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

The idea at the heart of my book, *How to Begin* is that we unlock our greatness by working on the hard stuff. Now, when I wrote the first draft of that book, or it was actually more like the third draft and I shared it with friends, the feedback I got was it was confusing and a deeply underwhelming mess. And so, when I picked myself up off the floor and I picked through the rubble to see if there's anything that could be rescued, the most precious thing was in fact that line. We unlock our greatness by working on the hard stuff, but here's the rub. What's that saying is this, how will you disrupt what's comfortable for you now? How will you stir things up? How will you confuse and disappoint and anger some people around you? How will you make them and you nervous?

([00:55](#)):

My friend, Whitney Johnson has taken the idea of the S-curve, a tool previously used in understanding the growth of companies and applied it to our growth as well. And the top of the S-curve is the plateau. Now, when you step up and you work on the hard stuff, you step forward into the unknown and into that



ambiguity, you find something thrilling and important and daunting where you free yourself from the plateau and you find yourself at the bottom of a new S-curve. The adventure begins once more, so take a breath and put on your seatbelt because things are about to get interesting.

[\(01:35\)](#):

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. I first came across Tony Stubblebine because he started really the first habit tracker app back in the day, Coach.me, and he turned that into a successful coaching business in part by becoming one of the most successful writers on media, a platform devoted to publishing, writing about human stories and ideas, and I'm going to come back to media in just a minute now. Back then, quite frankly, things were pretty sweet for Tony.

Tony [\(02:13\)](#):

My businesses were mostly running well, which is a rare thing if you've ever run a business, they're rarely run well, but they're running well and without a lot of oversight to the point that I was telling people I'm half retired.

MBS [\(02:27\)](#):

Half retired, I remember hearing Dan Sullivan, who's the founder of Strategic Coach, also author of a number of books saying that when they retired old machinery, they basically just took it out to the field to rust. So not everybody wants to be retired or even half retired.

Tony [\(02:46\)](#):

It was an interesting moment that you were involved in because I had a preview copy of your book, How to Begin, and there's this idea of this a Worthy Goal, and I was feeling of itching for a Worthy Goal.



MBS ([02:58](#)):

A Worthy Goal, something thrilling and important and daunting. A project that calls you force, demands your time and your focus and resources. We unlock our greatness by working on the hard things. Now, when you get itchy feet, when you get restless like this, sometimes opportunity comes knocking. You remember me talking about Medium.

Tony ([03:23](#)):

I got a chance over the summer to apply to be the second CEO. The founding CEO wanted to step down, and I was close enough to the situation to know that that was happening. I said, you know what? I think no one knows Medium better than me.

MBS ([03:40](#)):

It was a bold claim, but Tony knew he could back it up. But every Worthy Goal offers rewards, but extracts a price, prizes and punishments. You might've heard me mention that before. So Tony was weighing up his choice.

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

I have this selfie of myself during the interview process to remind myself of what I would be giving up, and the selfie is me in a pool on a floaty, smoking a cigar, 3:00 PM on a workday, just like I could do that. But I was itching for more and this job, I was like, "Wow, this job will test me like nothing. No other opportunity I've had." I'm a big believer in the way you can change people's lives through great writing. I thought, well, if I can help to grow Medium, it can have a big impact on people's lives, which is something that was always important to me.

MBS ([04:37](#)):

Where did the starting businesses or running businesses bug start? Do you know when you first noticed that?



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

Yeah, I like to say I backed into it in that kind of a late bloomer. There's this world of entrepreneurs that feel like if you haven't started by the time you're 22, you'll never amount to anything. And it's more, I just kept being dissatisfied at work because that turns. I didn't understand this about myself, is that I'm very sensitive to impact. I want to see how the work that I did mattered. I don't just want to be paid for it. I don't just want my boss to pat me on the back. I want to actually feel that connection. And so, the first job I ever had was incredibly meaningless. I'll say I worked for MasterCard. We built basically brochureware websites for banks that MasterCard did business with. I'm sure no one ever looked at these websites and-

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

I've done those jobs. I know what you're talking about.

Tony ([05:43](#)):

And people were happy there. It was an easy job. I was not stressed. I was good enough at it. I was paid well. I could see a comfortable life ahead of me. I thought, this is just not why I got into tech. I got into tech because I love it. So I thought, oh, well. So I was dissatisfied. So I jumped to a more interesting job and then I got dissatisfied there. And so, then I jumped to an even more interesting job. And this job, the first time I worked at a startup, this company, Odeo, to the podcasting startup, which was-

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

I remember that.

Tony ([06:14](#)):

... 18 years ahead of its time, here we are on a podcast and my podcasting is real and established, and we thought, oh, it's right on the cusp. And we were easily 10 years too early, but Odeo is a little bit famous in tech circles as the company



that Twitter spun out of. So I was part of that team that built the first version of Twitter, but I was again, dissatisfied there because I felt like the thing that I went to work on, Odeo, we were walking away from. And so I felt like, why did I bother doing all of this work? And that's when I got the buck. I said, "I cannot trust the other people." I think a lot of entrepreneurs have a lack of trust. I was like, "I cannot put my career in the hands of other people." And so, I thought, well, I've got to start my own business. Of course, I knew nothing and I was terrible at it, and it was such a barely breakeven type of business, but it was great just to cut my teeth on anything. That's where the bug came from.

MBS ([07:23](#)):

And how did you start figuring out the impact you wanted to have?

Tony ([07:35](#)):

Yeah, I mean, this goes into none of this was pre-planned because that first business, I was looking at it as a test of myself. I was like, "Can I do this?" I mean, all I'd ever done at that point was write software. I'd never done the product. I'd never done the design. I'd never done the marketing. I've never done the sales. I've never done the books. And so, I really just wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. But around the time that I started to be a living, I started to realize the product that I'm selling is not important to me in any fundamental deep way. And so, I had to do a self-evaluation of, well, what is important? Who am I? And I kind of looked over a lifelong set of interests. I've just always been interested in the backstory behind how people achieve things. I'm not a believer in talent, particularly because you get into it and the backstory is always something else. There's opportunity and work and sort of a phrase I use sometimes that is advantage training.

([08:50](#)):

It's like you had the experiences that let you learn how to do it better than other people, and those experiences are an advantage for you. And so, I wanted to



build things that help people along those lines. And so, that's when I felt like when I started the company before Medium, Lift, that then became Coach.me, I thought, oh, well now I'm in my sweet spot. I'll be running it. So I'll be in control of whether we have impact on the world. And it will be something that is more core to my interests and it will fulfill, I guess, I'd have to say I get really dissatisfied if I don't feel good about the impact. And so, it'll fulfill me in that way. It's a 15-year process of learning about yourself. In hindsight, you would go, "Couldn't I have fast forwarded through some of this?" And for me, no, I had to discover myself through trial and error.

MBS ([10:02](#)):

The phrase I talk use often is inspiration is when your past suddenly makes sense. And what I like about that is you're naming why the path makes sense, because the Advantage training, as you say, and it's not just you figuring out the stuff you are good at, it's also going, okay, I never need to do that ever again. I never need to talk to that person or that type of person. It's clear that this is not my path. That is also a form of advantage training, what you're saying no to as well as what you're saying yes to. Hey, Tony, you said you had a comfortable life and being called back to be CEO of Medium, which I would call it a publishing company, is that what you call it as well?

Tony ([10:50](#)):

Let's call it a publishing platform.

MBS ([10:52](#)):

Yeah, publishing platform. And it feels like that probably means it's not a comfortable life. It might be a fulfilling and impact field life, but not necessarily comfortable. I'm wondering what you had to say no to when you said yes to taking on the CEO ship of Medium?



Tony ([11:15](#)):

Well, during the pandemic, we had this discovery about how to live, and one of the really nice discoveries was how much we like our family. And so, one of the things that my partner Sarah and I end up doing quite often is going up to Boston where her brother lives and podding with them for weeks at a time. I used to just see them at family holidays where you're barely crossing paths. It's a completely different experience to live with them. And so, anyways, we're much closer to family and I started the interview process while I was up there. And so, her brother is in tech, he's the CTO of a fairly large company and understands everything that's going on, understands the opportunity for me here. And he said half jokingly and in a loving way, he goes, "Part of me who doesn't want you to get this job? Because so much of the family dynamic relies on how much flexibility you have." And so, sure enough, I took his oldest son on a Saturday.

([12:17](#)):

I took him to a basketball game that he was going to play in, and this was going to be my first time to see him play basketball. Basketball is the sport that I love more than any other. He had picked it up in the pandemic. So he had been playing basically by himself or against me and nobody else. This is the first time he's on a team and I go to the game and immediately get a phone call from the chairman, then CEO of Medium, that's one of these key phone calls. And so, I leave the gym. I've still never seen him play. And I mean, I'm pausing here because that's sad for me. What am I going to miss? Sarah and I don't have kids. So probably a lot of people would miss time with your kids, but I might miss time with my family, with my friends. I worry a lot about how it affects health. You know that to have unlimited time to work out is very different than to have limited time and to already to come to the workout already exhausted.

MBS ([13:43](#)):

So the price is real.



Tony ([13:45](#)):

Yeah, for sure. And yet it was not a difficult...

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

Because why? What do you imagine the impact is you have as you lead Medium into its next phase?

Tony ([14:01](#)):

There is something emerging in the world right now around realizing how much of online publishing people have sort of abdicated responsibility for the impact, and this reaches the highest level. So I'll say, first of all, my original touchpoint with publishing came in a job I didn't mention in my bio is I worked for this company, O'Reilly Media, which is a tech publisher. Before tech information was as available online. So essentially all programming for a period of time was done by programmers who had O'Reilly books, physical books on their desk.

MBS ([14:49](#)):

As a really distinctive commonality to the look and the feel of it. I remember those, right.

Tony ([14:55](#)):

So now I think there's such a great counterpoint to this period right now where I often hear about the importance of free speech and platform. People especially are like, well, it's the we're going to put a bunch of ideas out and let them compete and the best ideas will win. I think what we found is the best ideas don't win and the loudest ideas, the most toxic ideas often are the ones that are winning. So I had seen it this other way, this way that had nothing to do with free speech. That was everything to do with manufacturing the best possible answer, not the right answer, but the best possible answer.



[\(15:40\)](#):

Because as a programmer, you are referring to these books to figure out how to do what you want to do. The machinery of O'Reilly was you take a very good programmer and you make them an author, and then you take a very good programmer and you make them the editor of that book. And then when the book is done, you send it for tech review to 20 very good subject matter experts. And then you publish it, and then you have a team of bug fixers essentially that take reports from the public. Any mistake gets tagged, tracked, ticketed, and then fixed, not between additions but between printing. And so, that was a company that it wasn't about giving a voice to everyone, it was about finding the best possible answer.

[\(16:35\)](#):

Now, today you have the platforms that don't care, it's the then, but then even the people you would think would care don't seem to care. That's this critique of journalism that both sides of them, like they don't seem to care that they're leading people astray in the name of objectivity. And then in popular publishing, there's been a number of books and a number of well-known nonfiction authors in particular who care only about being interested. So it's like, can you tell a story with these facts? Not whether or not the conclusions are real. And we're just swamped with information overload, and I think we're sort of failing this basic test. Is all of this information making us smarter sometimes. But what if we had a company that really knew how and believed and was dedicated to being a platform for everyone to speak.

[\(17:53\)](#):

But that speaking can be guided towards conclusions or summary that actually helped people understand topics better. And so, that dual nature of Medium had never been fully exposed. I mean, certainly we were a platform for everyone to have a voice, but those voices weren't worked. They didn't work towards some greater good. And that's something that I understood how to do from my prior experience at O'Reilly and then as a long time editor at Medium.



And so, I think we're starting to go in that direction and I thought first of all, just the impact that Medium can have could be massive. And if we can set a template for it, then that can be a cultural shift about how we think about publishing online.

MBS ([18:45](#)):

Tony, tell me about the book you've chosen to read for us.

Tony ([18:49](#)):

Yes. So the book is *Once a Runner* by John L. Parker, Jr. And this is a book I first read in college. I was a competitive runner, not a good one, but on my division three college team and sort of in the life. And this book is about a very good collegiate runner, like champion level collegiate runner who gets suspended from school and has the opportunity to train as hard and as focused as possible, ends up surprising himself in being an Olympian. And so, the book resonated in two ways for me in that time is one, the collegiate experience was exactly my collegiate experience. To be in a group, the sort of locker room culture has this reputation for toxicity, but also there's so much goofiness to it.

([19:56](#)):

And so, this book was written by someone who ran at Florida State University, and it just pulls from so many anecdotes are pulled from real life and it just resonated so much. But then as you're working towards something hard, you also dream of being able to do that work in the ideal scenario, how hard could you push yourself? And so, it resonated in that way too. And the passage that I'm going to choose is about identity, which also was running for me is the thing that changed my identity. Probably a lot of people have this identity in school where it's like I thought it was smart but lazy, and so I thought it was great, do well on the test and cheat my way through the homework.

([20:51](#)):



And do as little as possible and just skate by and avoid the wrath of my parents by getting good enough grades. Never make anyone afraid, I wasn't going to go to college, but I was never really committed to it, and that creates this identity. I pathologized it. I thought, oh, I am a lazy person. And it wasn't until I was introduced to running that I hit the cognitive dissonance of, wait, why am I running more miles than anyone on the team if I'm so lazy? So it's the identity thing.

MBS ([21:31](#)):

That's already a great story.

Tony ([21:35](#)):

And should I read?

MBS ([21:37](#)):

I think you should. You set it up beautifully for us.

Tony ([21:42](#)):

"Certain compliments and observations made him uneasy. He explained that he was just a runner, an athlete really with an absurdly difficult task. He was not a health nut, was not out to mold himself a stylishly slim body. He did not live on nuts and berries. If the furnace was hot enough, anything would burn. Even Big Macs. He listened carefully to his body and heeded strange requests. Like a pregnant woman, he sometimes sought artichoke hearts, pickled beets, milked oysters, his daily toil with arduous, satisfying on the whole, but not the bounding joyous nature romp described in the magazines. Other runners, real runners understood it quite well. Quenton Cassidy knew what the mystic runners, the joggers, the runner poets, the then runners and others of their ilk were talking about. But he also knew that their euphoric cells were generally nowhere to be seen on dark rainy mornings.

([22:38](#)):



They primarily wanted to talk it not to do it. Cassidy very early on understood that a true runner ran even when he didn't feel like it and raced when he was supposed to without excuses and with nothing held back. He ran to win, would die in the process of necessary and was unimpressed by those who disavowed such a base motivation. You're not allowed to renounce that which you never possessed. Because the true competitive runner simmering in his own existential juices endured this melancholia the only way he knew how. Gently together with those few others who also endured it, yet very much alone. He ran because it grounded him in basics. There was both life and death in it. It was unadulterated by media hype, trivial pairs, political meddling. He suspected it kept him from that most real variety of schizophrenia that the republic was then spouting like mushrooms on a stump. Running to him was real. The way he did it, the realest thing he knew, it was all joy and woe hard as a diamond made him wary beyond comprehension, but it also made him free."

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

That nailed it, that's fantastic. You kind of set this up before you did the reading, but what's at the heart of this for you, do you think, Tony?

Tony ([23:59](#)):

I looked at this and I've highlighted this and I've referenced it now for 15 years or more as a difference in identity. I mean, to simplify it, the identity of a competitive runner versus the identity of a jogger and it's not just the difference, it's the power of identity. I think a key thing that Quenton is saying in this passage is that he's not spending a lot of time negotiating with himself and a jogger when they wake up in the morning, if it's rainy, if it's cold, their legs don't feel right, that's a negotiation. Maybe today's not the day to jog. He already made this decision. He made this decision a long time ago. He's a runner and therefore, he will do what needs to be done.

MBS ([24:54](#)):



Yeah. One of the phrases that you read out, which I wrote down because it was powerful, is in competition, no excuses, nothing held back, which is like lack of negotiation then turned up to 11 spinal tap style. What does it take to get to that place, do you think? Because I am not sure I've ever done anything. No excuses, nothing held back, willing to live or die.

Tony ([25:29](#)):

I think this is something that runners or competitive endurance athletes get to experience because the time period is shortened. To be an entrepreneur with no excuses, it's impossible. So many things pop into your life. It's like, what? Am I not going to see my parents for Christmas? But if you talk about this is he's a miler, so we're talking about four minute periods pain and what a competitive runner gets to, which is I think different. The sort of epiphany is that you get there through acceptance. So a lot of people think you get there through whipping yourself. It's like I might hype myself to go as hard as possible. And runners I think are much more distance runners especially are much more just matter of fact, my legs are burning, my vision is darkening. I'm almost towards the end.

[NEW_PARAGRAPH]Actually in the World Cross Country Championship, a couple of days ago, this is a professional runner, a woman in the lead collapsed with 30 meters to go. So she had no problem taking herself to the very edge and tipped over and everything that I've ever learned by talking to runners of my own experiences, that it is just a thing that's happening to you and not as emotionally charged as people might think. And when I read that line, also a thought popped into my head as I was reading it to you is a phrase that I'd heard from Corey [inaudible 00:27:27]. It was about writer's block. He said, "If surgeons aren't allowed to get surgeon's block, why are you allowed to get writer's block?" And kind of just this, can you get yourself to this matter of fact place, this peaceful place? The thing I want to underline is it's a little bit peaceful because as we keep using this word negotiating, you're not negotiating and you're just observing. This is as hard as I can go.



MBS ([28:09](#)):

I am wondering how you've built that capacity of matter of factness. This is the reality rather than trying to negotiate in your life beyond the running. As you say, as an endurance athlete, it's like four minutes or 10 kilometers or a half-marathon or whatever it might be. You're like, I've got 26.2 miles to accept this. I'm curious to know what you've learned about bringing that into the wider world.

Tony ([28:46](#)):

Well, I actually used to teach this. I mean, this goes back to my coaching world, and I obviously a lot of people had a period of meditation, and the meditation helped me connect other things that I had done. But I had realized there was a way to teach meditation a little bit differently. I think meditation is often taught in terms of calm, but especially if you do a breath based meditation, there's this other awareness loop that's going on. Which is the point of focus is your breath, and you're expected to have your mind wander around it. It's not a bad thing. It's normal, and in fact, it's better than normal. I would point out to people that every time your mind wanders is an opportunity to practice bringing it back to your point of focus. And so, what we call this as a mental pushup, your mind wanders a lot. You've got more pushups than the other.

MBS ([29:46](#)):

You get more reps coming back to presence.

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

And so, this awareness focus loop is like, oh, I'm aware that something is happening. I acknowledge it and then I can bring my focus back. That as a muscle ends up being really powerful. And I had this experience along with other parts of self-improvement like through therapy and self-acceptance when



I was interviewing for this job, because tech has a hierarchy sometimes and it's hard not to buy into it. And so, I remember one of the people interviewing me was this guy Ben Horowitz, if you know Marc Andreessen, who is the founder of Netflix, Marc Andreessen is now an investor, and the other name on the investment firm is Ben Horowitz. So this is like a luminary.

MBS ([30:42](#)):

That's right. This is a big dog.

Tony ([30:44](#)):

Total big dog. And the thing that stood out to me about my interview process was that I was never scared because I was centered from... I hate this could be bad news for people. For 10 years of being a self-improvement professional, a lot of self-work went into that. And there was this one point where basically my hypothesis on Medium was they just needed to buckle down and focus. And so, Ben, he asked me like, "What's your vision? Do you see the need for any big pivots or changes?" And I said to him, "Ben, I think that's the wrong question." And-

MBS ([31:37](#)):

You have to get there very often.

Tony ([31:40](#)):

Especially for me, it's like he was on the board because of Evan Williams, who's the founder of Twitter and Blogger and Medium is like big names. They're peers. Evan's friend who was successful on Medium, who doesn't really have that level of resume. There's a couple of different ways to be strong in these conversations. Some people are kind of aggro strong, and I was able to have a strength of base through meditation, through therapy, through journaling that when I told him it was the wrong question, I think what probably came through is I was not afraid to tell him that. And I look back to how scared I was when I



used to interview for jobs or how scared I was to push back on authority. There was a project manager that I'd worked with early in my career who was like, I don't know. I think he was too good-looking and so-

MBS ([32:52](#)):

This is a problem that you and I have never had, but okay.

Tony ([32:55](#)):

That's how I feel. And so, I couldn't look him in the eyes, let alone disagree with him. You couldn't get more of a shrinking violet than my starting point was those. So that's my starting point, I couldn't look my boss in the eyes.

MBS ([33:18](#)):

It's interesting. It just reminds me of some of my own story. I think of the two starting points, the first kind of jobs I was going for, and I was fine if the interview was going well, but I remember being interviewed for a job in an advertising company by the UK's grandmaster of chess. And he was utterly uninterested in my self-deprecating humor and my slight swagger, and I just kind of fell to pieces. He moved two pieces and I was just getting hysterical and trying to rescue something from this burning ship.

([33:56](#)):

I walked away from that going, it was so interesting how I fell apart in that interview, the equivalent to your interview with Ben was being interviewed by Brene Brown on her podcast and unexpectedly having a moment when she goes, "Okay, so coach me." I didn't know she was going to ask me to do that. It was one of those moments where, oh, this is really helpful that I've had 20 years practicing asking a question and then being quiet and being willing to wait for an answer, being less daunted, and I might've been otherwise. I could have got hysterical and I didn't.



Tony ([34:37](#)):

That is the perfect example of being at peace with yourself. But also one of the major ways that that happens is people always want a quick fix, but the most reliable fix is a massive amount of work, which is what I said and what you just said that 20 years of doing this, you had the experience to be like, it's in there. I just have to take a breath and it'll be there.

MBS ([35:12](#)):

Exactly. I can just notice my own panic and go, I don't actually have to give into that panic. It's like I can notice my vision darkening, but that's just my vision darkening. It's fine. I'll just take another breath. How has your presence being tested by the hurly-burly of being a new CEO?

Tony ([35:34](#)):

I was thinking about this a little bit in case we talked about identity and how to change it. And so, some of the things are just these incredible confidence builders. The first time I got in front of the whole company is I gave them a speech that I was certain they would not believe. But I felt like I had to tell them the truth and let them come to find later that I had told them the truth from the beginning. I just thought, there's no way I'm telling them things that are outlandish. I mean, the company had been struggling. This is part of, there were a bunch of very obvious struggles, and I came in as a kind of an insider understanding. These are all fixable.

([36:40](#)):

And so, a thing I told them, I was like, I think this is going to be a public company. And I was like, why would they believe that? They've seen my resume? I haven't even come close. Actually, literally, I'd never managed managers to give you a sense of the jump for me here, and that one might lead them to be a public company, come on. But I had done the analysis and I completely believed that it was possible. But then later, more recently, I had



made a change. I saw this opportunity with Twitter imploding that we should be doing something in this Mastodon world. And so, I'd launched a project in this world, and I was met with a lot of disbelief and I realized I was actually quite hurt by this. And the difference is that I didn't expect to be believed the first time.

[\(37:57\)](#):

But I did expect to be believed the second time because literally, the one thing I actually am very good at is getting in early on social media movements and getting established. That's how I have the job at Medium. Got in early, got established, and I was like, oh, right. So my ego is involved here. But that goes to what you said. It's like now we're old enough, we've done enough work to be like, oh, I'm hurt and all I have to do is acknowledge it, take a breath, and then I'm back on doing the best that I'm able to.

MBS [\(38:46\)](#):

Have you invited support in to help you with this bigger role, this shift in identity, this new way of influencing rather than being hands-on? You were writing the great encyclopedia of self-help things, now you're managing managers. I'm curious to know where you go to for support.

Tony [\(39:10\)](#):

Well, I was someone who didn't really support. I think that's why I like self-improvement so much. I like to figure it out on my own. I had an experience early on with this job of all of my friends were so happy for me and so generous that I just leaned into it. So I had experience, and this started during the interview process where people would just be like, "Call me." And so, I remember this one hour, I was a stereotypical high school girl on the phone with my friend who's the CEO of his own company, and he spent an hour in the middle of his workday.



(40:05):

Half of it was giving me advice, the other half was just hyping me up about how I was a perfect person for this job. And it was so connected, it was such a gift, and I feel so grateful for it. And that's really continued. So I do, I don't know. I was wondering if this is connected in any way to Worthy Goals is a side effect. I think of many Worthy Goals is that people want to help you. But that's the experience I've had here.

MBS (40:46):

Yeah, I think it's true. I think part of what I say in that book is it's really hard to do a Worthy Goal alone. So you have to figure out what are the energies you want to bring in? And you can have energies in people or you have multiple energies in a person, or you can get it from other resources as well. But this idea of being a kind of lone warrior striding out across the tundra, the odds are against you. But I also think that when people see you pick up something that feels like Tony is pulling the right sword from the stone, it's like, I want to put my hand on his shoulder and go, "This is fantastic. You're the right person for that." There's a way that can shine.

Tony (41:33):

Yeah, thank you. That's the experience.

MBS (41:40):

Your background, Tony is both engineer and self-improvement psychology. How do those two areas of expertise talk to each other?

Tony (42:00):

In one good way and then in one way where they sort create a stumble. So my approach to self-improvement was very systems oriented. That's why I got into self-improvement at the habit level. I thought about it in terms of systems and



processes, checklists, all of that stuff really appealed to me. And this actually opportunity to tie it back to the book because there's a person that now I think we've talked about this person so many times that they're now just a myth. A person came to us as we were starting habit coaching and failed because our whole understanding of behavior change was so wrong. And the person's goal was that they wanted to stop eating sweets.

[\(42:59\)](#):

And so, the sort of habit coach approach is to rack up days of successes. And if there's a failure, just simplify it and clarify it. So it's like you could start no sweets. How many days in a row can you do? But if you fail, change it to something more specific, a tinier habit. And so, we kept kind of shrinking the habit, trying to get something more specific that this person could achieve and whatnot. And so, it had gone from no sweets to no sweets before dinner, to no sweets before lunch to finally no ice cream, cookies, candy bars holding fine, but we're just going to not going to have ice cream.

MBS [\(43:41\)](#):

You can snort lines of pure sugar, that's fine. Just don't eat ice cream.

Tony [\(43:46\)](#):

And exactly right. And as part of that, it's like, well, what are your replacement habits? There's all of the systemic work you can do there. And so, we've really tightened it up. We've crisped up the goal to something really specific for this person, and the very next day we get a note from them. "You're not going to believe this. We're in Vermont. And my family wanted to tour the Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream Factory."

MBS [\(44:20\)](#):

The most famous ice cream factory in Vermont.



Tony ([44:23](#)):

Only goal is just not to eat ice cream. And the very next day he's touring an ice cream factory. So we're like, "Well, we're failing here. We're failing this person. What's going on?" And over time, I've thought a lot about this person. What are the other things that are going on? And I think one of them is, or it's like if you go say higher up the stack beyond habit, there's belief and identity. FOMO is a belief. Well, this is my only time to tour the Ben & Jerry's factory, or am I someone that puts my family first? That's an identity. So now we're projecting on a false person. We never followed up with this, but I'm projecting onto this person an identity that they put their family first. And so, they have said, "I'm not going to have ice cream today." But then their family says, "We want to go to the Ben & Jerry's factory, so I'm going to say yes, and I'm not going to be a buzzkill by not participating."

MBS ([45:31](#)):

Exactly.

Tony ([45:31](#)):

"I'm not going to sit in the car. I'm going to be part of this." So that is this example of how who you think you are ends up defining the choices and the decisions you make. And that's what I thought. That's why joggers in the once a runner's story get sidetracked because they think running is joyous. So what happens when it's not joyous? Quenton Cassidy, you don't think running is joyous at all. You think it's a pain in the ass really painful? He expects that, but his identity is that-

MBS ([46:09](#)):

It's a daily necessity. I am a runner.

Tony ([46:11](#)):

Yeah.



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

It's so interesting you say that, Tony. I'm trying to own the identity of being a writer. And even though I've written books, I don't think that makes me a writer. I think that makes me an author and I'm trying to think about what does it mean to be fully committed to being a writer in terms of what I now have to say no to in terms of what I'm entangled within the rest of my life. And it's exactly what you're talking about, which is it's a way of me saying, this is the non-negotiables about how I show up in my world as a writer. This is what that identity brings with it, with the dark and the light, the moments of joy and the moments of my legs are heavy. My vision's darkening. I'm about to collapse 30 meters from the end. It's like that's just part of being a writer. [inaudible 00:47:06], it's not good every day. You and I both know that as writers, that some days it comes and some days it's misery and it's like they're both the same. It's just writing days.

Tony ([47:16](#)):

Yeah. I wonder for you thinking about the ways that you change identity, and one of them is the cognitive dissonance. It's like somehow writing several books that have been successful has not created enough cognitive dissonance that you consider yourself a writer. And it goes to show how much cognitive dissonance is required for you to reevaluate yourself.

MBS ([47:45](#)):

It's kind of speaks to Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey stuff around immunity to change and the unconscious stuff. Unconscious things that you're committed to that you may not realize you're committed to. And I'm like, I'm really committed to having too many things on my to-do list because it gives me a sense of identity. And I'm trying to make the identity of being writer more important than the identity of being wanted and overwhelmed and busy. That's the competition. And it's like ferocious because I'm like rationally, that's a really easy choice. But in my bones, it's the two wolves battling out and I'm trying to figure out which one to feed.



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

As I was sort of ending my career as a full-time self-improvement person, I had tried to become a champion for throwing the kitchen sink at things. It's like, by all means, look for the one quick fix first, obviously. But then when it doesn't work, then what are you going to do? And I just wanted to get it in people's heads that one option is to do all the work. So I hear you mentioning mindfulness in that. You're aware now that you desire to be busy and wanted. That's a piece of it, it's not the old piece. But certainly that level of mindfulness ends up being really helpful. Then there's a level of acceptance of emotions, which you didn't say, but it is, it's sort of like, wow, I really need to be wanted today. How does that feel in my body? That's something my therapists have given. That's almost like a sarcastic but serious joke in my household is Sarah and I will say, but how does it feel in your body? And we're both being sarcastic and being serious when we say it.

MBS ([49:46](#)):

Exactly.

Tony ([49:46](#)):

Because it's a really good question. You have feelings.

MBS ([49:50](#)):

You have to be slightly sarcastic as an intellectual person, you have to be slightly sarcastic to allow the question to actually land.

Tony ([49:57](#)):

Yeah, exactly. And we intellectualize our feelings. So we think we're feeling our feelings, but we're not. We're just naming them. But when you feel them in your body, then you realize, oh yeah, this is the thing. And then your beliefs, your thought patterns, there's a lot to rewire in there. And maybe if you wrote every



day for two years, maybe that's what's required. Then you'd be like, wow, I did it. I am a writer now.

MBS ([50:29](#)):

I think that's right. I think it falls down to writing every day and reading every day. I think that's the essence of being a writer. Now I have to put that from theory to practice a bit more. Tony, I love talking to you, so thank you. As a final question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in our conversation today?

Tony ([50:53](#)):

Take a breath. There's a word that came up a bunch of times for us, but that we didn't dig into word in negotiating. And one of the core concepts in how I had been approaching self-improvement at some point, which was there's an energy cost to not having made a decision. So pre-deciding is the start of lowering that decision cost, but habits are the end of it, right? Habits, beliefs, identity. Once those are actually changed, then this negotiation goes out of your world. And the example that I had used for a long time was one, I think a lot of people have heard is this idea that for a while, Steve Jobs wore the same turtleneck every day. So there's a decision, and if you think about your life in terms of a cognitive budget and there's some research that you can wear that out, you start to reduce the number of decisions you have in a day, the more energy you have for other things.

([52:12](#)):

And that leads me to an idea that I've long had about what is mastery? Mastery is when you're so good at the basics that or what is genius even. It's when you're so good at the basics that you can look at a problem from multiple angles because you're not weighed down by all of the details. And so, this goes back to even my intro here. If I like to uncover the advantaged training, so it's easy, people on text say, "Oh, Steve Jobs is a genius." But there's also a lot of things



that he did to enable that. And one of the ways to do that is to reduce the cognitive load of your daily life by getting rid of these negotiations. So it's not just you have the identity of being a writer, but everyone in your orbit needs to hold that identity that you are a writer, and then now there's so much support for the decisions and the behaviors that you have to do at that point.

MBS ([53:33](#)):

What label do you have for yourself right now? I mean, I know you've probably got more than one, most of us do. But what label do you think is most helpful for you doing something thrilling, important and daunting? What's the label? A self-identifying label that you attach to you that best serves you doing or claiming a Worthy Goal or flip that exercise. What's the label that keeps you playing small right now? What's the story you've got that's got you being contempt with the status quo? And what does that label, whichever one you've chosen, either the one that is liberating or the one that is confining, the one that pushes you into the future, or the one that keeps you tethered to the present? What does that label allow you to negotiate or not negotiate? I mean, I'm wondering what it could be for me.

([54:29](#)):

It could be writer. That's definitely a label I've talked about and thought about a lot in the past and the last two years or maybe three years. I've thought, what if I called myself a writer? What would that give me permission to do? And part it's because I've had two books come out in the last two years. I've read another two books planned in the next two years, so that's helpful. It could be maker because I realize I'm doing more than just writing books. I'm building systems and ecosystems around books, around ideas. It could be purely fit. I'm like trying to fight age, stay fit, play soccer, go for runs. It could be even husband. My relationship with Marcella is so essential to my life, and how do I be the best version of that? These are all labels that matter to me.



[\(55:21\)](#):

But as I say them to you, I see now I've still got work to do on making clear my choices, knowing the prizes and punishments of really committing to one or more of those, removing, in other words, the ways I might negotiate against myself, collude with myself in playing small. The two interviews that this one with Tony reminded me most of are first of all dancing with ambition with my friend Eric Zimmer. He's a great podcaster himself. His podcast is called The Two Wolves, and he is such an amazing story. I look at him as kind of an elder in my life, someone who's wise and showing an interesting path forward. So definitely, I recommend that.

[\(56:06\)](#):

And then Jessica Abel, who's one of the real forces for creativity that podcast is called How to Survive Being Creative. Now, if you'd like more of Tony, he's on Mastodon, the Twitter equivalent and also on Medium, where he still writes a lot and is influential and is the CEO and it's Coach Tony. You'll find that at coachtony.medium.com. Thank you for listening. Thank you for loving the podcast. Thank you for recommending episodes. Thank you for writing reviews and blurbs and stars, that helps as well. You're awesome and you're doing great.