



# BEWILDERED

WITH MARTHA BECK  
AND ROWAN MANGAN

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## Episode #1: The Happiness Imperative

*Please note: This is an unedited transcript, provided as a courtesy, and reflects the actual conversation as closely as possible. Please forgive any typographical or grammatical errors.*

Martha Beck: [Intro Music] Welcome to Bewildered. I'm Martha Beck, here with Rowan Mangan. At this crazy moment in history a lot of people are feelings bewildered, but that actually may be a sign we're on track. Human culture teaches us to come to consensus, but nature — our own true nature — helps us come to our senses. Rowan and I believe that the best way to figure it all out is by going through bewilderment into be-wild-erment. That's why we're here. [Music fades]

Martha Beck: Hi. It's me, Martha.

Rowan Mangan: And me, Rowan.

Martha Beck: We're bewildered.

Rowan Mangan: We're trying to figure it out. At least, I'm trying to figure it out. I think Marty might have figured it out a long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.

Martha Beck: Oh, that's right. I did.

Rowan Mangan: You did?

Martha Beck: Yes, and it was all about hair buns.

Rowan Mangan: I should have guessed.

Martha Beck: I kept it in my lush, natural hair buns, it was easy. Everything was figured out.

Rowan Mangan: That's brilliant, but ...

Martha Beck: But I have no hair buns in this life.



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Rowan Mangan: No hair buns in this life. It's a tough galaxy for hair.

Martha Beck: It is.

Rowan Mangan: This one, yeah.

Martha Beck: Yeah, buns like that. So, basically we're screwed and that's the end.

Rowan Mangan: Hope you enjoyed Bewildered. This will be our last episode. No. This is our first episode, our first-ever episode of all time. The one-th, the glorious one-th.

Martha Beck: The very one-th.

Rowan Mangan: The very one-th itself. And I think it bears asking at this point, since we are obviously some madcap people: why we would want to be doing a podcast at all, Marty-moo?

Martha Beck: Well, seriously, it's because I have spent my whole entire life trying to help people with what I thought were a whole bunch of different problems that turned out to be one single problem.

Rowan Mangan: How nice.

Martha Beck: Yes, and that problem is: being pulled away from our true nature. And the specific reason we do it is because of the pressure of culture.

Rowan Mangan: Culture?

Martha Beck: Yes, culture.

Rowan Mangan: What are you meaning exactly by "culture," in this context?

Martha Beck: So, I have a PhD in sociology.

Rowan Mangan: Oh, do you, darling?

Martha Beck: Yes. From Harvard!

Rowan Mangan: Oh, how fancy.

Martha Beck: By the way, as you listen to this podcast, now and in the future, every time I say the word "Harvard," you may drink a shot.

Rowan Mangan: I'm very sorry if this is a bad thing to encourage drinking games during our podcast.



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- Martha Beck: Oh, yeah. Trigger. Trigger warning. Just a joke. Drink a shot of water. You'll be bloated. So anyway, yes, I do have a PhD in sociology from Harvard, and —
- Rowan Mangan: Drink!
- Martha Beck: — And in sociological configurations, it's any type of social pressure could be considered "culture." So, the great druggie wise guy, whose name I'm forgetting is... Tristan?
- Rowan Mangan: No, Terry.
- Martha Beck: Terence McKenna.
- Rowan Mangan: Terence McKenna.
- Martha Beck: He said, "Whenever there are two people in the room, culture is the third guest at the table." Because every time people interact, we're always looking at each other for social cues and we're always putting out social cues that we don't even know about.
- And so, it can be just you and your best friend. It can be your whole family. It could be your religion, your ethnicity, your nation, the entire global culture. It's all putting pressure on you to decide how to behave.
- Rowan Mangan: So, if I was having coffee with my best friend, there would be a kind of cultural force operating where I would... What? Try to behave like we've always behaved together, or —
- Martha Beck: Yeah. Yeah, and you'd see maybe her face would change if you went to a given topic so you'd steer away from it, or you'd think something was funny and she'd look at you glaringly and you would feel crestfallen and remember not to do that again. All of that is cultural pressure.
- Rowan Mangan: And I guess the obvious one is the sort of going to the family at Christmastime. There's a lot of cultural cues and pressures there.
- Martha Beck: I can't tell you how many people I've had to mop up the dregs of their personalities after family holidays. It's really kind of horrifying, but very remunerative for a life coach. It's great. The market will never run dry.
- Rowan Mangan: There you go.



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- Martha Beck: But yeah, it's a real issue. And I finally came to think that the only way out of it is a complete detachment from culture, to return to our true nature.
- Rowan Mangan: And we figure it out by going to our true nature. Is that right?
- Martha Beck: Yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: So, all right. Just to tease this out a little bit more, why nature? Why culture bad, nature good?
- Martha Beck: Because culture doesn't know you. It just knows "person." And you might as well be a robot, especially in our culture, which is very materialist. It's based on sort of factory models of creation. It's vast numbers.
- Martha Beck: And the idea is, "Do this. Go here. Say that. Think this. Live this long, and all will be well for the culture." And by making things right for the culture, it can push the individual nature completely off into the margins of reality where it will suffer.
- Rowan Mangan: And I guess there's also the sort of factor of, if you have, my best friend's and me culture, my family of origin culture, my work committee's cultures, they're going to contradict each other at some point, right?
- Martha Beck: Yeah. Like you may need to discuss your strong feelings about something, but in your family, "We don't talk about strong feelings." And in another group, someone needs you to be quiet about your strong feelings because they have differing feelings. There are all these different types of pressure that might make you... and then you go to your therapy group and they say, "No. You must, you must speak your feelings!" So, there are contradictory messages coming from culture all the time.
- Rowan Mangan: Which, I imagine, kind of pushes us even further away from our true nature.
- Martha Beck: And it can actually get us completely stuck. There's something in the brain called the attention aperture, and if you get too many inputs, it all just gets stuck. Which is why tigers and lions can't always kill one in a herd of antelope.



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- Martha Beck: Because there's so many things coming in as input that the attention bottleneck gets stuck, and they actually just stand there, staring. And they don't chase anything.
- Rowan Mangan: That sounds like my entire life.
- Martha Beck: Oh my gosh. It's every client, every other client that's come to me. Thousands, literally thousands of clients now. And they were just gobsmacked and stunned by the level of cultural pressure and the differences. They were logjammed.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. No, that makes total sense. So, I guess, as far as what we are talking about as bewilderment, be-wild-erment on this show, the returning to your true nature is be-wild-erment in response to bewilderment, right? So, we're proposing that, you feel bewildered, that's a point, like a juncture where you can choose to come back to your true nature. As you do that, what you'll be doing is wilding yourself. So, we're talking about be-wild-erment as a response to the mayhem of this moment in history.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. So, as we keep making these podcasting episodes, we're going to talk over and over again about people who feel, in some way, conflicted, pressured, troubled, bewildered. And instead of saying, "Oh, don't be bewildered. Here's the recipe for making it better," I guess we kind of are doing that, but we're literally saying, "We don't have the answer, but your own wild nature has it."
- And if you can pull away from civilization, because in our culture, civilization and the wild are opposed to each other. Maybe there's a cultural setting where they don't have to be, but in ours, they are.
- So, withdrawing from civilization into a wilder self can get you on track with truth. I mean, the things you figure out in the wild work because they work, not because people say they do. So, if you take a test on making fire, and you get the steps wrong in class, the teacher can tell you you're wrong. Or if you get all the steps written down correctly, the teacher will say you're right. That's a social pressure.



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- Martha Beck: If you go into the wild, and you try to make fire and you make fire, it's because you're aligned with the principles of nature. You're in truth. And that is something civilization does not give us in the same way.
- Rowan Mangan: So, one of the things you'll hear us say a lot is that culture is a process of consensus. Culture wants to bring you to consensus. We all agree that this is how we behave. And what going through this be-wild-erment process is, is coming to your senses. Coming back to the part of you that knows what to do, that knows how to navigate this moment in time, this life or these very particular sets of circumstances that you're trying to work through in your own life.
- Martha Beck: Yup. So, if you find yourself obsessed with wanting everyone to agree with you, you're trying to come to consensus. If you're trying to figure out what's true, you're coming to your senses.
- Rowan Mangan: Right.
- Martha Beck: That's be-wild-erment. Okay.
- Rowan Mangan: That's be-wild-erment. So, since this is our first episode, we thought we would tell you a little bit about our own bewilderment experiences, just to give you a little flavor.
- Martha Beck: So you can get an idea of what we're talking about. I was born on a snowy day ...
- Rowan Mangan: Here we go.
- Martha Beck: I am actually going back almost that long. This is a long time. No, I was born and raised in a very religious family in Utah. And I will let you guess the religion of which my family was a part. But very much a part.
- So, until I was 17, I lived in a hotbed of Mormonism, in a town with 100,000 people and one bar. And all my friends were Mormon. I had a couple who weren't, but they were discriminated against. And then when I was 17, I went off... Guess where? To Harvard.
- Rowan Mangan: Drink.



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Martha Beck: Where things are not... You may be surprised to know, not everyone is Mormon.

Rowan Mangan: I can just imagine you being surprised by that.

Martha Beck: Complete stunner. I mean, seriously, people would say ... Somebody asked me out. "Do you want to go get a cup of coffee?" And I was terrified. I'd had never had a cup of coffee. I didn't know how to have a cup of coffee. Coffee was a sin. People who drank coffee were sinners.

Rowan Mangan: So, did you just shout, "I don't do sin juice!" And like, you ran away?

Martha Beck: Well, I hit him really hard in the face like you're supposed to do.

Rowan Mangan: It's the Mormon way.

Martha Beck: I literally ran away. I literally, physically ran away. Oh, it was pathetic. Anyway, so then I was there. I got my bachelor's, my master's, and my PhD. So, by then I'd been living at Harvard for —

Rowan Mangan: Drink.

Martha Beck: — my entire adult life. And then I had a kid, and another kid who was diagnosed prenatally with Down syndrome. It was really late in the pregnancy, and though I was pro-choice, still am, I felt really bonded to him and I just... I was facing the question, "What kind of a child is the right kind of child to have?" And the culture of Harvard said, "Baby with Down syndrome, no good."

Rowan Mangan: "Not smart."

Martha Beck: No! My doctor said —

Rowan Mangan: "Not smart like us."

Martha Beck: "It's like having a malignant tumor." And I was like, "I disagree. I've watched him suck his own finger on the ultrasound. I'm in love with him. I can't believe that he is bad." But to my culture, he was. So, guess what I did? I hightailed it back to Utah, where everyone told me I'd done the right thing.





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Martha Beck: Yay, I was back in culture. So, I lived there, I had another kid and after a few years I realized I was gay. Yes, so there I was in the most Mormon town in the world, becoming a lesbian. So, I went to Harvard to choose to have a child with Down syndrome, then came back to Utah to become a lesbian.

Rowan Mangan: Always pushing the envelope.

Martha Beck: And made my career giving people advice. So anyway, yeah. So, then I left Mormonism, which was a big to-do, and ran away and lived in Arizona for a long time. But really, where I lived was in the sky.

I traveled constantly and I ended up going to Africa a lot, and going to wild places in Africa, because I'd had so much cultural pressure in different directions that I felt completely confused a lot of the time, and I never felt like I was doing anything right.

And the only place that felt calm to me was literally out in the natural world with animals, with no people at all. And eventually, I couldn't come back from that, so I bought a ranch in California next to a national park, and I literally lived in the woods for six years and came to my own nature, came to my senses. And that's where you and I started hanging out.

Rowan Mangan: We did. Where all lesbians hang out.

Martha Beck: We're all lesbians hanging out, and now we are in Pennsylvania. Why? Because someone said to us, "Hey. Maybe you could move to Pennsylvania." And we went:

Rowan Mangan: "Okay."

Martha Beck: "Okay." And that's what we did, because that's how we make our decisions.

Rowan Mangan: We just move from one forest to another.

Martha Beck: It agreed with our true nature.

Rowan Mangan: It sure did.

Martha Beck: Us and our beloved Karen.

Rowan Mangan: And our beloved Karen. And our beloved Adam.





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- Martha Beck: We do not live normal lives. We have a very abnormal family, and we are very, very happy.
- Rowan Mangan: It works for us. And life can look a bit weird by the culture's standards when you keep pushing that envelope of culture towards nature.
- Martha Beck: It feels to me like I literally was given a life on purpose where everywhere I went, I would be strongly emotionally drawn to do things that would make me an absolute outcast.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. I mean, it's kind of amazing when you run through it like that, just how much you went somewhere and then confounded it.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. And I didn't just leave Utah, either. I left Utah after writing a book about how I left the Mormon church, which is the one thing in Mormonism that's considered worse than murder. So, I didn't just leave. I left with a vengeance. I didn't do it for vengeance. I left emphatically, and made sure that everybody there thought I was evil.
- So, it's like I've been maximizing cultural pressure on myself everywhere I've gone in my life, and it means that I have become wilder and wilder and wilder, and more and more ready to make unorthodox decisions. And that's why we're sitting here together, and I think that you have an equally interesting story.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. I mean, it's a different kind of story when I thought about it, but from when I was super young, I was born — No. I have always loved animals, much as you do, Marty, and I always thought that I would, I had this weird girl crush on — Well, crush-crush, on Dian Fossey; dead gorilla woman — I'm just setting up my taste in women for life.
- Martha Beck: Thank you very much! "Dead gorilla woman." That's the pressure that's on me right now.
- Rowan Mangan: So, there she was, being out there with the gorillas and I really, really wanted to do work like that. And as I got a bit older, I realized that there's this little thing you have to be able to do, or at least I assumed you did, when you want to work with animals.



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- Rowan Mangan: I just thought, "Oh, I'm going to have to do science. I'm going to have to make formulas and numbers."
- Martha Beck: Which in itself is a cultural pressure.
- Rowan Mangan: Well, true. Yeah.
- Martha Beck: I mean, Jane Goodall didn't have any special education. She just went out there with the chimps.
- Rowan Mangan: Well, even Dian Fossey did all kinds of things to get out there. But anyway, this was this idea that I got in my head. And because I have the kind of, "I want to be helpful in the world" is like one of my things, I thought, "Well, I guess animals, I'd have to learn science. I'd have to learn about animal bodies or something. So, I'll instead do something with people."
- And I ended up, long story short, in my mid-twenties, doing a master's in international politics. So I had this idea, and I think I'm not alone in this sometimes, of, "I care about the people, so therefore, in order to express my empathy or to fully experience my empathy, I need to know at all times just how bad life is for some people and just how much suffering there is." And that's all a cultural idea as well.
- Martha Beck: And it's interesting, because if you'd been, like say 10,000 years ago, you would have had 135 people to keep track of in your whole life. And then maybe you could know all of that, if you were like the medicine person of the tribe or whatever, maybe you could take that on. But when you were doing your master's, it was information from around the world.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. I had a radio station at my home in Melbourne that played round the clock international news, so it would go from the BBC World Service to CNN World or whatever it was. And no kidding, you guys, I bought a radio for every room in the house in my flat so I could just walk around and have it at me all the time. And that was all day, every day. And for four years.



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- Rowan Mangan: So, coming to the end of that time, I feel like I'd been really, really poisoned by the impact of all this suffering. I mean, ugh. There was so much. There was Iraq and Afghanistan going on. There's always a genocide somewhere if you dig hard enough.
- Martha Beck: And those were all human-caused.
- Rowan Mangan: Right.
- Martha Beck: I mean, there are natural disasters too, but the political stuff is, by definition, human-caused atrocities and suffering. Talk about the ugly side of culture.
- Rowan Mangan: Completely. And I feel like I had just spent four years filling this animal of myself with so much toxic human shit, you know? I had stifled any hope of connecting with my real self at that point. My true self was almost obliterated by the gorging on suffering that I was doing.
- Martha Beck: And you really thought this was going to be helpful in some way?
- Rowan Mangan: I think I thought it was virtuous to know, and that people who stuck their heads in the sand, like I do now, are in some way morally lacking. Yeah.
- Martha Beck: There's a big red flag for cultural pressure. Yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah, totally. So anyway, that was the point I was kind of pushed into it at that point in my life, the way that Marty was at many times in her life, and I did the whole ... I threw out my TV. I filled my place with plants and sunshine and started —
- Martha Beck: You hit a breaking point, in other words.
- Rowan Mangan: Absolutely.
- Martha Beck: And you just said, "Enough of this," and you pushed away from civilization.
- Rowan Mangan: Completely, yeah. I mean, not completely. But yeah, to the extent that I could, at that point, I made my home into a much more natural place and started digging my way back to myself, I think. And then if you fast forward six years, here I am in the wilds of Pennsylvania. It's lovely to live by nature.



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- Martha Beck: Yeah. So, both of us did this thing where we were in the culture, felt like, almost to save our lives or at least our emotional lives, we had to retreat from culture. And we found in that retreat from culture, a connection with our own natures that really has helped us navigate the world and feel happy.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. And so that's what this podcast will focus on, is taking the little bits of bewilderment that we find in our lives and just finding lots of little ways to just come back to our senses each time.
- Martha Beck: Cool. And I hope we can come to consensus on that.
- Rowan Mangan: Yes. It's very clear to us that going from bewilderment to bewilderment is the only way that any of this makes sense, really. So, without further ado, shall we?
- Martha Beck: Let's jump in.
- Rowan Mangan: Let's just do it.
- Martha Beck: Choose a real person with a real issue.
- Rowan Mangan: Absolutely. So, at the moment, because it's early days for us, we've just been bothering our friends with questions about where they're feeling bewildered. And one of our friends, who we're going to call Pam for the purposes of this podcast.
- Martha Beck: The Pamster.
- Rowan Mangan: Pam. Pamelar. She is someone who I think can describe as professionally very successful. She's got a wonderful family that she loves very much, and a pretty good life to look at. And yet, Pam sometimes feels deeply unhappy, despite all these blessings.
- Martha Beck: What? Unimaginable.
- Rowan Mangan: I know.
- Martha Beck: So wrong, right?



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- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. Impossible. So anyway, she tells herself a lot of stuff on these days, or on these weeks, whenever she's having these down periods. And you'll recognize the cultural stories that get told in this.
- It's basically, "What right do you have not to be happy? I should be happy. Look at everything I have. I should be constantly grateful. I know so many people who have it worse." So that's where she finds herself on the bad days, and she can't figure it out.
- Martha Beck: And before we really go into this topic more deeply, I do want to say that there's a differentiation between having a bad day or even a bad week, and being depressed. Like deeply, intractably sad for a long time. That is a very real psychological condition, and nobody should have to feel that way.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah, so just understand that we're not talking about clinical depression here. That's not the situation that our friend outlined to us.
- Martha Beck: And if you feel depressed, go get help. Go get whatever you need. Therapy, medication. That's why I'm alive, so just thanks for listening to my little rant on that.
- Rowan Mangan: The culture's not perfect but it has its good sides and that sort of help is one of them.
- Martha Beck: Yes. It certainly does. I know one anthropologist who says that she believes that humans evolved to be depressed, because depression makes women more compliant and it makes men more aggressive. And she believes that that leads to a lot of babies. Therefore, it's an evolutionary advantage.
- But when there are billions of us overpopulating the planet, it's no longer necessary to stay depressed for reasons of reproduction, so get yourself some medication to overcome your evolution because depression is not fun.
- Rowan Mangan: No.
- Martha Beck: Anyway, moving on.



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- Rowan Mangan: All right. So, Pam's bewildered because she doesn't understand why she's unhappy when she's also so blessed, too blessed to be stressed. So, Marty, the first thing I feel like we need to dig into is, what's the cultural pressure in what Pam's experiencing?
- Martha Beck: Yeah. Well, the first thing is, I said before we have a very materialistic culture. And it's really based on, "If you have enough stuff, you will be happy."
- If you have a certain very rigid sort of drama playing out in which you have your one true love — that's very central to American culture — if you have a certain amount of money, if you have a certain kind of high-status job, if you have beautiful children that behave just so, if you have the right shoes and you don't wear white after Labor Day, you will be happy. Right?
- And so, people chase that. And so many people come to life coaches like me going, "You've got to get me the right pair of shoes." And when I was starting out, I would say, "Okay. Let's set up goals and make it happen and get you the pair of shoes you want." And we'd do that and then they'd say, "I'm not happy."
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah, spoiler alert. It was never the pair of shoes.
- Martha Beck: Never the shoes. And it got to the point, it really got ridiculous. I mean, I got to the point where I was working with very wealthy, very successful people, like world-famous, billionaire people. And I remember one guy calling me from a party and he'd made \$400 million the day before when his company went public, and there was this band playing.
- I can't remember what one, but a famous band. And it was deafening, and he was screaming at me into the phone at 2:00 in the morning, drunk as a lord, "It's not enough! When is it effing going to be enough?"
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. That's perfect, because what we're sold is that there's an equation there. If X then Y. If you build up a life that looks right, it will follow that you will feel right. And so I think there's this natural human desire to assume that something's missing.



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- Rowan Mangan: And if that formula hasn't worked, it's like, "Oh. I mustn't have enough of the material stuff to equate the happiness that I want, and so I will just add more."
- Martha Beck: Keep getting more, yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah.
- Martha Beck: And it's not just material stuff. It's what early sociologists said that, in Western culture ... Well, in all culture. Power, wealth and status are the three things. So, wealth is just material stuff. And then there's power and status.
- And some people actually want power more than they want stuff. And they want to be able to push people around. Some people just want status, like narcissistic people. They can't get enough of people screaming their praises. They need crowds to scream their praises.
- And I've worked with people like that too, who are really, really world-famous and cannot get enough. And they just become like, these kinds of dragons. But that's at the very top. Down at the level where most of us live, we just think, "Oh, if I had that, I'd be happy." And trust me. The people who have that are not necessarily happy.
- Rowan Mangan: No, but it's a very pernicious kind of story that we're bred into from, "What do you want to be when you grow up? What's your life going to look like when you are perfect?"
- Martha Beck: Exactly.
- Rowan Mangan: "What's your brand of perfect life?"
- Martha Beck: Exactly, and it's always culturally influenced and then we do it. We make it happen as best we can, or we get bits of it. So, we think, "I have more than I deserve," to be humble. And then we start to attack ourselves because we've answered society's equation and it's not working. The true nature is not doing what the culture said it would do.
- But instead of saying, "Oh, culture must be wrong," we say we're wrong. So, we say things to ourselves like, "How dare you be sad. How dare you complain."





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- Martha Beck: I remember hearing one famous person shout while she was giving a speech, "You don't have the right to be tired!" And I thought, "She's talking to herself. She's exhausted up there, and she's yelling that because that's the cultural message."
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah, and there's even like, smaller ones that have the same impact. Like, "Just keep your chin up. Why don't you smile more?"
- Martha Beck: Right. Oh, and that can be... Somebody used to always tell me, "Buck up. Buck up." And I literally would have just lost someone to death, and they'd be like, "Well, buck up." No, I don't want to buck up. So even that can feel like a whip hitting you, somebody saying, "Keep your chin up. Turn that frown upside down. Have a positive attitude."
- There's the whole, "You're not pleasant for us when you're not feeling good, so feel good so we all can feel good. If you don't have anything pleasant to say, don't say anything at all." That can feed into it. There's the lunatic fringe. "Don't manifest badness by feeling bad. You'll just manifest more badness. Think of good things and you will not manifest bad things."
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. I think the one that really resonates for me that Pam mentioned is the one where you start comparing yourself to other people. Where you say, "You can't complain because Linda down the street has the same situation but this much worse in all these ways."
- Martha Beck: Or when you were listening to your genocide things, it's like, "How can I feel bad because I have a dentist appointment, when there are people being tortured to death in other parts of the world?"
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, I hadn't put it together that that was what's going on, but it was like... Oh, that's exactly what was going on.
- Martha Beck: Along with, "I have to understand their suffering," there's also, in that particular sort of self-sacrificing way of thinking, which is a cultural — It's an aspect of culture. It's not only, "I have to feel their suffering," but "I can't be happier than they are, or it's not fair."



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- Rowan Mangan: That is so true.
- Martha Beck: Oh, that one just about killed me. It literally just about killed me. Because when you get down to the most miserable humans can be and you feel like you don't deserve to feel better than that, really suicide starts to look interesting at that point. But it's not, guys. It is not. It is a cultural burden that you should not be carrying.
- And then there's... Speaking of sociology, there was this whole thing in Europe when modern society as we know it was getting started, where people believed that the way you showed that you were favored by God was that you were always happy. So, it's the kind of, "Look happy. Jesus is coming," sort of pressure. "He's not going to like it if you have that nasty expression on your face."
- Rowan Mangan: Jesus will be really mad if you're not smiling wide enough.
- Martha Beck: Jesus, oh, yeah. Boy, oh boy, have I gone there.
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, gosh.
- Martha Beck: Oh, I'm sure our listeners will hear so much more about that. So our friend Pam ends up all in a knot because not only is she feeling sad for reasons she has not examined, she's also dumping cultural pressure on herself because she doesn't feel good, which makes her feel worse. So, it's a self-reinforcing, vicious cycle.
- Rowan Mangan: And it's part of the culture, but what we're saying is, the culture can't solve the culture's own problems. So, we need to look at... Well, all right. First of all, why can't culture solve the problem?
- Martha Beck: Well, we both know people, I will name no names, who when they feel bad, they immediately go looking for someone who will give them permission to have a problem, give them permission to solve the problem, give them permission to feel better, give them permission. They're looking for cultural affirmation that says, "Here's how to do things. We will love you and approve of you and you will get socially conditioned to be happy."



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Martha Beck: Because when you're small and compliant, as all of us are when we're children and usually even when we're grown up, the culture functions by creating group norms and everyone has to follow them. If you look at the culture as the organism, the culture needs everyone to agree with it.

And in theory, the idea is in a sort of equalizing culture, everybody will just automatically think the same things. And I remember studying many, many years' worth of documents about different utopian movements, everything from small cults to societies to communism, where everybody ... These intelligentsia would say, "Well, everybody automatically wants good things. So, let's set this up so everybody has a voice." And then they do it, and guess what? Some people don't behave the way they like it.

Rowan Mangan: You're kidding me.

Martha Beck: But the intelligentsia say, "Oh. Well, clearly they're not smart enough to get it, so we will just impose the right cultural attitudes that will make everyone happy."

Rowan Mangan: Oi, oi, oi.

Martha Beck: I remember when Karen and I were both professors when we met, and Karen was a social work professor, and we had this conversation where she ... I had just come out of studying communist China and I'd been there and I'd been taking in all these stories of 30 million people starving to death because the communists wanted to make everybody happy, and I think they really did.

Martha Beck: But Karen was like, "You know, we should just have a pool where everyone puts in money, and then if you need it, you go get it. And that would solve everything." And I was like ...

Rowan Mangan: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need."

Martha Beck: Yes. I said, "Karen, don't you think there's the potential for fraud in that system?" And she was like, "Oh, no one would do that."

Rowan Mangan: Bless her.



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Martha Beck: "Certainly no one, because it would be bad for everyone if some people took more than others." She was like, a classic little budding communist. She didn't even know it.

Rowan Mangan: Actually, it's kind of an interesting point. Not to go off-topic too far, but what Karen was doing there was projecting onto everyone how she herself is, and it strikes me as killing 30 million people in the service of making them happy is the same thing. I know what makes me happy, which is not even necessarily true, but I'm going to impose my worldview of happiness onto tens of millions and hundreds of millions of people.

Rowan Mangan: And that's what Karen was doing as well, is she has a very, very kind heart, and so she was projecting her own idea of what people will do *en masse* based only on her own self. And that's why we're saying culture is problematic.

Martha Beck: It never works. The cultures that have existed so far, I mean, I saw this when I was Mormon just before I left the church, and I was teaching at the Mormon-run university, BYU, and they would pipe speeches into our offices that were ... and they would disable the controls so you couldn't turn it down.

Rowan Mangan: That's actually super communist.

Martha Beck: I know. And I remember hearing one guy who would go on to be prophet of the Mormon church saying, "Of course we trust the faculty at BYU. We just need to make absolutely sure that trust is warranted." And I was just like, "This is exactly like communism." I'm not saying "communist bad, capitalist good" or anything.

I'm just saying it always goes wonky, because people decide that the culture is a manifestation of themselves, their own egos, and then they decide to take over and force other people to be like them, and that is pretty much how every culture on Earth has played out.

And it doesn't lead to happiness. So, we kind of need to look at something other than smart people figuring it out and forcing it on society. And you always say, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," right?



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- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. That's Audre Lorde said that, and it's something I think about a lot, because it's similar to the thing you often say that Einstein said. Not just you. Many people say Einstein said it. You've probably even said it.
- Martha Beck: [crosstalk]
- Rowan Mangan: [crosstalk] Do you know what I mean?
- Martha Beck: "I've got bubbles up me whoopsie-daisy." Is that it? Famous quotes from Einstein.
- Rowan Mangan: He said, "A problem cannot be solved from within the —"
- Martha Beck: "Within the system of logic that created it."
- Rowan Mangan: Right, and this is basically the same thing, that if you're trying to dismantle something, using the product of that thing can't dismantle it. But you need to come from a completely different place in order to do that.
- Rowan Mangan: So I feel like this problem of Pam's is very much the kind of problem that we see as cultural pressure, where if we try to solve it within the culture, it's going to self-perpetuate and it's going to get like that millionaire screaming, "When will it be enough?" Or whatever.
- Martha Beck: Yup.
- Rowan Mangan: So it's definitely like a classic invitation to look at the situation through a different lens.
- Martha Beck: Right. So what do we tell Pam to do here?
- Rowan Mangan: So, here's how I see it. And I'm saying "a different lens" because it's really a re-frame, to me. It's not a, "Take action." It's, "Look at." You're having a day you're feeling sad and you don't know why.
- You know, Pema Chödrön says, "You are the sky. Everything else is just the weather." And oh, I love that. And so there's our friend Pam, and she's the sky with a bad day rolling over her, rolling through her, and there's something very beautiful about that. Like, imagine a big storm in that sky. You know how it feels after a storm? Like if you walk on the beach or just go outside after a storm, there's a particular freshness in the air.



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- Rowan Mangan: And we don't blame the storm, you know? We don't blame the storm. So, I would be encouraging Pam to, in the very first instance, to look at these sad days as being as perfect as the weather is, and as without blame.
- Martha Beck: And I'm right here with you, but I also hear my earlier stuff going, "But sadness feels bad. A storm may be beautiful, but sadness isn't beautiful." And I used to believe that, that if it was negative, if it felt painful, I had to push it away.
- But I love what you're saying, because I went into the wild more, I did experience feelings that I had defined as negative because they were painful. But it was weird. When I was away from culture, and it just moved through, it's almost as if you can ask the part of yourself that disapproves of that to stand aside and look at it without judgment and without language, and just be in the storm.
- Rowan Mangan: As the sky.
- Martha Beck: As the sky.
- Rowan Mangan: The sky that is actually blue.
- Martha Beck: Yeah, which can never be harmed. And from the position of something that has no judgments and can never be harmed, even real pain can become awe-inspiring and beautiful, and clearly meaningful. I'm not saying you're going to enjoy it, but there's depth and there's meaning and there's fulfillment, and there's something clean in that.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. And something that is so much more natural than the idea of the Stepford smiling person stepping out of yourself.
- Martha Beck: Yeah, and forcing yourself. But you're dealing with very, very strong cultural learning. I mean, going down all the way right down to when you cry on your first day in your little bassinet when you're brought home from the hospital and you start to cry, and your mother or your father or another caregiver feels anxious because you're sad. You learn to be anxious because you're sad, which is not being the sky. It's being a human. It's being a social primate.



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- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. That's what we do.
- Martha Beck: Yeah, so you're talking about going to a place that's very deeply wild. It's before your first day of life, where you're already getting influenced to push away things that aren't necessarily enjoyable.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. But I do believe that you can, as you sort of cycle back away from the culture, even in these moments, I've had plenty of times when I've been really sad and felt it as a kind of beautiful experience. So I have this sad woman music that I put on, and I stand by a window and look out and there's all these really sad songs that I've got in a playlist in my mind that I can play. And I can feel the sadness, look out the window at the rain and the futility of it all, and it does feel meaningful.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. And we're not going into other emotions. We want to really focus on what Pam is going through. But you can see other emotions like angry the same way. If you watch them without judgment and you don't immediately take action interacting with other people, anger can be an amazing teacher and it can be an awe-inspiring sight, like a volcano exploding.
- Fear can be... Gavin de Becker describes it as being a very clear, clean, calm motivation to act if you take judgment away from it. So, all emotions that we socially call "negative," they just are, in nature.
- Rowan Mangan: Right, right. And I think this could be a new concept to some people, so I just want to say first, that re-frame is something that, it'll take time to practice. But I was also thinking, Marty, that you might have an exercise that could kind of prompt them into... prompt our beautiful listeners into that place.
- Martha Beck: That's what I do. That is what I do. Yeah, absolutely. So, all of you guys who are out there, knowing that you've been given much by the world, the very fact that you're listening to a podcast means that you've been given more than many starving people in various parts of the world. And you probably also have bad days, and it may be that you fight against those bad days and beat yourself over the head with cultural stories about how you're wrong to have them.





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Martha Beck:

So, I want to do a little thought exercise with you. I'm very big on thought exercises. Find a place where you're relatively calm. Like if you're walking through a mall right now listening to this, it may not be as easy, but you can still do it even if you're driving a car or whatever. But if you can get by yourself, so much the better.

So, the first thing to do is, detach yourself from the people around you, whether it's a crowd of strangers or whether it's your family, your partner. Go in the bathroom for 10 minutes. Go outside for a half-hour walk. Get by yourself. And this is something that we'll say over and over and over, because one of the biggest things that you have to do to start sort of detoxing from culture is be okay with yourself. Go alone somewhere.

It's almost impossible to get out of really entrenched cultural models when you're with other people. So get by yourself, and forget other people for right now. For 10 minutes, they don't matter at all. It's just you. And that doesn't mean you're going to do anything bad. You're just going to sit here and think for 10 minutes. But other people don't exist right now, okay?

So now, think of something that would be nice to love. For example, it might be really nice if you loved rain, if you live in a rainy area. Or if you loved, for example, exercise if you're somebody who resists exercise. Think of something that you believe you should love, and then try to force yourself to love it.

It might be a person. Somebody who loves you, but you don't love them. Have you ever tried this? Try to force yourself to be okay with that relationship the way it is. Really. Not just to tolerate it, but to really be in it, like it's the best. Something that you don't love. Try to force yourself to love it. Feel the sensation of that pressure inside your body and your psyche. That's step one.

Step two is this. Shake all the trying out. Shake out any judgment, and just start to notice what emotions you're feeling right now. And especially notice anything that might be a little bit uncomfortable.



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Martha Beck:

So, say you're tired. Say to yourself, "You have permission to be as tired as you want. The tiredness can be as big as it needs to be." Let it get bigger. Maybe you'll find a trace of sadness in there. Say, "Hello. Guess what? I have so much room for you. You get to be exactly as big as you are, so spread out. Relax. Be sad. Tell me everything. Put on the sad songs. There's lots of time and lots of space for you."

And do that with any other emotion. You're angry? Okay. Let it rip. "There's lots of room in here for you. You can't possibly exhaust my permission for you to exist. I accept you as you are." And encourage it to get bigger.

Now notice not the feeling itself, but the spaciousness of giving it permission, and how the part of you that's giving permission is not trapped inside it. It's not the same size and shape as the emotion.

And this is what Ro was saying about becoming the sky. When you give yourself permission to feel what you're feeling, you become like the sky, and everything else is just weather. But as long as you resist the weather, you're caught in it, and you will always lose 100% of the time.

So then just notice that come back into your regular life, and you're not going to be able to sustain that. You can't talk to your very repressive parents and feel all your anger at the same moment and make sense of it. You're going to blow up or become silent or something. That's okay.

You don't have to figure all this out in real time. You have to take moments of wildness, and you have to start tracing your way back to your true self, to your true nature. And that will always be peace.

Rowan Mangan:

So keep listening as we go forth with this podcast, and we'll be presenting lots of different ways that you can come back to your nature, come back to your own wildness at many times in your life. And in the meantime, we will bid you adieu.

Martha Beck:

Yes. And Pam, be happy to be sad.



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Rowan Mangan: Happy to be sad. Hashtag.

Martha Beck: Yeah. Hashtag that makes no sense whatsoever. Hashtag, stay wild, everybody, and we'll see you later.

Rowan Mangan: Stay wild. See you next time.

Rowan Mangan: [Outro Music] Are you enjoying these shenanigans? We can notify you when a new Bewildered episode comes out. Just text the word "wild" to (570) 873-0144. You can also follow Martha on the socials for all kinds of ways to improve your life. On Instagram she's @themarhabeck, on Facebook @themarhabeck, or on Twitter, plain old @marhabeck. Her website is marhabeck.com. You can also follow me, Rowan Mangan, for all kinds of stuff on the writing life, wordsmithing, and honestly, general nonsense. My website is rowanmangan.com. Find me on Insta, @rowan\_mangan. On Facebook, I'm @rowanmanganwriter, and on Twitter I'm @rowanmangan. Thanks for joining us. We'll see you next time. [Music fades]