

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / Fatherhood and What Americans Get Wrong About Major Life Changes

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One of my favorite writers is Martin Amos,
and he once said that life is full of ordinary miracles and ordinary disasters.
In the ordinary miracle, birth, two people enter a room and three come out.
And in the ordinary disaster, one person enters a room and none come out.
This show has been dark for the last few weeks because
an ordinary miracle in my life came several weeks ahead of schedule
before I had time to fully prepare for it,
either psychologically or logistically, in terms of prepping future podcasts.
My wife gave birth to our daughter the first week of August.
My daughter turns four weeks old the day I'm writing this.
And I remember when people asked me in the weeks before my daughter's birth
what I imagined fatherhood would be like.
I told them to a person, honestly, I'm trying not to imagine it.
That's what I said. I'm trying not to imagine it.
I said I'm trying not to attach any particular prediction, expectation
to an experience that I frankly had trouble envisioning.
Plus, I'd received so much advice and so many tips and hacks,
so many habits and strategies and purchasing recommendations,
so many words of wisdom and words of warning from friends and family
that I decided to go into the experience of my daughter.

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Friends and family, that I decided to go into the experience as blank as and as tabloirasa as possible, be prepared for anything and everything. I don't know if that sort of Zen approach to imminent fatherhood has actually worked out. I think you might need to ask my wife or my best friends. But I can definitely attest that fatherhood has been everything and nothing I expected. I remember thinking at one point during the first week of being a dad, why didn't anybody warn me about the weeping? The sudden out of nowhere full on torrential downpour crying that would strike like a random summer storm, quick and furious and gone in 30 seconds. These were almost never sad tears, mind you. They were tears of full heartedness. I remember in the hospital the night our baby was born, my wife and I watched Sleepless in Seattle while our new daughter slept. And I remember thinking as I wiped away tears every five minutes, whether this was the most emotionally profound movie experience I had ever had in my life. It was a little bit like when you see a movie on an airplane and there's something about the experience of being suspended 30,000 feet over the ground in this aerodynamic metal tube. It can make the shittiest film in the world, seem like an incredible artistic achievement. I think psychologists call this misattribution of arousal. But in any case, the first week was a delightfully weepy mess. The next three weeks have been nothing short of chaos and for the purpose of both maintaining my family's privacy and not boring you with a tic-tac of new fatherhood, I'm not going to elaborate on the word chaos, but to all you dads out there who said, you, Derek, have no idea what's about to hit you. Dads, I hear you. Something I think about when my daughter is resting in my arms at 3 a.m. during a particularly fussy feed is just how brutally simple the task of raising a baby is. Emphasis, of course, in the word brutally. When a person is born, their stomach is the size of a marble. So raising a baby is a bit like being given the following challenge. You are handed a precious hollow marble.

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You are told, keep this marble filled with liquid
or else the worst thing in the world will happen to you.
And also you are told, when the level of the liquid
and the hollow marble is running low,
this thing will emit the most excruciating sound in the world.
And so what do you do? What else can you do?
But turn your life over to the careful filling of this hollow marble
that empties out every two minutes
and you fill and it empties and you fill and it empties
and again and again and week after week.
And there's no clever solution to this problem.
There is no hack.
There's no productivity tip that gives you an escape hatch
from the scenario.
Of course, my daughter is much more
than a marble sized vessel for food.
But sometimes, many times,
I've learned that a newborn is not much more than a stomach that screams.
I think I always wanted to be a dad
without having a clear picture in my head of what being a dad would feel like.
Like I've said, the threshold of fatherhood
always seemed like a deeply mysterious frontier to me.
This gate through which you pass and come out a different person
and you've kind of grown up.
The truth is that the actual experience of becoming a father
has not felt like growth to me.
I mean, physically speaking, there is no metric
along which I am healthier than I was three weeks ago.
But in a profound way that I cherish and I find beautiful,
I think becoming a father has felt like an uncanny form of self-discovery.
It feels like becoming something
not like becoming something bigger,
more like finding something small and deep
and powerful that was always there.
It feels like, in a way, I've been a father for years
and it took a daughter to show me.
Today's episode is about change.
My friend, the author, Brett Stolberg, has a new book,
Master of Change, about the psychology of resilience,
what we get wrong about resilience,
what we, especially in the West,
especially in America, get wrong about change
and becoming a new person.

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And so I can't think of a more perfect guest
for this new first episode back in my incipient fatherhood.
I'm Derek Thompson and this, at long last, is plain English.
Welcome back to the show.

Derek, it's great to be here.

And congrats on the book, Master of Change.

It's actually really fortuitous to have you on the show
for my first interview since parent leave
because I think if I were to condense
the experience of being a parent into one very small family,
I'd be happy to have you on the show.

I'm glad to have you on the show.

I'm glad to have you on the show.

I'm glad to have you on the show.

I'm glad to have you on the show.

I'm glad to have you on the show.

I'm glad to be a parent into one very small,
very capacious word, that word would be change.

And here you've written a lovely meditation
on the psychology of change, the philosophy of change.

And what we, and especially, I mean,
we Americans get wrong when we think about change.

I think there's this sense in modern culture
that resiliency in life
is about maintaining consistency in the face of adversity.

And this idea is like inherent to the concept of grit
like stay true to yourself, right?

Inherent to those ideas is this notion
that there's a fixed identity that you want to hold onto
to weather the storms of life.

But life is problems.

Like it's just one frigging thing after another.

And your book I think builds around this beautiful idea
that our rigid notions of fixed and strong identities
is the wrong way to think about making your way
through a complicated world.

So with that preamble out of the way,
why don't you scope all the way out
and tell us what's this book about?

What is your thesis?

All right, there's two core elements
that I think are worth unpacking
to set the context for the conversation.

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The first is conventional wisdom on change says that after a disruption or disorder event, we should try to get back to where we were. Most people define resilience as bouncing back, right? This is rooted in a word called homeostasis. It's a very longstanding scientific term that describes change as a cycle of order, disorder, back to order. Inherent to homeostasis are systems of which we are one, dislike change, they ought to resist change. And when change occurs, the goal is to return to where they were as swiftly as possible. More recently, the research community has stepped back and said, actually, homeostasis is not a great fit model for change. Better is what they call allostasis, which describes a cycle of order, disorder, reorder. And it says that change is the ongoing nature of reality. Change is not something that happens to us, but something in which we are in conversation with. And the goal is, yes, to get to stability, but that stability is always somewhere new. And I think that the etymology of these words tells the story. Homeostasis comes from homo, which means same, and stasis, which means standing. So it is stability by staying the same. Allostasis comes from allo, which means variable. So it is stability through change. And it's this beautiful double meaning, because the way to stay stable through change is through changing, at least to some extent. So core thesis number one, we get change wrong, we should be trying to reorder, not get back to order. Core thesis two is this term that I've coined called rugged flexibility. And it states that the way to go through constant cycles of order, disorder, and reorder is not to be just rugged and strong and robust and rigid, not to be just flexible and always go with the flow, but to marry these two qualities, to be both rugged and flexible at the same time. So I don't want this interview to be exclusively

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about fatherhood.

I don't want it to be about fatherhood narrowly,
but let's just apply these concepts to my very young,
very inexperienced understanding of fatherhood.

It is amazing to me how fast I have felt
my own daily priority shift in the presence of my girl.
And this, I think, is a common experience.

I think that initially that shift
was pretty discombobulating to be concrete.

I still want to see my friends.

I still want to go out and be a little bit irresponsible
on a Friday night, maybe have that extra drink
with a close friend.

I still want to leave the house.

But many days, especially when she's sick,
I can't do that.

So it's like I have this portfolio of values,
sleep and friends and date night with my wife.

And that portfolio has to be renegotiated
or reweighted in the presence of my kid.

So you're a double degree on this subject.

You're a dad twice over.

You're the author of a book about strength through change.

What's worked for you?

How would you apply your model
to counseling a first-time father?

The first thing I would say is an expectancy
that it is going to be hard.

Right now, you are in the disorder period, right?

Order, disorder, reorder, you are in peak disorder.

And just having some language for this
and being able to name it and say,

hey, I don't have to have everything figured out right now.

That's step number one.

The second thing I'd say is realizing that order or stability
is not going to look like it was before you had your kid.

And that's okay too.

It doesn't mean that things will always feel chaotic,
though they might for the first year.

That's just how it goes.

But wherever you end up achieving stability in new routines
will inherently be somewhere new.

And it is so important to release

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from trying to get back to the old.
You will never sleep like you used to sleep.
You will never consider going out with friends
and having that extra drink in the same way you have.
Those days are over.
And there's no point of trying to get back to them
and holding on to an expectation that you will
because you'll just constantly be frustrated.
So this expectancy around change being hard,
around disorder being hard,
and around, yes, you will achieve stability somewhere new,
but it's going to be somewhere new.
This reminds me that a friend from work
when I told her that I just had a kid,
said having a kid is the greatest accidental lesson
in Buddhism.
And I know that you're a little bit
of a part-time Buddhist yourself.
So maybe you appreciate this.
She said, if you ever have read these books that say,
release the ego,
but you never really understood what that meant
or everything is impermanence.
And you never really understood what that meant.
Well, when you've got shit running down your shirt,
like that ego is released.
Like there is no part of you that has any kind of ego
about your physical appearance
when you are covered in the Little Girls' Instrument.
And also this fact of impermanence,
like it's just amazing how every day is a new world.
Like the absolute five alarm crises of week one
have nothing to do with the five alarm crises
of week three and week four,
which I have to anticipate will have nothing to do
with the five alarm crises of month five and month six.
And so like having to have your feet in the mud
of this truth that everything is impermanence,
I think it really fatherhood has brought these sort of
old standing Buddhist cliches very much to the fore for me.
That's right.
And I would argue that in addition
to those old standing Buddhist cliches,

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there's a wonderful lesson on modern neuroscience in here.

And one model for the brain is that it functions sort of like a prediction machine.

So it's constantly predicting what's going to happen next.

And that's a good thing because if it didn't, we would never be able to get through a day.

We'd be so inefficient.

However, when you have a child or undergo any big change, it becomes very hard to make good predictions

because it's new territory.

And if our predictions are constantly off, we feel really icky.

But if we can quickly update our predictions to match what's happening in reality, it gives us the best chance to engage with reality skillfully.

There's this shorthand equation that your mood or your happiness at any given moment is a function of your reality minus your expectations.

And it's really important to update your expectations to match reality.

Otherwise you're going to be a mess.

And I think a baby is great training to let go of expectations or at the very least hold them lightly and consistently and very quickly update them when the next five alarm fire comes, which as you said, will be quite frequent as a new parent for you.

So I want to challenge your thesis here.

And I don't know if it's fully a challenge or whether I'm opening a door for you to deepen the thesis, but it seems to me that so many of the wisest pieces of advice for health have to do with habit, have to do with consistency and stability.

So people say sleep is the most important thing in the world.

And a part of me thinks that's right.

People say social fitness is the glue that holds a person together.

And a part of me thinks that's right.

People say habits daily, morning habits are the bedrock of success.

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And a part of me thinks that's right.
But what are the first three fucking things
to go out the door when you have a baby?
Sleep, goodbye.
Social fitness, like seeing your friends
the same way you did three weeks ago,
it's just not going to happen.
Morning habits, well, you're awake sometimes at 3 a.m.
You're awake sometimes at 7 a.m.
You're awake sometimes at 10 a.m.
What morning habits?
I eat coffee when I'm awake,
but that when I wake up can be off by five hours.
So there's this whole like literature of wisdom
that says that happiness comes
from cultivating simple simplicities.
And here you are telling me that I need to embrace
something that's kind of like the opposite.
It's like rugged flexibility, change with change.
How do these two ideas snap together?
Yeah, I don't think that you're challenging the thesis
as much as helping me deepen it in real time here,
which is wonderful, so thank you for that.
I would say that those habits, that's the rugged part.
And you don't wanna throw the baby out with the bathwater.
Maybe we're getting a little bit too on point
with the cliché here.
So you do wanna hold onto those habits as much as possible,
but you also wanna be really flexible
in how you apply them.
Because if you cling too tight to those things,
they are going to be the greatest source of your misery.
Your mood equals your reality minus your expectations.
If you expect to do all these things
and your reality says there's just no way,
you're gonna be a mess.
The other thing that I would say
is that the things that work work until they get in the way.
And I think that that is true for sleep,
meaning it makes so much sense to focus on sleep
and double down on sleep until you have a crying baby
that makes it impossible for you to sleep.
And then the worst thing that you could possibly do

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is freak out about the fact that you're not sleeping.
Same thing with social life, same thing with exercise.
So what I would say for all of these things is,
yeah, those are like your rugged anchors of stability
and you wanna define maybe a minimum effective dose
or say, hey, I'm gonna do the best that I can,
but you wanna be able to release from feeling like,
you know, your whoop needs to show you the perfect score
because it's just not realistic
and all you're gonna do is frustrate yourself
and have these freak outs
and make whatever you're going through even worse.
And then the other thing that I'll say is it is true
that having some sources of predictability in your life
during times where there is a lot of disruption
and change is very helpful.
But when you have a new kid
or when you've just getting married
or you're going through a divorce
or you're suffering with grief,
sometimes these like the big life changes, right?
Sometimes it's gotta be really compact.
So, you know, the books say 150 minutes of moderate
to intense exercise a week.
Maybe when you have a new kid, it's just 10 minutes.
It's like, I'm gonna do 10 sets of pushups
on the minute every minute.
And it's not so much the pushups that are carrying you through,
but it's that one source of predictability in your day.
Yeah, 10 sets of 10 pushups is even pushing
what I've been able to manage.
But I agree absolutely with the general principle
that finding little tiny ways of anchoring my life today
with my expectations, with my habits has been useful,
even if I can't sort of recapitulate all of them.
I wanna broaden this
because of course we're not just talking about fatherhood.
You have this really fascinating point
on one of your first pages
that research shows on average,
people experience 36 major life changes
or disorder events in the course of their adulthood.
That means one major life change every 18 months.

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By major life change, you're talking about breakups or marriage or unemployment or new employment or births or deaths.

Like these major transitions in life are so frequent, are so regular that they're not special.

They feel special in the moment.

I mean, we celebrate them, marriage, it's a big party, births, it's a big event.

But in the course of life, these are ordinary miracles, these are ordinary events.

And the lie we tell ourselves is that major life changes are disruptions when the truth is that, if your life hasn't changed very much for five years, that's unusual.

And so just scoping out of this with an actual question, like I wonder if change, if allostasis, as you've defined it, is good for us.

Do you think people should seek out change for change's sake?

I think that the answer there is it depends.

So there are, and I wanna be really careful here, there are some changes that are inevitably going to be painful.

And here I think about grief and loss is the top one.

Yet those changes are also inevitable, but no one should seek that out.

But once you put aside grief and loss, then absolutely, like the engine of progress is going through these cycles of order, disorder, reorder, you step back and you look at the most grand, magnificent, empirical example of change that we know of, evolution.

And what is evolution if not progress by external changes happening, species figuring out how to stay stable through change, adapt, and then becoming more fit for their environment.

So if that is literally the mechanism that got me and you as humans here, and that underlies all progress, then absolutely.

I think to be stagnant and to be rigid and to try to avoid change in many ways is to diminish one's life.

I was watching an interview with Yaval Harari, the author and philosopher,

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and he was talking about the future of artificial intelligence.

And someone asked him the question, how would you advise a young person to prepare for a world where technological change, especially in AI, will be exponential?

And look, maybe it'll be exponential, maybe it won't, but that was the premise of the question.

And he said, you know, technology is so unpredictable. People thought that the next sort of tranche of AI would come for routine work, it would replace blue collar work.

And instead, the Breakthrough Product Chat GPT is much better at supplementing or replacing wrote writing or wrote computer skills, white collar work.

And he said, maybe rather than emphasize this idea that we should aim above all in developmental psychology to raise IQs, we should be more concerned about raising EQ. We should hope for building a generation of young people that have the kind of resilience to deal with whatever technological change is thrown their way.

And he had this little lovely metaphor that, you know, I wonder how it connects to some of the work that you did on this book.

He said, you know, a lot of people, especially in the West, we think of our identities as modern homes with very deep foundations, foundations that go all the way down.

Like, this is who I am.

And he said, we should probably maybe cultivate identities that are more like pitched tents, that we have the flexibility and even the eagerness, the curiosity to want to move around a bit to be open to the flow of life.

This seems very much to click into your concept of rugged flexibility and the ideas that Master of Change is talking about.

Yeah, my favorite part of the book is probably the second section, which is all around rugged and flexible identity.

So I want a table because you mentioned people in the West.

I want a table West versus East for a second

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and just talk about this notion of a house because it's also a metaphor that I like to use. And the way that I think about it is as follows. If you've got a house and it only has one room in it and that room floods, then you are going to be in for it. It is going to be very discombobulating. But if you have a house with multiple rooms in it, if there's a flood in one important room, you can seek refuge in the others. And I think when it comes to cultivating an identity that is rugged and flexible and robust throughout change, it is so helpful to have multiple rooms to your identity. You can have the writer room, the family member room, the neighbor room, the athlete room, the art lover room. But there is so much risk when you go quote-unquote all in on one thing and you only have one room that when that one thing shifts, you really struggle. And we see this all the time with Olympians transitioning out of sport, that was their one room. Founders transitioning, their one room. People just going through a normal retirement when they didn't diversify their sense of self. So you diversify an investing portfolio. Why? So that if one of your assets undergoes a rocky turbulent time, you're okay. Yet in the West, we often don't diversify our identities nearly as much. So I completely agree with Yvall Harari that, yeah, like we should have multiple rooms in our identity. And it's not to say I want to be really specific because I've worked with a lot of world-class athletes. If you want to be excellent at something, you can't have a quote-unquote balanced life. You do have to go all in. You have to spend a lot of time in one room, but it should never come at the expense of completely shutting the doors to other rooms. How does that work in practice? Let's say you're working with an elite athlete or maybe sometimes, I think about, I'm right now still working on a book which requires just an enormous amount of focus,

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an enormously weird amount of focus
because you've written several books, you know this.
With an article, it's a thousand words long.
You have a glimpse of an idea, you're writing it,
and then there it is.
With a book, you're writing a thousand words
that fits into a 10,000-word chapter,
that fits into a 70,000-word book,
that fits into a marketplace.
There's this weird like Babushka-doll,
kind of a focus that you need
in order to keep all these ideas together.
And so it requires maybe like an athlete,
I'm not much of an athlete myself,
like this extraordinary psychological
and temporal devotion to a single thing.
Like how do you balance that
with your sort of index fund approach to life,
that you need this sort of diversified portfolio
that lives across sort of your social life
and your health and your work?
It's such a great question.
And to answer, I wanna tell the story of Niels van der Poel,
who in the 2022 winter games won gold medals
in the 5K and 10K speed skating event,
and absolutely shattered the world record.
Like this world record will not be touched
potentially for centuries.
It was that much of a just complete destruction
of the prior world record.
And heading into the 2022 games,
van der Poel did something that at the time,
other Olympians would think was crazy.
So his performance wasn't great.
And he felt like he was underperforming.
And he stepped back and he said, why is this the case?
And his answer was fear.
He said every time he stepped into the speed skating oval,
he felt a lot of fear.
And then he peeled back the onion a layer further.
And he said, well, why do I feel fear?
And he realized that that was because his entire source
of meaning and identity in his life was as a speed skater.

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There was no Niels van der Poel
other than Niels van der Poel the speed skater.
And that caused so much pressure.
That was such a heavy weight to bring into the ring,
especially knowing that in his sport,
injuries happen all the time.
One misstep once a year,
and you blow your chance at a world championship.
So in the lead up to the 2022 games,
van der Poel did something extraordinary.
He said, I'm going to train my butt off five days a week,
but I'm going to take a normal weekend.
He said, I used to have friends, I don't anymore,
but when I did have friends,
they're in accounting, they're in finance,
they go out for beers, they go bowling,
they go on hikes, they read books.
I'm gonna do that too.
So every Friday night to Monday morning,
van der Poel did nothing with speed skating.
Didn't go see massage therapists,
didn't get dry needling, didn't train a minute.
He lived a normal life.
He rekindled friendships,
he became active in his community,
he developed a reading habit, he went on hikes.
This is blasphemy.
You're supposed to be quote unquote recovering,
you're not supposed to be out there hiking.
And van der Poel says that whatever he might have lost
in physical fitness, he gained in psychological resiliency
because he was no longer scared to step into the ring.
So it's a really extraordinary example
of being able to go all in,
because he did Monday to Friday, he trained a lot,
but then compartmentalizing enough
where he never shut out other parts of his life
and he built up these other sources of meaning in his life.
And I think with a book, it's the most important thing
because if you were just to pour your all into your book
and I know you're not gonna do this
because you're smarter and then that book flops
or Donald Trump does something crazy

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the day your book's supposed to come out
and it kind of gets lost in the media cycle,
that is gonna feel like a whole loss of self.
Whereas if you've got your new dad room,
your husband room, your athlete room, your friend room,
then you can still care really deeply
about the success of your book,
but it kind of frees you in a way to play to win
instead of playing not to lose
because you have these other components of your identity.
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which are owned by Vanguard's fund to shareholder clients,
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I wonder how much the phenomenon that we're talking about
is predominantly a Western phenomenon
or even especially an American phenomenon.
That is the phenomenon of not being able to let go
of this fixed sense of self.
This is who I am and I will not change
for anyone, for anything.
So when I'm up at 2 a.m., 3 a.m.,
there's a handful of bucks in my Kindle
that I'm picking through.
And one of them is The Weirdest People in the World
by Joseph Henrich.
And weird in this case is an acronym, W-E-I-R-D.
Weird stands for Western Educated, Industrial, Rich,
and Developed Countries.
So essentially Western countries
and other industrial developed countries.
And one of the big theses
of this really fantastically interesting book
is that Westerners are unusually fixated
on having rigid identities that carry across circumstances.
So one awesome study he points to to make this point,
he says, there's these surveys that ask people

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around the world to define themselves
by completing the sentence, I am blank.
And subjects can write anything they want in that blank.
They can write one word, they can write a short phrase,
I am blank, who are you?
Tell us who you are.
And the weirder you are, that is with the acronym again,
Western Educated, Industrial, Rich, Developed,
the more likely you are to define yourself
by personality adjectives.
You're more likely to say, I am curious.
I am smart.
I am a hard worker.
Non-Western subjects were more likely
to answer with relational links.
I am a dad.
I am a husband.
I am a brother.
I am a son.
And I wanna take that observation,
which I think is just so interesting on its own
and just add this following excerpt from the book,
Weirdest People in the World,
because it's just such a perfect compliment,
I think, to your book.
Quote, compared to much of the world,
weird people report behaving in more consistent ways,
in terms of traits like honesty or coldness,
across different types of relationships,
such as with younger peers, friends,
parents, professors, and strangers.
By contrast, Koreans and Japanese vary widely
and comfortably across relational contexts.
One might be reserved and self-deprecating with professors
while being joking and playful with friends.
The result is that while Americans sometimes see
behavioral flexibility as two-faced or hypocritical,
many other populations see personal adjustments
to differing relationships as reflecting wisdom,
maturity, and social adeptness.
End quote.
I mean, that passage just leaps out
and begs to shake hands with your book.

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This idea of everybody.
Can I shake the hand right now, real quick?
Shake the hand right now, jump right in.
Let me read back to you, right?
This is from page 83 of my book.
You are a very different person
when you are with your friends at work, on vacation,
staying at your mother-in-law's house,
listening to beautiful music,
caught in a downpour, on a sunny beach,
scrolling social media, and on and on and on.
Few people would argue with this,
but when it comes to how we conceive
of our quote-unquote selves, hardly anyone,
at least not in the West,
considers the role of their environment,
let alone weighs it heavily.
Rather, when asked to define their selves,
the vast majority of people respond narrowly
within the confines of their own skin and skull.
When people ask what enneagram number
or Myers-Briggs personality type you are,
the most accurate answer is probably some version
of it depends on where you are, who you are with,
whether or not you are hungry,
how well you slept the previous night,
whether you exercised that morning
in a variety of other factors.
Amazing, so Brad, I mean,
Hedritch has his own theory
of why we in the West are like this,
and I'll share it in a second,
but why do you think we're like this?
I'm gonna draw on the work of Hazel Rose Marcus
and Alayna Connor, who are the two researchers
that I cite most in this section of the book,
and they describe Western people
as predominantly having an independent self,
which comes from the Western mythos
of rugged individualism,
pick yourself up by the bootstraps,
bend the world to your will,
be in control of situations.

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People in Eastern cultures, however,
have what Rose Marcus and Connor
call an interdependent self,
and this is a self that views themselves much more
in relation to what's happening around them,
it's a much more fluid self.
And what's fascinating is that there's nothing
that leads us to believe
that this is a genetic inheritance, this is learned.
So what I argue in the book is that,
it's like a fish in water only knows what's in water.
If you grew up in the West,
you're kind of surrounded with independent selves.
You don't know that there's another way of being,
but with practice, we can adopt an interdependent lens.
And I think it's really important to note
that neither are better nor worse.
They're tools in the toolkit.
And sometimes you wanna have an independent lens
of how you view yourself.
You want to be able to problem solve and fix things
and to exert your will on the world.
And that works really well in some circumstances,
but in others, it becomes the number one thing
that gets in your way and makes you an insufferable person.
And to know that you can switch
into this more interdependent mode,
where you are in concert with your environment
can be really empowering and really freeing.
So independent versus interdependent selves,
neither are better, both have their time and place.
We Americans, and I think people that live
in the Western world in general,
really over index on this independent self
because it's such a part of the mythos,
of the pioneer that came West to work the land
and shape it is they thought made sense.
That's so interesting.
And it totally fits with Hertz's theory,
which is essentially that a series of religious changes
that discouraged cousin marriage in Christian Europe
melted away kin based societies.
And instead in lieu of kin based societies,

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we had this blossoming of highly individualistic, self-obsessed, control oriented culture where people were more likely to build independent selves rather than interdependent selves. And one of the really interesting, just one more little bit on this book and then I wanna go back to applying your book to another thing I've been thinking about. He mentions that there's a distinction in some sociological literature between shame and guilt. Guilt by this definition is violating your personal sense of right and wrong. And shame is violating a societal sense of right and wrong. So if you act in a way that the tribe disagrees with, they can shame you, but only you can guilt trip yourself. And he says in the West, people have a ton of guilt in a way that non-Western societies don't necessarily have in part because of this bizarrely, independent, hyper independent, highly individualistic idea of what the self is. So for example, if I tell myself, Derek, you're eating too many cookies as a young dad, time to eat more salad. And I fail to eat a salad on Tuesday night and then I fail to eat a salad on Wednesday night. I'll feel guilty. Who is making me feel guilty other than me? My neighbors don't care that I don't eat salad. You don't care. Devin doesn't care. No one listening to this show cares that I eat salad. Only I care that I eat salad. And so I guilt trip myself because I have fallen short of an arbitrary standard that I've created for myself. And so there's all sorts of bizarre sort of consequences of the weirdly individualistic nature of the West. Any little bit on that before I go to masculinity because I definitely want to hold on masculinity with you. Well, I think what I'll say to kind of wrap this subject up here on independent versus interdependent selves is that it kind of gets back to not rugged or flexible, but rugged and flexible. Because people in Eastern cultures will often talk

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about all the ways that having a too interdependent self works against them or a too flexible sense of self. So I think it's just so important that we get away from another very Western concept, which is linear thinking this or that, you know, I'm independent or interdependent. I'm rugged or flexible and actually say, hey, I can be both independent and interdependent. I can be both rugged and flexible. The last place where your book really just crashed into a common theme from our show is the theme of modern masculinity. We've done several episodes about trying to cobble together a definition of masculinity that is non-reactionary and non-toxic. And I'm really interested in this thread of right wing masculinity that is the opposite. That's very reactionary. That's very anti-change. I think the upshot of the the manosphere as it's sometimes called is that like being manly in today's world means essentially being akin to an ancient Roman warrior philosopher. And to be clear, you know, Roman warrior philosophers from 50 BCE were real men. No question about that, but they were real men in a context that is now almost 2100 years old. And I think we could probably use a successful modern definition of masculinity that survives contact with modernity. Have you thought about the way in which themes of your book sort of connect with this project of sort of defining a new masculinity? I have because I'm a man and I'm trying to raise a son and do my best job. And I'm also just a member of society that cares about where we go as a collective. So the short answer is yes. And a couple of things come to mind. The first is back to that cycle of order, disorder, reorder. I think we are in a disorder period of masculinity. Like there is no normative value driven masculinity that everybody can agree on.

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And that's largely for good reason
because the old very patriarchal version didn't make sense.
So that's the first thing that I'll say.
The second thing that I'll say
and why I think we're in such a jam
and I'm gonna paint in broad strokes here
is that back to rugged flexibility,
I think that there is some ruggedness
in what it means to be a man.
And Richard Reeves, who I know as a prior guest
has done such great work on this.
I wanna try to be as elegant as him.
These are bell curves and you can't judge an individual
based on population level characteristics.
But at a population level, there are biological things
that separate a man, sex, not gender,
a man from a female.
And some of these are really rugged traits.
And I think some of the discourse wants to pretend
that these rugged traits don't exist.
Testosterone, a drive towards physicality.
Again, not all men, but on a bell curve,
more men than women.
So there's a rugged element of manliness
that I think some on the left wanna pretend doesn't exist.
But on the right, there is zero flexibility,
as you said, in what it means to be a man.
And that is creating so much fear, I think.
And out of fear, people latch on to demagogues and grifters.
Look across history.
In any time there was dramatic socioeconomic changes,
there were the rise of right wing
charlatans, demagogues and grifters.
Why?
Because people are scared and when people are scared,
they latch on to anyone that says,
I see your pain and I'm gonna take you back to the old way
and everyone else is wrong.
So I think that there's both of these happening
at the same time.
I don't think they're balanced.
I don't think they're equivalent.
I think the right's kind of latchback or snapback

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is perhaps much more intense.
But I do think there's also like,
there is a sense of ruggedness
on the population level of what masculinity means.
And now the question is,
how can it be applied in a much more flexible way?
I wanna end with one of my favorite charts
on our world and data,
which is this chart from the American Time News Survey
of our relationships in life.
And it's a chart of how much time we spend
with ourselves and various people.
And if you look at this chart in a certain way,
it's a chart of when our time's spent
with people in our lives peaks.
So it turns out that time spent with family,
that is mostly your parents and grandparents,
peaks at 15.
The time in your life that you spend with friends,
peaks around the age of 20.
The time you spend with coworkers,
peaks around the age of 30.
The time you spend with your children,
peaks around the age of 40.
The time you spend with your partner,
plateaus in your 50s,
and if your partner is alive and still married to you,
repeats again in your 60s.
And the time we spend alone with ourselves,
rises every decade after we turn 40.
And I find looking at this to be sort of a beautifully
haunting existential picture of life,
thinking about when time with people is peaking.
But then I sort of looked at this picture
with new eyes after I reread your book,
because it's also the case that our relationship
with all these people is changing within these curves.
Our relationship with our kids when they're five
is not a relationship with our kids when we're 15.
I've had a best friend, the same best friend
for 32 years, it's a different friendship.
It's different at 10, 15, 25, 30, 35.
Relationships change, marriages change.

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And that change is good.
It's not a weakness that these high quality relationships
in our lives are different decade to decade.
It really is, I think.
And your book makes such a lovely point
of making this clear, a sign of growth,
a sign of allostatic growth growing into change.
And I just wonder how at the biggest
lifecycle existential level,
you have thought about your relationship
with the people that you love the most in life
through the lens of this book.
I think it's just that, it's a process.
It's not a static thing.
And a relationship is a process of becoming
where the two people in the relationship are becoming
and they're changing individually
and then you're changing together.
And back to that, having legitimate,
realistic expectations of life,
expecting something to stay the same
and hold on to it forever,
just sets you up for disappointment.
It's just not how the world works.
So I think that viewing relationships
not as these things that are supposed to be stable,
but more as ongoing processes of becoming
is really helpful.
And then the relationship with yourself, right?
That's kind of the one that goes up in time.
I think you said once you hit 40,
I think this is also just such a beautiful opportunity
to grow and to have a rich and meaningful textured life,
while at the same time realizing
that there is a source of ruggedness underneath someone.
A religious person might say it's their soul.
An atheist might say it's base consciousness.
A therapist might say it's your core values.
Whatever we're gonna call it,
like there is something that's there,
but how that there gets applied changes all over
and over again.
I almost think of it like you have this canvas

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that is yourself.
And that canvas is constantly being filled with paint
as you live your life.
And it sounds so cliché and trite,
but at the end of your life,
you've got like this beautiful picture,
but the canvas was there all along.
Another way to think of it is something
that my grandmother says,
which is she looks in the mirror
and she sees this old lady that is weathered
and has been through so much,
but she doesn't know who that old lady is
because underneath it's still the same kid.
And I don't think it's either or,
I think it's both and.
So I think as we think about relating to ourselves,
it's realizing that, yes, our identity is a process,
yet there's also this core canvas that's just kind of there,
and that is our source of stability.
And you think about in psychiatric terms, right?
In ego, with absolutely no bounds,
with no ruggedness is either someone experiencing
enlightenment in a monastery
or like psychosis and bad mental illness.
However, an ego that is so rigid,
that cannot be flexible, that cannot change,
is its own form of neuroticism and anxiety
that often leads to depression.
So we have to have both.
We have to have a sense of who we are that is stable,
and then we have to be stable through and by changing.
And I think that that is true
in the most important relationship
because it's the one that we can't escape,
which is the relationship with ourselves.
We're kind of stuck with ourselves.
Brad Stollberg, Master of Change,
thank you very, very much.
Derek Thompson, it's a pleasure.
Plain English was hosted and reported by me, Derek Thompson,
and produced by Devin Manzi.
We'll see you back here every Tuesday

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for a brand new episode.
Have a great week.