



Mag Dimond

307: Mindfulness and Memoir

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at diymfa.com/307, because it's Episode 307. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, and you know, all the usual places where you might listen to a podcast; and please leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there, discover the show as well.

Now, today I have the pleasure of interviewing Mag Dimond. Mag Dimond has been a world traveler since the age of 11, when her mother took her to live in Italy. She's traveled extensively in Europe and Central America, and ventured to such exotic landscapes as India, Cambodia, Bhutan, Japan, Kenya, China, Burma, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cuba.

In her seventies now, she continues traveling; and her most recent adventure was going to Machu Picchu and the Amazon jungle.

After a career teaching Writing to college students in San Francisco and Taos, she often volunteers as a writing tutor at 826 Valencia – an organization that is near-and-dear to my own heart, as I used to volunteer at 826 New York – an esteemed literacy program launched by David Eggers.

And she is a practicing Buddhist for over 20 years; and a classical pianist, photographer, gourmet cook, animal rescuer, and philanthropist.

Today we're going to be discussing her book, *Bowing to Elephants*, which has been honored by Kirkus Review (with a starred review) as one of the best Indie memoir/biographies of 2019.

Prior to its publication, excerpts from the book appeared in *American Literary Review*, *Travelers Tales Solas Awards*, the Tulip Tree "Stories that Must be Told" awards, and the 2017 William Faulkner Wisdom awards.

Additionally, she's also published essays in *Elephant Journal* – which if you don't know about *Elephant Journal*, it's this prestigious online magazine that has a readership of almost two million people. It is truly an honor to have her here at DIY MFA Radio today. Welcome, Mag. It's so great to have you here.

Mag Dimond: Well, I'm delighted. I'm really looking forward to the conversation.

GP: So, I always like to start out by hearing about the story behind the story, and I feel like you share a little bit of this in the introduction or preface before you dive into the meat of the memoir. But can you share with our listeners, what inspired you to write this book and why?

MD: Well, you know, I've been writing about my experiences since I was a young girl, keeping a journal. I started keeping a journal back when I did live in Italy. And so, I was always sort of recording my life.



I grew up in sort of a literary family too. Everybody were-- Everybody were readers and talked about, you know, writers and books and everything. And I imagined myself writing a book. I mean, it kept coming into my mind.

I also was an only child, and I sort of had a very solitary experience of being a witness. And so, it felt to me like I sort of had a responsibility to report my experiences. I was also one of those people that was always looking for answers, which is why the whole traveling adventure thing made such great sense – that when you're traveling, you are looking for answers.

There may not be questions that you've articulated, but you are looking for things. And so, it felt to me that I needed to, first of all, share the vast kind of colorful experiences I had in going into so many different cultures.

I thought-- I thought that would make a good read, you know, I was convinced of it. And then I also really felt that my own life, my own kind of eccentric, you know, unusual life would be of interest.

And so, those two things combined, sort of, made me realize I should write a book. And I talked to my teacher, my mentor Jack Kornfield, and we were kind of ruminating about getting things done in our 60s. This was in--

It was when I was, sort of, maybe after my mid-60s and I said, "You know, I really, really need to write a book. You know, I've been teaching, I've been doing all this stuff."

And he said something like, "You know, you're getting to the point in your life where you got to stop talking about doing something, and you've got to just do it." So, that was the catalyst for, you know, jumping on board with the idea of making the book.

GP: I love that you mentioned journaling, because as you mentioned, it's part of like how the book is made up, and you were-- You know, it was part of you chronicling the events of the book.

Can you talk about like, what does journaling look like for you? Because I feel like writing in a journal, keeping a journal, can look very different from one writer to another. So, I'm curious, like, what does that look like?

MD: Well, you know, I actually have my old journals; I have these two old journals that were given to me back when I was young. So, I have had the wonderful opportunity of being able to peruse them and see what kind of nonsense I actually wrote when I was 11 and 12 years old.

It wasn't very wise and it wasn't very observant, but it was a lot of things I needed to put down on paper about myself. So, when I was younger, my journaling was really about me dumping my feelings on the page – you know, dumping my disappointments, my yearnings, my anger at my mother.

I mean, my mother and I had a very, very volatile and not-so-warm relationship – so I used it to vent, you know, so to speak. And it wasn't until I got to be an adult and was traveling, that I used a journal for a different purpose; and that was to record everything that I saw or as much as I could.

So, every day when I was traveling, I would write in my journal; and I would write about everything from what I had for breakfast, or the piece of art I saw in the museum or something like that. You know, because I knew I would never remember all those things, anyway.

And so, it was a wonderful companion, you know, on the travel experience. And so, it had a different character, the journaling - you know what I mean? I also did write about my feelings in the journal.



It's not like I didn't write about feeling sad about something or whatever, but the focus was really on being almost a reporter, you know? And so, I amassed this amazing collection of notebooks over all the years. And most of them, I was able to hold on to.

GP: It's interesting also because-- I've often, you know, had discussions about journaling with fellow writers and whatnot. I, like you, when I was younger, wrote a lot of, you know, kind of emotion-dump journal entries, where it really was just verbal spillage of my emotions.

One of the things that I'm curious about when you got to more of the reporter elements of-- I mean, obviously, it makes sense that you would chronicle your travels in that wave so that it would then inform the writing of the book – but at the time, you didn't necessarily know that you'd be writing the book so many years later.

How did you know what to notice? Because I would imagine there's so much that you're seeing when you're traveling to these amazing places – that to me, it almost feels like it would be overwhelming sensory stuff, right, this mountain of sensory experience. How did you pick what you would pay attention to and chronicle in the journal?

MD: You know, in a way, I'm not even sure it was a conscious choice. I mean, I can tell you what moves me when I'm in a different place, and it's sensory experiences. So, it might be the way a certain part of the landscape looks or a city street at night, or it might be the way my dinner stayed in my memory and I had to write about my dinner – you know, what I had for dinner, the smells of it, the taste of it, and so on.

Also, you know, I write about, if I see any kind of drama that moves me, I write about that. You know, if you see something happening on the street that is just, you want to stop and absorb, you know, that definitely gets written about.

I remember being in Paris, and I was walking across this bridge to the, from one bank to the other, and I was by myself; and I turned back to look kind of where I'd come from, for some reason, and I saw this couple embracing – and it was like out of a 40s movie.

I mean, it was-- They were dressed beautifully, and they were in this incredible embrace. And I just went, 'Oh my God.' I mean, I thought of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, and I thought of all these films of romance; and I just, I was riveted.

I took a picture of it, which I actually often do when I travel; I do a lot of photography. And then, I wrote about it; I wrote about how it made me feel. You know, it made me feel touched, and it made me feel happy that I saw these two people who – I was assuming – were also happy, you know?

GP: Right.

MD: Or in India, the reverse of that, I would write about the beggar children; you know, the children who came at you from every nook and cranny of the world to beg and to ask for money – and I remember them so vividly.

And so, there's these things that impact you emotionally that absolutely cry out to be written about. And then, like I say, there's the wonderful sensory stuff. And yeah, that's primarily it. I mean, I'm drawn to--

I'm a very sensory person. My mother was an artist, and I was exposed to art as a young girl. And so, I had a liking, an affection for beauty – for things that were beautiful or interesting in a sensory way, you know?



GP: Yeah. So, in terms of, I mean, sensory aspect, obviously, there's five senses. And you know, art, it draws mostly on sight. Do you find that there's one sense that tugs at you more than others?

I know, for me, sounds are incredibly powerful because I grew up playing music ever since I was four; I studied the violin – so my ears are particularly tuned in, and they pay attention to stuff. Like noise, really kind of hits me in both positive and negative ways. What about for you? Is there one of the senses that really kind of just knocks your socks off?

MD: Well, you know, I think there's something about smell and taste. You know, there's, sometimes I can imagine I see something and I can taste it – or, you know, there's a strong smell. Or even when you're eating something, there's a smell that remind--

You know, we have that kind of wonderful associative memory thing where as Proust wrote about, you know, you remember something in the past because of something you smell. So, that's strikes me pretty regularly.

And I mean, the sound thing is important to me too, but I don't know that it would be at the top of my list. It's more this touching and smelling, kind of thing; this getting really up-close to something, and then the challenge of trying to write about that, you know?

Because in the journal, I probably didn't write about it in the way that I ended up writing about things in the book. You know, I was just jotting down information.

GP: Yeah.

MD: Yeah.

GP: It's interesting too what you were saying about getting up-close-and-personal. I had never thought about this before, but smell and taste are the senses that close the personal space gap the most, right?

Because you can experience sound or sight from far away – and touch, you can be at arm's length – but if you're going to smell something or taste something, you really got to get close to it. Like, there's that physical proximity that needs to happen that I'd never really considered before.

MD: Yeah. Yeah. That's a great observation, actually. And I did like to get close to things. You know, I did like to get right up in the middle of things. And if I went into a bakery-- I mean, it wasn't enough if you were walking by a bakery just to look at all the beautiful things in the window – you had to go in and smell the stuff, and you had to get really close to it.

GP: Yeah.

MD: And then maybe you purchased something, and then you-- And sometimes, you would just hold it in your hand – I mean, I would, and then I would smell it before I even ate it.

You know, it's like, there's something-- You know, who knows where that came from. But it was a powerful energy that I felt when I was in, you know-- And I remember all kinds of different smells that I associate with different parts of the world where I've been.

You know, the smells that I smelled in Cambodia were quite different than what I smelled in Paris or Italy or whatever – you know, the smells in China, again, very different than what you would be



smelling in San Francisco... you know, because I also consider San Francisco a place, even though it's my home, a place where I travel.

GP: Right.

MD: Yeah. I like to think of myself as a resident traveler in San Francisco

GP: Yeah. You know, one of the things that's interesting about your book is that the scenes are so vivid; and I think in large part it is because of this multisensory experience that you create for the readers.

Like, I felt like I was there, like when we're in Italy, I could smell the carbonara sauce in the kitchen – you know, it really comes to life. And of course, there's certain details in the memories that like, it gets interesting when we craft scenes and memoir because we don't have like video memory in our minds, unless we have a photographic memory or something.

So, it's not like you have this mental recording of exactly as things happened. Like, I certainly don't have that for my own childhood. So, how did you craft the elements like dialogue, for example, between the people in the memoir? Like, how did you know--

Like, how much of that was actual dialogue that you vividly remember? How much of that did you fill in around the story that you were telling once you knew what the scene was going to be?

MD: Yeah, that's a great question because it's-- And that was a big piece of the challenge in making it all happen because, in fact, there's a lot I did not remember. One of the things I struggled with when I was creating the book was that I kept thinking my memory is so lousy.

'Yes, I have the journals – yeah, I have all this, kind of, this log that I've kept of experiences, but that's not good enough for story – you know, that's not story,' because the story is the conversations and it's the interior moments where you go inside people's heads, and all that kind of thing.

So, what I did was I really tried to, kind of, travel back in time. I mean, this is, particularly, true now when I'm thinking about, you know, looking back into that whole backstory about my childhood, where the memories are a lot murkier.

And I would go back and I would really sit with this, I'd imagine, you know, being in the kitchen with my mother or my father coming over for a visit looking really painful and awkward – you know, after they had separated. And I would just sit there, and I would try to relive the experience.

And then I would know what the words were; and then I would know, somehow, what the words were that might come out of my mother's mouth – or, you know, what the words were – or that might come out of even my mouth. Well, you know, what I might have been thinking that I needed to say at the time.

So, I think with most memoir, because nobody has a memory that's reliable; I mean, that's kind of a given.

GP: Right.

MD: And so, you have to use invention – but in order to use the invention well, you have to be really, kind of, really in the experience in your heart and in your mind. You know? And then it becomes authentic, whatever the words that you're bringing up; they're real and believable.



GP: Yeah. And you know, it's interesting too, like what you're saying about reliving the experience – in a way, the experience is also getting filtered through like 'present-day writer/author-you' that is now remembering that experience.

So, there's sort of this meta component to it as well; it's not just the purely-lived experience of you as a child. It's now got this additional layer of understanding on top of it, which obviously, also shapes the way the memory comes across.

So, in terms of sort of, you mentioned sitting with the memory and using that, sort of, immersive time travel, as it were. Do you have any other techniques that you could share with listeners on how to tap into those memories? Because I think for memoir-writing, especially, that ability to reach into like the deep bowels of our mind to get those memories out, is a huge part of the writing process – is pulling those memories out.

Mag Dimond: Right. Well, I was working with a group of people during the making of the book; and it was a support group, essentially, that helped writers finish a book project. And we did a lot of different kinds of exercises, and so on.

But one of the things I remembered doing-- And this wasn't even because of the group I was working with, but it was a technique that I actually learned really a long time ago. And it's that technique of freewriting, where you just – you write and you don't stop.

And so, you start with yourself, you know, 'Okay, so, here I am – I'm Meg and I'm eight years old – and I'm sitting in my grandmother's living room and she's announcing to me that my parents are getting divorced – and I'm just sitting.' So, you take that moment, and then you just write and you don't stop – and you write and you write and whether, you know--

And some of the stuff that comes up, some of it is kind of crazy and nonsensical – and some of it is very real, and it is stuff that is really being felt. You know, you discover that you were feeling something that you wouldn't have, you know, necessarily, here in present moments, remember that you felt then.

So, I think there's something immensely powerful about using that kind of nonstop writing thing, you know, without edit – you don't edit yourself, you don't stop, and you do it for whatever it is... you know, 15, 20 minutes, something like that. And then, you see what you've got.

GP: And it's interesting also that when you were describing how you would do it, that you were writing in the present tense like, 'I am eight years old, I'm sitting in the living room with my grandmother,' is that element important?

MD: Well, I think you're rooting yourself in time. And then, I would root myself also because I'm, again, as we mentioned, I'm sort of a sensory person, so I would be remembering certain key elements of that environment.

You know, certain things that were in the living room, at the time, that I do know for sure were in the living room. It's not like even a matter of salty memory. It's like I knew that my grandmother had a couch and a Japanese screen, and that she had this, and she had that – or another context where you're, you know what your mother's kitchen looked like, you know?

GP:: Yeah.

MD: And so, you're in there and you're looking, you're bringing those elements in – so you're really are placing yourself in this place, in this spot as a young girl.



And then the other thing that I had to do, work at doing pretty consistently, was getting out of my adulthood and getting into my younger person head; and really trying to remember what it felt like to be that person sitting there being given this kind of heavy information – like by my grandmother, for instance. You know?

And so, the older-self is in there too. It has to be because you can't cut the young person out of the old person. I mean, we're carrying around who we were before.

GP: Right.

MD: And, you know, I had a friend, who's also a writer who told me, "You know, one of the things that's really important to do is to remember what it's like to have been young, and to get into that point of view," because we do have that inside ourselves, even as adults; we have that young person.

And then it allows you to feel much more kindly and loving of yourself if you can look at that kid – and the kid, as angry and as weird as she might have acted, there was a reason that was happening.

GP: Yeah.

MD: And you can get closer to that. I think the other thing that I have to say about this process – and I think it's quite important – and that is that my mindfulness practice, my ability to be in the present moment because of my meditation practice, then allows me to sit in a moment of my choosing.

I can go and be in that moment; and really kind of stay there, and try to wait for stuff to happen in that moment – you know, so I can focus on it because I have the discipline of meditating for, you know, sometimes I meditate for 45 minutes at a time.

I can be very still; and I can be very, very cognizant of everything that's happening. And I know that that really had an incredible effect on the, you know, using of those past experiences for me.

GP: So, that's really important. I love that you mentioned that, because I'd love to hear you talk a little bit more about the meditation aspect – in particular, because I'm someone who's not really good at meditation.

I have a very hard time being still; and yet, I've been told by people who do meditate that like, it's a matter of practice just like you practice writing. So, I'm convinced that, at some point, I will get there – I just need to practice. So, how do you recommend-- Like, how would a writer even begin if they've never meditated before? How would they start doing that to tap into those memories?

MD: Well, you know, there's so much available right now for people to-- There's stuff online. There's apps you can use, all this kind of thing. I mean, my preferred way to be introduced to meditation is actually to go find a group that sits, and go and sit with them. And then you learn that it's very, very simple.

And then, you don't ask a lot of yourself. You know, what you do is you learn the, kind of, the basics of it – like sitting on the cushion and closing your eyes and paying attention to your breathing. And then when you do it on your own time, in your own house or whatever, you do it for very short periods at a time.

So, you cultivate a tolerance for it. So, you start out doing it for 5 or 10 minutes, you know. And you set a little timer; you know, we all can figure out how to do that. And you do it regularly, and then it becomes easy.

It becomes something that feels natural. And yes, it's hard – and yes, all kinds of weird mind states come up and, you know, frustrations, or you feel like you're no good at it, or-- You know, we're so



great at criticizing ourselves for not doing things perfectly; and you have to let all that go, that's part of the discipline of meditation.

You say, "It's not time for criticism, it's time for being with what is true in the moment," which means paying attention to what's going on in your body, paying attention to what's going on in your mind – you know, not criticizing any of it, not judging it. It's kind of like paying attention to it.

And then it becomes, like I say, you start small and it becomes easy – or I mean, it becomes, it feels like a normal thing to do. And then, you do it for longer because actually, it gives you a sense of centeredness and a sense of clarity that you didn't have before. You know?

And you find that the clutter of your mind-- You know, we all walk around with our minds filled with stuff. And the clutter of your mind, kind of, gets eased in a way. You know, it's less pre-occupying, you don't feel aggravated by it anymore.

And that actually helps you be a better writer because if your mind is uncluttered, then you're seeing clearly kind of what's important.

GP: Yeah.

MD: Like, what's true now-- What's true now, for instance, you know, is I'm looking back on the making of the book. So, what's true now is that I really create this book – you know, that I have promised myself I was going to finish this book by the time I was 70.

And I would just come back to that even if I got upset with myself. And even if I thought it was hopeless. And even if I thought nobody cared about my story, I thought, 'Oh no – but I really, I've made this commitment, I'm going to write this book, and it's very deeply important to me.' And then, I would-- I would realize what was true for me, and I could keep on going.

GP: That is such an excellent point. And you know, I love what you said about the 'clutter of the mind' because, I mean, I've been teaching Writing basically my whole life – but in college I was part of The Writing Center – you know, the peer writing team.

One of the things that our mentor, who was one of the professors/deans of the school, one of the things he said again and again, is that, "Unclear writing is a symptom of a bigger problem – it is a symptom of unclear thinking."

If the writing doesn't make sense, if the essay you're helping someone with isn't coming together, it's not because the writing is itself bad, it's because the person hasn't figured out what they're trying to say yet so the writing can't be refined enough.

So, that makes such sense to me that like clearing that mental clutter can be an incredibly liberating thing in helping us improve our writing, because now we have clearer thinking – clearer thinking means clearer writing.

MD: Right. Yeah. I mean, I remember when I was in college getting my essays back from teachers, and I got-- You know, and I was-- Technically, I was very good at writing essays, whether it was literary stuff or other kinds of stuff – but, you know, the main criticism of me, what I did was always that I was trying to study too many things at the same time.



And the teacher would say something like, you know, “What is the most important point? Like, what is it you want? Because you’re not coming away with this clear message that in the paper or the short story,” for that matter, when I was doing Creative Writing.

Although when I was doing Creative Writing, it was a little different because I was actually taking things from my own life and trying to turn them into fiction. I mean, that was the way I did that, that thing.

But yeah, it was like-- It was like honing in on what was really, like, ‘Why are you doing this? What do you want people to take away from it?’ And so, important. And if you are practicing some kind of mindfulness, you will be identifying the things that are deeply important in your mind or in your heart, in your feelings.

I mean, actually, it’s more based in your heart than it is in your mind. And, you know, the mind does a lot of editing and criticizing and, you know, tacking on things – but the heart is what generates the message from deep inside, you know? And the heart never lies – whereas the brain does.

The brain does a lot of, you know, finagling and mean-spirited stuff. I have the worst self-credit, you know, on the planet. And I’ve come now to, I least am trying to have a sense of humor about it.

[laughter]

GP: So, tying into this idea of clarity of mind, one of the things that naturally would make sense to address next is the structure of the book, because the book-- You know, there’s any number of ways that one could structure a book about travel to all these different places.

Someone who has had the travel that you’ve had, there’s so many different ways to put the book together. You chose this specific format, the specific structure for the book. Can you tell our listeners about it? And then, also, how you figured out the way you wanted to organize everything.

MD: This was really the great, kind of, there were the ‘light bulb’ moments that happened – what I thought I was supposed to be writing was not what I was supposed to be writing.

So, I started out thinking that I was going to write this wonderful, brilliant, witty collection of travel essays; that’s what I envisioned. And, you know, you’d go from one chapter about, you know, France, Paris on to another chapter about this. And you just take your readers on a wonderful journey.

And you know, I was influenced by reading. I loved reading essays all through my life. And I was influenced by people as, you know, “Dance” as Henry James, who wrote brilliantly about his time living out of the United States, which was a lot – he was almost an expatriate.

And I read other people who wrote about travel, and how kind of inspiring their writing was. So, I imagined that I would, sort of, do that now. And I started writing – you know, I forget where I was what-- Oh, and then I had to go and select the places that I really wanted to highlight – that I wanted to offer up to my readers.

So, I selected, based on the journals that I had in my possession and the ones that had enough information, I selected the various places. And so, I started, and then what happened was that my family started to show up.

I started to think about that. My mother would make comments to me, or I would remember something my mother said about art or about painting, or something my grandmother said about food or table manners. And it would all come in; it would come into the moment of present experience where I’m really writing about being in India, for instance. Okay?



And all the different kinds of new experiences I'm having. And one of the experiences I had in India that was so striking that I start the chapter off with is that sense of this duality that exists in India between the rich and the poor.

You know, that it's just so striking and so heartbreaking. And there was somebody on our group trip who was very, very, sort of, unprepared for the drama of the poverty-stricken in India; she reacted very strongly.

And then, all of a sudden, I was remembering my mother and how-- You know, she had this sense of being this entitled, and she knew; she was an entitled affluent woman, and she had all these privileges. And philosophically, she believed that the poor should be taken care of – but she didn't believe that she was connected to the poorer people, you know, you know what I'm saying?

And all of a sudden, I saw my mother in this, kind of, as a person who had a disconnect; and, you know, a disconnect from what I thought was real, which is that we're all in this together.

And so, this is kind of a long illustration of this point, but I have a mind that works very comparatively or, you know, associatively. And so, these people from my past would show up, and I would just have these memories of conversations or something I had thought about in relation to them.

And then, I thought, 'They have to be in here; they have to be in my story, they have to be in my memoir.' And then I thought, 'Well, how can I do this?' You know?

And so, I thought, 'Well, okay, I'm going to do, each chapter is going to be in two parts; and one part will be relating of the travel adventure – and the other part will be the backstory, which is Mag, at an earlier time, with all kinds of feelings of loneliness and sadness and wondering about whether her mother really loved her.' You know?

And then, I would-- The tricky part was weaving those two things together in the same chapter without confusing the person who is the reader. You know? So, the tricky part was creating a clear transition between the travel experience and the backstory, and then leading back to the travel experience often as well.

So, each chapter became a little mini, you know, entity of its own, not just a single chapter about one thing. But it was a chapter about what led me, what drove me to be engaged in the looking at art, for instance, just as an example. Okay?

And when I looked at paintings in Paris, which I did all the time, I drew the connection with my mother all the time because my mother was a painter; and I grew up looking at art, and I remember her being a painter, and I remember being fascinated by that. So, those two things wove together very nicely, you see?

GP: Yeah.

MD: And this curiosity I had about what it was like to be a painter and to make these big oil paintings, and they were very tactile and they smelled; they smelled like oil paint and all that.

So, you see how there's this blending that can happen between what happened when you were eight and nine years old – or seven, eight and nine years old – and then what you were happening when you were in your 50s or 40s or whatever.

So, it was technically kind of hard, but I really believed in it. And then, I kept getting people to listen to me. They would look at something I had done where I was weaving together the present and the



past; and I was getting people to respond to that. And generally speaking, everybody felt that I was succeeding in weaving the things together, you know, so that it was comfortable for the reader.

GP: Yeah, because that's got to be tricky to weave the two elements. I mean, the chapter that takes place when you're in Italy, the very first one in Florence – that obviously, like, because you were there as a child, the weaving together comes a bit more automatically.

But I can definitely imagine that in the later ones, like kind of layering those two realities together could be a really difficult to do. When you had these insights where you suddenly would realize like, 'Oh my gosh, this is really-- this experience I'm having in India is really about, like, it's connected to this experience that I had when I was little and my mother.'

How did you then start to figure out how to put them together? Like did you write the different segments separately and then weave them? Like, how did you layer the two things?

MD: Well, I just realized when I saw the connection, okay, I started writing a-- Like, I'm going to think-- I'm going to talk about the India thing again because it led me to writing probably one of the most powerful things I've ever written about my mother – which is, I wrote about her as an 'untouchable'.

You know, I was-- I had never written about my mother being an alcoholic and being this sort of marginal person because on the surface of it, she was a rich woman who had all these advantages – and she had great beauty, and she was smart, and all this good stuff, right?

But she was a very sad and lonely and lost person who stayed inebriated most of the time. And so, and she hid alcohol around the house; and she did all these weird things; she did things in secret.

And I kept thinking that the people who are 'the untouchables' are living these secret lives in India, even, where people don't want to know about them, you know what I mean?

So, I don't know if I'm answering your question, but I just wrote out the stuff that I wanted to get written; and it was hard. And then I found the connection between that and what I was writing about in India, you see? It was--

And I figured out how to make the transition; you know, I somehow figured out that I could go from writing about this woman on our trip who was repelled by the beggars – to writing about my mother and the fact that she was an alcoholic, but she hid it from everybody, or she tried to--

And, she was-- You know, it's sort of a-- Even though she had all this delusional thinking about who she was, so there was a lot of juice in that, all of that.

GP: Yeah.

MD: And in other chapters, it had a different flavor and different quality, of course. But I would spend a lot of my time writing, on the backstory. I was pretty confident that my adventure part, my travel part, was pretty intact and pretty good, because I had the journals and I had a lot of stuff to draw from. So, the challenge was in writing those, and I would spend more time on writing the backstory and then seeing how it fit. You know?

GP: It sounds also like a big part of it – and we've touched on this already in this conversation – a big part of it was also allowing yourself to just get it down, and to sort of write--



Like what you said, 'Writing what you thought this was about and kind of just getting the ideas down, and then going back and finding the connections and drawing the parallels and whatnot.' But getting the ideas down without the inner critic and silencing, you know, that inner monologue sounds like it was an important piece of the process as well.

MD: Right. Yeah. And as you know from teaching writing and being a writer and all the rest of it – is, you learn about the important stuff by writing it. You know, I mean, you'll have this moment or this flash of a feeling of needing to write something and you're not quite sure why. And so, you start writing it, and then you realize why you're writing it. You know?

GP: Yeah.

MD: And I had this vision of this drunken, sort of, guy in a gas station when I lived in Northern New Mexico; and he was lurking by the minimart, and he was – he was carrying a bag, which obviously had some booze in it. And, he was kind of swinging away from the public; he was trying to get out of public view. And I had this memory; and who knows how that memory came to me, but I had it very strongly and I started to write about it.

And I realized that that drunk lurking in the gas station area reminded me of my mother. And I thought, this is a-- For my own sanity, I needed to get this stuff out of my system and on the page, because I had carried a lot of this grief about my mother for so long – and she never listened to me and she self-destructed, and I needed to tell the truth.

And the fact that this bum, so called, in northern New Mexico reminded me of my mother, and that I could use that in a really good way in my story – not to be mean to my mother, not to be harsh – but to tell the truth.

GP: Yeah.

MD: And as I told the truth, I felt better – you know, like, 'Okay, I'm able to say my mother was a drunk,' you know?

GP: Yeah.

MD: I mean, it's not like that's a very uncommon thing in our world, sadly. And there are many people that have had that experience, and there's many people that have not been able to talk about it or write about it or whatever because they find it's shameful or it's dark, and they don't want to go there.

GP: And you touched on something so important, which I think is sort of a running theme throughout our conversation today, is that interplay between the facts of the story versus the emotional truth and really getting at that deeper Truth (with a capital T) as you're writing the memoir.

It's not just about relaying a straight up, you know, journalistic factual account of your travels; it's about getting at that deeper truth.

MD: Yeah. Yeah. And I think that the truth that I wanted people to-- I mean, I did struggle with, 'What do I want people to come away with?' And I thought, you know, 'One of the things I wanted people to come away with was a sense that we can persevere – even if we feel we're unloved and unseen – we can persevere and make something of our lives.'

And I really did – I mean, I found ways to become my own little person, you know, even though I wasn't witnessed and cherished by my mother. And we have a resilience in our being, in our spirit that--



I mean, we all want to live and thrive, and be whole, right? And, this is-- You do have to tell the truth – but you also have to show, in a way, that there is a path forward... that you can find your path, you know, to loving yourself, actually, and to having respect for who you are.

GP: I love that.

MD: Yeah. And that's sort of-- That's sort of the journey. And I think the travel was definitely the through-line for me of figuring out who I was, and my grandmother's love; you know, the grandmother that was always watching over me, and that gave me the unconditional love I didn't have from a single other human being, you know?

So yeah, there is the way to succeed. There is the way to forge a life, but the really important thing is to tell the truth about it – and because I was never told the truth as a child-- You know, I lived around a whole lot of brainy intellectual people who never told me the truth.

You know, they fabricated things right and left, and they talked in euphemism; and I was going to be damned if I was going to let that sort of define my life. And so, this had to be truth; and therefore, some of the stuff had to be dark and sad.

GP: Yeah. Wow. There's so much that we could continue to unpack in this book, but before we wrap up, I'd love to hear like, what's next for you? What else do you have going on that you'd like to share with our listeners?

MD: Well, I've been talking a lot to people about mindfulness practice; people who have read the book and looked at it. And so, I have seen that thread of the importance of that practice for me and my, kind of, my journey.

So, my manager and I conjured up this idea that I would make a nice loving kindness meditation tape, and I would offer it to my readers; you know, to my 'potential avid readers'. And so, we recorded, I recorded this lovely loving kindness meditation, which is one of my core practices; and it's on my website.

GP: And we can link to it here from the show notes page so folks can look on the show notes page as well and get that link.

MD: Yeah. The link to the actual meditation tape is if you went to bowingtoelephants.com/gift (Bowing to Elephants, which of course the title of the book – .com – and then /gift) there would be the free meditation offer.

And the idea was that people would start a little mini practice. So, even for you who are asking me specifically about the using of this for writers in their life, this is a very kind of gentle beginning to this idea.

And I thought, since a lot of people were linking me with this, kind of, the importance of this journey being one of the journeys of my life, I thought, 'Okay, let's have this.' So, I'd love to share that with people. It's been something deeply important to me. It's allowed me to open my heart even bigger than I imagined, and I know it does it for people.

So, if people take it seriously, they can feel a difference. So, that's one thing that I think is really kind of up for me to tell people about. I am hoping to write another book; and I'm beginning to scratch away at some ideas because I can't spend the rest of my life trying to promote Bowing to Elephants.



I mean, it's been fun, you know, I have to kind of get my writing muscles going again. So, I think I'm going to concentrate on a love story, and it'll be from my life, but we'll see what happens with it.

GP: Love it. Very excited. And I'm definitely going to have to check out the meditation audio because I think that will be really useful for me. So, I could-- Maybe I can do it this time around, I can actually figure out how to meditate. So, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

MD: Well, I think, I mean, go back to when I look at my struggles to make the book; and I had a mentor at the time, who's a writer and a Buddhist, who said-- When I was in deep distress, he said to me, "Mag, do not believe everything your mind tells you."

Now, this is very Buddhist, because yes, you can – you notice what's in your mind, but you don't have to believe it. Because I think what happens to writers is that they fall into the trap of believing that their message is trivial or unimportant, or their writing is lousy or, you know, whatever – and that derails them, as we all know.

It can stop people in their tracks. And hybrids of my mentor up on my computer – I typed it up, I got it typed up, printed up, I put it on my computer – it's like, 'Don't believe everything your mind tells you, and believe what your heart tells you'.

So, that for me, from my personal experience and also from even students I've had – who bad-mouth themselves terribly – I would want to say that to them, 'Don't buy into that self-critic because your heart knows that you have something important to offer, and you got to trust that.'

So, that's what I-- I think that's my message, you know, for people. It's very important because it can lead you to a place of expanding yourself and having more appreciation for who you are or deeper love. And if that isn't important, I don't know what is, you know?

GP: Yeah.

MD: I mean, I'm so proud of this book, when I stopped to think about it, and when I remembered a time when I almost gave up and I wanted to just drop it and say, 'Nobody gives a damn about this thing.'

GP: Yeah. Imagine if you had, right? Like, then we wouldn't be here. Yeah.

MD: That's right.

GP: That is such great advice. I think just, something that every writer, I think, can relate to. Thank you so much, Mag, for being here today. It has been an absolute treat speaking with you.

MD: Well, I've loved it. I really loved it. I think that these kinds of conversations are just so important. I mean, I think they're important for your audience out there to gather new insights and thoughts; but they're also important for someone like me where I can help kind of help myself, you know, broadcast my work and share it with the largest amount of gratitude possible. It's a great opportunity.

GP: Yeah. And you know, it helps also, as you said, we write to understand things. I find that often also speaking about books and talking to writers like yourself on the show, is a way for me to deepen my understanding. So, thank you for that. All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

