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

One of the most powerful lessons I learned was from the author Peter Block, one of my greatest intellectual mentors. Back in the day, he did a lot of work with organizations. His bestselling book is actually called *Flawless Consulting*, which is a bit of a Trojan horse of a title of a book, because sounds like it's about consulting, it's actually about courage and accountability, and essentially building adult to adult relationships.

([00:30](#)):

Block said that the characteristic of someone living an adult life is being willing to make hard decisions, to make a choice when the choice is hard. The same sort of thing gets said about leadership, a willingness to make decisions, but I really like that Block has shifted that simple and difficult task to being at the heart of being human, rather than being pigeonholed as some sort of corporate badge of honor.



[\(01:00\)](#):

But here's where it gets interesting. Block says, "The inevitable outcome of making a hard choice is two feelings, guilt and anxiety." Guilt about the choices you are saying no to, because they'll never come back again in quite that form. And of course, anxiety about whether you've made the right choice, and how it will play out and if it will even work. Guilt and anxiety then is not a bug, it's not a personal flaw, it's a feature of having the courage to be an adult in your own life.

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

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. Now, I'm noticing that the guests I invite to this podcast, and I curate like mad, or I think really hard about who I invite. They're often designers, or creators, or makers of some sort. And actually writing this introduction, I'm coming to realize that it's not just because they have an eye for how they see the world, but more importantly, it's because they have the intention and the courage to make decisions, to make choices, to orient towards taking joy in, and responsibility for, this one and precious life of ours.

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

And Debbie Millman, my guest, is a designer to her bones. She is the author of seven books, and an educator, who runs the branding graduate program at the School of Visual Arts, a program that was the first of its kind. She's a lover of Rilke's poetry, and we'll get to that a little bit more at the end of the conversation, an unexpected sidebar, I guess. And I first came to know of her, because she is truly one of the OGs, original gangsters, of podcasting. Design Matters with Debbie Millman has been on the air for 18 years.

Debbie [\(03:00\)](#):

In that podcast, I talked to what I would consider to be some of the world's most creative people, about how they've created the arc of their lives.



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

Now, while we do create the arc of our lives, there are always outside influences that help shape it with us and for us. For Debbie, one of those influencers was Emily Oberman, a designer who amongst other things, worked with the band Talking Heads, with Benetton, back in the day when Benetton were absolutely on the cutting edge of what it meant to be a brand, and who has designed logos for DC Comics, Saturday Night Live, and many more.

Debbie ([03:40](#)):

She was a person who I considered a personal hero, and somebody that I was thoroughly in awe of. And so, not only was she really influential in my thinking about the possibilities in graphic design, and the kind of career I wanted to try to have, and the kind of work I wanted to try to do, she's since also become one of my dearest dearest friends, and somebody who is sort of a constant inspiration in my life.

MBS ([04:08](#)):

Well, I want to hit the rewind button. What do you do before you meet a role model like Emily Oberman? When do the first seeds get planted? Do you simply wake up and declare, "Hey, I'm a designer now."

Debbie ([04:22](#)):

I had been appointed the Arts and Features Editor of the student newspaper at SUNY Albany, which is where I went to school, at University of Newark at Albany. And in that appointment I realized that I wasn't just responsible for the writing and the editing of the paper, I was also responsible for the design and the layout of my entire section. And in doing that, a baby designer was born, but it was really quite by accident. It was an accidental appointment in that I didn't know anything about design. I didn't know how to design a newspaper. It was all very OG, very basic drafting, wax machines, and stat machines, and all very old



school. And I learned on the job doing that work on the student newspaper, and fell madly in love with the discipline of design, in my senior year of college.

MBS ([05:31](#)):

That's so lovely. How has the idea, or the meaning, of the word designer evolved and changed for you? How do you now think about what it means to be a designer versus how do I operate a stat machine?

Debbie ([05:49](#)):

Well, I think that design is very much about intention. And everything we do in our lives has some sort of decision behind it, whether it's conscious or unconscious. And so for me, we're in a constant state of designing our own lives, and also designing the world around us. And I've often said that the condition of design and branding really reflects the condition of our culture, because we are making it as we go along.

([06:17](#)):

And so, every step of the way we are creating intentional moves forward, both for ourselves and for those around us, and for the world at large. And so in many ways, everything we do has an element of design in it. That doesn't mean that everybody is a professional designer. There are very different steps that you take in becoming a professional designer, whether it's an interior designer, graphic designer, industrial designer, all of those require quite a lot of schooling and skill, whether it be self-taught or more academic education. But, I do think that every decision we make in our lives has some design embedded in it.

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

Yeah. I'm wondering, knowing that design is intentional, how you've built your capacity to be intentional. I find it very easy for me to drift.

Debbie ([07:21](#)):

Oh yeah.



MBS ([07:21](#)):

Drift through life.

Debbie ([07:21](#)):

It's super easy.

MBS ([07:24](#)):

Drift through status quo, drift through acceptance. And it feels like this idea of almost coming back to the moment, being present, noticing that everything is a choice and what's the bravest choice you can make, that's a learned wisdom. I'm wondering how you've built that capacity in yourself?

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

Well, it's an ongoing process, like you, I can easily veer off course, and I can feel very unmoored and often get very frustrated when that happens. But I think it's really about self awareness, and knowing where, and how, and why you do that, and trying to be gentle with yourself when that happens, and not go into a downwards shame spiral, which I'm not unfamiliar with to then try to pull yourself gently back on course. Again, being really intentional about what you want to do.

([08:29](#)):

Now, there are times when I fall off course, and all I really want to do is stay in bed with the blankets pulled over my head. And there are times when I do that. Yesterday was a good example where it took me quite a long time to feel like I could even get out of the bedroom.

([08:45](#)):

But for the most part, I try to, at this point in my life, live it with the knowledge of, if not now, when? Because, I am 61 years old, and if I'm lucky, if I'm really, really lucky, Michael, maybe I have another third left. And with that knowledge comes this sense of longing for a sense of feeling right about what I'm doing,



and right about what I still can do, and feeling very motivated to try and make that happen.

MBS ([09:38](#)):

There's a poem by Rilke, I keep a some lines of it on my desk there, and I'm going to misquote it of course, because I can never quite remember it. But it's from a poem called The Man Watching. And the line is something like, "His goal is not to win, but to be deeply defeated by ever greater things."

Debbie ([09:59](#)):

Perfectly [inaudible 00:10:00]. That is just stunning. That is stunning. My favorite poem.

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

The whole poem is heartbreaking. It's wonderful. Yeah. [inaudible 00:10:11].

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

Is it really long? Can you read it?

MBS ([10:15](#)):

I don't have the whole poem to hand, I've just got those excerpts of the line, but I can tell you the essence of the poem. And I'll send it to you after we've done talking here, Debbie. But the essence is about wrestling with the angel. So calling on the biblical story of Jacob and the angel. And what's amazing is it says, "Look, the angel doesn't choose to wrestle with anyone." You always lose when you wrestle with an angel, it always leaves its thumbprints on you. You can't an angel, but to even be able to wrestle with an angel means that you have taken on something important enough for the angel to come and wrestle with you. And it's the glory and ever greater things deeply defeated. It's just that call to, just as you beautifully said it to go, "What am I spending my time on? And am I being courageous enough about what I say yes to?"



Debbie ([11:13](#)):

Speaking of Rilke, he's also one of my favorite poets, and there's a poem that he wrote called The Panther, which is one of my favorite. And I have it on my computer too, because it's so much a poem that I find so riveting. It's only 12 lines. Do you want me to read it to you?

MBS ([11:35](#)):

I'd love you to.

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

Okay.

MBS ([11:37](#)):

I'd love it, because this is such a wonderful poem.

Debbie ([11:38](#)):

The Panther. And now this is translated by Stephen Mitchell. It's a great translation. It's the only translation that I think people should read. His vision from the constantly passing bars has grown so weary that it cannot hold anything else. It seems to him there are a thousand bars, and behind the bars, no world. As he paces in cramped circles over and over, the movement of his powerful soft stride is like a ritual dance around a center in which a mighty will stands paralyzed. Only at times, the curtain of the pupils lifts quietly. An image enters in, rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles, lunges into the heart, and is gone.

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

Oh my goodness.

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

Right? Right?



MBS ([12:37](#)):

So extraordinary. Yeah. I know the neuroscience, Andrew Sacks, who wrote, the Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, uses that poem to describe the locked in condition of some people where they've got a whole interior world, and you just don't see it in that cage.

Debbie ([12:56](#)):

Yeah. That locked in condition was the focus of the movie Awakenings.

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

That's right. That's right. The movie inspired by that same book. If I may, Debbie, what's the cage you feel that you've escaped from?

Debbie ([13:21](#)):

Well, I don't know that I've escaped. I think that it's a room, and it's a room with an open door. So, I freely go back and forth. And I would say that barred room is my own self-doubt, shame, insecurity, fear, et cetera. And I go in and out.

MBS ([13:59](#)):

It's a paradox because it feels to me that in the world of design, part of what you're doing, you're always not quite succeeding. There's a lot of failure, and drafting on the way to creating a final thing. As a writer, I'm like, "My first drafts continue to be shit." Even after all these years, after all these books, I write a terrible first draft, and I'm like, "Ah, this is so disappointing from what's in my head to what's actually written down." What have you learned about sitting with failure?

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

That feelings pass, feelings metabolize, they all metabolize, good feelings, bad feelings. That doesn't mean they're not going to come back, but in the same way that you can satiate hunger by eating, but then time passes and you get



hungry again. All feelings and emotions are like that. We metabolize all of our emotions. That's what people say, "Time heals all wounds." But they might not heal, but they certainly are less painful, maybe don't hurt quite as much. But our feelings metabolize, and we go in and out of various states, whether they be hunger, tired, love, contentment, all of those things morph and change. So, I think that smartest thing to do in those states, is to let yourself go through them. It's the holding back that then stops it up like a dam. They don't go away, they just sit there getting bigger and bigger until they crash through the dam.

[\(15:40\)](#):

And so my recommendation is, as painful as it can be, sit through that emotion, and sit through that experience. You'll see that it won't kill you. I remember when a student of mine, years and years and years ago, I asked him, "Well, what's the worst that could happen if you don't succeed at this thing that you do?" And without missing a beat, he said, "I think I might die of heartbreak." And I said, "Well, it might hurt for a while, and your heart might be broken for a while, but you will recover from that." The only thing we don't really recover from is regret because there's no way to metabolize regret. It's just there. And it's a forward thinking experience as opposed to a backward thinking experience, which people, I think, really imagine it to be. You're thinking back on something and regretting, but you're living in the moment and holding it forward, that this is something that you haven't done, and feel bad about.

MBS [\(16:37\)](#):

I've never heard that before, and I love it that the only feeling you don't metabolize is regret, because that's in the past rather than in the moment. That's wonderful. Debbie, what book have you chosen to read for us?

Debbie [\(16:51\)](#):

I have chosen to read one of my favorite passages in David Foster Wallace's book of essays called, Consider the Lobster.



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

Fantastic. Which already wins a prize for one of the best book titles ever.

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

Yes, it absolutely does. It absolutely is.

MBS ([17:10](#)):

And how did you discover this book?

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

This is a book that I actually... Well, I had heard about it because it was, when it first came out in 2005, I think everybody was just talking about how brilliant it was. It was a collection of essays that he'd written over the decades and various magazines and newspapers and so forth. And Consider the Lobster is just that. That particular essay is considered a lobster. Consider what happens when you put a lobster in a pot of boiling water for your own sustenance.

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

And so I knew about it, and I think I had read that particular essay, because I was so intrigued by the title, but the essay that I am going to read from, I was first introduced when I was doing some executive education at Harvard and Babson. It was a collective that was created by Omnicom, or the senior executives within the Omnicom companies.

[\(18:13\)](#):

And at the time, I was the president of Starling Brands, and I was very lucky to be able to go and get this executive education at Babson, taught by Harvard and Babson professors.

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

Nice.



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

And [inaudible 00:18:27] Kane was the professor in this particular class, and we were learning about leadership, and she said that she had come across the best definition of leadership that she had ever encountered, and read us this passage that I am about to read to you.

MBS ([18:47](#)):

That's fantastic. Well, I'm excited to hear it. And just as an aside, I worked for Omnicom, or one of the companies of the Omnicom Collective, and I remember my boss going off to that very same course, and thinking I was envious of it.

Debbie ([19:00](#)):

Yeah. It's really one of the best things that I think that Omnicom does. The two best things that I came out of Omnicom with was my education at Omnicom University, and I did go I think, three times, three different classes, all of which were extraordinary. And then also Omniwomen, which was a collective of some of the most senior women within the Omnicom companies. And we would get together. I was on the governing board for a time, and just to meet that many powerful women in one room, really shaping the world of design, and advertising, and creativity, and branding was just unprecedented for me.

MBS ([19:41](#)):

Amazing. David Foster Wallace, which people listening, you've heard me talk about the CEO of Box of Crayon, Shannon Minifie. She has a doctorate writing about David Foster Wallace. So this is an author I know and appreciate, just because you brought Shannon into my life amongst other things. So Debbie Millman reading David Foster Wallace.



Debbie ([20:03](#)):

Okay. So this is from the essay called, Up Simba. And this particular part of the essay has a subtitle and it is called, Suck It Up. And at the time, David Foster Wallace was hired by Rolling Stone, commissioned by Rolling Stone to write to follow John McCain around during the 2000 election cycle, and write about the experience. And so, this is in relation to that, and what it means to be a leader.

[\(20:33\)](#):

"It is all but impossible to talk about the really important stuff in politics without using terms that have become such awful cliches. They make your eyes glaze over and are difficult to even hear. One such term is leader, which all the big candidates use all the time as in providing leadership, a proven leader, a new leader for a new century, et cetera, and have reduced to such a platitude that it's hard to try to think about what leader really means, and whether indeed, what today's young voters want is a leader.

[\(21:11\)](#):

The weird thing is that the word leader itself is cliché and boring, but when you come across somebody who is actually a real leader, that person isn't boring at all. In fact, they're the opposite of boring. Obviously, a real leader isn't just somebody who has ideas you agree with, nor is it just somebody you happen to believe is a good guy.

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

A real leader is somebody who, because of their own particular power, and charisma, and example, is able to inspire people with inspire being used here in a serious and non cliché way. A real leader can somehow get us to do certain things that deep down we think are good, and want to be able to do, but usually can't get ourselves to do on our own. It's a mysterious quality, hard to define, but we always know it where we see it, even as kids.



[\(22:06\)](#):

You can probably remember seeing it in certain really great coaches, or teachers, or some extremely cool older kid you looked up to, interesting phrase, and wanted to be like. Some of us remember seeing the quality as kids and a minister, or rabbi, or a scout master, or a parent, or friend's parent, or a boss in some summer job. And yes, all of these are authority figures, but it's a special kind of authority.

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

If you've ever spent time in the military, you know how incredibly easy it is to tell which of your superiors are real leaders, and which aren't, and how little rank has to do with it. A leader's true authority is a power you voluntarily give them, and you grant them this authority not in a resigned or resentful way, but happily. It feels right. Deep down, you almost always like how a real leader makes you feel, how you find yourself working harder, and pushing yourself, and thinking in ways you wouldn't be able to, if there weren't this person you respected, and believed in, and wanted to please.

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

In other words, a real leader is somebody who can help us overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness, and selfishness, and weakness, and fear, and get us to do better, harder things that we can get ourselves to do on our own."

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

Thank you, Debbie. That was wonderful. What's at the heart of this for you?

Debbie [\(23:46\)](#):

Inspiration. In somebody being able to inspire you to do something, that you want to do but you're afraid to do, but because if they believe in you, or because they know you can do it, or because they want you to do it, they inspire you to



be better than you think you are in that moment, and are able to conquer your own fear, because of their belief.

MBS ([24:13](#)):

What have you learned, and perhaps had to unlearn, for you to become that type of leader to other people?

Debbie ([24:23](#)):

Well, even being exposed to this, by Nancy Keen at Harvard, she's the real deal, and she read us this definition, but I have to say, she embodies the definition. And just by her encouragement, you want to know and learn more. I had a teacher like that in college who fundamentally changed my DNA, I have to say. Dr. Helen Reguerio Elam, and she still teaches at SUNY Albany.

([25:00](#)):

Before taking her first class, and I ended up taking classes with her after I took my first class through the rest of my college experience, I think her power was her ability to do this for everyone, but I wasn't really caring about that. What she did for me was she, for the first time in my life, made me feel smart. She helped me find the courage to share my ideas, in a classroom format, and then was able to, by her own brilliance, find something in what anybody said, and make it intriguing.

([25:57](#)):

And so as a result, people were unafraid to raise their hands in her class, and they were unafraid to debate, and they felt safe in sharing ideas and saw how big ideas could be built collaboratively, or how one person's idea might influence another's. And I, for the first time in my life, felt, "Oh my God, I might be smart. I might be smart." I remember her saying, "That's really brilliant," just so offhand and so casually. And I'm like, "What? Could you say that again?"



MBS ([26:32](#)):

Just changed everything.

Debbie ([26:38](#)):

Yes, yes, yes. And so, that has so influenced the way I teach, and this segment that I shared with you, and what I've shared with your listeners today, is something I'd read to all of my students now, hoping that they can understand what it means for them to step up to being a leader, and inspiring other people to do that in turn.

MBS ([27:05](#)):

There are paradoxes with leadership. It is this place of creating safety, but also taking people to the edge of who they are, and what they know of themselves so they can see beyond that edge, and maybe step beyond that edge. There's holding authority, holding status, but also decentering yourself so other people can step into a spotlight, and claim authority, and claim what might be theirs to claim.

Debbie ([27:41](#)):

Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And actually, I asked you before we went on air, if I could read a second little bit, because I do think that there are leaders that become leaders because they want power. And other people that become leaders because they want to make the world a better place, and change things for everyone.

([28:02](#)):

And so there's one more paragraph I'll read that David wrote in the same essay, about the different kinds of ways that different kinds of people will lead. So I'll just read this. It's not nearly as long as the other one.



[\(28:18\)](#):

"Now you have to pay close attention to something that's going to seem obvious at first. There is a difference between a great leader, and a great salesman. There are also similarities, of course. A great salesman is usually charismatic and likable, and they can often get us to do things, buy things, agree to things, that we might not do and go for on our own, and to feel good about it.

[\(28:42\)](#):

Plus, a lot of salesmen are basically decent people with plenty about them to admire. But even a truly great salesman isn't a leader. This is because a salesman's ultimate overriding motivation is self-interest. If you buy what they're selling, the salesmen profit. So even though the salesman may have a very powerful, charismatic, admirable personality, and might even persuade you that buying is in your interest, and it really might be, still, a little part of, you always knows that what the salesman's ultimately after is something for themselves.

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

And this awareness is painful, though admittedly, it's a tiny pain, more like a twinge, and often unconscious. But if you're subjected to great salesmen, and sales pitches, and marketing concepts for long enough, from your earliest Saturday morning cartoons, let's say, it's only a matter of time before you start believing deep down, that everything is sales and marketing. And whenever somebody seems like they care about you, or about some noble idea or cause, that person is a salesman, and really ultimately doesn't give a shit about you, or some cause, but really, just want something for themselves."

[\(29:53\)](#):

So that's the caution in this desire to be leaders. And I think that from what you were saying before, with great leadership comes great privileges, but it also has a great accountability to it. I think about there's this silly scene in the movie Animal House. And this is aging me, and only your slightly older listeners are



going to get this. It's a great Jon Belushi movie from the seventies. And there's a scene where one of the frat boys pushes the leader of the marching band out of the way, and starts leading the marching band, and takes the marching band into a dead end alley. And they all follow this band leader just without even thinking about it and all end up crushed in this alleyway with their trombones, and trumpets. And they're all squished together doing in this cacafeny of chaos.

[\(30:57\)](#):

And that's what will happen when we're being led by people that don't have our best interests at heart, and only want something for themselves. And we've seen what that does to our culture and our society.

MBS [\(31:12\)](#):

That's right. Debbie, how do you find the balance of, as Robert Green have called it, servant leadership, where you are in service to the people that you are leading, but maintaining boundaries, so that you are not depleted by that service? So that it's not actually all about them, there's also somehow that you benefit from this act of leadership, which is about allowing others to flourish. I'm just wondering how you navigate that tricky middle line?

Debbie [\(31:51\)](#):

Mostly unsuccessfully. And I wish that I could give you lots of ways in which I am successfully able to do that, but I'm not. I get way too engaged, way too involved. Right now, the area where I am the most leadership oriented is in the running of a graduate program. And I am on the front lines of seeing what the pandemic has done to the mental health of young people. A lot of people now in school, have suffered through one or two years of isolated education, and that has really taken its toll on a lot of young people. And I don't think we've even begun to understand the ramifications of that.

[\(32:56\)](#):



We're already seeing how in elementary school students that's impacted their reading and math abilities. But in a day and age where college, university, graduate school is all used to not only educate, but to also socialize, and experiment, that has dramatically impacted their way in which kids are showing up, young adults are showing up.

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

And it's very hard to put a boundary on myself when dealing with that. And, I'm still trying to figure out how to do that, because I am really not equipped to lead through that. That's not part of my educational background or my skillset. And so I'm learning how to do that in real time.

MBS [\(33:52\)](#):

Who do you look to as your teachers these days? You've been taught by great designers and influenced by great designers, and you are a great designer, and you now play that role for many people. I'm wondering what you're needing to learn, and who do you look to as a teacher?

Debbie [\(34:14\)](#):

It's a really interesting question. I think there are different areas of interest that I pursue at any given time. And so, one of the things I'm super interested in right now is the James Webb Space Telescope-

MBS [\(34:37\)](#):

Amazing.

Debbie [\(34:37\)](#):

... and all of the research and data that's coming out. And so, I follow a lot of science oriented sites, and NASA, and Brian Greene, and Neil deGrasse Tyson and I'm endlessly fascinated by this.

[\(35:02\)](#):



So I would say that that becomes a teaching place for me, because it's so much bigger than I can ever hope to understand. But I'm fascinated by it, and trying to learn as much as I can. And then, because I'm always trying to become a better podcaster, and because there are so many people around me that are so good at it, I'm always listening and learning.

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

And so people that I follow are people like Tim Ferris, who is probably, in my opinion, one of the greatest interviewers alive. So I'm always following and listening and I read a lot of the transcripts as well. Brene Brown's work I love, and I find her to be really remarkable teacher. And then I have some friends that are leadership coaches, and so I follow their work and get their regular emails, and I'm always learning from them. So Alyssa Cohn and Dorie Clark are people that I really, really admire.

MBS [\(36:10\)](#):

I just spent a weekend hanging out with them in Miami.

Debbie [\(36:11\)](#):

I saw that on Instagram.

MBS [\(36:11\)](#):

And their mastermind Brain Trust was fantastic. They are so smart.

Debbie [\(36:16\)](#):

Mitch Joel. People that I just find so inspiring.

MBS [\(36:23\)](#):

Yeah.

Debbie [\(36:24\)](#):

Your work. I don't want to embarrass you, but your work as well.



MBS ([36:29](#)):

Thank you, Debbie. That's very complimentary and flattering, and I'm blushing. Part of being a designer, I imagine you find simplicity on the other side of complexity. When you've done work enough, you start seeing some of the pure forms that underline design. I'm wondering how you think about designing your life, and what design principles you might bring to how you think about the life of Debbie Millman?

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

Well, there's still information, and I'm not so much a process person. People often ask me about process. How do you go about this? How do you go about that? And I don't have a process for anything, maybe except the podcast, which just is a process of research more than anything. But I guess there are principles that I think about. And one really impactful conversation I had that influences the way I think about designing, and creating, and building my life now, has been heavily influenced by something that, believe it or not, David Lee Roth said to me.

MBS ([37:59](#)):

Well, he's a rock god.

Debbie ([38:01](#)):

So David Lee Roth-

MBS ([38:02](#)):

I believe anything David Lee Roth would say to me.

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

... former front man for Van Halen, for those that's might not be aware-



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

That's right. Hideous trousers in the business.

Debbie ([38:10](#)):

And one of the most popular bands on the planet in the eighties. And I had him on the podcast a couple of years ago, and we were there talking about a lot of his more current work, which includes making music, but also running a company that makes really beautiful, sustainable tattoo ink.

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

And so we were talking about that, but I couldn't resist asking him about his tenure as one of rock's leading gods. And I asked him, "What was it like in 1984 when you had one of the biggest albums on the planet, the biggest tours on the planet, one of the most popular videos on the planet? You had everything that anybody that's ever dreaming about success as a rock and roller could have, and then some. And he's very much a jester, who you see as him in his interviews, and on talk radio, and talk shows, television shows and all of that, that's who he is. He's very much a jester and a joker, and he's always playing. He was playing to the student audience I had in the room at the time, in a very lovely way. He's a really genuinely nice person.

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

But at that moment, when I asked him that question, he got very pensive, and very circumspect, and paused and said that, "When you get to the top of the tallest mountain in existence, you have to be really careful, because you're almost always alone, it's really cold, and there's only one direction to travel."

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

And it suddenly occurred to me, and I thought about this, and this is several years at this point, and I think about this all the time, and I talk to my students



about it as well. I had this sense of me just racing up the mountain, like Sisyphus pushing the boulder.

MBS ([40:26](#)):

Yeah, yeah. The rock.

Debbie ([40:28](#)):

And I suddenly realized, "What was I racing towards?" Because, when you get to that tallest mountain in existence, you've literally and figuratively peaked. And I suddenly realized, "I don't want to peak, and think that somehow my best work is behind me. I always want to be striving for higher, and better, and more," maybe incrementally. And my whole life has been about that, because I'm still on that journey, and way older than David Lee Roth.

MBS ([41:04](#)):

You have great hair like David Lee Roth.

Debbie ([41:09](#)):

I suddenly realized and encouraged my students to just take the small steps up that mountain, and hope that you don't peak, until the day before you die, so that your best work is always the best work you just made.

MBS ([41:25](#)):

Fantastic. How do you think of success now for you?

Debbie ([41:30](#)):

Oh, I have such a complicated relationship with success, because I never feel like I'm successful enough, or successful really in the grand scheme of things. And I just am struggling with success versus purpose.

([41:44](#)):



But I do have this battle that I'm facing, this inner battle between purpose and success and at 61, again, I'm thinking, "If not now, when?" And, "What is my real purpose here?" And, "Can I make a difference and what does that mean?" And so, it's really about thinking about priorities, and meaning and all of that. So, that's what I've been thinking about a lot lately.

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

It feels like that could open up another three hour conversation. So, in the interest of your life, we probably won't nudge on that door, unlike Theo the cat who I still come in through the door behind you. So maybe I could ask a final question.

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

Absolutely.

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

Debbie, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in our conversation today?

Debbie ([42:33](#)):

I said this to my wife, Roxanne, yesterday. I feel like the earth is really mad at us. I really do. All of the terrible things that are happening, climate, earthquakes, poverty, water shortage, housing shortage, just feels like Mother Earth is really scolding us right now. And I think we really have to listen.

MBS ([43:12](#)):

When I asked Debbie about designing her life early on in the conversation, there was one word she used that really grabbed me. She said, "I can easily veer off course. I can feel very unmoored. Unmoored, what an interesting word that is. Moored means tied up to the jetty, made fast with cables and anchors and the like. It's weird that made fast actually means to be made stationary. And of



course, unmoored, means to be cast adrift into the current, being pushed along by forces that are beyond our control.

[\(43:48\)](#):

And then later on towards the very end of the podcast in our spontaneous Rilke lovefest, we talked about the panther in the cage, a thousand bars, but holding the promise of escape, only at times a certain curtain of the pupils lifts quietly, an image enters in, rushes down through the tense, arrested muscles, plunges into the heart, and is gone.

[\(44:18\)](#):

Both these things I think speak to the elusiveness of freedom. Too much, and we can be swept away. Too little, and we pace like the panther in cramped circles, over and over, paralyzed. What's powerful about claiming the identity of a designer, and this is an invitation I'm really making to me, and to you. What's powerful about this is, claiming agency to keep shaping, and reshaping, and reshaping again, your own relationship with your own freedom, and with your own life. Thanks for listening. I'm going to recommend, first of all, the most obvious co-interview. Ayse Birsal, had a move from pessimism to optimism. She's a fellow New York designer as well. I'm sure Ayse and Debbie hang out all the time.

[\(45:07\)](#):

Another great conversation about not just Ayse and the books she chose, but design and why that is such an essential part of living a life. Her new book is called Design the Long Life You Love. So, it speaks very much to what Debbie was saying.

[\(45:23\)](#):

And then Arthur Brooks, writing very much about climbing the Second Mountain, and the second half of life. His book, Strength to Strength has gone on to be a very big hit, and our conversation is called The Search for Purpose.



[\(45:38\)](#):

If you want more information about Debbie, the place to go to is debbiemillman.com. That's where you find her podcast, her books, her social media accounts. It is truly a one shop stop for all things Debbie Millman.

[\(45:52\)](#):

Thanks for being a listener to this podcast. It is an act of love. I love doing it. It's nourishing for me. That's how I think about it. It's an act of nourishment. It's an active design. How do I sit down with really interesting people and expand my curiosity and have them expand my world for me?

[\(46:09\)](#):

If you've loved the interview, please do find somebody in your life to recommend it. That is the greatest gift really, you passing along an interview that's meant something to you and saying, "Hey, listen to this," because the people who join and sign up and subscribe and then become ongoing listeners, in my quest to be people's favorite podcast, are people like you, who are interested like you.

[\(46:33\)](#):

If you're willing and able to give us a review in all the places you might give things a review, and stars, and some words, that's lovely as well. Let me finish just by saying you're awesome, you're doing great.