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Michael ([00:02](#)):

I've had the very good luck to work with some of the TED fellows. You all know TED, of course. It's the conference that's become famous for its 17-minute speeches. It's the conference that's helped launch Brené Brown, and Simon Sinek and Shawn Achor and thousands of others, and of course, TEDx, which is the spinoff, the local versions of the big TED Conference. Hey, you may have even watched my TEDx talk called How to Tame Your Advice Monster. So the TED Fellows Program is when younger people of promise are given access to the TED world. They attend the conference, they do speeches. They get mentoring. They meet powerful and influential people. They get some financial support. For a number of years, I went to an annual gathering of these extraordinary young people to give them some support and some facilitation and some coaching. What became obvious over these three years that I did this



was that there was a common theme. There was brilliance, there was brilliant, there was achievement, and there was disintegration.

[\(01:07\)](#):

They were often exhausted and overwhelmed and lacking in confidence and stuck and broke and just rung dry by their so-called success. They were all doing great things, and they were all struggling with the success that they'd brought upon themselves. What was brilliant, of course, was that a range of coaches and facilitators and subject matter experts were able to provide support and accelerate them, or most of them, to a plateau of sustainability, of financial and confidence and foci sustainability. Now, as you know, I collect questions. I love good questions, and here is the question that I really took from this. What does sustainable, nourishing success look like? How do I not sacrifice my life for my ambition? Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS, the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book, a book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them.

[\(02:15\)](#):

Laurel Braitman is a bestselling writer, lover of donkeys, a commercial grower of avocados and limes and lemons, and a secular clinical chaplain in training. She's also someone who wears a cowboy hat better than most, and she's also a TED fellow, which is where I met her a decade and some ago. She was fresh from the New York Times bestselling success of her book, *Animal Madness*, and she was also at a crossroads trying to figure out who she was going to be and what she was trying to do with her life. Now she's on that path and if you want to give her a job title, it's Director of Writing and Storytelling at the Stanford School of Medicine. They actually teach those who are in the medical field communicate more clearly and more vulnerably with their patients. Laurel was raised in Southern California on a ranch. In fact, it's the very ranch that she's talking to us from today. But when she first moved there, there were less than promising beginnings.



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

My parents bought it in the mid 1970s. It was falling apart, but we had beautiful orange avocado and lemon orchards, and they wanted to rehabilitate them and turn it into a more profitable venture.

Michael ([03:31](#)):

Now, you'd be forgiven in assuming that rehabilitating a ranch might be a full-time job for everybody concerned. That's my assumption, but for Laurel's family, not so much.

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

My father was a heart surgeon by day, so he was a rancher at night and on the weekends, and my mom really ran the commercial ag operation while he was at the hospital.

Michael ([03:54](#)):

So Laurel grew up learning that you could have a life with many irons in the fire, but it wasn't just the stuff being done that was influential on who she was becoming. It was understanding how and where and when best to think.

Laurel ([04:10](#)):

I'd say for me, the most valuable thinking time I have is when I'm outside without my phones. Every book idea has come to me that way, ideas for articles, even Instagram posts. If I have my phone, if I'm looking at a screen, they don't usually come. It's that shower moment, where does your creative muse find you? For me, it usually finds me when my feet are muddy, and I'm doing something else with my hands.

Michael ([04:39](#)):

That's not to say Laurel has only ever known a rural life. She didn't return full-time to the ranch until the pandemic, but she's always held this space as a



place of refuge, especially when she's taking on some of the big challenging, daunting writing projects that she's known for.

Laurel ([04:55](#)):

The spaciousness gives me time to think. Also, there's always something simpler than fixing a book or fixing an essay or editing someone's essay, which is, you plant a seed and unless a rat or a bird eats, it grows into something.

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

It's the same in publishing. It's exactly the same.

Laurel ([05:14](#)):

Just about the same just about the same.

Michael ([05:17](#)):

Yeah.

Laurel ([05:17](#)):

But there's something so satisfying about that. I have a huge passion fruit vine right now-

Michael ([05:23](#)):

Oh, fantastic.

Laurel ([05:23](#)):

... and I planted it three years ago, and for the first two years it did nothing.

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

Right.



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

Now this thing, I will send you a photo, it's roughly 50 feet. It's covering the entire garden. It's huge, huge. Now I have more passion fruit than I could possibly do anything with. The freezers are full of it, and I've made way too many passion fruit margaritas-

Michael ([05:45](#)):

Wow, that's great.

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

... but it's a miracle.

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

Is there such thing as way too many passion fruit margaritas? I'm not sure that that's even possible.

Laurel ([05:53](#)):

They're awfully acidic, the same which is [inaudible 00:05:56] part. Instead of keep giving you too much tartness, it gives you indigestion.

Michael ([05:58](#)):

I see that.

Laurel ([06:01](#)):

But it's just a comforting miracle. Of course, it's the oldest metaphor too.

Michael ([06:06](#)):

Yeah.



Laurel ([06:06](#)):

You plant a seed, you water it, it becomes something else. So it's an act of hopefulness always every year. Yesterday I went on a hike and I just kept saying, "Spring, it's such a miracle. Spring, it's such a miracle." My husband was getting so annoyed with me.

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

I've known you for quite a while now and watched your journey and part of your journey was up to Alaska. I remember seeing photographs you were posting on maybe Instagram or somewhere just about what that landscape was like. I'm curious to know how you've been shaped by the landscapes you've been within.

Laurel ([06:47](#)):

Oh, my God, I think I've been waiting for someone to ask me this question my whole life. What a good question. I can't answer because I am those landscapes, I would say. I think, you look at the Grand Canyon and you see the great carving of the water has made. We are all that. We are each a Grand Canyon shaped by the waters that run past us and smush us and try to kill us and also are beautiful and carry delightful things to us. I grew up outside all the time. I grew up ranching. I've spent a vast amount of time in busy cities, which I absolutely love. They feel like national parks to me, albeit urban ones. But I have been shaped by the great wildernesses of the world. I worked in the Amazon for many years. I spent many years as a fisheries conservation biologist in training before I decided I really just wanted to write.

([07:48](#)):

I studied grizzly bears in Alaska in college and thereafter. Then I fell in love with and met my husband up in the Bering Sea in the Aleutian Islands. He runs a salmon cannery on Kodiak, which is a big island off the coast of mainland Alaska. The cannery is in a small native village. It's off the road system, so we call it the Alaskan Bush. That's what everyone calls it, and we spend our



summers there. So we only got internet a year-and-a-half ago, something like that. That was a delightful practice. Every summer I would make a list of the things I needed to do online. Then I would walk to the computer and check off all the things that I needed to do online, and then I would walk back to our house-

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

That's great.

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

... which is a very early 1990s thing to do, but oh, my God [inaudible 00:08:40]

Michael ([08:40](#)):

You tell that to the kids today and nobody believes you. Yeah.

Laurel ([08:45](#)):

Exactly. Exactly. It was so nice. So I'd say I've been shaped in both spiritual and intellectual ways and us with the very practical ways-

Michael ([08:52](#)):

Yeah, you have.

Laurel ([08:54](#)):

... where I tend to feel most comfortable in wilderness off of pavement, though, I do love the pavement. If I am in the wilderness for too long, my God, do I start dreaming about someone else making me a coffee?

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

I'm still hung up on a fact in a fairytale you met your husband in the Aleutian Islands. How great is that?



Laurel ([09:17](#)):

Oh God, I would never-

Michael ([09:18](#)):

It's something like Angela Carter would've written about. Yeah.

Laurel ([09:22](#)):

Well, I did write about it, but it's not something I would ever recommend someone else looking for a partner in the Bering Sea. That there are more fish in the sea is true, but some seas are more barren than other seas.

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

That's funny. I remember when, and I think she wrote about this in your new book as well, What Looks Like Bravery, that your ranch where you are at the moment came very close to being burned down in one of the Californian bush fires, which of course, as an Australian we are pretty well familiar with as well. What felt at risk with that fire approaching?

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

Oh, God, everything. The fire didn't just approach, the fire actually took everything I loved. The fire burned the house to the ground. The fire took a big chunk of our orchards, and the fire left surprising things like our chicken coop full of chickens in it who were unharmed and in fact, laid eggs throughout the wildfire. Just remarkable. The fire left a pile of firewood next to where the house was. What I didn't know until we lost our house to wildfire is that it comes for your memories too. I would say that is something that now I look at wildfire smoke very, very differently. When I watch those terrible fires in Australia of the last few years and you see the terrified fleeing wildlife, you see the what look like refugee camps of people who are displaced and waiting to see if their homes are safe to go back to or if they've made it.



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

I look at that smoke, I don't see particulate, I see people's recipes from their grandmother's written in their handwriting. I see their family photos. When you lose things, yes, they're things but they are also the reminders and the receptacles for love, for memories, for experiences and just losing all of that felt like a massive death is the truth. Just like a death, you look around after and you're just angry the world is going on as it was, and that it's beautiful. I felt so much rage how beautiful the wild flowers were that year really after we lost what we lost and also, grateful. This is a very American thing, I'm not sure if this is true in other continents, but people want to immediately pivot your hard thing to the silver lining. So we would say, "Oh, yes, we lost everything in this wildfire." People would immediately say, "Well, thank goodness no one died." You're like, "Well, true, but death is a low bar," or excuse me, "Death is a high bar for suffering."

Michael [\(12:26\)](#):

Right.

Laurel [\(12:26\)](#):

It can't still be a really bad even if no one was burned alive.

Michael [\(12:29\)](#):

Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. That ability to be just present to loss and present to grief is hard, but it's such a gift if you can find that space.

Laurel [\(12:45\)](#):

I really agree. What a lot of writing this book has taught me and what my life has taught me generally is that the way we think about grief is in many ways broken in that we talk about grief as something to get through, or something that you survive or that you're in an acute period of grief on the other side of your grief.



We use language like that even if we're not using a specific progressive staged idea of grief, which actually Elisabeth Kübler-Ross never really intended.

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

Exactly. She's talking about people getting used to dying, not people grieving whatever. Yeah.

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

Exactly. Exactly. But man, do we as humans love a neat progression and boxes to slaughter ourselves into, to the promise of organization, man.

Michael ([13:36](#)):

Yeah.

Laurel ([13:36](#)):

But what I really feel is that there's no other side of grief. There is only grief, and it's a new color that you never unsee laid over the world. It's a kind of filter that never leaves you. It's a taste you never stop tasting, and thank goodness. I wouldn't wish crushing loss on anybody, but I really do feel that it's an amplifier of flavor and of love and of joy, and I think we need it for awe and wonder. I really do. I spend a lot of time writing about this in the book, but there's really no such thing as happiness. There's only happy, sad. There is only sadly happy, in which I think our most delicious feelings are always colored by a tiny bit of pain, and that's okay. Grief is just something that parachutes you, sends you into another layer of human experience, so thank God for that also. I just want to be shallow like-

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

Exactly. Can I be blandly and in denial and just happy the whole time? Apparently not.



Laurel ([14:48](#)):

Exactly. Exactly. I want basic problems. I want to be someone that panics that someone stole her parking place.

Michael ([14:56](#)):

Yeah, exactly.

Laurel ([14:57](#)):

I want to be mad at brunch lines. I just want to be basic so badly.

Michael ([15:02](#)):

That's funny. We're going to talk more about this, Laurel, but I want to hear about the book you've chosen for us.

Laurel ([15:09](#)):

Oh, my goodness, this was such a fun ... I've been in school way too long as you know, and there's nothing I love more than a good homework assignment.

Michael ([15:19](#)):

Right.

Laurel ([15:23](#)):

Sorry, do you see my coffee stain on the top?

Michael ([15:26](#)):

When breath becomes here, yeah, exactly. I love a well-read book. People hold them up and they're like, they got bookmarks and underlines, imaginalia, it's perfect.



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

Exactly. I feel like, don't you feel that way as a writer? I want my books that live in people's houses to be dogeared, to have crumbs in them, like chocolate stains. It's just proof someone lived with it and really welcomed it into their life.

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

Passion fruit margarita stains, the whole shebang. Yeah.

Laurel ([15:53](#)):

Exactly. God, did I grow up wanting to be a Hemingway kind of writer. All I wanted was to be drinking whiskey and writing like the men I read about him. I'm like, "That is the last thing I want to do when I have a whiskey. I don't know how they did that. What would've Hemingway written if he hadn't been drunk all the time?"

Michael ([16:10](#)):

Exactly. That man had potential. He could have been great.

Laurel ([16:16](#)):

Right. Exactly.

Michael ([16:17](#)):

Why this book. How'd you come to choose of all the books, 'cause I can see all the books behind you, actually-

Laurel ([16:22](#)):

Oh, yes.

Michael ([16:22](#)):

... it isn't necessary a closet, but it's like a-



Laurel ([16:24](#)):

Yeah, this is my husband's book collection that he doesn't want my grubby paws. He put these in his closet 'cause he doesn't want me to wander off with them. That's funny.

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

That's funny. But of all the books you could have chosen, why did you pick this one?

Laurel ([16:38](#)):

Oh, I feel like this book is in some ways a benevolent parent to mine. I'd actually already started writing my book, which is my own investigation of loss and grief, but also joy and the struggle to figure out who we are outside of other people's expectations for us when this came out. So I was already writing, and my mom and I read it at the same time. So for any of your listeners who haven't read *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi, it's the story of a neurosurgeon who's very young, who is diagnosed with cancer stage four, so it's already metastatic. He receives a pretty dire diagnosis. He lives for a fair bit of time considering his prognosis, and writes so beautifully about his own transition from physician to patient, not that he ever stops being a physician. He's deeply philosophical and he writes about his impending death and also reflecting on his life while he's ill. Also, he and his wife, Lucy, decide to have a child named Katie that they have while he's ill knowing he is going to die.

[\(18:00\)](#):

She's still a very young child when he dies. So the book is, I believe, a love letter to life. I think one thing he does, which is what I wanted to do and which all of my favorite books do, they say they're about one thing, but they're really about something else. I think a lot of people thought this book was about illness or death, but the truth is none of us know what death is. We cannot write books about death. We can only write books about life. So to me, that's what this book



is about. It's about the preciousness of life, and that's what I want to do in my work. That's what my favorite work does, is that just reminds you like, "Hey, hey, can you hear the mortality clock? It's ticking. Get out there, do the thing you're scared of." So I would say his book isn't explicitly that, but that's how I felt reading it. That's my favorite kind of story is one that makes me want to just go take a big old bite out of life.

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

Love that. How did you choose what two pages to read?

Laurel ([19:08](#)):

Well, the truth is, love him to death, but I can be kind of dense and kind of intellectual, and that's fine when you're reading things out loud, those are the parts that don't work quite as well and I-

Michael ([19:20](#)):

Right. Right.

Laurel ([19:21](#)):

... know this from experience because the first book I wrote was based on my doctoral dissertation. I went on a book tour to try to find evocative passages to read and I didn't have enough.

Michael ([19:29](#)):

Right.

Laurel ([19:30](#)):

So this book I set a challenge for myself so that I would be able to pick it up any page, any paragraph and be able to read out loud. So who knows if I've done it, but that's what I wanted to do.



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

Right.

Laurel ([19:43](#)):

I believe Paul did it throughout the book, but especially on pages 198 and 199, which is the very end of his portion.

Michael ([19:53](#)):

I love it.

Laurel ([19:56](#)):

He finished with these two pages and then his wonderful wife, who's actually also a brilliant physician and an author wrote the end of the book after he died. So these are his last two pages.

Michael ([20:08](#)):

Oh, I'm excited to hear it. So over to you, reading *When Breath Becomes Air*.

Laurel ([20:18](#)):

Graham Green once said that life was lived in the first 20 years and the remainder was just reflection. So what tense am I living in now? Have I proceeded beyond the present tense and into the past perfect? The future tent seems vacant and on others' lips, jarring. A few months ago, I celebrated my 15th college reunion at Stanford and stood out on the quad drinking a whiskey as pink sun dipped below the horizon. When old friends called out parting promises, "We'll see you with the 25th." It seemed rude to respond with, "Well, probably not." Everyone succumbs to finitude. I suspect I am not the only one who reaches this blue perfect state. Most ambitions are either achieved or abandoned. Either way, they belong to the past. The future instead of the latter toward the goals of life flattens out into a perpetual present, money status. All



the vanities the preacher of Ecclesiastes described holds so little interest, a chasing after wind, indeed.

[\(21:25\)](#):

Yet one thing cannot be robbed of her futurity, our daughter, Katie. I hope I'll live long enough that she has some memory of me. Words have a longevity, I do not. I thought I could leave her a series of letters. What would they say? I don't know what this girl will be like when she's 15. I don't even know if she'll take to the nickname we've given her. There is perhaps only one thing to say to this infant who is all future overlapping briefly with me, whose life barring the improbable is all but passed. That message is simple. When you come to one of the many moments in life where you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been and done and meant to the world. Do not, I pray, discount that you filled the dying man's days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years. A joy that does not hunger for more and more, but rest satisfied in this time right now, that is an enormous thing.

Michael [\(22:33\)](#):

Ooh, wonderful. Thank you. What rings so true about that for you?

Laurel [\(22:44\)](#):

Well, Paul was writing that to his infant daughter. You feel like you're eavesdropping on something so intimate, which is a father trying to remind his daughter in perpetuity that she is enough, that she will never worry that she is not enough because she brought him so much meaning before in his brief time on earth with her. I love that so much, and I think that's true for all of us. We have all been that. We all are that, but so few of us get a New York Times bestseller dedicated to us in which it's printed forever. But I think even if you've had bad parents, plenty of people aren't lucky enough to be loved like Katie was and is loved.



([23:30](#)):

But I think almost all of us have been loved by someone in that way, even for a brief moment, and that is enough and frankly, we're enough even without being loved that way. But I think by writing that to his daughter in a public way, he gave it to all of us, that you can wonder who thinks of you that way and that you don't have to be around a long time to have made a huge impact on someone. I've lost both my parents. I lost my dad at a really young age, and he did not write me a book. He did many other things of which I write about, but I just felt like, "Oh, this was such a gift to me, and this is a gift to any of us who've ever lost someone that loved them profoundly."

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

Yeah. I love the dedication to your dad in the new book written with the pen he gave you posthumously at your graduation. It was a beautiful story.

Laurel ([24:30](#)):

Thank you.

Michael ([24:32](#)):

Your book is called *What Looks Like Bravery: An Epic Journey From Loss to Love*. How in writing this book did your understanding of love deepen?

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

I'd say actually it was in living my life before writing the book that my understanding of love deepened, and then the book allowed me to share a little bit of what I'd learned.

Michael ([24:55](#)):

Beautiful.



Laurel ([24:58](#)):

Love for me is treacherous. I hate love, hate it. When I was falling for my now husband. I would just get so mad at him like, "Damn you for being someone I am falling for, I hate this. I don't want to love anyone else." Loving someone means that they can die or that you can get divorced or they can change their mind or that you annoy them. But it's just the best case scenario, one of you dies. That is just a terrible idea, and that's the best case scenario. I just hate it. I hate it. I think any of us who've been marked by disappointment or loss, whether that's through death or illness or divorce or any other thing, someone just seeming at the beginning to be someone that they're not, they turn out not to be. There's a million ways to do that, to be disappointed by life and our affections for others. But I just really didn't want to go there, and yet, love is irrepressible. I couldn't control it.

([26:21](#)):

So I'd say my journey that I write about in the book is I was raised with this deep and encompassing love that was at times unbearable in the heart. My dad found out he was dying when I was three, and he had about 14 years to prepare me for a time he wouldn't be around, but he never knew he was going to have 14 years. So we would get six weeks, one year or six months, eight months, and so we lived with this very acute sense of mortality sitting at the dinner table, and that was amazing. That shot me a cannonball into life. I had take nothing for granted. Also, it comes with a deep and abiding anxiety that everyone you love is just a hair's breath away from leaving. I carried that into my adulthood. I did get married in the end of my 20s. It ended in divorce and then I spent, oh God, better part of 10 years doing what my brother refers to as my YMCA dating period, very basically just worked my way for the Village People of-

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

Nice.



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

... I dated an anthropologist or someone at a dim sum brunch. The more interesting and new to me flavor, the more I was going to go on a date with that flavor. It was fun and it was fascinating, and it was also exhausting. I think I was dating as a rebellion against mortality, and there's nothing wrong with that if that's what makes you happy. But it wasn't making me happy in the end. It was just making me exhausted and unable to keep everybody straight, and I just felt vaguely unsatisfied.

([28:05](#)):

So I really had to go on something of a journey that was both literal and metaphorical to figure out how to be open to loving someone else, knowing what I know, which is that you can lose people for no good reason at all, and you often do. It's hard once you've seen that to make yourself open to it again. You're like, "Ugh, you dumb ass. Why are you doing this to yourself?" So that's my lived experience. So I had gone on that journey. I'm still on that journey. It still wakes me up at night. It's not something that goes away. I've just learned to live with it like an unwelcome house guest.

Michael ([28:43](#)):

I'm curious to know whether in that softening, was it something that you had to learn or was it something that you had to unlearn?

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

Both. I had to unlearn a vicious internal voice that I used to speak to myself. I had to learn, I don't know, I guess to leave 3% up to chance, like there's 97% odds I'm going to die at any time, or that you will.

Michael ([29:19](#)):

Right.



Laurel ([29:20](#)):

But there's also this tiny chance that maybe I'll get old or that you will, but then we might get old together, and that is a practice. I'm terrible at it, and it's hard for my brother too. I have many friends who have loved people with chronic illness or have it live without themselves, and it is a practice. It's hard and I'm not good at it, but I try just to remind myself that maybe even though you think the end of this story is written, it actually hasn't been and let life surprise you. Maybe it'll surprise you in a good way.

Michael ([30:03](#)):

In your new book, the second part starts with a quote by Nick Cave. So already, I love this book because Nick Cave writes, I like some of his music, but I don't love his music. But his newsletter, The Red Hand Files, is just this extraordinary chronicling of love and life and rediscovery of vulnerability and compassion. It's just a, he writes so beautifully. It's like, "I want to be Nick Cave when I grow up, I'll skip the heroin," and has he. I'm like, he writes so beautifully and he talks about understanding limitations. What's your relationship with your own limitations? How do you dance with those?

Laurel ([31:02](#)):

Well, I'd say for a long time I just stuffed them into a box and refused to admit they existed. So I'm not sure I've danced with them yet, but I do let them out of the cage every once in a while for light and air and some water. My favorite drug of choice is excellence.

Michael ([31:22](#)):

I love that. Tell me a great phrase.

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

I for so long was absolutely convinced that I could excel my way out of suffering, and if I only was better, things would hurt less. That was an accidental



lesson I really wish I hadn't learned from my father who really believed that vulnerability was a sign of weakness and desperately didn't want to be seen as a patient. I think that's another reason that *When Breath Becomes Air* resonates with me, because I think Paul Kalanithi was able to hold both things in a way that my dad really had a hard time doing. I used achievement as a way to hold off any existential dread. I really believe that for way too many years, I acted as so much, how do I say this? I am really proud of the things that I was able to do, get a PhD from MIT and New York Times bestseller, those things, doing the TED Talks, the professorship at the Stanford School of Medicine. With every new shiny trophy, I expected to feel better even though I knew better, right?

Michael ([32:57](#)):

Yeah.

Laurel ([32:58](#)):

Rather than stopping and saying, "Huh, I have just carried my suitcase of anxieties and questions into this new room with ever shinier prizes." Instead, I would get into that room, I would be given the shiny thing. I would look around and be like, "Ugh, I'm still here."

Michael ([33:15](#)):

Dammit.

Laurel ([33:17](#)):

Dammit. Dammit. I'm still waking up at 3:00 AM, and I think eventually I just hit a wall. I got so tired and I just felt like, "Ugh, there must be a better way. Have I given up hustling? Oh, hell no. I will hustle until I die. I will die with 50 unfinished projects, a million applications. Oh, that may be enough." That's just my personality. But I think you can hustle and you can want to do well, and you can know that it's not a spiritual salve, and I confused those things for so long. I really think that if only I was good enough, or if I had been good enough, the



pain of loss would hit differently. It wouldn't hurt as much, and that is just so wrong. But no one could have told me. I think Nick Cave, some of us, we just got to touch the fire and get burned and then realize maybe without all the heroin, he wouldn't have God all the wisdom. Right?

Michael ([34:18](#)):

Exactly. That's true.

Laurel ([34:19](#)):

It's like [inaudible 00:34:21]

Michael ([34:23](#)):

I've got a quote on my writing desk over there from Rilke, from his poem called The Man Watching. There's a line in it which I've pulled out. As a reminder, which is, and I'll get this slightly wrong, but it's broadly saying his quest is not to win more, and this is the line, "To be deeply defeated by ever greater things."

Laurel ([34:49](#)):

Oh, God.

Michael ([34:50](#)):

I love that as a attempt to remind me to stop going for the things where I get to win the trophy, but start going for the things where it's all about the angel wrestling with you. The theme of the poem is, the angel doesn't wrestle with everybody, the angel only wrestles with people who are doing the stuff that is big enough and hard enough that it makes a difference, and you're going to fail at it. To wrestle and lose to the angel 'cause you always lose when you wrestle an angel is a success it is to be defeated by ever greater things. So when you talk about that, that rings true for me as well.



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

Oh, my God. What's the name of that poem again?

Michael ([35:33](#)):

It's called The Man Watching by Rilke.

Laurel ([35:36](#)):

All right. That's going over on my writing desk-

Michael ([35:39](#)):

It's wonderful.

Laurel ([35:39](#)):

... and maybe tattooed on my forehead. [inaudible 00:35:44]

Michael ([35:45](#)):

Yeah, exactly. Get a bit gangster-

Laurel ([35:47](#)):

Yeah.

Michael ([35:48](#)):

Medical professor-

Laurel ([35:49](#)):

With Rilke, that's my kind of gang.

Michael ([35:49](#)):

Exactly.



Laurel ([35:52](#)):

It's like, "That's how I roll." So Laurel, with this awareness that the external validation and the trophies don't actually grant happiness, how do you hold success for you now? What does that mean?

([36:09](#)):

Great question. I feel like we began this conversation with you telling me my deep anxiety. I'm nobody reading this book.

Michael ([36:14](#)):

Exactly.

Laurel ([36:16](#)):

It doesn't go away if only would go away.

Michael ([36:19](#)):

I know.

Laurel ([36:20](#)):

I wish I had a meditation practice. I think this is one of those things of, "Oh, you label your thought. You think about a thought like a cloud. It's on it's way, the rain," like you don't know-

Michael ([36:31](#)):

There's something in the tone of your voice that tells me that you're not totally buying into that.

Laurel ([36:35](#)):

No, because our anxieties are not clouds. They're permanently affixed to the ceiling of my mind, and they're more like Snoopy clouds that just follow me everywhere in rain on me.



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

That's funny.

Laurel ([36:46](#)):

Could I get rid of that through practice and self-awareness? Sure. It's not like I'm anti the therapeutic process. I reflectively write. I have done all this work. I have been in therapy. It's not that I don't want to live a different way, but I also feel like if you want to make things, if you want to wrestle with angels, some element of other people being involved is often part of that. The need to not disappoint others is huge, is huge. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I think that's part of humanity.

Michael ([37:25](#)):

Right.

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

We are a social species, and so we are wired for a certain level of anxiety around disappointing self and others because we're worried about being left on the side of the trail while everyone else moves on. So I think part of it is just recognizing that that is an intrinsic thing. That's part of the same desire that we have to connect and be loved and adored by other people and to love and adore them. So I know that's where it's coming from, but I think I am just trying to set small goals for myself. I had a mantra while writing this book that really helped me, which made it less about me and much more like the ancient Greeks thought about the muse, which is like, "Please let me share the wisdom that I have been given with the people."

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

Right.



Laurel ([38:22](#)):

That's not exactly it, but it's close, and I think it makes it externalized in a way. I also think wisdom is the same thing that belongs to all of us. Most good books are sharing a universal truth that has been shared for centuries and millennia. We just keep repackaging in it new ways-

Michael ([38:41](#)):

For sure.

Laurel ([38:41](#)):

... to reach people, right?

Michael ([38:43](#)):

New wine in old bottles.

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

Yes, always.

Michael ([38:46](#)):

Old wine in new bottles, actually, the right way of putting it. Yeah, I feel the same about my work. I'm like, "It's nothing here that's really radically new. It's old wine but new bottles. Hopefully, you like the bottle."

Laurel ([38:57](#)):

Exactly, because every new generation of people will only drink out of certain bottles.

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

Yeah, that's right.



Laurel ([39:04](#)):

It's not that I think that it means our work is any less, but I think that every new generation of people needs the messages delivered in a way that they can hear them. To make your messages audible, you have to figure out what the medium is and what's going to work for people, what's going to set them a light? What's going to make them pause. Something that worked in like A.D., B.C. is not going to work in 2023, and that's okay. Even if the same wisdom is fundamental and it hasn't-

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

That's right.

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

... changed, I think it's not a problem. Cliches are cliché for a reason, usually, they are true. Usually, they hold a kernel of wisdom, and the job to reinvent the wisdom, the job is to deliver it in a way that people can integrate into their lives. So when I think about it that way, it takes off some of the pressure, which is just like, "Ah, I'm just the latest in a long line of people that are trying to get people to pay attention to the fact that life is short and they should do with it what feels right to them and what will make their time here as meaningful as possible." That's really it.

Michael ([40:14](#)):

Before we hit record, you and I we're having a quick chat about book launches because yours is coming up in a month and mine's coming up in three or four months time, both lamenting the experience of book launches because it's a lot of running around like a headless chicken with about as much a fact as that as well. Well, I'll tell you something that's just occurred to me that might be helpful. I'm going to ask you a question about it. So with my new book, which is called How to Work with Almost Anyone, rather than framing the book launch as how many books can I sell, we've framed it as our goal is to improve 10



million working relationships. So it's a mission-driven thing rather than a book selling thing. I'm totally going to put you on the spot here, but if there was a mission for What Looks Like Bravery, what's your crappy first draft articulating that? What comes to mind?

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

You are so smart. This is changing my life right now. I have to think of words for it, but I would say it's, oh my goodness, 1000 people, though, I feel like I should read big. To change 10 million, I'll borrow from you, relationships between people and the ones that they love that are still here.

Michael ([41:41](#)):

Nice.

Laurel ([41:44](#)):

I want just a couple of people to pick this up, read this story and either forgive themselves a bit, to recognize that the shame and guilt that they have over the loss of someone else isn't indicative of something they've done wrong, but is actually the feeling of grief itself and love itself. It's the feeling of that we choose to feel because loss and believing that there was no reason for it as too painful, so instead, we blame ourselves. I would love just a few people to see me walk that trail and be able to forgive themselves a bit of suffering in the same way. Then on the other side of the coin, if they have their person still here, or eight persons still here that they ask a question they're too scared to ask, that they set aside a meaningful hour, that they don't believe the worst possible story about themselves without confirmation, really that I inspire a little bit of human connection either and self-forgiveness in anyone who is living with somebody else who is on their way out. I really want that, so-

Michael ([42:57](#)):

I hear that.



Laurel ([43:00](#)):

... I'll try to think of a better way to do that. I will tell you book tour for me, as you know, book tours have changed and who knows if they're useful and that was already happening, but I think COVID really did it in.

Michael ([43:16](#)):

Yeah.

Laurel ([43:16](#)):

But what I want to do is go to the major cancer centers around the United States and any other country that will have me and do some reflective writing workshops for patients and caregivers-

Michael ([43:28](#)):

Fantastic.

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

... because that's something that is just so fun, so meaningful I wish I had had myself. I've been doing it for healthcare professionals now since March of 2020, but I have not done any for patients and caregivers. I think especially caregivers are often left out of many of these kinds of interventions of support. So I will be doing this in places where the people are who are wrestling with brand new diagnoses.

Michael ([43:59](#)):

That sounds like a fine book tour to me.

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

I hope so. If you know any clinics, hospitals, care centers that you think would be interested in having me, let me know.



Michael ([44:11](#)):

I will.

Laurel ([44:13](#)):

But I love that idea, Michael, that you're changing relationships. The goal is not copies sold. They're not unrelated-

Michael ([44:21](#)):

They aren't unrelated-

Laurel ([44:21](#)):

... but it's such a better [inaudible 00:44:22]

Michael ([44:21](#)):

... but one's more interesting to focus on. Yeah.

Laurel ([44:25](#)):

Yes.

Michael ([44:25](#)):

It feels like your number is somewhere in between a couple and 10 million, so the two numbers you named, I'm like, it's probably more than two, it doesn't have to be as many as 10 million. Maybe there's some other number in the middle that feels-

Laurel ([44:38](#)):

No, I'd be happy with [inaudible 00:44:39]

Michael ([44:38](#)):

... not too big, not too small.



Laurel ([44:41](#)):

... frankly. But I felt like I should set the bar high, what was I telling you, the shiny prize desire does not go away.

Michael ([44:47](#)):

Exactly. Hey, Laurel, let me ask you a final question. What needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in our conversation?

Laurel ([44:56](#)):

I am so grateful for you.

Michael ([44:57](#)):

Oh, thank you.

Laurel ([44:59](#)):

You believed in me in a time I didn't believe in me, really. I remember your coaching has been so fundamental to my life, and I remember you looking at me. I was like having trouble paying my bills, and I was dreaming of being a professor. I had not lined up a professorship at all. My last book had come out. It had done well, but not financially. It had not translated into financial success. I really didn't know what was next, and I'm someone who doesn't do well outside of a structure. You believed in me, and you told me I could do it. You asked me how much money I wanted to earn in a year, and I said what to me at the time felt like a preposterous sum because I was earning \$30,000 a year, which to all those people out there who are doing that, no shade on you.

([45:48](#)):

I was just living in a very expensive American city, and it was really hard. I set a preposterous number, and you just looked at me and you're like, "Well, of course, you can do that." No, it just didn't seem strange to you, and I remember that feeling. There's nothing like the gift of believing in someone when they



don't believe in themselves and calmly seeing a future for them that they can't trust yet. You hold the torch for somebody until they can believe it too, and you absolutely did that for me. I will be grateful my entire life, Michael. I really will be. I try to now do that for other people because I know what that's like, and that had just never been modeled for me before. I'd experienced others' expectations, but I think others' calm belief in you is a totally different thing.

Michael ([46:37](#)):

Thank you. That's amazing to hear. I really appreciate that.

Laurel ([46:41](#)):

That's just a thousand times true. You don't need an endorsement for me, but just if you ever need a humanity blurb, I'm here for you.

Michael ([46:52](#)):

Oh, thank you. Part of our conversation was about a passion fruit vine that Laurel was looking at through the window. First, let's just celebrate how brilliant a fruit passion fruit is. That black whiz encased that when you cut it open reveals this orange and purple, massive sweet and citrus and crunch and smooth, it is truly one of my favorite, favorite fruits. But back to the vine, Laurel was saying that she'd planted it three years earlier, and this was the first season in which it had blossomed. It takes time for things to come to fruition. In fact, when you plant a seed, you're not even sure if something will blossom in fruit. This is one of my favorite phrases, you're taking your best guess. When Laurel was introducing *When Breath Becomes Air*, she said, "This is really a call," this is how the book hit her, "a call that the mortality clock is ticking. You got to do the thing you're scared of."

([48:03](#)):

That's not just the scary thing in the moment, jumping off a metaphorical or maybe even literal cliff, it's about placing a bet on something that you might not



know how it will play out in the future. It means understanding that risk and that uncertainty and that ambiguity and going for it regardless. It means being willing to plant a seed. Thank you for listening. I've got a couple of interviews for you to discover or perhaps rediscover, Katherine Mannix, *The Art of a Tender Conversation*. Katherine is the doctor that brought cognitive behavioral therapy to palliative care in the UK, a brilliant woman, lovely woman, love that conversation, and Andri Snær Magnason. That interview is called *Not Wasting Time*. He is Iceland's most famous writer, most famous contemporary writer, and that was a wonderful and unexpectedly delightful conversation, I would say. For more of Laurel, you can go to her website, Laurel Braitman. I'll spell it for you, L-A-U-R-E-L B-R-A-I-T-M-A-N. You can get the book there, but also, you can join a workshop every other Saturday and write with Laurel.

[\(49:20\)](#):

I use this structure all the time, not immediately with Laurel, but with other people where we get together, and we just hold space for each other to do work. In fact, I'm recording this voiceover whilst I'm doing that with a group of people from the Conspiracy, the membership site that we have at mbs.works, and we're all just working on our stuff. Some are reading, some are writing thank you notes, some are writing and designing a course. I'm doing voiceovers. This is a random aside, but finding people to work with and hold space with is really powerful. Laurel is doing that for you as well. You can find out more at laurelbraitman.com. Thank you for listening. It's a pleasure. It's a pleasure to have you as an audience. It's a pleasure to know that you're enjoying these interviews. If you have a chance to love me up in some way, rate the interview, give us some stars. Pass an interview on that you've particularly loved to somebody. We grow this reading community one person at a time, and if you can help with that at all, I'm certainly grateful. You're awesome and you're doing great.