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0:00:01.1 Nicole Antoinette: I'm Nicole Antoinette, and this is Real Talk Radio—a podcast filled with honest conversations about...everything! Hey friends—welcome back, and happy new year. Today's episode was recorded at the end of December, and in it you'll get to meet the wonderful Marlee Grace—a dancer and writer whose work focuses on the self, devotion, ritual, creativity, and art making. I have had such a big crush on Marlee's brain and work for a while now, and getting to have this conversation was such a treat!

0:01:01.4 NA: More than anything, it's a conversation about commitment, really, like how to commit, how to not be an unrelenting asshole to yourself when your commitment doesn't go according to plan, which definitely has happened to me and continues to happen to me, and I'm sure to all of us all of the time. We talk about all of that and more. I really hope that you enjoy listening. This episode, just like every episode of Real Talk Radio is 100% listener-funded. Last year marked another full year of us being 100% listener-funded. We're a values-led show grounded in honesty, connection, justice, and joy. And with those values to guide us, Real Talk Radio does things a bit differently. So for example, all of the funding to create this show and pay all of the guests as well as paying me and my sound engineer, Adam, comes entirely from our Patreon community. And that community operates on a shame-free sliding scale that allows each community member to pay and support from within their own means, wherever they're at.

0:02:04.7 NA: One of our members recently described our community by saying, "It is by far the most juicy and satisfying Patreon that I'm a part of." [chuckle] I am very down to be the most juicy and satisfying Patreon that someone's a part of, I love that so much. When you join us, you're supporting lots of things, the creation of this podcast and me being able to pay all the guests, of course, you're supporting the personal essays and the group discussion threads that happen over on my Substack column, which is called Good Question, and lots more that I create throughout the month. I also host a super popular live end of month journaling circle exclusively for my Patreon community, that happens on the last Sunday of each month. Plus, I create a very transparent, very transparent monthly behind-the-scenes business and money report all about my small business and lots of other things as well that you get access to in Patreon. It's a really fun, delightful community. A deep community, too. There's lots of deep conversations that happen, and I would love for you to join us.

0:03:08.7 NA: You can cancel your pledge at any time, it's not like a long-term commitment or anything, so maybe you'd like to join for the next few months, get involved, see how you like it, that would be awesome. And you can find us over at patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. That's patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. We would love to have you. And now, on to the show.

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0:03:35.6 NA: Alright, friends. Here we go. I am joined today by Marlee Grace, whose writing I have long admired, particularly her new book. Marlee, I loved your book so much, I'm so glad you're here.

0:03:48.3 Marlee Grace: Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here. I loved writing the book and I love being here today.

0:03:55.9 NA: It was perhaps the most helpful and soothing thing that I read in all of 2020, for real.

0:04:00.0 MG: Oh my gosh, that's... Wow, that is really meaningful to hear. Thank you.

0:04:06.7 NA: The mark of how I know that I'm obsessed with a book... So I read pretty much everything on my Kindle, and when I find that I'm highlighting too much of it on the Kindle, then I will order the paperback copy or a hardback copy 'cause I'm like, "This is a book that I need to own and put sticky notes in," so I bought the Kindle and I was like, I need a different copy because I've highlighted entire pages in a Kindle which sort of takes the point away from highlighting. So that was my experience of your book.

0:04:35.2 MG: Do you feel like... Plot twist, I'm interviewing you. Do you feel like it made you feel less alone? I guess I'm curious why was it that book for you this year?

0:04:49.4 NA: I think it definitely made me feel less alone. I mean, as we were just talking about before we started recording, you and I have some personal similarities that I definitely saw myself in, sobriety and divorce and that type of stuff. I think, honestly, it was how frank and almost blunt, but in a gentle way, your writing and conversational style was. Particularly, the chapter about commitment, which is one of the main things that I am excited to talk to you about today. I feel like it's something that I think about all the time, this idea of What does commitment mean? What am I actually committed to? How do I not be an asshole to myself when the commitment changes or when I need to break it? There's just so much richness there and that was the chapter... It was like what? Chapter two? I'm like, "Well, I've highlighted this whole chapter, so I need to get another copy."

0:05:36.2 MG: Great. That was probably my favorite chapter to write, and I haven't really talked about it with anyone yet, so...

0:05:42.4 NA: Alright. Well, here we go. The title of the book for anyone, since we're going right into it, it's called Getting to Center: Pathways to Finding Yourself Within the Great Unknown. And I guess perhaps, a good starting point would be, if you could explain for folks what you mean by that idea of getting to center.

0:06:01.0 MG: Well, I started really rejecting the word balance, and I think it came from one of my favorite books is When Things Fall Apart by Pema Chodron and...

0:06:13.7 NA: Me too.

0:06:16.6 MG: And you know, it's not called If Things Fall Apart, it's called When, and it's also like... She's kinda like, "Sure, you can try to be grounded, but the only way you'll really get through

the world is to practice groundless-ness, the ground could come out from under you any time." And so I think also just in late-stage capitalism and in the self-employment world, there's so much about productivity hacks and work-life balance, that was always a phrase that I hated so much. Because there... I wrote... I'd always be working my first... Or technically my second book, but I wrote it and even in that book, I was like, I don't want you to... "If you love to work all the time, knock yourself out, go for it." And I think getting to center for me was the, I don't want every day to look the same where I'm like, "I'm balanced, I'm eating well, I'm working, finding pleasure."

0:07:20.9 MG: I was like, "I know that there will be days on end where I don't stop working, and that's just how I am. And it feels great, and I like that, and I only eat frozen pizza and I watch five episodes of Grey's Anatomy, and then I work a ton, and then I'll have a couple of days where I don't work or... And I eat really well, or I don't eat really well." I just think the markers for me need to be about how do I get back to my center, not how do I find constant balance, is where the concept came from. And just as someone who's been through a lot of big transitions all sort of... I just turned 32 this year. In my 20s through my Saturn return, I felt like I really checked a lot of the cliché boxes of getting sober, getting married, starting a business, getting divorced, closing the business, moving across the country, moving back across the country, realizing you're gay, just kind of all the funny things. And so I was like, "How do I write a book that shows people how to move through these things without getting totally destroyed/you will get totally destroyed and then how do you come back to yourself?"

0:08:41.1 NA: The expectation of getting destroyed or of the ground being pulled out from under you, that was a really refreshing part of the book, I felt as well, because you're right. This idea of a perfectly balanced day or a perfect work-life balance for me, I have found it doesn't exist, and I have made myself so miserable striving for that. And then telling myself that I'm doing something wrong because I'm not finding that and even in as much as I've tried to, "Okay, what's my one non-negotiable thing every day?" Or what's... I've been so rigid about it in the past, and really the last, I would say year, maybe year and a half, I've been experimenting and practicing with just loosening the grip on that a little bit and taking a wider view. Like you said, I'm also someone who's a... What I think of as a sprint worker, I like to do a lot of work in a relatively shorter period of time, especially if it's the same kind of work and then take more extended break instead of... I'm not someone, as a writer, I don't write an hour a day. I'll write an entire day or a couple of days and then not write for a while, and there's nothing right or wrong with either approach, but I found that for my rhythms and cycles and seasons or whatever way you wanna call it, that I need a different approach.

0:09:57.3 MG: Yeah, couldn't agree more.

0:10:00.8 NA: So going into this idea of commitment, what do you feel like you're committed to right now?

0:10:06.8 MG: Well, we talked just before this that I cry a lot in 2020, and I just like... Before I could even answer, my body was like, I'm so committed to... I'm so grateful, I feel so committed to my partnership right now because I think I spent a lot of the year really committed to my work, and

that has felt really good and... Yeah, a lot of the book is about how committed I was to being single last year for the longest stretch that I had really ever gone in my adult life, and... Yeah, I feel like right now, I'm really committed to my partnership, my romantic partnership, I should say. I feel like I have a lot of partners in a platonic way, and I think that feels really special. I often think of my ex-husband as one of my partners still in life, even though we aren't romantic. But my romantic partner, Jackie and I'm really committed, I think, to just investigating some really ugly parts of myself, and that's in therapy and sort of in my work getting ready for this deactivation period. So, yeah.

0:11:22.8 NA: When you talk about being committed to your partnership, what does that actually mean for you? I know it's funny, I feel like all I'm gonna do is reference your book. I'm gonna be that annoying person who keeps saying "in your book, you said." You talked a bit about finding a middle ground between a forever commitment and a one day-at-a-time commitment. In the context of the partnership can you share about that?

0:11:45.8 MG: Well, I think that's why I thought of it, 'cause we're coming up on the one year of when we had a small commitment handfasting ceremony... Ceremony sounds a little dramatic. It was more like we were sitting on our couch and made lists with Sharpies. But last year, we made a commitment to just stay together and in partnership for all of this year. And it was really amazing when things would get hard this year to just lightly energetically reference some of the actual commitments we made to take care of ourselves and each other and the energetic commitments we made. And so I feel really excited because this year we decided... A, I think it just feels really special to be like, "Wow, it wasn't by chance we dated another year." It was like we did it, we did our commitment to not run this year. And this year, we're gonna go away for a couple of days and have more of like... We're gonna leave our dog with a dog-sitter and drive a couple hours away and have more of... Like a deeper planning retreat of like, "What does it look like to plan our finances a little bit more? What does it mean to maybe plan what kind of trips we might wanna take COVID-safe and all?"

0:13:16.8 MG: But I think that's what feels exciting to me is to just be like... Partnership does not randomly just go well, at least for two queer sober alcoholic women in this household. It means a little bit more like visioning and... Yeah. And I think it just feels... It's just really beautiful to have a partner who's on board for that kind of visioning and commitment and planning. So I'm excited to plan my 2021 with Jackie.

0:13:52.3 NA: I think that's incredibly beautiful and also incredibly realistic in a way. I'm interested... Obviously, I know that you and I both have the uncoupling divorce. I would say that my former spouse is also one of my partners, it sounds like we have some similarities there. How did getting divorced maybe change your idea of this type of commitment or maybe make it... That you wanted that middle ground a little bit more? I don't know if that makes sense.

0:14:20.6 MG: No, definitely. I think... By this time in my relationship with John, my ex-husband, we were already engaged to be married. And my current partnership is only my second longest partnership next to my marriage. And so, it's been really helpful for me to actually untangle some of

the weird timeline expectations to be like, "Well, should I be engaged by now again?" And also, it's just... Maybe it's 'cause I was married before, I don't think I... When I got engaged, I was in my early 20s, I had just gotten sober, I was certainly in a rush. I was like, "You need to get engaged." And my literal thought was like, "If I get engaged and married, I never have to go through a breakup again." And that's what I want. I wanna never be uncomfortable again. I think I also loved John very much. There were other reasons, but that was a huge motivation was like, I never want to break up again. And so, I think releasing that in this relationship is so helpful. It's like, I know I can walk through really, really painful breakups/divorce, relationships ending and be okay. And yeah, I think it just...

0:15:48.5 MG: I also will be really honest that my psychic I regularly see suggested the handfasting ceremony, and she was like, "I really think it's not about forever, it's not about one day at a time, I really think you and Jackie should do a commitment ceremony for one year." And I was like, "I love that. That's so beautiful. That so fits into my current idea of commitment." And it really helped, I feel like, there were a couple of times this year where I was like, "Wow, partnership is hard." And in more fling-y relationships, I might be like, "Bye." And I loved being like... There was a certain point where I was like, "This only has to go til the end of the year," and then here we are at the end of the year. I mean, that sounds dark. But when we were fighting or... Here we are at the end of the year, and I'm like, "Wow, we are so much stronger and more in love and... Than ever." And I think it really, so much of it has to do with being able to reference what we visioned and keep building shared languages for each other and for our commitment.

0:17:00.4 NA: Something that I struggle with a lot and also work on in therapy and have on and off for years is breaking away from the all-or-nothing, black-and-white mindset. Either I'm not gonna do it at all or, "Right, I'm gonna be married forever." And...

0:17:14.2 MG: Correct.

0:17:15.1 NA: Trying to be like, "Oh, what's door number three?" Maybe... Is there a little bit of a grey area? Could you make this more multi-colored, more multi-faceted? And that's been... Not just in romantic partnership, in literally every single area of my life. And I see that a lot with this too, and getting divorced for me, it really made me think a lot about what my assumptions were about commitment. I thought if I did X, Y and Z exactly like you said, that means I wouldn't break up or I wouldn't this... And to have seen, "Oh, actually, that's not necessarily true or guaranteed true." It really was helpful for me to realize, "Okay. Well, if that's not a formula that I can rely on, how might I go about this in a way that's a better fit for me?" And everything that you just described, I relate to very much. So yeah, I appreciate you sharing that.

0:18:02.3 MG: And I mean... I think I write about this in the book a little... Yeah, I do. It's like John and I kept our commitment. In our vows, we never said we would always be together, and we did say we would always be family. And we kept those vows. We also wrote new vows when we got divorced. I think that's the other thing, it's like commitments change, and how can you flow with them so that breaking the commitment doesn't look like throwing away being committed to each other. It just looks like writing new vows and new ways of being together. So that's where I've

always felt really weirdly... I'm like, "I didn't break any commitment. I never said that." I think if I got married again, I might wanna tell somebody I wouldn't... I would stay married to them or never break up, but maybe that's the unrealistic romantic in me who doesn't wanna be divorced again. It's like that's... I'll take that to my therapist.

0:19:08.0 NA: So it sounds like your partnership with Jackie is a commitment that's deepened this year. What would you say is a commitment that's shifted or changed or that you've broken, walked away from, whatever word you wanna use, maybe in the last, I don't know, a couple months or a year?

0:19:24.8 MG: Yeah. At some point this year, I made a joke to a friend where I said, "No new acquaintances 2020," because I am such a friendship person that I make friends. I turn... Acquaintances turn into friends really quickly for me, and sometimes that over the years between hosting a residency, having a podcast, running businesses, moving around, always organizing public spaces, I end up just falling short a little bit with certain friendships, I feel. Or they just shift and I'm like, "Maybe I wish they were deeper." And so I think I've been trying to be honestly committed to not adding too many new people to my life this year because there are already so many people in it that I'm like, "I wanna tend to those people more." So I get so many really beautiful emails and letters and people who I think maybe desire a closeness that in past years... Or even now, there's part of me that's like, "Oh my God, this person seems so cool." And I have made new friends this year, but I've been trying to be a little more committed to just like... I barely have time for myself and my partner and the friends I already have, so how can I slow down the entrance of new people into my life?

0:21:03.0 NA: Yeah, I think a lot about the often wide gap between the ideal me and the actual me. And ideal me has very high capacity, endless amounts of energy, endless amounts of everything. And actual me sometimes can match that maybe a couple of days a month, but not sustainably. And that reckoning with almost having to let go of part of my identity that I wanna be the person who can say yes to everything, have all of the friends, be really close with all these different people, manage all these different creative work projects. And there's something that's really appealing to me about that identity, and I am starting to let go of it, and it has felt incredibly uncomfortable to have to be like, "Actually, I can't do that." Deep down it makes me feel... Like even right now when I'm explaining it, I'm like, "Ugh, I don't like it." And yet that realization of, "I can continue to check in with my capacity for different relationships or different projects on a more cyclical, evolving, rolling basis."

0:22:10.0 MG: Yes, oh my God, the roll... 'Cause that's the thing, is I would say I have one... No, I have about three friends-ish this year who I made in quarantine who I've never met in real life who are like my family, who I speak to multiple times a week, who I love, who I know when we meet it's gonna be like we've met. We've met digitally. We talk, we Zoom. And that's the rolling basis example. There was a space and I was ready for them and they were ready for me, and I paused and now they're like my friend family. And so I like... Yes, there's flexibility in "no new acquaintances".

0:22:56.8 NA: So this is perhaps the million-dollar question that I don't expect you to have an easy

or simple or soundbite answer to, but for you, how do you know when it's time to shift a commitment?

0:23:08.8 MG: That made my heart hurt a little bit. I was like, "Ooh." Because I think the hardest, the hardest one I've ever had was really ending my marriage. There were so many times where it was like I was so sure, and then I was so afraid and so filled with fear. And I don't even think I really knew it was correct until years later. It wasn't... There were moments of like, "This is what... I know this is what needs to happen." And then there were moments of deep fear. And then John was like, "I know this needs to happen," and I was like, "Oh, right. It's not totally up to... I'm not fully in control here." I think for me, I know a commitment needs to shift when it stops me from caring for myself. It really is stopping me from being nice to myself, from caring for myself. And so that goes with my work. If there's something in my work that's making me not like myself, I'm like, "Whoa, okay. What needs to shift with this commitment?" So yeah, I think...

0:24:26.4 MG: And the same with... I've had friends who I collaborate with. It's rare I collaborate with people. I'm more of a host to projects that people come in to, but I've definitely collaborated with people and was like, "Whoa, this does not feel good. I don't feel good about myself." And I think I used to blame that person and be like, "That person made me feel bad about myself," and now I'm just like, "Nope, something about the dynamic, and I can end this and bless this and just shift it." And I've definitely ended collaborations in order to protect the friendship itself, to be like, "Okay, this is making me feel bad about myself. Let me see if I can fine-tune it within." And if I can't, it's like, "Okay, the commitment needs to shift."

0:25:16.6 NA: Yeah. I feel like if I had to boil all of my work... And similar to you, it's like, my life is my work. It's like going through things then sharing those things and creating the spaces. There's certainly a lot of overlap between life and work, for sure. And I feel like my work can be boiled down into navigating the tension between what I think of as how to live with grit and how to live with grace. The grit of when to push through, when to do the thing even when you're not in the mood to do it, or when you're scared or that versus the grace of, "Oh, I really... It's time to pull back, it's time to rest, it's time to ask for help," whatever that might look like. And there's never one answer. It's not like, "In this situation, always grit is the answer, and in this situation, always grace is the answer." It's usually some combination of both, or on any given day, the answer could be for me, "Suck it up, be your highest self and just do it," and on the other day, the right answer might be, "Quit as fast as you can."

0:26:15.9 NA: And it's recognizing that this perfect... You mentioned the life hack idea earlier, the life hack or the formula that I searched for in self-help-related stuff for so long actually doesn't exist, and it's more about, can I be honest with myself about how engaging with a certain person or a project actually feels in my body? If I'm dreading it, why? And just sort of being willing to unpack that and letting it all be way messier and way more nuanced than I would like it to be.

0:26:47.5 MG: And I think that's sort of for me was the point of writing *Getting To Center*. It was like, it's choose your own adventure, like what exactly what you just said. What I need grace for might not be the thing you do. So here are these tools that helped me figure out when to get the fuck

out and when to sit my ass down and stay put. And then how to not abandon myself in either option is the thing.

0:27:17.8 NA: What do you mean when you say that?

0:27:20.7 MG: I can run from something and not run from myself, and I think that's something I figured out. I think I used to be like, "Well, see ya," to a person or a place or an idea, and I was also like, "I'm gonna drop Marlee off at the bus stop and take the bus somewhere else also." So now I feel like I can live in a little more integrity, which makes me not want to abandon myself. I have better tools to say, "I'm gonna end this commitment swiftly. It's gonna feel swift. Here is why. I care for you, I'm gonna exit." Instead of being like, "This sucks. I gotta get out of here." And then I'm mad at myself for not being kind or living in integrity, so I also abandon myself along the way. So I tend to scoop Marlee up and take her with me most places now instead of abandoning her along the way.

0:28:16.9 NA: That's such a lovely visual image. You're just scooping her up, you're holding little Marlee. I love that.

0:28:21.4 MG: I made a really nice scoop with my arm here and she was sitting here. It's some inner child stuff, obviously, 'cause she's tiny, but it's cool. It's also like Elf on a shelf size at the same time. So it's a metaphor and real, but yes.

0:28:38.0 NA: What do you feel like has been helping you to not be as mean to yourself or not hate yourself when a commitment does need to change or doesn't go as planned?

0:28:49.3 MG: I'm part of multiple 12-step programs. I have a therapist and I see a psychic pretty regularly. And so I think... Who sort of like functions almost as like a metaphor giving therapist. It might not be what... If you're hearing the word psychic and you're thinking of the drive by hand flashing sign, it's not like that. Although respect to those people, I wish I would stop by one of those sometimes. But it's more of like an intuitive witch/therapist/counselor. Anyways, yeah. I have a lot of outside help. I have a lot of people who reflect back to me what's happening in my inner landscape and really push me to find myself. And I would say specifically having... I've been with the same therapist for a little over a year right now, and this is the longest I've ever gone in therapy with the same therapist, and I'm just really appreciative and enjoying the building on these different themes and looking at what's happening. But yeah, I have a lot of... I have a big team of help, for sure.

0:30:08.7 NA: Yeah. And I appreciate you saying that too, because sometimes we feel like, "What's wrong with me that I can't navigate all of this on my own?" Right? It's like, "Well, nothing. Nothing is wrong with you."

0:30:18.1 MG: Yeah, I gave that up a long time ago. I'm like, "I need a lot of people."

0:30:22.5 NA: Also, even as you were talking, it made me think, "I wonder if there's even

something unhelpful in the question that I asked of how to not hate yourself when something doesn't go as planned." I think everyone can relate to what that feels like, but I've also been trying to allow more space for disappointment and for grief. I don't know why I think that I'm supposed to be at this complete stasis, centered, good point. It's fine to get knocked off course, it's fine for me to be really disappointed. I had so much grief after getting divorced, and it was arguably the best divorce of all time. And it was still... I had so many feelings about it. And obviously, we keep each using that as an example 'cause I feel like it's a really easy one to pull from, but it's been the same with either friendships that don't work out, or a work project that doesn't go the way that I thought, or when something in my financial life isn't where I want it to be, or I told myself I was gonna do X, Y, or Z, and for any number of reasons, I just didn't do those things.

0:31:22.3 NA: And, I don't know, it's like I don't wanna be awful to myself about it because shame is both unpleasant and not an effective motivator, but also it's okay to be disappointed too, and that's something that even as I'm saying it, I really resist that that's true, but I'm trying to make a little more space for it.

0:31:37.7 MG: Yeah, I re... Yes, yes. I relate.

0:31:41.7 NA: Yes. So maybe this is kind of a strange transition, but thinking about commitment, and when I think about commitment, I think about things that we do regularly all the time that we show up for, which I know social media, particularly Instagram, has been for you. And you are gearing up to take quite a big break from it, and I would love to hear the story of how you decided to do that.

0:32:09.1 MG: So many years ago, no, actually two years ago, I wrote a zine that was about social media addiction, and it came out just before *How to Not Always Be Working* came out. And when *How to Not Always Be Working* was getting ready to come out, I deactivated my Instagram because I was like, "I hate it here." And no part of me cared. I was like, "I don't care if I don't have a job, I don't care if no one ever talks to me again, I hate how I feel in this app." And within an hour or two of deactivating, I got an email from my publisher who was like, "You have a book coming out in three weeks, and you absolutely cannot deactivate your Instagram account." And I was like... I fought it, I think, for a second. I was like, "I can do whatever I want. There's nothing in my contract that says I can't deactivate my Instagram account. This is not my problem, this is actually your problem." And that would be an example of maybe just keep parts of the commitment, even if they're not in writing, maybe don't sabotage your book.

0:33:31.3 MG: Anyway, so I re-activated my Instagram within an hour of the email. Yeah. So I guess all to say, I've been on a real two-and-a-half year journey of trying everything to be less addicted. Giving other people my passwords, using other apps to upload things, taking breaks, yada yada. And the summer I was like, "I have to take a break." The dates came to me really clearly that they were very spirit-given like, "January 17th is when I'll de-activate." And that's about three months of this book being out, it had some time on social media to make its rounds, I'll be there. And then I've celebrated and shared so much of my sobriety on Instagram and with that community that it feels special to reactivate on what one day at a time, God willing, will be my ten-year sober

anniversary. And then I have no idea what will happen, but it also feels really correct. I have a lot of examples of people who just stop posting. They leave their page up, they stop posting, they maybe check the DMs sometimes, or they just leave it up. I feel very clear that for this experiment, I need to deactivate for four months. There's nothing to see here, nothing to do here. I want to truly not be a part of the attention-selling cycle. And we can get to other things that I'm curious about, but anyways, that's how it all came to be and will happen very shortly after this episode airs.

0:35:27.9 NA: Yeah, yeah. A couple days after the episode airs, which it feels like delightfully good timing. So this is just a really tactical question. You mentioned deactivating it. Does that mean you're deleting it? Can you get it back?

0:35:41.8 MG: Yeah, I'll get it back. You literally just log back in. I'll log back in on May 17th, and it'll all still be there.

0:35:49.1 NA: Okay, so you're just like... It's like a logging out type of situation...

0:35:53.0 MG: Well, it's different than logging out. Logging out would be that you click the log out button and your page is still up. Deactivating means you have to go in a computer browser, you cannot do it on your phone, you go to Instagram.com, you sign in, you go to the settings on your computer browser, and you hit deactivate. And then it will disappear from the app and it will return as soon as you sign in again.

0:36:17.0 NA: Got it, got it. Okay, yeah, that was... Thank you for...

0:36:18.9 MG: Thank you for asking.

0:36:20.7 NA: For clarifying that. Okay. So something that you shared in there that I think is really interesting, you mentioned that you've seen people that have just logged out or use it this way, or use it that way, and I know something that you... I'm in your Patreon community, I know something you put together was that list of other people who built businesses on Instagram and then left. And one of the things that I found so useful about that was that it seemed like a really clear example of you looking for evidence to prove to yourself that it was possible, which I think is a tool that I often forget works as well as it does. I have all these stories in my head about why I can't do something, and it can be really nice to surround myself with examples of like, "Well, here's 10 people who actually did do it, and I'm not that special so I could do it too."

0:37:11.0 MG: I think that that list for me is also... I think a huge point of the Patreon for me was, "How do I bring other people through this journey?" Because I really... It's why I write books, it's why I have my radio show. I really feel like my work in this world is about being like, "Here, figure it out with me." I am not an expert, I maybe not all the way to the other side, so why don't you witness me as I figure it out? And maybe it will help all of us. And so, you know, I... Just even in my friend group, it was becoming so clear how addicted people were and how painful it was and how much they cannot leave the app, like financially cannot leave. And that is where I was like, "Okay, I wanna ask these questions." I mean, the list is actually... Feels really sad to me because I

felt like I found two humans and both of them I feel like have pretty different careers than me still. So anyone who I feel like has truly a similar business model to me has not left forever. They keep their page up or they deactivate and come back.

0:38:48.0 MG: I feel like I still haven't found someone who truly deactivated and never came back, who has used Instagram as part of their business model in the way that I have. I'm not saying that in a cocky way. I have no idea if I will also do that. I don't even know if I want to do that, I just think it's really interesting, and I know people are in enormous amounts of spiritual pain because they can't figure out how to leave.

0:39:18.7 NA: Yeah. I definitely fall, at least this last year, into the camp of people you described of like, leave it up, post very infrequently, mostly just use it to check DMs. And that for me was an unbelievable relief on what it felt like the previous year or a couple of years. I just felt like I was just in this constant, "What am I supposed to do with Instagram? How am I gonna do it right? How do I do the algorithm? Blah, blah, blah." There was a constant undercurrent of anxiety for me around it, or for showing up in that way, or for getting really attached to number metrics and all of that type of stuff, and it was making me feel so terrible. And I wound up taking three or four months off basically this time last year.

0:40:02.7 NA: And the decision that I came to at least... And I say decision, not as if it's a forever decision, along the lines of our commitment conversation. But a for-now decision that came up for me was, I need my business and my livelihood and my sense of community and friendship not to depend on the app at all, and so let me explore building that up in other ways. And if I choose to use Instagram, if it feels fun, because there are some aspects of it that as of right now I enjoy, and being able to sort of divest from it as a monetization tool or any of that other stuff this year has been relatively successful. And it's been interesting how much anxiety or how much less anxiety I have about it now that I've made it sort of like a non-entity. And I don't know if that will change. I'm very intrigued to hear the results of what you wind up doing and going through that process with you. And I think this is along with the idea of a rolling evaluation period for relationships and commitments. I think the relationship with social media and any of these tools also needs to be continually investigated.

0:41:11.7 NA: But it's been really wild this year, how differently I feel about it than I did in the past when I just decided, "This is only for fun. I only use this if I want to. I don't keep the app on my phone. I go into the app store and re-download it every time I wanna post something, and I then just delete it right after." And for me right now, that's enough, but I'm curious what a deactivation period would feel like.

0:41:30.6 MG: Yeah. And I love to hear that. I love that that is true for you. And that behavior so quickly starts to feel so similar to alcoholism for me, 'cause it reminds me so much of the like, "I'll only drink on Tuesdays. Maybe I'll only drink tequila. I'll only have wine. I'll only have one bottle of wine. Well, maybe I'll only have a bottle and a half of wine. I won't drink before work. I won't drink before 4:00. I'll try to only drink on Saturdays. I won't keep it in the fridge, I'll keep it in the cupboard." I just was doing... It was taking so much energy to "try not to drink" and it never

worked. I always found a way. And that's just how it's been for me with Instagram. It's like, "I give my assistant my password. I only download it on this day. I'll only post on Tuesdays. But then, oh, now I'm posting on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I'll only check DMs on my browser. Oh, now, I'm back on my phone." I'm trying... I think that's what I'm so curious about is it's amazing we have to delete it and re-download an app and that it can't just be on our phone.

0:42:48.2 MG: There are people who just have beer in their fridge and they just sometimes open it. They don't have to hide it in the cupboard sometimes, they don't have to ask their friend to keep an eye on them, they don't have to bury the bottle opener, they just can have beer in their fridge. And I imagine there are people who can just have Instagram on their phone. And I think that that's where I'm like, "Yeah, I'm curious if after the deactivation, if I'll move to something like that again, where I can figure out something." And if I'm really honest, it just feels so unmanageable that I'm not sure if I can. So I don't know what that looks like.

0:43:33.4 NA: Well, and that's the core of it, right? It's how you feel. It's like it's not about the rules because that sort of "only do it on Tuesdays" might feel great for someone else, and if it feels trash for you, what matters isn't the rule itself, it's how you feel about it and what your experiences of it, and can we give ourselves... Can we be kind to ourselves by giving ourselves what we actually need to feel good and to be well cared for?

0:43:54.5 MG: Totally, yes. Yeah, yeah. How do I feel? And again, that's where sometimes I feel great. Sometimes it makes me feel great. Sometimes when I drank, I felt great. I don't know. It's like sometimes when I drank, I had a blast, I had a lot of fun, and I didn't get sick. That happened every once in a while. Sometimes when I use Instagram, it feels really fun. I love to make personal practice videos. I love to do certain parts of things on Instagram. And I think I'm also... I love the phrase, "I quit drinking because I was sick and tired of being sick and tired." It's like I have to deactivate Instagram 'cause I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired. I'm so sick of hearing myself talk about it that I'm like, "I have to leave and see what's happening under there."

0:44:46.0 NA: Honestly, so much praise for... Or so many... What am I trying to say? I feel like it's such a blessing when you get to the point where you're sick of yourself.

0:44:56.7 MG: Yes, yes. I couldn't agree more.

0:45:00.2 NA: That like, "Okay. Well, now I finally, I'm so sick of my own bullshit that I'm actually willing to do something differently." Sometimes I wish that point would come a little bit sooner than it does but...

0:45:08.6 MG: Me too.

0:45:11.7 NA: When you were talking about there are people that can just have beer in their fridge, my personal example from that was always, there are people who can be at a restaurant or at a bar and can get up and leave the restaurant with half a glass of wine still there, or they didn't finish their cocktail. And that for me was always like, "Oh," the mind-blown emoji. That's a thing? People do

that?

0:45:31.8 MG: Yeah. I used to... John, God, would so rarely drink, my ex-husband, and I'll never forget when we first started dating. We started dating two weeks after I got sober in 2011. But I'll never forget, we were at a bar or something and he put down half a beer and I asked him if he was okay. I was like, "Are you feeling okay?" And he was like, "What?" I was like, "Well, you didn't finish your beer." And he was like, "There's five sips left," and in my head, I'm like, "Those are five very important sips." And he was truly just like, "I just don't feel like finishing this beer." And yes, that was one of my early moments of like, "I am an alcoholic, and this is a problem for me." But yeah, people don't finish drinks. It's true.

0:46:21.2 NA: One of the things that I most appreciate about honest conversations like this one, is that it gives us a chance to know ourselves through seeing each other that... I don't know. If we're using Instagram as an example, if we never talked about... If you never talked about how you felt about it, I think it would be really easy to have the story of, "What's wrong with me that this is unmanageable just for me? It seems like it's so easy for everyone else. Why can't I figure this out?" And that's certainly, I've thought that from time to time as well, and I've been really grateful when people like you are willing to talk about how it actually feels, just because there's some permission in that.

0:46:58.4 MG: Yeah. I mean, I will be honest that I feel a little bit of that right now. I feel a little bit of the why haven't I figured it out yet? And I think that's where I needed to start being more honest about the process and I needed to plan the deactivation. I was like, "I need to try something else." So yeah, I don't know.

0:47:31.9 NA: Being willing to try something else is incredible though. That reminder that if what you've been doing isn't working, maybe there's another way. And also, like you said, it's not 100% of the time you hate Instagram. Sometimes it makes you feel good. Sometimes it's fun. Sometimes sharing the dance videos feel good. I find, again, with the all or nothing mindset, I sometimes get to this point where I'm like, "Unless I'm so miserable and every single aspect of this is fucking terrible, then I should probably keep doing it." And the reminder of, "Oh, I actually don't have to wait until that's the case, I'm allowed to walk away from something just because I want to or just because maybe it's feeling more bad than good," there's something in that that I have to untangle for myself sometimes too.

0:48:20.1 MG: Yeah, yeah.

0:48:23.7 NA: You said before that there are some things that you're curious to find out during this four-month holiday, sabbatical? Will you share a little bit about what you're curious about?

0:48:33.5 MG: Yeah. First of all, I had to do... This is what I most recently wrote about on the Patreon, was just planning for the break. Without a plan, I couldn't financially afford to leave, which also sheds a light on the fact that I didn't have a real business plan, I was just relying on an app to randomly create ideas to generate income. And so that has been helpful to shift to be like, "Okay,

I'm gonna build out this Patreon, I'm gonna hire an assistant, I'm going to plan out my teaching schedule and promote that before I leave so I have some financial padding, some flexibility." I'm like, "Cool. I could make \$0 for the four months and it wouldn't feel good, but I would be able to pay my rent and eat." So I'm like, "Okay, my basic things are covered, and I could still pay Isabelle." I wouldn't technically pay myself, but again, it's like, I'm talking scrappy here right now. I'm talking like, "Could I leave and eat my meals and buy my toilet paper and have my rent covered?" Yes. And again, that's if I made \$0, and I'd like to think that my newsletter and word of mouth and my Patreon, I will still be able to generate income.

0:49:56.9 MG: So one thing I'm curious about is I've been teaching a quilting class on Zoom, and I definitely fill it with people from when I post about it on Instagram. And I'm going to be teaching it in March and only posting about it in my newsletter and maybe talking... I don't know. I don't know where else I'll share about it, and I guess here is somewhere, but I am so curious if I can fill those 35 spots with not only without posting about it on Instagram, without not having an Instagram. So yeah, I'm curious, what will my finances look like? Will I just be so filled with serenity that I become a millionaire? Maybe. I don't know. I...

0:50:43.1 NA: Hey, I hope that for you, yes.

0:50:45.3 MG: Me fucking too. That's, I think, the other question. And then my big... What I've been calling my ugly truth is I have an assumption... I have a false... I have a story that I tell myself, which is that people only think I'm cool because of who I'm friends with. They actually don't think I'm interesting, they just think it's cool that this person thinks I'm cool, or I'm on this person's podcast, or I'm on this bookstore's list, or this person from this magazine thinks I'm cool. I think that that is a false reality that Instagram creates, is like you see who follows each other, you see who has each other on their Instagram Live, you see who comments on each other's posts, etcetera, etcetera. And so I feel like that's something I'm curious about, is how will my feelings about myself change without that validation?

0:51:50.9 MG: I don't really get validation from followers, readers, fans. I get validation, or don't like myself, depending on if certain people like me or not. I think I'm getting a little clearer and more honest with myself about that as I consider and prepare to deactivate, to be like, "Oh, I think I'm like, I don't care." And then I'm, as I think about disappearing from that space, I'm like, "Will people think I'm relevant existing on my own," kind of feeling.

0:52:28.6 NA: Yeah, yep. Mm-hmm, all of that. I need a moment, I feel, with this. This is very really what you're bringing up, that I think I'm really grateful for your honesty because I think that so much of what you're speaking to, maybe for someone else, it isn't the who's friends with them or whatever, but it's so easy to attach worthiness to any of the various things or metrics on something like Instagram. And one of the things that I told... That I have consistently told myself about why I couldn't quit it, which I know obviously is a story. Of course, I could. People have. There's nothing inherently special about me about why I'm the snowflake example. But one of the stories that I have is that it's having some kind of social credibility in terms of having an audience of at least somewhat of a certain size, that that makes it so that more people are likely to say yes to being

guests on my podcast, or that they'd be more likely to have me on their podcast.

0:53:37.7 NA: And some of that stuff is actually is real. I have to check myself. This is a very unflattering thing that I'm about to say about myself, but when I... If someone sends me a message or they invite me to be on something or whatever, and if it happens through Instagram and I click over really quick, I will have an immediate kind of gut reaction to like, "Oh, they have a really small audience, this probably isn't worth my time." And then I have to be like, "Oh, that's interesting." Is that actually the measure of that? Or it's big, but it's not engaged. I have all these stories about worthiness, and I see myself being judgmental about other people, so of course, I'm judgmental about those things about myself too, and none of it is a cute look, Marlee.

0:54:22.3 MG: Yeah. I think these are the kinds of things that no one wants to admit, it's not cool to talk about, nobody likes it. I mean, I have it on absolutely both sides. I'm like 80,000 something followers and a blue check mark. That's... People love that. People see that and there is... I... Yes, credibility is given to me. And it's tricky, right? Because some of that is because I have those things because I'm good at my job. They don't not go together. It's like, "Yeah, I've worked my ass off for the last nine years at my job and have metrics that show that." And some random fucking beach girl in who knows where is an influencer on Instagram with a million followers, and I don't think that's cool. You know what I mean? It's like... And there's people have huge audiences and that means nothing, and people have fucking 2,000 followers and have amazing business models, and maybe there are people who have 2,000 Instagram followers and have an 80,000-person newsletter list. There are people who... That is the thing, is that Instagram is not the only place someone has an audience or a platform.

0:55:51.4 NA: I mean, if you were to look at my fucking Twitter, I think I have 1,000 followers. If you're a Twitter person, you're not like, "Wow, Marlee Grace, she really runs a great Twitter." It's like, that's where... Yeah, I just think that's where it's both... It makes sense. And I sadly have heard that from my agent and the publishing world is like, they wish it wasn't like this, but they sometimes can't... They won't even take on book projects with people who have less than a certain amount of followers because that's how you sell books in 2020 is... Or 2021, wherever we are. It's like you have to have a big following to sell a book, which I just think is not true. And I think that that's where I'm like... That's... Okay. My last curiosity is can I sell a book? Can I sell book three to a publisher and be like, "I don't have Instagram."

0:56:49.1 NA: Yes. Yeah, yeah. Like what's possible in potentially letting go of the thing or not relying on the thing as a crutch? 'Cause there are people who do sell books who don't really have Instagram. There just are.

0:57:02.8 MG: Yes.

0:57:03.6 NA: Yeah, yeah. I feel very excited is maybe a strange word to use, but excited that you are gonna be sharing about this from the trenches, so to speak, because...

0:57:15.5 MG: Yes, I will be.

0:57:17.4 NA: It's brave and I think it's really generous of you that you're willing to share about it.

0:57:20.3 MG: Thanks. Thank you so much.

0:57:22.9 NA: If you could leave folks with one call to action, let's say, based on our conversation, what would that be? Maybe a question to ask themselves or a tiny action to take.

0:57:35.3 MG: Drink water and make a gratitude list.

0:57:42.3 NA: Yeah. Will you share a couple of things that would be on your gratitude list today?

0:57:48.6 MG: My bathtub, and my girlfriend, and coffee, and my higher power, and the me that remembers to scoop me up and not abandon myself along the way.

0:58:08.5 NA: Yeah, and also the you that totally deserves to be scooped up, both yours. Grateful for both.

0:58:13.6 MG: Yes, I love that. Thank you.

0:58:16.4 NA: So since you're not gonna be on Instagram, what is the best place for people to find you, say hi online, support your work, learn more about all of this adventure/journey thing that you are on?

0:58:27.4 MG: Absolutely. If you go to MarleeGrace.space/home, that is where you find all the links to all the things, and that's where you can subscribe to my newsletter, which is free. You can listen to my radio show, which is every Sunday from 3:00-5:00 PM Mountain Time. You can listen online, and all of the shows are recorded and archived and transcribed, and you can ask questions. It's a great place to engage with my work for \$0. And then I have my Patreon, which is amazing and fun, and it's between \$5 and \$25, depending on how you want to engage. And I'm teaching A Quilt Is Something Human in March, on Saturdays in March. So if you're feeling like you wanna be a part of a small class that makes blankets, you can find that on my website too.

0:59:21.0 NA: That sounds very cozy and very lovely, and I will make sure to put that main link that you mentioned right in the show notes so that people can find it and find you there.

0:59:30.9 MG: Thank you so much.

0:59:32.4 NA: Thank you. This was delightful.

0:59:35.0 MG: I loved our convo. Very, very special.

[music]

0:59:43.2 NA: And that's our show for today. Our music is by Adam Day, who also handles our sound editing. Thanks, Adam. You're the best. And a huge thanks as well to every single member of our Patreon community for making this honest conversation, this entire podcast, and so much of my other work, like my twice-weekly personal essay newsletter called "Good Question" possible. Your monthly funding allows me to keep creating resources and gatherings for folks who crave honest conversations, both with themselves and others. And I fully believe that these conversations can change our lives, our relationships and our world. To join us, just come on over to patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. Our community operates on a shame-free sliding scale, so you can feel good about supporting this work from within your own means. So I'll see you over in the Patreon community, yeah? And until next time, I want you to know three things. First, that you are enough. Second, that you are not alone. And third, that I'm totally rooting for you.

[music]

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