

Jerry: Duff, it's good to see you. Good to meet you officially. And as we were saying just before the recording started, we may have met a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away back in New York. But before we go there, let's just take a moment. Why don't you introduce yourself?

Duff McDonald: Thanks for having me, Jerry, delighted to be here. Name is Duff McDonald. I'm a, um, author and journalist, uh, in the last decade or so more author than journalist. Um, spent most of my career as a business journalist and my, uh, early, the first couple of books I wrote were, were very much Wall Street finance, business. And my latest book, which you made the wonderful favor of blurbing on the back of the jacket is called *Tickled: A Commonsense Guide to the Present Moment*.

Jerry: And I love the book.

Duff McDonald: Thank you.

Jerry: It's a delight really to, to connect or reconnect with you. Um, and, and we have this, uh, uh, shared experience of having, uh, the same editor at HarperCollins and, and that was a delight and we'll probably end up circling back to that. We may or may not mention her. Um, um, that'll make her blush by the way, if we, if we start [crosstalk 00:04:12].

Duff McDonald: Her name is Hollis Heimbouch and we love her.

Jerry: We love Hollis.

Duff McDonald: The best editor I've ever had in my life.

Jerry: (laughs) She is amazing. She is amazing indeed. Um, and you know, I, I'm really been looking forward to this because, um, you know, as you know, once you're out there and you, you, you, you write a book, you start getting books to review, right? And you can start getting things. And, um, Hollis sent me a copy of *Tickled*, uh, early galley, uh, on PDF. And, you know, I didn't know that we knew each other in that way, but I was like, "Okay, you know, Hollis wants me to read this." And it was a sweet note.

And, um, as I said to you, even before we started recording, you grabbed me in the first paragraph and I'm gonna read it to you just 'cause I think it's a fun experience have your own words read back to you. You wrote, "I'm going to begin this book in a way that's probably a little different than most books you've read. It's certainly different than any book that I've written. But I'm going to tell you about is the book that had every intention of writing, but didn't end up writing. Nothing turned out the way I planned. The original idea you might say, didn't tickle me anymore. I ended up writing something else entirely." And, um, that grabbed me...

Duff McDonald: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: ... from the very beginning, um, on a number of levels, one is the fact that one of my big complaints about most books is that the writer, the author doesn't actually show up, there's like a distance between them. And I am compelled by people who actually show up and, you know, we'll talk about this experience and who you are and all that stuff. It's the hour and faults, but the fact that it's dude, you showed up from the first sentence.

Duff McDonald: You know what's, you know what's interesting. I just got my wife reading, Italo Calvino-

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: ... the great Italian novelist, uh, recently. And at this very moment, she's reading *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, one of the great, uh, works of fiction of all time. And in the very first paragraph, I was, I was looking over her shoulder. He does the exact same thing. He's like, "You've just bought the latest book by Italo Calvino."

Jerry: (laughs).

Duff McDonald: And I was like there's something in there. So the breaking of that, uh, the, the fourth wall there, uh, I think we find much more often in fiction-

Jerry: Yes.

Duff McDonald: ... because they don't feel as constrained, uh, by, uh, rules that are either explicit or implicit. You know, my first three books were in a much more serious tone than *Tickled*. Not because I thought I was doing something super serious or that I took myself super seriously. I just thought that's the way you were supposed to do it.

Jerry: Well, that's what we're taught, right?

Duff McDonald: Yeah, and something, you know, we'll get into the sort of subject matter and stuff of *Tickled* as we go here. But something, thi- this is a very different book for me. Uh, it's much more memoirish, obviously. Um, but, uh, the, the fact that, uh, I had sat down, uh, very excited to write the book that I was gonna write and ran into a wall, uh, in, after writing the introduction and suddenly was not just, it wasn't writer's block.

It was, I can't do what I'm about to do. And I had to sort of pull out and rethink everything about the book that I was working on. And ultimately, uh, with the help of a very good friend, Hugo Lindgren, uh, realized that the way to, to ease

the reader into what I was about to, to write was to start the book by telling them what happened, right?

Jerry: Yeah.

Duff McDonald: As opposed to trying to write book number two on its own, it would be much more valuable to take the reader with me, uh, because it's got, the book has some sort of jarring revelations in it, right? And, uh, it was a brilliant idea to just say, "All right, let's start this by letting you in on what happened to me in addition to what I have to say." So that's how we got there.

Jerry: What was it that you intended to sit down and write?

Duff McDonald: So I had sold a book to Harper in December of 2019 called *The Precision Paradox*. And, uh, we were still working on subtitles, uh, but it was, uh, how are, something to the degree of like how our obsession with measurement has led to the decline of common sense. And that came out of, uh, my previous two books, uh, I wrote a book called *The Firm* about McKinsey, and I wrote a book called *The Golden Passport* about Harvard Business School. And, uh, when trying to figure out what to do next, I realized that instead of talking about institutions or companies or people, I want to move into sort of the idea realm.

Jerry: Hmm.

Duff McDonald: And I thought, what is it about, uh, these two, um, sort of avatars [00:10:00] of our quantified era that makes me just feel some, uh, I wouldn't say anxious, but it was, why am I obsessed with these two? And it ended up being, I realized what it was, was that we've gone all-in on quantification.

We quantify everything, whether it is, uh, your wealth, your, uh, the value of your, your net worth your influencer rating, your weight, your height, your everything, what we, when we seek to understand things, we start, we generally, these days start by quantifying them, uh, COVID included, right? We're still counting COVID today. So the book was supposed to be *The Precision Paradox*. And essentially it was me saying, uh, "All you people don't understand-

Jerry: Hmm.

Duff McDonald: ... you're doing this wrong."

Jerry: Hmm.

Duff McDonald: And I've been selling the idea to people for a while and it's very straightforward. And I'm, I still believe in sort of the gist of what I was saying, which when we go for quantification, we're basically looking at superficial attributes of any situation. We are compromising our ability to understand things. And then what, then suddenly in the quiet of quarantine I had, you could call it anything you

want, a symantec breakthrough, uh, a revelation and awakening something where I was like, "Oh, my God, I'm talking to myself-

Jerry: Yeah.

Duff McDonald: ... all my criticism is to me."

Jerry: Yeah, I wanna, I wanna pause and I wanna take you back to an emotional reaction I had when you were describing all you people have got this wrong, right? And we're talking a little bit about this sort of genre here that, that we're really talking about, which is memoir mixed with non-fiction-

Duff McDonald: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: ... so we're talking about is the author actually breaking through the fourth, fourth wall, but we're talking about something else too, right? And that is, there was this plan that you had, which was to explain to all the people who were obsessed about quantifying the self in a sense how they were quantifying things wrong and that you had the answer-

Duff McDonald: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: ... and to use a lang- to use a phrase I often use in a finger-wagging way.

Duff McDonald: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Oh, absolutely. I'm, I have written in a state of moral self-righteousness, you know, when I was going after Harvard Business School, uh, the subtitle of that has the line, the moral failure of the MBA elite in it. I judged them moral failures.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: Si-, you know, from a, from a remove, meat of McDonald's sitting on his throne and I was about to do it again with an even wider target, society itself. To circle back to what I was saying, just before there, I suddenly realized that it was mirroring-

Jerry: Right.

Duff McDonald: ... I was, I was in judgment, uh, I was judging myself without realizing it and taking it out on, uh, uh, whatever available targets [crosstalk].

Jerry: Right, that's it. A psychologist might call it projective identification.

Duff McDonald: Sure.

Jerry: Right, it's like, it's, uh, there's nothing we can st- can't stand more than what we see inside of ourselves reflected in other people.

Duff McDonald: Well, I even got farther than that in the, you know, in the writing of the book and then sort of subsequent exploration of sort of what had happened to me. I, I'm, I'm now firmly of the opinion that everything is the self. So whatever it is that you are criticizing, it is you, it is your universe that you have created, and you have a choice to, uh, um, emphasize what you want. You can, you, that, which you focus on expands, right?

So if the universe isn't working for you, you're, the, you should put your complaint in the suggestion box of yourself. And I suddenly realized that I had, was about to sort of put the capping, move on a career of criticizing other people in, um, in sort of a phenomenally arrogant way.

Jerry: Right.

Duff McDonald: And it, you know, thank God at the I had, and it was the quiet of quarantine, right? Zero distractions. I suddenly was like, "Holly smokes. It's not where I wanna go." And at that moment I pulled back and was like, this, there's this, there's still a story to tell here about an obsession with numbers.

But it is a story about my own obsession with numbers, or if you wanna go just a little metta, my own obsession with other people's obsessions with numbers, right? Still, ultimately my obsession and working myself out of it and how I extricate myself from that. And [00:15:30] that's what *Tickled* ultimately ends up being, right? Is, is a lot of the, how I realized what was happening to me and how to, uh, solve, uh, suddenly very obvious problem.

Jerry: Right, I, uh, with, with gentleness, and as I said to you before, I'm just slightly older than you. So a little older brother perspective, I would have said, uh, extricate yourself from the question rather than solve.

Duff McDonald: Sure, exactly. Agreed, agreed.

Jerry: You know, and as I read through that experience and read into that first chapter, um, to use language that I often use, I kept thinking of two things, one what you had identified in attempting to talk about the precision, *Precision Paradox* is a way in which we deflect from the more relevant questions that we're seeking answers to. If I can quantify it, then I actually don't have to feel it.

If I can quantify it, then I can solve it without experiencing it. And the second thing that I, I think I saw you going through is to use language that I use, uh, is, is to go through a process of what I call radical self-inquiry, which was just, uh, a, a, a, a quippy way of describing something that I learned to do both sitting on the meditation cushion, but also being in psychoanalysis.

And the best way to describe that is, um, it's the process by which the masks that we wear. And in this case, it might be the pursuit of quantification, right? As

a way to know things without actually feeling them, the way, the process of that mask being slowly, compassionately, stripped away. And it's the compassionate part that I think is really critical here, because there's this moment of like, which I see you doing, or saw, saw you doing, which was holy shit.

I'm about to do the thing in a sense that I can ac- accuse other people of doing, only I'm gonna be clever about it. I'm gonna be more, uh, facile, maybe even a better writer about it. Now, I may be reading too much into that, but just curious how you would [crosstalk].

Duff McDonald: No, no, that's it, that, that's exactly what happened. I get at it using ideas like, uh, so one of the things that our Western reliance, our analytical culture, and embrace of science and mathematics has done is created the illusion of certainty.

Jerry: Hmm.

Duff McDonald: Right, so of course, we can be certain that two plus two is four, but the reason is, is because we set it so, right? Mathematics is our own creation in a closed system. So, what occurred to me was that I had spent a career writing about numbers. So when you write that a stock went from here to here, or that a company raised this much money, uh, when you're talking about numbers that are actually graspable like that, right? You can be certain that it was so, and the stock did fall from 15 to 10.

Nobody's guessing about that, right? So I took that sense of certainty, uh, and let it bleed into realms of life where it did not belong, which is basically all of life because life is flux. You are change, right? All the things that matter, right? Beauty, love, friendship, trust, loyalty, all these things. We try to measure some of them, but it's all silly. It's silly when we do it, right?

All the things that truly matter are not quantifiable. However, I spent most of my adult life, uh, feeling quite certain about very many of the things that I thought, and it wasn't that I was an over-the-top asshole. Uh, but I was pretty sure of the things that I thought.

Jerry: I wanna build on what you're saying in a particular way. And I think it's, it's gonna be helpful. When a stock goes from 15 to 10, not only is it quantifiable uncertain, but it also generates something else, which is an interpretation, which we believe to be certain. So for example, when a stock goes from 15 to 10, we believe that there's something wrong with the company, or we believe that there's something wrong.

That there's something knowable and that it's, it's actually measurable and that there's a problem, or when a company raises at a certain valuation, we believe there's certain worthiness to that. And I'll make this connection. This is something that I deal with my clients all the time. There is no correlation

between the worth of a company or a very light correlation at best and its stock price. And there is certainly no correlation between the worthiness of an individual and whether or not they've raised a lot of money. Does this resonate with you?

Duff McDonald: Totally, and we're gonna dive right into the deep end here. You're talking about causality, right?

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: And causality requires, uh, a belief in the existence of time, right? 'Cause one thing, change doesn't happen instantaneously. So if you're going to say one thing led to another, right?

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: You need to believe that time exists. And what we do, uh, again, analytically, we're constantly looking to tell stories where this thing led to that thing, right? I wrote histories before *Tickled* and, and there's a lot of this led to that in them. And so in the, in, in quarantine what happened to me in very summary, um, description is my brain exploded. Time went cyclical for me, right? When we all, we all got off the calendar at the same time, right?

We all, we tend to think of time as linear when, when you have nowhere to go and nowhere to be, and no appointments, time can go cyclical for you. I realized that time was an illusion. And if time is an illusion and everything is now, right?

Jerry: I feel like we're in a realm of talking about it externally. And from what little I know of your story and from what little you've written about and what you've shared, I actually know that there's a personal connection here. And how did this thinking, right? 'Cause you-

Duff McDonald: Okay.

Jerry: ... you, you, you, you wrote the proposal, you sold the proposal to Harper Collins. You sold the proposal called *The Precision Paradox*, maybe at an agent, whatever. And there was a part of you, right? You said before, everything is an extension of self. Everything is the self, right? So in what way has it served you to quantify or to not focus on the now? Cause in the book you talk about and you made reference to this before on the call, being something of an asshole in your past, what's the relationship between those two things?

Jerry: I'm gleaning from this that you needed personally, Duff McDonald needed to feel certain and the result was they were a shit-ton of people in your life that you categorized as wrong.

Duff McDonald: Yes, although, you know, looking back at it again, causality, did I need to feel certain? You know, my best version of how I got where I got was that I was just great at math, right?

Jerry: Ah.

Duff McDonald: I almost majored in physics-

Jerry: Yes.

Duff McDonald: ... but ended up at, at Wharton because I told my high school guidance counselor I wanna be a businessman.

Jerry: Ah.

Duff McDonald: I didn't even know what that meant. I think one of the things that happened to me is that level of ability in math led me into a career, uh, and realm in which I could use that ability.

Jerry: Hmm.

Duff McDonald: Uh, and it made me good at what I did, uh, in the numbers game. And which just sort of reinforced the idea that I was pretty smart, right?

Jerry: Right.

Duff McDonald: To me and-

Jerry: Right, which probably felt pretty good.

Duff McDonald: Totally. Right, I like my assholeishness was that I, from my perspective, did not suffer fools.

Jerry: Right.

Duff McDonald: I wasn't running around trying to pick fights with people, but, um, I was pretty sure that my brain was, uh, more powerful than yours.

Jerry: Right.

Duff McDonald: And I confused that kind of, uh, sort of, uh, ability to, to work with numbers. And, you know, I did well in school and all the courses, um, I just thought I was smarter than everyone else.

Jerry: And you confuse being smarter with everyone else with what?



Duff McDonald: Uh, testing-

Jerry: Hmm.

Duff McDonald: ... by being, you know, uh, someone told me about in the early version of the Precision Paradox, I was going to talk about the SATs and-

Jerry: Hmm.

Duff McDonald: ... all sorts of stuff, going back to how we've con-, you know, we've let quantification lead us astray. And one of the things I read about the SATs is that, the only thing that the SAT, high scores on the SAT show is that you're good at taking the SATs.

Jerry: Right.

Duff McDonald: Right, as you said earlier, we add these interpretations on top of things, right? So when you have a stock that goes down, what we know is that the stock went down.

Jerry: That's right.

Duff McDonald: We don't know why.

Duff McDonald: So I had higher grades than most people in high school and college. I thought it made me smarter than everyone else. No, it simply meant that I had higher grades (laughs) than everyone in high school and college.

Jerry: And, and in very Jerry language, it, it, you might've extrapolated to the point of saying, and you may never have articulated it this way, but it may have come across as, and therefore, since I'm smarter, I deserve more. And, or if I don't measure up, which is what I'm always dealing with clients, if I don't measure up, I deserve less.

Duff McDonald: I think what ultimately this sense of certainty and inflated sense of how smart I was led me to give myself a pass on bad behavior.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: I, uh, I wasn't as nice as I should have been to a lot of people in, in my life. I ended up drinking my way out of a marriage, uh, in, in part, 'cause I wasn't focused on the present. You know, I talk about this in the book too, that I think a lot of when we quantify, uh, stuff, you know, if you're just setting the table, how many people are coming for dinner, that's a totally acceptable and appropriate quantification. You need to know.

Jerry: Right.

Duff McDonald: But when you think of stuff like, uh, when we start making projections or, uh, building models, uh, what it does is it takes us out of the present and into the past or a theoretical future. And, um, one of the conclusions I come to is I spent so much time, uh, working with numbers and projections and goals and all this stuff, my own. And but also just the stuff I was writing about, that I, it made me, um, I made it very difficult for me to be present, um, for the simple reason that if you're thinking about the future, you're not being present.

Jerry: Right.

Duff McDonald: And, uh, looking back at it, I was like, I spent a lot of time in quant- in, in the land of quantification, uh, as a career choice. And it just simply meant that I wasn't as present as someone who did wasn't in sort of that sort of head-spinning realm of predictions and forecasts and historical models-

Jerry: Well-

Duff McDonald: ... and I think that made me less, um, uh, the lack of presence made me less of a good person in the present than I could have been.

Jerry: I can see from my own life and from the lens of my own experience, how not being present in the way you're describing, makes me less of the person, less of a man that I'd like to be. And, um, I think it's important to acknowledge that, one of the most important insights I've come to, um, in the last 15, 20 years is the difference between transactional and relational.

And I mean, this is going to sound simplistic and like what an idiot I used to be, but I also would walk down the street and measure the number of steps it would take. And, and can I get to the traffic light in the right time so that I can, or do I have to turn right? You know what I'm talking about?

Duff McDonald: Yeah, totally.

Jerry: Thompson calculating or not. This kind of constant, uh, calculating going on, what has helped me is to understand that the calculating mind that I had was really designed to keep me safe. It was designed to ward off certain things. The irony is that it resulted in me being non-relational, so calculating and transactional became opposite in opposition to relational instead of in service to, which is what you're, I think you're speaking to, it's great to have a dinner. I thought there were four people coming there's five. Oh no, right? My calculations are off. And yet that fifth person is somebody lovely, wonderful in their spontaneity. And there's present moment, uh, experience in that fifth person.

Duff McDonald: You're touching on something I got to in the book there too, which is the difference between probability and possibility, right? So what we do in our, in our risk reduction, uh, culture, uh, and our probability obsessed culture. We are trying to predict the future, right?

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: And, uh, we're doing it both consciously and unconsciously. And any time that you spend, you know, I figured something really important out in the past year. We are taught and very wholeheartedly believe in the fact that you are doing yourself a favor. If you spend time worrying about the future, right? We do financial planning, we do all sorts of stuff.

We do the quantified self, all these things that are supposed to, uh, um, lengthen our life and make everything more enjoyable. And I ca- I came to the realization that that's actually not the case. And, and here's the thinking that took me there. If you, uh, it's almost axiomatic to say that the more awareness you have, the better decisions you'll make, right? So in any particular situation, the more awareness you have, the better decision you'll make in the here and now. If you are, if you have like a separate thought stream going about something that might happen, right?

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: Setting yourself up for, uh, the possible risk of this or that, you are compromising your current awareness over a theoretical future. So what that does is it compromises your current effectiveness by worrying about the future. So let's say that thing, uh, it may or may not come to pass. You will be better positioned for anything that comes your way. If your decisions in the present have been, are, have been the best possible decisions you can make.

So anytime we spend with even a half-eye to the future, is actually making us more vulnerable to something that might happen that is a surprise. Whereas if you spend all your focus on what is happening to you right now, you will be best able to deal with anything that comes at you. I think, you know, there are some things that we should obviously prepare for, right? Like the inevitables, the seasons, the next stock market crash-

Jerry: Death.

Duff McDonald: ... death, like things that are absolutely going to happen. I'm talking about the things that might happen, but then again, might not happen. And I realized that I'd spent a lot of my life because of the ability to quantify things, thinking about spending too much time, thinking about things that might happen and therefore squandering my awareness.

And in the past year, I've actually reeled it back in on a number of fronts. But the main one has been financial. You know, I've been a freelancer for 20 years. Uh, I have no complaints. Life is good. Uh, but I have had lumpy cash flow because all freelance people do. And, uh, no matter what financial situation I was in, I would constantly be checking the state of my portfolio, right? Or the stock market or something.

Even if I was totally in the black and was, had no cashflow, uh, issues in the next year or so, everything was good, still checking it, right? Because, and I thought I was doing myself a service, it turns out, um, you know, back to my point before, as a freelancer, what you wanna do is be positioned, enabled to take on interesting and lucrative work for yourself, right?

To, to keep that party going. And you don't report to anyone and, um, you are the boss. The best way to do that is to have all your focus on what you're doing, not on sort of, uh, a side thing with yourself that's doing risk assessments in the future. And I'm at this point now where I haven't checked my financials. I don't do that obsessively anymore. I don't even know what my current theoretical [00:40:00] net worth is. Whereas if you went back a year and a half ago on a day-to-day basis, I could have told you by the thousands, you know, down to the last thousand dollars. Right now, I have no clue.

Jerry: So I, I wanna go to a couple of things, what happened and why *Tickled*? And then if we have time and we better have time, *Harry Potter*.

Duff McDonald: When quarantine hit, I had already sold that book to *Precision Paradox*. And I actually thought to myself, this is, you know, the world is fucked up right now, but thank God I sold this book in December. You know, it'd be hard to sell it. I decided I wasn't gonna start working on it until Harper sent me the first check of the advance.

Jerry: Right.

Duff McDonald: 'Cause the world seemed like it might [00:41:00] be collapsing. So I started dithered around for a week or two in March. Then the check arrived. I was like, "All right, we're off."

Duff McDonald: So I counted myself lucky. I was like, "I'm gonna just read for a couple of months here and, uh, and, and get this book started." And then all the COVID data started coming out. And, uh, I, I thought, oh my God you know, *The Precision Paradox*, I sold that book in December. We didn't know about COVID data. And suddenly it was like the COVID data is affirming my thesis.

Uh, and just sort of very short version of that, um, for you or me sitting at home, uh, the COVID, uh, positivity ratios and death counts. And all the, you know, the

array of statistical information, we've been force-fed over the past year. None of that really has any meaning for you or me and how you live your life, right?

You wanna wear, if you wanna wear a mask, be vaccinated, absolutely. But those aren't, you didn't find that in the COVID data, you found that in our experience of pandemics, right? And so I was like, this is, this is affirming my thesis. And I thought I'm going to have to start writing this book immediately because every day I was like, "Precision Paradox, Precision Paradox. Here it is again, here it is again."

Jerry: (laughs)

Duff McDonald: And my daughter who is, was 11 at the time, uh, uh, had earlier in, in January, she got kicked in the face by her horse. And so she'd been laid up and she'd, uh, started reading Harry Potter and she was begging me to read Harry Potter with her. And I said, I would love to, but I've just sold a book I have work do.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: And I wasn't trying to be a dick. I actually thought I had... One of the things I've done when I'm reading or writing a book is I read as much as I possibly can on the subject while I'm writing it. Um, And [00:44:00] I was like, I got other stuff I have to read. And then she started reading us Harry Potter memes over FaceTime during quarantine. And one day I said to her, "I haven't read it. It's not interesting. Can we talk about something that's interesting to all of us."

Duff McDonald: But that night my wife said to me, "Are you sure you're doing this right?" You told her, you don't wanna go on this adventure with her reading the thing. And now you've told her that you don't, you want her to stop talking about something that interests her? You know, in retrospect we called it that was tickling her. And I was like, "Oh man, uh, that's a fairly obvious dad fail." And so I told her the next day that I had started reading Harry Potter.

Duff McDonald: And so when I told her, I'd read Harry Potter with her, uh, within almost instantly. And again, I don't wanna put, go too specific on causality here 'cause a lot of stuff was contributing [00:46:00] to changes in me, but basically, everything exploded. And uh, I became a fire hydrant of love.

It unleashed that act of love, unleashed, open something, the yogis call it untying the knot of the heart. And suddenly, uh, it was as if all the bottled-up anger of my entire life was released in an instant. I suddenly realized that I couldn't write the *Precision Paradox* anymore because [00:47:00] new Duff was no longer an asshole and wasn't gonna tell anyone else what to think.

I suddenly realized that I'd been telling other people what to think and that that was arrogant, I wasn't going to do it anymore. I realized that I was mirroring

that, um, uh, it was all about me and that I had spent my entire career writing about things that bothered me

Jerry: There's a moment in conversations that I liken to speed bumps. And the impulse that we have is to go fast when we hit speed bumps.

Duff McDonald: Got it.

Jerry: 'Cause, and this is a speed bump, man.

Duff McDonald: This is a speed bump. We should slow down.

Jerry: This is real stuff here. This is fourth wall-breaking. I wish you could see your face, 'cause you went from explaining something really important to you, to me, to talking about love and the fire hydrant.

Duff McDonald: Right, and it was, it was like nothing I have ever experienced. It was love of self, which snuck in under cover of love of child, right? And love of wife. My wife is, you know, the two of them are the greatest things that ever happened to me. And I suddenly, it suddenly hit me and it was like a frying pan in the face, right? What have I been doing? The flood of love that suddenly came out of me and I credit it both to the *Harry Potter* thing, but also quarantine, right? We move too fast.

I moved too fast, even though I worked from home, the sort of the calming of my life so that my brain could do what it does. Uh, and I read a series of great books in a row. Uh, my favorite of them called *A History of Reading* by Alberto Manguel, uh, which sort of blew my mind about, I'd never really thought about reading that way like he makes the point, the books are infinite, right?

And, um, so all of that sort of came over me and I, um, uh, things had started to sparkle, right? Jim James has a song where he says, um, "there's more stardust when you're near," suddenly life got more vibrant. And I realized that and this is from presence again, I realized that everything that I'd been spent all this time criticizing and complaining and whining about, right? Paled, uh, in the face of the miracle (laughs) of my own existence.

And it all hit me at once. Now, I've been doing yoga, Hatha yoga for a decade. My wife had gotten me to start meditating but to no great effect. So this was not in my vocabulary. Uh, I was not walking around as a seeker, none of that. And, uh, suddenly it was dumped on me and, you know, you can call it whatever you want, but, um, there's a catch-all word for it, which is God, right?

Suddenly, I realized, uh, the miracle of all of this and that, uh, there were, there were powers at our disposal, like the number one being love, that were magic, right? And you talked about this in your book, in the blurb of the, that you wrote for *Tickle*. Suddenly, I realized that magic was real. And what was crazy is it I'm

reading Harry Potter at the time. So I was like, "Could this be more of a, like, could, could the powers that be, be, uh, be sort of making this more clear- they couldn't have made it more clear to me."

An act of love with my daughter suddenly on leased a flood of the feeling of the magic that is life itself. And I realized that I had spent my whole life complaining about a miracle. And, you know, at that point I couldn't write the Precision Paradox anymore because there was no paradox anymore. The paradox had been me. The paradox was me thinking that, uh, there was something that needed to be solved, uh, outside of the self, that there was something that needed to be explained that I need other people needed me to help them understand something.

All of those things evaporated at once. And it was like, "Oh my God, the answer is love." And you know, I did my best. *Tickled* is, uh, a long-form expression of, [00:53:00] something that my wife told me. She said, "There's only one story. It is love. You're either telling it or you're not, there's only one building block for those stories. It's either you're either using love or you're not." So in any situation you find yourself in that doesn't seem to be working out or is it's not to your liking, the answer always is to love more. And I was like, "You told me that you'd have me on your podcast. I'd cry. I'm about to."

Jerry: Good.

Duff McDonald: It's like, sudden, suddenly it was like, "Jesus Christ, it's so much simpler than, than I led myself to believe." And, um, you know, then all the dominoes fell for me basically. It was like all this stuff I thought I knew, uh, was wrong. Uh, all the things that I thought I needed to do were wrong. Uh, I had one job only and that's to, you know, spread love around wherever I could go. So *Tickled* is gonna shock anyone who's followed my career because I have, I have, have not been in the business of dispensing love. It is not what I did. It is not what I thought I was supposed to do.

I thought I was doing something, you know, I thought I was on the side of the angels, right? Talking about let's do this right. Uh, but I had miss misunderstood. Um, the let's part of that, the let's is you. It's, you take care of yourself. Everything else follows.

Jerry: I wanna say a couple of things. There's a profound relationship between the behavior that you described as being an asshole and the revelation that has come to you in the last year. There's a profound relationship because you don't actually have to try as hard as you used to try.

Jerry: My therapist used to say to me all the time, uh, "Would you rather be right or happy?" And, uh, I used to say in response, "When I'm right, I'm happy." (laughing) And you can recognize it and, and letting go of the need to be right,

letting go of the need to be released or to be precise, to use your terminology, I think allowed you to be tickled.

Duff McDonald: Oh my God. It but again, I didn't actually consciously let go-

Jerry: Right.

Duff McDonald: ... it happened. Right, I am like beyond grateful for whatever confluence of events. And I credit again, the two women, the two primary women in my life, my wife and daughter, like I didn't set out to try to do this, right? I won a lottery and, but you're totally right. It's like every single part of life has gotten easier. Nothing bothers me anymore. Nothing and, uh, choices almost make themselves.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: And as we, uh, now we've gone deeper into meditation, just sort of the centering. I had no idea life could be this easy in every possible way. And it's like, I was trying, you know, what, w, it's you look back at it? And you're like, Jesus Christ, so now I suddenly understood what they mean by awakening, right?

Jerry: It's a waking up, you know, and, and, you know, to, to use, you know, you quote from Ram Dass early in the book, "why are you acting this way? Why are you so angry? What are you doing with your doing? What is your purpose?" Those are all questions designed to sort of wake up to pause because we are trained from childhood to externalize the responsibility for internal experience and to the world at large.

Duff McDonald: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: And if those of us who are smart enough can find all sorts of reasons why we feel like shit inside and make that the responsible feeling.

Duff McDonald: The intellect can be a significant obstacle to this.

Jerry: You're reminding me of a podcast conversation I had with one of my teachers named Parker Palmer, and Parker is 82. And as many people know he is my spiritual teacher. He's my, he refers to me as his older brother, 'cause that's our private joke. But the truth is, he's a, he's a soul friend, he's an Anam Cara. And we had a podcast conversation about his book called *On the Brink of Everything*, which is about his thoughts on aging.

And we came to the conclusion that the real question that one should ask myself is not what is my purpose, but how have I been kind? Because it gets to the same question, kindness as an expression of that torrent, that hydrant of love. And, and I, you know, as a friend now looking out, or, out from the outside, looking at you, I think you weren't just a hydrant of love. You got knocked on



your ass by a hydrant of love. And she happened to be an 11-year-old girl, 'cause she wasn't gonna put up with your bullshit about not reading Harry Potter.

Duff McDonald: Right, it's like, so, you know, they talk in yoga too, about the descent of grace, right?

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: So, you know, looking at it, it's like, we're all God, right?

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: And it's just a question of whether or not you know it.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: And I talk a lot about my daughter in the book-

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: ... and about the fact that she shows qualities of character and, um, humanity that I most certainly did not have at the age of 12.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Duff McDonald: And, um, it's basically, she, um, used my own techniques of stubbornness or whatever to sort of trick me into, um, making the right decision. You know with an assist from Joey, my wife, who is just, you know, an angel and yeah. So I didn't see it coming, even though, and I say this in the book too, I was like, "I didn't see it coming even though I had these two angels beaming all their love power directly at me." You know, as too busy going to work on this thing I was doing.

And, um, you know, I don't wanna minimize anybody's, pain and suffering, but when I look back, the quarantine, COVID, uh, in, in, in there, there's a way that I can look at, it's the greatest thing that ever happened to me because it slowed me down, uh, took out all distractions and allowed to be present in my own life, maybe for the, well, most definitely for the first time ever in this way, uh, and in a lasting way, like we all experience moments of presence, right? And my point I'm making the book it's, it's when something tickles that's when you're feeling presence, because tickles don't happen. They only happen in the now, uh-

Jerry: And they only happen when you're slow enough to allow them to happen.

Duff McDonald: Yeah, and so what, what, what, um, the writing of the book and sort of focus on this, this whole, um, change have done for me since. It's allowed me to start working on practices for how to sustain the tickle. And, you know, I talk about a lot of sensory tickles in the book, right? You, um, or you could call them surface

tickles, but all those are is, you know, focused on the things that bring you joy, because that allows you to focus on what is happening to you in a way that you can't really bring when, when you're thinking about stuff that doesn't bring you joy because you don't wanna, um, center on that.

So my theory is that if you focus on the things that bring you joy, which you can identify by the fact that they tickle, it'll get you close enough, uh, that you can grab onto the tickle of existence itself. And if you can hold on to that, uh, then you're good to go, that's bliss.

Jerry: I would add that list is focused on the stuff that manifests kindness for you and for other people. And you may in fact find yourself tickled, being tickled a lot more. I know I have.

Jerry: Thank you, Duff. It was a delight reading your book. I started it on a Friday and I finished it on a Sunday morning. As I said, you grabbed me in the first paragraph and I went along for the ride and I'm really grateful that you did the book that you did do.

Duff McDonald: Thank you for having me on, delighted to talk.