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MBS (00:00):

Tolstoy famously started his novel Anna Karenina; thus, happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. A twist on that not nearly as eloquent as Tolstoy. But, you know, hey. Stories of success are all alike; stories of failure are where things get interesting. I love someone who knows how to share their failures well. When I get introduced as a keynote speaker, I have them mention that I was banned from my high school graduation and left law school being sued by one of my professors. And that's just the start. If I say so myself, my failures are what's helped me find my edge. Do you have a failure that it's time to flip? So, as they say in the product world, the bug becomes the feature.

(00:55):

Welcome to Two Pages with MBS, the podcast where brilliant people read the



best two pages from a favorite book, a book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them. Suneel Gupta presents as a success. I mean, he's an entrepreneur who founded and led RISE, a wellness company Apple named App of the Year. He is a best-selling author, and a speaker, and a visiting scholar at Harvard Medical School. But that's now. It's not where he started.

Suneel (01:24):

The New York Times years ago had me be their poster child for failure. Read a big article about people who fail. My face was the cover of that article.

MBS (01:35):

Aha, I guess you always assume that if you're being featured in The New York Times, it's for a moment of triumph.

Suneel (01:41):

The story went so viral that I kid you not, Michael. There was a point in time when you could have Googled the word "failure," that's it. Literally just the word failure. And my face would have been one of your top search results. And I'm still a little bit self-conscious of that. I sort of go through this back and forth where, for me, I think there's a lot of power in owning not just your success but your failure. At the same time, here I am on your podcast, wanting you to think that I'm successful. The reality is, if you Google my name, it's still going to be one of the things that comes up, is going to be sort of this laundry list of my failures.

MBS (02:21):

That must leave a scar. But what if you made a bug, a feature? What if you made a flaw, a strength?

Suneel (02:26):



The saying is long-term success can come from short-term embarrassment. If you know what to do with it, and if you can learn something from it. So what I decided to do is I started emailing this article out to all these people that I admired, people who had no idea who I was. Oscar-winning filmmakers, celebrity chefs, leaders of large companies. And I would literally email them a link to this article. And I'd say, "Hey, as you can see, I don't know what I'm doing with my career or my life. I feel lost. Would you be willing to have a conversation?" And to my surprise, the response rate to that email, this cold outbound email, was extraordinarily high. All these people wanted to talk to me, and not just about their success, but about all the things that you don't read about when you look up their profiles, or you read their bios. It's about these mistakes that we don't hear about. So I started to write about that. I started to put that down on paper for myself. And some of them turned into articles, and eventually, they turned into books. And so today, I make a career out of basically studying what I think are some of the most extraordinary people on the planet at their most disappointing moments to really understand what it was that helped them endure through that and what separates them from people who have really high potential but then tend to fizzle out over time.

MBS (03:50):

Got it. So that was ten years ago when you had that spotlight moment. But I'm curious to know, if you go further back, when did you first encounter failure in a way that struck a chord?

Suneel (04:06):

Yeah, I think first, I was raised in an ambitious sort of immigrant household. My parents were both; my mom is a refugee, my father immigrated here from India. And we're a very driven family. And I have an older brother who was just the embodiment of, I think, everything that they sort of had hoped for. We all have one of those in the family, right? I'm super close to my brother today. We



produce television together and everything. He's on CNN. His name is Dr. Sanjay Gupta. And Sanjay is today; he's a neurosurgeon. He is CNN's chief medical correspondent. And the thing is that growing up, it was kind of that story, just in a different form. He was valedictorian, went to medical school, followed the path. I was a straight B student. I goofed around a lot. I went almost in the opposite direction. Not only that, but I was really overweight. I was about 30 to 40 pounds overweight, clinically obese, according to the doctors. And so I felt like just this really out of place, out of skin color. We grew up in mainly a white neighborhood, not getting good grades, not pleasing my parents. I mean, I felt like a disappointment and a failure from a very early age.

MBS (05:40):

Yeah. So when and how did you start first piecing together the sense of who you were beyond who you weren't?

Suneel (05:55):

So, when I was seven, we took a trip to India. It was the first trip that I can remember that we took to India. And one of the big figures in my life was my grandfather, who was based in New Delhi. We stayed at his home, and every morning, we would sit on his front porch, just him and me. I was jet lagged, so I was waking up super early. And he was an early riser, so we tended to be the first two up in the house. And I would sit with him on his porch, and we would literally just look out at the streets of New Delhi, and we would watch the fruit cart vendors sort know, shouting their prices into the open air. There were cows ambling towards their pastures. Auto rickshaws firing up for the day. And I remember all that. And it was, like, electric for this kid from suburban Detroit to see all of this. And one of the things that we talked about a lot on that porch is I still remember he pointed to the Indian flag, which, if you've ever seen the Indian flag, it's orange, green and white. In the center, there's a navy blue wheel. And I remember him pointing to that flag, and he said, "Do you know what that



wheel in the center is?" I said, "No." And he said, "That is the wheel of Dharma."

MBS (07:12):

That's right.

Suneel (07:13):

And Dharma is who you are. And at the center of that wheel is the truth behind that. But the issue sometimes is that as you get older, that wheel starts to spin faster and faster. Every birthday seems like it comes sooner than the one before it. And it's very easy to get sucked to the outside of the wheel. And literally, I'm seven years old, and he's telling me this. He says, "Your job over your life is always to find your way back to the center. Find a way to come back to the center." And again, I'm seven years old. I'm like, "What?" But that voice continued to echo all these moments in my life when I felt lost. Where I was, for example, working in consulting. And I'm like, "What the hell am I doing here? I'm a bottom performer trying to put a prestigious firm on my LinkedIn."

MBS (08:14):

McKinsey always fired their bottom 10%, notoriously. And you're like, I'm in that 10%.

Suneel (08:18):

You're right. I would have been out the door anyway. And I would literally wake up on those mornings where my stomach was like, "Oh, my God. What are you doing with your life?" And inside my head would be his voice: "Find your way back to the center."

MBS (08:35):

How do you find the path back to the center, back to Dharma, when you inherit the ambitions of your family, which my guess is, are more likely to be pushing you to the rim of the wheel?



Suneel (08:57):

Yeah. Part of it is that we sort of are, I think, trained and conditioned to be in what I call an occupation mindset, which is sort of Dharma equals occupation. My purpose equals a job or a job title. And so as long as we're stuck in that occupation mindset, we sort of feel like, "Well, look, if I don't have the right job, then I cannot be fulfilling my purpose," right? But there's another way to look at it, which is what I've started to think of as an Essence mindset. Who are you at your essence? And how can that be reflected through everything you do? Not just a job but the way you interact with the people around you, with the people you love. How do you interact with yourself? I think essence has a lot to do with that. So, for example, it took me a long time to realize that, at my core, I love to tell stories. It's what I do. I do it on stage, I do it in books, I do it in the media. But it took me a long time to realize that. The interesting thing, though, Michael, is like, if I asked my parents when I finally came to this revelation of, "Oh, my God, I love to tell stories," they're like, "No shit, dude. You've been telling stories since you were a little child. Like we were trying to get you to shut up." So the reality is that when we think about purpose, oftentimes, it almost seems like we have to get our backpack on and go on an exploration out into the wild to find our purpose. The reality is it's already inside of you. And the work, for lack of a better word, is really to strip these layers away to understand what that essence is. Once you understand what that essence is, it can be expressed in lots of different ways. So with storyteller, it could be podcasting, doing what you do. It could be storytelling from the stage or inside classrooms. But I think that journey is more internal; "What's the essence?" And then the second piece is, "How do I now start to express that in the world in a way that actually fits my lifestyle needs?"

MBS (11:00):

How do you come to trust the whisper? Because essence is like there's a lot of



things that float around that could be essence. Because when you're a kid, you're a great storyteller, but you were also B and C and D and E, and any one of those five or six or ten things could have been true, could have been something you claim as essence. How do you know what to trust?

Suneel (11:30):

Yeah, it's such a good question. I mean, I think for me, I like to use what I now call a Dharma Deck. And what the Dharma Deck is when I think of something that feels like an essence for me, it's whispering to me. I think I love that phrase that you're using. I will write it down on an index card. So, for example, you ought to sort of really start thinking about expressing through film, right? That was a whisper that came to me. And I was like, "Okay, it's come to me more than once. I'm going to write this down on an index card." Another one was you need to go write a book about Dharma. That's something that's really whispering to me. I wrote that down on an index card. And over time, you'll start to build what I call this Dharma Deck. A stack of index cards could be a few. In my case, I now have like 20 to 30 cards. But what I try to do is every month or so, I try to find just an afternoon or a morning of complete stillness where I can just leave my phone behind, go to, for me, out in nature where I know I'm not going to be bothered. And I just take this stack of cards with me, and I sort them from top to bottom based on what's emotionally pulling me. So, I leave behind the intellectual side of it. I don't think about market size or competition or any of that stuff. I try to check all that at the door, and I say, "Emotionally, what is pulling me the most?" Those cards go to the top, and what I find is that month over month, there are usually two or three cards that are just retaining their position at the top of the deck. And I think that's where the whisper is the strongest for me.

MBS (13:10):

I had an interesting experience about five years ago as I was moving away from



a company that I founded into trying to figure out what was next for me. And what was interesting, Suneel, it took me a long time to get out of the valley of that company. Because I am connected to that, this is the work I do. It was connected to my purpose. It was around coaching, curiosity, possibilities and creativity. But it was an exercise with somebody else listening to my story and telling me what she heard was whispering behind and through the stories that created the breakthrough to help me find unexpected elements of the center of that dharmic wheel that you're talking about. Suneel, tell me, what book have you chosen for us?

Suneel (14:01):

Yes. So I chose a book called *The Alchemy of Opposites*.

MBS (14:05):

It's perfect. I haven't heard of this. I've just ordered it, and I'm curious to know more about it. How did it come into your life?

Suneel (14:10):

Yeah, so that's so interesting that you haven't heard of it either, Michael, because it came into my life through a friend of mine a few years ago. Her name is Robin Rice. Robin is based in Portugal. And I remember literally on Zoom her holding it up and me going and looking for it. And it actually wasn't a very easy book to find because it's out of print. But more interesting than that, when I read it, I was like, "Oh, my God, this is a phenomenal book." And I would start sharing it with everybody I knew. And to this day, nobody I have shared this with has heard of it. And I think that just goes to say that sometimes commercial success doesn't equal the quality of a book because I think this book is beautiful. But Rodolfo Scarfalloto wrote the book. He's a chiropractor by training. But the depth of his knowledge, and ultimately, where he applied that depth, was this idea that these things that we believe to be opposites ultimately put us in a form of



duality. And I'm always sort of, "Do I need to do this? Or this?" There is a way for us to start taking these polarizations and sort of bringing them together. And when you do that, you can start to live in a different place. I know that sounds very esoteric, but when I read one of those examples, I think that it will click into place.

MBS (15:31):

Let's go there; let's hear what you're going to read. I'm very excited to hear this. So thank you for bringing a book that is, like, in the shadows into the light. That's great.

Suneel (15:40):

Yeah. Okay, so Chapter Five. I'm going to read the first couple of pages from chapter five, and the title of chapter five is Doing Versus Being. Creativity is a blend of doing and being. Doing refers to the performance of a task to achieve a specific outcome. Being means that we engage in an activity just because we like it. If one is seen as better than the other, creativity goes out the window. Doing is the vehicle for expression of being. Likewise, being includes a deep appreciation for what we are doing. Now, the question is, if our being and doing are disconnected, what can we do about it? One useful rule of thumb is to just tell the truth about it. Recall emotional pleasure results from expressing the genuine self. And pain is the result of suppressing the genuine self. Telling the truth feels good because, in that moment, who we "be" is fully expressed. Thus, in the moment of honestly saying, "I don't like what I'm doing," the being and doing are reunited, and creativity starts to flow. There are two ways of experiencing self-worth. One way is by doing; it must be earned. The other way is being; it cannot be earned. There is a place within every human that wants to do, to create, to achieve. This creative drive is usually linked to the need to receive acknowledgment for the doing. In recent years, this need has been regarded as a sin, a weakness. In truth, it is a simple thing, an innocent thing. It is



a voice that says, “Look at what I've accomplished. I've put my heart into it. I'm really proud of it, and I want you to be proud of me for doing it.” Many of us are afraid of allowing this voice to speak and be heard. When we reject and conceal our desire to be acknowledged for what we do, two things happen. Number one, the suppressed desire for external validation becomes the silent ruler of all of our doing. And therefore, number two, we close the door on the intrinsic sense of self-worth, which is beyond doing. Likewise, if we devalue the deep desire to know that we are loved regardless of what we do, then nothing we do will truly be satisfying, and no amount of external acknowledgment will fill our cup. We simply won't let it in. The merging of doing and being means that we recognize and give equal value to our desire to do and our desire to know that we are loved regardless of what we do.

MBS (18:47):

Thank you. What's the diamond of truth at the heart of this for you?

Suneel (18:55):

I think it's the merging of so much, Michael because I can take that question from every angle. I think from a spiritual angle; I grew up in a place where when I went to the temple, it was all about “being”. And then I would exit the temple doors and I'd go back into American society, and it was all about “do,” right? Get it done. And I've, for my whole life, felt like I've been trying to merge doing and being. It's almost, in some ways, ambition versus joy. For a long time, I thought to myself, “I have to either expand my ambition,” and that means shrinking my joy. Or I've gone, I've swung to the other direction where I'm like, “All right, I have to expand my joy and therefore shrink my ambition.” But what I think lovely about this is that, no, those can actually be merged in a really profound way. And I think the way that I think about merging those things is really figuring out what makes you come alive going into that all out, no longer feeling like I need to shrink or hide my ambition to do that thing that I love. And I think most



importantly, though, is turning that to service. Because as long as it's all about me, as long as the “who” is me, I can't be in this merging of doing and being. It just won't work.

MBS (20:30):

Yeah. One of the phrases right at the start of the reading was about the power of telling the truth. What's the truth you had to hear or tell yourself that allowed you to sink more deeply into the learning here?

Suneel (20:54):

Such a good question. I think the truth that I'm still trying to tell myself and still trying to absorb is that even if you don't succeed at these things that you're trying to do, you still have worth. David Burns, a psychologist at Stanford, wrote a book called *Feeling Good*. Another great book. And one of the most profound parts of that book for me was really just having him break down the difference between self-confidence and self-esteem. Because to me, I thought that they were both kind of the same. But self-confidence is this belief that you can actually do something. And self-esteem is loving yourself, whether or not that happens. And for me, I've always treated those two things as the same, right? If I got it, I was worth love. If I didn't, I was not worth love. And that was the drive, right? That was me getting out of bed because I felt, fundamentally, I needed to be loved. But the problem with that is that it's just a really shitty way to live. It's not that you won't get things done. You will. But at the end of the day, I would never be the person I wanted to be. Not to myself, not to the people around me. I was just miserable, right? I was miserably trying to be ambitious. But there's a better way to do it, and it doesn't require you to sacrifice what you want out of life. And that's what I think is beautiful about this.

MBS (22:35):

How do you manage disappointing others?



Suneel (22:41):

To me, I think disappointing others is about creating expectations, right? And I think that it's really important to be honest. I think that when you're dishonest about what those expectations are, about what you're about and what your intention is, I think that that ends up being sort of the source of true disappointment. But even if you do have the right intentions and you, play all the cards the right way, and you're good about everything, you're still going to disappoint people. There's no doubt about that. Bob Marley has one of my favorite quotes of all time. He said, "Everybody is going to hurt you. You just have to figure out who is worth suffering." And I think about that all the time because the people I'm afraid to disappoint are the people who I'm closest to. Right? It's my family. It's my very deep friends. I don't want to disappoint them. And at the same time, I know that that is inevitable, right? And part of it is also, I think, modeling what happens when they disappoint you and how you behave, I think, is ultimately going to end up mirroring how they behave when you inevitably disappoint them.

MBS (24:12):

One of the things I've learned as I've traveled a not-dissimilar path and trying to wrestle with some of this stuff is how strong a hold the status quo has on us. It's all very well to talk about this emerging ambition and joy and how doing and being wraps around each other and move you into the glory. It's fantastic when that can happen. But there's a constant pulling back to the comfort and familiarity of what we have right now, even if we're struggling, even if it's hard. If you're working at McKinsey, it's miserable, perhaps, but at least it's a known misery rather than an unknown something else. Where do you find, or how do you summon the courage to say no, to Present You in a way that allows Future You to have a chance of showing up?



Suneel (25:12):

Yeah, I used to think that it would happen through these sort of big watershed moments. Like, I would go to these silent retreats, and I'd backpack through places in South Asia or Africa, and I'd be like, "I'm going to go find myself, and then I'm going to come back, and I'm going to be completely renewed." And it would never work because I would come back in a different state, but then they would quickly evaporate. And I guess what I realized over time is that this journey that we're on, I think, is an everyday journey. It's something that you don't need to wait for big, big moments in order to put what you're learning into practice. You can apply them to really tiny, everyday situations. So, for example, I think one of the most important things we can bring into our lives is what my ancestors called Upekkha. And Upekkha is basically sort of the space between impulse and response. And when something triggers you, when something bothers you, or when you have an opportunity to do something, the space that you give yourself between that trigger and the sort of action is really important. And I think in today's world of Chat GPT AI, where things are speeding up even faster and faster, where it's like we need instant, instant, instant responses, the temptation as human beings is also almost to follow in the direction of the bots, also to be instantly responsive. But when we do that, I think we lose a part of ourselves that is able to make choices, and we lose wisdom. Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* said that there's a space between impulse and response, and in that space lies our freedom. And if you are the kind of person who's just constantly reacting quickly to everything, inadvertently, you are losing your sense of freedom. And I think it's time for us to reclaim that back. You don't have to wait for big, big moments to make that happen. You can reclaim that right now.

MBS (27:25):



Suneel, this has been such a rich conversation. Thank you. A final question: What needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between us?

Suneel (27:37):

I hope this doesn't come across as puffery because it's not. But I've had a chance to research you. I've had a chance to listen to your work. And I think what inspires me is somebody who says, "Hey, I'm deeply curious. I'm deeply interested in the world. I love to read books, and I'm going to find a way to kind of merge all that together, right? I'm going to find a way, a creative way, to bring all those different pieces of myself into a project." And I think that's what you've done here, with Two Pages, right? We don't know each other very well, but that's my sense of you. And I think it's a beautiful, shining example of what's possible for us. Because sometimes we feel like we've got these different worlds, and we're trying to balance them all. But maybe if we can find enough stillness in our lives, we can sort of take this creative approach to, "All right, how do I start to bring and merge these things together?" I think you've done that beautifully.

MBS (28:47):

I've heard about Dharma, although vaguely, and I'm not sure I've ever heard of the Wheel of Dharma before. That was a new idea, a new concept that Suneel introduced to me. But I do love this idea of finding your way back to the center. You know, his grandfather said, "That's your job, Suneel. Get back to the center." It reminds me of the playground that I used to play at as a kid, just up the road a little bit from my school. I had one of those really big - I'm not sure we call it - spinning wheels; you put 20 kids on it, you'd run around the edge to pick up speed, and then you'd hop on. And once you got that really good speed going, then you had to fight against, I guess, the momentum. Or maybe it's inertia, but you had to kind of push yourself, pull yourself into the middle. But that moment when you get into the center of the wheel, even though it's spinning fast all



around you, suddenly there were no forces pushing you to the rim. You were in this place of calm, of centrality. Now, I know how to get to the center of that wheel. I'm not sure exactly how to get to the center of the wheel of my life. I've ordered Suneel's new book, so perhaps that's going to help guide me a little bit. But as I try to figure that out, because it's probably one of those big existential questions, "How do you get to the center of your wheel?" I'm pretty sure that one of the secrets is stopping doing stuff. We just had a team meeting today at MBS Works, and a lot of what we kept saying was we have to do fewer things but do them in a brilliant way. And I know that in theory and in practice, I tend to be an adder-on, not a taker-away. So, I just need to keep learning this lesson. One of the secrets must be stopping stuff. Now, Suneel talked about writing down on index cards those moments of insights and wisdom, of connection to some essential part of who you were. But also, I think there must be or how helpful it would be to have the discipline to capture and notice those moments where things don't feel quite right. I think, and this is what I'm trying to remember and take from this conversation, is what pulls you to the center is letting go. I like the paradox in that. Now, if you enjoyed my conversation with Suneel, I've got a couple of other suggestions for you. Thibault Manekin, that interview is called *How to Surrender Your Heart* and then the conversation with Eric Klein, probably one of my closest friends and the wonderful spiritual being we call that interview *When All is Confusion*. I pretty much would recommend anything from Eric all the time. He's got a wonderful newsletter and spiritual community as well. If you haven't checked that out and you're into that sort of thing, you might want to go there now if you want more of Suneel, his new book is out in early September 2023. So depending on when you're listening to this, you'll be able to get a copy of that. The place to go is his website, SuneelGupta.com. That's where you'll find his books, bite-sized videos with excellent practical advice, his newsletter about preventing burnout and much, much more. Thank you so much for listening to the podcast. Thanks for giving it some love. Thanks for passing episodes on. We don't have an enormous



audience, but the audience includes you. So it's obviously an audience of extremely high quality, stunning good looks, breathtaking intelligence, generosity and wisdom. So, all to say, I'm very glad that you're a listener to these wonderful interviews. You're awesome and you're doing great.