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

Look, there's no doubt that I am a purpose-driven person. I mean, right from when I started my work, I've really been able to ground it and find the point of it. When I started Box of Crayons 20 years ago, the language I used was to infect a billion people with the possibility virus. Obviously that sounded a lot better before there was a global pandemic for two years, but still the idea is a powerful one for me. Over time, Box of Crayons, as it moved to kind of a more corporate setting, it narrowed its focus, but we had a really clear purpose to that as well, which is to teach 10-minute coaching to busy managers.

MBS ([00:38](#)):

And now with my new venture, mbs.works, well, it committed to helping people be a force for change. And for instance, you can see how the new book, How to Begin flows directly from that headwater. But it's interesting, I don't



know where this sense of purpose comes from, I mean, I'm trying to figure it out. I'm an atheist unlike my guest today who I'll introduce in a minute, he's devoutly religious, and I'm also, I think, an existentialist and amongst other things, I think as best as I understand existential, that means I don't have an inherent purpose by being human. So where does this drive of mine come from? I mean, let me ask you, where do you find your sense of purpose, what's its origin?

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

Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS, 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. Arthur C. Brooks is a thinker and a writer about both leadership and more broadly about a good life. He holds academic positions at Harvard, he was previously head of a conservative think tank, and he writes a regular article in The Atlantic called How to Build a Life, really interesting article, always based on science and written with a degree of elegance, but those are just his jobs and in many ways. And here, Arthur, I certainly agree the least interesting answer to, "Who are you?" Is, "Well, here's what I do." So what's the why of Arthur C. Brooks?

Arthur ([02:23](#)):

I'm a guy dedicated to bringing people together and lifting them up. I'm dedicated to helping people understand the nature of their own happiness, how they can practice it in their lives and how they can share it with others, that's the why of my life. And I've found all different ways to do it. Currently I do it by teaching at a university and by writing about it in a magazine and giving lots and lots of speeches about it and doing media and podcasts. Before that, I ran a think tank in Washington, D.C., and at the beginning of my career, I tried to express these ideas of lifting people up and bringing them together through music. And so I spent the first 12 years of my career as a classical musician, a lot of that in the Barcelona Symphony.



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

That's interesting. So instead of just lifting people up, Arthur instead said, "Bringing people together and lifting them up." I'm really curious to know why he combined the two.

Arthur ([03:11](#)):

Basically you can't find a place today around the world where people are not polarized and it's incredibly problematic with respect to happiness. And one of the biggest impediments to happiness is our inability to actually make common cause across the things that we care about. You find that loneliness is a major epidemic and has to do with the fact that we're atomizing, we're isolating ourselves and a good deal of that has to do with this polarization across political ideas.

MBS ([03:36](#)):

Sometimes the world seems so polarized and I'm not sure about you, but I certainly can despair. And I'm trying to imagine what it would take to actually bring us together as a species across borders and across politics and across ideologies. But I think he got an answer to that dilemma.

Arthur ([03:55](#)):

My job is to help people, convince people that love matters more than politics, that love matters more than really anything. And so if I can help bring people together and cross bonds of love and lift them up to greater levels of progress and then the world is just a better place.

MBS ([04:13](#)):

So is this a Beatles' moment, I mean, is all we need love? Well, that would be great, but here's one of the things that I think is interesting, it kind of moves



away from rainbows and unicorns. Arthur believes that the path to happiness begins with unhappiness.

Arthur ([04:33](#)):

Well, to begin with, if we all say, "Hey, would you like more unhappiness?" Everyone would say, "No, no, I don't want more unhappiness." And that makes sense as far as it goes. In my study, in my work, in my research as an academic on happiness however, happiness requires meaning in our lives. It's one of the macronutrients of happiness. Happiness is made up of enjoyment, satisfaction, and meaning, and meaning actually requires suffering and pain, it just does. And so in the search to... We talk about the pursuit of happiness.

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

Well, I think that when I look at the data on millennials and Gen Z today, they might as well rewrite the declaration of independence and talk about the avoidance of unhappiness, the inalienable right to the avoidance of unhappiness. But the problem with that is when you avoid your unhappiness, you're avoiding meaning. And when you avoid meaning, you're avoiding happiness. So there's a lot that goes into that. Now true, we don't want needless suffering, we want to avoid needless suffering for other people, but we should not go out of our way to undo suffering in our own lives.

MBS ([05:35](#)):

I mean, it brings to mind the Jung quote that the gold is in the dark. And also, I think he said, "I'd rather be whole than be good." A similar piece.

Arthur ([05:47](#)):

For sure. I mean, a lot of people will say, people who share my... I'm a Roman Catholic and a lot of Roman Catholics will say, "I prefer to be holy than happy." And the truth is if you're holy, you're mostly happy, but also there's joy that comes in a more fulsome way to that by being a complete person under those



circumstances. And so there's not only Catholics having a lock on this idea, to be a person fully alive, you need to be fully alive to all the experiences that are actually in your life.

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

Arthur, how did you come to the why of your work? Because obviously you think about it and you write about it and you teach it, but you're also very articulate about it. Not many people can, when put on the spot, go, "Let me tell you the purpose, the meaning, the foundation of why I live the way I do." What was the process for you in terms of uncovering that and refining it?

Arthur ([06:41](#)):

And it wasn't that from my days back in the crib, it was something that developed over my adult life. And I remember actually a real juncture where I started to consider why the why is more important than the what. When I was in classical music, which was my whole life from the time I was four years old until I went pro when I was 19 and then I left it when I was 31. So all the way through my 20s, before I ever went to college, before I did any academics at all, I was a professional classical musician.

Arthur ([07:10](#)):

And my favorite composer during those years was Johann Sebastian Bach, maybe the greatest composer who ever lived. 1685 to 1750, he wrote and published more than a thousand pieces of music for all different instrumentations. By the way, he also had 20 kids so he was incredibly productive. But Bach was asked near the end of his life, he was an extremely spiritual, even mystical person. He was asked near the end of his life, "Why do you write music?" What a profound question. I mean, not, "What's music writing process?" And he didn't answer it glibly like, "Dude, I got a lot of mouths to feed."



Arthur ([07:44](#)):

And his minor biographer now lost in posterity, asked this question, but his answer to the question has endured. He said, "The aim and final end of all music is nothing less than the glorification of God and the refreshment of the soul." And I thought, man, I want to answer like Bach. I want to answer like Bach. I mean, people are like, "So why do you play the French horn?" "Because it's awesome, and the music is really good and the money's okay." No, no, no. And the truth is, Michael, I couldn't answer like Bach when I was a French horn player. I literally left music because I wanted to answer my life's vocational question like Bach. I went in search of something that would be more meaningful, I became an economist, it's like the sublime to the dismal-

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

Yeah, the dismal act.

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

... because I wanted to lift people up. I wanted to lift people up and bring them together. I wanted to do my own version of Bach, but Bach was the one who pushed me out of music. And I think today where I write books and teach and write a column and do shows like this about the art of happiness. But I think that maybe I'm a little bit closer to Bach than certainly than I was then.

MBS ([08:54](#)):

So I see that moment where you're like, "Ah, what I'm doing now doesn't have an answer like Bach can give, and I want that answer." It's one thing to leave the music, it's another thing to then find the purpose. How did you uncover it?

Arthur ([09:10](#)):

I went in search of something that I thought was really going to edify other people. And it's interesting, studying economics, it wasn't just so that the



American economy would work better. Actually the reason I studied economics is because I was very interested in why some people were poor and some people weren't poor. And I thought I was going to find that the capitalist system is inherently exploitative, blah, blah, blah, blah, I thought that's because I was a musician, so I had predictable politics on that.

Arthur ([09:39](#)):

But what I found was that since I was a kid 80% of the world's poorest people had been pulled out of poverty. 80% had been pulled out of dollar a day poverty and 2 billion of my brothers and sisters had been pulled out of poverty. And the reason, quite frankly, was because of globalization and free trade and the rule of law and because of these ideas of free enterprise spreading around the world, which weren't perfect, as nothing's perfect. And it's not like some crazy laze fair thing where no regulation is ever need, none of that.

Arthur ([10:11](#)):

But it's just, I found the opposite of what I thought I was going to find. And so I studied economics because I wanted to the idea around the world that for the first time in human history, we can eradicate poverty. And we can't do it very effectively with just government programs or Foreign A programs, those are important, they're really, really good. We can do it with our system if we share our system and we're abundant with our system, we're generous with our system, if we have love that we wrap into our work and with our system and spread around the world. And that literally there are millions of people not going to bed hungry tonight because of these ideas that we've tried to spread around the world.

MBS ([10:48](#)):

When you have a purpose, which is, I'm not sure if it's a luxury, but it's a privilege to have an articulated purpose. I'm curious to know how you decide where to spend your time, a couple of years ago you moved away from running a think



tank to being an academic. How did you choose that as opposed to all the other things you could have done? Because when you're in your position, you have an abundance of choices, because you could have done all sorts of different things in terms of trying to best reach and serve the purpose you've said for yourself, how do you know what to say yes to and what temptations to walk away from?

Arthur ([11:28](#)):

Yeah, and I have been very fortunate in having a lot of opportunities because before I was teaching I was running a think tank in Washington, D.C. at the center of Washington, D.C. And when you're a chief executive and things are going pretty well, you have a lot of opportunity in the back of that. Now the tendency is to think, look, I'm going to retire from this. And I was 55 years old, so I wasn't retirement age, but I was going to step down from that. And I had a commitment to stay for 10 years, but no more and they felt like, "Yeah, we'll see buddy, you'll get there and you'll stay."

Arthur ([11:58](#)):

But I did, I kept to that, I kept to the commitment, I stepped down after 10 years. And it was very, very disconcerting because that was really what I knew and I really liked it a lot cetera. But I knew, I'd studied this stuff because I was an academic before and I studied leadership, and I had looked at the lives of corporate and governmental and nonprofit leaders. And you get one vision and you can push it, you can push it to 20 and 30 years, but will be under you because there's really only two ways to leave a chief executive job, you can leave before you're ready or you can leave on somebody else's terms.

Arthur ([12:32](#)):

And I don't like those choices, but I like leaving before I'm ready a lot more than I like getting shoved out because I've kind of overstayed my welcome. So I looked around at the next thing to do, and then that required a process of what we call discernment. And there's a long philosophical tradition and in almost





every theological tradition as well, spiritual tradition as well, discernment, which is discernment of your why and then finding the vehicle for expressing the why. And that's what I did, and as a Catholic, I went through discernment that is very, very common for Christians.

Arthur ([13:05](#)):

But I've also studied this because I've worked very closely with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, we've published a lot on this and he treats discernment of your purpose the same way, it requires work to uncover the nature of your desire. Here's a weird thing that I find, Michael, with my students, they know everything in the world. I mean, they're students at the Harvard Business School, they know everything in the world, except one thing, they don't know what they want.

MBS ([13:31](#)):

That's such a good question.

Arthur ([13:32](#)):

They don't know the nature of their own desire, and that's what discernment is all about, is trying to uncover your desire and it requires actual work. And so I went through the process of discernment, where I was spending 15 minutes a day for six months praying. And it works with Buddhist meditation, it works in many, many different ways to do it for I was asking for knowledge about the nature of my own desire. And I had no idea that I was going to go back into academia, I had no plans to go back into academia, but it occurred to me that I wanted to teach these ideas and to work in media and to do the kind of thing that we're doing now, where I can articulate these ideas to a bigger audience, I can teach to a bigger audience. And at that point, the world opened up to me and I started talking to 10 universities and I went to the one that I thought was the best fit, and I'm really glad I did.



MBS ([14:21](#)):

Yeah, it's interesting. We've had a parallel life in some ways, I stepped away from being CEO of the company I founded two and a half years ago, so mid 2019. And it was a similar kind of wandering around in the wilderness a little bit because you're more entangled in that past role and the company and the status and the association with being a CEO, all of that. And it took a lot of kind of discernment just sitting with it to figure out what might come next.

Arthur ([14:51](#)):

Yeah, for sure, for sure. And there's sometimes a little bit of regret that comes with it too. I mean, I'm sure, but I'll ask, Michael, I mean, over the past two and a half years have you said, "Good old days, good old days, back when I was the King of the Mambo and now I'm trying..." And you're rebuilding now and you're building the show, you're building a new sort of idea, empire a little bit, and it's not easy every single day, but it's the right thing to do, right?

MBS ([15:22](#)):

Well, there's a writer who I love, who's work is based on kind of existential thinking, because, look, every the role of being an adult in your own life is to make choices, to make hard choices and every choice comes with guilt and anxiety, anxiety about whether you've made the right choice and guilt about the choices that you're walking away from. And all of that was true in terms of shifting away from being the CEO at Box of Crayons and it still being the right choice, absolutely.

Arthur ([15:48](#)):

Yeah, for sure. And as time goes, there's a lot of data that shows that you can't know the appropriateness of your discernment and your choices until about 18 months in. And so the biggest mistake that people make is when they have a major life change, it's actually in my new book is that they tend to... After six



months they're miserable and so they think they made a mistake. Well, no, no, no, no, no, it's the same thing when you go to college. My youngest daughter just went off to college in the fall and I said, "Look, Honey, if you actually like college by October, it means you're partying too much and you're going to get a bad report card."

Arthur ([16:26](#)):

Basically, it shouldn't even be until the November at the earliest, when you start to say, 'This might be okay.' And then after Christmas, maybe we'll talk about it. And it's only going to be in the second year of school before you say, "Yeah, this is really for me. I love it." Because I've seen a ton of data on this, but the same thing is true for you and me, that it takes time and it requires learning about yourself and experiencing the unhappiness and sacrifice and even pain that we talked about a minute ago.

MBS ([16:52](#)):

Yeah, the model that I've heard is the Finland bus station model, you might have heard of that as well, which is like-

Arthur ([16:58](#)):

What's that? Tell me about that.

MBS ([17:00](#)):

Well, when you catch a bus from the Finland bus station for the first 10 miles, all the buses follow just one of four different routes. And it's only after the first 10 miles that the route start diversifying and you start getting into interesting places. And the problem is that too many people get off in the first 10 miles going, "This isn't the right bus for me." And you need to stick at it a little longer before it actually starts finding the interesting places and going to the places that you might not have expected, that the journey starts to pay off.



Arthur ([17:31](#)):

Yeah, and there's actually another characteristic of change for somebody like you, you run Box of Crayons and now you're building a new empire kind of from scratch. As soon as you step down from a major leadership position, you have neurochemical alterations that necessarily follow you that mimic clinical depression. It's just the way it is, I mean, Jordan Peterson has talked an awful lot about this way, your fellow Torontan. And he talks about the fact that serotonin levels dip when people step down from CEO jobs, but I've seen it so profoundly in my own practice that I will even recommend that when somebody's stepping down from a major CEO job, that they have a preventative visit to a psychiatrist to see whether or not they should actually be sort of prophylactically using some antidepressants or some selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, because it's such a common thing, it's hard to step down.

MBS ([18:25](#)):

So speaking of people who've held fairly senior leadership roles, tell us about at the book you're going to read from.

Arthur ([18:31](#)):

So I want to read today about something that has had a big impact on me for a long time, and this is the most important classic of the stoic philosophical literature. This is the meditations of Marcus Aurelius. Marcus Aurelius was one of the great Roman emperors, sort of the latter part of the Roman empire. But he was the most virtuous of the Roman emperors preceded by and followed by Roman emperors that were considerably less virtuous than he was and less successful as well. And he kept a diary during his time of stoic ideas. Now he had studied stoic philosophy from his tutors for 40 years before his glory years as the emperor.



Arthur ([19:13](#)):

And so he was a stoic philosopher in his own right and very sophisticated and highly intelligent. And he kept a diary of his stoic thoughts, kind of his own self-improvement journal, never intended to be widely disseminated, but it fell into the hands of people who after he died said, "This is pure gold." And it 1,700 years later, it is still read. I read this book the first time about 20 years ago, and it rocked my world, I have to say. Really, it was just so full of wisdom, it also empowered me so much to think about my emotions, to think about how I felt about the world and understand that I don't have to be managed by my emotions.

Arthur ([19:56](#)):

I can manage my emotions by running the causality in a different direction. Now I went on to become a social scientist and study modern neuroscience, I understand the biological process of managing your emotions, Marcus Aurelius didn't need that, he understood the profound truths of managing oneself. And that's what I'm going to read from, couple of pages from the meditations of Marcus Aurelius.

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

I've been waiting for somebody to pick a bit of stoic philosophy to read from, so this is perfect.

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

Stoic philosophy, sure, and it's become very hot in the last few years because my friend Ryan Holiday has done the daily stoic and people are really, really finding stoic philosophy. But I have to say that I was reading it before it was cool. So this is two pages from Book Four of the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, since it's a diary, it's just little snippets. So these are 11 short meditations.



MBS ([20:52](#)):

Brilliant.

Arthur ([20:53](#)):

Starting with 38 and going to 48, so I'll number them accordingly. Meditation number 38, look into their minds at what the wise do and what they don't. 39, nothing that goes on in anyone else's mind can harm you, nor can the shifts and changes in the world around you. Then where is harm to be found? In your capacity to see it, stop doing that and everything will be fine. Let the part of you that makes that judgment keep quiet even if the body it's attached to is stabbed or burnt or stinking with pus or consumed by cancer. Or to put it another way, it needs to realize that what happens to everyone bad and good alike is neither good nor bad, that what happens in every life live now naturally or not, is neither natural nor unnatural.

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

40, the world is a living being, one nature, one soul, keep that in mind. And how everything feeds into that single experience moves with a single motion and how everything helps produce everything else, spun and woven together. 41, Epictetus said... Side note here, Michael, Epictetus was the most famous of the stoic philosophers, was not known personally by Marcus Aurelius, but Marcus Aurelius' teachers had studied with Epictetus. Quote from Epictetus, "A little wisp of soul carrying a corpse." 42, there is nothing bad in undergoing change or good in emerging from it.

Arthur ([22:40](#)):

43, time is like a river, a violent current of events glimpsed once and already carried past us and another follows and is gone. 44, everything that happens is as simple and familiar as the rose in spring, the fruit and summer, disease, death, blasphemy, conspiracy, everything that makes stupid people happy or



angry. 45, what follows coheres with what went before, not like a random catalog whose order is imposed upon it arbitrarily, but logically connected. And just as what exists is ordered and harmonious, what comes into being betrays another too, not a mere sequence, but an astonishing concordance.

Arthur ([23:28](#)):

46, remember, Heraclitus, when earth dies, it becomes water, water, air, air, fire and back to the beginning. Those who have forgotten where the road leads they're at odds with what is all around them, the all-directing Logos, and they find alien what they meet with every day. Our words and actions should not be like those of sleepers for we act and speak in dreams as well, or of children copying their parents doing and saying only what we have been told. 47, suppose that a God announced that you were going to die tomorrow or the day after, unless you were a complete coward, you wouldn't kick up a fuss about which day it was.

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

What difference could it make? Now recognize that the difference between years from now and tomorrow is just as small. 48, don't let yourself forget how many doctors have died after furrowing their brows over how many death beds, how many astrologers after pompous forecasts about others ends, how many philosophers after endless disquisitions on death and immortality, how many warriors after inflicting thousands of casualties themselves, how many tyrants after abusing the power of life and death atrociously as if they were themselves immortal, how many whole cities have met their end?

Arthur ([24:51](#)):

Helike, Pompeii, Herculaneum, and countless others and all the ones you know yourself, one after another, one who laid out another for burial and was buried himself, and then the man who buried him all in the same short space of time. In short, know this, human lives are brief and trivial, yesterday a blob of semen,



tomorrow embalming fluid, ash, to pass through this brief life as nature demands to give it up without complaint, like all of that ripens and falls praising its mother, thanking the tree it grew on. Marcus Aurelius.

MBS ([25:33](#)):

Well, so I'm getting a sense of the transient of life.

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

Yeah, no, I mean, imagine that being your journal. He was pretty naturally gifted obviously, but to write this to himself.

MBS ([25:53](#)):

Right.

Arthur ([25:55](#)):

It's one thing to-

MBS ([25:55](#)):

Pontificate about it.

Arthur ([25:58](#)):

Yeah, totally.

MBS ([26:00](#)):

So 20 years ago, when you read this for the first time, how does this shake you?

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

There's something bracing about this, and it's a cold splash of water in the face. What it does is basically it makes you zoom out, the problem with day-to-day life, as we see it is it's just so boring. It's my job, my work, my life, my car, my house, my money, my friends, my, my, me, me, it's so boring. It's like watching the same episode of a television show over and over and over again. And





getting a perspective that's bigger than me where I see with perspective my own relatively small role in the broader scheme of things. That's not scary, that's reality, that's the kind of reality that I want because that perspective makes it possible for me to actually understand the nature of being fully alive.

Arthur ([26:54](#)):

I'm a walking zombie when I'm in this silo of my own narrow interests all the time. This is one of the reasons that I found in my subsequent research that people who seriously practice a life philosophy or religious faith are much happier than those who don't, and it doesn't load on a particular faith. I wish it were mine, but it's any serious wisdom, tradition, philosophy meditation it all works the same way. It lets you zoom out on the nature of life itself and to be able to be free to say, "Yeah, I'm little. Yeah, it's trivial. Yes, I will be forgotten. I will be forgotten by the people on this earth, so therefore what I do right now in love is what matters."

MBS ([27:38](#)):

I remember being in Istanbul and stumbling across this kind of little worn down nub of stone and buried a kind of a foot or two under the current height of the pavement and reading the inscription, it was the marker of the center point of the Ottoman Empire. And it just felt this moment of transient around empires, they come and they go. After knowing that life is transient, that we are this brief flip of light with darkness either side, two questions, they might be the same, they might be different, what are you ambitious for and how do you think of success?

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

So there's earthly ambition, then there's supernatural ambition. And as a Christian, I'm ambitious to go to heaven and take as many people with me as I can. I mean, I want that because it's not darkness, it's just different, it's life eternal, it's life everlasting and it's the beatific vision, I study happiness, well,



that's happiness. And not everybody agrees with me by the way, and a lot of smart people think that that's insane what I just said, but that is my view. My ambition for this little brief time of life on earth, however, really gets back to what we talked about before, which is this incredible privilege and opportunity of lifting people up and bringing them together.

Arthur ([29:02](#)):

And in all sorts of transgressive ways, the single most transgressive teaching over the past 2,000 years comes from Jesus of Nazareth who said, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you." I wrote a book called Love Your Enemies, which wasn't a religious book, by the way, it was a book about politics. But the whole idea of being able to do transgressive, strange counterpoint things in life and in so doing lifting people up and bringing them together, that's success and that's an adventure.

MBS ([29:34](#)):

It feels like not quite enough people have read that book recently. How do you find the courage to make these transgressive acts?

Arthur ([29:49](#)):

Well, it's interesting because I've studied the lives of people who've done transgressive negative things. And that takes a lot of courage too, takes a lot of courage. I mean, it's not meritorious, it's terrible, it's evil to do terrorist things, but it takes a bunch of courage to do that. And so if we can take the courage to do a transgressive negative act, we can certainly find the courage, we can muster the courage to engage in an act that's transgressive and positive for other people. Now, what do you lose when you say, "Love your own enemies"?

Arthur ([30:22](#)):

You lose the admiration of people who are not meritorious, you lose the admiration of people whose admiration you shouldn't want, which is, that's a



very Marcus Aurelius way to look at it, of course. He says, "Why do you strive after men who don't deserve your attention?" Or as my old friend, Niall Ferguson, he said, "Why should I let somebody into my head that I wouldn't let into my living room?" But still we have a natural, very human desire for the approbation of others, including total strangers and there's good evolutionary reasons for this.

Arthur ([30:59](#)):

Look, I mean, human beings, it's actually what we find in the modern neuroscience literature, that being cast out, being rejected socially stimulates the same neural substrates that are stimulated through physical pain. And the evolutionary reason for that is that 200,000 years ago, if you got thrown out of your tribe, you'd be wandering around the frozen tundra and dead in a day and so you want to be accepted. Social comparison and acceptances unbelievably powers an evolutionary force, but we are not the sum of our evolved impulses.

Arthur ([31:33](#)):

And when we think about these things, this is exactly Marcus' point. I mean, Marcus' point is that you have impulses, be the master of your impulses, don't let them be the master of you. And this is a perfect case of that, you're afraid to be transgressive, you're afraid to speak the truth, you're afraid to express love to the people that are unpopular among your friends. Well, master that, master that, you'll be in charge.

MBS ([31:59](#)):

I mean, that reference to Niall Ferguson around, why would you let somebody into head that you wouldn't let into your living room? I think he said this in an article, actually, it's like that's easier theory than it is in practice because these people worm the way into your head and part of what you're talking about reminds me of the Martin Buber philosophy, the I-Thou philosophy, which is, how do you constantly build I-Thou relationships not just with people in your



tribe, but people beyond your tribe? But our instinct, particularly when the people not in our tribe is to move to an I-It relationship, objectify them, lessen them, belittle them. Is there a practice that allows you to notice those impulses, to objectify and soften them?

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

Yeah, and that's the whole point of the book that I wrote, is not the book that's coming out now, the book that I wrote in 2019 called Love Your Enemies. And it talks about practices where we can do that, where we deeply listen, where we make a public commitment never to use our values as a weapon only ever as a gift, which, by the way, is completely sensible. I mean, and that is of course, a tentative of stoic philosophy. If you knock on somebody's door and they open the door and you smack them across the face with a bouquet of flowers, well, guess what? They're not going to appreciate the flowers very much.

Arthur ([33:25](#)):

That's just using your values as a weapon eviscerates the moral content of your values. And so remembering some common sense things and so there are a whole bunch of techniques that you can do that. But personally, one of the things that I recommend is that we think of... I mean, for years, I've engaged in loving-kindness meditation, which is something I've learned from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. And a loving-kindness meditation is one in which you focus on somebody that's hard for you to have loving kindness for. And you imagine yourself expressing words and actions that are kind and loving toward that person.

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

And it just changes you, it changes your brain chemistry, it changes your whole outlook, it makes you happier, it makes you more effective, it makes you better off. And it makes you feel powerful because you are no longer being managed by your ill temper, you're no longer being managed by your tribal impulses.



There's a whole social science branch that's dedicated to this, it's the study of social capital, and my colleague at Harvard, Robert Putnam was really the founder of this. And there's two kinds of social... Social capital is this connective tissue between people that creates bonds of trust.

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

And we do things together, we trust each other, it's not market transactions necessarily. But there's two kinds, there's bonding and bridging, bonding social capital is that Michael and Arthur have a bunch of things in common and that's why we like each other. Bridging social capital is across differences, is finding bonds, is finding links across differences so Michael and Arthur are different and those ways are interesting to each other, and so we want to understand those things. Great leaders and happy people are extremely good at building bridges and so that's the key thing, is like, I am I just reinforcing bonding social capital ingroup mentality and reinforcing outgroup negativity or am I looking for ways to bridge across differences? And that's where the beauty in life and that's where the thrill in life really comes from.

MBS ([35:24](#)):

So the new book is called From Strength to Strength, do you need different strengths in midlife and beyond?

Arthur ([35:34](#)):

We do. And this is one of the things that I point out that, you're younger than I am, but you've gone through a change, big change in your career. Every 10 years, I tend to take my whole career down to the studs and rebuild it. So I'm on my fourth entirely different career and who knows how many? Maybe God gives me one or two more. Maybe it's like, "No, you're done." I don't know. But the whole point is that that transitions are hard and we have to know the skills so that we can transition. Furthermore, this book shows that there's a



particularly strong transition that we need to make usually between the ages of 35 and 55.

Arthur ([36:11](#)):

It's not a midlife crisis, but it's a midlife change in strength. So when I call it Strength to Strength, that's from the 84th Psalm in Hebrew, mekhayil el khayil, which means, may you go from strength to strength, and it's a traditional Jewish blessing, may we go from strength to strength. And so how do we do that? Well, to begin with, we have to recognize that we have certain innate strengths early in life and different innate strengths later in life and this has to do with the structure of the brain actually. So early in life, there's a success curve that we climb called the fluid intelligence curve.

Arthur ([36:47](#)):

Fluid intelligence is a kind of intelligence that correlates with raw cognitive horsepower and our ability to innovate. So your career as an innovator and an entrepreneur early on was super loaded and crystallized, I mean, on fluid intelligence. In your mid 30s to early 50s, that's when you're transitioning to another kind of intelligence that you get in greater abundance, when, by the way, your fluid intelligence is declining. In every industry, your fluid intelligence declines, and you're going to see trouble. I mean, it doesn't mean you're going to fail, but it means you're going to struggle.

MBS ([37:19](#)):

Oh, believe me, I'm very conscious of how my fluid intelligence is declining.

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

Yeah, because your innovative capacity, your ability to just solve problems quickly with novel solutions, but there's another kind of intelligence behind it called crystallized intelligence, your ability to take ideas, which you're doing right now in your show, and blending them together. It's like you quoted a couple of



different full philosophers, this reminds me of this, this reminds me of that. That gets stronger and stronger through your 40s, 50s, and 60s, and can stay very high through your 70s, 80s, and 90s.

Arthur ([37:47](#)):

That's your instructive capacity, that's your ability to be a mentor, to have wisdom, to take ideas that are already there to put them together, to coherent stories and to use them in the service of others. And that's what we need to do, so the big transition to go from strength to strength is to go from the fluid intelligence curve to the crystallized intelligence curve. And this is an owner's manual on how to do that in your career and in your life.

MBS ([38:08](#)):

I love that. What does it take to become an elder, not just elderly, not just kind of in that second phase of your life, but holding the status of an elder?

Arthur ([38:22](#)):

So there's a couple of different groups that talk about elders. So there's a guy named Chip Conley in California who started a big hotel chain, hospitality chain, he was a super successful, rich and famous guy, he's great guy. And in his late 40s, he was just done.

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

Yeah, he burnt out.

Arthur ([38:43](#)):

He burnt out, his successes were coming harder, he just felt like he wasn't on his game anymore, he didn't know why. Well, now we know why, it's because his fluid intelligence has declined. And he decided that he was going to do something new. So he retired and he retooled, he went to Airbnb. And what they did was they were asking him advice all the time and they called him their



modern elder. And he's like, give me a break. Well, he had bummed them out, because he's in California where youth is everything. I mean, everybody has surgery to keep looking young all the time, it's dreadful actually, but I mean that obsession with California youth culture.

MBS ([39:20](#)):

What you don't know is I'm actually 93 and it's only massive surgery that's making me look like this, but I digress.

Arthur ([39:25](#)):

Impressive, Michael, impressive. And so what he did was when he was there at Airbnb, he realized that he had abilities he didn't know he had to combine knowledge, to put it together in novel ways, to see around corners, to teach people ideas. He never had that early in his career and so he put together something called the Modern Elder Academy that he teaches, he brings people that want to retell their careers. And in my book I'm talking about something very similar to be an elder, is somebody who is high in crystallized intelligence and knows how to use it in service of other people.

Arthur ([39:59](#)):

Now, by the way, you can also be incredibly professionally successful using it. If you want to be a great CEO and you're 65 years old, you have to be using crystallized intelligence, not trying to use your fluid intelligence. That means you need to be a teacher CEO, somebody who's firing other people up, who is accentuating their ideas and mixing those ideas together. The big reason, by the way, that Silicon Valley and social media and information tech has gone from the most respected entrepreneurial part of the American economy to the least respected in 15 years is because it's all fluid intelligence and no crystallized intelligence.





Arthur ([40:35](#)):

And they need way more old people in every single one of those companies. As a matter of fact, if I do my job in the coming years, I want to start a labor market for over 70 executives. I think there's not a company in the world that shouldn't have at least one person in the C-suite that's over 70 years old and is the elder of the company.

MBS ([40:57](#)):

David Brooks wrote his book, *The Second Mountain*, where the first part of your career is you climb the career mountain and then you get to now, and you're like, "Now what? What's my legacy? And as I kind of step into crystallized intelligence and eldership, do you need to put aside or lessen your individual ambition to be able to step more or into this teaching role?"

Arthur ([41:21](#)):

You need to change your ambition. So the ambition along the fluid intelligence curve, you can have the ambition to be the super lone wolf, ultra achiever, the guy who invents everything, the guy who solves the problems faster, the girl who actually has the most game on every single team. And that's not going to work because fluid intelligence, as it naturally structurally declines, it requires that you jump onto this next curve, which says, "I'm going to be all about assembling teams. I'm going to be all about teaching ideas. I'm going to be all about putting ideas together."

Arthur ([41:56](#)):

As opposed to being the person who comes back after the long weekend with a solution to the problem all by myself in the darkened room. Some people can be still pretty good at that when they're older, but not as good as when they were younger. And that's certainly not exploiting the natural intelligence, the natural gifts that they have later in life.



MBS ([42:17](#)):

I've just written a book called *How to Begin* and paradoxically, that means I've been thinking a lot about how to finish. And I really liked Arthur's comment talking about leaving the think tank, you can leave before you're ready, or you can leave on somebody else's terms. Obviously neither one of those choices is ideal, but it is a world truism that it's the ending that allows the beginnings to appear. Now you might not be coming up to a 10-year anniversary of a commitment like Arthur was, but if you had to leave before you were ready, I mean, if you had to leave now, what would you leave behind? What would you take with you and where would you go?

MBS ([43:03](#)):

These are hard questions, I don't know what my own answers would be to that, but I am sitting with them trying to figure that out. It's interesting to notice immediately for me, and maybe this is true for you, how much I could abandon without too much regret. But I don't want you to abandon this podcast, so if this conversation with Arthur has struck a chord, let me suggest two interviews that you could represent. Loran Nordgren is so very thoughtful about change and in my interview with him, he read really a wonderful poem. That conversation is called *How to Meet Resistance*.

MBS ([43:40](#)):

And also, I love my conversation with Jenny Valentish, that's called *How To Reinvent Yourself*. She is such interesting person, just kind of fearlessly, exploring kind of the edges of who she is and edges of how she shows up in the world. If you're interested in more details about Arthur, his website is [arthurbrooks.com](http://arthurbrooks.com), and you can find all his work there, podcast, books, articles, free courses, a whole shebang. And just a nod to his brand new book out which is out about now, *Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep*



Purpose in the Second Half of Life. Obviously there's a nice kind of dancing partner to the How to Begin book I wrote as well.

MBS ([44:24](#)):

Thank you for listening. Thank you for giving the podcast a review, if you've done that, if you haven't done that, maybe you could go somewhere and give it some stars and say what a charming man Michael is. If you like this interview, particularly one of the best ways to grow is just to pass it on. So just send a note to somebody saying, "Listen to this." And if you'd like a little more, including some access to unreleased podcasts and interviews, you can go to Duke Humfrey's, which is our free membership site. You'll find that on the mbs.works website, click on the podcast link and you'll find your way there, no problem. I think all that remains to be said is that you're awesome and you're doing great.