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MBS ([00:02](#)):

So writing a book can be a lonely, lonely, scary, confusing business. And that's when it's going well, when it's going badly, it's much worse than all of that. And one of the things that has been brilliant about writing How To Begin is my friend, Jenny Blake, because Jenny's been a friend of mine in for many years now. I first met her when I gave a talk at Google. I know, more than 10 years ago now and she worked at Google at the time and helped introduce me and coordinate that, which was wonderful. And then glory be, we stayed in touch, we've become friends and I feel like in the last year or so that friend deepened because we have been traveling companions in writing books.

MBS ([00:46](#)):

Jenny's had other books written before she's had other podcasts. So we're kind of similar in a lot of things that we think about, but Jenny and I have been kind



of encouraging each other and exhorting each other on to write a book. So when I thought of who would be the small number of people who I'd love to preview the new book with and have a conversation about it, honestly, Jenny was just on a unmissable top of the list person, because she's been with me the whole way. So it's very exciting to talk to Jenny as it always is. So Jenny Blake welcome.

Jenny ([01:18](#)):

Wow. That might be my favorite podcast or any introduction of all time ever. Thank you, MBS.

MBS ([01:24](#)):

My pleasure. How would you introduce yourself, Jenny? Who are you?

Jenny ([01:29](#)):

It's such a good question. Whoever really knows? I would say a lifelong book worm, books, as I suspect they have been for you given the name of your new podcast, books have been my bomb, my best friends, my teachers, my business mentors and every now and then one of those books comes to life. AKA, I get to meet a friend or hero like you back in the day at Google and keep in touch. So I would, on paper, consider myself an author, speaker and podcaster. Speaker sort of went by the wayside the last year and a half. But that opened up space for something new. I realized that instead of jumping on planes and trains, running around, speaking to others and kind of serving others and clients, I actually had a chance to pause and reflect and recalibrate and kind of take a moment to be truer to myself.

Jenny ([02:24](#)):

What did I really want to talk about if I wasn't afraid. And you were so instrumental, as you said in the intro. I will not forget this. Yes, we both had ambitions to launch a book and a podcast pretty much at the same time. And



when I failed all these accountability check-ins with you, you had said, "send me 1500 words twice a week." And I said, "Okay, MBS, you've got it". And I just didn't do it over and over. I failed. And you said, "I have a better idea. Send me a hundred words a day. Just send me a check mark, just a hundred words. It's seven sentences. You've got this." And that did it. That was it. The month of December, you and I traded check marks just about every single day. And I was absolutely shocked to compile those efforts and find that there's a book draft there in January. So thank you for that. And I'm just thrilled to be here, talking about your beautiful new book.

MBS ([03:17](#)):

Thank you, Jenny. You know, I'm going to love to talk about my book because I'm excited about it. But before we read... before I read the two pages from my book and then we have a quick chat about it. Tell me a little bit about your new book. What's it about what's at the heart of it.

Jenny ([03:35](#)):

My new book is called Free Time, lose the busy work, love your business. The heart of it is my passion to help all of us create smarter systems around some of the busy work and the minutiae in our life and our work. To do it in a way that's useful and joyful so that we can free up our mind and our time to do our best work and also to be present in our lives. I feel that work becomes this all-encompassing behemoth sometimes. And every time a new social media app is introduced, we acquire a new inbox and the inboxes is never end. And the pings and requests for our attention never end. And they're designed that way. So for me, Free Time, is really a manifesto and a love letter most directly written to heart based business owners. But I hope that even more can benefit. It's how I have grappled with these questions over 10 years of how do I continue to free my mind of my time so I can do more of my best work.

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



Yeah, I love... I mean, you're a great role model like that. You are this kind of hardcore, "I am not going to be sucked into the narrative around, over busyness and climbing the slippery pole and scaling the success ladder. I'm going to define success on my own terms. And then I'm going to build systems and structures that allow me to do that in a way that is effortless and that creates free time". And I think the title of your book is so clever, because it's about free time, but it's also about freeing time. So it's a.. The free is an adjective and it's a verb and it's brilliant because of that. So I look to you as my wise teacher around building systems and structures, which I'm not the great at. And I'm very excited for the book coming out. When does it come out?

Jenny ([05:25](#)):

Thank you so much. It comes out March 22nd, 2022.

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

3/22/22.

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

Yes, exactly.

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

Well, let's talk... Enough about you. Let's talk about me.

Jenny ([05:38](#)):

I thought you'd never asked.

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

The four or five people who have asked to do this with me, I said, "Look, tell me which chapter you'd like to read... me to read from. And then we'll talk about it". And I was really thrilled you chose chapter six. So chapter six is called Weigh up the journey. And it's probably the, the heart of the book and the kind of deepest



part of the book, because in the first part of the book, the first section, you kind of define a worthy goal and you go through process of drafting it. The final part of the book is you cross the threshold. How do you start the journey? How do take... get going on it? But this middle section, I think of it as that, that like the moment in a tennis ball, when you throw it up in the air and it pauses for a moment and it's neither going up nor going down, it's got that still heartbeat.

MBS ([06:31](#)):

And it's when you decide whether you can really commit to it. And it's where I think so often now commitments to our ambitions go off the rails, because we haven't fully understood what's the reward and what's at risk and weighing up the journey is part of that. So thanks for picking this bit, because I love this part of the book.

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

You got it. I'm so excited to dive in and it's the perfect... This and what you just mentioned, the previous chapter on prizes and punishments, it all... You kind of hold our hands on this journey of what's at stake for you. What's going to be worth the prize, giving up the prizes and what are the potential punishments. I just love how there's this reality of weighing up the journey. And when we get to this chapter in the book and this moment, and you kind of ask us, "How serious are, are you? And are you going to make incremental change or are you really going to go for this thing that is thrilling and daunting and calling you forth to be a new version of yourself?". So I just love how you... This is kind of that crucial moment in the book where you're calling us forth to really take the leap.

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

Indeed. All right. Let me read these two pages. It won't take long because my pages are pretty short. So chapter six is called Weigh up the journey and the subheading is called Grow in layers.



MBS ([07:51](#)):

In Alexandria, Indiana hangs the world's largest ball of paint. It started life as a baseball and on January the first 1977, the first coat of paint, blue was applied. It's been painted many, many, many times since then, somewhere north of 25,000 coats. It now hangs from a beam and a purpose-built barn has its own website and weighs in as close to two metric tons. And as an aside, if you're interested in this, I learned about this from John Green's Wonderful WOLFY Anthropocene reviewed. He has a podcast of the same name. So if you want to geek out about a paintball, definitely check out John Green's work cause he is a genius. All right back to the text.

MBS ([08:37](#)):

It's not only a roadside attraction. It's a slightly or quick metaphor for how we can mistakenly think about our personal growth. Another day, another barely perceivable paint layer. Psychologist and academic, Robert Keegan has one of the most robust models to describe the process of self growth. What's helpful to know for now is, in each of his five behavioral stages. There's first growth within each stage and then a leap to the next stage. I frame it as a difference between you plus and you 2.0. You plus is growth within the stage. And it's akin to that paintball.

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

You work to fine tune yourself, getting better and more comfortable in the stage you're in it's often every day work another day older, another day wiser. But you plus has its limits. It's not like one of those charts where there's a straight line heading diagonally upwards, rather growth is an S curve. You start slow, move more quickly up the curve and finally begin to plateau. To continue to grow, to unlock your greatness. You need to make the leap to the next S curve and onto the next stage. This is You 2.0, your worthy goal can be a catalyst for this leap.



Your worthy goal can break the limits of U plus and free you to step into your next phase of learning and growth.

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

That's the first two pages of the chapter. After that we get into that. Wait, "What do you mean? It's going to break me". That doesn't sound good. And I'm like, "It doesn't sound good, but it's part of this process of what does it mean to become you 2.0". Anyway thanks for picking that Jenny. Let me ask you, what struck a chord for you in hearing me read that and hearing those words again?

Jenny ([10:39](#)):

One thing that came to mind as I was reading this is that there was a zero to one moment for that paintball as well. That even though the layers accumulate day by day in the later stages, aren't that transformative, someone had to decide, I am going to take a freaken baseball, paint it, hang it in a museum and commit to this creative goal and not knowing what's going to happen or what's going to result. Maybe he did. Maybe he piloted with a secret baseball in his attic somewhere but this moment of deciding and also transforming, and this is what is so impressive about artists and fine art just in particular is they just have this way of looking at something differently and saying, I'm going to take a baseball and turn it into art. And so there is that moment, what you call you 2.0, it went from you plus, baseball plus to a baseball 2.0 and now we're here talking about it and it was featured in the Anthropocene... That's a hard word to say John Green's wonderful book as you write.

MBS ([11:43](#)):

The Anthropocene reviewed... John Green, mocks it all the time. He's like, "I've chosen the book that the hardest name to say in the world. So you're living the dream for him.

Jenny ([11:54](#)):



Totally. I wonder for you MBS. One of the things I loved most about the entire book are your personal examples and you are truly in process, which is rare for an author to share things that are in process in a book because a book becomes this fossilized artifact that we might get embarrassed about a year from now. I wonder if you see yourself in this paintball metaphor and or even this U plus to 2.0 Where are you in that leap yourself as we sit here, recording this and the book is just about going to launch?

MBS ([12:30](#)):

You know, for me I would say the thing that kind of catapulted me to a next level probably has been happening over the last year or so. And it it's moving away from being the CEO at Box of Crayons, which is one of the examples I talk about in the book because I had spent 20 years being that person, the founder, and then the leader of Box of Crayons and I... Inevitably, I just had a lot of identity entangled in that and it was scary and brilliant. I mean, prizes and punishments for stepping away from that and letting Shannon, not letting, just having Shannon step in to be the, the CEO of the company, but it just meant that I didn't have any more layers to apply as the Box of Crayons person. And so I kind of moved to a new baseball and I went, okay, what's MBS?

MBS ([13:26](#)):

Who am I now? I mean, I started calling myself MBS as cause Michael Bungay Stanier is almost as difficult to pronounce as Anthropocene reviewed. And I feel like I started painting a new baseball and I'm still painting that. It's pretty small at the moment. I'm still trying to figure this out, but it was understanding what I'm leaving behind, understanding what I'm trying to become now. And this book, How to Begin is manifestation. It's like a worthy goal. That is part of... It's not, I figured it out and therefore this is my worthy goal. Writing and bringing How to Begin out into the world is how I become this next version of myself. It's part of the process. It's not an outcome in and of itself. So yeah, I feel like I'm at the start of something.



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

You said something really interesting in there, which is that you felt that you had added all the paint layers you could as CEO of Box of Crayons. And now this new direction, you 2.0, is removing layers to go back to the core and say, who is MBS after all? Who is MBS after 20 years of adding paint layers. And I just... It's fascinating to think of removing them. And you know the saying, "It's harder to read the label from inside the jar"?

MBS ([14:44](#)):

I do. Yeah. Great saying [crosstalk 00:14:45]

Jenny ([14:44](#)):

It almost like, why is it that we go... Why is it so hard to see what you 2.0 looks like, or to remove those layers and know what that baseball and remember what that core is. Why do you think it is such a daunting process to truly, truly make this leap that we're talking about from you plus the one thin paint layer back to something a totally different manifestation ourselves?

MBS ([15:12](#)):

Jenny I think it gets to the very heart of what this section of the book is about. Which is in summary, we are far more committed to the status quo than we realize. And it is kind of full on to kind of go, "Wow, what does it really mean for me to step away and, and leave behind the benefits I get from things being exactly the way that they are now". And often it's a bit nuanced as to what those things are, because you can be in a time in your life where you're like, "God, I'm busy, I'm overworked, I'm stressed, I'm a bit anxious, I'm a bit distracted", and you can feel all of that and those are the... That's the foam on the waves of the ocean, but there's a deeper current, which is like, "I'm comfortable. I understand it. It's familiar. I know what the patterns are. I know who I am".



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

And so we just have a level of comfort. There can be a level of discomfort bit surfacy and it's just a deep level of, what actually status quo is okay. Like I could have continued to be a slightly mediocre CEO at Box of Crayons for many more years. There's a bunch of things that stroke my ego, help my wallet, all sorts of things that I could do around that. But sometimes it's really helpful to have something happen to you. And I mean, I decide... It was a unilateral decision by me to move away from this role of CEO. But it was a really great catalyst for me to step in into, to this next thing. But it's... This is the power of this section of the book which is, you got to you got to see how you are nourished by the status quo right now, before you can really understand whether it's worth leaving it or not.

Jenny ([17:09](#)):

You mentioned something that was on my mind too. Sometimes things happen to you or it's almost like you 2.0 asserts itself. Like we can be cozy in you plus. And it's interesting as your friend and I feel very fortunate to be a good friend that in different parts of the book, you talk about one of your gremlins or inner critic is the lucky amateur, which is so funny to me from the outside, because... I mean, it's not funny, but it's just fascinating because I saw you building layer by layer, by layer for 20 methodical, strategic, passionate years of Box of Crayons. And I go, there's nothing lucky about that. I wonder... Maybe this relates to you 2.0 asserting itself and sort of knocking on the door and going, "Hey, you, yeah, let me in or wake up or I need you to do something for me now".

Jenny ([18:00](#)):

But I also wonder, I wonder with the paintball, you know what this saying, "It takes 10 years to an overnight success"?



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

Yeah.

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

We cannot always plan when that moment... I actually feature you in Free Time in the introduction. And I say, you are a beautiful example of escape velocity, where you actually are so successful at building your business. And we all know The Coaching Habits sold probably a million copies by now, but that came from one layer of paint after the other, that gave you the opportunity to even step into you 2.0. And so maybe can you speak to, how do we know when to make the big leap versus keep putting those paint, layers and trust that there will come some kind of tipping point or catalyst that we don't always plan? We don't always know the timing of as it relates to you 2.0.

MBS ([18:51](#)):

It's a powerful question, Jenny, without a good answer. I wish I had that kind of magic. And now because that's like buying low and selling high in the marketplace, we all aspire to doing it. How do you do that? I have no idea, but you know there's that saying "Planning is useful... Plans are useless, but planning is useful"? I feel like it's something like that, which is part of what you're doing in that incremental growth is building capacity, building confidence, building resource. And I think part of what I'm trying to provoke and you do this as well in your work is to also start people feeling a bit restless. Just looking around and going, "Am I happy with this? Is this the mountain I want to be climbing? Have I got to the top of the mountain? What am I doing?", And there's a way that you... Stuff happens to you all the time.

MBS ([19:48](#)):

Sometimes you are aware of it and you understand the opportunity that it offers. So like when I moved to Canada, I lived in Boston beforehand. I'd quit



my job as an unhappy consultant. I had another job as a consultant lined up in Toronto. Our flight out of Toronto was on 9/11. So it all went to hell. I found a... My job disappeared. I found a temporary job. I struggled through that for six months making no real impact. And after six months they finally fired me basically exactly the same time as my equivalent of a green card, my landed immigrant status arrived in Canada. So I was like, "I can work for myself now". And the safer thing would've been to go find another job.

MBS ([20:37](#)):

And the thing I did instead was to start Box of Crayons going. I have no idea what it means to start this, but honestly it was like, "All right, it's a new baseball. I'm going to start painting a new baseball now". And as you said, what is true is that I then spent 20 years trying to figure stuff out and trying to build a... And succeeding in building a company and a business, around some of those ideas. And of course, what you see from the outside is me making a whole bunch brilliantly strategic and successful decisions. And what you don't see is me making a whole series of not brilliant and unsuccessful decisions, which are also true.

Jenny ([21:16](#)):

It's so hard to imagine those because every time you've given me advice, it's like the most transformative game changing. So, so certainly my experience of you is always just so much vision and talk about creativity. Here's a question for you. One of my gremlins is this... It's a little dated now, but the kid that wants to play basketball when they grow up and somebody goes, we can't all be Michael Jordan. Like you, I share ambitious goal, a worthy, daunting, thrilling goal of having a top rated professional podcast. Yeah. The gremlin on my shoulder is, "who is to say, that's in the cards for you. You might think you want that". You might declare it to the world. You might even write it in a book, but the little gremlin sits on my shoulder going, "We can't all be Michael Jordan. We can't all be Tim Ferris. We can't all be Joe Rogan."



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

And I still don't feel that I have a strong sense other than intuition along the way. And you don't know until but I guess what I'm wondering is, we can declare you 2.0, all we want and do believe that we can all pursue that. Or is there some other factor that just steps in? And then my question is, how do we know? Like, I don't even know this is your next book probably is.

MBS ([22:42](#)):

It's called, How do you know?

Jenny ([22:44](#)):

Yeah. Or How do we know? I mean, that's kind of what Pivot, my previous book is asking as like, "How do you know when to persevere? How do you know when to pivot?", but I have a lot of question around you 2.0, and sometimes when I'm in the moment of taking that leap going, "Am I being delusional? Or am I onto something here?" Beyond the intrinsic benefits of how wonderful it is to talk to friends while hitting record, all that good, good stuff.

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

Well, it's another great question, Jenny. The sentence that's at the heart of this book, we unlock our greatness by taking on the hard things. It's not, we unlock our greatness by having and succeeding and winning the hard things, it's by taking it on. So I do think it's a commitment to a process where you're like, this is actually how I'm going to learn and grow and stretch and be nourished and have an impact in the world. And it is deeply true that there is no guarantee of success in that. I mean I look at my podcast and it's like, I love the design of it and the vibe of it, but it's also true that it's nowhere near 10,000 listeners, which is a goal I set in the book and which I've got three, two and a half months to achieve it and I'm like, I'm hoping to get... now I'm going "Maybe a 1000 listeners per episode. If I could get there, that would be pretty cool".



MBS ([24:07](#)):

So I'm like, "Okay so... Part of what I get to is going, if this fails utterly, was it still worth it?" And I've got that with every one of my books that I've written, I've hit a point where I'm like, "Dammit, this is a good book. I'm just going to go with this because this feels like I can stand behind this book and it's part of my body of work. And if nobody reads it well more fool them". And I've had this conversation with myself, with the two pages with MBS podcast where I'm like, "Okay, not as many people are listening to this, as I hope they would. Do I give up on this?"

MBS ([24:53](#)):

And I'm like, "Well, what's success for me in this?", and I'm like, "Okay, the real success is innovating in podcasting. And I think the kind of the setup is a slightly innovative [inaudible 00:25:05] and honestly meeting some really cool people and having great conversations and feeling less lonely and feeling like I'm building a constellation of people who I would love to hang out with. And so it's about understanding what real success means, but also then also looking at the cost of it, which is like, "This is take costing me time and money, and an opportunity cost to not work on other things, because I'm doing a podcast. Its two episodes a week. And weighing that up and going, "Is now the time for me to stop doing this or I keep going along this?"

Jenny ([25:44](#)):

Yeah. It's so interesting. And there isn't always a super clear answer. You just kind of articulated, later in this chapter that we're talking about, you do talk about external rewards and goals and status markers, and then internal needs that something might serve. Like an introverts guide to making friends is just start a podcast and qualities we're cultivating. I would also add there's an other benefit, which is surprise benefits. Something I love about writing books and podcasts, creating anything. I call it public original thinking. Just got to think out loud



sometimes. And then the serendipity that results is exactly what you said. And David White also has a version of the quote you shared. "What you can plan is too small for you to live" so [crosstalk 00:26:29].

MBS ([26:29](#)):

I haven't heard that, but I love that. That's great. Isn't it?

Jenny ([26:32](#)):

Yeah. "What you can plan is too small for you to live." I try to remind myself when I'm sort of in the forest of it all. And let's say in my case, just like you, I've sort of taken the leap, I'm like standing naked out on the... Not to take your podcast in a wrong direction, but like very, very vulnerable, very, very stretched in every way. I just try to remind myself, I won't even know all the rewards, like at least I'm out there open for surprises and seredipities. And those are some of like the most delightful things for me is just, the stuff I don't see coming.

MBS ([27:10](#)):

I think... And this is a perfect place to be finishing, I think, which is you're just coming and taking us back to the sense of part of what's exciting about setting a worthy goal is you are committing to a journey towards that worthy goal. And it's a cliché, but it works. Which is, it's often that the journey is a thing that nourishes you and rewards you. And the goal itself changes and shifts and becomes something different.

MBS ([27:37](#)):

Hey Jenny, thank you for being such a gracious podcast host. I was kind of thinking I was going to host this, but you just took the reigns and when I'm just going to ask you questions. I was like, "Oh, this is great". So thank you. You make me look smart. [crosstalk 00:27:49]



Jenny ([27:50](#)):

You got it. I mean, what happens when you put two podcasters in a recording room? It's like, we'll both...

MBS ([27:52](#)):

Exactly. For people who want more Jenny Blake, of which many people will be saying yes. Where do they find you? How do they learn about your podcast, your book, and about you?

Jenny ([28:05](#)):

Wherever you're listening to this search for Free Time with Jenny Blake. You can also visit itsfreetime.com. And if this... If you're listening to this before March 22nd, I'm going to do a special pre-order. If you pre-order the hard cover, it's buy one, get one, give one. So if you pre-order the hard cover, you'll get instant access to audio book, and you'll get to gift one to a friend. Cause that speaks to my delight of just giving things to others. So just go to itsfreetime.com. And MBS, I just have to tack on one thing to the end of what you just said. Maybe the Easter egg to the whole book is that our worthy goal is always the same and it's just to become more of ourselves in the world. You know, like no matter what we write down on paper, as we go through your book exercises, ultimately we're all on a similar journey of just exactly of self actualization.

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

Jenny Blake, you are awesome. I loved having you walk this path with me, this journey. I feel I'm a better person for knowing you. So thank you.

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

Thank you so much. Likewise, MBS. Words cannot express and my book would not exist without you. It's been an honor and a joy and I'm just so grateful to be here. Thank you. And thanks to everyone for listening.



MBS ([29:20](#)):

Hey, it's Michael here. Thank you for listening to one of the, How to Begin episodes. Part of the two pages with MBS podcast series. So you're either listening to it before or after January the 11th, which is the launch of the, How to Begin book. How to Begin, start doing something that matters. If it's before January 11th, if you are happy and willing to make a pre-order of the book, I would certainly be grateful. The pre-ordering kind of really matters to authors. It's our chance to kind of get some notice of the book to kind of get a bit of buzz going around it. It's one of those great gifts that a reader can do, is to pre-order a book for an author. You know I wrote the book because a line came to me, which is, we unlock our greatness by working on the hard things.

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

And when I think of my own personal growth and the difference I've made in the world and the impact I've had, it's when I've taken on something that feels thrilling and important and daunting. And I wanted to share and write about a process to help others do that. So if you're looking to be more ambitious for yourself and for the world to kind of connect to that ambition, and if you're really wanting to rethink goals as a liberating force, and if you just want to be the best version of yourself and do work that makes a difference. Whether that's work at work or work just in life, outside your kind of a career, then I think this book might be for you. You can find out more about the book at howtobegin.com, that will give you bonuses. That'll give you pre-launch extras. If you're listening before January the 11th, and it'll just give you additional resources if you're coming to it after January 11th. Thanks for your support. You're awesome. And you're doing great.