I mean, the point is that the reason death is terrible, it's not that you'll feel pain. It's all the things you won't do and all the things you won't get, and being told you won't exist doesn't help with that. So I think, for me, acknowledging that death is a profound deprivation, that it is a terrible thing, and that we face it, and that we can't argue our way out of it or convince ourselves that it's not bad, is a starting point.

Kieran ([26:21](#)):

This goes along with the sense that a frank acknowledgment of the ways in which life is hard is really the precondition of dealing with any of the ways in which life is hard. I mean, the other way in which I feel like thinking about death shifted my sense of my life, and I think it can productively shift people's sense of their lives, is that for me, a big part of the challenge of mid-life, the mid-life crisis, was this idea that I've got a bunch of tasks that I was going to keep repeating over and over again. I'd teach another class or I'd write another paper and there will be a certain number of them and then I would die.

Kieran ([26:59](#)):

And if I worked really hard, it would be 37, and if I didn't work so hard, it would be 24. Putting it in those terms made me realize that structuring my life around the frantic completion of activities, completion of projects, was itself a



distorting influence. So this is another distinction that I think is really important. Also, I could have read this passage from Aristotle, it's another one that has Aristotelian roots, is this distinction I want to draw between what I call telic activities, comes from the Greek telos, which are projects that aim at a completable end.

Kieran ([27:41](#)):

Atelic activities. Basically, this is about things that don't have a natural terminus and that the value is in the process. So you might think making your kids dinner tonight is a telic activity. You're going to hopefully finish it. Parenting is just an ongoing activity. It's not like it ends.

MBS ([27:56](#)):

It never ends.

Kieran ([27:58](#)):

There's no point to which you're like, "Well, I've parented that one. It's all over." It doesn't have a built-in terminus. I think one thing the thinking about the finitude of life and the accountability of projects, the fact that there's a certain number of things you'll get done project-wise, can shift one's orientation towards the value of the process, the value of what I call atelic activities. That is, I think for me, the biggest way in which thinking about the temporal shape of human life, the finitude of human life, around mid-life has changed my sense of what actually matters, and led me to try to reshape not exactly what I do, but what I value in what I do.

Kieran ([28:46](#)):

Is it getting this paper finished? Or is it more that I'm writing a paper, which is something I will finish, but in order to be thinking about philosophical problems about the good life, where thinking about philosophical problems about the good life, thinking about how to live is atelic activity. It's not like it's going to end.



That's an ongoing thing. And so, that reorientation has been a very big part of adapting to mid-life for me.

MBS ([29:11](#)):

That's very interesting. The project is a time-bound manifestation of a larger commitment to a better self that you have.

Kieran ([29:21](#)):

Right. Exactly. It's not that projects don't matter. It matters whether you get things done and there are deadlines, and it's not that those are to be neglected. But it's also very important not to neglect the ways in which, in the process of pursuing things, you're finding a value that isn't mortgaged to completion in the way projects are. I mean, I think this also connects with another theme I've been thinking about a lot recently, which is about success and failure, because it's also projects, you succeed or fail in them.

Kieran ([29:57](#)):

Atelic activities, the process of engaging with things, it's not that it's exactly immune from failure. Sometimes you can't be in the process of doing what you want to be in the process of doing. But it doesn't have quite the same relationship to a finite failure where either you did it or you didn't.

MBS ([30:14](#)):

It's more like dimmer switch of adequateness.

Kieran ([30:17](#)):

Exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think that's another reorientation that I think can be helpful in distancing us from certain ways of evaluating our own lives, that are... I mean, they're not exactly new. They have ancient origins. I mean, there are ways in which the structure of our current lives built around needing to get jobs, needing to make money, the various kinds of milestones that you're aiming at,



things you have to get done, I think that cultural circumstance really lends a lot of weight, both to the project driven structure that I think we need to get away from a bit, the success or failure focus that I think can be overwhelming and distorting and the focus on these ameliorative activities on problem solving, as opposed to what you would actually do if you had the freedom to do what you wanted.

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

Navigating mid-life, you and me, and you writing a book about it, how has your relationship to ambition changed?

Kieran ([31:29](#)):

Well, that's a good question. I would say a couple of things about that. They both fall under the heading of it's one thing to say this in theory, it's another thing to live it in practice.

MBS ([31:48](#)):

Yeah.

Kieran ([31:49](#)):

One of them is this intellectual recognition that I was very project driven, excessively project driven, and that I should value the process more. I should try to recover... I mentioned being seven or eight years old staring at the tree trunks, thinking about philosophical question. I should try to recover some of that spirit, that it was just what mattered was to be engaged with these deep hard questions. At the intellectual recognition of that came much earlier than any real practical steps towards doing it, because I think actually changing, shaking the project-driven orientation is a more than intellectual achievement, more than intellectual challenge.



Kieran ([32:28](#)):

And so, I think I have made progress and I think I am more detached from that, but that's come partly from non intellectual things or not straight-forwardly intellectual work. Like meditation has been a very big thing for me in trying to set aside the future focus and get better at just attending to what's happening now and valuing what's happening now. So that's one thing that I think has changed and that has made me feel less attached to academic ambition.

Kieran ([33:00](#)):

I mean, the other thing I will say is that, I guess, when I wrote this book about mid-life, I didn't think of it as more than a one-off. I thought I'd been an academic, I'm having a mid-life crisis, write a book about the mid-life crisis, get over it. Seems like a plan. I don't know that I thought I would just go back to regular work as an academic afterwards, but I didn't think I wouldn't. So I didn't expect to make radical changes in what I do.

Kieran ([33:30](#)):

In fact, I was wrong about that. I'm writing another book now that is also maybe even more aimed at a wider audience. It's much more memoiry. It's much more personal, even though mid-life was in some ways a personal book. I don't know how this relates to ambition exactly, but I feel like the sense of what I want to do with my life has shifted in that I feel now like I would like to have two sides to it, one being teaching, research, my academic life.

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

But I'd like to sustain and carry on writing in a different vein and writing for an audience in a way that's very different from being an academic, where the audience you're writing for, it's both small and quite specialized, and that has its rewards. But it's very different from writing in a vein where you're thinking, "I want to communicate this to absolutely anyone who's willing to listen."



MBS ([34:28](#)):

Right. How do I move people who may not have the technical knowledge that a fellow philosopher might have?

Kieran ([34:34](#)):

Right. No, exactly. I feel like that shift in conception of audience is... I mean, it's quite deep. I mean, I've said this in other times too, that one thing I realized when I started writing more for non-academic audiences, was that the editorial voice in your head when you're an academic, especially when you're a philosopher, is a nightmare. I mean the editorial voices, "Hold on, you need to distinguish X from Y. Slow this down." And I've got 15 objections.

MBS ([35:04](#)):

The first sentence needs a footnote.

Kieran ([35:07](#)):

Exactly. I mean, it's not conducive to writing in a way that's actually fun to read because the point is not. The point is a certain kind of impregnability against various kinds of skepticism. It's not that I imagine that when I'm writing for other people, writing for a non-academic audience, they'll take everything I say on trust. But I think I do imagine a willing audience, an audience who want to read, and want to learn, and want to be engaged and to see something good in what you're writing, rather than an audience whose professional job it is to object to everything that-

MBS ([35:45](#)):

To engage in the argument and offer an alternative.

Kieran ([35:51](#)):

Right. Yes, exactly. I think that's a big shift and I feel like that has been... I wasn't anticipating that there will be big changes in that way in that... A lot of the





mid-life book is about how to carry on doing what you're doing in a better way, rather than making dramatic life changes. I feel like a thing I hadn't anticipated was that my life would outwardly change in the ways it has.

MBS ([36:18](#)):

Is the new book still provisionally entitled Life is Hard?

Kieran ([36:22](#)):

It is, yes. It's supposed to come out next year. I'm supposed to finish it soon. I have a deadline, so I'm working on it right now.

MBS ([36:30](#)):

Speaking of life is hard and projects. There we go.

Kieran ([36:32](#)):

Yes. Exactly. Yeah, so it's supposed to come out next year. Life is Hard. Yeah. It connects to things we've been talking about, and then this other way of responding to Aristotle where I'm much more focused on the concern that he's idealizing life or downplaying the ways in which life is hard. And so, the project is to think really about what a philosophical approach to the good life or living well would look like if it started not with the ideal, but with the ways in which life is difficult and how we can adapt to them.

Kieran ([37:12](#)):

There are chapters on loneliness, grief, failure, and frustration, injustice. I started thinking about this before the pandemic, but-

MBS ([37:23](#)):

That describes the last week for me.



Kieran ([37:25](#)):

Exactly. No, I mean, it was changed very much by the pandemic because things like loneliness went from being serious, localized problems to being things that virtually everyone had a profound relationship to. Similarly, grief, I think. I mean, people's engagement with the hardships of life has been transformed over the last year, 18 months or so. And so, yeah, my work on the project was changed by that and I wrote it under pandemic conditions in a way that it was itself a consolation.

Kieran ([38:02](#)):

I would bury myself in my office and just think, "I'm going to block out the outside world for at least a few hours and just write." Yeah. That was an unexpected feature of how this book got written.

MBS ([38:17](#)):

Do you have a subtitle for it yet? Will it have a subtitle?

Kieran ([38:18](#)):

Well, we'll see. The current subtitle, again, this is tentative, is Philosophy For Troubled Times. We'll see if that changes.

MBS ([38:31](#)):

You didn't ask for my opinion or feedback, I think you're underselling the book by then.

Kieran ([38:36](#)):

Yeah. There is a question about whether it needs something that brings out more what it can do for you and why this book could make a difference-

MBS ([38:47](#)):

Who's your ideal reader?



Kieran ([38:49](#)):

Well, I mean, it's aimed at both the people who have a preexisting interest in philosophy and would like to read a philosophy book about how to live, that has an unusual and distinctive angle because it starts with hardship and is quite personal. But I would also like it to be a book that can reach anyone who is struggling with any of the things it's about. So anyone who's struggling with loneliness or grief. I hope even if they're not antecedently interested in philosophy, will find that in some way it changes their perspective, illuminates things, and helps them to come to terms with the ways in which life is hard. So-

MBS ([39:30](#)):

If you had to pick one of those audiences who you most wanted to serve, which one is it? The first one or the second one?

Kieran ([39:35](#)):

Wow. Guy, you're asking me a hard question. I mean, I feel like I have written in the deep desire to be able to reach both and not to have to choose between them. So you're pressing on a sensitive point. I mean, I suppose in the end, it's very much, for me, more driven by the problems than by an antecedent sense that, "Here's a survey of philosophical ideas." The way I think about it is I want to write essays about these problems that connect them to one another and that bring out how we could approach them.

Kieran ([40:20](#)):

I'm a philosopher, so the lens through which I think about all of this is simultaneously my own life, my own experience with pain and infirmity, with loneliness, with grief, with injustice, and a philosophical lens. And so, it's how a philosopher might approach these problems as a human being. And so, I guess that tends towards the second thing. It's certainly not a survey philosophy book of, "Here's what philosophers have said about the good life. It's, "Here are some



problems and I'm going to try to grapple with them. I'm a philosopher, so it's going to be a philosophical grappling."

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

Well, this is utterly unasked for opinions from me. It's not even feedback. It's just random opinions from a dude you've never met before.

Kieran ([41:07](#)):

Okay.

MBS ([41:09](#)):

But I've written some books. And so, I know just how hard it is to title and subtitle a book. I think the title is great. The current subtitle serves the first audience, which is people who have some footing in philosophy.

Kieran ([41:24](#)):

Right. Right.

MBS ([41:25](#)):

And it puts off the second audience, which is like, "I don't want philosophy. I want to help navigating these hard problems."

Kieran ([41:31](#)):

Right. Yeah, no, I think that's-

MBS ([41:33](#)):

If you're trying to serve that second audience, which is the bigger audience as well, there's another subtitle to be found, perhaps.

Kieran ([41:41](#)):

I think you and my editor seem to be on the same page about this. So yeah.



MBS ([41:46](#)):

She called me up.

Kieran ([41:49](#)):

I think there's a conversation about that in my nearest future. So yeah. I've been thinking about that. Part of what the challenge for me about thinking about this is that in some way I feel that a kind of loyalty to philosophy, and to the book in its way, that I feel like philosophy or philosopher or something ought to be there. That's not a deal breaker. Maybe that's wrong. But I do think that that is a kind of...

Kieran ([42:21](#)):

The rest of the subtitle, I'm not so much committed to. So I think that's a manifestation of the double life question of, I'm a philosopher, but also I would like to be a writer who writes for anyone and how exactly to balance and fit those two identities together is an interesting...

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

I'd be more interested in a subtitle that didn't talk about philosophy, but talked about a philosopher.

Kieran ([42:47](#)):

Yeah. Right.

MBS ([42:48](#)):

So if it was, A Philosopher's Guide To Navigating The Hardest Things About Life-

Kieran ([42:54](#)):

Right.



MBS ([42:55](#)):

Now I'm interested.

Kieran ([42:56](#)):

Yeah. Maybe that's right. The philosopher captures the sense of-

MBS ([43:00](#)):

You keep saying how personal it is for you.

Kieran ([43:01](#)):

... personality. Right. Also, a philosopher also I think is right, because it's not... I think the thing about Philosophy For Troubled Times, suggests that philosophy is this monolithic thing that I'm going to wheel out.

MBS ([43:12](#)):

Exactly.

Kieran ([43:12](#)):

... which is not how it is.

MBS ([43:13](#)):

It's scary.

Kieran ([43:14](#)):

It really is me.

MBS ([43:15](#)):

It's scary for almost everybody.

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

Yeah, yeah, yeah.



MBS ([43:18](#)):

[crosstalk 00:43:18] scared of philosophy. I don't even know. Such a big word. I don't even know what it means.

Kieran ([43:22](#)):

That's interesting.

MBS ([43:25](#)):

Kieran, let me ask you a final question, if I may.

Kieran ([43:25](#)):

Sure.

MBS ([43:26](#)):

What needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

Kieran ([43:31](#)):

Oh boy. What needs to be said that hasn't been said in this conversation? One thing that we haven't talked about that I think is present in the excerpt from Aristotle and also in the writing and thinking I've been doing recently, is the question of injustice and really the question of the relationship between living one's own life well, and one's obligations and commitments to other people.

Kieran ([43:58](#)):

I think the other theme, that we can't really tackle now, but I think comes out of Aristotle, and I think is worth grappling with, and that I've been grappling with, is how to figure out what, in terms of living a life we can feel okay with, we have to do and what we can do to respond to the injustice of the world. In my case, I mean, climate change and climate justice is the thing that has been most





engaging and urgent for me. But there are many other forms of injustice that we're surrounded with that, again, the pandemic has made especially vivid.

Kieran ([44:39](#)):

I think it's really important not to think of the question of the good life as a question about you in isolation from the rest of the world and the rest of society. That's a thing that we have not maybe foregrounded as much as we might have.

MBS ([44:59](#)):

Okay. Well, that was pretty funny. Michael, don't-give-anybody-advice, Bungay Stanier slathering on advice about how to write a book title, or a subtitle. But audience hooks aside, what I'm sitting with from this conversation is this realization that, yes, things do shift as you get older. It's not just a younger you with backache. It's like the rocket ship going into space and those booster rockets fall away, and suddenly it's a different trajectory. It's a different gravity. It's a different way of relating to what's up and what's down.

MBS ([45:35](#)):

Now, I'm not sure it came out explicitly in this conversation between Kieran and I, but I am contemplating what is sweetness to me now? Where do I find joy? And what do I need to let go of so I can fully step towards that? How about you? If you're after more of Kieran, you can certainly buy his books, which I would recommend. He's got a new one coming out as he said in the interview. You can find him on Twitter where he's most active at his full name, Kieran Setiya. I spell it for you. K-I-E-R-A-N S-E-T-I-Y-A.

MBS ([46:16](#)):

Thank you for listening. I really appreciate you being one of the many people, actually, who listen to this podcast. You can help me out by leaving a review on your podcast app. You can help me out by passing this on. If you know anybody



else entering mid-life, or exiting mid-life, or struggling with mid-life, perhaps this is a conversation that they'd like to hear.

MBS ([46:36](#)):

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