



BEWILDERED

WITH MARTHA BECK
AND ROWAN MANGAN

Episode #39: Always Growing Up

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. This is another episode of Bewildered, the podcast for people trying to figure it out. How you doing, Marty?
- Martha Beck: I'm pretty good. I have a tubercular cough.
- Rowan Mangan: You do.
- Martha Beck: But I feel it adds to my mystique as a writer.
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, absolutely. And if you die of consumption, all your books will become best sellers.
- Martha Beck: And they'll do Amazon series of me daintily holding a lace handkerchief to my face and coughing. And then, it zooms in and there's blood on it.
- Rowan Mangan: That's so true.
- Martha Beck: But really, it's just because I killed a bird and ate it. I would never. I think other people killed the bird, so I ate it. Oh, no, this is terrible. How are you? How's your life?
- Rowan Mangan: Different than it was a couple minutes ago. Yeah, it's good. It's good. I've been trying to figure out... as always, trying to figure out how to be the loving spouse of someone with ADD.
- Martha Beck: Aw. Who would that be? Oh, yeah, me.
- Rowan Mangan: So, you don't really do social media?



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- Martha Beck: Not really, no.
- Rowan Mangan: And yet, so there's this thing happens between us and I don't know how aware of it you are day-to-day. But often we will find of an evening we'll be lying in bed and you'll be doing something. I'll be doing something. And what I'm not too proud to say sometimes what I'm doing is scrolling Instagram.
- Martha Beck: I'm proud of you. I think that's amazing. It's an amazing act of courage.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. It really isn't. Well, this is where we're different. But you don't like to go on Instagram because you think it's scary.
- Martha Beck: Well, it will eat my soul. Yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: It will eat your soul. But what you do seem to like is sort of glancing over at my phone while I'm mindlessly scrolling and because I'm mindlessly scrolling isn't really a skill that you have.
- Martha Beck: No.
- Rowan Mangan: What happens is that you see pictures, there's a lot of pictures on Instagram and you just see pictures. And as I'm scrolling by, I start hearing this little voice going, "Ooh, who's that? Is that you? What's happening there? Well, is that you? Is that our friend? Is that oddly satisfying? Is that cake?"
- Martha Beck: Oh, cake.
- Rowan Mangan: And then, also the other thing is you go, "Stop. Go back. What was that?" And that's not the way of the mindless scroll.
- Martha Beck: See, that's why I can't do it. Because ADD, the thing is, I used to think this was like, "Oh, come on, hyperfocus plus I'm easily distractible. Pick one or the other." But what happens is that I get distracted by something and then it eats my soul because I cannot look away from it.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. You can't put your brain on soft focus for scrolling.
- Martha Beck: No. I can't scroll. It's like I mean, I just dive deep. I cannot snorkel across the top. And you just snorkel and snorkel. It's amazing.
- Rowan Mangan: I do. I do. I mean, it's not even... snorkeling is too strong a word. I lie face down in the water breathing with a, like, what do you call a life jacket here? Like a life preserver?



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Martha Beck: Life preserver. Yeah.

Rowan Mangan: And I wear that so that I don't even have to that make any effort.
And I just like...

Martha Beck: You have a snorkel.

Rowan Mangan: I have a snorkel to breathe with. Yeah. So, that's my metaphor for scrolling is it's very effortless. But yesterday, Marty, what happened was that I was sending a text. I was sitting in a chair, minding my own business, sending a text. And that text was, it was an important one because I was texting our beloved Karen who had said, "What do I say to Lila, our daughter when she doesn't want to come inside and I want to come inside?"

And so, I was telling her, "This is what we will say. We'll say this and then say this because it's what I find works for me." And I'm busily texting away. And suddenly I hear this voice over my shoulder, "Is that a carrot?" And this is because you had peeked over my shoulder in that way you do.

And you had seen a photo on this text thread and in fairness, Marty, it was a photo. You were on that thread. And it was a photo that had been sent 10 minutes earlier by Karen to us that you'd already responded to with two simple words, deer scat. But 10 minutes later you saw it on my phone and went, "Is that a carrot?"

Martha Beck: In my defense.

Rowan Mangan: You don't need to defend.

Martha Beck: Deer scat looks nothing like a carrot. I mean, I was distracted by a leaf. So, I can look at the deer scat, process it, and go away. But then, be completely mesmerized by a nearby leaf. Welcome to my hell.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. I mean, it's different. It's interesting. It's a real insight into your brain.

Martha Beck: You are getting a tiny slice of what it's like to have ADD, because literally my whole-

Rowan Mangan: Slice of what cake? Is it cake?



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Martha Beck: My entire day is, "Is it cake? Oh, what's that? No, go back. Go back. Oh, I'll do this. No, I'll pick up that. Why am I holding this? I don't know." And it's not old age or anything, it's just I've always been this way.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah, yeah. No, I know. It's rough. Anyway-

Martha Beck: I'm glad that you're starting to empathize through my constantly annoying you.

Rowan Mangan: I do. I do empathize deeply.

Martha Beck: Thank you. It's so kind.

Rowan Mangan: Aw. Yeah. What are you trying to figure out, my love?

Martha Beck: Well, as usual, has everything to do with wildlife.

Rowan Mangan: Deer scat?

Martha Beck: Not so much.

Rowan Mangan: Okay. Well, good.

Martha Beck: That really-

Rowan Mangan: That's certainly for the good.

Martha Beck: ... reminds me of the time that in South Africa, I once actually entered a contest, informal about spitting impala dung. Yeah.

Rowan Mangan: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I've heard about this.

Martha Beck: I'm pretty good at it as it turns out. Anyway, I'll just leave that as an image in listener's minds. But that is something I have done competed at spitting impala dung. So now, I'm down the deer scat, rabbit hole, deer scat, rabbit hole. That's a mixed metaphor.

Holy crap. Okay. So, what I'm worried about actually is raccoons. And because you get bird feeders and then the squirrels attack. They sell you this chili hot bird seed that's supposed to discourage the squirrels. They just are wearing little sombreros going "Mexican tonight."

And they're okay because I re-designated my bird feeders as bird and squirrel feeders. The problem is that the raccoons have some kind of malicious intent like they-



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- Rowan Mangan: Are you sure?
- Martha Beck: They make macrame out of the bird things. They unscrew things that take half an hour to unscrew. I mean, they are putting some effort into destroying my bird feeders in the night. I know it's them because I bought a camera trap. And sure enough, there's this incredibly glossy raccoon. Have I already talked about this on the podcast?
- Rowan Mangan: I actually don't think you have. It's exciting.
- Martha Beck: Well, anyway, he's a real scoundrel. I mean, yesterday you saw what he did with that bird feeder. It was bizarre.
- Rowan Mangan: Is it just one guy?
- Martha Beck: It was performance art.
- Rowan Mangan: It was just one of them. I always imagine there were like three or four.
- Martha Beck: It could be because I've seen pictures of them actually standing. There's a picture online, you all can Google it if you don't believe me, of somebody has hung up a food package that they're hiking with.
- Rowan Mangan: Can I just tell listeners that if you meet Marty, you will, within about 45 minutes have been shown this picture that she's describing now?
- Martha Beck: Yes, absolutely.
- Rowan Mangan: She's obsessed with it.
- Martha Beck: Because somebody hung this bag of food up from a tripod to keep it away from the bears and the raccoons. Well, there is a picture, a photo of I think five raccoons stacked on top of each other with the top one getting the food. They conspire.
- Rowan Mangan: They cooperate.
- Martha Beck: They cooperate, they conspire, they have abstract thinking, they have planning. They probably had a freaking spreadsheet for that.
- Rowan Mangan: And what does this tell you, Martha Beck?
- Martha Beck: Well, I finally figured it out because it was freaking me out, Ro.



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Rowan Mangan: I know, it's been troubling you.

Martha Beck: And everybody talks about how they have the little mask and it's cute because they're such scoundrels. Well, I am not finding it funny after going through nine different suet feeders. And then, I realized as I was undoing the macrame that they had made the other day, monkeys... oh, sorry.

Rowan Mangan: Just blew the punch line.

Martha Beck: Raccoons are the monkeys of North America.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. And as soon as you said it made total sense to me. And you know what got me over the line with that is the hands.

Martha Beck: The hands. That's what it's all about. Once you get hands going on and the planning and because you know monkeys.

Rowan Mangan: Oh, yeah.

Martha Beck: Oh, my God.

Rowan Mangan: Do I know any monkeys?

Martha Beck: They can be real... excuse me. I know this is a family show, but they are woo. You'll go into a monkey that is-

Rowan Mangan: You have to say the word.

Martha Beck: They're assholes.

Rowan Mangan: There we go.

Martha Beck: They're just little assholes is what they are.

Rowan Mangan: They got a good sense of humor about it.

Martha Beck: You know why? Because they lie. You walk in on them going through your luggage and they pretend they're not doing it. They don't just run away like a rat or something normal. They look at you and go, "Oh, I thought this was mine." And they mean like you look in their little eyes and they're like, "I'm sorry, I thought I had this outfit."



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And it's very creepy. It's that uncanny valley of, they're just too human to be like okay. And now I'm afraid that raccoons are going to mutate and we're going to have tiny 40-pound humanoids going after our bird feeder because we are an offshoot of the primate group. Well, what if raccoons have the same mutations and we get little raccoon-like humanesque brains in the forest. It's a moral crisis. What do we do with a human raccoonoid in the forest? We can't just treat it like an ordinary animal.

- Rowan Mangan: How do you treat it now? You just ignore it and get traps.
- Martha Beck: You'd have to give it civil rights. And for all I know the raccoon that has been doing macrame with my bird feeder is already human, basically or equivalent. Human equivalent.
- Rowan Mangan: Is it racist to say that maybe this has already happened and that's what oompa loompas were?
- Martha Beck: I think that's very racist.
- Rowan Mangan: All right. I'll leave it then.
- Martha Beck: Anyway, so, I have this moral crisis going on with raccoons being basically human and we have... where it cross purposes. And somehow, I have to negotiate with them because I can no longer just treat them badly.
- Rowan Mangan: The reason you have a moral crisis is that you also have this very deeply held belief that you must feed all the things.
- Martha Beck: That is true.
- Rowan Mangan: And that's what makes it tricky for you. Because other people just take all their bird feeder stuff inside at night. But you are like, "Oh, but he's probably hungry."
- Martha Beck: No, no, no, no, no. That's because I don't get up in the morning for anyone. Not even the woodpeckers. But the woodpeckers get up really early. So, if I take in the suet at night, then the woodpeckers show up at dawn for breakfast and there's nothing for them. I have obligations to my constituents.
- Rowan Mangan: I wonder if we could program a drone to fly over and delicately hang all your bird feeder things.



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- Martha Beck: Yes. And artificial intelligence and then it maybe will develop sentience and consciousness. They will have a humanoid drone, a humanoid raccoon. There's me sleeping upstairs, I don't know what's going on. There could be an entire war between the humanoid raccoons and drones.
- Rowan Mangan: Or what is more likely, they team up against us.
- Martha Beck: So, basically, I am starting the apocalypse on my bird feeder. But it's actually your fault because you bought it for me.
- Rowan Mangan: Oh, well. We'll just both agree to take responsibility for that.
- Martha Beck: Okay. Good. Well, I feel like we've figured that out now.
- Rowan Mangan: I do too. Much further along.
- 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 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.
- What are we talking about today, Marty Moon?
- Martha Beck: Today is of a BeWild Files episode.
- Rowan Mangan: Yay.
- Martha Beck: Because I love getting questions from the peoples.
- Rowan Mangan: I know, me too. And who are we hearing from today?
- Martha Beck: From Kirsten.
- Rowan Mangan: That's right. I told Marty she had to say it because I can't say that name in an American pronunciation in my accent. So, there we've done that and now we're going to hear from her.
- Martha Beck: Okay. Kirsten.



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- Kirsten: I am a single parent, very single for 10 years now. And my children are 23, 20 and 18. We are very close-knit and we do pretty much everything together. They are of course getting ready to launch as they should, but COVID slowed down the process. I want tips, please, on how to be emotionally healthy during this launching time.
- I know when they can't sleep, I know when they have stomach aches or headaches, I know everything and I'm just so emotionally connected. How can I step back and still be supportive and loving?
- Rowan Mangan: Such a good question.
- Martha Beck: So, many people have it.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. We loved this question. We heard it and we said, "Oh, yeah."
- Martha Beck: Oh, yeah.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. Because it's all about growing up.
- Martha Beck: Yeah, it is. It's about how to grow up, how to let other people grow up. And it's a very ambivalent thing in our culture growing up.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. And as with so many of these topics that we discover, like you dig a little bit and you're like, "Oh, my God, there's culture everywhere."
- Martha Beck: And I have to make a disclaimer at this point and I'll probably make this disclaimer a million times because we talk about-
- Rowan Mangan: I think we already have made it several times, but go ahead.
- Martha Beck: Yeah. Nature versus culture. Sometimes I talk about traditional cultures, Western cultures or whatever. I am aware, keenly aware that culture is not monolithic and that it flows and that there were thousands and thousands of cultures that existed on earth before modern western culture developed. And that modern western culture has its subcultures and all of that. So, it is a shorthand, but it's basically just to say when you do something that isn't true for you because you want to please other people or a mental image of other people in your mind. You are having a social response, a cultural response.



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And there is a Zeitgeist. There is a spirit of the times that goes along with the culture that is spreading all over the earth because of the internet and everything. There is a modern western culture that has certain characteristics. It's not monolithic but it's very powerful. And it does show in the main, some consistent characteristics. Okay. Caveat over.

Rowan Mangan: So, in a way, it's like when we make generalizations about our culture or whatever, you can just imagine that it's Marty and me talking about our subjective experience of the culture at large and you just adapt it to whatever your version is.

Martha Beck: Yeah. So, sorry for all you social scientists out there. I am among you and I believe you and still it's a very convenient shorthand to say we got a lot of pressure from the society, from our culture to do this and that.

Rowan Mangan: So, wherever you find yourself saying, "I should"... or feeling, "I should do something because other people do it not because it feels intrinsically good to you." Then, you can be pretty sure that there's a cultural pressure there. There's some sort of element of culture there.

Martha Beck: Whether it's from your family culture or from the church or the state, whatever. But that's the whole idea is that we want to get people away from violating what feels true to them on the inside in order to please other people.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah, exactly.

Martha Beck: Bottom line. Okay.

Rowan Mangan: Exactly. So, bearing all of that in mind, of course, we're thinking about the culture and our culture and the concept of growing up and kids launching and everything. I think some of the kind of cultural messages that I was able to identify around this, is the first one is launching this idea of your children in their late adolescence. At some point, they'll go off and become adults. That's what we're basically talking about with launching. That's what Kirsten, sorry Kirsten was talking about.

And I think one of the things that our culture tells us is, is that that process needs to happen on a certain timetable. And I was, instead of when the family's ready and I was thinking about, so for me, I turned 18 and my mother moved out of our family house.

Martha Beck: You must have been a really fun teen.

Rowan Mangan: I was like, "Come on. It's time."



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- Martha Beck: She's like help. She just moved out.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. No, she had to-
- Martha Beck: Does that count as launching? Did you launch her that-
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah.
- Martha Beck: Does that mean?
- Rowan Mangan: It was time for her to spread her wings. It's a whole world out there.
- Martha Beck: You're just hunched in the nest.
- Rowan Mangan: Yeah. And I think another message. I don't know if you would agree with this Marty. But when we've talked about parenting and parenthood and all of that before I feel like there's this built-in message that is about when it comes to being the parent of someone, it's got to be all about them and not at all about you. And I always get really uneasy with that because it's like there's going to be needs in a collective sense and that part of the growing up process is that we learn to accommodate others' needs and work with others and not have it be all about us all the time too. Right?
- Martha Beck: Uh-huh.
- Rowan Mangan: This like is a side note, but I was thinking about the language of it. Because you know how there's so much culture in the language we use. And I don't know if this is true in every language, if languages have a word for adult children. Because I feel like there's, when you want to describe the relationship of yourself, of those people who are adults, but they're your children, you still call them your children. And yet-
- Martha Beck: Did you learn that in other languages?
- Rowan Mangan: I don't know. I was thinking in Spanish or French you would use gender but it would be the same. So, you would be able... you wouldn't say children collect... oh, well, you would be. You know we're not get into that.
- Martha Beck: I think in Chinese and Japanese, I'm not sure. But I think you would say my son or daughter. But I don't think you would ever... I don't know. I don't enough to say my child. I don't know if they would use the words for child to describe a 40-year-old.



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Rowan Mangan: I just-

Martha Beck: They're still your son or your daughter, but they're not children. I don't know if that's in of... that's really interesting.

Rowan Mangan: Isn't that?

Martha Beck: There should be a separate word for a child who is not a child anymore.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah.

Martha Beck: It's my child. But we should make one up. We should just make one up. See if we can spread it.

Rowan Mangan: Adultrin.

Martha Beck: Adultrin. That sounds like the child I had from my adultery.

Rowan Mangan: It does. Oh, no, let's not say that. Yeah. So, anyway, all of this stuff and it's so-

Martha Beck: My grown-ins.

Rowan Mangan: Ew.

Martha Beck: Ew.

Rowan Mangan: My ingrowns. Ew.

Martha Beck: Ew. So, go on.

Rowan Mangan: So, anyway, I think that what's interesting about this topic of growing up and launching and everything is that there's so many maturation points that we go through as parents, as well as fledgling human beings. And I feel like this moment that Kirsten is going through is having, there's a moment of maturation for her as a parent that I think we can also resist and we can also put off.

Martha Beck: Absolutely. Oh, that's so interesting. You call yourself a mother when your baby is born. You call yourself a mother when your baby is 53, but you're a different entity. You're real. And if you freeze it in language, I'm the mother, that's the child. Then, you could be 86 and they're 66 and you're still calling them a child and you still are acting like you're the mother that suckled them. And one would hope that by your '80s you're no longer suckling anybody.



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Rowan Mangan: Oh, well, I don't know where to go with that, if I should go down there. How dare you.

Martha Beck: I don't know.

Rowan Mangan: It sounds ageists.

Martha Beck: That was like what the raccoons would do. I do have to say sociologically speaking, there's a whole thing around the technological advances that have driven the age of maturation older and older and older because there's so much more to learn. I remember hearing... I don't know if this is true, but I heard once that the Vikings considered a boy old enough to go to battle if he could reach across his head and touch with his right arm touches left his ear or with his left arm touch his right ear.

Because little kids, I mean, if we tried this with Lila, her hand would get about halfway up her head because their heads are much bigger and their arms are shorter. That's why they tottle. Very cute. But once you can reach your own ear with the opposite hand, you're ready to kill and be killed. That's pretty radical.

Rowan Mangan: Marty.

Martha Beck: What?

Rowan Mangan: I just tried it. I think I'm ready.

Martha Beck: You're ready?

Rowan Mangan: Ready to kill and be killed.

Martha Beck: I'm going to put you out there at night next to the bird feeder. Yeah. But children as young as four were considered to be old enough to be contributing to the family finances by hunting, gathering, farming, whatever. And now it's like I was like 43 before I realized, "No, you really have to keep all your receipts for seven years because the IRS could come and ask you why you bought a breath mint seven years ago and question that legally."

It's like, "Nobody ever taught me this in school. What?" There is so much to be learned to navigate the complexity of society that now it takes about 20 years to get to the point where you're sort of literate. Not in the sense of reading, but in the sense of understanding the functions of the structures in the society. It is incredibly hard. And that's why you see the adulting memes online. There's so much stuff.



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Rowan Mangan: Figuring out all the phone calls you need to make, all the different passwords and all of that. Compared with a hunter-gatherer thing of, "I'm hungry, I'll do something now. Now, I'm no longer hungry. I'm tired, I'll go to sleep." Not to oversimplify. But there's definitely a level of complexity in our society that for sure would have to have pushed.

Martha Beck: So, I'm like, "All right, you were grown up at nine. Now you're grown up at 29. How do I make the call intellectually?" I can't make the call intellectually. So, what I do is I go back to the whole nature thing, which is, you just said something, if it's best for the parents, best for the child, it's best for the family.

My premise and this is just my cosmology, it's my faith is that if you do it is truly best for you and you're honest about it and communicative with the people you love and the people you don't love, it will be best for everyone if everyone serves their integrity. And that means that one kid might be totally ready to go at 15. And another person may be... like Adam, he has down syndrome for those of you who have been living under a rock somewhere. And he's very grown up in some ways and in other ways, you could not... I asked him if he wanted to learn to cook his own eggs on the gas burner and he just looked askance.

And he said, "You want me to burn the house down?" Which pretty much shows he's a grown up, but he knows he's a grown up with limitations. So, it's like, again, I'm not trying to make a general rule for Kirsten, here's how you know how. It's a deeply personal thing, but I really love your idea that the mother should, or father or parent should look at his or their own sense of maturation in the relationship to know when it's time to launch someone.

Rowan Mangan: And in fairness, Kirsten wasn't saying when is it time and how do I know, she was looking for how to stay emotionally healthy. And I think what she was also looking for was how to let those chords be a little less tight. That we talk about that umbilical cord being of sometimes people haven't quite cut the umbilical cord and in a metaphorical way. But what do you think about that, Marty? How to stay? How to do that?

Martha Beck: I think and for some reason, I'm remembering something you once quoted from Russell Brand where he said, "I want to do something. I don't know what it was, something socially responsibly." He said, "I do want to do it, I just don't want to very much." And I'm thinking it's almost like you still care. You just don't care very much.



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If a 40-year-old has a stomach ache, if you're 40-year-old child, whatever the new word is, if you're a 40-year-old raccoon substitute has a tummy ache, instead of going, "Oh, honey, let me come rub it with liniments." You're like, "Oh, yeah, you know how to get that taken care of. Call me when you've been to the doctor or whatever." You care. You just don't care as much.

Rowan Mangan: And that's got to be a discipline. Right? If it's-

Martha Beck: And also, I actually feel like I'm going to get in trouble for even saying that. It's almost like there's a... and again I'm generalizing to what I think the Zeitgeist is saying, but it's like never stop caring as much for your grown child as you did when they were a six-pound infant with no skills and no abilities.

Rowan Mangan: I know, I hate that. I hate that. Like as you know it, I have real issues with that because for me... and our daughter is two. And for me, my job as parent is to ready her for hard things that are going to come not to protect her from them.

Martha Beck: Which is why I think we should have her making textiles in the basement. Well, or no.

Rowan Mangan: Well, at least like guarding the bird feeder at night. Right?

Martha Beck: Good point. Let's check her arm length.

Rowan Mangan: She couldn't get close.

Martha Beck: She couldn't.

Rowan Mangan: Unless we could get three of her and they could stack up on each other.

Martha Beck: Yeah. I wouldn't put it past her, but no, I hear what you're saying. And you were felt so clear, so deeply about maturation that you kicked your own mother out at 18.

Rowan Mangan: Yeah. She needed it. It was time. We both needed it. Like when I tried to run away from home when I was about eight or nine and I was trying to like... I don't know if I've talked about this on the podcast before, but I was trying to get some information out of her without showing my hand.



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And so, I was like, "So mom, if you wanted to get to the countryside, could you just take any streets and eventually you'd get to the countryside?" She's like, "What are you up to?" And I said, "Oh, nothing." She's like, "Are you planning to run away from home?"

I said, "Look, you and I just don't get along that well." She's like, "I don't think that's the way of characterizing it. I think what's going on is that you don't do it all." I remember thinking, "No, no, that can't be right."

Martha Beck: This goes to my point. Not all children are the same. You were clearly a freak.

Rowan Mangan: I should say, my mom decided to move to the countryside and have some time there and I rented her house, our family house with a couple of other students for a couple of years. And it works really well.

Martha Beck: It's so mature of you. It's amazing. It breaks the cultural model of what is meant to happen. It shows how it can work really well because you and your mom have a wonderful relationship.

Rowan Mangan: We did have a lot of parties in that house, I have to say.

Martha Beck: Topic for another podcast. So, should we have a little break and come back in a minute?

Rowan Mangan: Let's do.

So, Marty, how do we figure this out, this thing of grown-up children, launching?

Martha Beck: Well, the interesting thing about the premise of following your own nature is you really can't know what's true for anyone but yourself. But you can know absolutely what's true for yourself. It strikes me when Kirsten asks this question that she's buying... sorry, this is putting it kind of cruelly, but we all buy into this idea that there is a way to do things with your kids and if you do it correctly, everything will turn out okay and everyone will approve of you about the children and everyone else.

But when I go completely to what is my truth, what struck me is you become a mother when you have a child. And that is a very stable identity. When your children leave home, you don't get to keep that identity unless you're very much a helicopter mother even of adults. So, the real issue is what are you and what are you becoming?



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Rowan Mangan: Oh, God, this is so interesting because we've come at this sort of place, come to this place that we've come from a lot of different directions in other podcasts, which is that, am I a noun or am I a verb? Do I stay static or do I change and evolve? And I was sort of reaching towards this idea of, I think it's a big transition or maturation point for a parent, but I hadn't realized that it was, "Oh, my God, it's like I am a mother. We are a close-knit family."

And all of that, all these ideas that are all noun based. I mean, that's huge in some ways that is going to... and I've not thought about it because I've not been through it from the parent's side, but that's got to be a huge transition in the identity of the parent.

Martha Beck: Yeah. And being a parent, particularly being a mother is a very safe thing to be. It's a very safe noun to be.

Rowan Mangan: Well, probably in any culture.

Martha Beck: And I will tell you, I will make a confession here. When I wrote my first memoir, which is about my son, deciding to keep him even though he has down syndrome and all that stuff. I knew that I was of stepping into the loving mother role and that it kind of made me bulletproof in the culture. Nobody goes after the mother of a child with a disability. I was so safe in that.

Rowan Mangan: Do you mean in terms of how the memoir would be received?

Martha Beck: About how I would be perceived in the world as well. And then, I mean, at first, I had a lot of shame about it. I was at Harvard and people thought I was making the wrong decision and I thought, "Oh, he's going to have a blighted life and everything." But as I came to fall in love with exploring the world through his eyes, I occupied this identity, which people might have thought it was stupid or whatever, but they couldn't say it in public because you're going to get in big trouble.

And here's the thing Rowie, as we've been talking about this, I thought, "Yeah. Okay. I'm all about launching, I'm all about freedom, I'm all about shifting identity. But you know what, I've never had to shift that identity."

Rowan Mangan: Because Adam-

Martha Beck: Because he really is not at a level where he could live on his own. And that means that I always get to keep that. It is holding an ace up my sleeve and I haven't thought about it until this very moment.



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But when your kids leave and you have to redefine yourself, what if you do something that's not as socially appropriate or admired as parenting? What if now you're just a freelance writer trying to make it work?

Rowan Mangan: I feel like this also ties in with the time, the era that we are living in. I think in earlier times there were more consistent nouns to be outside of parenting, but I've heard you say that it's a more chaotic time and the train track metaphor.

Martha Beck: Yeah. It used to be like, I love reading about plagues.

Rowan Mangan: You're such a weirdo.

Martha Beck: It's something that... especially since the pandemic came, I'm like, "Well, it could be worse. Have you checked out 1348? Not a good scene." So, it makes you feel good to read about the black plague. But the life expectancy, and I know this is probably... it was almost certainly due to vast child infant mortality, but the average age life expectancy was 17. So, basically you got to grow up, hit puberty, spawn, boom, you're done, you're out.

So, at best if you were like a farmer, or a laborer, or an artisan, you only had to use the one identity and then you got to be a mother until you died at 17. So, there were only a few things to choose from. Now, we have these vastly extended lifespans and the number of ways we can define ourselves has become virtually infinite. And a lot of the old definitions that were current five years ago are gone. We talk about this a lot as writers.

It used to be that writers were writers. We were talking about Lawrence Block who wrote hundreds of novels and just sent them off to the publisher. They all got published and he made enough money to live. Most writers these days work for years and years to make little money over a long period of time. It's a different thing.

So, you can't just be a writer, you have to be a writer and then, you have to have other things to keep the pot boiling. And maybe if you're doing lots of things, like I speak and I coach and I just, what am I then? And people say, "What do you do?"

Rowan Mangan: It's okay. You're a mother.

Martha Beck: I'm a mother. Yes.

Rowan Mangan: You're a parent.



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Martha Beck: That's right. And then, that just trumps it. That trumps everything. I mean, in the chaos of the way the world is developing, we're running out of nouns, things to be that are consistent and admirable. What if we just don't need to be a noun at all? What if you let go of parent? Who would you be if you let go of the guideline and just said, "Let's see who I am today?"

Rowan Mangan: And it's so scary, isn't it? Like it's so confronting. I remember hearing our wonderful friend Liz Gilbert say somewhere, I don't remember where I saw her say this, but she was talking about her decision to be childless. And that it takes great courage in many areas of your life because without children you have to really create the meaning of your life because you don't get a shortcut, which is, well my child, my children, it will go on after me, all of that like you've actually got to make that with your hands or your heart or whatever.

I find that so fascinating because I mean, it's true. So, I had Lila late. I was 40 when she was born and it's, oh, my God. Talk about being able to just lean back and think, "Oh, well if my book doesn't get published. I made a kid."

Martha Beck: I'm a mom. Yeah.

Rowan Mangan: I'm a mom. Scot-free.

Martha Beck: And it is completely awesome. It is something that personally, like it fills your world for sure. But she's only two. You're going to change as she changes and I think that's Kirsten's point. How do you-

Rowan Mangan: Wait. No. But that's not what I mean. What I mean is when I get... it's not about that. It's about when I go into the thinking of what's it all been about, what's my life for - that sort of existential place? I can just tick the box because of Lila. It was for her, my whole life. Every day that I ever got out of bed, it was all for this, the child that didn't exist until I was middle age.

Martha Beck: That's so interesting because it's a biological imperative, right?

Rowan Mangan: Yeah.

Martha Beck: Your selfish genes would be saying, "Why do you exist? One reason and one reason only, pass on those genes." And the culture basically grew up around that biological impulse, which is very, very real.



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Rowan Mangan: Isn't this so interesting because it's one of those places where that bit or the biology bit is true, is real. And so, it's like, "Oh, at some point parenthood shifts from nature, like all you're saying that the selfish gene, the urge to reproduce, all of that, everything that gives way or is accompanied by culture and the pressures of culture." And then, at a certain point, it's mostly culture because they are capable of going off and living their own lives.

And at that point, you are like what you're saying from an evolutionary perspective is that at that point your job as parent is complete. And it may be that's... I mean, it would be complete earlier. But it's like but we are hanging onto it as though it's nature when it actually at that point it's culture. Is that fair to say?

Martha Beck: It is very powerful. Yeah. I mean, I remember when I first had children, it was in the '80s at Harvard and I was in the social sciences. So, feminism was a big thing. I really bought the subculture of feminism was having children and raising them is not that important. What's important is being a fully-fledged individual and making your mark on the world and everything.

So, I had that bias. Then, I had a baby and I was going to go to a painting class because I loved it. I'm big into art and I had scheduled this painting class for three months after my child was born and my then-husband was happy to take the baby and everything. And I remember leaving her with him and trying to get on the subway. Number one, I was very exhausted and weak from the whole new parent thing.

Second thing, I don't want to be too graphic, but I was feeding the child from my body as nature and my body started producing a lot of food to the point where it wouldn't let me keep going. It was like go back and nurse the baby. It felt like suicide would've been easier than not going back. There was no way I was getting on that subway train.

Rowan Mangan: And so, in that moment you were trying to do something that was closer to culture. I know art is your nature but in a slightly removed point. But your biology just went, no, this is time for nature. And that was incontrovertible.

Martha Beck: Oh, it was so strong. Here's the thing, if we stayed that tuned in to ourselves... I mean, that's for the survival of the baby. So, nature programs it in without vengeance. But what if you were that attentive to your inner voice as the child grows? And in your case, you were very independent, you had a very adventurous nature and your mother actually pretty much fostered that, let you do it. Other children may get caught in a trap based on their mother's need to remain in the place of intense care. Like the helicopter mother thing. I remember having-



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Rowan Mangan: Which by the way clearly isn't Kirsten because she's thinking about all of this and being forward getting into it.

Martha Beck: But I remember when my kids were in primary schools, they were like ten, eight and six and another mother came over and she'd had one child who was a friend of my daughters. She'd had a baby late. She said, "Isn't it just amazing how it overwhelms your life?" And I said, "Yeah, it really does." And she said, "Like the compulsion to just notice everything."

And I was like, "Okay. I think I know what you mean." And then, she told me that her daughter had joined a swimming team for little kids. And the other parents, all the parents had gotten so obsessed with the training that the trainers said they couldn't come to the training sessions anymore. So, they collectively rented an apartment across the street where they would watch the training sessions through binoculars. I remember thinking, "That's not nature."

Rowan Mangan: What?

Martha Beck: But what? No. But she was still going on that overwhelming feeling you get when they hand you your baby or when you first bond with the baby. I was like, "No, you're using this." I have no idea how it was affecting the child, but I remember feeling in my tummy, that might be right for you but it makes me really, really scared and I feel like something very wrong is happening. So, the very same, I love my child thing had gone from feeling totally right to me to feeling really wrong.

I don't know if it was a bad identity. She didn't want to stop being the mother to a baby or I don't know what it was for her. But I think if she'd really had a little therapy and paid closer attention to her inner feelings, she might have been steered in a slightly different direction.

Rowan Mangan: It's kind of fascinating how total selflessness can become addictive because you'd think that they wouldn't work that way. But there's so much gender stuff that we keep bumping up against as we do all our little explorations into culture on this podcast that it's like you can really see how women, people who have children biologically can be sort of herded in that direction by the cultural messages that like you say, it's a comfortable place to be. It's very comfortable to be.

And I find this too, we're in a different kind of relationship. We're gay. It's like I can go to school and I'm just a mom, take Lila off to school and here I am with the other moms. And it is, it's lovely to be so normal for these moments.



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- Martha Beck: It's so fascinating because at the very same time, that is the feminine mystique that Betty Friedan talked about in the '60s when the mothers started staying home and just being mothers without extended family around. And it was driving them crazy because they wanted to have an identity. It's almost like the parenting trap. I do think it's stronger for people who identify as mothers rather than fathers. It is this very plush, except... you get all kinds of social treats for hanging out there. But it's a cage.
- Rowan Mangan: Yes. Oh, my God. Yes.
- Martha Beck: It's a gilded cage. Like we'll feed you the esteem of being a mommy forever but you never get to leave. You never get to be a person.
- Rowan Mangan: I never get to be anything else.
- Martha Beck: I think you need a cage for a while to protect you and your newborn. And then, there's a time when it's like if the door is wide open, the kid is like going, "If I just take any particular street, could I get away from you?" And you're thinking, "Oh, no, come back. I want to be in my cage. It doesn't feel safe to go out there.
- Because I don't know who I am out there. At least in here, I'm a zoo display that everyone loves. But if I go out there, I'm going to have to create my own identity, fend for myself in a world where identity is completely falling apart right now is so fluid."
- Rowan Mangan: And it even folds back into the, "What's the meaning of my life now?"
- Martha Beck: Yeah. And here's the thing I love... we were listening to a podcast, Glennon's podcast with Dr. Becky, a parenting specialist. It's a great podcast.
- Rowan Mangan: It's so good.
- Martha Beck: Oh, my gosh, I just listened to it. But what I really loved about her when she said, "The most important thing is not to do something perfectly, but to be an expert at repair. Repairing the relationship, repairing your own psyche." So, if you've launched your kids too soon and they're like stumbling around the world, aching for the mother that you aren't, or the father or the parent that you aren't, you can observe that and feel it in your heart and say, "Oh, yeah, they need more." Like Adam, I would not feel... I don't know.



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I would not feel good sending him to live on his own. And if you've made a mistake and left them motherless, you can go and say, "I feel like I've made a mistake. I've left you motherless." But if you've over-mothered and you've wanted the cage and you've pulled them in with you, it can be very toxic. If you feel your own need to be free and the fear of having to redefine yourself and let the children go, then you repair by saying, "I need to let you go."

In fact, I need to move out of the house. One of us has to leave here because I feel in my heart that this has grown unhealthy for me." And then, the child is being told that... I didn't see him still calling it a child. This other person is hearing, "I respect you as an equal. I understand that our relationship has been very unequal and I'm shifting it to be something more horizontal rather than vertical." You do it because it feels healthy in your heart, your soul.

Rowan Mangan:

Yeah. And just because something is going to take courage, which is stepping into the new phase of life, we mustn't mistake that for it being wrong. Scary. Say the thing about the diving board, it's always... it's so important.

Martha Beck:

Oh, this is what I always tell... this is what my coaches are trained to say to people and everything. There's two kinds of fear. There's fear that is mixed with desire and fear that is mixed with disgust. So, think about yourself on a hot day. You're parched, you're sweaty, and you're standing on a very high diving board above a sparkling blue Olympic diving pool.

And it's a long way down and you're scared to jump, but the water looks so cooling and refreshing and you desperately want to be down there. That's one kind of fear. Then, imagine the same precise situation, except instead of sparkling water in the pool, there is toxic sludge and it stinks and it's poisonous and you can tell even from up there. If that's the sense of fear you're feeling climb back down the damn ladder. Do not jump.

So, yeah. If the thought of pushing your kids out of the house takes courage, it takes courage for them to be free. It takes courage for you to redefine. But it feels like, "Oh, we're all going to learn to... this is bracing. This feels healthy."

Then, do it even if it's scary for you, if it's scary for the kid, you can talk about how it's scary for both of you. That makes both of you equal grownups. And if it says, "No, no, no. Wrong, wrong. Do you want me to burn down the house?" Listen to it no matter what pressures you get from the outside.



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Rowan Mangan: Yeah. Yeah. I think that like the turn of the wheel, each new season and adapting to the requirements of each new season always takes courage. I think that we're constantly being called on to evolve and that some of those moments are more visible like this one than others. But I think there's always that-

Martha Beck: I love that.

Rowan Mangan: ... invitation to be brave.

Martha Beck: Like the answer to Kirsten's question is not, "Okay, you know your children are ready when blah, blah, blah. And this is what you do, blah, blah, blah." Instead, the answer to the question is, go in the direction that is true and frightening. Always invite yourself to be courageous. And so, define yourself as that.

I'm a person who does what is brave. Instead of, I am a parent, I am a novelist, I'm whatever. I'm the person who takes the next risk.

Rowan Mangan: Oh, I love that. That just gave me chills. Yes.

Martha Beck: Me too.

Rowan Mangan: I am someone of courage.

Martha Beck: And my child or my grownup is also someone of courage.

Rowan Mangan: Yes.

Martha Beck: We are-

Rowan Mangan: And that's what I'm raising.

Martha Beck: ... courage together.

Rowan Mangan: That's what I've raised and that's what I will continue to model.

Martha Beck: Yeah. Because to live without roles is the ultimate bravery. It makes you invent what's going to happen new every day based on your own resources instead of a model given to you from outside. And it's scary as hell. It is growth. It is freedom. It is strength. It is everything we want for our children. Right?

Rowan Mangan: Yes, exactly. That's it. Now, we've got to stay brave, Marty.

Martha Beck: Yeah. Go out and fight the raccoons and stay wild.



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Rowan Mangan:

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