

EPISODE 110

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09.3] AT: Welcome to The Portfolio Life Podcast with Jeff Goins. I'm your host, Andy Traub. Jeff believes that every creative should live a portfolio life, a life full of pursuing work that matters, making the difference with your art and discovering your true voice and so Jeff is committed to helping you find, develop, and live out your unique world with you so that you too can live a portfolio life.

Today's guest is Rob Bell. He's difficult to describe. He's been a musician and a pastor, he's one of Oprah's favorite people, he is disliked by many people on traditional church and adored by others. He's complex, he's maligned, he's controversial, he's deep, he's vulnerable and today, he's here to talk with Jeff.

Here's Jeff Goins and Rob Bell.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:04.2] JG: Welcome Rob Bell to the show.

[00:01:07.1] RB: Beautiful, it's great to be here.

[00:01:08.4] JG: I'm so glad to have you. Rob my first question for you is what is it that you say that you do? What's your job title? Because in my mind, you're the musician turned pastor turn speaker/film maker/writer/on and on and I love all those slashes. I love those slashes. We talk a lot about that on this show, the idea of a portfolio life is you have a whole portfolio of things that you do.

You talk about this in your book, *How To Be Here*, which I loved. Read it over the weekend, we'll get to that in a second, but when you're at a party and somebody says, "So what do you do?" What do you say?

[00:01:46.6] RB: Feel free to help me on this one. Sometimes I say “author” because people can get their minds around that, you know what I mean? They can be like, “Oh write books,” and then I say, “Then I speak and then I create these spaces where people can wrestle with all of the stuff they don’t have other spaces where they can wrestle with it and I announce good news, like, we’re going to be okay, you’re loved, there’s something happening in the world and you can be a part of it.” My wife says that when I say “pastor”, for a number of people that means a building that has services on Sunday mornings that you’re at each week and I don’t do that, do you know what I mean?

[00:02:22.9] JG: Right, not anymore.

[00:02:24.2] RB: And then if you say “spiritual teacher”, that’s probably the most accurate but at some level, people are immediately like, “Yeah, I think I want to go back into the bar and get a drink,” do you know what I mean? That just sounds a little bit like, “woo”.

[00:02:38.6] JG: Yeah.

[00:02:39.5] RB: One time, I on a Sunday afternoon noticed there was something sticking out of our mailbox and I went down to get it because mail doesn’t come on Sundays and it was this piece of sandpaper and on it was this drawing of a ladder and at the top of the ladder was a string that was tying together a bunch of clouds and I saw that the artist was a really well-known local painter.

So I found his number, called him and said, “I see that you put something in my mailbox what is this?” And he said, “I went this morning to hear you give a sermon,” and he says, “I finally figured out what you do.” He said, “We all have hopes, dreams, ambition, doubt, fear, worry, insecurity, wounds, plans we’re making, goals, we all have this stuff floating above our heads.”

And he says, “What you do is you tie the clouds together. You help make sense of all this stuff that’s stirring inside all of us,” and I was like, “Well, there you go. Tying the clouds together, that’s what I do.” Although that demands it’s own paragraph.

[00:03:41.2] JG: That’s no small task.

[00:03:42.6] RB: Yeah.

[00:03:43.4] JG: Yeah, you know I think that's true. When we were getting e-introduced via e-mail, I was thinking about when I first heard about you, I guess probably originally like a lot of wayward college students through some NOOMA videos, which I loved. You talked about in how to be here, just the origin story of these different creative projects. But then I read *Velvet Elvis* and it was explaining familiar things in unfamiliar ways and I think you do really well. So thank you.

[00:04:15.5] RB: Oh that's great.

[00:04:16.0] JG: Yeah, thanks for the work that you do. I appreciate it and as a creative, as an artist, as somebody who strives to make things in the world, it's fun to watch you operate and learn from the things that you do including doing Facebook Live and uncontrollably laughing.

[00:04:34.6] RB: Oh man, I feel like they invented that thing for me.

[00:04:41.0] JG: Fun.

[00:04:41.8] RB: Half the time I'm laughing, the technology alone makes me laugh like I lived to see this and then half the time, is that people and that all of a sudden there'll be thousands of people watching and I'm laughing like, "What were you doing that you were on Facebook at the middle of the day? What am I doing, doing this, but what are you doing?" You know what I mean? And then the things that people say sometimes is just so funny how the communal mind can move that fast that's why I'm laughing.

[00:05:17.7] JG: I was thinking about this because I see you doing interesting things with social media but I don't see you crazily going after technology. In fact, I think I heard you in interviews and start talking about technology addiction. You talked in the book about the importance of Sabbath and just rhythm of the week, which I love. But are mostly hopeful or skeptical of technology? Somewhere in the middle? I'm curious about that.

[00:05:45.4] RB: I think that the fundamental question from early on, every major advancement brings with it great potential for good and great potential for not good. From fire all the way through to texting. So that the larger issue is humanity evolving and growing to have the maturity to be able to handle whatever this new fire is.

So we split the atom and discovered nuclear energy, which can be awesome unless you're splitting the atom to make a nuclear bomb to kill innocent civilians. So I think I so appreciate it and at the same time, just looking through our past as a species, I always hold it a bit at a distance because it will always simply raise the age old question, "What will you do with this new thing that you can do?"

When you look back in the ancient Hebrews, the invention of the brick, there is actually a story in the Bible about the invention of the brick and all of a sudden, you try piling stones that are all different sizes on top of each other, you can't build something very high but somebody invents the brick and they're like, "Let's build a tower," and the story of the Tower of Babel is a story of warning.

Somebody may get a hold of this technology and use it to oppress others and like Michael Lewis has that book *Flash Boys* about hedge funds and this extraordinary new technology that allowed people to make hundreds of millions of dollars essentially exploiting milliseconds on the trading floor, you know what I mean?

[00:07:19.7] JG: Yeah, right.

[00:07:20.5] RB: Basically just skimming profits off of the backs of other people and so I don't charge in. I sort of stand in a distance sometimes because I always know there will be some flip side to this.

[00:07:34.4] JG: Right. Yeah, I was thinking of another book that I read by Shane Hips whom I know you're familiar with.

[00:07:39.3] RB: Oh yeah.

[00:07:40.2] **JG:** *The Flickering Pixels*, remember that book where he talks about how technology inevitably affects our inner lives? And this was a time, which I'm sure you remember, when churches especially were telecommuting everything and using big screens and using all kinds of smoke and technology to advance the message and Shane goes, "Wait a second, this is going to affect the message in some way." People are like, "No, no, no we've got to get the message out there bigger, better, faster," and I love that book. It was provocative.

[00:08:11.3] **RB:** Very provocative, yes.

[00:08:12.7] **JG:** Okay, so the last time I saw you, you probably remember this, no I'm just kidding. The last time I saw you it was at Belmont University, have you been back to Nashville since the Love Wins Tour?

[00:08:25.7] **RB:** Yeah, the *Everything is Spiritual* tour this summer.

[00:08:28.4] **JG:** Yeah.

[00:08:29.4] **RB:** I was in Nashville.

[00:08:30.1] **JG:** Yeah, I remember hearing about that. Well, I wasn't there for that. So the last time I saw you was several years ago for *Love Wins* and there was a lot of hoopla about this book, you may recall and I remember thinking skeptically going, "Wow, this was a really well planned publicity stunt," and my therapist says that in order for you to advance relationship, you have to go back to where the thing was originally broken so we have to talk about this, just sort of teasing.

But this was my last recollection of you and I remember going into that going, "Huh, well we'll see what he has to say," and then I remember you being really vulnerable. I don't know if you recall this and saying, "Man, I'm tired," and somebody asked a question and you basically said, "This has been the hardest season of my life especially for my family and me," and that's my last recollection of you is being tired and being, in my estimation, the most famous, the most probably maligned.

It was a very controversial book and also a very popular book and that's my last recollection of you in person and then I've been following your work ever since but a lot changed after that and without making it about that and dredging up a bunch of old memories.

[00:09:46.6] RB: That's fine, you can dredge. We can dredge, no problem.

[00:09:49.4] JG: Let's dredge it up, the dredge report. No, I remember reading *How to Be Here* and going, "This is a really cool picture of creativity." You talked about failure, you talked about craft, which I loved and so I'm wondering, because I saw it from a distance what happened to you externally after this. You left your church, you moved to California and started to follow the next part of your path. What happened internally? What happened to you since then?

[00:10:18.1] RB: Besides unbelievable joy and feeling like I'm more alive than ever?

[00:10:24.1] JG: That's a good place to start, we could talk about that.

[00:10:27.2] RB: Yeah, well...

[00:10:27.6] JG: How do you think about that moment? I'm just curious because you know it's...

[00:10:31.1] RB: Right, I know exactly what you're talking about. I think, well first off, I never set out to prove to religious people that I was religious enough. So part of it why am I spending so much energy answering questions about breaking the rules of golf when I am playing tennis? Do you know what I mean? Or people asking how does it feel to get kicked out of a tribe when I never felt like I was a part of that tribe in the first place?

So part of it was just why are all these narrow angry Christians — this isn't what I ever set out to do so why all of a sudden — do you know what I mean? Like if all of a sudden the knitting community was angry with you, you'd be like, "What?" Do you know what I mean? "I don't knit," or whatever. It was just a strange — that was a weird example by the way but it was just this weird like, "I'm not trying to do what you're doing."

Secondly, the Jesus tradition is incredibly broad and vast and nothing in that book was anything that hasn't been said for thousands of years. So you're not angry with me, you're angry with your own tradition and actually, that book is the intro to these issues. I just scratched the surface. If you're upset about that, your faith is really a problem. Part of it was just, that's much more of the mind rationalizing it. It was also I wrote that book because as a pastor over the years, people come to you and ask you all sorts of questions and questions always come out of a story that people have been told.

I kept noticing how many people had been told, "Billions of people are going to burn in hell forever," and if you believe that's the story, that's a horror story and I kept meeting people who struggled with suicidal thoughts and depression and deep anxiety and it was because religion handed them this understanding of the universe, which essentially says, "The universe is not a safe place and you should be very afraid," do you know what I mean?

[00:12:45.2] JG: Yeah, totally.

[00:12:45.9] RB: So this book, I was not trying to prove to religious people I was religious. I was just trying to tell to a number of people another story about who they are and what it means to be a human being.

[00:12:57.9] JG: Did the — sorry.

[00:12:59.1] RB: I think that what was happening was the amount of energy that this feedback loop and then the fact that the Internet loves controversy. So the book, anybody who says that they want to be controversial, I'm instantly not interested in listening to them. I think it's a terrible goal. I, as a pastor, set out and to this day I try and help give people a better vision of what their life could be and our life together and the future of the world could be.

I've been probably at that point about a decade in to being criticized. Protesters out front when I go speak places, people trying to have me removed from the church that we started, just weird but in some ways for me, probably what you picked up on is the end of a phase in my life where I kept bumping up against a religious world that had a bunch of rules for a game that I was never trying to play in the first place.

And it was through that process that some people that we really love who were actually the people who ran the church that we are a part of said, “What do you want to do next?” and we started really thinking through their question because their question came from a great place of love and care for us and it was like, “Oh, we need to go farther and do this work in a much broader wider world”. So part of that fatigue in some way was, “Oh this is an end to a phase of life. I have come to the end,” you know what I mean?

We’re going to have to have an octomb baby here. It’s time for now a reinvention and it also brought with it this extraordinary joy because all of us, our worst fear is that we will be misunderstood, that we will be hated, that we will be criticized. The ego wants control over those things and there was such a feedback loop that I was on the receiving end of and if religious people — there is a unique venom that religious people spew when they believe they’re defending the Almighty. You know what I mean?

[00:15:07.9] JG: Yeah, totally.

[00:15:08.6] RB: The only thing more important to defend is America. If it’s God or America, defending those two things brings a particular brand of ire out of people but a part of it was all that happened and I survived and at some level what it did was, “Oh all the things that your ego is most terrified might happen actually happened and you’re here.” So, oh my word, there’s some sort of, “Well, then let’s go farther,” and all of the things like this might happen.

Now, I laugh like, “Oh that might happen. Yeah, it already did. It already did and we’re here,” and in some deep, deep way, joy through that process became like a constant companion. Like, “Oh my word, all that stuff that we’re all terrified that could happen it all actually happened and I’m fine. I’m not only am I fine, I’m great.” So yeah, you’re right. It was almost like you have to go to the belly of the beast and if you keep going, you come out the other side and you are not the same person that you were.

[00:16:22.5] JG: The reason I asked that, and thank you for dredging with me.

[00:16:27.2] RB: No worries, it’s fun.

[00:16:28.6] JG: It's fun to dredge. I mean certainly from the outside, it looked like a closing of one chapter and opening up of an entirely new one.

[00:16:35.2] RB: Yeah, very perceptive, yes.

[00:16:37.0] JG: And you talk about, in *How to Be Here*, failure and my favorite chapter/section was about craft. I love that word and you talked about the separation of what you do on a daily basis from the results that you seek and we all want results, we all want to make an impact. If you were doing the Facebook live video and nobody watched, a certain part of that would feel a little bit unfulfilling.

[00:17:04.9] RB: Yes.

[00:17:05.5] JG: But I love that your response to that eventually wasn't, "Well I've gone too far and I've got to leave this life and go be a hermit somewhere," but, "I've got to go father." And that's really inspiring.

[00:17:22.7] RB: Absolutely and actually the word "radical" comes from the Latin word "radix" which means root, so a radish is actually a root vegetable, you are eating a root. The radical is not the person who wandered off into the deep weeds and left the path. The radical is the person who returns to the center. Think about how many businesses were started based on a really amazing innovative idea and years later, when somebody presents a new great innovative fresh idea, everybody goes, "Oh that's too radical for this company," do you know what I mean?

[00:17:55.1] JG: Yeah, right.

[00:17:55.9] RB: When that person is actually presenting the most traditional idea imaginable, which was to innovate and in my line of work, the Jesus tradition is about a universal human solidarity in which we all care for each other. In which love, we really do move in sacrificial love to create a new kind of world and for me, it was part of this, "Oh wait, no, no, no, you're not wandering off the path, you're actually journeying father into the center than ever, so just keep

going. Just keep going,” and it just keeps getting more enjoyable along the way.” So yeah, I’m more into it than ever.

[00:18:35.8] JG: Yeah and it’s been cool to watch as your message has expanded instead of, you said, sort of wandering off into some other path entirely, if that makes sense? I think that’s been cool to watch. What I love, to change the subject, about your latest book, *How To Be Hear*, first of all listener if you’ve never listened to a Rob Bell book, you’re in for a treat because it’s like a performance. It’s not like somebody reading his book. My favorite Rob was I think it was in *Love Wins* where you had like an illustration, you were narrating the illustration. So there’s a picture, I can’t remember, it’s like a picture on my grandpa’s...

[00:19:20.9] RB: Oh, that’s right. My grandma’s wall, yeah.

[00:19:22.6] JG: That’s right, anyway you’re like, “So this is the second part and here’s the quote and my quote is by so and so and here’s what they say.” What I like about this, and as I said earlier, I admire — and maybe it’s because we’re just so darn alike, but I love the musician past. I used to be a musician, I still am I supposed and whenever I think of you and I go, “Oh yeah, he was in a band,” I think of that band Semisonic and Closing Time.

[00:19:47.9] RB: Oh Closing Time.

[00:19:48.7] JG: Especially when you had the glasses, I don’t know? I need to probably do a picture of you guys together with this episode. So what’s interesting about *How To Be Here* for me is I feel like this and maybe *Drops Like Stars* too, which was a really cool book. You sort of pulled the curtain back on how your creative process works a little bit.

Obviously, this is a bigger book than that. It’s about seeing your life as a creative act and designing your life but I love every chapter. So I was working on this thing and it went back to that how you described what you do. I was like, “Man, he did indeed does a lot of things, events, movies, TV shows, novel, books,” on and on and you do them really well. I just want to acknowledge that.

There is an artistic sensibility to what you do especially, I mean to go back to that doing in a religious context, I don't have to tell you that there's a lot of bad art in churches today and it's sad when the church was one of the biggest patrons of the arts long ago. So I love that. I love your aesthetic. *How To Be Here* was a great read because you talked about all these different things that you did. You talked about creativity in a way that we can all be creative but I'm wondering what is your definition of creativity? What does it mean to be creative to you?

[00:21:08.8] RB: Well, one of the things in the book I tried to do when I was talking about moms and accountants is root all creativity and creation, which is what you do with the life you've been given. That that's a fundamental act of creation. So how you organize your time, where you go, what gets you up in the morning and that for many people, creativity is just, "Oh my friend Phil likes to paint," you know what I mean? And often times — what?

[00:21:36.3] JG: I love Phil's paintings.

[00:21:37.5] RB: Yeah, I love his paintings especially Cliff, Cliff's sculptures are just amazing and I think for many people, creativity was just, "I guess there's a couple of people over there who get to be arty and maybe some landscaping here and there." You know what I mean? Like, "I get to be creative," and what I was trying to do is give people a broader definition of creativity that's rooted in creation, which is you get to create your life and where you go and how you spend your time and more importantly, what you give your energies to is all a fundamentally creative act.

And that when an accountant makes sure that all the numbers line up and there's enough money to do the next thing, that is all fundamentally creative work and so I think I am trying to rescue people from the idea that some people get to be creative and some people aren't. The ancient Jewish consciousness, talked about the ongoing creation of the world. That we are all creating a world together and the question is what kind of lives are we going to create and what kind of world are we going to create together?

That just becomes a much more interesting discussion to me than whether or not you are good at writing songs, which most of us just check out at that point because it has nothing to do with

paying the bills and what gets us up in the morning and how do you raise kids and how do you think about career and all of that?

[00:22:58.5] JG: So when you talk about creating your life, to what extent do we have agency over that? You talk about suffering, you talk about things that happen like, “Oh I didn’t want this to happen. I didn’t design my life for this to happen,” and that was a question I had as I was reading the book like, “How much do you get to create your life?”

[00:23:17.5] RB: I know and in some ways, how free am I and how much are things determined? People have been arguing for thousands of years and anytime people create a binary of either or, the answer is probably yes, do you know what I mean?

[00:23:33.1] JG: Yeah, totally.

[00:23:33.9] RB: You are into the deeply paradoxical nature of reality itself. I would say though that for many people, and what I kept trying to return to in the book, for many people life is something that happens to you and so there is a fundamental disempowerment and if one thing could happen in the book, to me it would be that somebody who feels like, “No, the whole thing kind of happens to you. My life is simply how it is and that’s how it’s going to be.”

If you could have a moment of just one area in your life and just one small area of that area, where you realized, “Oh I could actually turn the knob there. I could actually make a small change there.” That’s all we need because if we can each see that we aren’t totally disempowered and all it takes is one small little thing where you realize, “Oh, I actually have a bit of choice and power here. I could actually change this,” even if it’s small and insignificant.

Well then that shatters the myth that the whole thing is happening to you and when you do that, all of a sudden a bit of an imagination may emerge like, “Well, wait. If I could have a little power in that area, maybe I could have power in another areas? Maybe I actually am more empowered than I realize?” Because we talk about the things in the book, for many people it’s like, “Okay it’s nice but I have to work X number of hours and I have kids who need food to put on the table. It’s all nice but I have stuff I’ve got to do.”

But I would just argue, is there anywhere within those parameters where you actually do have room to affect it and make changes that would make your life better? Because if there's even one small area, then you may have a bunch more power than you realize and that's when things get quite interesting.

[00:25:30.0] JG: Yeah, I love that and I feel like the book did a good job of sort of stretching you like a rubber band. Stretching you and then letting you shrink back down to size but still be a little like you're stretched out.

[00:25:39.7] RB: Yes because some people are like, "Well it would be nice to buy a van and spend my time driving around Maui for the next three years but I've got stuff to do." And I'm like, "This isn't a book about radically leaving every single thing in your life and going and snowboarding every day or painting," you know what I mean?

This is about tiny little tweaks that you make, maybe you do need to pack everything and go to Toledo. But probably the way it will work is you just make all of these small little shifts and suddenly you realize, "Hey wait, this is way better than it used to be."

[0:26:18.8] JG: You use this term that I hadn't heard before, "ikigai"?

[0:26:22.7] RB: Yeah.

[0:26:23.9] JG: Not icky guy. Ikigai, Japanese term. What does that mean?

[0:26:27.7] RB: You know, I first stumbled upon it, they were doing some studies on where people live the longest in the world and there was this area of Japan where people live well over a hundred on average. They said that these people had this concept of ikigai, which is this Japanese word essentially means "that which gets you up in the morning" and that they have this long standing tradition of ikigai which is you have to figure out what gets you up in the morning and it's also translated "reason for being", and that people who live long are deeply in touch with their ikigai and that may shift over the course of your life.

I found that really helpful because for many people, calling, vocation, path, destiny, all had a very narrow feel to it. Like, “You’re supposed to get trained and get a master’s degree and whatever it is or go to college and get trained,” and you do that the rest of your career. But I kept meeting people who were thriving who if you were to map how they spent their life, it was all over the place, you know what I mean? It was a whole series of weird turns and cul-de-sacs.

But then often you’d look back on it and see common threads just below the surface and for example, what if you get trained to do something and then industry shifts and you now have a skill — you own a company that makes eight tracks, you know what I mean? You’re going to have to figure something else out that your ikigai may shift over the course of your life and maybe several things. Maybe somebody near you get sick and you have to take care of them. For a season of life, one of the things that get you out of bed in the morning is the care of somebody else.

To me, that’s such a more fluid, dynamic realistic vision of life than “you do one thing, you get trained in it, you get a paycheck from it and you do that till you die”. So in the book I talk about, your ikigai, you might not even get paid for it. You might have a job that pays the bills so that you can do this other thing and actually getting paid for some things may ruin them for you. But it’s much more of a fluid endless process of discovery.

[0:28:34.2] JG: What would you say is your ikigai?

[0:28:37.2] RB: I think I create spaces where people can make sense of their lives spiritually. I think that a book is a way of creating space, film, a podcast, a live event. I think somehow whatever it is that I do, it gives people the space where they can discover who they are and what they’re doing here and that there’s some element of good news in that.

At the heart of the tradition I come from, there is good news, an announcement of good news that it’s good to be human, it’s good to be you, there’s good happening in the world and you can be a part of it.

[0:29:20.7] JG: You talked about why it’s sometimes not good to get paid for your ikigai and I think you made this distinction that I liked, it’s not just what you love. That was really fun

because a lot of people will go, “If I could just get paid to do what I love, I’ll never have to work a day in my life,” right? Is that true?

[0:29:40.5] RB: That’s fantastic and some people do. I mean I happen to stumble in to work that I love and that’s been great but it’s also been brutal and I had a couple really bad burn outs and it’s also taken everything I have just to stay on the path at times. Then there’s also, there’s the American Idol where the contents are like, “This is my one shot and I was born to be a singing super star,” but maybe if you got paid to be a singer you’d hate it. It might actually ruin it and that maybe the reason why you love in is because it has no paycheck pressure attached to it.

Because often there’s this thing, “Well there’s this thing that you love so you should get paid for it and then do that as your job for the rest of your life.” But I know lots of people who thought that was the case and then they try to do it and it just crushed them. So part of it is, there are some things we love to do like surfing is how I sort of fill, get my tank filled. I love surfing and it sort of puts me back together and it’s how I — it’s almost like a rebirth every time I get in the ocean. If there was money at all involved in surfing, I’d instantly be like, “Really? I got to go surfing again?” You know what I mean?

[0:30:52.0] JG: What if you were surfing in money?

[0:30:57.1] RB: I think as soon as a paycheck is attached to things, now there’s a whole number of other factors that are now in play and a part of your ikigai is your life is this strange exotic cocktail of what you do for fun, what you do for work. What you do because it’s the right thing to do, what you do because it makes the world better. If you can hold it a bit more loosely, you could sure figure it out with more joy and it might even bring you the kind of life that’s actually worth living.

[0:31:32.2] JG: So as a writer, I’ve followed your writing for a long time and it has always fascinated me how you’ve been able to say a lot with your little.

[0:31:41.4] RB: Oh yeah, which takes way more work.

[0:31:43.8] JG: Well, what's interesting about the book is you talk about how you write a book and there's a lot of work that goes into it. Even into books that maybe don't get published. I'm wondering if you could, because this was fascinating to me both when you talked about rhythm, creative rhythm when you do what. Because this is a profession. I think this is something that if you aspire to do creative work for a living and, as you've said, that anything that you do is innately creative if you have the right mindset about it. It can just turn into a job.

It can turn into endless administration. I mean, that's been something that I've had to grapple with recently and the way you order your day, I thought it was fascinating and the way that, getting some insight in the way that you write is really interesting too. So there's two questions there, you can answer them however you want. One is, how do you write? What is that process look like for you? And two, how do you order your day around all of the creative projects that you're working on in such a way that like A, they actually get done and B, you don't completely check out on your family?

[0:32:45.8] RB: Yeah, those are great questions. First off, it's not hard to fill pages, the hardest work is in what to eliminate. So I'm always trying to say it with less words. That takes way more work than saying whatever it is with more words. Most books I read I'm like, "Too long, too many words, too many words." So I'm looking for the simplicity after complexity. It's one thing to be simple, that's easy. It's another thing to be complex, that's slightly more difficult. The greatest degree of difficulty is to push through the complexity to the simplicity on the other side of complexity. So I'm trying to write a book that people will actually read all the way through you know what I mean?

[0:33:31.2] JG: Yeah.

[0:33:32.7] RB: I'm also trying to keep pairing it down until I've captured it in the least amount of words and that just takes way more work. It's designed by elimination. It's like a cluttered logo isn't the goal. The goal is something with very clean lines. I actually leave lot of empty space on the page because those few words need to have the space they need to breathe and to do whatever it is they need to do.

[0:34:06.8] JG: So you do that when you're writing?

[0:34:09.1] RB: Yeah. An example would be the book I'm writing right now, the first draft was 102,000 words and I'll probably, it will probably — the first draft I turn in to the editor, I'll probably turn in 50,000. I'll probably get rid of 50,000 words. I'll probably get rid of half of the content I created. Part of it, you know you're doing well, a talk, a book, I know we're on the right path when good material isn't making it in.

When I start hacking good scenes, get edited out of the movie, that's when I know we're getting there. Then I actually, it has to look a certain way on the page and my first book, I had never written a book but I just knew it needed to be these spaces. Sometimes it needed to be a long run on paragraph, sometimes it needed to be a couple of lines all alone in one sentence with space above it and beneath it. That was just an intuitive and people are like, "You can't do that, it doesn't look right. It looks like you don't have anything to say." And I was like, "No, it just needs to look like this."

[0:35:15.0] JG: I hate interrupting but this is fascinating because this is like a trademark of your books and I was like, "Does Rob just sit down and writes this on a steno pad and hand it to his publisher and then they do all this interesting design?" Because different alignments, different line breaks between [inaudible]? That's your process.

[0:35:31.6] RB: Yeah, that's how it has to look to me.

[0:35:33.5] JG: Interesting. That's fascinating.

[0:35:35.1] RB: I don't — some of it I can't intuitively, I can't intellectually, it would be hard for me to explain why it needs to look like that. Probably at some level if I thought about it I'd be like, "Oh, that sentence needs to be on its own. But then that sentence needs to be a part of a long run on paragraph that has," — it's almost like my speaking. Sometimes you build ahead of steam and then it comes faster and faster and faster, and then you just stop and you say, you slow it down because this line is going to make that previous section pop. It's going to connect a bunch of dots. So there's almost like a speed, slower speed, faster speed, a density, a scarcity and a sparse nature. All of those things are in play, and that's what it's just supposed to look like.

[0:36:21.8] JG: It's kind of like music.

[0:36:23.2] RB: That is a musical — definitely.

[0:36:23.7] JG: Do you think about that? Like a cadence?

[0:36:24.7] RB: Definitely for me, there is like a great storytelling has a musical dimension to it in which — oh here's an example. I'm visiting my friend recently, he's recording at Sunset Sound in Hollywood, which is his famous studio. His band is in room two at Sunset Sound and I was visiting him and the studio manager was telling me about all of the famous — and my friend's band, we were all staying around.

The studio manager was telling us about all the bands that had recorded in this room. He's like Van Halen One was recorded here, Van Halen Two. Prince in the 80's rented the studio for six months. He starts listing all of these — he says, "Led Zeppelin recorded in this room." We were all like, "Whoa," and he's like, "When the Levee Breaks by Led Zeppelin was recorded in this room." We all just — like it gets quiet, you know what I mean? Like, "Whoah."

It's like, "When the Levee Breaks," we all just kind of went, "A moment of silence for When the Levee Breaks." Then he says, we're all sort of sitting there like, "Wow," he says, "And also, Let It Go from the Frozen soundtrack was recorded here." It was like, "Harmony and balance had been restored to the universe." When you tell that story, you pause after When the Levee Breaks and then, "And also, Frozen. Let it Go from the Frozen soundtrack."

There's a sort of musical dimension to that story and harmony and balance have been restored to the universe. There are pauses in that story, it goes up, it goes down, it leaves your hanging, it interrupts itself, it concludes, it has like a coda you know what I mean? A good story has all these elements to it and you sort of respect them and know them and it sort of have emotional contours to it. That's how it works.

[0:38:17.6] JG: Yeah, you do that while it was speaking and I'm sure that's a lot of practice with the pause where you go. Then there's this big pregnant pause and it's — I remember you

talking about in the book about one of your first speaking gigs and I know it's practice because you said, "I had enough for a speaking gig and I spoke for half the time and I was done."

[0:38:35.9] RB: Yeah, that was a nightmare.

[0:38:38.6] JG: You just keep going, you just keep talking.

[0:38:39.7] RB: It's actually not about rehearsal. It's about knowing what this, whatever it is that I'm going to communicate, it's me understanding what it did to me. What it evoked in me. The more I've done the work of understanding what this has done in me, the more I'm aware, is it loud, quiet, fast, slow? Is it provocative? Healing, dangerous, comforting? Do you know what I mean? The more I am familiar with what it has done in me, that's what I'm trying to be true to.

When I heard that, *When the Levee Breaks*, I had like a "whoa." When he said, "Oh also, Let it Go from Frozen," I was like, "Oh man." I'm simply witnessing in my telling of it to what it did in me. That's why when people are like, "So do you add drama, do you where the flourishes come?" No. The gift and the truth is just be true to what really happened, you know what I mean?

You don't have to embellish and when people are always like, "Do you sort of add stuff to your stories?" No, because adding stuff to the story, it won't be as good. The best story will be the one where I simply have sat with a story long enough that I can actually bring it to you as it happened to me. The more true I am to what really happened, the more you might actually feel what I felt.

[0:40:29.2] JG: Sp you're pausing and feeling it and then emoting that?

[0:40:33.6] RB: Yeah, because that — I paused. A friend of mine, Carlton, made the show *Lost* and recently, he came to something I was doing and I did like a two hour thing and at the end he was like, "The most," — and there was a story I told at the end about something that happened to he and I one day when we were together and I told that story and later he was like, "The most amazing thing was," he says, "The story that you told is what actually happened." He found that something to remark about, which I thought was funny. "That's actually how it happened."

[0:41:08.9] JG: Well, there's that saying like, "Don't ever let the facts get in the way of a good story."

[0:41:11.6] RB: Right.

[0:41:12.4] JG: Well speaking of rhythm and I want to wrap up here, you talked about in the book, there's a rhythm to your life. I think this is really fascinating to find out, what do other creative people do? You do a lot of different things and I was frankly surprised to hear that there was significant order to it, you weren't just sort of bouncing around doing all these different things. I don't know if there's some aspect to it but it sounds like there's a lot of order to it and how do you organize the portfolio that is your life? I mean there's business, there's marketing, there's creativity, there's promotion, there's all these different things. How do you do all that?

[0:41:50.3] RB: Which I realize was your second question than the previous question that I never even got to.

[0:41:53.5] JG: No, that's my fault for asking two questions in a row.

[0:41:56.5] RB: I take my kids to school, I take the dog for a run and then I sit down and if I can't get it done before five, it doesn't get done. So I work in between some very narrow windows and that's it. Now obviously I'm doing this tour now, so I'll go out and do a Saturday event. I'll be in Durham this weekend, I'll fly Friday morning, I'll be home Saturday night. So I might go out for a day. I hate leaving my family, so if I ever leave it's one night, maybe two and I'm back.

Maybe once a year I would leave my family for more than two nights. Otherwise, I stay home, making kids breakfast, tucking my daughter in at night because you only get one shot at when your kids are home. So I honestly — it is a ruthless attention to discipline and each morning there is a window, it's about eight to noon is the creative window and then it closes.

So this interview with you, I do in the afternoon because in the morning there is this window when I work on whatever the next thing is. If I just take a little whack at it every day then over

the course of time, it all seems to work out. But it's just the discipline of everyday when that window opens, just be there and take another shot at it and trust that if you're true to it, given enough time, things get made.

But no, there isn't like some 5 AM thing and there isn't some nine at night thing, and I'm done by five-ish. That's probably even — maybe some days earlier, later, whatever. Actually my kids right now want to play basketball. But really, and I actually, if you are grounded, centered, healthy, you fully grounded and centered for an hour is worth you frazzled, distracted, and exhausted for 10 you know what I mean?

So an example, you think about the business person, she's in a meeting and she's exhausted, she's fried and she's been in nonstop meetings and in that meeting, Cliff and Phil are discussing the Q3 reports and normally, if she was sharp, she would say, "Hey, wait, we don't actually have the numbers back. So we don't have anything to discuss until we get the numbers at next week's meeting." She would shut that discussion down in 17 seconds.

But she's tired so she let Phil and Cliff go on for 17 minutes about, "What if the numbers are this, what if the numbers are that?" You know what I mean? That the more grounded and centered and healthy you are, the more you're aware of how much you're wasting and how inefficient you are. So I'm actually much, much more productive than I used to be in much less time but the time I'm so much more present in it and my brain is so much more focused and calm. So that's how it works.

[0:45:08.8] JG: Yeah.

[0:45:10.9] RB: If I do have an idea, I'm trying to think about — oh I just had an idea for another thing I'm going to do and I just jotted it in my phone and then next week the idea will probably be a little bigger and the following week after living with it for two weeks, the idea will probably have grown, it will just grow and eventually it will be something. It will be a book, it will be a show, it will be a tour, it will be something, that's kind of how it works.

[0:45:35.1] JG: I like that Cliff and Phil were our mainstays throughout the interview.

[0:45:39.2] RB: We invented some characters just for this podcast but yes, there is — it is the discipline of showing up and sitting at this desk and trusting that if I show up and I just keep going. It's less about the fireworks of, "Oh my word, that was a creative, magical moment" and "just show up and then there will be moments when things drop out of the — I remember when the title *How to Be Here* fell out of the ceiling and landed in my heart of desk or computer or something, you know what I mean?

I was like, "Oh, *How to Be Here*? Oh, yes!" I didn't even have the book at that point. I just had that title and a couple of ideas and I was like, "Oh well that burrito story, and that whole head injury thing. That's probably how that content starts." I just knew it was content, I just knew it was called *How to Be Here* and I knew that that burrito story and then eventually I was like, "No, no, no, it ends with the burrito story and the head injury story."

[0:46:44.3] JG: Yeah, I love that.

[0:46:45.7] RB: Then I'd been writing up that blinking line thing about the first book, "Oh I should start there." That took place over probably a year. So I think maybe your question is, "Is there like this flurry where you're just killing it 17 hours a day for three weeks on end?" No. It's every day, calm, centered, not that I'm always like this, sometimes I'm just — I've been actually exhausted yesterday because of these tour events where I talk all day Saturday. I'm fine Sunday, it's Monday where I'm like, "Oh man, I don't got much." Yeah.

[0:47:21.6] JG: Yeah, that's great. I think we have to end here because your kids want to play basketball and this is a good place to end.

[0:47:29.0] RB: You ask great questions, love it.

[0:47:32.3] JG: Thanks. You do interesting work in the world.

[0:47:36.3] RB: That's kind of you.

[0:47:37.5] JG: You're a healthy person and I love when these things go together because I think we think they don't have to and just want to thank you for your work and your example.

[0:47:47.3] **RB:** That's very kind of you. Yeah, the myth of the tortured artist to me is just rubbish. Yeah, I don't buy that.

[0:47:54.1] **JG:** Thanks for your time Rob, it was a gift.

[0:47:55.8] **RB:** Great talking to you, we'll talk again sometime.

[0:47:57.7] **JG:** All right, thanks.

[0:47:58.9] **RB:** Thanks. Bye-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:48:00.9] **AT:** Are you going deeper into the center of who you are? Do you feel more empowered day by day? Well I encourage you to get Rob's latest book, *How to Be Here*. It will help you with those things. To leave your thoughts on this episode or to easily share it with a friend, go to Goinswriter.com/110.

If you've benefited from this show from this conversations then you can free yourself from the guilt of getting so much but not really giving anything back. You can leave a review on iTunes or you can share the show with a friend. I'm Andy Traub and on behalf of Jeff Goins, thank you, thank you sincerely for spending some time with us.

Now, go build your portfolio.

[END]