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MBS ([00:01](#)):

My great-grandparents feel fictional to me. I mean, I've seen photos and I do know their names. My dad loved the family tree. He had a piece of technology on the computer so he was able to plot and plan and piece it together, and he was really able to find his way back, quite a number of generations.

([00:21](#)):

Stanier, in case you're interested, means derived from the Celtic word for stone hewer. I love that. Part of my surname is connected to the idea of chiseling out meaning and practicality and shape and form. Here in my grandiose moments, I think of Michelangelo chiseling away the stone to find the angel within and like, whoa, there's a connection there with my name. But do I feel the touch and influence of my great-grandparents, their hands on my shoulders? Do I feel like I'm standing on their shoulders? Well, no, I don't really.



[\(00:58\)](#):

But my grandparents, well, those are four presences I definitely notice. There's Harry on my mom's side, my mom's father. He was a brilliant man, but actually as the oldest son, he was made to go into the family business selling clothes. He tried to get into Oxford on a Rhodes Scholar. Came close but didn't quite make it. He was very proud, actually, when I became a Rhodes Scholar. It was one of those small moments of family celebration and connection.

[\(01:25\)](#):

Joan, married to Harry. She was a teacher, brilliant and smart. She had a really fierce integrity. I once lied to her about stealing some chocolate from her cupboards when I was staying with her. I just remember wilting under her interrogative stare. On my dad's side, there was Bob, my dad's dad. He was a teacher and a headmaster in fact, and he loved knowledge. I remember he had a commonplace book or a common book I think it's called, where he would collect and write the knowledge that he loved. That was always inspiring for me. Stay hungry, keep learning. And then of course, Maida, who was married to him was a writer. Books and plays and kids' books and newspaper columns. I feel a very strong connection with Maida and I love that she was prolific and kind of undaunted about what she was writing. Kids' books, sure. Plays, sure. Newspaper got columns about the gossip of Oxford, sure. What do you know about your ancestors? What have you learned from your ancestors? How might they be present in you today?

[\(02:37\)](#):

Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS, the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages of a favorite book, a book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them. Sarah Lewis is an art and cultural historian and author of *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*. Now, on book title alone, you know that I'm going to be excited to talk to her. But she's more than all that. She's also actually the founder of the Vision and Justice Initiative as well



as being a professor at Harvard. But as she reminds us, we are all more than our pedigrees.

Sarah ([03:16](#)):

I am a daughter, a friend, partner, a writer, former curator at MoMA and a proud former New Yorker.

MBS ([03:25](#)):

And again, beyond our present day relationships and passions, we are still more.

Sarah ([03:32](#)):

I am a granddaughter of a man named Shadrach Emmanuel Lee, who was really interested in the arts and justice.

MBS ([03:38](#)):

History shapes us as much as we shape the future, looking back, looking forward. And Shadrach Emmanuel Lee's presence and passion resonates in our world today, through Sarah. He instilled in her a love of art.

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

I think the first work of art I ever saw was in my grandfather's home. He lived in rural Virginia. He was painting by night and he was working as a janitor by day, at the time, Temple and other spaces. And I was just so struck by this multicolored template he had to convey the vivid inner dimensions of anyone's face or figure. And he was so just impassioned about drawing and painting. I was probably five or six when I saw this work and it struck me because he wasn't known for being an artist, and yet, he dedicated this time to it. I came to learn, when he died, why he was so passionate about the arts and that really is what became the engine house of my life. He was, I learned at that time in high school, in a public school in New York City, in Brooklyn 1926, and he just had this



question of his history teachers just wanting to know why the history books presented excellence just one way.

[\(05:04\)](#):

He wanted to know where African-Americans were, Asian-Americans were, Latinx folks, indigenous folks were, the whole world really. And the answer his teacher gave him a history class was that African-Americans had done nothing to merit inclusion. And he kept asking and he was expelled for his so-called impertinence. He never went back to high school and never received a GED, but he became an artist. It's his intended life in effect, to support himself, he had other means, jazz musician as well. But he created, through that practice, the images he knew he should have been able to find in those history books, images that affirmed all of us. And I think there's something about the intensity and the beauty of his practice that drew me to it as a young girl. Yeah, yeah. It was the first work.

MBS [\(06:00\)](#):

It's a wonderful story.

Sarah [\(06:01\)](#):

Yeah, yeah.

MBS [\(06:05\)](#):

Where does the flame of justice come from, spring from?

Sarah [\(06:11\)](#):

Yeah. I've asked myself that a number of times. I think in part, it came about because of just the circumstance of how I was raised. I had two incredible parents. We lived in Midtown Manhattan and I was always surrounded by people outside of my apartment who didn't look like me. It was a predominantly white area and a predominantly white school. I was the only a black student for at least seven years there. But I was also in New York City,



which is the whole world. So even as a five-year-old, I was met with this contrast and I thought, "What?" I went to a very privileged school, a school that afforded all of us girls, it was an all girls school, every opportunity imaginable. So at that young age, I thought, well, why is it that just one group receives this, plus me? How are the systems designed to allow for this? Why do I walk a few blocks and get on the bus and I see a vastly different set of people?

[\(07:22\)](#):

So it made me think, at a very young age, I think about privilege and rights and representation in American life. I could just add one sort of funny anecdote that I just realized. In class, as young as I think the first grade, they would have us draw things and we had a pilgrims exercise. We had to all draw a pilgrim. And I drew a pilgrim that was black because no one had told me that I couldn't be part of the narrative, part of the story in the beginning, outside of the context of slavery. And so I think I was always interested in ensuring that I knew I could count as much as anyone around me, instinctually at a very young age.

MBS [\(08:09\)](#):

I'm curious to know what, if at all, the experience of being the only black girl in an otherwise all white school being kind of other, taught you about seeing art?

Sarah [\(08:27\)](#):

Yeah, yeah. It's a brilliant question. I'm finishing *Vision and Justice*, a book for Random House that really should have that. It's a central question and very much does. That experience taught me that one's inner vision, the narrative you construct about who you are and who the world should be to accommodate you is foundational for your life. The expected conflict you might imagine that would come about from being someone like me and many people have had this experience, being all in an homogeneous environment and being different made me realize that I couldn't always trust the perceptions of others to be accurate about me, that I couldn't always feel necessarily safe in any group. The



school that I was in eventually shifted, the demography was extraordinary. By the end of the time there I was in a class of 50 and I was one of 18 students of color. So that shifted, but the students who came in were a little bit wary of me too, who's this black girl who's not really lived amongst black people, their whole lives.

[\(09:49\)](#):

So that showed me a great deal about the need to rely on your own perception of who it is that you are and who you know yourself to be. It gave me a very deep sense of also spirituality, but it oriented me, to answer your question, to really privilege and honor the inner creative life that's represented on the canvas through a sculpture, through a film. Knowing how hard won that is and knowing that those images, those visions are the ways in which we construct the world in which we're honored to live.

MBS [\(10:26\)](#):

How do you figure out what voices or what narratives or what images to trust? I'm a straight, white man, so I am surrounded by a whole lot of stories that basically only reinforce my status in the world. I'm guessing it must be different. If you're not that and you're like, here are the stories, which of these actually elevate me and allow me to flourish and which actually are subtly undermining or not subtly undermining?

Sarah [\(11:04\)](#):

The main filter I use for this is to think through and to feel out whether there's dignity being presented in front of me. That's really I think the crucible of the marriage of rights and representation in this country. Images, photographs in particular, were weaponized at the start of the foundations of American democracy to both honor human life and to deliberately denigrate it. This is the foundation that we're still grappling with, wrestling with. So to a noble, particularly Black life, through say the photograph when it was oftentimes used



to do the opposite through the lens of a Joseph T. Zealy using photographs to prove polygenesis, to prove that African-Americans were subhuman explicitly creates out of culture, redemptive act. But honoring human life through these images, that's really the way in which I come to works that I find to be what I want to write about and put on museum walls and engage with, and teach about at Harvard.

MBS ([12:26](#)):

What is dignity? I mean, how do you know that?

Sarah ([12:31](#)):

Well, what we're also speaking about is agency. Who has a right to present themselves as they like to be seen? This is one of the crucial questions at the heart of just art-making in general. This agency has not always been given to many now makers of color, whether Asian-American, African-American, Latinx, Indigenous. So dignity was not always presented in various works of art. It's why we're able to celebrate the work of a Gordon Parks or a Carrie Mae Weems or a Hank Willis Thomas because of the fulcrum shift they affect by doing so when that state was so often denied.

([13:23](#)):

But dignity, I think we know it when we see it, right? We know it. I could offer many examples, but I think we all do. I think the one though that for the listeners that might strike a chord is to think about the unveiling of the portraits of the Obamas. Kehinde Wiley's portrait of President Obama. Amy Sherald's portrait of the who I call, the Forever First Lady, so struck a chord. And there's one virally disseminated image of a young two-year-old girl named Parker Curry. She was looking at the portrait of Michelle Obama and her mouth was just on the floor and she wouldn't turn around to have her mother take a picture of her with it because she told her mother later she was staring at a queen.



(14:14):

What images, despite the best efforts of her mother, was this young two-year-old black girl surrounded by, such that this image of Michelle Obama with dignity and pride struck her with the force of a detonation. That's what we're dealing with. We're dealing with the internal life of the youngest among us. And it's critical for their own futures, for our future, so that we can have the full flourishing, this democracy of everyone's full potential. These narratives matter. What we put in front of our young people, in front of all of us matters.

MBS (14:49):

Sarah, what have you chosen to read for us?

Sarah (14:53):

An excerpt from James Baldwin's speech turned essay entitled, The Artist's Struggle for Integrity. And it's from the collection, The Cross of Redemption.

MBS (15:05):

Beautiful. How did this book come or this writing come into your life? It feels very connected to your twin engines of arts and justice.

Sarah (15:14):

Yes. I began delving into his archive of speeches, thanks to YouTube, and I found that where I lived in New York was close to his final home in New York City. And I found myself walking by there not knowing why I loved that block so much and learned later and thought, oh, this is so cosmically gorgeous.

MBS (15:37):

It's a lay line for you. It's got that kind of resonance and power.



Sarah ([15:41](#)):

That's exactly it. Exactly. So this, of all of his speeches, I think speaks to me as a maker, as an artist, as a creator, and I hope will be resonant with those who are listening, who would like to create or who are asking themselves what their purpose is and why they do what they do.

MBS ([16:02](#)):

Fabulous. I'm excited to hear it. Over to you, Sarah.

Sarah ([16:05](#)):

Okay, so I'll just set this up by saying that he begins by describing that he doesn't like words like artist or integrity or courage or ability. But in fact, when the chips are down, he says he is an artist and there is such thing as integrity and some people are noble.

([16:30](#)):

I'm not interested really in talking to you as an artist. It seems to me that the artist's struggle for his integrity must be considered as a kind of metaphor for the struggle, which is universal and daily of all human beings on the face of this globe to get to become human beings. It is not your fault, it's not my fault that I write, and I've never come before you in the position of a complainant for doing something that I must do.

([17:00](#)):

What we might get at this evening if we are lucky is what the importance of this effort is. He then says, the second proposition is really what I want to get at tonight, and it sounds mystical, I think in a country like ours and at a time like this, when something awful is happening to a civilization, when it ceases to produce poets. And what is even more crucial when it ceases in any way, whatever, to believe in the report that only the poets can make. Art is here to prove and to help one bear the fact that all safety is an illusion. In this sense, all



artists are divorced from and even necessarily opposed to any system, whatever.

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

Let's trace it just for kicks for a minute and I'll use myself. I won't say me, but it's my story. The first thing an artist finds out when he is very, very young, when I say young, I mean before he's 15. That is to say before properly speaking he or she can walk or talk, before he or she has had enough experience to begin to assess his or her experience. And what occurs at that point in this hypothetical artist's life is a kind of silence. The first thing he finds out is that for reasons he cannot explain to himself or to others, he does not belong anywhere. Maybe you're on the football team, maybe you're a runner, maybe you belong to a church, you certainly belong to a family and abruptly, in the other people's eyes, this is very important, you begin to discover that you are moving. And you can't stop this movement to what looks like the edge of the world.

[\(18:40\)](#):

Now, what is crucial and one begins to understand it much, much later, is that if you were this hypothetical artist, if you were in fact the dreamer that everyone says you are, if in fact you were wrong not to settle for the things that you cannot for some mysterious reason, settle for, if this were so, the testimony in the eyes of other people would not exist. The crime of which you discover slowly you are guilty is not so much that you are aware which is bad enough, but that other people see that you are and cannot bear to watch it, because it testifies to the fact that they are not. Well, one survives that no matter how. By and by, your uncles and your parents and church stop praying for you, they realize I won't do a bit of good. They give you up and you proceed a little further.

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

You survive this in some terrible way, which I suppose no one can ever describe. You are compelled. You are corralled. You are bull whipped into dealing with



whatever it is that hurts you. And what is crucial here is that if it hurts you, that is not what's important. Everybody's hurt. What is important, what corrals you, what bull whips you, what drives you, torments you is that you must find some way of using this to connect you with everyone else alive. That is all you have to do it with. You must understand that your pain is trivial, except insofar as you can use it to connect with other people's pain. And insofar as you can do that with your pain, you can be released from it and then hopefully it works the other way around too. Insofar as I can tell you what it is to suffer, perhaps I can help you to suffer less.

[\(20:24\):](#)

All right, you get through all that and you've had your first breakthrough. People have heard your name and here comes the world again, the world you first encountered when you were 15, the world which has starved you, despised you, here it comes again. This time it is bearing gifts. The phone didn't ring before if you had a phone. Now it never stops ringing. Instead of people saying, "What do you do?" They say, "Won't you do this?" And you become or you could become a quote, unquote, very important person. And then, and this is a confession, you find yourself in the position of a woman I don't know who sings a certain song and a certain choir, and the song begins, I said I wasn't going to tell nobody, but I couldn't keep it to myself. You've come full circle. Here you are again with it all to do all over again and you must decide all over again whether you want to be famous or whether you want to write.

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

And the two things in spite of the evidence have nothing, whatever in common. What is it at this point that the artist, since I must put it this way, begins to come of age that he cannot keep to himself. And he describes his friend who is an actor playing a role that he and another friend knows he ought to play. And his friend was saying to him, Baldwin says, and I paraphrase it very awkwardly, you must remember that most people live in almost total darkness. It is true said this friend, that we drink too much, that we suffer from stage fright and that you



may get an ulcer and die of cancer. And it's true that it is all very, very hard and gets harder all the time.

[\(22:03\)](#):

And yet, millions of people whom you'll never see, who don't know you, never will know you, people who may try to kill you in the morning, live in a darkness. If you have this funny, terrible thing in which every artist can recognize and know artist can define, you are responsible to those people to lighten. And it doesn't matter what happens to you. You're being used in the way a crab is useful, the way sand certainly has some function. It is impersonal. This force which you didn't ask for, and this destiny which you must accept is also your responsibility. And if you survive it, if you don't cheat, if you don't lie, it's not only you, your glory, your achievement, it's almost our only hope. Because only an artist can tell and only artists have told since we have heard of man, what it is like for anyone who gets to this planet to survive it.

MBS [\(23:08\)](#):

Sarah, that was wonderful, thank you.

Sarah [\(23:10\)](#):

I love that passage so much.

MBS [\(23:12\)](#):

I can tell. I can tell how you read it that has resonance for you. What is the truth in that passage for you?

Sarah [\(23:21\)](#):

Well, two points that are sometimes intention. One that there is a very real sense I think you have when one is, when you are in flow. No matter what it is in life and doesn't have to be as an artist, that there is a grand design of which you're a part. And he gets at that at the end when he says it isn't personal. You're being used in the way a crab is useful, the way sand certainly has some function.



And that can feel in sharp contrast to the beginning of the journey, when you might be grappling or just scrounging around for your sense of purpose, for your foothold in that sand. So there is that tension, I think is so much a part of just the human experience. I love it. I think it's gorgeous, how he's expressed it.

MBS ([24:25](#)):

So you've had success. You've had TED Talks that have been seen by a bazillion people. You've got, I don't know, it looks like about nine books coming out in 2024. You're a professor at Harvard. You have some of that success and some of that status. I am wondering how you manage the dance between success and this idea that all safety is an illusion?

Sarah ([24:54](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Well, I think I manage it the way anyone does who wants to keep their integrity in the process, and that's why I come back to this essay. I both acknowledge it, but I deliberately force myself to forget as well. Your stature, success, achievements don't accompany you when you have to produce all over again.

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

Right.

Sarah ([25:27](#)):

Your experience might help, but none of the titles matter. So at the end of the passage, which I didn't read, he kind of does offer a key about how to do this. He speaks about the need to be willing to have only if you're willing to let it all go.

([25:53](#)):

It's not, I don't think, an investment in your future necessarily to have achieved success at one stage because the endeavor requires that you barrow into yourself again and again. In fact, success can make you not want to do that very thing. Spend the time away from the stages where you might give another TED



Talk or cocktail parties, et cetera, to do the very unglamorous work of being home for the full day with the phone off, not having the meetings or doing podcasts like this and just getting the work done. But I find that it's just requisite, and I find solace in seeing the life stories of others who have committed themselves to this eternal dance. I feel fortunate that I can do it.

MBS ([26:51](#)):

How do you decide what to turn your attention to? Because just as you read, there comes a time from when the phone starts ringing and people start saying, "Hey, can you do this? Can you do that?" Like me? Sarah, can you come on my podcast as the most minor of invitations away from the things. And I'm wondering how you find the ability to take the best guess on what the next project should be.

Sarah ([27:24](#)):

Yeah. Well, my filter at the moment is to consider deeply, I mean after meditation, after grounding myself, after doing lots of other spiritual practices, what we are failing to see and to train my gaze on that. And so what we're failing to see within the remit of my own mission in life and focusing on culture and justice and the creative process. So I tend to think that through as a way of framing what I create, as I hope it might be as an offering, right?

MBS ([28:09](#)):

Yes.

Sarah ([28:10](#)):

Something that will contribute to society and its form. So that's one filter I have. The day-to-day, what do I say yes to, what do I say no to that? Oh, that seems to fall into place. If there's a greater urgency behind the mission and the purpose of the larger projects, I can figure out what's an emotional fit to that.



What will be a welcome respite and what will be just a true distraction. And I have no problem saying no to those directions now.

MBS ([28:47](#)):

Good for you. That's a hard skill to learn, in my experience anyway.

Sarah ([28:53](#)):

It is. Yeah, it's a hard one. Through some painful, painful experiences.

MBS ([29:00](#)):

I'm also curious, Sarah, how you view tradition and what your relationship is to finding and reinforcing some elements of that and challenging and provoking, and perhaps blowing up tradition?

Sarah ([29:23](#)):

How are you defining tradition as you see it?

MBS ([29:25](#)):

I'm not sure. Perhaps you could call it expectations or perhaps rules of the road. Or perhaps it's a kind of something to do with a lineage, whether that comes in artistic lineage or whether it's a lineage from your grandfather downwards or a lineage as an academic. There's a range of different doctrines which you could be connected to and how you sit with, am I supporting that doctrine or am I challenging that doctrine?

Sarah ([30:15](#)):

Yeah, it's a broad question.

MBS ([30:17](#)):

It is.



Sarah ([30:18](#)):

Yeah. I love it. I am sitting here in my home office in Cambridge... walking through Harvard's campus makes me think about tradition all the time. What does it take to actually create dynamism in a place, one of the institutions in America that is most perhaps known for that term, tradition? What does it mean to be an African-American woman, one of the youngest professors here, teaching the very topics that I hoped would be taught when I was an undergrad, but weren't? What was required for that kind of transformation? All these questions are, I guess, in ways, answered by my own life narrative. But in terms of my day-to-day work, writing and researching, I think about the great traditions in the arts that will be here after I'm gone. It's, in a way, it's sort of getting around to also answering your other question through this one, because I notice that as I get older, I am more invested in traditions that I know will last. I know that we will always want to read about the works of artists.

[\(31:41\)](#):

I know that we'll always have these extraordinary books about their practices. And I know that that will probably pale in comparison to the number of people who read the copious amount of emails that are being sent on a daily basis, a hundred years from now. So it lets me freight my time in a way that might be frustrating to some people who would love a long letter from me back over email. But I do know that what's going to matter in the end is what I write about Frederick Douglass or what I write about Gordon Parks, or an extraordinary artist, another extraordinary artist. And that wasn't a perspective I had in my twenties or even young thirties, but it is one that I have now. So being part of the traditions that I believe will continue is just greater value to me, and that creates a filter. But of course, they are traditions that I want to change, and part of the writing has very much to do with expanding the racial narratives that are included as part of those enduring traditions. Yeah. Does that answer your question? I don't-



MBS ([32:57](#)):

It does. I wasn't even sure what my question was. I was like, I think there's something interesting here, so I appreciate you wrestling it to the ground and giving me an answer around it.

Sarah ([33:08](#)):

Yeah, yeah. It's got me thinking really in different ways. Sorry, go on.

MBS ([33:16](#)):

I was going to ask you, perhaps connected to that question, who do you consider your teachers now?

Sarah ([33:36](#)):

Well, in many ways, my eternal teachers have become those who taught me years ago and have recently passed. Robert Farris Thompson, he was my co-advisor with Alexander Nemiroff, and I was his final graduate student at Yale. He recently passed. I had a dream about him last night. It was so interesting. And I thought, yeah, he is my teacher. He's still here as I finish this book due in a few weeks. And Greg Tate, who recently passed during the pandemic, and Maurice Berger, these eternal teachers, these extraordinary critics.

([34:20](#)):

So I guess I start that way because I'm not seeing the answer as predicated on someone being here or lateral to me. Yes, I have extraordinary teachers in my wonderful colleagues, senior colleagues at Harvard and other institutions. But many of the teachers are also my students who see the world very differently from the way I do, or challenge me to do so simply by being in a different generation. So there's that.

([34:52](#)):

But also, the pandemic we were living through and went through made me also think differently about the direction of where teaching comes from. I found



myself learning more from just the rhythms of the seasons, the way in which nature moves me, and the lessons that are embedded in the transformation of even just as something as rudimentary as the seasons. I take lessons now from just greater sources than I did in the past.

MBS ([35:26](#)):

Yeah.

Sarah ([35:26](#)):

Yeah.

MBS ([35:28](#)):

There's something I've been sitting with as the people who have influenced me and taught me and been role models for me have passed and died, and feeling like, to my surprise, I'm now, it feels weird to even say it out loud, but kind of stepping more into an elder role. Like actually, the stage of elders is emptying, and I'm finding myself up on the stage now. I'm wondering if you feel you have some of that mantle. And if so, what does it mean to be an elder?

Sarah ([36:12](#)):

Well, what you've just said is largely why I agreed to come on the podcast, despite the fact that I'm on deadline today because I got this sense of just this beautiful fond of wisdom in you, and I was really excited as I have-

MBS ([36:27](#)):

Thank you.

Sarah ([36:28](#)):

... Yeah. Now to engage.



MBS ([36:28](#)):

I hope I haven't dashed your expectations in our conversation.

Sarah ([36:35](#)):

No. Not at all. No, no. That's why I'm mentioning it now. There was a line I saw somewhere on social media that said, "We are the new ancestors. Act accordingly." I feel that. Yeah, yeah. I think as an educator, you always feel that.

MBS ([36:56](#)):

Yes.

Sarah ([36:58](#)):

That's the poignancy of teaching. I was just talking to a colleague who mentioned that he was teaching students this term, it's the fifth week of the semester now at Harvard, and this student had been embarrassed to say that this professor had also taught his father in the '90s, at Harvard. The professor said he wanted to just keel over. How is this possible? But this is where we are.

MBS ([36:58](#)):

This is where we are.

Sarah ([37:25](#)):

I like to embrace it. Don't you?

MBS ([37:27](#)):

I do. There is that saying, which I love, which is inside every old person is a young person going, "What the hell just happened here?" And I'm like, I certainly feel that. But I also quite like what it means to play a quieter role where what I'm ambitious for has shifted a little. I'm striving for less, but kind of striving for more at the same time, somehow.



Sarah ([38:01](#)):

I'd love to talk to you about that comment for a whole podcast episode. Yeah. Because I agree, there is a quieting, or at least, but I think that there's a greater power in that stillness. I have the great fortune of having friends of my life who are double my age pretty much, almost. And I noticed that there is just a kind of a pursing of the lips and a quietness that will happen when you might be about to say something extraordinarily profound. So I think there's a contrast in that as we age. But I just think it's a matter of society also shifting it the way in which it honors and values where knowledge comes from and where wisdom comes from. And so I don't know if the lessening of the ambition is necessarily required as much as it is acknowledging that we might be part of a transformation that shifts our sense of what ambition should look like in the first place.

MBS ([39:00](#)):

Lovely. Let me shift slightly, although I think there's a thread here. You describe yourself both as a curator and as a maker. I'm wondering how those two roles, which are related, but different, how they feed each other?

Sarah ([39:29](#)):

Yes. It's a great question. It has to do with how I began to write. I began work as a curator, really, kind of my youngest stage in my career, at Tate Modern and then at MoMA. And I was fortunate to work with wonderful minds, putting together shows on artists like Elizabeth Murray. And it was there that I saw how stories could be told in public through sequence and series, through walls, through pacing. But I also learned when stories couldn't be told in that fashion, when it really did require text or a speech or the creation of another work of art. And that's when I began to write.

([40:19](#)):

So curators, the beauty of it is you get to honor the work of an artist. But there are times where not everything you want to say can be done through that act,



there are things you'd like to also express. So I began to write when I realized that there was enough that I had to say that I was too, an artist. So it inspired me to become a maker. It's not actually a word I use very often. I have used it with you. I would typically say I am a writer or an artist, but I think I'm saying the word maker because being a researcher as well, as a scholar, there are ways in which I'm fashioning out of shards in the archives, just extraordinary letters that have been lost to history or that are conserved and preserved by incredible archivists and historians, but people don't know about that, that makes me feel like I'm cobbling together, that I'm making assembling an object, as I'm right now for this book. So one led to the other, in effect.

MBS ([41:23](#)):

That's beautiful. It's reminding me of, I think it's a Japanese ceramic practice, I think it's called Kintsugi. I'm sure I'm probably getting that wrong, and if I'm not, I'm pronouncing it incorrectly. But it's a ceramic piece that is broken and then joined together with gold. And it's considered more beautiful and more valuable than the original thing in the joining that the elegance of the whole is revealed.

Sarah ([41:51](#)):

Exactly. I love that practice, yes.

MBS ([41:54](#)):

And that description of shards from the archive immediately brought that image to mind.

Sarah ([42:00](#)):

Oh, that's gorgeous. Thank you for that. Yes.



MBS ([42:04](#)):

Well, as a fellow writer and knowing that you're on a deadline, I'm like, okay, I'm going to send you all the encouragement I can because those two weeks before deadline often have an intensity.

Sarah ([42:14](#)):

They do, they do. I'm questioning my sanity some days and then just [inaudible 00:42:18] happy about them the next bit, thinking about these pages. Yeah, thank you for that vivid image.

MBS ([42:24](#)):

Sure. Sarah, as perhaps as a final question for you, this has been such a rich conversation, and I feel like I would love to sit down with you for three hours and talk, but we both have books that are due soon. So my final question, and I appreciate your time for today, is what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

Sarah ([42:50](#)):

Oh, goodness. Well, one just practical point is that I cannot wait for your books. Definitely needs to be said. I would say, both to those listening and as a reminder to the both of us as we sort of put our hands in the air and ask for that co-creative spirit to come and accompany us as we continue to write, to trust that the seeming accident oftentimes never is. The way in which we met was through Brené Brown's podcast and you reaching out to me, I think at least for me, has resulted in such a rich conversation here with you, and I hope the beginning of an ongoing conversation.

MBS ([43:42](#)):

Me too.



Sarah ([43:44](#)):

And that was, I think, the only invitation of another podcast that came in that way from that event, and I've always treasured it. So that's what I'd like to leave us with and also the audience with. There's just a magic in the everyday. I think there's so many winks and nudges trying to get our attention to pull back some piece of paper to find the glory underneath that is just waiting for our attention and our own unique ability to convey it, to publish about it, to engage with it. So yeah, that's what I'm leaving this conversation feeling, grateful and for that awareness in the both of us.

MBS ([44:35](#)):

So this is a very rich conversation. I mean, I'm right at the start of a new book, and one of the many things that Sarah said that struck a chord for me was your stature, your success, your achievements don't accompany you when you have to produce all over again. Your experience might help, but none of the titles matter. So it doesn't matter what my resume says, it doesn't matter what my reputation is. The act of grading in me is pen and paper and keyboard and a deep breath. And here I go again. I'm back to being a stone hewer, a Stanier stone hewer. Block of stone and a chisel and an intention to find the truth and the beauty within.

([45:23](#)):

This conversation with Sarah made me think of two others that maybe you'd like to check out as well, Ashley Good, who talked about being transformed by failure, and Mia Birdsong, a wonderful conversation with another creative woman. We call that the sacred and the mundane because I thought Mia had really captured away a balancing both of those things and bringing both of those things as important things into her life.

([45:47](#)):

And if you'd like more of Sarah, well, the place to go is her website, SarahElizabethLewis.com. Thank you for listening. Thank you for loving the



podcast, for reviewing it, for passing on episodes that you love to other people and saying, "Read that," for posting it on social media if you're so moved to do that as well. We grow through your support and your encouragement. So I will just remind you that you are awesome, and you are doing great.