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

There's a New Yorker story published years ago called The Dolt, it's by Donald Barthelme. And the final sentence reads thus, "Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin." 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.

MBS ([00:31](#)):

Now, I've been thinking very hard about what it means to begin over the last little while. Yes, I have a new book coming out in January and, yes, there's a connection there. I'm speaking today to Tom Vanderbilt, whose most recent book is *Beginners: The Joy and Transformative Power of Lifelong Learning*. Now, Tom's a journalist, so he has written a little about a lot of things, that's the nature



of the beast, and it's put him in a pretty interesting position over and over and over again.

Tom ([01:01](#)):

The funny thing about writing a book about beginners is that as a journalist I feel like I am a perpetual beginner, I really am always plunging into some new field of knowledge that I really have the barest background in. You have to become a quick study and I'm a little bit, perhaps I'm a mile wide and an inch deep, but I mean, the benefit of that is that sometimes a person who's not essentially siloed as they say in one field can skip between these fields and perhaps find connections or find connections between ideas or connections between people who might not otherwise meet, and you can be the bridge between those ideas and perhaps in some ways make other ideas and things happen.

MBS ([01:44](#)):

Tom's written books but also many articles in impressive places like WIRED, and Outside, and the London Review of Books, and the Financial Times. I'm thinking, when you find an idea, you get an angle, you get a hook, how do you decide what is a book and what isn't?

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

Writers are at heart romantics and if you love what you're doing, I fall in love with every topic but often these are flirtations. You're hanging out with someone for a night, for a weekend, and then you've seen that, well, okay, we've figured each other out and it's time to move on. But so it's a book, yeah. There has to be that depth, that interest, that idea that it's going to appeal to enough people and that there isn't something already out there that is essentially doing what you're doing which is a constant occupational hazard.



MBS ([02:37](#)):

Aha, so do I flirt or is this a serious romance? Now, look, a lot of us flirt with new ideas, new possibilities, new opportunities, but we often do very little else other than bat our eyelids at it. For the one big reason, we are bad at doing new things particularly as we get older in life. I asked Tom, how can we cope with the foolishness of starting a new venture?

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

One reason I wrote the book was to put it out there that you are not alone, that this is a process. This is just a necessary process of learning. The philosopher, Daniel Dennett has this idea that without mistakes there is no learning. If you already know how to do something that's not learning. Just to put it out there that maybe some people will be better at it, this thing in the beginning than others will, but that mistakes are just necessary. You can learn from them but just to go in with this mindset that it's okay to look foolish, that that is an inherent part of the beginning process. And that what may look foolish might be this interesting learning going on that is a little bit out of your control and that's part of the idea here too, is that when you leave your comfort zone interesting things happen and that's where the growth happens.

Tom ([03:57](#)):

There's this cliché that nothing grows in a comfort zone, you have to go out there. And often there's various ways to look like a fool. In my own book that involved everything from almost essentially cracking my head open on the bottom of an ocean floor while surfing to sounding some really off notes when trying to sing. And, yes, would I have preferred the moment I began this vocal instruction to hit every note perfectly? Yes, but then why would I even be in that vocal instruction? I needed to get to that place. I would just try to console people that... And also, no one's looking. If you go to a class-



MBS ([04:37](#)):

Yes, that's a key thing.

Tom ([04:38](#)):

... With a bunch of other beginners people are concerned with their own. Everyone's obsessed that everyone is looking at them, this, I think they call it the spotlight effect in psychology when in reality really no one is unless someone's particularly interested you. But so just the mistakes you think are magnified in the eyes of others, they've probably not even noticed.

MBS ([04:59](#)):

There was that great quote, I can't remember who said this but it's, "I used to worry what other people thought of me and then I realized nobody thinks of me."

Tom ([05:05](#)):

Right.

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

And that's, oh, that's actually a very freeing experience.

Tom ([05:11](#)):

Yes.

MBS ([05:12](#)):

And I believe we're going to finish this interview with you giving us a solo song, so that's something for everybody to look forward to. I'm kidding. Tom's looking very anxious on that screen there. I'm kidding.



Tom ([05:22](#)):

I will sing if you will play harmonica or ukulele or something, or... Oh dear, oh, no.

MBS ([05:29](#)):

I have a ukulele but I'm a beginner with that so I'd probably read the perfectly complement to you because I can't play the uke that well although I love it. It's my foolish endeavor in some ways, which is I just play it badly and sing badly to it and it's a source of joy for me. Tom, tell us about the book you've selected to read.

Tom ([05:53](#)):

It's called Range by David Epstein. The subtitle is why-

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

Oh, that's it.

Tom ([05:57](#)):

Why... Yes. Yes, Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World. And what was particularly interesting to me about this book, well, first of all, it came out right as mine was going off to the printer, but it answered, it fulfilled for me something that went unfulfilled in my book. When I first pitched my own book I had this chapter in there and writers pitches always change over time and the book-

MBS ([06:19](#)):

Of course.

Tom ([06:19](#)):

... You think you're going to write-



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

Is never the book.

Tom ([06:22](#)):

Yeah, you'll have a no. Right. I thought, well, to talk about beginners I should probably have a chapter that looks at something like the world of science and tries to find interesting case study of someone who was a beginner in a field and made some huge breakthrough or changed your mind. And I started dabbling around in that and I found some interesting things, but then I felt I wanted to keep the book a little bit pure in the sense that I wanted this to focus on only what essentially people did in their spare time and not to make it a manifesto for changing one's job or quitting one's job or having this mid-career pivot, but really this is what I thought overlooked aspect of leisure, for lack of a better word.

Tom ([07:06](#)):

But what was great about Range was that this was an entire book essentially delving into this notion I had about the idea that there are people that really didn't cleave so tightly to one specialized focus in science or any other career dabbled, and were able to bring some of that experience into this new field and created great things as a result. It was just a perfect distillation of this idea so I was very happy to see it and read it.

MBS ([07:38](#)):

I suspect it was a brilliant marketing move because maybe people are like me going, "This is the book I need to at least have on my shelves to self-justify my lack of specialty in anything." That becomes a comfort blanket as much as anything else. Which two pages did you choose for us?



Tom ([07:58](#)):

32 and 33 in the chapter titled The Cult of the Headstart. And... Yeah.

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

So, Tom Vanderbilt reading from David Epstein's book, Range. Tom, over to you.

Tom ([08:12](#)):

Okay. And I'll just preface it briefly that because he mentions Tiger and Polgàr, and he's referring to Tiger Woods, the golfer, of course, and Judit Polgàr who is a chess Grandmaster, the highest ranking female player of all time, I believe. And part of this amazing family that was taught by László Polgàr, their father, all three daughters were taught to play chess and they all became quite good, some better than others. Anyway...

Tom ([08:46](#)):

"We've been using the wrong stories, Tiger story, and the Polgàr story to give the false impression that human skill is always developed in an extremely kind learning environment. If that were the case, specialization that is both narrow and technical and it begins as soon as possible would usually work, but it doesn't even work in most sports. If amount of early specialized practice in a narrow area were the key to innovative performance, Cervantes would dominate every domain they touched and child prodigies would always go onto it with eminence.

Tom ([09:18](#)):

"As psychologist, Ellen Winner, one of the foremost authorities on gifted children noted, 'No servant has ever been known to become a big sea creator who changed their field.' There are domains beyond chess in which massive amounts of narrow practice make for Grandmaster-like intuition. Like golfers, surgeons improve with repetition of the same procedure, accountants and



bridge and poker players develop accurate intuition through repetitive experience. Canamen pointed those domains, 'Robust statistical regularities,' but when the rules are altered just slightly, it makes experts appear to a traded flexibility for narrow skill.

Tom ([09:55](#)):

"In research in the game of bridge where the order of play was altered, experts had difficult time adapting to the new rules than did non-experts. When experienced accountants rest in a study to use a new tax offer reductions that replace the previous one, they did worse than novices. Erik Dane, a Rice University professor who studies organizational behavior calls this phenomenon cognitive entrenchment. His suggestions for avoiding it are about the polar opposite of a strict version of the 10,000 hour school of thought, very challenges within a domain drastically, and as a fellow researcher put it, insist on having one foot outside your world.

Tom ([10:35](#)):

"Scientists and members of general public are about equally likely to have artistic hobbies, but scientists inducted into the highest national academies are much more likely to have applications outside of their vocation, and those who have won the Nobel Prize are more likely still. Compared to other scientists, Nobel laureates are at least 22 times more likely to partake as an amateur actor, dancer, magician, or other type of performer. Nationally-recognized scientists are much more likely than other scientists to be musicians, sculptors, painters, printmakers, woodworkers, mechanics, electronics tinkerers, glassblowers, poets, or writers of both fiction and nonfiction. And again, Nobel laureates are far more likely still.

Tom ([11:20](#)):

"The most successful experts also belong to the wider world. 'To him who observes them from afar,' said Spanish Nobel Laureate, Santiago Ramon y Cajal,



the father of modern neuroscience, 'It appears as though they are scattering anticipating their energies while in reality they are channeling and strengthening them.' The main conclusion of work that took years of studying scientists and engineers, all of whom were regarded by peers as true technical experts, was that those who did not make a creative contribution to their field lacked aesthetic interest outside of their narrow area.

Tom ([11:56](#)):

"A psychologist and prominent creativity researcher, Dean Keith Simonton observed, 'Rather than obsessively focusing on a narrow topic, creative achievers tend to have broad interests.' This breadth often supports insights that can not be attributed to domain specific expertise alone. Those findings are reminiscent of speeches Steve Jobs gave in which he famously recounted the importance of a calligraphy class to his design aesthetics. 'When we were designing the first Macintosh computer it all came back to me,' he said. 'If I had never dropped in on that single course in college the Mac would never have had multiple typefaces or proportionally-spaced fonts.'"

Tom ([12:39](#)):

But I think maybe one of the main takeaways for you I'm suddenly thinking is that a Nobel prize could be-

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

Exactly.

Tom ([12:46](#)):

... Circling in your future because you've taken up a musical instrument.

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

I've taken ukulele and I'm another step closer to that trip to Sweden so I'm quite excited about that. I should probably email them to let them know that I'm



taking that up and maybe I'm going to do Dungeon & Dragons as well, and who knows what might come from that? How did your exploration into different skills you learned and tried out first as a beginner, how has that influenced you as a writer do you think?

Tom ([13:17](#)):

That's a good question because it's something that's a little bit hard for me to self-analyze. And I do think as a writer who has a very fluid coverage of topics, let's say I was already living some of this mantra I try to express in the book. I mean, I guess a true self-realization of my own mantra here would be for me to write something like a screenplay, poetry, even fiction, which I've only ever done the barest amount of. But also there is this thing where I do need to make a living and the things I make a living in are generally nonfiction.

Tom ([13:58](#)):

But I think it's an interesting question and I often thought, "Well, has this thing actually... Could I take something away from my project in what I did with Epstein is talking about in Range, how did it change my own life? I think more important than my own career, perhaps, it's just my own sense of self than my own personality and my own sense of wellbeing, that taking on all of these activities really expanded the notion of what it was possible for me to do, change the notion of what I should be doing. Added a whole new set of, let's say, nouns to my own life resume as Jesse Itzler calls it. That for me was a bigger takeaway. I'm not sure that my writing has changed all that much but... Yeah, sort of, if that explains it.

MBS ([14:54](#)):

In that sense of self, it does. What do you know now, Tom, about the art of beginning and the art of learning that you might not have known before you ventured into this book?



Tom ([15:07](#)):

I mean, I guess I have a stronger sense of resilience, let's say, about... And I think it is a process. No matter what the thing is there are a series of steps you go through, a series of feelings you have, and those are both positive and negative. I mean, for me, the positives were just that sense of novelty. I mean, just it wakens the brain, it awakens the self. You're moving your brain and your body in new ways. There's a whole new vocabulary to whatever it is, sailing or gardening, you're just in love with this, all this new information. There's new stuff you can buy. Let's not forget there's stuff you can buy.

MBS ([15:52](#)):

Exactly. I'm going to gauge it up here. Yeah, exactly.

Tom ([15:52](#)):

Yeah. I mean, my favorite part of trying to learn to draw was essentially visiting art supply stores, which I was doing already but now I really had a real reason to go there and laid out some serious coin. And then the negatives, like we talked about before, there's that sense of feeling foolish, there's just that the mistakes you're going to make and mistakes tend to be very similar in a discipline. No matter who the person is we all make them. I mean, in the field of road cycling, for example, have you ever seen people out and they have those shoes that you clip into your pedals?

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

Yeah, yeah.

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

... And so you can really spin those pedals. Everyone who cycles at some point falls over in the beginning because they can't-



MBS ([16:37](#)):

Exactly.

Tom ([16:38](#)):

... Unclip the damn thing. It's just-

MBS ([16:39](#)):

Yeah, exactly.

Tom ([16:40](#)):

Everyone feels like an idiot yet everyone does it. And the ten-year veteran can look over and say, "Ah, I can't remember I did that one."

MBS ([16:47](#)):

Yeah, exactly right.

Tom ([16:48](#)):

So there's both positives and negatives and a process. I mean, I think it is we're all beginners in a unique way but also in the same way.

MBS ([17:02](#)):

Yeah. I mean, there's that learning hierarchy, I guess it's just you started unconsciously and competent where you're like, "I don't even know I'm bad," and then you move to consciously incompetent where you're like, "Oh, I'm bad. I'm really bad at this." Then consciously competent which is I'm beginning to master it and then unconsciously competent which is when it becomes habitual and kind of in the bones.

Tom ([17:28](#)):

Yeah. I love that formulation. And it does remind me of something from, let's say the world of singing. Not only did I not know how to sing I didn't even even



really know what singing instruction was. I mean, I imagined a cozy little room with a piano and my instructor would just start playing these songs and I would just give it my best, and kind of a lounge singer, I would just be belting it out but it really wasn't like that at all. I mean, we really had to essentially go through this whole more fundamental deep process of breaking me down, breaking down decades of bad habits-

MBS ([18:06](#)):

Everything in bad phrasing or whatever, yeah.

Tom ([18:08](#)):

Yeah, just habits. And I really had to reevaluate my whole relationship to language which is interesting as a writer because song language is very different than spoken language, even though it's the same action essentially. A lot of singing instruction to me seemed very elemental and simplistic and childlike and I felt like an idiot doing it, yet, it was just essential. That was something I had to learn about a lot of these things was just, the very pedagogy of it was different than I imagined it would be.

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

Do you have any insight about what it takes to survive the conscious incompetent phase? Because it feels that that's the place where I speak for myself but I think I'm speaking for some others as well, which is I want to quit. And I'm like, "You know what? I am a middle-aged man and I have constructed my life to be mostly successful at most of the stuff that I do." There's not a whole lot that I stumble around being foolish at and when I try and take on something new I feel that awkwardness of, God, do you even know that this was bad? I didn't even know that I didn't know this. It's there's definitely a pool to go, "Well, maybe I could just go and do something else instead and it would be easier or faster or less spotlighting. What does it take to get through this, Tom?"



Tom ([19:28](#)):

Yeah. Well, first I would just advise that you don't have to be masochistic about it. Unless someone is paying you to learn something, life is short, you don't have to stick with something that you're genuinely not feeling the love. I mean, you might be feeling the love, you're just not feeling the talent or the aptitude, and that's fine. But if you're really just not enjoying it on some level I would advise, just move on. I mean, there's such a cult of mastery and a negative idea about quitting. But again, it's okay to dabble, it's okay to realize something isn't your jam.

Tom ([20:07](#)):

But when you feel it is yet you're not making the progress you hope, one thing is to just not go into something with massive goals, I think that's just a major problem people have. And people were taught endlessly to come up with goals and write these down and have very clear paths that we want to take and maybe even have a timeframe, but I think that is often a road to disappointment because those goals can become... You tend to be making those goals, as you said, during this period of unconscious incompetent so you don't know what the goals should even be because you don't know how long it's going to take you to become even remotely good at something. The goals you set will come back to haunt you and will I think get in the way of the thing you're trying to learn and just make you feel bad.

Tom ([20:57](#)):

Learning something like juggling, I mean, juggling five balls is the thing that separates a really great juggler from a pretty good juggler. Five, is this magic number and it can take a year. And so I had this going in, I thought, "Well, maybe I'll try for five but to be honest it'll really be four, even three." I mean, you



go into a room and ask 100 people, "Who here can juggle three balls?" You're you're going to get a very small number of people raising their hands.

Tom ([21:28](#)):

I just think beginning with very small goals is just the way to build confidence and and give yourself that emotional ladder that you can keep climbing that makes you feel like you are making some progress. And progress can be so minute. And the last thing I'll say is that progress is not always a linear process upward. If there was any-

MBS ([21:51](#)):

It's never a linear process, it's never a linear process.

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

But I feel people feel that's only applies to them, like, "Oh, that person is just getting it and I'm going backwards," but this has been studied again and again. And in juggling, for example, one day jugglers were doing 100 cycles of juggling three balls, the next day they couldn't do 10. There are just these hiccups that happened which have to do with sometimes the brain, you're reconsolidating memories, the brain trying to make these new linkages, the brain communicating with your muscles and it doesn't always sometimes quite work. So that's when people advise all sorts of tricks like changing up your practice. But again, yeah, I would think...

MBS ([22:32](#)):

That's interesting. I learned I can mostly juggle three balls and what I really appreciate about how I was taught to do it was I was taught to let the balls drop because the secret of juggling is in the throw rather than obsessing about the catch. And so I just remember just the resistance when throwing a ball up in the air and letting it just go splat on the ground and how counter-intuitive that felt.



Is there something about learning which is get to the edge about where the mistake is and wallow in the mistake? Does that help?

Tom ([23:16](#)):

Yeah. I mean, that's a great point, and that is, what you bring up is a very good and established juggling practice technique. And it reminds me of what we were just talking about as well, which is that, I thought juggling was about somehow tracking every ball in flight with your eyes. And this is the exact mistake beginners make, they're trying to throw up each of these three balls independently and then follow each of them. And you see their head whipping around. It's possible to do that. It's really about establishing this almost automatic pattern that you then just catch automatically, but it's hard for us to overcome that.

Tom ([23:58](#)):

But I think you're right. There are mistakes I think that that harm us or that don't produce progress or there are mistakes that do. And I always use the example of when my daughter was trying to learn to ride a bicycle. And I put the training wheels on, she was about three, and this is a very common thing that people do because you think, well, it allows them to ride a bike without falling over. But what it doesn't do is give you a sense of what a bike actually feels like.

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

Right, this is errorless learning. Yeah, I think-

Tom ([24:27](#)):

Exactly, yes.

MBS ([24:28](#)):

Thank you. [crosstalk 00:24:28].



Tom ([24:28](#)):

What happened was that she went really fast and tried to turn and fell over. And it was an error but it was an error that taught her nothing about how to actually ride a bike. Whereas... So I eventually, like a lot of people do, I took the pedals off, made it into what they call a balance bike. That was every time you felt like you were going to fall you actually had to correct it yourself. And I think she did fall once on that even, but they became productive mistakes. The dropping balls is productive in juggling. I'm trying to link this back to cycling, but anyway, so...

MBS ([25:06](#)):

You said your productive mistakes is really helpful. Is there a way of actively coming to mistakes so that there's a better chance that they can become productive? Because I feel often with mistakes the temptation is to hurry on as fast as you can, there's nothing to see here, keep moving people.

Tom ([25:27](#)):

Right.

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

And I'm wondering how you help somebody to stop and go, "If this mistake was productive what would I be learning here?"

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

That's a good question. Yeah, I think I really try to have a relationship with my mistakes without at the same time letting them harden. I mean, there's a fine line between a mistake and a bad habit and that was happening to me quite a bit in surfing, for example, where I just found it hard as many people do to jump up on this moving board at certain-



MBS ([26:04](#)):

It's so hard.

Tom ([26:04](#)):

... Speed with waves around you.

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

It's impossible.

Tom ([26:08](#)):

I thought it hard to not look down at the board and at my feet because I wanted to make sure I was actually on this thing. The problem with that though is it kicks off this whole neural muscular adaptation where you shift your weight forward in the very act of looking downward that can shift your body weight, it can push the nose of the board under water. I mean, surfing is maddening for this because a lot of the behaviors you think would correct the mistake you're making actually only make it worse. They call it pearling or nosediving. This to this day torments me in surfing, when you take this plunge and you sometimes go down in a very frightening way. Sometimes you have to pedal faster into that wave that you think is about to plunge you downward, when your impulse is to lean back on the board and maybe slow down. And so it's just filled with things like that that at the moment are very hard to actually deal with.

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

It's interesting. There's so much about so many of these things that the secret to mastery turns out to be counter-intuitive, like from juggling don't track the balls. For surfing it's don't look at your feet but your weight back. It's like drawing, it's don't draw what you see because what you're seeing is not at all what actually is there. It's turn the thing upside down and draw the thing upside down so you're forced to reevaluate what it actually looks like.



Tom ([27:45](#)):

Yeah, that's a really astute observation. I think it brings up an idea here that often what gets most powerfully in the way of learning a skill is our brain, is our conscious knowledge. Because skill learning is mostly unconscious. I mean, if you went outside, if a listener to this podcast went outside after this and I said, "Try to analyze how you're walking. Really think about how you're walking, study your walking and look down at your feet." You get slightly worse at it. We're all-

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

That's right.

Tom ([28:15](#)):

... Expert walkers, we've put in our 10,000 hours. And the secret to that is we don't think about it at all. Except maybe if there's some strange glitch where we trip on the pavement and then it's never our fault, it's the pavement's fault. But this is something that you just have to let go and let your analytical mind go. You can use that analytical mind to analyze mistakes after the fact by looking at footage and stuff like that but in the moment just... And this is hard for people especially let's say middle-aged people who are really goal-oriented and progress-oriented and want to know... They want to know why they're making a mistake, they're making guess, so...

MBS ([28:55](#)):

Yeah. You explored five new skills, things to begin in the book. Are you learning something new now?

Tom ([29:09](#)):

Oh, a little bit. I mean, I number one, I moved into a house in the first time in my adult life. I've been a long time apartment dweller and I always had a building superintendent or some similar figure to take care of stuff. So any



homeowner, I would say, becomes a beginner in 1000 ways, from plumbing issues to gutters to, you name it. And in a way this speaks to the golden age of learning that I often refer to that I think we are living in, in that, which largely involves the presence of YouTube and online videos that because I'm garbage at repair manuals, which is ironic being a writer but often I think they're terribly written. But I think reading... And this gets to that thing about how we learn skills. It's a very difficult way to actually try to embody an activity or a physical skill.

Tom ([30:10](#)):

We're memetic creatures born to imitate other humans, we're social learners. So to see a plumber actually unclogging a toilet on YouTube and just telling you, "Break it down step-by-step," you could watch his body language exactly what it does, that is a great way to learn. So any homeowner out there you've gone through this process. And there's a few other things, indoor climbing, for example I'm trying to get better at that with my daughter. And it's, when I say get better it's one of these disciplines that the lines of what getting better are very clear because each climb is numbered. There's 5.1-

MBS ([30:53](#)):

Yeah, 3.6 or a 5.1 or something like that. And you're like, "I can claim a 5.0, I can't climb a 5.2."

Tom ([31:00](#)):

Yeah. I think I'm not even sure where I am right now but there's a number of that for me is the five ball juggling that I'm not sure I'll ever get there but I'll just keep at it because it's an interesting activity. But I'm always... I don't want to sound like I'm a... What's the word? Serial non-monogamous when it comes to skill learning that I'm always looking for some... That I'm hopeless still at times although there is that, oh sure. Because my point here is that I'm still trying to work on the things I set out to learn in the book and those still entertain me and



they're all deep skills I think that even make progress with, which I think applies to too many things.

MBS ([31:44](#)):

I'm looking forward to the photo of you juggling on a surf board. I think then you'll really have really hit something.

Tom ([31:52](#)):

I mean, if you go to my Instagram account I did juggle while riding my bike no-handed mostly to amuse my daughter and then also to show that I can do it, but I almost cracked my skull on that. In some ways surfing would be easier once you got a nice, stable, long wave, you wouldn't want to juggle while you were catching the wave but once you're up, I'm sure Kelly Slater could do it right now, but...

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

Hey, Tom, has exploring what it takes to learn taught you anything about what it takes to teach? How do I teach better?

Tom ([32:37](#)):

Excellent question. And I'm not really someone who has taught although after doing this book and trying some of these skills I have in some cases become... I have done the barest beginnings of teaching. And I think that this is a bit of a cliché but it's still underrated. I think that one of the best ways you can actually learn is to teach. And there's this mantra in medical school, see one, do one, teach one.

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

That's right.



Tom ([33:08](#)):

I think one thing that... You see these online courses out there like masterclass which I think are... And they'll have you learn filmmaking with Martin Scorsese or something like that. I really think those are more interesting as almost the whole files are [crosstalk 00:33:24]. Yeah, into those people themselves. I mean, but it raises this idea, we revere masters often rightfully so but they are often not the people we actually should be learning from at least at that beginning stage.

Tom ([33:37](#)):

I mean, what you really need is a teacher that still knows what it was like to not be that good. I mean, Lionel Messi, amazing football player, probably can't break down step-by-step what he's doing. And this is an interesting thing that both the novice and the expert share. Neither in a sense know what they're doing, but for different reasons. I mean, the novice truly doesn't know what they're doing. The master doesn't really consciously know what they're doing anymore.

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

That model, again, which is you moving from unconscious incompetence and then you're moving to unconscious competence.

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

Exactly, yeah.

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

Most of them are unconscious.

Tom ([34:20](#)):

Yeah, that's right.



MBS ([34:20](#)):

And it's interesting that you look at some of the very best soccer coaches like Pep, some of you-

Tom ([34:26](#)):

Pep Guardiola.

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

The coach of Manchester City, yeah. And he's, he was a average professional soccer player. He was okay at it but he wasn't a star, he wasn't no Lionel Messi by any means. But there's something about being good enough to understand it but not being naturally talented enough that you don't have to understand it. Allows you to perhaps be in a position to teach.

Tom ([34:51](#)):

Yeah. And I think just having that ability to still break things down, but I think even more important than any question of ability is just empathy, to remember what it was like, to know what that beginner is going through and not simply get frustrated and say, "I don't know why you're not getting this, everyone knows how to do this," or something like that, and to just be a shoulder to cry and a helping hand.

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

Yeah. And when my nephew, George, trying to teach me some computer game, he's like, "Just do what I'm doing. Give it to me, I'll do it for you." And I'm like, "You know what?" He's 10 so I'm not expecting him to be a master trainer in this, but this was the worst experience I've had for a while because you're like, he taught me nothing. I didn't understand what was going on.



Tom ([35:48](#)):

Yeah, yeah. It is difficult to learn with children. For an article I was doing I was playing the video game Fortnite actually with my daughter. And I was in a set of squads with her friends and I was so routinely labeled a bot, which in video game language is just like a new, but it's just the worst insult. Because I was trying to learn on the fly which is very difficult and stressful when you have a lot of judgmental ten-year-olds around.

MBS ([36:12](#)):

They're all judgmental, 10. Tom, I've loved the conversation. What hasn't yet been said that should be said in this conversation between you and me?

Tom ([36:23](#)):

I mean, I would just say, I think there are so many self stories, stories that people tell themselves. And I was telling myself for many years just about what it is to take up a skill or to try to learn something new. And there's been a lot of messaging in this other direction of, especially in this day and age of increased I think professionalization and the ever spreading element in our lives of mass media, in that, we're always looking at people doing amazing things, which is great. But it leaves out this idea that there are a lot of things that we could take a try at and maybe not be anywhere near as good at but these things could still bring so much pleasure to our lives. And I'll just use the example of singing again which I think I heard so often from people I was talking to when I'm working on the book. I love to sing but I'm just, I'm tone-deaf. And they've actually studied this, hardly anyone is physically tone-deaf. This is a very a very remote medical condition. Most people are just-

MBS ([37:34](#)):

My brother has that for sure. But I think-



Tom ([37:36](#)):

Okay.

MBS ([37:38](#)):

But I'm kidding, yeah.

Tom ([37:39](#)):

No, but, I mean, most people are just out of practice so they've never had the practice. We don't sing enough together in public, we've lost the ability. We're thus, people who do, do it. We tend to think they're this freakish God-given talent that, oh, they're a singer, we are not singers. And I think we can all be singers. We can all... No one says they were just born to serve a tennis ball because that's a very odd motion that takes a lot of work. You could be a little bit more coordinated, sure, but we tend to think your singing is just the thing that you open your mouth and there it is but it really takes a lot of work, it's a motor skill. And it's something that I think anyone could do at any age. You can get better, you can feel better as you get better, bringing more pleasure. But at the end of the day it's not about how good you are, just what is it doing for you?

MBS ([38:32](#)):

Yeah, exactly.

Tom ([38:33](#)):

And I found that even singing badly, practicing singing badly, failing to hit my scales-

MBS ([38:40](#)):

Your high key.



Tom ([38:42](#)):

It's still brought a lot of pleasure and just brought all these things that we always hear that we're missing in modern day life about focus and mindfulness and contemplation and relaxation and happiness. The list goes on.

MBS ([38:56](#)):

When I first moved to Toronto I signed up for a hip hop class. I've always loved dancing and I actually know how to do a quick step and a waltz, but I'd like to be cool. So I thought I'd do some b-boying, some break dancing. Anyhow, I signed up and I was in this class and, one, I was the only beginner, everybody has to be doing this for long enough that they look good. Number two, I was at least 10 years older than anybody else. And three, I definitely had the least melanin skin pigmentation of anybody else. It was awkward, and I wimped out, I never went back and I regret that. So be foolish, and perhaps more profoundly than that, be willing to unlearn as well as learn. Explore forgetting, explore letting go so that there is this courage and this capacity and this enthusiasm for the new thing.

MBS ([40:02](#)):

You can find out about Tom at his website tomvanderbilt.com. You'll find out about his books and his articles there. Thank you again for listening, I really do appreciate it. Reviews always welcome on your podcast app, thank you for that if you've already done it. The Duke Humfrey's I should tell you about, it's the free membership site where, come to the website mbs.works and you can get access to unreleased episodes, to transcripts if you like to read the stuff, I certainly liked that and the like, free downloads.

MBS ([40:34](#)):

And I would also just make this request, if this conversation struck a chord for you, who else in your life might like to hear it as well? We grow this audience person by person, word of mouth, by word of mouth recommendation. So if



you're willing to make a recommendation to somebody who you think is interested in beginning and learning and gaining new skills and expanding the possibilities of who they are, please pass conversation on. You're awesome, and you're doing great.