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MBS (00:00):

So what was your lucky break? I mean, I remember some research ages ago, the distant past. I can't even remember if it's real research, but I'm going to go with it. And the research said that one of the ways you become luckier is to consider yourself a lucky person. I love how that insight kind of starts playing with your head, playing with how you show up in the world. So whether or not your inclination is to think of yourself as lucky, just humor me for now. So if you had to name a lucky break, what would it be? That moment when things tipped in your favor, when you inadvertently unlock the secret to the next level, when you actually noticed a clue to a hidden door. That moment when things changed.

(00:47):

For me, it was accidentally cracking a joke in a really important interview. They pointed to the contradictions in my past and said, "So Michael, can't you make

up your mind?" I mean, that's a pretty pushy question, but I said, "Yes and no." Now, I didn't mean to be funny, but I was. And we all relaxed. And after that, the interview went brilliantly. And I, in fact, got the result that I was hoping for. That was it. That was my lucky break. That was the moment where instead of going left, I somehow got to go right, and everything changed. How about for you? What was your lucky break?

(01:30):

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. Dr. Emily Balcetis is one of the most sought after voices on motivational science. Her research sees her delving into the differences in judgments and behaviors from person to person.

Emily (01:54):

So I'm a behavioral scientist. That means I design studies in my lab and test out all of the things that I want to know about how people work.

MBS (02:02):

Emily shares what she finds out through her keynote speaking, through her writing. She writes articles, and she has a book called Clearer, Closer, Better: How Successful People See the World. And she continues to shape and define the cutting edge research in her role as director of the Social Perception Action and Motivation Lab, the SPAM Lab, which is such a good title. But this was not what she thought her career was going to be.

Emily (02:29):

I'm a wannabe rock rockstar, a wannabe musician. Well, I guess I am a musician, but a wannabe rockstar. That's what I thought my first career would be. It was in music. I was a very good saxophone player. I was a not-so-great flute player. And I'm a one-hit-wonder on drums.

MBS (02:49):

Emily studied music in college and was excellent at playing the saxophone. And in fact, her whole family is musical, including her sister.

Emily (02:57):

Playing the saxophone duets with her on a street corner, busking for money was lucrative at the time that we started, given what the alternative would be. And you get to choose your own schedule. Plus, it was hanging out with my cool sister. So we got really, really good, really fast, by spending our summers doing that, when we felt like working at all.

MBS (03:18):

Ah, now, if just one or two things had been different, we could be living in a world where Ed Sheeran was doing research somewhere and Emily was the rockstar. But no, it actually wasn't her sister. It was another family member that created a bridge, a bittersweet bridge, to the focus of her work today.

Emily (03:38):

As a psychologist, I really am interested in how the brain works. So that's me as a grownup adult. But as a child, I remember being confused the first time I saw my grandmother sitting in the corner of her living room, crying, just crying, crying, and even more confused because my mother, my aunt, so her children, were in the kitchen and not paying her any attention. And I didn't understand what happened, what was happening. But later on, I realized that's the day that my grandmother, who was a registered nurse, discovered that she has Alzheimer's. And because she was in the medical community, she knew what that meant for what the rest of her life would be. And my mom and her sister were in the kitchen, trying to grapple with that awful news.

(04:22):

So my grandmother had Alzheimer's for 15 years before she passed away from it, which is a very long time, especially when 13 of those years, she wasn't able to talk with us. And then 10 of those years, she couldn't do anything for herself, and even including sitting up straight. But when we would go to her care facilities and play music, and in particular play her wedding song, Stardust, Hoagy Carmichael, she would start to cry, and she would start to move her feet. And that was a memory that I had when I was in high school, probably my second year of high school. And it's those kinds of things where you have those moments, and you realize there is something fundamentally special about music.

MBS (05:08):

Yeah. And it feels like that's the bridge between music and psychology, the way the brain interacts with music.

Emily (05:17):

Mm-hmm. I think so. Right? There's-

MBS (05:19):

Yeah.

Emily (05:19):

... Yeah.

MBS (05:21):

What was the moment when you moved away from music? Was there a moment where you went, "Actually, I've pursued this career. I have a sister who's becoming a professional musician, but maybe this isn't the career for me"?

Emily (05:36):

Even though I'm far into life, I'm still not ready to accept that I have moved away from music. I mean, obviously, it's not my profession, but it's an important part of my family. My parents are still around. We play music together. And I have two kids, and we all play music together. My husband is an incredible rock drummer, not professionally, which is good. I don't think I could be married to a professional rock drummer. As much as my brain, or my heart wants to be, my brain knows I can't. But I was in college. I was a music performance major, plus a psychology major. And I chose my school because of the saxophone teacher, and I wanted to study with Dr. David Nabb. And that's how I chose my university.

(06:25):

But in my junior year of college, he was in his early thirties, and he had a major stroke that paralyzed the whole left side of his body. It was a really shocking, surprising, unexpected thing for everybody because he was in incredible health. He was an avid cyclist, and it was just a fluke. It was just a really unfortunate fluke. But it did mean that I lost out on a year and a half of my music studies at a very formative and important point in the development of that career. And it would've been an uphill-battle kind of life anyway. So that's how life sort of had its way with me and decided that this wasn't going to be something I could be very competitive at. So luckily, I had an amazing psychology department that I was a part of also, that gave me incredible opportunities and really supported and encouraged this career path that I now own.

MBS (07:16):

Yes, psychology is a broad field. I'm curious to know how you found your path in it.

Emily (07:25):

It was just really letting my heart guide the way. What was fun? What did I like reading about? What did I like doing? I did lots of research projects when I was an undergrad, including some that tried to merge music and psychology. Did that and didn't like it. Thought I wanted to study group dynamics because I was always annoyed at how I felt like I was the one doing far more than my fair share of the work. So I started studying that-

MBS (07:53):

I recognize that, yeah.

Emily (07:54):

... and realized, I don't like that either. It was a lot of jumping in, giving it a shot, and realizing that I didn't like it. It seemed good from the outside, but not from the inside. But then I was reading journal articles, and I found this author who I just loved, loved his writing style, the sense of humor that was coming through. I've always been a strong writer, or at least that's what my mom says. And so this felt like [inaudible 00:08:21] somebody-

MBS (08:21):

I know your mom. She has impeccable taste. I'm sure she's right.

Emily (08:25):

... Well, thank you. She's the most biased person that there could be on this planet with that assessment. But I did like writing, and I found a scientist author that I felt like I shared a similar style with. And I really liked the things that he was studying as well. And so on a lark, I applied to work with David Dunning at Cornell University, and I got in there. And it was in social psychology. I was

studying social psychology, and as was he. And that area just doesn't really pigeonhole you that much. It's just people. It's like being-

MBS (08:25):

Right.

Emily (09:03):

... It's like finding a career that lets you be a professional gossiper, but gives you the scientific tools to being confident in whatever judgments you pass about people. And as a young person, that really appealed to me. I get to be judgmental and someone's going to pay me for it. That's it.

MBS (09:22):

How have you come to learn what to trust and what not to trust in how you experience the world?

Emily (09:33):

That's a great question. Well, I trust in science. And I understand the fallibilities of science, and I understand where bias creeps in, even for scientists who are using the tools of science. But there's another tool of science, which is its ability for self-correction. So I don't go into that statement blindly, saying science is the best, science is great, everyone should believe everything scientists say. But I do think that it's a mechanism that includes self-correction. It includes the minds of many and the perspectives of many more. And it is a way to triangulate around truth better than any alternative that we have, in my opinion. I was a failed philosopher, I should say also. So if that is lingering in other people's minds, that doesn't resonate. Philosophy does not resonate with me as a means to triangulating on truth. I like data.

(10:34):

But I think also, there was this moment in my life when I was in graduate school. It was a stressful time. I was supposed to be a grownup, but I didn't quite feel

like I was there yet. And I was going through an awful breakup. And so I joined a group therapy session, through student health services group therapy. My first time of doing that, first and only time of doing a group therapy session. And I just remember going in, meet these people who are strangers, who are there because they want help for themselves. And not necessarily that we all want to help each other, but we're there for ourselves primarily. And so every couple weeks, I ... Well, every time I would go in for a few weeks, I would say, "I don't understand why this happened. I don't understand how this happened in my life." And somebody just said, "Maybe you're never going to understand. Okay?" Not a compassionate answer.

MBS (11:27):

No.

Emily (11:27):

But it was like a breakthrough moment for me, which is, "Oh. That's what I have to accept." Not that he was right, I was wrong. I was wrong? He was right? I don't know. I don't know. But what I needed to accept was I am not going to know. And so that was a moment for me, that really sunk in of like, "Oh, that can be the end. You don't always have to have the answer." And I feel like that's been a guiding conclusion or mantra of, sometimes what we're going to know is that we don't know, and that what I'm going to know is that I'm not right, that I might not be right. And that's what I know. So I think that's sort of the other thing floating around in my mind, is that I-

MBS (12:09):

That's very helpful.

Emily (12:10):

... might not have the right answer. And that's true.

MBS (12:13):

There's more there, and I want to come back to it, but perhaps now, I could ask you about what book you've chosen to read from.

Emily (12:20):

I chose How to Change by Katy Milkman.

MBS (12:24):

Fantastic.

Emily (12:25):

An incredible behavioral scientist, right?

MBS (12:28):

She is, yeah.

Emily (12:29):

Yes. You know the book, you know her. And she's part of an incredible club, I suppose, of amazing scholars that really take these principles of science, the tools of science, to understand real human problems and find the solutions for them. So I admire her approach to science and her incredible ability to communicate complex, tough ideas in an extremely understandable and relatable way.

MBS (13:00):

How did you come across this book?

Emily (13:06):

I don't know. I internet-stalk her and see what she's up to. That's probably part of it.

MBS (13:09):

I do that as well. We're in good company. I keep watching Katy and her gang of smart people around her, doing stuff. In fact, I think I probably found your work through her, actually. I think she was my gateway drug to you, Emily.

Emily (13:26):

Oh, cool.

MBS (13:28):

And how did you choose what two pages to read?

Emily (13:31):

Oh my goodness. It's almost random because when you said find your favorite two, I was like, "Oh, please, that's not possible. There's no favorite two." Choose two that maybe you don't like would be easier than ... Well, I don't know. There's a lot that I like. But one that I chose, I feel like ... I study motivations. I study ways to help people better meet their goals, and that's what I enjoy reading. And my colleagues at New York University do a lot of that work, too.

(13:59):

What I chose though, is a section that I think adds on to what I generally feel is the process, the formula, for setting goals the right way. But if you have a recipe and if you're a chef and you want to cook something special, you still have to have the conditions right. I tried making macaroons in August, on a very sultry, humid August day. It doesn't work. They don't work at all. They are disgusting. They're awful. You have to have the conditions right. And so this passage really spoke to me because it's getting the conditions right for the recipe, the formula for setting goals effectively.

MBS (14:34):

Well, I'm excited to hear this. Katy's been a guest on this podcast, so it's a nice kind of continuity around behavioral scientists reading behavioral scientists. So thank you. Emily, over to you.

Emily (14:49):

Sure, thanks. So it's a section titled Look for Fresh Start Opportunities.

(14:57):

Since publishing my research with Hangchen and Jason on the fresh start effect, each year around New Year's Day, my inbox is flooded with emails from reporters, TV anchors, radio personalities, and podcasters who want to tap my expertise on this topic. But once we've talked for a bit about the power of fresh starts, many journalists bring up a well-known and dispiriting statistic from a 2007 survey: One third of American's New Year's resolutions bomb by the end of January, and four fifths fail overall. As a result, nearly every interviewer asks me the same, cynical, but fair, question, "If so many resolutions fail, why bother? Shouldn't we just cancel this silly tradition?" Of course, I understand where they're coming from. I've been frustrated with failed resolutions in the past, too, and I'm committed to teaching more people about the science that can help them succeed. But this question still drives me a little crazy.

(16:03):

As actor David Hasselhoff said, "If you're not in the game, you can't hit a home run." In my opinion, New Year's resolutions are great. So are spring resolutions, birthday resolutions, and Monday resolutions. Anytime you make a resolution, you're putting yourself in the game. Too often, a sense that change is difficult and daunting prevents us from taking the leap to try. Maybe you like the idea of

making a change, but actually doing it seems hard, and so you feel unmotivated to start. Maybe you've failed when you attempted to change before and expect to fail again. Often, change takes multiple attempts to stick. I like to remind the cynics that if you flip the discouraging statistics about New Year's resolutions on their head, you'll see that 20% of the goals set each January succeed. That's a lot of people who've changed their lives for the better, simply because they resolved to try in the first place.

(17:07):

Just think of Ray Zahab, transforming himself from an unhappy, out-of-shape smoker to a world-class athlete. For some people, fresh starts can help prompt small changes, but they can also inspire transformative change by giving you the will to try pursuing a daunting goal. So if you're hoping to make a positive change in your life, but are pessimistic about your chances, perhaps because you've failed before and worry another attempt is likely to turn out similarly, my advice is to look for fresh start opportunities.

(17:43):

Is there an upcoming date that could represent a clean break with the past? It could be a birthday, the start of summer, or even just a Monday. Can you change your physical circumstances or help your employees change theirs? Moving to a new office or home might be impractical, but working at a cafe or changing some of your other routines could be enough to make a difference. Or is there anything you can do to reset the way you're tracking success? Okay, so you don't coach a professional baseball team, but maybe you could break your yearly sales goals into monthly ones to give yourself, or your employees who are struggling, more frequent resets. Just be careful not to disrupt routines when they're working well. Once you've found or created the right moment to start, the next question is how to succeed on the journey to change.

MBS (18:40):

Beautiful. Thank you. That was lovely. You read that beautifully. Thank you, Emily.

Emily (18:45):

[inaudible 00:18:45].

MBS (18:46):

What's so important in that section for you?

Emily (18:50):

Well, I do think it's that idea that if we've messed up, it's not the end of the world. There's the next Monday, right? We don't have to throw in the towel and call an end to it all, that there's another chance. It's another way of thinking about growth mindset rather than fixed mindsets. I just came off of a conversation actually, right before I popped onto this call, about how to praise our children when they come home with artwork, or how to bolster them when they have a hard time with learning multiplication. But the same goes for this scenario, too. If we just think of, how can I create a fresh start for myself, then it can put us into that growth mindset camp, really. That it's not about, am I someone who can succeed? Am I not? Is this a space where I can succeed or not? But how can I set up the right conditions, with the right humidity levels or temperature, like my macaroon failure, that will give me that sort of fresh perspective and opportunity to try again?

MBS (19:57):

Emily, what have you learned about navigating failure? Because it's all very well to say, "Just get back up and give it another shot. It's every moment. Every morning's a reset moment if you want it to be." But I find most of us have a certain cruel streak to ourselves around what failure is and what that means about who we are. And I'm wondering what you've learned about what it takes to be kind enough to yourself to be able to face a restart?

Emily (20:35):

Yeah. I think you hit the nail on the head when you use the word kind, because that word, failure, is so stigmatizing. We've created that stigma around it, especially in Western cultures that have a whole philosophy of individualism. In the United States, we have some of our national mottos through the military, "Be an army of one," "Be all you can be," which really implies get yourself on the top, be the top of the heap, be better than the rest, be better than your competition, even if the competition is your teammates or others that are cadets with you. These are supposed to be the people that support us, in the military anyway, through some of the toughest challenges we'll ever experience in life. And I'm supposed to be an army of one?

MBS (21:30):

It's a lot. That's a lot of responsibility.

Emily (21:31):

It's a lot of responsibility. And when you see that kind of philosophy play out in corporate environments, you see organizations that don't do so well. Morale is low, unethical behavior emerges, and innovation is stymied. Because when you have a culture where an employer, a boss, somebody who's deciding raises, believes that there are stars that are out there, then that is going in line with the, "Okay, I either have this potential or I don't. I'm either this kind of person or I'm not. I don't want to come at the bottom. I don't want to be the rank order at the bottom because then I'm going to lose my job, or I won't be put up for promotion, or I won't get the raise. So I'm only going to do the things that I know that I can do well because this is not an environment where it's okay to not be the top."

(22:32):

Research that's done by Mary Murphy and her team at Indiana University have found that companies, where you can pick it up from their mission statement,

or you can ask employees who work there, does this company create a culture that really values learning, that believes in potential rather than performance? And when you identify, either the researchers identify or the employees say themselves that they feel like they're in a growth culture, that's where you see greater cooperation happening among team members and greater innovations can happen.

(23:09):

But companies with a fixed culture where again, it's like, "Don't come in last place here because you're the one who's going to be on the chopping block," those are the companies where you see people cut corners, that they're more likely to lie to colleagues, and cheat from the company, as reported by supervisors' observations of their employee behaviors.

(23:36):

So how do we pull all this back to the idea of failure, then? Well, because it's so stigmatizing of a concept, we all want to avoid it. We want to avoid being labeled a failure. We can't entertain the possibility that we, ourselves, might've failed because so much about most of the cultures that we are in, microcultures that we're in at work, or the families that we are a part of, or the way that we talk to ourselves even, doesn't allow us the opportunity to fail. So maybe it's going to be hard for us to change our corporate environment or the way that we've talked to ourselves for our whole life, although that's not impossible to change, but we can at least maybe avoid talking about the word failure. It doesn't need to be the word failure. The same experience can be labeled a learning opportunity, right?

MBS (24:23):

Sure.

Emily (24:25):

You can think about it in economical or rational terms. If you've just invested in X, you've just been trying this thing out, you spent your time, you spent your resources, you spent your brain power working on something, and you didn't hit your goal, you didn't hit your mark. Do you want to label yourself with failure? Yeah, and that'd be really tricky to do, and you don't want to think about it, and you want to move past it really quickly. No, because that's a total waste of investment then. What if instead we think, "What did I learn from that? Did I come away with any translatable skills? Did I have a fun time? Do I at least have a funny story that I can tell people when I get over the embarrassment or the shame or whatever?" Right?

MBS (24:25):

I love that framing.

Emily (25:06):

So if we think about it in those terms, then we don't even need to entertain that word, failure. We can't have seen it as a growth opportunity.

MBS (25:17):

There's always an interesting tension in my mind between setting a goal and then somehow using the goal. It's almost this misdirection because the value is so often in the process, in the journey, in the experience, as you learn, you grow, you try things out. I'm just wondering, knowing your own expertise and understanding how goals work, how do we navigate between these two things, which is like the journey is the reward, and yet the goal is the thing that allows us to keep going on the journey? Is that even a question?

Emily (25:57):

That's deep. That's great. Well, one of the first things that came to my mind was I recently took my six-year-old son to an arcade. And yeah, I'm such a Skee-Ball fanatic. I don't know if anybody else knows it. It's like-

MBS (26:14):

I don't know what that is.

Emily (26:15):

... It's like a drunk version ... like a drunk person's version of bowling. You have these really small balls you just toss-

MBS (26:21):

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Emily (26:23):

... up the short runway-

MBS (26:23):

I do know that.

Emily (26:23):

... just upwards constantly. Yeah. And then you're trying to get points, and I am obsessed. I remember my mom being pregnant. I have no memory of my sister being born until ... I don't know, until she's like eight, until she becomes fun. So my second-earliest memory is me playing Skee-Ball as a child. I'm obsessed with this game, and I have been my entire life. I love playing the game, just playing the game. I like beating people, too, but I like playing the game. And so I take my son, who's now at the formidable Skee-Ball age, and he wants the tickets. He's into knowing how many points did he win from playing the game because then he can go buy some plastic crap up at the little gift shop. And I'm

so sad. I'm so sad that he's in it for the tickets when there is the love of Skee-Ball.

MBS (26:23):

Exactly.

Emily (27:17):

That is what we're here for. So that's my first thought is, where did that come from? Not the Skee-Ball thing, but where does that come from, where we are so focused on the product. We jumped over all the fun parts to just focus on, did we hit our goal or not? Did we get 500 tickets or not? How does that come about? I mean, I know there's a deeper love for plastic crap in six-year-old demographics than mine, but that's one of the first thoughts that I had, was wondering that, too.

(27:47):

So if I try to actually answer your question, what also came to my mind are some stories about ... iconic stories of some of these companies that everybody loves to learn more about and some people love to hate, like Google, like Supercell is another one, the gaming company, Proctor & Gamble. They all are sort of notorious for part of their corporate culture, not just the free lunches like Google has, but that they do celebrate the process, that that's part of their system of reflection, is that every so often ... And Google's X Division, the division that's responsible for some of their greatest innovations, they have sort of a science fair of sorts where these groups show off to each other something that they have invested. Research teams have invested quite a lot: time, hours, effort.

(28:47):

And they're not showcasing the things that they think did really well. They're showcasing the things that are probably going to get axed, and it's sort of like a Hail Mary, last-ditch attempt. Can anybody see a reason to save this? Or does anyone see the reasons we see also to kill it? And that's what the science fair is, is this failure show, a show of all the projects that they want to get rid of. And what's cool about it is that it's an opportunity to get a fresh pair of eyes on something that you've been really in the weeds about. But it does so much more than that because it, first of all, normalizes that experience of obstacles, that we are going to have obstacles. It stops the sunk-cost fallacy, where you've invested, and so you just need to keep throwing resources at it because you can't have those other resources that have been wasted. So let's just keep trying to salvage this thing, even if it's something that should never actually, well, could never actually be salvaged. It allows people-

MBS (29:47):

I'm in the hole. I'm going to keep digging in this hole because I've dug this hole so far. It's the wrong hole, but I'm going to keep digging.

Emily (29:52):

... Exactly. Right? Which is common. And why is it common? Because people are worried about either themselves or their team being seen as having wasted resources, or being the one that can't make this thing come to fruition, because they're afraid that they might get fired. Or they're afraid they're not going to get a promotion, or that they're going to get in trouble.

(30:09):

And so they're taking all that stigma away by normalizing that experience of obstacles. At the end of it, what do they do? People applaud. They applaud for each other, so they make that part of the socialization experience. At Supercell, they crack open a bottle of champagne every time they make a game that's not going to go to market. I'm forgetting which one, but there's another group that ...

another company that has their heroic failure award. At Google, they actually ... The teams that kill off their ideas, they get paid time off to reinvent themselves. Sometimes they get financial rewards, an investment in their research budgets, to give them the resources to try over again. Not one that's so large that it would incentivize people to kill off ideas unnecessarily, but it's-

MBS (31:01):

Well, let me ask you a connected question, if I may.

Emily (31:04):

... Yeah.

MBS (31:04):

One of the words in the reading you gave from Katy Milkman's work was, I think she said, "Have the optimism to reset and restart." I'm curious to know what you think the role of optimism or pessimism is in the pursuit of goals?

Emily (31:23):

This was an area of psychology that I once was fascinated in, and then started to try to look at that, and realized, "Oh, I don't want to spend my life doing this," because I am a defensive pessimist, and I married an irrational optimist. So we average out to be a normal human.

MBS (31:42):

That's great. I've got the same marriage dynamic. I'm the optimist. My wife is the pessimist. And we've really had to learn how to navigate the fact that her first answer is always no, and my first answer is always yes.

Emily (31:54):

Yeah, yeah. My first answer is always yes. And I instantly start thinking about how it's not going to work out. So that's a weird hybrid-

MBS (32:06):

It's different, yeah.

Emily (32:07):

... going on in my brain. So when I was starting to look into this literature about, is my strategy ... I was doing this well before I met the man that I married, but is my brain broken or is there something that's okay about my brain with its defensive pessimist tendencies? And I mean, for people whose brains work like mine, where you believe in yourself, it's not a lack of confidence, but there's something else. I just know this isn't going to work out. Circumstances are going to prevail. I don't know, natural disasters. Here are the ways that it's not going to work out. And my brain just jumps to the worst-case scenario as the first default. And at least in the academic space, where this has been studied a lot, studying students who have this defensive pessimist tendency, they actually perform on exams about at the same level as people who are not defensive pessimists, whose brains are more optimistic, I guess. Which then begs the question of, well, why be a defensive pessimist then? Why do that to yourself if it doesn't actually help you better prepare for those obstacles?

MBS (33:16):

Yes.

Emily (33:16):

You just allow yourself to live in that anxiety and rumination, and you don't even get a better gain from it. But I don't know, that's what I've discovered. So you were asking me about optimism and pessimism in fresh starts. Yeah, I mean, I think it's a lot of fear that people have that stop them from starting over. You can think about that with a new career path, a new career option. It's a

lot of fear, but the unknown, that can make that challenging and stand in people's way from hitting the reset button.

MBS (33:50):

I mean, you talked about, from macaroons onwards, how the setting can make such a difference. And one of the things that I've noticed in pursuit of goals and in pursuit of personal growth, which is often connected, if not exactly the same as a goal, is just how strong the gravity of the status quo is. Because a goal is often stepping away from what's present into some sort of imagined future, a different way of doing and being. And so often, we're pulled back to the structures and the systems of, and patterns of, our present. I'm curious to know what you've learned around what it takes to say no to present you, so that you can say yes to a version of future you.

Emily (34:47):

That's a great question. Well, again, I'll give an anecdote that came to my mind, which is the story of Vera Wang. We know her as the fashion empress that she is, the wedding dresses, and having this incredible fashion house for her whole career. But that's not where she started. She started as a figure skater, and that was her first career. And she was quite accomplished, I mean, better than most people could possibly be. But for her, she hadn't quite hit her mark of what she wanted, to be the best in the world. She plateaued at a point that felt like ... It felt like there was still room to grow, but for her, she couldn't grow, that she plateaued below where she hoped her career would be. And so, I put this in quotes, she "quit." Well, yeah, she stopped being a figure skater. She took a year to regroup at the Sorbonne in Paris. A lovely place to regroup, if one must.

MBS (35:49):

Yeah, exactly.

Emily (35:51):

I would imagine. I don't know.

MBS (35:53):

If you're going to quit, quit in the Sorbonne if you can. Yeah.

Emily (35:55):

Yeah, right? I wouldn't know personally, but from what I read. And then, she went on to start her career in fashion. And so some people might look at that story and say, "Well, thank God she failed at figure skating so that we could have her in fashion." But in interviews, she talks about it not as leaving one career and restarting a new career, but instead, finding a new way to express her passion, because for her, there is continuity between both careers, and that's her love of line. As a figure skater-

MBS (35:55):

That's nice.

Emily (36:30):

... she's cutting lines into the ice, and in fashion, she's cutting lines into fabric. She's playing with lines of the human form and the art of design. So she doesn't see it as a failure or as a reset, but taking a moment to get a higher-level perspective on what does she want in her life and is there a different means to getting there? So I think that's what I-

MBS (36:30):

That's interesting.

Emily (36:55):

... think about, is what holds us back from stopping trying something new is that ... Again, it's that fear of the label of failure, but it doesn't need to be that way. If we go up into the clouds and see our life from a higher perspective, then we

might be able to see a different path through the forest than the one that we had been doggedly trying to follow, that came to a dead end.

MBS (37:20):

I love that. Emily, this has been such a great conversation. I'm sorry to bring it to an end, but I'm about to. But a penultimate question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

Emily (37:36):

One of the largest sections in a bookstore is the self-help section. And I never came into this career thinking that I would be a self-help author or researcher, but I think I am. And I think Katy Milkman might say the same thing, that that's ... Her background is in engineering. That's her first degree and career path. So would she want to be put on the self-help section? I don't know. I haven't asked her, but I imagine that's not what she thought for herself.

MBS (38:04):

Right.

Emily (38:05):

There are so many approaches that you can take. And if anybody tries to tell you there's one right one, that my approach is right and Katy's is wrong ... I would never say that. Katy's is right and mine is wrong, if anything. But none of those perspectives are wrong because what we need to do is expand our toolkit. You can't use a hammer to build ... You can't use exclusively a hammer to build a house. You need all of those tools in your toolkit, in your toolbox, to get the job done. And the same goes for setting our goals. Read all the books. Don't hesitate to seek out additional perspectives. You don't have to throw out what you already learned or what you already tried because you just want to be able to pivot to a new tool if the one that you're using isn't the right one for the job.

MBS (38:56):

I asked about the lucky break at the start of this interview, not only because Emily's story about the lucky break of finding the professor that she wanted to follow, she liked his writing, and that became one of the big clues to the path she took and do the work that she does today. I asked also because I think it's connected to what she read from Katy Milkman's book: How do you reset? How do you make a fresh start? How do you reframe, not just what you're doing, but who you are and how you show up in the world? I mean, what if you decided to begin anew right now? And in this moment, what if you called yourself lucky or blessed or ready or generous or whatever it might be? Pick your word. This really isn't trying to deny reality. We have all been dealt a hand of cards. It's mixed for all of us. And I know you've got your struggles, too. But what if you hit a reset button, just to see what might be happening? And when you hit that reset button, what if you took on another type of identity? It's an experiment.

(40:09):

If you want to experiment further in behavior change, two conversations in this podcast you might be interested in: Katy Milkman, the person that Emily read from, she's been a guest, and that interview is called You Are Predictably Imperfect. And Dolly Chugh, one of my favorite people in the world, How (and Why) to Be Good-ish. All of those three people are very smart professors, doing very great work. If you want more information about Emily, her work, her research lab is spamlabresearch.com, and you can find a bunch of her work at psychologytoday.com. A lot of her articles. She's findable on LinkedIn as well, if you want to make that connection with her. Thanks for the love. I think you're lucky. I feel lucky by having you listen to this podcast. I feel even luckier if you're willing to share it with somebody, if you're willing to give it some love, some stars, a review on whatever platform you listen to. Thank you. You're awesome and you're doing great.