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Episode 140:

“When Your Book Needs to Change in Big Ways”

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.

Mike Michalowicz:

This episode is brought to you by Page Two, Simplified. I forgot to mention them in the beginning of last week's episode, so I wanna bring 'em up right in the forefront. Okay. <laugh>. So there, done. Done. Yay. Page two. Yeah. Yay. Page two. Today we're gonna talk about when your book needs to change in big ways. Uh, you're listening to, don't Write that book, I'm joined studio with AJ Harper. My name's Mike Michalowicz. AJ, what I admire about you is you actually called out when a book needs to change in a big way. We've been writing, and I think at least on one occasion, we did a full throw out of a manuscript and said, no, we need to redo it. And it may have happened. What? Yeah. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

It wasn't a complete manuscript.

Mike Michalowicz:

It was, um, no, we, we threw away a book. We were writing one about how to sell a business, so that was a throwaway, but

AJ Harper:

We hadn't written any of it.

Mike Michalowicz:

It wasn't baked yet? No. But I think it was with Clockwork. Oh, God. And think about it, the Money Habit. The Money Habit. When we're writing this, the Money Habit was, we were writing it and you were still very much in the frame of profit first. Yeah. And I, I wasn't, I wasn't explaining well, but one day it clicked and you're like, manuscript is done. Let's restart.

AJ Harper:

Yes, that's true. But we, we weren't too far into it. We've never trashed a whole book.

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Mike Michalowicz:

I felt like we're trashing a whole book.

AJ Harper:

It does feel like that sometimes. Yeah, it does.

Mike Michalowicz:

But, uh, we're gonna explore when your book needs to change in big ways. Yeah. Big ways. And what inspires that too. So I admire that about you, that you have the, it feels like courage because there's this, there's this, um, sunk cost fallacy. We've made so much effort. We've got so much done. Can't we just see this through? And the better choice is to abandon and start anew. And, uh, that's very difficult for many people, including myself to do. But you seem to have the courage to do it. I admire that.

AJ Harper:

See, I don't, I don't think of it as abandonment.

Mike Michalowicz:

I don't say, did they say abandonment?

AJ Harper:

Yeah, you said start a new, start a new, but I, I think that's what it feels like. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. But that's not actually what's happening.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, talk to me, Chiefy. That

AJ Harper:

What's happening is that it's, you're reshaping it. It's just getting a new shape. And that might require overhaul or I call it major surgery. And, but that doesn't mean that it's totally new. And I think I have, I'm never, it doesn't feel like courage to me, but that's because I feel like we have to do what we have to do, so we're just gonna make it work. And I don't really think about that. It requires courage to do it. I just say, okay, let's get to work. What can we do to make that happen? But it's not like a brand new book. It's more like, oh, we were wrong about that part. Okay. What do we need to do? Shift, shift, shift. Reshape, reshape, reshape. To me, it's fun. It doesn't mean it's not a lot of work, but I do respect the fact that a person who isn't familiar with these kind of overhauls feels like I screwed up, or This is too much, or I don't know how to make that work. Or this is too, I don't know. But for me, it just feels like, oh, all right. That's the work. That's what, that's what it sounds like to me. That's the work.

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Mike Michalowicz:

It's so interesting. I heard someone define courage is doing something that you must do even though you're afraid to do it. Yes. And you just said, you gotta do what you gotta

AJ Harper:

Do. Yeah. I'm not afraid, which

Mike Michalowicz:

Is the fear has been removed. Yeah. Which maybe is the,

AJ Harper:

It's just practice though. Yeah. I do respect that. That's a point I am where I am in my career, where if you're a brand new writer, it's very daunting to think, wait, what I have to do. What if you have to cut, lose multiple chapters? What if you have to take out a major story? Um, there's a lot that could happen. Or you realize, I got my fundamentals wrong. That happens sometimes. Hmm. I'm doing that right now with my own book. I wrote a good chunk of it already and realized, oh, dang it. That's not it.

Mike Michalowicz:

Interesting.

AJ Harper:

And so that's to me, more like a puzzle. Okay, fine. Lemme take all the pieces again. Let me take 'em out again and let me reshape it. And I'm not afraid. But again, we're doing the episode because some people are a hundred percent, and that turns into a little bit of paralysis. So we wanted to talk about that today. But let me tell you what I admire about you. And it's, I thought about this on the way in, in, in the last episode, I mentioned that it was just like a rainbow Fiesta on the way in. And, um, you, one thing I admire about you is you maintain these long-term childhood friendships. Hmm. And you inspired me. So on my trip, so I was just, uh, we're recording this in, it's May 6th, I think, or fifth.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, today's May 5th.

AJ Harper:

Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

So yesterday was May the Fourth be with you. Yes. Today's Cinco de Mayo.

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AJ Harper:

Yes. So it's May 5th. And I've just gotten back from two weeks, two, two to three, three week actually road trip where I was at our lake house to check out that flood damage. Then I went, made sure to see my mama, my in-laws. And then I was in Minneapolis. I went to, I saw my BFF Zoe Bird, and we all went to see Maria Bamford, who's an incredible comedian. But you know what I did Inspired by you? I, I had put up a post because my wife and I just had our an 30th anniversary of our first date. (Wow.) And I put up a post about it. And my childhood, B fff, Stacey Sanders, now Stacey Sanders divorced, put a little comment and we're Facebook friends. So that happens. But I just thought, you know what I need, I should call her. I should text her.

AJ Harper:

And I've been afraid to go, have, I haven't seen her since her wedding in 1996. Wow. 1996. So the same 30 years. And I thought, oh, that, you know what? I'm holding off because I gained so much weight. Mm. And I keep thinking, I'll, I'll always go see her when I lose more weight. Mm. And now I, I am working on it, and I am losing weight, but like, well, how am I waiting to do this? That's so silly. So I texted her and I said, you know what? I've been meaning to do this. And I was very honest. I said, I, I held off because I gained so much weight, but I just think that's dumb. And I'd really love to see you.

Mike Michalowicz:

Kudos for you.

AJ Harper:

And then we, we hung out and we, I'm telling you, we were BF Fs. Oh. Like, I think I spent half my week sleeping at her house.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, That's amazing.

AJ Harper:

And Then her mom showed up who was like my second mom. And I have not seen her since the wedding. And you know what it did for me? And Stacey said, I have all these friends I've known for decades, but they don't know these childhood stories. And you do. And I said, and, and then we were filling in blanks for each other where she was remembering. So she, she was remember a whole trip to Orlando that we all took and I had no memory of it Yeah. Till she said it. And then the whole, the memories just went, whoosh. Yeah. Like, oh my God, we went to Cape Canaveral and I totally forgot. And then I told her something. She said, we did that. And it helped me remember the kind of girl I was. And we, we kind of had a special education, the two of us. Um, very unusual. And it kind of made us who we are. And it, anyway, you inspired me to be like, you know what? I'm just, I'm just gonna go find this childhood friend.

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Mike Michalowicz:

I'm so happy you did that.

AJ Harper:

So we had a great time.

Mike Michalowicz:

That is absolutely amazing.

AJ Harper:

And I, I really do attribute that to Thank you. You are always nurturing those. And I have good long-term friends, don't get me wrong. But that one was always a sticking in my head. Like, I, I have to be look a certain way.

Mike Michalowicz:

Thank you for sharing that. Yeah. I hope more people do that. It's interesting. I was talking to my mother and, uh, my mother's 91 years old. Uh, my father passed away now three plus years ago. And, um, she's like, I'm really getting lonely. There's not many people around. I have to call people to get them together. And they do. She was like, I'm tired. Tired of being the facilitator. Yeah. I'm like, I'm Sid. Instead of being tired of being a facilitator, maybe see it as an honorary position, because everyone appreciates when they get together, it is human nature not to wanna make the effort. So kudos to you for reaching out to Stacey, because Stacey could have reached out to you. And I'm not holding this against her or for her.

AJ Harper:

No, I don't, I think she would've,

Mike Michalowicz:

Someone needs to be the facilitator, and I think most of us are waiting for the other person to call it. So just call it and say, look, we gotta get together.

AJ Harper:

I should have, I should have asked her. There was nothing negative. There was no, you know, you just get in a rut and she, oh, she said something interesting. She said, you feel like you caught up 'cause of Facebook.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah.

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AJ Harper:

So you see each other's kids Yeah. And the trips, and then you think you know them. And she said, but you don't, like, you need to, you need to get face to face.

Mike Michalowicz:

So my, my mother, she lives, uh, down the street from my childhood friend, his name's Chris and his parents. His mother passed away. His father's still alive, and he's late eighties. And my mother enjoys going out to lunch with him and the other, they call himself the girls, even though he's a guy. And, uh, she's like, yeah, I just would like to chitchat with him. She's like, but I don't want, I don't wanna call. His name is Fran. I don't wanna call Fran because I don't want there to be implications of something. I'm like, mom, you're 91. There's no implication. I

AJ Harper:

Mean,

Mike Michalowicz:

I mean, come on, he's 88. He's lonely. You're lonely. You wanna have a cup of coffee and talk, and both of you're happy with that. Do it. So she's like, I can't, it's inappropriate. I'm like, oh my

AJ Harper:

God. She's a different time. She's on a different time. Oh

Mike Michalowicz:

My. Geez. Yeah. Okay. So let's get into the meat of today's episode. Who inspired this one?

AJ Harper:

So this is from Mara Yale. And she's, you, you know Mara.

Mike Michalowicz:

I know, I know Mara. Yeah. Lovely.

AJ Harper:

Longtime member of my community. Did she?

Mike Michalowicz:

Hockey just popped into my mind.

AJ Harper:

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Oh, yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

Why did the hockey pop In my mind?

AJ Harper:

She played hockey. That's why my kids play hockey. Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's

AJ Harper:

Why. Yeah. Hockey, hockey, hockey.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's so funny. That was bizarre. Just all sounds like hockey.

AJ Harper:

No, I, every year she sends me the hockey schedule for her kids. And then something happens, like the last few years, I, I've been so sick and it's been hard for me to go. And then this year it didn't work out. Mm. I hope I still get a chance at some point to go to one of the hockey games. But anyway, Mara's amazing. And has been working on her book for a while. And lemme get the exact quote I put it in here.

Mike Michalowicz:

You wanna say I have in front of me? Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Do it

Mike Michalowicz:

Specifically, Mara said, finding the legs when the original book you envision hits a stumbling point.

AJ Harper:

That's where, that's where she's, she's been for a minute.

Mike Michalowicz:

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Can... Now you gotta be a little cagey about this, I believe.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Probably cagey is a negative word, but I just wanna be respectful because it's Mara's story to explain. I know that she trusts me to say it in a way that doesn't reveal anything. But sometimes we work on a book and that, especially if the book shares part of our lives. Mm. And then maybe there's part of it that we don't feel comfortable sharing anymore. Mm. And or someone needs us to not share it. And so it changes the scope of the book. Mm. And, um, that's, you know, trying to figure out what's the book now if I don't include this thing that I was always going to include,

Mike Michalowicz:

And particularly if that's poignant to the entire book.

AJ Harper:

Exactly. And you know, you, there's, there's different, we're gonna talk about what do you do, what's the next step? I came up with several ways to think about it, but on the whole, I just wanna bring this up because I think it feels hard to get into that flow again, if you have to make fundamental changes, and maybe you have to make them because that's what the book needs. Hmm. But maybe you have to make them because someone you care about needs that, you know, or maybe you have to make them, because for legal reasons, that's not the case with Mara. But I've definitely worked with people who, you know, they have to get their book through an approval process. Maybe they're in finance or the military, and there's a whole review process that has to happen. And they're taking a chance that, you know, if there's gonna be requests for changes, they'll be minor. But what if they're major? And now you've gotta rethink the book a bit. It can, it feels, feels like ex first of all, exhausting. And you wanna get your mojo back. So that's what this episode is. How do you get your legs under you, as Mara said?

Mike Michalowicz:

Do you see people paint themselves in a corner where they could have proactively identified stuff that could become troublesome because they didn't look at it in advance?

AJ Harper:

No. Sometimes, I mean, I think anytime you're dealing with a personal story that you might be sharing other people, talking about other people in the story, Hmm. There's always a risk that those people will not want their story told. Now, I always tell folks, tell your part of it. Don't tell you know, don't tell, tell your version of things. Tell how things affected you. Don't tell the, the arc of someone else's story. Tell the arc of your story. And in that case, you're in pretty good stead. And, and so that's your due diligence. So that you're not centering their experience, you're centering your own experience. And, um, therefore you're going to naturally leave out a lot of

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things that you probably shouldn't include. Like, making decisions about what they felt or thought. You know. Um, so again, it should just be what's the impact of this on me? But even still, you may still have people who say, I'm not comfortable.

Mike Michalowicz:

We did an episode, now this is gonna be months back, Amy, was it Griffith or Griffin? Amy.

AJ Harper:

Griffin.

Mike Michalowicz:

Griffin, yeah. It's our most popular episode. Uh, at least on our initial downloads, it just took off because it's so

AJ Harper:

Salacious.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Salacious, but also timely it news. Yeah. Timely. Yeah. And, uh, you made that suggestion is she wrote potentially allegedly someone else's story as her own. Can't do that. That's

AJ Harper:

A whole different

Mike Michalowicz:

Thing. Whole different thing. But she could have been integral and said, here's something I observed and saw in someone else, your own perspective.

AJ Harper:

But she assert that she didn't. So I, I

Mike Michalowicz:

Know that's why this was, is absurd. I Yeah,

AJ Harper:

That's, yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

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Yeah. But I, I'm just saying there's an opportunity for all authors that if you simply share your, your perception of something that happened, you're in a much safer territory

AJ Harper:

For sure. You all, and you always need to ask yourself, do I need this story to help my readers, or do I just want to tell it? So I'm gonna tell you that I, I know Maura did all her due diligence. Okay. But sometimes you, you realize, right. That's actually not gonna work. Another thing that could happen is you have this idea and it's then something happens that's newsworthy or in your industry that, that takes the legs out from under you. Oh wait, that doesn't exist anymore. Or someone, or the law changed, or the circumstances changed. Now I, now, my whole book is, um, I have to rethink it because the world changed. All these things happen. And you, you, you have to, you have to write it and see what book you have. On the other side of that,

Mike Michalowicz:

How do you see authors respond to those circumstances? I mean, perhaps not the appropriate way to respond.

AJ Harper:

Well, I also just had, so this is one of the reasons I wanted to bring this idea upfront now is another author who I won't name, um, just finished their book after I think almost 10 years. Wow. Nice. And gave that book to family members uhuh. And it did not go well.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh.

AJ Harper:

And set call called me in a sobbing and said, I am gonna put it in the drawer. That's all I can do. Because sometimes the relationships, I mean, you, you are making the choice prioritize. I would always prioritize the relationship. That would be my recommendation. You could bulldoze through that. But that's not healthy in the long run. Mm-hmm. And you, I think you regret it eventually. Even if at first you think this is my right to do it. I think later you'd be like, oh shoot, I probably should have just not done that. And so it's devastating. Here's why. It's devastating. It's devastating because you put so much work into it, and often the response isn't, I'm so proud of you for creating this. I really loved learning this about you. This response is usually, I can't believe you did that. About me.

AJ Harper:

Even if it's not even negative. That's the thing, is that it doesn't have to be some sort of expose. It could just be, I just don't want anyone to talk about me. I just don't want anyone to talk about me. I don't want anybody to see my name. Right. So I ha you know, I said to this person, let's just

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pause. So that's what might be my advice for everybody. Um, when Mara realized that she had to fundamentally change her book, you know, I told her the same thing, which is, let's just, you know, I think at first she was wondering if she was even gonna ever write it. Like it feels dead. That's what happens. Okay. You know, it feels like, oh, you know, 'cause it's so much.

Mike Michalowicz:

How, how far along was Mara?

AJ Harper:

I think, I wanna say three quarters. Maybe even. Almost all the way.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. So you feel like you're so close to the finish line.

AJ Harper:

There were some interviews she was doing and some things she was working on, but she was. She was pretty far along.

Mike Michalowicz:

So you're almost at the finish line,

AJ Harper:

Or you're at the finish line, like this other person I had dinner with the other night,

Mike Michalowicz:

And someone throws a flag and you're like, the initial response is the book is, I'm just gonna show it. And maybe that's the appropriate response.

AJ Harper:

It could be. But I think the app, I mean, this other person was saying, I'm gonna call my publisher and say we're yanking it. I said, don't do that. Just request a pause from your publisher. You don't even have to explain what's going on. You can just say, I'm gonna be delayed turning this in, and please pause. Because that initial reaction is just devastation. And you don't wanna make decisions from a place of devastation. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. It's kind of like writing a book. You shared something with me years ago. That was a revelation to me. You said don't write it while you're in it. No. Yeah. Write it on. When you can reflect on

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AJ Harper:

Hindsight, you need to see it in the rear view.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. It's much clearer. And we did that. I can't remember the exact reason or, or which, what it was about at the moment, but it served me, us extremely well by doing that.

AJ Harper:

Yes. Because you are a type of person where you get an idea and you wanna tell everybody about it. Yeah. And you wanna do it right away, but that's okay. But writing about it is different. And you need more time to see what it really is. By doing it, doing it, testing it, doing it, testing it. Then you really know what it is. And I think, um, you know that now. So you're gonna hold off on writing things till you have enough perspective.

Mike Michalowicz:

Are publishers prepared for this? You said just call in a pause.

AJ Harper:

Well, I will argue, having been a publisher, that they are used to authors causing these sort of jams and delays and they don't like it. So the second that you feel like it might happen, you need to give them a heads up. That's the thing. You don't wanna wait. It should be one of your first calls to ask for the pause. Um, because you wanna give, because it's a domino. When that, that deadline isn't met, then this whole string of dominoes falls down. But if they know they, then they have time to reconfigure it. It's not the complete end of the world. It happens. Books are delayed. Um, but tell them as soon, don't, don't wait until you feel better. Don't think you can solve it in time. Just if it's this, if it's this kind of thing where you think the whole book is gonna maybe shape differently, you need to pause. And then if it is, you have to have a conversation with them, because they may not be getting the book they thought.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. And that's a big conversation. But you may not even know what the book is gonna be.

AJ Harper:

That's why I'm saying you need to, you need to pause. Don't, don't burn the bridge. Don't put the book away. That's our, that's your first instinct is well eff it, you know, fine. I'll make something else. Or I'm just done with this whole writing thing forever. These are extreme emotions and you need just to let us settle.

Mike Michalowicz:

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Okay. So when you hit this realization, uh, maybe the money habit wasn't a perfect example, but there was this moment we said, oh, this is not a translation of profit first. This is for a different audience. And it's a different story. So maybe it's not perfect. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

That was more like us getting our head on straight. Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

But maybe this is just getting your head on straight later in the game, maybe.

AJ Harper:

No, this is when something happens.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. So there's a trigger of significance. And you gotta stop this book,

AJ Harper:

And you have to, there, it's gonna take an overhaul to make it work. And so your first instinct is, forget

Mike Michalowicz:

It. Okay. So say I take a pause. How long is the pause? Is, is there a certain realization that needs to happen?

AJ Harper:

Um, I, I would say at least a few weeks just to stop feeling like crap. Okay. Just to stop feeling stunned, like a deer in headlights. And to feel let down. Even if the person whom, even if the reason why is, was not negative in the sense that no one's trying to hurt you or anything. It just happened though. The world changed, the circumstances changed, someone's feelings changed about being included. None of that is necessarily negative. It's just a fact. Okay. Yeah. So you gotta get, you gotta get over the initial shock of it. And I think it takes you a little bit.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. So get over the shock. So

AJ Harper:

Do that. Yeah. And then I have my list of what are your options? Well

Mike Michalowicz:

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Then, now I want to, yeah. So pull that up. 'cause I, I want to understand every option that we can go through.

AJ Harper:

So we talked about bulldozing through it. So once you let the dust settle and you think, okay, what I want, what I want today is for anyone who's going through this to realize there's a way. Don't give up on the book. But now it's, you have to decide what it is. And there's, this is the method I would recommend first is to decide, are you just gonna go ahead anyway? Okay. I don't advise to advise to do that because we have to live with people. We have to live within our industry. We have to live with consequences. And

Mike Michalowicz:

I know someone who actually did bold this through it. Yeah. Sandy wt, she wrote a book called Bold Moves, and she features her mother in here. And then her mother did not perceive it as a positive representation of her. Sure. And Sandy said, but this is what needs to be done, and push through it. Okay. Um, her mother passed away a year later, which, okay. So her mother was in final stages of life and they had a very, uh, conflicting relationship. Um, and it, the book did not heal that. But the interesting thing from my perception is Sandy felt whole and complete that a real story was told. Sure. And it transformed her.

AJ Harper:

So she knew that that's as, that's, she felt good about that decision. If you're feeling uneasy about it, it's probably a sign that you Yeah, yeah, yeah. You shouldn't bulldoze. Yeah. Right. Yeah. Okay. So that, that would be your decision. Yeah, of course.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. If you feel uneasy after contemplating for a couple weeks and you bulldoze through anyway, you're probably gonna be uneasy plus. Yeah. And

AJ Harper:

Again, it could be not a person that's asking you to change it. It could be an industry asking you to change it. It could be any number of things. And so, you know, that's your choice. Do I wanna just, I'm just gonna keep writing the book I was writing. Yeah. The consequences. That's your option. I would say. Don't do that. Um, the other of course is Forget it, I'm done. We talked about that. Please don't do that. Um, and then I think we need to just start asking questions. We need to go back.

Mike Michalowicz:

Can I rewind to forget I'm done. Yeah. There might be a circumstance where it's just appropriate to say, this book was not meant to be published. It probably is.

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AJ Harper:

Maybe. But you're talking to me like I'm, I'm not that girl. Yeah. I'm like, no. Yeah. We will figure it out. And maybe it's not gonna be right away. Maybe we won't figure it out for a year or two. I don't even know. But I'm just not that girl, I don't think.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. And maybe, maybe the book in the quote, worst case scenario was this a learning journey. And it's, it's your notes to yourself for the refresh of this story.

AJ Harper:

Sure. Because no words are wasted.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, I like that phrase. So said. You said that before. 'cause that's a G one.

AJ Harper:

Yes. I don't, I'm not the first person <laugh>. I don't know who said it first, but it's true. No words are wasted. It might be the thing that leads to the next. That's why I want you to start thinking now. It's about thinking we're gonna pull back and put a development brain on a little bit. Let's, let's look at this. So one of the things is, um, what's important about the stumbling block? So do we even know what it is? So in that frenzy where you find out, I'm gonna have to fundamentally change this book or ditch it, you might not even fully understand what is the scope of this stumbling block? Meaning what's gonna be allowed or not allowed? What can I do and not do? Um, so you, you need to get, okay, let's get this, just the facts. Hmm. This is what your industry is comfortable with. This is what your family member is comfortable with or not comfortable with. So you probably need to get clarity. 'cause you didn't have it before because you were in the fog of emotion. So what actually are we dealing with? Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

So there's a difference between symptoms and cause. So the symptom could be anger, conflict, and what we're hearing, even the words that a family member saying, I don't like this because of so and so. There could actually be a root cause behind that. And we have to maybe uncover that

AJ Harper:

You Could. Well, okay. That's not what I meant. Okay. You could do that deep work. I'm just saying, let's get cleared about what's actually being asked.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yes.

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AJ Harper:

'cause a person says, how dare you do that. They aren't maybe saying, okay, I'm good with this, but not that. Or maybe they're saying, don't mention me at all. Yeah. Or maybe they're saying, I'm fine with everything after 1972, or, you know what I mean? Yeah. Or actually, I'd be fine if you changed my name. But you haven't, you don't actually know because you were so caught up in the surprise of this. Yeah. And that you didn't ask. I bet.

Mike Michalowicz:

And sometimes is a minor detail. Now this is, is similar, but not the same. When we write a book, we'll send all the stories of the individuals featured saying, please review this for accuracy, or if you don't like it, we'll change it. And so forth. I'm surprised often that most people say this is a hundred percent perfect. I'm also surprised that when the feedback comes, usually it's just one minor or two minor elements. Like, oh, this number should really be this.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. It's definitely different.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's rarely someone says throughout the story, and I think I, I know this is different, um, but it's, I remember Sam's story, um, he was sharing some deep stuff. Yeah. And we wrote about it in the money habit. And I sent it to, we sent it to Sam. And I'm like, he may not wanna expose any of this. And his response is like, the world needs to know this is a reality that's going on

AJ Harper:

By, by the way. Yeah. He's doing so great right now. I, him, I haven't talked, I, I told him, you need to text you, you should text him because I'll text him. I'll text him. He's doing so well. Like, he's really getting his, getting his feet under him.

Mike Michalowicz:

It, it surprises me how many people like Sam have this courageousness and willingness to share a real raw story about themselves. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Most people do. But when this part of a story is fundamental to the book, that's different. Correct. Sam is an example. That's right. That illustrates one teaching point. If it's fundamental or if it's about you, that's something personal to you. It's just tricky. Yeah. It's just tricky. What else you got there? Alright, so now you know what the stumbling block is, and then, you know, so what are the clear parameters of it? Um, what's, what's, what's forbidden? What can you keep? Just have, take an honest inventory. Right. Okay. I can, I can't, I can I can't. Just very plain

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Mike Michalowicz:

In execution, would you make like a spreadsheet or, or document saying, this is what I have this,

AJ Harper:

I don't know if I would make you would make a spreadsheet? I would, yeah. I would make a, you know, notes in a notebook. Okay. But just the point is you won't have a clear head in the beginning. Yeah. So mounts get a clear head and have a real conversation. And you can say to colleague or friend or loved one, whoever is requesting this change. Sometimes you can't ask anyone because again, maybe the world blew up and you don't know. Right? But you can just say, okay, let's just, I wanna respect your feelings. I wanna respect this legality, I wanna, whatever the issue is mm-hmm <affirmative>. Um, can you just lay it out for me? Right. So you don't have the presence of mind to say that in the beginning when you're upset. Um, and then I, this is how I always wanna look at things. To me it's like, okay, it's not the book. Okay. We thought it was this book, but this is my woo coming in and I'm so practical. I have a little baby, little tiny amount of Woo. I think, oh, the un the universe wants it to be a different book. And so we're getting this block And then I, I ask, how can this be a source of inspiration instead of frustration?

Mike Michalowicz:

I love that reframing.

AJ Harper:

Yes. What can we do instead? Like, what's, oh, maybe it's supposed to be something else. And by including this, it was actually keeping us from writing the book we were supposed to write.

Mike Michalowicz:

I heard a saying, I'm totally gonna bastardize this. But the difference between successful people and people who struggle is that people who struggle think the universe is conspiring against them. And people who are successful believe the universe is conspiring for them. And that's what I'm hearing too, is I can hit the stumbling block in my book and say, clearly the universe does not want me to write this book. Or I can say, clearly the universe wants me to write this book in a better way.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Or different. And maybe there's more. Maybe you didn't, maybe by including this other thing that you now have to take out, you miss something else. Hmm. And so to me, it's an opportunity. I get jazzed about it, I think, okay, what are we gonna do? What's it supposed to be? Um, so I wanna also quote my pal, Andrea Lee. And I think you, you've definitely met her. She was at a number of events and she's also an alum of my workshop. But she has been a mentor to me in many ways as well. We reverse mentor each other. <laugh>. She says, um, what's in the

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way is the way I love that. And so I think we need to take a look at that. What's in the way is the way, so that stumbling block, all right. What's, what are we learning from that? Um, I think these are the right questions to ask. And then, like I just said earlier, how could a fundamental change make room for something else? You didn't see it 'cause you were so set. You were so sad, this, then this, then this. That makes sense. It's working good. That means you're not noticing what else it could be. So let's take, let's just see what else can we do? Do you go

Mike Michalowicz:

Back to the fundamentals, like the promise, the core message and reinvestigate all that?

AJ Harper:

I would, yeah. I think it's helpful. And I would actually go through book fundamentals, revisit all of that. Make sure you still feel that way. Take it as an opportunity to just do a reset. Just do a reset. I would also go through and look at every teaching point that you wanna include every other story. And really say, okay, we're, is it all up for grabs? You know, um, for the person that I'm not naming, you know, I suggested let's, what if you just took out everything linear so that there are no big gaps? 'cause it's, there's a big life story. Okay. Right. So by taking out a huge part, it's very noticeable. But what if that wasn't actually what the book was? What if it wasn't linear? Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

I see.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. So what if, what if you go back to, these are the main teaching points I wanna share. And so it's then just snapshots from a life and they can be out of order. Let's change the structure. Right. It become, it's hard to think about, wait, how do I do this? But there are structural things you can do to make it work. So

Mike Michalowicz:

That author was writing chronologically. Yeah. And you said it's, it reminds me of, uh, Thomas Edison's biography. And I don't remember who the author was, but there's one particular one. How I visualized it is there's a stage and it's totally pitched black, and a spotlight pops open. Boom. And you saw one section of Es essence's light life. And then the spotlight went out and then boom. It lit up somewhere else. Yeah. And they jumped around, which is a very, at least for me, peculiar way, most of the biology, uh, biographies I read are chronologically. Sure. But it was actually end up being more immersive because you're, you're seeing these lights and you were able to see a future state. And then when you read his pa uh, past state, it made sense because see how they were linked. Yeah. Yeah. So it could be, to your earlier point, it could be an opportunity.

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AJ Harper:

Yeah. So mess with structure. Well, okay. If, if every, if I'm taking out this big thing, if I'm making this big structural sh or big fundamental change to the book, what else could change? Let it be an opportunity to be wide open. Instead of trying to figure out how to make what you have work. Really question everything. And I wouldn't, I wouldn't spend a lot of time on it. I think once you get the clarity on the stumbling block and the clarity on the fundamentals, give yourself a day. Just take it honestly. Go analog, print it out, make notes. Ask yourself, do I need this? What else could it be? What else could it be? And structurally could be another. So an example I have is, let's say, if you need to let go of a personal story, um, you can then look, okay, what else could I tell that doesn't feature this situation or this person?

AJ Harper:

Um, I have another author who is also is telling a series of, um, it's actually Francesca, you also know Francesca. And she's been changing the fundamental structure of her book several times. And there's a component of the story that, you know, she at one point thought she would include that had a whole big legal issue, and then she's decided to omit it, and that's fine. Do you know what I mean? She doesn't wanna really get into it. And sometimes you don't wanna do it because you just don't wanna keep talking about it. You know? Um, so she just changed the structure. So she's not doing, she's doing interconnected essays, but not long, not a long form piece. And that frees her up. So that's an example. You can let go of the long form and you can do short stories that are some connected on a theme or essays connected on a theme. And I mean, sky's the limit. You can see how ex See, I'm excited. And that's where you need to get to, is like, let's go have some fun and see what could this be?

Mike Michalowicz:

This is An opportunity.

AJ Harper:

Yes.

Mike Michalowicz:

Do you go back to the manuscript and start mo modifying it? Do you put the manuscript aside, look at the outline, start restructuring it? Like where do you go?

AJ Harper:

For me, I would print the whole manuscript out, take the outline and print that out. And then if, because I'm an index card girl, I would have all my old stuff and I would just spread it out. Yeah. On the dining room table. And I would just spend an entire day just saying, what does this book wanna be? Now,

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Mike Michalowicz:

One of the fun experiences I had in doing this method of kind of moving an outline around, we went to that lake house. Me and you. Yeah. And, uh, I got there before you. I'm like, I have a nice fire going when you get there. I couldn't get the fire started and all. Yeah. We end up, we bought, um, those flip charts with the sticky top. Yep. It's like massive sticky notes. Yep. And one exercise you had me do, what we did together is write the outline or all the different effectively chapters or stories. And we started physically moving around, moving it around. Yeah. On the wall. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

We, this whole place covered significant moves.

Mike Michalowicz:

So is it, it sounds like a similar thing. You can do this, just

AJ Harper:

Go back, go

Mike Michalowicz:

Back and, and start moving, shifting things around. Adding, deleting,

AJ Harper:

Be free. Yeah. Yeah. Think what what could it be? Is the, is the question. And when I do editing retreat, one of the first things I do is have people walk through their books even though they already have it. Because maybe it's more, in fact, it probably is interesting. Yeah. There's always more. And I don't know why we think, I don't know. I guess we think people tend to think, this is my book. That's it, because you got that line done check, next step. But it's really amorphous. It's really just, it's always shifting until it's done. It's shifting till it's done. So it's totally normal. But again, this stuff can rock your world. So let's say you have to do a, a different personal story. You could pick something else from your, from your life that probably shares the same lessons. Um, you could also shift the lens of the story. So now again, you're mostly centering yourself. That person is, you know, if you can't include someone or you can't include a situation or circumstance, you're just focused on your own lens, you might set, you know what, let me do more with others. Let me get other people's stories in here. Let me make that more of a focus. That could also be the shift. Um, so there's, there's lots of opportunities there.

Mike Michalowicz:

Have, have you ever had this experience with your own work? Personally?

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AJ Harper:

All the time. I was just up at the lake

Mike Michalowicz:

all The time.

AJ Harper:

Like All the time.

Mike Michalowicz:

With your own personal books?

AJ Harper:

What do you mean? Where some Oh, you mean where someone is telling me they can't? Yeah. Oh, I'm sorry. I misunderstood. I meant do I I was answering. Have you had to do a fundamental change? Yes, but from my own realization, not from anybody telling me, I had to. Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. So that's another way they come about. Yeah. So can you gimme an example from your own story?

AJ Harper:

Um, oh, it just happened. I was at the lake working on a book.

Mike Michalowicz:

This is your, you're working on two books simultaneously right now.

AJ Harper:

Right. But again, for clarity, I'm writing one and the other one's in development, so I'm working on two, but, so which book was it actively write? I'm not saying Well,

Mike Michalowicz:

No, no. The one that you had the shift in, you said you had a fun,

AJ Harper:

Um, my book too. I'm, I'm actually writing. Writing, okay. Like, you like writing season on it. Okay. So, but I was feeling like it was off. So I got out my index cards and I actually started redoing them and putting them up on, I have a big wall, a cork wall in my studio.

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Mike Michalowicz:

You actually know where I can see it.

AJ Harper:

It's like the greatest thing in the world.

Mike Michalowicz:

This is where the conference table is not in your personal office. Right. There's that cork wall in the, there's a

AJ Harper:

Whole wall of cork. Yeah. In the main work workshop room. Yeah. And I just started doing my own book on the wall, just like I have my students do. Yeah. To see, wait a minute, I don't think this is right. And ended up moving several chapters around. I found an extra chapter. I realized that my core message was wrong. These are fundamental shifts actually. Then I started to think, oh, maybe this is shorter. Interesting. You know? And, um, that's another option by the way. Maybe you have to omit a big part of your book and you're thinking, how am I gonna make a whole book? Books aren't as long as they used to be <laugh>. Yeah. So that's another thing is maybe you don't need as much content as you think. Just open your mind a little bit.

Mike Michalowicz:

Interesting. Are you publishing this, this book too, with page two?

AJ Harper:

I haven't decided yet.

Mike Michalowicz:

You're still in the process. Okay. Yeah. Okay. Interesting. So, okay, so, so you've even experienced this yourself. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

So you, so then you get, if you do that day of whatever, like being free with the book, then you ask yourself what's important, what absolutely cannot change, and what could change. Just get clarity on what is, what is critical, what isn't critical, so that you can give yourself some space. Um, and then I think it's always important to go back to fundamentals. Are there other ways you can get people to the promise? 'cause you're kind of setting your ways. Yeah. So what are some other ways? Just brainstorm. What else could I do? Yeah. Now you're getting new ideas. Now you're, 'cause remember Mar's question was how can I get the legs under me? This act of sitting down and playing is what gives you that fire again. 'cause now you're thinking, what else could I

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do? Oh, I could do this. And now it's fun again. And that's really what the legs are. It's just, I wanna do this now. I don't, like, I'm excited. I wanna see what this is.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's interesting how much opportunity comes outta constraint. The more constraints we have around us, the more innovative you have to be to get past that constraint. So the obstacle or the whoever's in your way is the way, is the truth here.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. And I think, you know, also ask yourself to have I make a list of everything you assume to be true about your book length, tone, personal stories, not personal stories. I'm gonna be heavily research based. Wait, am I, like, just make a list of all your assumptions and then decide, is that still true? Take this as an opportunity to just, people always accuse me of blowing up the book. It's just, the other day someone was running their book fundamentals by me in sprints. I do these on Fridays. And, um, and I, I said, oh, I feel like I maybe hurt their feelings. I didn't. But I get always get nervous because if I'm basically saying, go back to the drawing board. And um, I can't remember if it was Laura or Sade said, oh, did you blow up that book again? <laugh>. But the thing is, it's to get at what's really there. Yeah. You know, we can't, we can't ever be satisfied. We can't be satisfied with that's, I know that there's a view of That's good enough. Go ahead. I don't really believe that about books. I feel like there's, until you hit it, you know when you hit it, you know, when you say, ah, that's it. Yeah. And you need to get there again.

Mike Michalowicz:

Agreed. I, I don't think good enough is good enough.

AJ Harper:

No. And so when you've, when you've, when you've had the rug pulled out from under you and you're almost done with your book or your book is done, you have to get there again where you feel like, oh, that's it. You can't be in that space of how am I gonna make this work? Agreed. It's more like, let me get that juice back, whatever. And so go through those questions I just listed, you know, ex let yourself think and ponder and c and brainstorm all over again. And then nothing's lost, but now it's gonna have a new shape. Hmm.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, you mentioned sprints and that's available for anyone to sign up for, I believe. How would people listening in sign up for this?

AJ Harper:

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Go to **AJ Harper**.com and it is as easy as clicking the button. Okay. There's two, there's one that has a set fee, which you can, if you can afford it, I'm happy for you to pay. And if you can't, then you do pay what you can. Either way. I will not know

Mike Michalowicz:

What, what's the set fee?

AJ Harper:

\$97 a month. Okay. For 10 hours of sprints a week.

Mike Michalowicz:

Wow. <laugh> Yeah. Of working with the community and, and there's so much more than, it's not just writing it's connection. There's so much more.

AJ Harper:

It's just writing sprints those 10 hours. Yeah. But there's a lot of connection in them. There's conversation limited, but it's definitely community. Laura Stone, my dean of students runs it Monday through Thursday. And often Sade is running them as well. And then I have a membership community beyond that where it's just more involved and that's a different rate. But, um, you can just, for whatever you can afford, you can come on down and do some writing. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

And it's great connections. I've connected with so many authors. Because of your community. So thank you for that. Um, any last things on this topic? I just hope

AJ Harper:

I've inspired someone now. Like I feel like I really, I tried so hard in this episode to convince whoever's listening that they can get their book back. Yes. You know, it's just not gonna be what you thought, which is probably, do you

Speaker 4:

Mind if I, sorry, go ahead.

AJ Harper:

Which is probably, it's probably better. And I, uh, go ahead and then I have a closing, Maddie. Yeah,

Mike Michalowicz:

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Yeah, yeah. I heard you getting fired up a little earlier. Oh yeah.

Speaker 4:

Well, I was trying to jump on the mic before, but you guys were like so into it. Uh, but yeah, I found this, uh, topic very beneficial. Uh, I wrote my book a couple of years ago now, and I definitely fell into that frustration of, okay, I've got a book idea. Great. Start laying it out. And I jumped straight into writing, which I know you're probably shaking your head at straight away. Um, but I had almost every day I would be in the car somewhere and they're like, oh, that's a great, that's a chapter or that's a little, you know, segment. And so over time I had all of these little segments and I had them in the wrong order, you know? And so I would sit down and I wrote my book four times maybe. But that frustration of, okay, I've got it this time. You know, I've got it dialed in, and I would lay everything out and then I'd start to read through it and I was like, oh, I didn't explain that bit. Oh, I need to do that bit first before I do that bit.

AJ Harper:

That's, you know, that by the way, that's a completely normal situation. Yeah. That's just revised. That's called revision. That's just, that's just how it is. Yeah. But when someone that it would be like, if Matt, you did all that and then someone came to you that you cared about or someone in your industry and said, you can't do that. I'm not gonna be Okay. That would be like you did all that work four drafts and find out that you can't actually do the book that way. Yeah. That's a whole nother level of angst. And what I'm hoping in this call, this episode is that people realize that maybe actually the book it was intended to be is on the other side of that. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Matt's book is called Understanding Happiness. Yes. It's a great book. And he reveals, uh, his own personal story, which there was a risk too, because you're sharing some stuff that's going on and your wife, uh, is part of the story. Um, I've read that, listened to his book, Matt reads himself, um, I think at least on three occasions now. Uh, you have the perfect jogging book. Just so you know, his book is about meditation and presence. And I find when I listen to his book, when I'm out for a run, I actually have a better run and I listen more deeply. So there you go, Matt. You go, um, okay. So people can sign for your courses. You gave that final tip. Um, and my big takeaway is that when there is an obstacle put in front of you, you have a choice to say, this is gonna stop me from delivering the book I intended, or this is gonna help me deliver the book. That was always intended. Uh, is there anything else you got in your notes that you wanted?

AJ Harper:

You know, remember I said I had dinner with this person and they wrote the whole book and now they were about ready to put it in the drawer. And I said, don't tell your publisher. I texted them last night and it was, I remembered the Andrea quote. 'cause I was working on this outline.

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Yeah. So when I finished the outline, I texted this person, I'm gonna read it to you. It says, one more thing Andrea taught me years ago. What's in the way is the way, and this means the book may evolve into what it needs to be because of this barrier. I believe that. And I carry the flame of your book in my heart. And I, I just want people to hear some, someone also is doing that for you. Mm. You know, like, it's not against you. Someone's holding that flame. Mm. Maybe it's your editor, maybe it's your friend. Maybe it's someone like me. If you were in my community, it would be a lot of people holding that flame for you. Mm. Um, but I just wanted read that out loud. 'cause I believe that, and I don't know how it's gonna shake out for this person, but I will, I will help them. Do you know what I mean? Yeah. And you, I hope whoever's listening will just keep that little flame going for themselves, even if it takes you a minute to get back to it.

Mike Michalowicz:

We have resources for this episode and every episode@dwtpodcast.com. We'd love to get your email. So emails at hello@dwtpodcast.com. AJ's prepared tons of free resources for you. We have 'em available. Plus we'd love for you to subscribe to this show. So whatever pod catching system you listen on, if you're willing to take the 30 seconds to hit subscribe and to give us a review, selfishly, that helps us tremendously. Plus you don't miss an episode, but, uh, that gets the word out for us. So please, if you do feel called to do that, please do that for us. And as a great reminder, don't write that book. Write the greatest book you can.