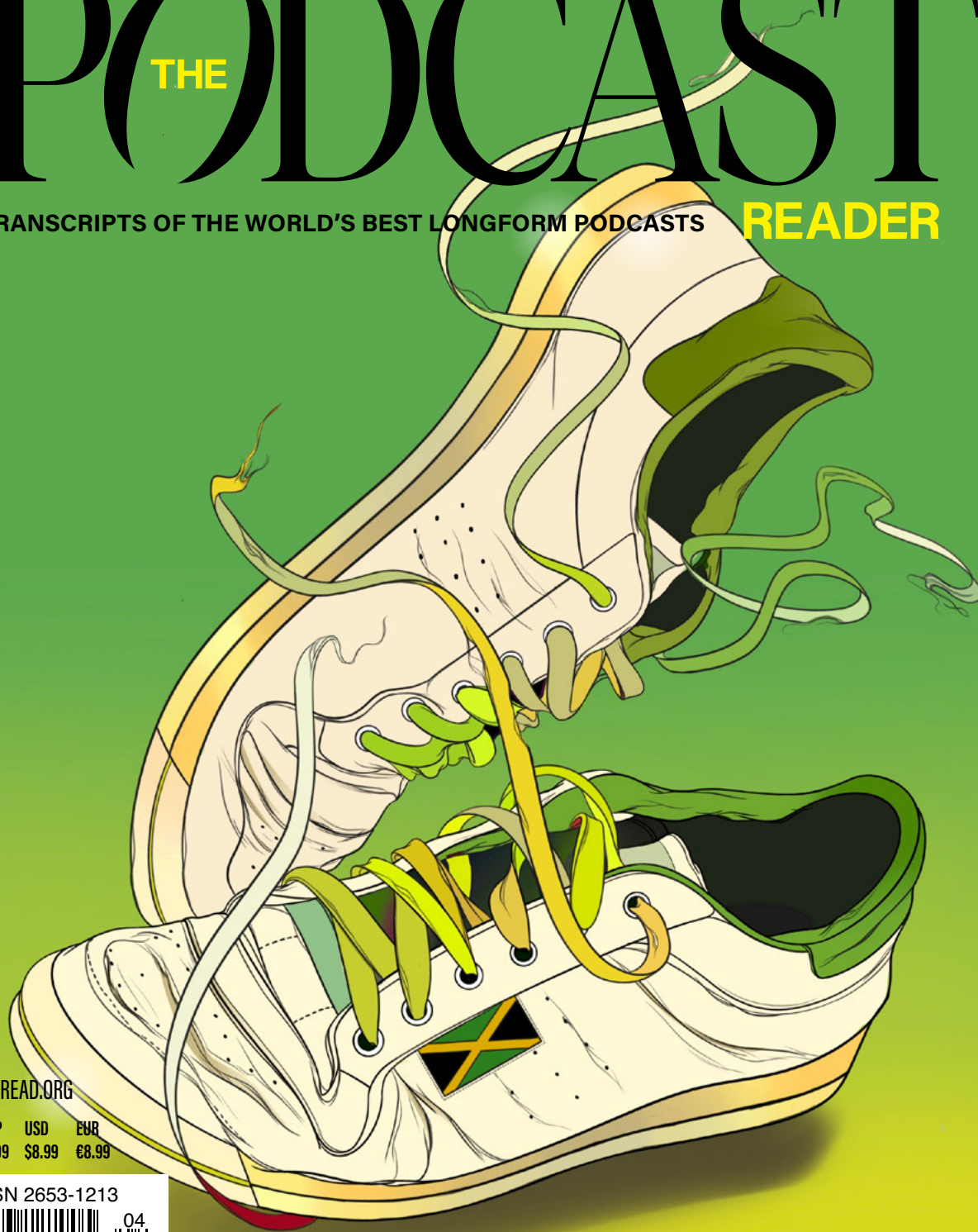


► GRAHAM ALLISON / NICOLAI TANGEN / ROYA HAKAKIAN /
DAVID SINCLAIR / MALCOLM GLADWELL ■

THE **PODCAST**

TRANSCRIPTS OF THE WORLD'S BEST LONGFORM PODCASTS **READER**



ISSUE 04

WWW.PODREAD.ORG

AUD	GBP	USD	EUR
\$12.99	£7.99	\$8.99	€8.99

ISSN 2653-1213



TPR IS A PROUD SUPPORTER OF



FEATURING PODCASTS FROM:



THE GOOD LIFE



THE MONEY MAZE



CONVERSATIONS WITH TYLER



THE JOLLY SWAGMAN



ECON TALK

recovawear™

easy recovery clothing

TAKE THE PAIN OUT OF DRESSING



At **recovawear™**, we have designed a growing range of opening seam clothing, making it easy for recovering patients to dress more easily. These clinically-tested designs minimise movement to the injury whilst dressing, providing improved injury management of shoulder, hip and knee injuries.

The designs use 100% sustainable soft remnant cotton jersey fabrics, which are fashionable solutions to the difficulties of recovery after operations and injury.

recovawear™
PO Box 401 Preston
Melbourne VIC 3072
Australia
1300 893 826
recovawear.com
info@recovawear.com
@recovawear

THE PODCAST READER

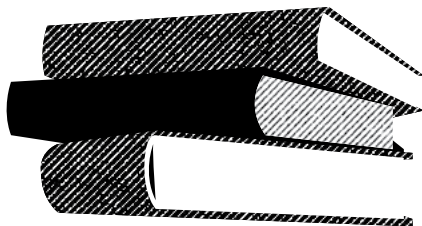
The Podcast Reader is published by Dialogues Media Foundation, an Australian-based not-for-profit company. Our podcast transcripts have been very lightly edited to improve readability.

We aim to support podcast producers by better disseminating their content and providing a more permanent platform for their work.

The Podcast Reader is a publication for those who are curious and open to new ideas, featuring selected transcripts of the world's best longform podcasts. From the overwhelming volume of podcast content, we've chosen the highlights for you - recent instalments to keep you up to date and some timeless episodes from the channels' back catalogues.

Longform podcasts provide a new and different platform for exploring the ideas that run our world, but they're underappreciated and under-exposed. It's easy to be distracted when listening to them. Interesting details can be missed, especially when episodes are long, and if you're finding part of a conversation uninteresting, there are no practical ways to 'skim' to the next point that interests you. Our printed podcast transcripts make it easier to focus on key points and follow complex ideas.

NB: All advertisements have been provided free of charge to social enterprises whose work we support.



► **THE IDEAL WAY TO ENGAGE WITH DIALOGUES IS TO READ THEM AND THEN TALK ABOUT THEM WITH PEOPLE. IDEALLY, YOU TALK ABOUT THEM WITH THE TEXT IN FRONT OF YOU SO YOU CAN QUOTE BITS AND READ BITS OUT LOUD. ■**

AGNES CALLARD



maison mabé

Motherhood
Jewellery & Gifts

maisonmabe.com.au



50% of Profits Donated



4. IN THIS EDITION

6.

Graham Allison

THE SPECTRE OF HAVOC

JOLLY SWAGMAN PODCAST 2021

18.

Nicolai Tangen

**EVERYONE SHOULD STUDY SOCIAL
PSYCHOLOGY**

MONEY MAZE 2021

32.

Roya Hakakian

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO AMERICA

ECONTALK 2021

44.

David Sinclair

HOW LONG WOULD YOU LIKE TO LIVE?

THE GOOD LIFE 2018

54.

Malcolm Gladwell

**TO MAKE THE WORLD SAFE FOR
MEDIOCRITY**

CONVERSATIONS WITH TYLER 2017

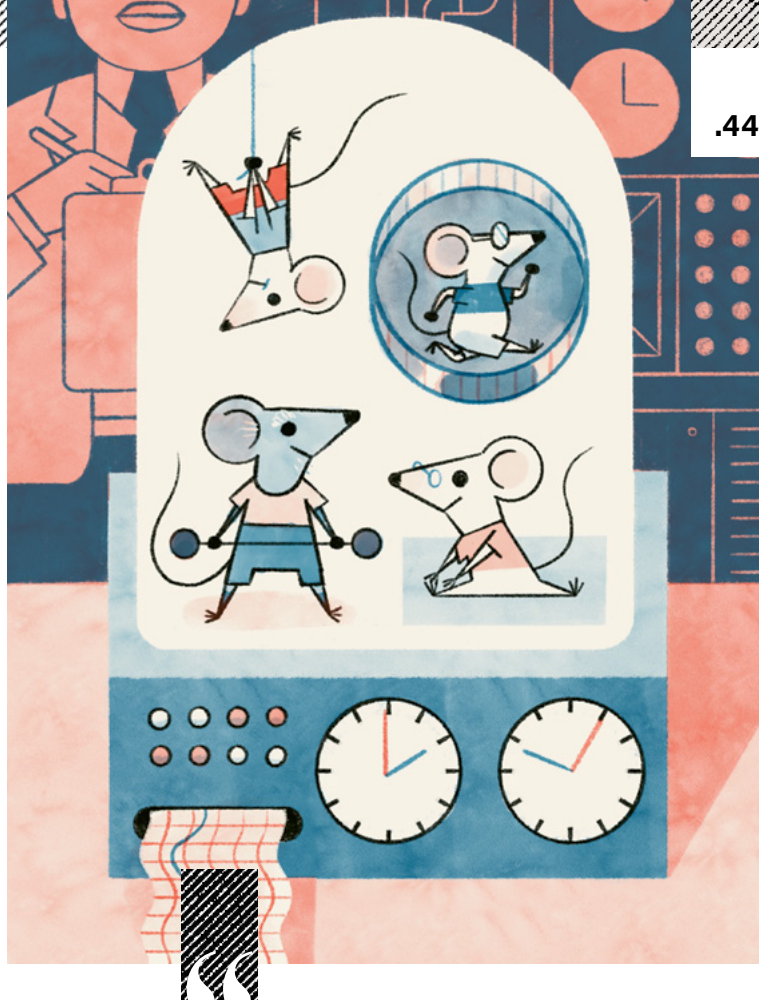
74. HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

*Illustrations by: Vaughan Mossop (page 7, 19),
Janelle Barone (page 55), Lachlan Conn (page 45),
LING (page 33).*





.54



.44



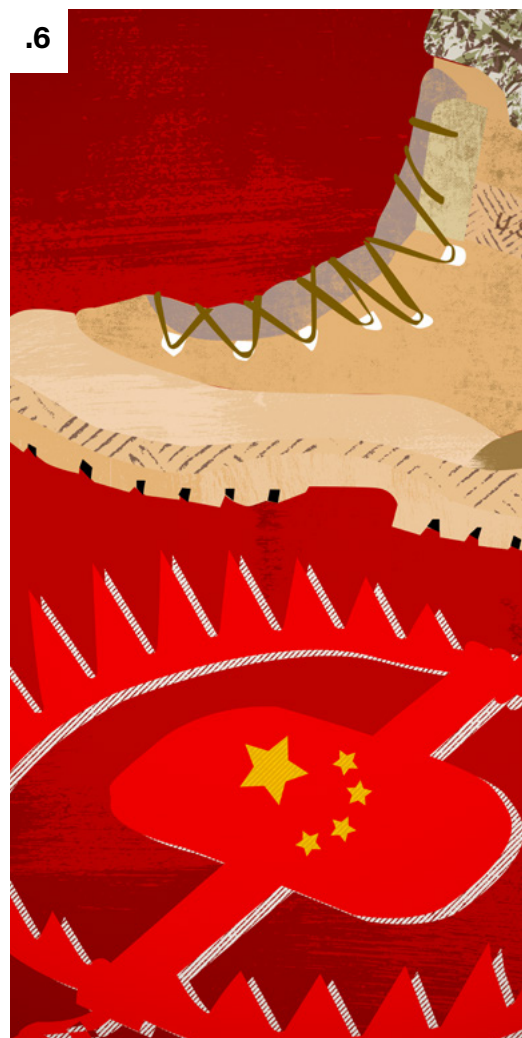
.18



.32

We who come under those circumstances become, if not later then definitely sooner, truly grateful for the many gifts that almost go unrecognised by the native born because they have always been here and they don't know of any other life.

ROYA HAKAKIAN



.6

IN THIS EDITION

GUESTS

Graham Allison

is the Douglas Dillon Professor of Government at Harvard University and was the founding Dean of Harvard's Kennedy School. His latest book *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* was published in 2017.

Nicolai Tangen

is CEO at Norges Bank Investment Management, responsible for managing the Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund. He holds degrees in finance from the Wharton School, the History of Art from the Courtauld Institute of Art and in Social Psychology from the London School of Economics.

Roya Hakakian

is an author and Persian poet. She is a founding member of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. Roya is the author of two collections of poetry in Persian and *A Beginner's Guide to America: For the Immigrant and the Curious*.

David Sinclair

is a Professor in the Department of Genetics and co-Director of the Paul F. Glenn Center for Biology of Aging Research at Harvard Medical School. Dr Sinclair is co-founder of several biotechnology companies and author of *Lifespan: Why We Age – and Why We Don't Have To*.

Malcolm Gladwell

is a journalist, author and public speaker. He has published seven books including *The Tipping Point* and *Outliers: The Story of Success*. He is also the host of the podcast *Revisionist History* and co-founder of the podcast company Pushkin Industries.

HOSTS

Joe Walker

is a Director of Operations at Forage, a Y Combinator-backed, venture-backed Australian start-up, and co-founder of the top-rated Australian longform interview podcast *The Jolly Swagman*, which he has hosted since 2017.

Simon Brewer

is CEO at Vantage Investment Advisory. Simon was previously a Portfolio Manager at Morgan Stanley Investment Management. He holds a degree in Economic History from the London School of Economics, and is co-founder of *The Money Maze* podcast, which he has hosted since 2020.

Russ Roberts

is an economist, President of Shalem College in Jerusalem, the John and Jean De Nault Research Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, and founder of the award-winning weekly podcast *EconTalk*, which he has hosted since 2006.

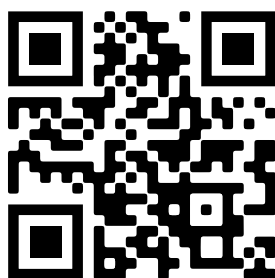
Andrew Leigh

is the Shadow Assistant Minister for Treasury and Charities, and Federal Member for Fenner in the ACT. Andrew was a professor of economics at the Australian National University and holds a PhD in Public Policy from Harvard. Andrew is the founder of *The Good Life* podcast, which he has hosted since 2016.

Tyler Cowen

is Holbert L. Harris Professor of Economics at George Mason University, author of bestselling books including *The Great Stagnation* and *The Complacent Class*, and host of the economics blog *Marginal Revolution* and the podcast *Conversations With Tyler*.

The Podcast Reader acknowledges the Kulin Nation as Traditional Owners of the land on which it is situated in Melbourne and Geelong, and pays respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.



USE THE QR CODE
TO **SAVE MORE THAN 30%**
BY SUBSCRIBING,
WITH FREE POSTAGE.

PODREAD.ORG/SUBSCRIBE

**Dialogues ■
Media ■
Foundation.**

THE PODCAST READER
PUBLISHED BY DIALOGUES MEDIA FOUNDATION
PO BOX 541 CARLTON NORTH VIC 3054

BOARD
NICHOLAS GRUEN
DAVID LOGGIA
JOE WALKER

THE PODCAST READER TEAM
PUBLISHER DAVID LOGGIA
PUBLISHER JOE WALKER
EDITOR ANDREA O'CONNOR
CREATIVE DIRECTOR VAUGHAN MOSSOP
WEB AND SOCIAL MEDIA LAURA SULLIVAN
CREATIVE CONSULTANT MICHAEL SKARBK
CONTENT NICK WHIGHAM

ILLUSTRATORS
JANELLE BARONE @JANELLE.BARONE
LACHLAN CONN @LACHCONN
LING @LINGERID
VAUGHAN MOSSOP @VAUGHANMOSSOP

ADVISERS
YANN BURDEN
VICKI LIKODIS
MO WYSE

CONTACT US
HELLO@PODREAD.ORG
PODREAD.ORG
@PODREADMAG
@PODREADMAG
/PODREADMAG

PUBLISHED IN 2021

Printed by Printgraphics Printgreen

The Podcast Reader is a proud supporter of:



The Podcast Reader is published eleven times per year. Views expressed by authors do not necessarily reflect those of the publishers. Copyright is reserved, which means you can't scan our pages and put them up on your website or anywhere else. Reproduction in whole or part is prohibited. ISSN 2653-1623 PPN 100029061

THE PODCAST
READER

**WE'D LOVE TO HEAR HOW
WE CAN IMPROVE!**



PODREAD.ORG/FEEDBACK



THE SPECTRE OF HAVOC

CAN AMERICA AND CHINA ESCAPE THE THUCYDIDES' TRAP?

GRAHAM ALLISON
JOLLY SWAGMAN PODCAST
2021

Interview by Joe Walker

Illustration by Vaughan Mossop

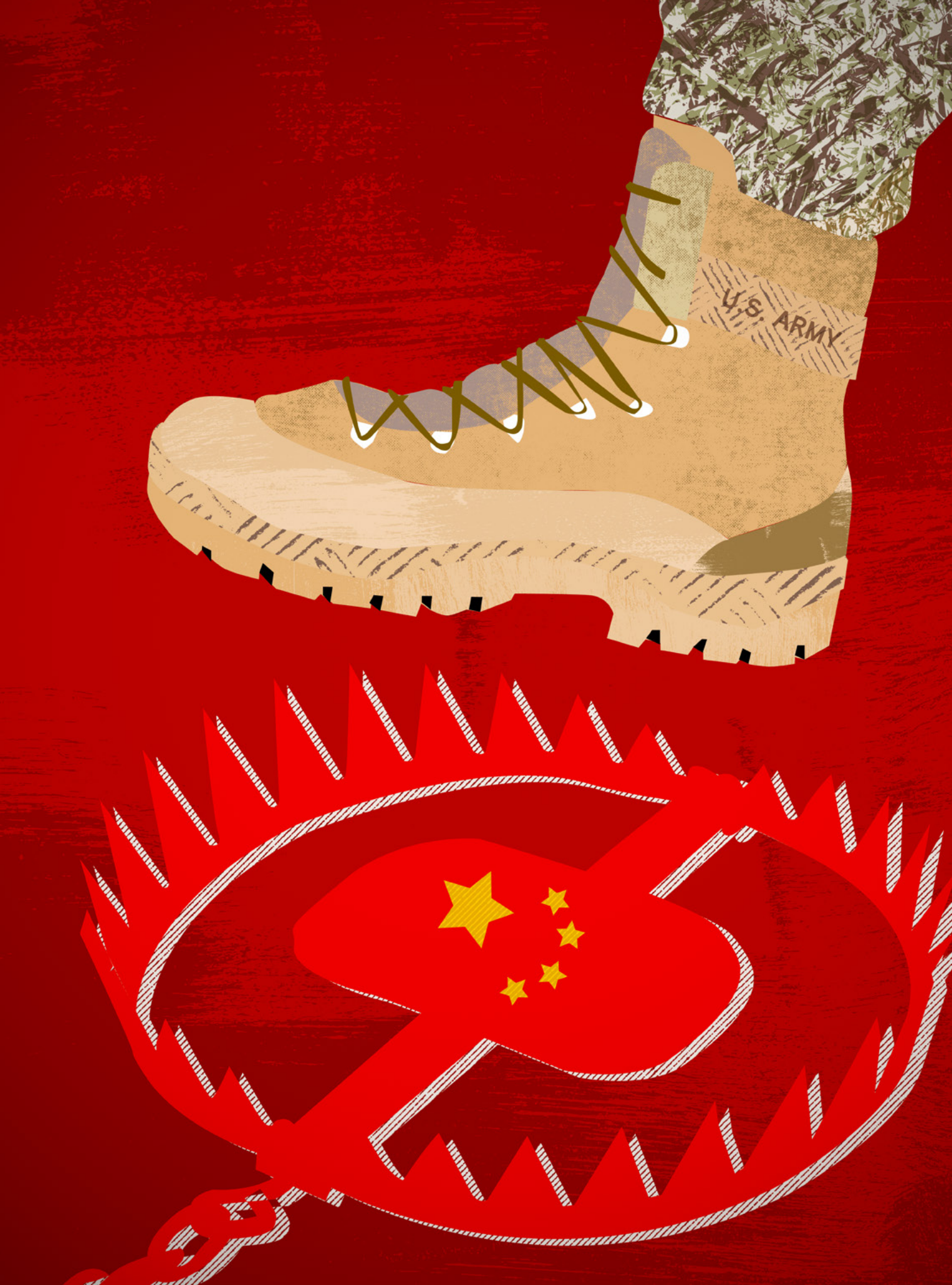
Joe Walker: This is an episode about China-US relations with one of the world's leading authorities on the topic. It's a serious episode and I want to set it up properly. To quote Lee Kuan Yew, 'China is the biggest player in the history of the world.' But China's rise has happened like a thunderclap, to paraphrase former Czech president, Václav Havel. It has happened so quickly we've not yet had time to be astonished. Measured in terms of purchasing power parity, China's economy has grown from being 45 per cent the size of the US economy in 2004, to surpassing it in 2014, to being one-sixth larger last year, and it's expected to be 135 per cent its size by 2024.

China's meteoric rise has created the greatest pov-

erty reduction mechanism in human history. It has also set the country on a collision course with the US as the rising superpower – and the ruling one – in a fight for global hegemony. This type of rivalry has occurred often enough in history that we've given it a name: Thucydidean rivalry. And it sets up what my guests coined the Thucydides' Trap – an idea I'll explain momentarily.

My guest Graham Allison is the Douglas Dillon Professor of Government at Harvard University. He's taught at Harvard for five decades. In fact, he was the founding Dean of Harvard's Kennedy School. He was also Assistant Secretary of Defense in the first Clinton administration. Graham is one of the most pre-eminent international relations scholars in the world. His first book, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, published in 1971, sold more than 500,000 copies and revolutionised the study of decision-making in political science. His latest book *Destined For War: Can America and China escape Thucydides' Trap?* was published in 2017 and quickly became an international bestseller.

I first picked it up in 2018 and it's one of the most important books I've read in the past several years.



Thucydides' Trap refers to the severe structural stress produced when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one. The name is a nod to the Athenian writer, Thucydides. In his book, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, regarded as the world's first ever work of history, Thucydides writes that it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.

The Peloponnesian War was not the last time Thucydides' trap was sprung. Looking back over the past 500 years, Graham and his research team at Harvard found sixteen cases where a nation threatened to disrupt the position of a dominant power. The cases range from Portugal versus Spain in the fifteenth century, to the United Kingdom and France versus Germany after the fall of the Berlin wall. In twelve of the sixteen cases, the result was war. Of course, it would be a mistake to conclude on the basis of those twelve war-torn cases that the probability of a US-China war in the next few decades is 0.75. It only makes sense to speak about one-shot historical events in terms of likelihood, an ordinal variable, not probability, a cardinal variable. For an explanation of why this is true, have a listen to my 30-minute conversation with John Kay in episode 131.

With that in mind, I agree with Graham that a US-China war is not just more likely than most people recognise, but more likely than not. As utterly and eternally regrettable as it would be, a war between the US and China is far from inconceivable. In fact, it's already happened. On the 25th June 1950, Kim Il-Sung, with support from China and the Soviet Union, launched a surprise invasion of South Korea. About a month later, General MacArthur came to Seoul's rescue leading a UN force mainly composed of American troops. They pushed the North Korean army back beyond the 38th parallel and towards the border between North Korea and China. One morning in November, MacArthur was flabbergasted to find 300,000 Chinese soldiers assailing the American lines. The Chinese beat MacArthur's forces back to the 38th parallel, which continues to demarcate the two Koreas today.

By the time the war ended in 1953, almost 3 million people had died, including 36,000 American troops. When I talk to people about the Thucydides' Trap and the parlous state of US-China relations, I'm sometimes met with the strange experience of being misinterpreted as somehow inviting or celebrating the spectre of war. Au contraire. Historically speaking, we're sailing through perilous waters. Objectivity, not struthiousness, is the first step to preventing war as an outcome. An outcome with the potential to end every part of every dream of every person. People who want to gloss over the danger are at best naive because by underestimating the risk, we increase it. Knowledge and chance are all that keep us

from stumbling bleary-eyed into the abyss, and I've never found chance to be reliable. Before I throw to the episode, I want to note two final things.

One, there is so much that Graham and I didn't discuss in the limited time that we had. I seriously recommend his book *Destined For War*. I don't say that lightly. And I tried to ask Graham some questions you won't find discussed in the book. Second, Graham is not just a scholar but also a gentleman. I was honoured when he emailed me afterwards to say it was one of the most informed, thoughtful and engaging interviews he'd ever done. It was a special privilege for me to have this opportunity to speak with Graham and I hope it provides some service to you, and to the world. So, without much further ado, please enjoy my conversation with the great Graham Allison.

Graham Allison, welcome to The Jolly Swagman podcast.

Graham Allison: Thank you for having me.

JW: It is an honour to speak with you, sir. I am a fan of your work. I think it is vitally important work in this current moment. And I have many things that I would like to discuss, but my first question is perhaps the trickiest and that is, in what circumstances would a war against China be worth fighting?

GA: Well, my God. That's a most difficult question. One of the difficulties with asking a question like that of professors is, as one of my colleagues used to say, we speak in 50-minute sound bites. So let me try to be succinct. Three or four points here. First, it depends a lot on what do you mean by a war. I think most of us have forgotten what war really means. If what we're talking about was a total war between the US and China, that is World War III. And if in that war, the US and China each used their full nuclear arsenals. At the end of that war there could be both countries erased from the map and every Chinese person in China killed and every American in the US killed. And, actually, there's enough other bombs to go around to hit a few other targets.

Ronald Reagan, a fierce anti-communist for whom I worked, worked his way through this logic and came to the conclusion that he often expressed in a bumper sticker: a nuclear war cannot be won and must therefore never be fought. So, he concluded there was nothing for which it would have been worth, after the fact, having destroyed the US entirely. So that's point one. Painful and very hard to intellectually come to.

Second point, quickly. So that doesn't mean that one's not prepared to risk a nuclear war for some things, or risk a small war that could escalate to a nuclear war. And in the Cold War, we did take ac-

tions that included some risk of a war. So, I think the question is better asked, under what circumstances should one take on risk of a war that could escalate to a nuclear war? And there, again, it depends on the values, and the interests. So, where the US has firm treaty commitments to Australia and New Zealand, to Japan, to South Korea – if the US should not fulfil its commitments, the alliance system would unravel and then we can play out the consequences of that. And one could well conclude that it would have been better to fight a war and risk the escalation of a nuclear war. Take, specifically, the Korean War – should we have fought the Korean War? Should the US and Australians have fought to keep South Korea from being absorbed by North Korea? Well, at the time we were able to do so against a China that we wouldn't even imagine would have entered the war, [but] did enter the war. As a result, lots more Americans and Australians were killed than would have been otherwise. But, nonetheless, there wasn't a risk that it would escalate to a nuclear war. And despite the fact that there were 50,000 dead Americans and some thousands of dead Australians, South Korea has been one of the great success stories of the last 50 years – it's emerged as a free, vibrant, democratic economy. So, if you said, 'Well, let's do it again.' Would we do that again? I think the answer is yes.

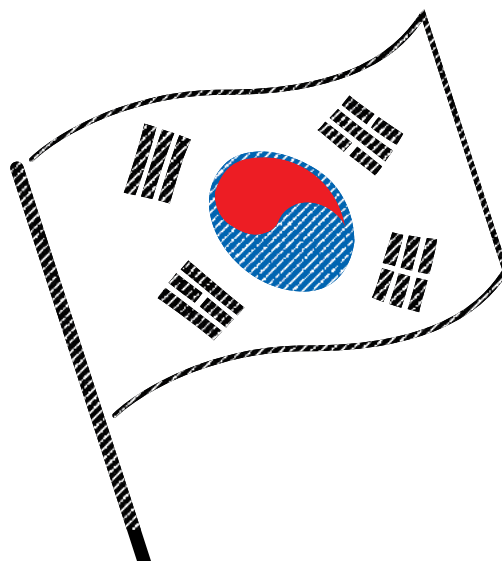
Would I do Vietnam again? No. So there are lots of unnecessary wars. Unfortunately, the US has had an inclination for them lately, including in Iraq and Afghanistan, but I think there's some things that are worth fighting for. Certainly, for our own freedoms, they're worth fighting for. John Kennedy had a saying. People would say, 'Well, would you rather be dead than red? Or red than dead?' And he said, 'Wait a minute, I refuse that dichotomy. I want both peace and freedom.' So, I think that's what we want.

JW: You've said that the three great teachers that you had on China were Henry Kissinger, Kevin Rudd and Lee Kuan Yew. I'm curious, could you summarise the most important thing that each man has taught you about China?

GA: Oh, great points. So, my teacher when I was a graduate student, was Henry Kissinger. Then I became his teaching assistant and course assistant and research assistant. He and I are going to do a call on Saturday on something. One of the things is if you've ever worked for Henry, you always work for Henry and he just turned 98 a couple of weeks ago. An amazing character. Henry, I think, understood the Reagan proposition that because we couldn't fight a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, we had to find some way to live with them even while we had a long-term competition or rivalry. And he struggled with that in the Nixon admin-



South Korea has been one of the great success stories of the last 50 years – it's emerged as a free, vibrant, democratic economy. So, if you said, 'Well, let's do it again.' Would we do that again? I think the answer is yes.



istration. Détente was an early stage of that – the evolution in the strategy of containment. And Henry has even said – there’s an online interview that I did with him in which he always wondered that if the Soviet Union had actually attacked the US with nuclear weapons, would he have recommended that we respond by basically destroying the entire Soviet Union if it meant that would mean the entire destruction of the US? And he was never able to answer that question in his own mind – even now, reflecting on it. But in any case, I would say that’s a big takeaway from Henry.

From Lee Kuan Yew, whom I think was unquestionably the most astute China watcher. In part because he was so smart, in part because he had a really urgent need to know since Singapore only survives at China’s whim or China’s largesse. Also, because he was a model for many Chinese leaders and they would come and want to talk to him. So, he spent more face time with Chinese leaders than anybody. His proposition was that China was going to be the biggest player in the history of the world. That its rise was normal since it was trying to follow more or less in the path of Singapore and South Korea and Japan and others who had made their way to the market. And that this was something that was going to become the defining feature of the twenty-first century. That the contest for supremacy would be the defining feature of the twenty-first century. And he kept telling me ... this is now back even at the beginning of the century, ‘Graham, you should pay more attention to China. Pay more attention to China.’ And I said, ‘Thank you, sir. But China is so big and so complicated and has such a long history, I don’t speak Mandarin.’ He said: ‘Pay more attention to China.’ So that was wise advice and his basic insight about how this was likely to develop was correct.

Kevin has been a great tutor for me on helping understand more of the complexities of the internal politics of China on the one hand, and also the reality of states like Australia in which it is impossible for them to choose between their security relationship with the US, which is essential for their survival and wellbeing on the one hand, and their economic relationship with China, which is essential for their prosperity.

So Kevin was one of the first people to drive it home to me that we shouldn’t feel made to choose between the US and China, and imagine that you’re going to reconstruct some Cold War with an iron curtain of economics between the people that are on your side in the rivalry and China, because you’re not going to find the choices are ones that you can live with. Whether it’s for Australia or Japan or Singapore or Germany.

So, I think that helps you see why this is ultimately

so much more complex than the Cold War because for the Soviet Union ... fortunately they isolated themselves from the global economy. So they only traded basically with the members of their bloc and the growing economies were part of the market world. And, ultimately, that built a strength on our side and hollowed out their side. They were mostly technically challenged except in a few areas. They had a good missile program. They had bombs that worked, but they were not able to make computers. Basically, they were a competitor in certain arenas, but unlike China. China is a full-spectrum peer competitor, and coming to grips with that for the US and for Australia and for everyone else, again means there’s no simple model like the Cold War that if we just follow that playbook it’s going to work out okay. This is a special new complicated case. It’s like what we’ve seen historically that Thucydides taught us: it is a rising power threatening to displace a ruling power. There’s a fundamental similarity, but the differences between this case and the Soviet Union – or many of the other cases – have to be more significant and have to be taken into account.

JW: Why is purchasing power parity (PPP) the best yardstick for measuring a country’s GDP?

GA: A great question. And this may be too complicated for some of your folks because once they get into PPP and market exchange rates it can become complicated. I wrote a fairly simplistic article on this called ‘The Big Mac Seesaw,’ for understanding economies. So, PPP is the best yard stick. That is the conclusion that both the CIA and the IMF have come to painfully after having used the traditional yard sticks for many years but worked their way through the logic of it. In brief, the logic of using PPP rather than market exchange rates is that it focuses on what the Chinese can buy in China at China prices as compared to what they would be able to buy if they took that equivalent amount of RMB, exchanged it at the current exchange rates for dollars and then use those dollars to buy something. So, to take the Big Mac Index, which was developed by *The Economist* and which is, I think, brilliant as a way to explain this. If I go to a McDonald’s in Beijing and take the RMB equivalent of the \$4.50 it costs me for a Big Mac at McDonald’s in Boston – if I take those RMB, I can buy one and a half Big Macs. So, I get more burger for my equivalent of a dollar or \$4.50. If I do it at exchange rates and make me translate it into dollars and take those there, I get less. So, I think the best way to think of it is in terms of what the Chinese buy for their currency at the current exchange rates and if they’re buying a car or a plane or a missile or a base. Another way to think of it is how much does it cost to buy a soldier? So again, in China about one-



... the reality of states like Australia in which it is impossible for them to choose between their security relationship with the US, which is essential for their survival and wellbeing on the one hand, and their economic relationship with China, which is essential for their prosperity [...]
Kevin was one of the first people to drive it home to me that we shouldn't feel made to choose between the US and China.



fifth of the price of an American soldier. Now they're not as good I think, not as tested but it's a complicated effort to try to compare. Nonetheless, if you go to the CIA Factbook online and ask about size of economies, you'll see that by their judgement of what's the best yard stick China's GDP is now about 20 per cent larger than that of the US.

JW: Why didn't China liberalise like everyone thought it would?

GA: Interesting question. And this is one I've talked to Liu He about often. He's their chief economics person who was a former student at the Kennedy School. I've known him for 25 years and he's a brilliant, thoughtful, serious person. And he says, as I think their government says: 'We believe that Western financial markets are like a casino and they invite excesses of the sort that we saw that produced the great financial crisis of 2008.' And they've repeatedly produced these crises in which there would have been a great depression if there hadn't been this extraordinary response both by the US Federal and by the Chinese government in doing their stimulus and coordinating them.' So they are creeping out in that space but they worry about financial markets in which the temptation always in a financial market is for big players to take on unnecessary levels or unsustainable levels of risk. And if we look at what Citigroup or Goldman Sachs or AIG or others did before 2008, they had created a bunch of instruments that left them so exposed that if ever real estate prices should decline, they would find themselves bankrupt and they would have been had it not been for the bailout. So I think the Chinese are very nervous about the full liberalisation of their currency because they think they can be jerked around by international markets and they believe those are wild.

It's a complicated subject because it certainly is the case that in Western open financial markets, we've seen recurring excesses of risk that led to financial crises that required major responses, including what we saw after the depression. So, whether they can find their way to a controlled market, or more controlled or more managed market, is a good question. In the same way that you can see how in the US we're asking how with too-big-to-fail and the other Volcker rule – laws that were put in after 2008 – whether there can be a little bit more management of the risks in the financial markets by the players whose excesses could actually jeopardise the whole financial system.

JW: What is the theoretical underpinning of the Thucydides' Trap?

GA: I think the fundamental idea, which Thucydides



There's something extremely, almost protean, about the proposition that when a rising power credibly threatens to displace a ruling power, you get a dynamic that is fairly predictable in which the ruling power believes this is unreasonable, unjust, irregular and that the rising power should actually know its place.



wrote about brilliantly and the reason why I always remind people this was Thucydides' idea, not my idea. I had the good fortune to coin the term Thucydides' Trap, but it was a way of making vivid Thucydides' insight. And I think his insight is actually fundamental, just as you say. What's the underpinning? There's something extremely, almost protean, about the proposition that when a rising power credibly threatens to displace a ruling power, you get a dynamic that is fairly predictable in which the ruling power believes this is unreasonable, unjust, irregular and that the rising power should actually know its place.

And so, you get what I described in my book as a syndrome. Similarly, the rising power quite naturally thinks, well now wait a minute. The rules were made before I was bigger and stronger. So they need to be adjusted to take account of my weight and my interests. And you actually see this everywhere. If you take the established firms in any industry and a technologically disruptive upstart, you can see this in the news business, where things that were newspapers and monopoly television networks for many years have been disrupted by technologies and upstarts and they wonder what the hell is going on. Why are you behaving this way? You shouldn't be doing things like this.

You can see this in the animal kingdom, as you watch an alpha wolf and the emergence of a would-be. And you can see this in families. If you have two children, roughly the same age and one, the older one is much taller than the younger one, but then for whatever reason, the younger one begins to sprout and becomes taller than the older one. The table conversation changes – the amount of talk the younger one begins to do. Even sometimes he suggests that maybe the bedrooms should be readjusted because 'my bedroom is not sufficient for me now'. So, I think the phenomenon that occurs with a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power you see in the course of history, but you can see its elements intuitively in the animal kingdom and even the human expressions of that in families.

JW: When you wrote the book, you implied that Germany and Britain prior to the First World War was the most similar case study to China and the US today. I'm curious Graham, has that view changed since the book was written? For example, Japan and the US before the Second World War might be more applicable now.

GA: No, I still find the First World War resulting from the rise of Germany and efforts of Great Britain to cope with it, the most analogous case. When I talked to the Chinese about this, the case they liked the best is the rise of the US and its rivalry with Great Britain

and Britain's acceptance of that. And the case that I remind them of is the case of the Cold War and the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union. I think there are three or four reasons why the German case is so haunting. The first is that once Germany was reunified, given Prussia and now that it had become a full German state, its growth rate began to exceed that of Great Britain. So, by 1900, its GDP was equal and by 1914, 25 per cent larger. So, it was on a trajectory in which it was getting stronger and as it got stronger, Germany said, 'Well, why does everybody else have colonies and we don't? We should have colonies.' Even though they were all taken, 'But they were taken before we were able to compete. So how about some for us? Why should the British have a Navy that dominates all the blue water? We're bigger and richer so we should have a Navy.' So, they began building a Navy. If you look at The Crowe Memorandum that I refer to in the book written to explain to the King of England why the rivalry with Germany was becoming the central feature for the British, I think it's haunting. Secondly, this is, I think, a valuable warning case for us that in this case neither Great Britain nor Germany wanted war. Both of them actually understood that war could be devastating for them, but they got themselves into a set of entanglements that then allowed something as otherwise inconsequential as the assassination of an Archduke in Sarajevo to become a spark that produced a fire that produced a conflagration, at the end of which nobody would have chosen what they got. And, actually, Europe, which had been the cockpit of civilisation for half a millennium, was basically exhausted and never recovered.

So, I think the reminder that you don't have to want war for war to happen and that things that would otherwise seem inconsequential when played into the misperceptions and miscalculations that are characteristic of a Thucydidean rivalry can often trigger a spiral of negative reactions that drag people to a place they don't want to be. And I worry about Taiwan as a potential trigger, or North Korea as a potential trigger. I think it's not difficult if you were thinking about it through Thucydidean lenses to find candidates that could become such a spark. If the two parties are not smart enough to think about them before and figure out ways to prevent them.

JW: That point, Graham, about the role of third parties in igniting a war between Thucydidean rivals, I think, is really important and overlooked. Most people who I talk to about your book, their first reaction is, 'I just can't see it happening because war between China and the US is so manifestly against the interests of both.' But your point is that there's almost this tragic quality to some of these conflicts because they spiral out of control.



I still find the First World War resulting from the rise of Germany and efforts of Great Britain to cope with it, the most analogous case.



GA: As I mentioned in the book, I've been fascinated by the First World War for a long time. So Bethmann Hollweg, he's very interesting, the Chancellor. He lives through this and after it, one of his relatives asked him, 'What did you guys do? What did you think you were doing? How did you let this happen?' And he has this crazy line. 'Ah, if we only knew.' So, he should have known better than that. And we can at least be smart enough to learn from lessons and mistakes like that if we're prepared to.

JW: On an optimistic note, the Chinese don't really believe in inadvertent escalation. Their thinking is quite different to Western thinking in that sense. I was catching up with Oriana Skylar Mastro in Sydney last night. And she was saying that the Chinese just think, 'why would we let a war spiral out of control? It's completely within our control.'

GA: I've had this discussion with the Chinese and I think there's no question that in their conceptualisation of war, and especially in their Marxist-Leninist light rinse of that, that has these ideas of inevitability and determinism. There's no doubt an element of that. But I think that it's also the case that for their

serious thinkers they notice lots of things that seem to happen that were not chosen. I've had this conversation with two people who worked directly for Xi Jinping. And I said, 'Did they think that the great financial crisis of 2008 was chosen by somebody understanding what they were doing?' They say, 'Well, of course not. If anybody had understood what was likely to happen then they would have positioned themselves quite differently.' So, I think to some extent I'm sure that much of Chinese thinking is shaped by their historical concepts and their Chinese characteristics, and even by their Confucianism to some extent. Kevin is about to persuade me that maybe even some of the Marxist-Leninism, although I keep telling him I can find more real communists in Cambridge, Massachusetts than in Beijing.

But I'm more impressed with their ultimate pragmatism. When I watch the way they actually behave – even though they sometimes give unusual explanations of it – they seem to be very ruthlessly realistic and pragmatic. And I think in that regard if financial markets can be as undetermined and vulnerable to being triggered by unusual behaviour or irresponsible behaviour, I think they suspect that could also be true if the US were to do something reckless. Or alternatively, Taiwan to do something reckless or to respond in a way that they would regard as reckless to something that they did.

JW: Is the Thucydides' Trap really a trap? We've already spoken about how there are some wars that have to be fought. For example, the US was right to join the Second World War. But, more than that, there are more things than war that are really, really undesirable. For example, losing your status as top dog and all of the loss of influence that that entails and sometimes a war might be necessary to prevent that loss of status. So is the Thucydides' Trap, not so much a trap?

GA: Good question. So, there's the Thucydides' Trap as one big idea and the Thucydidean rivalry is really the structural underpinning of that. A Thucydidean rivalry is a special form of great power competition. Great power competition as known through history. But some great power competitions include rapid change in the relative power of the two parties in which one power's rise is basically shifting the seesaw of power to the disadvantage of the party that was the ruling party. So, in those circumstances that's the fundamental situation and sometimes there can be an argument for the ruling power fighting the rising power deliberately before the rising power becomes strong enough to overtake it. Or, similarly, the rising power may think I'm big enough and strong enough that it's time for me to make my move and you should either stand down or if I have



I'm more impressed with their ultimate pragmatism. When I watch the way they actually behave – even though they sometimes give unusual explanations of it – they seem to be very ruthlessly realistic and pragmatic.



to fight you, I'll fight you.

I would say Thucydidean rivalries produce war in some instances without having been caught in the Thucydides' Trap component. The Thucydides' Trap component emphasises the ways in which the misperceptions and miscalculations in this rivalry and accidents or incidents or third-party provocations trigger the parties into a war that neither would have chosen. So, it tries to highlight that component of it but you're certainly right to notice that the Thucydidean rivalries are about something and they're about not simply who's at the top of the ladder, but whether if as you get bigger and stronger than I am, you insist that, well China rules Hong Kong. So, China rules Hong Kong. Well then China rules Taiwan. Well, wait a minute. But I was proposing we leave Taiwan the way it was before to which the answer is, well you now have made it such that if I want to prevent you ruling Taiwan, I have to take a risk that I would regard as unacceptable because a balance of military power has shifted.

So, I think the proposition that the relative strength of the parties, given that they have quite understandable contrary interests and values, being that it's about more than worrying about the risk of accidental war. It's also the fundamental question of, well whose rules are you going to ultimately obtain? And if we care deeply about our freedoms, which we do. And if we believe that democratic forms of government are the best way in which to ensure those, then we have to figure out a way in which in this rivalry ultimately our team wins at least enough of the Olympic contests to hold our own. That doesn't mean we have to hold on to every position we had when we were relatively stronger, and I think we have to be careful not to get stuck with lost causes or sunk costs. But I think there's more reason to believe that the US now needs Australia, Japan, India, if ever India could become real and South Korea, than in the earlier period in which we [the US] were more doing a favour for countries by bringing them under our nuclear umbrella.

JW: Joe Henrich, another distinguished Harvard professor points out that China has become 'weirder' [WEIRD: Western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic] in the sense that it's developed a psychology more similar to Western psychology. The CCP began altering kinship structure in ways similar to what the Catholic church did in Europe beginning in around 1950. They started by destroying the clans, requiring bilateral inheritance, ending polygyny. Then the one-child policy massively shrunk families, made cousins rare. And then add to that urbanisation, competing voluntary associations like universities and business organisations. China has become a lot weirder and there's evidence that



Thucydidean rivalries produce war in some instances without having been caught in the Thucydides' Trap component. The Thucydides' Trap component emphasises the ways in which the misperceptions and miscalculations in this rivalry and accidents or incidents or third-party provocations trigger the parties into a war that neither would have chosen.



culturally similar groups are less likely to go to war. Britain and America around 1900 is an example of that. Should the west be trying harder to make China weirder?

GA: So, first, it's a slightly perverse argument that he makes by calling it weirder because it seems like he really means more like us, more normal. Now I think Americans are weird anyhow. Normally when this argument comes up, people think it's about China's Confucianism, autocracy, hierarchy, communism or party-led system. In the US now, particularly for people trying to rally efforts to counterbalance Chi-

na, the more they can seem 'weird' in simple English, the more they seem like they're behaving differently than other states, in Xinjiang or Hong Kong, or in their autocratic system or in their party-led system. The more you can hit the ideology piece of this, or human rights, in order to build a coalition to counter China. So that's actually a different idea. I think in this instance, it's a very big and complicated argument and I don't have a totally settled argument or agreement about it. There's no doubt that Chinese history, culture, Confucianism, characteristics are significantly different. And there's no question that their current party-led autocracy and their views about the fact that the party should rule everything is quite contrary to my convictions, or Western convictions, about individual liberty being the highest political value and the political system protecting that. There's no doubt that that's true.

On the other hand, I would say fundamentally this is a geopolitical structural rivalry and if China were 'just like us' I believe the difference in the rivalry would be modest. So contrary to those that argue that what's going on now is China's abnormality, I would say China looks to me, unfortunately, very normal as a great power. And, in fact, in my book the chapter that most Americans don't like the most and that I actually find the most delicious is called, What if Xi's China were just like us? And I imagine a conversation between Teddy Roosevelt and Xi Jinping. And I think Teddy Roosevelt who led the Americans into what he was confident would be an American century would say to Xi Jinping, 'You seem to be pretty mild and reserved given your relative power.' So, in the US case as you'll know but many of your listeners may not, Teddy Roosevelt showed up in Washington in 1898 as the number two person in the department of the Navy. He found it an abomination that there were foreigners, especially Spanish who were occupying Cuba, and even British and Germans, in our hemisphere and it was time for them to leave. And then a dozen years after that a lot happened. There was a mysterious explosion in the Havana Harbour where a ship called The Maine was blown up. We didn't know who had done it, but in any case we declared war on Spain, defeated them, kicked them out, liberated Cuba. Took Puerto Rico as a spoil of war, and also Guam, which is how the US got Guam. Picked up the Philippines as a first colony. We then threatened war first with Britain and then Germany unless they backed out of a territorial dispute in Venezuela. We sponsored and supported a coup in a country called Colombia. Created a whole new country called Panama, which the next day gave us a contract for a canal so that Teddy's ships could go from the Atlantic to the Pacific. And he even then annunciated the Roosevelt Corollary of the Monroe Doctrine, in which it said any nation

in our hemisphere that misbehaves, we will send the marines and change their government. And every year thereafter we sent the marines somewhere and changed some government. So, I think he would look at Xi Jinping so far and say: 'Pretty mild.'

JW: Absolute last question because I know you have to go. If the US is Sparta and China is Athens, Australians feel a bit like the Melians at the moment. And you'll be familiar with that other passage in Thucydides history of the Peloponnesian War, The Melian Dialogue, where the Athenians come to the island of Melos and say, 'You know as well as we do that right as the world goes is only in question between equals in power while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.' Australia is in the freezer at the moment with regards to China, and China's behaviour has been lacking all proportion. What principles should Australia obey in its response to China?

GA: First: is Australia in the Melian position in which the weaker suffer what they must? Yes. Two: if I understand it, 40 per cent of Australia's exports go to China and that's about 10 per cent of Australia's GDP. So, China is your most important economic relationship. This current punishment is for about 7 per cent of that, with the seven whatever they call them – the seven wrong moves that Australia did. These are about 7 per cent, so a small portion of the overall trade, and they're attempting to punish Australia in order to encourage the proper level of deference. So, I think unfortunately, that as an alien, it's necessary to try to humour and deal with, and adapt to, and adjust, and defer, and grovel to some extent in order to deal with a big powerful strong neighbour. Finally, last point. Fortunately, the Australians are not exactly like the Melians. The Melians actually didn't really matter that much to anybody. They certainly didn't matter to Sparta. They didn't have a defense treaty with Sparta, so nobody was coming to the defense of the Melians. Whereas in the Australian case, the exports that you provide, the raw materials especially, iron ore and coal and soybeans and others, are absolutely important to China. So, there's a degree of interdependence there that, managed carefully, I think you can be successful. But I think the bottom line is you're living with a big, powerful, strong neighbour that you'll have to find a way to humour and defer to, and cope with, but be unable to choose to ignore because you would do so at the risks to your economy and any Prime Minister who tried to do that would be at the risk to his power.

So, I think it's back to the Kevin Rudd point. Don't try to make us choose between our economic relationship and our security relationship. We're going to have to live in this very uncomfortable middle

ground. I think maybe for some lessons in it, you could talk to some people that live in the Western hemisphere with the US. I think the Mexicans have a good line which says, 'So close to the US and so far away from Go.' Maybe that'll do it.

JW: Thank you, Graham.



The Jolly Swagman

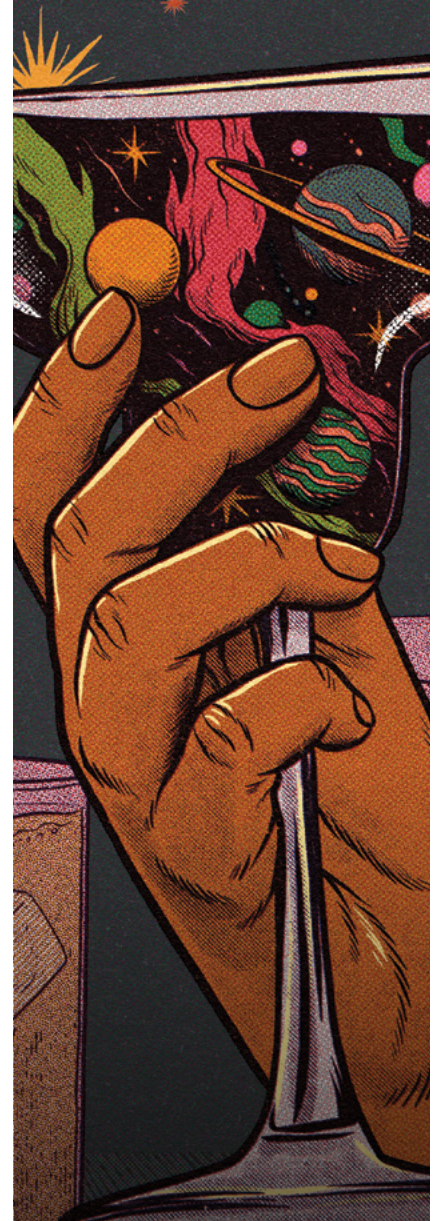
*Published in 2021 and transcribed for
The Podcast Reader.*

 Read more @ podread.org

 Listen @ The Jolly Swagman

THE PODCAST READER

**FOLLOW US ON
SOCIAL MEDIA!**




@PODREADMAG



@PODREADMAG



/PODREADMAG



EVERYONE SHOULD STUDY SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

WISDOM AND INSIGHTS FROM THE MANAGER OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST INVESTMENT FUND

NICOLAI TANGEN
MONEY MAZE
2021

Interview by Simon Brewer

Illustration by Vaughan Mossop

Simon Brewer: If I asked our listeners which country has the world's largest sovereign wealth fund at over \$1.3 trillion, quite a few, reasonably, would think it could be a Middle Eastern country. But if I then said this country has won more winter Olympics than any other, invented skiing and introduced salmon sushi to the world, you would pivot northwest. You would, of course, know it's Norway: prosperous, peaceful and phlegmatic. Its wealth, in large part, is courtesy of its oil riches and its sovereign wealth fund known as the Government Pension Fund Global. Today, we're very fortunate to have Nicolai Tangen, its chief executive officer and seasoned investor, who's taken on this formidable challenge of managing such a vast pool of assets. So Nicolai Tangen, welcome to The Money Maze Podcast.

Nicolai Tangen: Thank you so much, Simon.

SB: You're our first Norwegian, which is terrific. Just intrigued, does a Norwegian child get brought up differently?

NT: Probably, I think, a bit more outdoor, a bit more social democratic. But apart from that, the same things.

SB: So, let's talk about your very intriguing journey prior to getting into the asset management space. Let's just start with your university choices and the army. I'm not sure of the chronology, but talk me through your choices of education.

NT: Yeah, so I went to school in Norway and did what is called a Russian language course in the school for the armed forces. It's kind of part of the intelligence service. And we study Russian for a year and a half, so I did that, spent some time in Moscow, started at the Norwegian School of Economics, but then transferred to Wharton, which is part of the University of Pennsylvania. Then I started to work at Cazenove, which was then an independent stockbroker and now part of JPMorgan.



SB: I also see that you have, along the way, acquired a degree from the Courtauld Institute, and you were at my alma mater the London School of Economics. So how do they fit into the equation?

NT: Well, that was a bit later. So yes, we're coming to my time at Egerton. But after Egerton I took a break from my working life and did a degree in art history at the Courtauld, and then, later on, just a few years ago, I did a degree in social psychology at the London School of Economics. I'd spent so much time reading up on social psychology, various parts of it. I had met with thousands of companies and heard CEOs talk about leadership and organisational development and I thought, hey, I need some more academic research and input into this.

So, I did a degree there, which was absolutely fascinating, and I just think that's a must-have degree for all people, social psychology. It includes everything that is interesting in life: what makes us tick, why do we take risks, what kind of risks do we take, how do we make our decisions, how do we un-bias our decisions – all that kind of thing. It's fascinating.

SB: So, I already feel inadequate because I studied economic history at the London School of Economics, so I don't have any of those skills. But we are going to just walk back a little bit because having also spent a little time as I did in the Territorial Army, I wasn't called to the intelligence services, so how did you become involved with the Norwegian Intelligence Services? What did they spot in you?

NT: God knows, but the thing is this was ... at that stage there was a mandatory military service and so it's quite competitive to get in there, but they took in sixteen people every two years and they gave us Russian education. It's great but very hard. I was the second-worst student and I was nearly kicked out, but just about managed to scrape through. It was probably the toughest thing ever.

SB: Right. We might come back to Russia later on but let's just start with the first bit of your career because how does a Norwegian become an equity analyst at Cazenove?

NT: That's a good question. I spoke to a lot of people at that stage and asked where does one kind of kick off? And some people said, 'You should start in a partnership because they just look at risks completely differently than most other companies. You can join a big bank but it's not their money and so they think about risk in a different way.' Cazenove was then a partnership, many hundreds of years old. For a partnership to evolve for hundreds of years you have to think about risk in a particular way. I think

it was just an amazing grounding in doing proper work, to think about risks, think about money in a very serious way. It was an incredible start.

SB: In fact, that reminds me, Michael Lewis in his book *The Big Short*, closes with the interview of John Gutfreund, who was running Salomon and took Salomon public and basically said, 'John, that was where it all went wrong wasn't it, when it was no longer the partners' capital.' I think there was an eerie silence.

NT: Absolutely.

SB: From there to Egerton – it seemed like it was an incredibly vibrant place. What did you learn there and who inspired you?

NT: Well, Egerton is a great firm. When I was at Cazenove, Egerton was my biggest client, and I did a lot of work with Polinger and John Armitage. I would say, if I think about who has taught me investing, it's those two guys. Bill on the risk side and risk management side, and then on the stock-specific analyses, and how to look at companies, John Armitage, he's just incredible. Really, really outstanding. Not only an outstanding investor but an outstanding human being. Properly triple-A.

SB: However much triple-A, there was obviously a burning desire to go out on your own. So, you established AKO and I believe that AKO are the initials of your children?

NT: Yeah.

SB: Tell me, why did you think you could do this on your own?

NT: It was wonderful to be there, I spent five years, and then I decided to take a break and that's when I did my art history studies. I had never thought I should set up a company on my own but I was a pretty pedestrian art historian and thought this is not going to be particularly great. I think we probably all gravitate towards the area where we think we excel. And I realised I was better at looking at stocks than paintings, so that's when I decided to set up. And both Bill and John were very, very supportive in helping me as a reference and so on at the beginning. Without them there wouldn't have been an AKO.

SB: Right. But you decide to create a hedge fund so you're going to be long and short, and why did you think that was the right structure?



I just think that's a must-have degree for all people, social psychology. It includes everything that is interesting in life: what makes us tick, why do we take risks, what kind of risks do we take, how do we make our decisions...



NT: Those were the kind of things that I knew. So, I think it's important when you start up something, you need to be credible and you need to know what you do. That's what I had been doing. I had been working, particularly in the small cap field, and that's how we started out at AKO. In a way, I just used what I had learnt. Investing is one of these apprenticeship businesses and I think it's undervalued in a way how important it is to have been taught by somebody who's good, and that's not only company analysis but it's also risks. How do you think about risks, how do you think about your balance sheets? What do you do when things go against you? So, from that point of view, I probably went to the best school I could with the Egerton people.

SB: So AKO was, by any standards, a terrific success. And we've had some very interesting investors on the show. I've spoken to a few ahead of our call today, and they've been incredibly complimentary about what was achieved there. We'll come back to some of the parallels and lessons later on, but all is going well at AKO, great numbers, great reputation. Different, in a space that's very typical. And your friend Maarten Slendebroek, chairman of Robeco, says that you're not somebody who seeks the limelight and yet suddenly you take one of the most public roles in the world. And you know about risk reward, so just tell me how did you weigh up that decision?

NT: Just to give you a few words on AKO, yes it did go very well. We started at \$500 million back in 2005. When we left the firm was roughly \$20 billion. And with a very strong track record. And I think what we were most proud of was the investor base, investing for many of the world's leading endowments and universities. So, it was a very meaningful setup from that point of view because we made money for the universities. We also created the AKO Foundation in 2013 where I took part in my profit share and so on and started with 10 per cent as it says in the Bible and then took it to 20, 50, 75, and then eventually I decide to put my whole stake into that charitable foundation.

I think I had reached a stage where the firm was just a much bigger success than I had ever dreamt it could be. I had planned the succession pretty much from when we started the firm, and because that takes a long time to make a successful succession, and very few people do it actually in this business, you need to push forward your colleagues and the next generation several years before you decide to step down so that the investors are really comfortable with them and trust them.

Then you need to build a system so that it is process-oriented and that the investment process is in-

dependent of the leading character. So that is what we did. And we launched a Nordic product as well, and you know the Global Fund. So, it wasn't just one alpha machine, there were several alpha drivers with separate short teams and long teams as well. So, a whole group of people playing into this.

Then I kind of felt, you know what, this has just been amazing, great track record, wonderful people. I kind of thought it was time for them to take over the firm, I thought it needed a bit of new blood, some new inspiration, and I think it's been very, very inspiring for the team to take over the running of the firm and they're doing a tremendous job. They are just really, really fantastic people, the guys who run AKO now. They are close friends. I'm just so proud of them. And then, so what do I do then? Well, I thought, you know what? I'll go back to university. So, I had started the application process to go back to university. There was a particular program I was really interested in, and then I met this guy who said, 'Listen, the job in the Wealth Fund, is that something you'd think about?' And it just struck me, it just hit me, just like bang, I was completely speechless, just wow, as a Norwegian interested in asset management and organisational development. It's the dream job. It's just unbelievable, I mean what an honour, what a responsibility to take over the running of the country's money. It was just fantastic. And now I've been there for seven months and I love it.

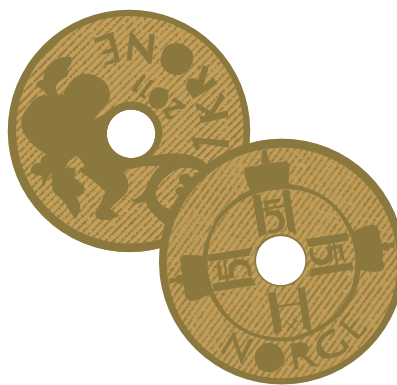
SB: Well, let's talk about it because this \$1.3 trillion, I mean I think that's the size of Australia's GDP, so it's an extraordinary pool of capital. Let's just start at the beginning. Was it Jens Stoltenberg, current secretary general of NATO, whose idea or genesis it was? Tell me a little bit about the history and how it came into place?

NT: It's one of the great success stories of this country. We struck the oil in '69 the day before Christmas Eve, on the last attempt. Bang, found the oil. Then very clever politicians and bureaucrats thought deeply about it and thought how do we do this? Well, we're going to avoid what happened in Holland where they spent the money domestically and drove inflation and crowded out industries and so on. We'll basically put the money from the shelf into a financial fund. And that's what they did.

So now the amount of money in the fund is twice as big as the remaining oil we have on the shelf, and in a way you can argue that we found oil twice because if you look at the 11 thousand trillion Norwegian krone we have in the fund, the oil base can be accounted for three of those, and six of those are returns and the rest is exchange in the Norwegian currency. But we have twice as much return now as the money which we put in. And the value of the fund



Generally speaking, we really believe in owning and being an active owner and helping companies improve...



now is roughly £200,000 per Norwegian. It's worth more than if you add on the value of all the houses, boats, cabins, just everything that people have, net of debt. The fund is bigger than that. So, it's just incredibly important. Last year it accounted for 25 per cent of the fiscal budget of the country, and that's by using on average over time 3 per cent.

SB: So, the only people who are really unhappy are probably Sweden that dissolved from the Northern Swedish Union in 1905 and a few other governments around the world. Holland wasn't the only one that spent oil revenues perhaps unwisely, and I'm sitting in one of the countries that had the windfall as well. But we'll move on. Just basically summarise the mission going forwards.

NT: Just one more thing, what is generally underestimated is how important the politicians have been here. There's been wide agreement amongst the political parties how this should be done. It's democratically anchored in the government, so all main decisions are taken in the government, and that means that you can see through volatility in a different way because you have that anchoring. There is a great group of people in the Ministry of Finance who basically set the mandate, and so there is a strict mandate and strict limitations on what I can do and what I can't do. I think their role in the whole process has been generally underestimated. Mission of the fund: safeguard the wealth for future generations. So, it's a generational fund, but it's also a reserve fund. So, for instance last year when we had the COVID situation, well I guess we still have, it has enabled the country to put in place measures which many other places can't do. There's a tremendous safety net in a way to have it.

SB: I understand all of that, and I guess that the fund is the largest single owner of stocks in the world. That presents great opportunity, but to a certain extent, it might also make you something of a prisoner, and we'll talk a little bit about that. But I know you've released your view and your strategy going forwards, and I'd just like to uncover that a bit because what I was intrigued with is you said what we want to do is make sure we use risk in a slightly more productive way.

NT: Yes, you're right, it's a big fund. We own 1.4 per cent of all listed companies in the world. In Europe we own 2.6 per cent, so a very big owner. We are running the fund close to the index, so it's an index near fund. And we have specific risk budget from the ministry, i.e. how much tracking error can we have on our investments, and we are not using the whole tracking error. Some of the risk has been accounted

for by various macro positionings, and those are the ones we want to do less of, and we want to do more stock-specific analysis and stock-specific investing. Partly through negative selection. So, for instance last year, you remember the Wirecard situation in Germany? We were out of that because of some very clever footwork from my colleagues, and we saved 1.4 billion Norwegian krone by not owning that stock. So that's the type of risk that I think we can take forwards through more negative selection.

We also have negative selection through various ESG criteria. So, we have published a set of expectation documents which lay out how we expect companies to behave and they are very much tied into the UN's sustainability goals, but we operationalise all the documents and put numbers on various climate measures, tax transparency, the use of water resources and so on. And we run all of our companies through this and then we sell out the companies that don't live up to our expectations. We divested some 300 companies this way, and that has actually also improved performance. I think we can do more of these kind of things going forwards, that's what I mean by using risk in a slightly different way.

SB: So, let's pause on that. We've had some very different views on The Money Maze podcast from Anne Richards, the head of Fidelity, and even Sarah Gordon, who is the CEO of the Impact Investing Institute, which is it's all well and good in pursuit of valid ESG goals to divest, but you might even then end up selling your shareholding to a passive fund as opposed to being a shareholder in BP and helping them with that journey. So how do you think about that, staying on board and helping that transition take place, versus just simply divesting?

NT: We are divesting in two different ways. One is what I mentioned, which we are doing internally, but we also have a council of ethics, which is a separate institution from us and they decide on companies that are going out of the index. For instance, coal, tobacco, some types of weapons and so on would be excluded from our index. So that's another way of thinking. Generally speaking, we really believe in owning and being an active owner and helping companies improve, and being a force behind that. That's the main thing. So, improving the world through dialogue is very important. Last year we had close to 3000 company meetings, and we have fourteen people in the ownership division, which works with the analysts and so on, and integrate that into the company dialogue we have. So very, very important. And that is why active ownership is important because active ownership and active investing kind of go hand in hand. You need to be an active owner in order to have that kind of dialogue.

SB: And as you review the mandate, and at least what you are capable of doing, you come from a background where at AKO you would have shorted, you maybe would have lent stock. Are these aspects that you would like to be able to do?

NT: Well, we do lend, we are a big stock lender, and that's been an important contribution to our returns over the years. We still do that. We don't short straight up, we are not net short, but we can be underweight positions. So that is kind of shorting in the oil fund world. Not owning something is practically being short for us.

SB: Which then brings me to private assets. I didn't think historically it's been an area that the wealth fund has been in. You've talked about valuations being elevated. We might come back to what that exactly means and the dispersion around that, but private assets – how are you considering their place? From hedge funds with low beta to forestry with recurring yields?

NT: There are some private things we do. I mean, we do real estate on the unlisted side. We don't do private equity, the reason there is mainly that the politicians are averse to paying the kinds of fees of these funds. But we do use external mandates when it comes to our emerging market exposure. So pretty much most of the exposures we have in emerging markets is taken care of by these external managers. They've done really, really well for us and they are an important contributor to returns. We have a group of people who select these managers who have tremendous knowledge and processes and are doing really well. So, it's an important part of what we do.

SB: And I think you've hired or you have a chief real assets officer, don't you?

NT: Yeah.

SB: So, I guess, how might this change over the next half a decade?

NT: The mandate now is also to make investments within unlisted infrastructure, so renewable infrastructure. And we made our first deal two weeks ago actually in Holland where we bought the second-largest windmill farm in the world and we are very happy about that deal. It generates electricity equivalent to what you need to electrify roughly one million households in Holland, so it's significant. We expect to do more of those things going forwards. Even though we are not in a hurry, because as you said valuations are not exactly rock bottom here, so we are taking our time.

SB: Well, you have the benefit of time but I just want to come back to your comment that there are no cheap sales out there in stocks. My question I suppose is the US by historic standards and most measures is expensive. The UK on the other hand, whilst very small, is historically very cheap. I think we quoted the other day, Graham Secker, Morgan Stanley's analyst, talking about it being at a forty-year relative low. How much can you, within your mandate, shift to make an important relative overweight that can affect performance when you see valuation skews?

NT: You can do some, but there are of course limits to how much we can move exposures around, because of that tracking error budget I mentioned. There is a rebalancing mechanism in the fund so that if a proportion of stocks go above a certain level, we rebalance that and move into bonds and vice versa. So, there is some rebalancing there. When we have the selloffs like we had during the financial crisis and also spring of last year, we are typically buyers in those situations.

SB: You own funds as well as direct stocks. I know we've had one of your investments, which was on your website, it was a Chinese manager, Red Gate, who came on the show. I'm intrigued again about how you think about complementing your core index plus with manager selections. How are you defining where you want to hire specialist management?

NT: Mainly in emerging markets. What we see is that they are so complex you really need the knowledge there, and that's how we are using them. We are using them in a way to help stay out of trouble because they only invest in roughly 30 per cent of the available companies in these markets, and hopefully we are not investing in the ones with the most reputational risk. Even though of course we never get it completely right and sometimes we end up indirectly having ownership stakes in companies which are controversial, that can happen.

SB: Well, this probably brings us to this topic of behavioural analytics, neuroscience, I think maybe your LSE degree clearly helped you. We know Jack Edmondson, who is the deputy Chief Investment Officer at Oxford University said that he attended your course at AKO on investment psychology, and this is something you were very keen on, and I think you believe it helps you understand whether the counterpart is being honest and trustworthy. Tell me about how you got there and how you're implementing that?

NT: Of course I don't work for AKO anymore so I



I think it is interesting, when you think about how many spend their lives talking to people, whose job it is to get information out of other people, how little training we have in asking questions.



shouldn't talk about AKO but let's just talk about this in general. I think it is interesting, when you think about how many spend their lives talking to people, whose job it is to get information out of other people, how little training we have in asking questions. You go into the average dinner party and look at how many boring men there are who just talk about themselves all the time and leave the dinner and don't know anything about a lady that they sat next to. The art of conversation, I think it's kind of a forgotten art in a way. What happened in Norway some years ago was this terrible disaster where this one person killed seventy-seven kids at this camp. And afterwards I read about the person who had done all the interrogation of this guy, and I contacted him and asked him whether he could possibly train us in the art of interrogation. It was called interrogation then. Now it's called conversation management because that's a bit less controversial.

SB: That's a euphemism.

NT: But basically he made a three-day course in how to do this whole thing. How you prepare, how you ask the questions, how you follow up the questions, do you use open-ended questions, do you tangle together various questions, just how do you do it and what do you read out of it and what do you read between the lines and how do you close meetings and conversations in a good way because, of course, that sets the scene for the next conversation you have. It's a phenomenal training and we, of course, trained the analysts at AKO and we also invited some clients along because this just isn't anything you can buy. I mean, there is one firm who's doing it but we thought our course was better. Now we're doing it in the oil fund as well, so our portfolio managers are being trained, and I think it's just an incredible education. These guys wrote a book about it, which is coming out in English quite soon, which is worth reading. It's fascinating, really fascinating.

SB: What's the book called?

NT: I'm not sure what they're going to call it in English. In Norwegian it's called *The Professional Conversation*.

SB: When it comes out we'll put it on the website in the show notes because that sounds fascinating and I take your point about how many men particularly will drone on at dinner parties. I mean, I wouldn't say I know any of them—

NT: Of course not.

SB: So, let's talk about this other issue, you've got forensic accounting, which is becoming more important. I think you're also doing linguistic analytics, now what does that mean?

NT: That's really fascinating. It is just how you read between the lines and what is meant by the usage of various words. And we hired a team of forensic linguists. Many forensic linguists get to work in the police and they analyse suicide notes and things like that, but many simply take the education and then stay at the university to educate the next set of forensic linguists, who then in turn educate the next set, and so on. So that's how it goes. I think at AKO, we were one of the biggest employers of forensic linguists and they were just absolutely brilliant. What is interesting is that they can read the transcript from a conference call and can pinpoint where there is a problem, what are they trying to hide? And that is why, for instance, if you get a combined question with two sub-questions, the CEO chooses not to answer one of them, or they change the history or they use different qualifiers in sentences and so on. So, it's an art but it's really fascinating to see how these language people can pinpoint problems even without knowing what kind of industry the company is in. What we did well was to combine these various sciences into the investment process. We're using forensic accounting, using market research, linguistics, etc. Of course, it makes the job 100 times more interesting. And I think it has huge explanatory value in terms of performance.

SB: I'm now thinking that I ought to ask these questions very specifically because I'm worried about what people might be saying about the way in which I ask the questions and read the transcripts. Anyway, I think you're also preparing your portfolio management athletes along the lines of elite athletes to be able to deal with headwinds and adverse situations.

NT: Yeah, it's interesting. I know you're a sailor, Simon, I also sail, and I was very lucky to sail with some of the Olympic sailors, and I just thought they were so professional. And I asked, what can we learn from the way you operate? And I think there were two main things: one was the debrief process, the way they debrief after each training session on so many different categories. It's kind of the process focus. And the other thing is what they call the bounce-back-ability after having lost a race: what kind of risks do you take in the next race, how do you get back? Why I love sailing is, well, for instance, take ping pong. You basically stay in a room and you play ping pong. No externalities. There is no wind, there is no nothing, it's just you and a ping pong ball, right? While sailing is very, very different. You



... in the long-term there is a very strong correlation between process and outcome, and that's why you need to have that process focus.



can be in the lead, the wind changes direction and you are last. How do you cope with that? What do you do in your next race? Well, you take the same amount of risk, the same strategy. What is that like in investing? Now, Simon, you lose a fortune in July. How is that influencing the way you take risk in August? I bet it does. Should it? No. Does it? Yes. So, you need to kind of work on that resilience and that bounce-back-ability, and that is why we use a psychologist, a sport psychologist. I'm sure you can use a normal psychologist, but then you just feel like I'm a patient, you know, I have to talk to a shrink and gee what's wrong with me?

But the thing is that you bring in a sport psychologist and you do that because you're a high achiever and you're a top performer, right, so people think it's great to work with a sport psychologist. It's helped me tremendously in terms of developing my resilience. And to focus on process and so on. We brought one in from what is called Olympiatoppen, it's kind of the combined effort within the Olympic Committee. Various sports have this kind of Olympic operation and we brought in the top psychologist from that entity to work with our team here. It's tremendous.

SB: So, would it be fair to say that what you're really trying to do is overcome the natural human tendency to move between fear and greed, which dictates so much of what we do and leads to so much bad performance?

NT: Absolutely. The thing is that the frustrating thing with asset management is that in the short-term there is no correlation between your process and the outcome. You can be doing everything right and you can lose your shirt and it's not because you did a bad job, it's just because of the way the market moves. Whilst in the long-term there is a very strong correlation between process and outcome, and that's why you need to have that process focus and that's what they're bringing into the picture here. Now, we're also using the sports psychologist to develop this thing called the 'investment simulator', which is, again, a very cool thing. It is putting the learning from mistakes into a system. If you manage to move from 51 per cent right to 52 per cent right, you are a hero, correct? And how do you do that? You look at everything you do, you look at your holding period, you look at your ability to be contrarian, you look at your mental state, which you can kind of read from your recent performance, etc. And whether you have been successful in these types of situations before, that type of stock, that type of industry, this market environment, etc. So, we're building all that data and we've got hundreds of millions of data points in the fund. It's all in the cloud and we can use that data to

feed back to us when we make decisions. We have a big team working on the development of that now, and I think that could be really, really interesting. Because the thing here is that in financial markets, how many crisis situations do you have? Okay, you had one with the Russian situation in the nineties, you had the dot com, you had the big financial crisis in '08/'09, and then you had COVID. You've perhaps had three, four of these situations during your lifetime. How do you train? You have no training. So, to build that simulator, which can take you through these stress situations I think could be amazing.

SB: There might be some people who know me listening and they're going to say, 'Gosh Simon, you're not a sailor, how come Nicolai said that?' So, I'm going to just say for the record I'm sitting here in Salcombe, in Devon, where there's a lot of sailing going on. I, myself, would possibly be the world's worst sailor. I'm a man for terra firma, but thank you for the compliment Nicolai.

NT: Well, I also call myself a skier and it's the same thing probably.

SB: I'm intrigued, because since 1998 the fund has generated, I believe, an annual return of about 6.3 per cent. You obviously have very understandable guidelines. How would you like to be judged at the end of your tenure?

NT: Good question. I mean, there are many things that go into that cocktail. One is, of course, the returns. I would probably judge myself more on the alpha and the excess returns hopefully, than the return itself, because we have limited leeway in how we can structure the investment decisions. But then it has to do with the methodology and whether we have brought forward the pros of the investment process. It's what we do on the ESG side. I know we are very, very important there in terms of setting the tone. Then it is what we manage to do with the people here. I mean, how fulfilling they think their work is and how we develop the people here. There are five hundred very, very accomplished people, and a lot of the areas within the fund are really world-class, and I think it's going to bring that world-class thinking across everything we do.

SB: And if there are three things you would like to define the culture that you are developing, what would they be?

NT: I mean, excellence is very important here. A huge amount of integrity and honesty. Those are the types of values we drive. It's a hardworking environment with ambitious people who really want

to make an impact. So, it's that kind of intrinsic motivation; motivation you can split in two, you have extrinsic motivation, which is more salary and all, you pay people. And you of course have the intrinsic motivation, which for us is trying to do something good, and doing something great for the country.

SB: Also, as we go along as investors, we learn from our mistakes. I'd love to know, what are the investing mistakes you've made that have really been helpful in the long-term?

NT: Well, I have made all the mistakes in the book. I don't think there's a single mistake I haven't made. I mean, personally I think it's interesting that the big losses you have are normally balance sheet related. So as long as you have a strong balance sheet, you are generally okay. The big learning also is to read fear and greed. And how do you do that? How could you really put into words the panic of the last year for instance? Well, interestingly, from social psychology, we took some learnings from fear, and how you operationalise them to get fear? And you look at fear as the amount of media about a topic, you look at how much disagreement there is between specialists, and what the doomsday scenarios are. And from that point of view I've probably hardly seen a higher level of fear than in February last year. Then what now? Well, we're seeing a pretty high degree of euphoria. You're seeing it in behaviour and risk-taking and quality of IPOs and so on.

SB: So, this balance sheet risk is, I think, spot on. Debt is what gets companies into trouble and you can only look at the high yield index to see how low it is and how easy it is for companies with very questionable finances being able to raise large amounts of money, despite suspect business models. How do you specifically want your portfolio managers and analysts to red flag those companies in the universe, so that when, at some stage there will be a hiccup, whether it's introduced by inflation or rate normalisation or another exogenous shock, how are you getting them to prepare for that?

NT: The model here is very much decentralised positioning. I don't hang over their shoulders and tell them what to do, but we decentralise mandates. We don't have the portfolio manager/analyst structure here, so we have a lot of people running money. We let them loose to do what they want. I do think there are many ways to skin the cat, and I think with the way we do it here works really well actually. I don't instruct them to do anything. We allocate capital.

SB: And what are your biggest gripes? Maybe that's the wrong word, but your biggest criticisms about

the investing industry generally?

NT: I should be very careful.

SB: That's maybe why I asked the question.

NT: It is a relatively short-term oriented business, right? I think there are not enough people who think properly about compounding and who have the patience. And I've been thinking a lot about time – how do you install that thinking, that long-term thinking, that compounding mentality? When you are young, straight out of school, and you want to make a killing every day, how do you get that thinking in? I mean, ideally you want to take all the analysts, put them five years at the top of a mountain in Bhutan with a monk drinking green tea and really understanding what time is. That's probably the course they should be doing but I don't think we can do that.

SB: Well, I get the time but I also get maybe the value of history. Most people investing today weren't around in the 1970s, they don't know what it's like to live in an inflationary environment. There may or may not be a resurgence in inflation coming, it's been my perspective that it is and it's going to surprise people on the upside. And I know you're trying to move away from that top-down and increasingly make sure that your bottom-up process is as rigid and thorough as it can be, but this could be a pretty important shift in the landscape. We haven't had an inflation for 35 years. How do you want to, I suppose, diagnose the ramifications?

NT: I think you're right, I am kind of in your camp on inflation. I think it could be the unexpected thing here, and of course it's bad because it will hit both the bond market and the stock market at the same time. And we are seeing some signs of it – we're seeing it in plastic, we're seeing it in transportation costs, we are seeing it in minimum wages and tax and so on. So, we are seeing it, I think. The question is how surprising it's going to be on the upside. I mean, some inflation of course is good but a lot is not so good. Now, when it comes to crisis they're all different, right? Otherwise there wouldn't have been a crisis. If we have seen it before it's not a crisis. It's the new thing which is really hitting you. When you have a nuclear meltdown in Japan, we haven't seen it, right? We don't know how important it can be. When you have a virus you just really don't know, it's completely new. The financial crisis, completely new. So, crisis is always new, otherwise it's not a problem.

SB: Well, on the subject of inflation, I will share with you, you may have read it, but Ben Funnell and Teun



... when it comes to crisis they're all different, right? Otherwise there wouldn't have been a crisis. If we have seen it before it's not a crisis.



Draaisma, who were the Morgan Stanley European strategists who now work for the Man Group, have published a really long-reaching study of inflation going back about as far as you can and its impact on assets, and it's a great study because I worry that there is a terrific amount of short-termism, and a terrific amount of basically an absence of skillset in dealing with inflation because so often I hear, well, a little bit of inflation is fine. Well, a little bit may be fine for some companies, but a lot is a big headache for many. So maybe that's an advantage if one's preparing for it.

I'd like to ask you some more general questions. You've been incredibly generous with the AKO Foundation. We had Chris Hohn on the show, who has done something very similar at TCI. What gives you the most satisfaction about what the charity is achieving?

NT: The education of less privileged kids. Very, very important. This is not a political statement because I can't say anything political but when you think about injustice and unfairness and how early it starts, it starts day one with the type of stimulus you get at home from your parents, and it has to do with language, the type of food you get, the level of aspiration, the support, mental support, safety network, all these kinds of things. It starts at day one and then it just increases. Look at childhood obesity, how socially dependent that is – it depends on where you grow up and what kind of parenting you had, and what it means in terms of future illness and pay gaps and so on is stark. And then of course if you are very good and you've had all that support, you get into a better school, you study with other clever kids, you work harder, you get a summer job because that's what you learn from home that you should have, and you even maybe have a network so that you get one. You have better teachers and you have better chances. So, it's that whole unfairness and injustice, which starts so early, and which accelerates. So early intervention is just so important. So that's the most meaningful thing, I think, that the foundation spends time on. But I'm not on the board of the foundation anymore because that was not allowed, it was part of the principles of me taking this job that I should disassociate myself from the foundation, but it does some really great things.

SB: And talking about resilience, what were your either one or two specific obstacles that came along the way that you had to overcome?

NT: I had some but many of them were self-inflicted, I have to say, by taking on very difficult things, such as the one I mentioned in the intelligence service, which was very tough. I've been privileged com-

pared to many other people.

SB: And what advice would you give to a student who's thinking about a career in financial services?

NT: I think finance is just incredibly interesting because it ties in so many interesting things, right? It's company analysis. Everything you use and eat and so on is produced by somebody. It's micro, it's macro. It fits into society. It's monetary policy, it's legal issues, it's greed and fairness and social psychology, and then things are moving all the time. It's a never-ending, moving puzzle. It's just fascinating.

But what I do think is, in order to stand out, you need to have something on top of an economic education. And that is important, and I think social psychology is really, really important. And then the importance of being contrarian, to be able to be contrarian, think differently from the people around you. Because if you look at four squares and on the one axis you have right and wrong and on the other you have consensus and non-consensus. All the money is in one square, right, non-consensus. You need to live in a square where nobody agrees with you. Life is not a popularity contest, and my wife says well that's only people without friends who say that, but I actually do have some friends. But to be able to live in a kind of non-consensus square, that's important.

SB: That's great advice, Nicolai, I'm going to take that on board because I think that I've been a contrarian investor but timing is another thing altogether on this. So, thank you for that very pithy observation. Changing tack, I am told that at some point not so long ago you decided to take a course in cooking, and I'm told that you essentially have become almost the Michel Roux of Oslo. So, which two people, famous people alive, would you like to cook dinner for and what would you cook?

NT: I'm no Roux. I did spend three months at Le Cordon Bleu, and I have a lot of respect for chefs. Well, if you think about the investing world, the person who I think is the most incredible guy is of course Bill Gates. I mean, you use your brains and your energy to set up Microsoft, make a killing. And then you use the same brain and the same resources to give it away. Wow, unbelievable. And you read his reports and you see how systematically he's gone about doing the various things, how he has eradicated various illnesses and how structured and systematic and clever his structures are, hat off for that.

If you look at the investors, well of course my previous colleagues were fantastic, John and Bill, but I think Jeremy Grantham is really fascinating. He's also very environmentally and socially conscious. I think Stan Druckenmiller is an incredible investor,

very clever, very agile. Changes his mind according to facts. So those are the two guys.

SB: I asked you the two questions and as you said earlier on, the problem is the CEO only answers one, so you haven't told me what you're going to cook, three courses.

NT: There you go, you see. Oh wow, what I did a lot of last year was on a barbecue – whole turbot, whole turbot on the barbecue. I was eating at various restaurants in London, there are three restaurants I think specialise in that kind of stuff. I was eating there and I was going to get the secret sauce out of it, what do you spray it with, right? Because a spray of lemon juice, acid and fish stock to get that one right is key. So you turn it and you spray and put it on the table and it's just incredible. What would you cook? What do you think I should do as a starter then?

SB: Well, I'm not a sailor and I'm not a cook, but I am sitting here in Salcombe and they drop off the lobsters at the quay and they're actually pretty good value and I like to make a lobster spaghetti with my own tomato sauce with onions and mushrooms and lots of garlic and some wine.

NT: That is good. I'd probably make a crab tagliatelle with some chilli and lemon juice.

SB: Fantastic. All right, well I'm going to have no friends at the end of this podcast because they are now absolutely sure that I'm a fraud. But I'm going to ask you one final question. This made me stop and I had to reread it, and you say if you're looking for something interesting to read during the holidays, I recommend Susan Cain's *The Power of Introverts*. You said if we can unleash this power even greater things could happen.

NT: Yes, I do think so. I think it's underestimated how important introverts are and the type of power they have. And, generally, we've moved the extroverts up in the organisation because they talk and they are more visible and so on. But you just need to be really conscious about it. If you want to read some other things, I think you should read Adam Grant's *Think Again*, the key thing there is what he calls the ability to be confidently humble. I think that's important. You want to be confident in what you know but you want to be in learning mode, and be aware of all the things that you don't know.

SB: Well, Nicolai, you have an immense responsibility running this vast pool of capital and the nation's expectations looking towards you. So, the very best of luck with that. I would say that they are very for-

tunate to have somebody who thinks so seriously about nonconventional aspects to the investment management industry, as well as the obvious conventional aspects. I've been taking notes as this podcast has gone along, and apart from cooking and book recommendations, I am going to be very careful at the next dinner party that I ask a lot of questions of my neighbours for fear of falling foul of what you quite rightly observe. And social psychology I just hadn't really thought or processed that. And it's important beyond investing but it's important in the investing world and it's definitely been underestimated by more than me, and so that's really great advice. The very best of luck with your job and with the future of the fund, and maybe we'll have a catch-up in a year's time also.

NT: Absolutely, and thank you so much, it's great talking to you.



The Money Maze

*Published in 2021 and transcribed for
The Podcast Reader.*

 Read more @ podread.org

 Listen @ The Money Maze

EVERYONE SHOULD STUDY SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

QUINOLA'S GENEROUS REVOLUTION

**WE'RE IN LOVE WITH
US HUMANS.
WE MIGHT BE MILES
FROM PERFECTION.
BUT WHEN WE ALL
DECIDE TO ACT,
THERE'S NO STOPPING
US. WE BELIEVE THAT
BEING GENEROUS TO
THE ENVIRONMENT,
TO OURSELVES AND
EACH OTHER, IS THE
ONLY WAY TO ACHIEVE
BETTER.**

**IT'S TIME TO PROVE
OUR COLLECTIVE
POTENTIAL. IT'S TIME
TO START RESTORING
THE ENVIRONMENT
AND REDISTRIBUTE
OUR RESOURCES. IT'S
TIME TO GET OUT
THERE AND ACTUALLY
START DOING
SOMETHING.
IT'S TIME FOR
MEANINGFUL CHANGE.**

QUINOLA™

**MAKING EATING
RIGHT, EASY**

[WWW.QUINOLA.COM](https://www.quinola.com)

  @QUINOLAUK



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO AMERICA

THE RELUCTANT WISDOM OF AN IMMIGRANT

ROYA HAKAKIAN
ECONTALK
2021

Interview by Russ Roberts
Illustration by LING

Russ Roberts: Welcome to EconTalk: Conversations for the Curious, part of the Library of Economics and Liberty. Today my guest is author and poet, Roya Hakakian. Her latest book is, *A Beginner's Guide to America: For the Immigrant and the Curious*. Roya, welcome to EconTalk.

Roya Hakakian: I'm delighted. Thank you for having me on.

RR: Let's start with your own story, which is the backstory of your book. Your book is written for any immigrant, and any non-immigrant curious about understanding more about the immigrant experience. It is a fascinating set of observations about America and what it's like to come to America. But what is your story, your particular perspective? What's it based on?

RH: I was born and raised in Iran. I came of age exactly when Iran was undergoing its most cataclysmic moment in the twentieth century, which was the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in February. Within about five years after the revolution took place in Iran in 1979, by 1984, my mother and I were forced to leave, which is not to say that we were held at gunpoint, but life had become very difficult in Iran after the revolution. The rise of Ayatollah Khomeini to power had created circumstances under which religious minorities and a lot of ethnic minorities, and since I was born and raised in a Jewish family, received an underprivileged or secondary citizenship status. And so, it was no longer a place where we could thrive. My mother and I left. And my father, who couldn't live with us, joined us about five years later in the United States.



RR: And how old were you when you came to America?

RH: I was 19. We spent about a year being refugees, kind of going from country to country in Europe until our asylum applications were approved and we came here.

RR: I would just add, just for historical perspective, I think some listeners might wonder, what were Jews doing in Iran? And the answer is Jews have been in Iran forever and often thrived there until somewhat recently, correct?

RH: Exactly. I mean, it's one of the very odd things that even Jewish Americans often ask me. 'I didn't know there were Jews in Iran.' Well, there were Jews in Iran before there were Muslims anywhere else because the history of Jewish presence in Iran precedes that of the creation of Islam. Historically, Persia has a very significant place in Jewish history. And part of the reason why Jews remain in the world is because of the sanctuary that the ancient Persian kings offered the Jews, who had fled Israel after the fall of the temple.

RR: So, you came at 19? There's probably never an ideal age to come from a culture like Iran's to America, which is obviously very different. But I wonder if you'd reflect on your thoughts of America before you got here and what you felt when you first arrived. Obviously, you had an imperfect picture of what you're getting yourself into. Share some of that. It's in the book in passing in certain obvious ways, but talk about it in your own personal example.

RH: I was 12 when the Iranian Revolution took place. So, I was a kid in junior high and high school when the entire education system in Iran was overhauled to pivot towards the new ideology that had taken over the country. So, I was one of the many, many children who lined up in the schoolyard and chanted down to the US every morning. Or Israel, for that matter. It was part and parcel of being a kid in school in Iran in those years. And no matter how much I didn't like the regime myself and suspected the circumstances under which they had come to power, if you're 13 and 14 and you're hearing the same things over and over on a daily basis, it kind of seeps into your brain a little bit. So, I can't say I didn't come to the US with certain negative impressions or at least apprehension about it. I remember vividly that a cousin of mine came to our home on the last night I was packing my suitcase, just before we were departing. And she gave me a book by Maxim Gorky called *The City of The Yellow Devil*. That was the title that Gorky had given to New York City.

So, the idea was that this book is going to give you all you need to know about the place that you're going. Here was a Soviet author warning me about the dangers of America. So that's how I came. I was a teen when I arrived, I had no skills, I spoke no English, and I came truly with a single backpack. I didn't even have clothes. I had to go to a store named Bradlees with my relatives to purchase some things over the weekend after we had arrived. One of the things I keep saying is that when you admit people like me, when we come around eventually as I have, we become dedicated patriots. Because it is that sense of indebtedness, that sense of loyalty that develops as you begin to remember who you were when you arrived and who you've become over the years.

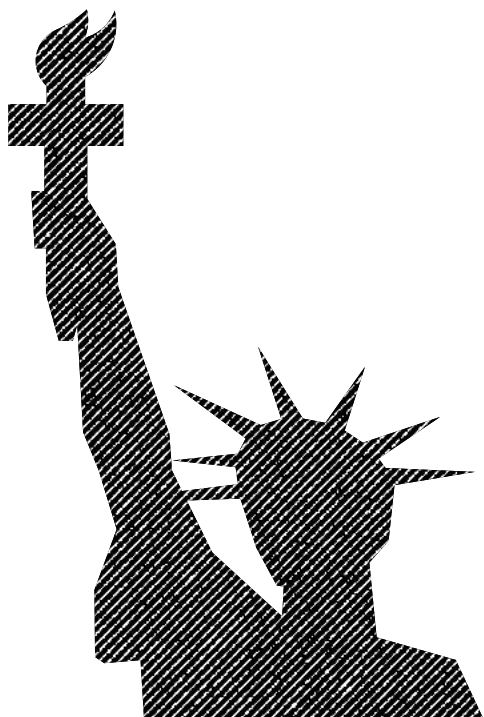
RR: Just for the record, I worked at Bradlees in, I think, 1977 in New Jersey and Bradlees is long gone. You came with apprehension. You become something of a patriot out of gratitude and mixed emotions. But what is special about this book, what I loved about it, is it is a love song to America, but it is also like many relationships – there's some quarrelling. So, it's America warts and all, and some pretty big warts. We'll talk about those. But when you were 19, that transition must have been extraordinarily jarring. The fact that you didn't come with any clothes and had to buy them was the least of your challenges. Talk about a little bit about the emotional upheaval that hits anyone coming in that kind of transition.

RH: Well, you're right. Not having clothes was the least of my problems, which is to say that I really had many, many problems and it really was all rooted in the fact that I didn't want to come to the US anyway. I think that's a very important fundamental fact that almost everybody misses about immigrants and immigration. Nobody wants to leave their birthplaces voluntarily. Nobody wants to be forced out. Nobody wants to be transplanted out of not having any other choice. So, when I had first arrived, people would ask me, 'Aren't you delighted to be here since you're from Iran?' Well, I wasn't delighted to be there. And yes, Iran was not a happy place. So, both these facts co-existed and people seemed to miss it. I was not delighted to be in the US. And yes, Iran was a terrible place for a woman, for a non-believing Shiite in 1985. One of the things I tried to do in the book is to convey that – that the overwhelming majority of us who come here involuntarily, we may eventually become happy naturalised citizens or happy immigrants, but it really, really is a steep battle to get there.

RR: A theme of your book, it's not explicit, but it runs all the way through, is the idea of home. You had to



I was thinking to myself, well, I and those who come under similar circumstances to mine, we're so broken when we arrive that if we can manage to put one foot in front of the other on a daily basis, we're lucky. Let alone organise a plan to commit crime.



leave home. There were things you didn't like about home. You were glad you left home, but it meant you weren't at home. And that reality – we've talked a lot about the importance of place on the program in recent episodes. I was born in Memphis, Tennessee. I left when I was one. The idea that I moved around a lot does seem natural to me. But other people find that frightening and horrifying and are aware of what is lost. I don't realise what I lost really because I was one. But I think there are a lot of powerful reflections in your book about the fact that no matter how much you love America, no matter how glad you are to be out of Iran, you're still not home, at least in some fundamental sense.

RH: Yes, and I think that a lot of that is determined by the circumstances of departure. Do we choose to leave or are we forced to leave because we have no other choice? I think whether you're an economic migrant or a persecuted immigrant, the results are the same. We arrived heartbroken and we arrived in pieces. It takes a very long time to mend the heart and put the pieces back together, which is in part why I wanted to write the book when in 2016, we were hearing that immigrants come to this country to rob and rape and do all sorts of crimes. I was thinking to myself, well, I and those who come under similar circumstances to mine, we're so broken when we arrive that if we can manage to put one foot in front of the other on a daily basis, we're lucky. Let alone organise a plan to commit crime.

RR: You start your book with a quote from *The Odyssey*, Homer's *Odyssey*. I've been reading it lately and it's an extraordinary book. It's entertaining, it's funny, it's frightening, it's thought-provoking. But of course, that book is fundamentally about coming home and trying to get home and what happens when you get home. One of the things that I love about *The Odyssey* is that Penelope, Odysseus' wife, she's home the whole time, but she's by herself. All these things are happening to Odysseus, her husband, that she is not a part of. A lot of your book is about the challenge of the people you left behind in Iran, the new community you've joined and the tension between the reality that the people who are left behind are not experiencing what you are experiencing, your family or relatives that you left behind. And as a result, that fundamental connection that you had can never be the same.

RH: I'm really moved and somewhat speechless because I've done many interviews, and nobody has questioned me about this. This is, in fact, the most tragic element, both in the book for me personally and also about the experience of being transplanted or immigrating. Because at the end of the day, I

think the number of communities, families, units that are unchanged by it are very few. And so, as much as you think you came to improve your life, and you do – you achieve certain things that you could have never done had you stayed – what you lose in terms of human relationships is irreplaceable. It certainly happened to me. The separation between my family, my mum, dad, and myself, and my brothers who had come several years before we eventually arrived caused a rift that we never really were able to cement again. And it's not because anybody is exercising malice or anybody wants to be bad. But human beings and family relationships are not meant to suffer such historical and cataclysmic events and stay intact. If we are not going through similar experiences together, then it's very hard to create the bonds that would have been in place had we witnessed the same events or experienced them together. It's almost impossible to recreate the relationships in the same way.

RR: I can't remember where I read this recently and we may have even talked about it on EconTalk, but I certainly read it in a book by a guest, so I apologise to that author. But the author was talking about how – I spend a lot of time on the program talking like we're doing right now, face-to-face interaction, conversation – it's different on Zoom. It's not as powerful. Life is rich from this kind of interaction. There's another kind that I don't think gets talked about enough, but it's when we watch something together. So, when my wife and I go to a musical, we're not looking at each other, we're not interacting, but we are sharing the experience, ideally a similar emotional enrichment, from the power of a great work of art. We might experience the same thing at a vista. We might go to Yosemite and look out at Glacier Point and be overwhelmed together. And we have that together. There's something profound about the sharedness of that that is not easily reproduced.

RH: Exactly. It's the power of witnessing. But witnessing *together*, because there's something really profound about the experience of witnessing important experiences. And if you miss it altogether, as you say, you can try to compensate, but then it's just never the same.

Now, imagine, instead of looking at a musical, the country where you had been born and raised is practically upended within a matter of a few weeks. Not only the entire homeland comes apart, but your community, your family also becomes unstable and so much else follows. Then there is this other part of your family, these other people who are undergoing their own difficulties, but not what you're experiencing. Then to bring everybody back together after a few years and say, 'Oh, let's redo or let's rewind or



... even though we have read a lot of memoirs or reporters report on the state of immigrants and much of it is done with a great deal of sympathy, the experience of being uprooted and transplanted is so profound that it's almost impossible to capture.



let's go back to where we were,' I mean, I'm sure certain families can live through it and can successfully come out at the other end, but I think those are few and far between. So, again, to emphasise what I'm trying to say isn't just to share these tragedies but to also say that when we hear that immigrants come here to do awful things, it comes in a way out of a fact that there is no understanding of what the immigrant experience is. Someone like me, someone who is involuntarily here, you have to know that we're here to grieve. We're here to try to figure out what happened and we're here to try to pick up the pieces. Under those circumstances, it's almost impossible to try to do something extra, no matter what that extra is.

RR: Just making a living and putting food on the table of course is a major challenge you write about a lot in the book. It's quite powerful. But I think this whole idea of the challenge of interpreting or imagining what other people are experiencing – we had a guest on the program, L.A. Paul, the philosopher – talking about what she calls the vampire problem,

the fact that before you're a vampire, you have a certain vague idea what it's like. But until you become one, you can't really imagine it. You can be told how great it is. It doesn't matter. It just seems awful and weird. Similarly – I never thought about it in terms of real time – but I've talked about this on the program, written about it a little bit in a fictional form in one of my books, but a family from the Soviet Union, a Jewish family came to St. Louis. Many people did at that time. It was in the late 1980s, early 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. People came and were connected with people who were already here to help them 'assimilate' – help them become more comfortable, acclimate, acculturate. You write about this very powerfully in the book. In my personal experience of it, we took this family that spoke no English, a little bit Yiddish. (I speak no Yiddish, so that wasn't very helpful.) And we took them to the grocery – and we'll talk in a minute about the American grocery, you have some great observations about it – but I was so proud to show off the American grocery. They were extraordinarily overwhelmed by it. Especially the produce, they just couldn't get over it. It was like a museum. And the story I tell in one of my books is, eventually we understood from the mum that she wanted yeast so she can bake bread. And yeast is hard to find in the grocery. And we're looking around, we can't find any. Finally, I got some help. And the guy said, 'Oh, yeah.' He took us to the place. There wasn't any. 'Oh, that's weird.' He went in the back and brought some out. And the mum looked at me with awe and reverence because it was obvious that I had connections. I was able to get things from the back and she was impressed. She obviously realised she had been tied to a family that was important. And I'm trying to tell her I'm a proud free-market capitalist. No, no, it's like this all the time, really. As obvious as it was that they didn't speak English, and it must be hard, the emotional turmoil that they must have been undergoing was so not obvious. I didn't think enough about it. I gave them as much affection as I had hanging around. But they needed something more than that, most of which I couldn't provide, probably because it just was the nature of the experience.

RH: Exactly, exactly. I remember, I used to take my parents shopping. It wasn't like I knew more English than they did. But they somehow felt like she's a kid and between charm and youth, she can get by far better than we can. So, I worked it out. We went to stores. And I had a dictionary and I would whip it out and ask for things. One of the things that I found incredibly frustrating, even though I was doing it myself, was the fact that we would look at an item, we would see the price, and we would transfer it or convert it to the price of the same thing in Iran,

which, of course you have to do because you want to know how much you're paying.

RR: Is it worth it?

RH: Yes, or am I paying too much? Or is it worth it, as you say. But it was a horrible exercise. Because every time we did that, we were attesting to the fact that we weren't living here. We weren't learning that currency. It didn't matter how much it was in Iran, it was irrelevant because we didn't have that money anymore. We didn't live there. And we're somewhere else. But the fact that we kept doing it was a way of kind of trying to create some sense of mastery over our environment, over life, and it was the wrong kind of mastery, but it was inevitable. I talked about all these things in the book just to say that even though we have read a lot of memoirs or reporters report on the state of immigrants and much of it is done with a great deal of sympathy, the experience of being uprooted and transplanted is so profound that it's almost impossible to capture.

RR: Let's talk a little bit about the supermarket for fun. One of the things I loved about your book was noticing the strange nature of the phrase, 'How may I help you today?' Because it's a boilerplate, customer service remark from somebody standing at the entrance to the GAP or the grocery store, or 'Did you find everything you needed?' Those of us who live here or have grown up here don't think about that as noticeable. It's just part of the air we breathe. Why was that so surprising to you?

RH: Because in the past, whenever I went somewhere, nobody wanted me there. If I walked into a store, even in Europe, if I sat in a cafe, nobody wanted to serve me. It was almost as if, 'Oh, why is she ruining a good time for us by becoming a customer?' But I mean, I don't think that people who have been born and raised in this country understand how uniquely American this is. Those who have been born and raised in this country don't understand so many other gifts that make this life so comfortable, so tolerable, so unusually rich. I'm not talking about money or resources. I'm talking about just the simple beauty that these comfortable experiences infuse life with. And, as a result, create a space. Because when you don't have anxiety and when you're not constantly worried, and when you're not fearful, suddenly, you realise that your brain has so much more space to think about bigger things and more important things. And that's what going to the store and hearing, 'How can I help you?' was like for me, when you don't have to worry about, 'Can I find it? And will they take it away from me? Or do I have to pay someone to get it?' Like Russians, will you have

to know someone important to go to the back and get it for you? All these things kind of crowd your brain and your soul. And when they're no longer there, then you experience yourself as somebody who is roomier, with more internal space to do other things.

RR: As you point out, it's an incredible gift that's common in America. It's not universal. We have a recent guest – this episode hasn't aired yet – but talking with a recent guest about economic insecurity, people who are struggling to make their rent, find work and so on, they don't have that room because it weighs on them. Your experience and the experiences you reference of others, a lot of times that insecurity was physical. It was the fact that you were at risk of being arrested. You're at risk of being jailed. You literally couldn't find things that you wanted in the store. They either weren't available or you couldn't purchase them. And similarly, you talked, I think very movingly, about so-called illegal aliens: people who are here trying to make a living, support their families who can't approach a policeman if they're scared because they're at risk of being arrested themselves. I think it's an issue that is not going away here in America that we have to cope with. But an enormous proportion of people in 2021 in America have a wide variety of races and colours and creeds and lead a pretty comfortable life. You make the point that after a while, you start thinking this is it. It's just comfortable. I mean, where's the excitement? Where's the vitality of life in contrast to the past that you've brought with you?

RH: Absolutely. It's a bizarre thing to admit, isn't it?

RR: Yeah. It's kind of fascinating. It was fascinating that that was so powerful for you.

RH: There's a hashtag on Twitter these days by the Iranian diaspora who object to the regime in Iran and the hashtag is *normallife*. Because I think the idea is totally brilliant – to show what normal life is like and how people who live in Iran or other undemocratic places simply don't know what normal life is like. And when you don't know that, because you're spending so many hours of every single day planning how not to get into trouble when you're going out, how not to get arrested, how to lie in order to keep your job or not pay the traffic ticket, or all sorts of other things, it's just endless. Then, suddenly, when you come here and you don't have to do any of it, then there is this vast vacuum in your life. And you suddenly feel like, what the hell am I going to do now? What do I think about? What do I worry about? And what do I do? If I'm not against that or if I'm not clearly operating against this grand menace,

then who am I? Then you begin to realise that you have to define yourself, your life, your direction in a very different way than you had ever thought possible. And that creates a sense of emptiness.

RR: I think it's a major problem in America today for the native born, not just the immigrants, that it's much easier to be against something than for it. We're really good at against. But then, there's a little hole if there's nothing here 'for' and it becomes a big hole. And the 'against' part starts to fill that hole as a way of coping with the fact that life is really what's going on here. Despite all the claims of our economic problems – and we have many here in the US – we remain a remarkably wealthy, comfortable place, again, not for everyone, but for the bulk of the citizens who, after a while, just take it for granted. It's just as you say, the comfort level is just extraordinary. And it's not just physical, it's pervasive. Your book really brings that out.

RH: That's absolutely true. I mean, even our poverty is far richer than poverty in other parts of the world. As an American, you can always find clothes, free clothes, anywhere. It won't be what you want to wear, it won't fit you right, and it won't be fashionable, but it'll be clothes. That's very different than places where these extras, they simply don't exist. And I think it's really remarkable, because in our conversation about immigration, we don't seem to recognise that if people come involuntarily they encounter so many difficulties in the beginning, and especially that putting one foot in front of the other will be the biggest thing you can possibly manage. But also, we who come under those circumstances become, if not later then definitely sooner, truly grateful for the many gifts that almost go unrecognised by the native born because they have always been here and they don't know of any other life.

RR: What I like about your book, among many things, is the clear gratitude you have for the opportunity to be here, while recognising that – certainly for black Americans and for many immigrants going back a long, long way – black, white, wherever they're from, it's a weird thing, but there's a tension. We welcome immigrants. But as you say, hating an immigrant community is America's hazing ritual. We have this weird thing. It's the ethnic group d'jour, or of the year or of the era. It used to be Germans, then it was Irish, then it was Jews. And once you've gotten here and become an American, you're happy to keep out others, which is weird. But, you balance and recognise that tension. It's not a simple story. And I think one of the tragedies of political discourse today – and your book has some political aspects to it along with the personal, obvi-

ously – is that it's so unnuanced. Your book's very nuanced. It's an extraordinary thing that America has brought people from around the world and let them become Americans. But is not so nice to them all the time. Talk about that, and if you want, talk about the ominous question, 'Where are you from?' Which Americans ask all the time, either of natives or immigrants. But it's complicated.

RH: Yes, exactly. Well, one reviewer, going back to the comment you were making, said of this book that it's a love letter by an exacting lover.

RR: Yeah, demanding lover, yeah. It's true.

RH: Right. That's honestly the only way I know how to love, because I think if you're engaged enough, if you're paying enough attention to what and who you love, you're then invested in the process of making it better. And, I think a criticism, as James Baldwin put it, is part of expressing love for something; or in the case of James Baldwin to America, because he says it was the one country in the world that he most loved. So, I think it would be foolish not to see the flaws. And, it would also be in some ways unpatriotic, because if we love something, if we love a country, we always want to feel that we've done something to make it better. So, recognising the shortcomings is actually, I think, part of what makes us deeply patriotic, because we want to feel like we've left a mark – that our presence somehow translated into something tangible that manifested itself in some form or shape of improvement. Whether it was in understanding or improving the dialogue, or actually building things, and so on and so forth. Going back to the history of America's favourite hazing ritual: I think in some bizarre way, it's very reassuring to know that we have hated everybody equally. We have been indiscriminate about discriminating against immigrants. You know, Benjamin Franklin hated Germans. He also thought that Russians were not white enough. He just wanted Nordic and British people to come into this country. In some ways, I think Trump echoed that when he said, 'Why don't more people come here from Norway?' Well, because–

RR: There are a lot of reasons. There are a lot of answers to that question.

RH: Then we didn't want the French here, at the end of the eighteenth century. We had trouble, great trouble, with Italians. We hung up signs saying, 'Irish need not apply.' We turned away the Jews from the shores on the ships fleeing the Holocaust. We put in place the Chinese Exclusion Act. I think it's one of the lowest points of the American history. And,



We welcome immigrants. But as you say, hating an immigrant community is America's hazing ritual



then we set up internment camps for the Japanese. In some ways, it's reassuring to know that whatever community it is that's being picked on now: we will move on from it soon enough. And, then they are not alone: that they belong to this longstanding history of an exercise of hate that I hope we manage to eliminate from our practice.

RR: It is extraordinary, given that history. My ancestors fled Eastern Europe in the late-nineteenth century. As Jews, they had very limited rights in the countries they were in, very limited economic opportunity. And, like millions of Jews, they came here in the late-nineteenth century. And were despised by large groups of people – kept out of the best colleges for a long time, and so on. Yet they were allowed to come. The Holocaust is a particularly tragic episode of that kind of fear of the other, and immigrants. But, just as a general history, the unease with which America accepts foreigners and yet takes them in anyway. There is a statue in the harbour, outside New York City, who says, 'Give me your huddled masses yearning to be free.' But,

America is a complicated place. There are people here who want that, and there are other people who don't. But, over time, it ebbs and flows, it seesaws back and forth. But, no other country has opened its borders historically to so many people – with mixed feelings, yes, and misgivings. But eventually it does turn out mostly okay.

RH: Precisely, this is what I tell my 15-year-old boys who, fortunately, as we want all adolescents to be, are developing very strong feelings for social justice.

RR: Idealistic.

RH: Idealistic. And so, they come home and they are all very critical of how bad we are in this country towards minorities, towards this group and that group and so on. One of the things that, at least where immigrants are concerned, I tell them, is that we are incredibly imperfect, but fortunately for us, in comparison to our counterparts in the West, we're much better off. And we have done a much better job. While we ought to try and definitely make things better in comparison to others, we have been a far more successful model for bringing in and assimilating immigrants than any other Western nation.

RR: We're going to come back and talk about social justice on this program in the coming weeks, months, years. But I want to say one thing in response to that young idealism, which is that condemning the US for various policies is an interesting starting point. My fear is that a lot of people seem to think it's an ending point. It's like, 'So, therefore we should start over.' Starting over doesn't have a good track record in human history, unfortunately. The people in charge of the starting over are not necessarily the people that you would like to see in charge. And so, as a result, I'm hoping in the next decade in America, we'll have a productive conversation about what is helpful, not simply about what needs fixing. What needs fixing is a lot of things. Definitely. But, you want to fix things with things that'll make them better and not worse. Just had to get that in. Sorry. That's my little soap box.

RH: Right. No, no, no. I completely agree. I think, or, as those who criticise America rightly for its bad behaviour or conduct, then say, 'Let's not do that again.' Well, you know, that's our solution. If you intervene in the affairs of another country and it went badly and clearly you shouldn't have done it, but if there is genocide taking place in that country, saying that intervention created problems isn't an answer. You have to figure out how to prevent evil from taking place while not adding to evil.

RR: It's not straightforward. Earlier I referenced the nuance in your book that I appreciated, and nuance generally doesn't sell. What sells is simplicity. But I've been thinking a lot lately about our national narrative in the US and how we need one. So, there are two competing narratives right now. One is: 'America was formed in 1619, in evil. It is irredeemable.' The other narrative is: 'Everything's great. Shut up.' Those don't work well together. We need a nuanced one. And my feeling is that the musical *Hamilton* – which is a somewhat nuanced story – is made more nuanced by the fact that it's performed with people of colour as a way to recognise the imperfection of the Founding. Your book is another attempt to give a national narrative that, I for one, would like to embrace: 'It's imperfect. We need to make it better. And we need to make it better in ways that actually make it better, not just appear to.' It's a recognition that our history isn't the same for everybody. It's different for people whose ancestors were enslaved, versus those who came here escaping tyranny or who came here for economic activity by their own free will. So, to me, we need a rich narrative that's not simple. And your book points the way towards that. I'm curious if you think about that at all and if you agree with me.

RH: A great deal. A great deal. I mean, this is why I wanted to write this. I talk about this in my memoir, which is my first book – the first people I identified with were African-Americans. And it's very strange because clearly I'm not black. I'm officially a white person. But, when I first came and I went to college or wherever I went, when I was in public, they were the people I most identified with. I would sit next to them in class. Somehow, I thought that being an immigrant from that sort of background and having experienced the oppression that I had experienced in Iran, made me kind of kindred to them more than anyone else. So, I think, speaking of nuance, this is an important narrative, too: that part of the reason why we as immigrants have it better in America is that we have this community of African-Americans who have put up this 200-year struggle, and perhaps longer, to make this society more just.

And, as a result, we come in more tolerated than we would have been had they not put up this struggle. Now, do I wish that we could go back to 1776 and tell George Washington and the founding fathers that: 'Don't be stupid. All human beings, regardless of gender and race, are created equal?' Yeah. But can I? No. But, I think at the end of the day, this struggle has left a great deal of tragedy in its wake, but also a great many gifts that need to be recognised. That if we are a nation of nations, if we do better at assimilating immigrants, if we have learned to celebrate this diversity of races and ethnicities and religions in this country, it's because we have had an ongoing

national conversation about equality. And we have all become better as a result of it and benefited from it.

RR: Yeah. I think of it as should we celebrate how awful we've been in the past, or should we celebrate how great we could be in the future? And I choose the latter. It seems kind of easy, but it's not always.

RH: Well, I think it's interesting because I think – you're Jewish, I'm Jewish. Passover is coming up. For me, it's a much easier answer. We sit around the table on a yearly basis and we recount the story of the departure of Jews from Egypt. We recount the story of how the Jewish slaves in Egypt toiled, suffered, but were liberated. Do we throw it away because it's a bad story? No. Narratives, especially narratives of struggle, if they lead to accomplishment, achievement, then they become backstories and backbones of generations to come. And so, while we don't want these injustices to recur, we have to also recognise that because they have led to success – whether it was in Egypt, in the Bible, or whether it is in America – then they can create the backbone of generations to come. That, no matter how bleak the circumstances and how awful the past has been, we have overcome. We have succeeded. And that makes us a much stronger nation than we would have been otherwise.

RR: And, a skeptic might say, 'Well, it's easy for you to say. You're not black. Blacks are not fully liberated in the US,' for all kinds of reasons. I think there are challenges that black people have in America, and immigrants have in America, that are unique. And, again, as we've talked about earlier, I don't think it's easy for people outside those experiences to fully imagine them. They can't. But, I think it's worth remembering that all of us could use a little further liberation. I think we're all a little bit enslaved, still. It might be to our screens or to our egos or our imperfection. So, we all have work to do. Some, tragically, have more to do than others. But what I like is the importance of looking to what can be, not just what has been.

RH: Great. Yes, absolutely. You brought up this question of 'Where are you from?' which I mentioned in the book. And, I have friends who have been born and raised here and they say, 'But, it's such an innocuous, benign question. Why do you talk about it in the book?' Well, you know, we had an extensive dinner conversation about 'where are you from?' When it's okay to ask and when it's not okay to ask. It was very interesting because I was listening in even as I was the reason the conversation had begun. But, I think: when you're a new immigrant and

you're trying to pass – trying to feel like you can fit in – and then somebody asks you, especially someone you're unequal with, for instance, you're a cab driver and you've picked up a customer, or you are a grocery worker or a babysitter in a white American household. When you are then under those circumstances, you're trying to

pass, you're trying to prove yourself, and then people ask, 'Where are you from?' Oftentimes, the reasons are completely benign. But you feel vulnerable because you feel vulnerable, period. Because of the circumstances – your own brand-new circumstances as a newcomer. But, I think once you settle in and you are no longer that vulnerable, anxious newcomer, and you find your bearings, then the question 'where are you from?' can be a wonderful way to strike up a brand new conversation and develop friendships.

RR: But, as you point out, sometimes it's just an innocuous question. It's a conversation starter. It's just something to get a conversation going. And, when you say, 'Well, I'm from Iran,' it's like, 'Wait a minute. They don't like America. Whoa. Who are you?' And that must have been very jarring, especially given that you write about it. You were fleeing Iran. You weren't a spy. You weren't fond of the regime. But you were of dubious origin, just by that statement.

RH: Exactly. And, ironically, a great many Iranians in America call themselves Persian Americans. And they always tell me, 'So, why do you say that you're Iranian? You're Persian.' And I'm like, 'You call yourself Persian because you don't want to take the trouble of explaining Iranian politics. You want to wash your hands of all the political strife.' I happen to actually like taking them on. And so, I call myself Iranian-American. But I can see that it becomes a really troubling issue if you come from places that are at crosshairs with the US, and you have to go into and out of these communities that can be prejudiced towards who you are and where you come from.

RR: At one point in the book you write: What ought to be the quality that makes an American? The answer is simple: devotion to America's founding principles. If you believe that all people have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that ideas and speech must be aired and protected, that people of diverse backgrounds can come together over the love of those values, that serving the country – through the army, unions, Rotary Club, volunteer groups – is the way to unite the people, that every person deserves a vote and equal regard before the law, then you are an American.

RR: I wanted to stand up and cheer when I read

that. But that's a controversial statement in today's world about all ideas and speech must be aired and protected. That definition of what is American or an American is under threat.

RH: It is. But do we have any other choice? If we are going to recognise the fact that we have become more racially diverse than we have ever been, and this isn't something that has happened only to us. We, in the twentieth century, have created possibilities for human interaction that have never existed before. We have become far more multi-racial and multi-ethnic in this country – and around the globe – than we have ever been. We can't define communities based on purity of race, purity of ethnicity and all this other jargon that we defined communities by in the past. So, we have to look for less moveable, changeable principles, and those can only be shared values. You can't define communities or tribes based on all the other things we did in the past. It was easy to keep other people out. It no longer is. And so, if we are mixing to the degree that we are now, then the only immovable things become fundamental values that we can all hold regardless of race, ethnicity and religion. And, I think we have good ones to want to hang on to.

RR: Yeah, and I think the fight is going to be over what those things are. But that's where we're at. You talk at the end of the book about naturalisation and becoming a citizen – it's really quite moving. I want to preface this: we're going to talk a little bit at the end of our conversation about my own journey, which listeners know: I'm moving to Israel soon. I think America will always be 'our' and 'we', and it'll be hard for me – I'm not giving up my American citizenship. But I'm making a big change. Somebody said to me: a person should re-pot themselves a few times in their lifetime. And a lot of what your book is about is the challenge of being repotted. I'm fortunate; I'm choosing to re-pot myself. But you are talking about being wrenched from the soil that you were raised in. And you write the following – it's very beautiful – about the naturalisation certificate, which is your certificate that establishes your citizenship:

'The certificate vindicates you. The certificate is proof that you were not permanently broken and deserve to belong again. You have been renewed, validated and recycled back into society to be visible among others once more. That is what America has always done. That is what America knows how to do. Do not mistake the certificate for a deed. You can only guard her grandeur, not claim it. Citizenship does not give you the ownership of this land. It only gives you the honor of her stewardship, the pride of upholding her principles, and of keeping her fire

burning to warm all the generations to come.'

That's really magnificent.

RH: You read it better than I do.

RR: Well, your written English is as magnificent and clear as your spoken English. Talk about what that meant to you?

RH: Well, it's interesting, because as a green card holder, five years after you have your green card, you can naturalise and become a US citizen. I didn't do that. I was thinking about naturalisation in a very strict nationalistic sense – that I was going to throw something away that I used to be, or I still was; and then take on this other thing. That created a sense of contradiction in me, because I thought, 'What kind of a person with a sense of integrity, would do that?' You have to hang on to whoever you were, regardless of how bad the place was that you came from. It would be a lie to throw that away and take on this other thing. I couldn't really reconcile it. And, then finally, after about 15 years, I recognised that I would become an American for the values and the principles that I loved, no matter what country I would choose to live in or be born to. So, in other words, once I began to look at this choice as a choice of adopting certain principles, which we were just talking about: freedom of speech, one man one vote, equal before the law and all that, then when it was no longer a matter of geography or nationality in its limited ethnic or racial sense, then it was very easy for me to naturalise. When I did, it was wonderful, because I looked around the room and I thought, you know, 'Nobody looks like me. And somehow we manage to all call ourselves part of the same broad family.' It's really incredible, and also uniquely American. Because, it's only when you come from a place like I do – from Iran, where you have seen people who have looked like you, spoken the same language, come from the same background – that you recognise when you come here that this multiplicity is staggering and the multiplicity of races and ethnicities and religions is, in fact, why we are who we are. Is, in fact, why we have gained an edge? And is, in fact, a source of innovation and just wonderful experiences? How else would we have these incredible cuisines when we want to decide what to eat? I assure you, in most parts of the world, you would be lucky to find something other than the cuisine of that country if you wanted to go out to dinner. We can choose to improve things, and we ought to. But the reason we have become, and we have the strengths that we have today, is because those imperfect original principles allowed us to.

RR: You mentioned food. I often think about music,

the incredible melting pot of music that is America. Those are things that we can point to and you can think about. I don't think we appreciate it. I want to let you end on that beautiful note, but this is important stuff to add too. You talk about the importance of accepting immigrants who aren't just highly skilled. There are a lot of people who say, 'Oh, we should only take the highly skilled ones, the ones that are going to make a contribution,' as if everyday human beings aren't making a contribution. Every day, as you point out, driving Uber, mowing the lawns, building the buildings, taking care of the elderly, they're immigrants—

RH: Picking our fruits.

RR: Picking our fruit. These are areas that are dominated often by immigrants – I hate to call them 'workers,' so I'll just say immigrants. They are leading lives and enriching the tapestry that is America in innumerable ways, just as we all do as human beings. It's nothing special about being an immigrant, although they're often, as you point out, working three jobs to make sure they can get their kids to where they want them to be and so on. And, that they're struggling just to keep things going. But they're all part of us. It's all part of the same big tapestry. It's tragic to not appreciate it. I think it's beautiful that you talk so eloquently about the contributions that everyone makes, not just the high-tech, H-1B1 Visa people – those are nice, I'm happy to have them, too.

RH: There came a point where, in 2016, this talk of a merit-based immigration system was all the rage. I froze, thinking that if those laws were in place, I would have never come in. I would have never.

RR: Yeah, what did you have to offer? You had nothing to offer on paper?

RH: Nothing. Nothing. If they asked me what I had to offer, I would say, 'Nothing.' I may be narcissistic, but I do think that at the end of the day I've been a good citizen and I'm contributing to this society – I'm more than productive. I have understood what it means to be here and what makes this American universe turn. I think the difference is when you admit the H-1B1 applicants, you don't buy their loyalty, because they know they have entered into an exchange. It's tit-for-tat if they have skill.

RR: Transactional.

RH: They have a skill, it's transactional. But, in my case, eventually when I grew up, I was less anxious and things turned, and I became who I became. I am full of a sense of: 'This is amazing. Who wanted me?'

I didn't want me. I was so devastated and angry, I thought I was useless. So, to think that, you know, some nation, some country, opened its doors to you when you didn't believe in yourself ... that you could be anything other than the miserable wretch that you were, then eventually they are buying, they are investing in patriotism that you will inevitably develop.

RR: Well, I'm glad you came around. I wish the circumstances had been different. But I think when you said, 'I'm more than productive,' I think that word 'productive' is a dangerous word, right? It implies that our value is what we make. It's important. It's not our value, though. It's only one part of the story. I say that proudly as an economist. But, what's powerful about your book is that because you were a miserable wretch when you came here and you came from a very different world, you were able to see things that those of us who were in the water don't necessarily notice. And your book is an incredible tribute to that.

My guest today has been Roya Hakakian. Roya, thanks for being part of EconTalk, and, for being part of America.

RH: Thank you. I really enjoyed it.



EconTalk

*Published in 2021
and transcribed for
The Podcast Reader.*

Read more @ podread.org

Listen @ econtalk.org



HOW LONG WOULD YOU LIKE TO LIVE?

ON THE SCIENCE OF ANTI-AGEING

DAVID SINCLAIR
THE GOOD LIFE
2018

Interview by Andrew Leigh
Illustration by Lachlan Conn

Andrew Leigh: Welcome to The Good Life, a politics-free podcast about living a happy, healthy and ethical life. In this podcast, we seek out wise men and women who have lessons to teach us about living life to the full, with humour, pleasure, meaning and love. For millennia, humans have been obsessed with the idea of longevity. From the legend of Methuselah to the Fountain of Youth, we seem drawn to myths about eternal life. One strategy is calorie restriction, which researchers have been exploring since the 1930s. Eating a lot less seems to make humans and animals live a lot longer. Many people say they'd rather live a shorter life and eat well than a long and hungry one. Today, a growing group of scientists think they may have found a better solution – drugs that can massively extend life. Among these scientists is Sydney-born David Sin-

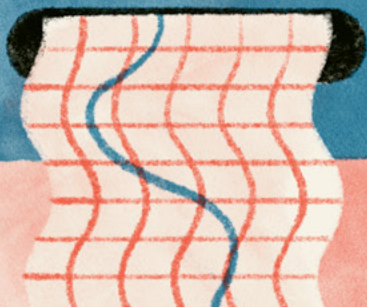
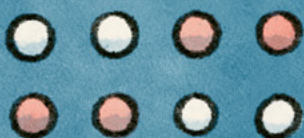
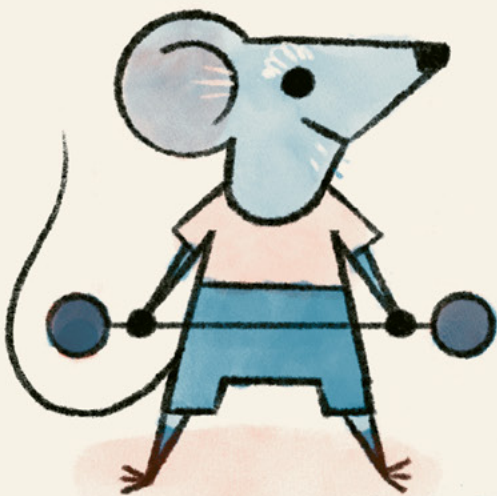
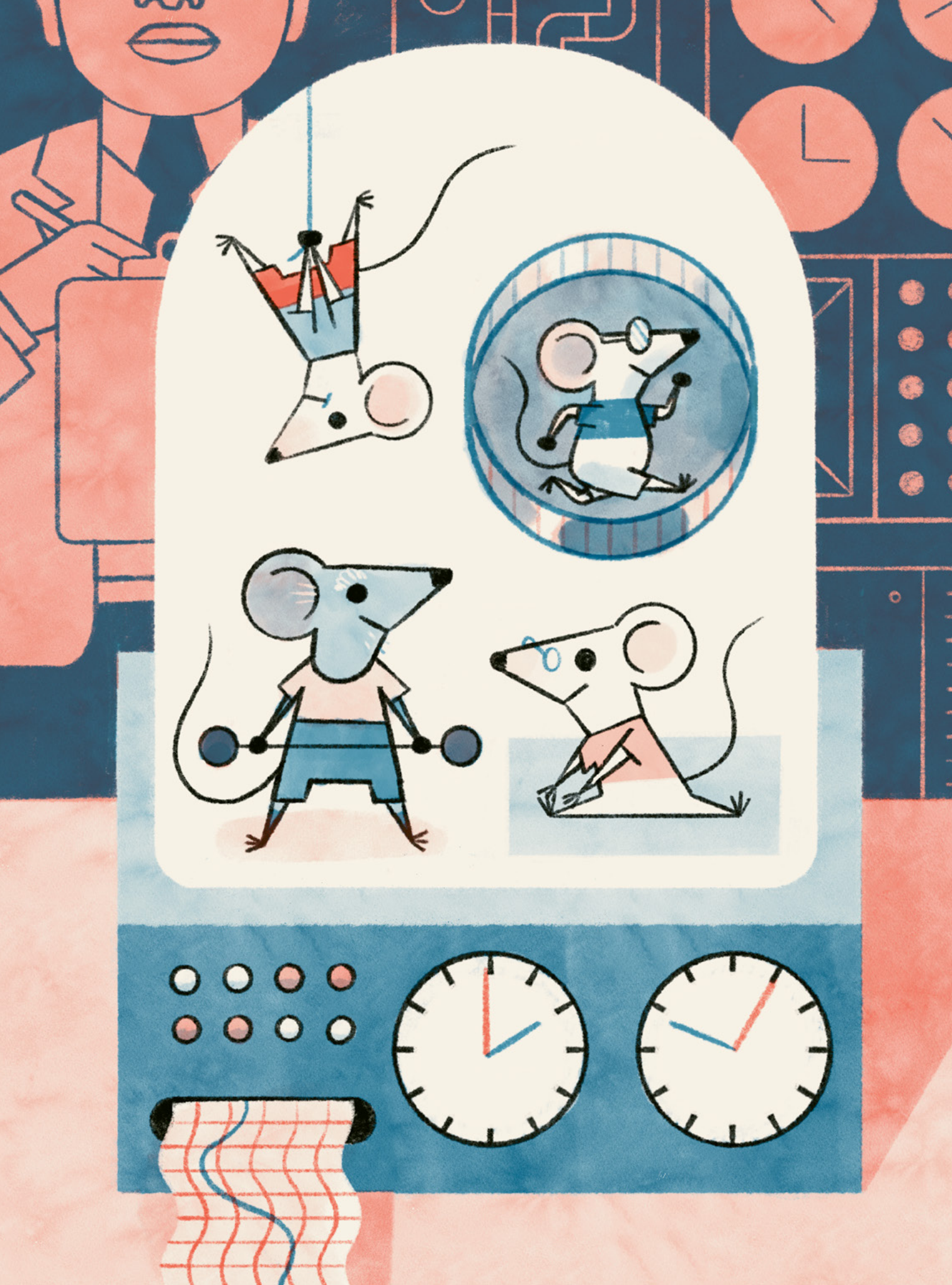
clair, who co-directs the Paul F. Glenn Laboratories at Harvard Medical School. He's also a professor at the University of New South Wales. For someone who works on giving us more time, he acts like he has very little. When I visited his lab recently, David was a dynamo of energy – talking about the new drugs, introducing me to his staff, casually brushing off my compliments about his new Order of Australia. And at times making claims so bold that I had to remind myself I wasn't speaking with a crank scientist in the basement, but a Harvard professor who has raised millions of dollars to support his research and published his results in nature and science. David, welcome to The Good Life podcast.

David Sinclair: Thanks Andrew. It's great to be on.

AL: Now you grew up in St Ives, in Sydney. What got you interested in science originally?

DS: I can remember clearly as a kid spending a lot of time in the bush and in Ku-ring-gai Chase forests. Also, I think I was influenced by my parents who were both biochemists. They would talk about all sorts of things at the dinner table. But I've always wanted to do something important with my life and I felt that discovering the secrets of the universe and biology would be a great way to contribute to history if I was lucky enough.

AL: You also had a sort of entrepreneurial zeal as a child, didn't you? I've heard the story that you and



your brother made ergonomic chairs in your garage and went selling them.

DS: It's true. I like to think that I was just thinking about being altruistic, but when I went through old records, written papers, I found something that said 'how to become a millionaire by age 30' and all these crazy inventions. So clearly it was on my mind from an early age.

AL: You did a PhD in molecular biology. What got you focusing on aging?

DS: This is where it really gets serious. In all honesty it isn't the money that drives me. It's more about being able to do things in the world that have never been done before. I became interested in aging when my grandmother who helped to raise me and was a very lively, vivacious, relatively young woman who immigrated out of Hungary and just loved Australia, she would tell me about life and how to stay young and how adults screw up everything. She loved to tell me AA Milne poems, such as 'Now We Are Six'. The best age. But then she also told me something that was horrific and I still remember it. I said, 'Will you always be around?' And she told me, 'No, I won't be. People die. And one day I'll be dead and everything around you that's living will eventually be dead.' And I'm not the first kid to be told this or to realise this. Every child goes through this realisation. But I found it just incredibly tragic. That we would be given, or you would have evolved, consciousness, and then have this horrible burden of the knowledge that everything around us would be gone one day. That was really the first big idea that I had, which was not that we could live forever, but why isn't anybody talking about it? It's a travesty.

AL: So, you began focusing on aging during your PhD, and then ultimately moved to the United States. What led to that?

DS: Well, if you want to be a well-known, or have a better chance of being a successful scientist, it certainly doesn't hurt to go to the US, and Boston is the hub of science and especially biology. And so, I headed off there. It was a lucky coincidence that allowed me to do that. I met a scientist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or MIT, when I was finishing my PhD at UNSW. He was talking about starting a new project to solve aging, not in humans, but in yeast cells. The same yeast that we use to make bread and beer. And I thought that was a great idea. Let's try to solve it for a simple micro-organism first. And if we are able to do that, then we might have a clue about why we age as well and possibly how to reverse it.

AL: So that was Leonard Guarente, and you joined his lab as a post-doc, is that right?

DS: I did. It was a tough decision because just as I was about to come over, having earned a fellowship to come over, my mother contracted lung cancer, had a lung removed. I was actually contemplating not coming to America. And my PhD supervisor, Professor Ian Dawes said, 'David, your mum may survive, she may not, but you've got your whole life ahead of you and this is too important. Just go overseas.' And it turns out she lived another twenty years, which was really a blessing for all of us. But I headed over here to see what I could accomplish in a short time, two years, then I was going to come home.

AL: Here we are a couple of decades on, have you found that it's easier to aim high in a country that's not your own? That it's almost like you've got the backup of moving home?

DS: I found that when I arrived here, two main things happened to me. One, it's fairly common for foreigners, especially Australians with our really nifty accent, to be taken more seriously over here. I've found that I would say the same things as I was saying in Australia, but people over here just paid more attention. I think it's our accent, mainly. The foreigner, maybe they know more than us Americans. And the second thing that happened was I became super brave. I wasn't worried about failing because the worst that could happen is that I got to go home.

AL: So, let's turn to the particular molecules that you've been working on. There's resveratrol in years gone by, and NAD + that you're looking at now. What do these molecules do in the mice experiments, for example?

DS: What we've discovered is that there are genes that control the aging process, and these are called sirtuins. A fancy name for just a set of genes that exist in all life to protect organisms and our bodies against the ravages of time. And they become complacent. These genes get switched off over time. There are some ways to activate them. You can keep exercising and occasionally be hungry - that tends to turn them on - but over time they lose their activity. And so, the resveratrol and the NAD + are two complimentary ways that we've discovered, at least in mice, are really efficient at turning on these survival pathways, these longevity genes that we call sirtuins.

AL: And what does it mean in terms of how much you can reverse the aging process in mice? If you have a mouse that's the equivalent of being a



... if you want to be a well-known, or have a better chance of being a successful scientist, it certainly doesn't hurt to go to the US.



60-year-old human, you give them NAD +, how do they perform?

DS: It was really surprising how well it worked. When I started in this field we had no idea if aging could be slowed by a molecule. And then we started to learn that you could actually make mice live 20, sometimes 30 per cent longer. And there are hundreds of labs working on this now, it wasn't just mine. But what's been really surprising in the last few years is how easy it is to reverse aging. And so, in the experiment that we just published, we were able to give our molecule that boosts NAD+ to old mice and these mice were about the equivalent of a 65 or 70-year-old human, and within just a week of drinking a little bit of this NAD-boosting molecule in their water, we completely reversed the aging of the muscle. These mice, without treatment could barely run on a treadmill, and we put the treated mice on the treadmill and they just kept running and running. We've had mice now that could run three times further than before, just after a week of treatment.

AL: So, you created little mice Olympians, basically.

DS: To be honest, the young mice didn't respond as well. It was the old mice that needed NAD + that responded the best. The young mice actually, they only benefited if we exercised them on top of giving them the molecule, which I guess you could claim could help athletes. That's an area of further discussion, about what this means for athletes: is it possible to use a natural molecule like NAD + to be better than you otherwise would be?

AL: Now, in the traditions of scientists such as Barry Marshall, you're not only experimenting on this but you're also administering it to yourself. What specifically do you take each day?

DS: Well, I take three things. I'm actually quite happy to talk about it, mainly because the science now is so strong. It's not even crazy to admit these things anymore. It may interest your listeners that probably half of all the scientists that I know studying aging are taking one of these three molecules right now. We've just all seen the evidence. So, the three are resveratrol, which is the molecule out of red wine or grapes. And that I think many people will have heard of. A second molecule that I take each morning is called metformin, which is a prescription medicine for diabetics, which seems to protect against not just diabetes but cancer and even Alzheimer's frailty. It seems very safe as well. And then the third one is an NAD-boosting molecule, which is essentially a derivative of vitamin B3 that the body uses to make NAD +. And the combination of those three has

made quite a dramatic difference, not just to how I feel day to day, but how my blood biochemistry markers have changed over time.

AL: Tell us more about how it makes you feel.

DS: So, I'm about to turn 50 next year and I don't have a twinge of any aspect of aging. I know I'm not that old, but I don't feel a day different. I don't have a grey hair. Most people say I haven't changed in 30 years. You can be the judge if you Google me. But I certainly don't feel any effects of aging. It's actually the older people who have tried this regimen that are the ones that notice a difference between them and their peers.

AL: There are others around you who are doing the same, our mutual friend, Tristan Edwards, your wife, your brother. I'm interested too in what it did for your mother who lived 20 years after that lung cancer diagnosis and for your father who is still around.

DS: I'm here in the walls of Harvard so I have to, and I want to, just put a disclaimer here that these are not real experiments. They're not clinical trials and I won't be publishing this, but perhaps this is an indication of what is to come in the future for everybody. So, with my mother, she was on resveratrol for 20 years. She survived without a lung for 20 years. The cancer never came back, which I think is in large part due to how great a surgeon she had, but also I like to think that we might've helped her along. She ended up being the longest surviving patient with that type of lung cancer in Australian history, as far as I know. So that was a very, very good outcome for her. She wasn't able to live long enough to be able to try these other molecules – that's where my father comes in. Now I've been asked before, do you tell your parents to take these molecules? Absolutely not. I don't tell anybody to take these. I'm not going to experiment on my family. But they end up demanding it. My brother got very upset that he was aging apparently faster than I was. And he said, 'Why are you using me as the negative control in the family?' So, he's now trying it, right? And he's doing okay but let me tell you about my father because I'm extremely proud of him. My father was just an average guy. He worked at the same company for 36 years, retired at 67 and said, 'I've had a good life. I got maybe ten good years of retirement, and that's it.' Okay, 10 years later, actually more than 10 years later – he's almost 80 – he hasn't changed a bit. He doesn't feel any different. In fact, he's feeling better than he did when he retired, no aches, no pains, can exercise and run like he did when he was 20. And he's got a new lease on life. And case in point: he started a new career. He's now working voluntarily as

an evaluator on the ethics panel for clinical trials at Sydney University. Really enjoying his new second life, travelling the world. He goes caving. He's doing abseiling. He travels the world every year with his good friend. Does a lot of exercise. Doesn't feel tired at all. And recently climbed to the top of Tasmania's Cradle Mountain with my brother who could barely keep up because he wasn't on the molecules at the time, and also with my ex-girlfriend who also found it hard to keep up with him.

AL: Does taking these pills mean you don't have to do the other things that we would often think we need to do in order to live a long life such as not eating too much and exercising and so on?

DS: Well, we don't know for sure whether these molecules truly work in humans. These are just stories that we hear and there's a lot of overlap between people's stories, which is encouraging. But we're doing the clinical trials to see if it's true. But what the science says very clearly is that in all the life forms that we've tested these molecules on, from yeast, to worms, to flies, to mice, these molecules mimic dieting and exercise, and give you the benefits of those things without necessarily having to do them, which doesn't mean that you have an excuse to just pop a pill and just sit around as a couch potato, because as I mentioned, you get the benefits if you exercise and are healthy on top of these regimens. But what it also means is there's hope for people who are already wheelchair bound, or in a nursing home, or have just had a heart attack. Those are people, of course, you cannot expect them to get on a treadmill or go on a diet.

AL: Do you do quite a bit of exercise yourself? Do you practice calorie restriction?

DS: I don't exercise enough. I really try, but it seems like my career is mostly based on keyboard presses and it's very hard. I've got three kids too, and I spend as much time with them as possible. Three younger kids. I do try my best to not overeat. And if I can, I try to skip a meal or two a day. Now I'm not always successful at that, but I do find with my busy career, that's at least partially feasible. What that means is at least part of the day, I have a grumbling stomach and I truly believe that that is going to make me live longer. Even if it doesn't, it will, I think make my life feel a little bit longer anyway.

AL: Yeah. Well, certainly life often feels longer when you're hungry, but I don't think that's exactly what you had in mind there.

DS: There's so much convincing evidence that being



He's almost 80 – he hasn't changed a bit. He doesn't feel any different. In fact, he's feeling better than he did when he retired, no aches, no pains, can exercise and run like he did when he was 20. And he's got a new lease on life.



a little bit hungry and certainly staying lean, if you can, is a good thing. There's a good reason why being obese is bad for you. What we're finding is it's because it shuts off your body's longevity genes. I think that is the main reason that we end up being short-lived if we don't watch our weight. What you're trying to do is trick your body into being in a defensive mode. If we go back to early life on the planet, these genes were there to make life survive adversity. By exercising and being a little bit hungry, those same genes are kicking into action those survival genes that will protect us, we think, from diseases of old age and eventually extend our lifespan by possibly five or more years.

AL: So, the current record for the longest life is a French woman who lived to 122 and a Japanese man who lived to 116. Where do you think we can go? Where can the research of yours and others take us?

DS: Well, most people who try to extrapolate look

backwards at history and don't take into account major advances in science. So, in 1902, I think most people would have said humans are never going to fly around the world, but as soon as the Wright Brothers took off in 1903, anything was possible. What we're doing here is the same kind of thing. We are building the Wright Brothers plane, we've taken off, and we can now see what's possible. So, I'm changing my view. I used to say that it would be great if we could live another 5 or 10 years, but I'm seeing results around the world and companies being started every few months to tackle different aspects of aging. I just came from a meeting in my lab where we've actually shown that we can rejuvenate cells from being old to being young again. Reprogram them to be young again and give them back their youthful identity. So, I'm going to go on record saying that the first person to live to 150 is already around us, has already been born, but I'm also excited by the fact that there is no law that says we cannot live much longer than that. Now I don't think we'll live forever – that's pretty hard – but I haven't seen any reason why we couldn't live for hundreds of years, given these new results that we're just seeing from our lab and a few others around the world.

AL: Do you worry about a society in which the old don't pass away to allow the young to flourish? You famously, in 2004, debated Leon Kass at the University of Chicago about the ethics of living longer. He made the arguments that people might feel less urgency. It might undermine the institution of marriage. That the old fogies would dominate and you wouldn't get the fresh, new start-up ideas. Do you think a society in which the old didn't shuffle off their mortal coil might be a worse one in some respects?

DS: I think that's a load of rubbish and I told him so. It would be like in the 1920s saying what are we going to do with all these people that survive infections? As we advance as a society, it's going to be normal for an 80 or a 90-year-old to be playing tennis with their grandkids and beyond. Dr Kass was on record as saying, 'Who would marry their partner if you would live to over a hundred?' To that I say, I would love to spend an extra decade with my wife. Each to his own. I also don't think that the urgency of life diminishes because you live an extra 10 years, absolutely not. Even a thousand years, for me anyway, wouldn't be a long time. I've lived now 50 years and that went by in a blink. So, a thousand is just 20 blinks. So what? I still want to do so much with life. If you have longer life and you're healthy, it gives you the chance to reinvent yourself. So, if you make a mistake or you have kids and you're held back in what you always wanted to do, you would have a

chance to start again, just like my father has at the age of seventy plus.

AL: Do you feel that the field is starting to get pretty crowded? You've got Google's Calico, you've got people like James Watson, Craig Venter, Aubrey de Grey, Cynthia Kenyon. You've got the backing of people like Peter Thiel and Larry Ellison. You've got all these different approaches. Rapamycin. Basis. This idea that we can infuse young blood into older people. Do you feel as though there are a lot of people around you, and perhaps your idea isn't going to be the one that dominates?

DS: I think it's wonderful that the world is waking up to this possibility. It's what I always dreamed of. And the more, the better. Only a fraction of 1 per cent is dedicated to studying aging at the fundamental level, and it's the most common disease that we all suffer from. It's going to kill most of us. So, finally, I found that it's very exciting that the globe is waking up to this because everyone pretty much, not everyone, but most people I met have been in denial their whole lives. Not only is it possible to dream about what's possible in the future, finally we're actually doing something about it. What I find exciting is that the young generation, especially Gen Z, are so optimistic about what we humans can achieve and make a better world. It's as though anything is possible and I just love that about them.

AL: I love that somebody who's focused on aging is drawing the greatest inspiration from the next generation. It's either beautiful or ironic. I can't quite figure it out. Do you worry that when taking on such a big question that you might fail? Do you have a fear of failure? You've had sort of certainly critics of your work in the past. Does the fear of failure trouble you?

DS: I don't worry about failure. I've already achieved more in my lifetime than I thought I would, so the rest is just a bonus. But I'm at the point of my career where I've put enough *Cell Science* and *Nature* papers on the wall, now it's all about training the next generation of scientists. I do this all the time now, and I'm looking forwards. If my son chooses to get into this, that's great. That'll be my legacy. He'll carry the torch. So, if I fail, and I think there's a small chance of failure now that there's so much going on, but even if I do, I'll still die a happy man because I know that I've been able to help inspire young people and show what's possible. It's now a whole movement. It's a global movement. If I was to get hit by a bus tomorrow, that would be fine because I think what we've started here, it's got enough momentum that it just is not going to stop, whether I'm around or not.



There's so much convincing evidence that being a little bit hungry and certainly staying lean, if you can, is a good thing.



AL: What does a typical day look like for you? Are you a ferociously early riser? Do you have a lot of structure to your day?

DS: Well, I have people who manage my time, so it's very busy. I'm going from meeting to call, to meeting to taxi, flight to meeting to back again. So it's a very full life, but I love that about it. I don't want to waste a second. Every moment is important to me and I feel like I'm on a mission to really change the world. And I'm in this position that I feel partly due to my stubbornness, but also just dumb luck, landing at the right place at the right time. I want to maximise my opportunity here to make the biggest difference. So, it's busy. An average day for me, there really isn't one, but it involves going to the lab and checking out the new results, talking to a few students, getting on a phone call to reporters, finishing up writing my next book, getting on a flight perhaps to New York for dinner or coming back, talking to investors to raise money for the company that I'm building right now. It's extremely exciting. I'm helping guide about 500 scientists around the world in what they're doing, and that's a lot of activity and a lot of emails each day.

AL: Do you have any tips or tricks for managing email? It seems to dominate many of our lives.

DS: Well, so it's really hard, especially when they fall off the bottom of the screen or the phone and you have to go back. I find that now I just have to do it every time I'm walking. Every spare moment, if I'm on a plane, if I'm in a car – being driven, that is. I'm always on point and on my work, unfortunately it never stops. Last night I was up till 2.00 am working. So, it's a busy life. What we need is a bot that can help answer emails, but I haven't found that there's any way to outsource that really. If there's one gem that I could give to your listeners, it would be try not to dwell on emails too long. Often you can spend too long composing emails, getting them perfect. Don't get them perfect. Try to get it off your plate, send it out, and move on to the next one.

AL: David, what advice would you give to your teenage self?

DS: I'm quite proud of my teenage self that he didn't screw up his life and ended up making something of himself. I would actually tell my teenage self don't be shy. Don't worry. You will find a partner. You're not going to be lonely forever. Just follow your passion. Keep following your dreams. I was a fairly, I wouldn't say clinically depressed, but I wasn't a happy teenager. I was too worried about the world. I was worried about where we were going. I was worried about the environment. Just overwhelmed with negativity. But when I finally found that I might be able to have a positive impact on the planet, everything changed and I came out of my shell and I'm not shy anymore and I find that I actually have some leadership skills that I didn't realise I had when I was younger.

AL: You've been quoted saying that you were inspired by your grandmother Vera saying, don't be boring. Do you feel as though you've lived up to the don't be boring maxim?

DS: I think so. There were a lot of things that I could say that I'm not allowed to because I'm a scientist and a professor. But I think that being able to maximise your life – don't always give the straight answer, make a joke as often as you can. I think that that's a life well lived.

AL: What's something you used to believe but no longer do?

DS: I used to believe that we were a species that wasn't worth saving and I've come to believe that humans are the most interesting thing in the universe. They're extremely rare. They're super interesting. They are each one comprised of 20 trillion cells that work to make a conscious being that can make

a difference. And, actually, we control our destiny, and that we can, if we choose to, politically and socially, solve any major problem. So, I've moved from being a pessimist to realising that humans are the most exciting – not just exciting, the most promising thing – to ever evolve on any rock in the universe that we know of.

AL: Was that a sort of radical environmentalist view that shaped that notion that humans weren't worth saving? You talked about spending the time in the bush and so on. Were you worried about the damage that humans were doing to the natural environment?

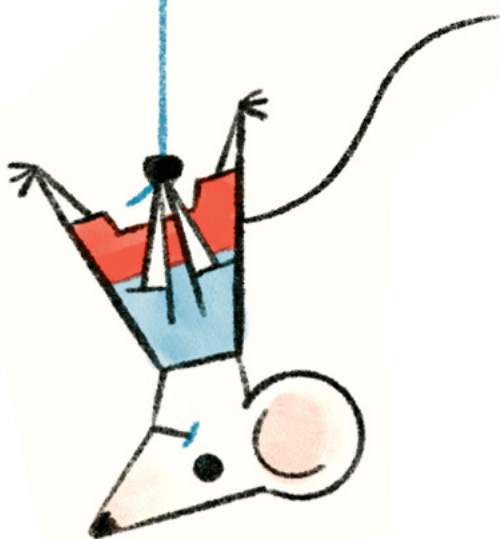
DS: Absolutely I was and I loved animals. I still love animals, and I was worried that we would just overcrowd them. But what I've actually seen is that as soon as you have a problem, like running out of petrol or gas supplies or pollution or overcrowding, we can solve those problems. I drive an electric car. I've seen housing that's great to live in that doesn't take up an acre and I've seen that we can make food that isn't environmentally destructive on very little amounts of water and fertiliser. And so, these are things that give me huge optimism, that if we just put our minds to it and we have the political will, we can make our future more like a *Star Trek* than *Blade Runner*.

AL: I understand you've even provided advice to the Chinese government on managing the challenges of population growth.

DS: I do advise governments. I advise various aspects of government, to protect us from bio-weapon threats and the like. What I'm finding is that governments are slowly waking up to the fact that this science is real. It's going to have a big impact. It's going to have social consequences. We will have to adapt the laws and age of retirement. It'll have a big impact on the government's ability to pay out retirement for 40 years of somebody's life span or longer. But these are things that we will adapt to because we're not all going to stop aging tomorrow, but I think the policies do need to be adapted. We've done the math. We've seen that if we are able to allow people to have an extra 5 to 10 years of healthy life, the longevity dividend that comes back is in the trillions of dollars of savings just to the Australian economy. And that money can be put back into saving the environment, into education, and to paying for people to be able to be re-educated and have a second or third life and career. That's a world that when that happens we'll look back, like we do at the 1920s and say, 'How is it possible people used to die from a cut? Who would want to live like that?' And we're going to have the



If there's one gem that I could give to your listeners, it would be try not to dwell on emails too long. Often you can spend too long composing emails, getting them perfect. Don't get them perfect. Try to get it off your plate, send it out, and move on to the next one.



same situation when this all comes through.

AL: When are you most happy?

DS: When I'm talking about the research and the discoveries of my students, and when I talk to people who share the enthusiasm and realise the promise of what humanity is about to embark on.

AL: Do your three children have a sense now as to what you work on? Are they at a stage where you're able to engage them with the wonders of what you're exploring?

DS: I'm like any parent. When I'm with my kids, it's the best times. I have three kids and they're all very different as you can might imagine. I have young boy who's similar to me, he's a scientist, big optimist, wants to change the world and take over from me if he can. I've got a middle daughter who doesn't really care about anything except being a socialite and performing and writing music, which is great. I totally respect that. But our eldest daughter has the negativity of a teenager that we're going to screw up the world. She's hasn't made that transition like I did at her age. She is 15-years-old. The discussions that I have with each of my children are just wonderful. They're all very different, but we do like to argue. We have dinner table conversations that can be quite heated, but extremely enjoyable. That's one of the things that I love about my family – that they won't just sit there and talk about TV shows. They will actually debate the future of humanity and who's right and who's wrong.

AL: What's the most important thing you do in your life to stay mentally and physically healthy? Is it those three pills?

DS: Well, I do gardening. That's my relaxation. My wife and I are avid gardeners. That's quiet time.

AL: That surprises me. It doesn't seem to fit with everything else that you've said – I can't picture your frenetic energy being imposed on petunias and carrots.

DS: Well, I do like weeding. I do have a little bit of OCD, so plucking stuff is good for my health. My wife and I, we are both overachievers. She's a PhD from MIT as well. If you could see our garden, I think it's a little over the top. We do like to grow a lot of things and plant a lot of things. We just finished building an orchard, which is drip-watered. I'm hoping to win an award for a competition with some of my colleagues who are trying to grow fruit, and we want to have the award for the most fruit per square metre.



So that's the kind of thing. I'm still, I think now you understand why I like gardening. It's a fun hobby but I still introduce competition into it.

AL: Right. Do you have any guilty pleasures?

DS: Guilty pleasure would be a glass or two of red wine. That's about it. I do imbibe occasionally. I'm being very good to my body over the years. Trying to not eat too much. I tried to give up, we call it deserts, at age 40, as best I could. If I do eat and snack at night, that's probably something that I should do less of, but I do – what do you call it? – stress eat, to try to get through a day, but I'm really trying to fight that one. But you can find me in the fridge at midnight on every other day.

AL: We should go to one of the myths about red wine, because it does contain resveratrol, but can you just remind our listeners how many glasses of red wine they would have to drink to get as much resveratrol as is in your daily pill?

DS: A glass of red wine has a few milligrams of resveratrol in it. The amount that I take is a gram. So, you'd need to take more than a hundred glasses of red wine. I don't recommend that to anybody. I think your liver will die before you get enough. So that's why I put the powder in a yoghurt in the morning. It's not a very soluble molecule. It's very good to have in red wine, actually, because it's dissolved in the alcohol. But one thing about red wine that I'm often asked is, well, can it actually do any good if you need a hundred glasses a day? The answer is that red wine is full of different molecules. Some are resveratrol, some of these other ones are beneficial. So, I think the combination of these, what we call polyphenolic molecules in red wine, with a little bit of alcohol each day, can explain why it's been found that red wine can seemingly protect you against heart disease and other diseases. Protect you against a fatty diet, such as you find with the French. As we know in the French paradox.

AL: And, finally, David, which person or experience has most shaped your view of living an ethical life?

DS: Well, I look up to Bill Gates. I've never met the guy. He used to be my moral enemy – I'm a big Mac fan. I have a museum of Macintoshes at my home to give an idea how much I adore Macs and Apple. But Bill Gates is a guy that has made money and then said, 'You know what? I'm going to give pretty much all of it away for good causes.' He'll go down in history more for his philanthropy than Microsoft in 500 years from now.

AL: David Sinclair, a longevity researcher extraordinaire, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom and ideas and time on The Good Life podcast today.

DS: Thanks Andrew. It was great to be on. Thanks for having me.



The Good Life

*Published in 2018 and transcribed for
The Podcast Reader.*

 Read more @ podread.org

 Listen @ The Good Life

TO MAKE THE WORLD SAFE FOR MEDIOCRITY

LIFE AS A SERIAL OUTSIDER

MALCOLM GLADWELL
CONVERSATIONS WITH TYLER
2017

Interview by Tyler Cowen

Illustration by Janelle Barone

Tyler Cowen: Most of my questions will be quite short, but my first question will be really, really long. Since everyone knows you and your work so well, I asked myself, ‘Who is Malcolm Gladwell?’ And I tried to come up with an answer. I’ll give you my answer, and then you can correct me or add to that, and this will take a little while.

So, I think of you as a figure set, really, coming out of the post-war Caribbean Enlightenment. I put you in a context with, say, Sylvia Wynter, C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon. A common theme in their work is the notion that science is something potentially liberating and emancipatory. You’re picking up on that, with one of the channels of influence being your mother, who is herself a very well-known Caribbean writer and intellectual. So, there’s that Caribbean background: power of science to liberate human individuals.

There is a Mennonite influence both from your childhood and your family, where you grew up in Canada. My understanding of Mennonites is they tend to stress that in the Scriptures there’s not much talk of original sin, so you see the possibility for goodness in people. You then spent much of your life in Canada, so there’s a modesty that comes from that temperament, and also intellectual modesty. You then have a father who is a mathematician, so there’s the emphasis on data. And you got your 10,000 hours of practice, mostly at the *Washington Post*, as an early person behind the rise of data-based journalism.

Key themes in your work: I think of them as contingency, optimism and voluntarism; power of the individual. Your first book, *Tipping Point*, is about how small moves can lead to big changes. Your last book, *David and Goliath*, is about how David can beat Goliath in many contexts. So again, contingency, optimism, voluntarism, the individual, and whether it boils down to: is there a better way to shoot NBA free throws *or* could Elvis Costello have improved on his recording of *Goodbye Cruel World*? There’s this consistently optimistic perspective, so you’re really a very systematic thinker with core themes running throughout your whole work. That’s my take on who’s Malcolm Gladwell. How do you see it? Who is Malcolm Gladwell?



Malcolm Gladwell: Well, that's a very flattering interpretation. I don't know if I think that deeply about myself. The only thing I would add to that is I really liked to tell stories, and my desire to tell stories is not a product of my background. It's a reaction against my background because my family, with all due respect to them – I love them dearly—are not good storytellers.

TC: [laughs]

MG: And so that was the role I felt I filled in my family, since everyone was so uninterested—the notion that you would sit around a dinner table and recount hilarious stories from the day was utterly absent from my childhood. And when I discovered much later on that there were families where this happened, I was just in awe. There are two kinds of influences: negative and positive. You just left out the negative ones, I think.

TC: I could imagine maybe your father, the mathematician, was not a natural storyteller. But if I think of your mother, Joyce Gladwell—I've been reading her book, published in 1969 – you even make a cameo appearance on page 178. It's called *Brown Face, Big Master*. It's a memoir and it's full of great stories.

What I find profound in that is her notion of both the importance of struggle and issues of race and feminism and fighting for your family, but also repeatedly being subjected to what she calls 'the medicine of acceptance,' and how you can combine those two things—struggle and medicine of acceptance—in a life that also finds God. And she's full of profound stories on that. So, did you get your storytelling nature from her?

MG: Well, my mother is very quiet. She is a lovely writer and a great storyteller when she writes, but she's not one to regale the room. Some people who write books, what they're really doing is they're just putting down on paper the stories they tell in public. My mother was putting down on paper the stories she would *never* tell in public. It's funny—she's not unusual in this. This is why I always urge people to sit down with their parents while they are still with them and turn on the tape recorder and force them to tell stories because surprising numbers of people don't—unless they're forced to, unless it's a deliberate act—tell the stories from their life that are meaningful. Writing that book was a very deliberate act on my mother's part. She was trying to make sense of ... one hesitates to call one's own mother's life 'extraordinary'. It wasn't that it was extraordinary, it was just unusual. She was a black woman trying to marry a white man in England in the fifties. So, they were

a little bit of an oddity. Can I tell my favourite story about my father from this era?

TC: Tell your favourite story, sure.

MG: They get married and they move back to Jamaica. My father's teaching mathematics at University of the West Indies in the early sixties ('61). I love this story. But this is a story my father did not tell me until three years ago, which tells you something about stories. Three years ago, he somehow just comes out and tells it. It's '61, he needs a particular textbook, and this being 1961, you can't go online, so he writes to all the libraries. It turns out the closest library to Kingston, Jamaica, that has this book that he needs for his research is Georgia Tech. So, he writes to Georgia Tech and says, 'Can I come and use your library?' And they say, 'Yes.' So, he makes preparations and it means sailing from Kingston to Miami and taking a bus from Miami to Atlanta because he doesn't have any money.

What he doesn't realise is that they said yes, but the person who said yes got in trouble for saying yes before they figured out his race. Because all they knew was that a man from the University of the West Indies was planning to use their library. And, of course, their library in 1961 would've been segregated. It set off this huge commotion at Georgia Tech as they tried to figure out whether my father was white or black. So, they look and they figured out where he got his PhD—could they find some kind of yearbook? They couldn't. They tried to get in touch with his thesis advisor; couldn't get his name. Couldn't just call him because of course you can't place a call to Kingston in 1961 and just ask. Finally, they track him down. The day before he's about to leave, he gets a call from the dean of whatever at Georgia Tech: 'Mr. Malcolm Gladwell?' He says, 'Yes?' 'Dr Malcolm Gladwell, well, we have sort of a slightly odd question.' He goes, 'Yes, what is it?' 'Are you white?' My father says, 'Yes.' And the guy says, swear to God, 'Oh, thank God!' Now, to my point about stories, like I said, he told that story three years ago; just happened to come out. Who waits until 2014 to tell a story like that from 1961?

TC: There's a discussion that Sylvia Wynter, the Jamaican intellectual, in year 2000 said there's something special about the United States: that in Jamaica, or in many parts of the Caribbean, being middle class can in some way counter the fact of blackness socially, and serve as a kind of offset. But she said about the US, and here I quote, 'The US itself is based on the insistent negation of black identity, the obsessive hypervaluation of being white.' Do you think that's an accurate perspective?



Key themes in your work: I think of them as contingency, optimism and voluntarism; power of the individual.



MG: Yeah, there is something – well, I hesitate to say under-theorised – but there is something under-theorised about the differences between West Indian and American black culture – the psychological difference between what it means to come from those two places. I think only when you look very closely at that difference do you understand the heavy weight that particular American heritage places on African-Americans. What's funny about West Indians is, they can always spot another West Indian. And at a certain point you wonder, 'How do they always know?' It's because after a while you get good at spotting the absence of that weight. And it also explains the well-known phenomenon of how disproportionately successful West Indians are when they come to the US, because they seem to be better equipped to deal with the particular pathologies attached to race in this country – my mother being a very good example. But, of course, there are a million examples. I've been reading all these oral history transcripts from the civil rights movement for one of my podcasts. I got halfway through one today and I had that completely unbidden thing, 'Oh, this guy's a West Indian.' He was an African-American attorney and a civil rights lawyer in Virginia in the sixties. I got a thirty-page transcript. I got to page fifteen, I'm like, 'He's West Indian.' And then, literally page

sixteen, 'My father came from Trinidad and Tobago with my mother and me.' There is something very, very real there that's not, I feel, fully appreciated.

TC: Another difference that struck me – tell me what you think of this – is that the notion of freedom for much of the Caribbean is in some way more celebratory, and it's more rooted in history, and it may be because these are majority black societies. History is, in a sense, controlled; it's much more commemorative. Does that make sense to you? It's not a struggle to control the narration of history at a national level.

MG: Yes. You're in charge of the narrative –

TC: Yes.

MG: ...which is huge. I thought of this because of a Jamaican poet called Louise Bennett. If you are Jamaican, you know exactly who this person is. She's probably the most important colloquial poet. I think that's the wrong word. Popular poet. And she wrote poetry in dialect. So, for a generation of Jamaicans, she was an assertion of Jamaican identity and culture. My mother was a scholarship student at a predominantly white boarding school in Jamaica. She and the other black students of the school, as an act of protest, read Louise Bennett poetry at the school function when she was 12 years old. If you read Louise Bennett's poetry, much of it is about race. It's about race where the Jamaican, the black Jamaican, often has the upper hand. The black Jamaican is always telling some sly joke at the expense of the white minority. So, it's poetry that doesn't make the same kind of sense in a society where you're a relatively powerless minority. It's the kind of thing that makes sense if you're not in control of major institutions and such, but you are 95 per cent of the population and you feel like you're going to win pretty soon. My mother used to read this poem to me as a child where Louise Bennett is sitting in a beauty parlour getting her hair straightened sitting next to a white woman who's getting her hair curled. And the joke is that the white woman's paying a lot more to get her hair curled than Louise Bennett is to get her hair straightened. That's the point. It's all this subtle one-upmanship. But that's very Jamaican.

TC: Now, to ask about your podcasts. I know some of them in the second season, they'll be about the civil rights movement – in particular, the 1950s, which are a somewhat neglected time. I'll throw out just a few possible forces that led America to start to become more integrated in the fifties and you tell me which you think are neglected or underrated. One would be professional sports and Jackie Robinson starting

to play baseball in the late forties. Another would be entertainers, a move towards having more black leads in movies and also music, say Chuck Berry or even James Brown. Harry Truman integrating the military, or the desire, for purposes of Cold War propaganda, to actually show this country is making some progress on civil rights issues. Which of those or which other factors do you feel are the ones we're missing in understanding this history?

MG: If I had to rank those, army one. And I would say that the entertainment and sports ... I would say that it was either neutral or worse than neutral.

TC: Why worse than neutral?

MG: Because I actually think if we were to take the long view, and look at this from a hundred years from now, we would say that ... it is not unusual for minorities to first make their mark in sports and entertainment. You see it with Jews, you see it with Italians, you see it with Irish. But the thing that's striking to me about those movements is they move in and out of those worlds pretty quickly. So, the Jewish moment in sports is really quite short.

TC: Sure.

MG: Which is, in retrospect, not that surprising.

TC: Boxing especially.

MG: The African-American moment in those transitional fields is really long; it continues to this day. And it's almost to the point where you feel they move into those worlds and get stalled there. And their presence in that world accentuates and aggravates existing prejudice about their community as opposed to serving as a way station to a better place. So, if your problem is that you're facing a series of stereotypes about how you are intellectually inferior, how you have a broken culture – I could go on and on with all of the stereotypes that exist. Then how does playing brutally violent sports help you? How is an association, almost an overrepresentation, in these kinds of public entertainments advance your cause? I'm for those things when they're transitional, and I'm against them when they seem like dead ends.

TC: How important a factor was the research of Mamie and Kenneth Clark? That's some work that, had there been a Malcolm Gladwell at the time, would have been written up even more: the notion that when there's segregation, people may value themselves or their race less. It seems that had a big impact on the Warren Court, on other thinking. What's

your take on *their* influence?

MG: Well, the great book on this is Daryl Scott's *Contempt and Pity*. He's a very good black historian at Howard [University], I believe. Yes, he's the chair of history at Howard. And he has much to say, so I got quite taken when I was doing this season of my podcast with the black critique of *Brown [v. Board of Education]*. And the black critique of *Brown* starts with some of that psychological research because the psychological research is profoundly problematic on many levels. So what Clark was showing, and what so moved the court in the Warren decision, was this research where you would take the black and the white doll, and you show them to the black kid. And you would say, 'Which is the good doll?' And the black kid points to the white doll. 'And which doll do you associate with yourself?' And they don't want to answer the question. And the court said, 'This is the damage done by segregation.' Scott points out that if you actually look at the research that Clark did, the black children who were most likely to have these deeply problematic responses in the doll test were those from the North who were *in* integrated schools. The southern kids in segregated schools did not regard the black doll as problematic. They were like, 'That's me. Fine.'

That result, that it was black kids, minority kids from integrated schools who had the most adverse reactions to their own representation in a doll, is consistent with all of the previous literature on self-hatred, which starts with Jews. That literature begins with, where does Jewish self-hatred come from? Jewish self-hatred does not come from Eastern Europe and the ghettos. It comes from when Jewish immigrants confront and come into close conflict and contact with majority white culture. That's when self-hatred starts, when you start measuring yourself at close quarters against the other, and the other seems so much freer and more glamorous. So, in other words, the Warren Court picks the wrong research. There are all kinds of problems caused by segregation. This happens to be not one of them. So why does the Warren Court do that? Because they are trafficking in – this is Scott's argument – an uncomfortable and unfortunate trope about black Americans, which is that black American culture is psychologically damaged. That the problem with black people is not that they're denied power, or that doors are closed to them, but because that something at their core, their family life and their psyches, have, in some way, been crushed or distorted or harmed by their history. It personalises the struggle. By personalising the struggle what the Warren Court is trying to do is to manufacture an argument against segregation that will be acceptable to white people, particularly southern white people. And so, what they're

saying is, 'Look, it's not you that's the problem. It's black people. They're harmed in their hearts, and we have to usher them into the mainstream.'

They're not making the correct argument, which was, 'You guys have been messing with these people for 200 years! Stop!' They can't make that argument because Warren desperately wants a majority. He wants a nine-nothing majority on the court. So, instead, they construct this, in retrospect, deeply offensive argument, about how it's all about black people carrying this ... and using social science in a way that's actually quite deeply problematic. It's not what the social science said.

TC: A more recent line of research—some of it coming from Roland Fryer and Steve Levitt—that at least claims that mixed-race children growing up have a harder time and take more risks than just their socioeconomic status alone would predict. Do you agree with that, take issue with it?

MG: *Mixed-race?*

TC: Mixed-race.

MG: Really? I never heard of that. It doesn't apply to me, certainly. No one has lived a more risk-averse life than me.

I don't know. Although I have enormous respect for both those economists, this isn't one of those highly imaginative uses of correlations, is it? Sometimes they lose me. Sometimes economists lose me when they play those games.

TC: Higher education. It's one of your passions in life. There's a recent paper by Raj Chetty that shows that at least 38 colleges are taking in more students from the top 1 per cent than from the bottom 60 per cent. And many of those are Ivy League schools. Take, for instance, Harvard, Princeton, Yale—why are those schools not doubling the number of students they take in? In your opinion, why don't they do this?

MG: I was going to say, 'Why are you asking *me*? You're the one in the academy.'

TC: But you must have a theory of why the world is failing in this way.

MG: Why? Well, why doesn't Louis Vuitton sell a \$59 bag? Because Louis Vuitton doesn't want to be in the commodity bag business. They would rather sell a small number of bags at \$10,000 each.

TC: But Harvard could take in two times and not lower tuition, I suspect.



... these guys are in the luxury handbag business. They're not in the education business. They are interested in sustaining a certain brand equity. And they see expanding the size of their schools as diluting their brand equity in exactly the same manner as Louis Vuitton does.



MG: Harvard could take in ten times and still have \$40 billion left over.

TC: Ten times and not lower tuition.

MG: Look, these guys are in the luxury handbag business. They're not in the education business. They are interested in sustaining a certain brand equity. And they see expanding the size of their schools as diluting their brand equity in exactly the same manner as Louis Vuitton does. Louis Vuitton is not going to open a Louis Vuitton store across the street right in that building over there next to the Starbucks. They're not going to do it even though there may be people right here who want to go and buy a Louis Vuitton bag. They're very conscious of maintaining that aura of exclusivity. That's all Harvard is doing. If you thought for a moment their primary motivation was in educating as many people as they could as well as they could, then I think you're living in a dream world. Right?

I was walking around—this is a tangent. I was in DC this weekend and I went for a walk with a friend of mine, and we went to Dumbarton Oaks. It's a gorgeous facility, and it was given to Harvard University in 1940 by Robert Bliss in its entirety. I happen to know, for complicated reasons that I shouldn't go into, that the endowment attached to Dumbarton Oaks has many, many zeroes. Let's just say that the endowment attached to Dumbarton Oaks is larger than the endowments of all but a tiny fraction of American colleges. And we all know that on the grounds of Dumbarton Oaks, they have a museum where there's one of the great collections of Pre-Columbian art in the world. So, as I was walking along the grounds of Dumbarton Oaks, I asked myself, 'This is a facility owned by a non-profit institution, which receives enormous tax benefits from the American taxpayer, and which has an astonishing sum of money attached to it. Why can't I see the art?' And why does no one get upset about this, by the way? I'm allowed to walk around the rose garden. Whoopee! Surely, I should see the art. I am, as an American taxpayer, subsidising this institution. When was the last time they brought in a busload of high school students to Dumbarton Oaks to walk them through the Pre-Columbian art collection? Has it ever happened?

TC: I don't know. One economic puzzle to me is why a university such as Harvard has such high endowments. Now you've just raised some objections to endowments. But if one is taking a somewhat cynical economic approach to this, you would think actually they would spend more on themselves from the endowment, and they don't. And that raises the question of what are they really trying to maxi-

mise? What's your theory of endowments and why they're so high? And why don't the people at Harvard spend more on themselves? Because they're not all *that* rich.

MG: You had a great post on *Marginal Revolution*, I remember, very short, in which you were giving a list of things you thought needed to be done in the world of economics. And one of them was, you said, 'Endowments are under-theorised.'

TC: Yes.

MG: I read that and I went, 'Ha! I'm going to steal that phrase!' Totally under-theorised. One of the greatest philanthropists of the twentieth century was Julius Rosenwald, the guy who makes Sears 'Sears', an enormously wealthy man in the twenties and thirties. And he starts the Rosenwald Fund, and what does the Rosenwald Fund do? It sets aside a sum of money, which in today's dollars would be probably close to a billion. And he decides what he wants to do is to go throughout the South and build public schools in African-American communities. And one of his rules is 'no endowments.' He said, 'We're going to spend it to zero.'

TC: Uh-huh.

MG: And they spent it to zero. And to this day, there has actually been some really lovely economic work measuring the economic impact of the Rosenwald schools, and it's not subtle. If you look at the list of things that made a tangible difference in the South in the first half of the twentieth century, Rosenwald schools is way up there. And why did he get way up there? Because he went to zero, right? If he set up an endowment to fund the building of schools for African-Americans in the South, we would still be building schools for African-Americans in the South. It would be a 100-year-long project. Instead of running through a billion dollars, you would run through 5 per cent of a billion dollars every year. So, the very fact that you set up an endowment means that you have decided before you start to minimise your impact. 'I'm going to take your dollar and I'm going to commit to spending five cents of it every year.' That's the craziest thing I've ever heard. Who does this? I don't know where it comes from. Why would you not spend your money? If you have \$40 billion and you're Harvard ... how many interesting educational things could you do with \$40 billion if you gave yourself a 10-year time horizon? By the way, given the track record of Harvard and raising money, why for a moment do they think they can't replace the \$40 billion once they run through the existing \$40 billion? They have proven over and over

again that there's one thing at which they truly are world-class, and that's raising money. The irrationality ... it's irrationality upon irrationality. They haven't even owned up to the one thing that they're truly world-class at.

TC: I'm pleased that we're holding this at George Mason the school, which, in the words of our president, 'tries to be the best school *for* the world, and not the best *in* the world.' But let's say we put you in charge at Harvard. What changes would you make? You appoint the board. You are the board; you and your mother.

MG: Oh, man. This is such a great question. Can I start at the beginning?

TC: Start at the beginning.

MG: Okay. I would establish a set of baseline criteria for admissions, and then I would have a lottery after that. So, if you're in the top 2 per cent of your high school class – 5 per cent, whatever cut-off we want – following test scores at a certain point, whatever cut-off we want, some minimum number of other things you do, you just go into the pot and we're pulling out names. I'd probably triple or quadruple the size in the next 10 years, open campuses – probably two other campuses in the US, one overseas.

I had this idea, I'm not sure how you'd do it, where I think that it would be really, really useful to ban graduates of elite colleges from ever disclosing that they went to an elite college. It's *not* a joke, it's deadly serious because what it does is it wonderfully clarifies the decision for the student of whether they want to go to an elite college. So, you don't want the kid going to Harvard who just wants the brand name, 'Harvard.' You want the kid to go to Harvard who genuinely believes that he or she can get an education there that they can't get anywhere else. I want *that* kid.

So, if I say, 'You can come here and get the greatest education in the world, but after you graduate you can never tell anyone where you went,' then I'm weeding out all the Louis Vuitton shoppers, and I'm getting the true scholars. If there's a kid out there who says, 'There's this certain professor ...' One of my oldest friends is a professor at Harvard, Terry Martin. Huge fan of yours, by the way, Tyler.

TC: Oh great. [laughs]

MG: If there's a kid out there who says, 'I read Terry's book.' (He wrote a couple of books.) 'I want to do Soviet studies; I want to study with Terry.' That's the kid I want. Actually, I'm willing to go to any lengths to get that kid: I'll cut him a break, I'll keep him out

of the lottery, I'll do all kinds of things. If you're running a truly elite college, what you want to select for is the kids who are most powerfully motivated to leverage the intellectual assets of the institution, not the brand assets of the institution.

TC: And now a truly important question: How would you treat the faculty?

MG: Well, there's a really interesting site – I've forgotten to my eternal discredit who did it – that looks at trends in educational spending and points out that educational spending – higher ed spending – has gone like *that*; the share of higher ed dollars that goes to faculty salaries ... it's basically been flat for 50 years.

TC: So, you'd pay us more?

MG: Oh yeah, I absolutely would pay you more. I don't say that because I'm at a university talking to a professor and I'm the son of a professor. I say that because it seems crazy to have to put academics in the kind of professional firmament, it seems crazy to have them losing ground to other professions when you would think that the importance in a modern society of having world-class faculty would be greater. I'm not saying that if you pay academics properly more, you're going to get better academics necessarily, but I do think it's not a bad idea if you want to reward people going into that profession.

TC: Human potential and talent: that's a key theme running throughout a lot of your work. Let me ask you two or three questions on that. Do you think that today we're actually working too hard to measure and spot talent very early, and thus we're branding and marking people and actually telling a lot of people they shouldn't do activity X because they're measured too quickly?

MG: Yeah. My friend David Epstein, who wrote *The Sports Gene*, is really, really interesting on this subject, with respect to sports, and points out that what really makes for successful, elite athletes is a broad early base. The last thing you want to do is to overspecialise too soon with a kid, for a number of reasons. One is the phenomenon of baseball pitchers having all kinds of arm problems in their teens, a product of kids simply pitching too much, too soon. But you can generalise from that: we think that an awful lot of injuries that elite athletes are suffering in their late adolescence are due to the fact that they have been doing the same repetitive motions from an early age. We think that burnout is also a function of this. But there also is a very interesting argument beyond those to say that there is a body of

skills that you only learn if you have a broad early base. So the basketball analogy would be Hakeem Olajuwon being a soccer player, or Steve Nash being a soccer player, or in tennis, [Roger] Federer being a soccer player. There are extremely valuable things about basketball that are most usefully learned on a soccer pitch when you're very young.

That is a beautiful analogy for academic work as well, or for any sort of intellectual work: that the best preparation for something over *here* when you're very young may be something over *there*. And then the third thing is the most important and the thing you're alluding to, that we do a really bad job of spotting early talent simply because you can't. I'm a runner and every runner knows this. The kids who are the great runners in their early teens, and I was one of them, are not the ones who end up being the world-class athletes. Sometimes they are, but there's a huge changeover in the ranking of runners between 12 and 18. When I look at the ranks of world-class runners and you look at their times, at least half of them had mediocre times. I was, at the age of 13, the fastest miler for my age in Canada. By 21, I was useless and washed up. There was a kid who I used to destroy when I was 13. He went on to be essentially world-class, right on the fringes of world-class. I used to *kill* him. I mean it was just not even close. Anyone looking at the two of us at 13 would say, 'Malcolm Gladwell's the talent. This other guy, well he should take up ...' He was terrible. He ended up running 3:35 for 1500 metres.

TC: Let's say you're giving advice to the parents and grandparents in the room. You can't reshape the system, you can't even control Harvard, but you can tell them what to do for their children. What's your advice, given all of what you just said?

MG: Well, you should delay specialisation as long as possible because prediction is poor, and burnout is as big an issue as poor prediction, early prediction. The other parallel problem, which I get at in *David and Goliath*, is that overly competitive environments at too early an age are really, deeply problematic. I thought about this the other day. I live most of the time upstate in New York, very close to Bard [College]. And I go work out at the Bard gym and I was watching ... Bard has got, I don't know, how many students? Is it 2,000? I don't even know. Some tiny number. And I was watching the Bard lacrosse team work out. And I don't want to offend anyone who went to Bard.

TC: They're not allowed to say, by the way, if they did.

MG: Okay. That's right, they can't say. They're terrible!



... that what really makes for successful, elite athletes is a broad early base. The last thing you want to do is to overspecialise too soon.



MG: I was eyeballing their lacrosse team, and I was like, 'Good Lord!' I felt that *I* could go down there at 52 and make this team. That was my first thought, and my second thought was, 'That is so fantastic.' Because what it means is you can be an ordinary Joe at Bard and play lacrosse. Now think about that in every different thing. In a school that small, there are probably two or three things at which they genuinely do excel. I'm sure the drama program or the music program is formidable. But let's accept, though, any non-specialty item at Bard is going to be wide open. It's totally accessible. You want to be in the physics club at Bard? You're going to be in the physics club at Bard. And that is a massively underrated thing. In other words, there's a continuum here, and exclusivity is at one end and opportunity is at the other end. And people constantly are confusing these two things and thinking that in exclusivity and in elite status is opportunity. False. *Eventually*, that's where the opportunities lie. They don't lie there when you're 16 or 17 when what is required of you is experimentation. If you want your 17-year-old to explore the world, send your 17-year-old to a place where the world can be explored. The world cannot

be explored at a super-elite university. It's impossible.

I talk about in *David and Goliath*, the phenomenon of very, very, very good science and math students going to elite colleges and dropping out at enormously high rates because they're in the 99th percentile and they're in a class full of people in the 99.9th percentile. And when you are in the 99th percentile and you're up against someone in the 99.99th percentile, you feel stupid. Even though you will never again in your life—unless you want to be an academic at MIT in physics—be surrounded by people that smart. It's over after that. Then you go back to the real world, and you're smart again. So why would you artificially put yourself in a situation where you feel so dumb that you stop doing the very thing that you went to school to do? That is bananas. When I was in college, I went out for the University of Toronto newspaper and they wouldn't give me a job. It was too hard to get in. They were brilliant people. So, what did I do? I wrote for my residential college. We put out this joke thing every couple of weeks, and it was insanely fun. I could do whatever I wanted, nobody cared. In the end, I had a way better experience than I would have had if I was at the highly competitive newspaper. I've never forgotten that. By virtue of being this lame, forgotten thing, I got to do more fun stuff and have a much better time than I would have at the proper newspaper. This drives me ... well, clearly it drives me crazy.

TC: You've argued that in the NBA, more players should shoot their free throws underhanded. It would take them some time to learn, but it would turn poor shooters into somewhat better shooters, and that would be worth a lot in terms of performance. Now, you were yourself a teacher in some way, in the broad sense. So, what is it that we other teachers are doing wrong? What is, for us, the underhanded free throw we're not doing enough of?

MG: Oh, that's interesting. Hmm. What are you not doing enough of? Well, I suppose I could expand on this notion that to encourage experimentation and open opportunities, one must also be much more tolerant of mediocrity. The notion that there can be something lovely in mediocrity is, to borrow one of your favourite phrases and now mine, is under-theorised. I wonder whether making the world safe for mediocrity is not a very worthy goal of teaching, not only because the people who'll one day be good need to pass through mediocrity on their way to being good, but also that, like I said, it's the gateway to experimentation. I don't know how that practically translates in a teaching session.

TC: That's a very Tocquevillian answer. What is it

that long-distance runners are not doing correctly? What is their equivalent with the underhanded free throw? You've been known to run a few times yourself.

MG: There are so many different arguments going on right now about long-distance running. I suppose the best way to sum them up is that, like all highly competitive subspecialties, everyone wants to believe they have an answer that works for everyone when, in fact, the truth is that there's probably ten different ways to run, train effectively for long distance, and we're just slow to understand how variable runners are. The most interesting thing happening, to me, in distance running right now is the rise of Japan as a distance-running power. And what's interesting about Japan is that Japan does not have any one runner, particularly in marathons, who is in the top ten in the world, or even the top twenty in the world, but they have an enormous number of people who are in the top 100. So, your notion of whether Japan is a distance-running power depends on how you choose to define distance-running power.

We have one definition that we use, where we say we recognise a country as being very good at distance running if they have lots and lots of people in the top ten, but that strikes me as being incredibly arbitrary and it goes to my point about we're not encouraging mediocrity. Why? All that says is ... okay, Kenya's got nine of the top ten of the fastest marathoners right now – why is that better than having 300 of the top 1,000? It's purely arbitrary that we choose to define greatest as just the country that most densely occupies the 99th percentile. Why can't we define it as the country that most densely occupies the 75th through 100th percentiles?

TC: Now, there's always a segment in the middle of these chats called overrated or underrated. So, I'm going to list a few things. You're free to pass. Overrated or underrated? Ketchup? Your first famous article, on ketchup.

MG: I'm on record as saying underrated, massively.

TC: Massively underrated. And which is the best ketchup?

MG: Heinz. Has to be.

TC: William F. Buckley?

MG: Well, in his day, appropriately rated; now, underrated. You're talking about someone who was a massive ... William F. Buckley is my childhood ... I was obsessed with him. I had entire works of his

seemingly memorised, so under.

TC: Who is the most underrated figure in Jamaican popular music? Past, present – either? Everyone knows Bob Marley, but who's the hidden gem?

MG: Oh my goodness, that's a really, really, really ... I'm going to pass on that one. I don't want to get into trouble.

TC: I would say Desmond Dekker or Lee Perry, if you're curious.

MG: But why are they underrated? I feel like their place is pretty ... anyway, we don't need to get into it.

TC: In Jamaica, but millennials don't seem to know very much about who they are in my sense, or even Toots and the Maytals or Keith Hudson or King Tubby. I think they're somewhat – not in Jamaica – forgotten, because there there's a more celebratory notion of history, right?

MG: Right.

TC: But in the US..? To me, that's sad. And the notion that the leading figures in electronic music in the seventies would come from Jamaica – not a high-tech country – that's an extraordinary story that seems to me so much forgotten.

MG: You don't need to get me started on Jamaican triumphalism.

TC: It's a David versus Goliath story.

MG: Yes.

TC: And the Jamaicans win. My colleague, Steve Pearlstein.

MG: Oh. He's not here, is he? He used to be of the *Washington Post*. My former editor.

TC: Your former editor.

MG: I love Steve. Underrated.

TC: Absolutely. I have lunch with him every week.

MG: His father owned that great clothing store, Louis Boston.

TC: That's right.

MG: And he was always ... I remember as a young

reporter at the *Washington Post*, I was very badly dressed. And Steve, a highly intellectual guy who cut his teeth in a high-end men's clothing store in Boston, would always come up to me and adjust my suit jacket and say, 'What are you, like a 36 short?' I always loved that. This reminds me, by the way. Can I do a little digression?

TC: Sure.

MG: One of the things about the Jewish immigrant experience in America that I have never gotten over, that always thrills me to bits and I don't know why, is the transition from merchant to intellectual class – that generational move, which is just so fantastic. My favourite one – there are many, many great ones – speaking of Boston and retail, is that Filene's Basement was started by ... or Filene's, rather, was started by the Filene brothers, one of whose name was Lincoln, Lincoln Filene. And their manager, the CEO of their store, was a guy named [Louis] Kirstein. And Kirstein had a son who he named for his boss, Lincoln, who is Lincoln Kirstein, the great giant of American ballet. And so, you see in Lincoln Kirstein, in the name of this extraordinary cultural figure, echoes of bargain retail from Boston. The idea that one person's name summons those two worlds simultaneously, it's so beautiful. The similar version of this is the fact that some of the people who were of the people who were saved – during the Holocaust – by [Oskar] Schindler, then went on, moved to New Jersey, became real-estate developers, did all these subdivisions and would always name a street after Schindler.

TC: Yes.

MG: And they would bring him over for the opening. Once again you have this incredibly moving and powerful tribute that's grounded in the prosaic, but it's the reverse of Lincoln Kirstein. That moving back and forth between these worlds, I just find it really beautiful and sort of moving.

TC: What's the most underrated John le Carré novel?

MG: Oh wow.

TC: So many, right?

MG: Well, the very early, *A Small Town in Germany*, the pre-*Spy Who Came in from the Cold* ones I really like. Also, *The Little Drummer Girl* is really fantastic, but I think maybe the super-early ones are remarkably good.

TC: And are le Carré novels Gladwellian in their



One of the things about the Jewish immigrant experience in America that I have never gotten over, that always thrills me to bits and I don't know why, is the transition from merchant to intellectual class – that generational move, which is just so fantastic.



worldview, or do you enjoy them so much because they are not? Are they offset or confirmation?

MG: I didn't know that there was such a thing as Gladwellian.

TC: There is to us.

MG: Why do I enjoy them? I enjoy them for a very specific reason that has to do with the fact that I was born in England and my father is English. My father's essentially John le Carré's age, so they come from the same world: bleak, middle-class, post-war English. And I have such an affection for that particular era and world. When I go back to London – I was just in London – I gravitate to those parts of London that still look that way.

TC: Yes.

MG: Because to me that's what London is. London is not the shiny, rich London of today, and London is not the gorgeous, historic ... what's London to me

is kind of 1950. That weird moment when you're walking down a street in East London, and there you see a block that was clearly bombed, and they built something, clearly in 1948, that just abuts something that was built in 1820 – that thing, whenever I see that, it just gets me every time. John le Carré, particularly, well *Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, to me, is just about that unrelenting bleakness of that world and all of the material niceties of their world were ... it was just tea and biscuits. That's as good as it got. That's what you looked forward to every day. And it was always raining. And no one could say 'I love you.' And it's just all part of it. It's fantastic. And when I'm in that world I feel so normal. I feel like I am this ray of sunshine.

TC: What's your favourite non-current movie?

MG: I don't go to the movies anymore. I haven't been to a movie in years. I can't do it; I don't know why. They lost me.

TC: But old movies? Michael Powell? If you like older England?

MG: No. I don't even ... I can't remember the last movie I saw, to be honest.

TC: Overrated or underrated, the idea of early childhood intervention to set societal ills right?

MG: Overrated. It became politically impermissible to say that certain people in society would never make it because they were genetically inferior. So, I feel like *that* group, it's like, 'All right, we can't say that anymore. We'll just move the goalpost up a few years.' And we'll say, 'If you don't get the right kind of stimulation by the time you're three, it's curtains.' Why didn't we like it when they set the goalpost at zero, but somehow it's super-important and legitimate and chin-stroking-worthy when they moved the goalpost to three. Truth is, people, it's not over at three any more than it was over at zero. There are certain things that it would be nice to get done by the age of three. But if they're not, the idea that it's curtains is preposterous. It's the same kind of fatalism that I thought we had defeated. If you want to say that the goalpost should be at thirty, then I'm open to it.

TC: Would you settle for fifty-five?

MG: Fifty-five.

TC: I'm very glad to hear that answer. Now, I looked back – there was an article you wrote, actually, in the 1990s for the *Washington Post*. It's not online, but I

can confide to you all that it was leaked to me. It's called '10 Things DC Could Learn from New York City'. I know it will be very hard for this crowd to believe, but you actually evinced an ever-so-slight preference for New York City over Washington DC, at that time. And one of the things you thought Washington needed more of – this is number three, and I quote, 'More adventurous celebrities'. Do you still feel that we need more adventurous celebrities?

MG: Pretty sure my opinion would change if I was doing that today.

TC: Your number one, however, was 'shame'. That this was a city that needed more shame.

MG: Really?

TC: Yes.

MG: I have no memory of this.

TC: Number five was the Knicks. So clearly you have no memory of this. But over time how has your view of Washington DC changed? There's a 2007 radio show you did with your mother. It's actually my favourite of all your outputs. But there you said, and she did as well, that you were always serial outsiders. Now do you feel that in any way Washington DC, with its culture that is in some ways fairly bland, passively pushy, nervously ambitious, and just too full of politics – has this now become a city where it's a good place to be a serial outsider, or simply not?

MG: Wow. That's really a good question. So, I was in DC from January of 1985 until July of 1993. And the city obviously has gotten a lot wealthier and safer and wider, and the area a lot more diverse, since I was there. I came here in Reagan years when an upheaval was going on politically. I suppose that's happening again, in some sense. The thing that's peculiar about DC – particularly if you're in your twenties – is the turnover. There are very few places ... and you actually make this point in *Complacent Class*, about how Americans are a lot less mobile than they used to be. Strikingly less mobile, and this has huge consequences for society. I think you're absolutely right. It's a really, really important point. DC, if you're in your twenties, is this grand exception. This massive turnover, everyone – not everyone, but when I think of the cohort I was with when I was 23 in DC – none of them are in DC anymore. All gone, with a few exceptions. And I feel there is that kind of churning. And that churning is really, really useful in terms of giving people opportunities to look at what's going on from an outsider's perspective because you're not committing to the city. There's the permanent

Washington and, in your twenties, you're not part of permanent Washington. You're skipping through, you're ringing the permanent city. And that was what made my time there so special. If I had stayed, I feel like it would, in my memory, have diminished a little bit.

TC: By the way, in the nineties you also wrote a profile of Pat Buchanan, which I would encourage you to reread. You may be surprised by your own prescience. You would have to change a few words in the article, but much of it would still apply today. Do you think New York City, and Manhattan in particular, is that still a good place to be a serial outsider? And what is it that you do in general to keep yourself as a serial outsider?

MG: Well, I leave Manhattan.

TC: Where do you go?

MG: Well, there are two things. As a writer, you have a series of problems. One problem, a serious problem, is that I'm old. And I don't mean that I'm decrepit. What I mean is that it's very important, if you are a writer, to remain current. And the greatest danger you face is this fossilisation of your positions and views. One of the main reasons that I wanted to do a podcast is that a podcast forces me out of my age cohort, and puts me back in the land of people in their twenties and thirties, primarily. I'm not being Peter Pan. I'm trying to rejuvenate my thinking because you become more aware. Many professionals have a professional peak in their forties. And then you can feel yourself, your views, hardening, and you feel yourself closing off to new ideas. And the minute you see yourself rolling your eyes at something – 'that's what the kids think' – then you realise the end is nigh. When I'm writing, I don't write in an office. I write in coffee shops. Why? I don't particularly think coffee shops are amazing places to write. But I do think that simply being around people who are not my age is really useful. And I travel a lot. And that's a really, really useful way of breaking out of bad intellectual habits, and reminding yourself about what the rest of the world is like.

TC: I also try to be intellectually flexible. Let me tell you about a worry I have. Maybe you can talk me out of my worry. I worry that, insofar as one is intellectually flexible on any particular thing, it becomes a way actually of protecting some broader and more hidden edifice – that there's an oddly hidden desperation or even pessimism embedded in certain kinds of flexibilities. There's something to be said for erecting a quite rigid structure, which people tend to do more when they're young, then it

can be toppled. So, one becomes 'wiser, more flexible, more willing to revise.' You've written in different columns – they're opening questions, they're to get people to think. And I worry in my own writing, when I try to do this, that in some ways, it's a deeper dogmatism than erecting the highly dogmatic structure, which can be toppled. Do you have that same worry, or how do you see those trade-offs? Do you see what I'm saying?

MG: We're at the point in the conversation where you reveal yourself to be much smarter than I am. I've never thought it through that deeply. I think ... well, I don't think of myself as having an edifice. I have a series of positions and feelings about things. You said early on that you thought of my work as being optimistic, so I feel that's a *feeling* and not an edifice. I don't have a formal reason to be optimistic, I'm just an optimistic person. I have a physiological optimism as opposed to intellectual optimism. And also, I don't understand what the point would be if you weren't optimistic, like why would you get up?

TC: I know people who enjoy their own pessimism in a strange way.

MG: Also, I don't think you could be an athlete – to come back to running, you can't really be an athlete and be a pessimist. Why? The whole point of being an athlete is you're building towards something, right? You don't just work out to work out. You work out because there's something out there that you're trying to achieve. Anyway, that's a side point. But here's a good example: on the Affordable Care Act, I've changed my mind six, seven times. And I'm not toggling back and forth between pro and con. I feel like I'm jumping around, I'm *eminently* persuadable on it. And what that has done is, it's been very useful because now, it's very fashionable for liberals to be super into the Affordable Care Act because it's under fire. And I feel myself being sucked in that direction. But then I remember, 'Wait a minute. I've been bouncing around for five years on this. Why am I suddenly – just because it's politically expedient – running to the defence of this thing?' Which literally a year ago, if you cornered me at a party, I would be the guy saying, 'And here's another problem with that...' Right? And still the best book I read about healthcare was an out-and-out attack on Obamacare. That, to me, is really useful – to accept the fact that 50 per cent of the time, you're going to be wrong on these kinds of things, but that's fine.

TC: It's been said that satire sometimes reaffirms power, while poetry affirms only its own power. You have a podcast where you express a worry that Tina Fey, by mimicking and satirising Sarah Palin, actu-



I don't have a formal reason to be optimistic, I'm just an optimistic person. I have a physiological optimism as opposed to intellectual optimism. And also, I don't understand what the point would be if you weren't optimistic, like why would you get up?



ally made her more acceptable and more likeable in doing so. So, fast-forward to the current moment: we have *Saturday Night Live*. Alec Baldwin and Donald Trump. Is that useful satire? Is it not sufficiently negative? Should we be deploying poetry or is that the effective medium for social commentary?

MG: Well, I don't like the Alec Baldwin Donald Trump, I don't think, actually, if you compare it to the Sean Spicer ... it's not as good, because the truly effective satirical impersonation is one that finds something essential about the character and magnifies it, something buried that you wouldn't ordinarily have seen or have glimpsed in that person.

With the Spicer impersonation, why that's so brilliant is, it draws out his anger. He's angry at being put in this impossible position. That is the essence of that character. So how does a person respond to this, it's almost an absurd position he's in. And he has this kind of – it's not sublimated – it's there, this rage. In every one of his utterances is, 'I can't fucking believe that I am in this...' And so that *Saturday Night Live* impersonation gets beautifully at that thing; it satirises that. I've forgotten the name of the woman who does it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Melissa McCarthy.

MG: Yes, Melissa McCarthy, when she picks up the podium ... that's an absurd illustration of that fundamental point. But the Alec Baldwin Trump doesn't get at something essential about Trump. It simply takes his mannerisms and exaggerates them slightly. But he hasn't mined Trump. There are many directions you can go with Trump, such is the extraordinary insecurity of the man. Like I said, there are many things you could pluck out, but the idea of doing an impersonation where you *really* thought deeply about what it would mean in a comic way to represent this man's almost tragic level of insecurity. Alec Baldwin is not ... he's a little too glib. That's the problem with *Saturday Night Live*, the larger problem – I was trying to get at it in that podcast episode on satire – with doing satire through the vehicle of a show like *Saturday Night Live* is, they're not incentivised to do that kind of deep thinking. The Melissa McCarthy thing is an exception; it's not the rule.

Really what they're incentivised to do is, for the actor – who is in many cases as famous or more famous than the person they are impersonating – is using the character to further their own ends. Tina Fey is *infinitely* more popular, more accomplished, more whatever than Sarah Palin will ever be. And so, she's using Sarah Palin to further her own ends. That's backwards. She's not inhabiting the character of Sarah Palin in order to make a point about Sarah

Palin, she is inhabiting Sarah Palin in order to make a point about Tina Fey. So long as satire is done by a television show which has such a lofty position in the cultural hierarchy, it's always going to be the case that that's what's going to drive their impersonations. They're always going to be sitting on their hands. Remember they're making fun of Trump six months after they had him on the show, right? After they were complicit in his rise, and after Jimmy Fallon ruffled his hair on camera. Maybe that's fine. My point is you can't be an effective satirist if you are so deeply complicit in the object of your satire.

TC: I was very struck by what I think is your latest *New Yorker* column where you wrote about what is parallel and not parallel between the cases of Edward Snowden and Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers Case. In my reading of the Pentagon Papers Case, here's what really struck and astonished me, and I'd like your view on how it's changed. When the Pentagon Papers became public in, I think, 1971, first they were incredibly boring, but when you did read them or read excerpts, one thing that startled so many people is, it came out that there were accords dating back to 1954 where, it turned out, America had broken the accords and not North Vietnam. And this shocked people and caused them to reassess their whole sense of the Vietnam War. And that's 1954, which was then, from 1971, a long time ago. So, there was a sense of history embedded in how people understood that episode that seems to me entirely lacking today. To get someone to care that much about something done under other administrations 17 years earlier seems virtually impossible. And what is it about America that's changed so that history now doesn't matter the way it did then?

MG: Yeah, you've touched on the thing about the Pentagon Papers controversy, which is in retrospect so unbelievable. If viewed through a present-day lens, the whole thing is bananas. It makes no sense whatsoever. It's the most hilariously wonky, nerdy exercise. So, step back – what is the Pentagon Papers? It is Robert McNamara saying, in whatever, '69 or '68, 'What we really need is to get the smartest historians in a room to write me a ten-volume set on historical analysis going back 20 years on this conflict we're involved in.' So, right from the start, we're in a rarefied academic realm. He gathers a bunch of PhDs who slave away on this thing and produce this massive, turgid... And you have Ellsberg, who is the central player in this whole thing, and what is Ellsberg? He is the wonkiest of the wonks. He wrote a bit of it, and his great complaint as he takes a copy of the Pentagon Papers, he's trying to get everyone to read it. And by reading it, he means, 'I need you to go away for however many months it'll take you and

work your way through all ten volumes.'

There are these hilarious conversations he has with [Henry] Kissinger where Kissinger just wants a summary. It's like, 'No, you can't do a summary. You gotta read the whole thing. You gotta get a couple of thousand pages in before it makes any sense.' There's no contemporary ... it's like history ... 2017 and 1971 viewed through the lens of the Pentagon Papers controversy – they belong on different planets. And when the *New York Times* gets the copies – remember, it takes them a year or whatever to photocopy all of it because it's just enormous and the copiers are really slow. And the great story, which is the woman who is now Lynda Resnick, who's now a billionaire and lives in a great ... when you're driving down Wilshire in Beverly Hills, there are those massive houses to your left as you drive into Beverly Hills – she lives in one of those houses. She's the one who has the pomegranate juice, POM juice. She was the girlfriend of Ellsberg's best friend, and she ran an ad agency on Beverly Boulevard, and she had a Xerox machine, which is a huge deal in 1971. So, he does it. He goes, she's the one who provides this pretentious thing. I once ran into her at some event in LA. I was like, 'You had the Xerox machine!' What a great role to play in history. But every part of it is all about people who took history so seriously that they were willing to spend all night photocopying for months on end.

Then Ellsberg took copies and he went around the Capitol, also trying to get senators to read it. And over and over again, the complaint that drove him to leak it to the *New York Times* was that no one's taking this seriously. What does the *New York Times* do when they get the copies? They rent a room, two rooms, in the Hilton, right next to the *New York Times* headquarters, put a guard out front, and then spend months reading it. Again, months reading it. Months. Imagine today, if this thing dropped. I don't even know how we would ... people would have to do takes that would come out within six hours. They'd have to do an executive summary of the executive summary. It belongs to a different era. It feels like it is the final act in an intellectual era in American life, when institutionalised government was expected to comport itself according to standards and norms that came from the academy. That's what the whole thing is about: people who came out of elite schools and had a certain expectation about what it meant to be a public servant, and what your intellectual responsibilities were as a public servant. And they carried those norms with them from graduate school to Washington. And the fact that Ellsberg is a PhD in decision sciences and wrote papers with Thomas Schelling is not a peripheral fact – it's the core fact. That's who they were. So, when we fast-forward and you have Edward Snowden, who

is a community college dropout, which I don't say as a snobbish thing, I'm contrasting him to his predecessor who was a PhD from MIT, and Snowden's intellectual understanding of what he was engaged in, it is a fraction of ... he used a search engine just to pluck stuff at random from the NSA files and hand it over to people. That's not what Ellsberg was doing. And in the gap between those two figures is the story of the changes in the last fifty years in American life.



Conversations with Tyler

Published in 2017 and transcribed for The Podcast Reader.

 Read more @ podread.org

 Listen @ [conversationswithtyler.com](https://www.conversationswithtyler.com)

PODREAD.ORG/SUBSCRIBE

THE PODCAST READER MAKES A PERFECT GIFT,
SEE OUR WEBSITE FOR GIFT SUBSCRIPTION OPTIONS

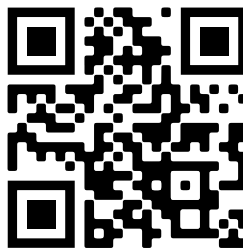
► **SUBSCRIBE FOR 12 MONTHS, OR JUST EDITION
BY EDITION, WITH BOTH PRINT AND DIGITAL
OPTIONS AVAILABLE.**

“
Definitely the highlight of this week
was the arrival of *The Podcast Reader*.
”

“
The magazine has helped me rediscover
the joy of reading at a time when online
newspapers and social media had
become the main texts I was consuming.
Once I'd finished *The Podcast Reader*,
I went straight out and bought other
magazines in order to have something
to keep reading until the next edition
comes along!
”

“
The Podcast Reader is great!
A very impressive effort.
”

“
I think it is marvellous! I have been
totally ignorant of international
podcasts. I think you have nailed the
concept of producing a printed copy of
the best selections as a perfect solution.
This is a gem!
”



USE THE QR CODE ABOVE TO
**SAVE MORE THAN 30% OFF THE
COVER PRICE BY SUBSCRIBING,
WITH FREE POSTAGE.**

**SAVE UP TO 70% OFF THE COVER PRICE
WITH A DIGITAL-ONLY SUBSCRIPTION.**

► **NOWADAYS, THERE IS SO MUCH
INFORMATION IT'S KIND OF OVERWHELMING.
SO, I CONSULT PEOPLE WHO I TRUST
TO MAINTAIN QUALITY CONTROL.
THAT'S ACTUALLY THE HARDEST PART.
YOU CAN EASILY WASTE A LOT OF TIME
BY NOT DOING THAT. ■**

FRANK WILCZEK

*Help families
leave poverty
behind.*

**Opportunity International
Australia provides small loans
to women in Asia to grow
small businesses to secure
sustainable incomes.**



Photo: Kim Landy



Small loans enabled Reena to set up a small shop in her village in Khedi, India. She can now provide nutritious meals and keep her children in school.

Find out more or support us at:
opportunity.org.au



OPPORTUNITY
International
AUSTRALIA



ENJOY IT GUILT FREE

ELITE ATHLETES ARE INCREASINGLY TURNING TO NON-ALCOHOLIC BEERS BECAUSE OF THE ANTI-INFLAMMATORY PROPERTIES OF NATURALLY OCCURRING POLYPHENOLS. ZERO+ PALE ALE IS ENHANCED WITH SPECIALLY SELECTED ELECTROLYTES DESIGNED FOR FASTER MUSCLE RECOVERY.

A FULL BODIED PALE ALE WITH A REFRESHING CLEAN FINISH.

only 40 calories per can.



sportsbeer.com.au

CATCH UP ON PREVIOUS OUTSTANDING CONTENT YOU MAY HAVE MISSED



EDITION 1

CONVERSATIONS WITH:

PETER THIEL
MARGARET ATWOOD
ARLIE HOCHSCHILD
FRANK WILCZEK
CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS



EDITION 2

CONVERSATIONS WITH:

KARL OVE KNAUSGÅRD
MARK CUBAN
ISABELLA TREE
MARTINA NAVRATILOVA
DAVID SLOAN WILSON



EDITION 3

CONVERSATIONS WITH:

RORY SUTHERLAND
SHADI BARTSCH
WILLIAM DALRYMPLE
DANIEL KAHNEMAN
ERIC WEINSTEIN

[PODREAD.ORG/ISSUES](https://podread.org/issues)

Eve & Rose

POUR LES PETITS



www.eve-rose.com



Certified organic



Made in France



Endocrine disruptors



50% of profits donated



SOBAH

NON ALCOHOLIC CRAFT BEER

VEGAN FRIENDLY

PRESERVATIVE FREE

AUSTRALIAN MADE

Proudly Aboriginal owned & led, Sobah beverages delivers Australia's first non-alcoholic craft beer brewed with Australian bush tucker. We're based on beautiful Yugambeh country known as the Gold Coast, Queensland. Sobah is a place with sun & surf where a fresh, crisp drink can be enjoyed without the headache.

Who we are.

Born with the desire to provide a better choice for those who are not drinking, for whatever reason at whatever time. Founded by Gamilaroi man and psychologist, Clinton Schultz, Sobah encompasses many traditional Aboriginal philosophies. These include acting from a position of respecting people, place and the environment; understanding and working towards fulfilling responsibilities to that we are connected to; and, engaging in positive reciprocity. We have the responsibility to give back, to share our knowledge and experience, to create opportunities for others, to encourage sustainable and healthy ways of living, and to assist in bringing about positive changes. Sobah is leading a conversation surrounding Australian societal issues with alcohol consumption and breaking down the stigma of socialising sober. We promote healthy lifestyle choices and wellness, social equity, sustainability, raise positive awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, smash stereotypes, unite people and of course, our beers quench thirst.

SOBAH.COM.AU

@SOBAHBEVERAGES

