



# BEWILDERED

WITH MARTHA BECK  
AND ROWAN MANGAN

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## Episode #25: Are You a Messy?

*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] Hi, I'm Martha Beck!
- Rowan Mangan: And I'm Rowan Mangan and this is another episode of Bewildered, the podcast for people trying to figure it out. I'm trying to figure it out underwater, not right now, recently. Let me be clear. Underwater, I said, but Marty turned up in full scuba gear and figured it out on the diving board.
- Martha Beck: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah, because what I found is that it's not the diving, it's the suit. It's because it keeps things from leaking in, extraneous things like water or anything that could disturb the mind, and then it keeps your thoughts from leaking out. So I never had to get in the water. I just wear the suit everywhere I go.
- Rowan Mangan: Does it not get mentally sweaty?
- Martha Beck: Well, for other people, yeah, because they see me and they don't know what's happening, so they begin to sweat, but I remain cool as a cucumber.
- Rowan Mangan: Just walking around in your scuba suit.
- Martha Beck: Walking around in my scuba suit.
- Rowan Mangan: Love it. Love it.



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- Martha Beck: Actually, that reminds me of a true story of a time when I thought Adam, our son, my son with Down syndrome had really figured it all out. We sat down to dinner and his friend was there and wanted to say grace or something. So then we did that. Then I said to Adam, "Do you believe in God?" And he looked at the table and he said, "God lives in pizza." I was like, "How cute." He was like, "And God lives in salad and God lives in juice." I was like, "Oh, my God. He actually is like an oracle prophesying." So then the next day, and here is where the story relates to what you were saying, he was going swimming. He went by in swim fins with a snorkeling set, with a mask that had a shark head on the top of his head.
- Rowan Mangan: Right.
- Martha Beck: So he is walking strangely in those fins and he's going by and he's got the snorkel in and the shark fin on and I'm riding away. I'm in this like dewy mood. I turned to him and I said, "Adam, where does God live?" and he said, "Mexico," and then he kept going. So yeah, that was the day I figured it all out. But what are you trying to figure it out in our present life?
- Rowan Mangan: Marty, I'm trying to figure out the cost of beauty.
- Martha Beck: \$12, Mexico, but only if you're already like Angelina Jolie.
- Rowan Mangan: I, yesterday, took myself off to a place of beauty.
- Martha Beck: A place of beauty?
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. This will surprise you. I know because it's not my usual thing to do. Well, it won't surprise you because we live together and you know all about it, but for dramatic tension sake, let's just say I'm not usually one to zip off for beautification. Is that fair?
- Martha Beck: Never. You would never-
- Rowan Mangan: I wouldn't.
- Martha Beck: ... dream of it. I have never known you to do that and if you break my illusion, you break my heart Rowan Mangan. What happened?
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. I'll tell you the backstory. I don't know. A few months ago, I had to see a dermatologist about something unrelated and he was quite rude to me. He peeked under my mask. Itself was quite rude. Then he was like, "So you're going to do anything about that rosacea?" It was a double-edged sword because I was like on the one hand, I'm like, "So that's why I'm always so weird and pink and blotchy." On the other hand, I was like, "How dare you?"



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Martha Beck: Right.

Rowan Mangan: But he was like, "Well, there's something you can do about that." In America, because of the rampant capitalism and absence of a healthcare system, many experts tell you that there are things that can be done. In Australia, where there's a somewhat socialized healthcare system, people are just like, "Eh, what are you going to do?"

Martha Beck: I'm bloody sorry about that rosacea, ma'am.

Rowan Mangan: No, they wouldn't mention it because they'd be like, "Oh, you don't want to be on a waiting list for six years to deal with that." They just wouldn't, but here it's like, "Hey, you can get yourself all snazzy and camera-ready." Actually, the reason I'm talking about this is that I'm very much not camera-ready today, which is why people who like checking out our little mini videos that we've been doing won't see any today, but I'm getting ahead of myself. I went in to get treated by lightsabers. Yes.

Martha Beck: Is Yoda there?

Rowan Mangan: In this mystical, futuristic world that we live in, you can go and have trained professionals apply lightsabers to your own face to get rid of terrible conditions you did not know that you had. That's it. That's it. I went in. I got goggles put on my little eyes. I got gel put on my little face. Then I got zapped with lasers quite aggressively for about 20 minutes. I tried to be very brave, but it effing hurt. That in itself, pain for sure, is the price of beauty.

Martha Beck: Yeah, for sure.

Rowan Mangan: Right? But anyway, I guess I didn't pay the right amount of pain or money or something because I woke up this morning and I looked in the mirror and there in front of me was the Elephant Man, Marty, as you perfectly well know,-

Martha Beck: I do not.

Rowan Mangan: ... because you're looking right at me as we say this.

Martha Beck: Actually, I got up a second and what I hear from the other room as I'm padding along is, "I'm the Elephant Man. I'm the Elephant Man," but she looks fine guys.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. I didn't sing it.

Martha Beck: I sang it.



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- Rowan Mangan: I said it plaintively. I wanted to warn you because you wouldn't have had any caffeine and you would've come in and then you would've got a fright.
- Martha Beck: Like you were attacked by an army of Jedi warriors who came at your face. I think you look great.
- Rowan Mangan: Bless you. I am the Elephant Man. I am puffed up beyond recognition. I can see my own face flesh in my peripheral vision.
- Martha Beck: Oh, my God.
- Rowan Mangan: It's so weird. I just keep going, "What's that?" And I was like, "Oh, it's my cheek." It's so weird, so I don't know. If I'd known this was going to happen while trying to treat having a red face... Why does one have to be bloated to treat a red face?
- Martha Beck: I think when they come and ask you for a testimonial, they'll have a picture of your beautiful face, which was never blotchy-looking to me, but you'll have a little testimonial there that will say, "I can see my own face flesh."
- Rowan Mangan: Look, honestly, some person in a white coat could tell me in America, the definition of beauty is being able to see your own face flesh in your peripheral vision and I'd be like, "All right."
- Martha Beck: But be careful if you go to Australia because they will let you die of rosacea without even mentioning it.
- Rowan Mangan: They don't even care.
- Martha Beck: They don't care.
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, look. So that's me. I'm a puffy, little person today. What are you trying to figure out Marty?
- Martha Beck: Oh, along those same lines.
- Rowan Mangan: Uh-huh (affirmative).
- Martha Beck: There's a part of my day and it gets worse as you get past a certain age. You are being initiated into, I think, the period of time when people will be suggesting things you should do to your face.
- Rowan Mangan: That could be true. It could coincide perhaps with that thing where you get asked by doctors at a certain age if you've had any falls.



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- Martha Beck: Right. Yes, I fell on my face and now I can see my own face flesh because my eyes turned sideways. No. At first, they just give you stuff like sunscreen. You'll want to have some sunscreen on. Okay. Then they get the moisturizer with the sunscreen. Then you get to be a certain age and they start to sell you things that are age reverse makeup or eye bag deny.
- Rowan Mangan: Don't you think if there was age reverse makeup, we would've heard more about it?
- Martha Beck: I know. I was like, "If I use this stuff, will I be Benjamin Button?"
- Rowan Mangan: Exactly.
- Martha Beck: What if I use too much, will I wake up tomorrow six years old, or apparently six years old?
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah, be careful.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. I could dwindle into a fetus and die if I used too much.
- Rowan Mangan: The Republicans would be all over you for that.
- Martha Beck: Oh, dear. Oh, dear.
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, she went there.
- Martha Beck: All right. What happens is it all seems good in the moment, plus the shame of it. Oh, my God. They think I need age reverse makeup. Okay, I'll get seven kinds. Then they say, "And you need the hydrolater and you need the exfoliator," because apparently, I have foliage on my face now. Because I am a sucker, I have bought dozens of bottles of emollients. I get up in the morning. I wash my face. That's just the sound I make when I wake up.
- Rowan Mangan: Can you do a replay please?
- Martha Beck: I think it's the sound that tips them off that I may need some age reverse makeup. But I wash my face. I brush my teeth. I dry my face, then I look at the emollients and I don't know what order they go in. So sometimes, I just put one or two on. Sometimes, I put all of them on and then my face starts to slide off.
- Rowan Mangan: Did you ever consider putting them one by one in a little pot and mixing it all up and then covering your face?
- Martha Beck: I don't know if that's against the rules, but I should try. It might explode.



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Rowan Mangan: It might.

Martha Beck: God, I don't know.

Rowan Mangan: It is some serious chemistry.

Martha Beck: Anyway, what it all does is it makes me squishy. I've tried different orders. It's not age reversing, as you well know. I think what is happening on the days I use it all is if you took a baseball glove - You have baseball gloves in Australia?

Rowan Mangan: I understand the concept.

Martha Beck: Okay. So you take an old catcher's mitt, like the gnarliest kind of baseball glove, and you put all the emollients on it in whatever order, what you would have is not like a tight-fitting spandex glove. You just have a catcher's mitt that gets really soft and squishy. That's my tale of beauty.

Rowan Mangan: You do look very-

Martha Beck: Squishy?

Rowan Mangan: ... supple in the face. Actually now that you mention it, I'm taking a better look and yeah. I mean you look lovely.

Martha Beck: Thank you. She had to take her glasses off to say that. I'm not even kidding.

Rowan Mangan: Because I'm nearsighted.

Martha Beck: This is literally true. This is literally,-

Rowan Mangan: Is it literally true?

Martha Beck: ... every single morning, it's like wash, wash, wash, dry, dry, dry, application of emollients. And I say that phrase out loud, application of emollients, just to brace myself for the science experience that is my moisturizer.

Rowan Mangan: I think I'm beginning to understand why you come padding downstairs so much later than the rest of us. We've already had a couple of cups of tea and deep in morning communion when Marty pads along.

Martha Beck: Because it takes a while for my face to firm up enough to come into the room and hear you yelling, "I'm the Elephant Man."



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Rowan Mangan: When I wake up in the morning, my sound that I make is this.

Martha Beck: That's the sound so many people make.

Rowan Mangan: 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, and a review would be 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. Mwah.

So Marty, as our listeners know, on this podcast, we are all about helping people from bewilderment, I don't know what to do, I'm so confused, to be-wild-erment. I feel so natural and in tune with my own nature. Good, right? That's the wild, true nature that's the good bit. Today on Bewildered, we'll be talking about this topic of mess, mess and order. By mess, what we mean is like a messy house.

Martha Beck: Not like an office or just mess where you go for food.

Rowan Mangan: No, or the kind of mess that I feel like I am emotionally many times.

Martha Beck: But an actual three-dimensional mess.

Rowan Mangan: Three-dimensional mess, unsightly, that kind of thing. We actually thought of this topic a while ago. Marty was telling me a story about a long ago book tour in Germany. That's what prompted us to be here today. Can you enlighten the listeners?

Martha Beck: Okay. I wrote a book and a wonderful German self-help author who speaks perfect English, liked my book. Had it translated into German and promoted it so that it actually did quite well. It sold quite well in Germany to the extent that they invited me to come for a book tour. I said, "Well, I don't speak German." They said, "Oh, that's fine. We all speak English." I was like, "All right. It's a little embarrassing, but okay." So I went to Germany for a book tour and I got off the plane in Frankfurt and this lovely gentleman from the publisher's office met me. He said, "Here is your list of speaking engagements."





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There were nine speaking engagements and on the last two it said, translator available. I said to him, "You know I don't speak German, right?" And he said, "Yeah, but you read it." I was like, "No. I'm American. When we say we don't speak something, we really don't speak it." I said, "Don't you guys all speak English really well?" And he said, "Ah, we get it in school, but not so much." So, I literally am in the actor's nightmare. I go back to the hotel.

Rowan Mangan: So just to be clear, you had translators for two of the events, but all the ones before that, no translation, German-speaking audience.

Martha Beck: Yes.

Rowan Mangan: Interesting situation to find oneself in. I personally would've cried and gone home.

Martha Beck: I actually, into my head, sprang the first German phrase that I'd ever actually formed up, and it was [foreign language 00:15:41]. I looked it up later. Turns out it's [foreign language 00:15:46], but it's close enough.

Rowan Mangan: I just think you felt fucked before you got [foreign language 00:15:53].

Martha Beck: So what I did, I had everything packed in one little bag because I'm proud of being a light packer. Not anymore, but I was at the time, proud of it. Stop laughing at me, you backpack woman. Ro, travels the world with nothing but a sarong. That is literally true.

Rowan Mangan: It is like three miles wide and 500 yards deep, sarong.

Martha Beck: Anyway. So, I go back to my hotel and I'm like, "What am I going to do?" Faced with a problem of this size, I became extremely frustrated with my luggage. I displaced all my aggression and horror and fear, rank, brutal fear onto my luggage. I'm like, "It's all wrong. It's all wrong." And I took everything out. Because I tight pack. I tight pack. No, I pack things tightly, like they are approaching a kind of atomic density, like Big Bang level of density in my suitcase.

Rowan Mangan: Like if it was coal, it would be about to turn into diamonds.

Martha Beck: Yes. Yes. So I undid it and I took everything out and I was looking for like, "Oh, what could I use to learn German?" I actually-

Rowan Mangan: This sarong?





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- Martha Beck: If I'd had a sarong, it would've spoken German for me. I did have an idea, which was that I decided I would draw cartoons on a transparency because that's what this gentleman from Germany was so good at. He was a cartoonist as well as an author. So I thought I'll get one of those transparency things and I'll speak very slowly in English while I draw pictures of the main points in my book. That is ultimately what I did, but I didn't have that idea at first. I was just throwing things around the room in a complete and total panic-
- Rowan Mangan: Got you.
- Martha Beck: ... like you do.
- Rowan Mangan: Like you do.
- Martha Beck: There's a knock at the door, boom, boom, boom. I do know one sentence that was in a phrase book, [foreign language 00:17:55], which means the shower is broken. So I'm like, whoever it is and whatever they say, I'm just going to tell them [foreign language 00:18:05] and put them on the defensive.
- Rowan Mangan: Can I just say something?
- Martha Beck: What?
- Rowan Mangan: If you had been able to say instead of [foreign language 00:18:14], if you had just said [foreign language 00:18:18].
- Martha Beck: See, but you know more German than I did, so-
- Rowan Mangan: No. No, that's literally, that's [foreign language 00:18:26]. That's my German.
- Martha Beck: That's literally true.
- Rowan Mangan: That's literally true. Sorry. What happened? Knock on the door.
- Martha Beck: What happened is I opened the door armed with my one phrase of German and there's this beautiful, distinguished gentleman author to whom I owe such gratitude. I immediately cranked the door around my face -
- Rowan Mangan: Lucky it was so squishy.
- Martha Beck: ... kind of extruded forward. But he wasn't looking at it. He was looking behind me and trying not to freak out because of the room.



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- Rowan Mangan: So just paint us a word picture of the state of the room.
- Martha Beck: Oh, my God. It was absolute mayhem. There were clothes scattered everywhere. There were notebooks. There were items to eat because they give me like-
- Rowan Mangan: Items to eat sounds very dodgy.
- Martha Beck: They've given me little liquor bottles on the plane. I don't even drink, so there's liquor everywhere because I save it. I don't drink it, I just save it. That's what I do with intoxicating substances. Anyway, I'm like, "I'm so sorry. It'll take me a minute to get ready." Then I closed the door and I died a thousand times and then we went to dinner and he didn't say anything. We went on our little book tour and I did my thing with the cartoons and everyone was so gracious and that we got to know each other a little and like the third day, he turns to me and he says, "So, are you a messy?" I was like, [foreign language 00:19:59].
- Rowan Mangan: Did he ask you the question with the kind of like, "Hey, it's okay.
- Martha Beck: Yes.
- Rowan Mangan: We're both self-help authors here."
- Martha Beck: Yes. No judgment. Are you a messy? Just tell me.
- Rowan Mangan: Just tell me whether or not you're a messy. It's okay. You're among friends.
- Martha Beck: I learned as we went along that he was quite interested in mess and he told me the number of people that died in Germany every year because their stuff collapsed on them. I mentioned this in a previous podcast. I learned it from him, but he was very gracious and I just, ugh. You have to do a lot of cleanliness to disprove one huge horrific mess. But here's the thing. The reason I was making the mess is that I have a particular relationship to it. I believe that it's part of the creative process and that if you're going to solve a problem, you need to make a mess first, or I should own this, I need to make a mess for it. We'll talk about this in a minute. But that's what happens. I create a mess almost deliberately in order to come up with ideas about what to do when I feel totally [foreign language 00:21:03].
- Rowan Mangan: I don't believe you. I don't believe that you were hurling your things around that German hotel room deliberately to prompt a creative idea. I think you were freaking out.



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- Martha Beck: Well, that too. That absolutely is the case, but I was nice to myself about it. I didn't say to myself, "I'm a messy." I said to myself, "There's a reason for this and I'm going to figure it out," and I did figure it out and it was, [foreign language 00:21:27]. What other alternative did I have really? But yeah. It was humiliating and I think a lot of people are humiliated about feeling like they're a messy.
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, my God. Totally. Totally. What experiences do you have in your life of being or not being a messy?
- Martha Beck: Well, I grew up in a tiny, little house that had 10 people in it.
- Rowan Mangan: Jesus.
- Martha Beck: I was the seventh of eight children so by the time I was there, it was very, very crowded and very, very cluttered. You think about all the stuff collected by 10 people over the years. My siblings and I would talk about the mess of our house almost constantly. It was like a major feature of my childhood. My older teenage siblings would give me instructions about how to keep people from coming to our house or knowing where it was even. There was so much. Then later I learned to clean things up. I went to work in a Mormon camp in the woods where I was supposed to teach art and run this little art studio, but they were trying to get bang for their buck. So the Mormon counselors or the bosses would have all of us go out and clean sticks and rocks out of the creek.
- Rowan Mangan: Wait, they made you clean the creek?
- Martha Beck: They did, yeah. So I go from one extreme, which is just chaos, chaos, and then I'm in this weird atmosphere where these super Mormon people are telling us that the creek is messy because it has rocks and sticks in it.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. What's a Creek bed supposed to be made out of?
- Martha Beck: I have no idea. Linoleum?
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah, right.
- Martha Beck: Marble?
- Rowan Mangan: Well, I suppose marble would be fine in it's natural state.
- Martha Beck: Yeah, marble would be good. But that was just this bizarre set of extremes and I was very confused by it for much of my life.



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- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. It's funny. For me it was like, I didn't know how to tidy as a child. I didn't know how to clean my room and it was this whole big struggle that I went through that I really just couldn't do it. I didn't understand why. I didn't even understand what. I can remember at one point trying to claim to a friend of my mother's that I actually preferred the look of mess than tidy. He said to me, "You just like it because it's easy." I knew even at the time, no, that's not it. That's not what it is, but God, it was so hard for me to even begin to do it. I could do lots of things, but I could not-
- Martha Beck: Right.
- Rowan Mangan: ... ever do that. I've thought about that more recently, especially since in your coach training program, everyone learns about what you call the living space metaphor.
- Martha Beck: Right.
- Rowan Mangan: It's taught me to have a glimpse into my little childhood psychology. But yeah, talk about the living space metaphor because it's so interesting.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. It's a tool we use in our coach training that comes from my experience plus reading a book called *Care of the Soul* by a guy named Thomas Moore who was a monk for a while, not the old-timey like-
- Rowan Mangan: Ancient.
- Martha Beck: ... Renaissance Thomas Moore, but more modern. He was a monk-
- Rowan Mangan: It was more like Tommy Moore.
- Martha Beck: Tommy Moore. Yeah. T-Moore.
- Rowan Mangan: That was his DJ name.



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Martha Beck: That's right. That was his DJ monk name. So, he was a monk for a while and he came out of monkness. He decided not to be a monk. All he had owned for 20 years was a cup. He got an apartment and then he knew he had to put stuff in it. Because he was so contemplative and so used to dealing with people's insides, he noticed that everything he chose to buy: a bar of soap, a welcome mat, it all reflected something about his state of mind. He was also a psychiatrist. I think he became a psychiatrist later. He would go to his client's houses and just walk through the house because he came to believe that every space we live in becomes a three-dimensional, self-portrait of our inner life. I remember the first time I used this on a client and she said, "Well, that's not true of me because I have four children. The house is completely full of their stuff. There's no room for me. Oh, yeah, you're right. It works."

So yeah, it's something we use. There's all sort of way that you do it. But I've really noticed that my living space seems to reflect my inner state without my conscious being able to shift things. It happens automatically. I couldn't keep things clean either. I didn't learn that when I was a kid, but when I did learn it, it came out of nowhere. It felt like the room was cleaning itself, and it was because I was in therapy and things got straightened out. I allow myself a certain amount of messiness because I understand that my insides are messy sometimes. There are ways to deal with that, which we'll talk about in just a minute.

Rowan Mangan: So, what would we say the culture says about mess, Marty?

Martha Beck: Well, I would say we always end up with Western.

Rowan Mangan: I think you meant to say Northern.

Martha Beck: Northern?

Rowan Mangan: Yeah.

Martha Beck: Well, I like to say WEIRD cultures, the Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic.

Rowan Mangan: Well, I prefer to say the NEIRD cultures because that's Northern, educated, industrialized,-

Martha Beck: Rich and-

Rowan Mangan: Rich and democratic.



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- Martha Beck: ... either developed or democratic. I can never remember. Anyway. Yeah, we know what we're talking about. It's the culture that surrounds almost everybody who's listening to this because you either were born into it or you were born into a culture that was taken over by it. Anyway, at least our culture is like messiness is not only bad and wrong. It's, I think, chaos itself is seen as terrifying.
- Rowan Mangan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah.
- Martha Beck: Cities used to be considered so calming because they weren't the mad chaos of nature. By the way, shame on you if everything's done in perfect order all the time around you.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. You know that cliché of, well, the wife, let's just say it, walking down the hallway with the guests. Oh, I'm so sorry about the mess. The house is probably pristine but the shame that they may spot something out of place or whatever. Or like you, hiding your face in the ajar, your squishy, squishy face in the hotel room to hide the fact that you were a messy in that moment. It is totally gendered though, isn't it?
- Martha Beck: Yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: Like it all goes along with some sort of housewife ideal kind of thing. It's not entirely, but because it... Do you remember where we have a not so secret, what's the word?
- Martha Beck: Passion.
- Rowan Mangan: Passion, that's the right word, for The Great British Bake Off, which in America is called The Great British Baking Show. There's this one line that we will always remember many seasons ago, listener, when Mary Berry complimented someone's, I don't know, biscuits.
- Martha Beck: Frequently, not just once.
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, really?
- Martha Beck: Yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: I only remember it once where she said approvingly, "They're like a row of soldiers."
- Martha Beck: Okay. That leads me directly to her wanting to eat all of them and we could go-



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- Rowan Mangan: Oh, in so many directions.
- Martha Beck: ... so many wrong directions. Anyway, she did. She repeatedly would say, "That's like a row of soldiers," which is a really interesting point in itself.
- Rowan Mangan: I should say that she meant it they were neat.
- Martha Beck: They were identical and they were perfectly aligned-
- Rowan Mangan: That's right.
- Martha Beck: ... in straight lines or perfect circles. That's a great, little mini version of what the whole culture means by ordered.
- Rowan Mangan: A row of soldiers.
- Martha Beck: Identical in straight lines and-
- Rowan Mangan: And also carrying guns.
- Martha Beck: Carrying guns.
- Rowan Mangan: It's just-
- Martha Beck: That's fine as long as you're not a messy.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah, don't be a messy.
- Martha Beck: If you think about it though, that's how the British lost the Revolutionary War with America because the way they did war, this is how obsessive their concept of order was. You get in these perfect squares, soldiers in a row, like cookies. The generals would come along and say, "It's like a batch of cookies." Biscuits, sorry. Then they would march into deadly fire and they would die in droves, but the guys at the back would have a chance to kill the other people who were marching in perfect squares across the field. The Americans had the temerity, the gall, to hide behind trees and shoot from there and then run to another tree. Can you even imagine?
- Rowan Mangan: Which [inaudible 00:30:40]?
- Martha Beck: They even had to learn from the indigenous population, right?
- Rowan Mangan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).





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- Martha Beck: The way the Brits were fighting, the reason they lost that war was that it's much more natural to fight from behind a tree and then run. It was culture over nature, big time.
- Rowan Mangan: That's fascinating.
- Martha Beck: Then we were all supposed to be so proud of this. They taught us this in grade school, Rowy. Then while I was still very, very little, we lost the Vietnamese War for very similar reasons. We had all this firepower and everything. The Viet Cong were fighting for their homes. They'd send soldiers out alone with a bicycle tube filled with rice tied around his waist, and there was no platoon. It was just a dude. Go out and do as much as you can, and they'd be like, "Okay." So they were even more left to their own natural devices.
- Rowan Mangan: Right. Right.
- Martha Beck: It even occurred to me that soldiers going to battle in the first place because they are ordered.
- Rowan Mangan: Right.
- Martha Beck: You follow orders.
- Rowan Mangan: Yes. Oh, my God. I don't want to take this podcast in this direction too far, but the thinking about the gas chambers of the Holocaust as the natural consequence, the extreme version of that idea of that industrialization and factory approach. They're all-
- Martha Beck: Factory death.
- Rowan Mangan: ... factory death, yeah.
- Martha Beck: It is kind of the logical extreme of the type of approach, the mechanistic, no natural chaos approach that our whole culture takes to everything.
- Rowan Mangan: They're all made out of tacky-tacky and they all look just the same. That's-
- Martha Beck: Cite that reference for those who-
- Rowan Mangan: It's about suburbia.
- Martha Beck: ... haven't heard that song.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. We'll put it in the show notes.



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- Martha Beck: Oh, yeah. It's a song about-
- Rowan Mangan: It's a song.
- Martha Beck: ... how people-
- Rowan Mangan: Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky-tacky.
- Martha Beck: Yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: Little boxes.
- Martha Beck: People inside are all made out of ticky-tacky and they all look just the same. That was an ideal for a while. Let me just say that in every culture, people create tidiness because it is calming to the nervous system. People create various types of beauty. Everybody decorates their living space in every culture. Everybody decorates the body. We have a natural desire to make things beautiful around us.
- Rowan Mangan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Martha Beck: It's just that in our culture, it's always in this Newtonian, straight line arrangement. If you look at the history of colonialism, every single time the First Worlders went to destroy a new traditional culture, they described it as being a mess and the people is lazy.
- Rowan Mangan: Totally, and there's that thing about that you talk about with the way that various, I don't know the origins of this story, but indigenous people are seeing the colonizers, something about their eyes and the intense focus of their eyes. Even that is like this straight line, stare at the thing.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. Very linear, very focused attention. That was actually studied. The whole idea of soft focus versus narrow, strict focus was studied at Princeton by a guy named Les Fehmi. He had people hooked up to fMRIs to see how the brain was working. One of the things he found is that that laser-eyed stare was associated with the fight or flight response in the brain and that it actually rules out almost everything from your attention. But people who go in, like when we go to South Africa and we go out with trackers who are brilliant, brilliant trackers, they always go into a soft eye focus because it changes the way the brain perceives and it allows them to see much more, but they're not thinking in these rigid, straight lines anymore.
- Rowan Mangan: Well, no wonder we have to march in formation and just shoot straight forward and get shot from the first line to the back if we can't even perceive properly-



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- Martha Beck: Exactly.
- Rowan Mangan: ... and we miss almost everything. Then how can we hide behind trees?
- Martha Beck: Yeah. It doesn't even occur to us because our attention is so bottled up. I remember flying from London to South Africa, the first time I went over the continent and I was just so excited to be seeing the African continent. I was so used to flying across America and seeing these perfectly straight farms, like these squares of territory, or sometimes perfect circles where they have those rotator things to water the crops. And you look down at Africa and wherever there's agriculture, the lines of the fields follow the contours of the landscape. So there's not a straight line to be seen.
- Rowan Mangan: Wow.
- Martha Beck: In fact, there are almost no straight lines in nature. It's very weird to associate order with straight lines. It's a very culturally-specific phenomenon and our culture just says, "Yeah, you got to be this way," and it keeps you away. It constricts us. It keeps us from being playful or inventive, I think. It makes us very rigid,-
- Rowan Mangan: Yes.
- Martha Beck: ... and frankly, boring.
- Rowan Mangan: I agree with you. I agree completely. It's so funny. I had such a similar experience as you a long time ago on a plane. It's funny how when you're up like that, you can make sense of things, there you are, more than you can on the ground. That's like bird's eye view. Anyway, listen, I want to do something really self-indulgent, which is there's a paragraph from my book that is about this exact thing.
- Martha Beck: Your book being the novel you wrote?
- Rowan Mangan: My novel.
- Martha Beck: Yes.
- Rowan Mangan: Yes. I am now going to read from my book for just one short paragraph.
- Martha Beck: Please. Okay.



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- Rowan Mangan: I once flew across the length of Russia in suspended animation. My eyes locked on the wintered ground below. It was a strange black and white landscape between fathomless horizons crisscrossed with occasional mysterious scratchings indicating human life. From that particular distance, the evidence of humanity was kind of lame, a patchwork of rectangles, a dark symmetrical scramble. There's so little temperate space in which to make a life. Just each of us squatting on the planet, inside the shape, we sketched into the ground around us. If we want to differentiate ourselves from nature, we draw a square. If we want to claim belonging, we draw a circle.
- Martha Beck: There you go.
- Rowan Mangan: Now that is something that I thought on a plane many years ago.
- Martha Beck: So we both had similar experiences looking down and seeing things that aren't perfect straight lines and going, "The straight lines have an alien relationship to this landscape-
- Rowan Mangan: Exactly.
- Martha Beck: ... and to us."
- Rowan Mangan: Yes.
- Martha Beck: I love, we draw a sketch of... What is it you just said? We sketch our own shape?
- Rowan Mangan: We sketch a shape around us on the planet. We just squat on the planet with some sort of line drawing around our bodies.
- Martha Beck: I think that the mess or the order in your definition of it happens inside the sketch.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah.
- Martha Beck: Whatever you're feeling at the time is what ends up getting drawn around you, but I think it also changes, which is a very important point. The idea of it being rigid and unable to shift is one of the problems with the culture.
- Rowan Mangan: So Marty, I have a question. When we talk about coming to our senses with mess and order... This is my question. If we know that mess in our home environment, for instance, and we do know that it adds to the informational load that our brain is trying to process and puts more stress on it. We know that mess can also be an expression of a negative emotional state.



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- Martha Beck: Yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: Right. So if that's true, then why doesn't the apparent mess of nature, like a forest floor all covered in leaves, why doesn't that have the same negative or stressful effect on us? How do we come to our senses and back to our nature on this issue?
- Martha Beck: It is really interesting that the only place I've seen that considered the sticks a problem in a creek was a very fundamentalist religion.
- Rowan Mangan: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Interesting.
- Martha Beck: I think it even extended to the forest for these folks, but for most of us, contrary to conventional wisdom, the random or the disorder of nature is harmonious and appealing. One of my favorite books in the world is a book called ***Chaos*** by James Gleick. When I read it, it was very current thinking. It's not anymore and I haven't read anymore in the subject since, so this is going to be dated back to the '90s or whatever, but it's about how mathematicians thought they could predict everything if they knew the position and velocity of every particle. Then they figured out that there are some situations, e.g., nature, where there are too many variables interacting in too many ways to be predictable. So you can't tell exactly what the weather's going to be. You can't tell at all.
- Rowan Mangan: You can't, for instance, tell exactly what's going to happen if you bring a whole bunch of dinosaurs back to life on an island to make a theme park because famously, "life finds a way".
- Martha Beck: Yeah. First of all, I see no problem with that plan, but also, yeah, when he wrote Jurassic Park, Michael Crichton was actually borrowing from the mathematics of chaos. It was a big thing at the time, this discovery that chaos creates pattern disorder.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah.
- Martha Beck: It never does the same thing exactly, but it does something that's similar over and over again.
- Rowan Mangan: Fractals.



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- Martha Beck: Fractals, yeah. So, a snowflake has six sides because the molecules of water are shaped in such a way that they always form these six-sided forms, but because they encounter different conditions as they tumble through the air, each one of them accumulates crystals in a different way. So there are no two the same, but they always have six sides. That's pattern disorder. You look at a photograph of a whole bunch of snowflakes and it's not messy. It's gorgeous.
- Rowan Mangan: That's how I feel when I see a photograph full of velociraptors. Just, it's beautiful.
- Martha Beck: Coming straight at you.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah.
- Martha Beck: [crosstalk 00:41:18].
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah.
- Martha Beck: Remember, I was stuck in the car with a velociraptor, well, a very small. It was actually blue jay, but they're descended from dinosaurs. And you know, it was beautiful.
- Rowan Mangan: There's a subset of our listenership who are so obsessed with that story.
- Martha Beck: Oh, really?
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, my God. I get messages about it all the time. I can't remember which earlier episode Marty tells the blue jay story. Oh, you know what? It's one with dinosaurs in the title.
- Martha Beck: Ah, yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: Dinosaurs and something, yeah.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. I was so pleased with that story and I was like, "Look at me. I am like the bird whisperer. This bird walked into my lap voluntarily," and people were like, "Oh, my God, you're so amazing." Then I tell my oldest child, and they go, "Yeah, corvids." It's like, "Uh-huh (affirmative), they're very intelligent. They do what they damn well want." I'm like, "You're a corvid."
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, that's an excellent comeback.



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- Martha Beck: Kit is never impressed by my shit. Excuse me. But you know, back to that story, are you a messy, well, I'm not going to march in straight lines into gunfire. That's the thing. If it's time to make something new, I will borrow from nature and look for the pattern disorder and look for what feels like balance and harmony because that is how chaos actually works in nature. It creates balance, harmony, and beauty. Like right now, there's a little part of my room where I used to do Zoom things during pandemic. Pandemic's gone, we have a different Zoom place. I thought I'm going to redo that part of my room as my little art studio, a place to paint. So everything, all disorganized. I moved in all my canvases and then I just went, no, no, no, no. That hurts my heart, and I started moving things out. Every time I move something out, it felt better and better and better until this space was almost completely clear and what it needed was a perfect rock. No kidding.
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, I understand.
- Martha Beck: So I went online and by God, I found the perfect rock and it was \$28, and that is the price of beauty.
- Rowan Mangan: There you go.
- Martha Beck: And I got it and I put it in there with like five books and I'm like, that's all that wants to be in that space. So I was literally letting myself be completely messy, but I was following my inner nature, which knows what it wants to see,-
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, interesting.
- Martha Beck: ... and what it wants to feel.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah.
- Martha Beck: Am I a messy? Yeah, but I'm also orderly. I'm in the chaos of nature.
- Rowan Mangan: Absolutely. Well, actually, that's the thing that strikes me about nature is that it's always changing, right?
- Martha Beck: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Rowan Mangan: It's always moving, and it's that movement, that ever-changing sort of thing about nature that is its beauty, I think.
- Martha Beck: Right.





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Rowan Mangan: It's not rigid. It's not boring. It never stays still.

Martha Beck: Yeah.

Rowan Mangan: I do have some Ani DiFranco lyrics that-

Martha Beck: What? You have Ani DiFranco lyrics?

Rowan Mangan: That is literally true.

Martha Beck: This has never happened before.

Rowan Mangan: I might have even quoted these ones before because they're like lyrics for all occasions. I'm going to have to write to Ani and see if I can start putting her songs on our podcast. So, these are the lines that I thought about, which are, "It took me too long to realize that I don't take good picture because I have the kind of beauty that moves."

Martha Beck: Ah, right. You should have said that to your damn dermatologist.

Rowan Mangan: I wish I had now.

Martha Beck: Can I just say, calling that back, that in future years when people forget the pandemic, when you say my dermatologist peaked under my mask, people-

Rowan Mangan: It already sounds pretty risque'.

Martha Beck: But I had an image of you in a rubber Richard Nixon head or something.

Rowan Mangan: I had your scuba suit on.

Martha Beck: Right. He was like, "Hello." Sorry. That's a big downbeat after hearing Ani DiFranco's really gorgeous lyric, I have the kind of beauty that moves, because when things stagnate, they... For example, I think if that little blue jay, say it was a female blue jay or at least say it was a cis female blue jay and it laid some eggs, what could be more perfect and beautiful than the shape of an egg, right?

Rowan Mangan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Martha Beck: You can't improve upon that. That is just a gorgeous natural form. But wouldn't that blue jay be sad if the little chicken side didn't shatter that perfect form and come out and become another perfect form?



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- Rowan Mangan: Okay. This is the perfect story except if any of us call to mind what a baby bird looks like. Not the most beautiful form.
- Martha Beck: Maybe to big birds, at least to Big Bird on Sesame Street is a very, very beautiful form, that nasty, squiggly, little-
- Rowan Mangan: Screechy...
- Martha Beck: Yeah. It looks like some kind of indecent organ with a beak.
- Rowan Mangan: That's very well put, very well put.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. But to the mommy blue jay and a daddy blue jay-
- Rowan Mangan: Or the lesbian parent blue jays, adoptive-
- Martha Beck: ... right, or the gay throuple blue jays, whatever, when the eggs hatch, people don't grieve the loss of that beautiful, smooth egg because what's coming out of it looks messier. A baby bird is a damn mess. My German friend would take one look and go, "You're a messy," and yet, nature is creating what eventually becomes a velociraptor and we know how beautiful that is. And it's always true. There's always an alternation between disintegration and integration.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. I love that. Actually, what it seems to me is that it's actually the mess versus order dichotomy that is actually the cultural construction here,-
- Martha Beck: Yes.
- Rowan Mangan: ... where we've actually just got a changing landscape in our lives that's always moving and always changing. The culture says, "You are a messy. You are a tidy," and that's not right. It's only ever in the moment that it is.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. And to designate someone that with language actually keeps them fixed in at least in terms of self-identity.
- Rowan Mangan: I was just thinking that, sorry to interrupt you, but it's so funny that you said that about language because I just kept started thinking about Spanish and the way that there's two different verbs for to be in Spanish and one designates right now, this is, and one designates always. So [foreign language 00:48:06] means I am and always will be if you conjugate that, but if you use [foreign language 00:48:12], I think, that means, "Well, right now I am standing on the street, but I'm not always going to be."



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Martha Beck: Wow. Look at you showing off your polyglotness. First of all, that is a really beautiful thing and I wish we had that same breakdown in our verbs and also, [foreign language 00:48:30].

Rowan Mangan: [crosstalk 00:48:31].

Martha Beck: You're not the only bilingual person in the room. No, but I think that the language there has caught onto the reality, which is that order and disorder are two halves of a dance that is always going on in nature and one can't occur without the other. So only if things stop moving do you get anything rigid. I was a messy that day. Then when I cleaned everything out of my room and put in a rock, I was a tidy. I'm still a messy and I'm still a tidy, and I think every one of us gets to be that.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. And plus now, you have a rock. It's a bonus. And if that's not our true nature, I don't know what is.

Martha Beck: I don't know what is. So get into your messiness. Get into your tidiness. Get into the rhythm of the beauty that moves, and 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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