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

One of my favorite songs is by Spearhead the band Fronted by Michael Franti. It's called Hole in the Bucket, and it's the story of someone walking along and deciding whether or not to give someone else money to someone asking for, as a line goes, for a dime, for a nickel, for a quarter. Now the song is an interior monologue. He's basically asking himself, do I give or do I not give? I don't want to pay for another brother's wine. How can I find compassion in the midst of a recession? My cup is half full, but his is empty. And a little line I love, how come all these questions are f-ing with my head? Effing is the suitable work version of the actual word.

([00:46](#)):

Now, you've probably had similar thoughts. And as we approach the holiday season, perhaps you're wrestling with the same challenge, as am I. What does it mean to be charitable? What does it mean to be philanthropic? What's the best way to be philanthropic? How much are you willing to give up for the sake of



others? How altruistic are you willing to be? But in this interview, there's a twist on that that might change everything.

[\(01:16\)](#):

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, Charlie Bresler is the volunteer executive director of The Life You Can Save, which is a nonprofit. He's been central to this organization really becoming a force. Now, there's an interesting story about the name of the charity and its eponymous book, but that comes later on in the interview. But to understand Charlie's passion for activism, his story, his background is truly illuminating.

Charlie [\(01:54\)](#):

My parents were the first people in their families to be born in the United States. They both had parents who came from Eastern Europe. They were, I think, quite affected by the Holocaust and transmitted to me a very strong concern for what happens to people around the world as a result of different sociopolitical events.

MBS [\(02:17\)](#):

So there were deep values being instilled. But at the same time, it was rocky. It was challenging.

Charlie [\(02:24\)](#):

My parents were both quite dysfunctional. My mother was in a mental institution for the bulk of when I was growing up, particularly in middle school and high school. And my father also had severe psychological problems. So I think I grew up in a difficult environment, but I also grew up in an environment that instilled me with what I think are values that have stayed with me throughout my entire life. So it was very mixed.



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

Charlie went to university in 1967 at the height of both the civil rights and the anti-war movement in the US.

Charlie ([02:56](#)):

I was very much ready to be affected by those civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, which I quickly became a part of as a university student. And I think in many ways, it helped me shed some of the dysfunction from my past.

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

As the war in Vietnam ended and the civil rights movement no longer held center stage, Charlie drifted away from activism. There's not much left of the left is apparently the saying of the time. His attention became, in his own words, a little more self-serving. He settled down. He had a family, even became a tennis pro while his wife attended medical school.

Charlie ([03:34](#)):

I decided I didn't have a strong enough ego to hang out as a kind of poor tennis pro and psych tech, so I decided to get my PhD in social and clinical psychology. But then again, this was sort of more turning inward and certainly a move away from having social impact.

MBS ([03:52](#)):

Now if we fast forward a bit, Charlie then pursued a career in mental health, which led him to opening his own clinic where he worked on his specialty, anxiety and OCD.

Charlie ([04:03](#)):

But at the same time, a childhood friend came along and said, "Hey, my company just went public. Would you be interested in joining my company to



help us grow our training program?" Very odd. And of course, I said, "If you'll pay me more money than I'm going to make in anxiety, I'll do it." And he said, "Yes, I'll pay you more money." And so we agreed on that. And I entered into a career in business, which is, for me as a lifelong democratic socialist, was a very weird thing to do. And it actually caused problems with Diana who thought it was a bad move, partly because she really liked the work I was doing with anxiety disorders, and partly because she didn't really want me becoming a capitalist. And my mother felt the same way, but she didn't really have a very large voice after having abandoned me for most of my childhood.

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

But anyway, she was also complaining. But anyway, I went ahead and did it. And oddly, I had 18 years approximately in this company where I went from starting a training program to the head of stores, and then ultimately president of the company. So it turned out I was better at business, oddly enough, than I was at tennis, or probably as a psychologist. So anyway, this was a very big deviation from my core values. Let me leave it at that. And it wasn't like I was torturing the employees at the Men's Warehouse, the name of the company, but I certainly was, as anybody in those positions would be, interested in providing shareholder value, which any Delaware corporation in the United States was pledged to do.

MBS [\(05:43\)](#):

It's the job.

Charlie [\(05:43\)](#):

It's my job. Or as Lennon used to say, when you run the state, you run the state. And he was apologizing for turning to capitalism in the mid 1920s, at least a partially. So, I did. And in 2008 when I was still slated to become the next CEO, I told the existing CEO and founder George Zimmer and the board that I was going to leave, and I was leaving for the reason that I was now 59 years old and I



felt like I had done precious little to live my core values. And so I had a couple of really interesting gigs advising wonderful people on HR policy for the organizations they were running. One was a nonprofit. The other was a for-profit that was supported by venture capitalists in the Bay Area. They were both very interesting people and I liked working for them, but it was a little bit closer to working on my values.

[\(06:44\)](#):

But in 2012, I came across Peter's book, Practical Ethics, Peter Singer's book, which was a pretty serious philosophy book. And after reading that, wading my way through it, I decided I would read The Life You Can Save. And I can't say that the life you can save precipitated an epiphany on my part, but it catalyzed a lot of feelings about what I should do with my life that I wasn't really acting on. But I started to act on when I resigned as president of the Men's Warehouse. And so out of the blue, I wrote Peter an email. I'd never even heard of him, even though he was quite a famous philosopher. And I said that Diane and I would be interested in helping him develop a proper nonprofit and funding the organization in the early stages to get it going.

[\(07:36\)](#):

We met over Zoom, or in those days, I think it was some other platform, Skype, I think, and we agreed that we would do it, although Peter was hesitant for us to put \$400,000 into doing it because he wasn't sure that it would be as good as donating that money to a very effective charity.

MBS [\(07:55\)](#):

Right.

Charlie [\(07:55\)](#):

But I convinced him that I thought it was a really good idea and we should go for it. And so we did, and the rest is history as they say. So I am still the executive director of The Life You Can Save. I volunteered to do that because Diane and I



decided that neither one of us really needed to be focused on making money at that point. We needed to be more focused on doing things consistent with our values. I should mention that until recently, Diana has been a full-time practicing family doctor, and so we did have an income, and we were using that income to support ourselves in the early days of my volunteering. Subsequent to COVID, we had grandchildren and Diana retired. We're both 74. So that is kind of my story.

MBS ([08:42](#)):

Good story.

Charlie ([08:43](#)):

I don't know if that helps you a little bit. It's certainly a crazy story.

MBS ([08:47](#)):

It is a great story.

Charlie ([08:49](#)):

Yeah. So anyway, that's it. I hope that's what you were looking for.

MBS ([08:52](#)):

It was. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I think I found something magical. Charlie, how do you keep your values alive, or how do you keep your connection to your values alive? Because lots of people start with fervor in their youth, and lots of people hit their mid fifties and life has flattened out and kind of severed them a little bit from something more essential to themselves. I'm curious to know how you kept that connection.

Charlie ([09:25](#)):

Well, for many years, as I suggested, I didn't keep that connection. The reason now that it's very easy for me to keep that connection is that the work we're



doing at The Life You Can Save is so rewarding and provides me with such an amazing opportunity to do really good things that it's like living my values every day, which I can consider to be a real opportunity. The other thing is that I have a wife, I'm fortunate enough to have a wife to be nagging me about doing the right thing all the time, as she has always done, and as she did as a family doctor. But I think the primary thing now is that The Life You Can Save is the actualization of core values. The other thing is, as a younger person, before I entered into business, or even before I entered into psychology, I was always interested in structural change, looking to change the geopolitical situation, looking to change things in the United States in particular.

[\(10:27\)](#):

And at some point, I believe that that desire and the grandiosity that I had that I thought I could really make a difference ended up causing me to leave living those values almost entirely, not completely, because I hope as a father or as a leader of a business, I didn't leave some of my humanistic values, but the inability to affect structural change led me away from politics and geopolitical concerns. Now, I think because I work at The Life You Can Save, I am concerned about what's going on in the world, but I feel like I'm best off focusing on what I'm doing at The Life You Can Save and not being overly embroiled in the situations that are incredibly important, be it climate change, although we do offer climate change nonprofits at The Life You Can Save, or what's going on in the Middle East or what's going on in American politics, which is a disaster from my point of view, I stay away from thinking too much about that.

[\(11:36\)](#):

In 2016, when Donald Trump was elected president, I told Diana that I was no longer going to watch the news every day, and I've kept to that promise to this day. I have not watched the news since, even after the Democrats took over, which they're not exactly my favorite either. And I haven't watched the news, but I do read The Guardian on my phone, parts of it, every day just to keep



abreast of what's going on. And I've been watching Al Jazeera recently about what's going on in the Middle East, which is just tragic.

MBS ([11:36](#)):

Yes.

Charlie ([12:11](#)):

And I don't need to get into that for people. What Hamas did was [inaudible 00:12:15] and what the Israelis have done to the Palestinians over these years is tragic as well. But I'm trying to refocus myself on actualizing my values through the work at The Life You Can Save. So that's my answer your question.

MBS ([12:29](#)):

That, I understand, which is this strong alignment between the work of a life you can save and who you are and who you want to be. I guess I'm curious about that moment in 2008 where you are sitting there, you're the president of the Men's Warehouse, you certainly on the short list of the people who will become the CEO. It's a crossroads moment, and I'm going to say you took a road less traveled. Tell me about that moment.

Charlie ([13:03](#)):

To be completely frank, I don't remember all the things that were going on in my mind, but it wasn't a moment. It was a series of thoughts and discussions with Diana and other friends about what I wanted to do with my life and the difficulties I would encounter becoming CEO of the Men's Warehouse, and the fact that I was clearly aware that I was aging and that I wanted to do something that was more consistent with my values. So it was all of these things coming together, but I have to say going into George's office and telling him that I was resigning was difficult, and I was nervous. But I wasn't nervous that I was making the wrong decision. I was just anxious about telling him and getting through the





disappointment he might have and the board might have that the person who was number one on their shortlist to be the next CEO was about to leave.

[\(14:10\)](#):

And we won't get into what happened to the Men's Warehouse. Subsequent to my leaving, George was fired and the company changed dramatically for the worst, both from a shareholder value point of view and also from a cultural point of view. If George and I had stayed, I think the company would've been better off, but I'm still very happy about the decision I made. And one of the things I was worried about was, what would I do after leaving? Because I had this very involving job where I made a lot of money, and now I was about to venture off and not make any money. And I think what I was most nervous about was, okay, how am I going to actualize these values? What am I going to do? And I did have people telling me, "Don't worry. It's kind of like if you build it, they will come kind of thing." And they were right. It took a while for me to really get into the best thing to do, but pretty quickly I was doing things that I felt good about.

MBS [\(15:09\)](#):

Yeah. You talked about your earlier life in psychology and working with individuals on obsessive compulsive disorder and anxiety. What's the connection for you between structural change and individual change? Is there a connection, or are they just two different phenomena?

Charlie [\(15:35\)](#):

Well, it's a good question. I think that clearly, individuals need to play a role in creating structural change, both in a particular state or country or in a world organization. How individual consciousness is changed is obviously a really important questions that historians and sociologists and politicians deal with. I don't think I've ever been involved as a psychologist in the kind of individual change that would lead people to engage in geopolitical solutions. I think I've



been involved as a psychologist in trying to change people's habits for the better in terms of health psychology, and then more recently trying to convince people that giving to high impact cost effective nonprofits is a really good part of a life well lived. Interestingly enough, maybe I think of myself as effective hedonist. So I've been thinking about it and writing about it. I'm actually in the middle of an article about it because I never really resonated with the term altruism. And Peter and I have disagreed with about that, but I don't see myself as in any way altruistic, and I don't see individuals striving to be altruistic. I feel people are guilty.

[\(17:09\)](#):

And what I'm trying to do is get people to understand that the best way to experience pleasure in life is to allow yourself to be living in a less guilty environment, but also to recognize that there's tremendous pleasure to be had, not only in improving yourself, but in giving to other people, and that somehow you can instead of being maybe an effective altruist, you can actually be an effective hedonist. And that's how I think of myself as aspiring to be an effective hedonist to maximize my own pleasure, but to do it through helping other people.

MBS [\(17:46\)](#):

Right. It feels like that's a perfect segue to talk about the book you've chosen. So tell me about that.

Charlie [\(17:52\)](#):

So the book I chose, not surprisingly, was Peter Singer's, *The Life You Can Save*. If I had chosen a couple of other books that I might've chosen George Orwell's *Politics in the English Language* or *Looking Back on the Spanish War*, or I love *Politics in the English Language* by George Orwell. I might've chosen *American Power in the New Mandarins* by Noam Chomsky that I read when I was 1970. So it was a long time ago, or *Manufacturing Consent*, which was



another book by Chomsky who's 94 now. So Orwell and Chomsky are two of my kind of long-term heroes. But Peter Singer wrote a book that really profoundly impacted my life and really changed the direction I was going in, and so that's why I chose this book.

MBS ([18:51](#)):

Yeah, fantastic. I think you've set up how you came across it and the importance in it, so I think we could just even plunge into it. How did you decide what two pages to read?

Charlie ([19:04](#)):

I think when you hear the pages, you'll understand why I chose the pages. And I know that your advice was don't read the first two pages of a book, but actually, these pages are at the early stage of this book and it's set up by Peter's famous thought experiment, which I will read. And that was one of the factors that led me to write to Peter and to get so involved. So that's why I chose this passage.

MBS ([19:28](#)):

This is great. I know this passage, and I'm delighted you're reading it.

Charlie ([19:31](#)):

We bought the rights to the book from Random House. That was an interesting conversation Peter and I had because he didn't want me to do it because it would cost 30 some odd thousand dollars. I said, "Peter, you're out of your mind." This is, by the way, one of the most, if not the most respected philosopher in the world, so it's great that I've developed a relationship where I can say, "Peter, you're out of your mind."

MBS ([19:31](#)):

Yeah, that's right.



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

But I said, "You're out of your mind. \$33,000. We are going to raise so much more money as a multiple of that \$33,000." So anyway, I convinced him that we do it, we did it, and now we offer the book for free on our website as a ebook or a celebrity read audio book because we got celebrities to read chapters of the book because we thought that would have great marketing value. Anyway, I can talk more about that, but let me read you the early pages of the book, and I think people will understand why I chose this

([20:31](#)):

On your way to work. You pass a small pond on hot days. Children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee deep. The weather's cool today though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler who is flailing about unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep her head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don't wait in and pull her out, she seems likely to drown. Waning in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago and get your suit wet and muddy.

([21:18](#)):

By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for her and change your clothes, you'll be late for work. What should you do? I teach a course called Practical Ethics. When we start talking about global poverty, I ask my students what they think a person should do in this situation. Predictably, they respond that you should save the child. "What about your shoes and being late for work?" I ask them. They brushed that aside. "How could anyone consider a pair of shoes or missing an hour or two at work a good reason for not saving a child's life?" I first told the story of the drowning child in the shallow pond in *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*. One of my first articles originally published in 1972, but still widely using courses in ethics. In 2011, something resembling this



hypothetical situation occurred in Foshan China, a city in the southern part of China. A two-year-old girl named Wang Yue wandered away from her mother and into a small street where she was hit by a van That did not stop.

[\(22:21\)](#):

A CCTV camera captured the incident, but what followed was even more shocking. As Wang Yue laid bleeding in the street, 18 people walked or rode their bikes right past her without stopping to help. In most cases, the camera showed clearly that they saw her, but then averted their gaze as they passed by. A second van ran over her leg before a street cleaner raised the alarm. Wang Yue was rushed to the hospital, but sadly, it was too late. She died. If you're like most people, you are probably saying to yourself right now, I wouldn't have walked past that child. I would've stopped to help. Perhaps you would have. But remember that as we have already seen, 5.4 million children under five years old died in 2017 with a majority of those deaths being from preventable or treatable causes. Here's just one case described by a man in Ghana to a researcher of the World Bank.

[\(23:18\)](#):

Take the death of this small boy this morning, for example. The boy died of measles. We all know he could have been cured at the hospital, but the parents had no money. And so the boy died a slow and painful death, not of measles, but out of poverty. Think about something like that happening hundreds of times every day, some children die because they don't have enough to eat. More die from measles, malaria and diarrhea, conditions that either don't exist in the developed nations, or if they do, are almost never fatal. The children are vulnerable to these diseases because they have no safe drinking water, no sanitation. And because when they do fall ill, their parents can't afford any medical treatment, or may not even be aware that treatment is needed. Oxfam, Against Malaria Foundation, Evidence Action, and many other organizations are working to reduce poverty or provide mosquito nets or safe drinking water. These efforts are reducing the toll.



[\(24:12\)](#):

If these organizations had more money, they could do even more and save more lives. Now think about your own situation. By donating a relatively small amount of money, you could save a child's life, but it would take more than the amount needed to buy a pair of shoes. But we all spend money on things we don't really need, whether on drinks, meals out, clothing, movies, concert, vacations, new cars or house renovations. Is it possible that by choosing to spend your money on such things rather than contributing to an effective charity, you're leaving a child to die, a child you could have saved?

MBS [\(24:51\)](#):

It's a good passage, Charlie. Thank you. Do you remember what hit you when you first read those words?

Charlie [\(25:00\)](#):

I think it was, again, somewhat reconstructing this memory, as we often do when we look back. I think it was the fact that these were not band-aids that were being applied to save these children's lives. These were actual children's lives that could be saved, just like the child who was run over by the van, just like the girl in the pond. And what was wrong with me that I wasn't acting to do anything about that. And I wrote the afterward to this book, which I didn't choose to read. But I remember when I would walk to Harvard Square with Diana when we were in college, to get a tuna fish sandwich or a bite to eat late at night, as students in those days tended to do 12 or one o'clock in the morning, I would say to myself, "Why are we doing this? I could be spending this money to do something much better."

[\(25:54\)](#):

But I had that thought in 1970 or '69, and here I was in 2012 reading that passage, and I still had done nothing. Diane and I would give away \$20,000 a



year to Oxfam, something like that. But given the salary that I was making, that was not nearly enough money.

MBS ([25:54](#)):

Right.

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

And so I think it was the fact that I couldn't do the structural change, but I could save one child. And about the same time I saw a movie called *The Constant Gardener*, which some people may have seen by John le Carré, who was the author, one of his many great books. And there's a scene where Rachel Wise, who's the protagonist, is about to go out into the country to do some of her charity work. And her husband is begging her, he's Ralph Fiennes, not to go. And he says, "Don't go. You cannot save all those people." And she turns to him and says, "You're right. I can't save all these people, but I can save one." And so it was that kind of thinking at that time that really hit me. And therefore, it was easy for me to write Peter an email and say that we wanted to help, and that I realized it was a privilege as opposed to an obligation.

MBS ([27:14](#)):

Do you despair of humankind, or do you remain optimistic?

Charlie ([27:20](#)):

Both. I think somebody said, and I try to get wiser as I get older, which is a challenge, that wisdom is the ability to hold two thoughts that are contradictory in your head at the same time.

MBS ([27:33](#)):

Scott Fitzgerald said that, I think.



Charlie ([27:35](#)):

And so I hold those two thoughts. I despair. I look around the world and I despair, but I also look at human potential and I'm optimistic. And I also know, having lived through the 50s and 60s where nuclear war was very, very close, that it didn't happen. And now we have not only nuclear war possibly, but climate change. And I think maybe we will solve these problems and deal with them appropriately over the next 20 years, as opposed to destroy the world. I know it's getting very late in terms of climate change. So I hold both thoughts at the same time, and it depends which side of the bed I get up, I suppose, or whether or not I'm engaged properly with my work.

MBS ([28:21](#)):

What have you learned about helping people overcome their natural selfishness, which is a very fundamental prehistoric wiring, protect yourself, gather resources, hold resources. Your brain is going to do this because this means you live longer, and therefore your DNA will carry on. So you've got a very primitive fundamental drive to say, look after yourself, look after your small tribe of 150 people or fewer. And what you are asking is a call for people to overcome some of that wiring. And I'm wondering what you've learned about how that happens.

Charlie ([29:09](#)):

Well, one of the places that I've learned was a book by Josh Green called *Moral Tribes*. He's a professor of psychology at Harvard, and I really suggest people look at it. But Josh talks about jumping over the evolutionary, or kicking away the evolutionary ladder, which is exactly what you're talking about, Michael, which is not being driven by your limbic system or your evolutionary desire to save only your own tribe, but to use your cerebral cortex, your brain, to push away that ladder and think what you actually can do as opposed to just helping yourself or even just your own tribe. In other words, the phrase charity begins at home. But looking at the world in a broader way, which may be from an evolutionary





perspective isn't the ideal, but we've been given this huge brain. And so in my article that I'm writing on effective hedonism, what I'm trying to say to people is, you should be able to have a lot of pleasure in your life.

[\(30:08\)](#):

It isn't selfish to want a lot of pleasure. It isn't selfish to want to spend money on yourself and your family, but what is an opportunity you're missing is to see the incredible amount of pleasure that you can get from saving lives and helping other people, even people outside the United States where a dollar goes further. So I'm trying to get myself, number one, and others to unite their desire for pleasure, which I think is understandable and reasonable, their desire to help their family and their community, which I think is understandable and reasonable, but also to expand using their brain to see where they can do good and how that can benefit them. And I think I said to Peter once that people think it's funny that I... People say, "You're working for the life you can save. You're saving people's lives." And I say, "It's funny, I'm working for the life you can save, because often, I feel like the life I'm saving is my own."

[\(31:08\)](#):

And what I mean by that is that I'm now at 74 looking forward to a period of time where I have this more mental peace because I've had a very pleasurable life, I continue to have a pleasurable life, I continue to support my family and work within my community, but I also have expanded my network and that I have the opportunity to save lives. And since I'm not a very brave person, I say... I made a video about this. It's called You Don't Have to Be Brave to Save Lives. But I'm really happy, and I don't think you have to be altruistic to save lives either, or you don't have to be Peter Singer to save lives. You just have to recognize that there's a huge opportunity waiting for you to do the things you want to do, but also to do some really cool stuff that would make you feel better.



MBS ([32:04](#)):

You had a 18 year career in the Men's Warehouse and understanding corporate culture and corporate scale because organizations are inherently trying to get a little bit bigger. What surprised you about the challenges of running The Life You Can Save?

Charlie ([32:25](#)):

What has surprised me, it's very simple, what surprised me. So back in 2013 when Diane and I donated \$400,000, which was a pretty significant amount of money for us, because we're not... People think we're very wealthy, but we're not very wealthy. We're well off, but we're not very wealthy. We're not very wealthy like some of the tech people who've had liquidity events or Carrie and Dustin Moskowitz who've supported GiveWell and Open Philanthropy. What I've been surprised at is how difficult it is to convince people that they have this opportunity, and that one way to do it is by supporting The Life You Can Save itself, like Diane and I did, and continue to do, I might add, because by scaling The Life You Can Save, you can scale the amount of impact we have with the 25 nonprofits we recommend. In fact, we believe over the last three years, for every dollar we've spent, we've raised \$15 for our recommended nonprofits.

([33:26](#)):

It has been surprising to me that even my own friends and community, some of whom are very well off, some of whom are very wealthy, and some of whom are very well off, like Diana and myself, that they don't see this opportunity and that they don't give what I consider to be a reasonable amount of their resources to these organizations or The Life You Can Save. It has been shocking to me. And I talked to other people who've been in this work who feel the same way. There's a woman named Nan Keohane who used to be president of Duke and Wellesley College, so very prestigious college, and she's a very respected educator. And she started something called the President's Pledge years ago where she asked presidents of universities to pledge to donate 5% of their gross



income, two and a half percent to charities in the United States, and two and a half percent to charities overseas.

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

And we met once at Princeton where she was doing some work when I went to see Peter, and she told me that she was despairing and closing down the President's Pledge, she couldn't get enough traction, and that in fact had cost her some friendships and relationships that were really important to her. And I've had a similar experience. On the other hand, I've also encountered incredibly generous people who are giving, some of whom are not wealthy at all. They may have... I remember one person I talked to in a church in Athens, Georgia during COVID through a Zoom talk, and I remember Dan coming back to me after the talk. He makes \$60,000 a year. He lives in Athens, Georgia. Won't give his last name.

[\(35:13\)](#):

But Dan said to me, "You know, Charlie, I've decided to give away 50% of the money I make." Now, his wife also works, so I'm not suggesting they're living on \$30,000, but he's giving away such a substantial portion. To me, Dan is more amazing than Bill Gates because Bill Gates is giving away, I don't know, I'm making up the numbers, 50 billion or 70 billion, but he's still left with billions of dollars, whereas Dan is not left with that much discretionary spending money. So I've encountered people like Dan over the last number of years, and that's just exciting. So it's, again, both sides of the coin here.

MBS [\(35:53\)](#):

One of the things that I notice about the charities that The Life You Can Save recommends, and for people who don't know, a core part of your work is to say, these are the charities that are effective. For the money spent and for the impact had, these are the charities that are outstanding in their field. Is that a fair summary, Charlie?



Charlie ([36:13](#)):

Yes, that's a fair summary. I think we have two fabulous people who curate and research these charities, Katie Stanford and Matias Nestor. Katie lives actually near me in Bellingham, and Matias lives in Sienna, Italy, although he's Argentinian, and they do a fabulous job of curating these opportunities so that you don't have to do that because you probably spend more time looking for a restaurant on Yelp than you do deciding where to give your money.

MBS ([36:43](#)):

And I know that when my wife and I have thought about where we give our money, A Life You Can Save is one of the places we look at to go what's being curated and recommended for us. And part of the challenge is many of those charities feel non-performative, non-glamorous. This may be out of date, this story I've got in my head, but the idea that giving money to an organization that helps deal with intestinal worms in kids is a far more effective way of giving than giving money that creates books that end up in schools because it just has an impact further up the system. You kill the worms, the kids are healthy, the fields get looked after the kids can go to school, then they can actually learn. Whereas if you just donate books, the kids are never showing up in the school in the first place.

([37:45](#)):

How do you help people manage... What's the question I want to ask you, Charlie? It's like part of what we get from giving, I think that drives some people is the ability to go, "Look at me, look at what I've given, look what I'm associated with." I think one of the reasons that Charity Water is so successful is they do a great job at helping people raise their status by being associated with that particular charity. I'm just wondering how you navigate the fact that so often what effective altruism is also not glamorous altruism.



Charlie ([38:23](#)):

Well, one of the things I'm trying to do is tell people, you don't have to be an altruist, thus my effective hedonism.

MBS ([38:31](#)):

Well, that's true. Yeah.

Charlie ([38:32](#)):

Which is, because most of us don't really identify with altruism. I certainly don't. That you can balance your own pleasure, your desire to do good for the communities, your families, with the idea of helping the global poor. So I kind of, wouldn't say attack the concept of altruism, but I try to get people to understand that-

MBS ([38:32](#)):

Sidestepping.

Charlie ([38:51](#)):

... this is an opportunity for them. But it's very difficult. It's not an easy thing to do, to make a mundane gift seem lifesaving to people. And I think we've done a terrible job at making those donations live for people, meaning that if there's a girl living in Uganda named Gertrude who is going to be able to live and thrive because of their gift of a bed net or food fortification, or whatever it is, or deworming, it's very hard for us to get people to experience Gertrude, which is actually one of our beneficiaries. That's why I'm using her name because she actually is in Uganda, and she actually is thriving because of this kind of work.

([39:45](#)):

But to experience Gertrude the same way you experienced that girl in the pond who you would never pass by and recognize that there's, every year, 5.3 million Gertrudes who could die, to connect the dots for people, we're doing a poor job



of that, I would say. If you could connect those dots better, which we're striving to do, I think very few people would walk by that pond, and more people would want to expand their care in the universe beyond themselves and their families, beyond giving just to charities in the United States to the Gertrudes, and they would make some sort of balance with that. So I think the problem partly is that we're not doing a very good job of it, and part of what we need to do is make that more real for donors than we've been able to make it, and we're striving to do that.

MBS ([40:36](#)):

Time is almost up, Charlie. I'm wondering, as a penultimate question, how do you now think of success for you and for your organization?

Charlie ([40:54](#)):

Success for me is staying involved in trying to help with the primary challenges the organization faces in making Gertrude real for people as a fundraiser, and also as a writer, like I'm doing with the effective hedonism, and to not be as worried about managing the organization because we have other people who will take over managing the organization who will do a better job than me, but that I can still make a contribution as long as I can think somewhat clearly. I don't think as well as I did when I was 50 or 40, but I can think, and I can talk to potential donors, I can help create content, and I can write. So staying involved is sort of what I call success. What I call success for the organization is growing the number of dollars that we raise for our recommended nonprofits. It's very simple. And it's almost like business. When you ask a store manager who's selling suits what success's, they would say, "We did \$2.2 million last year. Success would be to do \$2.6 million this year."

MBS ([40:54](#)):

Right.



Charlie ([42:09](#)):

And that's at the individual store level. We had 650 stores or 700 stores when I left. But it was easy to measure success, and I think we measure success, ultimately as an organization, as the amount of dollars that we raise for these great nonprofits.

MBS ([42:23](#)):

Nice. Charlie, it's been a wonderful conversation. Thank you. As a final question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

Charlie ([42:37](#)):

Well, one thing I'd like to say to people is I really like it when people want to reach out to me personally. So I'd like to make sure that you have my email-

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

Perfect.

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

... and that you feel like you can reach out, particularly if you would like to get involved, either as a significant donor or in some other way that you can offer a skill. Will you post my email?

MBS ([43:01](#)):

We'll put it in the show notes, for sure, but please share your email, and also the website for-

Charlie ([43:06](#)):

Okay. So the website for The Life You Can Save is [thelifeyoucansave.org](http://thelifeyoucansave.org). And I really hope that you'll spend 20 minutes looking around the website. And my personal email is charlie, C-H-A-R-L-I-E, [@thelifeyoucansave.org](mailto:@thelifeyoucansave.org). And I



welcome people who are thinking, gosh, I'd like to take advantage of this opportunity like Charlie and Diana did. I welcome people contacting me directly. As far as anything else that needs to be said, it really is just to remind people that I don't think you have to be altruistic. I don't think you have to be self-sacrificing. In fact, I think, like me, you could be quite hedonistic, and part of your hedonism is to recognize that you have this huge opportunity sitting right in front of you.

MBS ([44:00](#)):

I'm really taken by Charlie's idea of being an effective hedonist. The marketer in me is not quite sure he is got the right language there. Effective and hedonism seem too much at odds with each other, so I can't quite get my head around how they combine. But in theory, I absolutely get it. There is a ton of research that talks about the deep and long lasting pleasure you get from giving, from helping others. To me anyway, it feels like it goes beyond pleasure. It's more contentment and satisfaction and gratitude. So the question is, what's the version of giving that might nourish you, that might enliven you? As I sit with that question myself, I see that while my son and I give money to some causes that we support, I'm a little bit distant from the challenges that they really face.

([44:53](#)):

For me to be a effective hedonist, to not only give but to get pleasure from it, I need some sort of connection to the work beyond just reading or flicking through their annual report. But what about you? What would it take for you? It's the holidays, so can you, to quote one of my favorite quotes, can you give more to the world than you take? If you like my conversation with Charlie, I've got two others to suggest to you, number 63, Rebooting Democracy with DeNora Getachew. She's the executive director of an organization that's trying to make or ensure, I guess, that democracy stays alive. And then Ashye Birsal, a good friend of mine, a brilliant designer, that's episode 137, and it's called How to Move From Pessimism to Optimism.





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

If you'd like to learn more about Charlie and Charlie's work, then I would send you to [thelifeyoucansave.org](http://thelifeyoucansave.org), the website of The Life You Can Save, [thelifeyoucansave.org](http://thelifeyoucansave.org). And in fact, you'll see there's a tab there called Best Charities, and that's really a valuable piece of information. It's basically the charities they recommend you donate to that have the most bang for your buck. I'm sure they don't say it exactly like that, but really do the work that's most important in the most efficient way. Thanks for loving the podcast. Thanks for passing on the word. Thanks for rating it, reviewing it, suggesting it to a friend. We grow through your support. You're awesome, and you're doing great.