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

Hey, it's MBS here, Michael and holidays are upon us. And as you probably realize, my book is coming too, *How to Begin*. So it's all hands on deck behind the scenes here. So as to give me a break and also the team a break so we get to celebrate the end of the year, we're releasing some episodes from the vault. So today I'm really happy to reintroduce, if you haven't heard this episode before, my friend Dolly Chugh. She's a professor at NYU. She's the author of a wonderful book called *The Person You Mean to Be*, all about how do you be good-ish, which I love as a standard to meet. And she's reading *A More Beautiful and Terrible History* by Jeanne Theoharis and of course, we get into the conversation about that very book. Thanks for listening. Thanks for being part of 2 Pages with MBS.



MBS ([00:54](#)):

Okay, on a scale of one to 10. One low, 10 high, how do you rate yourself as a good person? Go on, give yourself a number, you don't have to tell anyone, it's just between you and me. Now it's interesting, but it's perhaps slightly predictable for me to ask you, okay, so why didn't you give yourself a higher number? And you probably have some answers to that. But let me ask you this, why didn't you give yourself a lower score? That throws up some interesting answers as well, right? And for me and perhaps for you too, some realization about the person I think I am, and the person who actually shows up day-to-day in my life.

MBS ([01:45](#)):

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. And my guest today is Dolly Chugh, a professor of social psychology at New York University at the Stern School of Business. And to be honest, a favorite person of mine. She's the author of *The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias*. And Dolly has made it her goal to speak to those of us who, while we consider ourselves good people might not realize how our unconscious biases affect what we do and how we act every day. And she has a rather cheeky, actually delightful name for her studies.

Dolly ([02:30](#)):

So I study what's called the psychology of good people, that's my general umbrella area of interest. And when I say I study the psychology of good people, it is a little bit of a tongue in cheek because the punchline of my work is that we all see ourselves as good people and care about being good people however we define that, but there's actually a lot that happens outside of our awareness, that doesn't quite live up to our aspiration.



MBS ([02:59](#)):

Good people everywhere in theory. I was actually curious to ask Dolly what she thought about the past four tumultuous years, which has seen America really divided against itself.

Dolly ([03:10](#)):

I'm pretty sure it's a poor choice of words, but I feel a little bit validated in the work I do. And that I think more and more people are seeing that gap that I study between the person I mean to be, and in my actual way of being. That's more visible. The invisible has become more visible to more people. It's come via a lot of pain and a lot of loss.

MBS ([03:39](#)):

Pain and loss. I wonder if we have to suffer the roll to become aware of our gaps, our failings. And is it even possible to change really, to close those gaps? Well, there is no magic wand true, I wish there was, but there is in fact something you can do today, literally right now.

Dolly ([04:00](#)):

The answer is almost always listen more. Talk less, listen more. So I think that's one place we start, is by listening to what the world is telling us, whether it's individuals in our lives or just society at large, forces. If forces around, you are saying, "There's systemic racism." And you're like, "What? No, I don't understand." That's not what would happen if we just listened to it and allowed knowledge to present itself.

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

There's a great acronym for that, W-A-I-T so it spells WAIT, and it stands for why am I talking? It is a great question to ask yourself. I'm a champion for, ask



you a good question and listen, listen, listen. But listening and allowing knowledge to present itself is only the first step. Next is changing behavior. And as I can attest to, that is not easy.

Dolly ([05:00](#)):

I think collectively what we've learned as scientists of human behavior is that, you're almost always better off building a system for change, hacking the change rather than just trying to wheel yourself to the change. And this applies in a lot of arenas. In Katie's Work, rather than saying, "Today I will exercise. Today I will exercise. Today I will exercise" You're better off getting yourself hooked on a page-turner-thriller, and then saying, "I'm only allowed to read the thriller, if I'm on the treadmill." You have a much better chance of exercising because you've set up a system there.

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

With the kind of work I do things like unconscious biases, it turns out as a field psychologists have not been able to figure out how to de-bias our minds. So, just willing myself to be less biased may not work as well as setting up a system where my biases are less likely to affect my decision making. So making it the identities of the people whose resumes I'm looking at, covering up their names will make it harder for my biases triggered by their names to affect my judgements.

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

That's great. It's building the structures and setting an environment just to give you the best chance of behaving in response to what's going on, rather than that conscious act of saying, "I choose to be this, because that exercise is a classic one." I'm like, "I've willed myself to exercise unsuccessfully for thousands of days now."



Dolly ([06:43](#)):

Exactly. Yep. I feel you.

MBS ([06:48](#)):

Dolly, tell me about the book that you've chosen for us to read today.

Dolly ([06:51](#)):

Okay, so the book I picked it's called *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* by Jeanne Theoharis. And I was introduced to Jeanne Theoharis's work via her first book, which I had read, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*. In of itself, that's a provocative title, right?

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

Well, [crosstalk 00:07:19] wonderful book titles.

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

Are they?

MBS ([07:22](#)):

I haven't read either of the books, but I wish I'd named all my books to have titles as good as hers, they're wonderful.

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

I know. The hooks, right? Yes.

MBS ([07:33](#)):

Yeah, yeah.



Dolly ([07:34](#)):

And so, when I read her first book, my reaction after I read it, it's the only and first adult, thorough historical biography of Rosa Parks written for adults. Isn't that astonishing? In the United States, Rosa Parks is one of the most recognized names in the United States.

MBS ([07:59](#)):

Absolutely, yeah.

Dolly ([08:00](#)):

And yet most of the books that have been written are for children, not for adults.

MBS ([08:03](#)):

Right.

Dolly ([08:07](#)):

After I read her biography of Rosa Parks, it was like "Phew!" Blew my mind. Rosa Parks's life was very different and much more interesting than all of us think. And felt like, I hope this isn't a spoiler for your listeners, after I found out who Luke Skywalker's dad was and I was just like, "What? No, he can't be." But that was a dark secret. This was more... Was actually, I thought a pleasant surprise.

Dolly ([08:41](#)):

So that's how we came familiar with Jeanne Theoharis's work. And this is her second book and I've read it. But honestly, I read it too fast when I read it. I read it because I was leading a book club in a prison and I assigned this book. And I needed to quickly finish it in time, just like my students did. And Jeanne, very kindly responded to an invitation to join me in the discussion in the prison. So we drove up together and discussed this book.



Dolly ([09:13](#)):

Now I'm rereading it slower. And I'm really glad I am, because it's just so rich and important and interesting, like really, really interesting. So I picked it because it's shifting my understanding of my country, and of my history in a way that I think will serve me well. I think I'll be a better American for understanding what this book is teaching me and has taught me.

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

I feel like there's going to be a provocative thesis at the heart of this book. What's it saying?

Dolly ([09:51](#)):

It's saying that the history we tell ourselves, the fables, the morality tale we've told ourselves about the civil rights movement is false. It suggests things happened over a tighter timeframe than they did. It suggests fewer people were involved than there were. It suggests the work was finished when it isn't. And it suggests that the problems were just limited to certain individuals, the bad guys, as opposed to broader and deeper and more in all of us. And it begins with a quote that's really great from James Baldwin. Maybe this is a better phrasing of the thesis. James Baldwin says in what he called A Talk to Teachers, he said, "American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it"

MBS ([11:02](#)):

James Baldwin is so eloquent. We've had another guest read from James Baldwin's work on the show. So I love that he keeps coming up as a voice to hear. And every time I hear a little bit of his writing, I'm struck by his poetry. It's amazing. It sounds like a very rich book indeed. How did you choose the two pages that you chose?



Dolly ([11:25](#)):

I decided to just go with the beginning, because I think they set the stage before getting into the nitty gritty of the specifics of the history. It frames it all in a way that I've... I noticed I underlined a lot of things in the first couple of pages, because I think it was turning on a lot of light bulbs for me. So I thought I would just do those.

MBS ([11:53](#)):

Let me introduce you to set this up. Dolly Chugh, author of a wonderful book, *The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias*, reading from Jeanne Theoharis's book, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History*, which was published in 2019. Dolly, over to you.

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

By the turn of the millennium, the history of the civil rights movement had become a national story. When asked to name a most famous American, other than a president from Columbus to today, high school students most often chose Martin Luther king, Jr., and Rosa Parks. Students chose two freedom fighters who in life had challenged the racial injustice at the heart of American society and who had often been treated as un-American for doing so. Now, the civil rights movement had come to embody American grit, courage, and resolve. And these two activists could be invoked as the country's most famous emblems.

Dolly ([12:59](#)):

Arguably beginning when president Ronald Reagan signed the bill in 1983 to make the third Monday of January, a federal holiday for Martin Luther king, Jr., the political uses of memorializing, the movement took on heightened possibility as a national narrative. 15 years of opposition to the holiday gave way



to recognizing its political utility. The civil rights movement became a way for the nation to feel good about its progress. And King's legacy became enshrined in his dream speech. His popularity expanded.

Dolly ([13:36](#)):

By 1987, 76% of Americans held a favorable opinion of the civil rights leader. Almost the reverse of his popularity at the end of his life, only 28% of Americans had a favorable opinion of him in 1966. President after president, from Reagan, to Bush, to Clinton, to Obama, hailed King's dream in their tributes to him. With these national stamps of approval, the civil rights leader's broader commitments to challenging the, "Giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism." And his legacy of sustained struggle shrank further into the background.

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

At the same time, memorials for the civil rights movement became national events. From President Bill Clinton's trip to Little Rock for the 40th anniversary of the Little Rock Nine's desegregation of Central High School. To Congress's decision to have Rosa Parks's coffin lie in honor in the Capitol. To the First Family's trip to Selma, Alabama, on the 50th anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery march. These national events honored not just the work of the civil rights activists, but the advancement of the nation itself. They mark the Americanness of the civil rights struggle and held up the power of U.S. democracy and progress to the world.

Dolly ([15:05](#)):

Political leaders, pundits, and citizens, came to see and tell the story of the modern civil rights movement as one of progress and national redemption. Jim Crow was framed as a horrible Southern relic, and the movement to unseat it became a powerful tale of courageous Americans defeating a long-ago evil.



Activists from Paul Robeson, to Malcolm X, who had once been deemed national security threats showed up on postage stamps. A movement that had challenged the very fabric of U.S. politics and society was turned into one that demonstrated how great and expansive the country was. A story of individual bravery, natural evolution, and the long march to a more perfect union.

Dolly ([15:57](#)):

A story that should have reflected the immense injustices at the nation's core, and the enormous lengths people had gone to attack them had become a flattering mirror. The popular history of the civil rights movement now served as testament to the power of American democracy. This framing was appealing, simultaneously sober about the history of racism, lionizing of black courage, celebratory of American progress, and strategic in masking and at times justifying current inequities. This history as national progress naturalized the civil rights movement as an almost inevitable aspect of American democracy, rather than as the outcome of black organization and intrepid witness. It suggested racism derived from individual sin rather than from national structure. And that the strength of American values rather than the staggering challenge of a portion of its citizens, led to its change. The movement had largely washed away the sins of the nation, and America's race problem could be laid to rest with a statue in the Capitol.

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

In the process, politicians and others shrank the progressive, expansive, challenging vision of the modern black freedom struggle into something more passive, individualistic and privatized, a dream diluted and distorted. The celebration of the movement became a way to avoid acknowledging the, "Enormous gap between America's practices and its professions." As historian, John Hope Franklin had explained. And it became a way to take the beauty and



power away from one of the most successful social movements of the 20th century and the vision it offers us for today.

Dolly ([17:52](#)):

The recounting of national histories is never separate from present day politics. What of the past is remembered, celebrated, and mourned is at the core of national identity. And the process of what is told and not told is often a function of power.

MBS ([18:17](#)):

Wow, there's a lot there. And that's just the first two pages of the book.

Dolly ([18:21](#)):

I love, that's the preface.

MBS ([18:23](#)):

It speaks to this, the complexity of success, which is when you succeed, you can then be co-opted and re-mythologized and becoming a kind of acute relic that seems to have been solved in the past, rather than something that is still present. Immediately as I hear that... Anyways, and I speak as not as an American, I'm a Australian and they're Canadian, it's like, "Oh, there's a civil rights movement that still it's an ongoing movement. It hasn't finished." It's not a movement in the past, it's a movement in the present. But I'm curious to know, what's resonating about this for you in particular, Dolly?

Dolly ([19:09](#)):

I really appreciate your reflections there. Like when I described that moment in Pete's Coffee Shop, and then the years that have passed since then in my work, that work has largely sat in the sphere of thinking about individuals and the biases individuals hold. And in many ways, I think that's the problem. Exactly



what I am doing is part of the problem is that, it's not that we shouldn't study those things.

Dolly ([19:42](#)):

But that in of itself, if I had a magic wand and I could make everybody's individual unconscious biases evaporate or align with their conscious beliefs, it would not solve a lot of the systemic problems that still exist. And I think that's what I'm learning more and more about from historians like Theoharis and others, is how the work of people like Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, Jr., was very much about systemic issues, but it got co-opted into this individual perspective.

Dolly ([20:26](#)):

And so, I'm hoping as I move forward, I'm going to be able to get my head around connecting those two perspectives. I in my first book did in one chapter tackle it. And that chapter was like a late breaking add to the book because I started to have these like cracks in my understanding while I was writing the book where I was like, "Yes." I was like, "Wait, what?" And my next book is going to tackle it more directly. But that's where I'm really appreciating like those two pages and this whole book. So many people's work in across the humanities and social sciences of helping us see that connection between the individual and the systems around them.

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

So it isn't just that I, as an individual carry around these unconscious racial biases. It's also that my unconscious racial biases make it harder for me to see the ways in which racial bias is baked into a lot of ways in which just the way things are done, the way college is organized, and the way dress codes are set up and companies, and what is considered professional in the workplace. It's



harder for me to see that. I have to be very intentional to see those things. And so there's a lot of connections there.

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

Okay, making your next book is going to be called, the communities we need to be; how good people fight bias.

Dolly ([21:48](#)):

Oh, that's good.

MBS ([21:50](#)):

The next level up. But...

Dolly ([21:53](#)):

I like that.

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

Dolly, it's hard enough to figure out and start restructuring around our own individual biases. That's a breakthrough just to realize just how much of that stuff we carry with us through our seemingly neutral worldview. Where do you begin trying to uncover and address the biases at a more systemic level? It feels overwhelming.

Dolly ([22:24](#)):

And that's one thing that my next book is going to try to tackle that. I think we begin by unlearning not learning. We begin by unlearning some things like, so for example, Theoharis, what she teaches us is that Rosa Parks, it was not that she was tired that day, it was not that she was an elderly seamstress, by the way, she was 42. We always describe her as an elderly seamstress. She was 42, Michael, what the heck?



MBS ([22:55](#)):

It speaks to it being like a children's story. The fact that it's turned into a children's story says a lot. It's just like we're infantilizing the civil rights movement. And of course, if you're an eight year old, 42 is an ancient person. If you're you and me, 42 is a young whippersnapper. [crosstalk 00:23:12] A very young person.

Dolly ([23:13](#)):

[inaudible 00:23:13] with kids. Exactly whippersnapper. I love it. She had decades of activism behind her. She had been very prominently participating as an officer in her local NAACP. There was nothing accidental about what happened that day. And so when we unlearn what we learned, and when we learn what is correct, then it starts to... I think it makes it easier for us to see the systems around us. I don't think it is as overwhelming. Then you start to say, "First of all, that was an individual who had such an out-sized impact. It wasn't only her, she was working with many others." And we start to see what the issue was. It wasn't that she was protesting one bus or one moment, it was an overall. It was in the pores of our country. I think it actually gets easier if we can get through the psychological resistance of unlearning something, it actually, I think is less overwhelming.

Dolly ([24:26](#)):

The world makes a little more sense, actually. It is what I'm finding. It's like, "Oh right. Of course..." It makes sense because now when you say, "Why do I look around the world and see all these everywhere?" Everywhere, disparities in health outcomes, disparities in wealth, disparities in education, disparities in COVID, disparities in where people live, why? It makes more sense if you understand that through the more accurate lens of systemic issues. Then if you



think, "We did this thing in the '60s and it's over, and yet there's all these disparities now, then how do you explain that?"

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

So how do I learn to unlearn Dolly?

Dolly ([25:19](#)):

Well, what I've been, and this is what I'm working on right now is trying to put together some tools for that, I think one place is there's wonderful research on paradox. The idea of having two conflicting ideas in our mind at the same time. Are we able to hold those? Our minds crave consistency. That's just like a human thing that we like consistency. I don't necessarily mean consistency in routine or consistency in my activities, though that's also maybe true for some. But I mean, we want mental consistency of... we don't want things to contradict. There's wonderful research on a paradox mindset, which suggests that we actually can actively let go of that and allow ourselves to... I forget who I'm quoting here, but I love this phrase that, "We can allow ourselves to love America with a broken heart."

MBS ([26:28](#)):

So the capacity to lean into paradox, being able to... There's, I think F. Scott Fitzgerald quote around, "Having an ability to hold two contradictory ideas in your mind at the same time, and be with the tension of that."

Dolly ([26:48](#)):

I love that quote. Yes, exactly. And I'm playing with a bunch of ideas about this part. Some of it's like, can we spot easy stories or simple stories? There's a lot of like what Theoharis tells us about Rosa Parks is dispelling a simple story. There's a lot of simple stories floating around about meritocracy, about morality. Those are things we probably have to unlearn. So getting better at spotting those.



Getting better at connecting dots, like disparities, when we see all those disparities I listed a moment ago. Getting better at just asking why not taking it for granted like, "All the black people live over there, and all the white people live over there. Why? There's more potholes over there than there are over there. Why?" And inevitably, if you keep asking the why question there, you either have to get to some historical or present day cause, or you get to a pretty racist reasoning. One way or another you've got to resolve that.

MBS ([28:07](#)):

Either people of color are lesser than I am, or there's some systemic issue going on that has them have outcomes that are lesser than I have.

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

Exactly.

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

It's such a gauntlet to lay down Dolly, because people love a simple narrative. Look at Trump and Make America Great Again. I'm not a Trump fan, I doubt you are as well, but the man has a brilliant capacity for creating simple narratives that stomp on paradox, stomp on new ones, but presents aid. and he's brilliant at it, he's brilliant at it. And convincing, and influential. Do you have a sense of how you counteract the force of that simple and unreal narrative?

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

Yeah. Facts are useful. I think there's a lot of people who like facts.

MBS ([29:18](#)):

That's right.



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

So I think, when I say paradox, it's a paradox that we've forced upon ourselves, right? Because if we have this America is the greatest nation on Earth, which I'm happy to sign that, but then we're unwilling to see anything else. So I've been toying with this idea of the patriot paradox, which is the idea of like, "The more you love this country, the harder it is for you to do what's right for this country." It's like, "You're so invested in this very specific vision." And I think there are a lot of people who want to resolve that.

Dolly ([30:01](#)):

So there may be people craving the simple story, but I think there's also people craving like this isn't making sense, make it make sense. And so the paradox thing is actually saying, "It makes sense of it. You don't have to believe only one thing. You don't have to believe this is an amazing country, or this is a terrible country." You are allowed to actually believe both of those things. I think that's liberating.

MBS ([30:32](#)):

Because the same patriots paradox is something like, "The more you love this country, the more you're willing to see what's unlovable about this country."

Dolly ([30:40](#)):

Right, exactly.

MBS ([30:42](#)):

And it's the other side of holding that tension between a commitment to, and a willingness to feel the pain of it at the same time.



Dolly ([30:54](#)):

I interviewed Mitch Landrieu, who was mayor of New Orleans, for a number of years. He was the mayor who took down the Confederate monuments from public spaces in New Orleans and got a lot of attention for that. And I was really struck by his ability to do this so well. His vision is like, "It is the most American thing in the world to want your best self to rise, to strive, to be the best." I'm putting words in his mouth. But this was the gist of what I took away. And so if that's true, if we're always reaching for better, why wouldn't we be trying to do this? Why wouldn't we want to take better care of each other? Because that's really all we're talking about here is not leaving behind huge segments of our fellow Americans.

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

Dolly, I'm looking at my little clock and I can't believe we've been talking for as long as we have, because I feel like I'm just getting started here.

Dolly ([31:57](#)):

Me too.

MBS ([31:58](#)):

So I'm sorry for a conversation that is so rich, and is that it needs to be another three hours longer. Let me ask you a final question if I might, that might have a chance to wrap some things up. What needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

Dolly ([32:20](#)):

Oh gosh. I'll speak for me personally. I definitely feel like I'm a learner in this space right now. A learner who's aspiring to be a teacher in this space, and I use my writing as a form of teaching. So, I am grateful that you let me show up as a



learner, and that we're unpacking this together. I think I'll have clearer thoughts, and more actionable tools over time, but I appreciate the space to just think with you.

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

My friend, Scott Stratten has the word unlearn tattooed on his forearm. It's one of my favorite tattoos because it speaks to the power of the beginner's mind and to be skeptical of neat narratives of power and accomplishment. And that tattoo speaks to humility, and it connects the knowing that you don't know everything, to the possibility that others will know things you don't can, and you can't, and have stories that you haven't yet heard, or haven't yet understood. And it's really saying, this tattoo unlearn, it's saying, "Know that you're wonderful, but know also that you're flawed and messy. And get beyond yourself." Literally get beyond yourself, reach out, connect to other people, hear other stories. I love my conversation with Dolly. I love her newsletter. If you'd like to sign up for that, you can find it at [dollychugh.com](http://dollychugh.com).

MBS ([34:03](#)):

She writes a funny and nuanced newsletter and I encourage you to sign up for that. And of course I do want to just thank you for being part of 2 Pages with MBS, listening to the interview today. If you are so moved to mention the episode to a friend of yours, if you like this wrestling with bias, with wrestling with goodness, with wrestling how we show up in society. If you like, Dolly and me are looking to shape a better society. Well, maybe there's somebody in your world that likes that as well. And you can share this conversation with Dolly, with them.

MBS ([34:36](#)):

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