



Dr. Isaac Prilleltensky - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

Matt: [00:00:00] Hello, writers. Welcome to the London Writer's Salon. We are Matt and Paro. We are your hosts for today's interview. We're also the co founders of the London Writer's Salon, and our Salon interviews are a chance for us to go behind the scenes of a writer's journey and dig into the stories behind the stories.

And so each week we invite to the Salon a writer that we admire to explore the craft of writing, the art of building a writing career, and the reality of navigating the creative world.

Parul: And today we are joined by Dr. Isaac Filitensky. Isaac holds the inaugural Erwin and Barbara Mortner Chair in Community Wellbeing at the University of Miami.

He's published 12 books and over 140 articles and chapters. He talks and writes extensively about the topic of well being, fairness, happiness, and mattering, and his latest book is How People Matter, Why it Affects Health, Happiness, Love, Work, and Society, and he's co authored that with his wife,

Matt: And I want to say a special hello to Aura who's here in the room with us.

So Parul and I, we've prepared a bunch of questions for Isaac [00:01:00] about his journey as an academic, a researcher and writer, and his work investigating what happiness is and how and why people matter. And this is particularly interesting for us as facilitators, hosts of a writing community. So we are so excited to dig into Isaac's work and learn how we.

can continue to serve this wonderful community of writers. So we've prepared questions, but about an hour or so in, we will, we'll turn it over to you. So if you

have a question at any point throughout this interview, pop it in the chat and we'll give you a chance to ask it at the end. All right let's begin without further ado.

Welcome to the London Writer's Salon, Isaac.

Isaac: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Matt: This is such a pleasure and a special shout out to Randall Hendy in our community who connected us. We're very grateful for you joining us and also for the work that you've done. And you've written prolifically as an academic and also more publicly.

I think it's 12 books, 140 articles at least over several decades in your career. But we're [00:02:00] curious, what was your earliest memory of writing as a kid or potentially as an adult if you were late into this writing craft?

Isaac: Thank you for having me and thank you for the question. I think I would be described as a late bloomer in terms of writing.

I don't think it was until I completed my doctoral dissertation that my Ph. D. advisor said. Isaac, I think you're a good writer. I think you would enjoy writing and maybe even becoming an academic. So to put this in context, I defended my dissertation when I was 30 years old, and I really decided to publish a summary of my dissertation in an academic journal, and I was audacious enough to send it to my To a top journal, the American psychologist, and I wrote a summary of my dissertation and [00:03:00] it was well received.

And I started at the time receiving handwritten letters from readers of the journal is saying basically that my work really resonated with them. And. I became very enthusiastic about sharing my ideas and being in touch with people with similar ideas from all over the world, really, and receiving those handwritten letters at the time, it was very meaningful.

So now, as a child, I do, I remember playing soccer. I remember being in politics, in youth activism. I remember moving countries. I don't remember writing at all. I

think writing was a chore for me in school. I guess I was a late bloomer. I discovered this very late in life, relatively speaking.

Matt: I'm right there with you.

I feel like I discovered it [00:04:00] later in life as well. And I think a lot of people here might resonate with that too. You mentioned your dissertation, that first kind of your entry into writing. What was the topic of that? And were the seeds of that now looking back through the through line of your work, were the seeds of your work now in that early dissertation?

Isaac: Yeah. So I wrote the philosophical critique of psychology. I had a simple thesis that psychologists inadvertently tend to internalize social problems, and therefore they contribute to the societal status quo. In other words, by focusing so much on the intra psychic dynamics of people's lives and problems, they leave the social order untouched.

So my thesis was called Psychology and the [00:05:00] Status Quo. And I think I developed that interest growing up in Argentina, under a fascist dictatorship. And we were reading, as young activists, what today might be called discourse analysis. And critical approaches to social issues. And as a youngster, I became really interested in how societal institutions like psychology, reinforce the social order as opposed to transform the social order.

And I saw in Argentina how intellectual elites, how the church, they were all supporting the dictatorship. And I became really interested in how discourses can become agents [00:06:00] of conservative forces. As opposed to social change, and that launched my interest in what later became known as critical psychology.

Today we have critical race theory, critical feminist approaches, critical sociology. I was there at the beginning when. A number of psychologists started really critiquing psychology for not promoting social justice for not promoting social change. So that was the origins of my interest in social justice, psychology and the social sciences.

Parul: I'd love to fast forward to today where indeed your work and your books do advocate social change. And in your latest book, *How People Matter*, you paint a picture of the world as maybe what it is. There's a lot more depression, there's disconnection, there's [00:07:00] loneliness, but you offer a solution and that is mattering.

And I wonder if you could define what mattering means in the way that you write about it.

Isaac: So I think mattering consists of a fundamental human need to feel valued and a fundamental action to fulfill that need, which is adding value. In short, mattering is about feeling valued and adding value. Now, we can feel valued by ourselves.

and others. We can feel valued by our colleagues, by our neighbors, by the community. We can even feel valued by the country and the government. Or we can feel devalued and [00:08:00] eventually we internalize. First of all, as children, through the process of attachment to our parental and caregiving figures, we internalize this feeling, Oh, I matter.

People love me. People care about me. People support me. People will be there when I'm hungry. As a baby, You are completely helpless and dependent on other people, and all the caring and attention means I matter to them. The more I internalize those feelings of caring and attention, the more confident I become in my own abilities to add value.

First of all, to add value to myself. I feel that if the world is threatening, I have a secure base. And a safe haven where to [00:09:00] go back to. What happens when you're hurt as a baby or a kid, you start running, you fall, you want your mommy, you want your daddy, you want your caregivers. So basically, you can feel valued by yourself and others, and you should add value to yourself and others.

If you don't add value, there is little chance that other people will reciprocate it. Otherwise, we just, we live in a narcissistic society where I said, Hey, I'm here.

Love me. But what have you done to earn respect and appreciation? That's the complimentary part about adding value to myself and adding value to others.

Parul: And so if I were to take this to a practical level, say on, maybe a day, a year, someone in this room, maybe all of us in this room will have that feeling of, I don't know if I matter. I don't know if what I have done this whole year matters. Now with this all in mind, adding [00:10:00] value, needing to add value and needing to feel valued, what could I practically do in those moments?

Or in those periods of time when I'm feeling like nothing matters and I don't matter.

Isaac: So first of all, I want to emphasize the importance of surrounding yourself with people who will give you a message that you do matter. Because I don't want to fall into the trap of saying that it's all about you and your agency and your self efficacy and self determination, which are very important, but they don't exist in a vacuum.

So I know that when I feel down, I have my wife, I have Aura to rely on and talk to and feel supported. And hopefully she feels the same in the relationship. So rule number one, surround yourself [00:11:00] with people who will support you and make you feel like you matter. That's number one. Number two, how do you add value?

I think it's important to always have bifocal vision. How can I add value to myself and how can I add value to others? So to myself, If you're a writer, I don't believe in having a muse for writing. I don't believe in having divine inspiration. I believe in working hard and doing an outline and writing and revising whatever your topic is.

We're among writers here, so what can you do? What goals do you set? What routines, what habits can you develop to add value to your writing passion career? [00:12:00] But at the same time, I think you should be thinking bifocally about how am I helping others? How am I helping other writers? How am I helping my family, my friends, my colleagues at work?

And this is what we call the mattering will. The more I add value, the more I feel valued, right? Because eventually, if you're adding value, if you're compassionate, supportive, caring somebody's bound to reciprocate. Unless you're really hanging out with the wrong crowd but it's, you are maximizing the possibilities to engage in relationships of reciprocity.

So my short recipe is add value to self, add value to others. And there is a plan for that. I think [00:13:00] writers or anybody who, accomplishes anything, a carpenter, a musician, an athlete, a teacher anybody who accomplishes anything starts with setting a goal and having short term objectives, smart goals, et cetera, et cetera.

So there is a science to adding value. How do you create a positive habit of writing? How do you set a goal? How do you enjoy positive emotions? How do you reward yourself? Maybe you want to share what you've written with somebody. How do you savor the moment? And Ora and I develop all these techniques based on drivers of change, behaviors, emotions, thoughts, et cetera, et cetera.

We've written about this, but the short answer is [00:14:00] have a goal, add value to self, add value to others.

Matt: That's really beautiful. And we have so many questions about how we can better do that within this community and is something we think so much about. But first before that, I wanted to talk about just the craft and the art of being a writer, writers and artists.

It feels like there's this need for a feedback loop. And there's nothing that's more disheartening when you write something and you either publish it or you put it out there and crickets. Nothing. And, you talk about mattering saying we can't control how and whether people make us feel that we matter.

We can only take control of our giving and writing in its best manifestation is a gift for someone, maybe even for yourself, but for someone as well. How can we as

writers learn to be okay? In those periods of no validation or not enough validation to give us the fuel to keep going, this is something many of us struggle with.

Isaac: [00:15:00] Yeah. I know that when I write something Aura, my wife is my first audience and I want some feedback and it's not always uniformly. Oh, that's great. No. Or I is a tough cookie, a tough reviewer, but I engage or ask how to give me feedback of all kinds. In a loving caring way and I think what you are doing in this community is really very important because I don't know if you publish something and you don't hear much at least you, you should have your own community where you can share what you've written and share among friends.

And I go back to the necessity to surround yourself with a supportive group. And first of all, going back to a community of belonging, a community of writers. But also, [00:16:00] I don't have to, I'm not saying anything new to a group of writers. that frustration is part of the trade and the craft. Like you, you send a book proposal, nobody likes, you're trying to talk to an agent, they never get back to you.

Even when you do have an agent, sometimes they don't get back to you. You submit an article here, there, or everywhere. My experience has been That sometimes it takes as many writers now multiple submissions to get something published. Now earlier we were talking about the fact that I have the privilege, the security of having a paid job.

I'm a professor. So my livelihood does not depend on, publishing this or publishing that. But I know it's hard on people who just rely on the writing [00:17:00] to make a living.

Matt: I'm curious, personally, were there periods where you feel like you were putting things out into the world and you weren't creating anything?

Receiving the value feedback loop that you felt like you needed. And how did you get through that? It sounds like aura is a wonderful partner in this for you, but were there any difficult moments in your career where you felt like this feedback loop is lopsided?

Isaac: I think I was lucky that my academic writing was always growing at a steady pace.

So there were times when I wanted to write more humor. And I did eventually, I wrote humor columns for the Miami Herald. I don't know. I wrote maybe a few dozen until either they changed the editor and the editor fired me, I don't know. She either didn't like my humor or she didn't like humor or whatever it was.

So there were times when my humor writing wasn't going very well, [00:18:00] but I had this other track. I had the academic track where fortunately I, I was having steady publications. And that kept me going. I had these two tracks more, humor, fiction, my non fiction always progressed steadily and that sustained me when this other track wasn't going very well.

Parul: Sounds to me like you're saying you shouldn't have your eggs all in one basket. So if we're looking to matter and we put all of the mattering on one single focus, we run the risk in a similar way that if we isolate ourselves, we run the risk that we're having to hold that heaviness of. Not feeling valued all ourselves.

Isaac: I couldn't agree more, Parol, and, I teach my students the importance of Diversifying their sources of well being and mattering, if you're, if you [00:19:00] think about well being as consisting of different domains, there's the interpersonal domain, very important. There is the occupational domain.

There is a psychological domain, physical domain. And I tell my students, if you put all your eggs in one basket, it's a high risk proposition, right? If it's all about work, it's all about writing, and you don't invest in your friends, you don't invest in your physical health, you don't invest in work, oh gosh, that's hard, because if that one thing doesn't materialize, you're gonna feel crushed.

I think it's exactly right, Perul, that even when your writing doesn't go well, you can rely on your friends, you can rely on other sources of meaning and satisfaction.

Parul: It's a good reminder for what, to have a well rounded life, I feel like it's a good, yeah, I feel like many of us could do that reminder.

I'm curious about something you spoke [00:20:00] about, you talked about status anxiety and you were talking around studies you've done into how egalitarian countries like Finland or Australia have less status anxiety. They're not worrying as much about what their neighbors are up to than say the U.

S. where there's a, there can be quite a huge discrepancy in wealth. Now I see a version of this in the writing community where there are a few writers who get bigger advances, larger audience, and the rest of us stand in that shadow, and we can feel status anxiety. We might think I'm just not as good as that writer.

I didn't get that deal, my book didn't get a film deal, I didn't hit the bestseller list. Any thoughts around how we might talk ourselves off that? Ledge.

Isaac: Yes, I think it's a, it's an excellent question. And I think about it as emotional capital to sustain the blows. If [00:21:00] you think about yourself as a source of investment we're investing in ourselves all the time.

In my life, I have invested in work, I have invested in my family. And the more emotional capital I build with my loved ones, the more I feel successful at work the healthier I become. I'm a bit of a health net. It's another source of wellbeing. The more capital of different sorts you have in your bank, eh, the more able you are to withstand the blows. of rejection or social anxiety. So I just talked about adding value to self, right? But it's also important, and I go back now to the [00:22:00] importance of the environment where you are. If you surround yourself, if you go to cocktail parties, populated by a bunch of narcissists who are only interested in their ego and showing and flaunting their achievements, their wealth, their pedigree, their college education, their status, their prestige.

That's not a healthy environment for you, right? Now, some countries are better at controlling the impulses of people to become narcissists. For example, when we lived in Australia, Australia is called a fair country and there is the tall poppy syndrome, so there is a culture of fairness.

And nobody thinks that they're necessarily less than you because maybe they don't have as [00:23:00] prestigious a job or whatever. That was incredibly refreshing in

Australia. So I always tell people you could talk to the To the vendors in the fruit and veggie store. You could talk to the post office man or woman.

You could go to the bank and talk to the bank clerk or the bus driver. And you felt equal. Which is something very rare in the U. S. Where status and money and achievements is at the forefront of everybody's life. awareness. So you can think about your immediate surrounding. Are you surrounded by narcissists or are you surrounded by egalitarian friends who want to make you feel like you matter?

So it works all the way from your family, to [00:24:00] your neighbors, to your friends, all the way to the country, which is to say some environments are healthier than others.

Parul: I find what's interesting to me about that is recognizing that we are At the mercy of the environments, but we can, what you're saying is we can change the environment.

So at least that's in our

Isaac: control. Exactly right.

Parul: I would love to now talk about another concept you discuss and that is me culture versus the we culture. I think it's quite pertinent to our community. I'd love for you to explain that.

Isaac: It is really related to what we have been talking about now. And so let me define it first.

A me culture is a culture driven by the following precept. I have the right to feel valued so that I can be happy. The emphasis is on I have the [00:25:00] right to feel valued So that I can be happy. This is a culture that promotes narcissism. Compare and contrast with a we culture. In a we culture, I say we all, not just I, we all have the right and responsibility to feel valued and add value to self and others so that we can all explore and experience not just wellness, but also greatness.

But also fairness. There is a lot there. Let me unpack it. We have to balance rights with responsibilities. Otherwise, we just live in a culture of grievance. Rights. I need this. I was harder done by. You owe me. Society owes me. It's all about rights and it's all about me [00:26:00] feeling value.

I don't want to live in a society where everybody just, wants to have their rights and feel valued because I want to live in a society where people balance rights with responsibilities. It's not just about feeling valued, but it's also about adding value to others. So that way we can create a more reciprocal community.

And the last piece of a WE culture is that we're not interested just in promoting wellness. We're interested in promoting fairness because Some of our studies that we and other researchers have done show that there is no wellness without fairness. If you're not treated fairly at work, in society, in school, in your own family, in your relationships, if there is no [00:27:00] fairness, there is no wellness.

Psychological wellness is highly dependent on conditions of fairness and conditions of worthiness. So if you can imagine, this is what I call the golden triangle. Wellness is an outcome. Fairness is a condition. Conditions of fairness lead to outcome of wellness directly. But also indirectly through experiences of worthiness and mattering.

So this is the third part of the triangle is mattering and worthiness. So what we found was that wellness is impacted by fairness and by worthiness and the more we experience fairness. The more I'm [00:28:00] treated fairly, the more I feel like I matter. At home, at work, in society. It's all about the relationship between wellness, fairness, and worthiness.

And we are now in a society that pays much more attention to wellness than to fairness or worthiness. We are off balance. I don't want to live in a society that only pays attention to wellness because it devolves into a me culture. I want to live in a society where we pay equal attention to my wellness and your wellness.

And if I care about your wellness, I have to care about fairness.

Parul: Absolutely. All of this resonates so hard and I agree with this. And this is something that Matt and I have been running this community for a number of years now. And I think we are trying very hard to create a WE culture within our community.

So [00:29:00] You know, we have around 800 writers joining us every single day to write in silence and we have another thousand or so in our online community. And just, we'd love to just bounce a few ideas with you around this. So we, the way we encourage a WE culture is that we encourage a habit of contribution.

And so an example of that would be people critique each other's work or in writer's hours, the silent writing sessions, people applaud each other. They offer encouragement, they're welcoming to new folk coming in. And so that's the, we help people contribute, but we're also, we're a community of practice.

We write together every day, we see each other. Like I said, we reward people for little bits of work they do, whether they finish a paragraph, send off a sub stack, finish the draft of a novel. And I wonder if you've studied other communities of practice like ours and In your research, have you seen any other communities or places that have done this extremely well, managed to create a WE culture?

And if so, what [00:30:00] kind of practices have they brought in to the communities to make them have the fairness, wellness and worthiness?

Isaac: I think the key, and you may have mentioned this, is participation. To make sure that no member of your community is invisible. You may have a lot of writers, people who show up to the meetings, but maybe people who hesitate to share their work.

People who are afraid just to put it out there. And,

When I was here, vice provost for institutional culture at the University of Miami, we were trying to create the culture of belonging and we had a lot of focus groups with people where my job as vice provost was to ask a very simple question. How

do you add value [00:31:00] to the university? And you would be amazed to learn that tons of people said, nobody asked me that question before.

And we encouraged people to come to these focus groups, to many events that we had, where we gave people the microphone, literally, And we said, tell us about your experience working here. Tell us about your experience. What contributions are you making? You may be a gardener, an accountant, or a surgeon, or a math professor at the university, but how do you add value to work?

And people were so excited to share. If you bring it to your world of a community of writers, I think it's really important to enable your members. to share, [00:32:00] to participate in whichever way they feel comfortable at first. It may be that not all your writers are ready to share their writing, but maybe they can share a little bit about themselves or their passion.

Because when you think about it, sharing your writing requires a great deal of vulnerability. You have to be ready. It's Oh my goodness, I'm giving you these and people may hate it. So I think a psychological principle that may help is how to lessen the threat and it's successful approximation.

If you're not ready to share your writing, maybe you are ready to share your ideas. Or your story, or your biography, [00:33:00] or whatever it is that you are willing to share. So this is something that comes to mind. In other words, how do you make it easy for people to participate and to meet them where they are at?

Matt: That's so helpful, Isaac. And we see this in the community where people join and they slowly get more involved. And now we're in a place where we have this thing called a brooms. These are virtual spaces and they've graduated into virtual meetups as well. And we probably have about 20, maybe 30 members in the community that have stepped up to host rooms now around poetry or memoir or essays, newsletters.

And it's really nice kind of hearing you talk about that and see how people can blossom into different degrees of sharing. But of course, there's so much more we can be doing. And that's one of our challenges. But I

Isaac: really like what a what you said people are stepping up to assume leadership positions.

Yeah.

Matt: Yeah.

Isaac: And I think communities of [00:34:00] practice. create opportunities for people to assume leadership positions. And that is very rewarding to the volunteer who says, Hey, I, I'll host the room, eh, because you feel validated in a sense, right? You're adding value. You're volunteering. You get something out of it too, right?

This is, this called the helper therapy principle. We know that the first person you help when you're volunteering is yourself. Because you are creating an opportunity to matter for yourself. And I think the more you can do that, the healthier the community becomes because people realize, Hey, I've been in this group for, I don't know, a year or two, and I feel like I can host the group great.

And the more people graduate into those leadership [00:35:00] mentoring roles, you are in your multiplying opportunities to matter. So I think it's great.

Matt: It's really great hearing you say that and. It makes me think that we could probably do a better job of signposting to the paths to add value. And I think that's something we don't do particularly well.

We quietly do it. Like we might tap people on the shoulder, or we might have to wait until someone reaches out to say, Hey, I'd love to help, but maybe there's more we could be doing to create paths to meaning and paths to value within the community. So it's really. Hearing you talk about that. Yeah, my gears are turning.

One of the things, the questions, and maybe one of the things we struggle with most is, part of mattering in community is feeling recognized, appreciated and seen. And I think one of the things that we've struggled with the most as community organizers is having visibility into all the great things that are happening, especially as the community grows.

And, [00:36:00] we've tried, I guess the question is how do we scale our seeing and our recognition? And the way we've done that is through more team members and we've also created systems like we have a thank you channel where people can thank each other. So people and also systems, we've tried to scale that there's always more we can be doing.

There's, we can always do better. And there's always people, unfortunately, who feel undervalued and that really breaks our heart. And I'm just curious if you have any tips or examples in your research on how communities, community organizers can better scale our recognition, our seeing.

Isaac: I think you are doing a great job already based on all the examples you are giving me.

But I want to say

The creativity of a group really depends. people stepping up and [00:37:00] creating conditions for members to take risks. So I may have a crazy idea. I don't know, to start a magazine or to start a newsletter or whatever crazy idea might be out there. And. If you create the conditions where all crazy ideas are welcome, some of them are bound to hit, right?

It's like the process of brainstorming. First, nothing is off limits, right? And you can have a brainstorm session. Just addressing what you're asking, Matt, how can we create more opportunities for people to shine, to be recognized, to be seen, and just have a brainstorm about that and I'm sure your members will step up, and [00:38:00] there is research showing that the most effective teams and the more creative teams are the most effective teams.

Are those in which the members have the social emotional skill to invite team members to offer input without criticizing them. This goes by different names, psychological safety or conditions for creativity, but really, the more you do that in my experience. The more you create opportunities for people to be creative, the more people will step up.

So it, the limit is only found in the conditions of threat. If you remove threat, people will [00:39:00] come up with all kinds of ideas.

Matt: That's a great reminder. Maybe to everyone listening or watching, we are open to your crazy ideas. Please always reach out. We love them. And actually, not that this is a crazy idea, but Isaac is a result of one of our community members saying, I think Isaac, you should bring him in.

Open invitation, all of you were always listening always there, but also we could do more. And so that's having me think we, we can create better forums to invite. That sort of things and those sort of things. And so thank you, Isaac. I'm curious. How the role of fun and humor play or the role that fun and humor play in community building and belonging and you talked about humor being one of the through lines through your work.

I wonder what you've seen in your research around humor and play in communities.

Isaac: It's a difficult question to answer because. On one hand, [00:40:00] the more humor, the more play, the better. On the other hand, eh,

it's not cultivated enough. So when you think about, eh, building a community, we talk about acceptance and belonging and rituals. Rituals are very important for community, having dinners together, celebrating birthdays or holidays or going for a picnic together, etc. So healthy communities create opportunities for people to hang out together and to give each other a pat on the back and reinforce, etc.

I don't think humor and play are given enough airtime and cultivation in groups and communities unless you belong to a, an improv group or something that is [00:41:00] designed, crafted to elicit humor and comedy and play. Humor can release stress. can be great in conflict resolution. There are many benefits to humor and laughter, and there is a science of laughter and humor and their positive impact on well being.

Apparently, it boosts your immune system. It's not that humor is this panacea, at the margins, it helps to lessen stress and buffer threats, etc. But I think the more we pay attention to humor and play, the better, because it's not one of those things, when you think about the team or a community, we think about all how to give feedback, how to make people feel accepted.

We don't think so much about how to have fun. [00:42:00] So I think the more we can. Deliberately build the fun and play in our communities, the better.

Matt: Yeah, that's a great reminder. And I think one of the things, the word that came to my mind was levity and lightness. And I think maybe we don't bring, I'm just thinking personally Pearl, but I feel like we, maybe we don't bring humor to it, but I hope we bring a sense of levity and lightness, especially to something that can feel heavy like writing.

Let's have fun. We're here in community. Maybe we can joke about it when things aren't going well. I think that's, reflecting how we try to bring humor or levity into this space.

Parul: We're going back to crowdsourcing. If anyone in this community has any ideas about how else we might bring humor and levity into all that we do, email us.

I'd love to know.

Isaac: I might just say that when I started writing humor, I was the subject, I was subject [00:43:00] number one of my humor, right? It was very self deprecating and I don't like poking fun at other people. I, so I poke fun at myself. And my neurotic tendencies and my obsessions, endless faults and deficits and I think a little bit of self deprecation goes a long way because, humor can be affiliative.

Can be the sort of community building humor when I make a joke about myself and people laugh with me about my foibles or whatever, but humor can be aggressive. I should really be careful. I can think of a colleague was extremely scenic. And sarcastic and I don't like that kind of, it's not an affiliative sort of humor but [00:44:00] nothing is as disarming as self deprecation.

And I have to say for a while, my humor writing was going well. But then it hit a snag, I was really deflated for a while when the Miami Herald stopped publishing. Then I found another, Miami Today, they were publishing my things, but but from experience what I can say is the following.

If you have the time and the space to devote to human writing. It's extremely rewarding. So that has been dormant in the last few years for me. Like I had a peak in around 2013, 2015. But it's something that if I could one day, I would go back because it's extremely rewarding.

Parul: And we'd love to dig into your actual, your book writing and actually talk a little bit more about humor in just a bit.

But I have one more question for you before we head into your [00:45:00] writing. And this is taking us out of community and back to the individual and We talked earlier about how writing in its purest form can be a gift, can be an act of contribution. It can be a way that we get validation as well and feel valued.

In today's culture though, freelancers and writers are being encouraged to create a brand, to make a name. We need to be known for our niche. You've got to be known. But how do we know if what we're creating is actually contributing to society, is actually making us valuable, or it's just feeding off fear and ego?

I wonder if you have any thoughts around that, building a brand for writers.

Isaac: Ora and I once, I think it was after I gave a TED talk here in Miami, and Ora and I after the TED talk we went to the lobby and there were a bunch of people and a person came to me and [00:46:00] said You directed a doctoral program, right?

And I said, yes. And I asked, are you interested? And she said I want to be a doctor of something, think it will help my career. So yes, there are a lot of people who are interested, in more degrees and science of. public recognition because it's part of their brand.

And I understand the need to find ways to be noticeable, but there has to be some meaning attached to it. And I think in my case, I write about social issues and mental health and social justice. So I feel that what I'm writing about are topics of importance, just speaking personally.

So I think there must be a balance between pleasure and purpose.[00:47:00]

And there is a British psychologist, Paul Dolan, who said that very well, you cannot just be a pleasure machine all the time or a purpose machine. So if you're a writer, there has to be a purpose in what you're doing. And there also has to be a little pleasure. So it's okay to enjoy recognition. I love recognition too, as much as anybody else.

But are we doing it just for the recognition, like this woman said, Oh, I want to be a doctor, It'll be great. I want to be called Dr. X. And I remember Ora and I had a laugh about that. It's okay, pleasure, recognition, but you have to have a balance between pleasure and purpose.

What are you contributing? Because I think at the end, a me culture is a very lonely place. [00:48:00] on one hand, you become addicted to the likes of your Instagram, right? That's a difference between a community and an audience, right? Like you are starved for the next for, for trending or whatever, the signs of recognition are, and the moment you're not trending, you feel like a nobody.

And that's because you have invested a lot in me and not enough on we, or you have invested a lot in what we call hedonic happiness and not enough on eudaimonic happiness, which is pleasure and purpose.

Matt: That's a great reminder, Isaac really good.

Isaac: And just to go back, like where we started, which is who are you surrounded yourself with.

Are you surrounded by people who affirm you [00:49:00] for your work or just. For your status and brand and recognition, right? Are we treating each other as

instruments? Are we having instrumental love for each other? Or are we having authentic love for each other? And are we just driven by hedonism and narcissism?

Or are we driven by compassion and caring and fairness?

Matt: That's wonderful. And it makes me think of one of the things I think we try to do well. I think we do it fairly well. It could always do it better, but rewarding showing up and whether you hit publish for the first time or the hundredth time, it's there is a bit of an egalitarian thing there, where everyone's here, we're showing up and we'll applaud you and recognize you for [00:50:00] that.

Which is wonderful. Isaac. We'd love to, we probably have about maybe 10, 13 minutes or so before we turn to some audience questions, but we'd love to turn to your writing craft. And in particular, we have a lot of academic writers here in the community. And you've written both for an academic audience and also a general audience in papers and magazines, and also the books.

What was that transition like for you writing from academia to a general audience? Is there anything that you found particularly difficult? How did you adjust your style to reach different and write for different audiences?

Isaac: I actually think that if we start with the motivation, my motivation was to spread the word of whatever I believe, I research, I study. So I was motivated by spreading the word and I don't think the transition for me [00:51:00] was hard, frankly, because I always wrote with a wide audience in mind, even if it was an academic audience.

And I remember going to conferences about theory and philosophy of psychology, which is an academic area of interest of mine. And sometimes I would go with Aura to these lectures and we would sit there for 30 minutes and then walk out. It's did you understand the word of what these people were saying?

And nobody understood anything. And I always critiqued academics who only wrote for themselves what's the point? If you're writing, it means you want to share something, and if you want to share something, you really have to pay attention to

clarity, message, conciseness, succinct information, [00:52:00] what goes into being a good writer, right?

A clear writer, a good communicator. So for me, it wasn't an effort at all because I think I started maybe at the very beginning, I was I don't know, too abstract, but I think my writing has always been clear and oriented towards a large audience. So when I started writing for Psychology Today or Miami Herald, It wasn't hard, frankly but I pay a lot of attention to clarity, to sequence, to flow of thought.

And I'm talking obviously now about nonfiction writing and there are three S's that I pay attention to story, science, and strategies. So if I'm writing for the general audience. [00:53:00] I always want to have a hook, which is a story, a human story. I always want to have science in my message. And I also want to have a strategy.

So these are the three S's that guide my nonfiction writing.

Matt: Are there any books or teachers or resources that you found helpful in writing?

Isaac: I think I learned most from colleagues and mentors who gave me feedback. I mentioned critical psychology earlier. I work with a wonderful colleague early in my career, Dennis Fox, another critical psychologist who is a very gifted writer. And I used to say, he's doing it, Dennis. on me. Lots of feedback just learning from the review [00:54:00] process.

In academic writing, you send the paper, the editor sends it to three or four reviewers. Then you get four, five, very detailed letters about what you wrote. And for me, that interactive process. was very enlightening. So Dennis was one of, a colleague, but I don't have any really luminaries that I say, Oh, that kind of writing is amazing.

There are a few in psychology, which wouldn't mean much to this audience because it's like an inside baseball conversation, but I've always admired clarity. Consistent of message, et cetera.

Matt: Wonderful. We've got a couple more questions from us, but we'd like to shout out to anyone listening, watching right now.

If you do have a question for Isaac, this could be inside baseball questions. It could be about [00:55:00] mattering. It could be about anything else that you want to ask. Now's the time to pop it in the chat. And in about 10 minutes or so, we will circle around to any questions that come up.

Parul: Isaac, I would love to ask you about your humor writing.

It's an integral part of your life. In your writing life, you've written a trilogy of humorous books, The Laughing Guide to Wellness, The Laughing Guide to Change, and The Laughing Guide to Life. Can you tell us about the origins of your humor writing career? Where did this come about?

Isaac: So I credit my humor writing with living in Miami. Miami is a very funny place. It's a very crazy city. The unexpected. Nothing is unexpected. So if you live in a place where people surprise you all the time, it's, I just, I was witnessing things in Miami that is this is crazy. How do people do that?

Like driving in reverse [00:56:00] in the, on the highway, eh, people stopping in the middle of the road just for nothing. So there are all kinds of irreverences and lack of civility in Miami that I had to find a way to cope with. So I just started writing humor about all these unusual, atypical things that I was weakening.

And, I was asked earlier whether I wrote as a child. No, I never did, like I was into many other things. But I was funny, like in the youth movement, they would say, Isaac, stand in front of the audience and, like we have half an hour until the program starts, do something.

So they would put me out there and I would make jokes and engage with the audience. And I used to write funny jokes. anniversary speeches for friends or retirement speeches or a bar mitzvah speech for my son's [00:57:00] 30th birthday. So I experimented. I wrote a few funny pieces, but it all really was catalyzed when

I came to Miami and I started publishing for the Miami Herald and I got really good feedback.

So it's a combination of opportunity and situation. But I want to emphasize That writing humor is much harder than writing academic or nonfiction, because I treat nonfiction as work. It's like you go to the office, you turn on the computer, and you work work. To write humor, you really need to have an emotional state which is conducive to that.

So it's not just like work, which is how I treat my nonfiction work.

Parul: And how do you bring about that state for yourself as you're writing humorous fiction? Yes,

Isaac: I think to write [00:58:00] humor, you need to be unencumbered by stressors. Of different kinds of work relationships, family, health politics.

For me, humor requires more of a the ability to block out disturbances. Psychological, objective, health, etc.

I know how to work non fiction. I have a system. I write an outline. I modify the outline. I write one section. I have a system. I don't need the surrounding emotional state to be in a particular state. For humor, I do. That's why it's harder.

Matt: More broadly, whether it's humor writing or your other writing, what does a good day of writing look like for you?

If we were to peek over your shoulder, On a day or a morning, you're sitting down to write. What do we see?[00:59:00]

Isaac: I have to say that because of my work and other commitments, A lot of writers say, I write from 7:00 AM until 11:00 AM and then I go for a WI don't have that. For me, I feel productive throughout all stages of writing, which can be, I can spend two months on an outline for it, 10 page paper, but I feel productive when I feel that my outline is coming along.

It's, I'm creating a blueprint, I feel productive when there is cognitive gelling

and synergy of ideas and I see a lot on outlines, for me, the most difficult part. is the incubation. The actual writing is not hard. I'm not a very [01:00:00] sophisticated writer, you might say. I write simply and clearly, and maybe even compellingly. But I feel creative when I sit and I think until something jumps.

And I tell my students no amount of time spent on an outline is ever wasted. I really like to sit and sit. Premature writing is a huge problem for people, and by that I mean you start writing because you wrote something that, you write something that it sounds nice. But it's, it may be disconnected from the main idea.

It may be disjointed. It may be out of place. This is what I tell my students. Look, you're writing a green story, [01:01:00] okay? Don't bring blue stories into a green story. The blue story may be beautiful, but it belongs in another book. So for me, the best way to be productive is to see the whole picture before I write it.

So for me, the actual writing, especially nonfiction, of course. For me, the actual writing is easy after I incubate an outline. And for me, usually the outline takes two, three times as long as the writing.

Matt: Really love that. Curious, does incubation look like you sitting in front of a computer or do you have pen and paper? As part of that practice, walking, anything else what does that incubation look like?

Isaac: Both paper, pencil, [01:02:00] diagrams, arrows going in all kinds of direction boxes. People used to laugh at me because I couldn't write a paper without a diagram or a table because I like to organize ideas.

And I think if I have been successful as an academic writer, it has been because. I am able to share clearly difficult ideas in ways that make sense to people. And I feel good about that. I feel good when I am able to synthesize complexity in parsimonious and easy to understand ways. So that's why, for example, a lot of people have written about mentoring, really great academics, scholars.[01:03:00]

But if you ask a lot of people now, what do they know about mattering? They will say, feeling value, that in value four words. And I feel these four words encapsulate. A ton of things about society and relationships and work and success and accomplishments and worthiness. So that's what gives me satisfaction as a writer when people say, Wow, that was clear and compelling and I resonate with it.

Matt: That's beautiful. Yeah, and that's the same thought we had. You've done that incredibly well in your book, Isaac. We're so grateful for it. Keep going. We are going to turn to audience questions in a moment, but we do, we actually are going to give away a couple copies of Isaac's book, so stick around for a chance to win it at the end.

Parul: Maybe one final question for me. [01:04:00] Isaac, what's next for you? Are there any books that you're planning or any ideas that you're currently drawing diagrams about playing with?

Isaac: Yes. So first of all I have two books coming out. One is called How People Thrive promoting the synergy of wellness, fairness, and worthiness, which is a book I edited with a few colleagues How People Thrive.

And I have another book coming out, it's called, long, long name, warning, the Rutledge International Handbook of Human Significance and Mattering. So these two books are coming out now. These are edited books with colleagues from around the world. But what's next to me? This is what interests me, how to create cultures of mattering, which is something that you guys have asked me about, [01:05:00] and I don't think enough scholarship and practice and theory has been devoted to how to create cultures of mattering in families, in communities like yours, in work settings, in schools, hospitals, factories.

Kindergarten government. So I'm really, you know that I believe in the importance of mattering for everything we've discussed today. I don't think we know enough about how to create cultures of mattering. And that's, I have a sabbatical starting in January, and I would like to devote more time to that.

And then hopefully I'd be able to come back to human writing. Because [01:06:00] that's a completely different ball of wax, which is very satisfying in many different ways.

Matt: We want that for you too, Isaac. And thank you, Lindsay, for sharing those upcoming books as well. And Isaac, just the open invitation. If there's anything that we either as organizers or as a community we can do to help support your work we're here, we'd love to, so please don't hesitate to reach out.

Isaac: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity. If people are interested in my work, they can go to Professor Isaac dot com.

Matt: We'll make sure to share all of that. And we do have some questions coming in. And also, we would love to invite all of you here. So I think you should be able to turn your video on if you would like.

To properly enter the room. And then Isaac can see all the wonderful people around the globe who have been lapping up your wisdom, Isaac. And there's so much love. I'm not sure if you've seen in the chat, but lots of love and respect and appreciation for this interview and everything you've shared with us.

So how this works, we've got, some of you have asked your question in the chat. So what we're going to do in the next 15 [01:07:00] minutes or so, we're going to get through as many as we can. We'll alternate Parul and I will choose one of you. If your camera's on and you ask the question, we may ask you to ask it yourself, unless you said, ask on my behalf.

If your camera's off, we will ask on your behalf. All

Parul: right. We start with a question from Lindsay. I'm going to Lindsay's behalf. Does the concept of creative health fit into your research on overall, overall wellbeing? And what role do you see creativity playing in fostering mental and emotional health?

Matt: And just a little context on that, Isaac, there's a, this phrase creative health is one that we've been playing around, what if our creating and community, a focus on our creativity was as important as physical and mental health. So a little context on that phrase.

Isaac: I love that. And I personally, my, my little experience with creativity has been, [01:08:00] both in nonfiction and in humor.

And what I was describing earlier about this process of outlining an idea I enjoy the process. as much as the outcome. So for me, the process, as I was saying before, diagramming things, playing with ideas, I enjoy that. I derive cognitive satisfaction from seeing how things gel either in humor or in nonfiction writing.

So few things In my life, other than love and interpersonal relationships, really, which is at the top, not surprisingly, few things have given me more pleasure [01:09:00] than these creative writing experiences. I think it's a wonderful resource that requires deliberate investments. So when people used to ask me how do you write humor?

There is a process, a time, an outline. You have to set out space and time, et cetera, et cetera. But I think I love the idea of creative health. I love it.

Matt: Wonderful. We might be reaching out for for more as we explore this topic as non academic people trying to understand what this thing is.

Let's see Laura has a question. Laura an inside baseball question. Laura wants to know about Oh, let me, I just lost it. One second. Sorry. Laura, as a psychology textbook editor is curious about the luminaries that you see in psychological writing. Would you be willing to share a couple of those names

Isaac: Yes, so I happen to have [01:10:00] the great privilege and honor of working now with Professor Arie Kruglansky.

He's an eminent social psychologist who was a professor at Tel Aviv University when I was a student. a student there over 40 years ago doing my master's degree.

And then he moved to the U. S. University of Maryland. Long story short, I wasn't in touch with Arye for, I don't know, 40 years or so. And now we edited one of these books I mentioned earlier.

And one of the things I admire about Arye Kruglansky is his

ability to integrate worldly literary social issues with scientific rigor. I just I feel really very fortunate to be working with [01:11:00] him. To read his work is a pleasure, both literary, and scientific. So I admire people who are able to bridge the gap between science and social issues, things that matter to people on a daily basis.

So this is the type of writing. I really appreciate I, I have to say nowadays there are some really great writers who may not be psychologists, but really do a fantastic job. Like David Brooks, how to know a person. Some of you may know David Brooks from the New York times. And so basically I admire people who are able to bring science and knowledge to bear on social and psychological issues.

Matt: Thank you Lindsay, for finding that link.

Parul: Thank [01:12:00] you. Let's see. Nikki has a question. How much of the outline is actually thinking beyond whatever goes on the paper?

Isaac: What a date actually? So there is the initial outline and then there is what goes into the actual paper. So that is part for me, that is part of the incubation process.

The incubation process is about, you may have a long outline and then you say, these sections are really great, but they don't belong in this piece. So I'm going to save them for later. So I don't have separation anxiety. I'll say I'm not deleting you. I'm just putting you in this other file for recycling at some other time.

So yes, the outline for me is usually more expensive. [01:13:00] Then what goes into the actual piece that takes time but it's okay because you may come up with an idea that doesn't belong in this piece, but you will use later. for the

Matt: question. Thanks. Maybe two more questions. Lindsey has another one, and this is maybe for all the parents in the room or listening.

What actions can a parent take to help their children feel like they truly matter both within the family and in the wider world? Any advice?

Isaac: What a great question. Parents have a really hard job because they are competing Against a me culture. They are competing against social media. They are competing against a digital world that is often very toxic for numerous reasons.

So if you go back to the science, actually, of parenting, and you think about attachment. One of the most [01:14:00] important things we parents can do is to make sure that our Children have a. a safe haven to come back to when they feel threatened by the world out there. And we need to make sure that we are there for them all the time, that we don't judge them.

And that sense of being there for them will give them what's called in the attachment theory literature. We have a safe haven and a secure base. What's a secure base? A place to explore the world. So what are we doing as writers? We're exploring the world, right? We're exploring fantasy, fiction, non fiction, documentary, whatever you may want.

We're exploring the world. What parents can [01:15:00] do is to be sure that they are there for their kids and that they convey a sense of mattering.

That their children may or may not have. And that's the difficult part because kids and parents living in a highly competitive society where you only matter if you achieve X, Y, or Z, if you get into an Ivy League or if you work for this company, or if you marry X, Y, or Z, or if you have these kinds of experiences in life.

Basically, that's conditional worth. And just to go back, I know there are some psychologists in the room, to Carl Rogers. [01:16:00] And what he said in 1957, the conditions for therapy and conditional positive regard. It's a very simple notion. How can we provide unconditional positive regard on one hand? And on the other

hand, how do we instill in our children a sense of responsibility to add value to others?

Not just to add value to themselves. Okay, so if we when our kids are young, if we instill in them this sense of unconditional positive regard, on one hand, this is you matter. And on the other hand, values that say, it's your job to make other people feel valued.[01:17:00]

We have to balance the feeling valued, the right for our kids to feel valued with instilling in them the responsibility to add value, not just to self, but to others. I think this is the most thing. I don't want to say the most important because that will sound hyperbole, but one of the most important things we can do for our kids, not just when they are young, but also when they are teenagers.

and they don't want to see you, and when they are embarrassed by you, and when they seemingly they need so much autonomy that you're the last thing on their mind. But if you keep investing in children, and if you are there for them all the time, and if you understand that they need time for themselves, you are not the most important figure in their lives.

It's okay. [01:18:00] It's okay. You just need to understand that they are evolving and they don't need you as much as they needed you when they were two or three years old, and that's fine. But if you do these things, I think in the end, you will have a very rewarding relationship with your kids and your kids will have a sense of not just right to feel valued, But a sense of obligation to add value to others.

This is, and by the way, this is not just one of the most important parenting expectations, but social expectations. This is what we do as professionals, as teachers, professors, mentors, friends, lawyers, doctors, politicians. We have to make, we have to make sure everybody feels valued in society. And we have to make sure that everybody, regardless of their station or [01:19:00] fate in life, can add value to themselves and others.

Our goal is to achieve wellness through the promotion of fairness and worthiness. This is the golden triangle. Wellness, fairness, and worthiness. Worthiness. This should be our compass.

Parul: It makes me so hopeful. This makes me feel like we can, as a society, rise above all the politics and above all the feelings of not mattering that, that pervade today.

Thank you Isaac. And thank you for the question, Lindsay. Now maybe we just have time for one more question. Let's see. Charles had a question earlier. Just want to ask that quickly on Charles behalf. Charles asks, we are in the midst of a sixth of the sixth extinction with species vanishing every day without notice or lament.

Could you address the concept of our disconnect from nature and how [01:20:00] we can learn to cherish our fellow earthlings and the natural world?

Isaac: Thank you for the question. I think this is part of the me culture that we have completely ignored other species. And nature that it's part of our egocentric nature that if you think about it, we have become disconnected, not just from nature, but really from each other.

And there are so many incentives, toxic, negative incentives in society to become self centered. Because. It used to be, we're among writers, that to publish something of worth, you have, you had to go through a difficult process of sending it to an editor, and the editor would [01:21:00] review it, and back and forth and back and forth.

But today, you can have a deranged idea, and post it on X or Twitter or social media, and tomorrow you're a celebrity because of the idiocy. Of what you have put out. So there are many incentives to become your own celebrity. This is, the pursuit of fame, the pursuit of recognition. This is, by the way, pathological mattering.

So you're obsessed with your own mattering. And so we've become disconnected from each other, disconnected from nature, disconnected from other species. So I want to believe that if we culture is inclusive, not just of other human beings, but other species which is a tall order nowadays.

Parul: Thank you for the question, Charles.

Thank you, Isaac.

Matt: Thank you, Charles. [01:22:00] Always thinking of the other than human community, which is really important. And thank you, Isaac. We are at time. This was such a treat, Isaac. The work you're doing is so important. It means so much to us as a community builders and also as this community.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much for this. We are going to give away a couple of copies of your book. How people matter. Is it available In the U S and what countries is it available? Is it

Isaac: available everywhere? As I say, everywhere where there is Amazon, or books and whatever, yeah, it's everywhere.

Matt: Yeah. Wonderful. Great. So how we'll do this. If you would like to win a copy or a chance to win a copy, raise your hand. You can do this your digital hand on zoom. Also, you can put it in front of your screen and I think we can see all of you. And we're going to pick two of you to send this wonderful book to.

Carl, would you like to do the honors or.

Parul: Yes, I shall do the honors. Let's see. Just waiting for hands to be raised. Roxanne and [01:23:00] Laura, you have won a copy. Please email us at hello at londonwriterssalon. com with your mailing address, please.

Matt: Amazing. Thank you everyone. Congratulations on the book, Isaac.

Thank you again for your wonderful work. We're gonna share links to all this, your book, your website. What's the best way for people to stay in touch? Are you on, speaking of social media and me culture, are you on any of these platforms? How can we stay in touch with you?

Isaac: Yes, I am, but frankly, I'm old fashioned.

I like email isaac@miami.edu. Or you can go to professor Isaac dot com and then just click send the message. But I really like email. I don't like to be engaged too much with my phone or social media. But I'm very easy to reach Isaac at Miami dot edu. If you know how to spell Isaac. I S double A C at Miami dot edu.

Matt: Beautiful. We'll make sure to share all [01:24:00] of this in the notes following with the recording. Thank you again. Thank

Parul: you

Matt: so much.

Parul: And this might be a wonderful opportunity for all of us to give. Isaac, a London Writers Salon round of applause. Please unmute yourself. Thank you, Isaac, for everything that you've shared with us and brought to this community.

Isaac: Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity and good luck with all of you writers.

Matt: Thank you so much, Isaac. Thank you again, everyone. Thank you so much for being here, for your questions, for your presence. We really appreciate it. And we do mean it, any thoughts, if this has sparked any ideas for you on how we can create a culture of well being Meaning responsibility value receiving and value giving we are always here listening.

So thank you for being here isaac Thank you again. All right until next time friends. We'll see you later.

Parul: Thanks so much for being here friend Hang out together