

A Better Table
Morgan Eckroth
Transcript

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Umeko Motoyoshi:

Hello and welcome to a Better Table, a coffee podcast about sustainability. On this show, we ask what sustains communities, what sustains relationships, and what sustains your heart. I'm your host Umeko Motoyoshi, and my pronouns are they/them. And today I am speaking with Morgan Eckroth of Morgan Drinks Coffee. You might know Morgan as the director of content at Onyx Coffee Lab. You might know them from their wildly popular TikTok and YouTube and Instagram accounts. You might even know Morgan as the 2022 US Barista Champion and the 2022 World Barista runner-up. And if you don't know Morgan, well, this is Morgan.

Morgan Eckroth:

Hi everyone. I am super excited to be here. My name is Morgan Eckroth. I use she/they pronouns and I have a whole lot of titles as Umeko just shared. I work for myself as Morgan Drinks Coffee. I am still a on the floor barista. And I also work in content marketing for Onyx Coffee Lab.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

That's amazing how much you do. And you always seem so calm and collected.

Morgan Eckroth:

It's all a facade.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I wonder sometimes, I hope that Morgan's happy and doing okay.

Morgan Eckroth:

I can tell you that I am very happy.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Okay, great. I like to do a three feeling word interval. What three words describe how you're feeling today.

Morgan Eckroth:

Okay. First of all, caffeinated. I don't think people can see this, but I have a cup of coffee next to me. This is my second and a half cup of coffee for the day. I'd also say just excited in general. I've been really, really, really excited for this podcast. And on

top of that, it is an absolutely gorgeous day in Oregon. So it feels like everything's aligning. And lastly, I would say very content as well.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

That's amazing. I love these three feelings for you.

Morgan Eckroth:

They're all very positive.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

That's positive. Today, I'm honestly pretty tired dealing with a lot of burnout and just a lot of stuff right now. But I woke up this morning and I was like, "Okay. You got to just get yourself together. Go to the coffee shop, get a nice little drink, get your act together. Have a treat because you're going to interview Morgan today." I'm really grateful for your time and I feel really excited to talk with you. And I also feel a little anxious because I just noticed that I have to change the batteries on my recorder.

Morgan Eckroth:

Not a problem.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Can I call you right back?

Morgan Eckroth:

Perfect.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Hi.

Morgan Eckroth:

We're back.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Hi. Thank you so much for your patience. What are your three favorite things about yourself?

Morgan Eckroth:

Three favorite things. I like my hair, I will say

Umeko Motoyoshi:

You have amazing.

Morgan Eckroth:

Thank you. I really like my internal drive that I have. And I also like my sense of humor. I don't know if that's weird to say.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

That's not weird at all.

Morgan Eckroth:

I don't know if I amuse anyone else, but I do find myself very just silly sometimes. So I'm grateful to be able to look at myself and laugh at myself very easily.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

What makes you happy?

Morgan Eckroth:

I would say being around passionate people makes me very happy. Being able to share things with people makes me really happy. And also I would say stories make me really happy.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

What's a passionate person?

Morgan Eckroth:

I would say a passionate person is someone who's not afraid to follow up on any internal drives that they have. Being able to identify what motivates themselves and then act on that, is the sign of a passionate person.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Is that you?

Morgan Eckroth:

I try for it to be me. I think sometimes it's me. It's a goal to be able to have that direction and purpose and motivation. And sometimes I think it's there and sometimes it's not. And I think that's just part of being human.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Who do you see in your life who embodies that? Who's an example?

Morgan Eckroth:

Very good question. I would say my parents, both my mom and my dad are very, very driven people. I grew up with them being just they had their hands and everything. My mom homeschooled my brother and I while also still working as a pediatrician teaching at homeschool co-ops, like she did everything. And then my dad, coming from a non college background, watching him pretty literally grind his way to all the positions he is in now, from a position that not a lot of people can come out of was pretty incredible too, growing up and seeing both of those things happen. So I would say my parents for sure.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

That's really amazing that you have the opportunity to grow up that with parents who are so dedicated to making the best life possible for your family.

Morgan Eckroth:

I think as a kid you don't really appreciate it because you're like a grumpy, rebellious. You go through the teenager phases and all of that. I certainly did, but the older I

get, the more I grow to appreciate my parents. When I was a kid, I definitely had moments where I was like, "I'm going to be the opposite of my parents. I'm never going to turn into my parents." And then literally, I had lunch with my parents the other day and we left lunch and I looked at my partner and I was like, "I think I'm my dad." Super funny realization.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

But when you say that you like to share things with people, what do you like to share?

Morgan Eckroth:

I think a lot of it ties back to why I love coffee so much. I think the act of sharing things that you create with people is a very special thing and that's a majority of customer service and hospitality and coffee. But beyond that, I really like being able to create things that are hopefully relatable and, or comforting to other people I suppose. And being able to share things online, whether it's videos or stories or anything that other people can identify with or take something positive away from is a pretty incredible thing.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

What do you like about stories?

Morgan Eckroth:

I've always been really drawn to stories in general. I grew up as a pretty extensive reader.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

You will casually be like, "These are all the books I'm reading today." It's like a library for some reason.

Morgan Eckroth:

Yes, very accurate. I had the classic homeschool upbringing of you didn't watch any TV, you didn't play any video games. But my mom would plant us at the library for three hours a week to collect this humongous book bag that we would take home and get through an entire week. So I grew up reading a lot. I have always loved just looking at things through a narrative lens of plot structure. And I also think that being able to see stories in your own life or in other people's lives makes you a more empathetic person. I think viewing experiences through the lens of what's the story behind this makes things a lot more digestible than just rushing through life without taking time to settle and understand and look at what's actually happening.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Yeah. Having a story is so universal. When we're just looking at life, it's chaos. It's very hard to decipher a meaning and I think you're so gifted as a storyteller because you tell a story with these aspects of daily life that a lot of people miss. And then we

relate to it and we didn't even know that we were going to relate to it. And that's such a special gift that I think you have and you're able to tell these really specific stories about your experience behind the bar as a barista that I think a lot of people wouldn't relate to because they don't work as a barista. But it still feels so relatable because you find the human element in it.

Morgan Eckroth:

And I think it makes life a lot better. I think there was a period of time very early in my barista career when, because being barista is hard. For so many reasons, it's a very tough job. And I think there were a couple points early on where I started to hit that burnout of why am I doing this? I'm having bad customer interactions, I'm not enjoying it and it's making my hospitality skills worse. It all compounded on each other.

And that was right about when I started doing TikTok and narrowing in on the fact that I was just making these little vignettes, I guess, of customer service experiences. And it gave me a fresh perspective on my work and hospitality and it gave me a renewed enjoyment by looking at it through the lens of let's break down these moments into stories. Let's identify what the silly parts are, what the funny parts are, what the really, really good parts are, and let's categorize them like that. And it made it so much better. Just my skills in the job and also my love of coffee was able to bloom through this lens of narratively looking at each aspect of it.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Were you telling yourself the story also? Were you creating a new way to frame your experiences for yourself?

Morgan Eckroth:

It wasn't intentional, but I realized later on that that's very much what I was doing.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

That's super healing. I mean that seems like it would be very much so fulfilling.

Morgan Eckroth:

Absolutely.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

So you are in Oregon and you work your regular baristas shift at Keeper. Did you grow up in Oregon?

Morgan Eckroth:

I did. So I grew up in Corvallis, Oregon, which is about an hour and a half south of Portland where I'm at right now. I grew up there. I ended up going to college there and then my partner and I moved up to Portland about a little bit over two years ago now.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? I see you as someone who, just your vibe, I'm like, "You wanted to be something when you were kid." You had a lot of ideas.

Morgan Eckroth:

I did. Even though the ultimate career dream has shifted, I've always at various points in my life had a goal for my career. I think the earliest thing I remember wanting to be with the director, I was like, I ironically nowadays working in a lot of creative producing roles, but I really wanted to be a movie director when I was a kid. I had this camcorder that had the fold out screen, you held it in your hand. And I got that for Christmas when I was pretty young. And I remember just going out into our backyard with my brother who's two years younger than me and being like, "Jacob, I'm going to direct you. We're going to make a movie." So I would just film stuff and edit it. And it wasn't even iMovie, it was Windows Movie Maker. And then my parents for some reason let us have a little YouTube channel and so I would upload these weird little videos.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I'm going to die. That's so cute.

Morgan Eckroth:

And I hope they don't exist anymore. I'll be honest, I don't remember what the channel name is, so if anyone finds them put on you because I can't at this point. But that was the earliest thing I remember wanting to be. And then, I don't know, it shifted around for a while. I pretty quickly when I was in college settled on wanting to work in advertising or marketing. I knew I wanted to do something creative and then everything else just fell into place after that.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I've heard you refer to your theater background and I would love to hear more about that. When I first watched your content, I was like, "What is this?" Because you seem classically trained Morgan.

Morgan Eckroth:

Well, thank you. That's a huge compliment. I feel like I am very scrappy online. That's how I usually describe myself. No. So I have always had some element of performance arts or competitive sports or something involved in my life. I was really, really lucky with the family I grew up in. And also being homeschooled, I had a good amount of free time and my mom was pretty conscious of the fact that since they were homeschooling us, there needed to be some, for lack of a better word, socialization outside since we weren't in public school. But I did classical ballet for a very long time growing up.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

You did. I did that too.

Morgan Eckroth:

Oh my gosh, I miss it to this day. But I did it for 12 years. I believe.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I did ballet for about that long too.

Morgan Eckroth:

You're kidding. This is incredible. I love this. I think my point shoes are still buried somewhere to closet. But I did ballet. I also for a similar amount of time, did classical violin. I was always in symphony and quartet groups and stuff. And then I also ended up in theater productions as well. I really enjoyed improv classes. Being homeschooled, this seems to be a thread that I've connected with many homeschoolers on. You end up doing a lot of Shakespeare in your education, so I've been in way too many Shakespeare plays, really janky productions of them. And I also did a lot of tech work behind the scenes. Yeah, that was a lot of my high school

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Did the AV cart?

Morgan Eckroth:

Yes.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Oh my gosh, I love that.

Morgan Eckroth:

It's so much fun.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I hear you talking about this wonderful creative drive and this environment where you're homeschooled and you're able to explore a lot of Shakespeare.

Morgan Eckroth:

I love Shakespeare.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

So what led you to coffee and what made you stay?

Morgan Eckroth:

So I got a late start in coffee I feel, or maybe not a late start, but I didn't grow up drinking coffee at all. My family to this day doesn't drink coffee. So it was something that was very outside my realm of knowledge. But when I turned 16 and I told the story a couple times and I really like it. When I turned 16, that day on my birthday, picked up my driver's license and the very first thing I did before driving back to school to finish out my day because I was taking a couple public school classes,

was go by the closest Starbucks and I picked up a caramel macchiato and I had no idea what I was doing. I literally, looking back on it, I think what I wanted to do was feel adults and I was like, "I have a car now." And I'm like, "I'm going to go get a coffee." It was it the most 16-year-old [inaudible 00:15:35] ever.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Wait, what year was this?

Morgan Eckroth:

Oh gosh. Okay. So I was 2014, I want to say.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Okay. Were you on Tumblr? I'm trying to imagine the aesthetic.

Morgan Eckroth:

Yeah. Oh my gosh, yes. I ran a blog with 5,000 followers and I would re-log soft grunge and hashtags pastel. So I had my arctic monkeys blasting, got my caramel macchiato and went back to school and that was the start of it. It very quickly became a habit. I'm very much a creature of habit and so I really enjoyed those moments of calming down and grabbing a coffee before the day starts. What led me to really get into it though was when the cafe that I ended up working at as my first barista job Tried & True Coffee opened up in Corvallis. Beautiful, beautiful little cafe and it was my first intro into the specialty world.

I ended up going there just to study a couple times and for some reason, and it's hard to quantify it, but for some reason that cafe space just clicked with me. It was the combination of the drinks of the craft that was going into it, of the baristas working of just the ambience and the creative synergy that existed in the space of, at that time it was mostly young creatives working in this coffee shop and I was like 16 being, "I want to be one of them someday." So it just worked and I started spending as much time as I could there either ordering drinks or studying or meeting friends there. And that was my gateway in the coffee.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

How was it for you when you first joined the coffee industry and started working as a barista? Did you feel welcomed?

Morgan Eckroth:

I did. I feel very, very lucky looking back on my early coffee experiences. The cafe Tried & True that I worked at initially because I'd been a regular there for so long. I don't know if I was friends with the baristas, I thought I was friends with the baristas, but I knew everyone decently well and everyone knew me as this kid who didn't really know what they were talking about or really liked coffee and wanted to learn more. So I was lucky enough to end up at a shop that was very welcoming and also very encouraging in teaching me things that I didn't know because I was hired with

zero experience and limited availability and it was literally just me annoying my way into the job because of how many times I'd applied. So looking back on that-

Umeko Motoyoshi:

How many times did you apply?

Morgan Eckroth:

See, me and my old bosses have conflicting stories on this. In my memory I applied five or six times, not even with the intent of getting the job. I knew I was under-qualified but I just kept handing my resume over being like, "I want this and I just want you to know that I want it so that when you're ready for me, I'm here and ready for you." So I had a really good intro into especially coffee for sure.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

So everyone knows, getting rejected five or six times is a good sign.

Morgan Eckroth:

It's very normal.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

It is. You are off to a beautiful start. It doesn't feel like that when you're doing it, when you're getting rejected five or six times, but it's a good sign.

Morgan Eckroth:

I like to think it demonstrates persistence question.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Yeah, I mean rejection for me is super scary. I have ADHD and there's rejection sensitivity with that, but it makes it hard for me to take risks like that. And I just really admire people who are able to just hear no and keep going. How did you develop that?

Morgan Eckroth:

I think it's a lot of just stubbornness. That's the more negative version of it. I am a pretty stubborn person in the sense that when I want something to happen, I am pretty good at putting my mind to it and just blindly shoving along until I can make it happen. Whether it happens immediately or whether I need to be... I keep using this word, that's how I feel most of the time. Whether I need to be scrappy about it and make it work on my own, I've always been able to keep pushing. That's how it feels is I just find a wall and I just shove on it until it finally cracks.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

What do you want people to know about working as a barista?

Morgan Eckroth:

So many things. The main thing I hope people know, people who are consumers, maybe outside of the specialty cost sphere is the amount of skill it takes to be a

barista. And it's not just the soft skills of hospitality. That's a huge segment. Good hospitality is a learned skill and it takes development and time and a lot of ability to process and know and understand people. But on top of that, there is the hard skills of coffee knowledge and coffee preparation and also just working in customer service, both the emotional toll it can take on people and then additionally the physical toll as well.

Any job in food service or most service jobs involves long hours, involves a lot of physical stress. There's just so many aspects that are bundled into the barista position and I think it's very easy to look at your baristas and think, "They're just making a latte for me and handing it off and that's the entirety of the role." But if you start peeling back these layers, there's so many learned and developed skill sets that encompass the position that are often unseen and underappreciated.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I love that you share that with so many millions of people. I worked as a barista for such a long time, for 10 or 11 years and the job is so special. There's something about it that feels so special and it often felt frustrating to feel like it was so invisible. If you tell someone, "I'm a really good barista that-

Morgan Eckroth:

It's hard to quantify. People are like, "What does that mean?"

Umeko Motoyoshi:

And it's like, but just trust me. That's cool. It's really hard to be a good barista.

Please trust me.

Morgan Eckroth:

I fully understand. I feel like I've screamed this at people before.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Or going into a coffee shop and when I notice the barista just made my oat milk latte is super fast and the perfect Rosetta and it tastes amazing. I get emotional because I know how hard it is to be able to do that so quickly, so consistently and so beautifully while you're also being nice to people. I feel like the idea of barista competition, it's been a cool way to share about the skill that is involved with being a barista. And when you started competing and you eventually won US and you were winning US as a TikTok star who's like live streaming and making this so accessible to so many people, I felt like you were really lifting up the barista community and making such a beautiful case for the respect and the dignity and the support that every worker deserves.

Morgan Eckroth:

Yeah. I mean that was the hope. It that was the goal. It's hard for me as the person doing it to ever know if it hits or lands like that, but literally what you just said, those

were the initial conversations that were had about my barista routine and what I wanted to do. I was like, "I want to share this with people," and there's this appreciation that I have and this love that I have for the coffee industry and the people working in it that I want other people to have. It's a very special thing. And if I can start to push people in that just give them a little nudge in that direction, that's all I want to do.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

How did it feel to be on stage at the World Barista Championship representing your literal country?

Morgan Eckroth:

It was probably one of the most surreal moments of my life. The first performance of mine was the most surreal. But literally when my team and I arrived at the Melbourne Convention Center and we walked in and the floor is still being built because it's the day before the convention. And we round this corner into what is essentially the barista arena, there's not really a better way to describe it. It felt like we were walking to the coliseum or something. But it was this very surreal moment of looking at this just grand setup with these bleachers rising on every side and having this realization that this is the world stage.

And I don't think it felt like that because beforehand it's all head down preparation. But that was the first moment where I felt I lifted my head up and looked around me and realized how many just incredible coffee people internationally were just sitting next to me and having this moment of feeling a little bit undeserving of being there. Just the imposter syndrome of oh my God, there's just these people I've looked up to for so long are just here in the room. But then on top of it, having this piece of I'm here, I've prepared this thing, this presentation, and it's finally time to show it off. And we're not going to change anything at this point. It is what it is and we're just going to do the thing we've been preparing for months.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Do you ever experience feeling so pressured from being a leader and being so not just visible, loved. You're so loved by so many people, you don't just have followers, you are loved.

Morgan Eckroth:

That means a lot. Yes, there is a lot of pressure. Even more so than the pressure that might come externally, there's a lot of pressure that I put on myself. I have a lot of expectations for myself and that tends to be the stuff that is more driving or sometimes more harmful than any external pressures. It is a very surreal thing still to this day to hear you use words leader because in my brain I sometimes still feel like I'm trapped at this 19-year-old age of just trying my best on the internet to make

something and hoping that people are enjoying it. It is still very hard sometimes for me to grasp that I've made something that works and that people are enjoying it. It really still feels like throwing stuff at the wall most of the time. So I don't know.

There's a lot of pressure and I think I just exist with it nowadays. I'm very used to it and so I don't notice it as much. But when I think about it critically, it's definitely still there.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Do you notice moments when you feel the pressure relieved?

Morgan Eckroth:

Sometimes. I think the most recent moment where I felt the pressure release, at least for a brief second, it came back afterwards. But when I found out that I made it to the finals of the World Barista Championship, that honestly was a moment of, "Okay. We've made it." Because at that point in the competition, just making finals is so ridiculously hard. You find out you're in finals and at least, at the very least you're walking away with a trophy. They are of varying sizes. So you're hoping for the bigger ones, but at that point you get a trophy. You are there in top six. For a brief second, I had this moment where I was like, "Okay. I've made it. I've done what I was supposed to do." Of course then everything kicked back in a couple minutes later and I was like, "Okay. We need to make it to the top." But there was a brief moment where I was like, "This is good and enough," and then it wasn't.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

How did you feel about the results?

Morgan Eckroth:

I go back and forth. I will say, I'm really, really, really proud of what myself and my team did. I think with the knowledge I had, the skills I had with what we prepared, we did the absolute best we could. Hindsight is always 20/20. Looking back, looking over my score sheets, I can obviously see the gaps, I can see where points were lost, all this stuff. So it's very easy to look back and be like, "Why didn't I fix this and why didn't I do this?" But in the moment I think we did a fantastic job. I am really, really, really happy with how I did. There is the part of me that wishes I could have done better. But again, just being on that stage was an honor and a privilege.

And also everyone else was so good and gracious and wonderful and Anthony who won was so deserving of it. He did a fantastic job. So it's these moments of internal conflict of you should have done better at myself. But also at the end of the day, I'm also super proud of what we did. So it's mixed bag, but it's mostly positive.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

It's pretty incredible. I think as an outsider, my perspective is you play second in the literal world and it's not like that was all you were doing. You also have three other jobs.

Morgan Eckroth:

Yes.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

So you have 7 million followers combined across your platforms, Instagram and YouTube and TikTok. You produce content at Onyx Coffee Lab and you still work a regular barista schedule. How do you balance your time?

Morgan Eckroth:

That's a good question. The answer is, I sacrifice a lot of personal time for what I do. I cannot recommend that anyone does the schedule that I do. It is very fast paced. It is incredibly dense and that's what works best for me personally. I find that I experience the most mental downturn and stress and just all the bad stuff. I experience those emotions when I'm what I call bored. When I don't have things going on, I'm a person that needs things pushing me and deadlines and structure like two day weekends. That doesn't bring me a lot of fulfillment and it's not rest for me.

So by doing all the things that I do, it fills my schedule in a way that works really well for me. I was actually talking to my mom because she had that same question, but coming from a space of, "Are you good? Should you be slowing down?" And I looked at her and she was asking me how much rest I get and I was thinking about it and I was like, my version of rest looks very different. My version of rest usually involves just taking small chunks of time to myself in a day. So my evenings are my own. I will add little things to my day, whether they're stops at a coffee shop or just little things that make my days flow really well.

So making that realization was really helpful. But again, it's something that works for me very well and it's very hard for me to be like, "Everyone should do this," because that is not at all true. It's a very personal balance that I've struck for myself.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

As another way of framing it, I hear you saying you're able to manage and balance your time because you listen to what works for you and you listen and pay attention to what you as your own person need.

Morgan Eckroth:

Very much so.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Cool.

Morgan Eckroth:

I try my best though because I know when I explain it comes across, I am a workaholic and maybe that is a little bit true and that might be something I have to contend with in the future. So I'm very cautious to tell people that that's my schedule because I'm like, "This is not something I think you should strive for it unless it works for you. You should not try to make this work for you. What should be done is what's best for you." But if people are asking genuinely, it's a very, very fast paced structure that I live right now and I really like it and when it stops working I'll have to reevaluate and figure out what the new balance is. But for now it works. So I'm like, "I'm happy with the current balance."

Umeko Motoyoshi:

How do you regulate your emotional responses to receiving so much feedback from literally millions of human beings every day?

Morgan Eckroth:

Another very good question. I don't think about it too much anymore. Early on I definitely did. I started doing content creation on TikTok when I was, I believe just turned 19 or maybe just before I was 19, somewhere around there. So I was really young, fresh out of high school, barely in college, all this stuff. And to suddenly be very open and public to what ended up being millions of people very quickly was a steep learning curve of my own mental capacity and just how I processed things. I've always had pretty thick skin even prior to the internet. It's very hard to get under my skin. A lot of things just bounce off of me because I'm usually pretty self assured.

So it's usually easy for me to look at someone perhaps throwing an insult or something and being like, "Well, that's their problem. They're just wrong in this scenario. So I'm not even going to pay attention to that because it's just white noise." But there were a lot of interesting things that came out of being a public person on the internet. I tell people I have probably read every single thing about myself that you can possibly imagine both good and bad. Over my time on the internet, I have seen a lot of things about myself that are not healthy.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

What do you mean with that?

Morgan Eckroth:

But I mean as being someone who at previously very much but at times can present pretty feminine online, I have found Reddit threads about myself that are really invasive and very inappropriate. And it's just stuff like that, not that it's right but it comes with the territory of being an online personality. It's something that's very normal. To the internet, you stop being a person and you become a character and you can do whatever you want with characters. You can write whatever you want

about characters. Characters can be whoever you want them to be. And that's how it's often taken. You lose a lot of your humanness to people online when you start doing things so publicly. And that certainly happens and it's just a part of it. I think nowadays I'm really good at dealing with it because I just don't let it get to me at all. But it's something that's there and at some point I'll probably have to unpack it, but at the same time I'm pretty good about just being like, "Well, they're talking about this person, Morgan Drinks Coffee who shares a very tiny part of their life online. They don't, don't know my story, they don't know a lot about me." So they are criticizing and or commenting on or doing whatever about a person that's not really me. It's just an aspect of me. So it's easy to divide the criticism to my online persona from direct criticism about me if I think about it in that way, if that makes any sense at all.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Yeah. How does that work when it comes to the positive feedback?

Morgan Eckroth:

It goes in the same function. I've been super cautious of absorbing positive feedback I suppose. I think being someone who grew up on the internet, I watch a lot of the rise and falls of a lot of early internet personalities and influencers or creators or whatever you want to call them. And I was always very conscious of Morgan Drinks Coffee is a job to me. I treat it a business, it operates a business nowadays. And I don't want to be, I guess a micro celebrity in all of this. That is not my goal. The attention, the whatever is not my goal. My goal at the end of the day is to create things and to share the things that I create and hopefully leave a little tiny positive mark in some way.

So getting positive feedback is awesome. It's great. It's very validating that what I'm doing is hopefully going in the direction that I want it to. But at the same time, I don't want to just sit in it and let my ego inflate because I've seen that happen so many times. And I think that's when you start losing yourself to this job of being an online personality. I want this to be sustainable for me. So I have to create a divide in that regard as well.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

What is it in your life that affirms you?

Morgan Eckroth:

I think affirmations from the people close to me are what truly affirm me, I keep a lot of people in my close circle that are pretty grounded and also very open with if I'm doing something like that they think is wrong or going in the wrong direction or whatever, they're very comfortable giving me criticism or feedback. So that's always been super important to me. So hearing positive validation from them, very affirming

because I've created a circle that I trust on their opinions, whether good or bad. So nowadays, that's what really guides me the most is this inner circle rather than letting too many cooks in the kitchen, from the comment section.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

What are the boundaries that are important to you in your life and how do you set those boundaries?

Morgan Eckroth:

The primary boundary I can think about... Well, I can think about two. So I have my online boundaries and then I also have boundaries for myself. I made a decision pretty early on in my content career that my content was going to revolve around my work in the coffee industry and that was pretty much it. If I decided to share stuff from my personal life that was going to be intentional and thought through. I really didn't want the internet to eat me alive because it's very easy, especially on TikTok with this advent of short form video and quantity being the primary factor of success, to start monetizing every aspect of your life, to start sharing every single thing about yourself. And that's again, what I think to be a very slippery slope, if not done correctly. I think you can lose a lot of joy in your life and your hobbies if you are thinking of them solely through the lens of content and monetization.

So I drew those boundaries very early on. I was like, "This channel is coffee and it's coffee alone." And then in my personal life, in a similar vein, I treat my content creation and a lot of my work as a nine to five. I will clock in for it at nine in the morning and I will clock out at five to give myself evenings. And that's been very, very helpful because working for myself, and I'm sure you can relate to this, you are your own best and worst boss at the same time. So I had to learn the hard way through a couple different layers of burnout early on that if I don't treat this a nine to five, I can't do this. So that was also a very important boundary that I've inflicted on myself.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Who do you look up to?

Morgan Eckroth:

I look up to a lot of people. To name a few names to this day still, Andre Allen is a huge inspiration to me. I remember specifically in the barista competition scene, her routines were some of the very first I ever watched when I was 19 and being like, "I think I want to do this." And still to this day getting to know her better, she's a huge inspiration to me as a person and a competitor and a leader. I look up to you very much. So I remember when the cupping spoons first came out. I remember when my first order came in and being just so absolutely excited about what you were doing

and just feeling so special as this little barista in Corvallis being like, "I have my own rainbow cupping spoon and so do so many other people around the US."

So much of what you have done and are continuing to do it is super inspiring to me. There's honestly so many folks in the coffee industry. I think that's one of the most special things about my career trajectory has been I've gained access and been able to have conversations with a lot of these people that I grew up in my career looking up to. And now I'm like, "I'm going to sit next to them. This is really fun. I can't wait to pick their brain." So it's everyone I guess is the one of the best answers.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Who looks up to you?

Morgan Eckroth:

I have no idea.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I look up to.

Morgan Eckroth:

Well, no. Don't.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Me and all my friends look up to you.

Morgan Eckroth:

It means a lot to hear. My hope is that the people who look up to me and I'm sure they're out there. My hope is that I can continue to be a good role model in the industry, I suppose. I don't personally use the word leader about myself really ever. People sometimes use the word representative and I'm like that's too much power given to me. I was like, "Don't name me as that." But my hope is that I can be a good, I guess, ambassador and continue to be that to as many as possible just because I have found so much personal joy in the coffee industry. For the good and the bad that it holds, I have found a lot of joy and I continue to do so. And if I can help other people find that joy, then that that's the end goal.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Do people say you are a representative in a political sounding way?

Morgan Eckroth:

It sounds very political when they say it. Frequently, it's used as when you think about the coffee industry, they're like, okay, you have the representatives of the coffee industry. And I'm like, "Okay. That's a little too serious."

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Yeah. No, you are a representative of coffee industry. Sorry. No offense. And I love seeing you succeed and thrive and be so visible as a queer person in the coffee

industry. That means so much to me. And also as someone who's just so kind and someone who really, truly has such a heart for baristas, for workers and gets so cool that you work baristas shifts every week. When I was doing my research, I was reading some interviews that you've given and you talked about how your customers don't really bring up your fame and it's not something that touches every part of your life when you're in the cafe working, you're there to be a barista. And I just think that's so special and it makes me feel really proud to be a part of the coffee industry. I didn't do anything, but I'm like, yeah, I feel proud.

Morgan Eckroth:

I think that's so important. I think how I look at it is the coffee industry is this big collective of passionate people and it encompasses all of us. And I want it to succeed and I want it to continue succeeding. And more so than that, I want it to improve. There are so many areas for improvement that still-

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Yeah. Like what?

Morgan Eckroth:

On a barista level, you think about things like going back to what I was talking about people understanding the job, the amount of skills and time and effort that go into the position. And more often than not, they're highly undervalued positions, purely in a monetary standpoint, whether we're talking about livable wages, we're talking about healthcare or benefits, all these things that baristas deserve and should have and often don't. When we look on a bigger scale of the coffee industry, about how much mistreatment there is and how much inequity there is between the US side of it and then also producing countries and it's like how are we exchanging value? What value are we providing to other people? How are we creating value and retaining value at a farm level rather than just siphoning it off to other places? That's barely even scratching the surface of these huge questions that exist in the coffee industry.

And I don't have the answers for a lot of them, but my hope is that by creating maybe just a little bit more value on the barista side, that's something that I think I can do. And that's a small step in a right direction. And it's just these incremental changes that each of us can continue pushing for. I think they're so important.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

What's next for Morgan Drinks Coffee?

Morgan Eckroth:

Good question. I can tell you that the status quo of content will stay the same. I'm still doing I think three or four short form videos a week plus a long form YouTube video. There is something actually exciting. My partner and I are moving. Come

spring of next year, we are moving to the East Coast which is going to be a big change. We're both super excited about it. It puts us closer to basically both of our jobs. It's just the right move right now. And then on top of that, and I haven't told anyone officially this yet, this is breaking news, I'm going to be competing again next year. So that is already-

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I'm going to freak out.

Morgan Eckroth:

Breaking news alert. So that is a huge project that's going to be happening. And we're already starting thinking about competition. So it's like we just got out of the season and now it's rolling right back into it.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Okay. Are you stressed about it at all? Are you-

Morgan Eckroth:

I'm excited. I went back and forth. I initially coming out of worlds, I was like, "That's it. I'm done." And it wasn't necessarily that I wanted to be done that I thought that I guess should be done because you did it once already. That's it. You're off the field. I had some really good conversations with, again, my close circle and also some other folks that I really respect in the industry and they were like, "Do you want to be done?" And I was like, "Well, no. It was the saddest moment of my life when I finished my world's routine for the last time and was like, I'll never do this again." I was like, "That's not at all what I want, but I think it's what I should do." And they were like, "Why?" And I was like, "I just think it's what I should do."

And they were like, "Okay. That's what you want." And I was like, "It's not what I want." So it was this weird back and forth until I finally was like, "I'm going to try it again." There's of course the pressure of, "Okay. You won it once and so that's the bar. If you don't win it again, you're falling below the bar." I'm trying not to think about that. I'm trying to work through that in a healthy way. What I am most excited about right now is the fact that I think there's still things that I want to say on the barista stage. I am really excited to bring people along. Again, I am really, really excited to see what other people create on the barista stage. So that's what I'm focusing on right now is all the really, really good stuff. Because I have so much excitement about this level of creation of a barista routine again.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

When you compete, you just look like you were born to do it. You just look like you're in your element and it looks like so natural.

Morgan Eckroth:

Well, I love it. I feel very blessed that my history in performance arts have given me. I've learned how to calm my nerves on stage. So very truly being on stage and performing is something that is incredibly fun and incredibly enjoyable and it's a very cool thing to do. So I'm excited I get to do it again.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I can't wait. I'm going to be in the front row. I'm going to be screaming. I'm going to have to fight off everyone from TikTok. 7 million people, I'm going to fight them.

Morgan Eckroth:

You'll win. I believe in you.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Yeah. Come big muscles, I can win. So on this podcast, we talk a lot about coffee in terms of social sustainability. I think of sustainability in a lot of different ways, it can mean a lot of different things. But I'm a feelings person and I'm like a person's person. I didn't want to say people.

Morgan Eckroth:

I completely understand. I'm a people person.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I didn't want to say people person because I wanted to sound cooler than that. So I said person, person.

Morgan Eckroth:

I love it. I would buy that on a shirt if you started selling it.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Be your friendly internet person, person.

Morgan Eckroth:

Exactly.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I think about sustaining communities and communities are made of relationships and relation are made of people, made of our hearts. And I think it takes different things to sustain us on these different levels. So I always end my podcast with these strange, abstract questions. What sustains communities, relationships, and your heart. So let's go Morgan. What sustains communities?

Morgan Eckroth:

I don't want to tie it all back to just the word stories, but when I think about, for example, the coffee community, there's I think a very visibly tight knit group of people within the coffee community. And I think that is an incredibly special thing that not a lot of industries experience. It's a very unique weird thing that everyone has created around this beverage.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

It's very strange to try to explain it to other people.

Morgan Eckroth:

And it's like why coffee? I'm sure these communities exist around many, many other things, but for some reason coffee, it's such a visible thing. And I think when you ask people why they care about coffee or why they care about the coffee industry, they will always come back with a story. It's never, I care about coffee because it tastes good. That's a given a component of it. But it always ties back to whether it's your grandmother making you coffee early in the morning when you were six years old and waking up to the smell of it. Or whether it's like for me, those stories of going into a coffee shop for the very first time and just feeling welcome and at home.

And I think holding onto those stories and recognizing them is what sustains communities. Because if you lose sight of those initial reasons or pieces of humanity that exist within the industry, it's very easy I think to become either jaded with it or to treat it a little bit more callously, maybe a little bit more in a sterile fashion. And I think then is when you start to lose that very specialness that for some reason coffee and the coffee industry has cultivated.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

What sustains relationships?

Morgan Eckroth:

I think the easy answer and the one that immediately popped in my head was love and appreciation of one another. I think being able to appreciate people where they're at and for what they're doing is a very, very important thing in relationships.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I think appreciation is so important for people to be able to even be around each other.

Morgan Eckroth:

Very much so. Lowering your expectations and appreciating people for who and what they are.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

It's a way of loving unconditionally when you appreciate someone exactly as they are.

Morgan Eckroth:

100%.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

What sustains your heart?

Morgan Eckroth:

What sustains my heart? I think I found this recently. Nowadays, what sustains me is being able to see other people succeed. I think for a long time growing up that was something that was hard for me. Being a very competitive person and feeling like I was scraping my way to wherever I was going, it was more hard to see other people do really well. Because it's like, "Why am I not there? Why am I not doing X, Y and Z? Am I doing something wrong?" Nowadays, and I think it's a lot of just maturing as I've grown up and experienced more. I think some of my most favorite experiences looking back are in watching other people do well in what they care about. I helped out with some instructing at a Cat bootcamp this year, which was an-

Umeko Motoyoshi:

I saw.

Morgan Eckroth:

It was an incredible experience. I feel like I learned more than any of them did.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

And for our listeners who don't know, Glitter Cat is an amazing non-profit organization that helps marginalized coffee workers, access, resources, and training for competition and just for life.

Morgan Eckroth:

Yeah. It's an absolutely incredible program. It was the end of the bootcamp and I had to leave a little bit early. I wasn't able to go to the final goodbye dinner and I was standing in front of them and all I meant to say was, "So great being with all of you this week, super excited for you. See you at qualifiers or whatnot." And I started crying. It just washed over me the fact that I'd been able to sit there and watch these people who a couple days before were barely starting with competition to reach a point where they were creating barista routines and feeling good about them and getting that drive and seeing that blossom was such an incredible gift. And that was a huge emotion and motivating factor that I'd never experienced before. And it made me more excited to hopefully be able to cultivate that for more people moving forward. Because that sustained me in that moment and I want to see more people succeed like that.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

How can our listeners support you?

Morgan Eckroth:

Follow along with the strange journey I'm on. I am on again, TikTok, YouTube and Instagram, it's Morgan Drinks Coffee pretty much everywhere. I love having people along on this strange little coffee journey and I hope everyone enjoys it as well. So it's an open invitation.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

And it's just your content's so good.

Morgan Eckroth:

Well, thank you. I think someday I'll probably run out of ideas, but it hasn't happened yet.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Well, thank you so much for talking with me, Morgan. And this is the first time we've actually had a conversation.

Morgan Eckroth:

It feels so weird to say that. I feel like we've talked so many times, but you're totally right.

Umeko Motoyoshi:

Yeah. And I feel really honored and just really appreciative of your time, you being so present with me and sharing everything that you've shared.

Morgan Eckroth:

Well, it goes both ways. Very much so.