My Year of Living Vulnerably

Rick Morton
Author & Journalist

Ebony Bennett
Deputy Director at the Australia Institute

Ebony Bennett **0:01** Good day, everyone. I'm Ebony Bennett, Deputy Director at the Australian Institute and welcome to our webinar series. Thanks so much for joining us today. I'd like to begin by acknowledging that Canberra is nanowall country and pay my respects to the traditional owners and elders past and present. sovereignty was never seated here. And it always was, and always will be Aboriginal land. And for those of you who missed it, yesterday, we did host the national closing the gap report launch, you should be able to find a copy of that recording up on our YouTube page. If you missed it, it was really great. And we heard from a lot of indigenous leaders about Aboriginal led responses to a number of crises, whether it's the climate crisis, or the pandemic, and the response of Aboriginal community controlled health organizations to that was a really wonderful webinar. And I encourage you to check it out, as well as the full close the gap report, which you can find at the Human Rights Commission website, and at the witch Institute's website as well. So the same as last year, we're trying to do these webinars at least every week. But dates and times do vary. For example, today is on Fridays. Normally, we're on a Wednesday, so do make sure that you head over to our website to check out when upcoming webinars are on the books and the dates and times. And you can always find the details and register there. We don't want you to miss out on all of the great conversations that we're having. And just a few tips before we begin to help things run smoothly. If you hover over the bottom of your zoom screen, you should be able to find a q&a function where you can ask questions for Rick for the second half of the webinar. And you should be able to upvote questions from other people as well and make comments on them. Please keep things civil and on topic in the chat, I will boot you out. We don't really have to do that very often. But we will if we have to. And lastly, a reminder that this discussion is being recorded. And we will post it up on our website and YouTube channel. Hopefully later this afternoon. So today we're talking to author and journalist Rick Morton about his new book my year of living vulnerably. I'm partway through it. And I have to say I've absolutely been devouring it. And I've been resentful of all my other social obligations that mean that I haven't had time to finish reading it. Rick is a journalist and writer on has been one for over 14 years. He's the winner of the 2013 Kennedy award for young journalist of the year, and the 2017. Kennedy Award for Outstanding columnist. His previous books include on money and

the fabulous 100 years of dirt. In 2019. Rick left the Australian where he worked as the Social Affairs writer with a particular focus on social policy. And he's now the senior reporter for the Saturday paper. He regularly appears on TV, radio and panels across both the ABC and commercial networks. I believe he did conversations on ABC earlier this week, where he discusses politics, the media, writing and social policy. We're so delighted that you could join us today. Good, Eric, thank you for coming along.

Rick Morton **3:01** You know, everybody, thank you so much for having me. I think I need to cut down that bio. Because I don't know what the statute of limitations is. achievements for 2013 young journalist of the year is probably when I can cut it.

Ebony Bennett **3:13** No, I think take it.

Rick Morton **3:16** You know, it served a purpose at the top.

Ebony Bennett **3:19** So first of all, tell us about your reasons for writing this latest book, my year of living vulnerably. How did it come about come about?

Rick Morton **3:27** Largely because I'm a huge nerd. And I wanted to kind of find an excuse to study the world around me. But the excuse really came in the form of the fact that I was diagnosed in 2019, with complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is a condition I'd never heard of at the time, despite writing an entire book about my family and their own sense of trauma, and how it travelled through the generations. And I kind of figured if I had written a Thai book and had never heard of it, none of the seven psychologists I had seen in the seven years previous had ever even mentioned that I might be a candidate. I figured that maybe there are other people out there going through the exact same thing that I did, because it's so common. And you know, and I've said this before, but I feel like you know, complex PTSD is defined by like a persistent emotional neglect or abuse or just a lack of love, particularly in childhood. And I essentially figured if that's the diagnosis, then the solution is probably the precise opposite, which is more love all the time, wherever I turn, and really the ultimate form of love. I think in the way I wrote this book is curiosity for the world and the way we live in it as human beings. So that was my overarching pieces.

Ebony Bennett 4:41 Yeah, and that definitely comes through. So this is what the book looks like. Or you can find it on booktopia or in all good bookstores. It's out this week. I'd really recommend people pick up a copy. It's about like I said, I've just been devouring it and you really do touch on a whole range of issues. So While you're, you know, exploring this, but I wanted to ask when you came across that complex PTSD, and did that kind of bring it a sense of relief to at least kind of have a name and know what it was that you've been experiencing all these years, it's,

Rick Morton 5:18 it's remarkable how much that changed the trajectory that I was on, because I was literally stumbling around in the dark corridors of my own mind without any direction, for seven years, and it's hard to overstate how deeply seismic these kinds of theories and rolling personal crises and mental breakdowns for one of a better term, how furious they were, and how interrupting they were in my life. And I think there's a broader point that I tried to make early on in his book as well, it's like, if you don't have a language for something, and if you don't articulate it in your own mind, then you can't fit. You can't fit in the world around you, and and just having a language for this condition was transformative. But more importantly, the treatment for trauma type conditions is so different, most of the time to what you would ordinarily get if you, I think just but if you only had depression or anxiety, which is what I was diagnosed with, when I was at university, and which just happened to be two, relatively minor symptoms of what was a much more serious condition.

Ebony Bennett 6:25 Hmm. And so you talk about kind of the cure for this absence of love being, you know, more intense love and what sort of it, I was really struck by one of the earlier chapters on touch. And you talk about some of the pretty horrific examples from past history, like the children in Romanian orphanages who went without touching, really early years, and how damaging that was, in particular, but then you kind of move to, in particular, how great hugs are in some quiet detail. And now, you know, I don't have a history of trauma myself, but my mom passed away in 2004. And she was just the best hugger. And you know, same height as me, perfect amount of pressure. Never, she was never the first one to let go. And it's kind of one of the things that I miss most about her. And so having almost a whole chapter kind of devoted to how great they are, and how kind of restorative but just really hit me personally as well. But tell me about your friend, Seamus, and how important hugs became to you?

Rick Morton 7:31 Yeah, well, Seamus is one of my best friends, younger brothers. He's only a couple years younger than me. But he's just the most gentle, affectionate, and kind human being real kind of like laid back very funny, a little bit. kind,

of course, in his sense of humor sometimes, but he's just a real gentle person. And because I think, you know, I was because I was abandoned by my father. The particular kind of affection that I crave the most as an adult was from straight men. Not in any romantic sense. But in a kind of validating sense. It's like here is a straight man, who actually does love me, or at least that's what I'm trying to convince myself, because I never believed that it was true. And so Seamus really became a lightning rod, I guess, in the early stages of me kind of realizing that something was deeply wrong. And he became the, the source and target of hugs. Thank God, he was gentle and just as affectionate as I was, because, you know, they were so comforting, I guess. And, you know, he was really one of the first straight men in my life. Well, men full stop, I should say, who taught me that it was okay to be vulnerable, and that it was okay to be open with your mates. Particularly as men, we've got a real problem with that. And I definitely did, because I was conditioned that way. Yeah, that was the beginning. But then I became almost indiscriminate. how this can be a dicey topic, because some people don't obviously want to be touched, and that's okay. But when you manage to negotiate that with someone who you love, and you know, for me, it's my friend, and I hug them out whenever I see them, because I genuinely love that contact. And it's no I mentioned a very, I mentioned a lot in the book, but the gist, why that is important is because we've got those examples from history, like the Romanian orphanages, where it's actually touch. And this kind of lack of emotional care that comes with touch that led them to become stunted in terms of their growth. They had gastrointestinal issues. They were they had lower cognitive capacity in their minds, they had lower IQs. And it wasn't because they weren't fed, nutritionally rich diet, they were fed properly, but they weren't cared for. And that's the difference and it has an effect that ranges well beyond the mind. And you know, it's not for prising that, you know, as social animals we crave that kind of, as Margaret Atwood says, the truth of touch. And that's what it is. It's just supremely company.

Ebony Bennett **10:10** Yeah, absolutely. And I was really struck by Yeah, the the physical and physiological impacts that that had as well, as you were saying, you know, IQ and all those those other things. That was a really interesting chapter to begin with, I thought and set up the book really well. And I was also going to ask, along those lines, you tend to go down little pathways in various chapters, you know, whether it's the Romanian orphanages and those types of things, or going down other pathways in other chapters, how did you decide what to keep in and what to keep out of the book and to thread that narrative through that?

Rick Morton **10:57** Look, I'm still deciding, like, I would have kept putting stuff in because I'm kind of like, so the book is a physical avatar of myself, I think. And, you know, I have always been a bit of a bowerbird for a little artifacts, and curios and an interesting tidbits about life, particularly, as I said, from science and physics and philosophy, I just, I latch on to these things, because I think they have

such explanatory power. And so I get excited when I'm writing about these big themes. Because I've read over the years, so many things that have turned my thinking on its head, or that have illuminated Some even just a small crevice of my own mind and the way I think. And so to me, it was just pure magic to be able to run book like this, because I'm I am I'm taking, someone described it as a magical, mystical, magical Carpet Ride, which I absolutely adored. Because that is how I'm trying to live life right now. I mean, the joy of it using all of that stuff. And really, it was my poor editor at HarperCollins. Madeleine who, Madeline door who had to pull me up on the more egregious examples, which, you know, I wanted in there, but didn't quite make the cut. But yeah, you studied.

Ebony Bennett **12:14** So talking about the importance of touch there at one point, you know, like the pandemic happened, and he talked about that absence of hugs happening, because of, you know, the health restrictions and Sheamus working in the healthcare sector, I was really struck by your point, you know, at one point, you were just like, I would rather die of COVID, then stop hugging you. Like, that's quite an intense feeling, and I think really demonstrates how important touches and everything from that chapter.

Rick Morton **12:44** I literally said that to him, because we had had that discussion of flatmates, because we're living together. And he was looking out to COVID-19 patients in ICU. And he said, because he's sister at the time was pregnant, and I live with him. So he said, Every time I've got a COVID-19 patient, I'm gonna have to isolate more hard, more severely than I would have, have just a normal resident. And we wouldn't do that for 14 days from the moment he had a resident. And so at the beginning, he we went from hugging every day, to intellectually knowing that we couldn't touch each other. And even though I knew full well, in the higher evolved part of my brain, that there was a very specific disease related reason for this. It really hurt. Like it really hurt. Like in my mind, where the amygdala controls is trauma, and the experience of abandonment in my life. That kind of sub basement was telling me that I was being left that I was being abandoned and that I was unlovable. And so the psychological effect of that was, to me more real than the also very real threat of COVID-19. And at the time, my friends were joking that because I was slightly overweight, and I was a smoker that I was probably most at risk in our friendship group. So you know, I knew what the risks were. But I just, you know, hugs I mean, what is the point of living if you can't enjoy the things that make us incredibly human? So, I mean, look, I was probably being a little bit melodramatic, but at the time, it feels like it happened to a different person. Also, funnily enough, a hallmark of trauma.

Ebony Bennett And so there was an excerpt of your book in The Guardian. This week, we

14:25 talked about the trap of masculinity. And I feel like that's a topic that's quite hot at the moment. But what did you mean by that trap of masculinity? We we built ourselves a prison

Rick Morton

14:42 and men, I mean, and we built this prison based on cultural understanding or a cultural view that the feminine form is weak, and that they are an object and so that extends beyond women like obviously, there is a Instead of men who think that when women are subordinate to them, that they are inferior, but for the same reasons, homophobia stems from that same thinking, because it's the idea of the feminine gay male, who is literally disgusting. To some of these people. It's an actual, you know, the anterior insula in the brain regulates disgust from an evolutionary point of view, where we like mourn or vomit when we smell rotting meat, but it's the same part of the brain that is used in moral disgust. And so there's this kind of thing that creeps through manliness or masculinity. And the same with women in lesbian relationships, men, throat men, some straight men, particularly the ones I grew up with love that if they're feminine looking, and they think that they want to serve their interests. So like, you know, that's, that's hard to cement. But the moment they don't look like a woman, or they're, they're Butch for one of a better term, than that's important to the man, because it's up ending this idea that they are at the top of the pyramid. And I and we did that to ourselves. And we still do that to ourselves. And I, you know, I have seen more of it than I want to even in the the more moderate well meaning end of masculinity, there are these, you know, I had a politician DM me yesterday saying that his wife was aghast when he caught up with his father, and they just shook hands. And little things like that, you know, I've watched men, in my broader kind of orbit, grow older and lose contact with their friends, and become more reliant, but also at the same time more bitter toward their wife or their spouse, because they are lonely. And the loneliness springs from the fact that we have isolated ourselves based on a view that we can't be more than one thing, and that if we are soft or weak, then we are no longer men. And it's just such I mean, it's literally at the foot of violence against women, but also violence against other men. Why men? You know, you'll hear men's rights activists talk about the fact that, you know, men suffer more violent crime. Yeah, they do. Because it's at the hands of other men. And it's typically based on a power structure that has, even if it's unspoken, at its very core, this idea that to be weak is to be feminine.

Ebony Bennett

17:17 So I want to keep talking about kind of the moment that we find ourselves in right now. So I think building on that idea of the trap of masculinity, you talk about a number of different traumas that you've experienced in the book, but in particular, you describe a sexual assault that you endured many years earlier. And you recently wrote for the Saturday paper about politics and the media really failing to understand trauma in the context of these allegations against the Attorney General that he raped a young girl when she was 16. And he was 17 allegations that he denies but also, you know, the other

allegations that have come forward from Brittany Higgins and other staffers up on the hill. And that whole debate that we're kind of having now about is the the workplace culture in Parliament, toxic how women are treated in politics. And I guess I just wanted to ask you to expand a little bit on what you're writing about in the Saturday paper about how media and politics kind of misunderstands trauma or fails to understand trauma in this debate that we're kind of having right now.

Rick Morton
18:32

Yeah, I mean, the thing that provoked that article, was this sudden flurry of, quote, unquote, reporting, I guess, suggesting that the woman at the center of the allegations against the Attorney General, which he does vigorously deny that she was suddenly recovering memories of what she had written about. Now, apart from the fact that that's just patently false. And they were written, virtually contemporaneous account from her. But also as four corners reported that she had told her counselor many years prior to this becoming public and prior to her death, then there was also the suggestion that because she withdrew the police complaint, but she didn't withdraw, she just said, I can't proceed with it. And that was, what two days before she died of suicide. And so there was massive conflation in the media, some of it deliberate some of it, I think, literally just ignorant, that suddenly you've got a trauma survivor, someone who clearly something bad has happened to her. And she's sought professional help. And she's read a book by Bessel Vander kolk. And that book, which I've read is about the neuroscience of trauma. It's not about recovered memories. And it's a book that reflects the scientific consensus about how trauma works. And the thing that's one of the reasons I wrote my book, and the reason I wrote that piece of Saturday paper was it's actually astounding how much trauma can take over your body. And so, you know, the memory of the traumatic event is rarely ever patchy or foggy, the actual moment is crystal clear. And it's like that because the amygdala, which is the oldest part of the human brain, its job is to store emotionally painful or thrilling, or just really exciting memories. And it stores its separate to the way the brain deals with other episodic memory. And it stores it alongside the sensation of what you were tasting, touching, smelling, hearing, seeing at the moment of that intense, whether it's acute pain or acute happiness. And when it's a painful event, the amygdalas job then is later on in life is to keep bringing up that exact replica of what it felt like in the moment when that initial trauma happened as a warning to your parent, body and mind to get the hell out of the situation you're currently in. It's literally a fight or flight thing. It evolved from us running around the plains, as Neanderthals or Homo sapiens, or mixture of both is the science now tells us to avoid danger. And there are so in that sense, you don't need to recover these memories. I've my own trauma, the sharpest trauma for me is the being alone on this cattle session after my brother's been burned. My he's 1200 kilometers away in hospital with my mom and my sister, and I'm alone with my dad, who's having an affair with a 19 year old governor. Now I remember four very, very clear moments that confirmed to me something had gone horribly wrong,

that he was having this affair him kissing her. him fitted on cheated her food on his lap. But I don't remember anything else around it. So like there is an ocean of black. But the memories are real. And I've always had, because it was so painful. And so people trying to discredit or suggest that this woman is crazy, based on the way that she was writing, which is a feature of some therapy anyway, particularly Narrative Therapy. It just was incredibly mean spirited. And more alarmingly To me, it was just wrong. And it just told me that no one who's writing these stories has actually lived anything close to what the form has gone through.

Ebony Bennett **22:26**

I want to ask now, I feel like it's connected to the book, but it's actually more about your day job, but the Saturday paper, and you used to write for the Australian a lot on social policy, but you've written a lot about the NDS and aged care and kind of, I guess, systems that we have in place of care. For people who are sometimes more vulnerable in the community. A lot of them have had royal commissions that are just uncovering these awful stories of abuse and neglect, in particular, the most recent one in the aged care system. But it strikes me that the whole book is about, you know, a journey to finding love. I guess I wanted to ask in all of that social policy reporting that you do is love an important missing ingredient from those policies and systems of care?

Rick Morton **23:23**

Yes, he has. Yes, yes, yes, yes. I wrote a whole chapter in his book called dysfunction where I wanted to apply what I had learned about myself, but also about trauma more generally, to the broader policy context in Australia, particularly the stuff I report on in my job, because it's like, I mean, getting my diagnosis made, my entire career makes sense. Because I have all the way along, had an intuitive understanding that people in the welfare system, for example, or people in aged care, or on the NDF, who, who have been beaten, abused, neglected, emotionally gaslit psychologically traumatized their entire lives one way or another, either by individuals or by the system. And it makes you understand what, you know, ordinary rational people, including myself when I'm not going through an episode of trauma, why we would think their choices don't make any sense. And particularly people who are just, you know, hardscrabble trying to get by. They're not making choices, based on some kind of ASX stock market, 10 year horizon analysis of whether things going up or down. They're going well, what can get me through the day, and in aged care and the NDS in particular, there are people who I mean, just taking the most recent example, the independent assessments that the government is trying to force through having done a very thinly veiled consultation, which didn't really consult on anything and then out to the panel of providers. Two days, three days afterwards. Now independent assessments are independent. The only independent part of them is the fact that it's going to separate disabled people from their long term treating

health professionals, psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, doctors, pediatricians, whatever. And it's going to outsource this to government paid contractors. So they're not independent of government. In fact, they're going to be forcing on disabled people, a very cookie cutter approach to how we assess need in the NDS and also the money that comes with it. Now, Stuart, Robert, and a whole cavalcade of other people in the government, and I suspect even in the Labour Party or the greens, maybe not the greens, but there are people in power, who don't understand why people are so afraid of this approach. And because trust is such a hallmark of my type of trauma there type of trauma, betrayal, trauma, and once that trust is destroyed, and it's the same with indigenous Australia, and our first peoples, there is theirs is the longest trauma on this land. And there's a reason they don't trust government institutions. And that is because they have been betrayed before. And so when there is this kind of lack of empathy, and a lack of love in or even just basic curiosity, to try and find out what it is that is driving, fear about policy, and maybe just maybe there's a way to do policy better if we actually inject a bit of love into it. And I mean, love from the top down, but also in terms of the people that administer those policies and who designed them. It wouldn't hurt. I don't think to have some people on the inside who actually know what it's like to live the facts. I'm

Ebony Bennett
26:45
picking up there on the trauma of First Nations people, you've got a chapter on forgiveness. In the book, we talk about a particularly violent character, Naga Morton. And in that chapter, you're exploring kind of the Truth and Reconciliation model from South Africa, how important forgiveness is in terms of trauma and recovery from it. But also, I thought was really interesting, some of the the limits of forgiveness and that it can't be something that's demanded or imposed, a kind of has to be freely given. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Rick Morton
27:29
Oh, it's a really difficult chapter to write because obviously, I'm, I'm white. And I grew up as part of a settler family on Aboriginal lands. And as I later discovered in adult life, quite a violent settler family, as most of them were, at the time toward indigenous people, even well into the late 20th century. So I was talking about, you know, forgiveness at a personal level, which is something I have personally tried to practice, because I can't carry hate around with me, I just don't have room for it. It's not an energizing thing to have. But I remember listening to Nigel Nuan, the Sudanese born, or Sudanese, Australian woman lawyer, who was talking on Twitter about it with someone saying, you know, you can't demand forgiveness, about, you know, from people about racism, or about these more general atrocities, such as what happened in apartheid South Africa, because that kind of negates the whole point of it. It has to be it's not something you can pluck from thin air.

And the interesting stuff in like writing about the Truth and Reconciliation challenge, because it was Desmond Tutu said that, you know, you know, forgiveness is the only thing that matters and, and there was this whole kind of systemic approach towards, you know, the truth, getting a broad out people apologizing in person in front of the people that they raped or tortured or maimed, or just treated terribly. But nothing really changed. And there was a lot of blowback, and particularly from young black kids in South Africa, who were looking around going, Well, you know, yes, apartheid is technically over, but our lives are still terrible. And they saw it as a whitewash. And the interesting thing about that, I think, is because forgiveness can only really come and you could only really earn it if the atrocity is over. And that's what I think is interesting, obviously, with the Uluru statement from the heart, the proposal for a voice There is also the, the ancient customer of maca rata from the y'all new people, which is about truth. And so I wrote about my own family, just to put it on the record. Because one of the things that we just weren't taught in school, my family certainly didn't talk about the fact that they were, in many cases savage towards indigenous people. But it's also not our right to ask for forgiveness from them. I mean, we have such a long way to go in this country, and even When we do get a Mac urata and a voice to the parliament, we have to atone in meaningful ways for what we've done before that equilibrium can never be restored, if it can ever be restored, and only then can we move forward as a country, but God, it's worth trying. Because it's just, you know, I mean, look, you don't need another white person to talk about this. But I am just astonished about how rich Aboriginal culture was when I finally got to learn about it in my 20s, I was remarkably ignorant, I still am on many aspects, but the best things I've ever done in my career, have been spending time with elders on their own country, and letting them show me around and tell me where all the different tricks in the holes word or grind different, you know, seeds and, and the dreaming stories and talk to people about their sacred sites in the Northern Territory, which are now you know, Derby fracked. It is such a rich heritage. And we are so lucky to have it and we don't know how lucky we are.

Ebony Bennett 30:56 Huh. It was a point brought up at the close the gap report launch yesterday, the importance of that statement from the heart that and the truth telling the Makarov process. And again, I'd encourage people to check out that webinar from yesterday, because it's it is one of the key recommendations from that closing the gap report. And yeah, I think it's been really disappointing to just say the government time and time again, just kind of more or less summarily dismiss it.

Rick Morton And you know, it's I didn't want to say this kind of too publicly, I guess. But like one of the reasons in the back of my mind, but I was thinking about

31:24 writing the book that I've just written was because growing up where I did in regional Queensland, you hear everywhere you go, why can't they just get over it? And which is itself a lack of understanding of trauma, like there is a reason why this wound is so real, apart from the fact that it's so recent. But it's also intergenerational. And the effects of trauma are third wide, ranging in everyday life, that once you know what it looks like, and feels like you see it everywhere you turn, it's like you've got a secret code, where you can see behind the scenes of life, and you got trauma, trauma, trauma, I can see it. But that's something that you know why Australians particularly have never, if they have understood it, which I don't think they necessarily have, they haven't had the generosity to extend that understanding to Indigenous Australians, which is, it's just such a frightful set of circumstances I think, and you know, the more understand we can have about how this wormed its way into everyday life, I think the more we can come to terms with what we've done in our own country.

Ebony Bennett

32:38 And we'll go very shortly to questions from the audience. And I want to remind everyone that there's a q&a function where you can type in questions for Rick there, I can already see a couple are in here. But I've just got a couple more questions for you, Rick. Um, so before we kind of move on, I guess I wanted to ask you, how the how is your life now at the end of this book, and now that you're launching it, compared to kind of when you started out on this journey?

Rick Morton

33:09 Look, I always say this. But um, you know, the favorite part for me of writing a book is coming up with the idea. And then everything else sucks. I mean, obviously, it's nice to be out in the world now. But I'm just so mortally terrified. Mostly, and it's a class thing, in my case, and a cultural class. But like, I didn't grow up with the right books, I didn't grow up with, you know, lawyers around the kitchen table doctors or anyone who was went to university, or even finished high school. And we were sheltered in almost every conceivable way and financially locked out. And so, you know, to be in this position now is a it's amazing, and like, little seven year old, Rick would lose his mind that we're here doing this. But it's also really difficult to give myself permission to talk about these big ideas like why why Rick Morton? Well, who gets Why does he get to write a book about love? Like, he's not? He's not Socrates. He's not Aristotle. He's not Penny, the younger, Pliny the Younger, I don't know. It's like this really nerve wracking moment where I'm, like, have I moved beyond my station in life, and I know that's not true. And, and that's the problem with kind of class stratification. But it gets into your head, and I feel uncomfortable in this moment, but in a way that's exciting at the same time and thrilling. So, you know, I'm obviously very grateful. And if I lose some sleep over it, it's a good way to lose some sleep.

Ebony Bennett **34:42** Um, and the last thing that I was going to ask about is coming back to your kind of everyday reporting that you do in the MDI Yes, and you know, all those other areas and for the Saturday paper And to talk about that kind of, I guess, class element that you were just talking about there. We've had a lot of discussion about how privileged kind of politics isn't that a lot of politician than coming from the same schools and all of that type of thing. But does that affect the media as well?

Rick Morton **35:20** Yeah, yeah, it really does. And, you know, I mean, even behind me, I used to work in the Australian. But beyond News Corp, I mean, everyone I ever met, particularly in the Sydney media thing. You know, they all went to University of Sydney, to a large degree, which is an incredibly good university, but it's also incredibly wealthy. But they, a lot of them went to private schools. In fact, most of the ones that I certainly ever met, and the ones that do go to public school, they did not their fault, but they didn't really talk about it. And it wasn't brought up and it was like, we our experiences were not just missed, but they were just non existent in the newsrooms, because the stuff, the readers we were serving, were not our people. But we were expected to serve them. These things about which we didn't know anything. But that ultimately didn't matter. Like, you know, which private school fees have gone up the most every year. So I'm sorry, but who cares? I'm sure parents do who send their kids there. But I'm like, you know, what, there's enough going on in the world. We've got some other stuff that we can get around. And it matters because like, I think, I think I read this in 100 years of dirt, but journalists are expected. And I'm not saying we always do this, because we fail over and over again. But we are expected to account for the people about which we write, and to record them honestly. And when we're covering so many sections of society. There is a massive blind spot. And it's a kind of, it's a gap that only really lived experience can bridge, you can be really well meaning and you can come close, and you can be empathetic and put yourself in people's shoes. And that's a really wonderful thing to do. But the stress, particularly in my experience of financial poverty, the the day to de stress and the way that curtails the options on the table for you, is such a specific understanding that unless you've lived it, you don't really understand it, it happened, the thing that really kind of radicalized me, I guess, in a really soft way internally. Because it's been a slow road, I'm from Queensland takes a while. But the thing that really turned my mind to that gap was the $7 Gp co payment. When that was proposed in the Abbott hockey budget, and well meaning good journalist who I respected at the Australian will I give it, who cares, it's seven bucks. And I was losing my mind, because I'm like, that is literally the difference between homelessness and being able to keep a roof over your head or being able to pay for medications you need for your mental health, or your heart. And they just couldn't see it. Like, it's like those people were lying about the In fact, one guy told me when I said that, and not that

this is okay, because it doesn't matter whether you're deserving poor, undeserving poor, but like I told someone, you know, my mom doesn't have any money left. And she doesn't drink, or smoke or gamble. And someone literally wrote back, I don't believe you. And I'm like, I don't know how else to have that argument. And we need people with those backgrounds to try and press that cause.

Ebony Bennett **38:27** Yeah, it is such a different lens. And I'm sure it makes you kind of seek out different people to talk to you and take different angles that other people wouldn't realize. But yeah, I remember having that same reaction to the $7 co payment at the time, and that total lack of understanding that that is, you know, life or death for some people. And, and then it's probably the thin end of the wedge to you know, start from $7. And then it just goes up from there. And once you've done it at seven minutes, only another $2 Yeah, what Exactly. Um, but no, it's a it's a really good point. So we might go now, Rick, two questions from the audience. I'll start with one from Lisa Kane. She says, How did you find time to write a book on top of all the writing that you do for a paper and Rose everything else?

Rick Morton **39:19** Lisa, I love that question. Because I don't know I became this is actually this, someone should study this. So I have been a night owl my entire life. Like I have been pathologically incapable of arriving before. Nine 9:30am like I used to, when I was at the Australian, I would get up at 9am and then be in the office by 10 1030 and just pathologically incapable last year when I'm trying to do my day job and write this book and edit another anthology collection and do a million other little things in between I just spontaneously, mostly out of stress, I think started rising at 5:30am in the morning and I would work from 530 to nine On the book, and then I would do my Saturday paper day job until about three in the afternoon where I would have a nap. Literally, this is now my routine that I can't escape. And then I would do a little bit more kind of reading and thinking a little bit more esoteric stuff in the evening when I was a bit knackered for one of a bit of word, and then I get up and do it all over again. And then I would do a similar routine on the weekend, Saturday and Sunday, I haven't really had a day off, except for my Christmas break, which was spent editing the book. So it's I don't know, I don't know, I just I'm like a shark. If I stopped swimming, I drown. This is what we do now.

Ebony Bennett **40:40** And of course, at the moment, even if you could have a holiday probably can't leave the state with stuff. The next question that I've got is from Melanie Clark, who says, do you have any advice for any inner work that you've done or been able to publish or that you've done to be able to publish such an unflinching personal account? And she could imagine that it was very confronting, in some ways, so curious about how you've protected yourself emotionally to be able to discuss these types of topics?

Rick Morton Yeah, it's an interesting point. And it's, I don't want to keep anyone like I did the work for this book, 12 years, 14 years, actually. And so you know, and half

41:12 of that was spent kind of messing around in darkness, and not knowing where I was trying to get myself. But you know, when I was in my early 20s, I was a really angry guy, like, I hated religion, I mocked my mother for believing, even though that was the one thing that got her through, you know, raising our three kids, and I love my mother, for those of you who don't know, I adore her. But I just thought it was silliest thing. And so I was just lashing out at the world. And so this book is the product of growing up a little bit, as you know, becoming more mature. But also, it really, I mean, I was talking to the Samsung wencke now, but through to Richard fiber after we were did our interview. And he was like, I really liked this idea of curiosity as an as a protective mechanism against depression. And to me, it might not work for everyone, I don't know. But to me, the real thrill of living is finding things out and discovering stuff. And so, yes, I was writing about some difficult stuff with this book. But I find myself when I write for work, or the daily, the Sunday paper I write alone. But when I was writing this book, in my first book, I, as much as I could, would ride around my friends. So that when I was done on the page, I immediately had real life. And people who I knew loved me to just go and chill out with them. So I wasn't stuck in my own head. And I think that was a really important thing for me to be doing. But at the same time, I was writing about things that were just fascinating. And as long as I've got that little Museum of artifacts going through my mind, I'm usually pretty good.

Ebony Bennett **43:00** Yeah, it really struck me going through it that like your curiosity. I mean, obviously, you're in the right trade, but like,

Rick Morton **43:09** I had a lot of social anxiety. So like, I always used to joke. I'm like, I don't know why I became a journalist. Because I have to call people and I'm terrified. But if I am curious, so you know, there's this classic tension between the two things.

Ebony Bennett **43:21** yeah, totally. People very hard. But, um, yeah, the curiosity and I guess it must have been really interesting to read a lot of this stuff and see, like, test it against your own experiences, and if it rang true for you, or if it explained something that you've observed or experienced?

Rick Morton **43:39** Yeah, it's like, it's, there are things I mean, there's things that are universal in this book that are out of the human condition, which I think we would all do better to understand. But you know, some people don't care too much about the science side of things. My mother was one of them. I remember once having a conversation with her trying to relate it back to the quantum entanglement theory, and she was just like, She's like, that fucking Einstein's did a lot to answer for 70. And she's just like, shut up, break Shut up. And I'm I get it, you know, not for everyone. But God, it's fun, isn't it? Like just, you know, even just reading it. I mean, not every page of every book you've ever

read is enjoyable, too. But when you find that one line that you get to underlie, I'm a massive fan of God, it brings me such joy. So, you know, maybe people will find that in my book. Maybe they won't. And if they don't, I hope they stay quiet about it.

Ebony Bennett **44:29** Well, it's certainly something i've i've underlined a few. I liked the word. What was the line? Something about? psychologists popping up conveniently. I can't remember exactly.

Rick Morton **44:42** I treated them like, script writers treat characters in neighbours in bold and beautiful. Like, when I don't need them. They disappear from the show. When I need them desperately. I bring them back. I'm like, man, I really hear that live.

Yeah, it's and it's true. Like I and that's the other thing. I'm still trying to learn to be more consistent in my approach. To therapy because I would always do it at points of distress. And then when I got a little bit better, I'd stop. And that's not how you get better. Trying to learn that still.

Ebony Bennett **45:13** Very good. The next question is from Jennifer Manson. He says, You believe the solution is more love, which makes sense. But how do you feel about the idea of avoiding those people who continue to be emotionally abusive, to enable time to heal, it can be very hard when they're family, and you might wish to stay connected to them.

Rick Morton **45:34** Yeah, that's come up a few times over the years, or not for me personally. But I understand that because I know people who have manipulative parents, who are overbearing, who profess to want to be in their lives, but then only cause drama and hurt. And at the end of the day, it's one of those things I mean, I don't know from personal experience, but you know, I still love my father, for instance. And if he made a meaningful attempt to get back in contact, I would probably be intellectually telling myself not to go there. Because I don't think he's capable of really ever being fully present. But emotionally, I would probably end up automatically entertaining it, I just would, and there's no right or wrong answer. But I think for me, when I'm at my most reasonable my life, like I don't miss my dad in my life, I miss the idea of him, and I miss what could have been, but I'm not sitting here everyday going, I wish he was here. Because I spent my whole life without it. And, you know, I'm more mourn for the person I could have been if I had been loved by both my parents. But there is a harm that a present active parent can do in a person's life if they're not, if they are a toxic person, or personality. And if it is something you can bring yourself to do, then I don't think we should be expected to maintain contact with those people. I did an episode of insight

SDS, about family, abandonment, and family breakdown. And there were people who were talking about really toxic relationships. And that when they finally ended, they discovered that they could actually build a life that more closely approximated what it was that they wanted to see in the world. And I think that's okay, I really do.

Ebony Bennett **47:27**

The next question is from Andrew McWhorter. He says, Rick, can you reflect on how toxic masculinity and trauma affect gay man's identity and conduct in relationships? He says, sometimes it feels that gay male culture fetishize his traditional masculinity, to the extent that it becomes toxic.

Rick Morton **47:45**

Yeah, and I could write a whole book on it. Having said that, I'm not the best person to give advice about gay relationships, because I've not been in one. Even though I am gay, I'm just terrible. And I think that's more my trauma than it is my masculinity stopping me from doing that, because I do love men. But I just can't emotionally give myself over. That's the last frontier in my case, but certainly from all of my gay male friends, we've had this discussion. In fact, I had a two hour chat on the phone with one recently about this idea that for a certain type of gay men, not everyone, but obviously, ones that I identify with, there is a real broken model of what it means to be a man that is sometimes inherited from our fathers. But sometimes it's just learned from society. And we crave it, we crave it, we demand its attention, and its validation. And it's not helpful in any way, shape, or form. But also we perpetuate it in our own relationships, you know, as much as we crave it from others. We also kind of doing this pantomime. And I can't put my finger I've there are better books. I wish I could remember their names. But I think one of them is like the velvet curtain or velvet glove or something where it talks about this idea that we are in competition with ourselves and other gay men. And we bring all of this baggage from those broader areas of masculinity and the patriarchy. And we bring them into these gay relationships, which ought to have no bearing on that whatsoever. But they do. And they're, I mean, they've got there's a whole field. I quoted a bit of this essay called the the loneliness of being a gay man. I think it was called in my first book, and it was just, I'd never felt more seen by an author and it was quite a controversial essay. Like, I know lots of people in the queer community were like, Fuck this. This is a terrible essay. But there was I knew for a fact that there was a whole segment of people going oh my god, Scott's just written about me. And I was one of them. So I was just like, looking around nervously going, do I relate to them? If so, why? So I mean, are we I had a more coherent answer. I'm sorry, but it's just when I'm more clear of mind, I might be able to expand on that.

Ebony Bennett **50:09**

I've got a couple of people in here asking about a velvet rage. That's what it is. Thank-

I've got a couple of people in here asking about what therapeutic approaches have been effective for you personally, apart from experiencing love and hugs.

Rick Morton **50:28**

Yeah, well, I mean, the first one I tried, which was a Well, I mean, I did a bunch of therapy, before I realized I had trauma before I was diagnosed, and it was mostly useless. But again, I'm not a health professional. And I'm not telling you what works because you have to try it. It's like, you know, antidepressants. It's different for different people. But cognitive behavioral therapy for me did nothing. You know, in fact, I was uniquely incapable of doing it when I was having an episode of trauma. And like, I remember my very first like, she was lovely, and she was publicly funded. So it meant I didn't have to pay the gap. Because I wasn't earning that much money. And she was adorable. But she gave me literally in print out book like this, filled with Excel spreadsheets, where I had to write down what I was thinking and eating and doing every half hour that I was awake. And I'm like, I don't want to be mean, but like, I'm barely in control of this right now. Like, I can't hold a pen. And so stuff like that I just found uniquely unhelpful, and in fact harmful, because I've thought I should have been doing something that got me better, and I couldn't. So when I was diagnosed, I was first told to start doing what they call progressive muscle relaxation, just as a real basic entry point. And I was actually doing this on the campaign plane following the Prime Minister around in May 2019. So like, we were doing like 15 hour days, not knowing where we were going to land whenever they put us up in the sky. And then just following around, Scott Morrison at stupid press opportunities in front of, you know, chickens and snakes and, and also animals. So that was a bad joke. I don't know why I didn't. And so involved like literally from my toes to my face, in groups of muscles, squeezing them and for half of like 30 seconds, and then letting them go for 10 seconds, and then moving up to like my shin muscles, and then my thigh, and then my butt. And then like my ears, even in my eyes. And remarkably, an amazing thing to do. Because so much of trauma is manifested in the body, to bring yourself back into your body. Like that is an incredibly anchoring experience. I think I was extremely cynical. I'm a cynical guy. I know it doesn't come across in this book. But I'm just like, they're really they're gonna fucking work. And then I do it. I might actually that's pretty good. But I also did in this book I write about neurofeedback, which is where you try to trick your own brain into doing the right thing, not you because you're not in control. And then the one I haven't done yet, and I always forget the name of that, but it's like the EMDR EMDR, which is the eye movement desensitization funding or other which ironically, the woman who made the allegation against thrift and Porter, that funding that she had thought out to do, and Crikey said that it was a discredited trauma therapy. And I'm like, well, it's fucking not it's covered by Medicare. And in fact, it's one of the ones that has the most evidence for its effect on people. It's one I haven't tried yet. But that's next on my list. The next question so much.

Sorry, I have a falling off.

Ebony Bennett **53:41** It's not commercial TV. It's um, what the next question is from a Heidi love Korean. She says what would be your advice to someone who would like to go into a job that they deeply care about, but perhaps does not have the ability to go to university?

Rick Morton **53:59** Jeez, that's a good question. I mean, I, I dropped out of university. So I know that, you know, you can do things without a degree, certainly in journalism. In fact, I would probably encourage it. But you know, if you're talking about other jobs, like, you know, community legal aid or social work or things like that, there are always ways in I mean, really the only thing that's ever counted in my career, and I suspect in careers where you are actually helping people is passion. Like there are ways through the end of the building into the building of your own career that is not through the front door. Sometimes it's harder. Sometimes it's more Securitas. But you know, university is not all it's cracked up to be. I don't want to be like I love academic researchers, and I think they progress knowledge and it's amazing, but as a reason to get a job. I think it's vastly overrated. By all means, I would love to go back to university and just learn for fun and do something completely unrelated to my work. But I might do that later on in my 30s. But you know, my mum never got to go to university. And she never got the time because she's a single mum. And it broke me because she could have done great things. She's just fundamentally curious little Hobbit. But I think if you've got I say the word curiosity a lot, I think it's the best quality a person can have. If you've got that, and you've got even just a little bit of stamina and passion, your help will be needed. Don't let the university be this kind of, you know, one ring to rule them all kind of thing. It's not, it's not.

Ebony Bennett **55:40** Which brings me to the final question. And I'm really sorry that we couldn't get to everyone's questions. But we've only got a couple of minutes left here. But just talking about your mum, their raker It reminds me of I think Gough Whitlam always used to say that one of the big got more letters and for the longest amount of time about getting women into university, and certainly there would be I'm sure a lot of women like you, mom who couldn't access even those opportunities. But yeah, university, not the be all and end all certainly. But that brings me to the last question here, which is from the Royal Bell, which is how is your mum these days? Everyone's curious.

Rick Morton **56:21** Due to what she's great. We I mean, look, I, part of the reason I'm doing so well, personally, and my mom is doing so well, personally, is because I have been lucky with the book stuff. I don't want you to think I'm JK Rowling. I'm not. I'm not JK Rowling in it. And I'm not a tough, but also it was enough extra money on top of my my daily job, but that I could do things for mum that just took away that last edge of financial stress. And particularly with my sister now earning, you know, pretty good money. She's a midwife. And so we're both established. And you know, I remember mom calling me once got our dial, and I just wish I could win the lotto, which was this eternal refrain in our

house growing up going, Well, maybe this week, maybe this week. And I remember saying to her on the phone, I'm like, has it ever occurred to you, it only just occurred to me then, that maybe the lotto was us like the family unit, like, maybe we, maybe you you finally reaping the benefit of being such an amazing mother, because she is and I won't let anything happen to her. And I'm trying to give her all of the wonderful experiences that she should have been able to have. And I realized, I'm lucky to be able to do that. And it's not the same for everyone. And the reason I still write I guess, and argue so vigorously on these things is because every time I see a story about you know, single parents or people on welfare, I just think of the goodness that is my mother and the life that she had to lead, and had no choice about. And so I'm obviously trying to make up for lost time. I'm, you know, going to take it all the route later on this year, because I'm going to Alice Springs for the Writers Festival from it's going to try her out. And she's like, Oh, goody, and she's got the map out. And she's already looked at, you know, the road that we can take from Alice Springs, because she's never seen it, and she's always wanted to. And, you know, I've got her I bought her a new bathroom. Because when she had was literally about to stop being a bathroom, it was just going to be like a manky 12 it was disgusting. And we just didn't have the money to even patch up the holes in the wall. So, you know, life has been kinda. And this is what I have worked for my entire life. And I'm glad that I'm in a position now to do some of this stuff. Because the only race I've ever in was in against time. Because she's older. She's not older. She's 61. But she's got an old body. And so I was just like, just trying and trying and trying to make it and do something worthwhile so that she could have a little bit of enjoyment.

Ebony Bennett **58:51** Hmm. Well, congratulations on the book. And on being able to take your mom to Alice Springs. I'm sure that will be an amazing trip. And I think it's a good reflection there on the role of luck. Obviously, you work really hard to be out of to provide those but I'm sure you met your mom worked hard their whole life.

Rick Morton **59:15** She worked hard, but it didn't have to. Yeah, she didn't get rewarded. In the way I did it. And I feel guilty about it. And I won't keep dragging things on. I mean, like I am doing work that is intellectually difficult sometimes, but it's not hard work. And she's done nothing but hard work. And she can't earn more than $30,000 like it's ridiculous. Yeah.

Ebony Bennett **59:37** Well, I'm sure everyone is super glad to hear that. She's doing well and she's got a new bathroom. And yeah, again, congratulations on the book. It's my year of living vulnerably available at all good bookstores. Look at these gorgeous cover. I just love looking at it on my bookshelf. I highly recommend it. Go out there and grab yourself a copy. Thanks so much for talking to us today, Rick, we really appreciate it. And answering all those questions. And just a reminder that we do have more webinars coming up. So a reminder again, we did the close the gap report launch yesterday, you can find that on

our YouTube channel. Next week we'll be talking to Australians for war powers reform and former green senator Scott Ludlam about how he's government accountable for what happens in armed conflict involving Australian forces. That's next Wednesday, March the 24th, at 11am. And the following week, we'll be talking to your favorite Richard Dennis, our chief economist about the long COVID economic crisis that we find ourselves in, and how too many people are still being left behind. Thanks so much for joining us today, Rick. Thanks, everyone, for coming and for all your questions and see you next week.

Rick Morton Thank you so much. I've been reading the chat as well, while we're going. It's so lovely. Thanks.

1:00:49

Ebony Bennett Thanks very much. Bye, everyone.

1:00:54