

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 92: Maria Popova

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Tim Ferriss: [Speaking foreign language] ladies and gentlemen. This is Tim Ferriss and welcome to another episode of The Tim Ferriss Show. This episode is a fun one. And, as you know, every episode, my job is to find world-class performers and help you do deconstruct them, to show you how they do what they do, what makes them unique, their routines, their favorite books and so on.

And, today, we have a repeat guest, Maria Popova. And Maria Popova has written for amazing outlets like "The Atlantic" and "The New York Times" but I find her most amazing project to be brainpickings.org. Founded in 2006 as a weekly email to 7 friends, brainpickings now gets more than 5 million readers per month. It is massive. And she does not have a huge team around her. This is just Maria. She is prodigious in the amount of content she puts out. I read very few blogs regularly, at all, but brainpickings is one of the few that makes the cut. It is a real treasure trove so I encourage you to check it out. Maria is a massively successful content creator and her output is staggering, as I mentioned. None of it's accidental. She is great and she is very great at teaching what she's learned. So this episode answers the top ten most popular questions you all had for Maria and I'm not going to add any more to this preamble. Please enjoy Part 2 with Maria Popova.

[Intro music]

Maria Popova: Okay. Here we go. Sun in Singapore asks, "Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give a complete beginner about starting a blog?" Write for yourself. If you want to create something meaningful and fulfilling, something that lasts and speaks to people, the counterintuitive but really, really necessary thing is that you must not write for people. The second you begin to write for or to a certain so-called audience – and this applies equally to podcasting, and film-making, and photography, and dance, and any field of creative endeavor – the second you start doing it for an audience, you've lost the long-game because creating something that is rewarding and sustainable over the long run requires, most of all, keeping yourself excited about it which, in turn, requires only doing things that you, yourself are interested in that enthuse you.

I think the key to being interesting is being interested and enthusiastic about those interests. That's contagious. That's what makes people read you and come back – which, by the way, should and can only be a byproduct of your own willingness to keep coming back to your work, to your creation, because, if you do it for other people – trying to predict what they'll be interested in and pretzeling yourself you fit those expectations – you soon begin to begrudge it and become embittered and it begins to show in the work. It always, always shows in the work when you resent it. And there's really nothing less pleasurable to read than embittered writing. I'm reminded of Vonnegut who, in the seventh of his eighth tips on writing, he said, "Write to please just one person.

If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia." Now, first of all, god, I love Vonnegut – always so witty and so wise – but, when I first came upon this, which was maybe about five years into brainpickings, it so elegantly crystallized something that I deeply believed and was living by and operating by but hadn't articulated that succinctly, even to myself. Now, sometimes, I think people – usually younger people – can misinterpret that to mean write to please your teacher, or your publisher, or the person you're in love with but Vonnegut really meant write to please yourself. And the other thing related to this which is a major, major thing, is this: I bet you that, if Vonnegut were alive today and was writing on a medium like a blog, he'd be approaching it the same way that he did his fiction.

And he, like any self-respecting writer, would never, ever, ever, ever, refer to or think about his writing on that platform – on any platform – as quote/unquote "content." On that platform – be it a blog, be it something else which is just a medium for the writing – he would be writing things more in the spirit of "Cat's Cradle" than in the unspirited vein of "Catlisticles." There's actually, I think, nothing more toxic to the creation of meaningful cultural material – whatever its medium – than the term content which already implies an icky external motive. Content is something you produce and purvey to other people – filler material that becomes currency for advertising and what not – and not something that you do for yourself.

Nobody does content for the joy of their soul. And the second thing, if you start thinking of your writing as content, you've altered the motive. You are no longer writing for yourself. So, to distill, write for yourself, stay interested, don't ever let yourself think of what you do as content or be bullied into viewing it –

much less treating it – as such. And, lastly, perhaps the best advice on writing ever given – which applies just as much to blogging – courtesy of Susan Sontag, "Love words, agonize over sentences, and pay attention to the world."

Next question, Leuf from Malaysia asks: "You have probably read and understood all the wisdom and knowledge shared on brainpickings. Do you feel you have become who you want to be? If not, what is stopping you?"

It's such an interesting question because there's so many layers to it. As I told Tim in our original conversation, I started brainpickings in my early 20s as a record of my own becoming and, now, nine years in, it's still that and it can only ever be that because we never stop becoming. We never stop growing. If we do, that's how we know we're dead. Life is a continual process of arrival into who we are and the funny thing, actually, is, from the vantage point of any moment in our lives, we look back on ourselves, say, five years earlier and we think, "Wow, what a spiritual embryo I was. What an intellectual baby." And yet, that very vantage point, when looked at from five years into the future, will look just as primitive of version of who we are then.

The Harvard psychologist, Dan Gilbert – whose book, "Stumbling Unhappiness," by the way, should be required reading for every human being – he puts it perfectly. He says, "Human beings are works in progress that mistakenly think they're finished." And I think that's so true. But there's a fine line between contentment and self-satisfaction and I think the key is to be content with who you are and where you are at any given moment – because living with presence both requires and gives rise to such contentment – but not to be so self-satisfied as to assume that you've reached perfection or who you're supposed to be and to cut yourself off from that vital impulse for continual growth.

So, back to question, I don't think I've become who I want to be and I have become who I want to be in this moment but not in an ultimate sense. And what's stopping me from becoming who I want to be? Well, in a way, what I do is all about stopping myself from the illusion of having arrived – of having become a static and self-satisfied final self. So the thing stopping me, then, is the very thing that's driving me forward. And I think that's true of all of us if we're serious about personal growth and this lifelong process of becoming.

Malika in Switzerland asks, "What is the most significant characteristic that distinguishes people who have accomplished greatness in any given field?" I would say consistency. Showing up, day in and day out, psychoemotional, rain or shine.

If you look at the diary of any great artist or writer – and I read a lot of those so I have a pretty vast sample pool, here – the one thing you see, over and over, is that whatever happens, whatever they experiencing, be it agonizing self-doubt, which, by the way, all of them experience – nowhere more beautifully than in Steinbeck's "Working Days" which I highly, highly recommend – or the intoxicating elation of being in love which makes you unable to think about anything else at all, whatever it is they're feeling, they still show up. They still face the blank page, the empty canvas, the fresh roll of film every day and they do their thing. And what this doggedness is really a deep love of the work, a deep need to do the work in order to feel alive. Making a living is merely a by-product of that and, for some of them, that doesn't even come in their lifetime.

And make no mistake, by the way, all those artist and writers who bemoan how hard the work is and oh, how tedious the creative process, and oh, what a tortured genius they are – don't buy into it. They're doing it, perhaps, because we've created a society that mistakes the notion of hard work to mean, not just dedicated work, but difficult work – as if difficulty, and struggle, and torture somehow confer seriousness upon your chosen work. Doing great work simply because you love it sounds, in our culture, somehow flimsy. And that's a failing of our culture, not of the choice of work that artists make.

But here's the thing. Yes, a number of artists are bedeviled by serious mental illness that makes them experience actual, real anguish in their lives and I have written, by the way, about the relationship between creativity and mental illness, if you're curious. It's far more complex than we realize. You can find that online. But, in any case, the reality of that is that, without their art, all of these artists would have suffered more. One of my big, big, big pet peeves is when someone, say, comments on Van Gogh's letters to his brother – which are absolutely beautiful and full of so much wisdom and light – and somebody says, "Oh, well, why should we heed Van Gogh when he ultimately perished by his own madness?" Well, how many people are there, in the history of the world, who perish by their own madness and didn't paint "The Starry Night"? Van Gogh's art didn't take his life – it redeemed it.

Without it, he would have just been an average, unkempt, mentally ill man who died miserable in a small village. With it, he was able to experience moments of transcendent joy and meaning which also happened to produce some of the greatest, most lasting works of art of all time. And, of course, Van Gogh is an extreme case, both in his talent and in his misery but his life illustrates why every great artist – and I mean artist in the broadest sense of a human being creating work that makes other human beings feel something meaningful – why every great artist does what they do. That's the key to both their consistency and their greatness. So, if you're looking for a formula for greatness, the closest we'll ever get, I think, is this: consistency driven by a deep love of the work.

Okay, next question by Matthew Silverman in Chicago, who, by the way, asked a number of great questions – this is one of them. "How do you decide what to read and what to read first? What makes something not worth reading?" I often say that literature is the original internet so every footnote in a book, every citation, every reference is essentially a hyperlink to another book. Most of the great books I've come across – and this applies especially to really great forgotten books – most of those I discover through a mention by an author that I already enjoyed. It's the ultimate recommendation algorithm that leads you to new, very surprising manifestations of the same shared sensibility sure to please you. For instance, recently, it was through Cheryl Strayed's memoir that I came upon a beautiful book from 1968 by a man named Edward Abbey.

It's called "Desert Solitaire," and he writes about a few months that he spent as a park ranger in the Moab Desert but he's really writing about solitude, and our intricate connection to the natural world, and how we find ourselves by getting lost – very profound things through what's, essentially, a travelogue. And, similarly, it was through Elizabeth Gilbert's novel, "The Signature of All Things," – which is obviously fiction but it's heavily inspired by the long actual history of largely unsung female botanists – it was through that that I came upon a tiny, miraculously beautiful book called, "Gathering Moss," by a bryologist – that, I learned, is a scientist who studies moss – a bryologist named Robin Wall Kimmerer.

She writes about moss but she's really writing about how to live, how to pay attention to the world, how to relish beauty, how to inhabit your own existence with a deeper sense of presence and that's the answer to the second part of the question about what makes something worth reading. To me, that's a book that illuminates some aspect of how to live, however large or small,

that leaves you with a sense of having understood a little bit better your purpose here, or having appreciated a little bit more some aspect of the world, inner or outer – or, ideally, both. And as for the sequence of what to read when, it is so much a matter of what's on my mind, what I'm experiencing in my own life, what I'm trying to make sense of. I read to make sense of life and the writing is just the record of the reading.

So mood, life events, time of year, time of the month, time of the day – all of these can have an impact on what I will read – begin reading – in that specific moment. But, again, it has to answer some aspect of this question of, "How am I going to make my life better and richer in this moment and in the long run?"

Actually, a number of people asked very similar questions so I'm going to combine them and answer them all at once, here. Here's one from Carla Sanfuegos in L.A. She said, "What is a text you refer to again and again?" And Krishna in San Francisco said, "What book have you read multiple times and have read the most?" I would say, right now – and this answer might be different in another nine years – the diaries of Henry David Thoreau. Speaking of this intersection of the outer world and the inner world, nobody writes more beautifully about the immutable dialogue between the two than he.

There is just so much – and I mean so much – universal, timeless truth in his private reflections, I've found, on everything from the best definition of success to the perils of sitting which he wrote about 150 years before we started saying, "Sitting is the new smoking." And, actually, what I said just a few moments ago about our warped cultural ideas of hard work reminded me of one of his journal entries. Let me see if I can find it. Okay, here it is, from March of 1842, Thoreau writes, "The really efficient laborer will be found not to crowd his day with work but will saunter to his tasks surrounded by a wide halo of ease and leisure. There will be a wide margin for relaxation to his day.

He is only earnest to secure the kernels of time and does not exaggerate the value of the husk." Think of what a beautiful metaphor this is for not mistaking the husk – the outer accoutrements of productivity like business, or a full calendar, or a clever outer responder – not mistaking those for the kernel – the core and subject of the actual work produced. And he then says, "Those who work much do not work hard." I love that. And a related but somewhat different question from Pratos in Pristina, Kosovo – which is very near my hometown of Sofia, Bulgaria – he

asks, "If your house was burnt and you had the chance to only rescue one book, assuming that you cannot buy any other book later on, which one would it be?"

Now, if I can't ever buy another book, the answer I guess, would be the same – Thoreau's journals. But, perhaps a more practical approach, assuming I can, at some point, replace the burned books, however far off into the future, then what is most valuable to me in read books is actually my marginalia. So, for instance, while I have a physical copy of Thoreau's diaries, it's actually available as an e-book which is how I most frequently revisit it. And my highlights and notes on it are electronic so I have so-called copies of them in the cloud. It's not clear in the question whether the great big fire is going to wipe out the internet, as well, but I'm assuming it does not.

But there are out-of-print books that I treasure that are hard, if not impossible, to replace in which I have copious notes by hand. And, in that case – if that counts – then I would have a different answer and it would be a tie between "A Rap on Race," which is the transcript of James Baldwin and Margaret Mead's extraordinarily prescient 1970 conversation on, not just race, but also gender equality, and democracy, and forgiveness, and the difference between guilt and responsibility, and what comes after consumer culture. It is amazing. It is very, very, very hard to find. My book has so much of my own writing that, on some pages, it's more than the actual text. So that would be tied with "On Science Necessity and the Love of God" by the French philosopher Simone Weil, whom I consider one of the most luminous, and lucid, and underappreciated minds of the 20th century.

That book is also very, very, very, very hard to find. Both of them, in fact, are so deeply out of print that there's actually a black market for them online so, if you manage to find a copy, you could probably make some good money for it on EBay or Amazon Used Books. And, again, both of my own copies are so heavily annotated that what I'd be running with, really, is as much my own thoughts and ideas recorded in there as the actual ideas of the authors.

Daniel, in Palo Alto, wants to know, "If you could guarantee that every public official or leader read one book and engaged one habit, what would those be?" The book would be, perhaps, rather obviously Plato's "Republic."

I'm actually gob smacked that this isn't required in order to be sworn into office like the Constitution is required for us immigrants when it comes time to obtain American citizenship. And the practice would be mindfulness meditation – it's not a vaccine against greed and corruption but it does make it significantly harder to be selfish when you cultivate equanimity, when you come to dismantle the illusion of the separate self, when you begin to see the inherent interconnectedness of everything – of all people and of all beings – how our smallest daily actions add up to our collective destiny. And, after all, if you're a public official, the public good – which is just another word for the best possible collective destiny – should be your primary concern and nothing centers you more powerfully on that than the mindset gained through meditation and through mindfulness.

Okay, and the last question comes from Frieze in France. "How do you turn down invitations that don't interest you? How do you avoid getting time-jacked by people who are just seeking from you and don't share anything?" I think that's harder earlier on – both earlier in life and earlier in any vocational trajectory – because we're such Pavlovian creatures and we crave positive reinforcement. And we often mistake interest for affirmation of our worth, especially if there's an element of prestige attached to it. That is, interest from people or institutions we admire, we perceive as prestigious. So, if somebody admirable is interested in us, we think, well, we, too, then must be admirable.

But, over time, I think you get better at trusting your criteria for what makes you and your work admirable – admirable on the inside, that is – what makes you proud. Maybe appearing on CNN for two minutes will make your grandmother proud but, if he travel, and preparation, and logistics eat up 20 hours of your time that your writing suffers so that you will ultimately not be proud of the result, then maybe it's not worth it. Often, I think the paradox is that accepting the requests you receive is at the expense of the quality of the very work that was the reason for those requests, in the first place and that's what you always have to protect.

I recently read Oliver Sack's memoir, "On the Move," which, by the way – and I don't say this lightly because, by now you know how much and how whole-heartedly and voraciously I read – it has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life and I couldn't recommend it more heartedly. But, in any case, in it, Dr. Sacks mentions that, when his career as a writer started picking up, so did, obviously, the volume of demands for speaking, and interviews, and this, and that and so he put a piece of paper on the

wall by his desk that simply said, in all caps, "No," with an exclamation point. It was to remind himself to decline invitations that tipped away from his writing time. And these reminders, they're so simple – in this case, so analog – and they work. I have a tattoo on my right forearm which I see all the time that reminds me every day what to focus on.

Now this said, I think it's a very subjective thing – this dance of discerning whether the end product will make you proud, will be rewarding and fulfilling by your innermost measure. So, for me, for example, I almost always do things for students even if it takes up my reading and writing time because I feel that, if I can help one young person even consider a life path other than the corporate gristmill, if I can persuade one aspiring journalist to consider not working for Buzz Feed and to refuse to feed the public's appetite for mindlessness and mediocrity, and to assure this young person to have faith in the possibility of building a life and a career based on E.B. White's journalistic ideal of lifting people up rather than lowering them down, then it's worth my time.

It is absolutely worth my time. I also always do things for friends and for people whose work I admire, and want to support, and with whom I feel a kind of kinship of spirit – hi, Tim – even if it takes time away from my work. I really, really, really believe that creative culture is woven of these invisible threads of goodwill between people who believe in one another and art is carried on the wings of this kinship. So any time you put toward that is an investment in the most rewarding thing about being in a position to be asked to help in the first place and that's the loveliest part of life.