

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 39: Maria Popova

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ExOfficio, boy, where do I begin? I've a long history with ExOfficio. ExOfficio makes clothing, and as far back as 2007, 2008, I had a hit video that went viral called, *How to Travel the World with 10 Pounds or Less*, and I talked about ExOfficio underwear.

ExOfficio underwear is lightweight – ultra-lightweight, quick-drying, and anti-microbial. Why is his important? Well, I've gone through 20 plus countries with two pairs of underwear before; both from ExOfficio. I'm not alone in this. This might sound crazy, but a lot of executives, for instance, will take this underwear. They'll wash it in the sink or somewhere else, roll it up in a towel like a burrito, step on it, and a few hours later, they are completely dry and completely clean.

You don't have to just have two. And, yes, they have to be comfortable for all-day wear, but check out their clothing as well

as their underwear. You can go to exofficio.com/tim. That's ex, E-X-O-F-F-I-C-I-O dot com, forward slash, Tim, and you can see this video which has a bunch of other packing tips. This underwear, this clothing is not just for the gents. Ladies, you have choices, too. They really have an incredible collection of high-quality products I used for almost ten years now. So, check them out, exofficio.com/tim.

Tim Ferriss:

Hello, ladies and gents. This is Tim Ferriss, yet again, running out the door to a flight. I have such an exciting episode, I can barely contain myself. I might just wee myself on my way across the country, but I digress; probably, TMI.

Let me answer just a couple of questions. What is this podcast about? You, long-term listeners, might know – long-term, long time. That it's about dissecting excellence. Trying to tease apart what makes world-class performers so good at what they do. Finding the tools and tactics that you can apply.

This episode features Maria Popova. I'm about to explain who she is. If you don't know who she is, or if you are intimately familiar with who she is, you're in for a treat. First, I'll answer a question that a lot of people ask me and that is, what are you reading? Well, what I'm reading right now is two books – comprise of two books.

The first is, William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade*. Goldman is the screenwriter behind such movies as *The Princess Bride* – one of my favorites of all time – and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. The second book is John Muir, *Wilderness Essays*. So, very different, both very, very good and highly recommended. The *Adventures in the Screen Trade* is a little outdated with some of the contents because it's related to film and it was written in the '80s, but there are a lot of timeless principles and Goldman is just hilarious.

But moving on; the guest, Maria Popova, oh, my goodness. Where to start? She would describe herself as a reader, writer, interestingness hunter, gatherer, and curious mind at large. What does that mean? It'll all make sense in just a few seconds.

While she's written for all sorts of amazing outlets like *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*. I find her most amazing project to be brainpickings.org, and I'm not alone in this. Founded in 2006 as a weekly email that she sent out to seven friends, co-workers, really, very informal. Brain Pickings was eventually brought

online, and, now, it gets more than 5 million readers per month. It is massive.

Many of you ask, what logs do you read often? What do you do online? Where do you spend most of your time? The answer is that I read very few sites consistently. I don't have that type of loyalty, but Brain Pickings is one of the few. It is a treasure trove. It is Maria's one-woman labor of love, her subjective lens on what matters. It's also an inquiry into how to live and what it means to lead a good life.

This is what hooks me, of course, because she'll pull from excerpt and reading from the Stoics; my favorite, Seneca to Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, and everyone in between. Maria is good at finding hidden gems to share. The amount of information this woman consumes and compressed down to the finest detail of what will help you now blows my mind. She makes me look like the laziest son of a bitch ever.

Of course, immediately, my questions are, how? How does she do that? How on earth does she do that? And we dig into this in this interview. Really, I try to unearth hidden gems in her life, her workflow. It takes me a few minutes to warm up as it often does, but once we get going, we geek out like crazy. And we talk about almost every aspect of her life, her site, her business, her workouts, her writing, her workflow, her tools, her workarounds, all of it.

I love doing this interview. I hope you love listening to it. For bonus credit, for those of you who are super curious, might have a little lack of extra time to do some detective work – at one point, she mentions that her Facebook fan page went from a few hundred thousand people to over 2 million people without explanation. So, if you are able to figure out why that happened, what contributed to that, please, let me know on Twitter – @tferriss, T-F-E-R-R-I-S-S. I'm dying of curiosity.

Always – or as always, I should say, the show notes all the links that we mentioned, the tools, et cetera. All of that can be found on the blog at fourhourworkweek.com/podcast, all spelled out. So, you don't need to scribble away furiously with notes. Although, you can. I will have pretty much everything that you will need right there in the show notes.

So, without further ado, please meet, Maria Popova.

Tim Ferriss: Hello, ladies and gentlemen. This is Tim Ferriss and welcome to another episode of the Tim Ferriss Show. I am extremely excited to have a fellow geek-in-arms, Maria Popova, on the line with me. Maria, how are you today?

Maria Popova: Very well, thank you. Thank you for having me.

Tim Ferriss: And I appreciate your coaching on the last name. I wasn't sure if it was Popova or Popova. I have friends who – for instance, Novel Rabika is a friend. It's actually Novel, but Americans can't really pull that off. So, he goes for Novel. So, I appreciate the coaching and I –

Maria Popova: Yes, as a country of immigrants, we have a surprisingly hard time getting people's original names right, right?

Tim Ferriss: Oh, absolutely. It's just the Anglo-sizing of such a cresol, like a melting pot of different cultures. At the same time, I think it's a reflection of where I spent a lot of time which is reading. There are so many words. I've embarrassed myself on many occasions. That I've read dozens or even hundreds of times, especially, in scientific literature that I've never heard pronounced.

Maria Popova: Oh, yeah. I call this reader syndrome. It's somebody who spends the majority of her waking hours reading. You run into that a lot, especially with cultural icons' last names, first names that are spelled differently than – very differently than their pronounced. It's tragic-comic when you actually find out how they're pronounced.

Tim Ferriss: No, exactly; or it can be a real revelation. I remember when I was a young kid. I couldn't hit, let's say, democracy or aristocracy. I could only say – because I had also read it – demo-crazy, aristo-crazy. For whatever reason, I couldn't get the emphasis right.

But going back to the reading and someone who spends most of their waking hours reading, if someone asks you – and I'm sure, occasionally, it happens – what do you do? For those people listening who may not be familiar with you, we'll start with the cocktail question. When someone asks you, what do you do? How do you answer that?

Maria Popova: Well, I've answered it differently over the years in part because, I think, inhabiting our own identity is a perpetual process that, right now, I would say, I read and I write, in that order. And in between,

I do some thinking. And I think about, how to live a meaningful life, basically.

Tim Ferriss: If someone, then, where to go online to find your work, end up at Brain Pickings, and they're like, oh, this is quite interesting. And they look over their shoulder because they happen to be doing it on their iPhone at the party. And they're like, what is Brain Pickings? How do you typically describe that?

Maria Popova: It's just a record of that thinking; my personal subjective, private thinking that takes place between my reading and the writing, and takes form in writing.

Tim Ferriss: A collection of very interesting things; sometimes, how I simply put it to folks. Brain Pickings – for those people wondering – is one of the very few sites that I end up on constantly. When people ask me, what blogs do you read? I'm embarrassed. In some cases, kind of humiliated to answer that I don't go, really, to many blogs consistently. I think part of the reason is, so many of them feel compelled to put out very, very timely, of-the-moment material that expires within a few hours. I don't like the feeling of keeping up with the Joneses when the Joneses are just churning out content.

I remember Cathy's here at one point, told me that you should focus on just in time information, not just in case information which I thought was very astute and really so profound. There are two sites that come to mind that I end up on quite a lot; Brain Pickings is one and Sam Harris' blog is another. I saw your review of his latest book, *Waking Up*.

Maria Popova: Well, not a review.

Tim Ferriss: Not a review.

Maria Popova: I don't review books ever.

Tim Ferriss: I apologize. Okay, no, so this is –

Maria Popova: An annotated reading, if you will.

Tim Ferriss: Okay, so an annotated reading of – and I definitely want to dig into that. An annotated reading of *Waking Up* which I found really impactful for me in a lot of ways. It put words to a lot of vague feelings or observations that I had for a very long time.

Talking about reviews; so, I polled a number of my friends and my readers about different questions they would love to ask you. A close of mine, Chris Saka, he came back with, what percentage of *New York Times Bestsellers* can be attributed to your coverage?

And I'd be curious to hear you answer that. Then, there's a follow up. You've built this incredible powerhouse of an outlet for your – whether it's creative musings or observations, and it has a huge influence on what people read. So, if you were to think of that, how would you answer that question?

Maria Popova: Well, first of all, you're very kind to put it that way as is Chris. I think one big caveat to all of that is that the majority of books that I read and write about are very old, out of print, things that are not competing for *New York Times Bestseller*. In fact, I won't even know if I ever really – I mean, perhaps. I don't know if the books that I read have any overlap and the Venn diagram of things with the *New York Times Bestsellers*.

I suspect that the reason Chris asked that question is actually that I met him through his wife who collaborated with Wendy MacNaughton, the illustrator – whose work I love and I love Wendy – on a book about wine –

Tim Ferriss: Definitely.

Maria Popova: And I wrote about it because it's lovely, and profound, and challenge our existing ideas about sensory experience. I like things that take something very superficial and find something deeper and something unusual in it.

But in any case, so I wrote about that book. In that particular piece on *Brain Pickings* that seem to do pretty well. I think, perhaps, that warped Chris' idea of how much contemporary books I'm interested in, but I would say that's a minority.

Tim Ferriss: Right. And for those people wondering, it's *The Essential Scratch and Sniff Guide to Becoming a Wine Expert* which is written along with – and the illustrations are wonderful. Richard Betts is the sommelier who's part of that.

At one point, I met with him because I wanted to try to deconstruct the master sommelier test, and he said, I can show you how to do it. It was just the paired-down hacked, if you will versions. Still, passing the master sommelier test was so intimidating that I put it

on ice indefinitely. But at some point, Richard, we will talk again and form a game plan.

So, the opposite, of course, of putting out this material that expires as soon as it's out on the vine, is putting out what, I think, you do very often, and that is timely and timeless – I've heard you call it – material where you're pulling from old sources or older sources, doing pattern recognition to pull from other areas to talk about, say, a theme or something that still affects people.

I was doing research for this interview. We've met briefly in New York at an event. I've been a long-time fan of your work. So, I thought to myself, how much digging do I really need to do? And good God, you have such an absolute cannon of work out there. It is astonishing. I mean, it is really –

Maria Popova: You're very kind. It's just the volume of time, really. I've been doing this for eight years coming up. Actually exactly a month from today it will be eight years.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, really?

Maria Popova: So, it's just the accumulation.

Tim Ferriss: So, I'm fascinated by routine and schedule, and reading from, of course from – not the always accurate, but generally a good place to start – Wikipedia. It says that Brain Pickings takes 400 plus hours of work per month, 100s of pieces of content per day, 12 to 15 books per week that you're reading. I know I'm asking a handful of questions that you've been asked before. Sometimes the answer has changed and evolved –

Maria Popova: They always do. Which is why I actually don't do interviews very frequently because I find they sort of tend to cast this as the static thing that just stays there; some sort of reference point while we're really just the fluid process and we're constantly evolving. But in any case, go on.

Tim Ferriss: No, definitely –

Maria Popova: The answer's too tame.

Tim Ferriss: So, the question that you've, I'm sure, been asked many times, but I'll ask again is, how do you find/choose the books that you read? This is a huge problem for me because my appetite for reading outstrips the time that I have. So, I end up actually, unfortunately,

sometimes finding myself anxious because of the number of books I've taken on at any given point and time. So, I'd be curious how you sort of vet the books that you read.

Maria Popova: Well, I guess, it goes back to that question of – well, let me backtrack and just say that I write about a very wide array of disciplines, and eras, and sensibilities because that's what I think about.

So, anything from art and science to philosophy, psychology, history, design, poetry; you name it. The common denominator for me is just this very simple question of, does this illuminate some aspect – big or small – of that grand question that I think we all [inaudible] every day which is how to live well. How to live a good meaningful, fulfilling life? Whether that's Aristotle's views on happiness and government, or beautiful art from 12th-century Japan, or Sam Harris' new book, anything.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. I've read you citing Kurt Vonnegut before. Kurt Vonnegut's one of my favorite writers of all time.

Maria Popova: I know. I heard your semicolon quote. I think it was either the interview you did with Kevin Kelly or with Sam. I actually have a counterpoint to the semicolon question –

Tim Ferriss: Okay, no, no –

Maria Popova: But go on.

Tim Ferriss: I brought up the semicolon quote partially as a wink, wink, nod, ribbing to a friend of mine named John Romanelo who has a tattoo of a semicolon on his – I think it's his forearm.

Maria Popova: Got to love type nerds.

Tim Ferriss: He loves semicolons. He also has a molecule of testosterone on the other arm. He's a fascinating guy. The quote that I heard you cite that I wanted to dig into a bit was, the Kurt Vonnegut saying, write to please just one person. So, my question to you is, when you write, is that still the case? And if so, who is that person that you are writing for?

Maria Popova: It is very much the case. I still write for an audience of one, and that is myself. It's like I said, it's just a record of my thought process, my way of just trying to navigate my way through the world and understand my place in it, understand how we relate to

one another, how different pieces of the world relate to each other and create a pattern of meaning out of seemingly unrelated, meaningless information, and the intersection or transmutation of information into wisdom, really, which what learning to live is. It's about wisdom.

It's interesting, too, because when I started Brain Pickings – like I said – almost eight years ago, it started very much as a private record of my own curiosity and I shared it with seven co-workers that I had at the time just as an email newsletter thing. Now, to think that there are about 7 million people – strangers – reading it every month –

Tim Ferriss: That's amazing.

Maria Popova: It's kind of surreal –

Tim Ferriss: Congratulations, by the way.

Maria Popova: Thank you, and I'm not sort of number-dropping for scale or anything, but I just to try to articulate how surreal it feel so me that I still feel like I'm writing for one person, one very inward person. There's also, now, the awareness that there are people looking on, and interpreting, and just relating to this pretty private act. It's a strange thing to live with. In no way a bad thing; I'm not complaining about it, obviously, but it's just interesting to observe how one relates to oneself when being looked on by a few million people.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. And, oh, there's so many, so many questions I wanna ask you. We might have to do a Part 2 at some point because I know we have some time constraints. Where do you even begin? This is where I start fraying at the ends as an interviewer.

So, the first question would be related to that. There's so much temptation to dumb things down or to go after the tried and true BuzzFeed type headlines. Do you ever contend with that temptation? And if so, how do you resist it? This is part of the, how do you respond to the expectations of the crowd or the 7 million people looking on.

I feel this personally sometimes because I have a blog that has – certainly, by no means the number of monthly readers that you have. I'm somewhere between 1 and 2 million units a month usually.

Maria Popova: Oh, congratulations.

Tim Ferriss: Thank you. But even at that scale, there are times where I put out something that I feel is very important, but on the dense side. Sometimes, it takes off, but sometimes it doesn't. And there's a lot of temptation when – for instance, I know you use social media quite a bit. We'll get to that. Where I look at, say, the retweets, the favorites on something that's dense, and then I'm like, oh, God. I should just do like the seven tricks you can actually teach your cat and get 500,000 retweets.

Is that something that ever crosses your mind? And do you ever feel that temptation?

Maria Popova: Well, it's interesting because, I think, anybody who thinks in public – which is what writing is, which even what art is. It's some sort of putting a piece of oneself out into the world. Anybody who does that struggles with this really irreconcilable tug of war between wanting to really stay true to one's experience and being aware that as soon as it's out in the world, there is this notion of the other audience.

Oscar Wilde, he very memorably said that a true artists takes no notice whatever of the public and that the public are, to him, non-existent. It's very easy to say – especially for somebody as Wilde who was very prolific, very public, almost performative in his public presence – it's very easy to call this out as a hypocrisy and say, well, you can't possibly not care about the audience given you make your living through it and perform to it, right?

I think that's a pretty cynical interpretation. I think, rather than hypocrisy, it's just this very human struggle to be seen and to be understood which is why all art comes to be because one human being wants to put something into the world, and to be understood for what he or she stands for, and who he or she is.

So, with that lens, I do think it's hard to say, well, I don't care about what happens to it out there. Even though I write for myself and think for myself, the awareness of the other really does change things.

I think, perhaps, Werner Herzog put it best. I just finished reading this 600-page interview with him, essentially. It's a conversation a journalist named Paul Krugman had with him over the course of 30 years. In one passage, Herzog says something like, it's always been important for me to have my films reach an audience. I don't

necessarily need to hear what those audience reactions are just as long as they're out there. That the films are touching people in some way.

I feel very similarly. So, with that in mind, I guess, to answer your question rather surreptitiously, I don't feel, quote/unquote, tempted to make listicles or to make anything that I think I feel compromises my experience of what I stand for. In part, I think, the beauty of the web is that it's a self-perfecting organism.

For as long as it's an ad-supported medium, the motive will be to perfect the commercial interest. So, perfect the art of the BuzzFeed listicle, the endless slideshow, the infinitely paginated article, and not to perfect the human spirit of the reader or the writer which is really what I'm interested in.

Tim Ferriss: I think it's a very virtuous goal. I really admire your site and, obviously, the newsletter, and all these other aspects of it for a lot of reasons. I feel a very kindred spirit with a lot of the decisions, it seems, you have made. So, for instance, I mean, not doing the slide shows to rack up page views for some type of CPM advertising. That stuff drives me insane. So, if it drives me insane, I assume it drives my readers insane. So, I'm not gonna do it or like you said –

Maria Popova: That's so wonderful that you do that because, I think, so much of the cultural crap that is out there – not just in the internet, just in general – comes from people who fail to understand that they should be making the kind of stuff they want to exist.

So, if you're a writer, write the things you wanna read. If you're an artist, paint the things you wanna see painted. I think the commercial aspect of really warping that – one thing I really admire about your work in all of its permutations from your books to this podcast, to say everything is that there's just this sort of sense that you just want this to exist. It doesn't exist for any other reason than you want it to exist. I think that's wonderful.

Tim Ferriss: Thank you, that means a lot to me. Coming back to the, write to please just one person, I think that it's related to that. So, in a way, it's put the things out in the world that you would want to consume yourself or experience yourself, No. 1. Secondly, just for those people who haven't heard this anecdote, when I was writing *The 4-Hour Workweek* as my first book, I still, to this day, find writing very challenging. I wish I could say it's gone easier overtime, but for whatever reason, it seems not to have.

In the case of *The 4-Hour Workweek*, I came out of undergrad at Princeton and that was many years past, obviously. But when I wrote the first few chapters, it was really stilted and pompous, and kind of Ivy League where I was trying to use \$10-words where 10 cent-words would suffice and be a lot cleaner.

So, I threw out the first few chapters that I drafted, and this was a major panic attack moment. I was on a deadline. I remember I was in Argentina at the time. Then, I went the other way. I said, no, no, no. I should be loose. I have to be funny. So, I wrote a few chapters that were completely slapstick ridiculous. I mean, it sounded like Three Stooges put on paper.

So, I had to throw out those few chapters. Of course, I'm doubling down on my anxiety at this point, and decided, at one point, that I was just going to have a little bit of [inaudible] two glasses of wine, and no more than two glasses of Malbec, and sit down and start to write.

Maria Popova: What is that?

Tim Ferriss: Malbec is just this wonderful varietal in South America, best known in Argentina, but they're actually some really nice Malbec wines in Chile. As I understand it, it was viewed almost as a garbage grape in Europe, but it was brought by the Italians to Buenos Aires and has developed this worldwide fame because of its cultivation in Argentina. So, there's a lot of metaphor there that I also like.

Drank two glasses of wine, sat down, and literally opened up an email client and started typing *The 4-Hour Workweek* as if I were writing it to two of my closest friends. One was an investment banker trapped in his own job and he felt like he couldn't leave because his lifestyle was swelling to meet his income. And then, the other was an entrepreneur also trapped in a company of his own making. So, these two very specific guys in mind, I started to write with just enough alcohol to take the edge off. I was writing, in that case, to please just two people. That's the only way I can make it work.

Your schedule, so I've read of your schedule, but I'd love to hear the current iteration of that. It seems like you have a fairly regimented schedule which would make sense if you're putting the number of hours into reading and writing that you do. So, what is your current day look like?

Maria Popova: Well, I'll answer this with a caveat. The one thing I have struggled with or tried to solve for myself in the last few years – a couple of years, maybe – is this really delicate balance between productivity and presence, especially in a culture that seems to measure our worth, or our merit, or our value through our efficiency, and our earnings, and our ability to perform certain tasks as opposed to just the fulfillment we feel in our lives and the presence that we take in the day to day. That's something that's become more and more apparent to me.

So, I'm a little bit reluctant to discuss routine as some holy grail of creative process because it's just really – it's a crutch. I mean, routines and rituals help us not feel this overwhelming massive mess of just day to day life would consume us. It's a control mechanism, but that's not all there is. And if anything, it should be in the service of something greater which is being present with one's own life.

So, with that in mind, my day is very predictable. I get up in the morning. I meditate for between 15 to 25 minutes before I do anything else.

Tim Ferriss: What time do you wake up, typically?

Maria Popova: Exactly eight hours after I've gone to bed. So it varies.

Tim Ferriss: Okay.

Maria Popova: I'm a huge proponent of sleep. When I write or when I try to think, what I do is, essentially, make associations between seemingly unrelated ideas and concepts. In order for that to happen, those associate of change need to be firing. When I am sleep-deprived, I feel like I don't have full access to my own brain which is certainly, I'm not unique in that in any way. There's research showing that our reflexes are severely hindered by lack of sleep. We're almost as drunk if we sleep less half the amount of time we normally need to function.

I think, ours is a culture where we wear our ability to get by on very little sleep as a kind of badge of honor that speaks work ethic, or toughness, or whatever it is, but really, it's a total profound failure of priorities and of self-respect. And I try to enact that in my own life by being very disciplined about my sleep. At least, as disciplined as I am about my work because the latter is a product of the capacities cultivated by the former.

So, in any case, I get up eight hours after I have gone to bed. I meditate. I go to the gym where I do most of my longer form reading. I get back home. I have breakfast and I start writing. I usually write between 2 and 3 articles a day, and one of them tends to be longer.

When I write I need uninterrupted time. So, I try to get the longer one done earlier on in the day when I feel much more alert so I don't look at email or anything, really, external to the material I'm dealing with which does require quite a bit of research usually. So, it's not like I can cut myself off from the internet or from other books, but I don't have people disruptions, I guess; so, anything social.

Then, I take a short break. I'm a believer in pacing, creating a rhythm where you do very intense focused work for an extended period, then you take a short break, and then cycle back. I deal with admin stuff like emails and just taking care of errands or whatnot. I resume writing, and I write my other article or articles.

Through the evening, I try to have some private time just later in the day either with friends, or with my partner, or just time that is unburdened by deliberate thoughts. Although, you can never unburden yourself from thought, in general. Then, usually, later at night I either do some more reading or some more writing or a combination of the two.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. So, a number of follow up questions. What type of meditation do you practice currently?

Maria Popova: Just guided vipassana, very basic. There's a woman named Tara Brach who, she's a mindfulness practitioner.

Tim Ferriss: How do you spell her last name?

Maria Popova: B-R-A-C-H.

Tim Ferriss: Got it.

Maria Popova: She's based out of D.C. and she was trained as a cognitive psychologist, then the decades of Buddhist training, and live in [inaudible]. Now, she teaches mindfulness, but with a very secular lens. So, she records her classes and she has a podcast which is how I came to know her. Every week, she does the one-hour

lecture and the philosophies, and the cognitive behavioral wisdom of the ages. Then, she does a guided meditation.

So, I use her meditations and she has changed my life, perhaps, more profoundly than anybody in my life.

Tim Ferriss: Wow.

Maria Popova: So, I highly recommend her.

Tim Ferriss: Tara Brach.

Maria Popova: Brach, yes. And all her podcasts is free. She has two books out, too. She's really wonderful, very generous person.

Tim Ferriss: I will have to check that out. You're listening to audio while you meditate?

Maria Popova: Yes.

Tim Ferriss: Got it.

Maria Popova: And it's interestingly, I mean, she puts one out every week, but I've been using the exact same one from the summer of 2010. It's just one that I like and feel familiar with. It helps me get into the rhythm. So, every day, I listen to the exact same –

Tim Ferriss: Summer 2010, how would people recognize it? How does the audio sound?

Maria Popova: It sounds cheesy, but it is not cheesy. I think it's called, Smile Meditation. I'm sure she has repeated it in various forms through the years in other recording. It just happens to be the one that I have on on my broken 3G iPhone without any internet or cell service which I just use as an iPod. That's on it.

Tim Ferriss: Awesome. That's great answer. God, I love digging into the specifics. So, when you go to the gym, then, to workout, are you still using an elliptical for that?

Maria Popova: Yes.

Tim Ferriss: You are? Okay.

Maria Popova: I do sprints, high intensive on the elliptical. I go for cardio, and I do a lot of body weight stuff, too.

Tim Ferriss: You do? All right, but when you're reading, is that on the elliptical?

Maria Popova: Yes.

Tim Ferriss: And what type of device, if any, are you using for that reading?

Maria Popova: Well, I prefer electronics. So, I use the Kindle app of iPad or any PDF viewer because I read a lot of archival stuff. The challenge, of course, is because I read so many older books that are out of print, let alone having digital versions, that's not always possible; in cases, rarely possible unless I'm writing about something fairly new. So, in that case, I just go there with my big [inaudible] and my sticky notes, and pens, and sharpies, and various annotation, and analogue devices, and I just do that.

Tim Ferriss: Cool. So, that lead perfectly into the next question which is, what does your note-taking writing system look like? How do you take notes? So, for instance, you're really good at using excerpts or quotations – pull quotes. And I found myself asking as I was reading this. Like, how are you gathering all this so that you can use it later? What is your note-taking system look like in the case of digital and in the case of a hard copy?

Maria Popova: Hmm, so with digital, it's very simple. I just highlight passages, and I write myself little notes underneath each that have acronyms that I use frequently for certain topics or shorthand that I have developed by myself. Understanding, really, which is what reading should be a conduit to, is a form of pattern recognition. So, when you read a whole book, you walk away with certain takeaways that are thematically linked. They don't usually occur sequentially. So, it's not like, you walk away with one is like from the first chapter, one is taken from the second chapter. It just those pattern of the writer's thoughts that permeate the entire narrative of the book.

Especially, if you read as a writer, so somebody who not only needs to walk away with that, but ideally wants to record what those patterns and themes are, that sort of reading is very different. So, what I end up doing with analogue books – in particular, that sort of hacked some systems of doing it electronically, but they're imperfect – is on the very last page of each book which is blank, usually, right before the end cover, I create an alternate index.

So, I basically list out, as I'm reading, the topics and ideas that seem to be important in recurring in that volume, and then next to each of them, I start listing out the pages numbers where they occur. And on those pages, I obviously highlighted the respective passage and I have a little sticky tab on the side so I can find it, but it's basically an index based not on keywords which is what a standard book index is based on, but based on key ideas. And I use that, then, to synthesize what those ideas are once I'm ready to write about the book.

Tim Ferriss: Okay. I have to geek out on this because I'm so excited now. So, as it turns out, with analogue books, I do exactly – literally exactly – the same thing. I usually start with the front inside cover, but I create my own index. Of course, they don't have to be in order. So, you can list them – in my particular case – in any order. I also will have a couple of lines dedicated to PH, and PH just refers to phrasing. So, if I find a turn of phrase or wording that I find really –

Maria Popova: Oh, I do that, too.

Tim Ferriss: Really.

Maria Popova: But I [inaudible] with BL for beautiful language.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, that's so cool. Okay, so there's that. Then, I have a Q if they're quotes. So, for instance, many books will have quotes attributed to other people or just header quotes, in some cases. So, I'll have quotes. I'll just write that out, and then colon. I'll list all the page numbers for that particular category that I'm collecting, in the case of quotes.

So, when you're gathering, as you mention, acronyms and shorthand, so besides beautiful language, what are some of the other acronyms that you use?

Maria Popova: Oh, they wouldn't make sense. They're just very private. It's like too long to get into what they stand for; basically, my own system.

Tim Ferriss: Is there one other example? If you can just indulge me.

Maria Popova: One, I guess, that is not so much about the contents of that passage as about its purpose is LJ which is – I have a little sort of labor of love side project called Literary Jukebox, right.

Tim Ferriss: Sure, I've seen it. It's awesome.

Maria Popova: Thank you, but yes, so I do these pairings of passages with literature with thematically matched song. Sometimes, as I'm reading a book, I would come across a passage that I think would be great for that and, maybe, a song comes to mind, and so I would put LJ next to it.

But I wanna go back to what you said about the external quotes, I guess, after quoting another work. I think those are actually really important and that goes back to your question about how I find what to read. I mark those types of things. For the annotations that are specific to that particular book, all of my sticky tab notes are on the side of the pages. But when there's an external quote, something referencing another work, I put a tab at the very top with the letter which stands for find if I am not familiar with the work or just no letter if I just want to apply the quote to something else that I know of.

I think that's actually very important because the phenomenon itself – not my annotations of it – because literature is really – and I say this all the time – it is the original internet. So, all of those reference and citations, and allusions even, they're essentially hyperlinks that that author placed to another work. That way, if you follow those, you go to this magnificent radical where you start out with something that you're already enjoying and liking, but follow these tangential references to other works that, perhaps, you would not have come across directly.

In a way, it's a way to push one's self out of the filter bubble in a very incremental way. I've often found amazing older books that were five or six hyperlink references removed from something I was reading which led me to something else, which led me to something else, which led me to this great other thing. So, I think that's a beautiful practice.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, the serendipity of it is so beautiful when it works out. I'll give a confession. This is really embarrassing, but since no one is listening. I came across Seneca – so, Seneca, the younger who's had probably more impact on my life than any other writer – originally because I was bruising a number of anthologies on minimalism and simplicity.

Seneca kept on popping up. Quote, Seneca. Quote, Seneca. And because it was always one word like Madonna or – and this is really gonna be really embarrassing – or like Sitting Bull. I

assumed that Seneca was a Native American elder of some type for probably a good –

Maria Popova: That's so lovely, actually.

Tim Ferriss: I assumed he was a Native American elder for probably a good year or two before I realized he was a Roman. I was like, man, you got to do your homework, pal. Got to dig in. And then, at that point, is when I really jumped off the cliff into a lot of his writings which I still, to this day, revisit on an almost month to month –

Maria Popova: I just revisited his, *On the Shortness of Life*.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, so good. So good.

Maria Popova: Which is perhaps the best manifesto and I had hate this modern word, sort of buzz word, but I use it intentionally. So, the best manifesto for our current struggle with the very notion of productivity versus presence. How much are we really mistaking the doing for the being? And it's amazing that somebody wrote this millennia ago, before there was internet, before there was the things we call distractions today, and yet, he writes about the exact same things just in a different form, yeah.

Tim Ferriss: The exact same things. If I'm trying to use Seneca as a gateway drug into philosophy, I won't use the P word, first of all, with most people because I think it calls to mind for a lot of people the haughty pompous college student in *Goodwill Hunting*, in the bar scene. He was like reciting Shakespeare without giving any type of –

Maria Popova: See, I completely disagree.

Tim Ferriss: No, no –

Maria Popova: I agree with the notion that those are its connotation today, and people have a resistance, but I think that's all the more reason to use it heavily, and to use it intelligently, and to reclaim it, and to get people to understand that philosophy – whatever form it takes – is the only way to figure out how to live.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, yeah.

Maria Popova: Everything else that we take away from anything, is a set of philosophy, essentially.

Tim Ferriss: I agree. No, I totally agree. But usually, if I'm gonna lead people there, I try to –

Maria Popova: Lure them?

Tim Ferriss: Lure them in with Seneca because I think he's very easy to read compared to a lot of, say, at least the Stoics – or that's not even fair; compared to a lot of philosophers who have been translated from Greek. Most of his writing, I believe, is translated from Latin which tends to be just an easier jump from English. So, it's very easy to read.

What I tell people is, start off with some of his letters and you'll find that you could just as easily replace these Roman names like Lucilius and so on with like Bob and Jane, or pick your contemporary name of choice and they're all as relevant know as they were then.

So, I'm gonna come back to the performance versus presence which I think of, oftentimes, as the achievement versus appreciation split or balance – or maybe, neither. Before we get there, I want to put a bow on the note-taking – with your electronic note-taking.

So, you're using the Kindle app. You're taking highlights. Where do you go from there? What is the workflow look like from there? And are there any particular types of software or apps, or anything like that, that you use often?

Maria Popova: Honestly, I feel that problem has not been solved at all in any kind of practical way. So, the way that I do it is basically a bunch of hacks using existing technologies. Perhaps, I'm just unaware, but I don't think there's anybody designing tools today for people who do serious heavy reading. There just isn't anything that I know.

So, what I do is I highlight in the Kindle app in the iPad, and then Amazon has this function that you can, basically, see your Kindle notes and highlights on the desktop or on your computer. I go to those. I copy them from that page, and I paste them into an Evernote file to have all of my notes in a specific book in one place.

Sometimes, I would also take a screen grab of a specific iPad Kindle page with my highlighted passage, and then email that screen grab into my Evernote email because Evernote has, as you know, optical character recognition. So, when I search within it,

it's also gonna search the text in that image. I don't have to wait until I finish the book and explore all my notes.

Also, the formatting is kind of shitty on the Kindle notes on the desktop where you can see all your notes. So, if you copy them, they paste them to Evernote with this really weird formatting. So, it tabulates each next notes indented to the right. So, it's cascading, the long cascading thing that shifts more and more to the right of the page and move down.

Tim Ferriss: It's horrible. It's like an email thread.

Maria Popova: It's awful. It's like an email thread except there's no actual hierarchy. So, when I go fix it, you have to do it manually within Evernote. On the Werner Herzog book, for example, which is 600 pages, I have 1000s of notes. So, imagine 1000s of tabulations until the last one is narrow and long. It's just unreadable. So, hence, my point about there is no viable solutions that I know.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. This may or may not help. For me, it was a huge shift in how I manage Evernote. I'm looking at these list of questions and I'm not reading entirely on script, but I have a collection of questions in Evernote right now. And one of the things I realized about formatting and transposing things from, say, the My Kindle Page – if you log in to your Amazon account through kindle.amazon.com or copying/pasting from many different places is going to – I don't know if you've tried this, but edit and either paste and match style or paste as plain text, and it tends to remove all of that headache, let's say, 9 times out of 10.

Maria Popova: Yeah, the problem with that – I did try that once, but when you remove the style, it makes all the metadata look the same as the text. So, on every highlighted passage, I also have my own notes.

Tim Ferriss: I see, got it.

Maria Popova: Plus, Amazon Zone thing that says, add note. Read. Read at this location. Delete note. And so it all merges. It becomes just hideous.

Tim Ferriss: Interesting.

Maria Popova: They're just impossible to read.

Tim Ferriss: God, I wonder what to do there. Yeah, I use to take notes and drop them into TextWrangler which is used for coding a lot just to remove the formatting, and then put it into Evernote.

Maria Popova: Yeah, I do that with code, though.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, it's true, though.

Maria Popova: But there's got to be a solution. The thing is, Evernote, I love Evernote. I've been using it for many years, and I could, probably, not get through my day without it. But it has an API which means, somebody can build this.

Tim Ferriss: That's true.

Maria Popova: You got to wait until like – I was, at one point, so desperate and so frustrated which I think is the duo that causes all innovation – desperation and frustration – I thought, maybe, I should just save up some money and offer like a scholar or like a grand for a hackathon for somebody to solve this for me.

Tim Ferriss: That's a great idea.

Maria Popova: I mean, I'm still contemplating that.

Tim Ferriss: Okay, we'll talk about that separately. I think that's something that we could absolutely explore. And for all of you, programmers/coders, out there, please take a look. This is actually not as rare an issue as you might expect.

One question for you on the Kindle highlights because I've run into this. You mentioned the Werner Herzog book and having 1000s of highlights. Have you run into instances where you're reading an entire book? You're super impressed or not, but regardless, you have 100s of highlights. You go to look at those highlights and you're restricted to only seeing the first –

Maria Popova: Oh, yeah. It said, like 200 highlight, 81 available or something like that.

Tim Ferriss: Right. So, how often does that happen to you? Because that's happened to me where I've taken so much time to meticulously highlight stuff, and then I'm only able to see 25 percent, and it's so infuriating. I think it's a limitation that is determined by the publisher.

Maria Popova: Yes, it is. So, I'll tell you why it hasn't happened to me much. It happens to me occasionally, but that's a DRM thing, – for your listeners who don't like acronyms – digital rights management thing that is fairly new. So, that is the case with more recently published books. If you read the digitized version of, say, Alan Watts that was published originally 40 years ago, there's no such problem unless the publisher now is reclaiming rights and doing a whole new thing.

Because I read so much less out of newly published material, I don't run into it often. There is a way to very laboriously deal with it which is you can still open that passage in your Kindle app on desktop – so Kindle for Mac, for me – and it will let you highlight and copy those passages, paste them into your Evernote in between the missing parts, but it's obviously completely not conducive.

Tim Ferriss: I have done that and it's so horrible.

Maria Popova: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Because you also get the excerpted from da, duh, duh, like three lines for everyone. So, just publishers, if you're listening to this, you are making it harder for people like Maria who have 7 million units per month to share your stuff. So, please, up your threshold.

Do you have anybody helping you with Brain Pickings? Or is it just you?

Maria Popova: The actual reading and writing, obviously, it's just me, but as of about 10 months ago, I have an assistant, Lisa, who's actually wonderful and she just helps me with admin stuff that has to do with my travel, or email, or scheduling things that I feel is weighing me down so much.

I operate so much out of a sense of guilt for letting people down, and as you know, I'm sure, when you get to a point where the demand are just incomparable with what you can even look at, then you need to have help in order not to either go insane or live with a constant guilt over not addressing things.

Tim Ferriss: And was there a particular –

Maria Popova: Oh, and I also have a copy editor. This wonderful older lady I hired to do my proofreading, she's great. That's all I can say. I think proofreading is really, really important. And I'm constantly embarrassed if I have a typo which as you know as a writer, you

cannot proof your own work. Your brain just does not see the errors that we made in the first place – or the majority of them.

And people are merciless. They think somehow that a typo makes you lazy or I don't even know. There's no compassion for the humanity that produces something as human as a typo, right? Despite how mechanical the term itself seem which is ironic. But in any case, so yes, I have my assistant for admin and my copy editor for just proofing.

Tim Ferriss: And what platform is Brain Pickings on at the moment? What's the technology? I've heard you mention WordPress before. Is it still on WordPress?

Maria Popova: It is on WordPress. So, I was gonna make a joke about how the technology is called corpus callosum, but the actual technology is – yeah.

Tim Ferriss: That was a very Sam Harris friendly joke. So, when you're working with, say, your copy editor, do you give your copy editor admin access to WordPress? And she'll go in, proofread it, and then schedule or publish? What's the process?

Maria Popova: No, again, it's sort of hacked together process which is every night, I email her the articles from the preview page on WordPress. So, I just copy that and paste it into a body email, and I sent it to her, and then she sends me the corrections via email.

Tim Ferriss: Got it.

Maria Popova: I mean, like I said, she's not very – I would say – tech-savvy. I mean, I'm sure she's a wonderful learner. So, I'm sure she would totally learn how to do it if I gave her admin access, but between that and the fact that I write in HTML, so I really don't like the WYSIWYG. I hate it, actually. I think it's just easier to do it via email because, then, she can like highlight the word.

Sometimes, she would make suggestions that are more stylistic, and I would like to have the final say in those because, very often, I wanna keep it the way that I have it because that's my voice. So, I find email works just fine.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. Okay, no, I'm always fascinated. Well, when I was hosting WordPress elsewhere – I'm also on WordPress – I would use the share a draft plugin to share drafts with people. I'm now on WordPress VIP, it has a sharing function where people can leave

feedback in a sidebar that runs alongside the article itself which is pretty cool.

Maria Popova: Oh, that's cool. I should look into that. I think that's what I have, too, the WordPress VIP, the WordPress [inaudible].

Tim Ferriss: Yeah.

Maria Popova: I don't even know what that function is. For somebody who writes on the web, I sometimes only learn about things through friends.

Tim Ferriss: I think, yeah, that's how I learned about a lot of this stuff. The other option that I've used quite a lot is – as much as I hate Word and I really do – I love the track changes feature, and I just find it more user-friendly for a lot of folks than having them use something that's cloud-based like Google Docs, just because I operate so much offline to try to get anything done.

Maria Popova: Yeah, that's what a lot of people suggest and what, Cai, my proofreader actually asked originally, but I do not own Microsoft products on principle. I'm just not gonna [inaudible] with it.

Tim Ferriss: Okay, no, that makes sense. And your assistant, what was the defining moment, the straw that broke the camel's back when you were like, you know what? What was the day where you were just like, fucking enough of this? Like I need to get somebody stat. When did you actually make the decision?

Maria Popova: It wasn't so much that I made the decision as the decision was very strongly – lovingly, but strongly pushed on me by my partner who, one day, said, you are using so much time on things that are just so menial and you should not because I was really stressing to a point of just driving myself crazy.

I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that I've always been very independent. I moved away from my parent's house when I was 18, paid my way through school. Lived always by myself, and I just have this Emerson-like sense of self-sufficiency and self-reliance to a point of pathology where it was to my own detriment. The notion about sourcing felt to me, on some level, almost like an admission of weakness.

Tim Ferriss: Sure, yeah.

Maria Popova: It's ridiculous to feel that. [Inaudible] –

Tim Ferriss: I think that's true for a lot of people, yeah.

Maria Popova: I know. The strange thing, the disorienting thing is, I think, we intellectually know that's not the case. That it's actually a lot of strength to be able to delegate and to diddly-up control according to a hierarchy of priorities. On some psycho-emotional level, it is just death to consider that you cannot do something on your own anymore.

It's interesting, in terms of how Brain Pickings evolved which has always been very organic. So, the eight-year thing that has happened; it went from being a little newsletter that contained five links, no text; like five links to five things that I found very interesting. And then, it went to five links with little paragraphs about why this thing is interesting and important. And then, it was not a little paragraph, but a little one-page piece. And then, it became not five things every Friday, but three things every day of the week, pretty long form, in the 1000s of words.

I foolishly and naively thought that I could just have the same operational framework despite the enormous swelling of just the volume of the writing, and that's unreasonable. It's completely unreasonable. So, at one point, last fall, as the 7th birthday of Brain Pickings was approaching, my partner was just like, please, consider. Yeah, I –

Tim Ferriss: Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off. I'm always curious to ask, how did you find the assistant that you ended up with?

Maria Popova: Well, she's wonderful. She's a professional personal assistant that's had this type of job for about 20 years. She just a wonderfully warm and just generous person, but also has such doggedness about things. And just work ethics, it's unbelievable. You always have the sense that she's looking out for your best interest in the most magnanimous kind of way towards you, but also the most warmly no bullshit way outwardly towards the world demanding things from you. Having this buffer, it's really great, yeah.

Tim Ferriss: How did you track her down? How did the two of you get connected?

Maria Popova: Just through a recommendation. She's been working for somebody who's a very trusted dear person for a long time. So, now, she works with both of us.

Tim Ferriss: And did that person reach out to you? Did you reach out to her? I'm always curious about the specifics because the way that I found one of my first assistants – and we worked together for many years – was anytime I had a really fantastic interaction with someone's assistant, I would say, hey, I know this is off-topic, but you've been awesome to deal with. Do you have a twin brother/twin sister, somebody who does what you do as well as you do it that you could recommend because I need some help?

And I just did that over and over again, and eventually, one of them said, well, actually I work for multiple clients. So, we could talk about it. And that's how we ended up working together. But what was the –

Maria Popova: Oh, the introduction was made by the person. So, I had met her. Lisa, my assistant, I had met her just socially many times before. So, eventually, when the time came for me to consider, we set up a meeting. We talked and she was really into it. She had been reading Brain Pickings. I asked to make sure it wouldn't be too much on her plate.

I mean, she's a superwoman. Lisa is superwoman. She is the mother of two kids. One of whom is, now, in her first year high school and the other one, his first year in college. So, she has that on her plate, too, but she's very – like I said – very dogged, very dedicated, and she was like, I can do it and I'd like to do it. I was like, great, let's roll.

Tim Ferriss: Onwards. So, with your assistant, if you were to do an 80/20 analysis, the 20 percent of tasks that take up 80 percent of her time, what would those look like? What is the vast majority of her time spent on?

Maria Popova: So, a lot of it is coordinating travel and things. I have this new-ish commitment to really not do any speaking at commercial conference anymore, but just speak to students because I think it's important. What it takes out of me – which is a lot – speaking takes out a lot of me because I'm a writer. I also don't really recycle talks. I like to write something original.

When it's a commercial conference, it just doesn't add up for me what I get out of it because I usually donate my commissions to the local public or whatnot. With students, it is worth my time. If I dissuade even one journalism student from going into buzz-worthy land after graduation, that's worth it to me.

So, even though I've scaled back on the speaking, speaking. I'm now getting all these college requests. So, that takes so much time, especially coordinating because a lot of them are organized by students volunteers, and they're still learning what it means to schedule, and deadlines, and advance notice. So, Lisa is rambling that.

I should also mention that the evolution of what I've been able to delegate has organically happened. Originally, I just really didn't know what to give her. I felt like I had to do all of it because I didn't know how to explain it to her to do. She's a great learner and I'm learning to delegate more.

Another thing, because my site runs on donations, I should make an effort to send handwritten thank you cards to just, at this point, randomly picked donors every month. So, I have her export those names and emails for me, and just give me prepared envelopes and all those types of things that I could not spend too much time on the actual admin of the mailing.

Tim Ferriss: Do you communicate exclusively via email? Or do you use other types of software?

Maria Popova: Oh, email. Email and text.

Tim Ferriss: Email and text. So, no project management software at this point? No Basecamp or Asana, or anything like that? Which is fine.

Maria Popova: No, that would make me feel like I have some sort of commercial organization. I still have so much resistance to the fact that I even have to deal with these things. Back to the Oscar Wilde hypocrisy about audience. So, there's some [inaudible] I guess, the pretention.

Tim Ferriss: A couple of quick ones. So, the first is when you lift, do you tend to have the same workout? Or what does your weightlifting look like?

Maria Popova: It's changed a lot. In the last year and half, I've prioritize bodyweights stuff heavily. No pun intended. That was actually total inadvertent. That's how we think in language. That's so funny. But have bodyweight stuff, and so I do pull-ups, push-ups, and that sort of things.

It also depend on where I do my workout. My building has a sort of gym, like one of those residential gyms. I also have a

membership at a larger, probably, I think, the best gym in New York. I love it, but I'm only there a few days a week. So, it just depends on where I do it and what I do.

Tim Ferriss: Besides the elliptical, if you were to pick one bodyweight exercise to hold you over – let's say you're travelling for a few months. You can only pick one bodyweight exercise, what would it be?

Maria Popova: Well, it would be pull-up, but you can't always find a place to do it. So, I just do, usually, elevated push-ups. So, my feet on a bench or bed, or like a step or something and just push up.

Tim Ferriss: Cool, a great little hack for pulling motions while traveling is putting your feet on a chair and going underneath the table to do, basically, inverted bent rolls with that. You know what's actually very helpful for traveling? Is –

Maria Popova: Plyometrics?

Tim Ferriss: Plyometrics and TRX is actually quite handy. There's a system –

Maria Popova: For some reason, it's just not my thing.

Tim Ferriss: Can't get into it? Yeah, I –

Maria Popova: Yeah, here's the thing. So, if I am forced by circumstances to do a workout that is not my preference, I very much like to be able to do something else while doing it such as listening to podcasts which is what I do while I do weights in the gym anyway. There's certain types of movements that it's just a hassle to have the headphones. It's not great.

Tim Ferriss: That's true.

Maria Popova: So, I actually carry a weighted jump rope with me when I travel in case there's nowhere to do sprints which is my Plan B for cardio, and then Plan C is just jumping, skipping rope, yeah.

Tim Ferriss: You're intense. I love it. This is so silly, but I was so obsessed with Bulgarian Olympic weightlifters for a very long that whenever I meet Bulgarians or people who, at any point, have lived in Bulgaria, I wanna talk about weightlifting, but it's not [inaudible] –

Maria Popova: I know nothing about them.

Tim Ferriss: Exactly.

Maria Popova: I don't even do the weight stuff when I was living in Bulgaria.

Tim Ferriss: No, exactly, it's like, oh, you're from Switzerland. Let me talk to you about the guys in the Ricola commercial. They're like, no, we don't talk about that stuff.

Maria Popova: [Inaudible] is that guy your cousin?

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, right. Right, you must know. Like, no, I actually don't. I know I went to X, Y, and Z College, but there are 5,000 people per year. It doesn't always work out.

You mentioned the donations. I wanna talk about the site. So, I dug around a bit, but it appears that you have no comments or dates on your posts. Is that accurate?

Maria Popova: I don't have comments. I do have dates. They're in the URL. So, the date stamp –

Tim Ferriss: Oh, they're in the URL, but they're not in the posts. They're in the URL structure, but they're not in the displayed posts itself.

Maria Popova: Yes. So, the reason for that is because I do think we live in an enormously news fetishistic culture. The reason I do what I do is precisely to decondition that because we think that if something is not news and it's not at the top of the search results or the top of the feed – because all feeds are reversed chronology. There's an implicit hierarchy of importance to that. We think if it's not at the top, it's not important.

And you would understand. Writing about Seneca, it really doesn't matter what the date stamp on it is.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely.

Maria Popova: But I think this culture conditions us so much, people, when they see a date stamp, they think, oh, this was like two years old. It's really 2,000 years old. Because a lot of academics actually use Brain Pickings to reference, so I constantly get things – this is another thing that Lisa deals with – like request from textbooks or citations, or whatnot. And those people actually need the dates. So, I've made it so that if you actually look, it's easy to see or I can just tell them when they write and ask me what the date is, look in

the URL, but it's not just one of those immediate things that slaps you over the head like newspaper front page.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely, I actually have done the same thing for quite a few years. If you go to any permalinks, if you get linked to any of my posts directly on the blog, the date is there in the URL, but also at the very bottom of the post, after the related links, for the same reason. Because there's so much bias against older materials. I think some of my older stuff – I mean, it depends on the person, obviously, in the context, but it's an easy way to have a high abandonment rate is to timestamp.

The comments, did you ever have comments? Or have you never had comments?

Maria Popova: I did, originally. And then, I was, you know what? I feel like Herzog does. I don't really care to hear. I do write for me. I'm very gladdened by people who are, in any way, moved or touched. I've been fortunate enough not to really get trolling or anything like that, but they were kind of vacant or people trying to plug their own thing, or spam. It was taking more of my time that was worth.

So, instead, I've made my contact information very easily accessible. So, if someone has something of substance and urgency to say – which is, I think, the two things that compel people to reach out – they'll do it via email, behind their own name and not anonymously. I do get a lot, a lot of emails from readers, and those are valuable, but I don't really care for comments.

Now the flipside of that is that, now that I have the Facebook page – something mysterious happened with Brain Pickings Facebook page last fall. It just started growing so fast. I've no idea why.

Tim Ferriss: I was gonna ask you about that because if you look at, say, that your Twitter follower growth versus your Facebook growth, the Facebook just kind of took off –

Maria Popova: Yeah, it was in about October of last year, and it went from 250,000 to, now, I think – I don't know –

Tim Ferriss: 2 point something million.

Maria Popova: Close to 3, maybe. So, more than tenfold in less than a year. I've no idea why. I've done nothing differently. I don't really enjoy Facebook. I do it reluctantly because I get a lot of emails from readers elsewhere in the world who actually use Facebook as their

primary thing, and there are such sweet notes. People who just are stimulated and inspired, in moved in a way that, perhaps, they wouldn't be if they hadn't read that piece about some random thing that I read and wrote about. I think it would be selfish of me to just disable Facebook because I hate it.

The point of it is that you can't – you have comments on there. Lisa, my assistant, actually, that's something I delegated her a few months ago just to completely deal with them. I can't deal with them. And not for any other reason that I have complete allergy to people pronouncing their so-called opinions about having actually digested or even engaged with the thing.

So, people would comment on the basis of a thumbnail image or the title; make really outrageously inaccurate comments, clearly not having read the piece. This kind of snap reaction thing that I think social media, to a large extent, perpetuate, I can't deal with it. It's like psyche drain. I can't even explain. I can't. So, anyway.

Tim Ferriss: So, that would explain, that would answer one of my questions which is, in your header picture on Facebook, you have, this should be a cardinal rule of the internet and of being human. If you don't have the patience to read something, don't have the hubris to comment on it.

Maria Popova: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: I was gonna –

Maria Popova: I don't care if it sounds like bitchy or anything. It's interesting. I think a lot about criticism and the notion of criticism, and why it's so hard for anybody. I don't think that people have a hard time with criticism because another person disagrees with or dislikes what they're saying. They really have a hard time when they feel misunderstood. Like the other person does not understand who they are or what they stand for in the world.

You actually touch on this in your conversation with Sam Harris where you say that his ideas are not as controversial as people think when they don't actually understand what they are.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Maria Popova: The main source of anguish is not being seen for who you are, not being understood. This reactive culture where people comment without taking the care to understand what you're expressing, who

you are, and what you stand for, it is so toxic. It is so toxic to readers, to writers, to us as a culture. I just don't know how to get around it other than just having instructed Lisa to be just merciless about banning people and deleting comments that are just not – there's no humanity. There's no patience. There's no thinking in them.

Anybody who writes online, I think, feel similarly that this is my home, and if –

Tim Ferriss: Definitely.

Maria Popova: People come and be idiots in it, then they're not welcome there.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, no, I actually use the exact same analogy, especially all my blogs. I view the comments as my living room. If you come into my house for the first time and get raging drunk, and put your feet up my table with your shoes on, you're not gonna be invited back. You're gone.

Is your assistant's job, as it relates to Facebook, then, primarily, culling the herd and just removing the idiots? Or what are other instructions, if any? Are there things that she passes to you? Are there things that she responds to?

Maria Popova: No. I don't really care what people say. Again, to the point, that if people have something of substance and urgency, they will reach out, and I'm, then, very happy to hear from actual humans and engage in a human dialogue which I do. I really care about the comments on Facebook. I just don't want them depressing me when I go on the page because I've put my own thing down there.

Tim Ferriss: Sure.

Maria Popova: Lisa doesn't put the actual postings. I also don't want them creating a culture that is antithetical to the very reason why I do what I do which is a faith in the human spirit. That's where I come from. I am a cautious one sometimes, but an optimist about the so-called human condition. Anybody who craps on that without having even given a chance to the thoughts that speak to those ideals – which is what my articles are a record of – then, I will want them gone.

So, her instructions are just ban people who are offensive to others in a vicious way as opposed to just having rational discourse of disagreements. Ban people who are ignorant, and have not read

the thing, and have some very scandalous or – not even scandalous.

Tim Ferriss: Sensationalist.

Maria Popova: Contrarians, sensationalist take on it, clearly not understanding the nuance. I mean, the culture of [inaudible] is, I'd say, often, a culture without nuance. Yeah, so that's basically it.

Tim Ferriss: Got it.

Maria Popova: Help me stay sane when I look at them. That's her task. Just not make me lose my mind over just exasperation on people, losing patience.

Tim Ferriss: No, and I really respect that because another reason that I read Brain Pickings as opposed to other sites and I feel comfortable going there is that I feel it is a stronghold of positivity and optimism in a lot of respects. So, kudos.

Maria Popova: Thank you.

Tim Ferriss: The email – actually, before we get to email. I've read that you schedule your Twitter and Facebook which would make sense because you're prolific. If that's still the case, what do you use to schedule that social media?

Maria Popova: I use Buffer for Twitter and I use just my hands for Facebook. Again, this goes back to the same inner struggle of, I do want to be reading and writing for myself. So, why do I have the compulsion to put so much of it out there? And I self-flagellate over that because, on some level, it does seem like a form of hypocrisy, but then, I do think about the people that email me from India, and Pakistan, and South Africa, and Korea, and wherever that actually that's how they connect.

I think, if I'm putting in the amount of time that I do into what I do – even if I do it for myself – I might as well just harness that time anyway if it benefits somebody else's journey. So, I do it because of that, mostly.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely, and I think that – while it's fine to write for yourself – if you keep the value of what you write to yourself when it could benefit a lot of other people, then I think that's actually – it could be viewed as a selfish act, right?

Maria Popova: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Particularly, when you're curating in the way that you do and you're saving people 1000s of hours of searching by distilling a lot of these concepts.

Maria Popova: Well, I would argue that the benefit, the value is not even – I mean, what I do is the antithesis of search. It's a discovery of things that, ideally, one would not have come across within the usual parameters of one's filter bubble, right? So, sort of, a lot of that I hear from.

For example, to use the Seneca example. Actually, just this week, I heard from this guy who was an IT person, trained as a physicist, ended up doing IT, and said, the Seneca, *On The Shortness of Life* piece really put everything in perspective. I've never really read philosophy, never been interested in it, never looked for it, but it just cut in the middle of what I'm struggling with in my own life. It gives you pause to hear that from people.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. Agreed. On email, if you go to your contact page, you recommend emailcharter.org. I'm very curious to hear if people actually follow the email charter. In terms of the email that you receive, do people actually pay attention to that and follow the rules?

Maria Popova: Yeah, yeah, they do and I'm so grateful. The majority of them do. Some people who reach out with the intention of self-promoting there's usually, laziness to people who self-promote for the sake thereof. So, they don't. They don't usually follow. But people who actually care to have a conversation and to engage are very courteous and very mindful of what I've asked – except for publicists who are never.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, right. I supposed if their flying on autopilot and just blasting out a template, Dear Blogger.

Maria Popova: Oh, yeah, I love it, the Dear Blogger, yeah. What I get very often which I think is actually hilarious, people who don't even bother to read the name of the site. So, they address me, Dear Brian. [Inaudible].

The pinnacle of this was when, last year, at one point, I opened my physical mailbox in my building, my home, and I found this bundle from the USPS with an elastic band around it of mail for somebody named Brian Pickens who lives in Long Beach, Pa. or

used to, I guess. And somehow that stuff got forwarded to me because, I guess, the guy either moved and the USPS like, somehow, looked things up. I don't even know.

It was such a mystery and metaphor for what I deal with online. I was like, oh, USPS [inaudible], how can you ask a publicist not to?

Tim Ferriss: So, I used to have a company ages ago called Brain Quicken. I got a telemarketing call one evening, I remember. This guy goes, hi, sorry, if I'm interrupting. Is this Brian? And I go, excuse me? And he goes Brian? Brian Chicken? And I'm like, I'm Brian Chicken.

Maria Popova: Brian Chicken?

Tim Ferriss: I was like, no, and take me off your list. Goodbye.

Oh, God. On the email and pitching side of things – or just on the pitching side of things, how on earth do you deal with – not just the cold inquiries – but how do you deal with writer-friends or acquaintances who are writers that you don't want to be rude to who want you to read their books? How do you politely decline that stuff?

And maybe, you don't get a lot of it. I get a ton of it. The fact of the matter is, like not everyone is able to put the time or effort into writing a good book. So, inevitably, if I get 10 books from decent or good friends, some of them are gonna be terrible. I don't have the time, necessarily, or the inclination to read them all. How do you deal with that type of situation?

Maria Popova: Well, I guess, you deal, first and foremost, by controlling not the outcome, but the cause which is your circle of friends and acquaintances. I'm very selective about the people I surround myself with, and I'm – I'd like to think – friendly to pretty much everybody that I meet, but my circle of actual friends is really close and really tight, and people who are just, when the sky crumbles, they're gonna be there. And we're there for each other.

So, with that in mind, I think, there is a certain boundary they have to put up beforehand to, I guess, manage social expectations, in a way. For those people, my friend friends, in large part, I should mention that the majority of my close friends including my partner, too, are people that I have met just through what I do. So, there's already the self-selection of sensibility and ideals.

I think, we become a centripetal force. We're the kinds of people we wanna be and surround ourselves with those types of people. William Gibson has a wonderful word for it. He calls it, personal micro-culture. And even when you said early on, the kinship of spirit, I think that's so important.

So, which is the long way to say that when and if those inner circle people put a book out, it's a guarantee that I will like it because of who they are. And so, then, I'm more than happy to support it. The book that we started with, *The Scratch and Sniff Guide to Wine*, Wendy, the illustrator, is precisely that type of person; somebody who I met through what each of us does, and she's, now, one of my closest human beings.

So, of course, I'm gonna support her work, but not because I'm being nepotistic about it, but because that's the pre-requirement that I am moved by her work, and respect it, and love it. And that's how we became friends.

Outside of that inner circle, I think acquaintances know that there's no such expectation. When I do get such requests, it's a matter of, well, did the person do their homework in knowing what I actually think and write about? Because very often – I'm sure you that, too. You get pitched things that are just so outside of what you do. In which case, I don't feel compelled to respond. Because if they didn't put in the time to understand what I'm interested in, why should I put the time to explain to them this is not a fit.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, that's a great way to put it. I need to embrace that more. I think that's an area where I carry a lot of guilt.

Maria Popova: Guilt, yeah. Guilt, it's interesting because guilt is the flipside of prestige and their both horrible reasons to do things. So, often, we would agree as humans, not just you and me, just anybody would agree to do things because they sound prestigious in some way and equally avoid things because of the guilt thing – or do things because of the guilt thing.

The whole Buddhist thing about avoidance and a virgin, and making decisions based out of either fear which is what guilt is, the fear of disappointing somebody, and then feeling disappointed in yourself; or out of grasping for approval or a claim which is what doing things for prestige is. I think either of those are really bad reasons to do things and yet they motivate us a lot or at least they sort of lurk in the back of the mind constantly. It is a real practice to try and decondition that.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. No, I like what you said about why put in the effort to explain why it's not a fit if they haven't done the homework to determine if it is a fit. I think that's a great way to put it.

I know we don't have too much time left, so hopefully some time, some day, we can do a follow up Part 2. I think that would be a blast.

Maria Popova: [Inaudible].

Tim Ferriss: I'll bring some Malbec if you actually wanna take wine. So, yeah, I can introduce you to it firsthand. The donations, I'm very fascinated by the ad-free donation approach. Just to keep it simple, if you had to choose, say, 20 percent of the options you're currently offering, which would you choose and why? In other words, you have people who –

Maria Popova: What do you mean by the options?

Tim Ferriss: No, no. So, I'll explain – or two or three. So, people can make one-time offer. They can make a one-time, single contribution. Let me simplify that question. Or they can become a member and donate 7, 3, 10, or \$25 a month.

What I'm trying to ask without being improper or making you feel uncomfortable is, what is working best? When you're asking people for donations, assuming that it's working, if someone were to offer one or two options instead of four options per month, or the single contribution versus the membership, or the membership versus the single contribution; what would your advice be to people?

Maria Popova: Well, I will preface this with a caveat that I use PayPal for donations. I can't, for the life of me, figure out how to actually look at the data and get any sort of real reason. All of it is so antiquated; their export tool and such. I'm not that interested. I would [inaudible] days into it looking into it. So, I can tell you my intuitive interpretation of it?

Tim Ferriss: Sure, great.

Maria Popova: By the way, the only reason these options are as they are – it's also the reason why I don't have an ad-supported site which is, I just ask myself, what would I like to read as a reader? Well, I like an ad-free site. And how would I like to support that? We'll I'd like

to have a few options. I don't wanna be confined to something. So, I just pulled it out of a hat, basically, with these peers. And I've just left them on since I've put them on. They seem to work, whatever.

Originally, my sense was that the one-time donations accounted for much more, but I'd never actually analyzed it. I see the alerts that come from PayPal, and sometimes, people would send really large one-time donations. Like things that are totally humbling and enormously generous. I think you kind of weigh them somehow as more than the cumulative sum of the smaller donations.

So, I thought, the one-timers were much more. I'm pretty sure that must have been the case early on, but – and I've had the recurring ones. I've had the one-time donations for as long as I can remember. As long as I, basically, needed to start making money for the site because, by the way, running the site cost me several times my rent. All the cost associated with it, it's like crazy.

So, at one point, I got to a point where I had to make money. I said, I don't wanna do ads. I don't believe in that. I'll have just donations and I didn't think of recurring ones, at the time. That was years ago. Then, my friend, Max Linsky who runs longform.org, we were having tea and he said, well, why didn't you like push the recurring ones more because it's working really great for us.

At that point, I had the option, but it was buried somewhere in my donation about page or something. And so, I'm like, okay. So, I put it in the sidebar. That was, I wanna say, maybe, 2011. It started occurring slowly.

So, this past year, when I did my taxes, I very reluctantly went to deal with all the PayPal tools to get the data out, basically. I actually had Lisa pull the Excels and whatnot. And then I did the tally to see, and to my surprise, the recurring ones which were very small individual amounts actually were 2 to 1 ratio to the one-time donations.

Tim Ferriss: Wow.

Maria Popova: And I don't know at what point it tipped over, but I think because of the scale, and just how many people have these tiny, tiny donations that they contributed every month. I mean, that's such an active commitment and it's so generous that they add up. My guess is that, as time goes on – because the recurring ones have

only been available for the last two and a half to three years, whatever – they would become, by far, the larger financial support compared to the single ones.

Tim Ferriss: Sure. No, that made sense. Of course, this is hypothetical, if you had to choose two of the amounts to leave in the drop down – so, you've \$7 a month, \$3, \$10, 25 – if you had to choose two of those to leave up, which would you choose?

Maria Popova: Oh, I have no idea. Probably, just the mathematical logical choice the two middle. What's it? The 3 and 10.

Tim Ferriss: Okay, cool. No, just very curious about this kind of thing. I think you've approached the blog in a very authentic way with the content. I can't emphasize strongly enough what you just said which is, you've based what you do on what you would like or dislike as a reader. In the case of text, it doesn't have to be super complicated. It doesn't have to be doing tons of analytics for months before you make a decision. Just ask yourself, would this annoy the shit out of me? If so, don't do it. Would I love this? If so, try it out.

Maria Popova: Every decision, too, has been that way. And actually, in the last couple of years, I've been getting really annoyed – I mean, Brain Pickings is a pretty sort of low-fi site. As you can see, it's just very simple, basic. But I've been getting annoyed that it doesn't load very well on my iPhone when I wanna look at something or pull something up to reference – or iPad.

My friend, Cog Belski who runs [inaudible], he's a great guy and he's been a very generous donor, just supporting. One time, he pulls me aside. That was, I think, in February or March. He's like, you know how much I love Brain Pickings, but like the site sucks. Like he didn't say it in that way, but he was super sweet about it.

He offered to connect me with this guy that he knew that I could hire to do responsive design. And I always have this resistance to making these technological improvement because, then, I feel like, I don't wanna be a media company. Like I don't wanna be a BuzzFeed, but at the end of the day, I, as a reader, and as an engager with that experience was being annoyed by it myself. So, now, I'm in the middle of releasing like a simple responsive site that is actually easy to read on your phone, and so, yeah.

Tim Ferriss: It's so worth it.

Maria Popova: Despair and frustration prevail again in innovation.

Tim Ferriss: It's so worth it. It took me, let's see, it only took me three – oh, God, seven years to get a mobile version of the site ready to go which I just launched a month or two ago. So, better late than never, I suppose.

Well, Maria, this has been a blast. I really appreciate you taking the time. If someone were to want to explore Brain Pickings, what are the few articles that you might suggest that they start with? Or few posts?

Maria Popova: Well, since we talked about it so much, the Seneca piece about the shortness of life, fairly a short piece. There's a piece I did a couple of years ago it was not about a specific book, just things that I've been thinking about for a long time; this disconnect between purpose and prestige, and why we do things. I forget what it's called. I think it's called, how to do what you love or some other – *How to Find Your Purpose and Do What You Love*. It was an assemblage of thoughts on that from various sources as well as my own.

Perhaps, most of all, a piece that I wrote last fall on the 7th birthday, really, of the site which was about *7 Things I Learned in 7 Years of Reading, Writing, and Living*.

Tim Ferriss: Which is a great article, and I didn't want to replicate everything in here. So, I sort of bobbed and weaved around some of this subjects a little bit. Just you, reiterate something that you mention, and that's doing nothing for prestige, or status, or money, or approval on. I just wanna quote Paul Graham here which you included which is, "Prestige is like a powerful magnet that warps even your beliefs about what you enjoy. It causes you to work, not on what you like, but what you'd like to like." So, I think it's so astute.

In closing, is there any –

Maria Popova: And also, I should just interject and say, any Allen Watts piece. Not because my writing about it is so great or it's not coming from a place of check me out. It's coming from a place of, check him out. Allan Watts has changed my life. I had written about him quite a bit. So, I highly recommend any of his articles.

Tim Ferriss: Cool. All right, brainpickings.org is the site, guys. Check it out. Maria, any parting advice for this episode, this portion of our

conversation before we check out? Any advice to the people listening out there; thoughts, parting comments?

Maria Popova: No advice per se, just, I guess, a comment and a hope which is that, thank you so much not just for having me, but for having this show and for doing everything that you do. I really hope we have more people who operates out of such a place of just – I guess, a lack of a better word – idealism and conviction. Yeah, thank you for setting an example that way.

Tim Ferriss: Well, that means a lot coming from you. I think you're a tremendous force for good out there in the world. So, I hope people check out your work. I hope you continue to do what you're doing. I hope you continue to add repetitions to your pull-ups and we will talk again soon. Thank you so much for being on the show.

Maria Popova: Thank you, Tim.