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

Growing up, there were a couple of small trophies on the sideboard in our house. They were dad's and they were from his high school track running. In his day, he could run 100 yards in a little over 10 seconds. I inherited none of this track speed, by the way. But I loved those trophies as a kid. They had a medal on the top of a stand that rotated, like a two-dimensional globe. Dad, on the other hand, was pretty indifferent to them. He'd moved on to other things.

([00:34](#)):

What are your trophies? Now, you might have some literal ones from success on the sporting field to some form of professional recognition. Perhaps you've recently, I don't know, picked up an Oscar. Maybe there's some Oscar winners who listen to this podcast. Or maybe an Olympic medal of some sort. Or perhaps your trophies aren't physical things, rather they're triumphs that have



stuck in your mind. Victories won and status are obtained by work and through timing with just a dash of good luck.

[\(01:08\)](#):

How do those past achievements shape you now? And how do they, perhaps, constrain you, a little like a gilded cage? To build on this, what trophies are you now chasing? What's the nod, a pat on the back, the gilded statue, the mountain peak that you're seeking and still wanting to climb and to conquer? How is that enlivening you, filling you with courage, and focus, and discipline? And what's the shadow side of that?

[\(01:42\)](#):

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. LGO, Laura Gassner Otting is the bestselling author. She has a new book out in the world, which we'll talk about, a keynote speaker, a coach, and a friend of mine. In fact, you may have been part of a summit that LGO and me, MBS, and our friend Ozan Varol, constructed and ran back in October, where the three of us got together to co-create and teach together, which is wonderful. By the way, my two pages interview with Ozan is imminent, coming next week actually. One of the reasons that LGO, Laura, is my friend is that she loves to take on the same big questions that I too wrestle with.

Laura [\(02:33\)](#):

I am somebody who has spent my career thinking about why success doesn't equal happiness and how we can get unstuck and live the lives that we have always wanted to live, the lives that we secretly, desperately, maybe sometimes suspect, and even just a little bit are inside of us.

MBS [\(02:54\)](#):

Do you remember the first time you decided for yourself what success was, what winning looked like? I'm told that when I came home from school, five



years old, I told my parents, "Tracy Harwood and Pauline Wade are definitely smarter than me, but I'm smarter than everybody else." So, in other words, I've been managing my success through winning genes, that apparently is part of my DNA, for quite a long time now. But for LGO, it was when the movie Grease first came out. You know, John Travolta as Danny, Olivia Newton John as Sandy. LGO and her sister fell in love with it.

Laura ([03:36](#)):

We would put the album on over the loudspeakers and we would dance out in the backyard on the Chattahoochee tile that was glued into the ground. And she would always be Sandy, and I always had to be Danny. And I, probably the first time I ever wanted to win was I was like, ah, I define winning as being Sandy, and I never got to be Sandy.

MBS ([03:58](#)):

Now, if the movie, if you can remember back to Grease, Sandy was the good girl. Yeah, she was mocked for her wholesome personality, but you knew she was also going to be getting the A's in class.

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

I think that there's a million miles between being loved and being really seen. And so, when I was a kid, the seeds of my drive were to be loved. I did all my chores. I got good grades. I was polite to the neighbors. So, I would get the gold stars. I would get the good grades in class. I'd get the pats on the head. I would get the, "Good job. We love you." And it felt transactional. And it's not that my parents didn't love me, it was that was how I thought that you earned love.

MBS ([04:40](#)):

So, LGO was Sandy in a way. But she learned how to break out of that gold star shell that she lived in. Except, she didn't break out of that shell to impress a boy, like John Travolta.



Laura ([04:56](#)):

I woke up one day and realized that it was hollow to be loved for being the person that everybody else wants you to be. And it wasn't until I was like, "Well, if I just fly my freak flag and I am myself, if people love me for that version of me, that's all the marbles." That's it. What drives me now, I think, is trying to continue to connect to that deepest version of who I actually am and who I actually want to be. And maybe that I'm now on the other side of what my mother used to call the FU forties. I've just turned 52. And you get through your forties, and you're like, "Well, this is pretty much who I am." If I'm not fully baked yet, I'm pretty close to it, so I might get a little better. That would be great. I'll probably get a little worse. That's not going to be so great.

([05:49](#)):

If somebody gives me feedback, I'll go to school on it. Is that real? First of all, is that somebody from whom I want to take feedback, number one. Which that's a big if. Number two, is there truth in that? So, like last week I posted a video of myself, as you may remember, sitting on my desk housing a sheet cake, as I'm talking about my new book. I'm like-

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

Exactly.

Laura ([06:09](#)):

... "It's my birthday and I'm just eating this whole sheet cake." And I happen to wear-

MBS ([06:13](#)):

I didn't even know what a sheet cake was. That introduced the whole idea of what a sheet cake is. It is, if you don't know, an enormous slab of cake.



Laura ([06:18](#)):

It is. But it's not just a slab of cake. It's like the supermarket cake you get, the one that is so disgusting. It's like yellow cake with white icing, and the kind of icing that, when you chew it, you can actually feel the granules of sugar in your teeth.

MBS ([06:33](#)):

It's slightly gritty. It's totally that. I totally know the one. Yeah.

Laura ([06:34](#)):

It's disgusting. And the more disgusting, the better. I've been to Michelin star restaurants all over the world. You give me a piece of sheet cake and I'm a happy lady. That's it. And I want the corner piece. I want all of the icing.

MBS ([06:34](#)):

Yeah, all the icing.

Laura ([06:46](#)):

I want it all. And I happen to be sitting there in a pair of overalls and a tank top, and I'm like housing the sheet cake. And a fellow speaker that we know called me right after I posted and was like, "Oh my God, you should take that down. That's so off brand. It's not polished. You're eating with your mouth... You're talking with your mouthful." And I'm like, "Yeah, that's just me." And he was like, "Yeah, but everything you put online looks so polished." And I'm like, "No, no. You just don't know the full me." And not only that, my readers actually love the hot mess that I am. Because, when I give them the polished punch in the face, they know what comes with that warm hug. So for me, what drives me now is how to just show up fully as I am, knowing if I do that, all the trophies and the awards will come. And they'll mean more actually if they come this way. But what about you?



MBS ([07:34](#)):

Look, I'm going to answer what about me. But I need to just ask you before you go there, there's that moment where you wake up and you notice it's a bit hollow to chase other people's approval and trophies from a recognition in that way from other people. How did you get there? Because, that's not-

Laura ([07:34](#)):

Oh, yeah.

MBS ([07:58](#)):

That's not a small thing. That's not a, "Oh, I just woke up and realized that I shouldn't combine green and pink because the colors don't go." That's a profound existential shift. Was there a catalyst?

Laura ([08:12](#)):

Yeah. There was a moment. There was a moment. And then, as they say, you can connect the dots backwards. It all made sense once I had that moment. So, I look back and I'm like, "Oh, I dropped out of law school and joined a presidential campaign. Okay, ended up in the White House, but I left the White House partway through the administration, which nobody does. And then I went to go work in search," it all made sense in hindsight. And all the people over 20 years of trying to recruit people that were successful but not happy, I was like, "Oh," click. Right? It was just this giant click.

([08:45](#)):

And this was the moment. I was sitting in my corner office. I was the youngest vice president of an executive search firm that did specifically nonprofit university foundation advocacy, social service work. So, I was finding C-suite positions for NGOs, for people who are changing the world, who had purpose. And I was sitting there in this corner office, that it was beautiful, overlooking all the Boston Commons, Boston Garden.



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

Beautiful. I know that.

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

Beautiful.

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

Know that view.

Laura ([09:12](#)):

Yeah, it's gorgeous. It's absolutely gorgeous. And I was listening to my clients talk to me about whatever it was that they were trying to do. They're changing the world, they're feeding the poor, they're creating opportunities for women, they're fighting for immigrant rights, whatever it was they were doing. And my mind drifted away from their problem, they need to find great candidates to do this work, to my problem, which is that I'm about to hit my numbers. Not only that, I was about to blow my numbers out of the water, and I was going to get a big bonus. I was going to make my boss so happy, because my client's definition of success was solving hunger, was helping these immigrants, was curing cancer, and my boss's definition of success was the P&L.

([09:58](#)):

I realized in that moment, as my mind drifted away, and my client noticed, and so I didn't make the numbers, because I didn't sell the work, because they realized that I didn't care about their problem, I cared about my problem, which was my boss's problem. In that moment, I realized that I was not part of their solution. And if I wasn't part of their solution, then I was only part of their problem. And I had that moment where I was like, "Oh, that's not why I do this work. Shoot." And so, I went into my boss's office a couple weeks later, and I had been doing a lot of thinking about how do we create a different business model



that works for our clients first, solves their problems first. And I basically walked in and I was like, "There's a better way." And he was like, "There's the door."

MBS ([10:43](#)):

It's like Tom Cruise in that movie.

Laura ([10:45](#)):

Exactly. I was like, "Okay." So I had my manifesto.

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

I've got my manifesto, yeah.

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

Totally. And so, in that moment where I was like, "Well, if he's not letting me part of the solution, then I'm going to be part of the problem. I that's untenable. I can't do it." So like me and my manifesto, my goldfish, Tom Cruise, I walked out the door and I started my own firm doing work completely differently. But it was in that moment where I was like, "Oh, I am so busy trying to fill the boxes on my boss's definition of success and I'm actually missing the entire reason that I dropped out of law school, and I joined the Clinton campaign, and I went to the White House, and I went to this firm. And then, in hindsight, I was like, and that makes sense now.

([11:23](#)):

The teacher who told me that I was really argumentative and I'd be a great lawyer, because of course I told her no, because I was argumentative, but in that moment I was like, "Oh, definition of success, become a lawyer." I'm watching TV, LA Law and Ally McBeal. And I'm like, "That looks glamorous." So, all of the steps along the way, who you should marry, who you like, what kind of house, what size you should wear, all those things were all handed to me by somebody else who just put these rocks in my backpack. And I didn't realize that I was



weighed down by those rocks until suddenly I threw them off. And I was like, "Oh, everything makes sense." Everything makes sense.

MBS ([12:03](#)):

Do you think that only can happen when, if you're lucky, if you hit your thirties or your forties, and you have to realize without the rocks that people are giving you're directionless? So, when somebody throws you a tidbit, you're like, oh, lawyer, oh this, oh that. And you chase it because you're like, "It sounds good. And how would I know any alternatives?"

Laura ([12:26](#)):

Yes. Yeah.

MBS ([12:27](#)):

Is it just like you get older and wiser, hopefully?

Laura ([12:30](#)):

Yeah. I mean, look, I talk a lot about how failure's not finale, it's fulcrum. It's the place from which we learn, and we grow, and we iterate, and we change. And I actually was giving this talk once in Austin and there was an astronaut in the front row, and I was like, Failure's not finale, it's fulcrum. Except for you, sir."

MBS ([12:50](#)):

Exactly.

Laura ([12:51](#)):

But for the rest of us, right?



MBS ([12:51](#)):

I've done that talk to a bunch of people who run a nuclear power station. I'm like, "Not all of these things I'm saying apply to all of the things you are doing all the time.

Laura ([12:59](#)):

Exactly. But for the rest of us, I mean, I don't know. Again, I spent 20 years in executive search, so I interviewed people who were boldfaced names in boldfaced organizations. They were incredibly successful, which is why I was calling them. They weren't very happy, which is why they all called me back. So, they're in my interview chair. And do I hear, "I got straight A's, and then I went to the perfect graduate school, and then I got the perfect first job, and then I've worked my way up"? No, it's like left turns, and right turns, and U-turns, and MBS. Those are the things that make us most interesting. I've heard you tell stories that are fascinating and none of them are like, "Let me tell you my unbridled success." They're like, "Let me tell you about the time that I almost got sued by my professor."

MBS ([13:41](#)):

Yeah, exactly.

Laura ([13:42](#)):

I mean, they're great stories. So wait, but what are your seeds? I want to know your drive. I want to go back to that.

MBS ([13:53](#)):

I'm not entirely clear where I get my drive from, because I know my parents looked at me and they're like, "Who are you?" I was a little bit alien to them, because I had a willingness to be in public that neither of my parents really had. As a three-year-old, I'd go up to strangers in a supermarket and go, "Hi, my name's Michael. I can hop. Would you like to see me hop?"



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

Oh, I don't even do that now. That's terrifying.

MBS ([14:20](#)):

Yeah, exactly. Well, I still do that, but I'm just now get paid a bit of money for doing it. And I had a strong streak of not figuring out what was different and pursuing that. So, everything from running a 10 kilometer race dressed as a berry with a pink tutu to all sorts of things. So, it's not entirely clear. I also had a drive to win. The story my mom tells is me joining Cub Scouts. And after the first meeting coming back and me telling her that I was the sixer, the lead of this small subset of the pack, she's like, "How did that happen? You literally only just joined tonight." I said, "Well, I just explained to the guy who was the sixer that I was better than him, so I should be the sixer." And this poor, whoever this kid was, was like, "Okay, I'm handing over the stripes to Michael." And my first-

Laura ([15:24](#)):

Would love to do a study on where Paul ended up. That would be really fascinating.

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

Exactly. He's a alcoholic in a gut gutter somewhere, because he was broken as a seven-year-old. So, for me, there's been a degree of having to learn to value winning less strongly. And there was a moment a I remember, playing cricket in the backyard. And my grandparents were over from England and my grandmother was bowling. She would've been in her sixties, I would guess. And I hit a great cricket shot and she basically dived full length to pluck the ball an inch off the ground because she was very competitive. She played hockey for Great Britain.

Laura ([16:15](#)):

Okay, there's the DNA drop right there.



MBS ([16:19](#)):

And I threw the bat, and stormed off, and was sulking in a corner. And I just remember in that moment going, I'm not sure this is a great outcome. I can't remember exactly what I felt, but I just remembered seeing myself and going, "This winning thing seems to be overrated, at least losing seems to be overrated." So then, it's just a lifetime of trying to learn to lessen some of that.

([16:49](#)):

30 years ago, I did some men's work, went away on retreats and stuff. And part of that came up with a personal statement. First time I done something like that. And it was to, and I still talk about this today, to infect a billion people with the possibility virus. And the power of that for me, Laura, was that creating a virus as a metaphor means that I decentered myself from being the star. I don't need to be the spotlight. In fact, it's not about being the center, it's being even anonymously, it's putting stuff out in the world that makes the world better. So, that was a catalyst moment for me, which is figuring out my role as a servant leader rather than my role as winning a trophy.

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

Yeah. I love that. I love that. And I actually, I've worked with a lot of servant leaders in my time, given how much work I've done in politics and philanthropy. And I have a little bee in my bonnet about the servant leader thing. Because, I think so often we think of ourselves as servant leaders and we put the emphasis on servant, and we sometimes forget that there's a lead part of it too. And so, you end up getting this martyrdom, there's a lot of burnout, there's a lot of overcommitment, stretched too thin. I like to think about it a little bit differently. I think about it as the difference between institutions and cathedrals.

MBS ([18:14](#)):

Nice, yeah.



Laura ([18:14](#)):

So, if you're building an institution, that idea lives beyond you. If you're building a cathedral, then everybody's praying to you. And when you disappear, all done.

([18:25](#)):

And for entrepreneurs, it's a advice I often to give, I think you know I mentioned that I founded this firm and I also sold it. The reason I was able to sell it was my name wasn't on the door. I didn't make it about me. The hardest thing for me in becoming an author and a speaker that it's like, look at me, look at my ideas. I'm here in the center in the spotlight. You have coached me a lot on the importance of marketing and that I need to be telling people about my stuff. And it's really hard, because it feels very cathedral-like until I remind myself that it's about you want to infect people with possibility. I love that.

([19:04](#)):

I think every one of us has this goal inside of us that we revere so much that we almost whisper it when we talk about it. And we don't know if we're allowed to have that dream, but we can see it around the edges and it doesn't want to let go of us. And I'm so fascinated by what gets people to say, "You know what? Now. I'm going to do it. I'm going to try it. I'm going to go for it. If I fail, whatever."

([19:31](#)):

I've had long conversations with our mutual friend, Jonathan Fields, who talks a lot about when he was younger. He found a can of a bunch of paints and an old desk in his grandfather's basement. And he immediately put the desk on a bunch of blocks and started painting things. And he had visioned in his mind of what the result should be. But of course, what he created didn't look like that, because his expectations were so out-sized to anything he had even any right to expect at that level, having just started.

([20:01](#)):



But he would take it and he would destroy and he would throw it away. He'd rip it up, and he would be so angry with himself. And this perfectionism that he expected was unfair. And then, over, as he says, getting knocked to his knees a lot, and a whole lot of yoga, and a whole lot of meditation, and a whole lot of making mistakes and coming back, he now, he said to me, he said in the last book that he wrote, he's like, "The coolest thing is that there is a paragraph on page 10 that I could not have written five years ago—"

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

That's right.

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

... "because I wasn't that person yet. And how cool is it that every time I see something that people are capable of doing, I don't throw my [inaudible 00:20:40] back down and storm off. I think, amazing. I can now spend the next 10 years being able to get good at that." So, that's really helped me think about it in a way where it's... When it's about you, it has to be perfect and it has to be all about the thing that you're doing. But if you let go of it and you let it become this ongoing experiment that everyone else gets to have ownership on, I don't know, I think it... It's, at least for me, it releases the pressure of the win need.

MBS ([21:10](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. There's so much more here I want to talk to you about, but I'm going to ask you about the book you've chosen to read.

Laura ([21:18](#)):

Yes. So, the book I've chosen, and I don't know if people are choosing fiction, nonfiction, but I've chosen *Stones from the River*, by Ursula Hegi.

MBS ([21:27](#)):



That's right. This is a book of fiction. And I haven't heard of this, so I'm curious to know how it came into your life.

Laura ([21:32](#)):

Well, I had a mad crush on a boy, a young man that I worked with in the White House. And he was a voracious reader. We would walk home from the White House together, and we were very good friends, and I had this huge crush on him. And we would always stop at Kramer Books in Washington DC in DuPont Circle on the way home. And there were tables laid out. And he would always just point books, like, "This one's good. That one's good." And of course, in my young romantic mind, I was like, "He's sending me messages and he wants me to read these books."

MBS ([21:32](#)):

Right. Exactly.

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

So, anything he thought was good, I would of course end up reading. And somewhere along the way, *Stones from the River* by Ursula Hegi was one of those books. It came out in 1994. And I worked in the White House and from 1993 to 1997. So, this was a brand new book at that time. And you can see it's dogeared, and the spine-

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

Yeah, yeah, it's well loved.

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

... is bent a little bit. It's well loved. It's well loved.

MBS ([22:27](#)):

As all good books should be.



Laura ([22:29](#)):

Yes.

MBS ([22:29](#)):

What pages have you chosen for us?

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

I'm actually going to read the first couple of pages.

MBS ([22:33](#)):

Okay, perfect.

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

This was such an opportunity to go through the whole book again, and what a gift that is. Do you want to hear about the book first? Do I just jump in and read it? How do you [inaudible 00:22:44] it?

MBS ([22:44](#)):

Well, why don't you set it up in whatever way you think is needed and then plunge in.

Laura ([22:49](#)):

Okay. This book really affected me when I read it. And I actually read it traveling through Greece and Turkey backpacking. I think I had fleas from staying in youth hostels. And I was on an overnight train, or sorry, an overnight bus from Istanbul into Cappadocia, which is in the middle of the country, as you know. And I was just sitting in the back of this bus bouncing, reading this book with my little flashlight sobbing at the end of it. And I think all these Turkish people were like, "Who is the crazy American back there?" But it just moved me, it just stuck with me so much. And so, the book is set in Germany, starting in 1915, which is what I'll read. And it goes through post-war, post World War II Germany. And it's



basically all about the lives of everyday common Germans through this very tumultuous period coming out of World War I and in II, and then after World War II.

MBS ([23:47](#)):

That's a great setup.

Laura ([23:47](#)):

And it circles around Trudi Montag, who is the main character.

MBS ([23:52](#)):

Brilliant. Well, take us there.

Laura ([24:03](#)):

"As a child, Trudi Montag thought everyone knew what went on inside of others. That was before she understood the power of being different, the agony of being different, and the sin of ranting against an ineffective god. But before that, for years and years before that, she prayed to grow. Every night she would fall asleep with the prayer that, while she slept, her body would stretch itself, grow to the size of the other girls her age in Burgdorf, not even the taller ones like Eva Rosen, who would become her best friend in school for a brief time, but into a body with normal length arms and legs, and with a small, well-shaped head.

([24:36](#)):

To help God along, Trudi would hang from doorframes while her fingers until they were numb, convinced that she could make her bones lengthen. Many nights she'd tie her mother's silk scarves around her head, one encircling her forehead, the other knotted beneath her chin to help her head from expanding. How she prayed."



[NEW_PARAGRAPH]"And every morning when her arms were still stubby and her legs wouldn't reach the floor, as she'd swing them from her mattress, she'd tell herself that she hadn't prayed hard enough or that it wasn't the right time yet. So, she'd keep praying, wishing, believing that anything you prayed for this hard would surely have been granted if you were only patient.

[\(25:12\)](#):

Patience and obedience, they were almost inseparable. And the training for them began with the first step you took. You learned about obedience to your parents and to other adults. And then about obedience to your church, your teachers, your government. Acts of disobedience were punished efficiently, swiftly, a slap to your knuckles with a ruler, three rosaries, confinement. As an adult, Trudi would scorn the patient fools who knelt in church waiting. But as a girl, she'd go to mass every Sunday and sing in the choir.

[\(25:40\)](#):

During the week, she'd sometimes slip into church on her way home from school, taking comfort in the holy scent of incense as she'd whispered her prayers to the painted plaster saints that line the sides of St. Martin's church. St. Petrus next to the confessional, his eyebrows perpetually raised in an expression of shock, as if he had overheard every sin the people of Burgdorf had whispered to generations of weary priests. St. Agnes with her ma mournful eyes rolled up, and her fingers clasped to her bosom, as if rehearsing to withstand countless other attacks on her purity. St. Stefan with a pile of chocolate colored rocks hiding at his feet, except for one pasty toe. His bleeding arms extended as though inviting his enemies to hurl even larger stones at him and ensure his eternal salvation."

[NEW_PARAGRAPH]"To all of them, Trudi prayed. And her body grew. But as though her prayers have been twisted in some horrible joke, her body did not stretch itself upward as she presumed it would be, yet had failed to specify in



every single prayer, but expanded into a solid width that would eventually make her forearms as massive as those of Heir Emers who own the butcher shop. And her jaws formidable of that is Frau Weiler who ran the grocery store next door."

[NEW_PARAGRAPH]"By then, Trudi had come up against the moment where she knew that praying for something did not make it happen, that this was it. That there was no God magic, that she was as tall as she would ever be, and that she would die someday. And that anything that happened to her until that day up until her death would be up to her to resolve. She knew this with stunning clarity, that chilled her to the core, that April Sunday in 1929 in the bermeister's barn where the circle of boys closed around her." Not going to read what happens. "And she saw herself as a very old woman and simultaneously as an infant, as if her past and future were at opposite ends of the taut rubber band that someone had let go of just for an instant causing her entire life, every minute she had lived and would live, to coil in on itself and touch where she was in that moment at the barn. She knew that she'd always be able to see herself that way again."

[NEW_PARAGRAPH]"She'd watched herself pull her mother from the earth nest beneath the house, dismantle a section of stonewall in the cellar, and dig a secret dirt tunnel to the Blau's house. Stroke her lover's back with both hands, and feel the fine oval hairs of the base of his spine, the night sky that's swirled around them. Recoil from the heat of the flames that spurred her from the broken windows of the synagogue and showered the school and the [inaudible 00:27:57] with sparks the color of the fabric star Judenstern that her friend, Eva Rosa, would have to wear on her coat."

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

It's a wonderful setup. What is it about these first pages that pulled you into the book?

Laura ([28:16](#)):



The first pages, it makes you think like, okay, so there's this young girl and she's small, and there's this whole world of things that are about to happen to her, and all she wants to do is become bigger. But here's the thing about Trudi Montag. Trudi Montag is a dwarf. And so, she never grows. And not only does she not grow, she almost becomes invisible in this way. So, throughout the book, she has a choice every single time to either become a victim and to be invisible and to have other people define who she is or to live the life that she can live.

[\(28:56\)](#):

What she realizes in the book is that because she is this Zwerg, as they call her in German, people will either say things around her because they just don't think that she's fully human or they will confide in her in a way because she thinks she's this mystical, magical person. And so, she, throughout the book, becomes the person who... She overhears, on British radio, and she brings the information back to the German. She overhears German soldiers talking, and she brings that back to the resistance. She hides Jews in her attic because nobody's going to look in the Zwerg's house. And so, she ends up using this thing that made her so different that she grew up hating, just detesting, and actually turning into the very thing that defines all that she can be in her life.

MBS [\(29:47\)](#):

Here's a question I want to ask you, Laura, and you can skirt this if you want. What have you had to grow to love about yourself?

Laura [\(30:06\)](#):

Going back to the perfect sister growing up, I was just a year behind her in school, and all of my guy friends had crushes on her. I remember going back to my ten-year high school reunion and all my guy friends were like, "Did you look like this in high school?" I was like, "Yeah." They're like, "Why didn't we date?" And I'm like, "Because you were in love with my sister. I was invisible."



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

I remember crying to my mom about it one time and my mom saying like, "It's okay, Laura, you're the smart one." PS, my sister has two master's degrees, so it's not like she's the dumb one. But by the way, parents of kids, don't ever say that to your kids, "You're the smart one." My parents, of course, my mother meant it absolutely perfectly. And I'm smart, so great. But I think getting comfortable with who I am and always feeling so insecure that people were going to love other people more than me caused me to create this very sarcastic outer shell. Because, if you lead with a good left hook, you don't have to worry about about the right-

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

Attack is the best form of defense, right?

Laura [\(31:13\)](#):

Exactly. Exactly. So, I would leave with a really hard offense figuring if I went in hard then I wouldn't have to show that I wasn't perfect. And so, all of this learning that failure's not finale, that it's the housing the cake while I'm talking about the new book, and I'm a hot mess doing it, people actually love the imperfection more than the perfection. They can relate to the imperfection more than the perfection. Lord knows I have a lot of imperfection. So, I think growing to love the part of me that is always in process, that is never perfect, that doesn't always know. Because, I think that the fact that I am just a super nerd about a lot of things is, I hope, part of what makes me more compelling as a human. But you don't know that unless you're comfortable showing it. You know?

MBS [\(32:20\)](#):

Yeah. I feel, on a perhaps parallel way, the fact that I have a cleft lip and palate I think plays to an advantage. It makes me different. It makes me less polished. I have a speech impediment of sorts. And I've gone away from thinking that's



something to be downplayed. It's not that's something I put a spotlight on particularly. But I think it's part of the package that makes me a bit more interesting and different from other people. And I'm happy to be different.

Laura ([32:49](#)):

Were you bullied about it as a kid, or were people loving you because it's... How did that manifest in your childhood?

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

Well, my dad has a cleft lip and palate, and the brother closest to me in age also has a cleft lip and palate. So, it was normal within the context of my family. So much so that when my youngest brother was born and he didn't have a cleft lip and palate, at some stage he had a bit of a crisis, because he's like, "I want a cleft lip and palate, because I don't have one." And I'm like, "Yeah." I've always had a pretty robust sense of self, so I don't really remember being bullied. I also have a very selective memory, so I may have been.

([33:29](#)):

I know my other brother, Nigel, found it harder. And he came a different route to getting used to who he was. But for me, I was always pretty comfortable about going, "I should be the sixer of this Cub Scout pack. Step aside, I should be the captain, because I'm going to claim that." I want to make the connection between what you're talking about, this moment of acceptance of, the unloving of the imperfection, the humanness. Your first book was called Limitless.

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

Yes.

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

Which actually, I know this isn't what the book's about, but it can hint it, a kind of searching for perfection. Your new book is called Wonderhell. What's the journey between those two books?



Laura ([34:26](#)):

Yeah, I mean it's so interesting because when Limitless came out, I did a bunch of podcasts and people would ask me, "What are five books every leader should read?" And I would talk about books that we all talk about for leadership books, but I would always mention Stones from the River. And people are like, "What are you talking about?" Because I do, there's just something in reading a book about somebody who has had to overcome something, but in the overcoming of it actually embraces it, that we can see this whole version of themselves. And there's obviously, I didn't write Limitless thinking about Stones from the River. It was only when people were asking me in the podcast that I was like, "Well, what are the books that are super interesting?" And then, I was like, there's a seed there probably early on about this thing.

([35:17](#)):

Limitless is based on this idea of if all those people that I talked to were successful but not happy, why are we filling in all the boxes on someone else's version of someone else's success, and then finding ourselves not happy? We've filled in all the boxes, why are we still so empty? So in Limitless, I talk about, as you know, how to find both success and happiness, this idea of consonance, which is when what you do matches who you are. And it's made up of calling, connection, contribution, and control. But it really focuses on this singular question, which is, what does success mean for you? How much calling, how much contribution, how much connection, how much control do you need right now in this point in your life? So, if you are at a point in your life where you don't actually want any calling, cool, fine. You don't have to have any. Maybe you need tons of contribution, great. So if you don't need any calling, because you don't have any great, you're in consonance there. That's perfect. You just need to have as much as you need at any particular time.

([36:16](#)):



And each of us, at every age and every life stage, that definition changes. So, when we're young and somebody says, pick a major, pick a trade, pick a college, pick a career, we're like, okay. And we don't have a frontal lobe.

MBS ([36:32](#)):

Yeah, exactly.

Laura ([36:32](#)):

We don't actually have the capacity to make good, sound, logical decisions when we're asked to make this decision that's going to affect the very rest of our lives.

MBS ([36:37](#)):

I'm so looking forward to that phase passing for me. I know it's coming soon. But I'm still working with an adolescent brain pretty much here.

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

But I mean there is a good part of that. I mean, obviously, you're kidding. But the thing is, the adult version of us says, "Stop, don't do it. You might get hurt. It might be a problem." And so, when *Limitless* came out, it debuted on the Washington Post bestseller list, number two behind Michelle Obama, oh my God, crazy. Huh, what else can I do? Right?

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

Right.

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

It was incredible. It was amazing. It was wonderful. But also in that moment I was like, "Well, I want to be on *Good Morning America*. And I want to band the



oak tree with Oprah. She's got to talk to somebody, why not me?" So, it also became stressful, and anxiety provoking, and identity questioning. I was exhausted and I was staring burnout right in the face. So, on all these moments where we find a little bit of success, whether you sold your first business or your first coaching contract, whatever the thing is, you suddenly are like, "Oh, what else is there?" And all the literature out there is bigger, better, faster, more, hustle harder. And I was like, well, that's untenable. So, if I'm in this moment where it's wonderful and it's hell, it's wonderhell, how do I get through it? And so, when the pandemic hit, I talked to a hundred different glass ceiling shatters, Olympic medalists, startup unicorns, everyday people like us, to find out how they did it. And what I realized-

MBS ([38:06](#)):

I'm sorry, I'm not an everyday person.

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

Sorry. I talked to Olympic medalists, I talked to startup unicorns, I talked to everyday people like me, and sixers like you.

MBS ([38:17](#)):

Thank you.

Laura ([38:20](#)):

And I thought they were going to give me an answer. And the answer was, yeah, on the other side of this Wonderhell is just the next one, and the next one, and the next one, if you're lucky. And so, what I came to learn is that there is a voice inside of our head that's like, "This is too hard, don't do it. Quit, stop." And that voice is this governor telling us, too, that we might fail, and we might embarrass ourself, and things are going to be terrible, and we shouldn't do it. And it feels like a limitation, when in fact, this version of Wonderhell where you see your potential and you feel the burden of it is only available to those of us who



actually can have the imagination of what's next. It's not a limitation, it's actually an invitation.

[\(38:59\)](#):

So for me, it's about constantly coming back to that question of not how much more can I do, but how much more can I be. And does this, at this age and this life stage, fit with where I want to be and who I know that I am inside when I'm being seen and not just being loved?

MBS [\(39:20\)](#):

So Laura, we're talking a little bit before your book is published. And so, I imagine this insight is being tested.

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

Daily.

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

How are you holding success for this book? And how is that being challenged just by the incessant gnawing that a book launch does, which is, it's never... There's a sense, with book launches in my experiences, which is like it's never enough. Whatever you're doing is not never ever enough, and it's probably not going to work. First of all, how are you thinking about success? Secondly, how's that being tested?

Laura [\(40:02\)](#):

I think I have all the regular metrics of success, like how many books will I sell, and will I make a list, and all of those things. And that's being tested a lot. It's being tested a lot and every single day. Because, who knows if I make a list? You could sell all the books in the world and they can decide to just leave your name off the list. It just, who knows?



MBS ([40:25](#)):

Yeah. It's random. Yeah.

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

So, it's random and it's capricious in a way that-

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

It's a better word. It's capricious is a better word.

Laura ([40:30](#)):

... it could maybe feel cruel. At the same time, will my life be demonstrably different if I make a list or not? Probably not. So, it's like there's success for my ego and then there's success for my heart. And I got an email this morning from one of my newsletter readers. I send out a newsletter every Tuesday, my Hello Tuesday. And I sent out some early copies for some of my most loyal readers. And I got an email back from somebody, literally just this morning, who said, "I have to tell you, I didn't think this book was for me, because I didn't know if I'd actually felt enough success for it. And I read Limitless and I love Limitless, and I didn't think this was going to be for me. But I'm halfway through the book and I feel like you and I are sitting on the couch and you are just giving me-"

MBS ([40:30](#)):

Oh, nice.

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

... "the best life advice ever." She was like, "I need to read this book over." And I think she said something like, "The jokes on me, because this book in fact was exactly everything I needed. And I can feel like I hear your voice with me." And honestly, somebody saying, "I'm reading your book and it feels like you're talking just to me," is there any better compliment an author can have than



that? When somebody says "MBS, I read How to Begin, I read The Coaching Habit, I felt like you were talking just to me."

MBS ([41:52](#)):

Well, let me ask you this. How is that different from seeking people's approval as a young kid? And let me ask you an add-on question which is, what's the success around the being for you? Because, you talked about success as a consonance between the beingness of you. How's that? Where's that?

Laura ([42:20](#)):

I can tell you very specifically the difference. I don't know if I could be as specific with the answer of the being. The old me would have wanted to succeed publicly. I make the list, I do the big media, I do all the things where I can be like, "See, I'm worthy. Here's my list of trophies." And then, during the pandemic, like a lot of us, I just stopped sleeping, stress all the... And-

MBS ([42:47](#)):

I think you did that more extremely than most of us, but sure.

Laura ([42:51](#)):

Yes, yes.

MBS ([42:52](#)):

Carry on.

Laura ([42:52](#)):

Well, yeah. Yes. Before I was diagnosed with the disease that 800 people in the entirety the United States have, I had stopped sleeping, which might have brought on the disease, the super rare, one in 415,000, disease that I had, which I'm fine with by the way, for anyone listening who's just got panicked. I went to go see a therapist and it's the first time in my life I'd ever had therapy. Not that I



was against it, I just never felt the need for it. And now I'm like, they should just pipe therapy in through the HVAC system. Everyone should have therapy.

[\(43:26\)](#):

I walked into the psychiatrist's office and I was like, "I haven't slept in three months, and here's the problem. And I think I've just got slow trauma. Something's going on." Our friend Tasha Eurich was like, "You should talk to somebody." And I was like, "Okay." And when Tasha tells you to go talk to somebody, you go talk to somebody. And he diagnosed me fairly quickly as being a bored overachiever. I'm really boring overachiever who suddenly can't stack up the trophies. And he was like, "Well, we could work on your overachievement." And I was like, "No, man, that's a feature, not a bug." And he was like, "Yeah, but it's untenable." And I'm like, "No, no, I'm fine." And he checkmated with, "But you're here." I was like, "Touche."

[\(44:04\)](#):

And he said to me something so profound that I actually put it into Wonderhell. He said, "Laura, you don't have to give any of the trophies back." And I was like, "Oh, whoa." All the trophies I have already achieved in my life, they're all still there. What will the trophies, the public trophies I get from this book do other than just weigh me down that I have to drag a bigger thing of trophies around? It doesn't actually do anything. So, the old me, the younger me, and certainly the pre-pandemic me would've said success was pleasing other people, and showing up, and getting everyone else's approval with those trophies. The new me just wanted to write a book that was so true to who I am.

[\(44:52\)](#):

When I sent it to my publisher for the penultimate round of edits, they sent it back to me wiping the LGO out of it. I'll say something like, "And then, the storm is coming, so you race to the grocery store, milk, butter, cheese, eggs, got to get everything in time." And it came back to me like, "And then, when you check the weather report, you notice that there's a weather system coming in. You decide



to drive to the grocery store. While there, you buy milk, butter, cheese, and eggs." And I was just like, "No, that's not like... Oh my God."

[\(45:25\)](#):

I would say success now is that I got on the phone with the publisher, and I was like, "WTF. Where's the LGO? Like, no. And he said, "Yeah, but it's a little too long. And you tell stories. They're a little... We can tighten it up a bit." And I'm like, "What you're tightening is taking the me out of it. And the me is what my readers read." And so for me, now success is knowing who I am and how I can bring that to people who actually want to see more of me. There are plenty of people who want to see no more of me. But for the ones who want to see more of me, I want to bring it to them. And so, that, I think, is the difference.

MBS [\(46:03\)](#):

Yeah. That's a perfect answer.

Laura [\(46:05\)](#):

Yeah.

MBS [\(46:07\)](#):

I can't remember how quick-

Laura [\(46:07\)](#):

That might also answer the second question. I'm not even sure, yeah.

MBS [\(46:12\)](#):

It does. No, no, it does. That answers the second question in a perfect way.

Laura [\(46:14\)](#):

Are your goals changing between with the next book coming out?

MBS [\(46:18\)](#):



Well, I'll tell you the thing that's really making a difference. Our goal for this new book is to improve 10 million working relationships. And because it's mission driven rather than book sale driven, it makes all the difference in terms of how lightly, and I'm holding the launch of it, and also how committed I am to the launch. Because, I feel like I can see how getting this book out in the world makes the world better.

[\(46:45\)](#):

Whereas, it's very easy, and I've experienced this with other book launches where I'm like, I'm just really trying to sell books. And so, the favors I'm asking for, because pre-launch you ask a lot of people for favors, can you blurb my book? Can you mention my book? Can you re-mention my book? Have I asked you to mention my book? It's like there's this relentless asking, which is it can be hard at times. It feels easier, because I know why I'm doing this. And I'm more enrolling people in a bigger mission rather than just helping me make my life better. So, that helps. The other thing that really helps me, and I remember it sometimes, is the saying, I've already won. Because, I feel like-

Laura [\(47:35\)](#):

You don't have to give the trophies back.

MBS [\(47:37\)](#):

I'm like, I have so already won. Because look how extraordinarily good my life has turned out so far. It's amazing. I know, I was just trading emails with a friend who is another author, and he's got a book out, came out three months ago, it's still on bestseller list, it's still a number one self-help book. And he's like he's a bit down about it. Like, "Dude, you are snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. You have already-"

Laura [\(48:01\)](#):

No kidding.



MBS ([48:02](#)):

"You have already won."

Laura ([48:03](#)):

We're so good at that. We're so good. I love that snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. I've heard that expression before and it's so clever. But I think we do that. I think we walk around, and 90% of everything could be amazing. And we're like, "Yeah, but what about..." And it's like, no, no. I mean, I think the secondary answer to your question is I think that this would be successful if I could just be present and enjoy it.

MBS ([48:03](#)):

I love that.

Laura ([48:32](#)):

Just actually enjoy the ride a little bit, because we are... You'll enjoy this, because I know you do yoga. I did yoga this morning. I went to a hot yoga class and it was the first yoga class I've been to since 2014.

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

Once a decade. I do yoga once a decade as well.

Laura ([48:50](#)):

Yes. So, as you might imagine, it didn't go so well. And on the way out the teacher was like, "How do you feel?" And I was like, "Creaky." But she did this whole thing while we were in our Shavasana, which of course is my favorite position, because you just got to lay there.

MBS ([49:03](#)):

Just lie on the floor, yeah.



Laura ([49:04](#)):

Lie on the floor. And she talked about how we're going to leave the studio. We're all going to be like, "What's on? What's next? What's next? Let's get on to what's next." And I have not had enough opportunity in my life to be present in the opportunity in my life. And I'm going to do it differently with this one.

MBS ([49:24](#)):

Do you have something celebratory planned?

Laura ([49:28](#)):

No, but-

MBS ([49:29](#)):

Oh, you don't. Get onto that.

Laura ([49:30](#)):

Well, as a family, we're going on a vacation at the beginning of July. So, the book comes out the beginning of April.

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

Yeah, but that's a family vacation. I want a celebration for you and the book.

Laura ([49:40](#)):

I mean, I could get another sheet cake and just... Maybe that's what I'll do.

MBS ([49:40](#)):

Possibly involving other people.

Laura ([49:44](#)):

If it makes a list, I'll sit on my-



MBS ([49:44](#)):

I want you to-

Laura ([49:47](#)):

No, see, I don't like to go up to people in the supermarket and hop in front of them. That's not my just... Ugh.

MBS ([49:53](#)):

No. Call in the people who you see and who see you and bring them together to celebrate the book.

Laura ([49:58](#)):

Yes, I should do that. I should do that. And we can all eat sheet cake.

MBS ([50:02](#)):

Exactly. Hey-

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

Or I could eat it all, because no one will want it, because it's disgusting. And then, more sheet cake for me.

MBS ([50:07](#)):

Exactly. That's a double win. A final question, Laura, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said between you and me?

Laura ([50:16](#)):

Oh gosh. What needs to be said?



MBS ([50:19](#)):

If anything?

Laura ([50:23](#)):

Here's what want to know, because I think you are such a good question asker. I want to know, when you get people together for dinners or... What is the question that you love to ask them most? I'm not going to answer I, because they're always so hard, but I want to know that. I wonder what your brain is thinking about these day.

MBS ([50:40](#)):

I literally collect questions. Like in May next year, I'm putting out a journal, which is a collection of my best questions to help people go deeper around stuff. So, I think hard about this and I collect it. But the question I often open with is, what are two essential things about who you are?

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

Oh, that's great.

MBS ([51:04](#)):

What that does is and makes people figure out what's essential. And it's often not my job title, or the number of kids I have, or where I live, or the usual stuff that normally gets thrown out in an introduction. It's normally, this is what matters to me.

Laura ([51:21](#)):

Okay. So I got to ask, what are the two essential things about you?

MBS ([51:28](#)):

Well, it's interesting, because I also tweak it to go, what's essential about me now?



Laura ([51:33](#)):

Yes.

MBS ([51:33](#)):

Because, it changes, it evolves. But one essential thing is I am becoming a writer, meaning I'm claiming space to... It's not about the books I do or don't produce. It's about recentering my life around a writing practice and what I think that involves, which is writing, and reading, and not answering email every minute, and all that sort of stuff. So, I'd say being a writer is an essential thing. And I think the other thing that comes to mind for me right now is I'm the son of a failing parent. My dad died a year and a half ago. My mom is having a very hard time in her widowhood. And so, that's just become a much more central part of what I'm doing, which is working with my two brothers to figure out how we support mom as she has a hard time in her life.

Laura ([52:36](#)):

Yes, yes. Well, and those two things are a little at contrast with each other, I would imagine.

MBS ([52:42](#)):

Yeah. So, that's interesting to sit there and go, "Ah." Because when I went back to Australia last time, it was very hard to do any writing, because my attention was always pulled away from when I was trying to do deep work on to cook dinner, or cook lunch, or vacuum the house, or listen for the phone.

Laura ([53:02](#)):

Just the emotional energy of-

MBS ([53:04](#)):

Just the emotional energy, exactly.



Laura ([53:06](#)):

Yes. Yeah.

MBS ([53:07](#)):

Do you want to answer that two essential things about you?

Laura ([53:10](#)):

No. I don't know. I think I am somebody who loves really hard. I am just one of those people. If you are in my heart, you are in my heart. And it takes a very long time for somebody to be out. But once you are out, you are out. I love hard. I read yesterday, I posted a video of me reading the acknowledgements of Wonderhell on Facebook, and my husband watched it at work, and he was like, "What I love about you, you are just, it's all there." And then, I think the related thing is probably that I'm an all-in person. If I'm going to run, I'm going to train and run marathons. If I'm going to write a book, I'm going to write the whole thing. I don't do anything halfway. I guess, the easiest way to say it is I don't like the liminal space. Yeah. Maybe that's one essential thing about me. But that's it. Yeah. I guess the second essential thing is that I really like efficiency, so I'm just going to give you one thing.

MBS ([54:27](#)):

You gave me two things. I love hard and I don't like the liminal space. I love both those things about you,

Laura ([54:33](#)):

Which is funny, because Wonderhell's all about the liminal space. That's the whole point of Wonderhell is the liminal space.

MBS ([54:39](#)):

We write the book we need to read.



Laura ([54:41](#)):

Always. Yes.

MBS ([54:49](#)):

The question that Laura's new book, *Wonderhell*, raises for me actually is not the one that I posed at the start of this interview. A question about what trophies have you collected and what trophies are you pursuing and how are they shaping you. It's a little more twisty, a little deeper perhaps than that. And here it is. What would it be to fully accept the success you've already had? Rather than rushing on from this, it's like to be with the success, to celebrate the success you've already had, not beating yourself up about failures from the past. That's where sometimes our brains go. Not grinding towards the future, relentlessly pressing forward, that's somewhere that our brains sometimes go. And not dismissing or hurrying on from what it is that you've done or who you've become, settling into the success, appreciating it, relishing it.

([55:52](#)):

I'm trying to do that. And honestly, it is not easy. In fact, it reminds me a little bit of trying to do a yoga stretch. I had a yoga class this morning, so this is on my mind. You somehow have to relax your brain so that your muscles learn to relax as well. You hold the pose, your brain says, "Michael, you can let go. You can relax." And somehow that tells your muscles to actually let go, and the stretch deepens. And then, weirdly enough, your brain goes, "Oh look, you are relaxed." And that allows you to relax a little more. It's this virtuous circle. So, you and the success that you've had can take a deep breath, and you can name a success for you. You don't have to name all of them, but just find something. And if you can relax into it and all that's good about it, how does that feel?

([56:49](#)):

Maybe while you are marinating in this glorious moment, I can suggest a couple of other interviews. JeVon McCormick, talking about how to face fear, is a man that has invented himself quite a few times. And it's worth that conversation



just to hear his various stories. And then, Madeleine Dore, her interview is called How To Be Alive. And I thought that was really great. She has such a good newsletter. If you haven't already enrolled in that, I suggest you do that.

[\(57:18\)](#):

Now, as for Laura, she has her book out, or at least it's coming out today, or yesterday, or tomorrow, or sometime about now. If you like the sound of her, and I think you probably do, I'd encourage you to check out this book. It's one of the things that I'm doing to support her in the book launch. You can pre-order or just order Wonderhell in all the places you normally buy a book. But you could go to heylgo.com, because you'll find pre-order bonuses there if they're still available. And on all the regular socials, Twitter, Instagram, and the like, it's [@heylgo](https://twitter.com/heylgo). Thank you for your support, your encouragement, for passing the word along, for giving reviews. You're awesome and you're doing great.