The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts
Episode 118: Alain de Botton
Show notes and links at tim.blog/podcast

Tim Ferriss: The guest that we have today is Alain de Botton, A-L-A-I-N D-E-B-O-T-T-O-N. He is many things, but I think of him as a philosopher of the most practical breed. And as I've mentioned before and written about quite extensively, I view pragmatic philosophy as a set of rules for making better decisions in life, ideally in high stress environments. So as you know, probably, I'm a huge fan of Stoic philosophy. Alain, in 1997, he turned away from writing novels, and instead wrote an extended essay with the funny title "How Proust Can Change Your Life," which became an unlikely blockbuster in the self-help genre.

No one expected it to happen, and bang, suddenly he was on the map. His subsequent books take on all sorts of fundamental worries of modern life. Am I happy? What do I do with status anxiety, etc. And this is informed by his deep reading in philosophy, but also by his novelist's eye for small perfect moments. It's a very cool combination. His books have been described as "philosophy of everyday life," and are on a diverse range of subjects, including love, travel, architecture, religion, and work. His bestsellers include "Essays In Love," "How Proust Can Change Your Life," "Status Anxiety," and "The Architecture of Happiness." And I'm going to include links to all of these in the show notes at fourhourworkweek.com/podcast. So everything we mention in the episode, all of the goodies, will be there. Fourhourworkweek.com/podcast.

In 2008, de Botton also helped start the School of Life, which is awesome. This began in London, and it's a social enterprise determined to make learning and therapy relevant in today's uptight culture.

His goal through any and all of his mediums is to help clients learn how to live wisely and well. And since I am also a student in that realm, I wanted to get him on the phone. Many of you asked for this conversation, this interview. I loved it, and I hope you do as well. Say hi to him on Twitter, let him know what you thought of the interview. If you have any follow-up questions, it's @alaindebotton, A-L-A-I-N D-E B-O-T-T-O-N on the Twitters. Please enjoy our conversation. Thanks for listening.

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Good sir, welcome to the show.

Alain de Botton: Thank you so much.

Tim Ferriss: I appreciate you making the time to have a conversation from the other side of the pond. And I will admit something very embarrassing. The good sir, the kind sir, the so on and so forth, is because I've searched far and wide to discover how to say your name correctly and didn't want to say it incorrectly because I had guests on like Maria Popova and Papel Tsatsoulin, who have had their names massacred every time that I've actually heard it said. So how do you pronounce your name properly?

Alain de Botton: Tim, you're so lucky to be called Tim. I was formed on this earth with the name Alain de Botton. Alain de Botton. So I mean, anything you can manage. Just don't call me Alain. You can call me Alan, but I don't care. It's just one of those things that happened.

Tim Ferriss: When you're speaking with native English speakers, how do you introduce yourself?

Alain de Botton: I just say, I'm Alain de Botton and see what they say.

Tim Ferriss: See how they respond.

Alain de Botton: Yeah. But every school kid in England has done four or five years of reluctant French, and there's always a French teaching book with a character called Alain. So they can just about match that. But I mean, it's really all my fault, and I'm deeply apologetic. And what can I say? It's one of those things. That's what globalization brings us.

Tim Ferriss: It's like Papel, when he orders his coffee at Starbucks, he just says Pablo, because that's what they're gonna come up with anyway. Well, that also leads me to ask, and of course, we'll dig into a lot in this conversation, and I'm very excited to finally be chatting.

This has been a long time in the making. When people ask you what do you do, how do you answer that?

Alain de Botton: Well, look, the easiest thing to say is that I'm a writer, but that doesn't really cover it because writers come in all shapes and sizes. If the conversation is allowed to go on a little longer, what I tend to tell them is I'm interested in emotional intelligence, in emotional

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health. It's the kind of topic that broadly pertains to all the things that make life difficult that are coming from the kind of emotional centers of our brain and functioning. Sometimes people joke about First World problems, right? They laugh at how we are in the United States or the UK, and they say, you guys have got First World problems. And it's supposed to be a joke. It's like people who are quibbling because the chardonnay is not chilled enough or whatever.

I actually think that there is such a thing as First World problems, not seen as a joke, but seen genuinely, which is really the problems of advanced civilization that we're living in now. When the majority of people have got enough food, have got a secure shelter, but life is still very tough in all sorts of ways. So it's not the old kind of toughness, when it was really about survival. It's toughness of a different sort. It's about trying to make sure that your brief time on earth is well-spent, that your talents have been properly explored, that you're in a satisfying relationship, that you understand yourself, that you have a purpose, etc. Now in many parts of the world, these things sound like luxuries, and indeed, they are. But they are daily realities in countries like the United States. There are about 20 countries in the world where these kind of concerns are active. And these are the concerns that interest me. They're concerns around relationships, place satisfaction, ambition, community, meaning.

I mean, these words, we can go into them. They sound a little nebulous when you first mention them. But it's the kind of high order questions that people start to ask themselves once the basic supply of food and shelter have been assured.

Tim Ferriss: Right. And it seems like when I look at, for instance, the cases of suicide that I've encountered in my own life, friends who have committed suicide, in every case, they're far enough up Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs that they've satisfied shelter, hunger, food, etc. And I think one of the challenges, perhaps, is that when people get to a certain point and they're grappling with self-actualization and so on, there are a few flies in the ointment. And I'd love to hear your thoughts on this. And feel free, obviously, to strike me down with a sharp blow. But No. 1 is that many of the terms that they're grappling with, like you pointed out, are in some ways nebulous.

They don't have the topics or challenges, don't necessarily have clean, clear evolutionary answers, like I am hungry, therefore I should find food. And in some cases, we realize that what we thought would address the angst or anxiety that we have, such as

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status or money, in fact, appears not to provide any type of lasting relief from those types of dilemmas. How did you become interested in these questions? And of course, I mean, your books, for instance, have been described as a philosophy of everyday life. And you've written about all sorts of things across the board. But how did you fall into or become attracted to these types of questions and the philosophy of everyday life, if you think that's a fair description in the first place?

Alain de Botton: Sure. Well, I tend to start always with myself. So I'm a very personal writer. I'm the opposite of an academic. I'm looking for answers to the problems that I experience.

I start with myself as the first case study, and I think, if I'm getting myself right, if I'm understanding myself right, by definition, I'll be getting lots of other people right as well. So I'm a laboratory of one. Of course, I step out of that. I read a lot. I meet a lot of people. I talk, etc. But as it were, I tend to start with the emotional energy that comes from the first patient, me. And I'm the one with all the problems. And they tend to also just have to be problems that other people have as well. So quite early on in my life, I realized that there were two things which were deeply problematic for me. The first one was the area of love and relationships, and the second was the area of work.

These were things that were giving me real trouble. I think I've come to see with age that there wasn't a coincidence, that these are the two areas of massive insecurity, doubt, and most importantly, lack of guidance. We live in a society where we very much believe in freedom and individual self-realization, which is fantastic from one point of view, and leaves us desperately searching for guidance, clues, etc.

And we're left very much alone. I had a so-called elite education. I went to Cambridge University in the UK. I got a good degree, etc., so I was a kind of well-educated citizen of the modern world. And yet, boy oh boy, I was so lost. I just didn't know – I hadn't had enough of the right sort of conversations. I hadn't met the right sort of people. Broadly speaking, I wasn't living in a therapeutic environment. I don't mean Oprah. I don't mean a psychoanalyst. I mean, literally in the ancient Greek sense, therapy, which is the kind of nourishment and nurture of the soul, the inner bit, the precious bit of you. There just wasn't any support. I felt very cut off from that.

And gradually, I felt my way through books, through

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conversations, to a kind of way of living where I could just begin to understand some of the things that I was suffering from. But if I were to diagnose my younger self, I was a classic example of somebody living in a prosperous world city in the middle of a kind of heyday of capitalism, suffering from all the angst that comes with that.

I'd been taught that personal happiness came from finding one very, very special person with whom there would be an ecstatic sense of communion, and she happened to be, and I would meet. It would be wonderful. My whole sense of loneliness, loss and drift would be healed. It would be like a sort of secularized version of a meeting with a deity. And I was on the lookout in bars, clubs, dinner parties, for this person, this angelic deity who'd graciously come down to earth. And that was going to solve my love problem. But I also was facing a work problem. And the kind of ideology I'd grown up with was, you're going to work very, very hard, and then you will find a precious bit of you, and you will put that on a commercial basis. Whatever it is, that inner, precious core, you will turn into money in good time. You will be both creative and also financially productive, etc.

Now, I'm not saying that either of these things is impossible, but they're very hard. And we're very alone with them. Very alone indeed. And this struck me, and my career in many ways was designed to try and find some answers that would work for me and would work for others. And by answers, I don't only mean solutions. I also mean interpretations. When you're suffering from something, you don't necessarily always want or expect there to be a fix. But at least just understanding what it is that's the problem and express it kind of eloquently. That's at least half the battle. And I didn't have any of that. And that's what my career has been spent trying to do.

Tim Ferriss: What did you study in undergrad? Was it your undergraduate studies at Cambridge?

Alain de Botton: I studied what they call over there History of Ideas, which was a wonderful course that really looks at the evolution of big concepts through time, and how attitudes to different things have changed.

So we would study a word like freedom, and look at all the different ways in which that word has changed, and how differently it was interpreted, say, in the fifth century AD to the way it was interpreted in the 18th century, to the way it was interpreted in America versus in China, or etc. So that was really

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fun and really good.

Tim Ferriss: And from that point, grappling with all these issues, as many people do, what put you on the map, so to speak, as a discusser/explorer of these ideas? You have, of course, a very well-known extended essay called "How Proust Can Change Your Life." That's another one I had to look up before this interview. I'm gonna admit, I had to look up P-R-O-U-S-T to double-check and make sure that I would be pronouncing it somewhat close to correctly.

Alain de Botton: Perfect.

Tim Ferriss: "How Proust Can Change Your Life." Is that the essay that kind of put you into the mainstream or slipstream, or were there other ways that you were able to test your ideas on a large public scale before that?

Alain de Botton: So when I graduated, I was very aware that time was short, and that there are immense pressures on young people to prove themselves pretty early on. And I felt that very much. I'd come from a family of high achievers, and I was born with a sort of sense of, you've got to prove yourself. And it was a kind of madness, I now recognize. It was not easy or the best thing. I don't think that's a great ideology to have, but there we have it. So no sooner did I graduate, that I really started asking myself the biggest questions, like where do I want my life to go? I applied for various jobs, but I graduated in the midst of a recession. It was very hard to find –

Tim Ferriss: When was this?

Alain de Botton: This was the summer of 1991. And so a lot of my friends were just finding things to do, taking jobs in bars, etc. And I asked myself, what do I really want to do? And I thought, what I really want to do is write books. And I dared to admit that to myself in a kind of late night session of self-honesty. And I thought, well, why don't I just start now? And I'd been thinking a lot about writing and self-expression and all the rest of it, and so I kind of gradually felt my way to writing my first book, which was published when I was just 22. And it was a book called "Essays in Love." In the US, it was titled "On Love." And I put my heart and soul into it. It's a very intimate dissection of a love story. And the book did very well. I mean, very well, certainly, for a 22-, 23-year-old. And it gave me the confidence and the courage to carry on.

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And relatively soon after, I then wrote what turned out to be my breakthrough book, which was called *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. And thanks to American readers and reviewers, that book did extremely well. And it was an unlikely moment because here was a book written about an early 20th century great French writer that was, at the same time, a self-help book. And I deliberately chose to kind of match up these two genres, a kind of scholarly essay and a self-help book. It wasn't just a kind of sly commercial trick. There was serious intent, which is that I always felt that high culture, by which I mean literature, philosophy, plays, etc. – these things do not just belong in the Ivory Tower. They have a richness to them, which can be absorbed and should be transmitted to the widest possible public. This is heresy among the universities that believe, partly for economic reasons, but only if you enroll in their sacred fraternity do you really have the right tools to be able to interpret and enjoy the masterpieces of civilization.

I passionately disagreed with that. I am by nature a popularizer and a democrat of the mind, and I did not appreciate that kind of cloistered vision of knowledge. So I took a lot of what I'd been thinking and reading, and really tried to express it so clearly. And I would write sentences 20 times to make sure that they could be understood by everyone. I would try material out on people who'd been educated and people who hadn't been educated at all. And I wanted to make sure that it would work at all levels. So that was an extra layer of work. And I'm really proud and happy to say it did work, and the book proved itself around the world. And so I was in the very odd and fortunate position that come the age of 27, I'd had this book that had worked, and I was aloft, at least for a time.

So that's how I ended up doing what I do.

Tim Ferriss: And for people who have not read, let's just take "On Love" and *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, was "On Love" autobiographical? Was it a novel? Was it a mix of the two? Neither?

Alain de Botton: It was a mix of the two, because Tim, what I love about novels is the local color, the intimacy of language, the sense that you're suddenly in a real place. And you know what the weather's like, and etc. What drives me crazy about novels is that sometimes you feel that the novelist is cleverer than they're allowing their characters to be. You feel that there's all sorts of stuff that is discussed in nonfiction ways that somehow just doesn't find its

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way into the novel, where it's all supposed to be about showing, not telling. And I didn't like those rules, so my novel was explicitly an attempt to tell a love story as well as show it, to have a mixture of analysis and also more sensory descriptive bits.

Because I wanted to touch the reader and make them think. I didn't want to tell just another ordinary love story. I wanted to analyze love in the course of a love story, so the knowledge bits would be well wrapped up in some of the excitement of a love story. So it was kind of trying out a genre. And in all my works, I've always been a little impatient by the kind of models out there for how to write. Like a classic novel must be X pages long, must feature, dadada. I've always been provoked to slightly pull at those rules. And so just as I wrote a self-help book, but it was half about this great 20th century writer. That's not normal. So I was writing a novel, but that wasn't quite a normal way of writing a novel. So I was impatient with some of the rules that writers get given.

Tim Ferriss: Which writers or books most influenced your approach or thinking about those two books, *On Love* – or we could focus on *How Proust Can Change Your Life*.

Alain de Botton: Look, the books that I always most enjoyed were the books, first of all, where you feel the presence of an author in the text who feels like a nice person. I know that could sound kind of trivial, but it just sounds like someone that you could kind of get to know and have a chat with. I mean, if we think of someone like Thoreau, Thoreau sounds like a really great guy. He's friendly. He's sometimes sarcastic, but he's always witty. He's humane. He's generous. He's sometimes impatient, etc. But you kind of get the sense of a person. You get this sometimes reading great writers' letters. If you read the journals of Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, you get a flavor of a person. So someone like the French philosopher Montaigne was a great influence.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely.

Alain de Botton: He was a man who, writing in the 16th century, again, just spoke in this wonderfully direct, intimate way. So yes, he was telling you about Plato and he was telling you about history, etc., but you always felt, I'm actually with someone.

And I've always really appreciated the personal voice. And that really influenced how I wanted to write and be with my readers.

Tim Ferriss: And I will admit, when it comes to most philosophy, I'm kind of a

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one trick pony. I've really read a lot of Stoic philosophy, but outside of that, I'm woefully inadequate. So I'm gonna ask a question that you've no doubt been asked before, that may be really irritating, but how can Proust change your life? What is the structure of the book, or what are some of the theses or concepts/

Alain de Botton: Sure. So Proust is really a philosopher more than a novelist. And his book is about a search for how you can stop wasting your life and start to appreciate life and live fully.

So the title is very accurate. The title of his long book is In Search of Lost Time. And it's literally one man's search for how you can stop wasting your life. And it follows the narrator hero as he tries out three things that he thinks may turn out to be the meaning of life. The first thing he tries is social status, a position in society. And a lot of the book follows how he tries to get in with the people in Paris. He wants to get in with – nowadays, they would be the celebrities, the businesspeople, etc. But in those days, they were the aristocrats. And so he's trying to get in with them. He's trying to make a name for himself, and it follows. It's very funny. It's warm, it's self-deprecating. But essentially, the search for the journey – he does manage to get into the inner sanctum, but he discovers that actually, these people are often brutal, brutish, not that interesting, and not really interested in him properly. And he has a kind of moment of existential despair around this goal of social status.

He then moves on to another possible goal of life, which is romantic love. And a lot of the novel is spent tracing the love affair of the narrator for a beautiful late teenage girl called Albertine, who's charming, headstrong, gamine, a kind of boyish charmer. And [inaudible], there are all sorts of disappointments, and he realizes some of the real limitations of love, which is that we go to love because we think that someone will understand us fully. We can be fulfilled totally in the arms of another person, etc. And gently, and with humor and generosity, Proust unpicks some of these hopes. And again, gradually, we realize that love, like social status, is perhaps not the meaning of life. So what is? Well, Proust ends up, like many writers, defending his own art and craft. He defends art as the meaning of life. And what he means by art is –

Tim Ferriss: It's kind of like don't ask a barber if you need a haircut kind of situation.

Alain de Botton: Exactly. So it's a big PR job on art. But he's more generous. You can certainly read him in ways that are more generous than merely

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art as – you've got to immediately enroll on a fine arts degree or something. He's not saying that. He is seeing the great works of art – not all art, but the great works of art as examples of life as it's lived to the full. And he's interested particularly in certain artists. So he talks a lot about the Dutch painter Vermeer, who he thinks –

Tim Ferriss: Oh, amazing.

Alain de Botton: Right. And what he appreciates is that Vermeer painted daily life, but he saw in daily life an extraordinary richness and level of kind of psychological involvement, etc. But he was living life to the full. So another painter he really liked was the French 18th century painter Jardin, who, rather like Vermeer, painted modest interiors, families around the kitchen table, loaves of bread. He painted about 20 loaves of bread.

One of the first painters to kind of spend so long with bread. And really, it's a kind of –

Tim Ferriss: It's very fresh.

Alain de Botton: Yeah, it's very fresh. But it's also a kind of secularized Christian message, which is really that ordinary, modest life has grace, is in contact with the glory and dignity of the universe kind of thing, to put it –

Tim Ferriss: Right, the sacred and the profane.

Alain de Botton: Exactly, exactly. And this is what makes Proust such an enchanting writer, that he is so interested in daily life. And he wants to make daily life magical. And that's what he resents and hates about snobbery, because snobbery constantly makes you think that there's a group of people out there who are special, more special than the ordinary people, etc.

And Proust, the son of a kind of ultra bourgeois wealthy family, etc., has this tremendously, deeply, profoundly Democratic vision about the value of each individual and the capacity of an artistic gaze to tease out that value, and therefore, thereby make life meaningful. That's some of what I discovered, and that provided the spine for my own study of Proust that I wrote.

Tim Ferriss: So I have two immediate responses. The first is, have you seen a documentary called Tim's Vermeer, by any chance?

Alain de Botton: I haven't.

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Tim Ferriss: Oh, it is spectacular. It is about a computer scientist and a very famous entrepreneur in the desktop editing world who is an incredible inventor also, outside of those fields, and decides he wants to determine how Vermeer painted the way he painted. And goes through many different attempts, build many different tools to try to replicate Vermeer paintings.

It's a very fascinating, hilarious, and insightful look at yet another obsessive. Not saying you're obsessive, but the world is full of interesting obsessives. The second is how did reading Proust or writing this book, as you really dug into it, affect how you prioritized or lived your life? How did you incorporate that into your decisions prior to this in your life?

Alain de Botton: Well, look. I think the liberation of that book for me was going up to a really big name, an authority that was spoken of by professors in reverential tones. And what I did with that is to fire some pretty naive questions at this kind of colossus of kind of Western culture.

And I really asked the most essential, but the most naive question, which is how can you help me to live? And I think, in a way, this is the best question to ask anyone one meets. In many ways, that's what you tend to ask in your podcasts. It's such a valuable question to ask. Very often, we're too shy. We're reserved. We think that other people are gonna be bored by that question, or everyone else knows it already, etc. The book liberated me to be a kind of person who would be able to go up to works of high culture and culture generally, and kind of shake down the tree and see what there was for all of us. And so that was the kind of personal discovery.

Tim Ferriss: So in sort of knocking at the door of this colossus and daring to ask these questions about practicality, that opened the door to then your career as a writer and exploration of that in that sense?

Is that what you mean? Or are there ways that Proust impacted, in the answers that you got back, in your exploration, your day-to-day living.

Alain de Botton: Yes. I mean, I guess both. To address your second very good point, I think that there were many attitudes that I found in Proust that were incredibly seductive and charming in the best sense. So Proust's anti-romanticism. What I mean by romanticism, Proust was reacting against many of the things that he saw in the 19th century that he disagreed with. The idea of the individual as a hero. The idea of love as the answer to everything. The idea of certain

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kinds of career success as being the only way to live, etc. He took kind of a skeptical position vis-a-vis a lot of these things.

He wasn't necessarily rejecting them wholeheartedly, but he was a little skeptical, beautifully skeptical. And I found in him a kind of – you could say a kind of maturity that I didn't necessarily possess at that age. I was 26, 25, 26. And I learned from him. It was like sitting at the feet of a kind of wise person who's seen a few things, and who says, steady on, calm down. Maybe look at it this way. And he gracefully prized me from certain of my more immature positions in relation to a number of things.

Tim Ferriss: Could you give some examples?

Alain de Botton: Well, for example, I'd mentioned love. But it's not that I am not cynical about love.

But in a way, Proust rather darkly says, "All of us cannot be understood by another human being perfectly." There is an area of loneliness inside everybody. And to blame someone for not understanding you fully is deeply unfair because first of all, we don't understand ourselves, and even if we do understand ourselves, we have such a hard time communicating ourselves to other people. And therefore, to be furious and enraged and bitter that people don't get all of who we are is a really kind of cruel piece of immaturity. And that came as a real shock to me, as a guy in his 20s who really thought, no, no. Love is this sort of magical communion where I see into their soul, they see into mine. There are no secrets, and there is no more loneliness. And I've realized that there's a kind of beautiful intolerance – both beautiful, but really kind of negative.

It's the breeding ground of a certain kind of impatience. And that's kind of dangerous. And that helped me a lot in my personal relationships. I think it made me a slightly more patient, more humble kind of person to be around.

Tim Ferriss: Um-hum. And well, I have so many questions for you. This is mostly just a therapy session for myself disguised as a podcast. But the first question that I'd love to ask is, building on that, I remember at one point, there was a poll or some type of research done. I don't know how well it was put together. And it said that the happiest country in the world is Denmark. So based on these various surveys, and the data has been gathered, the Danish are the happiest people. And I got a comment on a post I put up about this from a Danish person who said the secret to happiness is low

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expectations. That's a pretty common belief here in Denmark.

And I thought it was very funny. And then upon looking at it a second time, began to ask, is there actually something there, right? And if there is, how do you combine ideally low expectations, so you're not constantly disappointed, i.e., the opposite of expecting your loved one to solve all of your loneliness and A, B, C, D, E, F, and G, while still striving, or doing great things for yourself or other people. And you of course have written a lot since and done many things, and we'll dig into some of them. But how do you think about that?

Alain de Botton: I think it's such a key question. I think you're putting your finger on a key thing, which is that very often, people think that having mature – we could call them mature expectations, or slightly low expectations in some areas is going to mean that you lose ambition.

You cannot have ambition and realism. You cannot be sober in some areas and still deeply excited to get out of bed in the morning. I think that's not really true. I think you could have these what you could call paradoxical positions on issues. For example, I like to explore the idea of being a cheerful pessimist. And you go, hang on? How can you be a cheerful pessimist, right? But if you explore that, if you're a little pessimistic about how a lot of things go, it doesn't necessarily mean that you're gonna be gloomy all the time. You may encounter moments of pure ecstasy as you realize that there are some very fine things in a world which is otherwise very dark.

I don't think a backdrop of stark realism/pessimism about all sorts of things, that death and illness can visit us very suddenly without warning; that all our grandest plans can be undone by a blood clot in under a minute; that some of the finest ambitions fall prey to the meanest realities, etc. That many of us, all of us, are going to go to our deathbeds with some very important parts of us still unexplored. I think it's because things are so dark, because we are operating against a backdrop of darkness, that a glass of beautiful lemon juice or a sincere conversation with a friend, or a moment when, yes, things do go right and everything does go right, why these things matter so much, and perhaps much more intensely. It's like the joy of the convalescent who's come out of the hospital, and they are seeing the sunlight strike the leaves of a daffodil.

And that daffodil seems more beautiful than it's every done to the robust football player who hasn't ever paused to appreciate these things. So as I say, I think it should be utterly compatible with

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ambition, appreciation, tenderness, etc., to keep the really grim things not far from the top of consciousness kind of pretty much every day.

Tim Ferriss: Who are some philosophers or thinkers that, for those people who have a lifelong aversion to the word philosophy and the concept of philosophy, just from a utilitarian standpoint, a readability standpoint. Maybe they're not the same. But who are some names that come to mind that you would recommend to folk as a gateway drug to philosophy?

Alain de Botton: Sure. That's such a good question. I mean, first of all, I'd like to apologize on behalf of philosophy. It's not my role to. But I'll do it anyway, playfully. The general public's disinterest and suspicion of philosophy is well-earned. It's deserved. The general public hasn't just forgotten about philosophy by mistake. Philosophers operating today have, on the whole, forgotten about the public. Insofar, my point of view is philosophy is interesting. I think it's most interesting in its very opening moves. When philosophy begins in ancient Greece and Rome, it says out to be therapy for the soul. It sets out to be a practical tool that can help you to live and die well. Philosophers in those days are interested in finding out how families work, how money works, how status works, what we should do about public opinion, what we should do about death and illness and ambition, and all of these things that trouble us every day.

That was centrally what philosophers were interested in and discussed. The great philosophers of those days, people like Epicurus, like Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Plato – these people are all very much worth reading. Philosophy continues to be interesting for many centuries. I mentioned the name of Montaigne earlier on. He's fantastic. In the 19th century, you've got a great German philosopher, Schopenhauer. He's fantastic. You get Nietzsche, who can be read with very rewarding results. When we hit the 20th century, the number of interesting philosophers tails off because something happens to philosophy that is not often remarked upon, which is basically, it splits into – for my money, the interesting stuff goes into psychology. Freud says that he is a philosopher.

And the whole tradition that comes out of Freud, not just psychoanalysis, but psychology more generally – the interesting stuff about how to live, how our minds work, how to actualize ourselves, how to relate to others. These things become the province of psychology. And throughout its history, philosophy's

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had a habit of casting off bits of itself that spur on subgenres. It used to be the study of stars was what philosophers did. Now that's astrophysics. So philosophy does this bit in the 20th century. And nowadays, philosophers tend to be really only ever employed by universities. Always a dangerous sign, when your subject matter – but no one will pay directly for your subject matter, that's often a sign that something's gone wrong.

Tim Ferriss: Right. The canary in the coal mine is getting a little wobbly.

Alain de Botton: That's right. And that's deserved because philosophers don't tell us how to live and die anymore. There are a few. There's a great philosopher who was at Princeton called Martha Nussbaum. She's terrific. There are a few others out there who are doing good work, but really not very many.

Not very many that you would recommend. Let's say, I don't know, you had a friend who was interested in philosophy and was having a little hard time in life. There's very few names that you would recommend. Nevertheless, what philosophy really is is a discipline that's distinct from, say, poetry or religion. But like poetry, it wants to talk about the things that are meaningful. And like religion, it wants to give us guidance. But unlike religion, it's not using the supernatural. There's no appeal to supernatural or mysterious forces, forces you can't define. It's based on anything that you can kind of reason with. And unlike poetry, it's not merely interested in kind of beautiful phenomena. It wants to take those somewhere. It wants to inform and reform us. So the book I wrote after I wrote How Proust Can Change Your Life is a book called The Constellations of Philosophy. And in that book, I looked at six great philosophers.

I looked at Socrates, Epicurus, Seneca, Montaigne, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. And I looked at these guys for very practical guidance. It was an attempt to say to these great names, how can you show us what to do and how to live? And so that was a kind of classic style that I was developing and that I was getting good results from. And that's a book of mine that won many readers around the world, and it's still probably the book of mine that sells the best. And it does what it says on the tin, which is to look for constellations among the work of some great philosophers.

Tim Ferriss: Do you consider Bertrand Russell a philosopher?

Alain de Botton: Absolutely.

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Tim Ferriss: I was always very impressed. I was introduced to Bertrand Russell before I was introduced to Seneca.

And then vis-a-vis Seneca and delving into Stoicism – of course, he has a very interesting style of prose and discourse. So he throws in his competition, right? He throws in Epicurus quite a bit as a way to pull in defectors, which is very clever of him, and not too surprising if you look at this political hardwiring.

Alain de Botton: Exactly.

Tim Ferriss: But Bertrand Russell was the first one. And I'm not sure if it was – I've read several of his books, but Why I Am Not a Christian was –

Alain de Botton: The Secrets of Happiness?

Tim Ferriss: The Secrets of Happiness also, yes. That may have been the first. And I was struck by how strongly it contrasted to most of the philosophy I'd been exposed to. I went to Princeton undergraduate. I did take on philosophy class that was very, very, very good with a Professor Rosen. And I'm blanking on the – I think it was Metaphysics and Epistemology 101. I probably couldn't define either of those terms at this point, but Professor Rosen was very good.

And then the rest that I ran into really seemed like a lot of intellectual masturbation where a vast majority of it seemed to focus on semantic tail chasing. Sort of the, "What does 'is' really mean?" And then they'd go on for 600 pages of rhetoric. And at the end, you're like, I don't think that added any value to my life.

Alain de Botton: I mean, I so sympathize. That was my experience as well, and it enrages me and saddens me. And I think that, look. The older I get, the more I realize that the great challenge of our own age is to take the good ideas and make them available to a wide public. And the universities often do, really, the opposite. I mean, they inform a kind of narrow coterie of students, but they stand outside the kind of democratic project.

And that's critical because we live in a mass culture. We live in a world where ideas have to have followings in the millions if they're ever to get traction. And when people wring their hands in despair and go, why don't we do this, or why don't we do that, or why is the world, etc., a lot of the reason is that the good ideas are not on network TV. They're not on the mass channels of

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communication. So a few people in the Ivy League universities have got full command of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. But out in the streets, there isn't that democratic pool of knowledge. And I've always been attracted to the great democrats of knowledge. So someone like Voltaire in 18th century France, he wanted to write for everybody. Someone like Emerson in the American tradition. Again, he was a man who toured the country and gave impassioned speeches about the highest and most meaningful things.

But he was in the church hall talking the language of ordinary people to get his message across. And that seems to have been so hard for many 20th century philosophers. And Bertrand Russell is in a company of almost just one in his decision that – here was a guy who had a column in a daily newspaper in England. He wrote articles for American Vogue. He appeared on television. He had a regular radio program. Many philosophers attacked him for this. They said that he was cheapening and deadening his subject, but this was a man who knew his stuff. He wasn't gonna be bullied and patronized. And he understood that the things he cared about would only live if he managed to get ordinary people properly engaged. So he was a wonderful, wonderful vulgarizer in the best sense.

Tim Ferriss: No, I agree.

And I think that one of the challenges is that when you had, say, the Stoics, right? Stoa, as I understand it, referring to porch, and they would sit in these informal classrooms and talk. I mean, there were other forums, of course. Fora, maybe? I don't know. I'm not up to speed with my etymology. But when that translated into a more structured academic setting, and say the hard sciences had a progression in difficulty, right? Where if you were going to study at the graduate level in mathematics, you'd need to master the prerequisites in undergraduate, and then algebra and so on before that. And when you take philosophy and force fit it into that type of progression, you go from not striving to make something useful, but striving to make something difficult. And I think when it becomes difficult, it's inversely correlated to its usefulness. Does that make sense? It's like, well, you can't be a PhD in philosophy until you've made it sufficiently arcane and made the rhetoric so convoluted that only five people at this university are willing to sit down and talk about it for three hours.

And it becomes this very unfortunate sort of self-cauterizing structure.

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Alain de Botton: Totally. The unfortunate thing is that the humanities – so all the great wisdom of the ages, at a professional level, they started to have to compete in the 20th century with the sciences for money and attention in universities. And the way that they decided to take the battle is that they sort of tried to turn themselves into pseudo sciences. They suggested that you would study them like a scientist would study. So you would do things like research, and you would find a poet and you would research the poet. And you would do some kind of complicated weird stuff in the back engine room around this person. Previously, the humanities wasn't handled like this.

They were handled by ordinary laypeople who would spend half an hour in the evening dipping into a volume of philosophy or poetry. Suddenly, this stuff became the subject of kind of study that was akin to studying nuclear physics. And that was all to make sure that the professors would get tenure, and the departments would get funding, and the governments would be suitably impressed. I can understand and sympathize with peoples' need to progress up the career ladder. But it's been a complete disaster for the rest of us because it's meant that wisdom that was supposed to circulate freely and democratically around the nation has become bunched up in some kind to centers in the universities, and is not doing its job. And we know what happens on TV and down the airwaves.

Tim Ferriss: Who do you think are contemporary thinkers who are doing a good job of popularizing what you might consider philosophy? Who are names that come to mind? Of course, you are one of the first names that come to mind for most people, but who else would you put on that list?

Alain de Botton: Well, I have a colleague who I like very much called John Armstrong who operates out of Australia, and he writes some wonderful things. There is also, as I mentioned, someone called Martha Nussbaum, who's doing a really nice job. There have been others. But it is hard. Popularization is hard. One of my favorite popularizers is Jamie Oliver, the cook, the chef. And what I love about the guy is that he's taught the UK how to cook. And the way he's done that is speaking the language of ordinary people about some pretty unordinary things, like how to cook duck a l'orange or something. And he's got working class English males to kind of put on an apron and do some weird stuff.

And I think that's what a good teacher is. A good teacher is the person who takes your fear. And we tend to have these fears, like I'm a woman, so I can't, or I come from a working class

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background, so I can't. Or I'm an elite person, so I can't. A lot of people have these kind of blocks. I can't do this because of that in my past. And a good teacher says, no, how do you mean? You can't do engineering and be a woman? Of course you can. Or you can't be a working class guy and read poetry? Of course you can, etc. And that's what a good teacher does, shakes you free from some of these kind of dichotomies. And so for me, a good teacher of philosophy is someone who calms down the audience. You thought that because you're a busy dentist, you can't read philosophy? It has no place in your life? Of course you can. So that's what a good teacher does. And there are some out there, and we need more.

Tim Ferriss: I agree on Jamie Oliver. I have one of his books, Cook With Jamie, about 15 feet in front of me on a shelf, next to a couple of other people I would put in that same category of teacher. You have Seven Fires, which is one probably many people haven't heard of, which is by a Patagonian chef trained in France about how to use fire to cook. But the underlying principles are the same, whether it's Richard Feynman, the physicist – one of my favorite books is Surely You Must Be Joking, Mr. Feynman, or Seven Fires, or Jamie Oliver. I mean, they are making the potentially complex simple to encourage the free flow of ideas and action. And it's the opposite of making the potentially simple complicated to constrain the flow because you have a scarcity mindset. You have a defensive mindset, which would be the case, I think, for many people at the highest levels of academia, which is unfortunate.

They feel like if they were to popularize, it would sort of loosen the soil beneath their feet and remove some stability in some way, or cheapen it. And I'm not sure when that happened. I mean, in the day of, say – there's a book I really need to read called, I think it's Dying Every Day. It's a book about Seneca in the court of Nero. But Seneca was a very, very popular writer. Do you have any idea if he was ridiculed and scoffed at by the highbrow philosophers of his day, or is that a recent development?

Alain de Botton: Well, he was ridiculed. Not for that issue, but he was ridiculed for making a lot of money, which he did, in politics and business, and also, having a pretty luxurious lifestyle. And people said, hang on, how do you mean? You're supposed to be a Stoic. You're supposed to be a philosopher. You're supposed to have one cloak and live in [inaudible], and your house is pretty nice.

And so there was some mockery. And he has some funny answers to that. I mean, he rebuts the charges head on. And he says, it's not

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the true philosopher must have no money, it's just that he must be ready to lose it. That his hold on it must be relaxed. And in fact, this could sound like, oh yeah, pull the other leg. But in fact, he did practice what he preached because twice in his life, he did lose everything. He was exiled. He fell into political disgrace, etc. And he behaved pretty well. And so Stoicism is not necessarily – Stoicism attracted a lot of support from the very wealthy and the very successful because it taught them that they could survive without their wealth and their success. And very often, when people get wealthy and successful, they become very scared of what would happen, and they feel the need for ever more success and ever more wealth from a fear that if they would have to go backwards, it would be catastrophic.

And what's very relaxing and nice about Stoicism is that it partly says, well, it's survivable. Of course it is. And one of the favorite Stoic exercises that they would perform was that once a month or so, a Stoic was advised the wear their dirtiest cloak and sleep on the kitchen floor, Seneca advised, in the dog basket. I don't know how big that might be. And you would drink the dog's water. And the idea was that for a few days, you'd live like a dog. And you realize that that's possible, and it's fine. And that removes a fear. And as they understood, coming back to your earlier issue about ambition, they realized that often, what stops us from realizing our ambitions is fear. And therefore, if we make ourselves totally at home with failure, totally at home with utter disgrace, we will feel a curious lightness and sense of possibility because we won't be held back by the constant thought, what happens if?

We will have fully explored the question of what happens if. We'll have made ourselves so at home, and seen that there is nothing so bad about failure. And that will free us to advance more likely and with greater courage towards some of our goals.

Tim Ferriss: I couldn't agree more. And you were mentioning pessimism earlier. I gave a presentation, I think in 2008 or 2009 – it was only five or six minutes long – called Practical Pessimism. And it made the point, like you just did very eloquently, that if you practice the worst-case scenario, and even if you were to view that as pessimism, but a very practical version of it, it actually frees you to be more ambitious. It doesn't teach you to drop your expectations, it just teaches you not to be attached to the expectation of a best-case scenario. So it frees you up to swing for the fences because you're not afraid of striking out. At least, I've found that to be true for myself.

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And there's a great essay also out there on the discussion and the stone-throwing related to Seneca and his wealth. I mean, he was very well-known for being wealthy, and had his ivory-legged tables and so on. There's an essay called "The Case of the Opulent Stoic," which is a very interesting read on how that controversy evolved, and where it may be a fair accusation and where it may be an unfair accusation.

Alain de Botton: What a wonderful essay.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, yeah. It's a great, great name, too, just like the In Search of Lost Time. Where did all this come from? I mean, insomuch as where did you grow up? What did your parents do? Could you give us some color as to your upbringing, the pre-Cambridge years?

Alain de Botton: So I came from a family of very displaced and very neurotic and anxious immigrants. My father was born in Egypt. He was part of the Jewish community in Alexandria that got kicked out in the '50s from one day to the next. He then drifted around the Middle East. He eventually wound up as an immigrant, as a refugee, more or less, in Switzerland. Was utterly penniless and desperate. Met my mother, who was part of the Swiss Jewish community, and she, for all her own reasons, her father had recently died. The family had lost everything from having come from quite a privileged background. They then lost everything, and she was living in very humble circumstances. Anyway, they found each other, they clung to each other, and they were united in their desire to make it in life, and to be ambitious and achieve great things. They did manage to achieve great things. Together, they built up a business. My father made it big in the world of finance.

He always retained a kind of immigrant panic mentality. Having not had a passport for long periods of his life, he eventually got a famed Swiss passport, and he would treasure that item like nothing else. And every time he crossed a border, every time he went in and out of a country, there would be panic in his eyes as he just thought, is this gonna be the moment when they grab me and put me somewhere else, etc. So that was kind of part of his DNA. So I was growing up in a family that was at one level comfortable, and had all the things in life. And at another level, there was a deep psychological kind of disturbance and fear. I would say that the dominant mood of my parents was anxiety. And if I returned home in the evening, they would sort of think, oh, you're still alive. And I would go, yeah, sure, I'm still alive. And they were amazed. And they believe above all in hard work. But to a slightly crazy degree.

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And as a child, I observed them and I observed both their successes and their strengths, and also some of their vulnerabilities.

I realized that these were people who didn't have a very good grasp of their own psychology. And but they did love the arts. Both of them loved the arts very much. And that, I inherited from them. Anyway, I inherited various things. Every childhood is such a mixed bag of things. But I came out of that childhood thinking success is important. But at the same time, aware enough of the limitations of success to not swallow uncritically some of the messages about what it means to kind of make it in this world. And so a lot of my work has been kind of exploring and probing what we mean by success and the challenges it brings, etc. So, yeah, I don't know if that explains some of it.

Tim Ferriss: No, it adds a lot of very helpful context. I mean, you've written, of course, Status Anxiety, The Architecture of Happiness, The News, A User's Manual. You're prolific, certainly, compared to me.

And have you developed any practices or reminders that help you to mitigate or minimize status anxiety? The keeping up with the Joneses, or the fear of missing out, all these issues that seem to really plague at least a lot of my friends, and I know I grapple with these myself.

Alain de Botton: Sure. I mean, I think a very vital kind of realization was, it's not just me. It's part of being alive today, that we 've got this ideology of individualism. What historians have identified, it's called individualism, which is a kind of new idea, because we've come from collective societies where your sense of wellbeing did not depend on anything that you particularly did. You were first and foremost part of a tribe, part of a village. You were part of a family.

Your own achievements were only one part, and perhaps even only the most minor part of those other sources of identity and sense of self. We've done away with that. Everybody is meant to reinvent themselves. And that's wonderful and liberating, and was part of the European and American story in the 18th century. But it's also deeply troubling for many of us. It crushes us because what a burden to bear. In a way, what unwitting cruelty, to say to everyone, you can't rely on where you have come from. You can't define yourself by your group, by your family, by your ancestors, by the nation. You can't believe in nationalism. It isn't enough for you to feel proud of your group. You have to be proud only of

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yourself and what you've achieved in the years since you've finished your college education or whatever.

That is a heavy and sometimes just overwhelming burden. It's good to realize that we are under this pressure. It's not that that will magically make that pressure disappear. But just to be able to know, no wonder I'm a little twitchy on Sunday evenings as the sun goes down. No wonder I get that Sunday feeling when I'm thinking, my god, I've got my dreams on the one hand and my reality on the other, and the gap is too large, and I feel desperate. No wonder we feel that, because that is what the whole system helps us and makes us feel. And I don't want to say that it's all wrong, but it is certainly very demanding. Look, my experience of envy and status anxiety, etc., it's a very simple idea. The more you know what you really want and where you're really going, the more what everybody else is doing starts to diminish. So the moments when your own path is at its most ambiguous, that the voices of others, the distracting chaos in which we live, the kind of social media static, that starts to loom large and become very threatening.

The thing about ourselves is, as you know, we're not very good at understanding what it is that we really want. We're extremely prone to latch onto suggestions from the outside world. When everybody was saying tech was big, a lot of people who never thought about it thought tech was really for them. When banking was big, people thought, banking's for me. When people were telling you that romantic love is perfect, you think, well, I must be finding it, perhaps even feeling romantic love, etc. So we've got a lot of models out there that don't necessarily suit us, but are deeply powerful. And I think that to calm down, first of all, you have to realize that your ultimate responsibility is to yourself, not the neighbors, not your parents, not the expectations that were put upon you.

This is where the thought of death is tremendously releasing, that your only real responsibility is to yourself as a kind of mortal, very temporary being, and constellation of particles and proteins that are hanging together in a particular shape for a few years before disappearing forever. That's you. And there are more ways to be than your college graduation speech led you to think. So, yeah. These are some of the tensions of the modern soul.

Tim Ferriss: And I've found a lot of – this is something I sometimes have trouble verbalizing to people, but I find that a lot of Buddhist thought has parallels with Stoic thought in terms of whether it's

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Marcus Aurelius saying, at the end of a very short period of time, I will be bones and dust on the ground.

And that's his uplifting note to himself in his journal before he goes off to battle. Or it's a Musaci Miamoto, who is one of, if not the most famous swordsman in Japanese history, who would say probably more or less the exact same thing before setting off on his day. And it sounds very depressing, and it sounds like a downer, but it for me has been such a helpful reminder. And it's sad circumstances, but I've had two friends die of unexpected causes very suddenly in the last month. And it just seems to be all the more important that we have some type of memento mori, right? Some type of reminder of death that – and in fact, I have a friend who is in finance. Don't hold that against him. He's a good guy. But he has an Excel spreadsheet that calculates and displays on his desk the number of expected hours he has left in his life.

So that he sees that every day. I don't have that, but in, for instance, The Four Hour Chef, in the author photograph, put a small skull in the very bottom corner. It's kind of hard to see. But that's what a lot of artists used to do. Not to say that I'm an artist, but that was one of the ways I wanted to constantly remind myself that time can be very short. You don't know how many hours you have left on the planet. I'm sorry, I was just gonna ask, and feel free to take this in a different direction. But with recognizing that the clearer you have defined what you want, the less fear of missing out, the less status anxiety, the less suggestive you will be to the madness of the mob. Where do you want to be in three year's time, for instance?

What would you like your sort of day-to-day existence to be like, or what would you like to have achieved – it doesn't have to be professional – in the next three years?

Alain de Botton: Sure. Well, I mean, if I can mention the professional, one of the things that's been really absorbing me in the last few years is – well, I was a writer for most of my professional life. And then I always had a sense that writing books wasn't quite enough. And what I mean by enough is I didn't feel that sending people 200 pages glued together was necessarily always gonna be the solution to many of the issues that I cared about. I felt a sort of crisis of the soul where I realized that this idea of being a writer that I'd wanted so badly when I was younger was no longer fully satisfying me, because I realized that so many problems were not going to be amenable to treatment by books, that you needed other things.

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And that led me to begin an organization which I call the School of Life, which was very much in line with things that I've been caring about in my books for a long time. But there were a few differences. For a start, it wasn't just about me. It was actually about gathering together with a group of like-minded but different people, with different talents and different skills, and starting something that could be a proper collective and an institution. The reason I started where I did was that I read a lot about religion. Because at a certain point in my kind of crisis about the meaning of being a writer, etc., I got very interested in religions. Because I thought, I'm an atheist. I don't believe, but I'm very interested in religions. I'm very sympathetic to many of the things you find in religion. And what I realized that you find in religion is a machine, organization.

Religions don't just believe in writing their deepest thoughts down in a book and that's it. They support things by having communal activities, group activities, getting very involved in the arts, getting involved in this thing which we call ritual. And we can talk amore about that, what is a ritual? But ritualized actions, repetition. The repetition of ideas. You don't just read them once. You repeat them, maybe with other people. You might use music to get a point across. All of these things fascinated me, and I realized that as religion declined in Europe in the 19th century, in many parts of the United States even now, etc., as religion disappeared, it was in many places replaced by culture. People who in previous ages would have been religious got very interested in music and literature and philosophy and all these sort of things. But I realized that those things were missing one thing that religion really did well, which was the kind of group bit, the institutional bit, the embedding in daily life bit.

And I thought, couldn't we do some of that now? And I also look backwards to ancient Greece, and I realized that philosophers, many of them had started up schools. Epicurus had started a school called the Garden. The Stoics had the Stoa. Plato had his school, the Academy, etc. And it's not that I wanted to directly imitate that, but I thought, how interesting, that these were people who thought it isn't enough just to be you in a book. Anyway, many of these thoughts contributed to my beginning this thing that I call the School of Life. And it's been the focus of a lot of my energy in the last four years. To give you just a sense of it, the thing has its HQ in London, but we now have 10 branches around the world, including in Australia and the Far East and Europe, etc. Not in the United States yet. But what we do is –

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Tim Ferriss: We don't care about that.

Alain de Botton: No.

Tim Ferriss: We just want bigger cars.

Alain de Botton: You care so much. But I can explain why we're not in the United States.

Tim Ferriss: No, I'm just kidding.

Alain de Botton: I'd love to be one day. But we're not yet. Anyway, we run classes, we publish books, we put on events. We run a YouTube channel. We do all sorts of things. And it's just –

Tim Ferriss: You have some great videos on the YouTube channel. I highly recommend it.

Alain de Botton: Thank you. And really, what we're trying to do is to take a lot of stuff that I care about, but try and find other channels down which to distribute. I mean, your career more than anyone shows how that can be done and that is done. And so I felt a kind of restlessness, which perhaps you felt as well at a certain point, about what it means to be a writer. And it's perhaps an intersection of writing and business for me, and learning how to create a business out of something that I'd previously just seen as a kind of romantic inspiration of the kind of lone artist. Anyway, all of that's been very interesting.

And you ask about the goals in the next few years. I really hope to continue to make a contribution there, and sort of make the School of Life as good as it can be, for us to touch as many lives as we can in as diverse a way as we can, to invite more and more people into this kind of little home we've built.

Tim Ferriss: And that was started in 2008, is that right?

Alain de Botton: Yes, yes. 2008, yes, yes.

Tim Ferriss: That is around the time, 2008, 2009, after, I think, partially instigated by the cultural – well, I shouldn't say cultural – existential and financial insecurity caused by the mortgage-backed securities crisis of that time. But I developed quite a high degree of restlessness about being an author, which led to starting the angel investing and looking at startups as a way to – using as a means of leverage.

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So using startups as an Archimedes lever of sorts to translate some of these concepts into the real world in a way that could scale at a very high level. But let me ask you a slightly more personal question. So what, for instance, bad habits are you working to overcome at the moment, or hope to work on? Let's look at the present day. I have a million of my own that I usually overshare in Facebook Q&As and things like that, especially if wine is involved. But what bad habits are you currently working on, if any?

Alain de Botton: Look, it's a very classic one that so many people, so many of us are guilty of, which is not properly communicating. And what I mean by properly is not properly teaching others about myself, what I'm feeling, what I would like, what bothers me.

And instead of properly communicating, merely acting out and symbolizing things and expecting to be understood. And this is a constant effort, really, to not imagine that those around me should mind read. They can't know what I feel unless I tell them. And also, they won't hear me unless I speak in a certain way. If I'm agitated and get annoyed quickly, that immediately shuts off communication. If I blame them, that shuts off communication. They will not hear. If I humiliate anyone, that message will get lost. So if you're trying to get something across, resist all those bad habits that we all around communication. I think it's trying to learn how to be a better teacher and a better student. Teaching has these sort of weird connotations. You think of some guy teaching history in a high school, or something like that.

But in order to have a good life, all of us need to learn how to be good teachers and good students of one another. Because every day creates moments when we need to teach something. We need to give somebody a lesson. It may be in what time we're gonna be home tonight, or how we're feeling about some event on the horizon, or whatever it is, but we're gonna need to get something across. And that requires kind of rules and disciplines. And just simply blurting it out, simply kind of exploding in some way or emoting in some way is normally the worst way. And at the same time, we have to learn to become students, which is to listen properly, to interpret. Maybe somebody's making a bit of a mess of trying to tell you something, but try and listen to what they might be telling you beneath the surface. I have relatively small kids. They very often don't tell you what they feel. They can't tell you directly what they feel. You have to do some guesswork. And a lot of what –

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Tim Ferriss: You have to deduce.

Alain de Botton: Yeah, you have to deduce. But I think you have to deduce for everybody's sake. And very few of us learn on the spot. If somebody told me or told you a big central truth about you – the thing about you, Tim, is dadada. Well, the thing about you, Alain, is dadada. If that was said, even just vaguely brutally, or even with just a little whatever, we would shut down. We get defensive. We go, no, that's not true. How do you know? What are you trying to do? Etc. We shut down quickly. We don't absorb that information. And we should try and get less defensive. And at the same time, when we're in the kind of giving feedback role, we should really think carefully. So I think this whole business of listening and feedback is a key issue that I'm always trying to work on.

Tim Ferriss: I'm trying to do the same thing. And that was my newly adopted puppy also trying to –

Alain de Botton: To make its feelings known.

Tim Ferriss: Trying to communicate. I've taught her to kick the bells on the door, but aside from that, I'm so far failing at speaking dog. But I'm trying to do the same thing. And you mentioned the young children. And I think if you can recognize that if you were to keep someone from having lunch, keep anyone from having lunch for three or four hours, and give them an argument with a spouse or loved one or coworker 60 minutes earlier, that their emotional state will probably be closer to your children than anything else. And if you assume that when you read their email as opposed to reading malicious intent. I was always – I shouldn't say always. I was told quite some time ago something that I've enjoyed trying to remind myself of so I don't respond in kind, so I don't volley back something nasty with something nasty. Don't attribute to malice what you can attribute to incompetence.

Alain de Botton: That's very nice.

Tim Ferriss: And a close cousin of that, which I've had to add to it, is don't attribute to malice what you can attribute to incompetence or business.

Alain de Botton: Yes, that's right. I often think – someone once said this to me, and it's really stuck in my mind, that when people seem like they are mean, they're almost never mean. They're anxious. That's what inspires the behavior that you read as meanness. But it very

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frequently is not meanness. And these are very basic bits of psychology. But I should say, again, the older I get, the more I think we are relatively simple creatures, just as to nourish us physically, we need our basic things. Some bread, an olive or two, some water, and off we go. So when it comes to our kind of inner psyches, many of the things that we need have an almost breathtaking simplicity. It is things like the person is mean, not worried. They're almost like mantras. They are simple things.

And I think we are so highly educated, we overeducate ourselves out of connection with these simple truths. And they are so key. And this is something, if you mention Buddhism, this is something that Zen Buddhists are very keen on. Zen Buddhist philosophy and poetry is often unbelievably simple. And rather than seeing that as an argument against it, the great masters will ponder a sentence, turn it over, write it down in ever more beautiful, refined, but simple ways on a piece of paper, etc. And I think that we've got, unfortunately, because of science and the glamor of science, this addiction to the idea that the most valuable things must be very complicated and constantly new, rather than perhaps very simple and repetitions of some basic, quite old truths. And it's just, I think we're mixing up a kind of source of wisdom in one area, which is flying rockets, with a source of wisdom in another, which is how to get through your day.

And we're misinterpreting what we need for both realms. We're thinking we need a kind of scientific version in personal life, where actually, it's really super unhelpful.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. And I think also, we tend to, as higher primates with big prefrontal cortexes, cortices? I have no idea. In any case, we want to, if we're having a bad day, we look at these big existential questions, as opposed to, did I have five olives, or should I have five olives? Maybe my blood sugar's just low.

Alain de Botton: That's right. I love that. Wasn't it Clinton who said that before, when dealing with anyone who's upset, he always asks, has this person slept? Have they eaten? Is nobody else bugging them? He goes through this kind of simple checklist. But we know so much. When we're handling babies and the baby is kicking and crying, we almost never just once say, that baby's out to get me, or she's got evil intentions.

We go, she's probably tired, or he hasn't had a enough sleep, or maybe it's too tight around his collar, or whatever. We look for pretty benevolent, often pretty basic explanations. Once we reach

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adulthood, we almost never. I mean, when have we been in a situation with an angry person who's whatever. We always look at the intellectual level. We very rarely go, wow, this is probably someone who's really pretty tired, or it's 1:00, and they've not had anything to eat. So that's where the explanation – it offends our self-knowledge. It offends our sense of dignity, but it really shouldn't. And as you say, we are an amazing computer sitting on some very, very basic bits of software. And not to accept how basic we are is its own version of kind of pretension, and we should resist it.

Tim Ferriss: And self-sabotage, in a way.

Alain de Botton: Yes.

Tim Ferriss: For sure. I would love to shift gears a little bit and lob some rapid-fire questions your way. The answers don't need to be rapid, but when you think of the word successful, who is the first person who comes to mind and why?

Alain de Botton: I didn't want it to be, but unfortunately, Steve Jobs came to mind. And I'm really annoyed about that because I don't actually see him as the quintessence of success. Look, I think a successful person is somebody who has taken hold and fathomed their talents, made the most out of those talents, and reconciled themselves to their weaknesses. They're not ranting and raging about their weaknesses. They have a sense of what those weaknesses are. They're not blaming the world for them. They know them. They own them. At the same time, they've had a sense of their strengths, and they've been able to make something of those strengths.

And maybe that thing's relatively modest, but they've still managed to externalize their strengths. That's asking a lot. That is a successful life. Very few of us are lucky enough to get there. But I think that's what it might be.

Tim Ferriss: Who would be someone, not Steve Jobs, who certainly was prone to ranting and raving, and I'm not sure how aware he was of many of his weaknesses. But who would be an exemplar of that for you?

Alain de Botton: It's funny, I was recently in Switzerland, where I come from, and when I was little, I was partly brought up my parents, but also partly brought up by a very kindly lady who lived with us in the family. She was helping the family, etc. She was almost like a second mother to me. And she's now 83 years old and lives in an isolated Swiss village. She's in amazing health for her age. And

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she is a true saint.

And she's not religious, but if you wanted to offer somebody out to science as somebody who is well-balanced – you won't read about her in the newspaper. You won't see her, etc. But you actually sit in her kitchen and you talk about politics with her, you talk about child-raising, you talk about the meaning of life. This is a person with an inherent ballast who's no nonsense, who knows how to be kind, who knows how to laugh, who knows, etc. And the world is full of such people, people who represent what you might call an ordinary genius. An ordinary genius of the business of living.

Tim Ferriss: I like that.

Alain de Botton: And we walk past these people because they don't star in any of our calendars. I'd even go so far as to say that perhaps a few more of them are women than men. And they are utterly unheralded. But they are out there, and they are the true philosophers.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, I guess that could be contrasted with the extraordinary hubris that we seem to worship oftentimes, sadly.

Alain de Botton: That's right. I mean, that's why I was kicking myself when the very word success has become contaminated by our ideas of someone extraordinary, very rich, etc. And that's really unhelpful, that ultimately to be properly successful is to be at peace as well. I've seen too many people who are so-called successful who are not at peace. And that's a problem.

Tim Ferriss: Well, and not to be too clichéd about it, but I think that it's easy to define success as getting what you want. But for those people you mentioned with that internal ballast, that ordinary genius, they also want what they have, right? They appreciate what they have, which I think is not nearly as taught or studied as the achieving of what we want.

Alain de Botton: Absolutely. And you say taught. I mean, we need reminders of this.

Otherwise people go, oh yeah. When you tell someone that, they go, oh yeah. That's obvious. I knew that. And you go, yeah, but is it alive? There's such a difference between an idea being in theory in your brain and alive in your brain. And those kind of ideas, about appreciating every day, are generally not alive in our brains. And that's the problem of art, really. They are not artistically alive. And that's something to bear in mind.

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Tim Ferriss: What is the book that you've given most as a gift, aside from your own? Book or books?

Alain de Botton: Hm. Well, there was a stage before I got married and when I was on the dating scene when I gave a lot of copies – this was the '90s. I gave a lot of copies of Milan Kundera to people. The Unbearable Lightness of Being was a book that I gave out a lot. I don't know if I still would, but I do admire this Czech writer very much. And it has all kinds of wisdom.

And it's beautifully written and impactful as well. I've given quite a lot of copies of Montaigne's essays to people down the years. And I've not given Proust because it's a little heavy. But yes, that kind of thing.

Tim Ferriss: Thank you. And for those people – his name has come up a bit, or several times in this conversation, Montaigne. There's a post by Ryan Halliday, an introduction to Montaigne on the blog, for those of you who want to check it out at fourhourworkweek.com. And I'm sure that that will be linked to in the show notes, as well as everything that we've talked about so far. What is something you believe that other people think is insane?

Alain de Botton: Hm.

Tim Ferriss: Or many other people. It doesn't have to be everyone. But what is something you think that most other people think is inane?

Alain de Botton: Yeah. I believe in the nanny state. We live in a very – you have that expression in the States, right? Nanny state?

Tim Ferriss: Oh yes.

Alain de Botton: Yeah. So I believe in the nanny state.

I'm not coming at it from the left or right. It's almost irrespective of that. But I believe essentially in a public sphere which should offer guidance. I think the idea of the neutral public sphere, where, for example, it's just completely left to the market to decide, and if you've got the money, you buy an advertisement. If you want to pay for a billboard, pay for a billboard, etc. And I think that – I'm interested in the way that we went from religious societies which guided people towards important truths, to societies that have just left everyone completely alone. So in my utopia, there would be a lot more guidance. I am a believer in – because I've needed so

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much guidance. I would pay real attention to what's on the airwaves, for example. In the UK at the moment where I'm based, the government is thinking hard about what it should do with its gigantic television station, the BBC, that it gives millions, in fact billions of pounds to every year.

And it's wondering what it should do with it. And the argument seems to be quite a sterile one. But my view, on the national broadcaster should be programs that systematically address all the largest failings and dilemmas of the nation, including the failures around parenting, around family breakdowns, around violence, around anxiety, around loneliness, etc. We know government statisticians know what the problems are in large populations. But they refuse the tools that they have, like, say, the BBC. And the idea is, well, no one should tell anyone how to live.

There's such a fear of fascism, Communism. And I can't help thinking that we have made a bogeyman here, that that isn't really the threat. The real threat is that we are drowning in chaotic noise, and unable to find a kind of balance. And I think that I'd be up for a little bit more vigilance about that and a little bit more nannying of the best kind. So that's the kind of thing that I'm very careful not to tell – I don't know why I've told you and your millions of listeners now. But I'm aware because I use YouTube a lot. And I'm aware that if you put anything out there that says even anything like that, an unbelievable torrent of messages comes through, along the lines of you're a Communist, or you're a fascist, or you're trying to infantilize me, or blablabla. And my view is always, hang on a minute. We're all adults. And when you know you're an adult, you can also admit that actually seeking help, therapeutic help in the broadest sense, is part of adult life.

That saying, no one teaches me anything. I'm just my own person, totally, is kind of like a brittle version of maturity. And I'm interested in a more dependent relationship on others, where we can seek help. Where we're not offended if someone offers help to us. Of course, we can turn it away, but we're not offended by the offer of help. And so these are some of the things that I think about late at night, and it would offend and frighten everybody.

Tim Ferriss: So a couple of thoughts. The first is on the art of asking. I think Amanda Palmer, the musician, has a lot of interesting things to say that people could benefit from checking out. The second is on being called a fascist. I think that YouTube – I love it, God bless it. But if you scroll to page four or five of comments, I think on any video, even if it's a kitten playing the piano, you're gonna have the

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word fascist in there somewhere.

Alain de Botton: Of course.

Tim Ferriss: The third piece I would say is, in terms of the state or the government offering guidance, or maybe even differing positions on some of these bigger moral questions and life questions, I think that there might be a forcing function. And that forcing function could be artificial intelligence.

Alain de Botton: Yes.

Tim Ferriss: And things like autonomous cars. I think technology – oddly enough, the most cutting edge technology is going to drive a reversion in some ways, or a return to some of the oldest philosophical quandaries and thought experiments that we have, that we visit in, say, a freshman seminar and think of as relevant. Like the trolley scenario, or the fat man blocking the cave with four people inside who are going to starve.

But when you translate that to modern day, I mean, even right now, there are tech companies hiring what they might consider utilitarian philosophers, along the lines of, say, Peter Singer, to advise them on some of these questions. For instance, if you have to program a car that is going to make decisions in disaster scenarios, like there is something in the middle of the road. I have to swerve. Do I choose to hit the six old ladies on the right-hand side, or the two schoolchildren on the left side? How do you make that calculus, right? And so I think that in some ways, technology might force the state or governments of various types to take a more active role in this type of conversation.

Alain de Botton: I think that's absolutely right and fascinating. And I too have been very interested in artificial intelligence of late.

And I think that what we're taking about is the broad recognition that we are not very good at making decisions, that our brains are extremely faulty in all sorts of ways. At the same time, we have this idea that no one should tell us how to live. And what can slightly break the logjam is big data, scientific information. So that in the Google in 50 years' time, you will say, who shall I marry? And the answers will really be quite accurate and personally attuned to you, and akin to having gone to psychotherapy for 10 years in their level of awareness of the issues facing you. So I think you're absolutely right that artificial intelligence will break through many peoples' resistance to insights, which currently,

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because they're not based on science and hard data, seem just too vulnerable to being shut down by the kind of line of, ooh, who are you to say it doesn't have any fact behind it?

They may be right. But because we live in a society that's quite obsessed by science and facts, and won't accept things unless they're backed up by facts, we may just need to wait a little until some of these more humanistic truths and insights have got the backing that is required to allow them to have sort of mass uptake.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, agreed. And I think that another factor will sort of drive together in confluence, certainly with other things, to AI, or incorporating AI, and that is virtual reality. I was not a true believer until less than a week ago. I had a virtual reality demo that I can't go into too many details about because it's not hugely public, that completely blew my mind. I mean, the experience was so lifelike and so compelling that it made me wonder more than ever if we're in a simulacrum of our own of some type.

But it will raise questions, such as, I mean, when you are a three-dimensional, immersive, photo-realistic environment, and most certainly, there will be tactile components and so on. Olfactory components. Those will come at some point. When will gains be permitted, for instance, that rather than being relegated to a 2-D service on a television, allow you to kill someone? Like bludgeon someone to death, or, I mean, much worse, right? Are those going to be in any way regulated, or are those going to be allowed? And what effect does that have versus a more video game-esque, in the traditional sense, experience, right? So it's scary. It's very terrifying. But at the same time, I think holds a lot of promise.

Let me completely abruptly transition to another short question, which is what is your favorite documentary or movie? What are some of your favorite documentaries?

Alain de Botton: Well, I very much enjoyed a documentary which I don't know if you'll know called Seven Up, which was done in the UK. And what it did is it followed a group of children every seven years, starting from their seventh birthday. And these children were picked deliberately from a wide variety of social backgrounds, different kinds of families, etc. And every seven years, these kids were revisited. And we traced their lives. And of course, this is one of the things that art can do for us. It kind of traces lives over timespans that we normally can't have access to.

So now these people are in their 50s, and they're still making the

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documentary. And it gets updated every seven years. Every seven years, there's a new thing. And it's a weird feature of British life. Everyone knows Seven Up sort of thing. And it just come along every seven years. And we know these people. And their lives show such a variation, ups and downs. And sometimes things are going really well, other times, going terribly, etc. And again, it's just so much the art I like. It's very much attuned to the every day. It's concerned with, broadly speaking, wisdom and how we can live. And very undramatic, but quietly so powerful. For my money, it's probably the best documentary that exists. I very much recommend it. So that's one that comes to mind.

Tim Ferriss: Wow, that's a strong endorsement. Now I'm on a tear with docs, so I'll have to check that out.

Alain de Botton: Please do.

Tim Ferriss: What is the purchase of $100 or less that has positively impacted your life in the last six months?

Alain de Botton: I've really discovered the pomegranate. And pomegranates are just a weird thing. I never even knew they existed, really. I knew the word, I just didn't know what it was. Anyway, someone told me about pomegranates, and that they could be a really interesting thing to eat and make part of one's diet. And it's a thing I now regularly have. They're not cheap. Each one is a few pounds. And but they're deliciously weird, and you think, wow. It's great this kind of thing exists on this little blue dot. This thing grows. So that's brought me constant pleasure, the life of pomegranates.

Tim Ferriss: How do you consume your pomegranates? What is your preferred sort of method and time of day for pomegranates?

Alain de Botton: You have to split them in half, and then while you've got your hand with your fingers slightly open over the pomegranate facedown in to the palm of your hand, you then strike the pomegranate hard with a wooden spoon, which gets the seeds to shake out. They go into a little bowl.

Tim Ferriss: Oh. That's a good trick.

Alain de Botton: Yeah. You hit it a few times, and out they fall. And it just makes a delicious kind of snack. And you feel good and you feel virtuous, but it's nice as well. So I really recommend that. I think all – in my ideal nanny state, there would be pomegranates in every –

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Tim Ferriss: Pomegranate rations for every citizen.

Alain de Botton: That's right. They would be forcibly on sale in every gas station across the United States. And I think genuinely the health, but more importantly, the happiness of Americans would rise exponentially.

Tim Ferriss: I love it. I used to love eating grapefruits in the morning. My grandmother used to use brown sugar on sort of pre-cut grapefruits that we could scoop out with special grapefruit spoons so that – this is making me long to eat pomegranates.

Alain de Botton: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: You mentioned rituals earlier. What rituals are important for you on a daily basis? The listeners often like evening – I'm sorry, morning routines, but it doesn't have to be morning. What rituals or routines do you find very valuable and important in your life?

Alain de Botton: Well, there was a lot of talk a few years ago and still now of meditation and mindfulness, and getting into a certain state. And I thought a lot about this. And I thought, why is it that it's not quite working for me as it's defined, but that there's something here that I really like? And I realized that what I love doing at the end of the day, or at the beginning of the day, is to kind of download my brain – is to just download those thoughts that are sort of buzzing around, slightly shapeless, slightly directionless.

And they need a little help. And if I don't get to grips with them, they will disturb my sleep, or they'll wake me up early. So what I like to do is just sit with a pad and paper and write down, in very small, slightly scrawly illegible handwriting, lots of things. It could just be a word, an image, something. And they will be the starting points of things. Books have begun out of one word that I sort of caught in my – and it's a kind of housekeeping. It's a kind of intellectual housekeeping. I like to call it a kind of philosophical meditation, where you just turn over what's going on in your mind. And I think insomnia. I went through a stage of having insomnia, and I think that insomnia is a kind of revenge of all the stuff that you haven't thought about enough that demands to be thought about and will wake you up in order that it gets its fair share of thought.

And if you can do that before bed with a pad and paper, it can be the best sleeping pill you've ever had.

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Tim Ferriss: Do you have a particular type of journal or pad that you like to use?

Alain de Botton: I'm unfussy. I'm pretty unfussy about what I write on. All kinds of pads. I have a wonderful Japanese pen called a Pilot, those Pilot pens. And it's called a GTechC4. And I write religiously only with those. I'm also the last person on the planet to work with a Blackberry, and I write all sorts of thoughts down on a Blackberry, and that's very helpful too. So those are my tools.

Tim Ferriss: So you share the Blackberry, the sort of vestigial Blackberry, in common with a friend of mine named Neil Strauss.

Alain de Botton: Oh, right.

Tim Ferriss: Who has written seven or eight New York Times bestsellers.

Alain de Botton: I feel honored. I mean, it's an odd feeling. You feel very left out, and there should be a support group started.

Because it's a very isolated position to be in, and one questions one's own sanity sometimes. One thinks one will go over to the light side soon, but one just can't do it. And yeah, there we are.

Tim Ferriss: Just a few more questions. If you could have one billboard anywhere with anything on it, what would it say?

Alain de Botton: Well, I think it would probably pick up on the need to appreciate, the need to be kind. I mean, it could be something stark. I mean, it sounds like what we were saying. It could say you have only – an average of life is how many hundreds of thousands of hours? You know this figure.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, I Don't. Maybe if I were better caffeinated

Alain de Botton: Okay, well, it would say life is only 400,000 hours long. Be kind. Or something like that. Just to grab the motorists as they're speeding down the highway at insane speed.

Tim Ferriss: I like it. And what advice would you give your 30-year-old self?

Alain de Botton: Calm down.

Tim Ferriss: And where would you be at 30? What's the sort of surrounding context?

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Alain de Botton: You mean what was it, or what should it be?

Tim Ferriss: No, where were you at that time?

Alain de Botton: I mean, 30, it was a weird year. My father died when I was 30 very surprisingly, so I was suddenly in a kind of different place, and that was very shocking. At the same time, it was a very successful year. My book, The Constellations of Philosophy, came out. I met my wife. She wasn't then my wife, but I met the person who would become my wife that year. So it was a kind of year of many things. I mean, I think I would have also said appreciate what's good about this moment. Don't always think that you're on a permanent journey. Stop and enjoy the view.

This is life, too. I think it took me a long time to kind of dare to appreciate the moment because I always had this assumption that if you appreciate the moment, you're weakening your resolve to improve your circumstances. That's not true, but I think when you're young, it's sort of associated with that. And even, I think, like flowers. I had people around me who'd say things like, oh, a flower, nice. A little part of me was thinking, you absolute loser. You've taken time to appreciate a flower? Do you not have bigger plans? I mean, this the limit of your ambition? And when life's knocked you around a bit and when you've seen a few things, and time has happened and you've got some years under your belt, you start to think more highly of modest things like flowers and a pretty sky, or just a morning where nothing's wrong and everyone's been pretty nice to everyone else, and things are pretty nice, and it's coming up to 11:00 or 12:00, and things are going well.

And you think, that's nice. No one's died, everyone's okay. It makes you a little bit more modest. And I didn't have that at all at 30. And I think I was the kind of – when people talk about being ungrateful, you often go, how do you mean, they're ungrateful? It's not ingratitude, it's anxiety, again. But I wish that I could have reassured my anxious self and just said that there is time to look out of the window and spot those flowers.

Tim Ferriss: That's great advice. That's advice I need to take to heart also. I think I've done better. It's funny you mentioned flowers because specifically, when I go on walks, I make it a point – this is thanks to my girlfriend, to stop and smell the flowers, whether it's with the dog or otherwise, just as a brief pause. But I think that ambition can be a wonderful tool, but it's a terrible master. And it's also

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something that, for the most part, you cash in in the future.

Alain de Botton: And the future may not come, as we know.

Tim Ferriss: Exactly. Exactly. And it reminds me of this story that Neil Gaiman, the writer, tells. I think it might have been in his commencement speech, Making Good Art, which everyone should watch. You can just Google it. But he was reflecting on signing books for Sandman, which was his first real huge hit, and signing comic books, in this case. And Stephen King, I believe it was, said enjoy this moment. And he didn't. He was wrapped up in, I can only imagine, looking two years in the future, three years in the future, striking while the iron is hot, whatever it might have been. And I think that's something that I need a constant reminder of. And the journaling, as you mentioned, I think also helps with that.

Alain de Botton: There's a funny thing. My wife and I – she spotted that I kept talking about cancer, and kept saying things like, "Well, I don't have cancer yet. And what happens if one day I get cancer?"

And so we now have this joke between us because I kept putting it like this. And so now she goes, remember, we're in the years before your bowel cancer. And she's partly teasing me. But really what we're saying, she goes, remember, it's before the bowel cancer. And it's really a way of saying, kind of, my god, things can get very miserable very quickly. It only takes a very few cells to subdivide in the wrong way, and a lot of what seems important now will just no longer be. And yeah, we just have to keep that in mind all the time. Today, which seems so incomplete from so many ways, and maybe frustrating in this and that way. Today may be the day that in a week, you will look back on as paradise because we are so – it could always get so much worse. And I think, partly to having children as well, we're very much at the mercy of fortune. Stoics talked a lot about fortune.

Fortune can do anything with us. We are very fragile creatures. You only need to tap us or hit us in slightly the wrong place, and we are done for. And the kind of levels of tragedy that can be – all of us, you only have to push us a little bit, and we crack very easily, whether that's the pressure of disgrace or physical illness, financial pressure, etc. It doesn't take very much. And yeah. So we do have to appreciate every day that goes by without a major disaster.

Tim Ferriss: I think that's a great place to wrap up. I love your work. Where can people find out about what you're up to online, find you on social,

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etc.? How can they say hello? What would you like them to check out of yours first, perhaps, if they're unfamiliar with your work?

Alain de Botton: Sure. Well, they can come and see my website, which is my name, alaindebotton.com. They can come and see me on Twitter, just @alaindebotton. I run a YouTube channel via the School of Life, so come and check out the School of Life at theschooloflife.com.

And come and look at some of the films that I make there. I make three films a week, so there's a lot of stuff out there. I write a blog at something called thebookoflife.org. So you'll see a lot of my pieces on all sorts of things. So take a look around. There's quite a lot in the digital space. And there's quite a lot that's free. And if you want to buy a book, well, Amazon has them all, and all the big stores too. So, yeah. That's me out there in the world.

Tim Ferriss: If you could recommend one video and one piece of writing of yours to start with, what would you suggest?

Alain de Botton: Well, if we're talking about – we were talking a lot about Proust. Actually, no. Now let me recommend something else. There's a film on my YouTube channel called Higher Consciousness. It's really a discussion of this strange term [inaudible] about higher consciousness. What is it? What does it mean to achieve higher consciousness? So just punch into the School of Life YouTube channel, punch in higher consciousness, and you'll get this film about, I don't know, how to look at the world with a high consciousness.

And then if you want to read something, go and check out How Proust Can Change Your Life. I think it's a book that still holds up after all these years, and it's got a lot of things that I deeply believe in, so check that out.

Tim Ferriss: Wonderful. Well, I really admire your work. I enjoy your work, and I would love for you to continue doing your work, before the bowel cancer, of course. And I really appreciate you taking some time. And if –

Alain de Botton: You're an incredibly generous host, person, and an incredibly gifted communicator, speaker, writer, inspirer, so it's been a tremendous honor for me. Thank you so much. I know you've done me a serious service in doing this, and I fully recognize it. Bowel cancer or no bowel cancer, it's fantastic.

Tim Ferriss: This has been really fun. And everybody out there, everything we

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talked about, you will be able to find in the show notes. That is at fourhourworkweek.com, all spelled out. Click on Podcast, and you can find this and all previous episodes, and you'll be able to find the books, the articles, the thinkers, everything that we mentioned in this conversation. And until next time, of course, thank you for listening. And Alain, I hope to see you in person sometime soon, and thanks again.

Alain de Botton: Absolutely. Thank you so much. Bye-bye.

Tim Ferriss: Hey guys, this is Tim again. Just a few more things before you take off. Number one, this is Five Bullet Friday. Do you want to get a short email from me? Would you enjoy getting a short email from me every Friday that provides a little more sort of fun before the weekend? Five Bullet Friday is a very short email where I share the coolest things I've found, or that I've been pondering over the week. That could include favorite new albums that I've discovered, it could include gizmos and gadgets and all sorts of weird shit that I've somehow dug up in the world of the esoteric, as I do.

It could include favorite articles that I've read and that I've shared with my close friends, for instance. And it's very short. It's just a little tiny byte of goodness before you head off for the weekend. So if you want to receive that, check it out. Just go to fourhourworkweek.com. That's fourhourworkweek.com, all spelled out, and just drop in your email, and you will get the very next one. And if you sign up, I hope you enjoy it.

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