How to draw your own map – Self-authorship of life in troubling times

Season 4 – Episode 10

Our guest: Eric Maisel

Transkript

Claudia Scheidemann

Welcome to another episode of our Podcast Tinte und Courage or Ink and Courage. Today, we have Eric Maisel as our guest, and we are very honored to have him. He is the author of more than 60 books, hard to imagine to be honest, in the areas of creativity, meaning, purpose, and mental health. The latest books are The Reenchantment of Meaning, Existential Nomads, and The Human Experience Specialist. These are three books we'll definitely talk about. He creates certification courses around those topics. He's also a blogger for Psychology Today and overall, a pioneer of existential psychology. So we are really honored and excited to have you on the podcast. Welcome.

Eric Maisel

Great to be here. Lovely to be here.

Claudia Scheidemann

Thank you. And well, I feel a little bit silly to start with the first question we ask every guest ask a person who has written more than 60 books, but what does personal writing mean to you right now in the moment?

Eric Maisel

It's probably both shifted and remained the same over the years. The part that's shifted is trying to make sense of how to use AI and still be a writer rather than a curator of material. I think many writers will end up being curators of material, which is going to be an honorable way to be, I think, but it's a new way to be, and we're all trying to figure it out.

I'm on the side of using AI a lot, maybe more than is kosher, but that's my position because I want to get my ideas out as quickly as possible. Turning 80, I probably have only another 40 years or 50 years. So I've got to get the books out. So that's changed. Our relationship to writing has changed.

What hasn't changed is my basic curiosity about who we are. We're complicated creatures. On the one hand, we seem to have persistent enough personalities that we're recognizable to ourselves and others. Uncle Joe looks like Uncle Joe pretty much each time we see Uncle Joe.

And yet we have the phenomenon of radical reorganization of personality when something happens, lose a job and get seriously less confident than you were one day before or there are all kinds of changes that happened very quickly. So it's all by way of saying, I think we're very interesting creatures and the helping professions coaching, psychiatry, psychology, different -

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even the peer counseling ideas - all different ways of helping, don't quite take into account how complicated we are.

And that makes sense because a lot of it is just unknowable. We don't know what's going on and inside of another person. Not only do we know. Don't we know what's going on inside of another person. We don't really know what connects to what. We don't know why a cloud passing in front of the skies should produce an existential crisis. What's going on there when small things result in big dramatic difficulties?

So that's all by way of saying what remains the same is my curiosity about what's going on. I'm just beginning to work on a book that I'm not sure I'm going to work on, but it's interesting to me. about what I'm calling the god bug syndrome that is the way we both inflate ourselves and deflate ourselves simultaneously almost, which I think explains a lot of the resistance writers experience to writing that they have this big idea and it's grandiose and wonderful in what have you, and then suddenly they're not equal to writing it. The bug part Kafka's cockroach arrives somehow overnight at any rate. I'm rambling a little bit, but that's the long answer to your simple question.

Claudia Scheidemann

I mean, it's obviously you have found a way around that putting out 60, more than 60 books into the world. And I find that as a number, it's fascinating, but also the scope of the topics you've covered. And I discovered at least one of your books quite a long time ago when I was (?) with depression and it was the Van Gogh Blues. And it was for me the first time to take a different stance on depression and to think about what might creativity have to do with that. So if somebody had told back then. Well, one day you will have to author in your own podcast. I would have said, yeah, certainly not. So it's amazing what kind of loops life can make.

Eric Maisel

That all started very early. I started as a little math and science boy. That's what my peers and I thought we were a little astrophysicist or what have you. I went to a math and science high school in New York City, a specialized high school. At some point, very early on, I continued doing it, but it stopped interesting me because it wasn't about human stuff. It wasn't enough about human stuff. It was about large numbers and long distances and mechanical things and things that didn't really interest me.

So simultaneous with reading Newton, I would be reading Sartre sort of at the same time as a young kid. And so my interest in existentialism and existential literature somehow appeared when I was still a very young kid. I remember reading Sartre's autobiography, Les Mots, when I was just a very young kid and agreeing with him about how lovely it was not to have a father. He didn't have a father. I didn't have a father.

I noticed how difficult it was for my friends who had fathers to have fathers. Who were very typically authoritarian in nature and how different the day was when the fathers came home from work, how dark the days became for them, and how light they remained for me. So I was responding to the existentialists very early on. And Sartre wrote an essay at some point about where existential is what to go next. And his answer was, I don't know. Let me write a biography of Balzak or Flaubert or somebody.

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He actually acted in bad faith, and that split second in his life, by not trying to pursue where existentialism might go. And I took up that mantle as a kid. I don't know why, but it became interesting to me to wonder where existentialism ought to go next. So it's been a persistent, consistent theme for me from a very early age.

Claudia Scheidemann

It's an amazing background to have also to have this long years of thinking about existential questions because usually we try to avoid those. And what I found so fascinating already in the beginning of your book, The Existential Nomads, or Existential Nomads was that you described this existential crisis that a lot of many, very many people struggle with, experience right now. And you've coined the word or the expression self-authorship of life. That was the one thing I thought about a lot, and so I'm still, I'm not done with the book yet, so there's a lot of things still coming. And that you also said that freedom is not something soothing for human beings.

Eric Maisel

No, the lack of freedom that we experienced by having multiple identities like father and son and writer and Berliner and whatever, those were lacks of freedom. Each one of those prevented us from being someone else, but they were useful. We woke up and we knew that if we were in our Dad identity, we had to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or if we were in whatever identity we woke up with, that's the thing we needed to do. We didn't have a lot of freedom to not make that peanut butter and jelly sandwich without sort of abdicating responsibility.

We're in a weirder time now where we are freer, that is we wake up typically not knowing who the heck we are anymore. what we're supposed to be doing. Now that's a bit of a dramatization, overdramatic, but not so far from how a lot of people are experiencing life right now. There's still wives and mothers and this and that, but it's much more fragile and unsteady and up for grabs. And so that's ultimate freedom. We can be anybody we want when we wake up, but that doesn't feel good. And it's very hard to know what to do given that freedom. It's a variation of Sisyphus pushing that rock up the hill and having it rolled back down. We're rolling up the rock of identity each day and having it rolled back down and not being sure that we've lived the right life or the life we intended to live or what have you. So freedom is a very mixed bag, and some constraints may be necessary or may be valuable.

Claudia Scheidemann

So what's your idea to, yeah, well, how do we choose well? And at the end of the day, these constraints...

Eric Maisel

I don't know how we choose well, but I have to say kind of a long sentence here. First of all, I don't believe that there is a purpose to life. I believe that many things are important to each of us that we have multiple life purposes. So that's the first paradigm shift that's needed in the universe is that movement away from there is a purpose to life to the more instrumental idea that we have multiple life purposes. So even though we have multiple life purposes, I do think that we can encapsulate all of those life purposes in some kind of aphorism or life purpose statement that orients us throughout the day and throughout life.

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For me, it's: Do the next right thing. That's my life purpose statement.

I don't know what that means 3 minutes from now. I don't know what the next right thing will be. But that's still my intention. So I think that that's how we deal with this lack of identity crisis is that we courageously stay put and almost say, what's the next right identity for the next moment? Is it, do I need to bring forth my mother identity next because the baby's crying, or what do I need to do? It's one right thing after another.

It's a very high bar place to be to be asking of oneself like consistent moral responsibility or principled responsibility for life. A lot of principled things have consequences. Being an activist writer has the consequences of maybe the state looking for you and putting you away. So doing the next right thing is easy to say and we appreciate what it means. But to do it is very hard. So maybe it's do most of the next right things and skip some of the dangerous ones or ... it's a more complicated statement than that. But I think it's a good headline life purpose statement to just try to do the next right thing, which means constant appraising of what that is.

Michaela Muschitz

But isn't it that we are all also somehow overwhelmed with all the possibilities and all those things we see that there might be the next good thing we need to do. Isn't it overwhelming?

Eric Maisel

It's overwhelming. I think we're completely overwhelmed and I think all of the . so to speak, epidemics that we hear about, epidemics of depression and anxiety and addiction and loneliness and job satisfaction and insomnia. We can name them all. They're all growing, and it's what you just said. It comes from the place of anxiety and overwhelm. And throwing in the towel, I think, overwhelm is one way to say it, but I think people just want to give up.

It's one thing to be overwhelmed, but to say to yourself, despite being overwhelmed, I'm going to persist. That's one kind of way of being which a lot of people do because they have to pay the rent and even while overwhelmed, they have to show up to their job. There are an awful lot of people who are more than overwhelmed. They've just given up. And so we have rise-ons in suicidality. We have lots of different markers of people giving up. And I think it can only get worse. Maybe AI will provide us with an extinction event and we won't have to worry about it. But while we're still around, we're going to have to deal with this demand on ourselves that we're not able to meet anymore to find reasons for doing stuff.

It's very hard to find reasons for doing anything right now, except at the practical level of putting food on the table. And even that, I think that's difficult for a lot of people to muster motivation to even do those bare necessities. And I know we want another sentence which goes and the answer is, but I don't think there is an answer to this. I think it's a somewhat downhill slope.

Claudia Scheidemann

And what my thoughts about this is also that this idea of you have to do it on your own is also something that stands massively in the way of creating or finding this life purpose statement. And also, as you said this, this demand or idea, you have to do something very special if you find yourself in a situation where you're.

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Eric Maisel

And these are all lovely complicated questions. So one of the things that I think happens with creative and/or intelligent people, let's just imagine we're talking about the top or the, whatever to call them, top 5% of the population. We're not talking about everyone here. But somebody two standard deviations above the mean in creativity or intelligence, let's say whatever that means exactly. That person's going to experience themselves as an individual right from the get-go.

They're going to look around and look at their parents and say who are these strange creatures and why are they telling me to do things? And they're going to be stubborn right out of the womb, I think, this 5%. which means that they're going to fight for their individuality their whole life long. Whenever society says X, they're going to say Y. Why are you telling me to do this? You say there's a God, but why are there 73,000 religions? What's that about? Explain that to me.

So this fight to retain individuality, especially in the teen years and then the first years of college, leads to a lot of oppositional behavior, a lot of risk taking, a lot of fighting for individuality. Even if it looks weird or dangerous or stupid, it's still that battle to be oneself. So that person who's fighting for individuality is not naturally a joiner. That person is reluctant to join.

They may join a choir or join ... there are things they may join a football team. There are things they may join for reasons, but they're going to be the individual on their team. They're going to be the one not quite listening to the coach or questioning why the coach is saying that and getting kicked off the team and being that person. But I think there's that tension, lifelong tension for creative intelligent people between fight for individuality and that hunger for community.

It's a battle, it's a tension. And I don't think it works out very well in the direction of community usually. I don't think nine individuals getting together actually form community. They just end up in a little while leaving, one by one or all at once. But it's very hard for human beings worth fighting to the death for their individuality to also hand over some of that individuality for the sake of community.

Claudia Scheidemann

So a lot of challenges we are mentioning here right now, and I'm wondering, OK, what do we do with this now? And you mentioned your curiosity, and in my mind, curiosity is one of the, well, let's say, superpowers to at least try to live with these very difficult answering.

Eric Maisel

Yeah, one answer I'm proposing is this human experience specialist, new helper. This person hardly exists yet. We just launched the program this week. The book, The Human Experience Specialist, has been out just a little while. But it presents a helper who is not a coach and who is not a therapist, who accompanies people, sort of like a professional friend.

One doesn't want to say it quite that way, but that's sort of what this person is. And rather than helping or co-creating a client, set goals, which can be very difficult for clients because they often don't achieve their goals. So it can be a very disappointing relationship where every week or every month the coach is saying, how did it go? And the client is saying, well, not quite that well, this got in the way and that got in the way and life got in the way. So rather than working on the goal level, this human experience specialist co-creates with clients little life experiments.

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And the beauty of this idea is these don't have to work. There's no shame if an experiment doesn't work. It's not like a goal. It's something else. So if the experiment, it's one thing to set as a goal, write 1.000 words a day. It's another thing to run an experiment of writing 1.000 words a day. Well, it turns out that that's the wrong number. That's the wrong number. Maybe it should be 500. Or maybe it's the wrong book or maybe this or maybe that.

But there's less shame and disappointment if it's an accompany model than if it's a goal setting model. And of course, we could talk for hours about the problems with psychiatry, psychology and that whole labeling system and how that is not particularly helpful to human beings. But this human experience specialist person, I think is the person who can help the most in the coming times. I think it's going to be a recession-proof identity because how can friends go out of fashion or how can friends ... that would be a big downhill slide if now friends don't matter and maybe we'll go there, but I don't think so. I think the accompanying model is going to have legs and is going to speak to people.

Claudia Scheidemann

Yeah, especially, I mean. I've come from the coaching profession and I have to admit I've also left behind the goal setting ideas because I mean, the last time I was asked myself to set SMARTgoals. I've said, no, I will not do that.

Eric Maisel

I will not do that ever again, no more smart goals.

Claudia Scheidemann

No more smart goals. And then I did a little research and interestingly SMART goals, they come from the business world. And they have proven that they don't work in self-development.

Eric Maisel

And they are quite as far as saying they don't work entirely, but they have a lot of shadow issues and difficulties and disappointments. There's something about having goals that connects to existential motivation and purpose and meaning and what have you. Even if we don't meet those goals, it's speaking to something that we probably need. It just is not the complete or right model.

Michaela Muschitz

And I do think because I also tell my clients or the people I work with just experiment with those things because when you set a goal, you don't know what will, if it's really this thing achieve that I want to get. But if you're experimenting, you can experience, is it that thing I want to go on for? So those tiny experiments and just to try out. and get a feeling for the tool, the things I want to achieve. – That's the way.

Eric Maisel

I'm just going to say it may even be the right goal, but it may be the wrong sized right goal. That is, you know, the two of you may have chosen 1.000 words a day, but it's just the wrong size, because the writer only has 20 minutes, so the right size is 100 words, not 1.000 words. So it

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may even be the right goal, but the wrong size. So there are a lot of problems with the with the goal setting model.

Michaela Muschitz

And I do like that experiments include that you can fail, and that's nothing bad happening. It's just an, oh, so now I see this way it's not working, so I can find another way which might help me to go on.

Eric Maisel

And by the way, you can't fail an experiment. All you can do is not have it worked.

Michaela Muschitz

Yeah, right.

Claudia Scheidemann

It's gathering of information.

Eric Maisel

We don't need any failure language with experiments. I don't know. How many filaments did Edison try to find before he got to tungsten 10,000 filaments before he could find the right one for a light bulb? Successful people don't hold those things as failures. They just hold them as running. And not there yet. Maybe disappointing. Oh, didn't get the filament yet, but not a failure. Not a self-characterization of failure.

Michaela Muschitz

And I do think that's a very, very big difference. If I say I did not get it yet, it's just not the right tool or failure, whatever, but it has nothing to do with me as a person. I'm not a bad person because it did not work out. And that I do think is a very, very big difference on seeing things.

Eric Maisel

And that's, we've learned, I think, some good things from cognitive psychology about. To use the Buddhist phrase, getting a grip on our mind, and how we need to be thinking the right sorts of things. I teach at workshop centers a journaling method called a focused journal method, and it's too tedious to give all the steps of it. But the main points are getting the question right, which may not happen at first go. The question ones, the prompt of question one's asking oneself. And then through several steps, seeing if there's an insight to be gleaned, looking for the insight, not just having the experience of personal writing, but now poking around in the personal writing to see what's there, what there is to learn.

And then the two big things, things that don't often come with journaling are then to align your thoughts with the insight. Now start to say the right things and align your behaviors with the insight. Start to do the right things. So there's a complete package there of journaling and identifying an insight and then aligning thoughts and actions with the insight that we're really after. I mean, a lot of people are happy to quote just journal, and that's fine. But I think they're maybe missing the opportunity.

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It looks like so many folks have been doing Julia Cameron's morning pages for 30 or 40 years now since the artist's way came out. And still, they haven't written their book.

Claudia Scheidemann

Yeah.

Eric Maisel

Their words are going into the morning pages, not into their book. So that's a challenge I see all the time with clients that the journaling is wonderful, but that should be evening pages rather than morning pages. If their priority is getting the book done and the book want to come first each day.

Claudia Scheidemann

Yeah, I think that's where, for me, we need the connection of the page to real life. And if I can, I mean, I can reflect forever and I've done that for phases in my life as well, also with morning pages, to be honest. And at some point, I realized: This is not it. I write always the same things over and over and over again. And there's something is missing.

Eric Maisel

Yeah. And it fails to do two things. It doesn't uphold the dream and it isn't good reality testing to just write and write. It does not connect to reality and it doesn't uphold the dream. Both are important. We need to be doing whatever. Again, for this 5% of the population, I'm not sure everyone, the other 95% have the kind of dreams we're talking about, dreams of creating something or accomplishing something or changing the world or being of use or what have you.

But to aspire to those dreams, we have to be upholding those dreams in some way and in some way that amounts to a regular practice or else they don't happen. That's why I did a book called The Power of Daily Practice. I believe that if we don't do the important things in a daily way, not every other day, that's not good enough. Not every third day. Because we try to do it every third day. We just lose months and lose years. It just the thing disappears, whatever the thing is.

So that's if the question is what helps, whatever the elements we're talking about are, if the question is what helps, a daily practice of some sort that is intentionally aimed at helping oneself is one of the things we have to aim for. We need a daily practice, whatever it is. And of course, it's going to be supplemental to all the other daily practices that a lot of people already doing their tai chi and their exercise and their meditation and what have you. So it's more adding on stuff. But it's an important adding on this daily practice and the service of one's life purposes. is a big add-on.

Claudia Scheidemann

And I think it aligns also with what you wrote, the other recent book the re-enchantment of meaning. And in our previous short conversation, you said that it is some kind of also paradigm shift in to look at meaning as a feeling.

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Eric Maisel

Yeah, so for thousands of years, we've had the metaphor of searching for meaning, meaning being out there somewhere. So you go on a vision quest or a pilgrimage or go to India and sit at a guru's feet or whatever. The meanings out there.

I never believed that I never made any sense to me because the simplest way to think about it is if two people are sitting at a lecture. One person finds it meaningful, the other person doesn't find it meaningful. Can't be anything about the lecture per se. It must be about our subjective experience of meaning. Must be how we react to things internally. That's where meaning resides.

So for a long time I thought that meaning is a subjective psychological experience. I just started to say it more simply as meaning is a feeling. And as a feeling, it naturally has to come and go like all feelings. So we have to stop being surprised when meaning leaves. It's time to not be surprised when the thing we're doing doesn't feel meaningful. It just means that we're not experiencing a certain feeling. Meaning will come back on Tuesday or Thursday or Sunday. It'll come back because it's that kind of feeling. Hopefully it'll come back. But it's nothing to find so dreadful that we're just holding meaning in all the wrong ways.

So if meaning is a feeling that vanishes, then what do we want to do? We want to invite it back. We can't force it back. We can't really make meaning. I use the phrase making meaning sometimes or often even. We can't really make it. But we can invite it back by doing things that we predict will feel meaningful. And so the re-enchantment of meaning describes I think 60 doorways to the re-enchantment of meaning, 60 invitations. That is what all that big number means is that there are lots of things that might provoke that experience, whether it's holding your kid's hand crossing the street or having a conversation with Aunt Rose about the family, who knows what? Plucking a chicken, whatever it is.

There are many things that might provoke the experience of meeting. That's ... That's our best knowledge, our best information is what has actually felt meaningful in the past, not what should have felt meaningful, like our PhD program, almost nobody's PhD program felt meaningful, just felt arduous. So forget about the things that were supposed to have felt meaningful, but what things actually felt meaningful? Well sitting with a book in a corner when you're six, that felt meaningful. We're going into a movie theater and watching something on the big screen that just felt meaningful. or listening to, I don't know what, Beethoven's ninth or whatever it is for a given person. Those are experiences that we then know to repeat or repeat in an updated way. So meaning is not that mysterious, as long as we stop thinking it's out there. As long as we stop thinking it's an objective reality and understand that it's just something we're trying to feel and we have ways of trying to feel it if only we're opening to adopting those invitations.

Claudia Scheidemann

Yeah, and the examples you just gave us is also, it doesn't have to be this grand, pompous, great, wonderful thing that evokes the feeling of meaning, but it can everyday experiences.

Eric Maisel

It almost never is.

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Claudia Scheidemann

Exactly.

Eric Maisel

It's almost always looking up at the night sky or something like that or some connections out of awareness that get made and we just have a sudden moment of okayness. Things seem congruent. The world makes sense for one second, then it stops making sense. But for one second, it made sense. That's an experience. That's a feeling.

That's why I call this helper, since a lot of time trying to figure out what to call this helper, it's not that easy to dream up a new name that's like coach or therapist. But I wanted to get experience in there. That's why I'm calling this person a human experience specialist, because these are experiences. These are not abstract ideas about what should feel meaningful or what one's purpose ought to be. These are experiences about what feels meaningful and how one experiences purpose by doing things.

Claudia Scheidemann

It also, I mean, it connects obviously to the existential nomad approach that we talked about before. So how do I find that meaning? How can I create that? And again, it's about if I don't know yet.

Eric Maisel

It's hard to change this language, but it can't be found. It's really it's hard to change because I'll work with the client and she'll use the making meaning language for three consecutive sentences, but then we fall back to the finding meaning. There's nothing to find. It's like how do we find joy? There is nothing to fine. We can set up situations where we might experience it or we can hope for joy, but it's not around the corner.

It's not even at those things where we think joy resides, just to use joy for a second. Maybe we think joy resides at the birthday party we're going to and we go there and our friend isn't there and suddenly the party is cold to us because we were looking for so we hoped for joy. But we can't guarantee these things like joy and we can't guarantee a feeling. Therefore, we can't guarantee. It's like if I seek hard enough, people think there's a built-in guarantee that we can find meaning if we just search hard enough. There is no such guarantee, can't be.

Claudia Scheidemann

I think that's the big shift actually to understand and also accept that so that I don't have all the control in my hand. It's about predictions, probabilities, and based on experience.

Eric Maisel

This is a sentence you're not going to hear very often. Life feels meaningless to me and that's okay. You're not going to hear that sentence out of a human being's mouth very often, but we need to be able to say that more often. Because all we're saying is I'm not experiencing meaning at this moment and that's okay. I'm still going to, here's maybe the fuller sentence. I'm not experiencing meaning at this moment, but I can still live my life purposes. I still know what I'm

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up. I still know what the next right thing is to do. Darn, it didn't generate the experience of meaning. I'm sad about that, but I still know what principles I'm impalding (?).

Michaela Muschitz

Isn't it helpful to make decisions? Other decisions when I do experience no meaning in what I'm doing right now. And I did it again and again. And then I can say, OK, now I see this does not make meaning for me, so I can decide to no longer do it.

Eric Maisel

Exactly. Again, just without guarantees. We have to keep putting in the 'without guarantees'. Because I think that's what people, my clientele are creating performing artists, somewhere in their mind, they want to guarantee that if they put in their 20 minutes at X, it's going to be worthwhile or meaningful or productive. They want to guarantee.

And they can't have it because many of those 20 minutes will not feel meaningful. Maybe the book is just slogging along and there's no joy there at all. It's just slogging work. That has to be okay. So you're right that if we're having a persistent feelings of meaninglessness, we have decisions to make. We have invitations to offer. We have things to try. We have a ton of things to try. People don't make that connection, though, that if life is feeling meaningless, I ought to try something. They think they would to find something.

Claudia Scheidemann

And also that maybe they didn't try hard enough, maybe it's a personal fault, but it's just meaning is a feeling it's fleeting and it has nothing to do with personal.

Eric Maisel

And now it's an overarching statement about the universe. It's not just that I'm not feeling meaning in this but second is that there is no meaning in the universe, which is that dark place that is easy to go to if you think that is out there. There never was any meaning to the universe in my estimation or if there is we ... that that guy over there doesn't have the answer. I don't believe it. When I said, God wants you to cover your head or something, I'm not believing these intimations of knowledge.

Michaela Muschitz

Yes.

Claudia Scheidemann

Yeah, and again, it's something challenging to put out there and say, okay, there is no meaning per se in the universe and I have to figure it out. It's something completely different.

Eric Maisel

Yep. And I wouldn't say there, again, to say there is no meaning, a little bit shifts the sense of what we're talking about. There is meaning. It's just that it's a subject of .... It's like there is joy, but it's a subject of psychological experience. There is meaning. We just may not be

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experiencing it. So I wouldn't say there is no meaning because that takes us down a very dark place.

Claudia Scheidemann

Yeah, actually to understand that how language shapes that.

Eric Maisel

I'm only dealing in English. I don't know how it would be in Dutch or German or any other language. My granddaughter speaks many languages. She grew up in Russia and she's currently studying in Italy and she speaks, I don't know what Italian, French, Hebrew, English, Russian. Is very interested in her identity when she speaks different languages. And what that does was a very interesting subject, something I can't ever know anything about without knowing any of the languages.

But for her, she has the experience of Russian sounding harsher and Italian sounding nicer, friendlier more charming, but the inner experience, she feels harsher when speaking Italian and gentler when speaking Russian. So these are interesting things about ... language is a wonderful field of study. It's so interesting. And by the way, part of my experience or education has to do with being completely taken with the British language analysts of the early 20th century, Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, John Wisdom. There are a whole slew of them who were working on how language really works.

And if you were to say God is dead, how is grammar making something happen there that is not happening in reality, but that is happening in language? And I just have to tell a quick anecdote. After I got out of the army, I had no idea what I was doing. So I got a degree in philosophy, which is what you do. And I got it at the University of Oregon. And for some reason, one of these great British philosophers had sort of retired and was teaching some classes at the University of Oregon. John Wisdom, I believe it was, one of them. So I took his philosophy of language, no, philosophy of mind class, which was actually philosophy of language class. And we spent the whole semester on the following conundrum. If you call a horse's tail a leg, does a horse have five legs? That's it.

We just kept deconstructing what language does there and how to now, I'm not that micro with respect to language, but it's important that we understand how language works. I think that's one of Orwell's great contributions is peace. Peace is war and war is peace, and just the way language gets used to manipulate people.

Claudia Scheidemann

Yeah, to better understand it and to probably minimize the effects in terms of possible manipulation.

Eric Maisel

Yep. And always to be pointing a finger of how language is working. It just.

Claudia Scheidemann

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Yeah. I mean, English obviously my second language. And what I find so interesting is that sometimes I think the expressions are more, there are more variations in the English language, sometimes in German, and in English we have purpose and meaning, and in German it's just Sinn des Lebens. So you have to do that. [How does that translate?] Yeah, you can't actually, because.

Eric Maisel

It does it feel more like meaning or more like purpose.

Claudia Scheidemann

I don't know. That's it. And for me, meaning and purpose have two different flavors. And I can't express it actually in German.

Eric Maisel

That's very interesting. Isn't it? I mean, that's a German handicap. Yeah.

Claudia Scheidemann

And on the other hand, it was like, findings of German works in the English language. I mean, the Rucksack and the Kindergarten and other examples.

Eric Maisel

Languages where nouns are masculine or feminine. How does that work in the mind? That's got to be very strange that you have to know if the noun is masculine or feminine. Very strange.

Claudia Scheidemann

Yeah, I know that there are. there are studies about the understanding of the sun and the moon. If the moon is female or if it is male, you have a different idea of the qualities of the moon or of a bridge. In some languages, a bridge is female, in some other languages is male. And there are studies that people have different.

Eric Maisel

How could one not be endlessly curious about all this stuff? And for me, I think one of the reasons that I can stay endlessly curious is that I know how to make books. That is a lot of people have fragments of ideas and they end up with 1000 little sticky notes here and there. And that's not satisfying. It's not fulfilling. And so even though they're curious, they get incurious at some point because they don't know how to easily hold things together.

They don't how to organize, let's just say it simply. And without that sort of talent or desire to organize, I think we start to get incurious because we just end up with too many fragments of thoughts. So that's its own skill and value is to know what to do with the curiosity or how to turn the curiosity into stuff, into things, whether it's sonatas or books or whatever it might be, or scientific innovation. Although my wife pointed out to me this morning, a big New York Times, headline. So I guess there's some new AI just rolled out and has solved all the mathematical problems of dawn to human beings since time and memorial. So I don't know how you're going

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to be a scientist soon. It's going to be very strange to try to still do stuff that AI can do in a split second.

Claudia Scheidemann

I actually talked with my husband about exactly that because he is a mathematician and he says for him, this is the worst-case scenario because the process of creativity and for him math is creativity.

Eric Maisel

I think math is going to end, which sounds weird, but I think math is going to end. I don't know if physics will because that's a different thing. I don't know if biology will, but I think math will end. And chemistry may end because chemistry is mechanical, so to speak. And I think AI will do that beautifully. It'll, I don't know, many fields.

Claudia Scheidemann

Yeah, yeah, and it's what you said in the beginning, being the curator of material. And as a mathematician, if you don't develop, but to just try to figure out what the AI figured out is a completely different thing.

Eric Maisel

No, that's right. And there'll be whole new profession, the old profession, current professions will disappear, and the new professions will arise where people are just thinking about how to deal with AI, just the interface questions or what can survive, what if you, what's the human part that can survive, this huge transition. I don't mind not looking a lot seeing what's going to happen 32 years from now. I don't mind not being there. Yeah.

But we're still somewhat in the name of we just have to say, my wife and I just went to one of these big box stores the other day. And now there's this whole section of robots, you know, they just all they do is clean the floor, you know, they run around the floor and they, but they're going to be whole robot stores soon where you get to pick out your robot that does this and your robot that does that. Science fiction has arrived. And that was another love of mine early on. Obviously, if you're a math and science boy and a literature boy, you're going to love science fiction. So which has become real.

Claudia Scheidemann

But well, we're still somewhat in an age of books. And one of the questions we ask our guests is a book, a book or books that way you say, okay, they influenced me a lot or they provoked certain times of thought.

Eric Maisel

You will know that it's going to be in the existential tradition.

Claudia Scheidemann

Of course.

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Eric Maisel

It's hard to pick out one. is not that I don't know which books I love. I just love a lot of them. The whole Camus oevre matters to me. Fall, of course, is the most interesting and ironic, but also maybe the least well known. People start with The Stranger. That's an important book to me. Merseau wandering around on that Sunday and eventually committing murder for no particular reason speaks to me as to what the existential situation is really like. So The Stranger would probably be among my top 5.

Kafka really knew something, really understood bureaucracy, but not even bureaucracy. He understood insignificance, and he understood the weirdness of insignificance. There's nothing like Gregor waking up one morning and being a cockroach, and no one seeming to care particularly, him not caring the people around him, not particularly. Business just going on as Kafka knew something. So I'll go with The Trial as one Kafka one.

Although the short stuff like Metamorphosis, the Hunger Artist is super wonderful, the short story of the hunger artist, which is a, which I'll just say in a sentence, the hunger artist is a character who can't find any food that he enjoys, so he starves himself to death not because he's trying to starve himself to death, but just because he can't find any food he enjoys so he becomes a circus attraction as he starves himself to death. It integrate, it's a great story about not finding purpose or not having meaning. So the trial.

And then all of Dostojewsky and I can't really choose among notes from underground and Crime and Punishment and the possessed and the brothers Karamazov. I'm just going to make them all one book and call them Dostojewsky. But each one is wonderful and brilliant. The possessed is the least known of the four and the most important in our current times because it actually deals with left-wing and right-wing politics in a way in which his other books don't, they deal with individual psychology and not politics, but the possessed, also known as the devils, is a really interesting novel. So those are some I feel like it's bursting into song, so those are some of my favorite things that Julie Andrews, is it Julie Andrews? I don't do it, some song.

Claudia Scheidemann

I think it's our request that arises is, why would you recommend reading such books with, well, they have a replication of being difficult, hard to understand, why should I strive for them, read them?

Eric Maisel

Well, I would not understand why they would have that exact reputation, maybe dry, but not difficult to understand. Camus' language is super simple. Kafka's language is super simple. A guy wakes up and gets summoned and this happens and that happens. There's nothing. It's not like one of these South American novels where you need an appendix to know. They are not like that. They're straightforward narratives. They're stories.

So I guess I would just gently explain to anyone who thinks that this is beyond them or not for them that they're just stories. They're important stories. By the way, I should have mentioned there's a different kind of book that matters to me. The reason I mention it now is that this is for someone who thinks they wouldn't like these books. They might like this book. And I love the Sufi

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teaching tales. Sufiaism predates Islam. And they have wonderful teaching tales like The Blind Man and the Elephant is a Sufi teaching tale. And there's a book called Tales of the Dervishes that translates a number of Sufi teaching tales. And I love that book. There's a lot of wisdom in those teaching tales. And if one is more interested in sort of parables or fables or that kind of writing, that's the book to go to.

Michaela Muschitz

Yeah.

Claudia Scheidemann

Thank you. We'll put all the things again on our reading list in the show notes, of course.

Michaela Muschitz

And we have one last question, which really is, Claudia just mentioned before, it's somehow silly to ask a man with your knowledge this question, but we will try. Is there any writing exercise or writing prompt you use a lot and want to recommend.

Eric Maisel

I should have a straightforward answer to that, but I don't exactly. I think I want to maybe make a generalization rather than a prompt. And that is, I try to invite people to go deep, especially if you think about how bored most kids are in school. Part of that boredom, there are lots of reasons for it, but part of that boredom and antsiness and itchiness is they're not invited to think deep about anything. It's not on the curriculum to think deep. So if you were to give a kid a prompt like, how would you go about achieving world peace? They would have fun with that. They would not say, what, that's impossible for a human being to think about, and I'm only 7 years old and I can't, they would just have fun with it. And they would come up with maybe remarkably interesting responses to a prompt like that. So I don't have one prompt, but whatever it is, whatever the prompt might be with a given client or a given person, it would be offering the opportunity to go deeper than an ordinary prompt might go.

Claudia Scheidemann

Thanks a lot. Well, I think that's one of the things at least I take away is this be courageous enough to go deep and also trying to figure out the existential questions and make them more, well, everyday sounds a little bit too much, but more common to talk about.

Eric Maisel

Every day that's right. You've got to right every day. We haven't talked about, of course, all the ways in which we prevent ourselves from doing that. That would be the next 17 hours of chatting. There's a lot of self-censorship and defensiveness and what have you in human beings that make these programs, whatever the good program might be, make these programs hard to enact.

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Michaela Muschitz

Before we started, Claudia said to me, I do think we have to ask Eric to come again and again, because I have so many questions, and we can't put all of them in one episode of our podcast. So maybe we can come back to you on all the other topics we had not mentioned yet.

Eric Maisel

Love too. This was fun.

Claudia Scheidemann

Great. So thank you very, very much. So, a lot of things to think about and it was a great pleasure to talk with you.

Eric Maisel

Thank you both and have a great evening.

Michaela Muschitz

Thanks a lot.

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