



BEWILDERED

WITH MARTHA BECK
AND ROWAN MANGAN

Episode #23: Outfoxing Anxiety

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 feeling 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] Hi, I'm Martha Beck!
- Rowan Mangan: And I'm Rowan Mangan, and you have arrived in another episode of Bewildered, the podcast for people trying to figure it out. I, myself, have been trying to figure it out. You'll know that I'm trying to figure it out constantly. Lately, it's been on roller skates because that was what was next.
- Martha Beck: Naturally.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. So Marty got one of those hoverboard things, and she came whizzing by and managed to figure it out in midair.
- Martha Beck: Yeah, I did. I did, actually. But then the hoverboard crashed.
- Rowan Mangan: Uh-oh.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. I had state-dependent memory. I needed to be in midair to remember what I had figured out. So then I just spent a day jumping off progressively higher surfaces, trying to think of things in midair again. My ankles really hurt now, and that's all I have to show for it.
- Rowan Mangan: Well, maybe one of these days, eh?
- Martha Beck: Maybe. We keep trying. We do keep trying. So what are you trying to figure out this week, Ro?
- Rowan Mangan: I am trying to figure out ... Hmm, how shall I put this? I've been struggling with my inner hippie, Marty.
- Martha Beck: Sometimes I hear you two fighting at night.



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Rowan Mangan: It's true. It's true. So you know how we all have these different aspects of ourselves, and I have a very strong and wonderful inner hippie who has spent a pandemic of early motherhood fantasizing about something called Forest School.

Martha Beck: Aw.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah.. So sweet.

Martha Beck: Are you going to put your dreadlock back in?

Rowan Mangan: I think that dreadlock has collected enough. I don't know what's in there.

Martha Beck: It's a genuinely dreadful lock at this point.

Rowan Mangan: It is. Yeah.

Martha Beck: Tell me about this Forest School thing.

Rowan Mangan: It's about parenting in public as well. Lila is 18 months old, and for the past 18 months we've been in our house. There was a pandemic or whatever. So then last week, finally she was old enough, Forest School began. I had spent all these 18 months fantasizing about Forest School because it's very much like what it sounds like, Marty.

Martha Beck: I hope so.

Rowan Mangan: The children go into the forest. When they're little like this, the mums come and the dads come, and the parents come and everyone cavorts. Yeah.

Martha Beck: Cavorting Forest School.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. I mean this place is wonderful. The tagline of the school is, "For kids who are serious about dirt". Who doesn't love that? So my inner hippie was just in paroxysms. It was-

Martha Beck: Of joy, just to be clear.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. Yeah. I mean no, just all the strong emotions at once.

Martha Beck: Ah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Rowan Mangan: It was intense. So off we went, all my hippie bells ringing and-



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Martha Beck: And let me tell you. In Australian parlance, they were kitted out. They were rugged up. They were dressed for the occasion.

Rowan Mangan: It was cold.

Martha Beck: Yeah. Ro's not used to cold, so they were wearing this odd mishmash of rubber boots and little fluffy gloves. They looked great, I have to say.

Rowan Mangan: We looked like we were letting our inner hippies out.

Martha Beck: You did, actually. That's exactly the image.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. So in my mind, Forest School, it's going to be little kids cavorting around and making bird calls and building forts and dancing in the trees in circles and talking to the trees. I thought she'll have these friendships that will begin now that will stay with her for life. She had these little rain boots, little mud boots on, and she could barely walk in them, honestly, because I was being economical and I bought some that were a bit too big.

So she had those on, and we practiced stomping around the house together. She quite got into that. So then we get there and, sure enough, there's a little bird call to bring everyone together. And then-

Martha Beck: Caw caw caw!

Rowan Mangan: And then it's also beautifully Montessori and respectful parenting. Our lovely teacher said, she's like, "Today, I'd just like us to let our children be the architects of their own experience. Try not to lead them in play, but rather follow them and see what they can teach you." I was just like, "Ah." I was in paroxysms.

Martha Beck: Again.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah.

Martha Beck: Of delight.

Rowan Mangan: - Ish. I mean it was a lot of emotion.

Martha Beck: Okay.



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Rowan Mangan: So then we all hiked off through the pine forest together to get to a sacred grove. It was very much as I'd imagined and all the little tiny children tramping along. And then we came into a circle and we all sat together and had a snack and talked about what makes a really good stick.

Martha Beck: Oh yeah. Oh my goodness. I'm still thinking about that, and I am older than 18 months.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. Well, I can give you some pointers. But, finally, it was time for the children to explore the pine grove. There were beautiful things. They could paint this big branch of a tree with these beautiful paints. There were all kinds of little activities set up around the pine grove for them to do. Lila's one of the youngest in the group. So one by one, the kids kind of, "Oh, look at this." All the parents are so perfect and respectful parenting and la la la.

So they were like, "I see that you are embracing the blue paint, Persephone." I was just like, "Yes." What Lila was doing was walking away from the pine forest with great determination in her little boots, tromp, tromp, tromp, tromp. So I'm looking around at the other parents to see if they've noticed and then walking after her so that she can be the architect of her own experience. I'm like, "Oh, Lila-ephone, are you interested in exploring the sacred puddle that lies beyond the pine forest?"

She was like, "Up, up, up, up, up." She had her own idea. I was so embarrassed because I felt like I was in such a bind, Marty, because I couldn't just ... Because she was the architect of her own experience, I couldn't just-

Martha Beck: There you go.

Rowan Mangan: ... pick her up and take her back.

Martha Beck: You sent a movie and she had architected. She was a long way away by the time you turned on your phone. She was architecting an experience that was like a gangplank that just went endlessly to the horizon away from Forest School.

Rowan Mangan: We were actually saying that it was basically like our podcast. It was like they created the perfect little culture, and Lila was just like, "Later."

Martha Beck: Off she went.



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- Rowan Mangan: Off she went, following her nature, which should have delighted me. But instead, culture had its little hooks in my hippie cell. My hippie cell was, "Ah ... I wonder what the other parents are thinking of me. My child is not properly making leaf potions."
- Martha Beck: I'm wondering if there's a related Forest School for children who are serious about acid. No. No. No, no, no. I meant LSD, which I've never tried. So that was a very, very bad joke.
- Rowan Mangan: I thought it was a pretty good joke.
- Martha Beck: All right. There comes a point with Forest School where I am with Lila. I'm beelining away without some kind of chemical support, I mean, if I just had to sit there with a straight face. Maybe I've had too much influence on the child.
- Rowan Mangan: Maybe so. Yeah. I mean it did occur to me just that your own introverted tendencies were quite clearly-
- Martha Beck: Well, she did shoot off into nature.
- Rowan Mangan: She did. God bless her. I was in this really peculiar position of trying to emulate, oh, this is all so natural for me. I just know that my child is exploring out here, but soon she'll come back into the fold. But I was purely in the grip of culture, and it was so interesting.
- Martha Beck: Meanwhile, she's like, "Where can I get a cigar?" If she doesn't grow up to be a hippie ... That's all she has to do to rebel is not be a hippie.
- Rowan Mangan: She is just her own person.
- Martha Beck: She truly is. I'm sure you'll hear so much about that because she's endlessly entertaining. In fact, she's the only entertaining thing we've had in our lives for 18 months, and she has carried us through.
- Rowan Mangan: She sure has. So what are you trying to figure out?
- Martha Beck: Yeah. Much less sweet and wholesome and respectful, much less respectful. I had to go do a taping. Talk about the end of the pandemic, I had to go to a physical space to record a physical TV thingy or something.
- Rowan Mangan: Amazing.



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Martha Beck: Yeah. Only, it's not the very end of the pandemic because I had to have a certificate, a testing that the day before I went to the taping, which was in New York City, I had had a negative COVID test. It was some special test. So, I got the directions to go to a lab, a diagnostics lab close to our house in Pennsylvania where they would do this very special test on the appointed day. So off I went.

It was quite a little trek, but I found it. It was a little weird. It was in a kind of strip mall, and it was hard to find. It was a weird little maze with just little paper signs saying, "Lab." I was getting a little nervous. I went in, and it was a large room, Ro. It was large, and it was bare.

Rowan Mangan: Okay.

Martha Beck: I'm not kidding. It was maybe 50 feet square. There were four chairs in it, one in the center of each of the walls and in the very middle of the room.

Rowan Mangan: Wait. Oh, okay. Yeah. All right.

Martha Beck: Yeah. So if you go to any wall, there's a chair in exactly the center of the wall, 50 feet from the other chairs. I mean they were serious about social distancing. And then in the middle, a teeny tiny coffee table that would have taken a day's hike for any of us to reach. There was nobody to greet me. "Hello. Come in. Do you have a fever?" No, none of that. It was just a computerized thing.

I went in and, sure enough, I had my appointment. I sat down, and I was waiting for my instant results test. The three of us that were sitting in this large echoing room could hear a conversation going on in the little special room where they do the actual testing.

Rowan Mangan: This is all sounding ominous.

Martha Beck: None of it sounded health-related. The conversation went on a long time, and it covered a lot of topics, none of which had anything to do with illness. You'd hear the patient occasionally saying, "Except, but maybe you could ...". And then there would be this other voice going, "You have no idea what I've had to put up with." It went on for a while. And then someone came out. We all perked up, all four of us in our separate chairs.

A woman came in in a mask and a hat. We could barely see her. She didn't speak to any of us. She just ran, and I do mean ran, around the room, pulling down all the shades, locking the doors, and then turning out the lights.



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Rowan Mangan: No way.

Martha Beck: Then she bolted-

Rowan Mangan: Wait.

Martha Beck: ... back into the special room.

Rowan Mangan: She turned off all the lights in the waiting room-

Martha Beck: Yes.

Rowan Mangan: ... while there were people waiting in it?

Martha Beck: Yeah. We all just sat there, staring at each other over our masks going, "I would talk to you about this, but I would have to shout. And then the other people would hear me."

Rowan Mangan: What an interesting permutation of culture.

Martha Beck: It was very interesting. So then, it was finally my turn. The voice from the special room called my name, and I got up-

Rowan Mangan: Even in the complete darkness?

Martha Beck: Yeah, yeah. It was dark. It was dark. I went in there. There was one light on. There was a lamp on in there and then the masked figure. I said, "I need to do a COVID test," and the mask figure said, "We don't do those." I was like, "Two years into a pandemic, you don't cover this?" Especially since I had a special request to do it. I believe it was a woman, although it could have been any species under that mask. Who would know?

So it could have been an alien. She said, "No, we don't do those. Even if you do them, you can't get the results for at least a week." I was like, but it's called the instant results test." She's like, "Well, don't I look like the fool?" I didn't say yes because I was afraid she could kill me. But it was very strange, Ro. It was very, very strange.

She said to me, "Here's what you do. Go to an urgent care center and pretend you have COVID. They'll give you a test immediately." I was like, "That seems unduly, difficult plus dishonest." She was like, "Nope, that's your only option."

Rowan Mangan: Oh, wow.



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Martha Beck: Yeah. So I left. I came home. We called someone else that came to my house and gave me an instant COVID test. They got the results in 10 seconds, and I went and did my taping. But all week I've been trying to figure out what the hell was going on in that room.

Rowan Mangan: Why did she turn the lights off?

Martha Beck: Well, all I'm saying is she may have been a graduate of Forest School.

Rowan Mangan: How dare you?

Martha Beck: You don't know what that amount of dirt does to your brain.

Rowan Mangan: How dare you?

Martha Beck: I'm the man. I'm not the man. What do hippies say? To fight the man? Fight the pigs? I don't know. Why would a hippie fight a pig? Hippies love animals. What is wrong with this whole system? Isn't there something you're supposed to do to the man, like resist it or ... Here's what's pathetic. I was actually alive during the hippie days, and you weren't even born really.

Rowan Mangan: Oh my God.

Martha Beck: What did they do to the man, the hippies?

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. Yeah. Fight the man.

Martha Beck: Fight the man. Okay. Yeah. I'm the one-

Rowan Mangan: You're the man.

Martha Beck: ... staring at Forest School and going, "Ah yeah. Are they eating mushrooms with the dirt?"

Rowan Mangan: I don't think that's what the man is doing though.

Martha Beck: The man is looking at them saying that.

Rowan Mangan: Just watching them and vaguely judging them, I don't think that's what the man is-

Martha Beck: Oh, I think the man is doing exactly that, but we can discuss this later. Suffice it to say, we're both deeply confused.



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Rowan Mangan: I think that is always the case and never more so than today. We'll be right back with more Bewildered.

I have a favor to ask. You might not know this, but ratings and reviews are like gold in the podcasting universe. They get podcasts in front of more faces, more eyes, more ears. All the bits that you could have a podcast in front of, that's what they do. So it would help us enormously if you would consider going over to your favorite podcasting app, especially if it's Apple, and giving us a few stars, maybe even five, maybe even six. If you can find a way to hack the system, I wouldn't complain. A review would also be wonderful - we read them all and love them. So thank you very much in advance. Let's just go out there and bewilder the world.

So Marty and listeners, as you know, in this podcast, we are all about helping people from a state of bewilderment to bewildment to their own true nature. This week's episode is a kind of hybrid one because it is a Be Wild Files episode because it's based on something a listener is trying to figure out. But we just wanted to do the whole episode on her submission, so it's not multiple people. It's just the one.

Martha Beck: But it's a big, big question.

Rowan Mangan: It's a big one, and we're excited to talk about this. So first up, without further ado, let's hear from Victoria.

Victoria: What I'm trying to understand and work out is anxiety. It's such a strange thing, and I just recently admitted that I might be susceptible or have it. The thing that's really bothering me is if you come from an unstable or traumatic background where you've lost a lot of things, basically everything, it makes sense that you would kind of always feel like you were going to lose something.

But I have a very close to perfect life. I have all of the things. My business is thriving. I love my family. Everything is good. I'm trying so hard to make that looming anxiety feeling go away, and I just cannot quite figure out how.

Martha Beck: Oh, Victoria, such a good question for the two of us, because we both have anxiety even when life looks outwardly good. We're very familiar with it.



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- Rowan Mangan: Oh yeah. Yeah. I mean we have different kinds of anxiety, I guess. For me, it's often a very physical thing. People talk about their anxiety as sort of racing thoughts and catastrophic thinking and everything. But for me, it's often just a nonverbal kind of physical state. What about you? You have both of them, don't you?
- Martha Beck: Yeah. I sometimes have racing thoughts, and I've actually changed that over the years a lot with some of the methods I'll touch on in this podcast. But I have massive social anxiety. Even though you kind of have to be exposed to the situation a lot to push yourself into it, so the pandemic has just increased my social anxiety ...
- Rowan Mangan: Your tolerance for being in social mode.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. It's gone way down. Yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah, right.
- Martha Beck: So yeah. We talk about anxiety a lot.
- Rowan Mangan: We love to talk about anxiety, Victoria, actually, to the point that Marty's next book is most likely going to be on this very topic, right?
- Martha Beck: That's true. Yeah. I started doing research on anxiety, and the constant exposure to the word just spun me completely into intense anxiety.
- Rowan Mangan: But you're not the only one with that, right?
- Martha Beck: No, that's a big thing. Diagnosed anxiety disorders quadrupled during 2020 in the US. That's a 400% increase in one year.
- Rowan Mangan: And that's in people who were officially diagnosed with it-
- Martha Beck: Exactly.
- Rowan Mangan: ... which has to be a tiny, tiny fraction of-



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Martha Beck: Right. The people who have the luxury and entitlement to go get yourself diagnosed. Yeah. So yeah. Various current events, including the pandemic, it's gotten worse than it's ever been. Thank God, you saved me by saying, "Why don't you write a book about calm instead of anxiety?" I was like, "Oh, great reframe." It kind of got me off the ledge. But still, anxiety keeps creeping back into my life even though I'm a self-help writer.

I try all my own methods, and they work. I sit and meditate and still, I see my mind like a terrified horse just tearing around and around in a circle half the time.

Rowan Mangan: Right. But this is what's interesting because when we started talking about this topic and we realized, as we often do, that has nothing to do with culture. Oh, wait. That has everything to do with culture, this topic. We started talking about how, okay, so to the culture, huge generalization, I know, let's just live with it. To the culture, our culture, Western culture, whatever, the line would basically be anxiety is just chemistry. You have an inbuilt ... Maybe chemistry plus trauma.

Martha Beck: Right, right, right.

Rowan Mangan: Some combination of those two factors. What we were talking about is, yes, yes and, oh my God, people, take your meds. God love anti-anxiety meds, antidepressants. I don't care how many pine groves I dance naked in under the moonlight, I will still take my Prozac every day like a good girl, but-

Martha Beck: In fact, that's how you keep dancing naked.

Rowan Mangan: Maybe that's the problem.

Martha Beck: It's a lot of Prozac.

Rowan Mangan: But it's funny because, that said, if the culture tells the whole story, which is chemistry, medicate, da da da, then how come anxiety seems so able to game the system? Why aren't we all dancing naked in pine groves because we took our meds? What we were talking about is it's sort of like anxiety will hack around the solutions, and that's not just drugs. You had the same thing-

Martha Beck: With meditation.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. Go. Tell us that story.



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Martha Beck: Yeah. I mean there are more anti-anxiety medications being consumed than ever. And yet, anxiety disorder's zipping upward, which it means basically the chemistry is being poured into people's bloodstreams, but somehow the anxiety is fighting its way back. My own experience with watching my mind is that I calm it down, and then the anxious part finds a way back into my consciousness.

Even though I'm watching it, it's still happening. It's really quite a fascinating thing. Like you, I thought, "Okay, that has nothing to do with culture." But then we talked about it and decided that's not exactly true.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. We started thinking about the brain. Okay, so you're medicating or meditating the brain to counteract the effects of that chemistry. But then the anxiety sort of overrides it. So I said to Marty, bringing mention of her friend who is a very famous neuroanatomist from a very esteemed university-

Martha Beck: Which we shall not mention.

Rowan Mangan: Which we shall not mention, but if you think really hard, you might be able to guess, Jill Bolte Taylor. I said, "Well, what would Jill say about what's the mechanism in the brain when the anxiety does fight back against these tactics?"

Martha Beck: As it so happens, I've spent hours talking to Jill about this very thing.

Rowan Mangan: Excellent.

Martha Beck: I'm going to plug her book, Whole Brain Living, which is really excellent for this. Everybody go out and get it if you have any questions about how your brain works. It's fabulous.

Rowan Mangan: Guys, it's Whole Brain Living with a W in the whole, not just hole, like a hole in the ground. Just want to be clear.

Martha Beck: Yes, that-

Rowan Mangan: Whole brain, not hole brain.



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Martha Beck: Hole brain, a brain with a hole in it. It lives. Yeah. It's Whole Brain Living with a W, and it's very, very useful because what Jill does is she breaks down and simplifies what's happening in the brain, especially when things seem to be going badly. So imagine, if you will, a three-year-old child who is very delicately wired, very highly sensitive, and not that experienced with the world, who's easily frightened.

So something happens, a noise in the night, a change, anything, boom, that child has a burst of fear. Now imagine that the only adult taking care of this child is very, very convinced that the child is always right. So the child goes, "I'm scared." And the adult goes, "Oh my God, the child is scared. There must be a good reason for this," and then finds a story that explains why they should both be afraid.

Rowan Mangan: I think there is a monster under the bed.

Martha Beck: There definitely is because that's where I left my cell phone, and it will plug me into 1000, 100,000, a million stories about monsters that will bring it right into my mind. Whether you look at fantasy games or you look at the news, you're going to find monsters. So then the adult says to the child, "You should be afraid. You should be more afraid." And the child gets more afraid and says to the adult, "I am more afraid." The adult says, "You're always right. So I'm going to find more reasons why we are afraid." So this-

Rowan Mangan: And finds ways to validate the existence of the fear.

Martha Beck: So it's like a feedback screech in a microphone where the amp amplifies the sound. It feeds it back into the mic, which amplifies it again and feeds it back to the amp. You get this horrifying sound ...

Rowan Mangan: Sort of like the early days of this podcast.

Martha Beck: Yes. All of this is happening, according to Jill's book and her research, in the left hemisphere of the brain. So the little kid is the amygdala, a very primitive part of the brain that is just going, "Fight or flight, fight or flight." Actually, fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. Those are the four things that the amygdala will try to get you to do to make a situation safe.

Rowan Mangan: We will talk about fawn in a future episode. How's that?



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Martha Beck: Yeah. That bitch. Fawn is not a person, but it is one of the responses you can have to fear. So the amygdala is very primitive. It has a lot of fear. This is what Jill says. It's not the amygdala, generally. It's the left side. The left side, hippocampus, is the part of the brain that says, "I will believe everything the amygdala says and try to control the universe so that we're safe."

You get a feedback screech going with that, all of it happening in the left hemisphere, because our culture is very left hemisphere-dominated and teaches us to basically live in the left side of the brain and not go to the other parts where different things are found.

Rowan Mangan: That is so interesting. So the child and the adult, who are creating that feedback loop, both live in that side of the brain that's all about logic and this ... I mean it's not very logical, but it's that linear-

Martha Beck: It has its weird circular, I mean the classic term is folie a deux, two people locked in a room going crazy together because they reinforce each other's craziness.

Rowan Mangan: And you're saying that that loop is just nurtured and encouraged by the kind of mechanisms of our culture.

Martha Beck: Not just the mechanisms, but also the structures. So if you're not in the rhythms of nature, which will slow you way down and make your breathing slow and calm down that amygdala part of you, the hurry, hurry, hurry structures, the bright lights, the fact that we read so much, which causes our eyes to focus sharply, which is part of a fight-flight response, there is so much. The productivity, be anxious. Could I tell you a story?

Rowan Mangan: Yes, please.

Martha Beck: I was there and I don't think it was confidential, so I'm just telling this story. I went to a small party with Oprah Winfrey the night before she did her very last Oprah Winfrey show broadcast, so 25 years of this epic show and she has to do the very last thing. Everybody who does media knows the ending is where it's all going to happen. She's at this party. She said to a group of us, "I've been up since 5:00 in the morning. I wrote the whole show script myself. I've been meditating. I'm in complete peace."

She was emanating this complete peace. And then her people, I don't remember who, but they started kind of circling around-

Rowan Mangan: Like her staff?



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- Martha Beck: Her staff, yeah, and the people who were working on the show. They were like, "She's not nervous enough." I could hear them. "She's not nervous enough. She's going to bomb if she's not more nervous."
- Rowan Mangan: Wow.
- Martha Beck: So they actually started telling her, "Oprah, you need to feel more nervous. You need to get afraid." Because there really is a strong cultural model that says, "If you are not somewhat afraid or very afraid, you won't do your best. You won't even show up." There's an example. She wouldn't do it, and she gave an incredible performance the next day from a place of deep calm. But man, it was such a great example of the culture in its very apex saying, "You have to be afraid. It's the only way to do well."
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah, yeah. Oh, that's wild. So the culture will give you lots of ways to ratchet up the fear, the anxiety. But I guess from within that feedback loop, there's no way to bring it back down. So we're all kind of stuck, right?
- Martha Beck: Yeah. If you don't deliberately decide to bring that pattern down, if you're not aware of it and you don't know how to interfere with it, it just goes up and up and up and nothing around you ... If you were out in nature after a few days ... One of my friends who lives in Africa says, "Culture is three days deep." Your third day in the wild, your whole system just re-regulates to nature. But if you don't get that, then the anxiety is catching on other human brains as well.
- Rowan Mangan: Right.
- Martha Beck: It starts to hyperlink. It's like you have all these hyperlinks in your brain where something that you see while you're afraid becomes frightening the next time you see it.
- Rowan Mangan: Right. I mean I guess the culture does give us ... The one way out that the culture offers us is regulating through substances. So there is antianxiety-
- Martha Beck: There's formal medication, yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: ... antidepressants. And then there's just alcohol is the most culturally approved way of regulating emotion. And then there's drugs. Then I was thinking there's also adrenaline, which I think is probably what the Oprah people were getting at. You need adrenaline. You need to be harnessing-
- Martha Beck: To perform.



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Rowan Mangan: ... that substance to perform. Sugar, dopamine from scrolling social media, serotonin from exercise, those are all the ways that the culture gives you the thumbs up for that's how you're allowed to regulate, but it's all still stay on the left side.

Martha Beck: Yeah. For example, scrolling social media for dopamine hits, you get totally desensitized to these bright, shiny, intense images. So in order to get attention, which is the currency of our culture, they have to become more and more and more striking, more attention-getting. A lot of the times, that means more frightening and disturbing because a murder gets our ... There are no TV shows about robberies every week, SVU. No, it's Law & Order: Robbery Unit. Nobody would watch it. It has to be murder. It has to be that horrifying to get our attention.

Rowan Mangan: Over, over, we've got another five, six, over. Oh man, it looks like a burglary. Looks like a pretty bad one.

Martha Beck: Oh my God. They took-

Rowan Mangan: I'm going to need back up, back up.

Martha Beck: They took the microwave. So we get more and more. We go looking for excitement, but the brain gets more and more high-strung, and things start to ... Our brains are incredible. Unlike other animals, we can tell these stories that hook objects together into a pattern that sustains our mood. So one of my favorite psychologists, Steven Hayes, terrific psychologist, created ACT therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

He had such bad panic attacks and he tried everything as he was going through school and becoming a psychologist. He got to the point where he had such bad panic attacks and he tried every method to soothe himself that he could read about. But those got connected to the panic attacks to the point where one of his triggers for having a panic attack was the word, relax.

Rowan Mangan: No.

Martha Beck: Yeah.

Rowan Mangan: Oh, that's wild.

Martha Beck: Or take a deep breath. Boom, panic attack.

Rowan Mangan: That's amazing.



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- Martha Beck: Because as scientists say, what fires together, wires together in the brain and-
- Rowan Mangan: That can be anything. It's not like the word, relax, has magical properties that make you relax.
- Martha Beck: No, it's just all associated. Anxiety starts to spread like mold in the walls, and there's nothing to stop it in the culture. There's a lot to stop it in nature, but not in the culture. So it's like a tire ripper effect. It keeps getting worse and worse. You can go forward, forward, forward, but you never back up.
- Rowan Mangan: Wow. Oh, that's horrifying.
- Martha Beck: It is.
- Rowan Mangan: It's funny because I'm thinking about the culture still trying to capitalize on even the mindfulness and meditation industry, the way that the culture tries to co-opt that stuff and get into it. It reminds me, Marty, of this meditation app years ago back in Australia that I signed up for because I was just looking for something to structure my spiritual practice or whatever, the way you do. This was so funny because it was in the early days, I'd say, of trying to gamify things like this. So it was an app to log your daily meditations.
- I was totally onboard with that. But then what it did is it wanted to link up with a social media site so that it could connect you with your friends who were also using the app.
- Martha Beck: Oh, cool.
- Rowan Mangan: Then it took you and your friends and made a little board game situation where you could out-meditate your friends and be at the head of the leaderboard.
- Martha Beck: Oh my God.
- Rowan Mangan: I'm not kidding. It was like, "Can you meditate an extra 33 minutes and beat Sandra?"
- Martha Beck: Oh my God.
- Rowan Mangan: "Oh no. Linda is closing on you." How bonkers and backwards and insane is that?



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- Martha Beck: I had a meditation app in my car for driving meditation. It was a tape. I just had a tape for driving meditation. You were supposed to become very alert. It's the opposite of sleepy. But you get calm but alert. And then it would say, "Okay, for 15 minutes, we're going to be calm but alert." But my car automatically fast forwarded through any blank space. So it would say, "We're going to meditate for 15 minutes ... How was that for you?"
- Rowan Mangan: The car's like, "We don't have time for this shit."
- Martha Beck: Right. So yeah. It's a cycle that seems to go up and up and up and never down again.
- Rowan Mangan: So what you're saying is there's no way out.
- Martha Beck: That's not it.
- Rowan Mangan: My question to you is, how do we get out? What's the way out?
- Martha Beck: I will tell you. The way to fix this is to access the parts of the brain that are not in the left hemisphere. At least according to Jill and her fabulous book, we have a lot more choice than we think we have when it comes to anxiety. That's what she always says. You always have a choice. You always have a choice. The choice is to find a way to access the amygdala and the hippocampus on the right side of the brain. So where the-
- Rowan Mangan: Sorry. I just want to stop you for a second because even that little piece, you have a choice, even that is a little blow against the cultural idea, which is you're a victim of your chemistry. So immediately, you just say that and it's like, "Wait, what?"
- Martha Beck: Yeah. Also, the cultural thing that says you must be afraid if something's ... "Oprah, you've got to be afraid." So there's this to say, "No, I have a choice, and I'm going to choose something different."
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah.



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Martha Beck: So I talked about the three-year-old and the adult. Well, you've got another three-year-old and another adult on the right side of the brain, but they do different things than the left hemisphere. It's the amygdala and the hippocampus, but let's just call it the child and the adult for fun. So on the right hand side, instead of fear, the little kid on that side is full of curiosity.

Actually, people who have phobias and then damage the part of the brain that feels the phobia become fascinated by the very things they were frightened of before. The high attention is still there, but it's joyful.

Rowan Mangan: So it's like-

Martha Beck: It's really different from what we're used to experiencing, right?

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. It's like a little kid stomping off away from a pine grove and into the unknown.

Martha Beck: A little bit like that. A little bit like, "Watch me architect out of this." Yeah. The hippocampus, the grownup on the right side of the brain, instead of the left side wanting to control everything, the right side hippocampus feels a sense of connection with everything and actually has no need to control. It feels supported and integrated into nature and into a benevolence that Jill Bolte Taylor experienced when she had her left hemisphere stroke.

She suddenly only had access to these right-side structures, and she experienced herself as full of wonder and joy and bliss with no boundaries the size of the universe. It was something extraordinarily beautiful that she held onto as she rebuilt the left side of her brain. Now she says, "I could go to fear and anxiety and control, but I am just going to choose to go to the right side of my brain and integrate with my fascination and my sense of oneness with the universe."

Rowan Mangan: But that can't be as easy as I will just go to the right side of my brain, can it?

Martha Beck: It's not.

Rowan Mangan: I'm kind of relieved to hear that because, otherwise, why wasn't I doing it already?



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Martha Beck:

It is that simple, which doesn't mean we know how to do it. It isn't easy because we're not taught to do it. Now, if you are in different cultures, some other cultures, they have a much easier time doing that. They actually are much more laid back. There was a conversation between Carl Jung, the great psychologist, and a friend of his who was a Pueblo Indian chief named Mountain Lake. They got to be close enough friends that Jung said to him one day, "So what do you people think about white folks really?"

Mountain Lake said, "To be honest, we think you're completely insane. You're always staring. You always want something. Why are you obsessed with it? By the way, you say you think with your heads." Jung was like, "Yeah. Where do you say you think?" He indicated his whole body. He's like, "With everything. We think with everything. We're part of everything. How crazy are you to think that you're not? How could you have this delusion?"

So we always talk about culture is coming to consensus and nature is coming to our senses. The way to step to the right side of your brain is literally to immerse yourself and focus your attention on the sensation of what is present, what is real. So our minds are constantly storytelling horror tales, right?

Rowan Mangan:

Right.

Martha Beck:

We can choose to stop telling those stories. Just like one of the things I've done with clients is just to go, if they're spinning out, just say, "Okay, stop for a minute. What color are the walls? What temperature are your feet compared to your hands? Feel the texture of your shirt. What's that like?" And suddenly when we're occupied, like Lila in the forest and she's completely occupied with what she's doing and exploring and adventuring, the hippies have a point.

When you're that drenched in sensory experience, the left side of the brain goes silent unless there's a bear. And then it's like, "Sure, I'll scare you away from the bear. But I'm not here to be yelling at you all day long every day." So you're actually doing an incredible thing by taking her into the forest.

Rowan Mangan:

Look, I deeply agree with you.

Martha Beck:

You have never made a mistake, Rowan Mangan. This is what I've started telling her. You have never made a mistake. That was amazing.



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- Rowan Mangan: You are perfect in every way, and you have never made a mistake, not once in your life. She doesn't mean it in the sense of on a spiritual plane, when you think about it, you can't make a mistake. No, you have never made a typo in a document, Rowan Mangan. I'm just like, "Thank you."
- Martha Beck: The irony is that it actually works a little bit. I used to send myself, when I was writing a lot and I didn't have anyone cheering me on, I would finish a chapter and send myself a postcard congratulating myself for my fine work. The sad thing was I was always so happy when I got them. So all of this, we're talking about using the right side of the brain to wire up a different set of stories. The more you pull attention out of the fear stories and put them on the present moment and the joyful things, even if you say something ... Now, I'm dead serious.
- There's no such thing as making a mistake if all you're doing is learning. You have to make errors in order to learn. So maybe I never have made a mistake and just playing with those absurd-sounding stories, stories our culture would never let us have, starts to release the stranglehold on the fear.
- Rowan Mangan: Is it fair to say that on the left side of the brain there's not a lot of kindness?
- Martha Beck: I would have to ask Jill about that, but I think she'd say there's good intention.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah.
- Martha Beck: Good intentions, but not a lot of kindness, not a lot of softness.
- Rowan Mangan: Because it feels almost like if we are looking to hack this, go over to the right brain, maybe just turning ... This is something you and I have been talking about, turning the internal voice towards kindness could be another kind of back to get over there.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. You actually gave me the key to that when I was doing my research. You said, "Try writing a book about calm instead of anxiety." Because it turns out that internal self-talk that is unkind to the self, self-criticism, is devastating to the psyche and to the body. It has all kinds of negative effects. So I started just every time I think a mean thought to myself, I stop and think a kind thought. It had a massive effect very quickly, but it's really hard to keep doing it because there's no support for it in the culture. I have to remind myself over and over.



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Victoria talked in her recording about losing everything. She said, "If you've lost everything, it's natural to be afraid." But what if you haven't lost everything? What I have to say to that is we're always losing everything because as time goes forward, we never get back the moment that just passed.

Rowan Mangan: You've lost everything you've ever had.

Martha Beck: Yeah. Everything you had up to this moment, you've already lost.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. It's gone. I don't know if they can see this on the video. If you're not watching the video, you should have seen Marty's face light up when she said, "Everything you've already lost," with this radiant smile on her face. I love it.

Martha Beck: But that's how I feel because-

Rowan Mangan: I know.

Martha Beck: Thank God, I was an Asian studies major at a university I will not mention because I learned about these cultures where letting go and letting things drop away is the path to happiness. I read that Tibetan parents raise their kids saying, "All those toys will rust and go away sometime and you will die. Everything's impermanent." I was like-

Rowan Mangan: Happy birthday.

Martha Beck: Yeah, happy birthday. I thought, "What a way to terrify a child." But then you talk to the people who are raised this way and they're so light and filled with joy. The reason is there's this natural brain thing to go, "I'm going to grab things that are good for me, and I'm going to hang on." They have recognized in many of these cultures, many traditional cultures, many Asian cultures, that letting go of what's already passing is the key to making experience fulfilling and benevolent instead of terrifying.

We always feel like if we let go, we'll fall, and that will be the end. That will be horrible. That left side is just gripping all the time. But when people reframe losing everything as everything becoming fresh every moment, it's a constant renewal. When I said that everything I've had, I've lost, it feels so light.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah.

Martha Beck: It's like why would you want to hold a little puddle of water in a stagnant puddle when it could just flow like a river and be fresh every moment?



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Rowan Mangan: And the abundance of that. That feels like stepping out of the left brain into the right brain to go, "I have this one little puddle," over to, "I have access to an endless stream."

Martha Beck: The moment you start talking about it, you have to move into the right side of your brain, which that is location. That's going to allow you to feel the connection with everything and the renewal of everything and everything in ... It starts to go out and shoot out little tendrils of meaning and connection and love that are the opposite of fear.

So you can make that choice all the time to do the opposite of what the frightened brain tells you to do. People say, "Be very afraid." Just turn it around. Oprah was like, "No, I will not. I will be calm." I've tried this. It works. It really does.

Rowan Mangan: So the other thing, Marty, that I don't want to finish this episode without mentioning is anxiety is not always bad or fear. I mean we're sort of conflating fear and anxiety as the one thing. But sometimes anxiety is the friend who's coming to say ...

Martha Beck: You're about to do something you may soon regret. Yeah.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah, yeah. Not that long ago, I had this thought that I wanted to make a financial investment because, as you know and as listeners to this podcast know, spending and saving are the same thing.

Martha Beck: Are the same thing.

Rowan Mangan: That is my financial philosophy, and I was going gung ho towards making this investment. I was really excited about it. I talked to you and Karen about it. And then I went to bed that night. The next morning I woke up and I just whenever my mind sort of strayed towards that idea, my gut kind of clenched a little bit. Nothing had changed from my excitement except this little feeling in my body that was just like, "Caution." It was just like, "Steady." That was so interesting.

So I sat with it for the day. By the end of the day, my mind had been able to listen enough to this sensation that I decided not to do it. As it turned out, it was a really, really good idea to pause in that moment, and I'm-

Martha Beck: It would have been a bad investment.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. And I'm really, really glad I did it. We don't want to paint anxiety and fear as always negative.



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Martha Beck: Yeah. They're not. The Gift of Fear by Gavin de Becker, I think I've mentioned before. It's one of the best books I've ever read, The Gift of Fear, Gavin de Becker. He's amazing. Basically, what he says is real fear is a gift, the fear that says, "Run away from the bear," the tickle that says, "That's not a good investment." But it feels completely different from the constant storytelling of worry and anxiety. It's a quiet thing really. It impels action in the moment, and there's a calm to it.

It says, "Here's a course of action. Take that." So we talk about dropping into our senses. To take Gavin's recommendations and everything we've been talking about, it's really dropping into the body, connecting with what you can taste, touch, smell, hear, and using the mind as a science mind, not a sort of news anchor, be afraid at 11:00 PM.

Rowan Mangan: Terror today as even more rain falls out of this sky.

Martha Beck: Yeah. So it's like what would an animal or a scientist say? What can I actually sense in my environment? What is my body telling me? What are my senses, even the prickliness in my gut, what's that telling me? I'm listening and I'm sort of judging experience according to whether or not it feels true as opposed to-

Rowan Mangan: And slowing down.

Martha Beck: Slowing it way down. The physical sense of your true wild nature will tell you where to be, to take action, to avoid danger.

Rowan Mangan: Absolutely. So I mean that's really key is working on your own methods of discerning is this bullshit anxiety or is this anxiety my friend trying to warn me or, excuse me, caution me or whatever it is to ... Yeah.

Martha Beck: At the end of the day, it's the story that makes you feel most settled in yourself that will be the true one.

Rowan Mangan: I am meant to live in peace.

Martha Beck: Yeah. So-

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. I will say also, Marty, that even when it's negative anxiety, I don't think any of us are silly enough to think that living in this world in this time in these bodies, anxiety can be cured and that we'll all be dancing naked in the pine grove forever. So I just want to-

Martha Beck: I will be.



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Rowan Mangan: You might be, and I'll meet you there. But I want to say, the muscle that we're trying to build is the one that says, "Oh, here you are, anxiety, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again. Here's what I've got to say."

Martha Beck: Yeah.

Rowan Mangan: Let's just be calm with each other and be friends with each other and be kind to each other.

Martha Beck: In Asia, they say the mind is a wonderful servant, but a terrible master. So we take that storyteller off the pedestal. When we feel an impulse of fear, we sit down and say, "Welcome. Let's look around and see what's actually happening."

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. Yeah. Perfect. As always, Marty, of course, stay wild.

Martha Beck: Stay wild.

Rowan Mangan: We hope you're enjoying Bewildered. If you're in the USA and want to be notified when a new episode comes out, text the word, wild, to 570-873-0144. We're also on Instagram. Our handle is @bewilderedpodcast. You can follow us to get updates, hear funny snippets and outtakes, and chat with other fans of the show.

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