

## **[Transcript] The Diary Of A CEO with Steven Bartlett / E261: The Psychology Master: The Colour That Makes You Attractive, How Your Name Determines Your Success & How To Become UNSTUCK In Your Marriage, Job, or Life!**

People are actually stuck in relationships and jobs.

I'm actually stuck becoming much lonelier as a species, but there is a way to get unstuck.

And we're going to find out right now.

Adam Alter.

A New York Times bestselling author and psychologist.

This episode is for people who are stuck in their careers, relationship or any aspect of life.

And how to become unstuck.

The career model for how we live our lives professionally is broken.

As you specialize, you have less variety in what you do.

There's a massive rise in loneliness and depression and anxiety.

And part of the reason for that is we don't share our stuckness.

And they also have no idea how common it is.

So is the relationship between perseverance or knowing when to quit?

Research basically shows that it's a good idea to persevere beyond the point where you say, this is hard and I feel stuck.

How long you should do that is another question.

And the best example of this is an idea known as the creative cliff illusion.

And it's this illusion where you that's when the good stuff comes.

If you persevere.

How do you teach someone to be that kind of person?

There are two things.

One thing is I remember reading about the studies where people would rather take an electric shock than to sit idly on their own.

It's a brilliant study.

They've tried it already so they know it hurts.

But it's so aversive to just sit with our own thoughts for even half an hour, two thirds of them go and start playing with this machine.

So what we found is that we don't pay enough attention to what will be good for us.

And that's often when we get stuck.

What do we need to do then?

If you want to be able to get unstuck quickly, the best thing you can do is have you ever been stuck?

Are you stuck in an area of your life right now?

I think you are.

And I say that because I think to some degree we all are.

Some of us more than others.

And that is exactly why I had to have this conversation with Adam Alter, the guy that literally wrote the book about being stuck and how to know if you are.

And maybe most importantly of all, how to get unstuck.

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Adam is a master of what he calls the art of the breakthrough, which is really looking at why some people fail, why they get stuck, and why others don't.

He's also a genius when it comes to marketing and psychology.

He's the professor of marketing and psychology at one of the top schools in America.

He kind of just knows why people do what they do, and how to help them do something else.

How do we know if the decisions we're making in our life right now, in all the areas of our life,

are the right decisions or the wrong decisions?

Adam has scientifically backed answers to all of these questions.

He is refreshing.

He is positive.

And he is full of just as many important questions as he is valuable life-changing answers.

I feel so much richer for having this conversation with Adam.

And I know you will too.

Enjoy.

Adam, from an academic standpoint, who are you?

I am a professor of marketing and psychology.

So I'm very interested in business,

but also interested in the psychological side of it.

So how do consumers behave?

How do they think?

What do they buy?

How do they spend their time and money and other resources?

I'm incredibly interested and curious about all of your books,

specifically this book here, Anatomy of a Breakthrough,

and also your first book, Drunk Tank Pink.

Because this book helps people to get unstuck.

Why did you decide to write a book called Anatomy of a Breakthrough?

And you know, writing books takes a huge amount of time and effort,

and you're a man that has many things he could be doing.

So why was this so important that you chose to write about it?

It's something that I've been thinking about in some form or another for years.

Literally, I'd say 25 years.

I've been stuck a lot in my life.

And so even before I became intellectually interested in the topic,

it was a factor that had had a big effect on the way I was living my life.

And I wanted to understand whether there was maybe a roadmap

that I could present to other people that would help them get unstuck.

But I think the real answer is there was some research that I was doing in,

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I think this would have been in about 2005.

And I found this really interesting cultural difference in how people anticipate or expect change in the world.

And so what we found is that people in the West, people in places like the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, they tend to be blindsided by change.

So if you give them five days in a row and you show that it's been rainy for five days or sunny for five days, they anticipate that that's going to continue.

And they think the same about the stock market and other variables that can shift or stay the same.

But if you do that with people in East Asia, Japan, South Korea, China, when they see a pattern that's gone a particular way for a while, they think that it's about to change.

And what that does is it means that they're much more nimble in the face of change, whereas in the West, people tend to be blindsided by it.

And it makes us especially slow at coming to grips with the idea that the world's changed and we need to pivot in order to get unstuck.

Can you give me the most popular examples of being stuck that my listeners now could relate to?

Yeah, I've been running this survey for about five years on people all around the world asking them,

with that definition of stuckness, are you stuck in some way?

And I find that people usually within about 15 seconds start typing a response, which means that stuckness is very top of mind and their responses vary.

So some of them are financially stuck.

They want to be able to save or they want to be able to earn more money.

Some of them are stuck in relationships.

Some are stuck in jobs.

A lot of them are stuck quite narrowly in creative pursuits.

Like I'm trying to learn this piano piece.

I'm trying to learn this new art technique.

I'm a filmmaker and I can't come up with creative ideas.

I'm a business person and I can't figure out what my next venture should be.

So there's a very broad range and I find that almost everyone, in at least one respect, with a bit of time comes up with something.

They say, I'm stuck in this way and then they can express it.

Is there a trend in who's getting stuck more often?

Yeah. So I have a pet theory.

I think the kind of career model for how we live our lives professionally is broken from most people.

I think what happens is as you specialize,

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you're supposed to get more and more narrow in what you do  
and you have less variety in what you do.  
And that's how you get stuck is by doing the same thing every day.  
And there's a huge amount of evidence for that in all sorts of different areas.  
Actuarial science, for me at least,  
very quickly put me into that little pigeonhole spot  
where I felt I was getting trapped and it was only going to increase.  
And so the thing I've done ever since  
is to try to create as much variety in my professional life as possible.  
Because then if you don't like aspect number one,  
but you have nine other aspects to your job,  
you can go and do that for a little while.  
And so bouncing around, I think, is critical for getting unstuck.  
Often very smart people get very, very interested in very narrow topics.  
And that's essentially the definition of a PhD,  
is you spend a huge amount of time becoming an expert in a very narrow area.  
And I think that's fine for a PhD itself,  
but if you're going to make a whole life out of doing that,  
I think if you're an restless, intellectually curious person,  
you're going to get stuck really fast.  
You almost become a victim to being good at something in life, don't you?  
Because you get promoted and promoted and promoted up in that direction.  
And your label, whatever it is, Dr. Dentist, lawyer,  
becomes reinforced by your own success at that thing.  
And you can get 10 years down the line at something and go,  
how the fuck am I living next to the office?  
I'm a lawyer, it's doing law 14 hours a day.  
What happened to that violin I used to play?  
And you're right, we've become really narrow individuals.  
And when you think about what a human is, we're so multifaceted,  
especially when we're younger, we're doing one of these things.  
It's a real shame.  
I also think what happens is you get promoted and it does get narrow,  
but it also changes.  
So the thing that you were really good at is no longer the thing that you're doing.  
And a lot of what happens in promotion,  
especially professionally, is you become a manager  
and you manage people who do the thing you love instead of doing the thing you love.  
And so that's how you get stuck as well,  
is by being promoted out of the thing that got you passionate about what you were doing  
and being told, no, instead you're going to watch other people do the thing you love.  
Now you suddenly have to be a people manager,

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which some people like doing, but a lot don't.

And so that's also inherent in the kind of professional models that we have in hierarchical organizations.

This happens by, I guess in part, by being a bit unconscious about what you want.

And you just kind of take what you're given.

So you take the promotion and you take this and you take the relocation to this place.

And how do we prevent that happening?

I think that's the job of people who write about these subjects, right?

And that's kind of what I saw as the mission for this book was to try to say, you know, if you don't want to be stuck or if you want to be able to get unstuck quickly, there's a set of questions you can ask yourself.

And let me just lay them out for you.

Here they are.

In fact, the last thing in the book is a hundred ways to get unstuck.

It's just a digestion of all these ideas.

And I think those are questions that people don't often ask themselves.

You're right.

There's a sort of accidental way that we live our lives and we take what's given.

And if someone says, here's a promotion, you hear that word and you grab onto it and you write it as far as you can.

But I think it's easy to be a little bit mindless about where your life takes you.

And sometimes that's fine.

But in a lot of cases, it's not.

And in the book, I try to distinguish those cases from each other.

Like when should you let life lead you and when should you be a little more purposeful?

On that exact point, I've mulled over the last couple of weeks, this idea that there's kind of two narratives that prevail in our lives, kind of two instructors.

One of them is this external narrative.

It could come from your parents or society's expectation of you taking that promotion or thinking that that job is a admirable job for you to take.

So you take it, that's the external narrative.

And the other narrative, if I can call it that, is how you feel.

And I think we're conditioned to care more about that external narrative because the rewards seem to be more aligned with the external narrative than like how you feel.

Because if people really were orientated by how they felt in that job, in that relationship, in that city, whatever, in that course at university, they would make significantly different decisions.

But it's almost like we've tuned out of that.

Yeah, I think the problem is that humans don't know how they feel in isolation as well.

If I took you and put you in a room for a week and said, you can have food and water and you can have your thoughts.

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And I took you out of after a week and said,  
so what are you thinking?

Like what's real?

What's not real?

What do you believe?

What are your preferences and values?

You'd struggle.

It's, there's a lot of really interesting evidence that if you isolate humans,  
they don't really know what to do with themselves.

So those external forces that there's a kind of permeability between what I'm feeling inside my head  
and thinking and what these other forces are suggesting to me.

So I think it's totally true that we don't pay enough attention to what will be good for us  
separate from what other people think we should be doing.

But I also don't even think many of us know the answers to those questions,  
not all the time, but about a lot of things.

Like I know deep somewhere, I know that I love to draw,  
that I'm at peace when I'm drawing and painting.

I haven't done that for a really long time.

I'm too busy to your point of being too focused.

But I know that that's something that preference wise, I love doing.

But then the question, should I make my career and my life about that?

The only way I knew how to answer that was by speaking to lots of people who said,  
it's very difficult to become an artist.

Here's the path.

It's probably going to be hard to make any money.

So keep it as a hobby.

But, but knowing just based on my feelings what to do,

I wouldn't have known what to do as a young person.

And so I think that's, that's part of the problem is that

it's not just that we're silly for kind of paying attention to others.

It's also that I don't even know if we know in isolation without those inputs,  
what the right kinds of paths are.

You said about putting me in a room and leaving me with my thoughts,  
that sounded like hell.

It does, yeah.

And there's, I remember reading about the studies where people would rather take an electric shock  
than to sit idly on their own.

Yeah.

And they tested people and they said,

would you rather take an electric shock or sit here for a couple of minutes on your own?

And people took the, it's a, it's a brilliant study.

I mean, the way they set it up is brilliant because they get you to sit in this room

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and they do it with men and women, mostly college undergrads.  
And they say to them, you're just going to be sitting here for half an hour.  
There's a little machine in the corner.  
It delivers electric shocks.  
They've tried it already.  
So they know it hurts.  
It doesn't feel good.  
And they're told, you know, you can sit with your thoughts or,  
you know, the machines there if you want to go and use it,  
which is a bizarre thing to say to people.  
And they sit there for a while and time passes.  
And the vast majority of them go, I think it's two thirds of them,  
go and start playing with this machine.  
It's so aversive to just sit with our own thoughts for even half an hour  
that we need stimulation, even if it's negative stimulation.  
And you wrote a book about this, this subject matter about addiction and screens  
and all of these things, this sort of incessant need for distraction  
that we seem to have developed.  
What was your biggest sort of takeaway and learning from that process  
of putting that book together?  
I think the biggest thing for me was I'd always imagined that addiction  
and the need for this kind of stimulation was a sort of personality thing.  
Like you either have that personality or you don't.  
But I became absolutely convinced by not only by the book  
and what I was researching, but by understanding how many of us  
fall prey to these devices, that this is universal.  
It's just about being human.  
That if you know how to push the right buttons in a human,  
you can turn that human as you can with rats and monkeys and other animals  
into a bit of a fiend for whatever the thing is that it needs.  
And the people who design the platforms that we use are so good at that job  
and they have so much data to perfect what they've done  
that ultimately the platforms they design for us are like crack.  
They're very, very difficult for us to resist.  
You talk about in drunk tank pink how people behave differently  
when they're in the presence of others.  
And I found that really, really curious.  
Could you just give me a flavor of some of the studies and insights  
you gained from that?  
Because that kind of links to what you were saying there  
about how living behind screens might decay our humanity a little bit.  
Yeah.

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Well, I think part of it is just that the best versions of ourselves come out when we're around other people. We are much, much more likely to be civil and decent to other people when they're around, when we see them and when we spend time around them. That kind of shared social space is really important. It's also really interesting when we're around other people, we tend to default to the thing that we are most likely to do in any moment. So there's a lot of good evidence of this. Like if you take a champion cyclist, you put him or her on a bike, a stationary bike, that person will go faster in the presence of other people than alone. And there's something about this kind of, they call it latent energy. This is a very old psychological study that talks about latent energy that is liberated from us when we're in the presence of other people. So if you're trying to learn something new, you know, you imagine you're in class at school and there's a teacher who's staring over your shoulder, that's terrible. Because we don't really know how to take on board new information. We're just overwhelmed by the cognitive load of that experience. But if it's something you're good at, you will be extra good at it in front of other people. There's something about being energized by others. So if I work out with someone that I'm more likely to... You'll lift more, you'll run faster and so on. Yeah, pretty reliably. In that book as well, before we get on to being unstuck, there were some other things that I found really curious that I was keen to ask you about. This is your, that was your first book, Drunk Tank Pink. You say how our names have a huge bearing on our outcomes across various facets of our life. That's quite shocking to me because our name is something that we don't choose and it seems to be so simple and slightly irrelevant. Yeah, it's true. I mean, there are lots of different ways names influence us. One of these little demonstrations that I do when I give talks on this subject is I'll present the letters of the Roman alphabet, the 26 letters that we understand to be the letters in the English language. And I'll ask people to think about their three favorite letters. And then I say, now put your hand up in the room if one of those at least was the first letter of your first name, middle name or last name and almost every hand goes up. So these are letters. Who has preferences for letters? It's a bizarre thing to have to answer. But we do and it's because this, these letters are such a strong expression of who we are. It's a part of our ego that's contained in the letters of our name. And so even that alone shows the power of names over us, that they are such a strong reflection of who we are and our identity. So that's the first thing. And you find interesting effects from this actually.



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If you look at the hurricanes that we name in the US or that you name around the world in other places, you get much more donation aid if the hurricane name matches your initial. So they found that when Hurricane Katrina came through and devastated New Orleans, people whose names began with a K donated way more than people whose names didn't begin with a K.

The same for a whole lot of other hurricanes with other initials.

The other big thing is the ease with which people can pronounce your name.

So that seems to have a really big effect on all sorts of outcomes.

If people can pronounce your name, there's this kind of sense of familiarity.

If that's the breaking of the ice happens over that first pronunciation of your name, obviously the easier it is to say the name, the less anxiety you have about it.

I guess the more smoothly that breaking of the ice goes.

And there's a lot of evidence from some of my own research.

We looked, for example, at how quickly people rise up through law firm hierarchies.

How quickly do they become partners?

And there's a period in the middle of careers in like about the 10th to the 20th year of a career for a lawyer where there's a premium, you are much more likely to become a partner, several percent more likely to become a partner earlier if your name is pronounceable.

And I think what's happening there is if I'm a partner at a firm and there are a whole lot of young associates and I'm trying to put together a team, if there's someone with a name that's easy to pronounce and someone whose name I'm anxious about pronouncing, I don't know how to pronounce it, I will default to the one who's easy to pronounce.

I'm not trying to be rude about it, but in that moment, it just seems easier.

It's the path of least resistance.

And that's how humans act much of the time.

Is there not an element of discrimination and prejudice associated with that?

Because I think if a name was easier to pronounce, it's probably familiar.

It's therefore probably culturally popular.

They're probably like me, you know, like a Jack or like a Stephen.

But if it's a name that I've not seen, trying to figure out causality here, it could be because they're foreign.

You know, my mother, I always think about this, my mother's from Nigeria and she could have given me a like a traditional Nigerian name, but she called me Stephen.

And I think, you know, I was also born in Botswana in Africa.

I think had she called me something else, my life probably would have been quite different in all honesty.

I worked for four years on phones doing like tele-sales.

And when you call up and your name is Stephen in the UK and you sound like I do,

I think any prejudice someone might have had because of the color of my skin or where I'm from vanishes.

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Is there any evidence to support that?

Yeah, so there are two things.

One thing is absolutely the prejudice that goes along with having a foreign sounding name. And there's evidence, for example, in the United States, there's a study where thousands of CVs were mailed out and applications for jobs, either with a traditionally white name or a traditionally black name, as we think of them in the United States, based on the demographic naming trends.

And especially for the ones that were kind of in the middle of the pack, not especially strong and not especially weak, there's a huge premium to having the traditionally white name.

So there's a lot of prejudice that goes on with naming.

But also in the studies we did, we wanted to partial out this specific effect of fluency of how easy it was to pronounce.

So we restricted our analysis in the one case to just white lawyers who were born in that particular country.

And so you find the same effect even there, that the white lawyers with white names that were easier to pronounce tended to do a little bit better.

But you're right, I think a huge part of it is prejudice and discrimination.

What about our environment, our surroundings?

How does that have an impact on how we're feeling in our behavior from what you learned writing your first book?

Yeah, so I focused a lot on physical environments, things like natural environments, the power of nature to replenish us in general, which sounds like a kind of non-scientific idea. But there's a huge amount of science to this idea that if you happen to spend a lot of time in urban environments and then you go to a place where you have say a running stream or wind through the leaves on a tree or something like that, it's deeply replenishing.

It has all sorts of amazing psychological and emotional effects.

I was also very, very interested in the effects of the weather and of colors around us and how those shape our experiences of the world.

So some of it's not all that surprising, but you see even in baseball matches in the United States when the game is being played on a warmer night, there is more aggressive behavior.

You see huge rises in crime, things like that on hot nights.

And then with colors, that's really the centerpiece of the book.

I'm colorblind, so I've always been fascinated by color.

But the title of the book, Drunk Tank Pink, is specifically about this color that is used to paint the inside of jail cells in some places.

And it's a color that's supposed to pacify people.

It's like this bright bubblegum pink color.

And they found quite a lot of evidence for the last 30 or 40 years now that there's something about this color that does seem to calm people down, at least initially. Pink.

It's bright bubblegum pink, yeah.

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And it sedates people.

Briefly.

And then they go, then there's a backlash effect.

Oh really?

Yeah.

They found that if you leave people in there for too long, apparently there's a backlash.

Hitchhikers should wear red.

Yeah.

This is a research looking at how essentially attractive we are to other people, depending on the colors we're wearing.

And the early studies were done on online dating platforms, where you have the same picture of a person and you photoshop the shirt they're wearing.

This is true for men and women, and it doesn't matter whether they're trying to attract men or women.

But there's something about the color red in particular that's really attractive to humans.

And actually to other animals too.

And when you see the color red, it inspires a kind of approach-oriented behavior.

So where you might have passed that person by, if you're thinking about dating apps and you're swiping,

there's something about the color red that slows you down and attracts you.

And in the context of hitchhiking, it has a similar effect, especially when you have a heterosexual male driving and you have a woman wearing a red shirt.

You get a very strong effect.

So if I'm trying to find a girlfriend or boyfriend, you're saying...

Make sure they're not wearing red.

Make sure they're not wearing red.

Well, if they're wearing red, you've got to ask yourself, am I attracted to the red shirt or am I attracted to the person?

Whereas if they're wearing another color, it's much more likely to be an unbiased, unvarnished opinion of them.

But if I want to attract the opposite sex...

Oh, if you want to attract, wear red.

Yeah.

Okay. That's useful to know.

Yeah.

I am not single, but if I am...

If one.

...I've been to be.

Yeah, yeah.

Oh, but even for your partner, this is probably why

Conor McGregor has this famous saying where he says, it's red panty night.

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All right.

So when he wins a fight, I think he said it on the microphone to Joe Rogan.

He said, oh, it's red panty night tonight,

which means that him and his wife are going to be intimate tonight.

But red is always, for whatever reason in society,

been seductive, hasn't it?

It's always been as it relates to lingerie.

I wonder if lingerie sales are more in red than others.

Quick one before we get back to this episode.

Just give me 30 seconds of your time.

Two things I wanted to say.

The first thing is a huge thank you for listening and tuning into the show week after week.

Means the world to all of us.

And this really is a dream that we absolutely never had and couldn't have imagined getting to this place.

But secondly, it's a dream where we feel like we're only just getting started.

And if you enjoy what we do here, please join the 24% of people

that listen to this podcast regularly and follow us on this app.

Here's a promise I'm going to make to you.

I'm going to do everything in my power to make this show as good as I can, now and into the future.

We're going to deliver the guests that you want me to speak to,

and we're going to continue to keep doing all of the things you love about this show.

Thank you.

Thank you so much.

Back to the episode.

So getting to the topic of being unstuck then,

which is what the anatomy of a breakthrough is all about.

What does it feel like when someone is stuck?

So how do I know if I'm stuck?

Is there an emotional sort of sensation?

Yeah, it's an interesting question.

So it's subjective.

You know, if you're stuck, you can feel it because you could be in the same situation and not feel stuck.

I'll give you a good example of this.

I had a conversation with Malcolm Gladwell,

who was telling me about his dad, who was a math professor.

And his dad was trying to solve the math conundrum for 30 years.

By external definitions, he was stuck for 30 years

because he couldn't solve this math puzzle,

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which is a common experience for math professors, I imagine.  
But he loved it.  
He didn't think of himself as being stuck.  
That for him was the process.  
That was why he went to work and why he kept doing what he was doing.  
And so, you know, if I thought about being stuck in something  
and not making meaningful progress objectively for 30 years,  
the idea drives me crazy.  
But for his dad, for Malcolm's dad,  
that was something that was really appealing.  
He really enjoyed that process.  
And so I think a lot of dealing with being stuck,  
at first, is getting your head around what it means to be stuck  
and figuring out that usually it's not as big a deal as it seems it might be.  
And once you come to grips with the emotional part of it,  
you can usually bring some sort of strategies and actions to bear  
and start to move yourself.  
I'm convinced of that.  
And that's why I write the book,  
because I think there is a way to get unstuck in almost every case.  
What is, in your view, the relationship between perseverance  
becoming unstuck or knowing when to quit?  
Yeah.  
I mean, there's an amazing cottage industry on both sides of that spectrum  
of books that are being written that I think are excellent books  
that make the case for both of those ends of the spectrum.  
You've got Angela Duckworth's Grit,  
which is all about sticking through and continuing on.  
And I think Anatomy of a Breakthrough leans in that direction.  
And then you've got Annie Duke, who wrote the book Quit,  
which is about quitting,  
the fact that we've got so many options all the time, most of us.  
Why would you keep doing the thing you're doing  
if it's not working out for you?  
You should probably do something else.  
Now, they're both very sophisticated thinkers.  
They wouldn't say you should always persevere or always quit.  
But it's a great question.  
How do you know when you are stuck  
that it's time to persevere versus time to quit?  
And I think it's worth thinking about, A, the opportunity costs.  
So what are you leaving behind?

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Is there something else that's very obvious that would be an easy thing to jump to that would require leaving behind the thing that's making you stuck? And if that idea seems really appealing, as it did for me when I was doing actuarial science and wanted to jump away from that, then you should probably consider moving on. But the research basically shows that almost always it's a good idea to persevere beyond the point where you say, this is hard and it's not feeling good and I feel stuck. How long you should do that is another question. I think one of the guides that should be useful in determining that is to ask yourself, if there's an end state that I'm trying to approach, am I getting closer to it across time? You know, if I'm learning a new skill, is the delta between where I am and where I'd like to be shrinking over time, the gap between those two shrinking, or is it staying the same or is it even getting larger? And if it's staying the same or getting larger, then I'm probably not getting closer. And that's a good indication that I should probably quit. It's time to move on. I've thought a lot about this. And in my last book, I wrote a chapter about quitting. And I was trying to figure out why I appear to be quite a good quitter. I'm well known for quitting school, my first company, my second company, university after one lecture. And this is the quitting framework I tried to draw up. So I'm going to just slide it across the desk and please ask me if you've got any questions or not. So there's two kind of routes you can go down the quitting framework. Is it, are you thinking of quitting because it's hard? You're running a marathon. It's the last mile of the race. It's hard, but it's worth it. Yep. So if it's hard and it's not worth it, quit. If it's hard and it's worth it, stay the course. Going down the other side, it sucks. That could be a relationship, a place you're living,

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the job you have as an actuary, whatever.  
So this framework seems to me unassailable.  
In other words, there's nothing,  
I can't imagine that anything here could be disagreed with  
because it makes total sense.  
And it's nice and broad.  
It's nice and broad, right?  
You can imagine any situation being folded into it.  
The other thing I quite like about it is that  
this distinction between it's just hard and it sucks  
is very central to a lot of the ideas in my book.  
And I think if something sucks, it's emotionally unrewarding  
and you hate it and you're grinding through it,  
most of the time you should quit.  
And you have here this one limb to your model that says,  
if you can make it suck less, continue on.  
Marriage counseling, speaking to your boss.  
Right, exactly.  
And so there's great value in asking that question.  
But it's just hard part I'm focusing on  
because a huge part of this book is about how  
hardship is the first step in making something good.  
Yeah.  
Good stuff happens when things are hard.  
And because we're human and we have been evolutionarily,  
I don't know, penned into the situation  
where hardship is seen as a problem.  
Like we're using too many resources,  
don't do something that's harder than it needs to be.  
We're very used to that.  
It's not true about everything we do,  
but it's true about enough things  
that we misinterpret hardship or hardness for being a problem.  
Whereas in many domains, the good stuff only happens  
almost every time after it gets hard  
in many domains for human growth and otherwise.  
In your book, you talk about how you debunk the idea that  
young people start the best, most culturally valuable companies.  
We tend to think that it's like 21-year-olds in their bedroom  
that are starting all the great tech companies, for example.  
But you show that a couple of failures  
actually seems to be correlated with success.

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And that whole section felt like a bit of a narrative shift.

Yeah.

I mean, it was a big thing for me that one of the ideas that's very prominent in my field is this availability heuristic.

It's this idea that you pay a lot of attention to what's most available in the world.

This is an old idea from Danny Kahneman and Amos Fersky, behavioral decision researchers.

The thing that we see a lot of is very successful young people because they're interesting.

They're fascinating stories.

So you're interested in them.

And a lot of the biggest companies, I think, are run especially tech companies by quite young CEOs or people who began when they were young.

And so we fixate on them and they're available in our minds.

We see documentaries about them.

We read about them all the time.

But they're vanishingly rare.

And so what you find is that the age to begin a company,

if you want to maximize success,

if you look at the age of the CEOs

who tend to be very, very successful,

we're talking like mid-40s.

That's the sweet spot.

Mid-40s even into 50s.

And the thing that distinguishes a 22-year-old from a 45-year-old is, as you said, partly failure.

That by the time you're 45,

you've doubled how long you've been alive.

You've had a lot of time to fail and to come back from that.

And so if you're still creating companies,

you've learned something along the way.

But also your life is deeply rich at that point

in a way that it isn't necessarily as a 22-year-old.

You've got a lot of other stuff going on.

Good stuff and bad stuff, maybe,

and maybe complicated stuff.

But all of it is kind of adding a spice to the mix

that I think makes your ideas thicker in some way.

And makes you, I think, better at making certain calculations

that maybe when you're younger,



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you don't have all the information for.

And so that's what you find.

Who's more creative, young people or middle-aged people or old people?

It's interesting.

So young people, and I'm thinking especially about kids, because I have a five-year-old and a seven-year-old, they are phenomenally creative.

And in part, they're creative because they don't accept anything.

They're curious about everything.

My kids will not ask a question without a follow-up or five or 10 or 20 follow-ups.

Nothing is OK until we've explored it to the ends of the earth.

And that's amazing.

And that's why kids learn so much so quickly.

They take nothing for granted.

There's no such thing as common wisdom to a kid.

You can say, everyone does it this way and they'll be like, why?

But you say that to an adult?

Most of us say, oh, OK.

We assume that what's the done thing, the way the herd is behaving, is that way for a reason, even though often it's just accidental or it's just the easiest thing or whatever.

And so I think very, very young people are tremendously creative because they push back a lot.

But one of the really interesting things for me in this book is that I found people from young adulthood

all the way through to very old adulthood,

very later in their lives, who are experimentalists by nature.

They take nothing for granted and they constantly question.

And so they are way more creative because they ask more questions.

But then they say, OK, so here are 10 options.

How do I know which one's the best?

I'm going to inhabit each one for two months.

And then in two years, I'll know the answer.

And they do this serially.

And some of them become Olympic athletes, even if they don't physically have the stature for it, because they're so good at finding new techniques.

I talk about one of them in the book.

Some of them become business titans

because they say that everyone else is doing this thing

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and assuming it's right.

Here's a different thing that's way better.

And I know that because I've tried all the other options.

And they end up being really successful

because that curiosity that you have in childhood,

when you carry it over into adulthood,

it's kind of like a superpower.

And so I think it's more about the questions you ask than your age.

I couldn't agree more.

And it's one of the things I constantly am trying

to figure out how to get my team.

When you said to me that there's a certain type of person

that just continues to keep asking why is the age,

I was like, can you introduce me?

Because I'd love to hire them.

Because that's exactly,

you think about what innovation is at its core.

And it's that kind of rejection of convention.

And that harder road,

which is to try and reason up from first principles, per se.

You mentioned an athlete.

Who are you referring to?

It's his athlete named Dave Birkhoff.

He was an Olympic athlete in the 1988 and 92 games.

88 in Seoul and 92 in Barcelona.

He's a backstroke swimmer.

He swims 100 meter backstroke and then some of the medley races.

And I spoke to him for a while on the phone

to understand his experiences because he doesn't look

like a lot of other backstroke swimmers.

They tend to be very, very tall.

The average world record holder is 6'3 to 6'4.

So quite tall.

He's about 5'10,

which is a big difference in professional avenues,

if you're thinking about Olympic athletes.

And when he was a student in the mid-80s,

he was at Harvard,

which is not a place you really go

if you're going to be a champion swimmer.

It's a place you go for intellectual experiences,

but it's not the best athletics school, generally speaking.

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But he had a coach there  
who encouraged him to be curious,  
to ask a lot of questions.  
And Birkhoff was naturally like this.  
So he would say to his coach,  
why do I need to swim that way?  
Like why don't I try like 10 other ways to swim?  
Let's tweak my technique in all these different ways  
and see what works best.  
And what he ended up doing was he discovered  
that you swim about 80,  
I think it's like 88% faster  
when you're fully submerged under the water  
than when half of your body is above the water  
and half is below,  
which makes total sense from a physics perspective.  
But most backstroke swimmers,  
the way they swim is they push off the wall.  
And the minute they do that,  
their body starts to fight for oxygen  
because they're under the water.  
And so your instinct is to pop up as quickly as possible.  
But if you can train yourself  
to deal with the oxygen deprivation,  
you stay underwater for longer and you swim much faster.  
So Birkhoff developed this technique  
called the Birkhoff blast off, it was known as,  
where he would swim underwater  
for the first 40 meters of 100 meter race.  
So 40% of the race, almost half of the,  
almost a full lap of the Olympic pool.  
And then he would come up for air  
and then he would keep swimming.  
And he broke world records.  
He wasn't the best swimmer in terms of his physique,  
but he was the best swimmer strategically.  
And he had spent years experimenting  
to find this technique.  
And then of course,  
all the other athletes saw the same thing  
and they started doing the same thing.  
And so it became more competitive.

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But in the interim,  
he won gold medals at two Olympic games.  
He won a bronze.  
He was the world record holder multiple times.  
So, you know, that questioning led someone  
who in certain respects, at least physically,  
shouldn't have been the world record holder  
to be just that.  
The question I ask is,  
how do you teach someone to be that kind of person?  
How do you teach someone to be more experimental  
and to be more curious and to ask why more?  
Because just from my observation,  
from what I've seen over the last 10 years in business,  
and I think about all the teams I've had  
and all the people we've hired,  
which is more than a thousand,  
some people just have it.  
Yeah.  
Some people just have it almost like a cognitive default  
towards being curious about the possibility of a better way.  
And then some people,  
regardless of how many times you ask for that behavior  
or you might write it on the wall  
or you might say that it's our values,  
they just don't naturally demonstrate that curiosity.  
Yeah.  
I mean, there's an individual difference variable  
that you're describing that's real.  
And with every construct,  
when we talk about a desirable human trait,  
there's going to be variants, right?  
Creativity, addictive personality and so on.  
All of these things are going to vary on a spectrum.  
Some things that are educable,  
you can sort of teach them,  
you can make people better at them.  
So if you're at a three out of 10,  
you can become a six out of 10  
or maybe even a seven out of 10.  
This curiosity question though,  
I think, and I say this as an educator,

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I think it can be taught.  
And I think that's essentially  
what we try to do a lot of the time.  
That's my course.  
I teach a marketing course.  
It's maybe three months long.  
If you only come out of that course with one thing,  
it's to know the right questions to ask.  
You know, if you're in a business  
and you're trying to promote a product  
or an idea or to create a new product,  
I want you not necessarily to know the answer,  
but at least to know what the questions should be.  
And so I think it's the job of educators,  
the job of books,  
the job of whatever information you get in the world  
to train you in that direction.  
And so if I were going to say,  
there's one thing we should train people  
in a business context,  
you know, if you have a new employee,  
it's certainly the on the job stuff is important.  
You know, like learn the skills  
that are important to the specific job  
if there are technical skills.  
But the most important general skill,  
know the right questions to ask and constantly ask.  
So here's one way you do that is you say,  
I want you to look at this thing,  
whatever this thing is,  
it could be your framework that you showed me,  
the quitting framework.  
I would take everyone who I'm considering hiring  
and as a diagnostic tool,  
I'd have them look at it and say,  
tell me one thing that's not right with the framework  
or that you think could be improved.  
Do it again now.  
Give me a second thing.  
What about a third thing?  
And if they can't do it the first time,  
coach them through it,

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work, work through it with them.  
But don't just do it with your framework.  
Do it with find 10 ad campaigns.  
Say, imagine you're the chief marketing officer  
at this company.  
What's one thing you could do differently  
that maybe isn't better,  
but at least is worth asking.  
Let's ask that question.  
And, and if you do that enough times,  
everyone becomes more curious.  
It becomes the habit.  
That's the way you interact with the world.  
So I think it to a large extent can be taught.  
That's the, that's kind of the thing I was reflecting on is,  
do you have to even tell someone to look at the framework  
and then find something better?  
Because I'm in search of the person  
that looks at the framework and goes,  
Steve, I found something better.  
Those people are amazing.  
They are, they do exist.  
They do exist.  
And I found some of them.  
And that's, that's Dave Burkhoff, right?  
No one said to him,  
you have to question whether the way everyone swims  
the backstroke is the best way.  
And I found a few people like that,  
but they are vanishingly rare.  
There aren't that many of them  
who really make that their kind of life's philosophy,  
experimentalism as a philosophy.  
But there are some,  
a lot of them actually end up going into academia  
and into science because they want to know their answers.  
They just want to know,  
they're curious to the ends of the earth.  
But for the rest,  
the other 99% of people who aren't like that,  
I think you can lift them all up from a three out of 10,  
four out of 10, to a seven or an eight,

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maybe not a nine or a 10.

But if your whole workforce is people who are a seven or an eight out of 10 on curiosity,

it's much better than having them mostly at a three.

So I think you can move the needle a little bit.

And those, that small minority,

tend to provide so much value

for the less experimental majority.

Because I think about,

we have this group in all of my companies

called ever-changing landscape.

And the whole point of the group

is when we see something changing in the world,

or might be a new update to a platform

or something within our industry has changed.

It could be an update or a feature or whatever.

Take it from where you've seen it

and just share it with the rest of the company.

And you see in these groups that we have

that it's really a small cohort educating everybody else.

So let's say there was a hundred people in the Slack channel.

I'd say there'd be five people that were super prolific.

And there'd be 15 that were kind of doing it.

And then there'd be another 25% that do it sometimes.

And then there's kind of a silent 50% that don't ever do it.

And they don't seem to have that sort of natural curiosity.

I always think as a CEO,

I need to like find more of that 5%

because the disproportionate value they can add

by finding, as I said to you before recording this podcast,

just a tiny tweak that changes our trajectory is profound.

Here's my advice on that.

I think you're exactly right about the distribution.

And we see this in a lot of cases.

I talk in the book about the 80-20 rule,

the Pareto principle that most of the gains

come from the small minority and so on.

And we know that if you're a business,

often the vast majority of your sales

come from the tiny minority of customers and so on.

So we know this is true.

And in the case here where you say 50% of people

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are not doing the work on the Slack channel,  
you could break that 50% down into, I think, two broad groups.  
There's one group that's just the way  
that kind of person approaches life  
is to just not be very motivated.  
And there's not much you can do about that part.  
If they come to work because they see it  
entirely as an extrinsic reward for their time  
that they come and they get paid  
and that's just what they're doing and it's a day job,  
you're never going to teach them to be curious.  
But there is a group of people in that 50%.  
And I think it's probably sizable,  
especially at a company like one of your companies.  
Those people want to be better.  
They want to do a better job at this.  
They maybe don't have the skills today,  
but if you show them, they will latch onto it  
and they will get better at it.  
And the most important thing you can do  
as a leader in organizations is to not just find  
the people who are talented versus not talented,  
but to find the people who don't yet have  
whatever you would consider to be the talent  
and to separate them into those  
who really want to be the talented ones  
and those who just actually don't care that much.  
They're just there to do the bare minimum.  
And that's where I think you're pouring your attention  
and education into that first set  
of people who are motivated is key.  
Do you think you can teach someone to be curious  
about something?  
Because I wonder, people go home  
and they choose what they watch on YouTube  
and what they read about and what they consume on Netflix.  
That seems to be the purest indication  
of what they're actually curious about,  
the stuff they lean into in their free time.  
So we've got some people in our team even here now  
that when they go home, they're learning about cameras  
and how to shoot video and all those kinds of things.



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And then you might have someone in the same team that goes home and just wants to watch keeping up with Kardashians. It's quite obvious and I think everyone could agree that the first person who has a natural curiosity towards the subject matter outside of their professional pursuits is going to achieve more in their professional pursuits. And I have to provide some nuance here that it doesn't matter if someone goes home and watches Keeping Up With Kardashians. They'll be useful in other ways because they'll be getting sort of creative insights outside of the industry, like you said. But I do believe that those that are curious about the thing they do professionally will go the furthest. Yeah, so I think with curiosity in general, like if I don't know much about cameras, I just have my phone and I use it as a camera. That's about all I know. I just push buttons. And so I'm not that curious about them. But if you give me, let's say, the most educated camera consumer in the world is at 100%. If you take me from 0% where I am now to 10% or 15%, I then know enough to start to develop curiosity. Part of the problem with being a novice is you don't even know what's interesting about the thing. Like if you don't drink red wine and then at some point you start drinking, you're like, oh, there are different varietals. That's interesting. Oh, even within that varietal, it turns out there's a difference between Napa and Burgundy or whatever. And as you get more knowledgeable about the subject, the nuances become interesting to you because they mean something. Like this happens with music all the time. Like if you love a kind of music,

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especially if it's a kind of music  
that most people don't listen to,  
you try to show someone else that music  
and you play your two favorite songs,  
they'll be like, they both sound the same.  
It's the most frustrating thing  
as someone who likes something a lot,  
who's really passionate.  
And it's true for art and movies and whatever else.  
Everyone's like, yeah, whatever.  
It's like, it's same, same.  
It's all just part of the genre.  
But once you develop a taste for it  
and you get curious and you get into it,  
that's when you start to see the real life of it.  
And so I think the job of someone  
who wants others to be curious about a topic  
or to develop curiosities  
is to make them not the zero percent,  
to make them at the 10 or 15 or 20th percent  
that then prompts them to want to figure out the rest.  
Because you don't get there from zero.  
You talk about maximizing and satisfying.  
You believe there are two outlooks on success.  
This is part two of your business, your book,  
the heart section.  
And there seems to be some kind of through line  
between experimenters and non-experimenters  
and maximizers and satisfying.  
Yeah, satisfying.  
Yeah, that's right.  
Yeah, so this idea, it's an old idea.  
It's about 70 years old now,  
but it's the idea that broadly speaking,  
when you make decisions or make choices,  
you can be either a maximizer on one end of the spectrum  
or a satisficer.  
A maximizer is someone who says about everything,  
I need the very best.  
I need to spend a lot of time and energy  
figuring out the best.  
I need to produce the best.

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If I'm choosing what food to eat or what job to have or whatever, everything's got to be the very, very best. I'm going to maximize. I'm going to make it as good as it can possibly be. And I'm going to bring the resources required to make that happen. Satisfices are people who say, you know, there's a level that's good enough. It's not perfect, but it gets over the bar and it's going to be a different bar for different things. If it's an important thing, the bar gets raised and it's lowered for less important things. But as soon as I find an option that's good enough, I'm going to take it and then move on with my life. And then there are people who are kind of in the middle who say about some things like my partner that I choose or if I'm going to choose what job to have or which country to live in. Those are really important, whether to have kids. Those are important questions I'm going to maximize on those. Everything else, not that important, at least relatively speaking, I'm going to just find a good enough option. And what you find is that people who satisfy tend to be much happier. Oh, fuck. Not it. No, the key is to... I mean, if you maximize on everything, I think it's paralyzing, the key is to know when to maximize. And so if you satisfy a lot of the time and say, let's be honest, I don't need to maximize on everything, then that's the way to do it, is to know to be able to distinguish between the two. So if you're a chronic maximizer about absolutely everything, there's a lot of evidence that you're likely to get stuck on small, unimportant things. Depression, is that a trait of maximizers? Yeah, absolutely. High achieving? Yeah, I mean, so what ends up happening

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is it's the same as perfectionism.

That's basically what it is.

It's the choice-based version of perfectionism where you never live up to your own standards, which on the one hand produces very good things because you're always looking upward and trying to get better.

On the other hand, it's paralyzing and exhausting and to live your entire life that way in every aspect of your life is problematic.

Mo Gouda, who came on this podcast, talked about how we're happy when our expectations are met and we're unhappy when our expectations are unmet.

And from what I ascertain from what you said, their maximizers have such high expectations that they're often unmet, which causes unhappiness.

Yeah.

It's accurate.

100%. Yeah, that's exactly right.

My thesis, my PhD thesis was on expectations and on how important it is when expectations deviate from, or when reality deviates from expectations.

It's almost never about the objective thing.

Two people could have exactly the same thing and feel totally happy.

One could feel totally happy with it.

The other could be devastated by it.

It's all about what you're used to, what you expect, how high your standards are.

So I think that's a very powerful human element in these calculations.

When you're talking about experimenters, these are people that go in search of nuances and ask why.

Our experimenters typically maximizes, because on the other side of the coin, satisfies it says they kind of accept it.

So they might be the people that would accept convention, conventions answer for as being, yeah, I'll just do what has always been done.

Yeah, I think so.

I think there's some overlap, but the thing about the people that I found were experimentalists, constantly asking questions.

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It was really about trivial things.  
It's not like they went and said,  
I'm going to go to the supermarket today and get a chocolate.  
And I want to experiment.  
I want to eat every chocolate in the supermarket  
over the next year,  
so that I know for the future which one's the best.  
They don't do that.  
They say, hey, I'm a swimmer.  
I want to be an Olympian.  
How do I get to be an Olympian?  
I'm going to maximize the hell out of that.  
And so it's about finding something  
that's really important to you,  
where it's worth being an experimentalist.  
But it would be paralyzing to do that  
with every aspect of your life, I think.  
It certainly wouldn't work for me.  
Life crisis.  
We were talking about age a second ago,  
and I've got two friends.  
I've got one friend that's 29,  
and another friend that's 39.  
And they're going through what appears to be  
on the surface of crisis.  
And when I read your book about how you call it  
the nine ending crisis, it all made sense.  
What is that?  
Yeah, so this is some research  
with a colleague of mine, Hal Hirschfield,  
who's also a very good friend at UCLA.  
And he was at NYU at the time.  
We were sitting in his office, and I said to him,  
you know, I ran a marathon when I was 29.  
I've never run another one, but I ran one at 29.  
And I remember thinking, I have to show myself  
as I approach 30 that there's meaning to my life and purpose.  
I need a big goal.  
I need to train for something.  
And I thought that was a really interesting human instinct.  
Like, it was a very productive one.  
I ran a marathon, which was not a bad thing.

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But we were talking about, and he said to me,  
it seems like maybe at these ages  
where there's a nine at the end of your age,  
and you're looking down the specter of a new decade,  
that it pushes you to kind of audit your life.  
You ask yourself, is my life meaningful?  
Is it what I want it to be?  
Are there gaps that I need to fill?  
Is there something I need to do?  
And so we started to find these big data sets  
that had some evidence where we could see  
what ages people were out and looking at their decisions.  
And we found all sorts of really interesting behaviors  
when people were 29, 39, 49, 59.  
You get this big rise in marathon running.  
So I wasn't the only one.  
There's an over-representation of marathon runners,  
especially first-time marathon runners  
who have a nine at the end of their age.  
If you were already a marathon runner,  
you run your fastest marathons in general  
when you have a nine at the end of your age.  
There's also some stuff that's not so good.  
So you see a massive rise in infidelity.  
So we found evidence that there's an over-representation  
of people at those ages  
who are seeking out extramarital affairs.  
You even see a rise in suicide.  
So that doesn't mean everyone who's got a nine end  
at a nine ending age is at risk of that,  
but it shows in general that we sort of hunt for meaning.  
And so the midlife crisis idea  
that maybe when you approach 40,  
there's going to be a big crisis there, that may be true.  
But we also found this kind of cyclical decade,  
every decade you get this sort of miniature nine ending crisis.  
I was in the best shape I've ever been in my life when I was 29.  
That was the year.  
That was the year I got closest to having all eight abs.  
30, has it been great?  
Not as great.  
So I was wondering, as you said that,

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what happens when the year after?

29 is often some of our most productive achievements or fails.

That mean 30, 40, 50 is when we chill a little bit.

It varies a little, it's funny.

So what you see is it's sort of like a wave

and the peak of the wave is at nine,

but there are some people who it only dawns on them

when they actually hit the zero ending age.

Some people it starts at the eight ending age.

It's really when you get to like 34, 35, 36, 44, 45, 46,

right in the middle of the decade,

when you see the trough for all of these kinds of behaviors.

We're sort of most in our lives and doing our thing

and not really questioning as much.

Which I mean, we found that fascinating that just the accident

we happened to count using a base 10 system

means that every 10 years we zoom back

and ordered our lives in this way.

It's such an interesting, because it doesn't,

the number is such an irrelevant thing

in the context of your physiological health,

your metabolic health, but symbols, symbols matter.

And you talk about symbols in your first book as well.

Yeah.

And we don't appreciate how much symbols sway our life

in fundamental ways, do we?

Yeah, no, that's right.

That's true.

And I think even these numbers are symbolic.

They have symbolic meaning for us.

It's something when you say I'm in my 30s,

it's different from saying I'm 28 or 29,

even if it's just a year apart or even a few days apart.

And it's the same with what it means to be in your 40s.

It's symbolic for a time of life and certain expectations

about what that time of your life is supposed to be.

And so I think that's what happens.

We talked about expectations that you're suddenly in your 40s,

or your 50s, or your 60s.

And then you say, what does that mean?

And here is where my expectations are.

I should have the following things,

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maybe a certain amount of money, a certain career status,  
maybe a partner, maybe kids.  
And then do you have those things?  
And if you don't, then you get this kind of acting out behavior.  
Some of it productive that tries to remedy the problem.  
Perhaps you try to get fit and run a marathon,  
but sometimes for some people it's not very productive behavior.  
I know this more than most because I started in business at 18  
and you can imagine when I was on BBC Newsnight  
and they introduced you and he's only 18 years old.  
My business is making zero money,  
but they were just blown away because of expectation  
of what an 18-year-old should be doing.  
And then I had that throughout my career  
and he's only 25 and he's got a thousand.  
And he's only 20, and then he's only 29.  
And then Stephen Bartlett is an entrepreneur.  
And I'm like, listen, one day has changed  
and suddenly no one's introducing me by my age,  
but he's 29 and 30.  
The expectations of a 29-year-old running a business  
and how big that business might be  
and how many team members and revenue versus a 30-year-old,  
you're going, eh, he better be a billionaire  
or else we're not going to mention his age.  
I'm in my early 40s and it's the same thing.  
As an academic, if you're a professor in your 30s,  
that's you're young and then you hit suddenly one day you're 40  
and they're like, eh, you're a professor, whatever.  
When you wrote about symbols in your first book,  
what were some of the most sort of surprising things  
in terms of how powerful and inspirational they are with us,  
to us, without us even knowing?  
Well, you know, as a marketing professor,  
I'm very, very interested in how symbols play a role  
in branding and in conveying ideas really succinctly.  
I think that the simplest way to convey an idea is with an image  
and the images that are the most powerful are often in symbolic form.  
A lot of them are very negative images that we get from symbols.  
They're associated with ideals that we don't like, for example.  
You know, like something like a swastika,  
it's a terrible symbol the way it's used



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or has been used for the last almost 100 years now.  
But the amount of meaning that's conveyed in those symbols is tremendous.  
And so there's a sort of terrible power to symbols.  
They can shape behavior in all sorts of ways.  
One of the studies I did looked at people who were religious versus not religious and then showed them a religious symbol and then asked them to do a behavior that was either going to be done honestly or dishonestly.  
We were essentially measuring whether they were going to behave honestly.  
And for those religious people, seeing that symbol kind of clicked something for them and they became much more honest.  
So in general, they might have had an honesty level of 50%, but you show them that symbol even subtly in the environment around them and suddenly they become much more honest.  
So these things are constantly swimming around us and gently nudging our behavior in different directions.  
It almost reminded me a little bit of the thing you wrote about in that book about how when people are shown a picture of eyeballs at like a free snack bar where they can take what they want, they're much more honest about their decisions.  
Because eyes, again, in a way are a symbol.  
Yeah.  
They're a symbol of the tribe, maybe.  
Yeah, of being watched, of feeling like you're being watched.  
There's some really interesting evidence from this looking at using eyeballs to get people to behave better.  
So if you have an image of a pair of eyes looking at you, just disembodied, just the eyes.  
You don't see any of the rest of the face.  
You find that people behave much more honestly.  
They're much less likely to steal something.  
You see shoplifting rates go down.  
The best use of it though, I think, is if you say you're a chocoholic, you love chocolate, but you don't want to be eating it.  
But you also want to have a little bit around every now and again.  
One thing you can do is you can have a little cupboard in your kitchen where the inside of the cupboard, you put a mirror.  
And that's where the chocolate lives.  
So you open it up and every time you reach for the chocolate, you have to stare into your own soul.  
And so the eyeballs, whether they're yours or somebody else's,

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just having to look at yourself, not just metaphorically,  
but literally as you do something, it brings out your better angels.  
And there's a lot of evidence for that in various psychological studies.  
One of the things that stands in the way of acceptance is this question,  
which a lot of people ask when they get stuck,  
which is, or when they have a life quake, which is why me?  
Why did this happen to me?  
And that relinquishes our sense of personal responsibility.  
It makes us a victim to the situation, which we might objectively be a victim,  
however you want to define it, to a situation,  
but it doesn't seem to be conducive with getting out of it.  
No, it doesn't.  
The interesting thing is if you go to people who are at the end of their lives,  
they're on their deathbeds, and they know that the end is near,  
and you say to them, did you ever have a why me situation?  
Did something happen in your life at any point where you had cause,  
whether you did or not, you had cause to say, why me?  
This felt unfair.  
100% of them will say yes.  
That's another case where we feel isolated in those moments.  
We're like, why me?  
The implication of that is, it's me, but not someone else.  
Their turn will come.  
We will all have these moments that are really hard to deal with.  
Some of us have had them already.  
Some of us will have more of them in the future, but they are universal.  
And so the best thing you can do, I think, in those moments is to just kind of recognize that  
it's okay to be sad and pissed off and to struggle with them,  
but also there's some comfort in knowing that actually this is just what it is to be human.  
Everyone has these moments.  
You're not unique in responding that way,  
and you're not unique in experiencing that situation in the first place.  
It's privileged as well as you write about in your book.  
It's a privileged response to have that you don't see across other cultures as readily.  
Yeah, it's privileged.  
And it also, I think, reflects the sense of agency we've got from becoming essentially  
masters of our worlds in ways that were not true for most of human history.  
You know, we, as science and medicine goes, we're living longer.  
We are generally a stronger species.  
We can do a lot of incredible things.  
We can move spacecraft to other planets.  
You know, it's ridiculous the number of things we can do.

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And so as a result of that, we kind of assume that that's the kind of control we should have over every aspect of our lives.

If we can do big things that are amazing, why can't we do small things that are amazing?

And that's not the way the world works.

And we mistake that general sense of human control over the world, especially as we move away from religion and become more secular.

We develop that sense of privilege.

And I think cultures that don't have that to the same extent, or that's still huge to religion more strongly, you have much more of a recognition that, hey, to some extent, I'm kind of at the mercy of whether it's the gods or however you want to describe it.

And that makes you more open to the idea that you don't have control.

Is that less Westernized culture?

So cultures with less money?

Yes, that's what that's why the privilege aspect comes into it.

Because I think the West, where we are more...

So expectations again, isn't it?

It comes back to almost everything.

Yeah, it's a huge, huge part of the human experience.

We all need to lower expectations.

Or have realistic ones.

There's going to be so many people that are listening that realize that, they objectively realize that life comes in seasons.

And but the difficulty comes is when one of those seasons ends, and we kind of resist ending.

And a lot of people, I think, will feel stuck when a season or chapter of life, one of those lifequakes, I guess the start of a lifequake, I guess, is one of those seasons ends. Knowing from an intellectual, from a strategy standpoint, how to deal with it in that moment. Because when a season of life ends, there's so much uncertainty and fear, and you can't always see the season to come.

And that's where a lot of those feelings come from.

He talked about acceptance, being a key path forward.

But is there anything else?

I really want to make sure we've completed that.

Is there anything else that we can do to be better at transitioning from one season of life to the other?

Yeah, so I love this philosophy from the rock musician, Jeff Tweedy, the frontman of the band, Wilco, who's also a writer.

He writes, he does music, he's a Renaissance man.

He talks about that feeling of being stuck.

And sometimes it's in transitions.

But also it's when you're chronically being forced to come up with new ideas.

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If you're a creative, and I think this applies to transitions to new periods as well. He talks about this idea that for decades, he has had to wake up and his bread and butter is to come up with creative songs and to write good passages that will then become part of a book. That is asking a lot of people. But what he does is he recognizes that above all else, action is going to move him forward. When you feel stuck, action, even if it's slightly sideways, it may not be exactly where you want to go. But the mere fact that you're acting gives you feedback that you're not stuck, that you're moving in the right direction. And so he talks about, at least temporarily, lowering your expectations to the ground. And so he talks about pouring out the bad ideas. If he's writing a song, he'll say, what's the worst musical phrase I could write right now? Or what's the worst line for this book? Let me come up with three of the worst lines ever. And that's easy to do because you have no expectations. It's not maximizing or satisfying. It's just like the bare minimum. And when you do that, you get the ball rolling. You show yourself that you're not stuck. And so then what follows that, as he describes it, is the good stuff. That's when you get your good ideas because the wheels are being greased and you're moving forward. And I think that's true in transition periods, that we spend a lot of time agonizing. There's a lot of dealing with the emotions, which is fair. There's a lot of time strategizing. But just acting is tremendously liberating, even if the action itself doesn't bring measurable rewards in the short term. I was thinking, as you were saying that, within the context of dating. So you've just come out of a horrific divorce. You're sad at home on your own. You can't even remember how to date. And you're going to try and find someone that is as appealing as the person that's just dumped you or divorced you. And they're hard to find. So you just procrastinate. You kind of sit in the misery and that's where you feel stuck. If I apply the philosophy you've just said to bad ideas first, what I'd actually do is I'd just go on a date. Yeah. And I'd say, listen, this is not going to be the husband,

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but we're going to start getting some practice  
and we're going to start getting out there and putting my makeup back on  
and whatever and getting out there into the market.

And you take a bad date just to get the ball rolling.

Is that accurate?

Yeah.

I mean, and a lot of people do that.

That's the philosophy of the rebound, right?

That, yeah.

But I think that's right.

I mean, I think from the perspective of the person who's been dumped,  
we always think about the rebound from the perspective of the person  
who suddenly discovers they're the next option.

Yeah.

You know that's not a good sign.

But if you are the person who's trying to get back out there,

I think that's a really great thing to do.

And it doesn't have to be a romantic date.

It's just like, go do something.

You're wallowing for a little bit, which is fine.

But the best thing you can do is to, as I said, move sideways.

Moving forwards might be going on more dates to try and find the next person.

It's not time for that yet.

It's time to just go and go to a movie, go and see a rock band,

like do whatever it is you like doing,

just so you're not doing nothing.

Just act.

And action, one of the great things it does,

especially when you're ruminating and you're thinking about how bad and tough things are,  
is action is a phenomenal distraction.

Like when you're acting, you're not thinking as much.

And so it's worth doing just to be doing something.

That's why people rebound, isn't it?

But it also gives us a sense of meaning and purpose,  
which is often the thing that the rejection has robbed us of.

So me going out and having a one night stand,

I don't advise it, I'm not against it, but I don't advise it.

No opinion on one night stands.

Going out and having a one night stand,

maybe the reason I feel rejection is because I'm telling myself a story  
that I'm unlovable or unwanted.

And going out and getting evidence that someone is interested in me

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can help with the pain of the rejection.  
And it's the same within work if you've been fired from a job.  
Maybe you're telling yourself a story about your self-worth  
and just going out there and doing some work,  
even if it's volunteering somewhere, could be help ease the rejection.  
Because the rejection often is just a story, isn't it?  
Yeah. I mean, I think that's right.  
I also think the human experience is essentially bouncing like a ping-pong ball  
from one thing to the next, where the next thing you do  
is trying to capture whatever feels like it's missing from the last thing.  
And actually a lot of relationships,  
when people jump from relationship to relationship,  
relationship are about exactly that.  
It's like when in a relationship ends,  
you think about what was the thing that was missing in that one?  
Like why didn't it work?  
And you fixate on that with the next person.  
Now, there may have been some great things about the last person.  
You forget to focus on retaining those in the next person.  
And so then you're missing something different  
in the next person that you go to after that.  
And so this is what we do in jobs.  
This is what we do in how we spend our time, in pursuits, in dating.  
We're constantly trying to create the thing that feels like it's missing,  
because humans by nature just focus on deficits, on losses, on the negatives.  
And so that sort of propels us forward.  
What's a better approach?  
I mean, the explicit one is the sort of gratitude approach in saying what's working.  
Like that's the flip side of this, is to say,  
whether it's about a relationship or a job,  
what were the best five things about that relationship  
that I would want to retain in future?  
If you don't ask yourself that question,  
it biases the decisions you make thereafter.  
And I think it biases them in a way that's really unproductive.  
It's going to be true if you jump to a new job,  
move to a new country or city or town, any change, it's worth asking.  
What do I, not only what didn't work and do I want to fix,  
but also what did work and do I want to retain?  
The best way to get unstuck is to simplify the problem as much as possible.  
That way, you can identify what the sticking points are.  
I call this simplifying of the complex a friction audit.

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What did you mean by that?

Yeah, so over the years, I've met people who need much less time to make sense of complicated situations, knowing what's not important.

It's good to know what's important, but I think a lot of us can do that.

What's really hard is being able to say, subtract that, subtract that, subtract that.

This is the thing.

This is the nugget, the kernel.

This is what I should be focusing on.

That's the idea of the importance of subtracting.

And there's a great book called Subtract by Lighty Klotz that's on this exact topic.

The friction audit itself is a philosophical version of that idea, where in business in particular, I do a lot of business consulting that works on this friction audit process, and I spent a long time with companies that asked the question, how do we sweeten the deal?

Now, how do we make the product better, more attractive?

How do we stand above the crowd?

And I started to realize that the return on investment to doing that is often minimal, and it's expensive to do that, and it's really hard to do that in a competitive marketplace where everyone's doing the same thing.

But where you get your massive return is not by focusing on making the carrot more attractive. It's by removing the stick that stops people from doing what you'd like them to do.

Maybe it's interacting with a customer service rep.

Maybe it's buying.

Maybe it's making a particular choice.

Maybe it's understanding information, whatever it is.

If you weed those out, you sand them down, so there's no longer friction there.

You see tremendous rises in conversion, often for almost no cost.

It's just a matter of asking that particular frame of question and going through that friction audit process.

And that friction audit process, I guess it starts with that question, which is like, what's getting in the way?

Yeah.

You can ask yourself that.

You can ask your team that question.

Yeah.

You probably don't ask our teams that question enough, just generally in business, which is because we're always thinking about things we can add, maybe something we can buy, equipment we could buy, someone we could hire.

Yeah.

I mean, when I think about this, certainly for teams that works really well,

I also think for individual lives, everyone, if you ask them,

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this is really liberating.

I like to do this sometimes.

What are the three things in your life right now that cause you the most friction?

It could be interactions with a certain person.

It could be commuting.

If you're traveling a lot, everyone's got a different answer to the question.

But imagine that those three things you could just eradicate from your life right now.

How much better would your life be?

And people often say, wait, like 100% better.

My life would be double as good as it is now.

And so the next thing is to say, well, that's a massive return on investment.

If you can't eradicate them, that's fine.

But at least sand them down, minimize them, shrink them to the extent possible.

That's where you should devote your resources.

It's a really, really powerful intervention for individual lives.

But I think also, as you said, in the workplace as well.

Such a good habit to have asking that question frequently, not just to yourself, but also just to the people you work with.

Yes.

Because you get such surprising answers when you ask these questions.

Also to your partner or to your friend, your close friends, there's nothing better than being asked that question.

If someone asks you that, the degree of caring, if they actually seem like they want to be able to help, that will melt any barriers between you and another person.

If you genuinely say, what are the three things right now that feel like they're the hardest, most unpleasant things, and how can I help you fix them?

Is a tremendously uplifting, connecting experience.

It made me reflect, as you were saying that, on that.

Is it the 61 rule in aviation?

Have you heard that?

Yeah, I think I know what you mean.

Where if you're one degree off for every X amount of miles you travel, you'll miss the airport by 60 miles or something like that.

Yes.

So just one degree in deviation from the path, which could be anything that's causing friction in your relationship at work and whatever you're doing, means that you'll miss the airport by 60 miles for every 100 miles you travel or something like that.

Yeah.



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And it shows how one small unaddressed friction point in your life could make you miss the target in such a significant way.

And by checking in, by doing the friction audit frequently, hopefully we can make sure we stay on course in our lives.

I think about that a lot with my relationship, because quite honestly, if I'm from a way on business, or I'm just getting caught up in my life, and I don't do a bit of a friction audit in our relationship, you know, you get a couple of weeks in, and I look over at her in the kitchen, something's wrong.

Yeah.

I don't know what's wrong, but something's wrong.

And it's always because I haven't done, we haven't had like a conversation in a while about like something.

Yeah.

We haven't checked in.

Yeah, I think it's huge.

Actually, talk about this in the book, that 61 idea.

Oh, so you know what it is.

Because I like, I like, destroyed it there.

No, no, no, no.

No.

So I don't talk about it as the 61, but I talk about the Y2K bug that people were worried about around the turn of the century to 2000.

There was this concern that all these computers would crash because they all had the two digit number associated with the year.

So in 1999, it said 99.

But when we ticked over to 2000, it went zero, zero.

And a lot of computers would think it was 1900 instead of 2000.

This was a concern that planes would fall out of the sky and nuclear power plants would explode and all this.

But they first identified this problem in the, in the 60s.

It was a guy at IBM named Bob Bemmer.

And I think it's Bemmer or Beemer who, who was like,

Hey, we should figure this out.

Like it's not a big deal yet, but I think computers are going to be big.

They're going to be a lot of them around by the year 2000.

Let's deal with this in the 60s, where it's easy to repro, reprogram the few computers we have.

Let's make it a four digit number or do whatever we need to do.

In the end, governments in the 90s spent billions of dollars

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because that one degree off in 1960 that no one bothered to correct ended up being the 60 by the time we got to the year 2000.

So these, these little things that niggle that we don't deal with end up getting worse and worse and worse.

And it's so true about relationships.

They compound negatively against us.

The first, my favorite book I ever read when I started reading more was, I think it's,

I think it's called Jeff Olson, The Slight Edge.

He talks exactly about that.

How about the things that are easy not to do like saving five pounds or brushing your teeth.

Other things that end up compounding against us or for us in our lives and having the most significant impact because we ignore those things.

We don't think they're important.

And that's why I think a friction audit, it's not, it's not a waste of time.

It's often sweating the smallest things that garners the biggest results.

As you know, they're a sponsor of the podcast and I'm one of the investors in the company.

My relationship with Huell started with the ready to drink range, which I have here in front of me on the table.

Why did I choose to drink this?

First and foremost, convenience.

I'm not the type of person that wants to spend a huge amount of time whisking or mixing things together.

And I don't typically have a huge amount of time during the day.

And there are some days, not always, but there are some days where because of the limited amount of time I have,

the choices that I would ordinarily reach for aren't necessarily the most healthy choices.

They're certainly not nutritionally complete.

So as soon as I discovered Huell existed,

because of a wonderful guy who worked on one of my teams in Manchester, walked past me wearing a Huell t-shirt, I inquired what it was.

He told me what it was.

And then I bought the ready to drink bottles into the office.

It was a game changer for me.

And it meant that on those days where I'm tempted to reach for less nutritionally complete options or less healthy food options,

I have something right underneath my desk in the fridge

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that I can reach for that allows me to remain in line with my health and nutrition goals.

And Tesco have now increased their listings with Huell.

So you can now get the RTD ready to drink in Tesco Expresses all across the UK.

Career hot streaks.

Yeah, this I love this research.

These these researchers who are asking this question,

is there something if we look at the course of thousands of careers in different areas?

Creatives, business people and so on.

Scientists, can you predict when we're going to have the best periods in our careers?

That's basically what they're asking.

They call this a hot streak, you know, like when you,

if you're an academic and you publish your five most high impact papers,

or if you're a filmmaker and you have five films that are seen as your canon,

when is that going to happen?

Can we predict that?

Is there a way to manufacture that if I'm a filmmaker or a scientist?

And they they identify these two processes that need to happen in precisely this order.

One of them is is known as exploration.

And in exploration, you go far and wide.

You basically you have a default of yes,

which means that when someone comes to you with an opportunity, you're like, yeah, sure, why not?

I give a talk to freshmen at NYU and they should as freshmen that time in your life, you should be an explorer.

You don't know what you're going to end up doing with your life.

You could stumble on something wonderful.

You should say yes to everything.

And during this phase, you know, they they talk about Jackson Pollock,

the artist who ended up developing his drip technique that he became famous for.

Before he did that, he spent a number of years trying five or six different other techniques.

Peter Jackson, who made the Lord of the Rings and Hobbit films and became, you know, a titan for those films.

He was doing horror and all sorts of other stuff before that.

These were their exploratory periods.

But at some point, that yes default has to become a no default,

where you say, hey, I've been trying these different things.

I've been exploring.

It's time to exploit.

That's the second phase.

And during that phase, you say, hey, of those five or six things I was exploring, this one looks like it has the most promise.

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I'm going to pour my heart and soul into that thing for a little while and see what comes of it.

So for Jackson Pollock, it was the drip painting for Peter Jackson.

It's these big epic fantasy films.

And what happens then is you've considered the options.

You pick the best one and then you make the absolute most you can make of it.

You squeeze all the juice out of the orange.

And that's when those successful hot street periods arise, when you go broad and then you go really narrow.

And then when you feel stuck again, you go broad again, and then you go narrow.

You expand and you contract throughout your life professionally.

And I think personally as well, that's, I think, a path to a good life.

So people that might have been doing the same thing for a couple of decades or a decade, are probably not going to stumble across a career hot streak,

because then they're missing that experimentation and that exploration.

Yeah, I think that's right.

And, you know, the best evidence for this, for me, at least personally, was when I give this talk to the freshmen, I show them the four emails that I've got in the last 20 years that changed my life.

And my instinct, I actually show them, I redact some of the information, but I show them the images of these emails that arrived in my inbox.

And I remember with each one when they arrived, I was like, I'm so busy. There's no way I can do this.

It would be an email from someone saying, for example, before I wrote my first book, an agent reached out and said, I just read a piece about some of your research.

I think there might be a book in this.

What do you think?

My first instinct was like, I don't have time for this.

I'm so busy.

I'm a first year professor, but I was in this exploratory period.

So I ended up saying yes, totally changed my professional life.

I have a few others that are like that.

And those four are sitting in a pool with thousands that went nowhere.

But if you don't have that yes default for a certain period of time, you're never going to find those four gold nuggets in that otherwise kind of silty mess.

And so I think it's a really important default to have at certain times in your life.

We talked before we started recording about some of the subject matter you love talking about, and creativity was one of them.

When we think about creativity, a lot of people think about this, the process of coming up with a new idea.

And by trial and error, I've tried to figure out the conditions which allow me to come up with my best ideas.

I mean, I've got a couple of hypotheses around when I'm at the gym,

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I seem to come up with all my best ideas or when I have space.

But the process of coming up with an idea, if you were advising me as a consultant on how to get my teams to think of better ideas or to come up with our best ideas, what would you advise us to do?

Yeah, so here's a long-term strategy that I think is really valuable, that I've used and I've found very helpful.

I have several documents that are about 20 years old.

One of them is called research ideas.

One is called book ideas.

One is called teaching ideas.

And every time I see anything that's even remotely interesting to me that's related to one of those, I put it in one of those documents, depending on what it is.

Like for teaching ideas, it'll be a great ad campaign that I want to share with my students. If you do that for 20 years, that document gets really, really long.

And so my documents now, some of them are I think like 40 or 50 pages long, just line after line of links and ideas and short descriptions of things that I've come across that are useful.

If I go back to that, it does two things.

One thing is it shows me over time what I'm interested in, because sometimes it's hard in the moment to say,

I don't know what am I generally interested in, but I have a 20-year record of what I'm interested in.

The other thing it does is it allows you to do what I think of as the best, the single best reproducible process for coming up with creative ideas, which is called recombination.

So we have this illusion that the best ideas are radically original, that they stand on their own.

They're different from anything that came before.

They are paradigm shifts, everything changes.

But even when you look at those ideas that seem that way, you interrogate them and you trace them back far enough, they are almost always a combination of old ideas or a recombination.

So the best example of this that I came across, and I talk about this in the book,

is when you ask musicians who is the most original musician of the 20th century, one of the most common responses is Bob Dylan.

But if you look deeply,

Dylan certainly had a lot of elements that seemed like they were different from what other people were doing.

But he himself has said, oh yeah, I was borrowing from this tradition and that tradition and the folk tradition and this artist and that artist.

And then when you look at the DNA of his music,

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there's so much evidence for what came before.  
It's true in business ideas as well.  
One of the things I ask my students to do  
is come up with a radically original idea in business that you've seen.  
Tell me about a company that's doing something radically original.  
And then I'll say they'll come up with something  
and then I'll say, all right,  
tell me what is similar to that that came before it.  
And they can always come up with something.  
So is it radically original  
or was it just a new combination of elements that existed before?  
And I think that if you have this long document,  
randomly pick idea three and idea 12 and see if you can combine them.  
And there you might have a business or an idea that's useful and creative.  
We could also do that collectively, I guess, as a team and as a company.  
We could create an internal ideas document,  
which everyone can kind of contribute to in terms of,  
if we're thinking ways to make this podcast  
or one of my businesses more successful,  
just dumping in ideas that were kind of on the someday shelf.  
Then when we revisit that document in the future, we can go,  
okay, so we were trying to find a way to get listeners to share the podcast more.  
And oh, someone found a tool over here that does something else for this part of the book.  
Maybe we could combine these two things and use that to share the podcast more.  
Here's a tweak to that.  
I think that's a great idea.  
But if you make it a collective document,  
people are going to feel like the ideas have to be a certain level of goodness to share them.  
Okay.  
So start alone.  
Everyone has their own document and then you combine it at some point.  
Ah, nice.  
That's much better for in general,  
that idea of brainstorming as the first step.  
Great if you do it on your own.  
You never want to start by thinking in a group.  
Group think.  
You always want to start alone.  
Yeah.  
People converge, they're scared.  
Yeah.  
One of those things.

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Do you do much of that?

Do you do much of sort of corporate consulting?

Yeah, quite a lot.

What typically tends to be the symptoms or the challenge that corporations are typically stuck with?

Yeah.

So, I mean, not all the consulting I do is about being stuck specifically, but that's often a way of framing why you would get a consultant in, right?

Sure.

There's something you want to change and you want to fix it.

So very, very often it's a company that's experienced a change in situation.

Like the cost of our raw materials has gone up.

What do we do now?

Or there's a thing that we needed and we can't get that anymore.

Or the legislation has changed and the government now doesn't let us do this key part of what we used to do.

So a lot of it ends up being quite operational when it's about stuckness.

It's like, how do we pivot?

How do we figure out a way around this situation?

But the consulting briefs are incredibly broad and varied, which is again why I love it so much because no two gigs is the same.

Pivoting, then?

Yeah.

It's a lot of pivoting and a lot of figuring out how to change.

And also, what doesn't need to change?

I think often the instinct is,

yeah, I did some work with a company that makes denim jeans and they were like, well, cotton's just gone up dramatically in price.

And so as a result, it's more expensive to make our jeans.

What do we do?

And we need to just overhaul the whole process.

I was like, I don't know.

I don't think you do.

I think what you need to do is frame the rise in price in a way that people don't bulk and run away.

You've got a strong relationship with a lot of customers over time.

You have a strong brand identity and so on.

So no, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Let's just figure out how we can sell the idea that maybe things are just a bit more expensive now.

And against a backdrop where everything's more expensive now.

So often it's about minimizing change.

As it relates to these 100 ways to get unstuck,

do you have any that are your favorite or that people seem to be most receptive to

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that are maybe more on the original side of things?

Some of them are very narrow and specific like case studies that I talk about, but a lot of them are sort of concepts like the idea that when things get hard, that's when creativity begins.

Like you've got to let things get hard.

And we're not creative until we struggle is really important.

It's very liberating because what it does is it takes the naive theory of what it is to struggle to be creative, turns it on its head and says, hey, you're going in exactly the right direction.

It's the hardship that heralds the good stuff.

So if it's not hard yet, that's the problem.

You got to keep going till it gets there.

And a lot of people find that quite liberating.

I've been playing around in the notes of my phone with this idea.

I was trying to find a way to put it on my stories over the last two days.

And like I got to this point about how the rarity of the amount of people that overcome the challenge directly correlates to the rarity of the rewards behind the door.

So the level of difficulty is a signal of how many people gave up at that exact moment.

And then logically, if you pursue and overcome the difficulty or get through that door, fewer people got the rewards behind that door.

And you're saying a very, very similar thing.

You're right.

It helps you reframe what difficulty is.

Difficulty isn't a signal to turn back.

It's a signal that if you keep going, the rewards just got greater.

Yeah.

And I also think it's a question of how difficult is this for other people, right?

So being creative is hard.

It's hard for everyone.

Even really good creatives, they get to a point where it gets difficult

because you're trying to come up with something out of a whole cloth that's new.

And so that's not easy for anyone.

If there's something that most people can do really easily and you're struggling with it, that's very different from doing something that's hard and persevering through that hardship.

So I think it's always important to ask in the background,

am I, by finding this hard, is that just like part of the course of doing this thing?

Or am I finding it hard because I should be putting my mind and attention elsewhere?

Maybe I'm just not very good at this thing.

And I would be better spending my time doing something else.

Is there anything else in your work?

Because you're such a multifaceted guy.

I mean, you've written about a variety of different subject matters from

how screens are harming us and our addiction to these mobile devices to your first book,



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which sent a lot on sort of cognitive biases and psychology.

And then this book about getting unstuck and all the psychology around that.

Is there anything else that we should have talked about that you think is valuable to my audience?

My audience or a group of people that are trying to get better in their lives.

They're trying to get unstuck, trying to get close to their potential.

Yeah.

I'll say one thing.

I've been doing a lot of research lately on nostalgia, on the concept of nostalgia.

I think in many ways it's the most powerful backward facing emotion we have.

As you get older, you start to miss things that are no longer existing in your life,

that you loved at the time and that you think back on really fondly.

And sometimes you even misremember them and you think of them as better than they actually were at

the time.

But it's an incredibly powerful emotion.

And one of the things we've been finding in this research is that

the things that make you nostalgic are often at the time what you think of as kind of mundane routines.

Like I really miss grad school.

I went to Princeton and loved it and had a great five years there.

But I don't miss the like momentous events.

I don't miss graduation.

I don't miss ceremonies.

I don't miss these big culminations.

I miss the really mundane stuff.

I miss walking this one path that I used to take in the summer between my dorm room and the office.

And I did it hundreds of times.

If I could just do that walk one more time.

And so I think there's a kind of message there that

we often mistake these momentous things that we go through for being like what life is really about.

But actually a lot of it is the kind of mundane routine stuff that's every day.

And the reason I like that idea so much is because it suggests that

you can ring tremendous value out of things that might seem trivial or not that important if you recognize that.

Like it's changed the way I live my life.

I cultivate so many little routines out of every day because I know when I look back that's the stuff that's going to really feel full of reward and meaning.

I think we try too hard sometimes to make everything bigger and better and more kind of emotionally explosive.

And so that's I've always found that at least since discovering that it's been a really powerful idea for me.

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I think about that.

You were just saying about nostalgia.

Relationships I've had, companies we've been in and worked in for many, many years.

And you look back at the early days and you go, oh, I wish we could have that again.

But you can't quite easily put my finger on exactly what it was other than a bit of excitement.

You know, a couple of moments where I have flashbacks of good moments we had,

but there's nothing to say we can't create those little good moments of celebrating together in a bar now.

I mean, there are three components to well-being.

There's anticipation before something happens.

There's momentary when it's happening and then there's retrospection after it's happened.

Think about a trip you take.

If you're really excited for a trip, I'm going to Europe this summer and I'm very excited about it.

A particular trip that I'm going to be taking.

And I think our job as humans in respect of all the time and energy we put into living our lives is try to maximize across those three kinds of well-being the sum of those three.

So the fun stuff, book it in as early as possible so you start enjoying it today before it's happened.

And then in the moment, which tends to be very brief, the moments themselves are brief, most of the value comes in thinking back for the hopefully decades that come afterwards.

So you're saying get your phones out?

Yeah, exactly.

Just spend every minute on your phone.

Take a photo of everything, spend the whole time at Coachella just videoing.

Just videoing it.

You don't actually want to experience it.

You just want to look back on it.

That's fantastic advice.

Thank you, Adam, so much for your time.

We have a closing tradition on this podcast where the last guest leaves a question for the next guest not knowing who they're going to be leaving it for.

I didn't get to see it until I opened the book.

The question that's been left for you is,

what is one belief or behavior that has positively impacted your life in the past 12 months?

So I've spent a lot of time over the last few years critiquing tech.

That's what a lot of my work has been about because I think it's technology generally and screen-based tech.

We spend a lot of our time on it and I don't think it always brings us the rewards we'd hope.

And my instinct when I first discovered generative AI, chat GPT and the other models that are proliferating was similar.

It was sort of this negativity.

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It's going to steal jobs.

It's going to be problematic.

But I sort of adopted a more experimental mindset and I've started using it more.

And I've started using it more than anything as a kind of brainstorming partner.

It's like instead of having a brain trust of 10 very smart friends

who all think a bit differently about something,

chat GPT is like billions of people all thinking differently about things.

And you can keep asking it, hey, give me another idea.

Give me another idea.

Imagine that one's wrong.

Let's tweak that.

So I think what's changed for me is I am trying to embrace these external things that are changing around us a little bit more because my natural instinct is to say, let's preserve what's so special about being humans and try to stave off all of that infringing effect that comes from these changes.

But I'm finding that very rewarding because I'm finding the good.

I can still say no to the bad, but I'm finding a lot of good.

I think there's a bit of a hangover from the social media era and how that played out where there was this new technology.

We all rushed into it thinking it was all positive.

And as the experiment played out, we realized that there are unintended consequences.

So I think we've come into this real next technological shift with the unintended consequences mindset.

I think that's right.

I think that's exactly right.

And I think the pendulum shifts.

I remember when I was talking to people about the last book, Irresistible, about screens, and a lot of them were like, this is 2013, 14.

They were saying things like, but everyone loves tech.

Like, why would we even consider the problems?

Why would you write a book about that?

It's a storm in a teacup.

The idea that people were not criticizing tech 10 years ago in the way they are now, especially screen tech, surprises a lot of people.

But I had way more pushback early on.

And then in the, let's say, three or four years that followed, the pendulum swung the other way to critiquing.

And I think now hopefully we're kind of leveling out a little bit.

But I think you're right.

There is a hangover from the social media era.

I think I'm quite scared about it.

I mean, we use it in our businesses.

But I think the social media era has maybe rightly made us think before we go all in

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about consequences.

And it's funny seeing the debates in Congress and with the CEOs taking place before a lot of this stuff has been built and deployed now.

Whereas with social media, we got 10 years in or 15 years in, and we were like, oh my God.

So let's do the run the studies now and see the impact it's having.

It's interesting.

We're going to see how that plays out.

Are you writing another book?

You thinking about a subject?

Yeah, I'm always thinking about stuff.

As I said, I've got this document with like 100 book ideas.

I'd need to live 100 lives to write them all.

But I'm pretty focused on this one now and some other things.

But I will start thinking about the next book proposal soon.

Adam, thank you.

Thank you for writing such an incredible book.

And if you do end up writing another book, I'll be the first to buy it because this book is phenomenal.

All your books are phenomenal because they're so accessible, but they're confronting subject matter.

That is, so as you say, has such broad appeal where there doesn't appear to be solid clear answers yet.

And I also love authors like yourself that don't take a binary approach to things because life isn't binary in any regard.

And so being nuanced and personalized, I think, is what you do so well.

But it's also what people love so much.

And you're a fantastic talker.

You're a fantastic at conveying ideas.

So if you ever want to start a podcast, I would certainly download it.

Thank you so much, Adam.

It's an honor to meet you.

Thanks, Steven.

It's been great.

Thank you.