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

The book I'm writing at the moment is about relationships. Now I'm not a relationship expert, I'm not a therapist or a psychotherapist, but they do say you should write so that you can teach what you need to know. And I'm always, I guess, curious at least to know if I can make my relationships, both personal and professional, a little more vital and a little more resilient.

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

It means that I've been reading some of the big names in the spaces. Esther Perel, her writing is great. Her podcasts are fantastic. Really quite moving listening to her be a therapist to couples working through stuff. John Gottman, he's the author of the famous Four Horseman of the Apocalypse for relationships, a very powerful insight and model. And most recently, a guy called Terrence Real, or Terry Real as he's more commonly known. And he has a



brand new book out called *Us: Getting Past You and Me to Build a More Loving Relationship*. Now, there was a phrase that was actually part of his marketing emails that really chimed deeply with me. Here it is, "At a time when toxic individualism is rending our society at every level, the book *Us* provides the tools to find our way back to each other through authentic connection and fierce intimacy." It's a big question, isn't it? How much are we our own person and how deeply must we connect?

MBS ([01:39](#)):

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.

MBS ([01:50](#)):

Now, Kevin Ashton's latest book is Called *How to Fly a Horse*. And I know this doesn't yet seem to have much to do with relationships, which we were just talking about, but if nothing else, that's a title that's going to get you curious. I mean, *How to Fly a Horse*, what does that even mean? But Kevin is also the guy who named the Internet of Things, the Internet of Things. He is that guy. And he's been a key player in its growth and its imagination and its evolution.

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

And if you're not sure what the IOT, the Internet of Things actually is, well, it is that thing that allows objects on a network to connect without needing human input. So it's everything from your smart fridge to those little Apple tags so you can track where your stuff is. In other words, it's now a very, very big deal. But every idea before it becomes a big deal is just some crackpot's mad imaginings. And Kevin might have been that crackpot. But even though it was an idea that nobody was really getting, it was also an idea that Kevin couldn't get rid of. And he had a self-created sense of urgency, one that I love, this sense of if I don't act on this now, I don't know if I ever will.



Kevin ([03:07](#)):

I had this screensaver that was called the death clock, which sounds very morbid, but it's actually fantastic. And you told it your year of birth and a couple other things, and it basically figured out what your average life expectancy was. And then it started counting down. So every time my screen saver came on, there was... I mean, I was 28 or something, so I guess I had 50 years. But you still see the seconds of your life. Even if the number's wrong, it's undeniable that the seconds of your life are ticking away in front of you.

Kevin ([03:41](#)):

And so I remember, and that was definitely part of it. It's like, I've got to commit to this thing because this is going to be much more fun than anything else I can think of. It's much more satisfying than anybody else. So I took a deep breath and jumped into the cold water of it.

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

If you ever read *How to Begin*, my new book, you know that I actually start the book with a very similar idea. I tell people my death date, September 15th, 2043, calculated through actuarial tables. And I'm just realizing I've got 21 years left and change, so I better get cracking on a whole bunch of stuff. Get that book written I've just been talking about.

MBS ([04:20](#)):

Anyway, this fermenting idea of Kevin's happened when he was working at Procter & Gamble, a big consumer goods company. Now his boss had given him leave to play with the idea, but honestly nothing much was happening because Kevin had a hard time finding anyone else who was thinking about the same things, who wanted to play along with them, play in this new space. But then one day everything changed.



Kevin ([04:45](#)):

A guy called me. I remember I was at my hotel. It was Cambridge Marriott in the morning, and a colleague called me and said, "I'm supposed to go to this meeting at the Department of Architecture and I can't make it. Please will you show up for me?" And I had nothing else to do. It was about homes of the future or something. It sounded vaguely relevant. So I went to that, and that was where I met Sanjay Sharma and David Brock who were actually thinking along the same lines as I was.

MBS ([05:11](#)):

So Kevin had met his future co-conspirators. And while they were coming at it from a robotics angle, he kept coming at it at a logistics angle. And in that dirty, dingy basement office at MIT, it was a glorious meeting of minds. Now, ideas like this need money to have oxygen and keep surviving.

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

But as I was raising the money, MIT reached out and said, "We'd like you to come and be part of this thing and lead it." And I remember my reply. I mean, it was very flattering email, but again, it was like, "They don't understand."

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

I wrote back and said, "I'm not an engineer." You know, I have a liberal arts degree. I have an undergraduate degree in Scandinavian Studies. I spent four years immersing myself in Ibsen, which was fantastic.

Kevin ([06:00](#)):

And they just replied, "We think you are an engineer."

Kevin ([06:04](#)):

And I was like, "Oh, well, if MIT thinks I'm an engineer, who am I to disagree?" And so they gave me this weird... I don't know if anybody's ever had it before



said, I think they made it up, but they called me a visiting engineer and offered me a job.

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

It's a hard offer to turn down when they basically invented a role for you. But Procter & Gamble, weren't ready to let Kevin go either. So they did a little inventing of their own.

Kevin ([06:27](#)):

As I was deciding to do it, the CEO of Procter & Gamble said, "You know what? We kind of don't want to let you go, so we're going to loan you to MIT." I think they made that up too. I don't think they've ever done that before.

Kevin ([06:39](#)):

I said, "What does it even mean?"

Kevin ([06:40](#)):

And it was like, "Well, we'll keep paying you. We'll pay for your relocation. We'll keep paying you. If it doesn't work out, you're still an employee." I'd already decided to do it, but this took all the risk away.

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

And thus, Kevin became known as the father of the Internet of Things. But he'll be the first to tell you that that title is an overstatement, and he's worked alongside many other brilliant, talented people who've all been part of this important phenomenon. And in fact, when he reads his two pages, you're going to understand that this whole individual achievement thing might just be a distraction.



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

Anybody who's had any success in their life who doesn't realize that really there were other people who probably had more to do with it in some ways than they did. And we all have to understand that it's like... I mean like Durk Jager is a CEO at Proctor. I'd mention him in my book, but I'm pretty sure he has no recollection of any of this. For him it was a 10 minute, one in a million decisions he made that day. But you can really change other people's lives with good choices. And if your life has been changed, you need to recognize who the people are who made the choices.

MBS ([07:49](#)):

Let me ask you about that, because you know, the book, How to Fly a Horse is a book about creation and invention and discovery. And as you tell the story, you've got people inventing stuff for you, but you've also got the serendipity of going to that meeting.

Kevin ([08:08](#)):

Yeah.

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

And everything changes because you find your collaborators and you find your way in and this incredible story begins. Is serendipity just a question of, keep your eyes open, or can you manufacture serendipity?

Kevin ([08:24](#)):

Oh, it's just probability.

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

Yeah.



Kevin ([08:27](#)):

I mean, you hear a story like, Kevin went to a meeting and met a guy and that was the beginning of the Internet of Things. But what I haven't told you is the other thousand meetings I sat through that were complete waste of time.

MBS ([08:35](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

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

But without going to those, you can't have that thing happen. So it's a little bit like, you know, you're in Vegas and you put a million nickels in the slot, you might win the jackpot one time.

Kevin ([08:50](#)):

Actually, you should talk about serendipity in the book, and the original concept is very, very different. But what we think of as serendipity today, like something fortuitous happening, it's really very straightforward. You have to take a million shots and one of them will go in.

Kevin ([09:12](#)):

It's really that simple. So it's about showing up and persisting. And I mean, doing it, like not being an idiot and annoying everybody at the same time, but getting invited back and what have you. And also, by the way, you can't go to the thousand things with the plan of, well, one of them's going to be the jackpot, because that might not happen. You do the work. This is the thing I say in the book. The book is basically based on my experience of how innovation actually happens versus the kind of the airport seven things you should know about inventing, and have an idea in the shower, and magic and all this made up biographies of people that aren't really accurate.



Kevin ([09:54](#)):

So I was like, "Oh, this is all rubbish, so I'm going to set the record straight." I guess that's *How to Fly a Horse* based on my own experience. The basic message of the book, which upsets a lot of people, is you just have to do the work. You have to show up every day for years and keep going, even when it's hard, and even when you don't know what you're doing, and even when you fail. And it basically, it really is, if you roll the dice enough times, you're going to get the result you want eventually. But you have to stay alive long enough to... So the the don't quit your day job is actually quite good advice. You need to be careful with your resources, with your time, and your money so you can keep trying again. But that's the answer to serendipity. It's what happens when you do something a million times, one time something fortuitous happens. Really that simple.

MBS ([10:44](#)):

Kevin, talk to me about the book you've chosen to read for us, because it's a great choice.

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

Okay. So this is quite a new book. I don't know if you can see it.

MBS ([10:53](#)):

I can. *Finding the Mother Tree*.

Kevin ([10:54](#)):

This came out last year, *Finding the Mother Tree* by Suzanne Simard, who... I love it, but one of the reasons I chose it is she's Canadian. And I know you're an honorary Canadian, so I thought would have some Canada in here.

MBS ([11:06](#)):

Thank you.



Kevin ([11:09](#)):

Suzanne is probably one of the greatest scientists of the 21st century. And very few people have heard of her. One, because she's a woman. And two, because she's working in a weird field, which I can relate to because often the most interesting stuff happens in fields that either don't exist or are looking in the wrong direction. There's a story in *How to Fly a Horse* about a woman, Rosalind Franklin, who was actually the discoverer of DNA. Watson and Crick just basically stole her work.

MBS ([11:40](#)):

Took the credit. Yeah.

Kevin ([11:42](#)):

Yeah. But the Rosalind Franklin discovered DNA, the structure of DNA, because she was an expert crystallographer. And the reason she was an expert crystallographer was, a generation earlier, women weren't allowed to do science and they kind of worked their way into crystallography, which at that time was kind of looking at pretty shiny things and cataloging them. But what those women did was very subversive. They turned crystallography into something completely different, which was understanding the molecular structure of things. But they got into science through this back door. No one was really interested in it, so the women can go do it, and then they turned it into something different.

Kevin ([12:20](#)):

Now Suzanne Simard is a little bit Rosalind Franklinesque in the sense that her field is something called forest science. And if you look up the definition of forest science, it's basically learning about trees so we can cut them down and turn them into paper.



MBS ([12:36](#)):

That's right. That's right.

Kevin ([12:40](#)):

So the original chauvinism of forestry science is trees need us to grow them and to figure out what's best for them. We need to be the shepherds of the trees. That's the idea of forest science. And why do we want to be the shepherds of the trees? Well, same thing as we do with sheep, we want to harvest them for our own benefit. So Suzanne Simard is just someone who loved trees and fell into forest science because she loved trees. And at some point during her research, she was like, "Well, hang on a minute guys. Trees have been here for hundreds of millions of years and we've been here for like 50,000, so how did they manage before we got here, if we are so important?"

Kevin ([13:22](#)):

And so she started looking at trees from a completely different perspective, which is not that they need us, but probably that we're screwing things up for them. And how do trees actually work? So she's one of several people who've really transformed forest science into kind of this growing thing so we can kill them field, sponsored by the paper industry, to actually deeply understanding the science of trees. And what she has been discovering, and she's really been leading this, is absolutely revolutionary. It's sort of Darwinian.

Kevin ([13:53](#)):

And one of my frustrations, and again, this is in *How to Fly a Horse*, is women in science do all the great work, nearly all the great work, and some mediocre white man always gets the credit. If you're a mediocre white man, you've got a very high chance of winning a Nobel Prize. If you're a brilliant woman, you've got very low chance of winning a Nobel Prize. And if you do, you'll be sharing it with the mediocre white men. Suzanne can't win a Nobel prize because there isn't a Nobel prize for anything remotely close to forest science. She should



probably get the Nobel Peace Prize, but again, that doesn't really go to people like her.

Kevin ([14:25](#)):

She's got a Ted Talk and she's got a best-selling book. It's not like she's completely underground, but relative to her importance-

MBS ([14:34](#)):

And she's marginal. Yeah.

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

Relative to her importance, and I think what will be seen as her importance a few hundred years from now, she's not as well known as she should be. But the work is fascinating. Her story is fascinating. It's all very inspiring. It's a book and a story that I wish more people knew. So that's why I chose it.

MBS ([14:54](#)):

I love it. And I'm going to ask you to read the two pages in a minute.

Kevin ([14:58](#)):

Sure.

MBS ([14:58](#)):

How did you come across it? Did you just hear about it on the grapevine or stumble across it?

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

No. I'm writing a new book right now. Or I just finished writing a new book. And most of my job, and I love it, is actually reading. I write narrative non-fiction and I tend to read a lot of peer-reviewed papers, academic research, stuff I know nothing about and I have to look up all the words at first and make notes. And



gradually, I mean, obviously I'm not an expert, but I can kind of understand what they're talking about.

Kevin ([15:36](#)):

I can't talk about the new book yet, but one of the things I was studying was the nature of intelligence and the nature of emotion. And I asked myself the question like, well, what else has emotions? Because you get this stupid phrase, "Oh, emotions are what make us human." I was sure that came from Star Trek. I felt like it was something that Kirk used to say to Spock, but apparently it isn't. But they certainly had a lot of emotions in Star Trek.

Kevin ([16:05](#)):

So you get this idea. And I said, "But my dog is very excited to see me." This was my point of departure. "That's an emotion. So how is it that..." Anyone who thinks emotions are uniquely human, doesn't have a dog. That's really simple. So what else has emotions? And I was doing this research and trees have emotions. And I was like, what in earth does that mean? How do we know that? And that led me to these landmark papers in Nature and a few other big journals by Suzanne, which were kind of, I think, scoffed at initially, which I could also relate to. Because all the best stuff is controversial at the beginning. It's a paradigm shift. So that's-

MBS ([16:44](#)):

First, they laugh at you. Then they accept your idea. Then they claim the idea for their own.

Kevin ([16:50](#)):

Exactly. Perfectly put.

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

As the cycle goes.



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

That's exactly the way it goes. And so Suzanne, her papers are actually quite readable and really fascinating, but last year she wrote this memoir. And so it's a much more accessible way into her work. That's how I came to it.

MBS ([17:11](#)):

Beautiful. And I love that. And I just... Your story about reading widely, not fully understanding everything, but grasping the essence of it, it reminds me of... I think Thomas Edison has a story of needing to solve a problem, finding some German paper about it. Not really having much German, but kind of figuring it out and reading through it and getting the aha breakthrough that he needed. Then getting the papers translated and the papers' meaning completely different from what he was thinking.

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

Oh, wow. I didn't know that. Okay.

MBS ([17:46](#)):

It's like that ability... Actually, you tell this in the first chapter of your book, How to Fly a Horse, which is like being able to press two things together fertilizes something unexpected.

Kevin ([17:58](#)):

Yeah. Absolutely.

MBS ([17:58](#)):

Those moments of fertilization are so powerful.

Kevin ([17:59](#)):

Yeah. I live in a world of Wikipedia and Google Scholar and Google Translate and Sci-Hub and all these. So for me, I don't have to go... When I was a student, I



had to get microfilm and all this nonsense. But today I can do everything from my laptop.

MBS ([18:15](#)):

That's beautiful.

Kevin ([18:16](#)):

Occasionally, there's a book I can't get, but then I can get it used in a week. That's my worst case scenario. So yeah. Edison had none of the advantages that we have when it comes to finding things out.

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

Well, Kevin, let's hear these two pages, because this is not a book I've read, although I've heard so much about it that I'm now not sure why I haven't read it yet. And I'm excited to hear the pages. How did you choose what pages to read?

Kevin ([18:42](#)):

It's actually a hard book to select from because she's building a story and some of the terms are unfamiliar and she's kind of interweaving her... Her brother dies while she's doing this research. And so she's interweaving lots of things. But this passage is really the crux of it for me. This is kind of her moment of breakthrough. It's very relatable to me. We were just talking... And not that, by the way, my breakthrough is anything as important as hers. But I think there's something recognizable that I think anyone can relate to about the moment when you figure something out. Whether it's like Wordle or something that's going to win you the Nobel Prize. There's something very human about how she describes this moment. And also the problems that then causes. So that's why I chose this. I think it's a very nice distillation of what the process of realization is actually like.



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

Perfect. So Kevin Ashton, reading from Suzanne Simard's wonderful book, *Finding the Mother Tree*. Over to you, Kevin.

Kevin ([19:54](#)):

When the data came, I held my breath. This was it. The science was sound. The experiment had taken every variable into account. I was alone in my windowless office as I scanned the report. My cheeks burned as my eyes raced up and down the data columns. Again and again, I checked the numbers just to make sure. I sat in disbelief. Birch trees and fir trees were trading photosynthetic carbon back and forth through the network. Even more stunning, fir trees received far more carbon from birch trees than they donated in return. The birch trees were generously giving the fir trees resources. The amount was staggering. It was large enough to make seeds and reproduce.

Kevin ([20:51](#)):

But what really floored me was the more shade that birch trees cast, the more carbon they donated to fir trees. Birch trees were cooperating in lockstep with fir trees. I reanalyzed the data over and over to make sure I hadn't made a mistake, but there it was telling me the same thing no matter how I looked at it. Birch trees and fir trees were trading carbon. They were communicating. Birch trees were detecting and staying attuned to the needs of fir trees. Not only that, I discovered that fir trees gave some carbon back to birch trees too. And so reciprocity was part of their everyday relationship. The trees were connected, cooperating.

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

I was so shaken, I leaned against the walls of my office to absorb what was unfolding because the earth seemed to be rumbling. The sharing of energy and resources meant they were working together like a system, an intelligent



system, perceptive and responsive. Breathe. Think. Absorb. Process. Roots didn't thrive when they grew alone. Trees needed one another.

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

I sorted through a stack of papers, documenting the competitive effects of trees on one another next to a growing pile of papers on how trees facilitated one another, which I collected because it frustrated me that researchers were firmly split into camps. Fights erupted in seminars, and the forest was the victim. I had a choice. I could show everyone all of this, taking the chance that they would try to suppress me, or I could stay in my lab, hoping someone else would eventually use my findings.

MBS ([22:52](#)):

Oh man. That's so good. There's two big things here. One is this insight around the interdependence of trees and how trees are linked through fungal links and all of that, which we will talk about. But just that story around the uncovering of it, and feeling an abyss open up where you're like, "Oh my goodness, I'm on the threshold of something extraordinary."

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

That's scary. And do I really want to take this leap?

MBS ([23:17](#)):

Yeah, exactly. What struck a powerful chord for you in this, Kevin?

Kevin ([23:26](#)):

I think that feeling of that loneliness. Am I crazy? Realizing that it's true and no one's going to believe you. And so knowing that... And obviously, she doesn't stay in her lab and hope somebody else discovers her work, she realizes she's got to run with this. And there's a lot at stake in terms of trying to change the way we think about forests. But you can hear it's definitely true. This is not



dramatized. You know, Suzanne is an amazing scientist. She's not the best writer in the world, which I kind of like, because it gives her an authenticity and a sincerity. I could absolutely tell, having been in a vaguely similar situation, that is not made up. That is how it felt to her. It was like, "OMG. WTF."

MBS ([24:10](#)):

"I need to hold myself up against the wall." Yeah.

Kevin ([24:11](#)):

Yeah. "I kind of want to run away from what I've just discovered because it is going to change my life and not necessarily in a good way." And Suzanne is, as I understand it, someone who's much more comfortable, pun intended, in the shade. She'd much rather be out among the trees doing her thing than giving a Ted Talk. So this is someone who's like, "Well, I have to do something with this. I have a responsibility, an obligation to do something and I'm absolutely terrified of it. And in a way I'd rather not do it." And by the way, that's the perfect person to do it because she's not doing this for glory. She's not doing this for money or fame or ego. She's doing it because she's compelled to by the truth that she has discovered.

MBS ([24:59](#)):

What have you learned, Kevin, about what it takes to answer the call and cross the threshold, just to use hero journey language around that? Because I think that's what we're speaking about.

Kevin ([25:17](#)):

What I learned... And there were other things I tried to do that I was very convinced were great, but what I was really convinced, I think, of was that I wanted to be great. So it was a pretextual like, what idea can I come up with that's going to make me rich and famous? That kind of intention. And then you convince yourself that the dumb idea you've got is awesome. And you try and



convince... There's a forcing that comes from this. You kind of sell yourself, you try and sell other people.

Kevin ([25:50](#)):

But something like this, it pulls you. It's irresistible. It's a gravity. And in a way I think, from my own lived experience, it's those things that are the right things. You have to figure out what is the thing that you can't resist that's bigger than you, that's more important? My feeling about the Internet of Things was very much like, the human race is coming to like 7 billion people. We need to get better at managing stuff. We need to become more efficient. We need less waste and so on. And that was very compelling to me. There was a moral imperative as well as all the interesting curiosity around can we make the technology work?

Kevin ([26:37](#)):

And so I think the thing for me in that passage and in general is you kind of have to find the things that pull you, that you can't say no to. Rather than the things that you have to psyche yourself up to get excited about.

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

And retroactively self-justify.

Kevin ([26:57](#)):

Yeah. Life is too short to get wrapped up in greed and ego and just doing things because you want the glory of it. I think you have to get deeper than that and find the thing that you can't resist.

MBS ([27:13](#)):

I want to come back to the book, Kevin. But what you're talking about now just compels me to ask you this question. If I look at Suzanne and her work that



you're referencing, I'm projecting, I'm making this up, but it feels to me that she's got her life's work set up. She'll be doing this-

Kevin ([27:31](#)):

Oh yeah. She's not going to get bored.

MBS ([27:34](#)):

She's not going to get bored around this. She'll be buried under the spreading roots of a tree somewhere and contributing to the network. But you've actually moved on and reinvented yourself a number of different times. How do you know when to stop something, to walk away from something?

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

Oh. I mean, I haven't reinvented myself. The post-rationalization of me, I guess, changes. Because one minute, I'm the tech Internet of Things guy, and everybody assumes I'm some kind of professor, computer scientist guy, which I'm not. And then I write a book and I'm supposed to be like an author guy, I guess. Or I'm doing a business, I'm supposed to be like a tech CEO. These are all kind of like... It's almost like you're the same actor playing different roles. But if you look at... I don't know who's a great leading male, like a George Clooney or Chris Evans, they're themselves and the character they're playing at the same time. Do you know what I mean? It's almost like an outfit they've put on. The great actors really invest themselves in the role. If Meryl Streep was actually that person, this is what she would be like, kind of thing. And I think-

MBS ([28:39](#)):

Let me ask you the question differently then, which is, how do you decide when to move on to a new role? How to take off the robes and then put on new robes? Because-



Kevin ([28:48](#)):

I don't.

MBS ([28:49](#)):

Yeah. Okay.

Kevin ([28:51](#)):

I don't. Something excites me and I follow it, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But I think my... It doesn't feel like a stopping, it feels like a starting. So it's always me. It has to be true to me or it won't work. But also it's like, what's igniting my passion right now?

MBS ([29:11](#)):

Right.

Kevin ([29:15](#)):

There's a Thelonious Monk quotation at the beginning of *How to Fly a Horse*, which is, "A genius is a man most like himself," or, "the one most like himself." And there's a few people who I've seen who are very successful and very interesting people, and they all kind of say the same thing.

Kevin ([29:38](#)):

So the reason I push back on the, "Oh, you've reinvented yourself," is I think what I've actually done is discovered who I am and to hell with everybody else's ideas of who I should be. And the who I am is weird. I'm into a variety of weird things, that for other people might not add up, but that's because I'm me. So I think don't be a cliché. Follow the things that you find passion for, whatever they are, whether they fit somebody else's idea of who you are or not. So that's me.



Kevin ([30:21](#)):

So the MIT thing came to a natural end. We had a goal and we achieved our goal. So back into business for me, and here are some really exciting tech things I want to do. And then I have an idea for a book. I'm like, "Okay, I kind of want to write that down now." So it's more about just being pulled in the direction of your passion than deciding to move on, if that makes sense.

MBS ([30:43](#)):

It does, in theory. And my own experience in practice is it's often harder... I found it harder to let go of stuff that I've done in the past to reset myself. A couple of years ago I stopped being the CEO of a company I founded. And it took me quite a while to figure out what the next thing was that was calling me that wasn't plus or minus 10% what I'd already been doing. Because it took me a while to get out of the valley of Box of Crayons. That's the name of the company, Box of Crayons. And I'm like, "I'm still in the valley, and until I cross the ridge line, I can't yet really see the rest of the landscape to figure out what the next path might be."

Kevin ([31:28](#)):

I get it. Yeah. But if you've going to write a new book, you start with a blank sheet of paper.

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

That's true.

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

So sometimes you have to recognize that the thing that you're doing, you've taken it as far as you can, it's time for somebody else to do it. It's not igniting your passion anymore. I'm always someone who's much more interested in doing new things than maintaining existing things. And there's nothing wrong with maintaining existing things, I'm just not good at it.



Kevin ([31:53](#)):

And so for me, it's like, okay, when feasible, I need to stop doing this thing because it's not as exciting as it used to be for me. It's reached a point where I'm not the right person or whatever. And I think you have to be comfortable with, "And I don't know what I'm going to do next." But you have to make that space in your life.

Kevin ([32:18](#)):

Now this is the other thing about capitalism, I guess, and the way we're all raised, is the idea that you have to be productive every day. There's this wonderful... I'd commend it to anybody. There's this Japanese anime studio called Studio Ghibli. I guess it's not really anime, but animation. It's kind of this famous cultish... They make these cool animation movies. And there's a Japanese TV series that you can watch for free with subtitles online about... I forget his name, but the main director at the studio who makes movies. And I think for a couple of years while the cameras are following him around, he just comes into his office and screws around. He's waiting for his idea. So he makes a cup of tea and he scribbles something and he makes a few profound statements and smokes a bunch of cigarettes and goes home. And he does that for a really long time. And he's completely comfortable with it because he knows that he has to wait for the thing to hit. He's doing the work, he's letting things percolate, but he's not putting himself under any pressure to produce.

Kevin ([33:29](#)):

And I think what happens to working class people in a capitalist society, which is all of us unless we inherited billions of dollars or whatever, if you've ever had to go to work-

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

That's not really my listenership.



Kevin ([33:41](#)):

Yeah. So you can eat. You're working class. There's really no such thing as middle class. Either you are working class or you're-

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

Landed gentry.

Kevin ([33:48](#)):

You've got more money than you know what to do with. And so we have this idea that if we have a day that's unproductive, like, "Oh, it's the weekend. We're allowed to be unproductive, but we've got all these chores to do." So there's this false idea that you can't stop what you're doing, do not start doing something else, and wait to figure out what the something else is. And if you have the means to do that, and if you live frugally, it should be possible eventually for most people to have a little bit of downtime to think about what's next. Then that's the answer. I think the fear of moving on often is because we don't know what's next.

MBS ([34:30](#)):

I think Kurt Vonnegut has a quote along the lines of, the purpose of life is to screw around or fart around, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise.

Kevin ([34:46](#)):

He's exactly right. Now, I want to say there's a lot of privilege in that.

MBS ([34:46](#)):

There is, yeah.

Kevin ([34:46](#)):

You have to be fortunate enough to have... And it's not a huge amount of means, but just enough means that you can screw around. And that might not



mean you quit your job, but you might say to yourself, "Okay, I'm going to maintain what I'm doing now, but I'm waiting for the next thing." But I do think it's okay to move on from one thing before you move on to another thing. You can have a gap.

MBS ([35:08](#)):

Yeah. Kevin, we've talked about the power in those pages you read from Suzanne around the moment of discovery. And I can feel like I had goosebumps as you read it.

Kevin ([35:22](#)):

Oh, Good. Okay.

MBS ([35:25](#)):

But there's also the actual content around what she's discovering.

Kevin ([35:27](#)):

Yes.

MBS ([35:28](#)):

And I'm wondering how that discovery around this kind of interconnectedness and this wisdom and this emotion and this idea of mother trees and tree hubs and fungal links and the like, I'm wondering what impact that's had, and discovering or learning more about that.

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

Oh, well, it's kind of like, "Damn trees. Trees came up with my idea 300 million years ago." And I push back... The one thing Suzanne and I have in common is people try and call it the internet of trees. And I'm like, "Hell no. The Internet of Things is the mycorrhizal network of humans." It's like, we've been doing it for like 50 years, and they've been doing it for hundreds of millions of years. The



metaphor's the wrong way around. And the interesting thing about that is trees are intelligent. Darwin was one of the first people who would notice that the way we think about trees is upside down. The bit that sticks out, the trunk, is actually kind of the tail of the tree. And all the equivalent of brain, all the neurological stuff, the sensing and processing is actually in the root bed. So when you see a tree, you got to think of like... The stuff you can't see is where the true intelligence is. The trunk is almost like an antenna in a way.

Kevin ([36:45](#)):

And so you look at, okay, well, if we accept that trees are intelligent, what do they tell us about intelligence? Because they've been intelligent for a lot longer than we have. And what you see, I think, is the future of intelligence generally, is in community and communication and networking, and not just networking with... This is one of Suzanne's great insights and it's in the passage. The original thinking, and the thinking that she picked up on a little bit, was like, "Oh..." There's a guy called Sir David Read in the UK who was one of the people who said, "It looks like trees are communicating with their offspring." That was kind of the beginning of this.

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

And so there was this idea of communicating with conspecifics, members of your own species, particularly people you're related to. Which again is a very human-centric way of thinking about communication. And that's not to take anything away from Read's work. It was groundbreaking.

Kevin ([37:41](#)):

But what Suzanne did was like, "I'm seeing some data that makes me think that trees might be communicating with other species of trees." Now that's the bit I... That's part of the breakthrough she... This idea that trees are competing or that there's this quote "Darwinian" competition between species of trees or individual trees, what she discovered was completely counter to that. That the



forest is a community of organisms that collaborate across species boundaries, across taxonomic boundaries, it's plants and animals, it's whatever you want. The way we divide up life is wrong, basically.

Kevin ([38:20](#)):

And so when I think about my work in like, how do we make our machines more intelligent by networking them? It's absolutely fascinating to see where a system that's been doing it for hundreds of millions of years ends up with this incredible network that's not just communicating information, it's sharing resources. It's not just sharing resources with other things like itself, it's this incredibly heterogeneous collaborative network. And it highlights the fact that this human-centric view of the world, where we're egocentric and then species-centric, is profoundly naive. It's absolutely ridiculous. It's as dumb as thinking that everything revolves around the earth or something.

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

And it's kind of the same idea, just rewritten. So God made man, and the world was man's dominion, and man was there to shepherd the animals and take whatever he wanted from the ground. And trees are basically flipping the finger at that.

MBS ([39:23](#)):

They're waving their tails.

Kevin ([39:23](#)):

They're like, "Yeah, we've been here a lot longer than you have, guys." And actually the way you survive for hundreds of millions of years is by cooperating and collaborating with every living thing around you.



Kevin ([39:32](#)):

And networking, bring it back to your question, networking is how you do that. So trees have their own kind of ethernet. They have this hard-wired network. They also have a wireless network, because they also communicate through the air. So they're doing everything we are doing in networking, they've been doing for a hundred million years. We do it with stuff made of sand. They tend to do it with stuff made of fungus. Not always. But there's a lot we can learn about the nature of intelligence and nature of emotion, the nature of communication from the way trees do it. And something like the Internet of Things is this very crude first step towards something that other species have been doing for longer than we can imagine.

MBS ([40:16](#)):

Has it changed the way that you show up and you build community?

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

Yeah, absolutely. And it's interesting because I was kind of guilty of the human-centered thing in that often when trying to explain the Internet of Things to a non-technical audience, I will talk about the human nervous system as analogous. People could understand that because they've got a nervous system. You say, "Well, you've got lots of fingers and you get lots of sensory information about touch. And your brain takes that and smell and multiple senses networked together by your nerves. That's kind of like the Internet of Things.

Kevin ([40:58](#)):

But then you're like, "Well, hang on a minute. That's actually not the best analogy. That's still a very human-centered analogy." And so you start realizing that... Not the thinking has been wrong, it's been overly constrained, it's been too narrow, it's been kind of blinkered. And we're still learning about the networking topology of trees. We're just scratching the surface.



Kevin ([41:24](#)):

You say about Suzanne's got her career made, I'm sure she's feeling like, "I don't have enough time." And I'm sure the things that her heirs discover will be even more remarkable, because she's crudely adapting technology for other purposes to figure this stuff out. As soon as we start making tree specific tools for researchers and it all starts to happen.

Kevin ([41:45](#)):

So I think, for me, it's really helped me understand that the way I see the world, I'm kind of looking like this, but there's this whole horizon that I should be taking. And there's this whole area of peripheral vision that I need to pay much more attention to.

MBS ([42:03](#)):

It feels analogous to the James Webb Telescope on what that's going to discover.

Kevin ([42:06](#)):

Absolutely.

MBS ([42:06](#)):

By decentering where you're looking and changing your perspective, who knows what will open up, what new horizons will be found?

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

Absolutely. Once you realize you're only seeing things from one point of view, and that the people you're talking to, because they're people, are kind of also seeing it from your point of view, it's more the same than you realize. That's kind of mind blowing. So yeah, for me, it's broadening, it's phenomenally broadening intellectually, to see this kind of work.



MBS ([42:36](#)):

Well, I'm excited to learn more about the new book when it comes out. As a final question, because I suspect the book will be touching on some of this. But as a final question, Kevin, and it's a broad one, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

Kevin ([42:55](#)):

Oh man. I think I would pick up on one of the themes from earlier, for people listening, which is most of what you've been told is... I'll say myth. Myth is my polite way of saying bullshit. Just as you know that hundreds years ago, people believed all sorts of stuff that was wrong, so do we. So I think as you go through your life, it is okay to find out what your preconceptions are, find out what you've been led to believe, challenge that, find your own path, be persistent, be eccentric, be weird, be true to yourself, figure out what that means. And by the way, you know you're starting to find it when things start to work in your life on every level. Don't force stuff. Don't resist things. Follow your passions. It's a much more exciting path. Those seconds on your death clock are ticking down whether you like it or not. You got the one shot, you might as well do your thing rather than somebody else's.

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

Here's the phrase that I'd actually quite like tattooed on my body somewhere. I mean, probably not, but I like the idea. It tells you how important it is. Here's what he said, "I think what I've actually done is discovered who I am, and to hell with everybody else's ideas." Now, I'm still trying to figure out who I am, but I do feel I'm getting a little closer and a little clearer most days. In what I take a stand for. What I stop doing. What I start doing. Who I keep inviting into my life. How I spend my resources, my time, my money, my attention. But saying to hell with everybody else's ideas, to their opinions, to their insights, to their wants and their needs, that is much harder for me. It's interesting just to notice that.



MBS ([45:02](#)):

And I'm also noticing that there's a paradox here, because Kevin and I have just had a deep conversation about connection and about interdependency. So how do you be who you are and be part of the greater whole? How do you be a tree, and at the same time, a forest?

MBS ([45:25](#)):

We've had a few guests on 2 Pages with MBS who have been exploring this idea of interdependency. So let me point out a couple of interviews that you might like to go back and revisit if you haven't heard them already. The first is Muriel Wilkins, an executive coach. She has a great HBR podcast on coaching. And her interview is called How to Hold a flower. And Nichola Raihani is also a wonderful conversation. And the title gives it away, On Cooperation and Competition, finding the balance between those two things.

MBS ([45:56](#)):

And if you're interested in more on Kevin, his website is a bit tricky to pin down because he's a writer and he wants to just write, but I would point you to his website, howtoflyahorse.com.

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

Thank you for listening. I always appreciate it. Thank you for championing the podcast. Welcome to the new listeners of which there are quite a few. Thank you if you have moved to give a rating or a review of the podcast. Thank you if you've passed the episode along, you've said to somebody, "You should listen to this guy. He's interesting. This insight of this book in particular strikes a chord for you.

MBS ([46:31](#)):

There is a membership site, it's called The Duke Humfrey's. It's named after the favorite library of mine from Oxford University. It's where there's some extra



cool stuff. Interviews we haven't released, transcripts, and the bits and pieces that you can download. So if you're interested or curious about that, just go to mbs.works/podcast and you'll find your way to The Duke Humfrey's. You're awesome. And you're doing great.