

[Transcript] Lex Fridman Podcast / #357 - Paul Conti: Narcissism, Sociopathy, Envy, and the Nature of Good and Evil

The following is a conversation with Paul Conti, a psychiatrist and a brilliant scholar of human nature.

My friend, Andrew Huberman, told me that Paul and I absolutely must meet and talk, not just about the topic of trauma, which Paul wrote an amazing book about, but broadly about human nature, about narcissism, sociopathy, psychopathy, good and evil, hate and love, happiness and envy.

As usual, Andrew was right.

This was a fascinating conversation.

As the old meme goes, one does not simply doubt the advice of Andrew Huberman.

Allow me to also quickly mention that I disagree with Paul a bunch in this episode, as I do in other episodes, even with experts, in part for fun and in part because I think the tension of ideas and conversation is what creates insights and wisdom.

My goal is to always empathize, understand and explore ideas of the person sitting across from me.

This agreement is just one of the ways I think it's fun to do just that, as long as I do so from a place of curiosity and compassion.

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They enable the quality of life that is observed in the developed world and that the developing world is reaching towards.

I mean, this is just incredible.

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And now, dear friends, here's Paul Conti.

Do you see psychiatry as fundamentally a study of the human mind and not just a set of tools for treating psychological maladies?

Absolutely.

I think psychiatry is our best way to understand who we are as people.

I mean, it looks at our biology, you know, how does our brain work?

How does it connect the parts with one another?

How does the chemistry in it work?

It's the very foundational aspects of who we are, and then it manifests as psychology.

What do we think?

What do we feel?

What are our strivings?

What are our fears?

So, yeah, I think psychiatry provides tools that we can use to help each other, but those tools come through it being a discipline of understanding.

So with every patient you see, with every mind you explore, are you picking up a deeper understanding of the human mind?

I think I'm trying to.

I think we should learn, we should be able to take something away from everything we do, you know, every interaction to some small degree.

Every conversation, it doesn't have to be a patient, just anywhere.

At Starbucks, getting a coffee, you can learn something from that little experience.

Yeah, even if you just reinforce sort of gentle kindness and gratitude and decent human interaction, there's a reinforcement of that, that even if we don't take away memories or lessons, so to speak, we can reinforce who we choose to be.

So understanding ourselves from those interactions too, not just the general sort of philosophical human mind, but understanding our own mind, introspect on how our own mind works.

Yeah, everything we understand about anyone or anything else is coming through here, right?

So yeah, we're understanding others, we're also understanding ourselves, it's all feeding through us.

Yeah, but it's a tricky thing to step away and look at your own mind and understand that it's just a machine.

You can kind of control the way the machine processes the external environment and the way that machine converts the things it perceives into actual emotions.

Like how it interprets the things it perceives, you just sort of step away and analyze it in that way, and then you can control it.

You can oil the machine, you can control how it actually interprets the perceptions in

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order to generate positive emotions and be like a, what is it, like a mechanic for the gears in the machine.

I mean, I think to some degree, to some degree of it, the difference I think, at least as I understand, I think of machines as not being inscrutable, right, that if there's enough study, there's enough acumen applied that we can understand whatever it is we're trying to figure out, whereas part of understanding ourselves is understanding that there are things we can't understand.

And I think that's indispensable, important to health and happiness, and also to having enough humility to see how people can be different from us, how we can be different from ourselves at times.

So knowing that we don't know a lot and having some idea of what that might be, I think is an indispensable part of the process, which I think is different from machines, I think.

Yeah, the machines, you're basically saying machines generally because they're engineered from a design, they're usually going to be simpler, therefore understandable.

And you're saying the complexity of the human mind is, at least from our perspective, nearly infinite.

Is there a meta-phenomenon?

Sometimes it gets described as levels of emergence, where at increasing levels of complexity, you have novelty evolve that you can't predict from lower levels of complexity, like for example, atoms to molecules.

It's just one example.

And I think neurons to consciousness, consciousness to culture, that there are meta-phenomenon that separate from the phenomenon underneath of them, and they're bought by an entire aspect of novelty.

So I think we are, I mean, I really think this is true that we are all infinitely fascinating because these levels of emergence, of novelty that are inscrutable because you can't predict from one level to the next or understand fully are what make us, and not just us, but I think sentient creatures, human beings, but sentient creatures, inestimably more interesting than creatures that aren't sentient.

And I don't know, I think when we think about machine learning and artificial intelligence, I think it's that that we're trying to create, the levels of emergence that now we don't fully understand anymore, which I guess is both exciting and maybe scary too.

Yeah.

So you start at the physics of atoms, quantum mechanics, go into chemistry, go into biology. From the biology, you have the functional phenomena, especially as manifested in the human brain, and then multiple brains connecting together through consciousness and intelligence creates civilizations.

It's pretty interesting.

Where do you think the magic is?

Which layer of the cake?

Every layer.

Because every time you emerge from one thing to another, I see it as an analog, the concept of the dialectic, where I think it was Hegel who realized, hey, when you have like thing

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A and thing B and they're complicated and they come together, you don't get a hybrid of A and B. You end up getting something that's new, that's novel.

And I think that describes to some degree that what emergence is, except there's a whole new universe of novelty that comes at each layer of emergence that allows infinite possibilities that weren't possible before.

And I think that's why we're so complicated, that our functional neuroscience, which I think is psychology, our ability to think about ourselves, about others to be reflective, is sitting on top of so many layers of emergence, like the idea of standing on the shoulders of giants that each of us, our consciousness is standing on the shoulder of a giant of many, many, many levels of emergence, of novelty, so many of which we don't understand.

I mean, about subatomic particles, everything that quantum physics means, when does time become important as opposed to things happening outside of time and outside of space, when do we slot into one temporal perspective?

And then the complexity just, I think, grows and grows and grows.

Yeah, the interesting word he uses is novelty.

If true, this really blows my mind in some either shallow or deep sense, it is true.

I'm trying to figure that out.

I don't know if you know something about cellular automata is this very simple mathematical objects where you have rules that govern each individual cell and they interact locally and that you understand the very simple operation of those individual cells, but at another layer of abstraction when you just kind of zoom out with blurry vision, these meta-objects starts appearing, that function, you can build a Turing machine with it, you can build the arbitrary complexity of computation on top of this kind of very simple object.

Yes.

It's an interesting question whether that was always there.

The atoms somehow know about love, about consciousness, about war and violence and evil and hate

and all that.

That's already laid in the possibility of that, the capacity for that, it's already in the atoms.

It's already in the physics, it's already in all the different chemistry that builds up.

Like even the origin of life, still a mystery, that's known, that's in the physics.

That's known to the universe, the basic background physics in the universe because that's not the case.

It's like, where does that come from?

Where's that magic and how many layers can the cake possibly have?

How many are we going to keep building?

If we're constantly through this process of abstraction of adding a layer to the cake, adding novel things, where's the ceiling?

As we expand on into the cosmos, if we successfully can do that, we're going to keep building more miraculous, complex objects and then the brain is just like a middle layer thing.

We tend to think of ourselves as truly, truly special manifestations of what's possible

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in the universe, but maybe we're just like the basic tiny building block of something much, much, much bigger.

We're in the early days of being a brick and a very large building.

Sure.

I think that's entirely possible.

I think the only emergent thing, so to speak, that we build is culture, the aggregation of us.

You have individual human minds which are entirely unique.

The fact that time is different for you and me, it may be by picoseconds, but we can engage because our perceptions of time are parallel enough, they're close enough that we can share a reality, but we're all living in a different dimension of time.

We know that, so we're unique in that way and then the unique individuals that we are just like the cells start to create not just one thing, not just a culture, but culture on top of our individuality, our uniqueness, our even dimensional uniqueness of time and experience and consciousness.

We create cultures on top of us, but what could be beyond culture and what is different from us either on underlying levels like quantum physics or chemistry or biology or entirely different and unconceived, I think is it's an immense question and I think it's one that should create humility in us, that look how much we don't know and then how reckless we are with ourselves, with our resources, with human life.

And I think there, it's important to say, think about how entropy rules the universe around us.

How over selected are we, how many, not just hundreds or thousands of times, but how many millions of times does there have to be a selection branch point before we get into a sort of eddy pool of counter entropy where you can begin to create, which I think is why you say, okay, the atoms know about love.

The fact that anything is being created means there's this over selection for counter entropy where there can be a building of greater complexity of ultimately of novelty and we don't often think about that of how far removed we are, maybe light years, so to speak, from any other location, temporally, physically in the universe where this could happen and we don't think about what does that mean?

And they just said love, everything is counter entropy goes against the way the basic physics of the universe.

So maybe actually the atoms really don't like what we're doing.

They want us to stop.

They've been trying really hard to stop and despite that we somehow started this whole bacteria thing for like a billion years and now we're here.

I should think of it kind of the other way.

I don't think there's any purpose to purposelessness, right?

So why would anything be here if the drive weren't towards creativity, right?

If it drive weren't towards those subatomic particles, not being nothingness that blips in and out of existence, right?

Like we think is going on an empty space for light years upon light years, right?

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But is there a design, either natural or intentional, for a schema, right?

A scenario that allows for the incredibly rare but not non-existent any pull of counter entropy where good can happen, right?

Where creativity can happen, where ultimately something can grow, something novel can happen.

There's no novelty in the vastness of space even though there's not nothing there.

There's novelty here because I think the layers of emergence start stacking very, very, very high when we're in a place of counter entropy, which then could provide even thoughts about like good and evil, right?

The idea that creating, that preserving is good, right?

It's what we build upon.

It's how we get to the eddy pool of counter entropy, right?

So then destruction is not good.

What good comes of aggression and destruction, right?

Unless we're protecting or even you could think of outlying cases, but just think in general concepts, right?

Evolution destroys.

It brings us towards a state of entropy, towards a state of nothingness, whereas goodness, commonality, collaboration, right, nurturing, right, brings novelty, it brings new existence into the universe.

And I think we don't think about that, that we're in the middle of something so vast and built on top of so many layers.

And I think it leads us to be cavalier with human life, including often our own.

So you think there's an underlying creative force to the universe that might even have a kind of built-in morality to it, where creating is better than destroying.

And then that somehow maps on into our society, where we kind of try to figure out what that actually means in terms of good and evil.

So there's some things there like that, but it has to be, it's like so nice.

It's so perfect because it's rare.

It's sufficiently rare where we have our own space.

Like you can close the door and it's like, I need to be alone right now as our human civilization to work on my thing.

So it's sufficiently rare that there's not other alien civilizations.

They're just like constantly knocking on our door, destroying us, but it still exists.

That's weird.

Right.

Right.

It's so fantastically improbable that I think we should be very respectful of it.

And I think you said there's a creative force that values creativity.

Yes.

Well, sure, it's a creative force.

Its existence, its ability to exist and to create comes from something other than entropy.

Something other than so much dispersion that there's nothingness.

So the creative force will value the sanctity of things, keeping things together, not destroying

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things, building novelty, including novelty of knowledge, novelty of sentience.

I mean, it fits with the idea that we're not nothing, that that's incredibly improbable

and that there are these many, many layers of emergence that we're standing upon.

And I think it tells us something that we're not doing ourselves a service to ignore, right?

It's not just a jump to saying, oh, there's a religious answer to everything.

It's just, no, it's saying science isn't a God either, right?

So if we think of science as a tool and not as an endpoint in and of itself, what is the science telling us?

I remember showing up at medical school and it really is true.

I knew so little about the human body.

I'd only been in hospitals to visit people.

I'd taken pre-med classes, but sort of intensely at once after I didn't take any and I was working in business.

I knew next to nothing and I had this idea that was so naive in retrospect that I was going to learn so much, right?

I was going to answer these questions because I was going, what's going on in the body?

What are these organs doing?

What are these cells?

And what I learned was there was so much more that was amazing and mysterious and seemingly impossible, like even how a cell functions, right?

Like what is going on inside of a cell?

The transport mechanisms and energy functions and diffusion functions and then you can go down to smaller levels than that.

But when you come back out and you say, how will those cells make a kidney?

It's not explanatory.

I remember asking the OB who had delivered my first child, right?

I was so amazed and I asked him, like, what do you think, like, what do you know?

You do this, right?

You're seeing this life created and his thought was nothing, I just marvel, you know, I mean

I get to do this, but I just marvel at it and I think the more we know about us, the more we respectfully marvel.

And we should do that.

We should proactively marvel at every aspect, at every layer that where the novelty emerges.

Yes.

We'd be a lot less likely to say, hey, I don't like you because of something, whatever it is, you know, race, religion, culture, sexuality, gender identity, whatever it is, you know, or I want to say I want rights that you don't have, right?

Or I want what you have, right?

I mean, there's so much of this.

And I understand it's driven by scarcity and by human insecurity and envy and all of these things that I think could drive us towards destruction.

But all of that recklessness comes from not having this initial appreciation and respect that you're referring to and just marveling at like, wow, okay, we're here.

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That's amazing.

Let's start with that.

But if we marvel at this whole thing, the human project, the human condition, all the different kinds of human beings that are possible, what do you then make of that some humans do evil onto the world?

First of all, are all human beings capable of evil?

If we're in the process, now we've got a little bit of momentum in terms of marveling at the layers of the cake.

Should we also marvel at the capacity for evil in all of us?

Yes.

Is that capacity there?

I believe that it is.

Yes.

So what do we understand about the psychology of evil?

Where does that originate in the human mind?

Is it there in the neurobiology?

Is it there in the environment, in the upbringing?

Can I clarify first?

I think the capacity for evil, I do believe, is in all of us.

There's a difference between enacting evil and a sort of preset, followed, developed plan of evil.

I don't believe that all of us are capable of doing what the people who perpetrate the most evil do.

But I do believe that we're capable of perpetrating evil, right?

And the thought, one thought would be that there are drives in us.

I mean, there certainly seem to be drives in us towards survival, towards gratification, in some ways towards pleasure.

And that can get very complicated because pleasure inside can be relief of distress.

So if I feel very badly about myself and I can feel a little better about myself by making you feel worse about yourself, which that plays out in a lot of human beings, is that an indirect way of bringing pleasure, right?

So it gets very complicated what's going on inside of us.

And sometimes the perpetration of evil things can be through misunderstandings, anger, impulsivity.

I mean, there are things that we can have in us.

And other times there can be other things going on which are through the lens of unhealthy human psychology.

So for example, the psychology of envy, which I think drives the lion's share of the orchestrated evil, right?

There's a difference between impulsive, reflexive evil and highly orchestrated evil, which I think is driven by envy.

Highly orchestrated evil, are we talking about as scale societies, like totalitarianism?

So if we're thinking about somebody like Hitler.

So at scale, orchestration of evil, envy driving that.

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So I mean, that's really interesting to think about.

I'd love to hear more about it.

So some of it, there might be some psychological forces that are in tension with each other.

So one is, if you look at something like Hitler, it's difficult to know what was going on in his mind.

But it's possible to imagine, if you just look at dictator's thought history, that he thought he was doing good, not just for himself, but for the people he believed have value.

So one way you can achieve what we consider as evil is by devaluing some group of people. And that could be all group of people.

So it could have sort of a narcissistic type of idea that you basically don't care about other human beings.

That's one.

Envy is different.

I mean, maybe they can collaborate together.

Or even like you mentioned, you can actually enjoy doing bad to others.

That's almost like different because if all it is is like narcissism, you disregard, you don't care what how others feel, then you can just have make cold, calculated, military, almost economic decisions and you don't care if a million people die here or there.

But if you actually enjoy some aspect of that, or there is like a resentment that fuels it, it's not just cold calculation, it's like fueled by some kind of personal or cultural resentment.

I think it's all fueled by that.

You think so?

I think it's all fueled by that.

I think the idea that the Hitler thought he was doing good is like that is such a thin facade that it flies away like a handkerchief in a hurricane, right?

Okay.

Yeah.

Thank you.

That's wow.

That's beautiful.

Yeah.

It's built upon, like it says, I'll explain, logical lies, right?

Because people can build lies upon specious logic, right?

So the idea that, okay, I am doing good because I believe that this ethnicity of people is good and this is bad and now I'm going to do this and I'm going to make the world different and it's going to bring better to the world and now I'm raising armies and I'm building concentration camps and I think like this is all in the service of good is I don't think anyone ever thinks that, right?

Or they think that but with, because they're living in the surface patina, right?

They're not allowing the hurricane that blows away the handkerchief and says like this is all evil, right?

How do you decide that some group of people is good and some is bad and like what is it

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that you take upon yourself to play God or make decisions about the world?

And I think what really is going on is that people are not doing that, right?

There's something cobbled together to say like, why this is right and this is okay, right?

And this is even good, right?

But it is all a lie, right?

It's a lie that's adorning that what I believe is the fact I believe that what's going on is the gratification of envy inside of the person.

And whether someone says, oh, I think this is good and it's okay if a million people die or I'm going to enjoy that a million people die, I think is the same.

I think the enjoyment, the gratification of the orchestrated evil is there and that it all comes from vulnerability and insecurity.

It all comes from deficits in the sense of self, right?

I'm going to have to process that, my slow penny in PC is processing that.

So envy underlies all of it.

The psychological concept of envy.

What is that?

I keep putting myself in the mind of Hitler, I guess.

That has nothing to do, it doesn't have to do with Jews or Slavic people.

Does it have to do with specific amorphous other in his mind that he's envy itself?

I think it has all to do with him.

All to do with him.

There's not a love of the people with whom he allied or even a sense of the people who he persecuted were worse than him.

It's all projections out of what was going on inside of him, which was an intense sense of inadequacy, a rage at being someone he perceived as lesser than.

That's the difference.

So we can define words in different ways even within psychology but let's say we take the definition here of jealousy as being sort of benign.

The idea that, oh, I might see something that you have that I don't and I might think, I'd like that.

Maybe I'll work harder to get it or maybe I can't get it, maybe it's that you're younger than I am.

I say, okay, you have that and I don't.

I have other things too, I'm okay anyway.

But I might want those things but it's very benign, the jealousy.

I'd like to be younger, I'd like to be richer, whatever it is that we people think.

But it's just a thought and it's a thought that can result in strivings or acceptance.

It's very, very different.

It's completely different than envy, which is destructive.

It's the thought of, I see something that you have that I don't have and instead of me working for it or accepting that I don't have it, what I'd like to do then is bring you down, take you down to where I am and then I'll feel better because from the perspective

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of envy, it is all relative.

So is jealousy a kind of, because he said completely different, but is jealousy potentially like a gateway drug to envy?

Like is it a slippery slope?

I think no, I think that jealousy is a natural just part of the human phenomenon that we go through life and we see like, oh, I'd like to have that.

I think it's probably part of our incentives, right?

If I'm farming and I have one row of crops and I look over and I see that you're working harder and you have two and I'd like to have two, that can make me work harder to have two.

You don't think it's a slippery slope from one to the other to, at first, you're like, I'd like to work harder, but then you keep failing and the weather sucks and you keep failing and the other person becomes more successful.

Plus he's got a new hot wife now, there's a nice tractor, there's a field is all working and then you get this idea that, you know what, I'm going to steal all this stuff and I'm going to murder him and that, do you think that's just like a leap of the same phenomenon?

No.

No, because I think there are things that are in us as humans, right?

So the things are just by being human, like we can, for example, feel compassion, right?

We can feel interest, right?

We can feel jealousy in that benign sense, like it's all part of just being human.

If we start going from, hey, you have more crops than I have and that seems like I actually have a better life in a lot of ways than I have, I'm going to kill you, that is not a progression of something benign, right?

That is, wait, wait a minute, but that is a human leap of the same thing, isn't it?

Because you're drawing a line, stuff, you're saying like, this is the, this human stuff, it's regular life, it's benign, but it feels like this benign thing is just a low magnitude thing version of the thing that's not benign.

Like there's probably a gray area where it stops being, but like jealousy, you can have like healthy jealousy, you can have a little bit slightly unhealthy, I think jealous guy, this John Lennon song that I love, it's beautiful, I mean, there's like this jealousy inside relationships can make you feel like, you know, could take your minds in all kinds of silly directions and it's crazy, but like, it feels like that's an extra neighbor to like being really crazy and toxic and all that kind of stuff inside relationships and then that feels like an extra neighbor, it's like an apartment building, that feels like an extra neighbor that eventually gets the Hitler with envy and resentment of entire population of people.

You're right, that there's a causal, there can be a causal chain, right?

Like if I'm not feeling jealous, maybe I won't ever feel envious, right?

So you can see, okay, so it can kind of lead to, it can open gates to, huh, like how much do I dislike that you have things that I don't have, right?

So yes, in that sense, but, and I think this is the part that I think is so important that I think there is a disjunction, right, there's an asymptotic shift, right, from one thing to another because it is there.

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I'm just speaking my language, mathematically.

Yeah.

Statotically, yep.

Yes, that's, it's a way to convey, right, something that's entirely different because if I start thinking, you know, I'm not going to try and make things better, right, I'd like instead to harm you, that's qualitatively different.

Oh, it's almost like, you know what it is, it could be, I don't know what you think about this, but it's in which direction your motivation is pointing.

So if in the response to the feeling of jealousy, your sort of, the motivation says, okay, I understand this feeling, I want to do less of it.

I think there must be a threshold to which you actually want to do more, like it becomes a vicious downward cycle.

So that's what envy becomes, like the first feeling, this idea that I'm going to kill the farmer turns into like more and more and more and you can't sleep and you're visualizing the farmer and it becomes the devil and like you have this very, you know, it's basically a thing that builds into the negative direction versus returns to the stable center.

Now a person is cultivating evil, right, they're saying, hey, there can be seeds of evil in all of us.

Let me take that seed out, dust it off, plant it, nurture it, right, and then grow that seed of evil, which will affect all other parts of the person's life, right, they won't behave the same towards others in their life, they'll become different as they nurture fantasies of evil as they begin to create with inside of themselves the motivation and the will, right, to enact evil.

I mean, the Hitler analogy would say, look, you take someone who had a bad childhood, right, who was not loved, who was taught and told that he was less than, okay, like that, we know that happens, I mean, that's why child abuse is so evil, right, it's telling children the worst possible wrong lessons, right, they're not good enough, they'll always be hurt, you know, they can't keep themselves safe, they don't deserve safety, right. So then you take someone who then nurtures that seed of evil, which is a choice and says, well, I can't paint well enough and no one appreciates me and I don't like how I look and I don't fit in with the people I want to fit in with and then and on and on and on and on and on and there's a hatred of self through that lens of misery of just being repulsed by the self, but that's unacceptable to the self.

So it has to be someone else's fault, right, it's not my fault, whose fault is it, right, and then you see en masse the enaction of evil towards groups of people who somehow in this press's mind, right, are responsible for his misery and there's the justification of evil and then all the, you know, whether it's this will be better for the economy, this will be good, this will be that, like that's all lies built to justify the evil.

Those are surface level narratives.

Yes.

And the envy is the deep down mechanism that enables.

And that's the endpoint that's being served.

What's being served is destruction, right, which is why it always brings more destruction,

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right?

I mean, how many times do wars that were started for purposes that we would look and say like that?

Those were evil purposes.

Like how many times does good come of that even if we look at the modern world, what comes of it is more evil is more destruction and Hitler's outward destruction eventually came inward and you see pictures of what Berlin looked like after the Second World War, right?

It wasn't just destruction perpetrated outward as awful as that is, it's catchy, right?

People used to worry if you, you know, before the, during the time of the Manhattan Project, right?

If you start this chain reaction, you know, will you blow the whole world up, right?

Or will it stop within this bomb or not?

And we see, okay, the chain reaction of evil hasn't yet blown the whole world up, but look at the, look at how the catastrophe spreads and you think 50 to 60 million people dead in the Second World War, which truly was a world war, what destruction was spread around the globe.

And this is something that can't be stopped once the chain reaction starts.

Like if Hitler was successful, like he would just keep going.

If he had been, on his personal psychological level, I mean, right, because if we think from the perspective of destruction, success would have needed, led to the need to conquer more than there's factions and infighting and then eventually you get the same mass destruction, right, and, and never does the inaction of evil satisfy what the person is initially seeking.

Like people want to feel better about themselves, right?

We, you know, Winnecott, who was a British pediatrician who, who wrote about children and adults from very deep perspectives, he wrote about the idea of good enough, right?

And then you can sort of extrapolate that to like, we all want to feel good enough, like not just limp over the line, good enough, but I want to feel good enough that I'm a decent person in the world and like what I do matters.

And, you know, I can, I can have an impact on people and, you know, people can like me and care about me.

It's, it's, there's a simplicity there that people want, that when people don't have, and there's certain other factors, maybe they're temperamental factors or historical factors can lead to trying to soothe that deficit, right, through envy.

And I think it starts with, with, it starts with that and it often starts in childhood, not always, but it often starts in childhood when, when the child's brain and psychology are so vulnerable and, you know, you see salient child abuse, if you, if you look at what was Hitler's background and what was Stalin's background, I mean, you could, you could look at almost anyone who's perpetrated evil or their serial killers or whatever it may be.

The majority, not everyone, but the majority had these lessons in childhood that said you're not good enough, you can't keep yourself safe, no one cares about you.

And, and in a subset of people, that's going to generate envy and that, you know, that,

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that seed of evil then gets planted and nurtured as a fighter jet, the sound of a fighter jet above us.

Being good by an orchestra.

If you get, you quickly forget the comfort of being in a peaceful place.

That's one thing I saw in Ukraine is, um, hey, you quickly get comfortable here.

The whole trip back, I was thinking, it's so damn good to be in America to hold just the whole, like, it's like a three day trip back.

It's so good to be American.

We might take that for granted, it's a population, but I do agree.

So the destruction never alleviates the envy.

Are all humans capable of envy?

I believe the answer is yes.

If you think, do we all have the possibility of evil in us?

I think the answer to that is yes, but we have free will, we have choice, we can choose what we do with that, which is why just because someone is a sociopath, you know, for example, is it doesn't mean that they're not responsible.

I mean, our, you know, our medical legal jurisprudence, right, has absolutely borne that out, that legally, medically, we think, okay, we're responsible, presuming we're healthy, we're not unhealthy in other ways that eliminates our ability to be circumspect, but that we're responsible for what we do and don't nurture inside of us.

I mean, there are plenty of things we could decide to nurture anger and hatred about.

You know, I could think of slights, difficulties, whether it's something someone else has done to me or I could blame fate or I could be mad at God or the world.

We can all make those choices and we're responsible for them or for recognizing things in us.

They're like, oh, I, you know, I too have that in me, but I don't want to nurture that.

I don't want to foster that.

Or do I choose to nurture and foster that?

And I think ultimately, you know, our subject of Hitler as evil, if Hitler had kept winning and winning, right?

Like ultimately, he would have been the only person on earth, right?

And I really do believe it.

Ultimately, everyone, everything else would be killed because it's such destruction, right?

Destroy everything, right?

And probably when that didn't work, then there's the destruction of the self, right?

Because nothing soothes envy that is stoked by the sort of flames of evil.

And what you see is more and more anger and more and more frustration, which is why I really do believe someone like that, who nurtured evil in themselves that way, ultimately would destroy.

They'd be like him and one other person, then he'd kill the other person.

I think that's really powerfully said.

But even just to return to the jealousy versus envy, I still think that it's the same flame.

And envy is just the bigger version of it.

So I think I just, in my own personal life, I've felt jealousy towards others.

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Like you said, like, oh, this person has a cooler thing, trinket, whatever trinket I cared about.

And usually it's when somebody's really close to the trinket you're building.

And early on, like in my teens, I realized that just empirically speaking, that jealousy over a period of a week just doesn't feel good.

And it's not productive.

It doesn't help me build a better trinket.

Or it does if I turn it not into jealousy towards another person, but into a love for building a better trinket.

It's like, oh, cool.

You know what?

Like proactively speaking, in later in life, people like Joe Rogan actually have been really powerful in this for me, just as a fan of his, to celebrate other people.

So it's almost as opposed to ignoring that other person with a cool trinket.

It's like celebrating their awesomeness in my mind, like just saying how awesome the humans are able to do that.

And actually just how awesome is that exact person at being able to do that?

And that somehow made me more capable to build my own trinket better.

And it feels good also, like it makes me feel happy.

And now you're not jealous anymore.

You're not jealous anymore.

Right?

So that's why I think jealousy is different.

Right?

Because you're saying, there's a week of jealousy.

Like, I don't like this.

Right?

I don't like, but if you take that in a way that says, wait, actually, this is awesome.

This is fabulous.

And this person did this.

That person's awesome.

Right?

Then you're not reigning on anyone's parade, right?

And in not doing that, even inside your own mind, you gain a greater cognizance of your own capability.

Right?

Well, if he, if he can do that or she can do that, why, why can't I too?

Like I want to build, I want to make the better trinket too.

Right?

Yeah.

Now you're thinking creatively, nowhere in there, nowhere in there was the emergence of evil.

I just disagree with that.

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I think there was a choice made where I, I looked at my, if my life was darker, more difficult, I think it has nothing to do with the actual little flame of jealousy I felt.

I think it has to do a lot more with the other context.

If, if I, if, if my life were more difficult, there was more abuse.

There was more challenges.

I think that decision, I could have made that decision a different direction.

Yes.

Maybe, I don't know.

Yeah.

You, you've written brilliantly about trauma.

If there's a bit more trauma as the background noise of my decision-making, I'll be more likely to, uh, not be able to, uh, pull away from the gravitational field of that jealousy and it would build and build and build and build.

So I think, not to disagree with a, with a brilliant, uh, a person, but like, I feel like that flame, that flame has the capacity to engulf the whole world.

I guess the, the initial flame of jealousy, the little bit, like, especially the younger you are, it's, it's almost like a habit that you get to build in either direction.

Cause I've early on built the habit of saying, I'm going to, uh, channel that jealousy, uh, into productivity and into celebrating other people and that jealousy disappears.

That was like a little discovery for me.

I discovered that.

I get it.

That doesn't come, nobody tells that to you.

You kind of discover that little thing.

I could have easily not discovered it.

I could have easily discovered that it kind of feels good to, to like mess with that other person, to like, uh, think, uh, shitty thoughts, think negative thoughts, do negative things to that other person.

Cause that could also, I just think the capacity in that initial feeling is there.

And I think it's the decision we make because like, otherwise I think it, it, uh, dissolves responsibility, like, well, surely I'm not Hitler, therefore this jealousy is normal.

No, I just feel like every jealous is the capacity to turn into maybe not Hitler, but a toxicity that destroys it in a small way in your own little private life, but it could destroy.

I agree that jealousy brings us, can bring us dangerously close to envy.

I mean, maybe, maybe let's see if, if, um, a heuristic we could agree on, right?

Let's see.

So let's say, okay, if we look at the terrain of the mind as geography, right?

So if I'm feeling happy, satisfied, probably like I'm, I'm pretty far from the, from Envy land, right?

Right.

But, but if I'm feeling jealousy now, I'm, I'm, I'm coming kind of closer to that border.

Right.

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And I still, I think there's, it's a big thing to go over the border, right?

That the border is in a gray area, right?

There's a border to go over, and I think that you're, I agree completely once certainly about trauma, that the more trauma there is, because then the more misunderstandings there are about self and feelings that I'm not good enough.

And then that can be anger about why and who might be oppressing me and you know, I mean, I hate myself and everyone else who seems to be better, like, so trauma can drive us in these negative directions, but we're still crossing over something, right?

So, so if you have the trinket and I think that's awesome, I want that, I want to work harder, you know what I could do though, is I could sneak in tonight when no one's around and I could move something, right?

No, no way.

I don't want to do that, right?

But it's like I came over the border a little bit and I thought maybe, maybe that's a better way, but then I came back, right?

And I'm, and you're, we're responsible for that, right?

Because it is a choice to say, I don't want to work hard.

I'm already working how, how hard I don't want to make my trinket better.

I want to think mine's the best one.

I could destroy yours, right?

Then, you know, we're letting our mind go over that border and do we say, right, run that forward, right?

Let's run that forward and put people around us who feel the same way and start doing it so we think less of ourselves and we debase ourselves.

Do we run headlong in or do we come over that boundary and that's maybe the capacity for evil in us, that we come over that boundary, all of us, right, at times.

But do we come over it and then say, no, that, that's not my choice.

That's not my self-definition.

Yeah.

I'm coming back.

I want to justify, maybe there are certain other sociological forces that help us cross the border too.

So in Nazi Germany, we've been talking about Hitler, but then there's also the German people. And so maybe when there's a bit of a mass hysteria, so all these effects of like a combination of propaganda with the small jealousies and resentments of the people that don't cross the border, together they can with great charismatic leaders that sort of really fuel that fire that we feel when we're a part of the crowd.

So maybe those individual kind of psychological barriers we have to take that leap from jealousy to envy, those can be made easier.

The leap can be catalyzed through this massive statement.

100%.

100%.

I think that to me is a massive point, we're talking about layers of emergence, right?

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So if there's individual consciousness, then there's culture, right?

And we're products of the soup we swim in, so to speak.

People would say that when I was growing up, we're products of the soup we swim in.

So if the soup that we're swimming in is the soup of hatred, then it's going to foster all of those things.

So then you think about just in a painting with a very broad brush, the culture created in Germany prior to the Second World War, and what was the impact of the reparations after the First World War, of the punishing reparations, impoverishment, and basically humiliation that people were feeling, okay, there were a whole bunch of decisions that impacted that cultural perspective, right?

Then there must have been aspects just like I see in many ways parallels in America now of what are our standards for what we're communicating to others, right?

How is the media deciding what's real and what's not real, what's true, what's not true, what's hatred that is only going to do evil versus what's hatred that's okay because I might sell something by putting it out there.

I mean, that was, we know that was going on in Germany during the rise of the Nazis.

And I think there's a parallel to, do we value truth?

Can we stand together and say, no matter how much I might disagree with you politically, right?

We can still understand that there's right and there's wrong, right?

There's truth and there's lies, right?

So I think those are just two examples of determinants of culture.

And then the culture is a determinant of, is someone like Hitler marginalizes, that's a crazy evil person, oh my goodness, like whoa, right?

Or is that someone who gains a greater following and more adherence and then there starts to be a momentum because why, because what did demagogues do?

I think they have a giant lasso and they harness the envy of thousands upon thousands upon thousands of people.

That's right.

You feel worse about yourself too.

It doesn't matter what the reasons are.

Maybe it's your childhood.

Maybe it's not.

Maybe it's job failings.

Maybe it's professional.

Maybe it's personal.

It doesn't matter.

Like you have envy too, let's put it together and do some destruction because that'll make us feel better, which is a lie.

So we've talked about envy.

Where does, from the leader perspective, things like narcissism or sociopathy, psychopathy come into play?

What can you make of the world we live in, maybe the leaders that run the world from

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the perspective, from the lens of narcissism?

So I am struck 20 years of doing what I do now.

I've been a psychiatrist for 20 years and I practice in so many different settings and I consult in different settings.

I've been fortunate to have a very wide purview of what's going on in people and in the world around us.

And I am struck with amazement of all the things I see that are, say, abnormal, let's say, from the mental health perspective.

This could be depression, panic attacks, hearing voices, addiction, but there's so many things that cover everything that narcissism is not frequent compared to a lot of other things.

So it's small in terms of, say, a narcissistic diagnosis, right?

It's much less than many other things, but it causes the lion's share.

I don't just mean the most compared to anything else, but I think more than 50%, the majority of bad things, evil things, destructive things that I see in the world around us.

I think narcissists are wildly destructive because they are driven completely.

They are lodged completely in the lane of envy.

Can you try to sneak up, and we don't want to be lost in definitions, but can you try to sneak up to a definition, non-clinical definition of narcissism that we're talking about?

Yeah.

So narcissism is a deep, pervasive and unquestioned sense of inadequacy in the self that comes along with anger and fear and vulnerability, fear of destruction, fear of annihilation that is compensated for by aggression, by the mechanics of envy, by trying to make the self seem better at the expense of others, by taking from others, by being completely cavalier to the thoughts and feelings of others, that narcissism is not arrogance.

Narcissism is the opposite of arrogance.

There is such a deep sense of inadequacy and incompetence in the self that the defensive structure around that becomes dominated by like rocket-fueled envy.

Also the machinery of narcissism is envy, but what do you make of the more popularly discussed symptom of narcissism, which is a seeming, not caring about other people, sort of a very inward-facing focus in terms of the calculation you make when making decisions about the world?

Narcissistic people definitely care about other people.

It's the people who are schizoid and say that don't necessarily register other people, but narcissism people care about other people, but it's entirely vis-a-vis the self.

If I'm schizoid, I don't really notice or care much who you are, but if I'm narcissistic, I absolutely care because I'm watching every last detail of you.

What might you have that's better than me?

It's an incredibly intense focus upon individuals and demographics of people, but the priority - the goal is entirely about the self, which is why it can become easy to say, I don't care if a million people die.

How different is that from going out and destroying one person or a million people?

It's in the same category of those people only - their existence is only meaningful

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in how it relates to me.

But it's still meaningful.

It just seems like a very difficult leap to take that I don't care that a million people die that seems to be even with envy, that seems to be a big feeling and thought to have if you at all care about them.

Are other people, I guess, tools for alleviation of your sense of inadequacy?

Right.

I mean, I don't even care about being caring at all.

I mean, care about in that noticing that the person exists.

I mean, someone who wants money and notices that there's a \$100 bill out cares about that.

They don't care about the \$100 bill in that it doesn't mean anything to them.

It doesn't have thoughts and feelings, but it's going to attract attention.

They care about it because it's something that they want.

The same way people will care about others, but only from the perspective of, do you have things that I want or can I feel better about myself by taking something from you by making things worse for you?

People often talk about narcissism as the opposite of empathy, but empathy, again, depends how you define it, but is a careful consideration of the mental space of another person, of how the other person sees the world.

And so you're saying that narcissistic people would also be very good at that in order to understand how maybe the other person could be manipulated or something to alleviate your sense of inadequacy.

Right.

So there's a difference between the mechanics of empathy.

So let's say, and we can define things different ways, let's say empathic attunement is the ability to be attuned and to think, okay, what's going on in you?

What might you be thinking?

What might you be feeling?

There's some people have a lot of empathic attunement, but we could look at that as mechanistic. It doesn't equate to care.

And empathic attunement can come along with empathy or not.

So yes, people who are narcissistic, they can mentalize well.

So you mentalize meaning the ability to understand or to consider thoughts, feelings, motivations and other people.

So people who are narcissistic can have empathic attunement or mentalization, depending upon how we want to describe those things.

But that has nothing to do with care, with actual empathy or kindness or consideration.

So in that sense, empathy usually popularly used means that you care, like your happiness is aligned.

I need to read this book.

I've read so little science fiction, there's been one of my goals for this year to catch up on some science fiction.

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So Robert Highland from Stranger in a Strange Land has this quote about love, which is love is that condition where another person's happiness is essential to your own.

So that's a good definition, I guess, of empathy where you're very sensitive, so mechanistically very sensitive to the state of another person's mind.

And your goal is to maximize their happiness.

It's essential to your own happiness.

So the happinesses are aligned.

And when that's elevated to its highest forms, you can call that love, romantic love, friendship and so on.

Okay.

And the other thing about the narcissist is some people can be sort of benign narcissists where they want great things for themselves.

But if they have enough great things, they can sort of tolerate others being happy too.

And these are people who sometimes are actually quite highly liked because they have to have the most money, the most power, the most of anything, anything more than anyone else could challenge.

But as long as I have that, it's okay that you have some too.

And then that can make you happy and can make you like me.

So benign narcissists can be well liked from that perspective.

But it's still all about them and that can change if, for example, there's a scarcity of resources now.

But they're generally, they're not people who are being overtly destructive.

Although that, they're over the border into the envy territory.

Malignant narcissists are very different where they then want to have everything.

So even if I have a thousand times more than you, do I still envy you what you have?

Because I want to have, I don't think I can feel good enough about myself unless I have everything.

And once I have everything, I won't feel good enough about myself either and I don't have to have more.

It's like, that's malignant narcissism, which we think of as sociopathy.

We can define these words in different ways, but they're very, very negative concepts.

That's profound sociopathy, malignant narcissism, envy writ large.

So sociopathy is malignant narcissism.

That's a convenient way to think about it.

No, because we can do sociopathic things, but not be sociopathic, like, well, tell a white lie.

It's like sociopathy on steroids, right?

Is then envy writ large is malignant narcissism.

Well, just like you're saying, there's empathic attunement, as you said.

So there's the mechanistic aspect of empathy and sociopathy.

And then there's the big label you get attached if you're just doing that thing regularly, I guess.

Living your life through that lens, right?

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And is there a nice spectrum that's like narcissism, sociopathy and psychopathy?

Is it all the same kind of nice stroll through the woods, off the cliff?

Not really, because the words don't have clear definitions like psychopathy and sociopathy.

There's no real definition of psychopath or psychopathy, or does that mean someone sociopathic but psychotic?

There's really not, we end up using those words colloquially, which is why concepts that we can define, like envy, empathic attunement, narcissism, even though there might be nuances and definitions, like we can define them in ways that are widely accepted, including within psychology and psychiatry.

So it's nice to just think about this broad umbrella of narcissism and the levels to which it's benign or malignant, and then also separating into the different mechanisms, like interaction by interaction, which sometimes can be narcissistic, but broadly speaking, do you do everything through the lens of malignant narcissism?

That makes you a sociopath or a malignant narcissist.

Yes.

And the thing I would add to that is the thought about culture, right?

It's like, how does the cultures we're in, whether it's the culture of a household, right?

The culture of a community, the culture of a nation or the world, right?

How does that impact what unfolds in that person, and then how does what unfolds in that person impact that culture?

Well, the question is, what unfolds in that person, how does culture affect it, but how does your own psychological development unfold that?

Because narcissism in leaders is the most impactful thing, right?

Who are the most impactful individuals?

What is the most impactful individual psychology we have?

It's usually leaders of countries or leaders of major organizations and so on.

And one of the things you mentioned with benign narcissism, that seems to be aligned with success, right?

If you care about your own success, that's going to be, you're more likely to have narcissistic tendencies, I suppose.

And so my question is, when you follow that thread of narcissism to become the leader of a country, now you have a lot of new interesting psychological complexities to deal with, like power.

I don't cliche that power corrupts.

Does that, is it possible for power to corrupt the human mind to where it pushes you farther and farther into malignant narcissism, into this destructive envy?

What are your thoughts on power?

Like the effect of power in the human mind?

Power is an accentuator, an intensifier.

So I think it is true that there are people who can be sort of in a gray area where there are malignant narcissistic tendencies and behaviors, but there are also ways in which that person can think outside of themselves and think in a broader way and think sort of kindly about others.

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And they're sort of trying to navigate whether they're aware or not that they're trying to navigate between one and the other.

And then the allure of power is, well, just look, just exercise that power and you'll feel better, right?

It'll show you, right, that you're good enough.

Look at the power you have.

And whatever may be going on in the person's mind that then power, yes, can corrupt. Yes.

I think that's why we have to have checks and balances, right?

Because we are all inscrutable to ourselves, let alone to others.

So we must have checks and balances and we should always have them on ourselves as well as on others.

We should want that for the health of ourselves and the world around us.

So I think all of that is true, but there are also people who don't necessarily become corrupted by power, right?

There can be an understanding and a grounding that there is a steward of power, right? A shepherd.

I mean, there are ways people describe utilizing power and utilizing it in a benign way that then fosters the healthy aspects of self, right?

So like gratitude and humility, right?

I mean, if we could add a healthy dose of gratitude and humility to everyone or to our society, there would be a sea change, right?

But how do you feel gratitude?

How do you feel humility?

Those things are incompatible with narcissism and envy, right?

With really the bad pole of things that we're talking about.

And part of the reason I'm so focused in my work and in really what runs through all of my thoughts about life is the impact of trauma, right?

Because trauma creates these false lessons and it walls us all from truth and it starts to point towards the unhealthy ways of trying to feel better about ourselves.

But we have the health in us too.

We have those seeds of health too that can grow into being a steward of power and sharing power, being considerate and kind and we see a lot of that in the world too, right?

It's not all just the evil.

We see plenty of people who do good and who are generous of spirit and we have both in us and it is, I think you're talking about our culture and the seeds that we sow and the climate that we set, including putting governors and boundaries around like how do we rein in or say that the more aggressive, the more envious or destructive is unacceptable, right?

How do we foster the part that's kind and considerate and reflective and slow to judge of like, hey, let's learn a little bit more like how do we foster that?

And I think a lot of that comes back to early childhood education.

I mean, I think we don't do nearly enough to protect children and as a corollary to

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that, we don't do nearly enough to educate children.

I mean, I said, I want to write a book, second book I write is going to be everything I needed to know about life I learned as a second year postgraduate psychiatry resident. It's like, why, you know, why then did I learn so much about unconscious motivation about the impact of trauma about how we can be envious and how we can act out, you know, even about how our emotions trump logic in us, like why don't we teach these things when we're young enough to understand like, why is that other kid bullying me, right? Or why just because I'm a little bit bigger, do I want to go thump that other kid on the head?

Like what's going on that we don't, we don't do those things, you know, we're just we're tripping ahead of ourselves and we don't stop and think, how are we using our resources? How are we, how are we shepherding forward the next generation, which by the way is a generation that's going to determine our fates too, right, as we get older.

But we don't, you know, do that, I often think of like in the Olympics, you know, you see like the great sprinters, right, and they've got to come out of the blocks perfectly, right? Because if they come out of the blocks a little bit too fast, they're going to fall over, right? They're going to just fall forward.

And I often see that in my head about us as, you know, as humans and as a culture that we're rushing so far forward, we don't stop and say, wait, let's, let's keep the basics here, the basic techniques of like, how are we navigating forward in life?

Or do we just throw all those away because I can get some benefit by saying that you're bad even though what's being leveled against you is wrong, right?

Like why, why do I take that?

Or do I say, no, there's something more important here that we want to shepherd forward in ourselves as a culture.

And I think preventing childhood trauma and changing the ways that we educate children and adults would, could again, make a sea change and maybe set us on a course towards, you know, even towards a greater likelihood of survival as a species.

Yeah, so talking to like people in elementary school about human nature and teaching them was so, how people can be resentful and envious and how, how to deal with your emotions, how to, yeah, so these basic interaction things about human relationships, about friendships, about betrayal, about love, about all those things.

Like it just, it's, it's actually strange that we don't, we kind of hope the parents talk about that kind of stuff.

But then the parents often, you know, need therapy themselves.

The parents didn't learn it.

I mean, I'm not joking that I was, I was mad, you know, second year after medical school, like how is it?

Like I think of even things in my own life and, you know, how I, you know, like how much shame I felt after my brother's suicide, like I was already an adult, right?

I was a young adult, but I felt so much shame.

I didn't, like I had no understanding that, that, oh, like it's, it's a, it's a reflex

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to trauma, right?

To feel guilt and shame.

And that of course I was feeling that it didn't mean it was true because I felt it.

But I mapped the fact that I felt ashamed to the fact that I should have felt guilty and ashamed and like led to some very negative things in my life that I had to sort of pull myself back from and recover from.

And like, I didn't know that.

Right?

I didn't know the automaticity of the reflex and how pervasive it can be and how it can put blinders on us.

And I mean, it's just one example, but, you know, it's an example of something big that happens to people that we don't learn about.

And I find myself sometimes having conversations with a person.

So, you know, I still do a lot of clinical care of having conversations with a person after a tragedy.

And I'm saying, I can't believe, right?

Again, I'm saying the things that this person didn't learn in elementary school because like none of us did, right?

And then look at the misery and the suffering.

And then I think this is one person among how many millions among us who, you know, who try and go about their way without knowing things that are easily knowable because they don't even know that they're knowable because we don't teach them to ourselves.

So how to deal with trauma, that trauma happens, first of all, that suffering can happen and small trauma and big trauma, all that can happen.

And there's natural ways to deal with it.

So in the case of trauma, as you write about, and we can also just talk about some more of the details of that, but it's good to bring it to the surface to talk about it, to not be ashamed to hide it inside, to be some kind of secret that it's actually, I mean, there's a lot of positive things to say here, at least from my perspective.

One is it's discussing trauma and dealing with trauma together with other human beings by talking about it is a path to deep friendship and intimacy with those people.

There's a dark aspect to trauma, to war, that communicating it or sharing it bonds you.

So like the other side of trauma is like love is you need that hardship, not you don't need it, but hardship and trauma can often be a catalyst for a deep human connection if you bring it to the surface as opposed to kind of hide it on the inside.

If we can just linger on it because you've been through a few very traumatic events in your life when you were 25 years old, as you mentioned, your brother committed suicide.

What did that event teach you about life, about death, and about the human mind?

Well, it certainly brought me face to face with the truths of life and death because I had not had a major trauma before then.

So there wasn't a major trauma sort of in my developmental years that what can carry forward is a sort of omnipotence defense, right?

I mean, the thought is that when we're toddlers, we all have like an omnipotence defense, which

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is like, I can just try and get up and run and move.

And if I run into something, I'll get up and do it again, right?

So we kind of have to end partly the protection of the parent, et cetera, but we think we can get out there in the world and do things and we just do.

And if we don't have major traumas, we can sort of carry through that, oh, like bad things aren't going to happen to me.

I know that they're there and I know they happen to people, but they don't happen to me, right?

And sometimes what will happen is being confronted with such a tragedy wipes that away very, very quickly.

And that person feels extremely exposed, like, oh, I thought that I was going to be okay, and now I know that I'm not, and that can start to lead to, and what does that mean?

And now, is this all coming for me now?

Did I get so lucky for 25 years, nothing bad happened, nothing but bad things are going to be happening.

Am I cursed?

Is my family cursed, right?

And I think that leads to, you say, what the learning about the human mind, in retrospect, I think I understood at the time to some degree, but not like I do now, I can put words to it now, right?

Like how incredibly important, powerful, powerfully important negative emotion is, right?

That how a sense of guilt and shame and vulnerability can just pervade our entire life perspective.

So all of a sudden we're swimming in a very different soup and it's a frightening soup and it's a toxic soup, and I'm most struck by that.

And that goes along with the idea that we're not taught that emotion always beats logic.

I think the idea of Descartes, the idea that we're rational creatures, that kind of comes down to us through Western thought, is completely not true.

We're rational creatures only if there is an emotion grabbing for our attention, right?

We're attending to one another, we're being very logical, right, what we're doing now.

If we heard a frightening noise right outside the door, like we'd be entirely different, right?

The emotion would trump everything.

It's not paying attention to this, right?

Now safety is at stake and we think differently, feel differently, behave differently, right?

And this is what happens to us, not just in situations where something drags us from, yanks from one emotional state to another, but it can be very, very pervasive.

So my sense of anger, frustration, inadequacy, and then soothing in unhealthy ways, soothing by drinking too much, and then kind of hating myself in the first place, and hating the world around me, and then starting to think, well, who cares what happens?

There's some very dark thoughts and choices that came from a changed perspective of self in the world.

So what do you do in that, because of trauma, again, small or large, you find yourself swimming or drowning in a soup of negative emotion.

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What do you do?

What do you do with that emotion?

I mean, we don't have to even talk about trauma.

I think the interesting thing is, you know, any one of us throughout the day can find ourselves taking a bit of a dip in the pool of negative emotion.

What do we do with that?

The first thing is to separate how we feel from what's true, because we don't do a good job of that as humans.

If I feel bad about myself, it's very easy to, and then I conclude like, I'm bad, right?

If I feel ashamed of myself, I conclude I'm a terrible person who's shameful, right?

This is an old psychodynamic concept of what these call an observing ego, still gets called that.

It's not ego in the sense of arrogance, right?

It's the ability to step outside and to see ourselves, right?

So that's what lets us keep the difference between our feelings, right, and what we know to be true.

We could be very angry at someone.

So I think that person's terrible.

I think the person's stupid.

I think that right now, because something negative just passed between us, this inside of me, it's just because of how I feel.

When I can separate that, how do I actually think about that person, right?

And we get driven so, so frequently by how we feel, because how we think, therefore, what we believe, just kind of comes on its heels as if the feeling is dragging it along.

And I've been struck by that.

It's one of the things that has struck me so the most, among the very most in 20 years of working as a psychiatrist is how we are led by our feelings, our emotions, as if they are truth.

And then they create truth because we embrace what they're telling us as true.

And that is, I think, incredibly, I think it's how people learn prejudice.

I think it's how people learn self-hatred.

I think it's how we learn so many destructive behaviors.

And then the blinders on us come in more and more and more and more.

So separate, you know, we're driven by what we feel unless we understand that what we feel is different from what we know to be true or what we can decide on one way or another.

And that requires realizing and catching the emotions themselves, realizing that it's an emotion.

A feeling comes into your mind, overtakes you.

A feeling of anger, dislike, hatred, all of that just comes in.

Like, why did that person just cut me off in traffic or something like that, that feeling?

To what?

You just kind of take it as a feeling and realize it's a feeling that doesn't represent some

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deep reality about the world that's fundamental.

Or you, they just kind of watch it and let it pass, which is the natural way of things.

Yeah.

Or decide if it means anything.

You know, if I'm mad, right, someone cut me off and I feel hatred and I want to destroy them, right?

Just stop and think, look, I've got that in me.

I can, you know, are the stressors running too high in my life?

Like is it really good?

Should I be, should I be on this road, 10 minutes behind schedule?

Yeah.

Like is it, what am I really doing?

So we can learn, but yes, it's an observation skill, right?

And it's an observation skill that we can develop, you know.

I often think about, you know, there was something called the tapestry theory, which I think initially was a theodicy of explaining, I believe this is true, I'm not sure of this.

The idea was that, oh, we don't see God's plan because we're up too close to it, right?

Like as if there was a beautiful tapestry on the wall and we're standing right up it, we're only going to see one part of it.

We need to stand back from it.

And you know, I remember learning that religion studies class made me really fascinated with that at the time.

And I think that there are a lot of things we do that about, right?

And in training ourselves to have an observing ego, what we're saying is, hey, like just the busyness of life or my own impulses or the pull of emotions are trying to pull me up right close to whatever tapestry there is there.

And I want to sort of resist that.

I mean, I'm better off if I really stay further behind it.

And then I make a choice if I want to come close to it.

If there's some really positive emotion, you know, it's friendship, it's love, it's nurturing.

You know what?

Let me come right up to this, right?

But I want to choose when I'm doing that.

I don't want some drive.

I didn't decide to like take me by the back of the head and put me up against that tapestry.

So the interesting exercise for me, and I think for a lot of people in modern civilization is the internet with social media, that it's almost like going to the gym or something like that.

At least that's the way I see it because there's a bunch of forces on social media that are trying to make you feel things.

Most of it is kind of in the negative space of feelings because there is actually a strong gravity pull to negative feelings for some reason.

And so the end the brain notices them more.

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I don't know what that pull is, but it's there and you get to observe it on social media. Like if you actually just scroll through social media, you feel the gravitational pull of negative emotions.

And I just see it as a kind of exercise of like, you feel the pull just like when you go to the gym, there's a resistance and I practice like stepping a stepping way to look at the tapestry, right?

And there's different mechanisms I think all of us have to learn.

For me, there's a kind of, you mentioned gratitude and humility.

So like if somebody, if it's me personally, I've recently got an attack, if you place it here and there, you know, if they're saying that they're much smarter than me, I practice kind of humility, like you mentioned, and I kind of imagine that they are smarter than me.

Those things like help me to kind of like pull away like, and then maybe they have a lesson to teach me.

Like, I don't take their sort of negative comments to heart, but I imagine the human being and like that they might have a lesson to teach me.

And in general, when it's more amorphous, kind of negative feeling, I'll think the other thing is that gratitude, just like different versions, almost meme, memeifiable versions of like, oh, this is pretty cool.

Like we got a thing going here, there's like human civilization, like bickering and having a little fun like lunch, food fight.

And it's kind of cool, like we get to interact in this way.

And there's a bit of humor, there's like Thanksgiving dinner, like if you like Thanksgiving dinner, if you're arguing about politics, you can feel like really intense, like I can't believe you said this, but if you zoom out, it's like family, this is like, this is amazing.

So that kind of feeling really helps.

But it's like, it really is like going to the gym, it's like building up a muscle to be able to pull away from those emotions.

Like, I don't think I get to practice that kind of emotion regular day to day life, because like, you can't, it's hard to get those reps on social media, you can really get the reps in, it's kind of cool.

Like that's the way I see social media is a chance to sort of practice that stoicism of like, of gratitude, of humility, of loving other people in the face of this negative emotion, all that.

Yes.

And, you know, there's, there's a certain kind of psychotherapy that, that talks a lot about this idea that like, oh, everything is as it should be, right?

Which doesn't mean from some moral or justice point, it's just that often if you look at things, one thing leads to another, to another, to another, in a way that's actually very, very predictable, even though we might be surprised about it, right?

And so an example, so I would say that gratitude often does come along with a healthy pride, right?

So, so you, you could say in the example you gave, hey, I'm being assailed on social

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media.

Okay.

So you could say, well, you know, there was a time I sat at, I set forth to impact people, right?

To be able to reach people and to impact them, right?

And look, I feel a sense of both gratitude and pride that I've done that, right?

Because look, you did it because of your, your effort, right?

Your work, your intelligence, your thoughts, like you're responsible for it, right?

But also you feel gratitude because any one of us who's here and has any opportunity has reason to feel immense gratitude, right?

So then you can say, okay, what's actually gone on here is something successful.

I set out to do something and, and I'm doing it, right?

And what it brings with it absolutely includes being assailed.

There's no surprise there, right?

That because of, because, you know, people who have anything good serve as lightning rods for envy.

So then yes, there will be people who want to make up lies or whatever they want to do because you become a lightning rod for envy by having succeeded at the thing you set out to do about which you can feel a healthy pride and gratitude, right?

And then I think that kind of puts it in its place.

I mean, you're still going to make decisions about it, but it makes sense then.

Like you have a mechanism of understanding it that not only makes sense to you, but reflects the truth of what you actually have done and achieved and what's going on in the world around you.

Well, I wonder if we're all kind of a little bit unique in this because for me, I mean, maybe it's useful to kind of talk to my own experience of it is for me, I try to avoid especially in those situations to feel pride because I'm just looking empirically.

I feel way happier if I focus on humility.

If I ever think of like, oh yeah, you know, when you do something meaningful or you become more popular, you're going to experience these kinds of, I feel the attacks more and it's like me versus the world, that's the feeling that you start getting and that does not create a pleasant feeling.

So to me, the pleasant feeling is like stepping away, like kind of laughing at it at all, like with a smile and not like in a negative, like laughing at people, but just like laughing at the theater of it, the circus of it, like this whole absurd existence we've got going on.

And then just having a humility in like, everybody has a lesson to teach me and it just makes me feel good.

The pride thing I do like feeling when in a positive pool of emotion.

So if I'm building a trinket and I finish it, I'm like really happy with myself.

Like I finished this thing and I usually actually like to do that alone.

Like I don't need an audience for pride.

I like to sit there and just like, ooh, this is cool.

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I did that, you know, but I just, I find that in social interactions, pride is just a danger, it's a dangerous drug for me because it's such a small, it's a small step away from then losing all the humility.

And then you start getting very defensive and that's not going to, that's just starting on a spiral of negative emotion.

But I also, I mean, with everybody, you mentioned this, it will probably sneak up to it in different directions.

I do think there's different brains that we all have.

Like my brain is exceptionally self-critical, like non-stop, it's like an engine that's always there.

And but at the same time, you're, I'm able to zoom out and have gratitude.

And it just, it's just, there's like two brains and they're like cohabitating happily.

And I can, the better I get at this, the more I can use the one that's self-critical and I'm trying to be productive because naturally I'm super lazy.

So I'm trying not to be less lazy, I'll be self-critical.

And then when I'm not being lazy, when I just, there's a special moment, I want to enjoy that moment, I'll turn on the gratitude engine.

I feel like generic advice that people would give, if your brain is self-critical, that's not a good thing.

Like you should probably get rid of that.

I don't know about that because it seems to be working.

Like I kind of like it.

I kind of like this grumpy old man that's in there, that's like, like that thing you did that really sucked.

I was like, and I kind of, you know, there's a movie grumpy old man.

Like I like, I like that grumpy boy, the grumpy cat is in there and it's nice.

But yeah, it can have bad effects on relationships and on maybe my wellbeing, maybe as you get older and all that kind of stuff.

So you have to monitor all this kind of stuff, but I don't know, I don't, I don't know which one is like, because you've kind of highlighted, it's good to have gratitude and humility, but it's also good to have a little bit of pride.

I wonder what that like set of ingredients for a healthy, what like healthy life looks like for each of us, whether we have to customize and figure out what that is because some of the cake is already baked is the problem.

And because of the trauma, like if I was like eight years old, maybe I could be a little more flexible.

But at this point, like you got the thing you got and it's hard to like fix it a lot with it.

You could.

It may not be easy, but there's a lot of plasticity and a lot of pliability there.

Across all ages.

Again, people are different and there may be idiosyncrasies of why one person is in a different place.

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But as a general rule, I think the answer is absolutely yes.

I mean, people have evolved and I've worked with people who've really changed themselves and brought in their conception and understanding, you know, they're in their 80s or, you know, I think we can do it at any stage of life.

And I would make a case for, for intracyclic, so not between people necessarily, right?

But inside of oneself or the feeling of pride and maybe if we call it self-esteem, right?

Like let's say we call it self-esteem, right?

Or we could call it healthy pride, we could put either word to it.

But if you think about what we're trying to avoid is say a sense of inadequacy, then it is good to sort of own what's ours.

We can put ourselves a little bit out of balance either in terms of building up resentments or in terms of decreasing self-confidence, right?

If we're not owning everything, that's ours, right?

So a thought, thought I would have about, let's say about some pride or some self-esteem, right?

Is it can work against vulnerability, right?

Which we know can also in some situations push us towards jumping the boundary into envy and all of that.

So think about vulnerability.

If you conceive, okay, people are assailing me and you just go to a place of gratitude, you know, it can send a message that, okay, I'm just lucky and I hope I continue to get lucky as opposed to like that's not true, right?

Like there's ability inside of me and discernment inside of me that tells me I can have a greater sense of confidence that I'll navigate what comes my way, right?

So because the pride or the self-esteem part is owning what we've contributed to the goodness we've created, right?

Which does in a sense helps us feel better about ourselves and it also helps us feel armed against say the slings and arrows of, you know, whatever outrageous fortune may come next.

I don't know.

I don't know.

I don't know.

Again, disagreeing with an expert here.

Yes, I think that's generally good advice, but I think you mentioned vulnerability.

I think it's like I've just been doing a lot of research on rocket engines and fuel and speaking of fuel, I just think I get a lot from being vulnerable because vulnerable leads to intimacy in friendships and relationships.

I get a lot from being intimately close with human beings just on a friendship, on a like a ideal level in conversations and so on.

And so I would rather err on the side of vulnerability.

Like to me, pride is destructive.

I think I already, I already have a pretty good engine that says like life is awesome.

I don't need help for that.

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That's fine.

That one is working.

I just feel like the way to face the world that's full of uncertainty that could be full of cruelty is with humility and gratitude.

I don't know, this pride thing, it feels like, I know that for a lot of people, it's really important to really, really work on pride to make sure they don't crumble under the pressure of like, they don't give into the sense of security that destroys them.

But I just, for me, empirically speaking, I seem to be happier facing the world with humility and just being grateful.

The pride I'm really worried about.

Like it feels more destructive than anything.

See, what I think, as you're telling me that, and I want to be presumptuous, but I make some thoughts or some conclusions that tell me, hey, you're in a pretty healthy place.

Right?

And the reason I say that is because I agree completely about vulnerability.

I mean, think about humility and gratitude make us vulnerable.

Right?

If you're like, wow, I'm grateful.

Thank you.

I'm grateful for you.

You know, we could get shot down or something, you know, something bad could happen and something could make us feel bad.

So yes, we need vulnerability, if we try and eliminate vulnerability, we're living miles into the envy, you know, land, right?

So you're describing a healthy vulnerability, but then my brain says that's because on the other side of the seesaw, so to speak, has to be a healthy sense of self, whether we call it self-esteem or healthy pride.

And then I'll cite what I think is the evidence for that is you describe the negative voice, right, as like the grumpy cat, right?

But that's a good negative voice to have, right?

Because it's telling you like, hey, that wasn't your best, like, come on, do better or, right?

Like, you can do better.

Like this, you know, there's a negative voice in some ways, but it believes in you, right?

Where that voice could be, it could be a negative voice that says, no, you didn't do that well because you suck, you don't deserve anything.

Good, right?

Well, I should even be alive, right?

I mean, that's the negative voice that can gain so much force.

If there isn't a balance of healthy self-esteem.

So I think because you're well-balanced, you know, you have what you need, and then having more of it seems like, oh, that's not so good.

But there are people whose negative voice isn't the grumpy cat, it's hateful, right?

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And then that's a person who needs to bring that into greater balance.

Yeah, I think my negative voice is like a grumpy cat that's like a French existentialist, maybe a little bit of a nihilist, but it's just kind of, it's a Sartre's cat.

Yeah, Sartre's cat.

So it doesn't get hateful, it's not like a Hitler cat.

So it's a little more, yeah, I guess there is kind of like this line that we've come across a couple of times between the benign and the malignant.

Right.

But of course, you have to monitor that line and just, I think you have to be careful when you face really difficult situations of, as you go on through life, more and more difficult to, you face a lot of loss and suffering, especially later in life, you have to be careful with that voice, that grumpy cat can get awfully confident.

And then if you don't have any source of positive emotions in your life, you can become too heavy of a burden, which I think this leads us to, well, I think it's a really important fact, right, that there are some people, like a significant subset of people who get happier as they get older.

They have more contentment, a stronger sense of self.

You might think, how could that ever happen?

Right?

Like we're getting closer to death, we're accumulating insults, right?

Like, you know, everything hurts a little bit more and we have less energy and we accumulate losses and traumas.

Why would anyone be healthier across time, if you're happier across time?

And what we see is it's linked to the good, to the things that we're talking about, right?

It's linked to, let's say, vulnerability versus pride, like there's a good balance there, right?

There's a lot of humility.

There's a lot of self-esteem.

The person is spending a lot of time standing back from the tapestry and looking at it, right?

And what can come into people is in sort of a sense of equanimity.

Like I sort of understand, you know, I'm being the best person I can be, and that's not always even great.

And there are things that I don't feel great about, even while I'm trying to do that.

But look, I'm being who I'm choosing to be, right?

And that doesn't have to be in some big way.

I'm not saying that means any one specific thing.

You know, that can mean the person who's taking care of their cat and tending their garden.

Like, that's enough.

We have to have, you know, love the ability to put good things out in the world, right?

And to put our ability to work and to make things different out into the world and make things better.

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And if we're doing that, we get happier across time because we come to a sense of peace with ourselves.

I'm not supposed to be everything.

I'm not supposed to do everything.

I'm not supposed to fix everything, right?

I'm also not supposed to suffer all the time for the things I haven't gotten right.

You know what?

I guess I'm kind of, and it leads back to Winnicott, right?

The British physician of, you know, I'm good enough.

And that seems to help people feel happy, you know, contentment and be generative and productive into later life.

It's like, that's what we all should be wanting.

But it's even, it's kind of an afterthought though.

Some people are like that as opposed to, wait a second, right?

Like, what's going on with them?

And let's do all of that.

Albert Camus writes in *Mythocisophus*, quote, there's only one real serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.

Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy.

Other questions follow from that.

So basically to be or not to be.

Do you think there's a truth to that statement?

This question of why live at all?

Do you think there's truth to that statement being a really, really important question for us to answer?

Yes.

Yes.

And what's the answer?

I think the answer is yes.

And I think Camus answered it, yes too.

Yeah.

I love his writing and I think there was a streak of nihilism that I think grew in his writing over the years and the thought is, I think that Camus died by suicide.

I think we're not sure of that because it was a car accident.

But I've always read that as the primary scholarly opinion.

And I think it's interesting that after his death, a book called *The First Man* was published, which I don't know if he had intended to publish, I don't remember the specifics about it.

But it's about him as a child.

And it's interesting, *The First Man*, he was the first man in his existence, the most, the one that felt and experienced everything.

And there's sadness and distress and all in that book, but there's a beauty of life and living and experience.

And I think to compare that beauty, that's life, even if something's difficult and scary

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and sad.

There's something beautiful around the corner and he's a kind person and a new discovery.

Or what was in him as a child.

And I think that we can get jaded as you and I were just talking about a few minutes ago.

We can accentuate the negative and foster the negative and come to a place where we're looking for some in-depth philosophical answer, some thick book that's going to explain all that to us instead of the simplicity that we've been talking about.

I think humility, gratitude helps us have just simple positive experiences, feelings of contentment, feelings of connection with another person, learning, discovery.

And I think the answer to Keimu's question is yes, and I think it lies in his writing about when he was a child, which I think he saw as less important than his later writings and the intellectual heaviness when I think maybe he had lost his way a little bit from the things he understood when he was younger.

So another way to talk about it, and I'd love to hear what you think is about these broad categories, let me be started with Kierkegaard, of existentialism, absurdism, and nihilism.

And I think Keimu considered himself an absurdist, not actually an existentialist.

It's kind of a middle ground where I think existentialists, I don't want to characterize it in the wrong way and there's a lot of different definitions, but I think existentialists ultimately do think that there's meaning in pursuing the passion of life, in living life.

That's where you discover the meaning at that individual level of fully embracing life.

And I think sort of nihilism is, again, it's kind of like a spectrum, but nihilism basically says there's no meaning and it doesn't matter, nothing matters.

I don't even know, but somehow that lands you in a place that's totally uninspired.

Maybe nihilists would disagree with that.

Maybe there's a way to live a creative life in a nihilistic mindset and I think absurdism is somewhere in the middle where pursuing meaning at all is not a good idea.

So I think existentialists say you should be looking for meaning and it's to be discovered in your own actions, in your own life in the moment.

And absurdism says life is absurd, nothing makes sense.

Don't look for the meaning, just live, just be.

I think that's kind of the later Camus kind of philosophy.

I don't know if you can sort of comment on these kind of nuanced ideas here.

If there is no religious guide to your life, what do you think about this kind of search for meaning?

Do you see that there's some wisdom in the existentialist perspective of discovering it in your own life, in this passion, in this kind of day-to-day existence, in the moments of your life that bring you joy, that kind of thing?

Bringing different sort of perspectives and trying to tease apart like, well, wait, what are the differences in those perspectives, right?

And I think what it points out is that, okay, we tend to conflate things as human beings, and to take two different things and try and make them into one.

But we also, I think on the other end of the spectrum, get very overly reductionist.

And I think that when we get too overly reductionist, we lose the ability to learn from anything,

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or to generate meaning.

I mean, the thing about Sartre, who is the thought of existentialism is so consistent with him, right?

Who, on the one hand, wrote about very clear terms, like, this is what it is, and this is what it isn't.

And here's how you're going to make your meaning in a very academically proscribed way. But he also wrote short stories like *The Wall*, where there's something totally absurd happens as part of the story, right?

So I think what ends up happening is people either reduce themselves or get associated with something that, by being overly reductionist, takes us away from meaning, right?

The idea that, look, we don't know if there is an overarching religious meaning, or what we call a religious meaning or purpose, like, we don't know that, right?

So, okay, if we take that as a given that people who say that they know are having faith, like Al Spinoza described faith, right?

Faith is that you don't know, but you believe anyway, right?

It's not because you have faith now you know something, right?

Because I think that's a slippery slope to the persecution of others, right?

So if we say, okay, we don't know, then, you know, we're left either deciding, okay, well, then the hell with everything, you know, like, there's that movie, *A Strange Brew*, right?

That Bob and Doug McKenzie were like, the brakes don't work on the car.

And one of them says, oh, why bother steering, right?

So if we don't know that there's meaning, like, why bother steering, let's just give up the ghost, right?

And I don't think that's even what the nihilist said, I mean, I think Bakunin said, we should get rid of everything that we've ever created except Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and start over from there.

But so even people who are very nihilistic or associated with that, a lot of them were just not liking what we had built, right?

So if we accept that a lot of what we have built as humans inside of us and outside of us is really counterproductive and doesn't help us, and that absurd things happen in the world, right, and that often the way social structures and systems build up, build themselves up is absurd.

I think our health care system operates in a way that's absurd, right?

So if we accept that there are absurdities that we don't know if there's truth, then what are we left with?

But like, well, let's try and make meaning, right?

Or Tega Igasset said, yo so yo, *Amy Circunstancia*, right?

I'm myself and my circumstances, right?

She's like, look, we can't control everything.

We live in circumstances around us, but within those circumstances, we can make decisions and define ourselves.

And I think the brilliance of that, and I think tying it all together, right, in a way that's not trying to be, in a sense, it ties it all together by not trying to answer everything

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concisely, that yes, we can make meaning.

Like we see that if someone trips in front of me, I could walk around them or I could help them up.

I mean, no one can tell me that it doesn't matter what I do.

I absolutely reject the idea that, oh, I could step over them or on them, or I could help them up and it doesn't matter.

Oh, yeah, try being the person on the ground, right?

So we create meaning, but we live in our circumstances and there are absurdities both within us and outside of us in our social structures, and there are a lot of things that pretend to have meaning that don't.

And there's the shades of nihilism, but ultimately there's something going on here that's doing the best we can in the context of just not knowing.

Yeah, I tend to see, I don't know if it's genetic, I tend to think just observing the internet, the number of memes there are.

I think many other people are like me.

I tend to see the humor in the absurdity.

I tend to enjoy it from that kind of angle.

I see the Kafkaesque nature of society, different aspects of society, and just kind of notice the magic with a smile.

Just laugh at the circus of it all, because it is magical that the circus all comes together.

It's like a little bit out of sync and then just a guy playing trombone, but overall it's pretty good.

It's pretty good.

Right.

And we can look at that and just kind of marvel go, huh, right?

Which I think is a relation to at least a lot of what we in the Western world think of as Eastern, right?

It's like as non-attachment, right?

Because then if there's something absurd and it's like not good for me, then I accept that too instead of getting angry about it and railing about it or seeing some cosmic meaning in it, right?

I think there's also a healthy non-attachment in what you're saying too.

So there's, I mean, you mentioned Eastern thought.

There's, just to ask Nietzsche, but also Buddha, have kind of spoke of life as suffering.

Do you think there's truth to that?

That suffering is a fundamental part of life?

I think it is a fundamental part of life.

I don't think that means that life is suffering, right?

If we say, well, life is suffering, then what am I doing that I'm trying to erase from my mind like the birth of my children, right?

Things that were filled with joy, right?

Like life is not entirely suffering, but life brings a lot of suffering.

And for some people that bring such disproportionate suffering and the people don't survive the

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suffering.

And I think when people are conscientious and empathic, that really bothers us, right?

The suffering in our own lives and the fact that others at times could, could it seem to be so overwhelmed by suffering that they don't even get a chance to see good.

And I think that there's, I do think there's truth to that and there's sadness and distress to that.

But to say therefore life is suffering, I think is completely untrue.

And it ignores the fact that someone even made a trombone, right?

Let alone that there's a little bit out of sync and someone's playing the trombone.

That's cool.

There's elements of the absurd that you said are neat and interesting.

And if we start accepting that we can't understand or control everything, then we can accept and I think really love and foster the beauty in our lives.

Yeah.

I think the word suffering is doing a little bit too much work because I think it's probably referring to the philosophical concept of that, yeah, that it's absurd, the absurdity.

That stuff just happens randomly, evil people succeed, good people fail.

There's a seeming random injustice on occasion and occasion there's justice in, yeah, all of it that feels like, and maybe because often there's a lot of loss and then there's a kind of matching complimentary aspect to any good feeling that all comes crashing down like every hello from a physics perspective ends in a goodbye.

That's a really sad thing.

All the amazing people I get to meet in my life, all the amazing experiences eventually they have to end and that's part of what makes them amazing.

But why is that sad?

Because we're taught to think that it's like, look, at some point you and I are going to say goodbye today, like I hope we're richer for it and then we take that goodness off with us.

Like I want to celebrate that because it's all part of the goodness.

I think we're taught to think, oh, that's so bad and it equates to death and misery and I think it's often not that way.

I think there is a sadness to it, but I also don't think that sadness is a negative thing.

It's a different way to celebrate a beautiful thing.

So there's a melancholic nature to it or something passing of it leaving.

It's that old Louis CK thing that I go back to over and over from his show, Louis, where he was all heartbroken that he just broke up with somebody he loved and he told about that to an old man and the old man said, you're a fool.

That's the best part.

I miss that part where you sort of are lingering in that loss, you're feeling the pain of that loss because that lasts the longest.

It's the most intense.

It's the most reliable and it's the kind of celebration of the love you had.

Like losing the love is still a celebration of the love.

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I think you don't want to over romanticize that but there's some aspect of truth to that. That melancholic feeling of remembering a beautiful time that's no longer there is a kind of celebration

of it and is a kind of joyful experience even though it's very easy to experience it as a negative emotion.

I think it's just like you said, it's up to our mind to determine how that emotion has really felt.

It's a tricky one because it's like heartbreak to experience that as a positive thing.

People can reminisce at funerals and laugh because people can be very, very, very sad and perceive that this person has died and perceive the sadness of it.

But in perceiving that and really living in it, then you can have people who want to remember that person by telling a funny story.

Why?

Because each of those people carries that with them.

I think what you're saying is consistent with healthy function as human beings because we're going to encounter sadness and loss.

What do we do with that?

And do we do things that ultimately create some redemption or even reparation inside of us?

And reparation is a big word in psychology.

It's how we repair damage and loss.

So if we lose someone and we're sad, can we by telling funny stories about that person remind ourselves that, hey, they're still inside of us, whether they're out there looking at me, I don't know.

But I can call that person to mind inside of us and then we have something that's good and beautiful that comes with that too.

In the introduction to your book on trauma, Lady Gaga wrote it.

She wrote the forward the intro.

She said this about you, quote, I can now say with certainty that this man saved my life. He made life worth living.

This goes to our discussion about the myth of Sisyphus Kamu question about why I live.

So I think at least to me, she's one of the most brilliant and unique artists ever.

So it's a difficult question, but a question of creativity.

What role does trauma play in somebody like that, in this artist that has created some incredible things?

What positive, constructive role does trauma serve and what limiting role does it serve in preventing that person from flourishing more?

Trauma can certainly drive us to creativity, even to push against or to protest against what the trauma tells us.

Trauma tells us lessons like nothing matters and you don't matter and nothing will ever be good and then nothing is beautiful and we can push against trauma.

They know there is life in me.

There's something, there's goodness for me to spread in the world, to express and spread.

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So I think trauma fuels creativity in many, many, many ways.

Trauma also shuts down creativity, right, to people who are, for one example, trauma that escalates to the point where now the person is soothing it with alcohol, one example. And now the impact of the alcohol shuts down any creativity.

So can people be creative and outward thinking without trauma?

I think sometimes, if I remember correctly, people will use Immanuel Kant as an example, someone I think hadn't traveled much and didn't have trauma and like look at what he knew.

So okay, there are going to be exceptions, right?

But a lot of our creativity is in some ways fueled by our suffering, although it's complicated because it comes from generative places in us, right?

So those places are there, they're not created by suffering, but maybe suffering makes an incentive or a passion inside of us.

And a person, you know, Stephanie, who you referred to, is just such an incredible astounding creative force.

And sure, some of that comes from trauma, some of it comes from trauma fueling the generative creative places in her.

But what I helped her to do, she's very generous with her words, but what I helped her to do was to see all that she is and all that the creativity in her is and all that there is to create through love and caring and compassion and to again see that.

I mean, a lot of time that's what I'm doing clinically.

I think it's what good psychiatrists or mental health professionals do is we help people see the beauty that is there, right?

Because oftentimes we're way too close up to that tapestry and what brings us close is often the sad thing.

So we're up close and all we see is the negative.

I mean, it's easy then to get classically nihilistic, but by helping someone take a step back and to see who they are and what's in them, that's how people get better and it's how people re-engage in life.

It's such a difficult thing because if you were to, from studying human beings, it seems like the optimal trajectory is having some trauma that doesn't destroy you, that forces you early in life to really struggle with the intricacies of the human condition.

And then later in life, as you form and you build an expertise around and mastery, start to do exactly what you said, which is step back and look at the tapestry.

So if you don't have the trauma, it seems like just empirically speaking, there's of course just a huge amount of data and all kinds of anecdotal evidence.

And I want to be careful here because maybe I'm romanticizing hardship, but it does seem that hardship in childhood, if it doesn't break you, can be constructive.

It's like you said, having that trauma, one of the ways to fight it is to say, I am worth something.

Right.

I am.

And this is, David Gages talks about this, is like, this is, I am somebody, I can be somebody special and I'm going to prove it to you, I'm going to do this, I'm going to

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do this big thing.

It's this engine that drives you forward.

Yeah, comment on that because from a parent's perspective, you want a child to have an easy life.

You want them to not have hardship, certainly not have trauma, but that's such a difficult dance because in some ways, a little bit of hardship and gradually increasing amount of hardship that doesn't break you can really develop you into a really interesting, complicated person and it helps you flourish as a creative being.

I don't know what to, I don't know if there's a question there, I just keep saying random things.

It makes, look, I think it makes good, it makes good sense to me.

I think you're trying to get at, look, we need trauma and how are we defining it, right?

Because we say trauma, hardship, difficulties, I mean, we could set aside, we could set apart, say, and differentiate things that are difficult, but that are overcomeable, right?

Versus things that we could use trauma, the word trauma this way, if we chose to, that are just entirely negative, like someone saying, oh, you can't do that and you'll never succeed because what?

And then they tell you something about yourself, like because you're from here or you're this race, religion, whatever it is, right?

We think, well, that could make someone say, hey, I'm going to show you, I'm going to overcome, right?

But then they're overcoming something bad, right?

Like it's just like there's nothing good or helpful about that, right?

If someone's saying that, so the person has to overcome it, that's different than something that is placed in front of a person where the whole conception of it is something positive that you can make through effort, right?

So I remember, I don't know, I think I was 15 years old, there was some rule where you could then go, I don't think I was picking raspberries or blueberries, right?

And I think, and my parents wanted me to see, like, hey, go see how that work as you, and now you got 50 cents at the end of it, right?

And then you think about that when you want to buy baseball cards or you think about it and you work hard.

And I could remember like it was hard and I was sweating and I was tired and, but I learned from it.

I mean, it's the reason I remember it today.

So yes, parents might want their kids to have like a good life, right?

But not necessarily an easy life, you know?

And I think that was done, they took me to do that to, so I had a greater sense of responsibility in a sense of like hard work is meaningful and it's important.

And I think that that kind of thing is good.

But if we separate that from something that's just denigrating, prejudicial, like I think those things aren't good, but they're unavoidable.

So it's not necessarily that, oh, is some trauma good, I would look at it more that

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some trauma is unavoidable.

I mean, you know, it's hard to go, how do you go through life and not have any losses or anything negative or anything sad.

And then people are people.

There may be people who have not a lot of that.

And then there's a sort of complacency or, and they don't do it as much as they could or feel as good as they could, you know, then there's other people who have a highly attuned emotional, there's people with very highly attuned emotional compasses for which a little bit of trauma becomes so intrusive.

So it's so much of it is person driven, but I do want to distinguish between things that are just purely bad that we might overcome or find some fire in our belly about or whatever the case may be.

And things that may be boundaries or barriers either directly, purposely placed or not that in a sense invite us or inform us of the possibility of striving and overcoming.

Finally in tuned emotional compasses, it's so true that there is, that's a component of it too.

It's this almost genetic, how sensitive you are to particular trauma.

So little things can have a huge impact or gigantic things, serious abuse in childhood can be by some people overcome more easily.

It's not just what's the trauma because what's the trauma that makes certain problems, you have to match the trauma to the person.

And a big part of what you're matching to is that, you know, genetically based characteristic of how finely attuned is that empathic attunement in that compass.

So when you think about, just return to childhood, when you think about trauma and childhood, what can we say about the impact of child abuse on the development of a human being?

I think the impact of it is so disproportionately bad, hurtful compared to things that happen when we're not children.

And I want to be very careful about how I'm saying that because people can, through their strength and resilience and human interconnectedness can overcome that.

I don't mean to say that anyone who's experienced those things is, can't make it through it or over it.

That part is not true, but it is true that the impact is so disproportionate to anything else that can happen because the brain is formulating, right?

So both, if we say psychology is like applied neurobiology, right?

When we look at both of those as different ends, right?

Even though there's a lot of gray in the middle, you know, the neurobiology is changed.

So just one example of a much greater salience of vigilance mechanisms, of mechanisms of self-protection, mechanisms that can make a person feel more fear and more insecurity and hide themselves away from the world and not trust the world.

And I mean, not trust the world even enough that, oh, you know, I'd like to have a better job and there's, you know, another one is here that I could take, but maybe it could be worse, you know, and then being afraid of that, right?

Like, there are all sorts of ways in which the changes to those pathways impact someone.

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And that's just one of, you know, we could bring trauma experts together that could talk about that for days, right?

Like, what is the impact upon the brain biology?

And so that then gets changed inside the person and from the perspective of those changes, the psychology on top of it changes.

Like, what do I think about myself?

Do I think that I'm worthwhile?

You know, even in my mid-20s after, you know, without formative traumas and a pretty strong sense of self and some achievements, there's a big trauma then with the death of my brother and I start questioning, am I cursed?

Am I worth anything?

I mean, I was 20-something years old and doing reasonably well at the time.

You know, how does this impact a child of 6, 7, 10, 12 years old, right?

We're sending such powerful messages that then change conception of self and that negatively changed conception sits upon the negatively changed neurobiology.

And I think if we really thought, hey, let's do the best we can just for humans in general, for the human race, for species in general, is we would handle children and caring for children so much differently in terms of protection mechanisms, intervention mechanisms.

How many times do you see where, like, now there's been some tragedy and the child gets a little bit of support and, you know, they had some therapy, you know, that was provided by some insurance carrier, you know, that they got once a week for 16 weeks or whatever.

I mean, we should be wrapping our societal resources around children, but we don't use our resources well.

You know, I was just reading, it's a little bit of an aside, but about \$300 and something billion a year in cost to the U.S. economy just from schizophrenia.

And you think, it costs a fraction, what do we actually put into caring for people who have schizophrenia?

So first, there's a moral imperative, but let's say we put that aside and we only care about the economy, right, because there are mechanisms of thinking that look at it that way.

How could we not amend that, right?

But we are so reckless with our resources and we're tripping ahead of ourselves that we don't think, oh my goodness, there is no better place on God's earth for prevention than here, prevention in terms of human suffering and also where do people like that go?

I mean, more often, people like that go to a place of increased suffering, inability to take care of themselves or to be in supportive relationships, okay, we know there's a higher prevalence of that.

But we're also creating the pool of people through which the envy, the narcissism, the sociopathy, the destruction arises.

So again, if we care about people, we would be so focused on that.

If we don't care about other people and just ourselves or just economic costs, we would still be so focused.

But we're not and we tend to just kind of call it good because we don't see anything disastrous happening at the moment.

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And I think there's a societal negligence there to the shame really of all of us when child abuse and the impact neurobiologically and psychologically is potentially the greatest cause of suffering directly and indirectly on the face of the planet.

How much does trauma of that kind and later in life affect your ability to love another human being, say inside a relationship, connect with another human being?

It can impact it a lot.

And I want to say, can people overcome and be as loving to a partner or a child or anyone else?

Yes.

But we're talking across society, right?

How are we setting the odds, right?

We're setting the odds towards a higher sense of vigilance, a decreased sense of self-confidence, an increased sense of vulnerability, right, a decreased comfort interacting with others, right?

Because we're pushing towards isolation and misery and depression and resentment.

I mean, those factors push towards that.

And we know that the research is so strong that adverse childhood experiences, at these things that happen, the more the worse, the more prolonged, the more that person is up against as they try and navigate life.

And I suppose one of the elements of intimacy, like what we're talking about is vulnerability and maybe there's a, is there a fear of being vulnerable, of being hurt again?

Sure.

Is that ultimately the barrier to intimacy?

Yeah.

If you're taught a lesson that says the world is not safe and you're not good enough for someone to keep safe and you're not strong enough to keep yourself safe, that's a final common pathway of the vast majority of child abuse or as it's telling those lessons to people, then how can that not change the lay of the land against openness, against the ability to rationally consider trust and mutuality and to protect oneself, but also take chances and do the things that we have to do to create the greatest happiness in our lives.

We set the odds so much against that.

There's another pathway which I think is really interesting because I've seen it in people.

Is this kind of ability to detach yourself from feeling any emotions to like protect yourself?

It's almost like you're not quite there.

There's a word of isolation of affect, this is a defense mechanism.

Yeah.

Is that a common way, another common way to deal with trauma?

Well, isolation of affect can cut both ways.

So if there's been a major trauma, if someone has seen something terrible and they're isolated from their affect, at one time it was thought, well, maybe that's good.

They're not hysterical, they're not distraught, but we see that is not good because what needs to be beheld, processed, we need to get our arms around in some way, shape, or form has

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just been separated off.

So we know that is not good.

But isolation of affect can also serve us very well when I think back to being a medical intern in the hospital and you might have to go and pronounce someone dead with hysterical family members and then 10 minutes later, 5 minutes later, maybe 2 minutes later, really, you have to go to another room and you've got to do some procedure that involves having your focus on a certain thing and making sure your hand movements are the right way or talking to a person in a way that's very different than where you just came from.

That's very hopeful.

So then you have to isolate the affect of what's going on around you and it happens not just in, it's just one example, but we have to do it in life so that we can put affect aside to process later or not feel the full weight of affect where we know the meaning. Like I know the meaning of the tragedy of the person I just pronounced dead, but I want to separate that for myself because I'm also aware that it's not my tragedy so that I can then put that affect aside and go do the next thing that I have to do.

So that I think can cut both ways.

Right, but then you have to reattach it, understand that it's good to be close with emotion, even painful emotion because that's the human experience.

I feel like if you build up a skill that you can detach yourself from emotion, I think that can become its own addictive quality.

It becomes too easy to do it and to reinforce.

That's when people are suffering too much over too long a period of time, then we're creatures of habit and even though our brains are sitting on the shoulders of the giant of the maybe 1,000 levels of emergence that come underneath of them, our brains are also working very simple habit-based ways.

If you and I chose a word right now and said it 500 times, we would know.

It's just a silly experiment, but we'd both be saying it tonight because our brains are also creatures of habit.

So if you over and over and over have to isolate yourself from affect and you develop those mechanisms, well, you develop those mechanisms and they don't go away any easier than if we said the word 500 times and decided to forget.

We won't forget no matter what we decided.

So how do we find our way back?

How do we overcome trauma?

What are the different pathways?

The first thing, the very first thing is to acknowledge to ourselves and often to others, which might be one other person, it might be in words, spoken, it might be written, what the trauma has been.

Because the lessons of trauma, the evil lessons of trauma, and I'll use the example of my own life, the lesson that told me that I was shameful, cursed, and hopeless.

It's a very evil lesson, but my brain will say it over and did say it over and over and over to me.

And if that just sits inside, that's how trauma festers.

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That's how trauma hijacks our thoughts, our emotions.

So being able to say to ourselves and to another, this is what's happened.

This is what's happened.

We're built to massage words and to create meaning through words.

We don't massage pictures, images.

We talk and massage meaning with words.

So when I finally went to see a therapist and I could say, my brother, whatever words

I would have said, he killed himself and I can't accept it or I can't imagine it and

I let it happen.

So I had to say those things.

So then I could begin to bring some sense of truth to it.

It was a long time ago, but the therapist probably said something like, okay, probably sees on you, you let it happen, it's your fault, right, because you got to get at those things so that one can begin to bring into focus what does the trauma mean and what does it not mean?

I mean, a classic example is that what would you say to someone else example, you know, you'll say, well, I, how many times have I, it's just, I could cry if I stop and think about it enough, stop and talk to someone who is sexually assaulted through no fault of their own, who comes in and tells the story they've been telling themselves about how it's their fault.

They should have walked home a different way.

They should have addressed differently.

They should have left earlier.

Right.

I wrote about it in the book over and over and over.

Now you have a person who, let's say you take a person who's intelligent, engage in the world who's like capable of understanding lots and lots and lots of things, but doesn't understand that.

Right.

If it were someone else, that person would understand in a moment that's not that person's fault.

Right.

So, so what you want to do is overcome the fact that the negative emotions that the hijacked emotion systems of trauma are telling that person a lie and they're telling them so strongly and so awfully, so meanly that the person just takes it inside and starts to see it as true.

Right.

So you begin to hold that up to the light of day.

And again, one example could be, okay, so someone, my person who's coming in next has actually been through something similar.

Right.

And can you, can you stay and just tell her how it's her fault?

Right.

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And like, oh my God, no, oh, because I could never, like then they, like, they, like, I could never, like then they see, right?

And again, I'm not, this is not always how you do it, but sometimes you can get a person to see like, well, that would be the most horrible.

How could you do that?

Right.

And the person can maybe commit they're doing it to themselves.

So, so, you know, you begin, you begin to put words in a structure and say, okay, look, let's look at what's going on inside of you.

You don't have to be scared of anything you're thinking and feeling.

In fact, the fear is in not exposing it to the light, to the light of day.

That's where it gets the best of us.

And now like everything is different and whether that involves use of medications for intrusive thoughts and depression, or there's no medicines needed, but it's all reframing, like whatever it may be that comes next, the whole world has changed when the person has acknowledged what's happened, exposed it to the, to themselves and to trusted others around them and begun to look at it in some way other than the stuff in an evil box place that the trauma initially puts us through our, the reflexes it creates in us.

It's interesting that there's powers that you're saying it out loud.

Right.

So, first saying your perception of it out loud, other than in that case, that might be your fault.

And then working through out loud, working through that it may not be.

Any experienced therapist will tell you, will tell you this, that every now and then it will happen, that someone will come and they'll say something, usually it's very early on in the process.

They'll say something they've never said before and they immediately are, are like in an entirely different place and they may have been for decades.

Right.

And I can remember a person saying that the, the coach had raped him and just saying it.

This was decades before and everything was different.

I'm not saying everything is now, is perfect, but his life was in a different, but as soon as he said it, he could see how daily he thought that person did that to this child.

The child was me.

He'd never thought it until he said it out loud because his mind was going over and over with why it was his fault, what he did to deserve it, how he kept going back.

So it must be his fault.

It was in, as soon as he put words to it, he saw the truth of it and it was a bifurcation in the path of life then.

And any therapist has, you know, stories like that, which just shows the immense power that it can even be that just uttering the words makes just a cascade of change all at once.

Just saying those words to another human being.

It makes you wonder what that compulsive loop that happens in our heads until it's brought

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to the surface.

It's so interesting.

Entirely nonproductive the loops.

And sometimes even if we put, what would I say to another, let me write it down.

It can get rid of those loops in our, in our brains.

Any even thought of outward expression is the enemy of those internal, persecutory negative thought loops.

How do you find a good therapist?

I tend to think of, listen, I'm a fan of podcasts, I'm a fan of conversations.

It feels like a, you know, it's like finding a good friend or something.

It feels like a difficult journey.

Maybe I'm wrong in that, but it just feels like such a, it feels like a partnership, a journey together versus like some very simple clinical procedure.

Well, the first thing I would say is to change the entire paradigm.

Like most people like, okay, I need a therapist.

So people feel often like they're in a weakened position because they need, you know, quote, unquote, AA therapist.

Then therapists are rationed, right?

I mean, how many insurance panels have lists a mile long of qualified therapists who could be on that insurance panel, but there's a certification process.

Like these is making no sense, right?

The state's already certified the person, right?

But there's so many barriers to entry that now we're rationing this resource, which we should all stop and pause for a second and think like we're okay with that as a society.

And by the way, everything else is like that too, when we're trying to get help for our health.

So let's step back from that for a second.

Now it's a resource that's not in great supply.

And then a person begins to think, you know, essentially, I'll take what I can get.

Like I've got to get somebody and I don't know enough to know anyway, right?

And those are very disempowering thoughts as opposed to saying, look, I'm going to be an empowered consumer and I need to choose someone who gets over just some basic hurdles of what I think are reasonable human interaction, right?

So like as a person making eye contact, do they seem interested, right?

Like these are basic points about any human interaction, including a therapist, right?

Then you can say, okay, is there a word of mouth?

Anyone else who has something good, nothing better than a word of mouth recommendation from someone you trust, right?

Or anybody can have a good website, but you say, let me look at the website.

What is it saying if there is one, right?

Does it resonate with me or not, right?

But after all of that, then you go to see the person with the idea that you're interviewing them, right?

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The idea that, yeah, I hope this person can help me and if so, great, I'm with the program, but I'm thinking about it.

Do I want this person?

Do I feel heard?

Do I feel cared for?

Which doesn't mean is it easy, right?

It might mean is it hard and I leave and I feel like emotional for a couple of days, but I see that I'm facing new things, you know, this process of assessment so that one isn't settling for something that is formulaic over package and I'm not trying to be overly critical of therapists.

I mean, there are people everywhere who do their jobs well and people who don't do their jobs well, but most therapists are working in systems that push against doing the job well, right?

Because they're rationing care and there's a lot of number of sessions and there's enough in such time before a person can return and so often it's an uphill battle because we're trying to be helped within systems we've created and tolerate that are pushing against helping us.

Yeah, but, you know, that interview process is tricky.

I mean, if you're in a rough place mentally, just like with any kind of interview, it's hard not to think that a failed interaction, failed interview, there's something wrong with you.

Sure, right.

There is an authority to a therapist, I think, where you think like they've got it all figured out.

Right.

It's a mess and therefore, if there's something off, it's all my fault.

Right.

All right.

So it's a very tricky and it's easy to then give up and then, because it's like the step to try to get a therapist, the first step to get help, if I get a therapist, like any kind of help, that's a big leap to take especially when you're in a rough place.

I agree completely.

We should not make people swim against such a strong current to get their needs met.

I mean, we see this in such obvious places where you have an elderly homebound person who can't get their medicine because, oh, there's been some change and they didn't put the new number into the form or Lord knows what.

I mean, it's incredible how we force people to swim against strong currents to get things that are just basic at times for their survival.

And with that in mind, I don't have a lot of respect for where healthcare is at or where mental health is at.

The field that I work in has accepted all sorts of aspects of how things go, someone else controlling how long the interaction can go on, how the interaction is bounded, what can be said and done, what medicines can be prescribed.

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There's so many external controls in the systems we work in that we, and I say me included like all of us in the field have let it get to a place where it's obscenely difficult to get help, obscenely difficult.

And we should say that's not okay.

I think psychiatrists and therapists and masters level social workers, psychologists and you name it, I think we should all say this is not okay.

And then we as a society should be saying this is not okay.

Otherwise what you're saying, which is I think completely true, will only become worse as there's more and more barriers to getting the help a person needs.

And each time a person isn't helped, it sets the odds against them getting more help.

I should say here that when I started working, there were times I would send people to an emergency room, right?

If there was some emergency, you know, emergency in their mental health and they were at risk. And there were times I'd send somebody to an emergency room where if you stopped and looked, it would have been malpractice not to do that, right?

Now, it's not just me who has an incredibly high threshold for sending someone to an emergency room because you just send someone who's in a lot of distress and oftentimes they're sitting on a gurney in a hallway or they're locked in a small white room and all they had was depression.

You know, they're scared when they go in and 36 hours later, oh, they're feeling a little better.

Wives are desperate to get out of there and someone sends them home.

I mean, so our systems have shifted so much that we tolerate now en masse.

What is egregious to the individual?

So you are a psychiatrist.

In terms of doing therapy, psychotherapy, what does the successful interaction look like?

Perhaps a fun question.

Perhaps not.

What do you think of the psychiatrist Sean and Goodwill Hunting played by Robin Williams?

So what is the full range of interesting interactions?

Can there be an intimacy, a friendship, a kind of varied interaction that kind of blends the lines of 30 minutes session once a week or whatever versus like a really kind of deliberate long-term project that cares about the well-being of a person across the months and years?

What can you say about a successful interaction between therapist and patient?

I think we're much better served by the latter, right?

And again, it doesn't have to be over years.

I mean, maybe a person might need that over weeks.

They might need it over months.

They might need it over years.

But if I'm understanding correctly, you're describing something that is like a real human engagement.

Yeah.

Right?

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And I work in a field that for years and years and years, the patient didn't get to see the therapist was sitting in a place sitting behind the person, right?

So that's not, of course, the only tradition and there are aspects of that tradition that can be very humanized.

But the idea that we're supposed to not be human, I mean, this medicine is shot through with this, right?

That the doctor is supposed to be God and it protects the doctor.

And that makes its way into therapy and the idea of the superiority, the therapist knows more.

I mean, in some ways, yes, but the idea is to know more about mechanical things, right?

To know more about facts and knowledge, not as a human being, right?

If we approach therapy as a collaborative human endeavor, right?

Where if we're going to do it together, of course, I'm going to learn from you too, right?

I mean, we're two human beings and we're talking about things that are deep and personal and intimate and I'm not going to participate in a way that makes it like about me as much as it's about you, but we're two humans and what's gone on in me may have relevance and sharing it may have relevance and at times you doing something back for me may have relevance. I'll give you an example of a person who would not let me help him.

It was a young man.

So when I was in training, who was very, very sick and needed to change certain choices and habits or he was not going to survive.

And I had no ability to help him whatsoever.

When I went and I saw a supervisor who was existentially trained, where here it's different from existentialism in the classic sense, but it's about really human connection, right?

And the guy was always wanting to teach me something, right?

Because I can get by in Spanish, but he was fluent in Spanish and he wanted to, he'd, oh, you traveled here and he'd say a word to see if I knew and I was always directing back to what I was supposed to do, right?

And the supervisor, I'll never forget, he said, let him teach you Spanish.

Like, come on, so we had a couple of sessions where if you look from the outside, he said, what is going on there?

Like, right?

Like it was, they were Spanish lessons to me, right?

And then at some point he brought in his mother and it was, he hadn't brought her in yet.

And he was in part showing off that he taught me something, right?

And I said a couple of things and he felt more powerful, like he was younger than me and he felt sick and disempowered, but he didn't feel that way once he taught me something and we showed it off to his mother, right?

When his behavior started to change, he started taking better care of himself.

He could see a little more what I was saying is like, you're a wonderful person, look, you love your mother and your aunt and they love you and like, look, he could start seeing that about himself, but that came from humanness and, and I think that's the way we help people. I don't understand why we don't do everything that way.

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It's like, we're two humans, but if you're doing something for me, then there's something, you have an expertise and I don't, that's why you're doing it for me.

The reverse could be true, but it doesn't mean we're not just two humans doing something together.

And the healthcare system and the legal system should not get in the way of that.

I mean, there's liability and all these kinds of things that can get in the way of the humanness. Right.

I mean, some of that is justified.

You have to be careful.

You have to make sure there's, of course, irresponsible, but a little too much can destroy the humanness.

I'll use it where I don't usually say something is insane, like it's not consistent with sanity.

And the presence of the legal system, look, I'm all for, of course, physicians have to be held, we have to be responsible and everybody makes mistakes and people have to be accountable

for their mistakes.

I understand all of that, but what we see now, it's so absurd that, oh, like everyone is frightened, right?

Everyone is frightened and then just looking to like, how do I slot into the box, check the boxes of what I'm supposed to do and not get in trouble?

People get sued because someone was at that hospital and that doctor touched their care. This happens in the VA system.

It happens in other systems too.

So you might have touched their care and no one's even saying you did anything wrong, but they say the next person did.

Oh, someone settled on your behalf and now you have a malpractice, ding, and maybe you can't get a license somewhere else.

But doctors are terrified and they're terrified for good reason because the same society that has given doctors in many ways too much power over time and treated doctors maybe too much like gods now is I think enacting some of society's anger and envy out on the physicians.

Even the idea that a person would know what medicine, like I saw a couple of TV commercials, give me this.

It's interesting, right?

Because even if, let's say I take myself out of it, it doesn't feel good obviously, but it takes a while.

It's like, wow, I went to school for eight years for this and you don't even want to hear my opinion, right?

You're not taking good care of yourself, right?

It doesn't mean you should think my opinion is gospel because I said it.

But people then don't have an understanding of what is expertise?

What do people learn?

How can people help us understand and make better decisions?

It kind of goes out with the wash and then the position of the expert, I mean a lot has

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been written about this, right?

It gets diminished over time very much to our own peril.

And then often with aggression in the medical world, coming back towards the alleged expert.

Yeah, expertise is a tricky one.

It's such a tricky thing because a couple with expertise, the attention is this arrogance that can come with expertise.

The arrogance can make the expert feel like they're more of an expert.

And then it's a vicious cycle.

And then the arrogance in the current in the 21st century, especially with the internet, the arrogance can completely force the public to distrust the expert because all they see is the arrogance versus the expertise.

So ultimately you have to have, I think, the greatest experts and masters I know are the ones that have complete humility.

Right.

Humility and gratitude.

And gratitude.

Be this back.

Which is usually a really good sign that somebody is at the top of their field.

And they'll acknowledge that they don't know everything.

Right.

Which is hilarious, right?

So like the best experts I know are the ones that will say that they don't know, not call themselves an expert.

Right.

It's very confusing.

Right.

Or know that they know a lot but don't know the answer to this.

You see that a lot in medicine.

That person knows they're an expert surgeon, but they also acknowledge they don't know if this is the right time to operate.

That's how you get to the best answer instead of someone who is an expert and always knows the answer.

Yeah.

If we actually rewind to the beginning of our conversation, we talked about, you mentioned something I wanted to return to.

So there's layers that are, there's an emergent novelty and you mentioned that we as human beings and we introspect on our own mind, we really can't know most of it.

Which of course makes me think of the unconscious mind, the subconscious mind and Carl Jung.

How much is hiding there in the shadows?

You've investigated a lot of trauma.

How much is there in our mind that's not directly accessible to us?

Like what can you say maybe philosophically about how much is there lurking in the Jungian shadow?

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I think there's a tremendous amount there, but I wouldn't, I don't immediately go to an ominous perspective, right?
Because if it's lurking there, right, it can come get us, right?
And to some extent that's true, right?
Because the seeds of evil are there if we want to plant and nurture them.
You think good things can't lurk?
I guess so.
Spring poetic.
But you're right, you're absolutely right.
And the Jungian shadow is supposed to not just be dark things, it's supposed to be everything.
It's supposed to be a lot of positive things as well, yeah.
Right.
Which I think brings us to self-knowledge, to truth, where I think the opposite of envy, narcissism, sociopathy, I do think is all rooted in truth.
It's both the truth of the good things about us or the ways we're not, we're not blameable for the, blame worthy for the things we're blaming ourselves for, et cetera.
But the self-knowledge and the truth and getting away from the reflex of anger, frustration, envy, shame, what I think happens then is all of that underneath the surface.
If we look at like the consciousness is the top of the iceberg, you know, outside the top.
You say, well, outside the water.
So is what's underneath like shifting and it can pull the top under, right?
Or is it supporting the top?
And really, I believe is honesty, truth, self-knowledge, humility, gratitude, all this simple stuff, good mental health is always consistent with simplicity, you know, humility, gratitude or easy things to say.
Like we know what that is, right?
We understand what that is soothing envy by having immense power and subjugating others is getting very, very complicated, right?
What that is and how that plays out.
So if we are in touch with ourselves, if we're honest with ourselves, if we own what's ours, we don't try and own what's not ours, right?
What happens then is something isn't waiting inside of us to sort of jump us with some new fact of self or challenge of self, right?
Then I think what happens are phenomena like intrinsic learning, like the way that so much happens inside of us automatically, right?
All people who have high levels of expertise know the answer to complex questions more rapidly, right?
It doesn't take them longer to think through it, but they have more knowledge to think through it's that more happens rapidly and unconsciously.
So they know the more complex answer more quickly and readily, right?
And we can build that in ourselves, not just in terms of factual knowledge, but in terms

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of how we respond to things, right?

If I make a mistake, do I respond with reflexive shame, right?

If I see someone has something I'd like, how do I respond?

We're more in accord with ourselves and then the automaticity in us is serving us better.

So that's in the positive.

Do you think, do you draw some wisdom from the early pioneers of psychotherapy like Freud and Jung?

Yes.

There's some repressed, there's some stuff to work through that is in the unconscious mind.

Yes.

I think there's always like 100% of the time, if you have a living human, you have things to work through in the unconscious mind, right?

There's too much that goes on around us that we might find unacceptable and suppress, right?

There can be smaller, but important examples, right, someone who feels that they're not a good enough parent and they, I don't know, they drop the child's plate, right?

And there's a feeling about that of badness in them that the person that can't tolerate and pushes away, right?

And maybe they become a little bit less confident, a little bit less assertive, like those small examples are important because they may be low valence, but there can be many, many, many, many of them, right?

Then you can look at the opposite end of the spectrum where someone, for example, feels or they're repressing their sexuality unconsciously.

There's something that is so important, say, to how a person feels about themselves, whether they can seek fulfillment to how they feel about their ability to interact and engage with others in ways that are loving and generative over time.

So from smaller things that accumulate often at a rapid pace to really big things, we are pushing things into the unconscious because they're not acceptable and we need to explore.

Why is that not acceptable?

Maybe there's an unacceptable urge because it's really not acceptable to me, right?

Like a violent urge.

Maybe there's an unacceptable urge because I'm actually listening to the lie society is telling me about what's okay and what's not okay, right?

So in exploring those things, yes, we become happier and healthier and that could mean if we're already happy and healthy, it gets better.

We get more insulated against the negative or it can mean the person who's really nurturing some of those seeds of evil and envy does that less or steps away from it.

So whether it's good or it's bad, it's in there inside of us and we benefit from understanding that idea of the observing ego, right?

Like we said, the part that can stop and say, Hey, this is what's, this is what I see what's going on in me.

What have you learned about exploring the human mind about the art of conversation is ultimately therapy is conversation.

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Yeah.

Is there something you can put into words?

Yeah.

Like what makes a good conversation?

I think language is among the most amazing gifts we have and it's also one of the most like clunky routes to misunderstanding, right?

I think of like, there's a concept of facticity, you know, things that are like, I guess, necessary evils and from the religious perspective, I think is where the word started.

But of language being like a facticity, right?

That we need to communicate with one another.

We want to communicate.

So we develop words and we have these amazing brains that can have language and that's all well and good, but our fantasy would be more like Mr. Spock, right?

You know, the Vulcan mindmill was like, I communicate with you because we put our hands on one another and we know, you know, by doing this, what we're thinking and what we're feeling and we won't have misunderstanding.

So because I think we can approximate that, we can come kind of close with language, right?

Or we can be so far away from it that we can say the same word and have opposite meanings and have it generate immediate animosity, right?

That we need to be very, very careful with language, with communication, with conversations and I've come to understand that much, much more as I've gotten older, both in terms of how hurtful, you know, reckless speeches, which is why I'm horrified by so much of what we see in our political discourse, right?

The slurs, the negativity that's attached to something, to some word, you know, how one can utter something and it can go into another person just into the ear, but then goes through so many parts of the meaning of the brain that that person feels a pervasive sense of shame or beleagueredness, right?

So yes, reckless language absolutely hurts people and we see that all the time in ways that I think are just atrocious.

And also how bad miscommunication harms us.

I mean, I really learned that through a lot of different ways, but in the work as a therapist of like really wanting to make sure that I'm really understanding you and you're really understanding me and a lot of work goes into that communication.

I think people, we can get into a rhythm of it and then it happens more easily.

But I think it's, it's like, it's a life and death difference at times, you know, lots of times, right?

In the world around us, between clear and accurate communication, just so I said a word because like, I think you know what I mean or something like that.

Yeah.

So to that, I mean, there's the Camus quote that I like as much unhappiness as coming to the world because of things left unsaid.

So that has to do with clear communication.

But there's also a dance to a conversation, a poetry to it.

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There is ambiguity to language.

And if you have a kind of awareness of that ambiguity and you play with it, that's where wit and humor come in.

That's allows you to sneak up to difficult topics without sort of trampling on them.

I don't know.

There's an art to it as well.

There's an art to the silence, you know, just allowing both human beings, one of the most intimate things you can share with a human being is silence.

Yeah.

That's communication.

It's a different communication, but it ties in more powerful.

Yeah.

Giving a person space to accumulate, to integrate, to make sense of their thoughts, enough to say a word, maybe a memory is sparked so they can think about that memory.

And like process that memory.

So it's not just words.

It's not just words, right?

Because now you're talking about communication as its body language, its, you know, its expressions of empathy, its movements, its pauses, right?

The communication process is very, very complicated and deep.

Yeah.

And some of that is building trust, but also challenging a person.

I wonder about that whole process with strangers, for example, of how you do that successfully.

Like you and I just met today, but I think a lot of our interaction is very free.

We can get to know each other in any way we want.

There's a few conversations I have coming up in general where there's a lot of other pressures and constraints on those conversations.

There's a, there's a danger to it.

There's risks.

There's the political forces involved, like what, what it, what it, from, not from my perspective, but probably from my as well of how do you say this thing?

What are the words that are going to offend and you're learning that about a stranger at the same time, you know, and you don't, it's a, it's an interesting dance because you have to walk carefully, but deliberately, right?

Carefully because I've, I've, I've learned this about, about myself, about others.

There's certain words that can trigger a person that they can make a person feel poorly, like shitty about themselves.

Uh, so you can, you can push, you can challenge a person about something and they're totally okay with it, but if you use a certain word to do it, it's going to, it's going to, it's going to, maybe it maps it to some childhood thing that their father or mother used to say or something like this.

And, um, I mean, part of the art of conversation is actually being a little bit free and using those words, but being extremely sensitive in detecting when a person reacts to a particular

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word and like storing that away is like, okay, then we might want to return to that later because there might be an interesting, that could be a tip of an iceberg that's actually representing something beautiful, or you might want to just, it's a nothing word that you just want to avoid because it's a distraction.

And so all of that kind of has to be integrated into the dance of language.

It's just really interesting, especially when the stakes are really high.

When you get one conversation, right, we have, when you sit down, you have one conversation and it makes the difference between like, say you had one conversation with a patient, this is the only conversation you get to help.

Sometimes it is the case.

Yeah.

And like, this is pretty high stakes.

Yeah.

Oh man.

Yeah, it's tough.

I guess you get over, um, and like over time, I guess you get used to the, the high stakes nature of it.

When you develop an ability and all that unconscious processing way, right, right.

All that part of the iceberg that's underneath the surface is doing all of that, right, is reading, you know, behavioral cues, verbal cues, and, and recognizing the primacy of emotion over logic, right.

If we're all logic, it'd be different.

Okay, we're going to talk about this thing.

I'll say things, you say things back, even if it's politically contentious say, it's

okay, we're just going to talk logically, but you know, and that's not the case, right.

There could be a word that raises a certain emotion and you know, you don't want to tread there because the emotion will color the person's ability to engage.

And so you're aware of all of this.

And then I think from the perspective of all of that, it's like standing on the shoulders of your own internal giant, right, that understands the, you know, language and emotions and body language and attunement and history and triggering and all of that.

And then on top of that, well, as you're standing up on those shoulders, you're trying to be effective, right.

And then I think that's where, you know, effectiveness can be unilateral or it can be together.

And I think some of what emerged from Victor Frankel's writing after the Second World War was how much a shared humanness means to us, how much of that can be an incentive for survival beyond all others, right.

So the idea of, are we doing something before communicating unilateral, like I want information from you or I want you to do a certain thing when we're done talking, right, done communicating. That's a very unilateral type of effectiveness, which can make sense.

Sometimes I want information out of a patient because I want to know what to do next, right.

So it doesn't have to always be negative, but it can also be a tool of manipulation,

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right.

If someone would say coming from envy or narcissism, I want to communicate with you in a way that makes you do what I want you to do, right.

Different from that is where it's a shared communication where, you know, there's like an umbrella, so to speak, over us and we're doing something that we can only happen together because we're us, we're each person, right, and we come together to do something that's a shared effectiveness.

Like I think we're doing now of like elucidating and pursuing thoughts and getting ideas out.

And I think the best situations are shared effectiveness situations because you call upon the resourcefulness and the internal resources of both people.

But you, especially with strangers, especially when it's not labeled the therapy session, you kind of actually stumble into that cooperative state.

Like you have to organically develop a trust together and almost lose yourself.

Ultimately, I do, I think you put it really nice.

I think successful conversations, even when it's with like, even if it's like with world leaders or logicians, people that operate in the space of reason, the most successful conversation will ultimately be in the layer in the landscape of emotion.

Like, that's where the interesting stuff will happen.

That's where you discover anything.

And that's where you get to actually meet to start getting an understanding of each other.

What you actually mean, even by the statements that are supposed to be kind of rationally based.

It's, it's, it's like, you lose yourself.

You lose yourself in the way you do when you're, when you're a children and you're just shooting the shit about whatever topic and you just forget yourself, forget what you're supposed to say.

You lose yourself in the context, right?

Yeah.

Well, you kind of plug into the unconscious mind a little bit and you get to speak maybe indirectly, but to the things that really drive you, to the thing that really, to the things, to the emotions, I suppose, that underlie your worldview.

I feel like that, that's where productive conversations can happen, whether it's a patient or just a stranger you're talking to at a bar about geopolitics.

You mentioned Victor Frankel, what, what do you make of his work, Man's Search for Meaning?

What are like the, the lessons you draw from his work of him as a psychologist, but also from that very powerful work that reflects on his experience in a, in a, in a Nazi concentration camp.

Yeah.

It was almost a profound reinvention of humanness, right?

After something so awful, so bleak and so despairing to speak anew about shared humanness, human

connection, meaning, compassion, that I think it was an, an intellectual direction that, that was adorned with all of the emotions that we need to adorn the logic with in order

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to make real change in the world.

And I think that his work has fueled so many branches have come from, you know, from his work, the existential psychotherapy and its place in, in helping human activities today, right?

A trend away from the idea that, that we're all quite isolated and that what's going on between us is all very transactional, right?

I'm putting something out and you take it in, you put something out, I take it in, right?

They either know there's a difference, there's a shared humanness that creates a meaning beyond the transactional kind of like you were just saying the logical stuff isn't really that interesting because, you know, the logic is, there's an answer to whatever logic is.

We can do math, right?

It's where does the surprises come in, right, either in terms of wonderful behavior or destructive behavior, right?

They're coming from people's emotions.

So that's what we want to understand.

And that occurs in the context of a person and other humans, you know, even if it's the conception of someone and all, and other humans as enemy, you know, or it's the conception of two people sitting together, the idea that there's a shared humanness and it's not all transactional and that he could take that out of, you know, the pinnacle of human tragedy and utilize it in a way that informs us being better as a species going forward, I think is really monumental.

What do you think is the role of emotion in the human mind, in the human condition?

Because you've, we've talked several times in different ways that emotion matters and it's a big part of who we are.

But why is it there?

Why is it useful?

What's good about it?

It almost said it's almost like a negative thing that we just have to live with.

But why is it also maybe a beautiful thing?

Yeah.

Well, I think he said, what's the role of emotion?

I think emotion is the king if we want to use that analogy.

It's the CEO if you want to use that analogy, right?

Emotion rules all.

We're taught that we're logical creatures, but we have innumerable pieces of data even over the course of just a day, let alone a human experience to tell us that is not the truth.

Is it ever logical to run into a burning building?

No.

Right?

I mean, logic is never going to tell one to do that.

Okay.

So many love is in the building.

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The person's already sprinted halfway to the building, right?
Emotion rules us and so the thought, a thought, is some of that is evolutionary, right?
That strong negative emotion stays with us very, very profoundly, right?
So example I'll give is if we're hunter-gatherers and like, I find a new berry and it tastes good and it seems nutritious and then, and it is, right?
Everything is fine.
It'd be good to remember that, right?
But if I find a new berry and it tastes good and it seems nutritious and we both eat it and almost die of sickness, we better remember that, right?
So the primacy of emotion is in us for reasons that are about survival, that the emotion of it's my child in that building or my loved one is why I don't give a damn about logic and run into the building, right?
The emotion of I thought that was good and I got really sick and I better never forget is also about survival.
And the same applies to humans.
If we're from different tribes back then and in my tribe, when you put your hand out, it's a greeting.
In your tribe, if someone puts their hand out, it means, hey, I'm going to attack you and take your stuff, right?
Then I put my hand out and you slug me, right?
Then it's like, I better remember that, right?
But you see how that can lead into, you know, are the constructs around that.
I say, oh, people in your tribe are violent, right?
We start then to make stories around that, but the primacy of emotion, whether it's berries or it's humans who might threaten us or it's humans we love, I think it's hard to even look at that anthropological, psychological literature to look at what's out there.
And I think the face validity, that's part of survival, right?
It's part of survival.
It's so cool that you get also things like love, which are not often rational or grounded in logic and so on, if you look sort of from a transactional perspective, a lot of times falling in love or whether it's with friends or friendship or romantic love, it doesn't really make sense.
I'm still not sure what the hell it is because it's one of the things or love for your kids when they're born, like that love, the parental love, what is that?
That's so cool that we get to have the, like if you're looking for the, in the menu of items that give life meaning, that seems like a pretty good one.
Yeah.
So my response, you just said that gives life meaning.
My response initially was going to be, it's the meaning of life, right?
Because saying, okay, emotion is about survival.
That's one part, right?
And it's a very important part, right?
If we don't survive, then we're not there to have emotions, right?

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So yes, it's about survival, but as important as that is, that's the small part of it, right?

I think it is about the meaning of life because it's about the beyond self.

And I think it relates back to what we talked, we're talking about the very beginning and the sort of levels of emergence, right?

And when we feel love, we feel happiness because that person feels happiness, right?

There's something that's so generative, so creative about that, like we want to bring order to things and we, you know, happiness is consistent with simplicity, right?

If we're healthy, there's nothing negative to say about our health, right?

If we have health problems, there's a lot to say, right?

And it's emotion that pushes us towards the goodness that I think makes all the meaning for us.

I mean, it's interesting, I actually was wondering your thoughts about this as a scientist, right?

Because we accept it by and large that we have free will, right?

We think, okay, we have free will, but then we get upset that there's not justice, right?

So, but how is it like if we have free will, I could act in an unjust way and then you're surprised or vice versa, like why, right?

We have these thoughts because I think because we're rooted, we want logic to rule, like there's a way in which I can understand logic, I can manage it, I can manipulate it.

We sort of want it to be that way.

So then we glorify logic and then we misapply it, like ideas like, oh, I know we have free will, but I'm now shaking my fist at the heavens because there's no justice, right?

And I think maybe what we're looking for is we should go back and look at the givens, like why is there, there's only goodness if there's justice?

I mean, that doesn't make, I think the goodness, why is the goodness have to be tied to that, right?

Maybe it goes back to the counter entropy and the fact that when there is something, there is not nothing, right?

And where there is something, there can be awareness, there can be goodness, there can be compassion, right?

Is it that what's really going on is not about justice?

Yes, we have free will, but it's that goodness, creating, shoring up, making better.

That is the meaning, that is the good, right?

And that the evil is the destruction as evidenced by the fact that it's over determined probably a million times that we're in this eddy current of counter entropy and we could destroy that quite readily, right?

And then we're nothingness, like everything else that we know of that's not us, that doesn't have the ability to do something that's creative or constructive, I mean, I think that that's the answer and I think that our science really tells us that that's the answer.

And I think it beckons us with ideas, like we know that things happen outside of space and time, right?

I mean, they're physics experiments, right?

We know this from the science of it, yet we don't stop and look and say, wait, is that the magic of the idea?

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Einstein said, God doesn't play dice with the universe.

I think, okay, maybe God doesn't play dice with the universe, that quantum indeterminacy and all of that is not just a flip of the coin, so to speak.

But maybe it's in that indeterminacy that we're given the opportunity to assert ourselves, right?

To make something one way or another, you know, maybe it's not God playing dice with the universe, but it's God loading the dice in our favor if we'll only listen to truth, the truth that being destructive doesn't help or soothe anything, even in the person who thinks it will for themselves and that creativity and generativeness and kindness and compassion. Like this, doesn't that seem so analogous to the eddy current of counter entropy that has us here in the first place?

And I think that's where I pin meaning and that meaning then going back to the initial question, right, is generated in us through emotion, through what we feel that leads us to feel something that is mysterious, I don't know why I feel it.

Yeah, in some sense, emotion is kind of the fuel of that creative imperative we have.

But if you step back and look at the tapestry a little bit, it does seem that the destruction, the creation of the destruction are the ying and yang of life, that it all works only if the main engine is towards creativity, but destruction also makes way for new things.

So that's the, this kind of struggle, it seems like life is struggled between the different forces that make up the individual human, they make up society, all this tensions are necessary for growth, for development, this kind of inner conflict and outer conflict are necessary for growth.

It's not just, I mean, in some sense, it's from the logic aspect, you kind of want everything to be perfect and just for nobody to suffer for everything to be perfect, but just like we talked about with trauma, it just seems like it's such a big giant mess.

What is it?

Bukowski said, fine, would you love and let it kill you?

There's some aspect of the negative aspect of passion and pursuit and obsession and the turmoil of the pursuit of happiness, of the creative pursuits and all of that.

I mean, that's part of life as well.

And I don't know what to do with that from an individual perspective in terms of figuring out how do you live a good life, how do you live a healthy life?

Because it does seem a bit of hardship or sometimes a lot of hardship can make a pretty interesting life.

I think it brings us back to the discussion that we were having before about what does mean like the challenges of trauma and of overcoming.

And I think here we got to be careful with the language because I would then say, let's take destruction and separate it into two things.

One is to say destruction is like the breaking down, the tearing down of something versus a process that has malice in it.

So just like when we were talking about trauma and setbacks, things to overcome and we'd say, okay, if you say, hey, you have it harder than the next person and you have more to overcome or someone put a barrier in front of you for you to overcome, that there can

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be a lot of growth in that, including the times when you don't know, gosh, can I do this?

Can I get over it?

Right?

We're saying that's challenge and something to overcome that's very positive.

But we're saying, but there's no benefit of throwing a racial slur in there, right?

We're saying, because that's all bad.

Even the prince says, I'm angry about that and I'm going to overcome that.

That didn't need to be, that didn't make anything better.

If the person sees that and says, I'm going to overcome that, it makes things less worse.

But there's no good to something that's created as destructive.

When we look at forest fires, like controlled burns, you say there's a forest burning down.

And that's, okay, there's some, there's some weak destruction there.

There's a tearing down there, but it's in the service of the next fire not running through the community, the town that's on the other side of it.

That's very different than a forest fire, say, started by arson.

Right?

So you might say they're both a tearing down, they're a tearing down of the forest.

But one is in the service of goodness, even though it's hurting the animals and the plants is not all good, right?

But it's in the service of something as opposed to something else that's wantonly destructive.

I think there's no good to the racial slur, there's no good to the arson, right?

That's destruction in a way that's incorporating, I think, the malice of envy, something that's really purely, if there's a yin and yang, that's the destructive, that's the badness end.

So racial slurs is a surface wave of a deeper thing.

And so, I mean, the reason I bring that up is like, all right, well, you have these discussions of censorship, like, what good does allowing racial slurs in public communication do, right?

And it's like, our communication would surely be better if we don't say bad things to each other.

But it's like, it seems like the truth is our communication will be better if the amount of bad things is a small fraction of communication.

That seems to be more true, because another aspect of human nature with power, the moment you start censoring and removing bad words that everyone agrees are bad words, then the people at the top that are doing the censoring start getting greedy.

They start, it starts expanding.

And this is the giant mess of human civilization, where we can't, the nice piles you created are kind of overlapping.

That's a gray area.

Yeah, I agree.

That's the problem with it.

No, I agree completely.

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There's a control of language.

There's slippery slopes there.

I think there's a very big problem there.

So I agree.

I think, again, parsing out the language, I'm not saying, hey, we shouldn't have racial slurs as if like, let's stop saying the words.

I mean, the idea is the premise behind it, right?

Like, you know, the prejudices, if we could eliminate the prejudice behind it, you know, I was struck, I said, I do almost nothing about medicine.

I get to medical school and start with anatomy, right?

And it's remarkable to see, as the bodies are being dissected, that we're all humans.

It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter any of these things on the outside.

And that's true, not just in our bodies, but in our minds, the part of the person that's not there, right?

Because now we're trying to learn from the body.

And it shows how ridiculous it is.

If you think that we're 99.9%, percent all alike genetically.

And by the way, it's only like taking another 10th off and we're all orangutans, right?

But somehow we have to see these differences between us, right?

And where does that come from?

And I think that I believe that all comes from envy in that classical sense, that if

I don't feel good enough, I'm going to want someone to feel better about.

And so there can be visual things that that person looks different, right?

Or you think about the, I spent some time in Great Britain and when there's a lot of conflict between Northern Ireland and Ireland, right?

And you thought, wow, there's not even a look difference, right?

It's the same general religious umbrella, same ethnicity, right?

But now there's some religious difference.

And I thought, it's not me trying to be denigrating around the Irish conflict.

It's like, that's human of, oh, there's no actual difference between us.

If I don't feel good about myself, I'm going to find one, right?

It's that, that I believe could go away.

It's driven by maybe the trauma of just being alive in the world and things can happen to us.

But we certainly promote in the human created trauma, people feeling not good enough, finding differences.

There's a place for the envy to attach.

And we're off to the races of, you know, wars.

I mean, we're talking about the Second World War and we think, well, what have we learned since then?

It would take us a day to map out all the wars since then, right?

Not alone for goodness sakes, everything that's salient right now.

So we're not pretty, we're not good at learning from what seemed to be some very salient lessons.

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I should mention one thing is that I also know that you're interested in Russian culture a little bit.

Churchill said, I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia.

It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

So what do you or some interesting differences between, so this Eastern part of the world of Russia, Ukraine, the Slavic countries, the former Soviet Union, all of that versus sort of the U.S. culture?

What stands out to you from the literature, from the music, from the science, all that kind of stuff?

I think there's so much intensity and I guess I would say fearlessness of expression that I see in the Slavic culture, maybe it's across cultures because there's a different way that expression occurs.

We say like, oh, it's different in the French than the Spanish or is different than in parts of Africa.

And I think when you take that part of the world for whatever reason, and maybe it's just totally random or maybe it's aspects of geography and experience and migration, but there's such an intensity.

And I remember listening to Tchaikovsky very early on, maybe not for the very first time, but early on in my life, or reading Dostoevsky and feeling like, oh, Dostoevsky's willingness, his ability and his willingness to express and create such powerful, aberrant states of human experience, Tchaikovsky in his music, the depths of suffering that it expresses has always stood out to me as a way that if that's the brightest light, so to speak, communicating information, that that's a place to look.

And it's also a place that resonated with me so strongly because I think for some people who are informative years and having very difficult feelings, depth of feeling of fear and how's the world going to be?

Am I going to be annihilated?

What do I even want?

What do I feel inside of me to encounter that being expressed so intensely?

I found to be very, very moving.

So I don't know if that's a good answer or not, but I think there's an intensity of expression and a fearlessness.

Dostoevsky wrote about terrible things.

What happens in the person?

Is there a person who is brilliant intellectually and very persuasive and very capable of being effective who also just chooses to be a child rapist?

I mean, he wrote about that.

He wrote about the truths of this is what we can be as humans.

And I think there's so many lessons, including the truth.

Like people will tend to think, oh, evil's not very bright or not very intelligent.

That's a way to let evil propagate, right?

Evil can be effective and attractive and very compelling, but evil nonetheless.

And I just think there's a fearless willingness to look at that and to describe it.

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Did I say primarily I've studied in Russian culture?

Yeah, the fearless exploration of this whole human drama, definitely Dostoevsky and others since in the 20th century and the 19th century have done an incredible job of that.

Some of that, just like you said, is the language, the culture.

I think that intense romanticism is there.

That is almost an overdramatic exploration of human nature.

It can err on the side or falter when it goes into a kind of cynical view of life.

Life is suffering.

I think that also has to do with the way you deal with the trauma of the world wars and so on.

This is something the different nations throughout Europe had to deal with that in different ways.

Some of them have channeled into envy and resentment.

Some of them channeled into a kind of nihilism or cynicism and ultimately the intensity of feeling is there, which is interesting to see and interesting how that manifests itself in the kind of governments it builds up.

There's more authoritarianism in that part of the world versus the Western world that's more focused on the individual versus the collective.

When more focused on the individual, you have a propensity to value individual rights with democracy and so on.

It's interesting to watch and to reconstruct how that all came to be.

Is it in the blood?

Is it in the mind?

Is it in some kind of thing that more ethereal, a collective set of ideas that we pass from generation to generation between each other, sort of the collective of it?

Yeah, it's fascinating to see.

But now reinvigorated because there's conflict in that part of the world.

You've also thought about the Cold War.

What lessons about the human mind, about psychiatry, psychology and about looking at the Cold War?

Can we take forward in the 21st century so that we can avoid World War III?

Right.

A major cold or hot war in the 21st century?

Yeah.

Well, I think unspoken animosities are very, very, very dangerous.

It was a Cold War.

There was fighting through proxies.

The superpowers were fighting surrogate wars through proxies, which of course in and of itself causes immense suffering.

But it becomes the opposite of an exchange of ideas or an exchange of thought, Chris Jeff, not believing that the kitchen could look like it did at the World's Fair and some of the misconceptions here of what things were like in Russia.

It was a thought that those other people are not actually people.

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There's an enemy society of evil which then paints with a broad brush in a way that makes it easy, too easy for the war to go from being cold to have a boiling over into utter destruction. And I wrote, it was really a true story that when I was in, it was still the Soviet Union, but it was right around the time the Soviet Union was coming to an end and I had gone on a trip for students from England and we got to go places of people like, I hadn't gone.

Foreigners hadn't gone in many, many years.

It was just kind of the right timing to experience that.

And it really is true that someone said on short notice to these poor kids that these group of Americans were coming and I have a picture somewhere of the kid in a gas mask. Like as they went under their desks and put on a gas mask and they thought, right, that's what, I mean, that's what they're taught to think about us and we're taught to think about them and like now we're back in an us them, right, when, you know, we're all trying to survive and we're all such, you know, human life is so delicate, right, you know, let alone human happiness and we make these divisions and we create this aggression and latent aggression.

We're doing the Cold War.

We developed, right, the ability to destroy the earth, right, and then just sat looking at one another, you know, with further growing misunderstanding and the opportunity for the proxy fights, like rather than the Cuban Missile Crisis, which I know wasn't a war, but it's an aspect of that, right, where we just have ourselves wildly, you know, at risk of destruction without any mutual understanding.

And again, I would argue that that is the opposite of the counter entropy, right, like we are setting everything up for less lack of communication, lack of understanding. Out of those feelings of love and shared humanists happen, they don't, right, if you separate people and then we push ourselves more and more and more towards reinstating the state of entropy that's present in the rest of the universe.

What advice would you give to young people that are fighting entropy with all their might?

So young people and people that are wondering how to find their way in life, what advice would you give, how to have a career, how to have a life they can be proud of?

I think starting off with sort of first principles, okay, what are my values, right?

How do I want to live life?

Because, you know, I'm in my early fifties and when I was a kid, you know, we waited for the newspaper came in the afternoon and then, you know, and then we'd see something, okay, what's going on in the world?

We'd learn something.

I'd get the West Coast baseball scores, right, and learn about, oh, here's what happened in different parts of the world.

And by and large, I and everyone else there, adult or child, we're like living in a reality that was largely, our conception was largely what was around us, right?

And now in many ways, it is, I'm guessing it's entirely negative, of course, that we have more information, we can sort of think globally, so to speak, right?

So, the other side of that is so much of the world's problems are on us all the time,

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right?

Like, here's this awful thing that happened, how many awful things happen each day and they're right in front of us and there's such an immediacy to it all that I think it can be like paralyze us with terror, right?

And for someone who's young and trying to make their way, it's like, how do you figure your way out in this world that your word isn't even going to exist, right?

And then you see how profligate the generations before you are, right?

In so many ways, and there can become, I think, a push towards extremes, either nihilism or I'm going to change everything, right?

And it's like, how about, let's start from, how do I want to behave in my own community, right?

Which starts with like, how do I want to behave in my household, right?

What kind of neighbor do I want to be?

I mean, it might seem like things like that are silly or small in comparison to the big things, but I don't think they are.

I think that's how, you know, that's how we start building foundations that lets us tackle the big things.

And then I do find myself saying when I'm working with, sometimes doing therapy with younger people of helping them kind of bring back their thoughts, their strivings, their decisions more to themselves and living with and around themselves more instead of in something that becomes very theoretical and therefore very threatening and unnerving.

So focusing on the people around them, taking one small step at a time to form deeper connections to build something locally.

Yeah, how do I want to be today?

If I go into the grocery store and the person in front of me drops something, you know, I can rock and scow because, you know, I'm in a rush, right?

And I could be like that, right?

I can be like that.

I've been that way many, many times in my life, right?

It's never done anyone a damn bit of good, including me, right?

Or I can realize like the 10 seconds aren't going to matter.

Can I help pick that thing up or just smile?

These are the seemingly small things that I think make the tenor of our lives.

Yeah, I moved, I think I mentioned to you offline, one of the really the main reason

I moved to Austin, Texas, I just remembered deciding it when I went to Walmart and a lady said, you look handsome in that tie or in that suit and tie, whatever.

Like, I don't think anyone's ever said, older lady, she was very sweet.

There's kindness in her eyes.

She said that I don't think anyone ever said anything like that to me in my entire life.

And it was just, I don't know.

It was like, wow, there's kindness in this world.

I know it sounds ridiculous, but like, does not sound ridiculous.

It's like those, you could be that for somebody.

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Go walk around in Walmart.

Right.

Think that you remember that and it's pivotal, you're citing it as, hey, that was a big part of me moving here.

So think about the branch point in your life that comes from the simple kindness of a person who had goodness to give and wasn't scared that you're going to be upset by it or what right?

Take the risk.

Right.

She probably didn't have the thought that you could be a sailing, right?

Probably she looks at you.

She's got goodness to give.

It's simple to give it.

It's not that simple and it's beautiful and it's worth more to you than like how many studies would be on where's it right to live or this and that.

None of that matters.

What mattered was just that freedom to be kind.

And that's emotion.

That's not logic at all.

That's purely just human emotion and a little bit of humanness, that little bit of connection.

And then that's what makes life great.

Which is why it's not a bad idea, right, that you moved here that way instead of one could say, well, I can't believe you did that instead of looking at all the data and hiring consultants of what's the best place to live.

But that would be wrong, right?

You made a good decision, right?

That was good data.

It was impactful data even in your thoughts about how you're happy living here, right?

It's not that oh, you discount, you shortchange yourself by not relying on all the logic, right?

You felt something about the place and you felt it as symbolized in a person and that made the choice for you.

Just a balance, of course, but you also have to know yourself a little bit.

Sometimes you can find stability and comfort in kind of reasoning things out a little bit.

Maybe as people close to me have sometimes criticized in that I'm a little bit too romantic where I'll just follow the feeling.

And life, there's physics.

There's a reality to this world.

There's a reality doesn't allow you to flourish if you just follow your feelings, but there's a dance there and happiness is ultimately falling in that landscape of feeling and emotion versus facts and reason and logic.

As you said, have their place, right?

Everything, yeah.

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They have their place.

I do.

But they're not the be all and end all.

You're an incredible person.

Andrew Huberman is a friend of yours, he said, you absolutely must talk called Dicerot.

The number of people you know that are just incredible people, there's just this group of folks that somehow helped each other flourish and grew together and I'm just, I'm so happy you exist.

I'm so happy you're doing the work you're doing and can't wait for your second book.

Thank you.

And thank you for talking today.

This was really cool.

Thank you so much.

I'm proud to be among the group of people that you cited, proud to be their friend and proud that you've had me on today.

Thank you so much.

Thank you, Paul.

Thanks for listening to this conversation with Paul Conti.

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And now let me leave you with some words from Victor Franco.

Everything can be taken from a man, but the last of the human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.

Thank you for listening and hope to see you next time.