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So if you enjoy what we're doing here, please consider becoming one. As always, I never want money to be the reason why someone can't get access to the podcast. So if you can't afford a subscription, there's an option that Sam Harris, Doug, to request a free account and we grant 100 percent of those requests. No questions asked. I am back with David White. David, thanks for joining me. It's a pleasure. So we already have a series of your poetry in the waking up app at which people have absolutely loved.

[00:01:12.270]

And now you are coming back with yet more work, which is derived from your book, Constellation's The Soulless Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words, which is a book I absolutely love. You've given us readings from that book and some marginalia, and these are just fantastic pieces of audio. So what I wanted to do here is have a conversation around a few of them. I thought we would drop in your sections on friendship, honesty, ambition and alone, and we could just have a brief conversation about each.

[00:01:53.280]

But perhaps to before we jump in, what was your inspiration for this book? Because it's really just it's a great formula for you as a student of the power of language to just drill down on the significance of specific words here. It was it's the perfect use of your talents as a poet to bring us this kind of prose level.

[00:02:14.730]

You're very kind. I think there were there were two forms of insight, in a way. I was in Paris, actually, and I was speaking to my assistant on the phone. My colleague Julie Quiring has been with me for years, and she was quite excited that I had been invited to write a little philosophical piece for the Observer magazine in England.

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And The Observer magazine goes out to millions of people on Sunday morning. So it was a lovely, lovely way of getting a lot of of listening. Yes. To my work. But then she sounded a little hesitant and I said, what's the hesitancy? She said that it can't be any longer than 300 words. And I said to myself, you know, I'm half Irish, half English.

[00:03:10.960]

The Irish side of me said, it's hardly time to take your breath, you know, never mind accomplish anything that would give anyone any insight unless you're actually writing poetry. And so. I can't remember how we finished the phone call, but I remember clicking it off quite firmly, as if to say, well, I don't think I'm going to do that. And anyway, I walked around Paris all day and then I ended up in a restaurant by myself and.

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And I sat down and I said to myself, what if you could? Right, what you needed to write in 300 words, the other specification was that it had to be a single word title. Which I didn't mind, you know, I said, what what would you write about? And so I asked the I remember asking asking the waiter if he had any stationery and and they did actually being French. And so he brought out some stationery and and I started writing and I wrote at the top of the page Regrette.

[00:04:18.320]

And I realized immediately how often that word was and how unfashionable it had become and how I was constantly meeting people who said they had no regrets. Now how I was constantly asking myself, where had they been all their life if they had no regrets? But that really put me back into a stream of experience that I had had all my life around.

[00:04:47.690]

Words where? I always felt the adult world was using words in a way that were abstracted away from the physical experience of what the word meant. You know, when you think of a child, when they first hear the word door, it's not an abstract word that exists separate from their own bodies in that word is the actual physical experience of the door itself. And I always felt this very, very strongly in my growing I grew up in a linguistic frontier actually between Ireland and the north of England and the north of England is very different than the received identity that we think of when we think of Downton Abbey or we think of Jane Austen, you know, southern England.

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It's very hierarchical, it's very distant socially. And the north of England is actually has more of a Scandinavian influence from the Viking settlements that were there. It's very egalitarian and people are really, really straight with you as they say in Yorkshire. They say nothing until they say everything about you and your flaws and how you can put yourself right.

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So I had that on one side of the house, you know, with these Yorkshire erm the vowel sounds, you know, very short sentences. If a story is told, it's told exactly the same. You know, my Uncle Tom would say to my father, Jim, tell that story about when you were driving up that hill towards Scarborough. You got out at the top, you went into the pub, this fellow said to you and you said back to him.

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And my dad would say, well, we were driving up this hill. We stopped at the top of the hill. We went in the pub. The fellow said to me and I said, and you were actually it was a kind of a ritual re investigation of what had happened. But you didn't expect it to be any different. On the other side of the house was this very different lyrical use of language.

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You know, it was it was all Holy St Mary and Joseph tonight, the whole immortal shame of it and all the saints in heaven. And it was and the story was never told the same way. My mother I never heard my mother tell the same story. I had about five parallel childhoods for her. So I started to understand quite early that you could.

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Inhabit language in very, very different ways, and that language could live in your body in a way in which he could open up different worlds to you. And, you know, later on, I heard our I read the great philosopher Wittgenstein, you know, say you cannot enter any world for which you do not have the language. You cannot enter any world for which you do not have the language. And so I felt like I was privileged living at this frontier and I could morph my accent.

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I still do. Actually, it's quite disturbing to the Irish people when when I morph into Irish, the Irish accent from my mother. But it's entirely natural, yes, and so I have three accents, which is a kind of after I received English from college, my Yorkshire dialect, which is a full dialect, actually, and then Irish, the Irish accent. And then my present kind of Americanized, Yorkshire, Irish. I've always been interested in language and the way that people learn words, actually, if you learn the word door when you're learning French now as an adult, you learn it as an abstract.

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You see the English word on one side, you see the French word on the other, Laport, you know, and you don't have it in your physical body.

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While many of us as adults learn words, you know, like regret like alone in this deep sense, you know, as abstracts.

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So the attempt of this book was to go back to the physical and etymological root of the word, you know, and the etymology of a word, of course, is its root in the past, how it was first used and what it meant when it was first physically expressed almost as a surprise in the society or the language. And so I felt there was tremendous solace in the way that words could be used from their original meaning that regret could actually be a kind of faculty for living more positively into the future.

[00:09:55.420]

Actually, with honest, deep regret. Yeah, you might treat a grandson with more patience and time than you did your own son, whose boyhood you might have missed because of your own involvement in your growing life. So regrets as a frontier with the future. And it's really actually quite remarkable to actually choose things out in your life that you would regret deeply. If you were ever a bully at school, even for just a moment, to choose out that moment and to see how it still lives in your body, and it almost always puts you in a sphere of generosity towards anyone who is being bullied around you at the moment.

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And in many ways, you start to look to redeem yourself from that moment. So I found it I found it very, very useful indeed to actually think of moments in my life that I deeply regret. And use them as a pair of eyes and ears for paying attention to my future. Well, it's beautiful. Well, so we've put your your work in the practice section of waking up instead of the theory section, and this confuses a few people because there's often an assumption that meditation practice requires silence or mostly silence or that he has spoken.

[00:11:36.950]

Instruction is meant to merely introduce the next chapter of silence, but that really isn't the case, or at least it isn't the case with what I would consider to be real meditation. And there's certainly a relationship between the power of words and the power of silence. And so what I've recommended that people do is simply listen to your readings in the same frame of mind in which they would meditate and just let your thoughts replace their own, which is what happens whenever we read or listen to someone read.

[00:12:13.430]

But it is possible to recognize the nature of mind just as clearly while contemplating someone else's thoughts. So it's really in that spirit that we offer these these new readings in the app. Well, I think you said that beautifully, because the object in meditation and all of our contemplative disciplines is silence. But really, that silence is in order for you to perceive something other than yourself or what you've arranged as yourself. To actually perceive this frontier between what you call yourself and what you call other than yourself, whether that's a person or a landscape.

[00:12:59.660]

So one of the greatest parts of poetry is actually to create silence through attentive speech, speech that say something in such a way that it appears as a third frontier between you and the world and invites you into a deeper and more generous sense of your own identity and the identity of the world. So I think poetry, as is the verbal art form by which we can actually create silence. So with that is preamble, let's launch into the first chapter here on friendship and then we'll come back to discuss it.

[00:13:55.220] - David Whyte

Friendship is a mirror to presence and a testament to forgiveness. Friendship not only helps us to see ourselves through another's eyes, but can be sustained over the years only with someone who has repeatedly forgiven us for our trespasses, as we must find it in ourselves to forgive them in turn. A

friend knows our difficulties and shadows and remains in sight, a companion to our vulnerabilities more than our triumphs when we are under this strange illusion that we do not need them.

[00:14:40.520] - David Whyte

A friend knows our difficulties and shadows and remains in sight to companion to our vulnerabilities more than our triumphs when we are under this strange illusion that we do not need them. An undercurrent of real friendship is a blessing exactly, because it's elemental form is rediscovered again and again through understanding and mercy. All friendships of any length are based on a continued mutual forgiveness without tolerance and mercy or friendships die. Without tolerance and mercy, all friendships die. In the course of the years, a close friendship will always reveal the shadow in the other as much as ourselves to remain friends, we must know the other and their difficulties and even their sins and encourage the best of them, not through critique, but through addressing the better part of them, the leading creative edge of their incarnation, thus subtly discouraging what makes them smaller, less generous, less of themselves.

[00:16:04.200] - David Whyte

Friendship is the great hidden transmuter of all relationships, it can transform a troubled marriage, make honorable a professional rivalry, make sense of heartbreak and unrequited love, and become the newly discovered ground for a mature parent child relationship. The dynamic of friendship is almost always underestimated as a constant force in human life, a diminishing circle of friends is the first terrible diagnostic of a life in deep trouble, of overwork, of too much emphasis on a professional identity, of forgetting who will be there when our armored personalities run into the inevitable natural disasters and vulnerabilities found in even the most ordinary existence.

[00:17:08.340] - David Whyte

Friendship transcends disappearance, an enduring friendship goes on after death, the exchange only transmuted by absence, the relationship advancing and maturing in a silent, internal, conversational way, even after one half of the bond is passed on. But no matter the medicinal virtues of being a true friend or sustaining a long, close relationship with another, the ultimate touchstone of friendship is not improvement neither of the self nor of the other. The ultimate touchstone of friendship is witness. The privilege of having been seen by someone and the equal privilege of being granted the sight of the essence of another, to have walked with them, and to have believed in them, and sometimes just to have accompanied them for however brief a span, on a journey impossible to accomplish alone.

[00:18:23.510] - David Whyte

But no matter. The medicinal virtues of being a true friend are sustaining a long, close relationship with another. The ultimate touchstone of friendship is not improvement, neither of the self, nor of the other, the ultimate touchstone of friendship is witness. The privilege of having been seen by someone and the equal privilege of being granted the sight of the essence of another, to have walked with them and to have believed in them and sometimes just to have accompanied them for however brief a span on a journey impossible to accomplish alone.

[00:19:10.940] - David Whyte

Friendship was begun after waking from a very, very realistic dream, a dream in which I'd been with a very, very close friend, a friend who had passed away. But in the dream, he was alive again with all of the joy of discovering he was actually still alive. And we were in a car and it was an open top car. And we were driving across the Golden Gate Bridge, actually, with the sun going down on one side of the moon on the other.

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And we had our arms around each other's shoulders and we were laughing and telling jokes. And we were also laughing about all the ways that we had consciously or unconsciously insulted and hurt each other over the years and how we'd been good enough to forgive each other and working out of that dream and the joy of that dream and the forgiveness of that dream. Brought me to understand something of the essence of what it means to be a witness and a forgiving witness at that for a good friend.

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So friendship. I love this contemplation on friendship, this is now we were recording this at the what one hopes is the tail end of a global pandemic, where many of us have spent a year being less social than perhaps we've ever been in our lives. So, you know, I feel keenly the importance of friendship and how imperfectly I have maintained my own in this context. And so just at one point, you make here about the the nature of friendship is that it does function by at different dynamics than any other relationship, the companionship it is, as you put it, to our vulnerabilities, more than our triumphs in the face of our lives that we show to a friend is the face that we often busily conceal in every other social encounter.

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Friendship is characterized by a real friendship, is characterized by a total absence of pretense. And that's an interesting boundary to discover. And I guess we could just take a few moments to reflect on what demarcates friendship from other forms of acquaintance with people. I mean, when does someone become a friend and how do you know that has actually been accomplished?

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Yes, Montane, the great French essayist who really began the form for us, actually, he said that that real friendship is very, very rare, partly because it's it's it comes to us in the same way that a good marriage comes to us, which is also very, very rare and a good marriage and a good friendship.

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It is is a product of a willingness to be fully vulnerable, but also to find the right person with whom to be fully vulnerable.

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And in marriage and in friendship, and you can have a kind of friendship in marriage and you can have a form of marriage and friendship, actually a kind of commitment over the years, you find that the relationship advances along the access of your mutual vulnerability. Rather than along the sense of trying to impress through your powers and your invulnerability, and so the lovely thing about friendship is that it's constantly asking us to be forgiving. Both of the mistakes we make ourselves in the friendship, you will always say the wrong thing to the at the wrong time to your friend over the years, partly on purpose, because you've meant to tell them you couldn't quite get it out.

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It comes one day and. They have to often they work, they might go away for a while, you know. And to look their wounds, but if the friendship is still alive, if it is a friendship of years, by definition they have come back to you and they have forgiven you.

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And you have you have then to forgive yourself. And you have to find a way to actually include it in the conversation at the same time. So it's lovely the way that a long friendship is is based on mutual.

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Forgiveness of one's sins towards each other and the other lovely thing about friendship is, is that is that a good friend looks at the best in you. And remembers what they were first drawn by and what they were first impressed by. And knows you in your worst when you're not living up to your possibilities and encourages you in your very, very best.

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There's nothing. As good for your own sanity when you're going through your own difficulties and especially people who start to hate themselves, you know, for various reasons, to have a good friend who sees you through different eyes, who sees the leading edge of your maturation in a way. And through their eyes, brings your eyes to rest on it, too, so I have had a number of really, really close male friends through my life. I'm just at the stage in my life where I now have really, really good female friends, too.

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But I have a good circle of half a dozen friends around the world, most of whom I spend time either in the mountains or talking over literary and philosophical or both matters.

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And I have I have had two incredibly close friends, one who's passed away. With whom I strangely still have a very, very powerful relationship, you know, I began this little disquisition talking about Montane, who lived, you know, in the hundreds and late 1400's and. He lost his close friend. Etienne Delaporte, when they were both quite young, but in many ways, he kept up an intellectual and philosophical and almost physical relationship with him after his death.

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And this is one of the remarkable things about true friendship is that it does transcend disappearance, it transcends mortality and death. I often think that you have as many conversations with the person you have lost who was close to you after they've gone.

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As you had before they passed away. And I often think in the case of John O'Donohue, who's a friend who I lost, that I actually have the possibility of winning arguments now that I care while he's still alive, because I can always have the last word and shut off the dialogue.

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But there is always a sense actually in a really long and really loyal friendship. Of mortality, actually, that one of you will be gone before the other. And there's a strange way, especially with with John, who is also a speaker, a remarkable speaker. He was from the west of Ireland. He was fluent in philosophical German. He was fluent in Irish. He had a bird of paradise vocabulary.

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I often think that I begin a sentence and then he ends it while I'm on stage, you know, or vice versa.

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I remember something he said and begin with that thought and and then carry it on myself. So there's this amazing, invisible and very physical sense of inheritance from a heartfelt and powerful friendship. Hmm, that's beautiful. Yes, it's also interesting, the way of friendship reveals the boundaries of the self. And for instance, one often finds it difficult to be charitable to oneself. And so much of our self talk is, frankly, poisonous. And it's never the sort of thing we would say to a friend.

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And one way of correcting for this is to just yet consciously imagine, you know, how you would treat your friend in this circumstance where you are currently lacerating yourself with self judgment and a door to compassion swings open effortlessly once you put the lens of friendship over it rather than the your default relationship to your yourself and your and your failings.

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That's very well said. And it's really interesting to extend that thought to how you speak to yourself.

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It's interesting that most of the dialogue we have with ourselves and in the mirror is quite negative.

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If you spoke to others the way you spoke to yourself in the mirror, you would never have another friend in your life clear your calendar rather quickly. Exactly.

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So it's really interesting. You know, we often think of meditation as being purely silence in order to make a friendship with this deeper sense of self and deeper sense of the world. But it's really interesting to think that you could actually practice a conversation with yourself that helped you to

mature. And helped in your own maturation that you could practice holding a fruitful conversation with yourself? You know, I think there was actually one French philosopher who defined the philosopher as someone who could stand on a railway station platform waiting for the train for an hour and keep himself fully engaged with his own thoughts.

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Yeah, well, the only way you could do that is if it was leading towards larger and larger understandings. So to ask yourself the beautiful question and to be able to follow those questions and to extend what we recognize as self compassion.

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And to find a verbal way, actually, which is I think may be as good a definition of poetry as any, the art of overhearing yourself say things you didn't know, you knew that you perhaps to begin with, were actually afraid to want to know.

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And that you allow yourself to understand. So friendship with another always introduces us to friendship with the deeper underlying phenomena beneath the. This is South.

[00:30:52.260]

Which is which is exactly what your your whole life is, is is trying to invite people into, I think, well, crossing the boundary into what one is willing to let oneself understand is a great Segway into our next topic, which is honesty. Honesty is reached through the doorway of grief and loss. Honesty has reached through the doorway of grief and loss. Where we cannot go in our mind, our memory or our body. Is where we cannot be straight with another with the world or with ourselves.

[00:31:41.140]

The fear of loss in one form or another is the motivator behind all conscious and unconscious dishonesty is. The fear of loss in one form or another is the motivator behind all conscious and unconscious dishonesty is. All of us are afraid of loss in all its forms, all of us at times are haunted or overwhelmed by the possibility of a disappearance, and all of us, therefore, are one short step away from dishonesty. Every human being dwells intimately close to a door of revelation they are afraid to pass through.

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Honesty lies in understanding our close and necessary relationship with not wanting to hear the truth, honesty lies in understanding our close and necessary relationship with not wanting to hear the truth. The ability to speak the truth is as much the ability to describe what it is like to stand in trepidation at this door as it is to actually go through it and become that beautifully honest spiritual warrior equal to all circumstances we would like to become. Honesty is not the revealing of some foundational truth that gives us power over life or another or even the South.

[00:33:20.470]

Honesty is not the revealing of some foundational truth that gives us power over life or another or even the South. But a robust incarnation into the unknown, unfolding vulnerability of existence, where we acknowledge how powerless we feel, how little we actually know, how afraid we are of not knowing and how astonished we are by the generous measure of loss that is conferred upon even the most average life. Honesty is grounded in humility and indeed in humiliation. And in admitting exactly where we are powerless.

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Honesty is not found in revealing the truth. Honesty is not found in revealing the truth, but in understanding how deeply afraid of it we are. To become honest is in effect, to become fully and robustly incarnated into powerlessness. Honesty allows us to live with not knowing. We do not know the full story. We do not know where we are in that story. We do not know who is at fault or who will carry the blame in the end.

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Honesty is not a weapon to keep loss and heartbreak at bay; honesty is the outer diagnostic of our ability to come to ground. In reality, the hardest attainable ground of all, the place where we actually dwell, the living, breathing frontier, where there is no realistic choice between gain or loss. So you make the point that honesty is often a matter of admitting how little we know rather than merely landing again and again upon further truths. That's interesting what it was, how do you think of honesty as a share in so much territory with a confession of ignorance?

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Well, you know, just by seeing the way the word honesty is used as a kind of weapon in everyday conversation when someone says, "Can I be honest with you," you should always say no, because they have a piece of ammunition which they want to fire at you.

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Yeah. And to my mind, the invitation to knowledge needs to be more of an invitation, so I think the pivotal line in the whole essay is honesty lies in understanding our close and necessary relationship with not wanting to hear the truth. And it's that axis of vulnerability, again, its honesty is grounded in humility.

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So this is where you do if you want someone to be honest with you, you want it in the context of friendship. I always remember a good Irish friend of mine saying when I was starting to explain something that I'd done that had been misinterpreted and I got halfway through the sentence. I remember we were on a mountain and in the barren of North Claire. And he turned around and he said, "Never explain." He said he said, "Your enemies won't believe you and your friends don't need it."

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It was the most beautiful thing to say. And the most inviting thing, and that led me into a deeper dialogue with myself. So the other pivotal sentence in the essay is honesty is grounded in humility and indeed in humiliation. And in admitting exactly where we are powerless. Honesty is not found in revealing the truth, but in understanding how deeply afraid of it we are. And then it's followed by to become honest is in effect, to become fully and robustly incarnated into powerlessness.

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I mean, I work a lot, I have worked a lot in the corporate world and. I always say that real conversations always happen along this axis of vulnerability, even in the most powerful hierarchies in the business world. And the foundational axis of vulnerability, you know, in the hierarchy of a workplace is my as a leader simply admitting that I do not have all the answers. I've only got one pair of eyes, one pair of eyes.

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I've only got one imagination and one intellect. But in conversation with you, in making an invitation to you, I can double and triple and quadruple and multiply all of those faculties by creating a conversation that's attentive to our mutual future. But of course, that kind of vulnerability means that giving up all of my protected place in the hierarchy, so honesty is always, you know, the unspoken measure of integrity in the workplace. Yeah, but it's also the unspoken measure of integrity in a marriage or a friendship.

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Yeah, well, it really is an integrity is a measure of how closely what you're willing to have exposed in public and what is true of you in private are in register with one another. If you have a vast landscape of private preoccupation, which you would never dare to reveal to others, you know that that really is the formula for a complete lack of integrity. I'm interested in this discomfort we feel around the truth, right? Whether it's the discomfort in speaking the truth to others or in knowing a truth about ourselves that really does seem to be yet another place where this boundary of self can be discerned.



[00:40:16.830]

I mean, that is that is the tension. That is the this feeling of self and this feeling of of living in jeopardy under the gaze of others or, you know, under the gaze of reality itself. Yes, and it's always the giving up of protection. And immunity, so, of course, there are parts of the mind that have evolved, and rightly so, to protect us and to create immunity. And we've survived because of them.

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But, of course, as you know, you know, I've heard a lot of your talks and a lot of your invitations you make through your various talks, you know, to understanding the deeper, more movable, more conversational identity.

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We don't want to lose those powers of protection, of recognizing what is a threat or what is other than us. You know, they're part of our ability to survive in an evolutionary scale. But they can't provide us any sense of real happiness or presence, so we have to go to a different part of the mind whose primary goal is not protection, but meeting and presents and what looks like an incredible form of generosity and beauty as its gift. Yeah, and this is this other, you know, remarkable flow that's spoken to in all of our great contemplative traditions.

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And this deeper flowing, more conversational, more generous mind is actually able to call on the strategic mind for protection and for saying no and for saying this is other than me and it's bad for me. So one of the great fears, as you know, is that we we when we when we go into this no self, we will lose all sense of discernment. And we will lose all sense of protection. And it's only with maturing into the practice that we understand that we can call on those qualities.

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But not have them as the central arbiter of our identity. So I do think that the invitation to honesty is the invitation to this. To this deeper undoing, actually. This deeper. Identity, which. Is able to break through these boundaries by what looks like on the surface, a kind of robust vulnerability. Well, the topics of identity and vulnerability and achieving anything like security and happiness in this life lead us naturally to our next word, which is ambition.

[00:43:18.830]

I wish you good luck. If you'd like to continue listening to this conversation, you'll need to subscribe and Sam Harris, Doug, once you do, you'll get access to all full length episodes of the Making Sense podcast, along with other subscriber only content, including bonus episodes and Amma's. In the conversations I've been having on the Waking Up app, the making says podcast is ad free and relies entirely on listener support. And you can subscribe now at Sam Harris.

[00:43:49.510]

Doug.