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

What does it take to be an ambassador, to be a diplomat? I mean, let me put you on the spot. If you had to list three core characteristics, what do you think they should be? Now, for me, part of me goes is all espionage, John la Carre and Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy. It's about blending in, it's about staying skeptical, perhaps wearing tweed. Now, part of me, of course, thinks of my brother Nigel, who actually works for the Department of Foreign Affairs in Australia and has actually played ambassadorial roles in Anchor and Turkey and in Berlin. Now, Nigel is the sole discretion. He has a deep curiosity. Also, not that much tweed. But after this conversation, which you're about to listen to a conversation where I realized that perhaps we all play the role of a diplomat. I'm wondering if the key skills are actually empathy, rebellion, and a good left hook.

([01:05](#)):

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. Now, Tom Fletcher is the principal of Hartford College in



Oxford University. That's the college I went to when I went to Oxford. But of course, being principal isn't enough to be a guest on this podcast. But I invited Tom because in his lifetime he's been a diplomat and also a writer and a campaigner. But along the way, there were several things he was not, or at least not successfully.

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

Apart from having failed to get into Oxford the first time around. I was a failed boxer. I was a failed singer in a band. I was a failed door-to-door salesman in the States. Failed teacher, ironically. And I suppose in a way, there's a sort of pattern there.

MBS ([01:59](#)):

I often think what's interesting about content people, content successful people, isn't that they failed. I mean, because we've all failed. It's often their way of holding failure lightly not, oh no, I've failed, but oh, okay, interesting. How fascinating. Not this then, I wonder what's next. And then there's one of my favorite sayings, inspiration is when your past suddenly makes sense. And for Tom, inspiration was becoming an ambassador.

Tom ([02:31](#)):

So I suppose the short version is I'm a recovering ambassador. I spent 25 years or so in diplomacy and government all over the world, Kenya, France, the United States. I was ambassador in Lebanon at the age of 36.

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

Now here's a fun fact about Tom's ambassadorial days in Kenya, and when he was there, he took part in a high profile charity boxing match with the mayor of Nairobi who had T-shirts actually printed "Fletcher goes home in a stretcher." The goal was to raise money for charity and they did that. But who won the boxing match? Well, in Tom's words, it was a diplomatic draw. Well, of course it



was. But let's pick up the boxing metaphor. What happens when the bell sounds on your chosen career? I love these crossword moments.

Tom ([03:25](#)):

So I ironically left diplomacy having felt evangelical about the importance of diplomacy. I left diplomacy to write a book, a book about why diplomacy matters so much and looking particularly with the way that technology is changing statecraft. So that was the Naked Diplomat, came out in 2016, and that did well. So I then got to write two more books. One 10 Survival Skills for a World in Flux is about the future of learning,

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

Which I love, I've read it.

Tom ([03:51](#)):

What to really pass on to the next generation. Brilliant, thank you. Always good to see one of those.

MBS ([03:51](#)):

It is.

Tom ([03:57](#)):

And then in August I put out my first novel, which was called The Ambassador, which is kind of behind the scenes kind of murder mystery set, it starts in the embassy in Paris. But I guess all that adds up this conclusion that education is upstream diplomacy and that basically if I want to make a real influence on the future of the country and the planet, then actually being here, developing young people, head, hand, and heart, is where I should be.



MBS ([04:26](#)):

Knowing that education is upstream diplomacy, do you remember the first teacher that really moved you into a learning moment?

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

So I had a number of great teachers at my primary school. Marj Francis was my teacher when I was five, and I'm still in touch with Marj now. So she sort of set me on the road really. And then secondary school had a fantastic English teacher called, I still say Mrs. Arga, I think I'm allowed to say Pat Arga, but if she's listening, hello Mrs. Arga, my teacher who really gave me the sense of that it was okay to be a bit rebellious,

([05:08](#)):

You didn't just have to read the text and have the same reaction as everyone else. You didn't just have to do what the headmaster thought you should do. And I also had a fantastic history teacher, Mr. Heights, Martin Heights, who was great. I now talk about it, the ability to take off your Instagram filter

([05:25](#)):

Or to see, understand that everyone else has an Instagram filter as well through which we see the world. I think it's a superpower when you can understand that, it's basically empathy. But I guess that's what he really showed me. There are different ways to look at a subject or look at a life. So they were very important along the way.

MBS ([05:46](#)):

When you think of those two characteristic, the teachers taught you beyond the text, beyond the stories of history or literature. One is it's okay to be a bit rebellious. The other is what empathy might be. What are the relationships of those two skills, rebellion and empathy to the essence of diplomacy?



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

I think they're absolutely essential. I mean, lots of people talk about 21st century skills now. We've done this work on global competence, which is really at heart about developing emotional intelligence and developing empathy. And as I say, people call that 21st century learning. When I look at those skills, I call that diplomacy. Actually it's the essential, a great diplomat, it's about the last three feet as Edward Murrow said, it's about that ability to really understand the person you're talking to, to know what baggage they arrive in the room with, and to almost zoom out of a situation in a room and use that empathy to understand what's going on. What's the social political dynamic in that room? The greatest diplomats I've watched in action have that.

([06:57](#)):

But then I'd always say, and this is probably an unconventional view, but I've always warmed towards the diplomats who do have that slightly rebellious streak as well, who are kind of willing to break the rules and be a bit disruptive. It's not a profession known for being disruptive, of course, it's not really known for mischief. It's very scaffolded as a profession. But when I went out to Beirut, it was the early days of social media and the Arab Spring was raging around us, got there until 2011, and I got to just experiment and be disruptive with Twitter and people, now if an ambassador says something on Twitter, no one listens because everyone's on it. But in those days, it was really unusual that an excellency would be in that world,

([07:45](#)):

And it gave people a bit of a peek behind the curtain at how that world really worked. And I think in many ways that ability to take those risks, and it was a risk because the smartphone that I was using to tweet from, great opportunity to connect with tens of millions of young people, but also it was the device on which terrorists were tracking my movements. So it wasn't even a metaphor, it was a risk, but I think that the ability to take those risks actually made the job



much, much more interesting. And ultimately I hope meant that I had more impact than I would've done if I hadn't.

MBS ([08:24](#)):

How do you learn to keep the flame of rebellion alive when institutions really, they may say they want it, but really they don't because what institutions love is consistency and predictability and nobody kind of stirring things up. I notice in myself actually, but in others as well, how quickly that spirit can get snuffed out. What have you learned about keeping that spirit of rebellion alive?

Tom ([08:59](#)):

So I had one wise ambassador who told me when I went out to Beirut, don't forget to put your trainers on every now and again. And it was about being grounded. It was about taking off the suit and the brose and just remembering that you were human. I am lucky to have family and friends who if I ever take myself too seriously, will pretty quickly bring me down to earth. I did a speech in Reykjavík on Friday, and I took along my 11 year old thinking, oh great, it's really important. He sees his dad in action. And as soon as I came off, I'm shaking hands with the foreign minister and so on, he came up to me and told me that in no uncertain terms, the five things I'd done wrong. Said my arms were in the wrong place, my shoulders looked nervous, I was laughing too much, all that sort of stuff. So that's quite a good way to keep you fairly grounded.

([09:47](#)):

But in terms of keeping that sense of mischief an adventure to it all, I always try and think not just what will people say about the way I'm doing this job now, but what will they say in 10 years or a hundred years? And actually that requires a bit of mischief and a bit of rebellion and a willingness to break some things. If you're going to think about that legacy and you're going to think about what it means to be a good ancestor in the role, then actually you look at the paintings on the wall and so on. So many people have done a job like this over hundreds



of years. The people on the wall are the ones who did have a sense of mischief and were willing to think differently.

MBS ([10:37](#)):

That speaks to the mischievous spark. I'm curious about empathy because everybody nods with empathy, but we're wired to love our tribe. And I can imagine in diplomacy in particular, it's very easy to see the person across the table or across the cocktail glass from you as other, not us, but them. What do you know about overcoming our wired instinct to, as they say other, the people who aren't like us?

Tom ([11:13](#)):

It's a great question because of course in diplomacy, you are othering people the whole time. You are sat in front of a flag and you are interlocutor is sat in front of a different flag. So it is like wearing two different football kits or something. From the very beginning. You're setting yourselves up-

MBS ([11:30](#)):

You're red, I'm blue, yeah.

Tom ([11:32](#)):

As different. And you go in there and you've got a brief or a negotiating position with a set of your red lines, the things you mustn't concede, whatever happens. And so the whole thing is often set up in quite an antagonistic way, quite a confrontational way. So I think much of the best diplomacy gets done not in the conference rooms, but in the bar afterwards or in the coffee room, sometimes literally in the bathroom. I once stood between the French president and the British Prime Minister, translating between them when they're standing at the urinals because the translator couldn't follow us in and they did some great diplomacy there. It is not something I like to think back to too much.



MBS ([12:16](#)):

You don't want to shake hands until you've washed your hands at a minimum. Yeah.

Tom ([12:20](#)):

Normally in diplomacy, you want to shake hands. That was one moment when you really didn't. So I spent a lot of time working on Norton Island and there was one amazing moment there where we were sat at all night between these two factions and one of the leaders, and forgive me if I don't say their names because many of them wouldn't thank me for it, but one of the leaders refused to face the other guy because of a terrorist attack that had happened against that had killed his sister. Some very good reason. So he actually turned his chair away from him, refused to even look him in the face.

([12:57](#)):

And there was a key moment in the negotiations when I got a message through that the second guy's mother had died. And so I shared that with him and I said, turned the room and said, look, you'll all understand why we have to break off now. He needs to be with his family. And he then said, it's more important I'm here in this room with you guys. This matters more and this is where my mother would want me to be. And at that moment, the guy turned the chair back round to face him because how can you not feel? How can you not fail to see the human at that moment, and something to engage with? It's very hard. You have to be very stony hearted not to see the human. So I suppose in really difficult, tough negotiations, you're looking for those moments where someone suddenly thinks they've got a kid too or they've had a bad morning as well, or they've had a tough life too, and then see something in the other person.

MBS ([13:50](#)):

Tom, tell me about the book you've chosen to read for us. It's a great choice.



Tom ([13:55](#)):

So this is a new one on me actually. So I got given it last year. We've been thinking a lot about how do we make this college into somewhere that really thinks about the future, that really represents future generations as well as those we're teaching now? One challenge that we set ourselves was we spend a lot of time here talking about ripping down statues of people from the past. What are the things that we are doing now that people will rip down our statues for?

([14:23](#)):

And how can we turn that round? What can we do on behalf of those future generations? And so I was given by one of our brilliant academics, Annette Mike's, this book called *The Ministry for the Future* by KSR Kim Stanley Robinson, known as Stan. Stan joined us for an event back in June and was utterly brilliant at it. And it's a crazy book. It leaps around. It's very hard to follow. I mean, I think I understood maybe two thirds at most of the book because he's really thinking about a group of people who save humanity basically by coming up with the solutions to climate change. But they're doing that on behalf of future generations. And the great kind of dramatic effect of the book is what would you be prepared to sacrifice? How far would you go to save future generations, which are you prepared to kill those who are doing most damage to our climate, for example, on behalf of our descendants? So it's this brilliant book.

([15:29](#)):

And what I love about it without giving away too many spoilers, is that ultimately it's an uplifting book. It's a hopeful book because it isn't just about how grim and difficult this task is. He finds the best creativity that's out there and brings all that together. And the bit that I'd like to read is actually towards the end of the book when actually we can see that there is a way to turn this around and that if we do, it's not just about stopping bad things happening, it's actually about making great things happen as well. And that for me is very



energizing when I try and think about the work of being a good ancestor, the work of being an educator.

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

Beautiful. Well, look, I'm excited to read this. I haven't read this book yet myself. It's on a pile on my floor down here, which I will get to. But when I was looking around, I loved its description as science fiction nonfiction. I thought that was a perfect, wonderful paradoxical description. So Tom, over to you reading.

Tom ([16:32](#)):

Yeah, they sometimes call it clifi as well.

MBS ([16:37](#)):

Oh, [inaudible 00:16:37].

Tom ([16:37](#)):

There's this great mixture between, so just on the event we did, we actually got some of the top academics to read this nonfiction, to read this fictional book, but with all its elements of nonfiction in it and then reflect on how they would change their work in response. And that was quite a powerful idea. So do you want me to read a bit?

MBS ([16:55](#)):

I do. I'd love that.

Tom ([16:57](#)):

So this is towards the end of the book, as I say, and basically one of the, great heroine of the book gets to go on an around the world tour. It's a bit like sort of Phileas Fogg around the world in 80 days in this amazing glass flying machine. And actually to really understand the impact of what they've done, what they've achieved.



(17:25):

East of the bay and that part of the city, then the delta, it reminded Mary of the model of Northern California that she'd been shown long ago, but this time it was real and vast. The delta and endless tule marsh below them cut into patterns by lions, lines of salt tolerant trees, remnants of the old islands and channels, blonde tipped green grasses, lines of trees, open water channels, the V wakes of a pair of animals swimming along, beavers, Art told them.

(17:55):

The viewing chamber had spotting scopes and what they showed when one looked through them was that the delta was dense with wildlife. Mostly unvisited by humans now they were told. Part of California's contribution to the half earth project. Mount Diablo rising behind them to the southwest gave them a sense of the size of the delta. It was immense. They could still just see the [inaudible 00:18:17] marking the sea on the western horizon. To the north stood the little black bump of Mount Chester. To the south the coastal range walled the central valley on the right. The Sierra Nevada walled it on the left. Huge expanse of land. It looked like California would have an easy time meeting the half earth goal. Over the Central Valley, habitat corridors looked like wide hedgerows separating giant rectangles of crops and orchards. A green and yellow checkerboard. Further east horizons erupted out of orchards, the first rise to the Sierra, now a dark wall ahead, the airship rose with the land, floating over wild oak forests and then evergreen forests with steep sided canyons etched deeply through the hills, snow ahead on the highest peaks.

(19:04):

Across the Atlas mountains east of the Sahel, there were new salt lakes and marshes being created by water pumped up from the Atlantic or the Mediterranean. Salt seas in dry basins, an interesting experiment, they'd changed things here in the Sahel. The dust storms that used to fly off these desert basins over the Atlantic were much diminished and certain kinds of plankton out to sea were going hungry. Unexpected consequences, no,



unforeseen consequences because now they were expected even when they couldn't be predicted. For now, the desert below them was dotted by long lakes green, brown sky, blue cobalt cat's pores. Little towns hugged their shores or stood on outcrops nearby. Irrigated fields formed circles on the land, circles of green and yellow like quilting art.

[\(19:52\)](#):

Local culture was said to be thriving, Art said. Polls indicated most residents love their new lakes, especially younger people. Without them we would've left, they said, the land was dying, the world had killed it, but now it would live. A red dawn punctuated by two black masses rising up higher than they were.

Ethiopian highlands their left mounts Kenya and Kilimanjaro to their right. As they flew through this immense gap, art told them about Jules Vern's first hit novel *Five Weeks in the Balloon*, also about his later works, *Mysterious Island* and *the Clipper of the Clouds* describing balloon and airship travels as did of course a big part of *Around the World in 80 Days*. Art told them about Vern's invasion of the sea, which told the story of pumping seawater over Saharan deserts to create lakes just as they'd seen during the previous few days, Fern's books had bewitched him as a youth he said, an idea of how to live.

[\(20:48\)](#):

He taught himself French in order to read them in the original, said that Vern's prose was far better than people usually supposed when judging by the wretched early translators. And so we're here, one of them said, with our own Captain Nemo. Yes, Art replied easily without his brooding, or so I hope. This too with a lightning glance Mary's way, I hope I'm more like Paspatau, passing by all, you know, with the least amounts of difficulty.

[\(21:15\)](#):

The green and gray masses of mounts Kenya and Kilimanjaro loomed over them to the south. One very flat topped the other a little flat topped. Neither had glassiers, nor any sign of snow, no such thing as the snows of Kilimanjaro,



something they could only hope for in distant times to come. But the great plains of East Africa were still populated by animals. Yes, they were now doing a safari from the air, elephants, giraffes, antelopes, great herds of all these migrating from river to river, some of the stream's water was now piped in, Art said quietly. Desalinated at the seashore and then piped up the headwaters and released to keep the streams flowing, the herds alive. They were in their 12th straight year of drought, but this was rewilding, Art called it. They were rewilding down there.

MBS ([22:08](#)):

Tom, that's beautiful. Thank you. What captures your imagination in that passage?

Tom ([22:16](#)):

So the most obvious thing is Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro. I know that landscape so well. I was in Kenya for four years and climbed both of those mountains and just loved the sense of expanse space you get there. But was also always very frustrated by the way that literally we'd carved into that environment with the wheels of our land rovers, the safari excursions and so on, and driven the wildlife into smaller and smaller enclosures, disrupted the migration routes. And what I love about this passage is that sense that the wildlife has taken over again, that we're the ones being pegged back into smaller areas where we have to live, but that the wildlife is able to go where it wants and that sense of regeneration and renewal, that we're not just stopping, as I say, not just stopping climate change, but actually reversing it and seeing that extraordinary rewilding around us. And then I love that link back to Jules Vern in this sense that humans have this longing for space and to look down on the world in that way. That's where we adventure.



MBS ([23:34](#)):

I've forgotten the name Paspatou, and I'm like, it's one of the best names in fiction ever along with Captain Nemo for that matter.

Tom ([23:41](#)):

It's good.

MBS ([23:43](#)):

Tom, the passage you read is very much one a picture of flourishing, but your book is about survival, 10 Survival Skills. What's the relationship between survival and flourishing in your mind?

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

So in a way, this comes back to this sense of education as upstream diplomacy. I think these great trends that we're experiencing at the moment, one is the rise of distrust. We all feel this sense of agency from the smartphone, but it also gives us a sense of skepticism, of challenge. Much of that's great, it's useful, but it makes it much harder to govern and to lead. And in my old world, to make policy, implement policy, look at the effort to have a climate change conference or a conference on how we live alongside AI, for example. So somehow we need to restore trust. But then the other two great trends I think are the rise of the perception of inequality.

([24:42](#)):

This consciousness we all have that, and social media fuels, is that other people have got a better life than us. And imagine the next ability to come online and look just across the ocean at how life is different. They'll be coming our way in life rafts and life jackets, not in doctor's jackets or as school teachers because of the lack of education in those areas. And then this third grade trend around the perception of flux and instability because of technological change, because the pace of technological change. And if we're going through as much change in a



century as in the last 43, then of course it feels unstable. Think of the internet, scale it up.

([25:28](#)):

So somehow we have to construct a conversation and construct a society that can get on the right side of those three trends because we'll need kids who are curious enough to tackle these great challenges ahead of us, whether it's rewilding or living alongside AI, who are kind enough to tackle all this inequality but also are brave enough to come back to your earlier point. You were rebellious enough, courageous enough because the world doesn't just reset without them. I collected this book of advice for my son when I was in number 10 for him to read when he was 14. And all the world leaders wrote their advice in it. Obama said he'll either be very rich or very clever depending on whether he sells it or reads it. But the best bit of advice in there is from my great grandfather. And he said, be kind, be curious, be brave.

MBS ([26:18](#)):

Yes. There's so many good questions. I want to ask you, the first of the skills that you mentioned is to take back control. Why did you begin there?

Tom ([26:31](#)):

So that's a slightly cheeky reference to the Brexit vote in the UK where the slogan was take back control. And I think that slogan became so loaded. Anyone who was opposed to Brexit would pillary that slogan, anyone for Brexit realized how powerful and resonant it was. And I thought in a way there was a need to reclaim that sense of taking back control but not taking back control in the sense of control our borders, control our flag, control migration, so on. But how does one develop the survival skill of taking control of one's own life or at least of the things that you can control? And for me, most important within that is controlling your own time and controlling the bank of trust that you have in the world. Those are two things over which you have a lot of control. And so that



chapter is about how we can find more time for the things that give us a sense of purpose.

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

It also for me offered up the invitation to not despair, not to assume that you're a victim beyond being able to do much, that you can be an active participant in this rather than a passive recipient of how the world is changing.

Tom ([27:48](#)):

Definitely. I'm really glad you felt that because I was thinking a lot in writing that chapter about my students here who do have this sense of activism and agency. They have a real desire to change the world but will often feel that they don't have any traction points, anywhere where they can actually do that. And so my generation looks at it and says it's all virtue signaling and it's all sort of slightly snowflakey, it's not, I mean they want to do practical things, but they just need that help in understanding where to focus that activism and how to make change happen.

MBS ([28:23](#)):

One way of reading the 10 skills that you mentioned feels like an additive list, this plus this, plus this plus this. And if you can do all or even some of those, something good happens, your chance of survival and our survival increases. I'm always curious when I see a list like this in terms of what's the tension between the different attributes because they're not just additive, they're like, you can be for instance committed to your community, but that may mean you can't be kind because you have to make some harsh decisions. And I'm wondering how you guide people to navigate between the tensions of this because you just can't be all of them all the time.



Tom ([29:06](#)):

I think that's a really important thought and a lot of it is just about an awareness of these different skills, that rebalancing and the rebalancing of mind, body and soul, of head, hand and heart in a world that spends so much time talking about the head and not enough about hand skills and heart values. So I think some of it's just about that awareness. I would hate anyone to read it and just feel daunted. How can I possibly do all these different practical things? Because as you say, they often are in tension. There's this idea in there and it comes from a Robert Brooks article, David Brooks article about trying to move the way you organize your life from a life based on the CV values to a life based on eulogy values. What does someone say about you at the end of your-

MBS ([29:55](#)):

Climbing the second mountain.

Tom ([29:57](#)):

Yeah, exactly. And I just gave a eulogy last week and I was curious afterwards to see what would Chat GPT have done with that job of giving a eulogy? And of course it was a CV, it lacked the here were the values, here are the stories, that's so human and that's the stuff that sets us apart and that's the stuff that will mean that the machines work for us and we don't work for the machines. So I hope that anyone reading the book would see it as a menu of ideas. Think of it like a Lebanese meal, a Lebanese meze where the foods all scattered around.

MBS ([30:36](#)):

My favorite meal, yeah.

Tom ([30:37](#)):

Stick your pita bread in whichever dish that you want. But if I had to pick one, I mean I think the superpower is about thinking about how to be a good ancestor, but the most important survival skill for all of us is that people are curious.



MBS ([30:51](#)):

We've had Roman Krznaric on the podcast before who has a great book on being a good ancestor. Tom, at the end of your reading, the final sentence was talking about the rewilding. You could see the planes of Africa stretching beneath you and this sense of rewilding, my sense of you is you are trying to rewild Hartford as an institution. What have you learned about what it takes to shift an organization, an institution that stretches back centuries?

Tom ([31:28](#)):

So I suppose unlike other jobs I've done, you are much more conscious of that time span and of just being a very small part of that history. So you become much more conscious of the need to do no harm in that time. I don't think I've done another job for more than three or four years, including the really big jobs in my life, like being ambassador. And whereas this is a job you do for longer than that. If they'll have me, I mean, who knows? And so you're conscious of the need to go at it slowly, but also that you are in the succession of people in the role and you can look back and read the history of what they've done before. And as I say, the element of mischief to that, but also you have to look forward and think, how will my time here be judged by my successes in a hundred years and so on.

([32:23](#)):

I think the other big thing I'm learning here is that again, every other job I've done, you arrive in a leadership position, you say, here's my vision, here are the three things we're focusing on, security, justice and opportunity, Lebanese stability or whatever it would be. And here, because of the way the power structures work, it's much more important to lead from behind. Much more of it is about setting the tone, the sense of the overall direction and letting then the strategy emerge rather than trying to dictate some sort of top down, here's where we're going by the following dates and here's the plan. So I suppose in



that respect, you need a lot more Barack Obama and a lot less Donald Trump, which I think is a pretty good rule for life, to be honest.

MBS ([33:17](#)):

Yeah, I think that is a pretty good rule for life. Knowing that the first skill that you suggest in your book is take back control. I'm curious to know what you've had to learn about what it means to let go of control in terms of allowing this to emerge from, as you say, step back and see what emerges in terms of strategy.

Tom ([33:41](#)):

So I think I've had to learn to challenge my instincts a bit more. I think one aspect of working in government, and you're often in environments where you need to exert quite a lot of control. Think about doing an evacuation of an embassy. You need to know the detail, you need to be on it. Whereas I arrived during the lockdowns and the first two years I was here, I didn't meet most of my colleagues. It was all on this screen. And I only realized when we emerged from lockdown that so many of my instincts about people's strengths and weaknesses were wrong because I'd seen them in this sort of one-to-one context, and I hadn't seen them, and coming back to that idea of empathy, I hadn't seen their social political skills, their social emotional skills, what they were like with other people, did they reinforce the team or undermine a team?

([34:41](#)):

And as we came out, I suddenly had to correct a lot of my assumptions about those I was working with. And there was a real lesson in that my antenna weren't working as effectively. Now, that was partly because we were on the screen, but it was quite a healthy corrective for me that the antenna aren't always right and you need to take time to really work out what's happening in the ecosystem around you.



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

And how do you grow to understand what to keep and what to let go of?

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

That's a brilliant thought. So I was helped in this, I suppose along the way by the fact that when you're a diplomat, you tend to think in three or four year chapters. You arrive in a place, you're trying to work out what your life will be like there, what relationships you'll form. But normally a year before you leave, you are mentally leaving already. You are unlikely to form great lifelong friendships in the last six months to a year in a city, but your life is therefore quite scaffolded. And each point you do have that moment where you are putting stuff down, putting it aside. So in many ways that makes your life less cluttered. But the great challenge when you get to this point in life, really having done that, is that you feel quite unrooted.

([36:13](#)):

You don't have a place where you are local, you don't have a community beyond family where you are making an impression, where you are building this load-bearing relationships. So at one point I remember it was really when I was trying to work out what to do after leaving the Middle East and I just sat down and went through an exercise around the eulogy and realized that at the heart of it, for me, education was such a theme. But I also realized at that point that I needed some land. That was an interesting realization, having been so [inaudible 00:36:56], having always moved and not really put down any roots. I was desperate to put a root down somewhere and have some soil somewhere that I could put my hands in and know was mine. And so a big part of the plan then revolved around buying a farm in Portugal where I'm in my shorts four months a year, growing stuff.



MBS ([37:18](#)):

That's wonderful. Tom, it's been such a rich conversation. Thank you. A final question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in our conversation?

Tom ([37:30](#)):

I think there's space, in all these discussions at the moment, there is space for hope. And in a way that's why I found the hopeful two pages in a book that's pretty hard going and has some pretty tough passages and is ultimately about the danger of humanity disappearing. But we're surrounded, I don't know how it is for you, but at the moment in the UK we're sort of surrounded by this sense of malaise and despair that the world's all going in the wrong direction, that we're screwing it all up.

([38:06](#)):

And yet I sit with these students every day and hear their aspirations, their sense of hope. And we were always told in Lebanon during crises, always look for the helpers. And they're always out there. I expected to leave Lebanon with my kind of idealism smashed up. Everyone said that I would leave there much less zealous and idealistic. [foreign language 00:38:34], the great diplomat says, [foreign language 00:38:36], don't be too zealous. I still feel as much zeal as I did when I arrived there. And I think it basically comes down to do you believe in humans or not? And if you think that humans are basically a bunch of scumbags, then the world's a pretty miserable place. But if you believe that we have something more magical, creative, ingenious and kind inside us, then I think there's space for hope. And I hope that's what that passage shows and I hope is what then 10 Survival Skills demonstrates as well.

MBS ([39:15](#)):

I was very taken with Tom talking about Rewilding. One of the values at this company, MBS works, is to disrupt the status quo while amplifying the good. Rewilding feels like it's saying something really similar, but perhaps even in a



richer way, a really more interesting way. Stir things up, unstick what's been stuck, break down something that's existing, plant what's good, seed power. I do wonder, and maybe this is the challenge I offer to you, how we might all be becoming, I don't know, a little too domesticated, a little too comfortable in our bubbles, too predictable, too safe. If you were to rewild your life, what would that look like? If you enjoyed the conversation with Tom, I thought it was wonderful. He's so eloquent, so interesting. And in the video, I can actually see him in the principal's office in Hartford College, which is a nice flashback for me.

[\(40:20\)](#):

But I've got a couple of other interviews I might suggest. One with Matthew Barson, who was another diplomat. He was the American ambassador to London for a while, amongst other places. That is called What To Do With Power because he's written a book about how power works and in a very interesting way, highly recommend that. And then Roman Krznaric an Australian philosopher who lives in the UK. His interview is called Hope for Tomorrow. And there's a really interesting connection between the book Tom read and the conversation I had with Roman. Check that out if you haven't already. If you'd like more of Tom, well you can find him on X/Twitter. I don't know if he still posts there. I think everybody's leaving Twitter as fast as possible, but you'll see him there at @TFletcher and his website. He's got his focus on being principal at Hartford.

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

So it's not, I think completely up to date, but it's good enough. And it's at TomFletcher.global. TomFletcher.global. Fletcher is spelled F-L-E-T-C-H-E-R. You'll see his books there. And I really thought his most recent book around the 10 Things to Help Youth Think about, very powerful, very helpful. It's one of those permanent books on my bookshelves. Thanks for listening. I appreciate your support. I appreciate you listening the whole way through. I appreciate any love you give the podcast, whether that's passing it onto a friend, giving it a



review, or giving it a thumbs up. All of that is gratefully received. You're awesome and you're doing great.