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

It's 1985. I'm in my final year at high school, 17, and I'm sweating about final year exams and whether I'll ever figure out how to ask a girl out, and I spend my lunchtimes playing rugby or soccer or Aussie rules on the school grounds. Basically, I'm 17 and I'm just having a good life. I'm having fun.

([00:24](#)):

There was very little then that hinted at who I've become now. I wasn't that interested in personal growth, particularly. I wasn't interested in business or entrepreneurship. My favorite class was literature and I liked explaining ideas about books, so maybe there was the hint of something there, but no one then would call me a writer, and I didn't write. Not things outside the essays that were due the next day.



[\(00:53\)](#):

During one of the assemblies where all the school is got together, one of my classmates came on stage. He brought his cello out and it was announced that he'd won some big prize. Now, I barely knew what a cello was, so you know, whatever. But then he played it. And while I didn't really understand the music, I remember thinking, "Oh, this is what it means to be really, really, really good at something." And just how extraordinary and how rare it is to be one of the best of the best.

[\(01:29\)](#):

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. Neil Heyde was that classmate. In fact, there were two really good cellists in my school. One became a neurologist and one was Neil. And Neil became, and still is, a member of a world class quartet, a recorded artist many, many times, and head of post-graduate programs, the Royal Academy of Music in London. That is truly one of the most prestigious music institutions in the world. And the Academy has been his home now for decades.

Neil ([02:09](#)):

The amazing thing about working at a place like the Academy is you are working with some of the most talented people from around the whole world. So it's a really exciting place to be, and I've stayed there almost as long as I've been a cellist now.

MBS ([02:24](#)):

Neil started playing when he was nine. But I'm really interested in understanding, how is it that you stay on the path? Because most of us don't stay on a path that shows up at 17. I mean, Andrew Duggins, bless him, he went off and studied medicine, understood how brains worked, became that



neuroscientist. I have no idea whether Andrew Duggins still plays the cello. So how did Neil make the decision?

Neil ([02:51](#)):

I think I remember having various conversations with people where I was playing off in my head, am I going to jump for the thing that I love doing and that I think I might not be able to get away with? Or am I going to do something sensible? I'm going to be a lawyer or something, which is the kind of stuff that I might have done. And I think I was a bit scared, but I think also it was a case of I can't see anything that would make more sense for me to do, so I'll just go this way and see what happens.

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

But this is not joining the Holy Orders, where you sign up a child and you're theirs for life. Even when accepted to study at the Academy, Neil still had his doubts, questions about who he could be and what was exactly his path as a musician.

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

Finding my own path, I don't think I was really confident with that until the very end of my twenties. You might be talented early, but whether that's the direction you can follow, that's another question all together.

MBS ([03:50](#)):

As my nieces and nephews get out of their teens, I've been encouraging them to think about their twenties as a decade of discovery and exploration. I mean, your brain is still reprogramming itself to be an adult's brain, and this is the time to test your hypothesis about who you really are by engaging with reality and starting to claim agency, and so too with Neil.



Neil ([04:15](#)):

You yourself have to set the agenda for what you want to do. It isn't about slotting into something that somebody else provides. And I think one of the things, I felt like a talented kid. I left Australia when I was 19. I just started to come to London to study. And you arrive and there are loads of really good people. And then you realize, oh, but I'm still in the pack. It's okay. But then, realizing that actually the ones who are going to absolutely step outside the pack, the few in a generation, well, there are a tiny number of those. Very, very few of us will be that person, and I'm not one of those people.

([05:00](#)):

But you realize that that doesn't matter. But I think that's the thing that you don't know when you're 21. And I teach a lot of the people who are at that age and are trying to work out, okay, what does this mean? Do I need to be the best in the world to have a career or can I be in whatever that very talented, really high achieving, but not the one or two.

MBS ([05:22](#)):

Yeah. One of the many things that you do at the Royal Academy Music is to manage postgraduates and help them. What have you learned from being that guide and mentor and coach to these young talented people?

Neil ([05:37](#)):

That there's no one way to do anything.

MBS ([05:40](#)):

That is wonderful, yeah.

Neil ([05:44](#)):

Genuinely, that 200 people arrive at the beginning of the year fresh, and you've got 200 routes through what's going to come out to the other side, which is,



from a managerial point, quite complicated. And actually, from the point of view of the individual, it's really complicated, because nobody can show you how to do it.

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

And the thing I end up saying to the students, and it took me, and it'll be relevant to the reading that we'll do, but it took me forever to learn this. But you have teachers as musicians, but the teachers... and the teachers can pass on bits and pieces of information. But what they can never do is show you how you can learn. You have to learn how you learn for yourself. And, of course, it helps to be in an environment where you've got other people, where you might be able to steal some ideas from or measure yourself up against. But actually, that whole business of how you find out who you are, no one can do it.

MBS [\(06:44\)](#):

Yeah. What have you come to understand about yourself and how you learn?

Neil [\(06:51\)](#):

I love to play music. The doing of music is incredibly important to me. But I realized that what's really important about it isn't the music. No, it is actually, it's the doing of this thing which connects you with other people, both the people who are in the room listening to you or the people you're working with, because a lot of a of my life is working with three other people in the string quartet. And I probably don't agree with them on anything in life. Yes, we'll do this concert, that kind of stuff we can agree on.

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

But what I love about music is it provides a framework in which we can interact together really creatively and positively, and the fact that we wouldn't see things in exactly the same way becomes provocative and interesting. And then, of course, I'm interacting with all of these incredible musicians from the past. So



it's the sense that there's this living, breathing thing we can do, and yet what it is a way of actually just connecting.

MBS ([07:56](#)):

Yeah. How do you feel your sense of yourself or your understanding of yourself as a musician has evolved over time?

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

Again, I don't know whether this sounds strange, but I feel much more aware of being part of a big world. So again, it's this connectedness with people, and there are all sorts of ways I think about it, but I tell a story for the new students who come to us at the Academy, because I find this helpful, and I've got millions of stories to tell. At least telling stories is actually how you make sense of your... or it's how I make sense of my existence.

([08:37](#)):

But I had two especially important cello teachers in my life, and at the point I studied with them, they were not young men anymore. They were getting on. They're both dead now, so I can say, although one didn't die until relatively recently, and this was my Australian teacher at the point that I was in my last years of school, Nelson Cooke, who'd been a student of Pablo Casals in Prades in the 1950s. So I think often that my grandfather cello teacher, through Nelson, is Casals, who was born in 1874, really long time ago. And then through William Pleeth, who I then went to study with in London, he went at 16 to study with Julius Klengel in Leipzig. Klengel was born in 1859.

([09:25](#)):

And the funny thing is, those people, those men, and Klengel and Casals, who will, maybe Casals as a name people know. Klengel, unless you're a cellist, no one's ever heard of him. But they're really important people in my life. They're grandfathers I never met, but they're grandfathers whose existence is totally real to me through the teachers I had, and in a way more real than my



great-grandmother, who I knew and died when I was 13 or something. So I find, I think that's one of the things that really excites me about the world that I live in.

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

What I love about this Neil, is I've literally, just before we did this interview, I recorded the introduction to another interview, a friend of mine called Eric Klein. And he is a spiritual teacher. He has a guru, and he is part of a lineage, and he can trace his learning back, and that's an important part of what he does, as is a sense that he is creating the progression of that lineage. He is in the middle of it. He's not the end of it. Do you have a sense of your lineage, not just going back but looking forward?

Neil ([10:40](#)):

Yeah, in lots of ways, and I think it's one of the things about getting to the stage of life that you and I are in now where you realize it..

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

He means very, very young men.

Neil ([10:49](#)):

With...

MBS ([10:50](#)):

With vast wisdom at the same time.

Neil ([10:52](#)):

You realize, maybe it's time where the egg timer is being flipped and you are looking slightly differently. And I think I'm very aware when you are really striking out for the first time, you're trying to grab the baton from someone, and you're aware that that's the job. And then there comes a point where you



become a really aware that you're passing things on. And I think actually that I made a really interesting... well, I think it's a really interesting decision, but I worked out really early on in my musical life, I love teaching, but I didn't want to teach the cello at all. That I gave lessons sometimes, and I still do with the odd, I do all sorts of coaching, but when I sit in the room with another cellist, I'm terrible because I want to play. I listen to them play and I... Maybe that's a very selfish thing, but I realize.

[\(11:47\)](#):

So that side of me speaks through the music I make, but I want to be in the room with people to talk about what it means to be part of this big world, to be somebody whose world exists in craft making, which is where the book will come in today. And actually, to understand that to what a high calling. Maybe that's saying too much. But I think what I realized was you could do this thing that is playful and engaging and fun and beautiful, but that also it could be deadly serious and there'd be something about it that you'd feel was really important to leave to the future. So I don't know whether that answers your question.

MBS [\(12:35\)](#):

Yeah, I think it does. I'm not even sure what I meant by the question. It just showed up in my head. And what's interesting as you say this, Neil, is one of the things I've been sitting with and trying to explore a little bit is what does it mean to step into eldership, becoming an elder? Because I feel like I'm, perhaps in a similar but different way to you, going actually, it's less about me taking a baton now, and it's more about finding ways of opening opportunity for others. A final question before I ask you to introduce your book, how has your sense of ambition shifted over the years?





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

The funny thing is, I've never felt of myself as an ambitious person. That's not been a driver for me. I remember turning 30, and I saw somewhere you'd done a podcast where you talked to someone about this, and so it struck me. I remember turning 30 and then thinking, there are quite a lot of things I've probably failed to do at 30, and then I must have then had them as kind of ambitions. But I tend to think always of the projects I want to do or the ideas I want to follow through, and I feel really, really fortunate that I've been in a position where I've been able to do a lot of those things. Yeah, so it's not for me about goals, but about processes. And if I'm able to do the processes I want, I'm going to be a happy man.

MBS ([14:09](#)):

There's so much wisdom in... I mean, I'm going to end up violently agreeing you with you on a lot of stuff, I can tell, because I try and structure my life to go, what's my best guess at the next big project I should be taking on that speaks to the impact I want in the world, but also the best expression and the best edge of myself that I'm trying to explore? And I'm not quite sure if it's right, and then there's probably other options as well, but I take a best guess and then I commit to a process, and then now come, the cards fall as they fall.

Neil ([14:41](#)):

It feels like a nice way to live to me. But the funny thing is, the elder thing I've been thinking about a lot, because one of the nice things, I work in two kind of overlapping worlds where there are quite a lot of, whether it's gatekeepers or there's a sense of control about what the right things to do would be. And one of the nice things about being a bit older and having got into a position where you have some authority or whatever we might call it, is you can kind of speak truth to how lazy a lot of the ideas, a lot of the things that are treated as important can be. And it seems to me that a really important thing for people slightly later on, because I think when you're 30, you can't do that. You just



come across as annoying and rebellious. But if you do it later, then they think, well, he must have got the rebellion out of his system by now, right?

MBS ([15:39](#)):

Yeah. It's not just being contrary for the sake of being contrary or making a name. It's a more grounded, thoughtful response, perhaps.

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

Yeah.

MBS ([15:50](#)):

Neil, you've hinted out the book you've chosen a few times. What is it, what have you picked for us?

Neil ([15:55](#)):

It's called the Craftsman, and it's by Richard Sennett, who's a sociologist and about whom I know surprisingly little. So, I really admire this book. I've not read anything else by him, and I often think I should, and life ends up feeling short.

MBS ([16:12](#)):

Yes.

Neil ([16:14](#)):

I love this book for a number of reasons, and one is, I work in quite an esoteric area of culture, you could say. I'm surrounded by people from around the world who work in the same area, so it starts to look normal to us that people operate like this. And I enjoy reminding people what's normal about it and what's not normal. It's a very strange thing to do.

([16:44](#)):

But what I love about this book is Sennett takes a very wide view of what he thinks a craftsman is. He's got a very open view to the sense that anyone can be



a craftsman if they choose to be, and I quite like that because there's a sense that this, there are closed worlds everywhere. And I find it a helpful way of thinking about what I do in a way that might relate to other people without having to go through some of the detail of what does it mean that you're using the third finger on the D-ring here to play that note, whereas someone else is using the second finger. Which can feel very important at certain points in how I'm thinking, but to a wider audience is meaningless.

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

Yeah. So, I'm excited to hear what you've got to read for us. Let me formally introduce you. Neil Heyde, professor, academic at the Royal Academy Music. Cellist. Schoolboy friend of mine, reading Richard Sennett's book, the Craftsman. Neil, over to you.

Neil ([17:45](#)):

Thank you. So, this is a section that he heads, he calls it Fractured Skills, and it's about hand and head divided. And I'm just going to make an apology. He's a very good raconteur, Richard Sennett, and he tells lots of wonderful stories, but I've chosen a bit without a wonderful story because it's got an idea that I thought it might be fun for us to talk about.

MBS ([17:45](#)):

Fantastic. Yeah great.

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

So if you hear this and then think, oh, I'm not sure I want to read the book, it's full of great stories.

([18:25](#)):

The modern era is often described as a skills economy, but what exactly is a skill? The generic answer is that a skill is a trained practice, and this skill, contrast to the [foreign language 00:18:38], the lightning bolt of sudden inspiration. The



lure of inspiration lies in part in the conviction that raw talent can take the place of training.

[\(18:50\)](#):

Musical prodigies are often cited to support this conviction, and wrongly so. An infant musical prodigy, like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, did indeed harbor the capacity to remember large swatches of notes. But from ages five to seven, Mozart learned how to train his great innate musical memory when he improvised at the keyboard. He evolved methods for seeming to produce music spontaneously. The music he later wrote down again seems spontaneous because he wrote directly on the page with relatively few corrections. But Mozart's letters show that he went over his scores again and again in his mind before setting them in ink.

[\(19:33\)](#):

We should be suspicious of claims for innate untrained talent. I could write a good novel if only I had the time, or if only I could pull myself together, is usually a narcissist fantasy. Going over an action again and again, by contrast, enables self-criticism. Modern education fears repetitive learning as mind-numbing, afraid of boring children. Avid to present ever different stimulation. The enlightened teacher may avoid routine, but thus deprives children of the experience of studying their own ingrained practice and modulating it from within.

[\(20:15\)](#):

Skill development depends on how repetition is organized. This is why, in music as in sports, the length of a practice session must be carefully judged. The number of times one repeats a piece can be no more than the individual's attention span at a given stage. As skill expands, the capacity to sustain repetition increases. In music, this is the so-called Isaac Stern rule, the great violinist declaring that the better your technique, the longer you can rehearse



without becoming bored. There are eureka moments that turn the lock in a practice that is jammed, but they are embedded in routine.

[\(20:55\)](#):

As a person develops skill, the contents of what he or she repeats change. This seems obvious. In sports, repeating a tennis serve again and again, the player learns to aim the ball different ways. In music, the child Mozart, age six and seven, was fascinated by the Neapolitan sixth chord progression in root position. A few years later, he became adept in inverting the shift to other positions.

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

But the matter is also not obvious. When practice is organized as a means to a fixed end, then the problems of the closed system reappear. The person in training will meet a fixed target but won't progress further. The open relation between problem solving and problem finding, as in Linux work, builds and expands skills, but this can't be a one-off event. Skill opens up in this way only because the rhythm of solving and opening up occurs again and again.

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

These precepts about building skill through practice encounter a great obstacle in modern society. By this I refer to the way in which machines can be misused. The mechanical equates in ordinary language with repetition of a static sort. But thanks to the revolution in microcomputing, however, modern machinery is not static. Through feedback loops, machines can learn from their experience. Yet machinery is misused when it deprives people themselves from learning through repetition. The smart machine can separate human mental understanding from repetitive, instructive hands-on learning. When this occurs, conceptual human powers suffer.

MBS [\(22:42\)](#):

Neil, that's great. There's a lot to dig into here, but I'm curious to know, what is the important idea that's at the heart of this passage for you?



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

That repetition, used in the right way, that repetition's a really powerful thing, and there's a real danger in us assuming that repetition is somehow mechanical or lazy. Music's really interesting in this front, because music repeats a lot. I know poetry does, but most of the arts don't.

MBS ([23:16](#)):

That's true.

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

But there must be something inherently interesting about repetition, and partly music's, too. You can't easily hold it in your head, so hearing something repeated afterwards. But the whole notion that repetition might be interesting and you could develop a relationship with it that would let you discover things, that's why I read that.

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

Yeah. It's really powerful. And that is an interesting observation, that in music you have these repeating motifs that occur as you listen to a symphony or whatever it might be, or a movement within a symphony, in a way that doesn't really occur in other forms of art. How do you help others grow as they do the work, knowing that there's this tension between a thirst for novelty and the power of repeating movement so that it becomes fluid and ingrained and habitual?

Neil ([24:19](#)):

Well, one of the things I feel I have to argue or defend against, I think there's been a sense that the kind of conservatoire in which I teach is a place where students are trained to be clever robots. And I think that's not the case at all, but it's interesting that there's a misunderstanding from outside that there might be an element of that in there.



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

And then, so partly I want to answer those people and explain what kind of training is going on, so I'll come to that in a moment. But I also want to help those of us who are learning, and I remember really clearly my early days, and by early days, I would say the first 10 years of playing my instrument, and I wouldn't say I hated practicing, but I found practicing quite hard work. And I'd set a clock, and I'd think, okay, well if I want to be serious about being a musician, I should do at least an hour and a half's practice. And you think, well, someone else says they're doing four, so I'll say an hour and a half. So I'll set the clock for an hour and a half, and I'll basically tie myself to the chair and do it.

[\(25:30\)](#):

And I found it hard, because I realized it's very easy to sit there and just think, well, the job is just, you make it better. And even if you define the goals of that quite well, that's not very interesting. Now, if I start a practice session after I finish talking to you, my problem will be working out when to stop, unless something else stops me. Once I get inside that space, I love being in this space, because there are so many ways it can now go, and I will be interested in following them through and seeing where it happens.

[\(26:09\)](#):

And of course, what I'm trying to communicate or help other people discover is that the repetition that practices can offer you that space, rather than one where you've got a predefined goal, which is one of the things Sennett talks about, the danger of thinking, we are just trying to achieve that and we'll hack away at this until we arrive at it. And even if you do achieve it, then what have you actually achieved? Well, maybe not much. So it's about defining, but the language I use is discovering the goal through the work.



MBS ([26:46](#)):

It harks to the Anders Erickson idea of 10,000 hours, which Malcolm Gladwell then made popular in *Outliers*. And it's like, the thing is, it's not 10,000 hours, it's the nature of the practice in the 10,000 hours.

Neil ([27:01](#)):

Exactly.

MBS ([27:01](#)):

And if you're just trying to notch up the time, then you look like what I look like when I was playing piano for my obligatory 30 minutes, which is like, I'm just enduring this. There's no sense of learning, I'm just trying to get across the finish line so I can stop playing piano because I'm hopeless at it. But what have you learned about what's required to create that practice space as, let's call it sacred space?

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

I don't think of practice as a sacred space. I like to think of practice as a workshop. I go in, I have my tools, I shuffle about and I play with things. I do think of the performance as a kind of sacred space. People give you their time. I love the fact you do this podcast as something that people would have to listen to it.

MBS ([28:05](#)):

Right.

Neil ([28:06](#)):

You can't just quickly go and work out, oh, what's the key point in this episode? Books are great.





MBS ([28:12](#)):

Because I don't know what the key point is, either. I'm like, I listen to this as an unfolding of a conversation, which I love.

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

But that in itself requires a kind of, there's a ritual of engagement that a listener has to go into to do that. Whereas with a book, I read very fast, I'm a skim reader. I find it very easy to process what's in a book fast. And of what I love about a performance space, whether it's a podcast or a musical performance, is that it's a space where you have to give in to the time that's in there. And that to me is a kind of sacred thing.

([28:49](#)):

But the working space is really, that's very down to earth. That's nuts and bolts and just moving things around. For me it's not inspiration, either. I'm just interested in uncovering what I can. In music, we often, in classical music, you often use the word rehearsal to describe what is done. So if my string quartet gets together, we would say we have a rehearsal before the concert. And that's a really lousy word, I think, because it implies that you already know what you're doing. You are rehearsing, you're going through it. I think of every meeting we have as a workshop we are going to go through. And we don't believe in determining the goals. I think a conductor has to do that a bit, because if somebody's not, hasn't decided already in advance. So that kind of working situation is a different one.

MBS ([29:46](#)):

I want to ask you in a minute about what it means to work with three other people in a quartet. But before I go there, just in this conversation about what practice means, what's the relationship between your mind and your hand?



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

This is the other reason I love the Sennett book, is that he wants to show that mind and hand in real craft, masterly craftsmanship, and he's very clear, it is not a gendered word. It's worth saying that. But in that, the two operate in such a way you don't know where the distinction between them lies. And that is, for me, one of the most amazing things about being a musician. I realize I can literally think through my hands, my arms, as well as in my brain, and that the way that those interact is so rich and complex.

([30:51](#)):

I think there is a kind of, it's the opposite of an out of body experience. It would be, whatever, and I don't want to use any of the normal language we might use, but when working properly, both in the workshop space and in the onstage space, there's that sense that actually, because you've done something for long enough, the routes through it can be discovered by the physical parts of your body as well as the mental ones.

MBS ([31:21](#)):

That's so interesting.

Neil ([31:23](#)):

And that's an amazing feeling. And the great thing is, it gets better as you get older.

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

I think that's true.

Neil ([31:30](#)):

I don't think that's much in life that feels like that. It's inevitable that certain things, certain skills will diminish. But I love the fact I work in a field where a lot



of the musicians I've most admired have been really quite old when they've done their best work.

MBS ([31:45](#)):

That's great. I notice, because if I would claim a craft, it would be as a writer, and in a similar way, I've now written a bazillion sentences in one context or another, stuff at university, I mean, essays at school, sure, but kind of writing in a way to find a voice, to have an opinion, to teach an idea or show an idea. And I feel like if I have a claim to mastery now, it's something along the lines of I have a nuanced understanding of what an edge is and what might evolve, and I kind of trust my keyboard or my pen, whatever I'm using to write, to have it show up there, rather than me trying to out overly figure it out in my head. Although sometimes I'm doing that, as well. Sometimes I'm thinking about what's the structure to this that would be reassuring and disruptive, or whatever it is that I'm trying to accomplish. So, what you're saying rings very true to me, Neil.

Neil ([32:42](#)):

Because it is interesting. It's about the flight time, or the 10,000 hours, but the 10,000 of engaged hours, and then, of course it's a lot more than 10,000 by the time we are at wherever we are now. I spend a lot of time talking to people. I much prefer talking to writing. I do write, and I need to write as part of what I do, but I feel very distinctly that that's something I have not mastered in the same kind of way. And I think it's, I spend less time doing it and I feel less embedded in it. So it's quite interesting to be aware...

MBS ([32:42](#)):

That is interesting.

Neil ([33:16](#)):

Of what real mastery feels like.



MBS ([33:21](#)):

I've done the same with my cello career. I've put aside the cello and I'm just focusing on writing for now.

Neil ([33:26](#)):

Yeah.

MBS ([33:27](#)):

Let me shift it a little bit and ask you this. What have you learned about collaboration, co-creation, workshopping with your three colleagues in the quartet?

Neil ([33:45](#)):

This might sound a bit provocative, but I did quite a bit of writing on collaboration 15 years ago or something like that, because people hadn't done much of it. And in my field academically, it's been a big topic for the last 15 years or so. Which is nice. But I think people have a weirdly utopian view of how a collaboration works, that it's flowery and nice and people get together and...

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

It's an intertwining of souls. Is that a...

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

Yeah. I don't think of it like that at all. And I don't see it as negative image of that either. I don't think it's all about battling for creative space. I think it's about disagreement and misunderstanding a lot, and then finding a space that enables you to move forwards. And I just love working in an environment where one needs to grapple a bit and then discover something, and then kind of agree together to run with it for whatever reason. I think often, one doesn't really know why you agree that something works, but I love that process.



MBS ([35:03](#)):

Sometimes in conversation, disagreements start to break or crack the relationship. How do you nurture relationships that have the resilience and grace and understanding to have disagreements not be a force of destruction?

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

That's a really good question, to which I'm not sure I know the answer. Well, I know I don't know the answer. But it is, at some level it must be something to do with respect or love for others. But with the three people I'm playing with in the quartet, one needs to respect who they are as musicians. And at that point, then if you don't agree, well, that's not a problem, because you are still working from a standpoint where there's a valuing of something always there in place. I don't know how one forms that. I can think of all sorts of situations where that might not be in place and makes it difficult. I also work in a managerial position at work, and you don't always have those kind of things to rely on. I think I like disagreement. I think I like the fact that I feel that there tends to be honesty there and I can respect that, even if I don't always necessarily respect where it's coming from.

MBS ([36:39](#)):

What I'm hearing, perhaps I'm oversimplifying it a little bit, is your disagreements tend to be on the level of the music rather than the level of the person.

Neil ([36:50](#)):

Yes.

MBS ([36:51](#)):

Yeah.



Neil ([36:53](#)):

And there are probably many disagreements on the level of the person too, but in a way those don't matter because actually, it's a job that we are do, that we are choosing to do together, and it's an entirely free choice arrangement.

MBS ([37:09](#)):

Yeah. That's beautiful. Neil, it's been such a great conversation. I'm now wanting just to come to London, so you and I can go out for dinner together and kind of great talk for hours. But I'm wondering, as a final question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between us?

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

I'm just wondering, I'm wondering how one knows one loves doing something. This is the thing that... There's a story I'll tell.

MBS ([37:39](#)):

Yes, please.

Neil ([37:39](#)):

And this is a story I tell the students, but as musicians, we tell ourselves one kind of story. Almost every music student will be told this at some point, and that is, you, the musician, have to decide how the music's going to go and make the instrument do the thing that you decide. You are the boss of the instrument.

([38:05](#)):

And in an interview, Nathan Milstein, great Russian violinist who probably died at the end of the '80s, but he's asked by another wonderful musician, "If you had to give advice to a young player today, what would you say?" And he goes, "Well, think with your head." So he begins with exactly this piece of advice slightly later in the conversation, which they're having over dinner. I love it. It's a very Jewish man in New York having a conversation over dinner kind of. Yeah.



[\(38:37\)](#):

And later in the conversation, it comes back and he goes, he says, "You know, I think I love the violin more than I love music, which is why I've been able to play so long." And it comes across as such a beautiful thing that he says it, and the fact that he's contradicting, in a way, the thing he said, which is always that in a way, the music comes first and goes, but he recognizes there's something in that relationship. And there's a lovely film of Casals, the great cellist, with the president of Israel in the early '70s, and he has his cello next to him. He says, "I've played this cello for more than 50 years. I love him and he loves me." And he looks at her. I've forgotten her name, Golda something. I think it may be-

MBS [\(38:37\)](#):

Golda Meir.

Neil [\(39:26\)](#):

Yeah, Golda Meir. And he looks at her and he goes, "Yes," just in case she thinks he's being arty-farty or it's a conceit. He goes, "No, I mean that." And I don't know how we really discover these things in life, but it feels to me really important that we know somewhere. So, I don't know whether that's something that wasn't said, but we need to love it, whatever it is.

MBS [\(39:58\)](#):

I hated practicing the piano. Mrs. Birmingham, my teacher, was ferocious and utterly uncomprehending of my profound lack of musical ability. Still, Mum made me do half an hour practice three or four times a week, and for me it was just getting to the end of those 30 minutes. There was no flow, there was no joy, there was no ecstasy, there was only misery, there was only grind.

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

I loved, then, what Neil said about returning to practice not as something that's a grind, nor as something that's meant to be magical or spiritual, but as a



workshop. I mean, I'm holding that insight even as I write this script. This is me practicing being a writer, playing with words and stories and rhythms, honing my voice, both the one you're hearing, but also my voice on paper, thinking about how I'll read this later on and the experience I want you, the listener, to have.

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

As you may have heard me say before, my worthy goal, that's the big idea from the *How to Begin* book, my worthy goal is to be a writer. And the essence of that, I realize as I type away on this at 7:00 in the morning, sipping an espresso, is to turn up to my workshop, figure out the problem that I want to solve and to start practicing. It's all practice.

[\(41:26\)](#):

If you enjoyed my conversation with Neil, I certainly did, not least because he's somebody I've known for, what is it, 40 years, close to, now? Let me suggest two other interviews as part of the *Two Pages with MBS* catalog, which is now well over a hundred episodes, probably closer to 130.

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

Madeleine Dore, *How To Be Alive*. She is a creative. She writes so beautifully about what it means to create, and I love how she's also on a journey to figure out her own creative spirit and we talk about that in our conversation.

[\(41:59\)](#):

And then, Jay Acunzo, who is a podcaster. He gave me the idea of you make a podcast, the goal is to be somebody's favorite podcast. Not the best, not the most popular, but somebody's favorite. That's what I'm trying to do for you. I'm trying to find a podcast that you go, "When this comes out Tuesdays, I want to make sure I'm listening to this episode." So, Jay Acunzo. That episode is called *Making What Matters Most*.





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

If you'd like to learn more about Neil, he works at the Academy of Music, so you can always find him on the webpages there, but he does have his own website, NeilHeyde.com. I'll spell it for you because it's slightly tricky.

N-E-I-L-H-E-Y-D-E.com. He's actually releasing a new desk even as we speak, early February, 2023, so you'll be able to track that down as well. It's called Digital Memory and the Archive. So really, as he tends to do a really creative collaboration with another artist.

[\(43:02\)](#):

That just leads me to say thank you for listening. Always appreciative. Thank you for the love you give this show, whether that's through a review or through passing an episode on. That's it for me from now. Goodbye. You're awesome and you're doing great.