

# don't write *that* book!

## Episode 65:

### “Writing About Painful Experiences”

**Mike Michalowicz:** Welcome back to the don't write that book podcast, where you can learn how to write your bestseller and own your authorship. Follow along with us as we give you an insider's view of the book industry. Now, here are your hosts, myself, Mike Michalowicz and AJ Harper.

We're gonna talk about writing about painful experiences.

**AJ Harper:** Mm hmm. Can you hear? Oh, my mic's not working.

**Mike Michalowicz** No, you don't have a headset on. It's working beautifully. Well, you're going through a tough experience right now. Yeah. And I don't want to go into questions right away, but one of the questions is going to be when is the right time to write about painful experience?

**AJ Harper:** We'll get there.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah. I'm joined in studio by AJ, with AJ Harper. I'm actually recording. I was supposed to be recording this on video. The last two episodes. So Hey, video land. And sorry, we haven't been doing that. We're getting one step closer to our live event. We got audio. Now we have video. And then ultimately we're going to be in a studio or a theater in front of people.

**AJ Harper:** I feel it. I feel it. We can do it.

**Mike Michalowicz** AJ Harper is my co-writer, uh, on all the books I've done. She herself is an author of one of the most extraordinary books for the industry. It's called Write a Must Read. In fact, uh, you hear over and over again now from our fans of this show of how they love your book and she has transformative services in helping authors, uh, become authors.

So AJ, thanks for. Being here. You're a great friend and I'm sorry for what you're going through. And I'm just shocked. You just keep on showing up.

**AJ Harper:** Thank you. Mike is the author of many books on entrepreneurship. I think technically we're on book 11, although two of the books were revamps. So I count those.

Believe me.

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**Mike Michalowicz** I'll never forget when Noah's like, Oh, you can update the chapter, the intro for clockwork. It's like, no, it's, it's going to be a brand new book. He's like, I got to edit this whole thing.

**AJ Harper:** All right.

**Mike Michalowicz** Um,

**AJ Harper:** we have a shout out.

**Mike Michalowicz** Shout out. So this came from Erica. She wrote this on our Apple podcast review. Erica said, I'm about to publish. My third traditionally published book, neither of the first two sold well. So I am so thankful I found this podcast and AJ's book write a must read. I worked with a big five publisher and they didn't help me at all with the vital needs and things I'm learning from this podcast.

Every first time nonfiction authors should be required to listen to this podcast and read AJ's book. I am so. Long O's thankful for all this insight as I write my third book. I'm convinced it will be so much better and sell more because what I have learned.

**AJ Harper:** How cool is that?

**Mike Michalowicz** It's amazing. Thank you for listening, Erica, to the show and all the folks that are listening in.

I'm not surprised that your big five publisher. You know isn't "helping." But honestly, that's the industry I mean here's the industry it shocks every author that gets a publishing deal They're like I've arrived, and I did the same thing. I was on in Manhattan Meeting with a guy named David Mulder.

**AJ Harper:** Mm hmm,

**Mike Michalowicz:** And we had just released Toilet Paper Entrepreneur. It was It was doing well because it was just hustle, hustle, hustle. And he calls me and says, Oh, you've, you've passed the threshold, not his words, but he's like, you've moved 10,000 books. We got to meet. So I meet with him. He's like, we'd like to publish your next book, which was the Pumpkin Plan.

**AJ Harper:** Yep. I remember when you told me.

**Mike Michalowicz** I walked out of that meeting, I'm like, call AJ. And I'm, I remember like looking up at the skies, the big buildings, I'm like, we've arrived. Everything's fixed. No more problems. Welcome to utopia.

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**AJ Harper:** Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** And I got some of the grit from New York in my eye, and I'm like, ah, and I think that was parenthetical for what's going to happen, and it was, ugh.

Um, so yeah, I'm not surprised, Erica, that your mainstream publisher doesn't help you in that regard, but that's not what they do. Um, we hope this show does those elements for you.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, imagine if they did.

**Mike Michalowicz** I wonder, why do you think they don't?

**AJ Harper:** Um, they're not, okay. Well, first of all, a lot of it is education.

So most authors aren't educated the way you are listeners because you've been listening to this podcast and the publishing industry is not in the business of educating authors on publishing and what it means to be an author. So that's a huge chunk of it. Actually, you're supposed, its publishing is an apprenticeship model.

Whether you are an editor coming up or an author, it's expected you will learn as you go. And the problem is it crushes so many people that are they really going to learn as they go? So it's really survival of the fittest.

**Mike Michalowicz** I think a lot of people don't hear that your publisher won't support you in marketing, won't support you in many ways.

**AJ Harper:** I mean, gosh, I say it constantly.

**Mike Michalowicz** I say it constantly too. And people are still shocked. I mean, I was

**AJ Harper:** I mean they do behind the scenes market so here's the problem is the publisher knows that they are actually supporting in marketing but it's not front facing

**Mike Michalowicz:** Right.

**AJ Harper:** And so authors don't realize because they think that that's They think that it's the publisher's responsibility to find all their readers.

That's actually not what their responsibility is. And because we live in the times we live in where everything is about being out there on social media and other aspects, um, the publisher actually isn't Uh, qualified to do that work.

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**Mike Michalowicz:** Mm hmm.

**AJ Harper:** You think you want them to do it, but they can't actually build your readership for you. You have to be the one to do it. So it's just a lack of understanding about what is marketing for books, what is required. They are actually doing it. They're just doing it behind the scenes and not telling you about it, which isn't helpful.

**Mike Michalowicz** So my theory is they play the venture capitalist model. Oh yeah,

**AJ Harper:** they're gam they're gamblers.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah. Yeah, they know that one out of a thousand goes massive. One out of a hundred goes pretty big and most will burn out. And therefore to invest all these resources in all of them would actually collapse their business.

**AJ Harper:** Yes.

**Mike Michalowicz** So they, if they knew which ones would go big, then it'd be obvious, but no one knows which ones will go big.

Even the author themselves. Like I knew, I knew Get Different would be massive. It's such a good book.

**AJ Harper:** Okay, but don't, it could still catch fire.

**Mike Michalowicz** Right. But I'm just saying.

**AJ Harper:** It didn't have the initial impact you were expecting.

**Mike Michalowicz** I'm like, this is the one that's going to go.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** And, and Profit First has blown away my expectations.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** It just, it had its best sales month again.

**AJ Harper:** But there's a reason, there are so many reasons why that's the case.

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**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah. And, and well, it's the hindsight you can put all together and, and the publishers can too, but in the foresight you can't.

**AJ Harper:** Hmm. Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** At any rate. That's my massive opinion. At

**AJ Harper:** any rate.

Talk

**Mike Michalowicz** about painful experiences.

**AJ Harper:** Listen to this podcast. You'll be more educated.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah, and uh, we're gonna talk about painful experiences, not just the publishing experience, but painful experiences and writing about them.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah. Yeah. I'm asked this question a lot.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah. Why do you think you're asked it so much?

**AJ Harper:** Well, because of what I teach, you know, I teach writing prescriptive nonfiction, teaching memoir. So there's a lot of story involved there. And often that's a painful story that someone needs to share and and they people want to know how to do it. How much is too much? How do you get through it? How do you, you know, there's, there's a lot, there's a lot of concern, fear.

Um, and so we thought we'd talk about it.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah. And I, maybe this is in the outline we're going to get to it, but I'm so curious, where do people typically go wrong when it comes to these considerations of writing a painful story?

**AJ Harper:** I don't think it's really about. wrong. I hate, I wouldn't want to use that word because it's so personal.

My experience is most people think that they're talking about themselves too much, but they're not talking about themselves enough. And we're afraid to overshare, especially if you're from a certain generation, like ours. We don't overshare. Gen X is not, not doing it. Nope. Younger generations, they're more apt to share more.

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But still, there's this fear of, this is too much about me. It's too much about me. Even in a memoir, it's too much about me, which is funny because the whole thing is

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah,

**AJ Harper:** um, I think that's where some people can go wrong. I think also people can write about a painful experience too soon. It should really be in your rear view so that you can process it because otherwise we end up missing insights and focusing too much on grievances.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Mmm. That's great.

**AJ Harper:** Your book is not the place to air your grievances.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah, and it's so ripe with, uh, at least for me, I want to protect myself, survival, defense excuses when you're in the moment. And it's only after reflection where you see I guess it's only in the reflection, at least for me, where I can see some or many painful experiences have a gift to them. Not all of them.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, and they don't There doesn't even have to be a gift, but at least you have some insight, because ultimately, the way you're really gonna go wrong is if you're writing about a painful experience that's not in service to the reader.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Mm.

**AJ Harper:** And so how do you know how to do that? You connect it to a teaching point, you the lesson.

So if you don't know the lesson, you don't have an insight. How can you do that? Then you're just, you're just giving somebody a published version of your diary, which we don't need that.

**Mike Michalowicz** We don't. I was at an event where I was speaking, but I wasn't going up yet. So I was just in the audience and they had another speaker go up who was excellent, excellent storyteller, funny, um, motive.

There was no points to it, and it was a diary that I realized, and it was by the third person, the third story, people start going on their phones and start scrolling through. What a shame. What a lost opportunity with such a gift. And that's what I'm hearing from some authors, too.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah. And if you're ever wondering, how do I decide which personal stories to share, the answer is always, what stories will be in service to your reader on this topic?

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It's always the same.

**Mike Michalowicz** So you have a series of questions you ask your authors or in sequence? How's this work?

**AJ Harper:** No. Huh? Cough. I just, so I, when people ask me, how do I write about painful experiences, then I always ask, why do you want to write? Why do you want to do that? Okay. Um, because I think sometimes people feel they have to, I used to work on these book collections for some pretty famous authors, kind of like chicken soup for the soul variety.

And sometimes I would talk to authors and they would say, I don't really have, like, that big tragedy, though. Like, I don't know what to write about because I don't have any tragedies. That's, that's not a requirement. Also, I will say, this is really key. Write this down. Your pain is not a commodity. Meaning, you don't owe it.

The readers don't have to get it. And I, I see with authors so much, they, oh, I've got to, I have to share that. Yes, we want you to be vulnerable. Yes, we want you to be truthful and honest and in service to the reader. But it's not a requirement that you share your pain. And I just think we've decided it is.

What good is this book if I don't share all my pain?

**Mike Michalowicz** Okay, does that mean, is that, is sharing the pain different than sharing the story?

**AJ Harper:** Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** Okay, how do they differentiate?

**AJ Harper:** Well, in some stories you can't share because it's too painful. And that's okay. What I'm trying to get at is, don't assume it's a must.

When I ask the question, why do you think you have to do that? If the answer is, because I think I should. That's not a reason to be writing about a painful experience.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Gotcha.

**AJ Harper:** If you feel like, I feel called to write this because I want to share, because I know that can help people, then that's different. But if you say, I think I have to, then you should walk away. Walk away.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Gotcha.

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**AJ Harper:** You see what I'm saying? We've just come, we've just decided, at least in certain genres, that the pain is required.

**Mike Michalowicz** Gotcha.

**AJ Harper:** It's not.

**Mike Michalowicz** What if you feel you have to write this? It's just excruciatingly painful to write it. So you have that kind of duality of this, this needs to be done.

I don't know if I can relive this pain writing it. Does that happen?

**AJ Harper:** Oh yeah, so, and I talked about it briefly on a really, a much earlier podcast. And I wrote about it in my book. It's called, um, I call it the healing draft. So, when you are writing about a painful experience that you do feel called to write.

So, you're not just trying to check a box. You're not doing it because you think it's expected of you. And let's assume it's in your rear view mirror, like we talked about earlier. It's still going to bring up a lot of stuff for you. And you're going to wonder how much of this do I share and how much is too much and how much is too little and what if it upsets people?

What if it upsets people I'm writing about? What if it's just triggering for the readers? How am I going to get through it as I write it? That's just too much for you to hang on. And then there's a big question. Is this going to be any good? Who's going to care? Which is the ultimate question all writers ask.

Who's going to read this? Who's going to care? And You can't think about that all at the same time while you're writing about something that was painful for you, and you're probably writing about it for the first time. So, by asking yourself to write about the painful experience in a way that will then not only be shared, but be something you have to sell?

That you're you're twisting it now that now it's not it's too much You're gonna censor yourself. You're gonna judge yourself. You're gonna get stuck and not be able to get back So the answer is to write what I call a healing draft Which is your first your first draft was just for you and you tell yourself.

I'm not selling this. I'm not sharing this It's just me. I'm telling myself the story And it will take as long as it's going to take. And you could do this with a short little story, or the whole manuscript.

**Mike Michalowicz** Just let it out.



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**AJ Harper:** Just write it out, because by trying to, if you, if the first time you write it, you're writing it with the intention to turn it into a book, and you're worried if people are going to care, and if it's sellable, you're, this is just a prescription for disaster.

**Mike Michalowicz:** So, do you take that healing draft, and it sits on the shelf as you write the next draft, or do you actually, Write the next draft based upon that healing draft.

**AJ Harper:** We'll see. We'll see what happens. But what I usually advise my students to do is to write the healing draft and then decide which parts of that are useful to the reader.

So, and then you can, you have maybe some distance from it, you've let it out, you can decide, okay, maybe I don't need all those details, or maybe I'll just take this piece. Maybe that's what matters. Or maybe I don't need to share any of this. You first have to write it for yourself.

**Mike Michalowicz:** There's a great studio, audio studio in New Jersey, North Jersey, called Common Mode. It's where I do all my books.

**AJ Harper:** I did mine there.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah, you recorded there. So the producer, I won't share the story details, but I'm reading a very emotive story for me, and I'm really struggling to get through it. But they're not stopping me. They're not saying, hey, let's take a break. They just did it. After I read the full section, he says, okay, let's do it again.

And I'm like, why didn't you stop me before? He's like, you have to get it out first, man. Yeah, you gotta get it out. That's what he said, he said, man. He goes, you gotta get it out first, man. He goes, now, do it. And it was such a better read. Yeah. Sounds the same. Now, the other question you have, or the second question is what?

Is the experience in your rear view mirror?

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, we already talked about that. Yeah,

**Mike Michalowicz** we did. But, but I wanna, is there any more details? I wanna give you a little challenge back.

**AJ Harper:** Oh, you're gonna challenge me?

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah, yeah.

**AJ Harper:** It, it just means can you write about it with any sort of reflection, that's all.

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**Mike Michalowicz** Okay.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** So here's the challenge. You challenged me, us, to include a story in All In about my father while he was dying.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** So I was in the experience and that's my argument, but maybe a different perspective, so let me lay this out. My father is dying. He died as, right before the book was completed. The story was important because it's about leadership.

It's gone on to be one of the best received stories of all the books. It's up there with the piggy bank. Uh, I'm at events and they pull me aside and say, hey man, that changed my life. The last thing I want to share about that, so I, uh, my father, as he's passing, I asked him like who the most important person was in his life, expecting him to say my mother or some family member.

He says this woman I never heard of. Helen Fuller. Helen Fuller. I get emotional thinking about it. I researched Helen Fuller. She, my father was deeply impoverished, uh, He may have lived in the foster system for a little bit. One of my cousins said that, I don't know if that's true. Um, but, uh, Helen Fuller took him under his wing and, uh, and transforms life.

And what I talk about is the cascade of impact my life and my sister's life is extremely improved. because of what she did for him. And so my argument is, as a leader, you will impact people that you will never see. And so people are so inspired by this. Um, and you challenged me, you said, Mike, we've got to include this, but it's also in it.

So my, that's why I'm challenging you here, is, I think the experience is still going on, but maybe you feel it wasn't.

**AJ Harper:** But you weren't really writing about your dad dying.

**Mike Michalowicz** I guess.

**AJ Harper:** No, you weren't. Yeah. You weren't, if you, if you were writing a book, and you wanted it to be about Um, You know, what I remember about your dad is that he was touch and go for so long.

I remember so many texts from you where you would say, you know, I think my dad's in his final days. Yeah. And then, you know, it was like a cat. I know. He had so many lives. It went on for years.

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**Mike Michalowicz** It went on for years. Four years.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah. I remember the last time, which was the last time. Yeah. And I remember thinking. Well.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Right, right. Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, so let's say you were going to write a book about that. About caring for your father and loving your father through all of those nine lives situations. Would I suggest that you start writing that book while he was dying? Hell no.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** But we just took one little moment. We just took one little moment.

It wasn't the you're talking about the call to greatness for all in the call to greatness for all in is about leadership. And yes, he's he's a moment from those that time you're sharing, but it's really not what it was about, right?

**Mike Michalowicz:** It's not about that experience.

**AJ Harper:** So I'm talking about

**Mike Michalowicz** directly.

**AJ Harper:** You know, I don't know to tell if you had a painful experience in your life that you want to show if it was Then about your dad dying. I wouldn't say for you to say, okay, let's start that book about your dad now. You know, I came to your dad's Wake.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah,

**AJ Harper:** and If I'd come up to you and said, okay, I got the laptop in the car. Can you just spare a few minutes? Let's get going. You know, we can't do that.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah,

**AJ Harper:** you could write about your dad now

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah,

**AJ Harper:** it's been what two years.

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**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah, two years, two months.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, you can write about your dad now.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah. Oh, that's a good question When do you know you're there because some people maybe two years isn't enough time is there? It's just personal.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, it's just personal

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah, let's go back to the healing draft So that's a great outlet. Is there some structure around this?

Do you have to write? You know, I actively kind of do some editing as I go along. I do type of correction. Is this kind of just to show up in the vomit draft?

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, it's the S. F. D.

**Mike Michalowicz** Was I mean, Oh, but,

**AJ Harper:** but it's even not even an S. F. D. It's not even a, it's not even a draft draft. I don't even want you to think of it as a book.

That's it's a healing draft is just telling yourself the story because if you because an SFD or a vomit draft is actually geared toward getting a book eventually. I want you to get even before that.

**Mike Michalowicz** Okay.

**AJ Harper:** This is not, I'm, no one may ever see this.

**Mike Michalowicz** So you're not necessarily thinking about an outline. You're just, just whatever comes to mind, put it to the paper.

**AJ Harper:** Put, put it down.

**Mike Michalowicz** So interesting. That is a technique to navigate, uh, depression.

**AJ Harper:** Yes.

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**Mike Michalowicz** So. After, in 2008, I lost everything financially, I went into two years of depression, started to drink a lot and, uh, I tried all these different kind of self managed therapies.

**AJ Harper:** Self-help books?

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah, self-help books, gratitude journal, like, you know, every morning wake up and write three things you're grateful for.

**AJ Harper:** Mm hmm.

**Mike Michalowicz** I think some of the things amplified the problems. It was like, Oh my God, it just felt fake. And one dude, one friend of mine said, uh, dude, just write whatever comes to mind, bro.

He goes, he goes, it's a journal. And he goes, it's a diary, but it's a journal. And so I started doing that and that was it for me. What you're allowed to do is say whatever you want to say with no judgment coming back because you're just putting it down. Yeah. It doesn't, I've never gone back and reflected.

I've flipped through some pages, pages, but barely. I still have it. I feel compelled to keep it for now, but maybe one day I'll throw it out. I think one day I'll add to it at some point. I rarely do now. But that was poor man's therapy.

**AJ Harper:** So, I mean, let's be clear. I want to Yes, it can be therapy to write about painful experiences, but I don't I would never claim that that's what this was for all I'm saying is if you want to write about your painful experiences Allow yourself the space and time to write tell yourself the story first.

I make no promise that it's going to It's going to help you with depression Although it could and I actually wanted to reference this the study today and how I think you should go about it but it's just It's not it's not even There's nothing Inherently, even spiritual about it or anything. It's just smart, you know, psychology man.

It's just practical.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** Because what I saw so much with people getting stuck is that you should never be wondering when you're writing a personal story that's painful. Is this good? And who's going to want to read this? You need to first get that out. That's all I'm saying.

**Mike Michalowicz** So you're removing those variables.

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You're just writing just to write. Actually, I don't have any intention of sharing this with anyone else. I don't have any intention besides getting it out.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** And that gives you that freedom just to go.

**AJ Harper:** So let's be clear though, you might run up against this when you're in your outline. So let's say in your outline you've identified some stories that you do plan to tell.

Yeah. And as you're working through it, you realize one of those is going to be hard. So then you can pause, do a healing draft just for that story that's within the confines of the outline. So it isn't just that. You're going to tell this whole big story and then work on an outline. Sometimes it pops up, you know, kind of like we worked on your Call to Greatness.

**Mike Michalowicz** Do you find it also improves, enhances your craft of writing? Do you get better at writing just by?

**AJ Harper:** I mean, every time you write, you get better. Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** That's, that's always the intention of it being a manuscript or anything, you're just getting into it.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, of course. But ultimately, It's gonna make you better at telling the story that's painful if you have an uncensored version first.

Because people tend to censor because they're worried about this is gonna be a book someday. So now I have to worry about hurting people's feelings, hurting my own feelings, being too much or too little, all of that. You're gonna end up censoring something that could have been really useful. So we don't, it's just, I just don't want people to get caught up in that censor and that pressure.

And just by taking that out, now you can have some stuff. Then you can come back with your, with your author eye and look at everything you wrote and decide, what am I keeping?

**Mike Michalowicz** Do you reflect back to your healing draft and, and see if there's nuggets you can pull when? Okay.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah. That's the point. The point is you're going to get past that.

Then you're going to go back and say, okay, which of this am I going to, how much am I keeping? What am I keeping?

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**Mike Michalowicz** Mm hmm. Yeah. Okay. I wonder, this is just me theorizing, when I wrote my own little journal, there's some stuff I wrote I don't ever want to see again necessarily.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, but you were talking about writing in a journal to write whatever.

Yeah,

**Mike Michalowicz** yeah. This is a story. This is,

**AJ Harper:** you know, you want to tell this story about the time that, um, you know, your best friend moved away or the, or something really horrible. Yeah, you know? Yeah. Um, I mean, there's stuff that the pandemic post pandemic years were in officially now five years out from the pandemic, which was devastating for my own family in many ways.

And I don't I might never have it far enough in my rear view that I ever want to write about it. But I'm not gonna, so I might journal and just share my feelings, but the healing draft is a specific story that you want to tell. If I ever got to a point where I wanted to tell it, I wouldn't just be randomly talking about anything.

Would be telling the story of what happened. Tell the story of what happened.

**Mike Michalowicz** I have a very specific strategy question. So COVID was very impactful for your family. For me, not so much. But 9/11, very impactful, perhaps for you, me, because it's our community, but someone that lives somewhere else in the country maybe doesn't get impacted the same way.

You know, we see the clouds coming up. I saw, we know people who died.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** So when it comes to a painful story, if you share something that has massive public exposure, COVID, 9/11, but you have an intimate story that someone may not be able to relate to. Emotionally. Do you, do you address that in the book some, in some ways?

Cause you can't say all people, all people had a horrific experience with COVID or all people struggled to recover from.

**AJ Harper:** You aren't saying that.

**Mike Michalowicz** I know I'm saying, but so what do you say? Do you even address it? You just say, you just talk about yourself.

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**AJ Harper:** It's a human experience. It's why people are coming up to you and saying, God, that's the story about your dad.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah, I get it. I get it. It does.

**AJ Harper:** They don't even have to have lost their dad.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah. I'm just saying when there's a greater public experience around it.

**AJ Harper:** So 9 11 is a good example.

**Mike Michalowicz** Everyone's aware of it.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** And if I say, you know, 9 11 was the most devastating day for people, that's not true.

**AJ Harper:** But you wouldn't say that. You're not doing that.

**Mike Michalowicz** So you talk about yourself. You're talking about yourself.

**AJ Harper:** You're talking about, I woke up.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah. Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** You know? Well, don't start with that. Don't start with waking up. No. By the way, that's a really common way that you can, when you see novels that are submitted. When I was an acquisitions editor.

Oh my gosh, how many novels start with somebody waking up? Really? Yes. Let's move further in the day.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah, let's not do that. Um, How much do you choose to share? Is there a way to throttle that?

**AJ Harper:** Uh, once you've written the healing, well the healing draft, you share it all.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yep. Yeah. Now the healing draft is done.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah.



# don't write *that* book!

**Mike Michalowicz** How much do I share in that? So you,

**AJ Harper:** you determine that based on What is useful to the reader is first. What is useful to the reader? Are you gonna use it to prove a point? Make them feel less alone Support an idea What's going on? Show them what's possible once you've determined that then it's just you're going back to basic storytelling principles of You know What works and what doesn't.

There may be some things you don't necessarily want to share because other people are involved.

**Mike Michalowicz** Can you give me, uh, the concept in a little more detail? So

**AJ Harper:** you have the right to tell your story even though other people are in it, because it's your point of view.

**Mike Michalowicz** Okay.

**AJ Harper:** But it doesn't mean they're going to be happy about it.

**Mike Michalowicz** Okay, but you don't refer, you don't, you still protect their names, you wouldn't say their names.

**AJ Harper:** You can say names if you want. It's totally your choice. If you were in a, um,

**Mike Michalowicz** Say a car accident.

**AJ Harper:** If you were in a car accident, and there were other people that were also involved, you can mention them. Or, there was, you were in a van, and you knew everybody in the van.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Mm hmm.

**AJ Harper:** You don't have to protect their names. That's because you're talking about the thing you were involved in. And you were there. And it's your experience. It's different than if you were recounting something someone told you.

**Mike Michalowicz** But you make sure you say it's your experience as opposed to being factual.

**AJ Harper:** Well, you just, there's easy ways to say this is my recollection. Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know,

# don't write *that* book!

**Mike Michalowicz** but that's how you do it.

**AJ Harper:** All I'm saying is that you can't stop people from being pissed at you because you wrote something from your perspective.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**AJ Harper:** There's nothing. So you have to be the best judgment of that.

Is it useful? Is it worth it? Is, you know, this is the next question, right? So is this useful to readers? Secondly, is it worth it? So is it okay? I mean, there's so many autobiographies out there. People disagree with

**Mike Michalowicz:** yeah,

**AJ Harper:** that's not what went down.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah,

**AJ Harper:** you know some people wait till somebody dies to write Because they don't want to get into it.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah,

**AJ Harper:** or they have respect and they feel like you know what? I really have to tell this thing. They are not gonna look good in this story. And so let me wait till they die Jeanette McCurdy's memoir comes to mind Do you know who do you know? I don't let me look up. It's got the best title. Hang on Um, she was, uh, on this, uh, Nickelodeon show called iCarly.

She was, um, I don't know. Did your kids watch that? I think, yeah, I

**Mike Michalowicz** do remember that. Yes.

**AJ Harper:** Um, and she did not want to be in it at all. Her mother was one of those stage mothers.

**Mike Michalowicz** Oh, like forcing her to be on the show.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah. So her book is a massive bestseller. And it is called,

**Mike Michalowicz** I like have my Amazon up. I'm ready to check it out.

# don't write *that* book!

**AJ Harper:** Are you getting it? Because I'm having a hard time. No,

**Mike Michalowicz** no, I am not. Let

**AJ Harper:** me put,

**Mike Michalowicz:** this is how live this show happens. Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** Book. My, my wife read it. Okay. I have to take off my glasses cause I'm almost 52. I'm glad my mom died by Jeanette McCurdy.

**Mike Michalowicz** I think I have heard of that book. If I look at the cover, I'll know instantly.

Yes. Yes.

**AJ Harper:** Very raw. That's, uh, there is, there is, uh, that's, it's all out there.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** Her mom is not living.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** It was, based on the book, there would be some problems from the, from the mom camp.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** You know what I mean?

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**AJ Harper:** So, um, I don't. I don't know if that was a deciding factor for her. I'm assuming it was.

So that's why I say worth it.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** Is it useful? Is it worth it?

# don't write *that* book!

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** And then I, I think it's, I want you to do the fast forward button. So in five years, 10 years, will you be glad you wrote that? And it was published.

**Mike Michalowicz** There was a book by Sandra Waggett called bold moves that I read. And it also talks about.

Challenges with family and particularly her mother and her mother was still alive. And you're right, she. She said, I, I need to do this book and put it out there. Mm hmm. Um, but she also know the consequence. And sure enough, Mama comes down with vitriol.

**AJ Harper:** Yes.

**Mike Michalowicz** You know.

**AJ Harper:** And that might be worth it to you.

That's why I say worth it. Yeah,

**Mike Michalowicz** yeah, yeah. That's the measurement.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah. Uh, I mean, there's things that I would love to write about, um, that I think I just won't.

**Mike Michalowicz** You're waiting for me to die? Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** I'm waiting for you to kick it. No. I think also for me, and it's just, just me, okay? So everybody do your own thing.

There's things that I probably would never write about.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Mm.

**AJ Harper:** You know? Yeah. It's um, you have to remember that once you put it out there, it's for everyone else.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah, it is for the world.

**AJ Harper:** They feel like they own it. They can have all their opinions about it. You can't do anything about it.

# don't write *that* book!

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yep.

**AJ Harper:** And you have to really decide if it's worth it.

What if it's a huge success?

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** The level of, the more readers you have, the more opinions you People turn on a dime. So, There's stuff I think you maybe you don't need to use.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** I don't know that it's worth it.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Uh, Miles Taylor. I mentioned this book before. He just put everything out there. Yeah. This isn't a painful experience.

Well, it actually was. It was his experience in politics. Whistleblower. Yeah, whistleblower. Um, but he knew. And the consequence was death threats. It was just insane. He did the, is it worth it? Measurement. He actually wrote the first book anonymously and then wrote a second book under his own name. I

**AJ Harper:** mean, that's a, you know, that's a, I need, I, he's a patriot.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah. Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** So it was worth it to him. Yeah. But sometimes the story of writing about is about something that happened between you and your parents or a loved one and you just really need to think about that. Maybe it is. And then do the fast forward button once you've asked those questions. Is it useful?

Is it worth it? Will I still want? Be happy that I wrote this five years from now. Because if you, you might think so, but until you ask yourself the question, well

**Mike Michalowicz:** I like that.

**AJ Harper:** Because who, what's gonna happen in five years? Your kids will be older. They might read it, you know? Or you're on a new career. Do you want people to be able to find it?

**Mike Michalowicz:** Mm

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**Mike Michalowicz:** hmm.

**AJ Harper:** Things like that. Do you really or maybe just do you even want to think about it that much?

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah, or five years of a splintered family. I mean, there's so many I like that that reminds me of Susie Welsh's book the 10 10 10 Rule.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, and you could pick another year doesn't be five years. Yeah,

**Mike Michalowicz** but she says look how you gonna feel in 10 hours 10 months 10 years is that framing tell me about these the experiment done by Um, James Pennebaker, I think it was.

Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** So, um, he was a social psychologist and this was in the eighties and along with his student, Sandra Biel, and I don't think I've pronounced her name correctly, but this was at the University of Texas at Austin. They did a study on expressive writing and they'd had 46 students. And some of them were directed to write about superficial topics and some about traumatic experiences.

They would write without stopping for 15 minutes, and they did this for four days consecutively. And then they would start back up again once they got a break from that. And the study showed that even though it would bring up a lot of feelings for them, the students kept coming back every day. They had to come in to do the 15 minutes.

And very few people quit. And then they also, uh, in this study and subsequent studies, because what happened was Pennebaker's study was successful and other people wanted to try it, so other labs started doing it as well. And it all came back with great benefits for, uh, physical health, mental health.

Interesting. Which is how we get this, let's write through our trauma.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Mm hmm.

**AJ Harper:** But, I think Even though I'm not at saying, this is what you should do. I think using their methodology might help you pace yourself with a healing draft is what I'm getting at.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

# don't write *that* book!

**AJ Harper:** So try, okay, I'm just going to do it.

I'm going to write, write what happened. Okay. For 15 minutes, do it for four days in a row and then take a break. I

**Mike Michalowicz** wonder if they, they studied the superficial topic. People, if people lost interest in that, it was hard to sustain that.

**AJ Harper:** Um, they didn't, that was, that's not what they were looking for.

**Mike Michalowicz** I know.

I'm just really curious because if the traumatic stuff you don't want to do it yet, you keep the compulsion to do it continues. I wonder if the reverse is the other.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah. So, I mean, I would advocate giving that a try because it's show that that, so instead of making yourself, you know, locking yourself away for 10 hours, trying to write it all out, like that could cause some, do you might, you might, that would be hard to read.

Traumatization.

**Mike Michalowicz** much.

**AJ Harper:** Exactly.

**Mike Michalowicz** It reminds me of, um, There's a therapy if you're allergic to bees or wasps, they take a little bit of the venom and they inject it in you and over time they build it and you build this immunity to the venom.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah,

**Mike Michalowicz** it's the same thing.

**AJ Harper:** So I want to just say, we, this is really important.

I really want to get this message across. In publishing and just I think in our country in general, we have this drive thru mentality. Hurry up, finish, get it done. Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up, hurry up. This is not writing. This is not helpful.

**Mike Michalowicz:** Yeah.

# don't write *that* book!

**AJ Harper:** You have to slow this stuff down. You're writing about painful experiences.

You have to give yourself grace and time to focus on this. It's the whole point of doing it. You're also, it isn't even if it's just painful experiences, you're missing out on the discovery process of writing. We have to stop this, I need to get this book done now kind of thing because we're missing so much of what it could be.

And when you're writing about personal experiences that are hard, you're missing the chance to let it shape you to write the book because you're trying to get it done so fast and setting these arbitrary deadlines and not just maybe having a conversation with yourself and saying, I'm going to let myself take longer to do this or it's okay that this is taking longer because I'm getting these insights and I'm letting myself feel.

We're so focused on again, back to that commoditization. Product. Product. Deliver. Deliver. Product. Product. Ship it. Ship it. Yeah. This is not writing. Wait. Just let it breathe a little bit. Let it breathe. Preach!

**Mike Michalowicz** In *Write a Must Read*, I'm paraphrasing, but you say, you write a book that will transform others, but realize the biggest transformation is within.

Not your words. But that's what every time I go through the writing experience. It's always like wow the self reflection It's not even it's not even the content in the book. It's reflection on yourself as you're creating a book

**AJ Harper:** Yeah, because even if you're writing a business book that doesn't have a lot of painful experiences mention it and the way you go about painful experiences is

**Mike Michalowicz** You know usually self-deprecating. I'm a goof.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah. Look what I did. Yeah This current book though has a lot of painful experiences. Oh, yeah. Yeah, I think um It's mostly though about organize, you're transforming because you're organizing the way you think about things.

**Mike Michalowicz:** That's right.

**AJ Harper:** And there's a difference between just thinking them, sharing them with your thoughts over drinks with your pals, versus presenting them to the world in a way that makes sense.

And even just doing that is enough to transform you.



# don't write *that* book!

**Mike Michalowicz** And what's interesting in this, in *Made for Money*, we talk about collection notices I was receiving and so forth. I would never tell my pals about that. In fact, I still haven't.

**AJ Harper:** They're going to find out.

**Mike Michalowicz** They're going to find out. I haven't even talked to my wife about it much.

It's almost like that's something I want to keep under the rug. There's an awareness, but it's all out there now. And there's, so there's this cathartic feeling of it's now all out. It's all out.

**AJ Harper:** Really? Yeah. It's so interesting because in writing it, I'm realizing that I was actually around for some of it.

**Mike Michalowicz** You were.

**AJ Harper:** But I didn't have a clue.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah. Yeah, and there's, and the self deprecating and the goof part, that's a defense mechanism,

**AJ Harper:** right? Well, yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** And so, um, going through that, it's like, oh, this, it. The distance has made it less painful to re experience that. The book has released it finally to, it's like, it's out in the universe and like, whew, I'll never.

**AJ Harper:** but that's in service, Mike.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah.

**AJ Harper:** Do you know how many people are drowning in debt collection calls? That's in service. So you're not. It's also in

**Mike Michalowicz** service to me, selfishly.

**AJ Harper:** Yeah. So that's, that's why it works. Yeah. That's why the story works if you, in your machinations to try and prevent anybody from getting your mail.

Yeah. Yeah. Right? Yeah. So that story works because even if the scenario isn't exactly the same for readers, they've been there and that's why shame story, that's really a shame story. Shame stories are always the most powerful. Where I'm, I felt ashamed.

# don't write *that* book!

**Mike Michalowicz** I have something that maybe won't put in the book now, just came to me.

I just remember this. I went to the post office. It was so embarrassing to get these collection letters and said, hey, um, we're heading out of town for a little bit. Could you hold the mail here and I'll come and pick it up periodically? Oh no. Because I didn't want my wife to see it.

**AJ Harper:** Oh.

**Mike Michalowicz** Yeah, because it was so much coming in.

**AJ Harper:** So, I didn't know you did that.

**Mike Michalowicz** I just remembered. Suppress that. So what I did was I go in the morning, I was going to work, whatever. I stopped by the post office, get the mail and I come in and say, Oh, mail came late today. Or I picked it up on the way. Does she doesn't know? No.

**AJ Harper:** You probably should tell her before the book comes out.

**Mike Michalowicz** Are we playing

**AJ Harper:** this podcast?

**Mike Michalowicz** I gotta go home now.

**AJ Harper:** But you have your wife will

**Mike Michalowicz** know. She'll understand. It's interesting. I was doing something cause I thought I was in service of her. It was protecting her. But was I, I was cloaking the truth and you know, yeah.

**AJ Harper:** It doesn't really matter

**Mike Michalowicz** now, but it's interesting how I was behaving trying to believe that ignorance was bliss for her.

But was she ignorant in the first place? And then it was, probably not. Yeah. She's smart. She's smart. Yeah. Most people are. And so then you become suspicious. Interesting. This is, this is a powerful episode. Uh, I hope our listeners start going at least doing that, that first healing draft. Um, If you think you're going to include the story or not in the end, just do the handwriting draft regardless.

**AJ Harper:** Let yourself have time to write it.

# don't write *that* book!

**Mike Michalowicz** Next episode, we're going to talk about some more book updates. Um, when are we recording next? In a couple of weeks? Yeah. Yeah, so we'll have some substantial updates. Uh, maybe a title. Officially. Uh, I've called Roni again today, so we'll see. And, um, I want to remind you, get AJ's book, Write a Must Read.

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Uh, list you can join to make sure you're notified of every cool episode. Plus, we want to know if you're going to come to our live show. We think we're at 12. I want you to be number 13. As always, I got a grand reminder for you. I don't want you to write that book, right? The greatest book you can.