

Maggie Smith: Writing in a Way that is Brave, Real, and True by Tami Simon

What follows is the syndicated transcript of an Insights at the Edge podcast from SoundsTrue, between Tami Simon and Maggie Smith. You can listen to the audio version [here](#).

Tami Simon: In this episode of Insights at the Edge, my guest is Maggie Smith. Maggie Smith is an award-winning poet, writer and editor.

She's the author of the New York Times bestseller, *You Could Make This Place Beautiful* and we'll be talking about that new book by Maggie. She's also the author of *Keep Moving: Notes on Loss, Creativity, and Change*, along with several books of poems including *Goldenrod* and *Good Bones*, which was named one of the best five poetry books of 2017 by The Washington Post. In 2016, Maggie Smith's poem "Good Bones" went viral internationally, and it's been read by millions of people.

My perspective is that Maggie has a gift for embracing the complexity of human experience and in so doing, and in writing about it with piercing intensity, clarity, distillation and beauty. She inspires us to embrace the complexity of our own experience. And with that, please welcome Maggie Smith. Maggie.

Maggie Smith: My goodness, thank you. Hello.

TS: To start, tell us about the very origins of you and writing poems. I read that you were a kid when you wrote your first poems. What was that like? What were you writing as a kid?

MS: I think I was 13 when I wrote my first poem, which makes sense. I have a 14-year-old now, and I think that adolescent time period is a time of having so many feelings and thoughts and not really knowing what to do with them. For me, poems ended up being the place where I could put all the things that lived inside me that I didn't know quite where they belonged. It really began with listening to music, I think I started writing poems before I was widely reading poems. But I was listening to The Beatles and Joni Mitchell and Neil Young and all of the stuff from my parents' record collection, and it gave me a sense of what you could do with language other than tell a story.

TS: Do you remember any of your early lines from poems?

MS: Mercifully, no. I do remember my very first poem rhymed, which I think makes sense. We often think of poetry as rhyming, especially early on. My poems rarely rhyme now. It rhymed, it rhymed, it had an ocean metaphor, and it was roundabout how no one quite understood me, which is probably how all 13-year-old girls feel. But no, I don't have access to most of my high school writing. It lives somewhere, and I wish I still had all of

that stuff, but the earliest poems that I have access to are from college.

TS: One of the things that I read about you is that you don't think of yourself primarily as a storyteller, but more someone who thinks and experiences life in sensory experience. I wanted to understand more about that, experiencing life in sensory experience. What does that mean? How do you know which sensory experience is so scintillating that it lands in, is worthy of your writing?

MS: I think I experience the world a lot like Polaroids sort of coming out of an old camera, so that tends to be how I write. If I take a walk, I might hear a bird that sounds like a typewriter key being tapped over and over or see the wind doing something with the leaves that reminds me texturally of something else. So it really does come down to metaphor for me. I'm always making comparisons in my mind between that immediate sensory experience. What I see, smell, hear, touch, and what it reminds me of, or what I can kind of bridge to in order to explain it, first to myself, and then perhaps explain that experience to someone else.

TS: I'm sure there's lots of metaphoric experience, sensory experience that lands with you. What makes it so interesting that you think, "I'm going to write about that"? Is it like a feeling inside that comes with it?

MS: I mean, I probably write a lot of things that are honestly not that interesting and then-

TS: OK, fair enough.

MS: Right? I think maybe the question is: when does the filter start? I really try not to filter too early. So if I see something and it strikes me, I write it down or record it in my phone if I don't have a pen at the time, or try desperately to remember it until I can get to a place where I can record it. Then, only later when I'm going back to that little scrap of language or that image or sound, do I think, "OK, is this going to kind of snowball and gather more material as it rolls downhill and become a poem? Or is it just going to be a very small observation of life that lives in this blank notebook or in the notes function on my phone indefinitely?" I never know until I go back to it, and either things sort of start to accrue around that initial observation or they don't.

TS: I think there are a lot of people in the Sounds True audience and who listen to Insights at the Edge who are interested in writing about their experience in some type of memoir. Maybe they already are in the middle of something and they're having a challenge finding their right form. What's the form that's really true for me? Yet, you kind of broke, I think, a traditional storytelling form and created this very poetic series of vignettes style spiraling book. It has a unique quality, it feels very true to you. How would you help someone find their form that's true to them?

MS: I worked with one of my favorite writers, Megan Stielstra, on this book and what I had when I gave it to her was a stack of vignettes. I wrote all of the pieces in this book separately, not in chronological order, and then sent them all to her and said, "What do I do with this?"

As a poet I'm really comfortable with form. Often it comes to me pretty early what the shape of the thing should be, and once I have the form at hand it gives me a kind of confidence to continue shaping the thing. With memoir, I felt sort of like I was open-sea swimming because I didn't really know what shape this thing wanted to take. Megan with her editorial expertise, sort of helped me color code all the different strands of the book,

assemble it, think about how I wanted the tones to be different between the strands, where I wanted to begin, where I wanted to end, which was incredibly helpful.

I think we all probably have books that we turn to, that we think, “f I wanted to write a memoir it would sound like that,” or “I wish I could write something that sounds like that.” I think those things can be incredibly useful. But it can also get in the way because I think probably each of our stories has an organic form and it’s up to us to find what that right fit is and it might not look like another book. It might not look like a book that even exists in the library or on a bookshelf just yet, and sort of finding your way and listening to that inner voice to me seems so important as you’re crafting your own story.

TS: It’s interesting to me that you sought out professional editorial guidance if you will and yet you also provide that to other people and that’s part of the work that you’ve done in the world. As someone who teaches in creative writing programs, interesting and maybe it’s so helpful to have a partner or an outside perspective. I’m wondering what your thoughts are on that?

MS: Oh my gosh, it’s huge. When I’m writing poetry, which is primarily what I teach and what I edit, I feel like I’m in water I can touch in. It feels like I can wade in and even when I don’t quite know where I’m going and what’s going to happen, my feet are touching the bottom of the pool. So when I say that memoir writing was like open-sea swimming, I mean just that. I felt like I was airdropped into the Atlantic Ocean, and I had no idea, formally, what I was doing because I had never written prose at this scale or size before. I’d only written poems, and so I really approached this book like a poet. Writing in small pieces, using pretty much— other than line breaks— every bit of my poetry toolkit in this book. I mean I used a lot of repetition, I used a lot of sound play, metaphor, image, anaphora.

I kind of carried all of that stuff over to make myself feel more at home in a genre I did not quite feel at home in, and I knew enough to know what I didn’t know and I think that’s really important as a writer. I came into this process having written and published several books, but under no illusion that I really knew what I was doing as a memoirist. So I sought out someone who had more expertise in this genre than I did to help guide me and also just give me the confidence. Because a lot of what Megan said was, “It’s OK to do things differently. It’s OK to write this book as a poet, trust yourself.” Having someone tell me that was incredibly important at the time.

TS: For a moment I want to turn to this topic of how writing can be a path for self-discovery for someone, for really finding out more and more the deeper truth of our experience. I’m curious what you would say to someone who says, “When I write, I find I’m a little bit on the surface of things and I can go a little bit deeper. But I can tell I’m not quite getting to the real core of what I want to share. I don’t quite know how to get there.” Are there prompts or any kind of pointers that someone like Maggie, who has this gift it seems, to getting right to that sort of raw center. How do I do that in my own writing about my experience?

MS: One of the things I like to do is a sort of drill-down exercise and so when I first start writing and it doesn’t matter if it’s going to turn into a poem, an essay, a story, a memoir. It all begins the same, it all begins for me as handwritten pages either in my notebook or on a legal pad and it looks like an absolute mess. So what I often do is write until I’m kind of wrung out, almost like imagine wringing out a rag over a bucket. I write and write and write until I feel like I’ve exhausted that path, and it may be that I take several digressions. I start out writing about a tree and suddenly I’m writing about my

grandmother's kitchen. And I try not to self-edit or censor, just go automatically, almost. Wherever your mind takes you until you reach sort of natural wrung-out stopping point. The drill-down then, is going back through that page or two or three or if you're lucky, five or six or seven.

I will go back and circle the pieces of writing in that big mess that I find most interesting to me. Not necessarily most interesting to a reading audience, but most interesting to me. The paths I think are most fruitful for me to follow, and so I'll circle a few moments and then I will start a new page and write one of those sentences on the top and then drill further into that particular experience. I will do that over and over and over again until I get to some kind of kernel that I couldn't even have dreamed of when I was writing the first page.

TS: In spiritual practice, one of the things that I've found just briefly, which will lead to a question here for you, is this embrace of how difficult things can be and how terrible I feel inside, and being willing to experience that in its raw form, and how I have to go through that. I have to be willing to go through that to make a real journey inside, and it seems to me that this is something that you do in your writing, and I wanted to understand more what that's like for you as you're entering the territory of pain.

MS: Writing this memoir was not easy, I will say that. I mean I felt often... And it was a

full-time experience for me which is not how I write poems. Poems just come to me, and if I'm lucky, I get one or two a month and after four or five years I have enough to make a book. So I say I've published several books of poems but I've never written a book of poems. I've just written a poem at a time until I have enough and then I see which ones speak to each other and they want to live together between two covers, and I'm glad that they're in conversation over that number of years.

But with this memoir, I sat down to write a book and every day I wrote, and some days were more fruitful than others and some days I got to lighter bits than others. Some days were a real slog, and often it felt like I sent the kids off to school and I lowered myself into a mine and spent all day down in the darkness where there were still some glittering bits because it is a mine.

Then would sort of pull myself up out of it in time for them to come in the door from school, sort of filthy from all of the sort of painful nostalgia that you have to steep yourself in to write about the most painful times of your life. Yet I felt better after writing about it, and it's not something I can really articulate clearly, unfortunately, why that is.

Probably other people, you would probably be able to describe this better than I would. Why that was satisfying in a way. And I think it comes down to confronting an experience that is painful and giving it shape and giving it language and giving it form. Even though I couldn't quite resolve everything on the page. It's not that I wrote this book and then sort of wiped my hands at the end and said, "Well, I've got that all figured out and now I can set that down and be done." It wasn't that neat, it wasn't necessarily healing. But I think it was cathartic in a way because memoir is almost like cartography.

Looking at a wide stretch of time, looking at different pieces of your life and seeing the ways that they touch, and maybe mirror or echo or rhyme with one another was so deeply contextualizing for me. I don't think I would've understood my adult life in the same way without writing about it for a year as I would've just thinking about it or even talking about it with my therapist.

TS: Now, there's a lot more I want to go into about writing as personal discovery and healing, and what kind of resolution we can or can't come to. But before we get there, I mentioned in the introduction that in 2016 a poem that you wrote, "Good Bones," went viral. And you write in your memoir how that experience of the poem going viral changed your whole life. So tell us a bit about how that changed your whole life and how this memoir actually was your working through of that change.

MS: Yes. When "Good Bones" went viral, I was a mom of two small kids in central Ohio working a regular kind of editorial job during the day and writing and publishing poems. I had a rich writing life, but it was still a relatively small writing life and it consumed a few hours of my day compared to raising kids and doing my regular job. So when the poem went viral, it was beautiful and terrible. I sort of, at once, had the opportunity to lean into my writing life in a way that I hadn't had the opportunity to do before. My readership grew exponentially, quite literally overnight, and at the same time it put a real strain on my marriage because I had been and still am the primary caregiver of these two children.

So I was very much needed in my home doing that work. And suddenly I had all of these opportunities to travel, to give a reading or go to a literary festival or teach a week-long workshop or whatever the case may be. So there was a real immediate not-able-to-be-planned-for tension between the sort of growing pains of my writing life, and the sort of expectations of me domestically at home.

TS: That gives us a sense of the stage that was set for the writing. In the book, you tell the story of the unraveling of your marriage, and also you reference the difficult miscarriages you had, and you talk about how this poem was one of the places you could have started the book. You didn't, but you do bring the poem up on page 63 and I might be one of the only people listening to this who had never heard or read "Good Bones" before. I'd never heard the poem, so when I got to page 63, I was like, "Thank goodness, here's the poem." I didn't ask you in advance, so you may be like, "Oh God, really, Tami?" But I'm wondering, would you be willing to read it for us?

MS: Of course.

TS: Thank you.

MS: Thank you for giving me the page number.

Good Bones.

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.

Life is short, and I've shortened mine

in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,

a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways

I'll keep from my children. The world is at least

fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative

estimate, though I keep this from my children.

For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,
sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful, right?
You could make this place beautiful.

TS: After I read the poem and got to the bottom of the page, I wrote, "Whoa," and then I had several exclamation marks. I was just like whoa, it was a stopping in my tracks from turning the page moment. I'm curious, when you reflect on this poem going viral during our time right now 2016 and then all of the repeated ways when there's a tragedy in the world that people bring up Good Bones and send it through social media. What do you think is in the poem that has landed so powerfully for people?

MS: It's almost not for me to say, and in some ways when I write a poem and then I send it into the world or a memoir or an essay it sort of stops being my business what other people think about it. But what I hear from people about why they share it is that it acknowledges the difficulty and darkness in the world. It doesn't have a Pollyanna outlook about the world that we live in and yet I think the ending of the poem is hopeful. I think it acknowledges that there's a lot of goodness here and that it's our responsibility ultimately to fix it up and bring out the beauty in it the best that we can.

TS: I think it was a sense of finally someone's accurately naming the horror that we're in the middle of while simultaneously making my heart enlarge and see a sense of possibility and how I could be a vehicle for that possibility in the world. Both at the same time in 60 seconds or less, so that's tremendous. Now, later in the book you talk about, "I contain multitudes." This quote that we hear from Walt Whitman and you talk about it both in a beautiful sense but also pointing to really the burden. This is the language I would use of that notion of containing multitudes and I wanted to hear more about that. Because sometimes I'm like God, I wish I didn't see things from so many different perspectives. I might get through the day a little more easily but I do see things, it seems like a blessing and a curse. I'm wondering your experience of that.

MS: Yes. I think being really aware of complexity is a blessing and a curse, right? We want to be aware, we want to be really paying attention and be dialed in and not be burying our heads in the sand and yet it doesn't help me sleep at night to perceive the world in that way. Yes. I think the chapter is but here's the thing Walt, sometimes I'm tired of my multitudes. There's a metaphor in this book about nesting dolls that we carry all of the earlier iterations of our self inside of us.

So inside 46-year old me is also 41-year-old me and 35-year-old me and 22-year-old me and

13-year-old me writing her first poem. That's some of the multitudes that I'm thinking of, is that we're never just one person, we're sort of ourselves and also all of ourselves dating all the way back to the very beginning of our own consciousness.

We sort of jangle around inside carrying all of these people, and one of the things I've been thinking a lot about as I age is it's not enough to just carry all of that knowledge, and all of that perception, and all of that complexity. It's, I have to listen to those earlier parts of me, too. I mean, I have to really dial into my intuition and my sort of deep wisdom and my inner voice in a way.

Sometimes it's painful because the thing about the inner voice, the thing about multitudes is sometimes you're tuning into things you don't want to hear. Right? It would be nice if I could just dial a radio to the inner voice that just tells me everything I want to hear and never gives me bad news and never prickles with some sort of warning. Or, "Well, maybe that's not what you think it is." But that's not how the inner voice works, I don't think. So yes, I mean being someone who is sort of... I think of myself as a porous individual.

I think it's what makes me right, I think it's what makes me a really sensitive mom but it's also painful to be porous. Sometimes I wish or I wonder what it would be like to be someone who just lies down in bed at night and just goes to sleep. I think those people might exist. I just can't imagine it.

TS: Now when you talked about listening inside and you were talking about these nesting dolls, you at different ages, the different identities you have inside. I wanted to understand more, are you talking about listening to the person you were in your 20s and 30s? Or are you talking about a different kind of listening and why do we need to listen to the... I mean the person I was in my 20s, whoa. I mean I know so much more now, I don't know if I want to listen to her.

MS: I don't know. I think in some ways I know a lot more now and some ways I'm like, that person actually probably was dialed into things that I have tuned out in my 40s. Integrity means wholeness. So something I've been thinking a lot about is what does it mean to be an integrated human being? For me, it's almost like when I save drafts of a piece of writing I never save over the old draft. So if I write a poem if it's Good Bones version one, it's Good Bones_one. When I go back and revise that poem, if I change a few words or change the line breaks I save it as Good Bones_two. I don't save over the old version, as a writer I might need to go back to something there. I might revise and polish out all of the interesting weird digressions in a piece of writing. I might find myself at Good Bones_17 needing to reinstate some of that original spark from the early draft, and I actually don't think of human life as being that different. But we get older and we get wiser, we revise ourselves over time.

But sometimes, I think it's worth going back and remembering and sort of staying in touch with an old friend, those earlier versions of ourselves. Because they have different wisdom, different spark, different knowledge that I don't want to be estranged from.

TS: When you're listening inside, how do you hear the wisdom in whatever voice it is and not just like, "That's one of those Tami tirades," or whatever it could be?

MS: Yes. It's like dialing the radio, dial through static and then you hear a station. I mean, I think it's intuition, isn't it? When you hit on something that feels sort of brave and real and true, and oftentimes it's not something comforting. I mean, that's the trick about, I think, dialing into that kind of deep knowing is that oftentimes I know I've hit on something if I'm uncomfortable. If it doesn't feel easy to integrate that piece of knowledge, if it feels like it's kind of going against the grain of where I want it to go. It doesn't mean it's, "Right." I don't even know what right is.

TS: Can you give me an example of that? Of something uncomfortable that you were like, "This is uncomfortable, but it's a piece of wisdom I need to pay attention to"?

MS: Yes. I mean, if you're thinking about a relationship you're in, whether it's with your boss or your partner or your child, and you remember something that someone said or a reaction you had to something that someone said. It's so easy to be like, "That's probably nothing," and sand that splinter down in your mind because you don't want to deal with it. What I'm trying to train myself to do, and what I think I'm finally getting brave enough in my life to do, is sit with the splinters without needing to feel comfortable, sand them down, set it aside, forget about it, let it go.

That thing that someone said to you that was passive-aggressive, or the thing that you did that you realized was unkind, and maybe there was no reaction to it. But it's bothering you because you know that you did something that was unkind and it won't leave you alone. Those things, really sitting with them, it's not easy. I don't like it, but the more I realize that if I'm uncomfortable that's probably...

It's almost like when a muscle hurts after you've done some sort of exercise where you access a part of your body that you're not used to moving. If something feels a little uncomfortable, it's probably because I'm stretching something that needs to be stretched.

TS: Now, Maggie, you mentioned that when *Good Bones* became the internet poem of the year, that's my language. When it became this viral sensation, that this had major ramifications in your marriage as the primary caregiver of your two children, and then your career blew up and the BBC was calling you, and Meryl Streep read *Good Bones* from the stage, and you got a whole lot of attention. As I was reading your poetic memoir, I thought, in a way, this is a feminist manifesto, if you will. That's my language. That, that sort of embedded in the story of "can both of us in this marriage have our full wingspan" or does only one person usually...

Not to be overly reductionistic. But often the man in a marriage gets to have a full wingspan web and I know that's not always true. But there's a woman taking care of children who's compromised in some way and I wonder, just as you have now spent all of this time talking about the book and having different conversations and the whole notion of emotional labor in the household, where you land on all of that?

MS: I love your language around that, I love the idea of this book in a way as a sort of feminist manifesto. I didn't realize how feminist the book was going to be at the outset. Of course, I was just sort of writing my life and then when I started to assemble the pieces, sort of kaleidoscopically, I was like, "Oh."

That's what I mean about memoir being deeply contextualizing, is unless you're able to really unfold the map and see the ways that—I was able to see the way that my upbringing and my own parents' relationship played a role in the kind of relationship I built. I was

able to see the ways and the pressure points between my writing life and my mothering life. I mean, all of these things I was able to see with the perspective of writing it all down and then stepping back and looking at it.

And I think you're right, I think it seems like every year or two, there is a wave of articles about whether we can have it all or not and we have these discussions about whether women can have it all or not? Then it sort of dies down and then a next year or two, there's another wave of can we have it all or not? And it just seems like the needle is not moving as much as I would like the needle to move and it's not just patriarchy, it's capitalism.

I like the wingspan image. I think often it is in a cis-hetero marriage the man who has the full wingspan, it's often the primary earner who has the full wingspan. One of the questions I have to keep asking myself in this book is, if you out-earn your partner, is there automatically a power imbalance and an expectation of being in some way exempt from a certain amount of domestic labor, including child-rearing? Yet talking about this book and going out on tour and doing interviews, I have heard from so many women who out-earned their husbands and still are the primary caregivers and still are the ones sort of making, I would say, asymmetrical sacrifices to take care of kids. I think the pandemic revealed a lot of cracks in the system that were primarily spackled by mothers.

TS: When you say "move the needle," when you imagine the needle really moving to a new place where both partners have full wingspan, if you will, to use my metaphor here. What does that look like to you? What would it take? What kind of relationship are you dreaming of for yourself, wanting to create, that realizes that?

MS: I mean, I think part of the reason the needle isn't moving is because it's not a needle that can be moved in individual families. There's just not enough structural support and we're moving backwards so quickly now in this country that it's hard. We're actually moving the needle in the opposite direction. Women are losing basic human rights, not gaining more of them certainly, but I mean the fact that there is no real leave, family leave in this country, there is no real support for working mothers.

So when there's a global pandemic and schools shut down and daycare shut down, even if both parents are working at home. I think we have a sort of Venn diagram where we have a lot of societal and patriarchal expectations of what women's work is and then we run up against a lack of structural support for women in the workplace. And where women live, in the slim center of that Venn diagram, is a really dark and crowded place.

TS: I think you're making a really important point about the social structures, the architecture of our society, and how that puts us in this position. And you went through

this deep archeological journey and are now in a different place. When you think of the kind of relationship, at least this is what it appeared to me from reading the memoir, the kind of relationship that you would welcome into your life and invest in again, I'm curious to know, in terms of your own inner development and psychological work you've done, what has given you a new sort of consciousness if you will? How would you describe it? Oh, this is the kind of relationship that I will now move forward into.

MS: So I live alone with my two children now, and what that means is I do everything and it's not a problem, because I know it's all my work. I think one of the problems I had in my marriage, and I hear this from friends, even happily-married friends. There is a resentment that can happen in a relationship if you think that someone else should be pitching in and helping more than they are, and so those kind of hairline cracks can grow over time. And it doesn't always create large fissures. It doesn't always break up a relationship, but those small resentments about who's not doing what can put a real strain on things.

So it's not that my load is lighter as a single parent living alone in this house, but it means I have clearer expectations and therefore no resentment about what my work looks like. If I were to live in a house with another human being again, another adult, it would have to look really different from what I did before and in some ways, I think the idea of negotiating that- it's not a place where I am right now.

It's not a place that I'm really ready to figure out how to negotiate that. Because I know I'm a caregiver by nature and so part of listening to myself- and this is one of the uncomfortable truths- is if I had another partner living in my house now, I think it would be really hard for me not to repeat the same patterns. So one of the safety guards I have in my own life is that I don't live with my partner. We live separately, and therefore I don't have the risk of resentment, or parenting another grownup, or having to argue about how I spend my time or with whom, or what my work commitments are, and what I accept or don't accept. So the ability to make decisions for myself without permission from another adult has been incredibly empowering for me right now.

TS: Thank you. Thanks for saying it right how it is. Now, this notion of our writing as having the potential for self-discovery and for healing. I want to talk about that, the healing aspect. I think sometimes people have this notion, "So I'm going to do all this writing, I'm going to come out and I'm going to have something like closure. Now I have closure on my grief, or I have closure on this part of my life." And I'm wondering what your thoughts are. Because as I got to the end of *You Could Make This Place Beautiful*, it felt like a deep embrace, but not exactly something I would describe as closure.

MS: No, I'm very suspicious of healing as a concept. Which I love the idea of it, I think it works on cuts on the skin, I think it doesn't-I have never fully healed from any deep inner wound. My friend, the poet Dana Levin, says that she likes to think about the concept of

endurance more than the concept of healing and I love that. That feels, at least for me personally, more psychologically true. It's not about healing and having closure for me and sort of setting the thing down and being done with it. The endurance piece is learning how to carry it better, having it be a little lighter in my hands, having it not be so cumbersome, being able to move more freely but I'm still carrying the thing, and I think I love the idea of resolution. I love the idea of closure, I love the idea of healing but it doesn't feel quite true to me.

It feels like there are always going to be splinters that are not sanded down in this regard. So the best thing I can do is learn to live with them, acknowledge them, talk through them, write through them, sit with them. And then through the writing and the talking and the thinking and the long walks and the ice cream and the music and all the joys of life, the dog kisses, I can carry those things better, they don't weigh me down in the same way.

TS: Related to this, what about this notion of writing with a goal of forgiveness?

MS: I was so naive. I really did start this book- and I write early on by the time I get to the end of this book, by the time I've written the last page of this book, I want to be in a place of forgiveness, and I did. That was a real deep wish of mine when I began this book and I think honestly, an honorable wish. I think I approached the writing of this book from a place of curiosity and empathy and frankly, a need for healing- even if I never quite got there. I didn't really get to a place of total forgiveness, I think I got to a place of acceptance, and I do think that's different.

TS: What is the difference? Because sometimes I think acceptance, maybe that's good enough and maybe that kind of is forgiveness. Because OK, they are who they are, they did what they did. I remember Rabbi Rami Shapiro who taught at Sounds True a program on forgiveness. He said, Tami, "You're not going to like my definition," when we were talking about doing the program, and I was like, "Try it on me, Rabbi Rami." And he said, "It's just accepting that, that animal has those spots. And when an animal has those spots that's the way that animal acts. And that's how they acted." I was like, "I quite like your definition." And in reading *You Could Make This Place Beautiful*, I thought, I don't know if I know the difference between acceptance and forgiveness.

MS: I've never heard that definition, but I quite like it and by that definition I might be there. So I might be leaning toward that definition because I feel like I would like the gold star of getting to a place of forgiveness, even though I don't feel like I've quite earned it. Yes. That's almost how I would describe acceptance, which is, "These are human things that happened in a human life and I can't change them and I don't need to, I can move past them."

To me, in a way acceptance doesn't require a relationship with the other person. It's not actually something that you need the other person for, and forgiveness feels more interactive to me personally. I can accept what someone has done or said to me without forgiving them, even if they're not sorry. Even if someone does something terrible to me and loved it and is not sorry at all. I might not be able to forgive them for that because they don't seem sorry and they don't seem to want forgiveness and it feels like that's always going to be a kind of open wound. But I can accept that it happened and move on and not think about it every day.

TS: I'm going to ask a personal question here. Do you still feel angry at your ex-husband? I mean, there was betrayal involved of you and of your children and, I mean, a complex story, and of course it would be completely understandable, but I wonder.

MS: I mean, not actively if that makes sense. I'm not walking around feeling angry. Anger to me it doesn't even feel hot, it feels like nausea. Anger in my body feels a lot like anxiety, it's a terrible feeling and for a long time I did actively feel that sort of ill, angry feeling on a daily basis which was not something I wanted to feel. I don't feel that way now. I mean, I think I've accepted enough that I don't actually feel angry.

Now if I start to think about it, if someone gave me a list of all the things that happened and said, "But what about this and what about this and what about this?" I'd be like, "Yes, that was really disappointing and frustrating, and I wish that wouldn't have happened, and how dare this person?" So am I a human being who can get riled up? Oh yes, I'm Irish. Yes, I can. But no, I think I feel much more at peace than I did two or four, six years ago.

TS: One of the, I guess I would call it writing techniques, I don't quite know if you would call it that. But it's also an inner-consciousness technique that you used in the memoir, is to take a witnessing, a kind of bird's-eye-view perspective on yourself and the events that are happening and I wanted to understand more about that. That seems like a great way to get a different perspective and way of understanding what's happening.

MS: I think it comes almost from- It happens to me a lot, and not just during painful times, where something really funny even is happening and I just think, "Oh my gosh, this is a scene from a movie. I would laugh so hard at this if it were a scene from a movie." And it happened a lot for me during my divorce when things would happen that felt too on the nose that I knew I couldn't- If I were writing a novel, I could never have written the scene the way that it actually happened because no one would believe that someone actually said that or that, that strange coincidence or serendipity actually happened.

But of course life hands us these moments all the time, things that are too perfect to be even believed in literature. And so I think about that a lot. One of the other impulses for writing about myself as sort of a character in an imagined play, which I do in the memoir, was giving myself a little bit of a cushion emotionally.

In poetry, we have all of these kind of distancing devices that we can use if the material feels too hot and personal. So if I'm writing a poem and the material feels too hot and personal to me, I can sort of put on oven mitts formally by moving it out of first person into third person. Moving it out of present tense into past tense, those things have kind of a cooling effect emotionally, I think.

Or even using a received form ,like a sestina or a sonnet, automatically sort of formalizes the experience in a way that kind of cools it down and makes it feel less like you're just handing a hot emotional experience to another human being. So when I got into the memoir, I thought, "I need to be able to use craft and form as a way of holding some of this material at an arm's length from myself, just for my own comfort in sharing some of this really vulnerable material with other people."

So the play and the third-person writing about myself as a character and imagining some of these things was a kind of device I used to make myself more comfortable with the level of disclosure that I had to do in this book.

TS: Maggie, I'm going to ask you a personal question that will require me to be personal. It's a little confessional here.

MS: Deal.

TS: OK. I don't think of myself as a writer, meaning I don't spend a lot of time writing, and yet I feel there's something in me that I want to share in writing. One of the obstacles, and I think this very well could be an obstacle for people within the Sounds True audience, the Insights at the Edge audience as well, is my first commitment is being of service. That's really what I want to do with my time and energy in my life and I'm not saying that to put myself-It's just true for me as a person.

If I'm going to write, I want to make sure that what I write, especially if it's for any kind of publication, is of service to people. They don't need to know all my personal stories and all my shenanigans and the funny things that happened to me. I want it to be medicine for people, and I don't know how to do that, how to find the medicine, what will really be helpful and uplifting to others in my personal experience. And I'm wondering if you could help with that?

MS: The short answer is, I don't think we know what our medicine is for other people most of the time. I wrote in the memoir, at a certain point, that I wanted to fashion this book into a tool that people could use. I wanted it to be useful, that's that service impulse. I think my impulse, by and large, is a caretaking impulse. So how can I be of service to you, reader? How can I give you something that you can use that will make your life better? What can I offer to you that's not just my own life? Then I realized a little bit later into the writing experience that experience itself is instructive, that we don't necessarily know the good that our words might do even if we're just talking about our shenanigans. I would actually love to hear about your shenanigans, because the medicine that your shenanigans could offer someone else is what? Like, laughter, or a point of connection where they remember a time when with their mother or cousin or daughter or best friend, they did X, Y, or Z.

One of the most counterintuitive things about writing and sharing, I think, our lives with other people through the written word, is that you would think that something really general and universal would attach to the most people. Right? Like writing a poem about capital L love, certainly that would have a wider readership than a poem about walking my dog around my specific block on a very specific day and yet that's not the way it works.

Actually what we, as readers, attach to the most, the things that have the most little hooks in them for us as readers are the most specific, could only have happened to that particular person on that particular day items. I have no idea why that's true, except for the fact that I think we go to books as lenses through which to understand our own lives. And even if we're looking through someone else's very, very specific lens, what we're seeing is ourselves.

TS: A final question for you, Maggie. Towards the end of *You Could Make This Place Beautiful* you write, "I joked that a more accurate title might be 'Notes From a Shipwreck' or 'Anecdotes From an Airship in Flames.'" And then you continue, "Now I see the title as a call to action, a promise I've made not only to this book and to you but myself, a promise I intend to keep." What I'd like to know more about is, what do you do and what can we do to make this life more beautiful?

MS: First, do no harm. I mean, I think I sort of move in the world the best I can to put love first in my actions. And that means on the page and with my kids and with my students and with the members of my family and community that I don't understand or see eye-to-eye and agree with. I mean, I think that's some of the hardest work, I think all of us have to do right now, is not being siloed and sort of living in bubbles with people who agree with us. But how do we reach out and have difficult conversations with people who don't? So I love your main focus being acts of service and how you can be useful in the world. I think I'm most useful in the world as a writer and probably as a parent, those are the two jobs I take most seriously. Those are the two jobs I feel like have the highest

stakes for me personally.

So how can I with my words and with the ways that I'm raising my kids, put more love and light into the world and encourage connection and communication? I think thinking about that, focusing our intention every day. How am I going to reach out instead of staying siloed? How am I going to lead with love even if it's a tough day, even if I'm dealing with people I don't agree with? Or even if I have to communicate with someone I still have some bitterness toward, how can I be charitable to the best of my ability? I think we have that in all of us even if it's difficult, even if it's uncomfortable, even if it's a splinter that doesn't quite want to be sanded.

TS: Maggie Smith, you certainly made my life and the lives of our listeners at Insights at the Edge more beautiful, and I think helped us find deeper inside ourselves our own integrity as human beings. So thank you so much, to me that's a form of beauty. Thank you.