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MBS (00:00):

What's the clearest memory you've got of something that was a while ago. I mean, I've got a few flash moments that come to mind right away, visiting a wine maker in the Hills of Cypress on that very first holiday that I took with Marcella, breaking up with a girlfriend before Marcella, in cafe in Canberra, a Christmas spent having a picnic with my family in Tidmambella during a hot summer, these memories flash bright, but the truth is I remember more, I guess, a feeling or a visceral experience. I don't really remember the details and honestly, the details I do remember. I'm not totally sure of, I mean that winemaker, am I remembering him or am I actually just remembering the photograph that I think I took of him, but what if you remembered all the details, if you remembered everything perfectly, not just that you had a birthday party when you were eight, but that there were 12 presence and you only liked



three of them and you knew exactly what those three were and who gave them to you and how you played with them and where they inevitably ended up.

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

I mean, would that be amazing or would that be onerous? My memory only gets dodgier day by day as time takes on. And sometimes I worry of about that. And sometimes I remember that the forgetting is one of the great adaptive strategies of life. Welcome to Two 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. Today's guest, Dr. Scott Small is a brain mechanic. He is a physician who treats pathological memory disorders like Alzheimer's and he helps people manage that terrible disease. He's also an author who celebrates the benefits of forgetting. And that's the title of his book, *Forgetting the Benefits of Not Remembering*. Scott remains grounded in the deeper purpose of being a doctor.

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

There is something about not just being a drug pusher as a physician, but being a true physician by which I mean, compassionately talking with patients, educating them, helping them manage their fears and that's the part of Alzheimer's management, which I actually didn't expect. I was sort of hardcore basic science. I want to understand mechanisms of memory. And so there's the joy of that, but ultimately that's not sufficient. The real joy will come when we can really, intervene meaningfully.

MBS ([02:43](#)):

Over time sign has definitely made strides towards this. So now we're able to diagnose Alzheimer's earlier, but honestly this creates its own ethical dilemmas. How do you begin a conversation with someone who has just started showing the first signs.



Scott ([03:00](#)):

For them often, the worry is the end stages of Alzheimer's disease and that's appropriate cause that's what the press typically focuses on. They like the drama of the end stages of any chronically progressive disease, Alzheimer's at its end stages is horrible. There's nothing to count veil that fear, but what I can tell them in good faith is that Alzheimer's, if you do have it now, if it's just causing mild forgetfulness that's years, if not decades away and so try to engage the now. And I do remind people that disorders like diabetes are chronically progressive. Their end stages could be horrible, but many people could live with diabetes. So that's what I try to very softly encourage them to consider without committing the sin of minimizing a disorder.

MBS ([03:49](#)):

Yeah. Alzheimer is generally well known to the public, you know that name, but I confess I've only got a limited understanding of it. So I ask Scott what we to get wrong about this disease.

Scott ([04:01](#)):

Well, one is that idea I already mentioned that someone who's diagnosed with early stages of Alzheimer's thinks immediately, oh my God.

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

In deed, yeah.

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

My life is over, this is not a aggressive cancer, which is an appropriate response. But the other thing, and if you don't mind me mentioning the book Michael. In the book, I do talk about how my patients have taught me a lot and I dedicate this book to them. One of the things they've taught me is that we live in an information rich world. We all obsess over trying to retain and recall



information. And my patients, particularly in the early stages of disease of Alzheimer's who actually lose that ability, they have taught me that it's actually not the end of the world. They still love and laugh. They still go to art, they enjoy art and reading and the sciences, they enjoy their families. So I think the deep metaphysical lesson they've taught me is that we over index information.

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

Right, I do Scott sometimes think about this concept of the beginner's mind and the power of coming to something with a beginner's mind. And whether if, I mean, am I just being kind of naive or kind of I know rose tinted glasses and thinking that there's happiness and coming to the things with that beginner's mind.

Scott ([05:23](#)):

I'm sorry, Michael, when you say beginner's mind, can you help me understand?

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

Yeah, I think I heard it in the concept of Zen philosophy, which is part of wisdom is being able to see things fresh without the layer of history or expectation or future hopes. And there's kind of this beginner's mind is the seed for current wisdom.

Scott ([05:48](#)):

Yeah that's absolutely. Yeah that's very interesting and not surprisingly, Nicha also engaged in that the rebirth idea that the ultimate, goal of all of the superman is to become a child again. And my child's mind. So I completely see that wisdom. I'm not sure I do. I read a little bit of Buddhist tape, not enough to opine about that, but if I might riff on that, I do think that one of the things that forgetting allows us to do is to maintain a playful mind. And so I use a lot of metaphors in the book. But if you think of memory as a consolidation, that's the term we use, if you say consolidation is concrete consolidating, imagine a mind



that has memories that are stapled with steel that are just concrete with information that, and there's a great chapter I think in the book where I discussed with Jasper Johns an American artist.

Scott ([06:44](#)):

On the issue of creativity the psychology of creativity have taught us that you have to keep your mind loose and playful, and that looseness and playfulness is exactly what a child's mind has. And it's often what we lose. So that's my take on the idea of a beginner's mind.

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

That's really interesting. I remember reading in the book, the heart of memory is the forming of associations between separate stimuli and part of what you're pointing to is that can become, let's call it ossified concretized.

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

Yes.

MBS ([07:16](#)):

And creativity and playfulness and new ways of seeing the world is when you're forming different associations, which will happen if those concrete, highest ones aren't quite as firm.

Scott ([07:26](#)):

Right, that was really when I paid the book a compliment. I'm not complimenting myself God forbid, I'm complimenting the fact that this was a new field for me, cause I'm an Alzheimer's guy and in doing the research, I spent a lot of time interviewing and reading. That was a real true punchline. And that is that first of all, you need the information there. So it's not as if the moment comes without information. So studies that have poured over the introspection of artists, the most successful creative types, not just artists, but creative types



in the sciences of all walks of life. They say two things. You need to immerse your brain with information. And so that immersion is important, but you have to make sure that that information is not ossified in its networks. It has to stay vibrant, loose creative and so the term I use in the book is that you have to unmoor your mind from memories in order to have creative flights of fancy.

MBS ([08:25](#)):

Yeah, there's a great research that says, if you are a Nobel prize winner in the sciences, you are much more likely to have an outside interest. Musical instrument, Dungeons and dragons, whatever it is. And there's just a direct correlation and per re causation, between that finding, which I think is fascinating.

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

That's exactly right, Michael. Everyone always wants to know the, the recipe of genius. It's not IQ, it's actually not memory it's creativity. And one way to define creativity is the synthetic mind, a synthetic mind is a mind that can combine multiple elements. That ability requires looseness of elements. Otherwise you can't have that magic of the alchemy of combinatorial's. And in fact, the great noble prize winners all have this synthetic mind and that's why they're interested, not just technically in their one confined field, but they tend to mag pie like jump from fields to fields. I think that's a unifying feature. You're right.

MBS ([09:27](#)):

So speaking of geniuses, tell us about what you're going to be reading from today.

Scott ([09:32](#)):

Yes, you're right. Borges is I think your already alluded to one of your faves, one of mine, he is clearly a genius and he's genius is a genius in many ways. I know people often talk about his genius as a literary genius, the birth of meta fiction



of post modernism perhaps, of irony, all that is true. And I love all that about him, but to me, and the reason I'm reading this is because what he illustrates is something that I know is true. And that is that artistic minds often intuit the way our brains work before scientists. And there are many examples of this and this story, a short story in his collection of fiction, illustrates that because he antedated what then became clear only decades later in the sciences. And that's one of the reasons why I love the story.

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

So Scott, reading from, how do you pronounce it? The first name of the story, Funes the Memorious.

Scott ([10:31](#)):

I pronounce it Funes the Memorious, I'm not sure I'm right. And hopefully one of your listeners can me correct me or us.

MBS ([10:37](#)):

If there's an Argentinian listening in, maybe you can correct our pronunciation, but Scott, over to you, I'm excited to hear this.

Scott ([10:43](#)):

Yes. And I will if it's okay, so this is a very short story. What I'd like to do is to begin with the opening paragraph and then move to one of the later paragraphs. So it's not going to be continual read if that's okay, Mike.

MBS ([10:56](#)):

Yeah, that's great.

Scott ([10:57](#)):

Yeah. And so just to set the stage here, so this is presumably about an urbanite who lives in Buenos Aires with a presumably a wealthy family. His father takes



him over the border to Uruguay where presumably they have a cattle farm and the protagonist is describing a person he meets a cowboy essentially, called Funes, Ireneo Funes. And he is described as the memorious. So I'm going to open with the opening paragraph because it is such a perfect setup for the rest of, I mean, it's incredible in a short story covers so much. So here I go.

Scott ([11:48](#)):

I remember him, I scarcely have the right to use this ghostly verb. Only one man on earth deserve the right. And he is dead. I remember him with the dark passion flower in his hand, looking at it as no one has ever looked at such a flower. Though they might look from the twilight of day until the twilight of night for a whole life long. I remember him his face immobile an Indian like and singularly remote behind a cigarette. I remember him, I believe, the strong delicate fingers of the Plainsmen who can braid leather. I remember near those hands, a vessel in which to make mate tea bearing the arms of the Banda or an tile. I remember in the window of the house, a yellow rush mat and beyond a vaguely marshy landscape. I remember clearly his voice, the deliberate resentful nasal voice of the old eastern shore man without the Italianate syllables of today.

Scott ([12:52](#)):

So then he's introducing a lot here, not just the character, but the whole concept of memory. And then he describes how he first met him, who was Funes. He goes to this town in Uruguay, the cattle town. And he's introduced to Funes once through his cousin and Funes has these peculiar personality traits. He can list names. He always knows what time of day it is without looking at his watch. And then that's his first meeting. And then he comes back one summer, the protagonist. And he hears that Funes had a terrible accident where he was thrown from his horse. And he wakes up crippled. That's the term used in the short story, but with this incredible memory. And so what I'd like to now describe is how the protagonist describes, his photographic memory.



Scott ([13:56](#)):

We in a glance perceive three wine glasses on the table. Funes saw all the shoots, clusters and grapes of the vine. He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882. And he can compare them in his recollections with them marbled grain in the design of a leather bound book, which he had seen only once. And with the lines in the spray, which an ore raised in the Rio Grande on the eve of the battle of the Quinn Procco. These recollections were not simple. Each visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, et cetera. He can reconstruct all his dreams, all his fancies, two or three times. He reconstructed an entire day. He told me, I have quote, "I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world."

Scott ([14:56](#)):

And again, quote, my dreams are like your vigils. And again, towards the dawn quote, my memory serve is like a garbage disposal. And then he goes on in a future paragraph. And these are the last few paragraphs I'll read. In effect Funes not only remembered every leaf on every tree of every wood, but every one of the times he perceived or imagined it. He determined to reduce all of his past experiences to some 70,000 recollections, which he would later define numerically two considerations, dissuaded him the thought that the task was indeterminable and the thought that it was useless. He knew that at the hour of his death, he would scarcely have finished classifying even all the memories of his childhood. The project's high of indicated and an infinite vocabulary for the natural series of numbers and an on new usable mental catalog of all the images of memory are lacking incense, but they reveal a certain stammering greatness.



Scott ([16:00](#)):

They allow us to make out dimly or to infer the dizzying world of Funes. He was let us not forget almost incapable of general platonic ideas. It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term dog embraced so many unlike specimens of different sizes and different forms. He was disturbed by the fact that a dog at 3:14 seen in profile should have been the same name as a dog at 3:15, seen from the front, his own face in the mirror, his own hands surprised him on every occasion. Swift writes that the emperor of Lilliput would discern the movement of the minute hand. Funes could continuously make out the tranquil advances of corruption, of carries of fatigue.

Scott ([16:51](#)):

He noted the progress of death of moisture. He was a solitary and lucid spectator of a multiform world, which was instantaneously and almost intolerably, exact Babylon, London and New York have overawed the imagination of men with their ferocious splendor, no one in those populous towers or upon those surging avenues have felt the heat and pressure of a reality as in the fatigable as that, which day and night converged upon the unfortunate Ireneo in his humble south American farmhouse, it was very difficult for him to sleep, to sleep is to be abstracted from the world, Funes on his back in his cot in the shadows imagined every crevice and every molding on the various houses, which surrounded him.

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

I repeat the most important of his recollections were more minutely, precise, and more lively than our perceptions of a physical pleasure or a physical torment toward the east in a section, which was not yet cut into blocks of homes. There were some new unknown houses, Funes imagined them black compact made of a singular obscurity. He would turn his face in this direction in



order to sleep. He would also imagine himself at the bottom of a river being rocked and annihilated by the current.

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

Wow.

Scott ([18:27](#)):

I know.

MBS ([18:28](#)):

I mean, it's kind of the overwhelm and the beauty and the terror of all of that.

Scott ([18:33](#)):

Right, I just reread it last night in anticipation of this, Michael and I mean, there's so much here at every level and it truly is magic, not magic realism because I don't think Borges was a magical realist. Some people think he was, but he was a magician.

MBS ([18:52](#)):

I agree with that. I agree with both of that, I know a little bit about magical realism and I wouldn't have called him that either. What is the glory and the terror of that passage for you?

Scott ([19:04](#)):

Well, first as a scientist who discovers the new science of forgetting, new science of forgetting by which, I mean the science that has emerged in the last 10 years, as I said at the get get go Borges intuitive everything.

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

Right.



Scott ([19:19](#)):

So on the issue of scientific precipitatusness through a literary mind, it's what I think literature and art is really the metaphysics to what we do, which is the physics of the mind.

MBS ([19:35](#)):

Right.

Scott ([19:35](#)):

And he really was a meta physician of the mind and this illustrates it. The interesting thing, if I can continue along that vein is that 10 years later, Leo O'Connor introduces a term. Leo O'Connor is the father of child's psychiatry. He's a psychiatrist at the time at John's Hopkins and he has an active practice. And he publishes two back to back papers in the 1950s, 10 years after this short story was written where he describes autism a new term, and he describes it as a disorder where one can't see the whole, from the parts. And if you read the case studies, he is describing Funes in many ways, particularly the early Funes.

Scott ([20:21](#)):

And I would love if any of your listeners have any idea if O'Connor who actually was a literary doctor read Borges cause he might have, but I have no indication of it, but that's what really leads in many ways to the insight on the clinical implications of the guide of forgetting. So I'll maybe stop there, take a breather. Obviously there's a lot more here, which you as a true literary expert can go on about the quality of the writing, starting that first opening paragraph by saying, I remember. I remember.

MBS ([20:55](#)):

I remember, yeah.



Scott ([20:56](#)):

And then he goes into details of things, which he clearly could not remember. That's Borges the ironist and I just clearly love that.

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

Yeah. So Scott, we talked about this a little earlier, which is the anxiety that can come to us if we feel that we're forgetting things. But in Borges story, it feels forgetting is a freedom. I'm wondering, and this kind of gets to the heart of your new book, what is the freedom that lies in forgetting?

Scott ([21:32](#)):

Yeah, it's a good word, freedom. It's an emancipation. Because in many ways and I think I do use the term. We can be imprisoned with pain and, I'm sorry, we can be imprisoned with memories of our pains of our pasts. And so freedom, emancipation liberation from the tyranny of memory is not a bad way to maybe encapsulate the part of the book. I should quickly say if I may that, this was not meant to be a fo feel good book, celebrate your foible, celebrate your forgetting, there's some subtext there. I approached this because I was intrigued by the new science of forgetting. So the new science of forgetting basically says that our neurons or brain cells have two separate mechanisms, one that governs memory, the other that governs forgetting the implication, the seductive implication of that is..

Scott ([22:28](#)):

“Well, if Mother Nature granted us with the mechanism of forgetting, it must be beneficial.” That's not necessarily true. Mother Nature granted us with an appendix that is not terribly useful. And there are examples where it can actually backfire, but once I had that and I accepted that as scientifically rigorous, cause as much as I like to read literature I am a scientist first. I need the rigor I require. Then I pose the question. Is it really beneficial? Or is it just a



vestigial holdover like an appendix. And ultimately, as evolution catches up with our information late in world. Will we get rid of this forgetting that we're all complaining about? And so I talk about the neurology, the psychology, even the philosophy of insight in those different fields that does support the conclusion that having forgetting and balance with memory is beneficial.

Scott ([23:22](#)):

So on the issue of emancipation freedom, the easiest example and the easiest chapter to articulate, although was the hardest for me to write was on what I think everyone intuitively knows. You have to forget to forgive, right? You have to let go, right. Amnesty literally means amnesia forgetting.

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

Amnesia yeah. I've never made that connection before.

Scott ([23:50](#)):

Yeah, I originally it's strange that I wouldn't have, so all this ability to let go and you know, marital therapists have told me, cause I know that I'm working on Alzheimer drugs. They say, well, if you develop a forgetting drug call me, cause my practice would thrive. So I think we all know that when it comes to emotional memories, we need to forget, let go all these colloquial terms that are basically, code for forgetting, letting go is forgetting. I think the other parts are more unexpected and interesting. So the issue of Borges is insight that we need to forget to abstract, to generalize that's a little bit less obvious and that took a little bit more work in the book, hopefully rendered readable.

Scott ([24:36](#)):

Other aspects of the benefit of forgetting are for creativity really interesting and the most ambitious chapter, which I actually in enjoyed writing. I hope some readers will enjoy reading is how forgetting and balance with memory helps us



to be better citizens of the world helps us with our ethics and morality. And that was the unexpected last chapter.

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

Scott I mean, I love this idea that you're presenting to us, which is around how do we find the balance between remembering and forgetting for a happy life and an ethical life in some ways, how do you actively forget?

Scott ([25:22](#)):

It's such a great question. I've been asked that a number of times and it's kind of strange that because as I describe myself in the book, I'm a brain mechanic. That's what I try to find what's broken and then fix it, right. If I can do it or not, as we talk to the beginning, that's a separate goal, but that is a separate question, but that is my goal. So if I'm saying forgetting is beneficial, how do you induce it? So I could say yet to speak to of the couple therapists out there, there is no pure memory drug, a forgetting drug, a drug that enhances forgetting, however nature has given us mechanisms to induce forgetting. So sleep, it turns out one of the reasons for sleep is to forget. And I talk about that and that's why we're most creative after a good night's sleep.

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

There are natural drugs or chemicals. So oxytocin, something that was first found in association with pregnancy and maternity has now shown to be released in all of our brains, as we socially and physically hook up, quote unquote, and that oxytocin, what it does is it temporarily turns down our fear memories. And if you think about it, we need to turn down our fear memories to open our minds to social interactions. So there are ways of doing it. And then finally, Michael, I hope I'm not too long-winded here.

MBS ([26:49](#)):

I know this is great, Scott.



Scott ([26:50](#)):

There are drugs, recreational drugs which I cannot as a doctor recommend, but for anyone who's tried MDMA or ecstasy and you felt the blissness and that's why ecstasy is called ecstasy.

MBS ([27:07](#)):

Yeah.

Scott ([27:07](#)):

That is that bliss is caused by, your temporary forgetting of your fears and your anxieties and your ability to really open up your heart and mind. So I think we've all experienced forgetting.

MBS ([27:21](#)):

Yeah.

Scott ([27:21](#)):

I think if you're asking, can I prescribe a pill legally? I can't.

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

Right well, look at the other side of that. Is there a memory that is precious to you and how do you maintain it?

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

That's a great question. And yes and so I think that's a great opportunity for me, Michael to emphasize that I'm not saying it's all about forgetting, forget your memory right.

MBS ([27:48](#)):

Right.



Scott ([27:49](#)):

The balance of both memory is important, critically important. And the conventional view is right. We need our memories to be ourselves, all the literature of that and the philosophy and psychology of that is spot on. The point really, as you say, is the balance between the two. So now back to your question, I do dedicate the book to two memories. I dedicate it to my mother, who had passed away in her memory and I definitely would never want to forget her. And I'm lucky enough to be married for over 25 years and I dedicate the book to Alexis England my wife for a lifetime of memories that I hope never to forget. Well, some of them, some of the memories, I hope to forget but on balance.

MBS ([28:33](#)):

Yeah, I've been married for 25 years too and I saw an anniversary card that made me laugh, which is, thank you for 20 amazing years, three so years and two terrible years. And I'm like, that feels about right.

Scott ([28:47](#)):

I like that. That's very good. That's that right.

MBS ([28:50](#)):

So, I mean, knowing how actually not that reliable our memories are, our memories don't kind of get frozen on a pane of glass and maintain they walk and they change. How do you, if you think of your mom, how do you sustain your memory of your mother?

Scott ([29:16](#)):

I love that question cause there's the kind of brain mechanics answer and then there's the meta physicians answer. I won't pretend to be the second all though, I double in that. So I was just talking to some friends who are younger than my



wife and I, and they grew up they're in their twenties. They grew up with perfect documentation of their parents. They have Instagram, they have movies, they have video, they have audio, my wife and I have pictures. We have occasional videos, grainy videos we're that old, but we don't have a lot of audio. So neither of us remember the voices of our mothers, my wife's mother had a wonderful, I met her, she had a wonderful southern accent.

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

My mother was Hungarian and had a very thick and sort of funny Hungarian accent. And we were talking about that. And at some level I think, and I do talk about that a little bit in the book, our memories are not, and should not be a museum of natural history. It really should be a museum of modern art. And in that case, if you really have a catalog, an actual, external hard drive of every moment in your life, which these kids growing up will have, right with Instagram every day. I think on the issue of fidelity, there'll be no question about what your mother's voice sounded like or who that person you first dated, who broke up with who cause it'll be documented.

Scott ([30:50](#)):

But at the metaphysical level, I worry that it's going to take away from the magic of our minds and really creating art out of our memories. And so I think there's a balance there. Of course you want to be faithful to your memories, but on the other hand, I worry about it being too concretized back to that word with external documentation. Did that make sense at all, Michael?

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

Well, it did. I mean, there's something about the stories we weave are the people who we become, there's a great quote from a poet Muriel, somebody who says, the universe is not made up of a made up of atoms. It's made up of stories.



Scott ([31:31](#)):

Right.

MBS ([31:35](#)):

And you could look at the documentation on the hard drive as atoms, and you can look at the memories as stories.

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

Yeah I completely agree. And I'm sure since this is a literary podcast, I'll probably get hate mail on the next thing I'll say, but people often ask me which literary luminaries are the best on memory. People often go to Pruss, in my mind it's Nabucove. Cause Pruss actually implied that it was the atoms. It was a hard drive. He in fact describes popup book the end caused the popup book of everything and you can just observe it from all angles and it's factually true. Whereas Nabucove and speak memory is brilliant on the point that he had this narrative of where he grew up.

Scott ([32:19](#)):

And I think it was Saint Petersburg at the time. And he went back finally, 50 years later had this wistful memory, he found a house. He was just going on and on about, oh yes, I remember exactly my mother. And then an older person walks by and say, by the way that wasn't your house, it was the one across the street.

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

Right.

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

And I think that is perfect. You don't really want to necessarily pop the memory bubble. And we don't have time for this, Michael, but I don't know if you like to



go to reunions, school reunions carry with it, that danger of the disappointment of the truth.

MBS ([32:55](#)):

Right. Oh, I love that phrase, carries the disappointment of the truth. I was back in my hometown where I grew up just a few months ago. And really for the first time in 35 years, I saw people I went to high school and university with and it was a really interesting mix around what the gap between my expectations, which is on the one hand they haven't changed at all. I mean, I've changed utterly in 35 years, but I'm assuming that they haven't changed at all. And so I won't like them cause I didn't like them much at high school. And then I'm, "Oh, you have changed. You've turned into a 53 year old man like I have." And then also going, yeah, but I actually, I still don't like you that much. It was confusing to have that kind of confrontation between memories and reality.

Scott ([33:47](#)):

Mike and that's sort of a slightly, and I'm completely with you on this a slightly snarky reason for not to be on Facebook because if I didn't like you in high school, why would I like you now?

MBS ([33:56](#)):

Right.

Scott ([33:57](#)):

But even on the beautiful memories, I think the beautiful memories should be preserved in our museum of art, not in our museums of natural history, because I think the beautiful memories run, if we were talking about this back to our voices of our mother, oh, wouldn't it be wonderful to hear the voices of our mothers? Well, maybe it wouldn't be, maybe it would provoke other stuff. So sometimes the cepetoned the wistful sentimentality of memory is not a bad



thing. Although I do have a chapter that rails against nostalgia. So I'm sort of speaking from both sides of my mouth here.

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

Can you tell us about how forgetting helps us be better citizens? You alluded to that or it's a really interesting provocative stand.

Scott ([34:44](#)):

Yeah. So it's really interesting that if the point of the book is how memory and forgetting needs to work in unison to strike the perfect balance to live perfect personal lives. Then there is something called communal memory. Then there is amnesty, which is a societal form of forgetting. And it really leads to the question, might that balance also ramify to our communities, our culture our place in the world. And that's an interesting idea, maybe for a chit chat in this wonderful program. It's something else to say that I'm going to write a chapter on it. So I had to really vet myself and make sure that it was again rigorous. And I was lucky enough to find this book where philosophers, a book called *The Ethics of Memory* written by Avishai Margalit, which is basically on exactly this, the philosophical implications in an ethical and moral sense on memory, and then forgetting.

Scott ([35:50](#)):

And it then led me, and again, Michael if I can just insert right now, if I'm too off pissed, let me know.

MBS ([35:59](#)):

That's right.

Scott ([35:59](#)):

But, it then led me to what was really, an enjoyable read for me. So this book and this chapter in particular forced me to read the primary literature. We all talk



about nostalgia. I was able to get my hands on original publication from 1688, which was a medical thesis by Johannes Hofer. He was a medical doctor in training, in the University of Basel. And at the time, unfortunately no longer in my medical school, for example, you had to submit a thesis to graduate. So his thesis was nostalgia he made up this term. And it is really interesting to read it carefully with the eyes of a modern neurologist, because he was basically arguing that nostalgia, this obsession with homeland memories is a disorder of the brain.

Scott ([36:56](#)):

It's basically a seizure disorder where the areas of our brain that storm homeland are active and seizing, and causing us to be obsessed with our memories of home sweet home. And to the point where we can't, there's nothing necessarily wrong with that.

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

Right.

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

But if it becomes all consuming a moronic inferno as Al bello describes, then what it does is it causes you not only to love your own country, but it runs the risk of causing you to hate other countries to be a xenophobe. So I try to work that in, with my own experience on 911 here in New York, where there was a lot of difficulties with xenophobia on how we really needed to have communal forgetting to balance our memories. It's okay to remember. It's important to never forget, but never let your forgetting your memory to burn so hot that it makes you a xenophobe.

MBS ([37:58](#)):

There's another five hours conversation right there.



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

That's right.

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

But Scott, look I've really loved this conversation, this dance between memory and forgetting between literature and science. So thank you. As a final question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation, do you think.

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

Wow, now you're testing my memory, cause we covered so much ground Michael and we said a lot, hopefully partially coherently.

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

Yeah.

Scott ([38:30](#)):

Well, I mean, I could say something about forgetting. I could say something about normal forgetting and something about pathological forgetting, meaning Alzheimer's, I'll talk first about normal forgetting, which is the point of the book. I do think that there's some deep implications in me writing the book and hopefully if readers read it on this issue of let's try not to imitate robots, artificial intelligence, our computer hard drives, our iPhones. Let's remember that in fact, we still outperform them. I know there are some who say we won't in the future. I'm not a Luddite I believe in technology, but it's still remarkable that we can achieve so much more particularly on issues of creativity.

MBS ([39:17](#)):

Yeah.

Scott ([39:17](#)):



And synthetic thinking. And that is a great example of where you need to celebrate your forgetting, engage it. I'm not saying it shouldn't be a nuisance when you miss fire in a debate and you can't quite think of that right poet or the right statistic, but don't be so frustrated by it that you would like to delete it from your own hard drive. That would be a curse. On pathological forgetting and I do have an epilogue on my work and in fact that's what the editors originally wanted me to write on. And that's Alzheimer's disease, hopefully in the future will be able to write it. I refuse to write that book until we have a better last chapter.

Scott ([39:56](#)):

But I do think, I'm not by nature an optimist, but when I started my career, I was a pessimist. I'm now cautiously optimistic that we're on the verge of making major breakthroughs into Alzheimer's because of the simple mechanics cliché, if you don't know what's broken, you can't fix it. And now only in the last 10 years, do we really understand what's fundamentally broken in Alzheimer's. So COVID has taught us if you can find the problem, biomedicine can really work miracles. So I'd like to remain hopeful and optimistic without being only optimist on the promise of future discoveries in Alzheimer's disease.

MBS ([40:33](#)):

This was such a great conversation. And honestly I loved how it ended. First the move from pessimistic to cautiously optimistic. That's a movement really I'd wish on the world, both the caution because that's about staying grounded in reality, but also the optimism. So I think optimism is the recipe for forward movement for taking on responsibility for making the world a better place. And I think that's probably the second thing I loved about Scott's final words, not writing the final chapter until there's a better chapter to write until there's a better last chapter and being committed to write to co-create that chapter. Now that's something I definitely wish upon the world.



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

If you're interested in Scott's book, *Forgetting the Benefits of Not Remembering* well available, wherever you buy books, I'd encourage you to go to an independent bookstore, cause we need to support them as best we can. And if you enjoyed this conversation with Scott, then let me recommend a couple of other interviews to bookmark a chat with Ian Leslie, about curiosity and conflict. That's wonderful that digs into some of those key elements on how we shape our lives. And also they chat with John Zuretski about the power of choosing what we focus on. Because of course, what we focus on is often what we remember. Thanks for listening, by the way, it's a pleasure to have you here.

MBS ([42:05](#)):

And if you've listened to any of the interviews before, you know the drill a request to give it a blurb, give it a score, pass it along if really like this conversation, because word of mouth is how we grow the podcast and growing the podcast helps me invite amazing guests onto the podcast. And if you'd like to join us at the Duke Humphrey is a free membership site where you can access the transcripts of the podcast. Some additional interviews that I haven't released publicly, some of the bonus downloads where you'll find that at [mbs.works](#) and click on the podcast tab. You're awesome. And you're doing great.