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

When I was in my thirties, I heard a statement that spoke loudly, loudly to the crossroads that often happens at this moment of midlife. And here's the quote, as I heard it, "When a man turns 30, he realizes that his life isn't working." Now, obviously I don't think it's just men who have this moment. I think it does capture for all of us or for many of us, this realization that the plan you've been working consciously or unconsciously for the last 10 or 15 years, well it's sometimes often got you someplace where you didn't expect to be.

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

When you hit your 50s and I think this is probably a different iteration of midlife. I think 30 is midlife. I think 50 is midlife and I'm 54 so maybe this is why I'm thinking about it. Certainly one of the reasons I wrote how to begin. But when you hit your fifties, I think the question reappears, although perhaps



dressed in slightly different Raymonds. You've climbed your mountain now, who do you choose to be beyond that first mountain? What's your legacy mountain? What does the rest of your productive life look like if hitting your 50s is in some way a culmination of a career path.

MBS ([01:17](#)):

Now, as I've faced into that question and thought about it, I've been sitting with the idea of stepping into elder-hood now, just to be clear, it's not the same as elderly elder-hood. And I think what that is about is accepting that a certain amount of wisdom has accumulated. And then I might be of service by fine tuning my ambition to be of service and to uplift and challenge and teach others. This is the archetypal mentor role, from the hero's journey think [inaudible 00:01:48] do you have a mentor, an elder in your life, or are you perhaps being called like me to become one.

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

Welcome to two 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. When I was at Oxford, I did a course on WB Yeats the famous Irish poet, and I actually traveled to Sligo to see Yeats country.

MBS ([02:20](#)):

And I visited his grave and on his grave, there are these lines, cast a cold eye on life, on death horseman pass by. Those lines, bring to mind Stephen Jenkinson, my partner in conversation today. He's someone I've looked up to as an elder and he's engaged rudely, briskly, lively with life and with death. Having actually worked in what he would call the death trade, counseling dying people and their families.



MBS ([02:52](#)):

He's an author, he's a sculptor, he's a musician, he's a canoe builder, he's a Sage, he is also the award winning author of one of my favorite books, Die Wise, a book that is well read and on my shelves. Now, Stephen got his start in the art of storytelling as a young man. He was apprentice to a master storyteller. So I asked him, why do you write?

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

Inside me, there's a medieval monk. I've made peace with this some considerable time ago, but this monk every once in a while issues the world and goes raving off into the inner wilderness seeking after a cave or a hovel of some description. That's what writing turns into for me is I have an obligation to obey the various semblances that are, that have gathered in me over the millennia, I suppose, or for the moment they take this form.

MBS ([03:56](#)):

I know this, that core from the wilderness that need to obey various semblances.

Stephen ([04:02](#)):

I think it's proper to understand a written effort as the best that your life was capable of condensed to an almost unbearable degree and prone to disillusion in the act of it being written.

MBS ([04:24](#)):

Yes, I know this. The working and the reworking to find the essence, to connect the light and the dark. If you're writing to make it the best your life is capable of and what a phrase that complexity and density and lucidity is what you're striving for. But perhaps that becomes more possible when you feel your life is on the line.



Stephen ([04:49](#)):

I did initial book about money and the soul's desires back at the turn of the century. Boy, that sounds like a long time ago [inaudible 00:04:55] turn of the century. And it was all I could manage at the time. But I left a lot of terrain ill considered let's just say which is first book [inaudible 00:05:10] largely.

MBS ([05:10](#)):

For sure. For sure.

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

And then it was 15 years I'd come out of the death trade in an unserious departure. And then I was very much in the grip of a pulmonary challenge that had every sign of being possibly terminal. And so I was actually facing the real possibility that that particular season, which I remember to be late fall early winter of 2014, I think it was, that might be my last. And it literally came to this.

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

So I'm at this point a husband and a father, although my kids are living elsewhere and I may be dying and I've made a ruckus around dying as a kind of profession if you will and I can imagine if this is not too self congratulating, a circumstance in which as I'm dying. And once I'm dead, that people close to me will be obliged to respond to a certain amount of email about, so is there anything else or what did he leave or things to this effect, or did you film him dying or something?

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

And I thought, well, what could I do that would somehow let's say, enable people to respond without having to go into horrible degrees of too much revelation, let's say too much exposure. And so I just started writing stories that I could remember about my time in the death trade as a kind of PS, if you will. And those stories began to grow a kind of [inaudible 00:06:56] relationship



one to the other, and that [inaudible 00:06:59] turned out to be the binding agent that produced a book. And that's how *Die* wise Happened. It literally happened in about six weeks of handwritten discipline from about six in the morning to about noon every day without stopping.

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

But it's not a small book.

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

No, no, it's a tirade. There's no doubt. And it's at least two books that forgot how to stop. I think that's how it began. It retroactively I thought to myself, well, that seems a proper book now. And if that's a proper book, then at least for the purposes of the time I was writing it, I seem to have become a writer. But I never understand myself that way, because I know people who are writers who do it because they've no choice in the matter. I still have a choice and I'm glad of it. So I'm somebody who stumbles into writing without permission. And there are some writers who are willing to include me temporarily in their ranks and I'm very pleased with that.

MBS ([08:02](#)):

I understand that. I've written six or seven books, but I've never fully gone, "I'm a writer." And I'm actually trying that on as an identity this year. What if I was a writer? What would that mean in terms of how I reorient to my work and my world? Steven, your new book is called *A Generation's Worth*. And this idea of worth or worthy feels central to it. What does that word mean to you?

Stephen ([08:30](#)):

Well, maybe not so much to me, but what's the consequence of employing it beside the word generation. Because I really thought deeply and hard. I knew that what I was coming up with, amounted to an indictment of my generation. It is just straight up what it's also that. There's other things too, but it's



inescapable as is the indictment inescapable. It's not the only note in the symphony of what my generation has done, but it's certainly there and without it, everything else is deeply compromised that you'd have to say.

Stephen ([09:09](#)):

So I put the two words together and I thought, "Okay, you're right. The word worth is the root word for worthy." So this takes us out of the marketplace of currency and estimated book value and all that sort of thing. And perhaps puts us in a more fitting direction of trying to come to an estimation of what the consequences cumulatively might be of the bequest that my generation is foisting upon the generation immediately younger than you.

MBS ([09:45](#)):

Yes.

Stephen ([09:45](#)):

And so I understood a generation's worth as, as functioning in two ways, one as a kind of increment of value. You could say a generations worth is like a day's work kind of thing. And then the other term was what is this generation of which I am a reluctant member worth to those who come after and those who've come before. Yeah. So it was a kind of prism, if you will, and a kind of litmus paper at the same time.

MBS ([10:18](#)):

I see that. It feels like that's actually a nice segue to talk about what you've chosen to read for us. What have you picked?

Stephen ([10:29](#)):

Well, this is a man who he's no longer with us. Dead maybe six or eight years now. And he died as these things go, demographically speaking young. I think he was in his 70s and that's lamentable. He won the Nobel prize for literature as



a kind of late middle-aged man. And he had a remarkable capacity to occupy a public life in Ireland, spanning the course of the readvent of the troubles in the 1960s and negotiated in an immensely dignified and skillful and responsible fashion the obligations of an artist with the obligations of a citizen, the obligations of a member of a culture that is not at its best at a given moment. All of those things contending well with him. The man I'm talking about is Shamus Heney.

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

And he wrote a book about mid-flight in his career called the Haw Lantern, H-A-A Lantern. And he had just come out of a book called Station Island, which is a remarkable meditation on the spiritual, medieval presence in contemporary Irish life of its old voice, its old presence. It's Nordic Viking, pasts, and various other things. It was immensely achieved work. And this Hall Lantern comes some years afterwards and very different orientation as I come to investigate it's beginnings, he was involved in teaching at Harvard quite a bit.

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

And so he was on the receiving end in the English department of what's come to be known retroactively as the deconstruction movement in literature and particularly in learning in Western universities.

MBS ([12:41](#)):

That's right.

Stephen ([12:42](#)):

So he was watching and presiding over and to a certain extent, subject to this slow disillusion of the notion of received tradition and the verities of received tradition and he was a master practitioner of being on the receiving end of tradition. And he was watching this being dissolved basically before his eyes as a gravitational presence, let's call it culturally. And so he's wondering clearly in this



book, what there is that was bequeathed to him artistically and literally. What chance it has of enduring and whether it should, as he's acknowledging a lot of the aspects of quote unquote provincial culture that needed some modernizing, but not globalizing.

Stephen ([13:38](#)):

And they both came in at once in Ireland at the time. And you can see him contending. So that's the context of the selection. And then the piece proper, he actually was commissioned by the local chapter of Amnesty International to simply do something for them. So it's noteworthy that an organization that had that kind of focus deemed him capable and worthy and a proper person to approach, to give voice to some of their basic concerns.

Stephen ([14:11](#)):

So the piece is called from the Republic of Conscience. And this is very interesting the title. Shall we segue into the think proper now?

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

Please. Yeah. I'd love to hear it.

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

Okay. So the title before I go, and I'll just try to read straight through without any editorial interruptions but let me just linger on the title for a second. So it's come from the Republic of Conscience. And it's not clear when you begin with the word from exactly what you're saying about what follows. So is the peace from the Republic of Conscience or are you imagining the word I, from the Republic of Conscience. I, as a spokesperson for. It's just not clear. And that-

MBS ([15:01](#)):

That ambiguity. Yeah.





Stephen ([15:01](#)):

Yeah. That ambiguity is really a salient feature of this piece because as you'll see it's part description, it's part allocation, it's part invocation, it's part aberration, it's part political preoccupation. It's part spiritual absolution. It's well, let me not preempt anybody else's reaction to it. I'll just go ahead and-

MBS ([15:27](#)):

You may have already preempted some of that reaction, but I'm excited to hear this. So Steven Jenkins, reading Seamus Heaney's wonderful book from the Republic of Conscience.

Stephen ([15:45](#)):

When I landed in the Republic of conscience, it was so noiseless when the engine stopped. I could hear a Curlew high above the runway. At immigration, the clerk was an old man who produced a wallet from his home spun coat and showed me a photograph of my grandfather. The woman in customs asked me to declare the words of our traditional cures and charms to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye. No porters, no interpreter, no taxi.

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

You carried your own burden and very soon your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared. Now, fog is a dreaded omen there, but lightning spells universal good and parents hang their swaddled infants in trees during thunderstorms. Salt is their precious mineral and seashells are held to the ear during births and funerals. The base of all inks and pigments is sea water. Their sacred symbol is a stylized boat and the sail is an ear and the master sloping pen and the hull a mouth shape and the [inaudible 00:17:28] an open eye.

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

At their inauguration, public leaders must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep to a tone for their presumption to hold office. And to affirm their faith,



that all life sprang from salt in tears, which the sky God wept after he dreamt that his solitude was endless.

Stephen ([18:04](#)):

I came back from that frugal Republic with my two arms, the one length, the customs woman having insisted my allowance was myself. The old man rose and gazed into my face and said that was official recognition that I was now a dual citizen. He therefore desired me when I got home to consider myself a representative and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue. Their embassies he said we're everywhere, but operated independently and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

MBS ([19:02](#)):

Thank you, Steven. That's beautifully read.

Stephen ([19:05](#)):

Thank you. So least you can do with an accomplishment like that is do it justice. The sound of it at least.

MBS ([19:12](#)):

Oh, isn't that true?

Stephen ([19:16](#)):

Yeah.

MBS ([19:16](#)):

Fog and lightning, where's the lightning for you in this poem?

Stephen ([19:22](#)):

Well, he says lightning spells universal good. Now, it's not clear for example, that everything he's included in the poem he's somehow advocating. Inclusion is not



the same thing as approval, for example. You have to acknowledge many things about your own life that you're less than thrilled about or proud of, but failure to do so would be to exercise a terrible degree of censorship over your own accomplishments.

Stephen ([19:49](#)):

So it's the same I think here. So he's saying lightning spells universal good. Well, of course, any culture worthy of the word culture understands its own accomplishments to be a universal incarnation of all that is good and just and proper. But we know it's in the nature of culture to be actually very specific and local. That's what makes culture something other than a globalized, neoliberal, corporate entity.

MBS ([20:22](#)):

Right.

Stephen ([20:23](#)):

And so it's not clear that we should say right then universal good is enlightening because he's declaring that in the Republic of Conscience, they hold this very dear. But having acknowledged the limitation, you could imagine for example, that for me the lightning follows from this. This is the middle stanza you've asked me about.

MBS ([20:46](#)):

Yeah.

Stephen ([20:47](#)):

He's saying, well, parents hang their swaddled infants in trees during thunderstorms. But he doesn't say why which is, which is a beautiful, let's call it gap, in the connectivity of the thing. He said, this is what they do and he's reporting like an anthropologist in a fashion without really accounting for it. He's



relating it to lightning as if they're somehow always happening at the same time. But we know they don't because sometimes lightning that has no thunder and vice versa, but I suppose it's what immediately follows upon there that is for me, the anchor of the gravitas of this poem. Particularly for us, who've lived the last two years.

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

And this is my curiosity. This is what I mean by where the lightning was. Actually, what illuminates here?

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

Of course.

MBS ([21:39](#)):

So, yeah.

Stephen ([21:40](#)):

So he says at their inauguration, public leaders must swear to uphold unwritten law. Let's stop there for a second.

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

Yeah.

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

This is a very compelling detail, unwritten law. He's very clearly making a distinction between that and codes of legislative conduct and what's permitted and what's not. And I'm reminded of something that Bob Dylan included in a story of his song of his, this might be 50 years old. Now he says to live outside the law, you must be honest.



MBS ([22:18](#)):

I love that line.

Stephen ([22:19](#)):

This is an amazing observation about what lawfulness actually requires and fails to require of the citizenry. Lawfulness to my mind is principally predicated on obedience, not discernment.

MBS ([22:37](#)):

Right.

Stephen ([22:37](#)):

Okay. That's the nature of written law. It's very clear if you've obeyed or not obeyed, but that's the only standard there is. And we go further and say, "There's something about written law that abrogates the responsibilities of fundamental, radical citizenship to my mind." And they're in this area. If you assume-

MBS ([22:58](#)):

[inaudible 00:22:58]

Stephen ([22:58](#)):

I'm sorry.

MBS ([23:00](#)):

I'm sorry to interrupt. It just reminds me of a phrase from a writer I love Peter Block who says, "How do you invite people to take responsibility for their own freedom?" And in the unwritten law, there is your freedom. And how do you rise to it? How do you swear to uphold it?



Stephen ([23:19](#)):

Well, my own inclinations come at it from the other way and wonder about the written law first and its consequences. And I think the dilemma with written law is the assumption is all that's good in the culture exists in the law. And so everything not forbid by the law is by definition, the right thing to do. Now, five minutes of examination on the assumption will crumble it hopefully permanently when you realize, "Oh my God, man." For everything that's included in the law, there are, let's call it aberrations galore that are not illegal, but should never be deemed therefore morally defensible or practicable or responsible.

Stephen ([24:05](#)):

And I'm surrounded by so-called neighbors in my part of the world who proceed exactly this way. If it's not against the law it's okay. And just spoil the neighborhood accordingly because it's not against the law.

Stephen ([24:20](#)):

So he's talking about unwritten law as a, I think a revivification of the notion of fundamental citizenship responsibility. Because it requires discernment in translation and pondering and truing in the verbals, in the verb sense of the term. All of those things are... So public leaders must swear to uphold to unwritten law. Good luck with that.

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

Of course. And the other part and who wouldn't want to see this in their lifetime and weep to a tone for their presumption to hold office. Just once you'd like to see somebody up there quivering before the microphone claiming very clearly and properly that they have no capacity worth talking about given the immensity of what's just happened to them. And the expectation piled upon them. But there it is. And then, and this for me is the access if you will, that this



whole poem swings around. That the other obligation public leaders have is to affirm the faith of the people.

Stephen ([25:28](#)):

Not to lead it, to affirm the faith of the people that all life, all of life sprang from salt, one of the most common minerals going. Nothing special or particular or unique, but immensely life compelling salt is, that all life sprang from salt. Where? In the ocean. Well, he's telling you where the salt in the ocean actually comes from. He says the salt in tears.

MBS ([25:56](#)):

Yes.

Stephen ([25:57](#)):

So you're talking about grief here. Which tears? Your tears and mine, because we were forced to live through a pandemic? Uh-huh. He says the salt in tears that were wept by the sky God, who's he talking about? Don't forget Heini was a self-avowed Catholic through his life. Never suggested otherwise. He's talking about Yahweh here. He's talking about the one true God. He's talking about the onliness, if you will, of the deity and the divinity that he was on the inheriting end of culturally speaking.

Stephen ([26:36](#)):

And look at what he's describing to that deity, the salt in tears, which the sky God wept after he dreamt that his solitude was endless. My translation of that last part is he's saying, for every God who's been obliged to be a monotheist there is nothing but sorrow as a consequence of the kind of austere onliness and solitude that an only God perpetrates upon him or herself. It's an amazing piece of [inaudible 00:27:14] Jesus about monotheism in about a line and a half. That's the lightning for me.



MBS ([27:20](#)):

Oh, I love it. Steven. You touched on grief.

Stephen ([27:28](#)):

Yeah.

MBS ([27:28](#)):

And I feel like you see this in the poem in its way, how is grief affirming?

Stephen ([27:42](#)):

That's a great question. Obviously buried in the question is the hope that it might be.

MBS ([27:47](#)):

Yeah. Right.

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

So indeed. Well, it's affirmation is of a very particularly non exorting kind. In other words, if there's affirmation in grief and I'll elaborate on this declaration here, but if there is affirmation in grief, it is so subtle and camouflaged by sorrow that it's far from clear that it's there such that you have to go to immense length to translate grief into a way of living instead of an interruption in your otherwise orderly regularly schedule programming. Okay. Well, that is the overture. I'm going to suggest to you that what grief is the willingness, the very involuntary even counterintuitive, willingness to be had by life. So you hear I'm putting a certain and fastest on a certain salvo when I say to be had by life.

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

Right.





Stephen ([28:56](#)):

Right. What I'm suggesting here is counter to the prevailing winds during the course of your lifetime and mind the notion that this life is ours to do with as we see fit, the notion that it's a personal possession, that there is certain rights inalienable that come with the possession, that there's no sense of accountability, that in any way, countervails that sense of privilege and possibility and fringing sovereignty and agency and all the other [inaudible 00:29:34] that accompanies the term today. All of that has the consequence of leaving grief in the dirt and replacing it ongoingly in the comments with what? Grievance instead. So what's the difference then between grief and grievance. I suggest to you, grievance is a consequence of a presumption of entitlement. Yes. That's unidirectional that all the entitlement goes one way towards me and anything.

MBS ([30:05](#)):

This is mine.

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

Yes.

MBS ([30:07](#)):

This should be mine.

Stephen ([30:08](#)):

Yes. Is mine. And anything that mitigates that circumstance is my personal a vowed and sworn enemy And grief, which says I'm just brought to mind the following. It's a true story. So when I'm working in the death trade, I'm working with a dying psychiatrist, which is a potent bordering on Calamus combination of attributes.



MBS ([30:33](#)):

I know way too much about everything.

Stephen ([30:35](#)):

But not enough to do it well.

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

Right, right.

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

Way too much to be ignorant, not enough to be wise. So this man in admits tirade and he's horrifically disfigured by his fear of the imminence of his dying. He makes the following declaration with no hesitation. I have a right he says, not to suffer. So you just let that linger in the air for a minute. And you understand as a fellow human being that he's pleading to be spared Jesus like. Take this cup from me. Of course he is. And if he could have said it that way, of course it's the only legitimate response you'd have if you were there sitting where I was. But that's not what he said. He said, I have a right, listen to the language, to not suffer.

MBS ([31:32](#)):

Yeah, I am aggrieved.

Stephen ([31:34](#)):

Yes. So you get the difference here between grief which would be the suffering and grievance, which is the right to be spared, that condition of being a human being, those particulars of your human, not entitlement allotment, that's the word I'm looking for. So there's the difference I think functionally speaking that in that grievance is a consequence of your sense of rights being aggregated or trampled upon and grief even excludes the acknowledgement that grievance is



so misapprehended, but so much a part of the current regime that there's grief about that, but no sense of grievance that it should be otherwise.

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

It reminds me-

Stephen ([32:23](#)):

It is amazingly axial understanding grief is.

MBS ([32:27](#)):

What comes to mind is the real Capone, a man watching and resting with the angel and to be deeply defeated by ever greater things-

Stephen ([32:35](#)):

Ever greater things.

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

And feel life pressing its thumbs into you is grief and it is life.

Stephen ([32:43](#)):

Yes, it is grief and so it is life. And this is one of the ways by which you know that you are so deeply, irreconcilably alive, that you have a capacity for grief, not the capacity to endure it, the capacity to practice it.

MBS ([33:03](#)):

Yeah. Steven, one of the lines in the first stanza of the poem is towards the end it says you carried your own burden.

Stephen ([33:13](#)):

Right.



MBS ([33:14](#)):

I'm wondering how you come to identify your burden.

Stephen ([33:22](#)):

Wow. Well, the word burden is a word that appeared very frequently in the death trade when I was working there. And it took the form of an aversion bordering on a almost seismic kind of reluctance that people had. And the way it was typically expressed was allegedly positive. And it went like this. I want the option of euthanasia. Yes. Understandable but why would that be? Or more importantly when would that be? And the answer almost universally was when I'm no longer able to take care of myself. And my question would be, "And why is that the drop dead, excuse the expression, moment that begins to consulate the understanding that life is no longer worth living?"

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

Right.

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

And the answer was because I don't want to be a burden to the people around me.

MBS ([34:21](#)):

Yeah. Right.

Stephen ([34:22](#)):

Okay. Now this is deemed to be an act of love. Okay. So let me restate the thing from a physiological level or a kinesthetic level instead. So imagine your granted muscle musculature as you were. Then imagine the best way you came up with to care for your musculature is to ask it to do nothing. What do you assume would be the consequence for your musculature in all a week?



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

Yeah. A withering.

Stephen ([34:52](#)):

Yes. If you were bedbound for a week and didn't even sit up straight. Yeah. You take the point. Okay. So you refuse to burden your body by employing it. And by the same token, you refuse to mobilize your love and other people's love of you in the name of sparing them that exercise of love.

MBS ([35:14](#)):

Right.

Stephen ([35:15](#)):

And all the while claiming that love is compelling you and informing you.

MBS ([35:21](#)):

Right.

Stephen ([35:23](#)):

So burden by definition, in a culture, deeply invested in autonomy and self-mastery and competence is to be avoided at all costs. And so his way of contending with this in this poem seems to me, he's saying, "Well, in order to carry your own burden, you have to cop fess up. If you will, to the understanding that there's such a thing as there's a certain aspect of life burden which has your name on it."

Stephen ([35:56](#)):

It's a consequence of childhood experience, the accidents of birth, the ensuing less than perfect parenting ideas of your parents and just goes on. It just goes on and includes you and produces you and then eclipses you. And so the more



sense of burden you have, the more sense of privilege is very close by. And that's the beautiful association he makes in this couplet.

Stephen ([36:26](#)):

He carries your own burden and very soon, interestingly enough, very soon, your symptoms of creeping privilege disappear. In other words, it's not an act of personal exorcism that you're a white person, and that you've suddenly realized that you are the pinnacle in the feeding frenzy known as the west and modernity. And you have the lion's share of the burden of every conceivable responsibility of every human travesty known. It's not what it says. It says there's a certain amount of accidents of birth that you're not personally responsible for but if you live them out, you are responsible to them.

MBS ([37:15](#)):

Right.

Stephen ([37:15](#)):

And retroactively you earn through actions of public service and the rest that you earn, the privilege that by virtue of the accidents of birth, you are on the temporary receiving end of. I think that's in what he's writing here, even though this was written in the mid 80s, slightly before the current rant about privilege and the rest.

MBS ([37:40](#)):

That's right.

Stephen ([37:40](#)):

Yeah.



MBS ([37:43](#)):

Steven, how do you decide where to put your time? It feels like you have a lot, you're a teacher, you have a school, you're a writer, you're a musician, you're a podcast guest. How do you decide what to say yes to.

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

Don't forget farmer. Farmer is in there.

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

And you're a farmer. That's very true. I left out everything. I left out a husband, father, all of that. So I merely touched on a few things.

Stephen ([38:15](#)):

Sure. Citizen.

MBS ([38:17](#)):

Yeah.

Stephen ([38:19](#)):

How do you decide? Well, fortunately, all the decisions one has to make a good number of them are foreclosed upon by necessity. So you can go through, let's say the appearance of deciding when it's really acquiescing to the givens. Like you can't fire me. I quit. It's that order of urgency. So one of the beautiful life lessons that have come to me as a consequence of farming for 20 years is that the farming life carries along a seasonal sequence of affirmations and obligations. These are non-negotiable. If you let yourself in to be responsible for the lives of animals on your farm for example, there's no day off there's no, I don't feel like it. There's no debate about the relative philosophical merits of having done so. Debate it all you want, but feed the animals nonetheless.



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

And then you work backwards. Where's the money for the feed going come from. And so there's necessities that begin to domino. These necessities, you could come to them as an infringement upon your pristine personal freedom, or you could understand it, oh my God. You've been granted a life in a way that you would never have had the good sense to ask for. And in that sense, it's a bit like a monastery, isn't it?

MBS ([39:52](#)):

Yeah.

Stephen ([39:53](#)):

I mean, from what little I can judge from the outside that you retreat from the world, let's see, only to submit yourself to a degree of ordering and scrutiny and frank obedience to a power greater than you that easily eclipses anything the world would've asked of you. This is exactly what farming is. You submit yourself to a notion of the greater good that you had no understanding of when you said yes.

Stephen ([40:27](#)):

In fact, it's not even clear, you said yes to most of it. So this is all to say an answer to your really well imagined question that the beautiful discipline, the kind of remarkable disciplined inquiry of farming is readily translatable to other aspects of life. But instead of thinking about the growing season, for example, you could think about the season of a culture, the culture that you're in. You could think of it as the season of the political cycle that you're in.

Stephen ([41:00](#)):

And in due course, you begin to try to translate the kind of regime of obligations that ensue from these sometimes cruel, sometimes complimentary accidents





that gather around the happenstance called you're alive now. You and I were both born to a trouble time. This is nonnegotiable. What is negotiable is and so?

MBS ([41:32](#)):

Right. And so.

Stephen ([41:34](#)):

So the and so we could pretend that we get to choose, well, there are certain range of choices yes that you more or less are obliged to choose, but the obligation to choose at all is probably not a choice.

MBS ([41:48](#)):

Right.

Stephen ([41:48](#)):

It's probably a condition of sentence. And the beautiful thing about sentence is it absolves you of the meager exercise of choice or self mastery and ask instead of your willingness to translate whatever you're personally capable of into something that serves the greater good.

MBS ([42:10](#)):

You carried your burden and very soon, your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.

Stephen ([42:14](#)):

Yes. And he says at the end of the poem and my arms got shorter and I became more symmetrical because my arms were the same length he says, as a result of carrying my own bags.



MBS ([42:26](#)):

I love that. Yeah. I love that. Steven, I love how you brought us background to monasteries. And you started by talking about in a monk inside you. Perhaps as a final question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation?

Stephen ([42:44](#)):

We haven't even begun. We've cleared our throats.

MBS ([42:46](#)):

I know. I know. I know that's true. Yeah.

Stephen ([42:50](#)):

We've cleared our throats. That's all we've done and said and said, hello basically.

MBS ([42:54](#)):

I feel like-

Stephen ([42:54](#)):

Which is not a bad beginning. This is a very slow elaborate and highly stylized way that strangers used to be able to be with each other. And I held out hope in the early days of COVID-19 that there would be enough strangeness between us that would be reinstated. That could bring out the best in our sense of profound etiquette. I was really hoping for that.

Stephen ([43:22](#)):

Strangely enough, I've been proven a fool by virtue of that hope, but I haven't abandoned it entirely. So then if I take your question at face value and show you the regard that a host is due, what would it be? Well, there's a detail in the poem that I'd like to maybe say goodbye to each other with, and it's this. At



immigration, the clerk was an old man. Let's just stop there. It's so wonderful conjuring because I do remember the first time I flew to Wales.

MBS ([44:02](#)):

Yes.

Stephen ([44:02](#)):

And this is exactly the case. There was an old guy in a cardigan leaning against a pillar. That was customs. And you kind of gathered around him, those of you just got off the little plane and he would say right then, "Who's first?" It was so informal. It was, you thought to yourself, there's nothing of a national security aspect that's at stake here. Clearly there's no need of security enforcement branch because why? Because there's security. That's why.

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

Right.

Stephen ([44:35](#)):

So it was an old man who produced a wallet from his home spun coat and showed me a photograph of my grandfather, very peculiar, parabolic, really in its consequence. And I think one of the things he may be finding a way to wonder out aloud about is something like this. When truly and properly in the presence of an old man, an accomplished esteemed old man, you are in the presence of every old man your culture has had the capacity to produce.

Stephen ([45:20](#)):

And so there's a resemblance between this slouching old man and a cardigan at customs and your own grandfather. Which is when you don't have the accidents of birth to lay a defeat of your parents and blame them and castigate them and impugn them for the shortcomings, which became you, when that's temporarily taken from you in a fit of real conscience, you realize that your principle,



spiritual affinity is not to your parents. Let them off the meat hook for the incompleteness with which they brought you into this world and understand that your real affinity skips a generation, always has and in a culture place always will such that your grandparents with no particular vested interest in how you come out are much more capable of driving your inner life towards a sense of the common good than your parents were ever capable of when they had so much skin in the game.

Stephen ([46:24](#)):

There's something of this that I think lingers in, this customs guy showed me a photograph of my own grandfather. And it doesn't tell you why, it doesn't tell you to what end it just says, you see, you are not leaving the old behind in your whirlwind tour of your little life. In a real culture they're there before you get somewhere else. They're waiting for you in a sense, you could say the old people are your future. At least as much as they are your past.

MBS ([47:04](#)):

So right now in both my countries, Canada and Australia, it's election time. Now, I don't envy politicians. They have so many masters, there's so many things pulling them this way and that. And I guess that you only really rise to the top in politics through a degree of Machiavellian ruthlessness. There is a sense that you're selling something to get power that you need. Power corrupts, et cetera, et cetera.

MBS ([47:34](#)):

And it feels because I'm exposed to this in two countries right now, that campaigning just means that transparent hunger for power is just all the more obvious. Campaigns seem to be 40% bribes to the electorate, 40% disparagement of the opposition and 40% self aggrandizing. And I know that means 120% like a politician, I am promising more than I can actually deliver.



MBS ([47:59](#)):

That moment when Steven caused us for, to the unwritten law, the notion of fundamental citizenship responsibilities of accepting the burden that you know, that you're not really capable and perhaps not worthy and that's the very reason you're willing to step up that sense of humility.

MBS ([48:24](#)):

There's so much to say here. I think this humility to know the best of yourself and your own flaws and accept them as both of these things, their flaws and your greatness as the whole of who you are. It's that mix. And of course, and this is important to me, this is why I look up to Stephen, the courage to take on something that matters and to be ambitious for the world and to seek to serve it.

MBS ([48:53](#)):

Two recommendations that flow nicely from this conversation with Steven. A recent one with Eric Zimer, who is a podcast host himself, Two Wolves talking about the internal conflicts of our lives. He is such a thoughtful man. I truly love my conversation with him. He's somebody I'm hoping to connect with outside the podcasting world, just so I can build a friendship with. And in fact, I would say, that's true about the other interview. This is part of the joy for me for doing this podcast. Steven Dsouza, How to Be and Not Be Yourself, is the name of that interview also. Also so smart, so wise, so nuanced in the conversations, both of these were nourishing and kind of inspiring conversations for me. I hope you find that way too. If you want more Steven, and I hope you do, Steven, he has a website it's [orphawisdom.com](http://orphawisdom.com), orphan wisdom, O-R-P-H-A-N W-I-S-D-O-M.com.

MBS ([49:57](#)):

You can access his books there. You can find out information about the retreats that he holds. They've been on hold for the last few years, because of COVID of



course, but they may be coming back. And I know that he and his band have just put together some music and a film of the creating of this music. It's called the dead styling sessions, not totally sure why, but that hasn't quite come out when I'm recording this, but it looks intriguing and I hope you'll check it out when the time comes.

MBS ([50:29](#)):

Please do pass along the interview. If you liked it, send it to somebody. If he didn't like it tell me. If you really liked it and you're enjoying the podcast please do give it a review. I know it's a bit kind of needy, continuing to ask for that, but it's actually the way people start to find the podcast. Thank you. You're awesome. You're doing great.