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MBS (00:00):

I had a lucky break when I started working. Having lingered in university for more than a little while, I found myself at 25 without any real idea of what I wanted to do. I mean, it wasn't clear that I was good for much at all. I started applying to places. I applied to McKinsey, that very high-end, big brained management consultancy, and it didn't take long for me to know that that was not going to be a place that I would survive. I almost got a job at a big ad agency, until I blew the final interview. By the way, I'm grateful for that. I'm not sure I would've thrived in advertising either.

(00:43):

Finally, I got a job in an innovation agency. Now, in the early '90s, nobody knew what an innovation agency was, including me. I mean, I remember trying to explain it to my brother Nigel and failing utterly. Nowadays, though, I'd explain it as a company that helps invent products and services for other big brands, but it

was definitely a little bit before its time. The real gift of working there, was that the founders were very, "Let's not do business as usual." They did things like sending out invoices with hieroglyphics, and they quite liked that I showed up for work wearing clothes that I had made.

(01:25):

Now, I suspect for many of us though, the first few years of working is actually mostly about being trained on how to be a good worker. "Here's how you behave. Here's how you don't be disruptive. Here's how you find and know your place." There are rules, unspoken and spoken, on how to behave. My first years had a degree of freedom and well almost anarchy. I like to think that that flame still burns bright. Let me ask you, do you know the rules that you're following?

(02:03):

I'm Michael Bungay Stanier. 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. McKinley Valentine is a fellow Aussie and the creator and writer and curator of one of my favorite newsletters, The Whippet. It's a cult hit newsletter with an eclectic mix of science and history and weirdness and unsolicited advice. At its best, which is often, it's a little bit like following Alice down her rabbit hole. The multifaceted nature of this newsletter is something of a reflection of McKinley's life. She hasn't followed the obvious career path.

McKinley (02:46):

I would say that I spent a lot of my life having no idea what I wanted to do. I didn't go to uni. I started bartending, which I quite liked and quite miss.

MBS (02:57):

What's the bridge from bartending to being the curator of a newsletter like The Whippet? Where do you even start?

McKinley (03:04):

One day I came back to Australia after being overseas and was like, "Oh, I don't know. I'm good at spelling. What's a job for people good at spelling?" I typed that into Google and came across the TAFE course for professional writing and editing.

MBS (03:16):

Now, she's continued to be good at spelling for the past decade, but as you may have guessed, successful copywriting and editing take more than being good at spelling bees. McKinley's talent goes much deeper.

McKinley (03:28):

The Whippet came about because I was writing these really long Facebook posts of all of the interesting things that I was finding, and one thing with our very information heavy culture is if you want someone to read something that you think is interesting, you have to sell it.

MBS (03:28):

Right.

McKinley (03:45):

Even if it's free, you have to be like, "This is interesting. Please, here's why it's interesting. You would love it." You have to convince them, because no one has time to read or look at anything.

MBS (03:55):

That's true.

McKinley (03:57):

As Facebook got increasingly a combination of boring and unethical, I wanted to leave that platform. I knew there wasn't the kind of current newsletter boom

happening, but I knew of one newsletter creator and I thought, "Maybe I can do that." It took off a lot more than I expected. It was obviously originally maybe 100 people, Facebook followers or whatever that signed up. Yeah.

MBS (04:26):

I mean, I love the story of you Googling, "What can I do, because I'm a good speller," and coming across a professional writer or editor as a result of that. What surprised you about what it takes to be a good editor and helping people write clearly?

McKinley (04:47):

Oh, okay. The biggest, I think, difference between professional editors and people who are good at spelling and grammar, I guess, is that there are no rules to editing, as in there is no grammatical or spelling rule that is so hard lined that you shouldn't ditch it if ditching it will communicate a message better or more effectively. Non-professional editors tend to be real, real sticklers for applying rules.

MBS (05:16):

Right.

McKinley (05:16):

Often they have the rules wrong, but even when they don't, they will butcher a beautiful piece of speech in order to make it fit grammatical rules. Good editors are never prescriptivist in their way. They're like, "How can we get this message across in a way that will be clear or beautiful?" Depends on the piece of writing.

MBS (05:40):

Right.

McKinley (05:40):

But it's a lot more fluid and a lot more contextual.

MBS (05:46):

It's that never split an infinitive. It's like, "Yeah, but how about to boldly go where no one's gone before?"

McKinley (05:52):

Yeah.

MBS (05:52):

That's a perfect piece of writing, and that's a split infinitive.

McKinley (05:56):

Yeah.

MBS (05:56):

Well, how do you learn to break the rules? Because those grammatical rules are kind of heavy and written in ink rather than in pencil. At least that's how it feels. I'm wondering where and how you learned to start breaking rules.

McKinley (06:17):

That's a good question. I definitely didn't used to. I mean, as a teenager, I was one of those obnoxious people who corrected people's pronunciation or spelling when they're just trying to have a conversation.

MBS (06:17):

Yeah. Yeah.

McKinley (06:29):

I definitely had to learn my way out of it.

MBS (06:31):

Yeah.

McKinley (06:32):

Some of it was probably just exposure to a huge range of writing and seeing what's good. Some of it is probably editing people whose writing I had an enormous amount of respect for, and so I was much less likely to want to take a hatchet to it. I was always thinking, "Why would they have done it this way? They probably had a reason. They're very skilled."

MBS (06:54):

Yes.

McKinley (06:54):

That probably helped me get more in the head of the writer, which is what you want to do. You shouldn't be imposing what the message that you think that they should have said onto it.

MBS (06:54):

Yeah.

McKinley (07:05):

You're trying to let them share their own message as best as they can. The nicest best moments of editing are when I've edited someone's work and they come back to me and be like, "That's what I was trying to say. You've nailed it. Thank you."

MBS (07:20):

That's great.

McKinley (07:20):

Yeah.

MBS (07:21):

Imagine it's like, struggling for metaphors here, but maybe like cutting a diamond. It's like you have to understand the structure of the diamond before you start cutting it and going, "This is how I cut it to show off its brilliant most effectively."

McKinley (07:36):

Yeah. I mean, I'm also not a diamond cutter, but that sounds right.

MBS (07:40):

Me either, but I'm working on the metaphor here. Well, McKinley, how do you think your writing and style of communication has evolved as you've edited and seen other people's work?

McKinley (07:57):

I've got a lot more comfortable with using my natural speaking voice. One of the compliments that The Whippet gets the most often is that it sounds like someone's having a conversation with me rather than sounding really written down. When I first started The Whippet, it wasn't like that. I was very, very, very nervous about sharing my own writing and anything that was like me. Part of the reason, the way it's set up is I have a little intro, which is some idea I've been having, then four articles or links that I found on the internet and what I think is great about them, and then an unsolicited advice section.

(08:32):

What that was, was a sandwiching of putting my own writing and then putting all of these other people's great writing, so that I could tell myself, "Well, people can skip my stuff. It doesn't matter and then they can just read the links."

MBS (08:46):

Love that.

McKinley (08:47):

Yeah, there's no pressure if my stuff is bad, because there's other things to tempt people. As it went along and people started complimenting on me on the parts that I had written, I kind of leaned further into that. There's just been, I guess, a series of occasions where I've had the thought of, "This is too weird, this is too specific to me. No one's interested in this."

MBS (08:47):

Right.

McKinley (09:10):

That's always the thing where people have been like, "I love that you shared that." That's, I guess, emboldened me as I've gone along, which I guess the lesson there for writers is to just give it a shot, because you're probably self-censoring more than you need to.

MBS (09:28):

That's interesting. I'm wondering, I think this is a question that goes beyond just writing. It's like we're all on the quest for this in some ways is you talk about, "I started to find my authentic voice," and I'm wondering how you go about discovering that, or crafting that, or honing that. What have you learned about what it takes to discover your voice?

McKinley (09:55):

I'll note here that I also write fiction and I'm not very good at it, and I could not answer that about fiction. But in terms of the article style writing that I am good at, it was much more a matter of stopping censoring myself. I mean, I don't just write stream of consciousness, I edit it, but a lot of times a dumb joke would

come into my head. You would be like, "I shouldn't say that." Actually, bit of a segue, but I think that my partner had a big impact on that.

MBS (09:55):

Right.

McKinley (10:27):

Because they were a standup comedian at the time and all their friends are standup comedians. When I was meeting these people and they were all riffing and making jokes, I was so intimidated.

MBS (10:37):

Right.

McKinley (10:38):

I would think of a joke and I would be like, "Well, I'm absolutely not saying that out in this company." My partner started encouraging me to just say the joke, it doesn't matter. Because the thing about comedians is they're also used to bombing all of the time and jokes that fall flat. As I started, I'd make the joke in a little deadpan voice that only the person next to me could hear. I guess I started doing it more because he encouraged me.

(11:08):

I think that that came through by writing as well, where instead of saying, "Oh, that's too weird," or, "That's dumb," or whatever, I would just be like, "Well, I'll put it in and see what happens." Again, because I had that safety net of if people don't like it, there's the other articles.

MBS (11:21):

I did a standup comedy course three years ago, four years ago at Second City in Toronto. It was revelatory around just how unfunny most of the preparation towards an attempt at funny [inaudible 00:11:37]. It was an excruciating six

weeks hearing everybody else's very unfunny stuff as they attempted to build five minutes of good stuff. Sure they felt the same about mine as well.

McKinley (11:49):

Yeah. My friend is a board game designer. When he lived in Melbourne... He moved to Toronto as well. There you go. I used to play test his games when they were still in the early stages, and these games were not fun. If I had made those games, I would've been like, "Well, this was a wash. This was a terrible idea. It's very boring and no one enjoyed it."

(12:15):

But those games he worked on them and worked on them and worked on them, they became really successful kickstarters and very well reviewed and stuff. I would've given up on them, because I didn't understand the difference between what a game looks like at the play test stage and what it can end up as.

MBS (12:29):

That's so good. This new book I'm working on, I got to what I thought was a really strong second draft. I mean, my wife had read it and she's often my bluntest critic. She's like, "I think this is pretty good." I was like, "You know what? I'm going to put it out to 100 early readers and get their feedback."

McKinley (12:47):

Yeah.

MBS (12:48):

Universally they were like, "We're pretty underwhelmed by this book." Those are the polite ones and then the unpolite ones were like, "It's not really a book, is it? It feels more like rough notes for a speech." I was like, "Oh my goodness."

McKinley (13:01):

Yeah.

MBS (13:04):

Mostly, I mean, it was like 5% crying in my coffee and 95% going, "This is really helpful." It meant that the third draft was much more work than I thought it would be, but it makes for a completely restructured, and I hope for a better book around that. Gosh, you just have to take that risk and throw it out there.

McKinley (13:27):

Yeah. I've been doing lifting weights for the last six months, and one of the things after the first three months you start developing muscles. I suddenly realize what was amazing about lifting weights is it's not a gamble. Every other thing that you try and commit to like writing a book or anything like that, you're putting so much work in day after day and you don't know how it's going to turn out.

MBS (13:50):

Right.

McKinley (13:51):

A lot of people, I think have the same struggle with forming an exercise habit. It's guaranteed. You lift the weights, you will get muscles. There's no, "Oh, I hope this pays off."

MBS (13:59):

Right.

McKinley (14:00):

If you want to be like a competitive bodybuilder, sure, that might not pay off. But the idea that your action can have a one-to-one result that you can rely on is pretty nice I guess to have in your back pocket.

MBS (14:11):

Yeah, it's like this is physics and biology. If you do this, your muscles will tear and they will reform stronger and you will start seeing muscles.

McKinley (14:21):

Yeah, there's just no way around it.

MBS (14:23):

Hey McKinley, what book have you chosen to read for us?

McKinley (14:27):

I've chosen The Expectation Effect by David Robson. This book collects together all of the existing research possibly on the expectation effect, which is what I would call a radical expansion of what we understand as the placebo effect. The idea that your expectations of what a certain intervention will do and how that affects not just your perception of it, but the reality of it, the changes in your body.

MBS (14:59):

Right.

McKinley (15:02):

The reason why I wanted to talk about it today is because when I write The whippet, generally speaking, if I get excited about an idea or something I've seen, that's pretty much my gauge for whether it should go in The Whippet, because it's going to be new and it feels important, cool, or interesting. I base my curation on that feeling in your heart. "Ah, that's amazing."

(15:24):

The research that is in this book absolutely fits that, but I have kept it out of The Whippet, because it's quite hard to talk about, especially in limited space, it's

both people tend to dismiss it or they get angry about it because with the placebo effect, it sounds like you're saying, "Oh, you're making it up," which is not what it is it about at all. I think also because I care about it a lot, so I feel like I have this one shot to sort of make sure people understand what I'm saying.

MBS (15:57):

That's great.

McKinley (16:00):

I haven't felt able to put that in The Whippet as well, because each individual study on its own has flaws as all studies do.

MBS (16:09):

Yeah.

McKinley (16:10):

It's when you gather them all in one place and you see the body of evidence and you see that it all points in one direction, that it becomes harder to unpick, which is what this book does. What really I guess has made me want to talk about it because instead of having to convince people of this one study, I can say, "It's all here."

MBS (16:30):

That's great.

McKinley (16:31):

"And you will get it. You can read all of this."

MBS (16:34):

Look, I'm excited to hear this. I'm excited that this is like a dress rehearsal for something you're going to put in The Whippet sometime down the road as well.

Well, knowing that this somehow pulls together various threads and presents a kind of impressive argument by combining different studies, how did you pick the two pages to read to us?

McKinley (17:00):

Well, one thing I did is what I always do for The Whippet, which is I put in the group chat, "Here are the three ideas I'm thinking of talking about. Which one is the most interesting to you?"

MBS (17:00):

That's great.

McKinley (17:09):

I don't know if they're a representative dynamic, demographic, but that's what I've got.

MBS (17:13):

I would be thrilled if Whippet readers listened to this podcast. That would be an achievement for me. That's a perfect test audience.

McKinley (17:21):

Yeah. I chose the one that I think that is less well known and also is going to be most relevant to the people I know. I guess I'm just assuming everyone is in the same demographic as me. I don't know why I'm doing that, but I am, because some of the evidence is pretty, I guess, well known. Most people know about the placebo and the sort of nocebo, which is the reverse, where you can convince yourself if you're in pain when you're not. I wanted to choose something that was a bit broader.

MBS (17:52):

Brilliant. Well, McKinley, I'm giving you the stage reading from the Expectation Effect and taking us perhaps to places that... I don't know, this book, so I'm excited to learn. McKinley Valentine, over to you.

McKinley (18:09):

Experience in any profession tells us that some people find the same mental effort much more tiring than others. Just think of the people you know. While some are exhausted at the end of the working day, others seem to have boundless reserves that allow them to read hundreds of books, play in an orchestra or write a screenplay. These individual differences may partly depend on our beliefs about the tasks themselves.

(18:28):

You might have been brought up to think that reading is hard work, whereas playing music is a form of relaxation or vice versa, and those beliefs will determine how tiring you find the respective activities. That's worth bearing in mind if you're a parent, teacher or manager giving instructions to other people. Dutch researchers have shown that simply being told that we may find an exercise to be energizing rather than fatiguing can reduce the sense of depletion, so that participants are more persistent and focused.

(18:53):

Don't overemphasize the difficulty of a task before someone has tried it for themselves. Even more powerful, however, our expectations about our own capabilities and our reaction to hard mental work in general. According to some game changing work by Veronica Jo at the University of Vienna, it's shown that our beliefs about the brain's resources, whether we see them as finite or non-limited, can powerfully change our experience, ego depletion, and our capacity to remain self-controlled and focused under pressure.

(19:20):

Working with researchers at Stanford University in the late two thousands, Jo first created a questionnaire to test her participants implicit theories of concentration and self-control with a series of statements that they had to score on a scale of one, strongly agree to six, strongly disagree. They included, when situations accumulate that challenge you with temptations, it gets more and more difficult to resist the temptations. Or when you have completed a strenuous mental activity, you cannot start another activity immediately with the same concentration, because you have to recover your mental energy again.

(19:52):

On the other hand, when you have been working on a strenuous mental task, you feel energized and you're able to immediately start with another demanding activity. Or if you've just resisted a strong temptation, you feel strengthened and you can withstand any new temptations. In the actual experiment, they were buried in a listed decoy statement, so it's not to give away the study's purpose.

(20:12):

The people who agreed more with the first set of statements were considered to have a limited theory of the mind's resources, while those who agreed with the second were said to have a non-limited theory of the mind's resources. After rating the statements, the participants were given an arduous exercise in which they had to cross out certain letters in every word on a typewritten page, a boring but fiddly task that was deliberately designed to deplete the mental resources.

(20:33):

Finally, they took the Stroop test, a standard test of concentration in which different color words appear in differently colored text. Participant's task is to report the color of the letter's irrespective of the word that is presented. If all of this sounds slightly tiresome, you could imagine how some of the participants

felt, when the people with the limited mindset reacted to the tasks in exactly the way you would predict from ego depletion theory.

(20:54):

The fiddly proofreading task exhausted their minds, causing them to lose concentration on the Stroop test. As a result, their accuracy was much worse than a control group who had taken the Stroop test without having to complete the text correction. The people with a non-limited view of the mind in contrast showed no signs of fatigue after the first exercise. They actually performed just as well as the control group who had taken the Stroop test when fresh without the dull, but tiring proofreading task.

(21:18):

Astonishingly, Jo's results seem to show that the consequences of ego depletion are real, but only if you believe in it. Jo next recruited a new set of participants to see if she could determine their beliefs and whether that would alter their performance. Instead of seeing the full questionnaire, half of the subjects were shown the limited statements while the rest were given the non-limited statements, a subtle intervention that was meant to prime one or the other mindset.

(21:42):

The participants were then given the text correction task and the Stroop test, and the effects were huge. Those who had been exposed to the idea that concentration can build with effort were around twice as accurate on the Stroop test, compared to the people who'd been primed to think that their resources would deplete. This proved causality through nothing more than a nudge towards one belief or another. She had strengthened or weakened their willpower. Indeed, the people who had been primed with the non-limited views actually performed better if they'd taken the so-called depleting task, than if they hadn't exerted the cells before the Stroop test. Their beliefs that mental effort could be energizing had become a reality.

MBS (22:19):

Oh my goodness, our human brain is so amazing and slippery. I mean, it's extraordinary.

McKinley (22:25):

Yeah.

MBS (22:25):

Well, what is it about this that kind of literally and metaphorically blows your mind, McKinley?

McKinley (22:32):

I mean, first look, because it directly affects me.

MBS (22:36):

Yeah.

McKinley (22:36):

Most of my work I have to be on for, and I do tend to have that limited mindset. This extract talks about, is a response to ego depletion theory.

MBS (22:36):

Right.

McKinley (22:45):

Which is the idea that your willpower is finite. If you have temptations throughout the day, then by the end of the day you'll probably start giving in to them. That's a pretty well believed theory, I think.

MBS (22:59):

That's a theory that you have taken on board, but you're now rethinking?

McKinley (23:05):

Yeah. Yeah, I think so, because... Or at least I'm trying to, is maybe a better way to say it, because it's huge if that can be changed. Actually, one of the other interesting things in the book is that this is cultural. Some studies in India and Singapore, those people just didn't have this cultural idea that mental work is draining.

MBS (23:30):

Right.

McKinley (23:32):

They all responded very positively to continuous willpower tests.

MBS (23:39):

McKinley.

McKinley (23:39):

Yeah.

MBS (23:39):

What this is, I can't remember how I saw this, but just the other day I saw an ad from the '50s for something. I can't remember exactly what it is. It's something to pep you up and it's like helps you deal with tired blood and it goes...

McKinley (23:51):

Tired blood.

MBS (23:55):

There's no such thing as tired blood, but it's language that people used then to explain a sense of lethargy.

McKinley (24:01):

Yeah.

MBS (24:01):

We're tired blood. They're like, "Oh, this soul is for tired blood." It feels ridiculous looking back 50 or 60 years to that and going, "Idiots, why would you think about tired blood?" But I suspect in 60 year's time, people will look back to us and go, "You idiots. What are you talking about your ego depletion? It's just a made up thing. It doesn't even happen. You're just making it so because you're thinking of it."

McKinley (24:28):

Yeah. I think probably a lot of people have had the experience that if you work away from home and you go and meet someone for drinks immediately after work, that's pretty manageable.

MBS (24:36):

Yeah, yeah.

McKinley (24:37):

But if you go home and sit on the couch and then have to get up again half an hour later, it's probably not going to happen. That kind of counteracts the idea that it's your day's energy that has been used up.

MBS (24:46):

Yeah.

McKinley (24:47):

Because you're still going to the event afterwards. It's clearly a mood situational based thing, rather than you literally having been drained of energy.

MBS (24:58):

McKinley, how do you-

McKinley (25:00):

Yeah.

MBS (25:01):

I mean, this is a relatively new book, so I know you've been studying this topic for a while, but to have it brought together must have happened sometime in the last year or so, I guess.

McKinley (25:11):

Yeah, yeah.

MBS (25:12):

What's changing for you as you reorient to the findings in this book?

McKinley (25:22):

A big one has been around pain and physical discomfort. Another part of the book talks about how, again, there's studies for all of this, but when you're exercising and you feel tired and out of breath, if you frame that as, "I'm terrible at this, I'm so tired already," then you will give up sooner, but you will also just have a more unpleasant time, than if your view of those symptoms is, "Being out of breath proves that this is working, that I'm pushing my body further to adapt. This exhaustion is a sign that I'm doing really well at this exercise."

MBS (26:01):

That's so interesting.

McKinley (26:03):

That is definitely something I've used.

MBS (26:05):

Yeah, you're like, "Hurrah. This is exactly what's meant to be happening and it's working. I'm clearly committed to the process," rather than, "Oh, I'm struggling and I'm failing at the process."

McKinley (26:14):

Yeah, I think that's a big one. The other one that I've been thinking about a lot is attitudes towards aging.

MBS (26:23):

Right.

McKinley (26:24):

Because again, it's blah, blah, blah studies, but people who have attitudes, people whose attitude of the ages that they're frail, or useless, or dependent on other people end up aging worse than people who associate aging with independence, wisdom maybe being spry, things like that.

MBS (26:44):

Spry is such a good word.

McKinley (26:45):

I know. Even at 30, if you ask someone, "How old do you think old age is?" If they say under like 60 or 50, they will end up having a worse experience of aging than if they think old age starts at 70.

MBS (27:02):

Oh, gosh.

McKinley (27:03):

Because it's sort of the age they hit when they start to categorize themselves as, "Oh, I'm old now."

MBS (27:08):

Yeah.

McKinley (27:10):

These include biomarkers of health, blood pressure, also chance of getting dementia. They've done sort of decades long studies.

MBS (27:20):

Yes.

McKinley (27:20):

Obviously, they would have to. The thought is that it's a bit of a vicious cycle, where you start to become scared of daily activities or hard work, or you think, "I shouldn't lift that I'm old, it's going to be too heavy," and so your muscles atrophy because you are no longer doing the hard work that you're actually perfectly capable of.

MBS (27:39):

Right. Yeah. That's interesting.

McKinley (27:42):

Or you start relying on a GPS, because you don't trust your memory, but actually your memory could have done it.

MBS (27:47):

Yes.

McKinley (27:48):

They haven't lost their memory, but they're afraid that they might have, and so they stop using it and then you're in that or lose it mentality.

MBS (27:56):

Yes. I suspect there's a counter study to this, which is around stupid men in their mid-fifties, of which I am one, who still think we're 30, so we keep injuring ourselves by trying to do the things we used to do when we are in our kind of 30s.

McKinley (28:09):

Yeah.

MBS (28:10):

But I get what you're saying, which is if you're like, "I'm not old, I'm just evolving in terms of physically and mentally.

McKinley (28:19):

It's different phase of life.

MBS (28:19):

Yeah.

McKinley (28:19):

Yeah. It's a different-

MBS (28:19):

Yeah.

McKinley (28:21):

Yeah. That is affecting me a lot because I'm hearing how often the people around me will say things like, "Oh, my knees hurt."

MBS (28:29):

Yes.

McKinley (28:29):

What is it? It's been in your 30s. It's starting to really bother me, because on the other hand, of course you can complain that your knees hurt. This is where we get into the, "It's hard to talk about."

MBS (28:40):

Yes.

McKinley (28:41):

It's not inevitable. There are exercises that you can do that will probably reduce the pain in your knees. Not only that, you are probably increasing the duration and likely to turn chronic-ness of that pain by believing that it's inevitable.

MBS (29:01):

Yeah.

McKinley (29:01):

This is where it's really tricky, because I don't want to sound like I'm saying, "Oh, it's your fault that you're in pain, which is not what I mean at all." I don't know how to get across that that's not it. But at the same time, I really want people to stop talking like that, as though decline is... I mean, decline to some degree is inevitable and not saying that if you just think right, that you can live to 100 as a superman. I don't think we should be accepting these things as just how it is.

MBS (29:36):

I know this is tricky, but how do you think we navigate through this fine line of saying you can talk yourself into old age, you can talk yourself into limitations, but also to recognize that you can.

McKinley (29:36):

You can.

MBS (29:52):

The dark side of that is you talk yourself into blame for everything that's going wrong to you. It's like, "I have cancer because I'm a bad person. I have cancer because-"

McKinley (30:03):

Yeah, absolutely.

MBS (30:04):

"I haven't been positive enough, and if I just stay positive, I would have avoided this disease or this limitation."

McKinley (30:11):

Yeah. I'll say straight up, there is no indication that positive thinking can affect cancer outcomes.

MBS (30:19):

Right.

McKinley (30:19):

Yeah.

MBS (30:20):

I mean, I know you're stumbling your way into this at the moment.

McKinley (30:23):

It's tough.

MBS (30:24):

This is why you are trying to figure out how to say it in the newsletter, but fumble with me. It was like, how do you-

McKinley (30:24):

I have a bit of a-

MBS (30:32):

Have a go at it and try and teach it to me.

McKinley (30:36):

I have another parable thing.

MBS (30:36):

Yeah.

McKinley (30:39):

I was diagnosed with ADHD maybe two years ago, and that in some ways, as I wouldn't be shocked if many of your listeners have ADHD, is that it feels like a relief from like, "Oh, I'm not stupid. I'm not broken."

MBS (30:56):

Right.

McKinley (30:57):

"These things are because of how my brain works."

MBS (30:59):

Mm-hmm.

McKinley (31:01):

What happened with me, is that I couldn't take ADHD medication, because it stopped me sleeping.

MBS (31:05):

Mm-hmm.

McKinley (31:05):

I went on Twitter and looked for ADHD communities of other people who can't take medication and what they did instead. What I found was people relentlessly saying that there was no hope. They were saying things like... This is because especially in the US, there's a huge stigma against taking medication.

MBS (31:05):

Right.

McKinley (31:24):

They were trying to reduce that stigma, but they would say, "Not having ADHD medication is like having a broken leg, and you telling me to achieve any goals is like telling someone with a broken leg to walk." After immersing myself in that community for a few weeks, I felt so hopeless and I felt like I would never achieve anything that I wanted to in life.

MBS (31:47):

Mm-hmm.

McKinley (31:49):

But at the same time, there's this stream of dialogue around ADHD, where people say, "It's a superpower." I'm like, "It's a superpower if you can afford a personal secretary."

MBS (32:01):

Right.

McKinley (32:04):

This is something where I really, really feel that tension where I think it did serious damage to me to be told that I was permanently and unfixably unable to achieve anything. But it's a real disability and people need help. I think a lot of this is this tension between good advice for an individual and good advice for a system or a society.

MBS (32:27):

Yeah.

McKinley (32:28):

Or even just good advice for yourself versus someone else. It's one thing for me to say, "Oh, I should imagine that there's a lot of possibility in the future."

MBS (32:39):

Yep.

McKinley (32:39):

It's another thing to tell someone else they should be imagining that. It absolutely should not be part of a government's system for helping people with ADHD to be, "Oh, just think more positively about it."

MBS (32:51):

Yeah.

McKinley (32:53):

I should say also, I'm using the phrase positive thinking, but all of this research is not about positive thinking. It's about very specific beliefs.

MBS (32:59):

Right.

McKinley (33:00):

Not just generally, "Oh, I feel good about aging," but, "I think that people can be independent when they age." Quite a concrete belief.

MBS (33:10):

Right. Got it.

McKinley (33:11):

Which doesn't answer your question, but it does-

MBS (33:14):

It speaks to the dilemma and the tension that you're wrestling with.

McKinley (33:17):

Yeah.

MBS (33:18):

How have you found peace and liberation with your ADHD diagnosis, to the extent that you have?

McKinley (33:33):

I think a lot of it is just that the more I find out about ADHD, the more I understand that it goes well beyond just executive function and into some personality traits, which is where sort of that there's some mobile overlap with autism. There's like weird tendencies toward being really uncomfortable with dishonesty and struggling to answer questions untruthfully, even if the question is, "How are you." People don't talk about that much, partly because you sound like an absolute wine carafe, you say, "Oh, my disability is that I'm too truthful. I just have too much integrity."

MBS (34:08):

Sounds like you're a job interviewer, where I ask you what your greatest weakness is.

McKinley (34:08):

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MBS (34:08):

It's like, "My greatest weakness is I'm basically flawless. That's my problem."

McKinley (34:08):

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MBS (34:16):

I'm like, "Yeah. Okay."

McKinley (34:19):

Similarly, the very classic ADHD trait is getting obsessed with a particular topic, researching everything you could find out about it, and then abandoning it two weeks later.

MBS (34:27):

Right.

McKinley (34:28):

It is obviously the basis of my career and sort of life to a great degree. I can't imagine what a McKinley with the ADHD removed is.

MBS (34:28):

Yeah.

McKinley (34:40):

I can imagine a McKinley without some of the executive dysfunction, who can get more done and never procrastinates. That's easy to imagine.

MBS (34:48):

Yeah.

McKinley (34:49):

But that's not what taking away the ADHD is. It would be taking away a third of my personality. It's not that I'm saying, "Oh, I wouldn't want that as such." It's that I don't even think the question makes any sense.

MBS (35:02):

Right.

McKinley (35:02):

It's like saying, "What if you were born in Wales?" I don't know. I'd be have a different culture and upbringing and parents and I wouldn't be me.

MBS (35:09):

It's so hypothetical that's so hypothetical it doesn't make sense to try and pursue it.

McKinley (35:13):

Yeah.

MBS (35:14):

No, it reminds me of, I mean, I'm stumbling into this myself, McKinley, but man's search for meaning, Victor Frankl, and what I remember as the key insight from that is being absolutely clear-sighted around what the situation is, around what the facts of the situation are, and remaining optimistic about what's possible even with the situation being as it is. He's in a German concentration camp, so his facts are pretty bleak.

McKinley (35:54):

Yeah. I've heard.

MBS (35:55):

Neither the optimists or the pessimists flourish, it's the people who have a grounding reality, but a longer term inclination towards, "I think this will work out for the best."

McKinley (36:06):

Okay. Yeah, I think that's right. I think when you talk about making peace with your ADHD diagnosis, the first thing is that for most people, ADHD diagnosis a relief, because it's not changing what you know about the situation, which is it doesn't make you be bad at doing a whole lot of shit, that you're bad at doing. You were already bad at it. It gives you an explanation.

MBS (36:27):

Right.

McKinley (36:28):

I don't think anyone ever feels worse after getting an explanation.

MBS (36:32):

No.

McKinley (36:32):

In terms of stopping feeling the way I was about that Twitter community, I just unfollowed them all. That was pretty much it. Then I tried to do some objective looks at my own life, like, "Have I failed to achieve anything that I ever wanted in life?" No.

MBS (36:47):

Right.

McKinley (36:48):

There's lots of stuff I'd like to achieve that I haven't, but I've done heaps of stuff that I'm proud of that 18 year old me would be proud of.

MBS (36:55):

Yeah.

McKinley (36:56):

It's a ridiculous idea. I do pretty well, and I know not everyone does with just applying indisputable facts. Where something is uncertain, I can absolutely spin off the rails, but if I have a piece of praise for a boss in text form...

MBS (37:12):

Yeah.

McKinley (37:13):

I can believe that and I won't usually talk my way into thinking that's somehow fake.

MBS (37:17):

That's great. It feels like there's wisdom you have about yourself, which is, "I know the stuff that is grounding and reassuring, and I know the stuff that feels more intangible and less certain and therefore less helpful for me."

McKinley (37:36):

I think in terms of... To talk about the mindset stuff in the book is I didn't necessarily do a ton of self-talk about, "You know you got this," I just unfollowed all of the things that were making me feel bad and I didn't... Those were all affecting my mindset and giving me this fixed mindset, and I just stopped reading it. I think that definitely helps. I think people have a bit of an addiction. I'm talking about myself here as well, to reading negative stuff because it feels important and real and true. Also, because we have a threat detection system in our brain that thinks it's really important to look at threatening things.

MBS (38:18):

That's right.

McKinley (38:18):

That just doesn't really apply anymore. I certainly didn't look at ADHD role models, which is what you might imagine. Look at positive people who've achieved all of these things, because their lives just seem so different to mine, and maybe they're not, but that's what you see in a profile of them.

MBS (38:39):

Yeah. This is very helpful, McKinley. One of the things I'm taking away from this is as just a reminder around how change happens is you can either start doing stuff or you can stop doing stuff. As human beings, we're very... We prioritize starting stuff. What do I need to do? What do I need to begin? What do I need to add?

McKinley (39:00):

Yep.

MBS (39:01):

We're much less good at removing stuff. What do I need to stop? What do I need to just get out of it? It's a good reminder to me and others perhaps that one of the ways that you evolve is not just by what you add, but by also what you stopped doing, what you remove, what you absent yourself from. It's a path for growth.

McKinley (39:21):

A friend of mine was trying to decide whether to quit their steady but very bad job for an unreliable short-term contract in an exciting industry. One of the things I said was that, "You can't make a clear decision when you're stuck in one of those jobs, because it occupies your whole mind and you can't imagine how different things could be."

MBS (39:21):

Yeah.

McKinley (39:42):

The same is true of relationships and there has never been a bad relationship or a bad job that I've quit that I haven't two months later felt like a veil has been lifted from my eyes and that I just completely see things differently.

MBS (39:55):

Right.

McKinley (39:56):

While I couldn't say to him, "This is how it'll be different," I feel like I could truthfully say, "You can't perceive how it will be different, but it will be bigger than you think."

MBS (40:04):

Yeah, that's interesting. I've got one more question for you, but I just want to build on what you're saying, which is on the weekend I went rock climbing with a couple of friends of mine. I'm not an experienced rock climber, Phil isn't either, but Andrew, who took us is, and so Phil and I would be holding desperately onto a wall of rock, kind of leg shaking, I'm shaking, panicking slightly and Andrew would say, "Just get your left foot up six inches onto that ledge and step up and a whole new world opens up when you're in that new place and a new perspective." It's very much just building on what you're saying about your friend and the promise that it will be different once you change position.

McKinley (40:47):

Yeah.

MBS (40:48):

McKinley, it's been such a pleasure talking to you. Thank you. I do have a final question for you, and it's this. What, if anything needs to be said for this conversation between you and me to be complete?

McKinley (41:03):

There is something.

MBS (41:03):

Great.

McKinley (41:04):

Which is maybe a little longer than you were hoping for one question, but it's the conceptual framework. There's two big concepts that if you understand them all, the rest of the stuff about the expectation effect will seem believable.

MBS (41:16):

Mm-hmm.

McKinley (41:17):

I think that you'll have a better understanding of it. The first is the pretty well established idea that your brain is sort of a prediction engine. It doesn't see what's actually out there. It is very lazy. It takes in some inputs, it factors that in with how you're thinking and feeling, other environmental cues, what happened in the past, and then it fills in the gaps with what it sort of thinks is probably there.

(41:40):

That is one of the ways in which things really change depending on your mindset because you're not just seeing exactly what's there. The other is that your brain is very, very conservative with energy. The reason why you feel both mentally and physically fatigued isn't that you've literally run out of ATP or glucose or whatever it is. Your brain does not let you get anywhere close to running out. If you think of those situations where a little girl or whatever has lifted a car off someone.

MBS (42:10):

Right.

McKinley (42:10):

Those are real stories. Those are real things that happened, and it's because the brain has let go of its protective mechanisms that stop you using all of that energy at once, because it's a life or death situation. That is basically what's going on when you say I'm not fatigued. Your brain is like it doesn't know that you have a ready supply of food ongoing forever.

MBS (42:34):

Right.

McKinley (42:34):

It's very, very conservative with how much it will let you use. If you can kind of convince it, "No, it's okay to let go of a little bit more resources," then that energy comes back to you. You're not making energy out of nowhere. You're just teaching your brain that it can relax a little bit and be a bit less conservative.

MBS (42:57):

When I left that innovation agency, I joined a management consulting firm that specialized in change. I felt like I was beginning again. I mean, for one thing, I showed up on the first day at the new job, my best outfit, and I was told very clearly that this wasn't appropriate. This was way too casual and I needed to buy a suit. My first suit after seven years of working.

(43:19):

Beginning near the bottom again, was okay for me because I told myself I was doing an apprenticeship. I was here to learn about how change really worked, and I got to dig into the mechanics of what worked and really what didn't. I was reminded of that mindset when I was hearing McKinley talk about learning to be a writer by being an editor, being exposed to a lot of good and not so good writers, trying to figure out the choices they made and why they made those choices.

(43:49):

It's a little akin to going to an art gallery and drawing the paintings you see there as a way of more deeply learning and understanding how Rubens or van Eyck or Emily Cumming Harris created what they created. It's humbling in the best of ways to be an apprentice. You put aside what status and expertise you may have accumulated and say, "Look, I'm a student. I'm here to learn. I'm going to start by mastering the basics."

(44:16):

I think of it as an active way of learning the rules, because when you actively learn the rules, I find that you then start to know which ones you can break, and when, and which ones it's helpful to follow all the time. It's how you find your voice, it's how you find yourself. If you enjoyed my conversation with McKinley, I'm sure you did, I've got a couple to recommend for you. How To Be An Artist, by Chadney Everett. Chadney is one of the creators and forces behind Meow Wolf. I went and saw Meow Wolf in Las Vegas. It's a huge immersive art exhibition. That was a great conversation.

(44:53):

Kate Berardo, How Not To Be Perfect, also a fascinating conversation. If you'd like more of McKinley, you can find her newsletter at thewhippet.org and she's on Twitter @McKinleaf, which is @ M-C-K-I-N-L-E-A-F. Final note to say you're awesome. You're doing great. Thank you for championing this podcast, for listening to it, for recommending it, for berating it, all you do to make my job a little easier. I appreciate you for that.