

MIKE BIRBIGLIA: I want to recommend your recent book, because it's funny and it's definitely a good thing for people who are struggling with adversity, because you actually... you go there to the dark places, but then you come out the other side.

MICHAEL J. FOX: Yeah.

MIKE: How do you think you get there? Cause it's like... I feel like... How few people would be diagnosed with Parkinson's and their instinct would be, "Well, I'm going to try to cure Parkinson's"? You like, to me, it would be like the ultimate excuse for why not to do anything.

MJF: Were that more the case, I agree, it would have been nice. But it was an evolution of behavior and thought, a reaction and attitude about it, which was: first I was diagnosed and I kind of, first thing I had to do was square with Tracy and find out if we were okay and if she was okay. And then she had no idea, of course, and she said she was okay, but would've been realistic if two weeks later said, "Enough of this." But we didn't know what's gonna happen. We didn't know. We knew Parkinson's vaguely as a geriatric disease, but that some people had. Like Muhammad [Ali] had it, but that was considered, to an extent, pugilistic dementia. And it was all this stuff that I was trying to figure out.

MJF: And in the meantime, I hid it. I hid it for 7 years. For 7 years, I worked and I did my stuff and I didn't tell anybody. Doctor told me that I had 10 years left to work when I was diagnosed. So it was a big shock, 29 years old. And I had a lot of stuff going on. And so I really freaked out and I just signed a big contract to do like a bunch of movies for a bunch of money and just all... Irrational thinking. And crazy thinking. And so after a period of about 7 years, I went through all kinds of stuff. I went through figuring out... I quit drinking, which [drinking] was not an effective tool in dealing with Parkinson's. And then I had a great moment with Tracy where she evaluated my situation and very calmly without anger said, "Is this what you want? Is this what you want to do?" And it just shook me. It just shook me.



MJF: And so I dealt with that. And I dealt with getting sober. And then I started to understand the disease more. I started talking to more doctors and I started to talk to, on the sly, more patients. And just really kept it close. And by the time I had released it to the public, I had gone through these huge evolutions. I quit doing films out of the country and out of the city, and then started Spin City, and picked up my kids at school every day, went to the movies at night. We had a regular life, and that was good. And then I started seeing opportunities to do stuff. I realized that I had to devote myself, at that time, totally to the [Michael J. Fox] Foundation. Now it wasn't just like, "Let's cure this this, let's get this done." It was a long trip through the desert.

MIKE: Yeah. At a certain point the Foundation crossed, the \$1 billion raised for Parkinson's research mark.

MJF: And honestly, and I say this with a great deal of pride and a great deal of affection and gratitude to everyone involved: a billion dollars, 20 years, we haven't done it yet. But what I want to get it done. And so I'm very happy that we raised a billion dollars. We had great help from some key donors and great help from the Parkinson's patients. That was one of the cool things that we did. We started out to be a research foundation and to be a foundation that purely focused on the next big breakthrough. And that's happened and we've brought some key initiatives and brought some drugs to market and demos, as things you'd expect us to do. But one of the things we would become is a focal point for the energies of the Parkinson's community of their families, of the other children, of them themselves, whether it's as simple as finding out who's doing a bike-a-thon in your neighborhood. Or perhaps more impactful in the long run is getting involved with clinical trials. And we have a list of clinical trials called Trial Finder. You can find something in your precinct that has opportunities to be of service.

MJF: One of the big things where we're we're into, and it's tricky because it's not a cure per se, but it's as close as you can get for those undiagnosed. There are a series of symptoms. Yours is one of them. Interrupted REM sleep, and messed up sleeping.

MIKE: Yeah, I have REM sleep behavior disorder, which I've documented comedically in a lot of places.

MJF: You actually mentioned it when you were passing by at 3 o'clock in the morning the other day.

MIKE: I should have said hi.

MJF: You were walking a raccoon and wearing a funny hat.

MIKE: But do you find that, because I find this with my sleepwalking, is people think I'm an expert medically and I have to be like, "No, no, no, no, no, no. I don't know. I don't know, half the, you know, I don't know a 10th of the things these people know."

MJF: I would disagree with you in that, to the extent that patients, aside from all the Latin and the diagrams you can't make sense of, we know more than our doctors. Because we know what it's like to have the disease.

MIKE: Oh that's funny.

MJF: We know what it is. I'm an expert on that. I'm an expert on what it's like to live with Parkinson's. And I don't want to forfeit that in any exchange I have with a doctor. I don't ever want to yield that, because it's really important. It's earned, and it's powerful.

MIKE: That's funny, because like, I think one of the things, I mean, in addition to the foundation, which is so impressive, it's like, your acting is still great. You have this great line in your book where you go, "As an actor. I can convincably play anyone on Earth, as long as they have Parkinson's disease." which is like, that's a great comedy line.

MJF: This whole trip has been really weird. And like I said, I had a really tough time in the last few weeks beyond what was in the book.

MIKE: No, I know. I heard that you had some trouble with your hand recently.

MJF: Yeah. And then there's things like antibiotics. And then the one size fits all kind of thing when you get taken to the hospital, and God bless them all, they're great and they work really hard, but for example, Parkinson's [inaudible]. So it means you have a patient that [inaudible] minimum I don't drink. So I don't like morphine. I don't like any of that stuff. I don't want it in my body. [Inaudible] succumb to their whims without being messed up for three months. And so then what happens is that they medicate you lightly, and it's nice, but you start to move a little bit. You have a hit of that, and a hit of that. And then you're kind of in another realm and you're not dealing with your initial issue, whatever, now you're dealing with drugs. Parkinson's is hard for people to figure out. So they don't know how to deal with it. They have a tendency to not know how to deal with that set of issues. With the hand injury, my doctor would

say, "Be still." I say, "I'd love to be still. That'd be great. You figure that one out, you give me a call."

MIKE: "You figure that one out, you let me know."

MIKE: I think one of the things that's remarkable though is like, you're on Curb Your Enthusiasm. You're on Rescue Me and Good Wife with some of the symptoms. And I think what's remarkable as an actor, I'm looking at you going like, "Well, you're still a better actor than me. And like, I got it all. I got all the faculties. I'm banging on all cylinders. You've got to deal with all this shit." What, as an actor. Are you held back from? Is there anything that you're held back from doing that you couldn't do before?

MJF: I actually got to [inaudible]. I was cruising along, doing The Good Wife and Larry's show, and all this other stuff, and really loving it. And loving that idea that [all of those characters] have Parkinson's, or that I can do anything as long as they have Parkinson's. The two sides are related. Because everybody has Parkinson's. I mean, everybody has some shit

MIKE: Yes, everyone has something.

MJF: So everybody's got their thing they're working on,

MIKE: But I I'm curious as an actor so much of it is observation. Observing, seeing how people behave and then acting.

MJF: Well that's a key thing. If you can see past the Parkinson's, as you can see past the other issues that they have, and to see the essential... This sounds so "actor-y" but you can find the essential truth would, the essential truth to that character. "This guy is afraid." I do that and I look at that, and it's really a lot of fun. Like I love playing this guy on Good Wife who was just evil. He played on people's emotions. He played on their sympathies and their best intentions, and just mutilated them with it. And then when I did the spinoff from Good Wife, which is Good Fight, I couldn't remember the lines. I just had this blank, I couldn't remember the lines. And it was strange because on Family Ties were used to give me the script and I'd go, "I'm in. Mallory, get off the phone." And I knew it, like in an instant. And it continued to be that way for me. I have 70 pages of dialogue on a De Palma movie. And knowing that a hugely expensive Steadicam shot, depends on me knowing the lines, not a trickle of sweat on my brow. It used to be like that. And I get to this point, I'm on a soundstage in Culver City, and I can't get this line together. It was this legal stuff and I just couldn't get it. But what really refreshing was I didn't panic. I didn't freak out. I

just went, "Well that's that. Moving on. A key element of this process is memorizing lines, and I can't do it." And I had done Kiefer's show in Canada, [Designated Survivor]. I had the same problem.

MJF: And so I was thinking about that time... I'm a big Tarantino fan, and a big Brad Pitt fan, and a big Leonardo DiCaprio fan. And I loved Once Upon a Time in... Hollywood, for a lot of reasons. One was that when I moved out to Hollywood just after that, and I experienced a lot of that old Hollywood, that doesn't exist anymore. That being said... what's cool about it was he was doing a scene of Western show and he couldn't remember his lines. He went back in the dressing room, he was screaming at himself, he was like tearing into himself in the mirror, and drinking. Just a mess. And I thought about that, and I thought, "I don't want to feel that. Am I wrong to feel that? Am I right to feel that?" But here's what it tells me. I don't take on something with a lot of lines, because I can't do it. And for whatever reason, it just is what it is. I can't remember 5 pages of dialogue. I can't do it. It can't be done. So I go to the beach.

MIKE: So do you find, you know, that it's like they say... you know, my Aunt Lucy is blind and she has a better sense of hearing. You know, people are, sometimes if they don't have their hearing, they have better sense of sight. Do you feel like from Parkinson's you have a better sense of like observation or like anything like that?

MJF: You're walking me right into this stuff. Beautiful.

MIKE: Really?

MJF: Well, because one of the things, and I don't say this as often anymore, and I used to say it all the time... but I'll just say it again. I couldn't be still until I couldn't be still. I couldn't gauge what that center of my equilibrium was. There was a place that I could get to that came about, and my understanding of it came about, because of having Parkinson's. I don't have that choice anymore. I don't have any choice. I don't have that choice. I've always had choices. And so I just, I couldn't be still and see those choices until I couldn't be still, because of this other crap. The peripatetic wanderings, and weird flailings and body impulses that I feel as a Parkinson's patient, a sober Parkinson's patient, are nothing to compared to what I felt as a drunken asshole. Like, I mean, that was a completely different thing that I couldn't be still, and I was less still than I am now. When I start moving around, I hear the ocean here, luckily, and the light's nice. And I'm talking to a friend, and it's all good. Let's take this now and enjoy it.

MIKE: So I have this one thing on the checklist, which is: when I was a kid, I wanted to be you as an actor, and as an adult I want to be the kind of person who does the kind of things you do with your foundation. And so I wrote: You always try and deflect compliments. But I'm requesting that you say, "Thank you."

MJF: Thank you very much. Thank you. And I so appreciate what you do. First of all, your work as an artist, you truly are a unique informer on our times. From your point of view and what I try to do from my point of view, seems like a really small corner of the world. But REM sleep disorder and sleepwalking are a big part of the world, and you're sharing about it, and your insights on it are huge. They helped me understand a lot of things about lack of control, and acceptance. And improvising. And family, what family means. I love the work you're doing, and I love every chance to get to see you.

MIKE: So this is this thing we do on the show called The Slow Round. It's based on sort of memories and things. Do you have a memory from your childhood where it just comes back to you sometimes, and you don't even know why?

MJF: Oh, I have a lot of those. Let me think of a random one... Being 4 years old and walking my parents to the edge of a pond in our neighborhood, looking for frogs but finding turtles, and just thinking, "I was looking for frogs but I found turtles."

MIKE: Looking for frogs but finding turtles.

MJF: I found turtles. And turtles are important to me. I have a turtle tattoo. The sea turtle. They didn't have those in the pond in Chilliwack, B.C. But turtles remain important to me.

MIKE: Why are they important to you?

MJF: Well, this turtle... I have this tattoo, which my wife just hates. So I can't get another one, but... It was New Year's Eve 1999 into 2000. We were in the Caribbean, St. John's. It was real swanky, a lot of cool people there. Alan Alda and his family. Mel Brooks. All these great people. Yeah. And then we were going into this year where we thought the world was going to end and all the computers were going to crash. So I was looking for some kind of clarity and I was trying to figure out whether to leave the show and start the foundation. And so I went swimming. It was twilight. You know, have a quick swim and go get

ready for the evening. The kids were getting ready. And I said, "I'm gonna go for one last snorkel."

MJF: So go in the water, just up on the beach, and very shortly into my snorkel, this turtle comes out of the weeds. He's like this big, massive turtle, and he's missing a chunk out of his skin, and he's got a big scar on it. And I said, "This mother has been through it. This guy has been through it." You go back to a little turtle running down the beach, like probably 30 years ago, where he could get picked up by ospreys and badgers and stuff. And this guy made it. And here he was in my area, like my zone where I'm swimming. So I look at him and swim around him for a while and I just thought, "This guy was gonna do the next right thing. His only agenda: do the next right thing." So I got out of the water and I said to Tracy, "I'm leaving the show and I'm gonna do the foundation."

MIKE: Wow.

MJF: It seems very, like, self-generated lore, but it's truly what happened.

MIKE: What's the best piece of advice that anyone's ever given you that worked?

MJF: My father said to me when I wanted to be an actor and move to the states... you know, he had no comprehension. He thought I was a hippie. But I was working. And he was a military guy. But I was working, and he couldn't argue with that. Dollars and sense where I was like, as a 17-year old I was making \$16,000 a year, like a good set of money. That was over the course of all my work. So when I said, "I want to move to Hollywood," he said, "Well, if you're gonna be a lumberjack, you might as well go to the goddamn forest."

MJF: And then other people like Jeffrey Katzenberg, who said to me, when in the bull ring don't wear red. And what else... A lot of program staff, like, I can't get into it specifically, but a lot of that stuff for the program that helped me quit drinking and get sober. It's about acceptance, and just because you accept something, it doesn't mean you resigned to it. You can endeavor to change it, but if you accept the truth of it first, "This is the truth of my situation," under those terms, but if I look at it from another angle, it's an opportunity.

MIKE: I think that's, that's phenomenal advice. I think that's one of the very strange things about this moment in history, in a broad sense, is that the "What is true?" is so heavily debated that none of us can get to acceptance on kind of the worldview of the whole thing.

MJF: It's terrible. I mean, you... Everything is, you said that there's no accepted truth. There's no good faith attempt at a co-understanding. And there's people who want to exploit that. Both sides. You know, we always say that there is unfair, characterizations of different situations, like "This is this, and this is real."

MJF: But the other side sees it the same way. And even saying "the other side." Those terms. It's all so screwy. I mean, everything's polarized. Everyone's forced to take a position on a truth that is not filtered through their own process of right wrong, but it's filtered through some other gas bag in Midtown Manhattan coming up with crap.

MIKE: Yeah. Do you remember being an inauthentic version of yourself from any part of your life, that you cringe at?

MJF: Yeah. You'd have to run a reel of me on David Letterman, who I love, and I was on 41, 42 times, over the NBC/CBS spectrum. I'd be on the show with big glasses and cowboy boots... Who are you? Dr. Ruth?

MIKE: Oh my gosh. Was that in your twenties or thirties?

MJF: In my twenties, I was at any given moment anybody. Because I was just like, I came from Canada in 1979. I worked for a couple of years and did like Here's Boomer and Lou Grant, like a weird training thing. And then I had this hit. It's like... Do you play poker?

MIKE: A little bit, yeah.

MJF: I was down to a chip and a chair. I had nothing. And then there were all kinds of implications. Because if I left [the U.S.], I owed the IRS like \$10,000 and I wouldn't be able to come back and and earn that money back. And I knew that going back meant... My brother who's great guy, head of a lot of construction sites, he was superintendent of... I would've been picking up nails on the construction sites. It was bad. It was down to the last second, and I got Family Ties, and my life changed. I've always had that, I've always had that thing to look to and say, "Shit can happen." You can't set the bar high enough to eliminate the possibility of good things happening.

MJF: And that's the thing about life, like, "How do you be optimistic when everything is terrible?" I say, I don't know about you but I'm hanging on until the last minute when it's great.

MIKE: Growing up, do you have a memory of like a really strange neighbor or a really unique neighbor?

MJF: Yeah, a few. We had a woman that... We lived in, at one point, when my father just got out of the military, we lived in a three story walk-up called Middlegate Apartments and it had a swimming pool, but that was fetted and awful, and I think it eventually shut down. But the manager of this place was a woman. You should've seen her, she was like a country star, in a way. She had dark, flowing raven hair, and she wore like white cowboy boots. And I don't even think they had spunks then, but spunk-like material. And she was very brusque, and there was always an opportunity to warn us children that we would be the cause of the eviction of our parents. [Inaudible.] I had a pet mouse I brought from science class, and then he got out. So then I was the scourge of the neighborhood. Because I had let this mouse out in the neighborhood. And she was just basically saying, "You find that mouse?" I lived in fear of this woman coming, popping out, demanding that I find his mouse. Like he's a white mouse. He's not going to be like a sign of a pestilence in the building. But that's a weird neighbor.

MIKE: When you watch a movie, read a book, see a play, like what's the thing that you crave? Like, what's the thing that's your favorite thing?

MJF: I was watching a movie last night, it was really cool. And I don't often like films like this, it's called Reign of Fire. It's like these dragons that populate Europe and Christian Bale plays this guy who was one of the first ones as a kid to find the dragons, and his mother's killed by the dragons. But it was Christian Bale, Matthew McConaughey, and Gerard Butler. All in this movie, and they're all great. But I look at that and I say, "They're all great... Christian Bale can act his ass off." He's just on another level.

MIKE: Oh, that's a whole thing.

MJF: McConaughey's great. And he's getting into in this role, he's all buff and his eyes are flinty, and he's got a cigar in his teeth and that's all great. But Christian Bale, in this goofy movie, he'll make you cry. He's so good.

MIKE: Do you have a smell from your childhood that you remember?

MJF: Yeah. I don't have smell now, which is a function of Parkinson's disease, which is another one of those things on the list.

MIKE: No kidding. Geez.

MJF: But I remember the smell of pine, just after Christmas, in this apartment building I lived in. It had balconies, fire escapes, and everyone would put the trees out there for New Year's before they got picked up, because you couldn't put them on the road. And the whole place smelled like pine. It smelled like a pine forest.

MIKE: What's a thing that you've always enjoyed in your life that you still enjoy? You know, in solitude.

MJF: I love to meditate at the beach. I was just doing it this morning. As I sit, I hear the pound of the waves, get the rhythm. I just go... and then come back 25 minutes later. And nothing's changed but everything's changed.

MIKE: I wrote this joke recently when I was in Minnesota, but it makes me think of Canada, which is, I find that people who live in these cold climates, they're so tough, you know, it's like they have calluses for the weather at a certain point. So I was making small talk with the taxi driver from the airport. I go, "How's it going with the weather?" You know, because it was zero degrees. And the taxi driver just goes, "I can't take it anymore." And I thought, "Can you take it for another 10 minutes? Because we're pretty close to the hotel."

MIKE: When you were growing up in Canada, did you ever clock how goddamn cold it is there?

MJF: What I think of when I think of cold is going on camping trips. We'd go on camping trips in November, for school. It's so cold. I can't believe children didn't die. We would have carried on anyway. But it's so cool that you're freezing from the inside out. Like normally the inside of you is the last vestige of warmth, like it started somewhere in your perineum and just radiated fingers of ice through your whole body.

MIKE: I think there's correlation between comedy and weather, because the amount of comedians and comedic actors out of Canada, Minnesota, Massachusetts... It's completely disproportionate.

MJF: There's a lot of truisms about the business and weather thing. You know, time plus tragedy equals comedy. The other one is: heat is the enemy of comedy.

MIKE: I've never heard that. Heat is the enemy of comedy.

MJF: Guaranteed, you go to the set of some sitcom that has an audience, they got that thing cranked down to like 62. Because if you're cold, you're awake, and if you're awake, you're alive, and if you're alive, you going to be involved in whatever shiny thing they put in front of you, and that's our show.

MIKE: I jotted this thing down recently, which is... This is just true story. For my whole career I've heard about these professional airport greeters, who escort celebrities through the airport. And I always thought, "That's not for me. You know, it's not who I am." And then during the pandemic, I was like, all right, I'm going to do the airport greeter thing. I made this woman on the curb, JFK. She walks me through security and we're walking through... totally, this is word for word, she goes, "One time, I told Hugh Jackman that there's a little nook behind a restaurant right there in Terminal 2. It's private. It's got great food, and I brought him there, and he loved it." And I go, "Is that where we're going? And she said, "Nope." And then we went to the food court and it was never discussed again.

MJF: That little nook that only Hugh Jackman knows.

MIKE: Yeah. And then we went to the food court and she tried to use her card for a 15% discount. And the cashier. "Is it for you or is it for him?" And I'm holding pizza that's clearly for me and I go, "Oh, it's for me." And then we didn't get the 15% discount. That's what I realized. I am not Wolverine. I'm like an Arctic Fox eating a pizza at full price.

MJF: You can't buy that kind of weight that can get you the pizza at a discount.

MIKE: What is the... I mean, genuinely, I grew up on your movies and to me, I look at you and go like, "Well, you clearly like have it all. You could do anything." What is the luxury that actually is as good as someone would think it is?

MJF: I can say yes first to my family, I say yes without thinking about it. We want to go here. Yes.

MIKE: Oh, that's interesting.

MJF: I'd like to have this for dinner. Yes. Yes is the first answer because they've never done anything to dishonor that. And it's a great feeling. Like, can we go to Disneyland? We've been to Disneyland 14 times. Never in a line.

MIKE: What's the inverse? What's the thing that doesn't matter how rich and famous you are, it's just, you got to deal with it?

MJF: Well I mean that's everyday with this. And look, the other side of it is, I can't go there. I can't go. I can't go to Hawaii, I can't go to the store right now. I can't go to a restaurant right now.

MIKE: The final thing we do on the show is it plays right into what we're already talking about, which is Working It Out For a Cause. And if there's one thing that you want people to know about the Fox Foundation, what is that single thing? And how can they help?

MJF: I'm going to paraphrase Barack Obama, but you are the agent of change that you're looking for. You are the tool that'll get this done. And then you can get involved with trials, you can get involved with, with anecdotal information that goes into several pipelines that then make that information accessible... accessible to researchers and other patients, and then we can sit down and talk about if we can do something about it. And doing something about it, might be sitting around and talking about it, but it's attached with an action. We don't have an endowment. We don't have, we don't have a big pile of money that we then go out to people. Money comes in and goes out. We've identified the science before we've earned the money, and the science is ahead of the money, still. And so we've got to reach that, and we'll get to a place where the money is ahead of the science.

MIKE: Michael, I can't thank you enough for doing this. This has been so enlightening and honestly, I feel so lucky to have met you. You're one of my heroes in my life, and to witness, close-up, what you're able to do on and off screen is unbelievable.

MJF: You, first of all, are a genius. What you do, the things you find, the truth you seek out and find, and the observations you make always touch me. Thank you. Thank you for getting involved in our foundation. Thank you for lending your talents to our efforts. Love to your family. And carry on, thanks.

Please consider donating to or becoming involved with [The Michael J. Fox Foundation](#).