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

I'm writing a new book it's due out in the middle of 2023. And just before I started writing and recording my script for this episode, I was sitting at a coffee shop, reading my editor's response to the first draft. Now, she's been reviewing it for about three weeks and those three weeks have been, as they always are, a little discombobulating. I've let something go out into the world, but not yet grasped what's next. So I'm in the time and space of an interstitial. I love that word. It's the moment between things. I'm not quite sure how I feel or what I think. I don't have anywhere to go because the path is yet to appear. Everything, anything, maybe nothing is possible right now. So in other words, I'm sitting with the ambiguity of it all and I'm trying not to freak out.

([00:58](#)):

I'm Michael Bungay Stanier. This is 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. You know how sometimes products just seem perfect for the task at hand. I mean, if you spend any time in the kitchen and to be fair, most of my time in the kitchen spent washing up, but hang in there, my point stands. You'll know OXO products and how they caused a bit of a revolution by rethinking things like the veggie peeler or the measuring cup. Or that work, that reimagining is done by a product designer. And product designers are taught by people like my guest, Andrea Small. But product design was not the starting point for Andrea's career.

Andrea ([01:46](#)):

I came to design through architecture essentially and metalsmithing. There was a moment there where I thought I really wanted to be both an architect and a metalsmith.

MBS ([01:56](#)):

So after studying architecture and metalsmithing at Miami University in Oxford, someone recommended product design to Andrea and it sounded like a possibility. But it was going to be hard to let go of the experience of the power of being at the forge.

Andrea ([02:13](#)):

The shaping of metal, I mean, there's a chemical reaction that happens to metal when you hit it, when you heat it, when you melt it. So you're taking this raw material from the earth and shaping it however you want. So there's limitations to what you could do depending on what the metal is, but there's this instant connection with the material itself.

MBS ([02:39](#)):

Having ideas is not quite the same as shaping molten metal. And yet, it's not that different. Because for ideas to become good ideas, we take the raw



material and we heat and we beat and we shape them, refining them into something new.

Andrea ([02:54](#)):

I, all of a sudden, had this realization that everything around us is designed and that's how I found that way. I was always more interested in ideas and strategy and what we come up with versus the actual technical making of the thing, so I leaned towards strategy and design research.

MBS ([03:15](#)):

Andrea now teaches it at the Stanford d.school, where people use design to develop their own creative potential. And one of the things that Andrea does there, strategy and design research, may seem a few steps removed from the organic experience of working with metal and wood. It doesn't mean she's not aware of just how important that is.

Andrea ([03:37](#)):

Working in technology, it is all about screens and interactions and all of these different interactions that we have with technology. And we lose a little bit of that physicality, but it's still so important. I mentioned it worked at Herman Miller and we talked about how chairs touch our butts and our hearts in this extremely intimate way. And it's true, there's a connection that we have to our physical objects that I think technology takes away a little bit, and it leaves us with this longing for nostalgia and for physical touch and it misplaces our connection to physical objects. So working with wood, working with metals, it just simplifies things for me and clears away all of the complication that technology has afforded us today.

MBS ([04:35](#)):

It feels to me that part of what design is, is about creating elegance and certainty. And I'm wondering when you first noticed your calling to ambiguity.



Andrea ([04:48](#)):

Great question. I think I first noticed my calling to ambiguity when I was young. I think my upbringing was pretty standard as a child. And then we had a massive amount of trauma in my family, a lot of death and right from an early age, I'd say I was a child at 14 and then just an adult at 15. And I knew right away my entire life then that nothing was certain. That everything could change tomorrow and that was my entire philosophy moving forward, and that's my philosophy today. And so I feel this really deep connection to uncertainty and ambiguity because it's always been a part of my life, it's something that I think about 24 hours a day and that it shapes everything. I think people who don't have those kinds of experiences and really know certainty in a different way, might design things differently or be thinking of a different user in their head when we're designing products. But uncertainty has been really connected to my philosophy and design from a really, really early age, even, like I said, before I knew what design was for a really long time.

MBS ([06:07](#)):

I can only guess at the experience of that moment of transition from 14 to 15 and the trauma involved in that. And one response to an experience that I can guess, again, might have been to search for certainty and trying to eliminate ambiguity. But it feels to me that you've embraced ambiguity. I wonder how you kept your heart open to that.

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

Yeah. I think the opposite was true instead of searching for certainty, I definitely released control and accepted that there is no certainty at all, for better or for worse. I mean, my therapist would say that I could probably use a little bit more certainty in my life. But I think that being open to anything is both good and bad. Of course, there's the financial implications of believing that you might not live to see tomorrow and living that kind of life, but at the same time, there's an openness to just thinking that everybody is different. Everyone has experienced



something different. No matter what comes along, your world could be completely changed tomorrow and I do search for certainty. I love organizing. At the d.school, I even taught a class about organizing and drew the parallels between synthesis and organization, so there are some aspects of my life where certainty and being clean and organized is really important to me. It's not just all chaos all the time.

MBS ([07:52](#)):

Exactly. I think you speak a profound truth when you talk about the relationship between Navigating Ambiguity, as your book is called, and what it means to understand control and understand how to let go of some control. The book has insights and I guess tactics around navigation. But more profoundly, how do you help people release control?

Andrea ([08:17](#)):

Great question. There is a chunk in the book about trust and control, and it is really, really difficult. Even that little section in the book when Kelly and I were working on it, it was during the beginning of the pandemic, we had just gone into lockdown. The whole book itself, we started working on it years and years prior, but that little section about trust and control was happening at one of the moments in time where we lost all control and where we're given this moment of we had nothing to trust in. It was just all uncertainty all the time. And I think what we unpack in the book is that there is no magical way, there's no one thing, unfortunately. Everything for each individual is going to be different of what helped you to release control. A bit of certainty might be the thing that helps you release control, but every person is different and every moment is different. So what that person needs in the moment could work today, but might not necessarily work tomorrow.



[\(09:27\)](#):

But it really does come down to trust and how you build trust with other people, again, is just so individual. It's hard to put your finger on what is exactly that thing. And we talk a little bit about how experience and showing over time, how someone could show up for you and what their reactions are to uncertainty, those are the things that really build trust, that continue to build a relationship. It's really hard to build trust right out of the gate. And it could be really scary for people, especially if you have a history of uncertainty and a lack of control.

MBS [\(10:06\)](#):

I like this and I think this is true that you build trust through keeping small promises and big promises. But how do you manage betrayal?

Andrea [\(10:17\)](#):

Poorly.

MBS [\(10:20\)](#):

Yeah, yeah. You and me both, I guess. That's true, but I mean, how do you keep going? I mean, trust is this tenuous, fragile, febrile thing. And it feels that part of never getting ambiguity is to not be totally knocked off course by acts of disappointment or more dramatically acts of betrayal. I'm wondering how you teach people or you help people, you strengthen people's ability to manage the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Andrea [\(10:51\)](#):

Yeah. Betrayal can feel extremely unfair and not tied to anything that you did. You could really wrack your brain to try to understand what you did to deserve what that betrayal is. And that is not necessarily the case. If you remove yourself from the betrayal, sometimes it's simply just not about you.



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

That's good.

Andrea ([11:18](#)):

Anchoring yourself in other people is one of the only ways that I can manage that kind of betrayal, is going back to the people that I know are consistent and sometimes not people, as talk about later about eels, I'm a really in nature person. And so when something betrays me on the human side, I know I have a place to go that I trust that isn't people, that I know won't betray me in the end. So it's really difficult when you experience that kind of betrayal from other people and it's happened, it happens to everybody. And it could really shake you back to the point of work and your life and the things that are happening to you and your life affect your work and betrayal at work could affect your personal life. And yeah, they're all tied together.

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

Well, that took a dark turn. Let me pause and pull us back from where we're going here.

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

I love a dark turn.

MBS ([12:21](#)):

Oh, good. Well, tell me about the book you've chosen to read Andrea. I think I've read this book and I've certainly read about it and I'm intrigued about it. So what have you selected?

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

I have selected The Book of Eels by Patrik Svensson. Patrik Svensson is a journalist, he's from Sweden. This book is about eels, but it's also a memoir and a bit of a biography of his life. And it really talks about his relationship with his



father and in the context of their experience with eels. And then it gets into our understanding of eels today, where they come from, what's happening to them and just our quest for understanding what they are and what they do and how that is a parallel to uncertainty in all other aspects of our life.

MBS ([13:15](#)):

Yeah, indeed. I mean, eels have just been unexplainable forever and we'll probably touch on that. But I mean, how did you come across this book? I mean, how did it come into your life?

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

So when I was a teaching fellow at the d.school in 2015, I was working with someone called Hannah Jones. She's a designer currently in London, also a design educator. And we worked together on the Navigating Ambiguity book, along with our other teaching fellow Nihir Shah. And Hannah really brought in mystery into this experience. She has a PhD in design, she ran a master's program at Goldsmiths in London and her thesis was on awkward spaces. She was focused on meta design, so she brings in this kind of esoteric quality to design that nobody else in my life really had in the same way that she had. And so early on, we started to think about ambiguity and how the d.school was using ambiguity as a creative device.

([14:19](#)):

She brought in some of her favorite things, such as Prince. She's just Prince's number one biggest fan and he really became this icon of ambiguity in our work. And Hannah also introduced me to this concept of eels and how they're just one of the most ambiguous creatures on the planet. And at that moment, I was again, working on the book, working on the book in the pandemic, and this book came out in the early 2020, and I read it while working on the book and just, it was a really beautiful metaphor for what we were doing. And Hannah is



the one that kind of brought all things ambiguous into my life from eels to Prince.

MBS ([15:11](#)):

Exactly. Purple jumpsuits from Minnesota and the Wide Sargasso Sea. That is a pretty great combination. Now, how did you pick the two pages to read from? I mean, what have you chosen?

Andrea ([15:21](#)):

That was really, really, really difficult. I read and reread the book so many times because I wanted the perfect passage about uncertainty and it was hard to pick the two pages. I did pick something where Patrik Svensson quotes a couple of people, other nature writers, and just talks about, first of all, sums up what is the mystery? And what is our quest for certainty when we consider the eel? And then what are the questions that we're left with? Because we really don't have those answers.

MBS ([15:58](#)):

I love it. Well, look, I'm excited to have you here. Andrea Small, author of *Navigating Ambiguity*, reading from *The Book of Eels: Our Enduring Fascination with the Most Mysterious Creature of the Natural World* by Patrik Svensson. So Andrea, over to you.

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

"When we say we know the eel procreates in the Sargasso Sea, there are still some essential objections to that statement. One, no human has ever seen two eels mate. Two, no one has ever seen a mature eel in the Sargasso Sea. That means the eel question remains unanswered. The truth has not yet appeared under the microscope. This uncertainty clearly acts as a driving force in a gravitational pool for eel enthusiasts. The mystery is there to be solved. Questions await their answers, but at the same time, the riddle is what sparks



and perpetuates interest. For centuries, people who have viewed the eel question as a problem to be solved, have at the same time, clung almost lovingly to the enigma of it. When Rachel Carson wrote about the eel in her fairytale-like nature book *Under the Sea-Wind*, she lingered on the mysterious and unexplained.

[\(17:14\)](#):

Being a natural scientist, she could have been frustrated by not knowing, but the opposite seems to have been true. Rachel Carson seems to have been drawn to the uncertainty. She approached the eel and nature, not just as a scientist, but as a human being. For instance, about the silver eels long journey to the Sargasso Sea she wrote, 'As long as the tide ebbed, eels were leading the marshes and running out to the sea. Thousands passed the lighthouse that night on the first lap of a far sea journey. And as they passed through the surf and out to sea, so they also passed from human sight and almost from human knowledge.' Aristotle, Francesco Redi, Carl Linnaeus, Carlo Mandini, Giovanni Battista Grassi, Sigmund Freud, Johanna Schmidt might have objected, perhaps they would've been unable to accept that a creature can in fact leave the realm of human knowledge. But to Rachel Carson, there seems to have been something simple and beautiful about the idea of the eel vanishing into the unknown. A creature that actively seeks to avoid human knowledge as if that's the way it should be.

[\(18:24\)](#):

'The record of the eel's journey to the spawning place is hidden deep in the sea,' she wrote. No one can trace the path of the eels. To her, the eel question, the enduring mystery, seems to have appeared to be preordained and eternal as though it was a riddle beyond our human comprehension, like infinity or death. Tom Krick, the history teacher and narrator of Graham Swift's novel *Waterland*, clings to the same feeling of a kind of faded inexplicability when he expounds on the eel. Curiosity will never be content.



[\(18:59\)](#):

Even today, when we know so much, curiosity has not unraveled the riddle of the birth and sex life of the eel. Perhaps there are things, like many others, destined never to be learned before the world comes to an end or perhaps, but here I speculate, here my own curiosity leads me by the nose. The world is so arranged that when all things are learnt, when curiosity is exhausted so long live curiosity, that is when the world shall have come to its end. But even if we learn how and what and where and when, will we ever know why? Why? Why? Why?"

MBS [\(19:40\)](#):

Oh, fantastic. To me, this just reminds me of the end of Jane Joyce's Ulysses. Yes and yes and yes. What's so essential about this passage for you?

Andrea [\(19:53\)](#):

I think in my field, which is right now technology and design and design education, there is this quest to just figure everything out and to have a clean and perfect answer for everything. And we often look to science and engineering to explain all of our behaviors, to explain how we're going to create solutions for all of those things and to have a part of our world that is still so uncertain, it just reminds me that we can't know. And there's a sort of freedom in allowing something to continue to be a mystery and supporting that mystery without, I don't know, necessarily trying to fill in all of the missing gaps with some kind of scientific information. We have this perfect example that there have been attempts. There have been many, many, many, many attempts from Freud to Aristotle of trying to figure out the mystery of the eel and we just can't.

[\(21:03\)](#):

And there's something really beautiful about that to me. I really prefer nature books to business books. I think reading business books as inspiration over and over and over, we're all basically saying the same thing. We're saying that there's a lot of ambiguity in dealing with people and people are inherently uncertain



and that's what it all comes down to. And I think if we looked to nature books a little bit more than just the business books, we might get to a different strategy.

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

First of all, I just want to check in with you around language. Is mystery and ambiguity, the same?

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

Ambiguity, mystery, the unknown, uncertainty, we all kind of talk about them as being the same or kind of use them the same way, but no, I don't think they're the same. In the book, we talk about how uncertainty and ambiguity are different. Uncertainty implies that there is something to be certain about. Ambiguity is more about holding multiple things at the same time or interpreting something in multiple ways. Mystery has a little bit more of that enigmatic quality. It almost seems like the thing that is mysterious is actively trying to be mysterious.

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

Right?

Andrea ([22:25](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. So I think of them as being a little bit different. But I do lump them all together when talking about it.

MBS ([22:32](#)):

I can see how you move between them because there's overlap for sure. I mean, I agree with you around also nature books over business books. Not at least because nature books are often way better written than business books, which are often miserably written. And one of the things I can feel you saying here is, how do you make ambiguity and or mystery a feature rather than a bug? Early on in my career, somebody told me a powerful metaphor. She said, "Look,



imagine you're swimming, the longer you can hold your breath underwater, the more interesting a place you are to likely pop up." And this idea of how long can I hold my breath in the discomfort and the uncertainty and the grayness and the fuzziness and the ambiguity, well, the longer I can do that, the more interesting a place it is, where I eventually arrive.

[\(23:22\)](#):

So how do you teach people to sit with the discomfort of ambiguity? When we don't have this very primitive part of our brain, that just goes, avoid discomfort, avoid discomfort. You die. You die when you don't know what's going to happen. You die and your job by the way is to stay alive. So it feels like it's a learned skill that's trying to override some very permanent part of our human survival. How do you help people build that capacity?

Andrea [\(23:50\)](#):

Yes. And I recognize that too, in your books as well, that recognition of sitting with the discomfort of ambiguity and needing to be able to do that in order to get to a better place, whether that's pausing in a moment of conversation to not filling the air constantly, that can be as stressful as holding your breath underwater.

MBS [\(24:16\)](#):

Right.

Andrea [\(24:17\)](#):

And the metaphor of holding your breath is great. We have another example in the book from Kimi Werner, who's a professional free diver. She has this wonderful TED Talk about slowing down to speed up, which talks about freediving. And when you start to feel like you're running out of breath, your body wants to start kicking and paddling and trying to go for air. But those are the moments where you really need to calm down in order to reach where you're trying to get. And again, talking from a trauma informed perspective, that



could be really, really, really difficult for people. Because that space might not necessarily be safe. And when you bring that into a sort of business context, it gets even more complicated because you're asking people to be okay with no answers when there's money and time and goals and all of these other things on the line.

[\(25:20\)](#):

But talking about yet another metaphor, the metaphor that I like to use in this case is about back to the sea. Of course, the great unknown, is about deep sea exploration. So ambiguity for me, particularly in work, when people are exploring the sea, they lay out a matrix on the seabed to kind of organize the search. So the search is going from square 1A to 1B to 1C to 1D. And if you find something in 1A, if you find that treasure chest in 1A that's great, you have that treasure chest. And we know from science and from other business books and from our own experience that people really want to clinging to that one thing, because the rest of the exploration is just scary. We found it, now we don't have to go out there and explore.

[\(26:18\)](#):

But the mindset shift isn't about being comfortable with that mystery or that unknown. But instead, actually wanting to just explore further. To know that you have that thing you have that treasure chest you found in the first square, you have that idea that you brought into the conversation, you could always go back to that. And feeling secure in that little thing that you hold onto might be enough to allow you the freedom to explore in improv, which the d.school brings into a lot of our design teaching. And as you know, there's so many parallels between improv and uncertainty. People can want to bring in their own thing too. That's like, I'm going to play this ukulele in this next thing. You really want to have something that feels [inaudible 00:27:15] and whole. But that's something is generally your own skill, your own knowledge that you are not comfortable admitting or feeling like you have all the tools that you need but



yeah, you do. The thing that you're hanging onto is really in you, it's not the object that you're dragging through the process.

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

That's interesting. So there are three questions that are bubbling up in my head. First of all, just on a tactical level, I'm wondering how much of managing ambiguity, which is presented as an intellectual thing. How do I hold two ideas in my head at the same time? How much of managing that actually starts with physical management and physical control? My guess is there's a connection there. And I'm also wondering physically, how do you best set yourself up to be able to sit more comfortably with ambiguity? Are there any tactics or tips you've got?

Andrea ([28:08](#)):

Yes, in fact, Kelly Schmutte, my co-author has a business that she's created called PerfectFit that creates these inserts for point shoes, for ballet dancers who are dancing on point. And first of all, the company's called PerfectFit so she has a connection to perfection and control in a way that perhaps I don't, which is another reason that this book has two authors, because how could you really write a book about ambiguity that only comes from one voice? And we didn't really draw the connections between her experience as a ballerina and in ballet with ambiguity until long after the book was done. And we started to talk about it. Because there's so much control in ballet and as she has said, when you're on point, if you zoom in on a ball ballerina's toe or someone dancing on point, there's actually all of this wobbliness that's happening.

([29:10](#)):

All of this calibration, it looks like immense control and it is immense control, but there's also this intense flexibility and ability to kind of calibrate depending on what's going on, it's active. It's not just pausing and slowing down, it is physically active to navigate ambiguity. And it's why it could seem so



exhausting. We're going back and forth between the amygdala and prefrontal cortex and we're asking our, as you all know, we're asking the primitive part of our brain to be overridden. And we might think that that just looks like calm because our culture is so much about Zen and meditation and pausing and breathing through it. But I think when you think about navigating ambiguity is more like a sport, it's active. You can get tired, you might need to rest. You might need to drink some water. It isn't just about chilling. It really is an active physical thing. And I think that comparison to ballet, when you think like, oh, that's all control, that's all stability. It's really, really, really active, actually.

MBS ([30:27](#)):

One of the things that struck a chord with me when you're talking about improv and I've done improv classes so I know what you mean. Is when you're like, I've already decided my thing three minutes before the actual acting. And then of course, when the moment comes, you've lost connection to what's actually happening in the group because you've been going, I'm playing my ukulele and I'm excited about it, or I'm doing this accent and I'm excited about it, or I've got this role. Those things are your preset. It feels, and I'm going to struggle to make this a question. But there's something about ambiguity, is about giving up some sense of your individualism or some sense of self. Trying to become a little more porous to the people around you and the environment around you. And honestly, this feels like a challenge when we've got a culture that is very much about being an individual and self-help and self expression and self-esteem. Feels that there's an invitation to needing to put aside some status, aside some individuality. How do you help people figure that out?

Andrea ([31:29](#)):

One thing is definitely exposure and being able to have experiences with other people who are unlike yourself. The class that I taught this year is about intersectional design, which is design, where you're considering all these other factors of gender, race, ethnicity, income, education, geographic location, et



cetera, cetera, et cetera, cetera. And one of the things that the class had focused on initially was gender. And I think gender ambiguity is a great example there where, the people who don't have that kind of personal experience with, if you consider there's a binary and you've grown up knowing the binary and when someone presents themselves as not being a part of that binary, it does not compute. It doesn't fit into what you already know. And if you have no experience with people who kind of represent some kind of ambiguity, it could be really hard to understand that.

[\(32:33\)](#):

And it's not like there's a place where you could just go out and expose yourself to all these different people, it's very uncomfortable. So it's difficult to say how to put yourself in those situations and again, it's super individual. But to your point of people just being individuals and understanding where they are as individuals, you do have to let go of your definition of what you have for yourself, or at least be comfortable saying, I have that definition for me and myself and I fit within that, but it's okay, not everybody else on the planet fits into that exact mold. And so you are giving up a little bit of your own individuality by saying your individuality isn't necessarily what everybody else has to experience. It's a really complicated question.

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

It is a complicated question. I'm not even sure why I ended up asking you. I just blurted it out, so thank you. Another question I wanted to ask you is your choice of the verb navigating in the title of your book, navigating ambiguity. I'm wondering what the other options were? Because navigating has an implied leaving a destination and arriving at a different destination. And part of what I feel this conversation has brought up is, it's less about the destinations it's about being on the journey. Being with ambiguity rather than solving it. What other verbs do you think fit well with trying to figure out or sit with, or be with ambiguity?



Andrea ([34:08](#)):

Great question. We had a lot of different titles for this book.

MBS ([34:11](#)):

I know. And for people who aren't writers, coming up with a title of the book is even harder than writing the book. Sometimes it takes even longer. It kills you.

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

It's true. And what's even funnier is that, so back in the day in 2015, when we started the work on teaching ambiguity at the d.school. We created this pamphlet that was called a designer's guide to navigating ambiguity. And that's what we thought the book was going to be. And then future iterations of it were just like paper copies, like stapled paper copies that were printed off of the copy machine at the d.school. And that's what I thought the book was going to be and it was called a designer's guide to navigating ambiguity. And then we had a real publisher and a co-author and the book became a series and it's so much bigger than the 25 printed copies that I thought was the book back then. And we went through about 4,000 names and came all the way back to a designer's guide, navigating ambiguity.

([35:13](#)):

But it's true, navigating implies that there's somewhere that you're supposed to reach. Kelly, my co-author, did a lot of research with way finders and she even had the opportunity to interview the director of the Polynesian Wayfinding Society. And wayfinding became a really important metaphor in the book and navigating I think stuck because first of all, we didn't invent this topic. We didn't invent the notion of navigating ambiguity or navigating uncertainty. There are thousands and thousands and thousands of years of important cultural history that support this kind of work when it comes to something like design, which is the context that we're writing it in. And navigating, I think as opposed to saying, exploring or sitting with or managing, navigating I think puts that idea of you



have the tools and there are tools and knowledge that you could have, and it puts it more back into that active space of you're not just sitting with and trying to be cool and Zen about uncertainty, it is an action and it is an exploration.

[\(36:40\)](#):

It's something that you can do. And if we bring it back to the Polynesian Wayfinding Society and actual way finders, they had a purposeful vision of where they were going with all of this experience and knowledge and achievement to nature that got them to that navigation. And we think of more Western ideals of navigation. It's like you have a boat, you have a point A, you have a point B, you have a course, you're going on that course, if you get blown off course, you might die. You have to get back on course and navigating is different. Navigating allows you to stay attuned with the environment around you. And I think that's why we stuck with that because, it was just the right way to frame it. It felt right.

MBS [\(37:32\)](#):

Yeah. I mean, it's very different from the little I know about Polynesian wayfinding, where you're like with currents and stars and noted string and sticks, you navigate the vast Pacific ocean. It's quite different from using your Google map and your GPS and your car and getting to the local Starbucks. And also, even as I ask you this question, I'm like, you know what? People buy books that solve problems in the business section. So even it's a bit of a kind of bait and switch the title works fine. Andrea, as a final question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

Andrea [\(38:14\)](#):

At work, I'm right now, today, really bogged down with being in this moment of uncertainty in a project where I don't know how it's going to turn out. We have all of these executives-



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

Read this book.

Andrea ([38:33](#)):

Yes, definitely pick up *Navigating Ambiguity* by Andrea Small and Kelly Schmutte. But at work even today, after our conversation, I'm going back into a moment where our executive leadership is really freaked out. And we're just in that moment of not having any of the answers and really being tied up in a lot of data and a lot of research and a lot of things. And if there's something to be, something that we haven't said yet, I think there's so much struggle right now, there's so many notifications and terrible news stories and horrible nature events. And all of that complicates our point of view at work as well. And there is this need or this desire to really tease things apart and not consider any of that and just focus on the work. And I think the harder thing to do is to bring that in, to bring in our humanities current experience with uncertainty, to bring it into the work is the harder thing and to examine how people are changing and that people might be changing in a radical way.

([39:57](#)):

I think that, that's something that we're struggling with, I know at my job, and I think a lot of other people might be struggling with as well, is that, we're at the tipping point of work life balance not being real. And it's messy and accepting that it's messy really goes against business strategy. And there is no perfect answer. I mean, if there was a perfect answer, there would be one book and that's it and we would be done writing all of these books about how to navigate ambiguity. But there is no perfect solution and sitting with that, I think is the most difficult thing to do and the most rewarding thing to do.

MBS ([40:44](#)):

So you remember when Andrea passed the difference between ambiguity and uncertainty. Uncertainty means there's something to be certain about and you



just haven't arrived there yet. You're not got that certainty. Ambiguity is holding multiple things at the same time or being able to interpret something multiple ways. Now I've come to realize I really dislike uncertainty. Actually, when I work with people and we're kind of setting up, how do we work best with each other? I'll tell them, "Look, I need to know things at certain stages. And if you keep me in the dark, if I'm not in the loop in those moments where I should be in the loop, that's one of the key things that drives me nuts." So that's the irritation of uncertainty. But ambiguity, well, even though you heard me complaining about waiting for Kendra's notes at the start of the episode, quite frankly, I'm trying to get more of that into my life.

[\(41:43\)](#):

Cause it's the place where my sense of rightness and maybe even righteousness fades. In ambiguity there are options and there are possibilities. And if I can stay in this space a little longer, slow down the rush to close it off and shut it down and move on, then there's a sense that I might drift somewhere pretty interesting. I was thinking about what interviews I wanted to suggest to compliment this one and actually three came to mind. I normally suggest two, but if there are three here. One is a fellow a d.school teacher, Sarah Stein Greenberg. Episode, perfectly entitled how to love the unknown. I'd also suggest Sara Hendren how to see the world in you. This is designing beyond normal. And you'll certainly understand that if you listen to the episode. And then a relatively recent one, Kevin Ashton, which is all about seeing deep connection, and he reads from a book about ecology and the mother tree, and it's wonderful. And it speaks to that kind of more expansive understanding of what relationships are.

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

If you want to have more of Andrea, and of course you should track her down. You'll find her andreamall.com. So nice straightforward website. And she's on LinkedIn and Instagram and Twitter @Andrea Small. If you want to see the full range of books that the d.school is producing, and I'm very drawn to them, I



think they're terrific. d.school.stanford.edu, and you'll find your way to the books. Thank you for listening, thank you for giving it some love in the ratings. A blurb or some stars always welcome. One of the things I most appreciate is when you pass the interview on to somebody who you think would enjoy it. So if you love this, I bet you there's somebody else in your life who would love it as well. And if you were able to ping him and say, "Hey, listen to this and while are you there, subscribe to Michael's podcast." That's perfect. Thank you. You're awesome. You're doing great.