

Paleo Solution - 265

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Robb Wolf:

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Hi folks. Another edition of the Paleo Solution podcast. Very excited for our guest today. Our guest is a world-renowned bestselling author. She has produced some of my favorite written works in behavior change and happiness and wellbeing. Her name is Gretchen Rubin. She is the author of the Happiness Project I'm sure that everyone has heard of that book and you will soon hear about her latest book Better than Before: Mastering the Habits of our Everyday Lives. Gretchen how are you doing?

Gretchen:

I'm so happy to be talking to you today.

Robb Wolf:

Well I'm just giddy. Like I literally have dancing feet right now. I have been such a big fan of yours for a very, very long time so I think that this is going to be – I have a good friend, his name is Dan John how we ended up with two first names for both first and last name I have no idea. But he always makes the point that when you do something, try to make it

benefit you if not anyone else. So I'm really looking at this trying to benefit me and figure out how I change some habits in my life. But Gretchen, you have a really interesting eclectic background. Could you give folks a little bit of your history?

Gretchen: You know, I started out in law. I went to law school and sort of did that all the way. I was editor in chief of The Law Review at Yale Law School and I went on to clerk for Sander Day O'Conner. So I was really so heavily into law but then when I was working for Justice O'Conner, I began to realize that actually I wanted to be a writer. That was when I had the seeds for my first book. The thought I started to think about what that would be. So eventually, switched to being a writer. So now I'm a fulltime writer.

Robb Wolf: Now I got to ask and this is maybe a weird thing but did law – how did law, how did the practice of law and being around law at literally the highest levels in the world, how did that sow a seed for writing the book called The Happiness Project?

Gretchen: Well I think the thing about law is that it really teaches you to make an argument. It really teaches you to think about well what would somebody, if I say this, what would somebody say or how would they say that what I'm saying is wrong? So I think that it really influenced my writing in like just the clarity of it, of the argument of understanding like how do I take somebody from this is what I'm arguing and this is how I convince you.

But also, it kind of made a negative, because I read so much stuff that was so hard to read and was so I thought unnecessarily obscure that I just vowed. It was like Scarlet O'Hara. You know, as god is my witness, I'm going to write as clear as I possibly can for the rest of my life. So when I'm writing I just edit, edit, edit for clarity. Because I spend so much time reading stuff that wasn't clear, I became just determined to write in as clear and as succinct a manner as possible.

Robb Wolf: Well and you know obviously that's been a huge part of your success and the reach that you've had because there is such clarity in your writing but I'm curious just on the topic of happiness. Like where was the seed crystal for that? Particularly in the realm of law?

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Gretchen: Well actually the Happiness Project was like my fifth book.

Robb Wolf: Okay.

Gretchen: So I switched from law to writing. I was working on a book called Power, Money, Fame, Sex: A User's Guide. I got the idea for that because I was out for a walk during my lunch hour. I was clerking on the Supreme Court so I was outside. I was starting up at the Capitol Dome against the blue sky and I thought to myself well if I were going to write a book that would be interesting to me and that would be interesting to everybody else in the world, what would I write about? I thought well power, money, fame, sex, and it hit me in a flash, power, money, fame, sex. Like this was a unit and I had to investigate it.

So I went out and started doing massive amounts of research. That book might sound very different from the Happiness Project or better than before or I also like wrote a biography of Winston Churchill. They might seem very different from each other to other people but really my subject was human nature. Who are we, why do we do the things that we do? So really every book that I've written has been to tackle human nature from a different way. So to me, they seem all very related to each other even though I understand that if you look at it from the outside, they really look like this like crazy mishmash of topics.

Robb Wolf: No, no. It totally makes sense. If I were to do a rewrite on Power, Money, Fame Sex I would just add nachos at the end of that.

Gretchen: Uh-hum. [Laughs]

Robb Wolf: And then you know, at least increase sales by a factor of a hundred.

Gretchen: [Laughs]

Robb Wolf: S you know when you are considering human nature like what kind of epistemological framework are you tackling that with? Like I tend – before we started recording, I mentioned that you know even though I'm a coach, and I guess theoretically kind of a health educator and whatnot. I tend to look at this a lot from an evolutionary biology perspective. I'm only now starting to really get in and do some reading on the nuts and bolts mechanistic elements of behavior change. But you know what's been your kind of driving epistemology for understanding human behavior?

Gretchen: Well I really try to grab from every source that I can so I read a lot of the science. I also I'm a big believer in the genetic routes of behavior which I think are often under played. But I also – what I try to bring to the table is just observation. Not to see things that no one else has seen or to get really deep into the science but just to see what's happening in every

day. What's happening, what are the people all around us doing? What are the patterns of behavior that are quite obvious once somebody shines a spotlight on it.

You know so I'm kind of a street scientist where a lot of times I think my biggest insights come from just a casual conversation with somebody or often I'll notice the strange pattern where I think well this doesn't really make sense to me but what one person after another is telling me that that they've had the same experience. So there must be some deeper pattern of human behavior involved or else all this people wouldn't be experiencing the same challenge or they wouldn't be saying the same remark kind of to an uncanny degree.

When I was thinking about habits for better than before, many times what I saw is I would just think well there's some pattern that I don't really understand and yet there must be some explanation for it because why are so many people experiencing the same thing. So I tried, but I'm reading everything from the science to you know, memoirs to weird stuff like the design of kindergarten rooms because you know guess who thinks a lot of that habits and how to shape people's behavior? It's people who are like in charge of little kids. Monastic governance like I really try to cast a wide net and that's part of what I love about what I do is that it's kind of an excuse for me to read all this stuff that fascinates me and then to try to distill it into something that can make sense to people who don't want to go out and read all that stuff. Well I'll read it for you and kind of put it in some kind of framework so it's easier to understand.

Robb Wolf: No. I love that and you know we were in such an interesting time because we have so much information available.

Gretchen: Yes.

Robb Wolf: And the different subdisciplines in any area --

Gretchen: Yes.

Robb Wolf: --whether it's history or science or what have you, they become insular just you know, just based off of nomenclature. You know like shorthand when you get it. Like I haven't stayed on top of genetics in a while and so if I start reading a paper that's interesting to me on genetics, I spend 45 minutes to an hour just getting reacquainted with okay this is the abbreviation for this gene and that's the abbreviation for that gene.

So synthesis is a really challenging process now because on the one hand we see these with these big kind of macropatterns but then they have some credibility. You've kind of got to dig in and get to some sort of fundamental you know controlled scientific kind of thing so that you can bridge that gap from the macro level to a more micro analyzed level.

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Do you see a challenge or some pushback from academics in that regard because they'll say well you know, this is a great theory but there's no randomized controlled trial on this? You know, we see it again and again as kind of there is not really a randomized controlled trial on you know, put a gun to your head, pull the trigger. If it's loaded you're probably going to die. You know I mean you have various potent statistical significance on just one episode of that but how is this received in an academic setting?

Gretchen:

Well you know, it's funny because there's things that you can put, you know you can test in a laboratory with a bunch of undergraduates eating marshmallows and then there's some things that you miss. I think that it's interesting for academics to see how you could look at it from a different way or even someone like Samuel Johnson who's one of my favorite writers and like shows such a deep insight of human nature that often somebody would write a gigantic science paper and then it's sort of I'll be reminded of a Samuel Johnson quotation who summed it up in a single sentence.

So I think there's all different kinds of ways and you're right like the more you get within your discipline and the more specialized becomes your vocabulary in a way you can go deeper but then in a way you also blind yourself to certain other ways of thinking. So I think it's helpful to try to – approach these things in a lot of different ways and just see that there's a lot of – there's many ways to understand that truth about human nature or to understand patterns.

So I really try to look at as many things as possible. You know it's interesting to me to talk about scientists who study habits in labs, but it's also interesting for me to talk about trainers who work with people in gyms. Because they have a different view of people because they're actually working with an actual person. In an academic setting then they have a different view too because they're looking at it in a very different way.

So I mean you know, as a writer myself what I'm trying to do is really just help people understand themselves better. So anything I can do that can shine a spotlight on people where they feel like oh wow now I

understand a pattern in my behavior or now I understand what I need to do differently. This is going to allow me to succeed or this is why I understand why I felt in the past a-ah I see this missing element. You know that's what I'm going for.

Robb Wolf: I love that and you know, in your book you make an early point that the real secret to habit change is that you must know yourself.

Gretchen: Yes.

Robb Wolf: You have a really interesting process for helping people to learn you know, who they are and how they function and whatnot. Again I tend to couch a lot of this stuff from like an evolutionary biology perspective. You know, if somebody is trying to affect behavior change with food kind of understanding that we're wired up to be as lazy as possible and get as much food as possible while being lazy and that worked really well in the past. Maybe it doesn't work so well now but what's the process that you go through to help people understand who are they so that they can then understand what their situation is now and then if they choose to make a decision to do something different?

Gretchen: Well you're absolutely right. I mean I think that one of the challenges happening is that there's a lot of expert advice and people say to you do it first thing in the morning or do it in for 30 days or start small or give yourself a cheat day once a week. The problem is that those strategies work very well for some people sometimes but they don't work for everybody all the time, which is obvious from just looking around you. So what I found is that there are actually 21 different strategies that people use to make or break their habits and this is the same strategies to make or break that doesn't matter.

The 21 can sound like oh my gosh that's such a gigantic number. It's overwhelming but it's actually good. Because what it means is that there's many from which to choose. Because for any individual some of these are not going to be appeal, some aren't going to work, some work very well for some people and they don't work at all for other people. Some aren't available to us at all times. They might be available sometimes but not at others. Some are kind of even not within our control. So but what you have to do when you're thinking about the 21 strategies is to start as you say with yourself.

What kind of person are you? What are your values? What are you like? Because then you can set yourself up to succeed. I mean I think often

night people and morning people. I mean this is a big distinction. There are truly are morning people and night people you know?

As a morning people I used to think that people woke up earlier, they went to bed earlier, they would wake up earlier and then they would be morning people. No. It's actually genetically hardwired thing, people are morning people while some people are real true night people. So if you're a night person is it going to work for you to get up early and go for a run? Probably not. That's not the kind of thing that's going to work for you because you're a night person.

So what I try to do is to lay out a bunch of different ways for people to understand well how they might be like certain people and how they might be different because you can't just say like oh well this haven't worked for Steve Jobs or this haven't worked for Ben Franklin or this haven't worked for my sister in law. Because maybe it will work for you but maybe not. You got to think about well what kind of person are you. So I really try to both in the strategy of the four tendencies which divides all people into four categories, because I love to divide people into categories.

[0:15:15]

Robb Wolf:

Right.

Gretchen:

Or the strategy of distinctions where I go through a lot of different distinctions is to help people see oh like I'm this kind of person so this kind of thing is going to work for me or oh I'm – that's not – I see why I set that up in way that's not going to be – is not going to appeal to me over the long term.

Robb Wolf:

No it's fantastic and you know I've always been interested in things like Myers-Brigg personality types and things like that. It's really provided a lot of insight for me. You know one of the challenges particularly being in kind of the food realm is that people really want black and white answers.

Gretchen:

Yeah.

Robb Wolf:

Low carb high carb done, you know?

Gretchen:

Yeah.

Robb Wolf:

And you know, I've got to say when I had a more black or white perspective on things, my job was much easier and as I've learned over time, that there's actually almost infinite shades of gray. It frustrates my

readership. You're in constant battles with people because you know you have these kind of all or nothing statements thrown out there. One thing that I encounter a lot is within a mainstream dietetics there is thought that no food groups should be off limits.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: That everything is equally good.

Gretchen: Yeah, yeah.

Robb Wolf: You just need to limit portion sizes.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: And that has failed horrifically. But the riposte from kind of this mainstream perspective is that categorizing any type of food in any type of a negative fashion is orthorexia and it develops eating disorders.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: And what are your thoughts on that? I have some very deep-seated emotional kind of thoughts on it, but what do you think about that?

Gretchen: Well this touches on what I call the strategy of abstaining. And the strategy of abstaining is the strategy that works extremely well for some people and doesn't work at all for other people. So the strategy of abstaining is just the observation, which I've noticed about myself. I'm an abstainer that for some people it's easier to have nothing. That once they have decided that something is off limits when they take it off the table they're fine. But if they start it's kind of all or nothing. Like I can have no Thin Mints or I can have ten Thin Mints but I can't have two Thin Mints.

Kind of once I get started, I can't stop. I've never left an ice-cream sundae half-finished in my life. That's an abstainer. Now moderators by contrast do better when they can have something a little bit or sometimes. They get kind of panicky and rebellious if they're told they can never have something.

Robb Wolf: Uh-hum.

Gretchen: A lot of times if they know they can have something they don't even want it. When I understood this distinction, it made something clear to me that it always puzzled me as an abstainer which is that people who

keep like a bar of fine chocolate squirreled away somewhere and once a day they have one square of fine chocolate and that's all they want. But as an abstainer, I'm like the whole day, would be now, later, two, three, how many isn't up? I would just be preoccupied with eat. I would eat the whole candy bar in one day. I would not eat it square by square. But the thing is there is no right way or wrong way. And for people abstaining is easier. Often you know moderators will say to me as an abstainer you're too rigid. You need to learn not to be so harsh on yourself. If you give something up altogether you're going to fall off the wagon. You're going to binge. That's just not my experience. For me abstaining is easier and I've heard from so many people because the book just came out that I've been writing about this on my blog like GretchenRubin.com for a long time.

So many people have said to me I always thought I had to try to be moderate. And I couldn't be but not I realize I can just abstain and abstaining is easier. It sounds harder but it's actually easier. Once I just you know like my sister had to give up French fries that was her kryptonite. So with the strong temptations for some people it's easier to give it up altogether. But for some people that doesn't work. For some people, it's better to be moderate and I think what happens that there's a lot of conflict because both people feel like they're doing it right. Both people can't really succeed using the other way and yet they keep trying to convince each other you know, I say that moderators like well why don't you just go cold turkey or why can't you stick to your own rules? Moderators say to me like you're not being healthy like you're too harsh on yourself.

But for me it's just easier to have no sugar is so easy. To have a little sugar then I have to be thinking about it all the time. It's just boring. So but these are really, these are strategies that it's really very different. Here you see like the roots of a lot of error conflict. Somebody comes up with ice cream and one person says oh my gosh, why did you buy ice cream. You know, I'm going to eat the whole thing and the other person says oh you know you need to learn to manage yourself better. Just have a little bit every night. The other person is like no I can't.

It's like it's and abstainer moderator. There's no right way or wrong way. It's just whatever works for you.

[0:20:00]

Robb Wolf:

Why is it so hard to pin I'm you know, we're getting ready to crack open this huge risk assessment program. We did this paleo diet risk assessment program with a bunch of police and fire fighters, saved the city of Reno \$22M. We're getting ready to scale this thing up and you know we're

doing the best that we can. We're going to be consulting with you extensively by the way.

Gretchen: Yeah. [Laughs]

Robb Wolf: Whether we want to or not but you know why is it so hard on kind of a national health level? Why is it so hard to have a meme or an articulation that some people will benefit from abstinence, some people will benefit from a more moderate approach. Why is it that – why is the main one out? You know, I'm kind of clearly food oriented here. Why is the meme one out that you know Twinkies are equal to apples to everybody. We don't consider the hyperpalability of food. We don't consider any evolutionary biology? Why has that meme won?

Gretchen: I think that there's just this desire for the one magic like a magic one size fits all solution that like here's the answer. You know? Also and not wanting to say well some people are some way and some people are another way. I think it's just that constant pressure to have the answer that's true for everyone even though we know that it doesn't work because clearly if it did work, we'd all these things wouldn't be – they wouldn't be a factor. You know eating is complicated. There are so many things that are swirling around it, which is again why with the 21 strategies, I think it's important because there's a lot of different things going on. There's how other people are affecting. It's how convenient is it to get those foods. It's you know are you rewarding yourself with food in a way that's undermining your habits? Are you constantly generating loopholes that are letting you off the hook because you're like oh sure, I'm eating my good. I'm keeping my good habits all the time except for this one time because you only live once and it's my birthday and I'm on vacation. I was so good yesterday or I'm going to be so good tomorrow. You know, there's all these things, there's all these ways to tackle it because it's complicated. There isn't an easy just magic answer that's going to work for everybody.

Robb Wolf: Damn it, Gretchen. What good is your book then if there's not a single magic answer?

Gretchen: Right.

Robb Wolf: This isn't getting me anywhere.

Gretchen: It's good because I think people get discouraged because they've tried something and they failed maybe even multiple times. What I feel like is this is good. It's encouraging to people because they said like well you

know I've tried this before and it hasn't worked but here's all the other things that I haven't tried. If I tried a couple of them all at the same time, I think people start to see how they can tackle it you know in a way that's realistic and actually manageable.

Robb Wolf:

Nice, nice. Okay. So I want you to ruthlessly grade me on the way that I've been presenting some material. So when I do my greasy used car salesman pitch about this paleo thing, in the back of my head trying to get people to generally eat better, I think a lot of folks have some food intolerances that are hard to ferret out until we've basically done an elimination diet.

So what I try to get folks to do is go 30 days no grains, no legumes, no dairy, try to stick to that as best you can. At the end of 30 days reintroduce, see how you do. Take the cost/benefit kind of story at the end. My thought being that hopefully it's short enough that those people that you know they aren't the abstainers. It's not so long that it blows them out of the water but then you know they get enough benefit that then at the end of that whole process when they reintroduced these foods they're like if they had some gluten reactivity or something they're kind of like wow, okay I really get it now and now it's worth altering this.

Like you know, what's my – how am I doing with that and how could I improve that message?

Gretchen:

Well I think one thing is you know the four tendencies framework is the framework about how people change habits. One thing is that – I mean 30 days is a short enough time that maybe people can stick to it because they're kind of doing a blast start. Like I just feel like it's a permanent habit change. It feels like it's a temporary thing that you're sort of experimenting with in kind of a fun way. Like it's fun to kind of almost to deny ourselves of things. It's kind of exciting and interesting.

I mean one thing is that for many people external accountability is crucial. So if you have people who are having trouble sticking to it, you might want to think about helping people to create forms of external accountability whether that's kind of groups or you're going to send them emails or whatever. So that they have a feeling of being supervised. Because for a lot of people if it's just them being accountable to themselves it's very hard for them to stick to it.

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But if they have a sense that somebody or maybe they're going to be a role model for someone else. Like you want to say to them like don't you want to model good eating for somebody else? Or do you want to show

somebody else that you know how to stick a commitment? Because for a lot of people it turns out external accountability is key. Those would be obligers in my framework. Obligers and questioners, most people are either obligers or questioners. Questioners needs justification, rationale. They're the ones that need a lot of information. Like they're not going to do it unless they really believe in the system.

So you kind of have to load them up with information because they're going to be more hungry for them. But other people maybe are going to accept it free. You know they'll kind of get along but then some people they think they're like I want data, data, data, I need information, why am I listening to you, why am I doing it this way? Is this the best way? Why do you pick the clarity, why did you pick these things? For them that's what's really important.

Robb Wolf: Would you say that maybe about 50% of the population is obligers and then maybe about 25% of the population are questioners but able dissuade them? I'm asking a super leading question here but what are your thoughts on kind of the numerical breakdown there?

Gretchen: Well that's a very interesting question. It's clear that rebel is a tiny, tiny category and then upholder. So rebels are people who resist outer and inner expectations. Upholders readily meet other in our expectations and I'm and upholder and boy many things in life were clear to me when I realized that very few people are upholders. So these are the two extreme personalities I would say and they are very small. Almost everybody is a questioner or an obliger.

I think you're right that obliger is slightly larger but questioner is also a very large category of people.

Robb Wolf: Interesting.

Gretchen: But I do think obliger is the biggest tendency. And they also have the tendency to get along to bet, they're like the type O also.

Robb Wolf: Uh-hum. Uh-hum.

Gretchen: Tendencies, which would make sense since they're O-bligers. They sort of tend to get along with all the other tendencies. Where some of the other tendencies --

Robb Wolf: So they're the ones that keep the rest of us from killing one another. They're like a social buffering system.

Gretchen: Well they're yeah they're the rock of the world. Yeah I know.

Robb Wolf: Right. It's interesting because in the gym and in traveling I've kind of – I figured out this kind of back of the envelop thing that you know about 50% of people if you hit them with this idea of like an anti-inflammatory diet, sleep a little more, do some exercise they're like cool, sign me up. Easy sale, no problem, let's check this out. We'll do blood work before and do blood work afterwards. This will be a cool experiment. About out of the remaining 50% of the population about 25% of those people I had to beg, cajole, threaten, educate and eventually when those people broke, they became like Jihadis on this stuff. Like you almost had to hose them down. They were so rabid in their adherence even though it was shit fight of a battle to get them into it.

Once you finally got them sold it was kind of crazy. And then there was this final 15% to 20% that I could set myself on fire. I could set them on fire and it wasn't going to change a thing. So I was just kind of curious what you had seen as far as you know some kind of breakdowns there.

Gretchen: Yeah. Yeah well and on my site I have a quiz, if people want to take an online quiz to find out what their tendency is on GretchenRubin.com. So that you know it leads you through a series of questions that then tells you. In my framework it's all about how you respond to an expectation. You know you're working with a very specific kind of change. So but that's interesting that what you found when you were trying to convince people to do it.

Robb Wolf: Yeah and you know that's already existing within a selection bias that these couple of walkthrough the door of a gym. You know like when they talk to the folks that I know that are primary care docs like they just have a whole other world --

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: -- to deal with. You know like there's no selection bias. They're the only people who are maybe more cranky than seeing their doctor are people that need to see a mechanic.

Gretchen: Uh-hum.

Robb Wolf: You know, it's horrible, yeah.

Gretchen: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Robb Wolf: So you know, the loophole spotting --

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: I had a client that I have to work with. The loophole spotter was someone that I wanted to kill and bury in a shallow grave. Why did those people get my goat too much. You know I did not get a chance to do my four tendencies quiz yet. It would be interesting to know that and maybe that's why the loophole spotter gets my goat. But why do those people get in my kitchen so bad and just spin me out?

Gretchen: Even the people who generate loopholes?

Robb Wolf: Yes.

Gretchen: Yeah. So yeah the strategy of loophole spotting is to be on the lookout for these loopholes because we are like these amazing advocates for ourselves. You know yeah sure of course I'm totally committed to keeping my good habit except in this one instance right now at the spur of the moment I just realized there's a loophole and there's ten categories of loopholes. I have to say of all the strategies that I love online strategies but these are the funniest. This is the funniest strategy and I love working on this chapter because I just love writing down all the crazy, hilarious, imaginative loopholes.

Robb Wolf: [Laughs]

Gretchen: I had to go through and cut out like 90% in the book. It was ridiculous how many -

Robb Wolf: Right.

[0:30:00]

Gretchen: And most of us have a favorite loophole like some of the more popular ones are they're all popular. Like the tomorrow loophole. Well it doesn't matter what I'm doing today because tomorrow I'm going to be settling tomorrow, I'm starting my diet so it doesn't matter what I do today or the fake self-actualization loophole which is you only live once. I want to accept myself just as I am. I have to act now or miss out forever. You know, but sometimes to be happier and healthier and more productive, we sometimes have to deny ourselves something in the present or ask more of ourselves. There is the concerned brothers loopholes. Well other people are going to feel uncomfortable if I don't have a drink at this

business dinner or if I don't have piece of birthday cake my host's feelings are going to be hurt. There's the well, my gosh, one of the best loopholes because it works in every situation is the one coin loophole which gets its name from an ancient teaching story which says would you say that one coin makes a man rich? No, you would not but if you gave them –what - if you gave a man one coin, what if you gave a man another coin? What if you give them another coin?

At some point you have to say that a man has become rich because one coin made him so. The one coin loophole we can do because it's like well what difference does one cupcake make?

Robb Wolf: Right.

Gretchen: What difference does it make, what's a couple of beers? Why should I go to the library today? My thesis isn't due for two years. Why should I wear a helmet today? What are the chances I'm going to get in an accident today? Any one time we do anything, it truly is inconsequential. Like what's one thing? But the only way we have good habits is one thing after one thing after one thing. So people often toggle back and forth between oh yeah, I'm totally committed to doing this but why bother to do it today? It really doesn't matter. And then oh I mean my favorite loophole probably is false choice. Oh, you know, I'm too busy writing to make those appointments. Really? Is that really the choice that you have? Moralizing and saying I've been so good, I deserve to have --

Robb Wolf: [Laughs] Oh, oh crushing me.

Gretchen: Planning to fail like you know how you – like here I am at my favorite bakery who could resist and you're like why are you standing in the middle of your favorite bakery? It's ten-blocks from your house like how did that happen? Somehow you found yourself there. So anyway the loopholes are hilarious and I think for many people they run through our minds almost like we're not even conscious that we're invoking them because they're so familiar and we're so good at generating them. Just by pointing them out, a lot of times people are like oh wow you know questionable assumption. The labels says it's healthy. But is it really healthy? Should I be questioning that assumption?

Just seeing the loopholes spelled out then helps people be on their guard so the next time they're getting ready to pull in a loophole to break a good habit they say wait a minute let me step back here. Maybe I don't want to fall for it this time.

Robb Wolf: Oh. Oh, man, I need you full time in my life.

Gretchen: Uh-hum. [Laughs]

Robb Wolf: [Laughs] You need to be my buffer between me and the rest of my reality because you've gotten yourself wired. This is maybe a little bit – this might be difficult to answer but what is it – where does the delineation occur between “simple behavior change and altering addiction?”

Gretchen: Uh-hum.

Robb Wolf: What's that demarcation.

Gretchen: Well you know in my book I don't talk about additions compulsions, nervous habits or habits of mind. But clearly the line between habit and addiction is very fluid. You know some people the idea of addiction is itself controversial. You know, and I think sometimes the question is, is somebody doing – is somebody addicted to something that's otherwise good? Are you addicted to exercise? Are you you know, and there the question is well is it enriching your life and making your life larger or is it making your life smaller and more cramped and feel confined?

So one person's exercise addiction you know I have a friend who people say oh she's addicted to exercise maybe at first it's like it's amazing I made all these friends I'm constantly going to new places I love training. Like for her it's making her life bigger and so I wouldn't call that an addiction. But then for some people if it's like oh, you know it's haunting me, I can't – it's interfering with my relationships, it's interfering with my responsibilities, I feel frantic if I can't do it, well then it's starting to edge into being a negative behavior.

You know, and then also we also use it colloquially to just mean something that we feel out of control. You know do you feel – are you addicted to Candy Crush? Are you addicted to sugar? Are you addicted to game of thrones? Are you addicted to video games? I mean the question of whether something is truly an addiction you know, I think the question is is this a habit that's not making me happier, healthier or more productive? Is this a habit that I want to get – I want, I'm feeling a loss of control with myself. I feel like I'm not the master of the life that I want to live and so therefore I want to see if I can change that habit.

[0:35:11]

To me it's less important about arriving at final definitions and more important to say well how can I have a life that I want to have and how can I change my behavior so that my life reflects my values, my interests,

my nature in a way that makes me feel good and doesn't make me feel like - You know you don't want the things that are supposed to make you feel better make you feel worse and a lot of times that's what happens. With my good habits. They start because we like them but then they become poison.

[0:35:41]

Robb Wolf: I think that's a beautiful way to look at it. I was actually jotting down some notes. You know, is what you're doing opening the aperture of your life or constricting it.

Gretchen: Yes. Yes.

Robb Wolf: And do you –are you enriched or you know receiving pain from that chain.

Gretchen: Yes.

Robb Wolf: That is just beautiful. I really like that. What do you see as some of the really hot topic changes that people are wrestling with today I mean food seems like a biggie, exercise seems like a biggie, enough sleep, not getting sucked under the rip tide of social media like what do you – and how do those interact? Like I'm curious you know like how does social media cracking you know, crack core of social media affect lack of exercise and food and stuff like that.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: Yeah.

Gretchen: Yeah well I've identified like the essential seven which seem to be just about every habit that people want falls into seven categories, many of which you have touched on. One is to eat and drink more healthfully, exercise regularly, save, spend, and earn wisely. Rest, relax and enjoy, that things like turn off your cellphone and stop watching TV in bed. Accomplish more, stop procrastinating, so those are habits related to getting stuff done. Simplify, clear, clean and organize, that's about your surroundings. And then finally engage more deeply in relationships. Whether that's with other people, with god, with the world, a sense of like wanting to deepen engagement and using habits as a way, as something that can either help you or interfere. And then just talking to people. I mean the things you mentioned absolutely come up all the time. Interesting a lot of people want to drink less. They don't want to give up drinking. It's not like they have a problem with alcohol but they just feel like they're more on their game if they would drink less.

Robb Wolf: Uh-hum.

Gretchen: So they want the fun of drinking but not the downside and it's not – as I said sometimes it's hard to do something less than to not do it at all so that's something to manage. You know, and one thing I think that's surprising to people is that sometimes it's just as hard to form a habit as something that you love to do, as something that you don't love to do. Like you think well I get why it's hard to make myself to cook if I don't like cooking. Well what if I love to cook, why can't I form a habit?

What I see is that the same strategies often have to be used because for some people sometimes like me the fact that I enjoy something almost makes me put it lower down on the list because I'm very focused on crossing the things I don't like to do at first. so sometimes the things that are fun get shoved to the side. Well that's not a good recipe for a happy life.

So I have to make sure that I have habits for the things that I love to do just as for the things that maybe don't come as easily to me.

Robb Wolf: Now let me see if I got that correctly and I'm drawing some old neurolinguistic programming stuff where they would say, you know, almost anybody has achieved success at something.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: So figure out the psychological state, the tendencies that allowed you to achieve a 400-pound body weight or you know, whatever it is and then apply those strategies to these other areas. But if I understood you correctly that's not necessarily the case right?

Gretchen: Well I do think that one of the – one really helpful thing to do is to look back to at your past and say well and have I succeeded at this at another time? Because if I succeeded in the past maybe there's something, maybe there's something that I'm not understanding that I could be doing now that would make it easier. So say cooking for instance I spoke to somebody who is like oh I hate to cook, I hate to cook but then when she thought about it, she realized well in her past there was a time where she did cook a lot. It turned out that when she thought about it, what she didn't like was food shopping.

She hated the grocery store. It wasn't the cooking and when she cooked in the past it's because she was living in a group house and she had a

roommate who bought, who like to go grocery shopping and so who bought all the ingredients. So sometimes it's like understanding what the underlying patterns are or like my you know, a friend of mine who you know said well when I was on the track in high school I never missed track practice but I can't go running now. When she had a team and a coach that held her accountable, she had no trouble but now she can't because she didn't have external accountability okay. So build that in.

So sometimes if you look at your past because you're right most people have things where they have succeeded that can have clues as to like what is going to help you succeed now? One thing is I don't really look at emotional states. I never – I don't think I used the word motivation one time in the book and if you ever think about things like self-esteem or making and setting priorities like intellectually or like emotional eating or any of that because I feel like...

[0:40:16]

And I never talk about things like neuroplasticity or what's happening in your brain because these are things that we can't – it's very hard to get our minds around. We can't really affect that. behavior we can affect. Behavior is concrete. So if you focus on your behavior then your mind will follow and so I'm like don't worry about you motivating yourself to do something. Worry about what are you going to do?

And then you can do something. You can decide to do something and figure out ways to help you stick to the decision and make that behavior happen. That just seems more like an easier, more straightforward course to me than trying to work on your inner emotional states. Which to me is very hard to do.

Robb Wolf: I completely agree you know, and it's interesting, if you do circle it back around into some neuroplasticity and motor programming and whatnot, it seems more and more clear that our inner state, even our brain circuitry is more of a reflection of how we interface with the environment and that plasticity changes with the way that we interface with the environment. So instead of doing a lot of inner child unique snowflake searching, if we just --

Gretchen: Yes.

Robb Wolf: -- figure out some way by hook or by crook to simply do things differently --

Gretchen: Yes.

Robb Wolf: --then we're kind off and running yeah. Yeah.

Gretchen: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it's a lot easier. Yeah.

Robb Wolf: Again if – that you may be answered this already because it maybe brushes into the addiction kind of story but what about trying to change habits related to dysfunctional relationships? Like you know because people will do a lot of like --

Gretchen: [Indiscernible]

Robb Wolf: -psychoanalysis and all that type of stuff but I mean where does – you know, discovering who you are and then you know, affecting change in that regard? Is it kind of the same process? Does it matter if it's cupcakes or dysfunctional people?

Gretchen: Well what's the habit?

Robb Wolf: Let's say you're – you tend to get into abusive kind of codependent relationships and lose yourself in that process. You just do it again.

Gretchen: To me I wouldn't call that a habit.

Robb Wolf: Okay.

Gretchen: that's not – to me that's maybe a pattern of behavior that you're doing but I wouldn't really call that a habit.

Robb Wolf: Okay. Interesting.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: Okay.

Gretchen: Now I do think with like looking at the four tendencies, which again whether you're an upholder, a questioner, obliger, rebel, I think a lot of times you can understand why you're having con – or any of the distinctions. You understand why you're having conflict with people because you just see the world in a very different way. So for instance rebels we talked about rebels. So rebels resist all expectations outer and inner like. If you tell them to do – if you ask or tell them to do something they really would like to do the opposite. It has nothing to do with you. It's not that they hate you or they're rejecting you. It's like they don't want anybody to tell them what to do. They don't even want to tell

themselves what to do. So if you're married to a rebel, and you say to your rebel hey, it's your turn to take out the trash, the rebel is probably going to be like well you know what I was going to but now that you told me to, I'm not going to. Because you can't tell me what to do. You can't make me. And that's just their nature.

So I've talked to a lot of people who are in relationships with rebels and you really have to learn how to work with that personality type or not. I mean you kind of – it's like it's there and same thing with obligers. Like maybe you know as an upholder I'm frustrated sometimes with obligers because I'm like why don't you just do the thing. You keep saying you want to do something why don't you just do it?

But an obliger needs external accountability. So if you're married to an obliger or you manage an obliger, you're working on a team with an obliger, and you're frustrated with they're not meeting their inner expectation well then just figure out how can you help them create external accountability for the things that they want to succeed at. So and I think that the more that you understand that how people see the world in a different way. It's not that anybody is right or wrong but that we all come to it from a different perspective. So we need to figure out how we can all get to where we want to go.

I mean the thing that comes up a lot in work is with workspace. Some people are marathoners, they like to work steadily well in advance, they don't like to be up against a deadline, they feel like doing a little bit over a long period unleashes their creativity and their productivity. But sprinters by contrast they love to be up against the deadline. They like the adrenaline of the crunch. They feel like that's what creates the most creativity and productivity and if they start too early they kind of burn out and lose interest.

Well there's no right way or wrong way and you can see in different circumstances these different work styles could be beneficial. But if you've got a team where people have different work styles, they might keep telling each other you're doing it wrong, you're doing it wrong. Well it's not that one person is right and one person is wrong but they have different styles. They have different habits of work.

[0:45:01]

And that's something to be thinking about and I think sometimes just having vocabulary just saying like I'm an abstainer and you're a moderator or you know, it's not that these labels should constrain us and make us feel like we're locked into an identity. But just by giving us an easy short hand to talk about what's true for us, how we see the world,

how we function best, and sometimes we can avoid conflict, you know, have more insight into other people and how their perspective is just different.

Also maybe frame habits in a way that is even more compelling to them because it's just more reflecting of the way they see the world.

Robb Wolf: Oh my wife is definitely a sprinter. She will fiddle and fart and procrastinate and then it's the 12th hour or you know 11th hour and 59 minutes and then she's on this thing. She always does a great job but I have to like crawl under the house and can't even watch this process. You know? And so like I have a talk coming up in Austin on the 23rd of this month of April and I've been working on this talk since the 23rd of last month. You know, and I'm almost done.

Gretchen: Yes.

Robb Wolf: With it and I'm going to have about a month. But even then like even before I started working on the thing I was waking up at 4 in the morning taking notes on it and stressed out. It wasn't until I embarked on that process and I got my first big outline done where I was kind of like okay if I had to give this to --

Gretchen: Yes. Right.

Robb Wolf: -tomorrow, I could get something done. It wouldn't be my A work but I could do it.

Gretchen: Yes.

Robb Wolf: But it was just going to consume me up until that last minute. Whereas Nikki would be in the back of her head and she would be you know, kind of bee bopping along. And then when you know it's time for all hell to break loose then it does. Yeah that's interesting. That is so interesting.

Gretchen: I just started a podcast with my sister called Happier with Gretchen Rubin. I saw this because the minute we were sort of like starting it, I was like we got to get it. We got to get started. We've got to get everything. We got to get as many decisions today as possible like we've got to get on top of this. And some people were like well we got plenty of time. Like we'll get to it you know, when we need to and I was just like no because as a marathoner you're like I see this checklist and I just and even if This deadline is far away like there's just a lot of things that I want to get through. Unfortunately for me my sister is like she's probably not as

much of a marathoner as I am but she is reasonably, she's flexible and so it works for her. But I can imagine that for somebody else they would be like why are we worrying about this now. We don't have to have it done for a month. But I'm like come on like we need to get all these things locked down.

Robb Wolf: Yeah, yeah and you know, my wife and I worked together a lot and so we've had to learn where --

Gretchen: Yes.

Robb Wolf: --you know, it's almost like a transmission where like my gearing doesn't directly mesh with hers and there needs to be able a little bit of a lag with that stuff where I can get certain elements of my work done, pump it off to her. She can wait until the last minute. I have no anxiety about it getting done because I know that she will kill herself to get it done. But I also can't watch that process. Like I just need to be out of the house somewhere while she is in that final sprint mode.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: But it's interesting but we've only you know, it was through really just kind of dumb luck that we figured out some coping strategies with that whereas if we had had some nomenclature and some understanding like what you offer in the book I think it would have been much easier. It's kind of like oh okay well I'm just wired this way, you're wired that way it's completely cool. Like we spend a couple of years of just like shit talking each other that we --

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: -- were both broken you know and neither one of us were. So that's interesting.

Gretchen: Yeah, yeah, yea.

Robb Wolf: So you know, where -- god there's so many -- I literally have like 50 other questions written down here and I'm trying to whittle it down because we're sneaking up close on an hour. I'm interested on the pairing part. Like how does that play into the you know, you're sitting as a new smoking and pairing. Like how does that plug in to this?

Gretchen: Well the strategy of pairing is one that came so easily to me that I almost like didn't even notice it.

Robb Wolf: Uh-hum.

Gretchen: And again I found that it's super powerful for a lot of people. And that is you take a habit of something that maybe you're not so enthusiastic about and then you pair it with something that you really love, that you really want to do. This is not a reward. It's not like if I do this thing I don't want to do then I will reward myself with this other thing. So they only go together. One of the ways that this is most often used is for people who are like running on a treadmill or on a stationary bike or whatever. At the gym we'll watch TV.

Robb Wolf: Uh-hum.

Gretchen: So let's say you love reality TV, can you watch reality TV if you're on the treadmill? Yes, you can. You're sick in bed, and you can't go for a run because you're too sick, can you watch reality TV? No you can't because those things only go together. Reality TV and we're going to have a treadmill. It's not a reward. It's just that these two things are paired.

[0:50:00]

And for many people and again I was just mentioning my podcast, several people were sending me like oh one of the things I pair is podcast and you know, going for a walk or doing my weekly cleaning or walking the dog or something like they pick something that they want to get themselves to do and they pair it with something that they really eager for but you don't get to have it unless you have the other, unless both part of the pair come into being.

You know, I'll listen to like a really compelling audio book, you're going to be eager to get to the gym if that's when you get to listen to it. So this is a really good way of making it the habit become easier and more pleasant because there's something about it that you're really looking forward to.

Robb Wolf: I love it and you know funny enough the weather has been pretty dodgy in Reno. We have a Schwinn Airdyne and a VersaClimber in my garage. I hate both of them with the fires of a thousand suns.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Robb Wolf: But I put on Archer, the FX animated deal and it makes it palatable and I get a half hour 45 minutes of it and then my keys still hurts too badly even switching back and forth eventually and I'm done with it.

Gretchen: Yeah, Yeah.

Robb Wolf: But if I do that and that's the only time I watch Archer and it's funny that I can't watch it when I'm just laying around. I can't watch it you know doing other things. The only time I get to watch it is during that time and luckily there's like seven seasons of it and we only have a season 2 so yeah, yeah.

Gretchen: Yeah. Pairing.

Robb Wolf: Well Gretchen, tell folks where they can track you down. Let folks know about your podcast and also be sure to let them know and we will have all of this in the show notes as well. But where they can do the four tendencies quiz.

Gretchen: Alright, so on my site GretchenRubin.com I have a ton of information about habits. There's a quiz where you can take the quiz to find out your four tendencies like 130,000 people I think have taken it. There's also a lot of resources. Like if you want to start a group for people who are changing their habits together, kind of an accountability group, there's a starter kit for forming a group. There's a lot of – there's a checklist so that if you want to change a habit, you can go through the checklist of the 21 strategies and figure out everything that you're going to do. A bunch of discussion guides, a bunch of stuff like that.

Also I did, I started this podcast, which has been doing great. It's so exciting, We're having so much fun with it.

Robb Wolf: Awesome.

Gretchen: I do it with my sister, Elizabeth Craft who's a TV writer in Los Angeles and it's called Happier with Gretchen Rubin and it's all about how to have a happier, healthier and more productive life. How to have better habits, how to think about the things that you could change in your life, the little manageable things that you can do in your everyday life to become happier. So that's on iTunes, Stitcher, Soundcloud, all that.

So yeah so there's a lot of stuff online for people who want to connect them on Twitter and Facebook and I love to hear from readers. I love to hear what other people are thinking about habits. So I really encourage people to get in touch with me and to explore.

And then of course there's the book Better Than Before, which is where I lay out the 21 strategies, you know, for all to see and benefit from, I hope.

Robb Wolf: Well I've gotten a ton out of it and I've only gone through this thing once. Like I should, I will take a photo of this thing and show you how dog-eared and --

Gretchen: Oh I love that.

Robb Wolf: --lined and like tabs in it. Like this thing looks like it's been chewed up --

Gretchen: I love that.

Robb Wolf: --by a dog.

Gretchen: I love that. Excellent. Excellent.

Robb Wolf: Yeah.

Gretchen: I know you think about all this stuff so much yourself. I'm thrilled to hear that you felt like it was useful to you because I mean this is stuff that you have thought about a lot.

Robb Wolf: You know I've thought about it a lot but I've got to say I've been in a cultural or intellectual cul de sac where you know I'm really steeped in this kind of evolutionary biology story and I think there's a lot of great stuff to learn from that. I think it's a fantastic starting point. But where it's failed me and where I've failed the folks that follow me is I really, you know, the actionable things to do I've arrived at those by accident. And what you've done with better than before and particularly I think you know, some of the figuring out your four tendencies and stuff like that, you really provide a framework so that when we go to our tool bag we have an understanding of a little bit better idea of okay given your tendencies which set of tools are more likely to work for you instead of just slapping stuff against the wall and hoping that something comes out of that.

Gretchen: Right.

Robb Wolf: Or you know which I think has been a tendency folks that gravitate towards my particular style and the things that I'm articulating if it fits with what they're doing, then it works for them and if it doesn't then I fail them. I think that by looking at this stuff, I would have a much better tool bag to be able to refer people to you know, if you understand where you are on these different spectrums, then we will be able to tackle this in a different way and we can also you know, just simple things like hey it's

reasonable for you to completely exclude certain foods. Because you know, it's going to be a trigger for you and it's going to be completely reasonable for your spouse to be able to be a bit moderate with that and we need to figure out how one of you doesn't undermine the other one in that process.

[0:55:21]

Gretchen: Right.

Robb Wolf: And not vilify the other one so yeah.

Gretchen: Right.

Robb Wolf: Well you did an amazing job with this. I'm just very excited and I was so excited that you agreed to come on the podcast. Just I love your work.

Gretchen: Well thank you so much. I so appreciate it. I feel like we can talk all day. Thank you so much.

Robb Wolf: Would you be game for maybe coming back on in about six months and we collect some questions and you do some Q&A?

Gretchen: Sure absolutely. That would be terrific.

Robb Wolf: Okay, awesome. Well folks we've been talking with Gretchen Rubin. Her new book is Better Than Before. We will have all of that in the show notes. Gretchen again, thank you and I'll talk to you soon.

Gretchen: Excellent. Thanks so much.

Robb Wolf: Okay. Bye-bye.

[0:56:06]

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