

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - ROBERT POYNTON (Katie Elliott & Robert Poynton)

On today's show it's my pleasure to welcome Robert Poynton, a designer of learning experiences, improviser, Associate Fellow at the Said Business School at the University of Oxford and author of the recently published *DO / Pause / You are not a To Do list*.

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Robert Poynton. Thank you, thank you for joining me today.

You're very welcome. I'm delighted to be here.

I've been hugely enjoying your latest book, *DO / Pause / You are not a To Do list*, which is a fabulous title I think.

Thank you.

How many of us feel like we have become a to do list?

Yeah, I think the to do list thing is very interesting. It does make a lot of people sit up. I think people feel, can feel they've become a to do list. It also attracts attention in another way. People can get a bit uppity and go, "I love my to do lists and I've got lots of things to do". And I think what's interesting if you scrutinise the subtitle carefully, it says 'you are not a to do list'. So it's not about not having lists, it's about understanding you are more than the list and the list can take over and this sort of idea of, are you enslaved to your tools and methods of working or are they serving you? So in a way one of the things the book touches on is our agency and, in a bigger sense, our relationship to time. You know, are we using the time in a way that suits us or are we subject to a kind of metronomic beat that's driving us that isn't coming from us?

One thing that really struck me early on in the book is the fact that you refer to a couple of examples - I think one of them was Goethe, I can't remember who the other one was - examples of people talking about how in that moment in time everyone's rushing and how it's the spirit of the age and young people today, you know, they're always in a hurry. And these were things from, you know, well over a century ago.

Yes. I think it's very interesting when you start to delve into this, and those quotes came from a book called *In Praise of Slow* by Carl Honoré. And yeah, it seems to suggest to me that there's much more about us in those statements than about the world. So, whilst it's undoubtedly true that the pace of travel, the pace of communication has increased, what's interesting is the sensations and experiences that come from that are pretty much the same. That, at least in this period post-Industrial Revolution, people have always felt that we're in a hurry or things are going just a bit too fast. And so I think what that says to me is, let's look at ourselves. Yes, we have to do certain things to deal with pace and rhythm, but actually what's going on in us that we always feel that things are a bit too fast? You know, in 10 years time maybe today will seem slow. And so this raises the question of where's that sensation coming from and what's our relationship to it and what can we do about it? Because I don't think it's a very positive one. That sense of things being slightly, 'Aargh!', you know, is uncomfortable for many people and stress-inducing. So yeah, I think it's good to acknowledge that and recognise it. Hang on a minute - you know, today is not as special as we might think in some ways.

I think there's kind of, for me, there's a bit of a relief in it, because it suggests that I have some capacity for reframing that. And so there's a lot of conversation right now about how distracted we are, how much we're addicted to technology, about our relationship with our smartphones, all of that kind of thing. And it can feel as if technology is happening to us and creating an environment that is not healthy for us or we're struggling with in some way. And what you're talking about kind of suggests that we've always had this feeling of discomfort and that's just the latest thing to pin it on and that maybe there's some element of taking personal responsibility for our relationship with time.

Exactly. I think to me it's also a relief because you kind of go, "Yeah, actually we can do something about this, we do have choice". That doesn't mean to say it's easy, of course. And I think it's fair to acknowledge and recognise that the insistency and the persistency and the subtlety of some of the technologies we're subject to today, it can be very insidious and therefore it can make it harder. But nonetheless, at root, I mean one could argue, I've never thought this before, but one could argue that actually the first technology to do that to us was the evolution of the neocortex. You know, so as soon as we start to have rational thought, we've got this sort of piece of technology in our own heads, which is insistently and incessantly kind of taking us away into a stream of thought. And if you compare that to a meditative state where other functions and brainwaves are in operation, you know, you could argue that the external technology just actually amplifies that kind of tendency in our minds, which is absolutely in us. So yeah, I think it does fall upon us to do something about that. On the one hand that's liberating because, "Oh look, I

can do something here, I can make a different choice". On the other hand it is hard because the stuff is so insistent and it goes quite deep. But yeah, I think that is something we can make different choices around.

I love that idea about the neocortex. Kind of embedded technology.

Yeah. It's like, you know, "Can I turn off the app that's my neocortex?"

Imagine if you could turn off the notifications, wouldn't that be great?

It would be great wouldn't it? That would be fantastic.

"I'm just going to put that one on mute. I'll check in once a day."

Although probably, there's somebody probably out there working in whatever the field is called of implanted tech in the brain that's probably already doing this, you know?

So something I really wanted to ask you, because *DO / Pause* seems to be very much of the moment. You've definitely tapped into something that people seem to be thinking about and feeling quite acutely. So what I'm wondering, on a very personal level, is - when you do something and it seems to have that energy around it, there's a lot of interest in it, people want to talk to you about it - it can make you quite busy. How do you, how are you managing to pause in the middle of something that you've created that seems to be quite lively?

That's such a great question. Um, well, there's a number of things. So first of all, long-held practices and rhythms and routines. So the way that, you know, I've had a meditation practice for longer than I can remember, 25 years or something. So that's actually become more important to me, I'm more diligent at practicing it, but it's very much a part of my life already, so that's sort of easy to keep up. Um, where I live. So I live in a rural environment in Spain where, you know, nobody has any idea (actually there's one bloke in the village who knows) that I've written a book, because nobody there speaks English anyway and they're not interested, and so there's a fantastically calming effect of being amongst people who don't give any importance or show any interest in those sorts of things. And of course that village is held in just a fabulously beautiful landscape and that helps. So there's sort of background things of these long-held practices and then I think there is some more conscious work. I've got more picky, I think that's what I would say. And I've invented a little thing for myself, which is called 'a defense against the reflexive yes'. So, like many people, I've spent a lot of my career trying to please people and trying to be good and be popular and so that people come back and give me more work

and so I have a tendency to just say yes to things that later I think, "Ooh, I'm not sure I should have said yes to that". So what I've got is a series of little rules for myself. There's one very simple one which people could take and adapt actually, which is the idea of 'you're not allowed to say yes to anything in the first conversation'. And so necessarily then, even if I know I'm going to say yes or I feel very strongly, I force myself to stop and sleep on it or reflect on it. So there are little things like that that I'm developing. And there's an interesting twist on this as well, which is kind of, how can I put it.... I have to work on reminding myself that I don't have to do anything I don't want to do. And the sort of guilt that comes along with that, you know, "Who am I to just do the things I want to do and is that selfish?" And you know, I suppose the way I think of it is kind of even in the things you want to do, there's enough struggle and suffering to go round, so it's not like you get a free ride. Um, but yeah, I think that for me is quite an interesting one as well, of just really trying to be diligent and saying, "Do I want to do this? Does it serve, you know, what I'm trying to build?"

Do you think at some point you'll be sharing your 'defense against the reflexive yes'?

Yeah. That's it, yeah. It's not a very catchy title, but yeah, I mean I think I might write a blog about it at some point. I suspect that the particulars of my system might not be so interesting, but the idea that you can create a system for yourself that calls your attention to something - it's almost like your self from three days ago or from two months ago has written this thing down to remind your self of this moment not to get carried away. And I think that idea is something people could craft for themselves. And I think it would be contextual and it would depend upon what you were interested in. But yeah, I think I probably will write a little bit about it because it's been quite helpful to me.

Isn't it interesting how in the moment it's really easy to imagine that we'll always feel as we do? You know, in the moment of saying, "Yes, of course I'll do that!"

Yeah.

One thing is we imagine we'll have more time in the future than we do today. Consistently overestimate how free we will be to do things in two weeks or two months or whatever it is. We also underestimate how long things will take us.

Always.

Those two things, those two things are huge. But another one... um, it's not really scientifically validated, it's a bit of a dodgy one...but this idea of 'Unconscious

Thought Theory'. This noticing that sometimes when you pause, perhaps you're not actively working on something and you just leave it as a friend of mine would say 'on the back burner', that there are processes at work and sort of shifts in your attitude and your understanding.

Yeah, I mean it's interesting, I read a book recently called *The Mind is Flat* by Nick Chater that challenges this very strongly and says that there's no evidence of any unconscious processes whatsoever. And I find it very stimulating. I like to read books that kind of challenge me that I don't necessarily agree with. But in the end I thought, well, that may be so, but actually it's a lived experience we've all had and very, very powerful. And I think everybody's had it - the thing about putting something away and coming back to it and it feeling different. So whether or not there's a physiological truth underlying this is perhaps not so interesting as the fact that we feel that that occurs. And if we do, one of the kind of notions I played around with in the book is this idea that we don't have a single integrated mind. And maybe this is what happens when we make poor judgements about the future or the past - it's because this self and that self or this character and that character is sort of looking at things slightly differently. Well the way that I think of it actually is, I think there are sort of almost different minds within us, different qualities and natures of mind. And I kind of realised as I was writing, if you think about the history of psychology, there's lots of evidence to suggest that other people have thought this. So, you know, Freud gave us the 'unconscious' and Guy Claxton talks about the 'undermind' and 'hare brain and tortoise mind', and Carol Dweck talks about two different kinds of thinking, you've got Daniel Kahneman and all this kind of stuff. So I kind of played around with that idea and thought, well, if you've got at least two kinds of mind (and by the way, all these theorists, they're not all talking about the same division, they're all talking about different divisions, but it doesn't really matter), there's this notion that, "Oh look, there's more than one sort of form of mind in play". And I sort of think, pausing is a way to get the other one going, you know? So right now, thinking, speaking, using words, I'm sort of in the more familiar, logical, analytical kind of mind, that conscious thought mode. But if I go for a walk or if I sit still for a moment, or if I focus on the sunlight or if I play a piece of music, maybe those other minds kind of come into play. And those other minds are probably more subtle, more ephemeral. They live in a different, kind of speak different languages and have different understandings and different appreciations. And so I think this is about the idea of pausing being a kind of portal that gets you from one mind to another or from one experience of time to another. And if you think of it the other way round, if you're driven by to do lists and it's all about ticking things off and getting them done, as a friend of mine Jorge Alvarez said, "Motorways always lead to known destinations". So the kind of going off the beaten track which, interestingly, tends to happen in all the fairy stories and the great mythical stories, that people always go off the beaten track - and you can say that's a metaphorical

way of saying, you know, we need to explore these other minds, other facets of self. And you don't get that, you know - radical serendipity, for example, when extraordinary things happen, seemingly by chance, that doesn't happen when you're goal-focused, you know, when you're driven towards something. One of my favourite images and I often feel I'm like this myself, is of hens or chickens. And so we have hens at home, and when you're rounding them up to take them back to the hen house, they go from running for their lives, that's how they behave to kind of going, "Ooh, what's that over there?" in a nanosecond, you know? And I just find it absolutely fascinating and I feel sometimes that I'm like that. But I think that if you're always running for your life, you don't even have the opportunity - in a way we should be a bit more like chickens, able to notice out of the corner of our eye and give ourselves the time or the space to kind of go, "Ooh, what is that?" or, "What else could I do?" or, "How do I feel?" So yeah, I think this driven nature is, in the end if we're driving ourselves to try and get something, but it's driving us if we're not careful.

Yes. And the thing about it is that the more driven we are, so the more we enter into that very goal-focused kind of stressy state, the more our relationship with time changes. So that when you most need to pause, it can become most difficult to do because there's a sense that there is no time to pause. The only way that things will be okay is by continuing. A very controlling way of looking at things. But a very difficult one to resist actually. Have you got any thoughts about how we can regain perspective?

Well, I think if, essentially if you analyse what you just said, underlying it is a conception of time, which was actually articulated by Isaac Newton, like so much else that we kind of now just take for granted - the idea that time is uniform, absolute and objective. And so you feel like it's a dwindling resource, a scarce commodity, time is money, all that kind of stuff. So one thing I think helps is if you realise that actually time is much more elastic than that, that not all time feels the same. That can help you to think, "Well actually, yeah I don't have a month to go on a Vipassana retreat". But you don't need one. You could just take 30 seconds before you start the car or you could just pause for three seconds while you listen to what the person you're talking to has said before you respond. And so the fact that these things can be tiny and yet powerful, I think is a really good place to start. Cos there's an irony here, as somebody said to me in one of the talks I did about the book, you know, "How do you stop pausing being another thing to do?" And I think it's about being compassionate to yourself and accepting that, "Yes I do feel hurried and stressed and all those things". One of the things I do personally, and I use the stress and anxiety of feeling like there's not enough time as the trigger for this - and the mantra I have for myself is 'There's time for everything'. And that's just something I say in my head. And if I'm on my own, actually I'll say it out loud. I then

get to hear it as well as say it, which is kind of interesting. And if I say 'There's time for everything', it calms me down and it stops me being a runaway train. And so I think that what I'm really saying is if you let go of the idea that time is this objective thing, you can then start to play with it and you can realise that it's elastic and you might only need 30 seconds to think about something. You might only need three seconds to listen differently. You might only need five seconds to actually go, "Look at what my daughter just did!", rather than immediately kind of go, "That's great, darling - do another one". Or, you know, "What mark did you get for that?" So that's a big thing and a small thing at the same time. And one of the things I've started working on as a result of the book with a friend of mine is the idea of time literacy and how could we become more temporally intelligent, instead of this sort of very mechanical machine form of time, which works for machines but not for us. And instead of thinking of ourselves as kind of slightly shoddy, disorganised machines, which is kind of how we often talk about ourselves. You know, we're gloriously variable and inconsistent and eccentric and lovely in our irregularity and that's what we are.

I love the idea of increasing our time literacy, of helping us to develop some sort of vocabulary around this that that doesn't just feel otherworldly and incomprehensible. Because I think what I was alluding to when I talked about that feeling of stress, you know, when we feel that time is very limited, that's clearly an experience of time where time has kind of constricted. The nature of stress is that it shrinks our perception of time and we can all know from personal experience that there are definitely times when time seems to take longer - like when we're waiting for something and we'd rather not be. So we kind of have embodied, lived experience of different types of time and different relationships with time if you like. And yet, I don't think we really have a way of talking about it that doesn't just sound odd and a bit kind of esoteric.

I think that's absolutely right. And I think that's part of what we'll be exploring is how can we create language around that. What I think's interesting is, we used to have language for it, I believe. Because when Newton first proposed this idea of a singular objective, measurable, absolute time, it was thought to be ludicrous. You know, I'm sitting in Oxford at the moment, just down the road at Christ Church College, they run on a time which is five minutes later than the rest of the UK in that one college, and that's because they've never abandoned time by the sun. And Oxford is, you know, far enough west from London, it's about five minutes. And in those days before the railways, every village had its different times. And that was kind of normal. And when Newton proposed this idea that there's just one, everybody thought he was bonkers. He was the eccentric one. So what's happened is that's been so successful and so important and so valuable, in lots of good ways, obviously, that we've now forgotten that that's a choice that we made and you're

right, in order to make a different choice and get kind of more variegated, richer, more diverse sense of time, we probably need to go back and find some new language for it that doesn't sound weird. But I mean one of the things that strikes me as absolutely fascinating - so all those weird thought experiments where somebody travels off at the speed of light and then they come back again and one person's aged more than the other, those are only strange if you assume there is a uniform absolute time. And actually what the physicists are telling us now, this was a fabulous discovery for me in the book because I was mostly thinking about how we experience time and then I found out that the physicists say that there's no one time, there are lots of times and how time flows depends upon where you are in relation to big masses, how fast you're traveling, all those sorts of things. So, for example, there's more time upstairs than downstairs cos you're farther away from the planet and you can measure that with a caesium clock. It sounds bonkers, but it's true. So that it's not just that we perceive time in a different way. it's that time itself is more interesting and more subtle and more variable and more stitched into the fabric of the universe than we realise. And we've got this convenient approximation that enables us to run trains and planes and machines and all that kind of stuff, but that's machine time that suits the machines. It's not how time really is. So the fact that physicists say something similar kind of gave me heart, because I thought, "Oh right, we're not just kind of trying to make this up to make ourselves feel better". Underneath all of that is this idea of, we can choose the idea of time we want to have. You know, in different cultures people have the idea of time as circular rather than linear. The idea of progress and time's arrow is relatively recent and limited to a relatively small part of the world, you know, Western European and the regions whose thinking comes from there. So yeah, there are other choices. It's hard when you're mired in it, but we can start to chip away, each of us, and make different choices, I think.

Wouldn't it be fun to be able to go forward in time a little bit just to a point where we understand all of this better? Cos I think we'll look back at this period of us frantically trying to tick off all the boxes on the to do list, which of course is impossible because I don't know anyone who doesn't add more on the bottom.

Exactly, yeah.

So I have a feeling that at some point we will kind of look back at this time and smile wryly to ourselves.

Yeah, no I think that's probably true. And we could also use lists in a different way as well. I mean I wonder what it would be like if we wrote a to not do list. If we wrote down all the things, let's be honest with myself, what are all the things I'm not going to do today or tomorrow or whenever? It reminds me of a friend of mine travelling

with his son and they got very anxious about all the things that might happen, you know, we might get there and there'd be no hotel or the train might break down or whatever. And so they decided to write down all the things they were frightened that would happen. And after a few days they realised that none of them ever did. It wasn't that not very many of them happened, none of them did. So I think there are probably more ways that we can be more imaginative and more inventive even with our lists. Because you're right, I mean the mind moves very quickly and it's much easier to add things to the list than it is to do them, in the same way it's much easier to buy books than to read them and that's not going to stop. So maybe if we could use that list-making capacity to list things we're not going to do, then it would work in our favour, I don't know.

I use a today list.

Today list?

A today list and I'm only allowed to put things on it if I'm absolutely promising, I'll do them today. So it's not a place for putting down ideas of things I really ought to get round to, because I find that so disheartening.

Yeah. Yeah. I mean there's another tool - this one's not in the book, but I think it's quite useful - is that I have this idea that in any reasonable unit of time, certainly in any days, definitely in a week or a month and over a year or a lifetime, it's quite interesting to think in terms of different characters of activity. So I think about four: physical, there's social (when you're interacting with other people), there's what I'd call intellectual (writing, reading, studying, all that kind of stuff) and then there's reflective or spiritual or (if you're religious) religious stuff. And I think the idea for me is it's a way of navigating what you do next by thinking, "Well, am I being today excessively one? Am I doing all thinking?" So if I'm doing all thinking, I could maybe pause that and then do something physical. So often, when I look at my day or my week, I try and look about, hang on a minute, how do I compensate a bit of this with a bit of that?

I do something very similar and I find that, not that we're obsessing about getting stuff done, but actually if you were, it's a very good way of getting more out of yourself because very often when we feel tired or depleted, we simply tired and depleted in one particular type of activity. And you can keep yourself quite happily busy and energised simply by, a change is as good as the rest, they're right aren't they?

I think that's right. The old wisdom, there's a lot in it. And one of the things in my inquiry into pause was I realised, quite soon, you know though we tend to think of

pausing as stopping, it's stopping something in order to start something else. So actually it's much more a form of switching. And exactly as you say, switching from mental to physical or the other way around can help keep us engaged and I think that's right. I'm not interested as it were in cramming more in. But that doesn't mean I'm not interested in how do we get more out. But getting more out of life means including and creating space for a different quality of experience. So to get more out of something might be, just to take a simple example you know, if I go for a walk - I live in a mountainous area, so I often go for a walk - to actually not just make it the goal of doing the walk and getting to the top, and how long did I take, but to stop and go, "Oh my goodness, look at that". And particularly when it's a view I've seen many times before, there's a tendency to sort of skip over that. But mountain views are different in every moment anyway. And even if it is exactly the same, it's stunningly beautiful as it was last time. So getting more out is not about doing more walks. It's about appreciating that which you do in a different way. And so, for me, that shift between getting more done and getting more out is about engaging or deepening or widening or enhancing the nature of our experience, not just about getting further down the list.

Mm. So in that spirit of pausing and seeing what's there, do you have a *Little Challenge* related to what we've talked about that someone listening at home might just experiment with?

Yeah, I had think about this, there's many, many things I could suggest. And I want to suggest something like almost inconsequential, like really tiny because I'm very fond of little things, little challenges. I think there's great wisdom in that. So the challenge I think would be to notice, to actually just take a period of time, a day, and to notice where there are pauses occurring. Because often we don't notice them when they do occur. So I think that developing a kind of richer, deeper practice of pausing starts with noticing, well, "Where are they anyway and where could I just extend them a little bit?" And at the same time, in the act of sort of noticing where are pauses occurring, you can't help but notice where they don't, where they don't occur and where they might usefully occur. You know, and this might be completely mundane. So, to give you an example, a friend of mine noticed how he really got very impatient at the hand dryer in the public loo. And so he'd end up leaving the bathroom with his hands not properly dry and feeling slightly flustered and impatient. And having noticed it he kind of went, "What if I, instead of thinking of that as something I want to get through and get over, regard it as a little pause in its own right and just wait until the dryer's free and then dry my hands properly? And you know, it'll take all of 30 seconds longer and I've just had a moment". So it could be something as mundane and routine as that. But just to start by noticing, cos often I think the act of noticing then tends to bring about change naturally. I used to teach people to juggle many years ago and when you're

juggling obviously the balls have to be thrown in the right direction for you to catch them. And so it was much more productive to invite people to notice where they were throwing the ball rather than to tell them what they were doing wrong. And the act of noticing that would almost automatically tend to bring the throw into the right position. So that's my invitation here, is to start to notice where you're pausing or not, and then see what just to naturally emerges from that.

Wonderful. Rob, I could talk with you all day, it would be an absolute pleasure. And I'd love to be able to conduct this conversation in a way that allowed for longer pauses. But I'm aware on a podcast that may not be quite the thing, but....thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you, Rob.