

# Paleo Solution - 346

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Robb: Hey, folks, Robb Wolf here. Another edition of The Paleo Solution Podcast. Really, really excited for today's guest. You guys know that I'm pretty geeked out on evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology. Today, we have Dr. Marianne Brandon. She is a clinical psychologist and diplomat in sex therapy. Dr. Brandon is the author of *Monogamy: The Untold Story*. And she is also co-author of the book *Reclaiming Desire: 4 Keys to Finding Your Lost Libido*. Doc, how are you doing?

Marianne: I'm great, Robb. How are you?

Robb: I'm really good. I'm just incredibly excited to have you on the show. We were chatting just a bit before recording and I think that this is just going to be a ton of fun. But, Doc, give folks some of your background. I tend to do very skinny biographical intros so that folks can kind of steer that boat as they see fit. You know kind of the audience a bit, food geeks, performance geeks, folks dealing with health problems. Tell them a little bit about your, I guess, kind of development along your professional line and then we'll actually dig in and start talking more about the work that you've done.

Marianne: Absolutely. I'd be happy to. So, I started my career as a general clinical psychologist. I was not a sex therapist and I really was not very aware of evolutionary theory and how that impacted us as human beings. We didn't really learn that in graduate school. I was going along as a general therapist and started collaborating with a gynecologist locally. We were working quite a bit with women who had low sex drive.

And he said we should write a book about this. So, he got us an agent and, lo and behold, I became an author. It was a very exciting time. In the process of doing that, it was suggested to me that I become a sex therapist. And I said, "No way am I going to be a sex therapist." Because people are going to think I'm a cook. So, I said, "Forget that idea." But as we were working with the book and things were evolving, our publisher was encouraging me to get the credential of sex therapy and so I finally gave in. I put up quite a struggle.

So, I became a sex therapist and it actually was really thrilling for me. It was very interesting process of education, a lot more than I expected, actually. I sort of thought that I was already prepared as a sex therapist. But going through the training, I learned so much. It was very exciting. I became known in my region for being a specialist in working with women with low sex drive. So, my practice was

overfilled. I mean, I could work every day every hour. People have so many sexual issues. My practice was completely filled with women with low sex drive.

I was working with them. I was working with their husbands. I was working with them as couples. They were great patients, great clients, and we did a lot of great work. But there was a significant number of women that as much as they love their husbands and they were in good marriages and worked through issues that I would have thought would have interfered with their sex drive, we still weren't getting them where they wanted to be. We still weren't accomplishing the return of their libido as they had wanted it.

This set me into -- This was a very difficult time for me because I was working really hard, trying really hard, an expert in the field but still there were too many women, too many couples that were still struggling with this issue. That propelled me into other literature because I knew my literature. I was writing my literature, for goodness sakes. I went to anthropological literature, evolutionary biology, zoology, primatology, looking for answers, what was I missing in helping these women?

And in that process of several years of reading and work, it really became clear to me that we have lost contact with our instincts with regards to sex. Evolutionary biology is a huge piece of the puzzle in terms of sexual function, in terms of relationship and sexual satisfaction. And as that became clear to me, and I've brought those concepts to my clients, I found a big shift in their responsiveness in working with the issues that they came in with. That's sort of my path. Since that time, I've considered myself an evolutionary psychologist and I've done writing on issues of desire, passion, monogamy. Because so many aspects of our sexuality relate to evolutionary biology.

Robb: Fantastic. I don't want to ask an overly leading question but my -- Tackling this from a food perspective, I felt like helping people understand that if you walk down the chip aisle in the supermarket and you just want to strip naked and roll yourself in that stuff, you should not be surprised by that.

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Like there should be no guilt. This was great evolutionary wiring, optimum foraging strategy. You got to eat more energy. You got to consume more energy than you expend in trying to acquire it. So, it's kind of baked in the cake that we seek out a nutrient dense foods. And so if people are able to really wrap their head around that, then they see some moralizing these challenges. And I'm curious, is that why an evolutionary perspective is helpful for you and your clients? What is it qualitatively that helps you to reach these people and they're able to do some internal processing that helps them?

Marianne: Well, I totally support what you say to your clients of not feeling guilty or ashamed for what their body is longing for. That is point. Because while we can control some of our behavior, like with food, we have some control over what we're putting in our bodies, sometimes we feel like we don't but for the most part we have some control over that, but we can't control what the body is desiring. And that's beyond us. That comes from a different part of our brain. That's from our reptilian brain. That's not under our conscious control, that body desire. I think that's what you're speaking of. It is completely similar in sex therapy, as you're talking about with nutrition.

Robb: Okay. So, yeah, I mean, the next book that I'm releasing in March, *Wired to Eat*, it really tries to peel into this idea of if you live in this modern world and you're not fat, sick, diabetic and broken, from an evolutionary perspective you're actually screwing up. The flipside of that is if you find navigating this stuff challenging then you shouldn't be surprised. It doesn't mean that we don't still have hard work to do. We do. But, hopefully, we can diffuse some of the morality and kind of the self loathing that people have around food.

But with this sexuality, digging into your book, chapter one of the book is the monogamy illusion. And that is just such a big gnarly hot topic but it seems like that is one of the things that when you dig into the evolutionary psychology literature around sexuality and whatnot, that that's one of the big stumbling blocks, hiccups. I don't know what you want to call it. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Marianne: Absolutely. So, what I call the monogamy problem is simply that we're primates. 99% of our genetic code is similar to that of the great apes. That's impressive. I mean, that's a shocking percentage. And 3% of primates are monogamous. And even primates that we consider to be monogamous, mammals that we have considered monogamous, aren't necessarily sexual monogamous. They just sort of -- Like birds often look monogamous, appear monogamous to people observing their behavior but in private they're fooling around.

The monogamy problem, the monogamy challenge is very real but we haven't dealt with it because people can't think of good solutions for that. There are good reasons to be monogamous. There are great reasons to maintain long term relationships. And so this contradictory point that the body isn't necessarily oriented to have sex with the same person decade after decade and really enjoy it, it's hard to put those pieces of the puzzle together. So, it hasn't been dealt with.

My feeling, after working with this issue with my clients for quite a while now, is that even just talking about it and acknowledging it can help matters

tremendously, when you're not pretending, but you can say, "Look, this is really challenging and it's not my fault. It's not your fault. It's just the reality of being human." That in of itself helps quite a bit. But there are, absolutely there are ways to work with this monogamy challenge within a couple to support passion.

It doesn't mean that people are out of luck. It just means that you can't really solve a problem you're not acknowledging or understanding. So, step one is recognizing it. And then step two is identifying ways to work with it. And that's what I do with my clients.

Robb: That's great. I look at the kind of the monogamy question from game theory evolutionary biology. Folks may ask, what's the upside? We've been raised in these societies that are theoretically largely monogamous or like the religious doctrine that most of us are raised in recommends monogamy sometimes at sword or gun point.

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But there appears to be some really powerful drives to work against monogamy and we think game theory and whatnot, there's some pretty good arguments for mixing of genetic code, of forging alliances, which is what we see in like bonobos and other great apes. Could you talk a little bit about what the historic upsides have been for our species and other species with regards to a non-monogamous sexuality, I guess?

Marianne: The upsides to non-monogamy?

Robb: Yeah, yeah.

Marianne: Okay. So, that would be -- That's an interesting question, Robb. I usually get the opposite question. So, let's say, people who practice non-monogamy in an open way today would say that it supports their passion, their vitality, that good sex feels vital and makes them feel alive and for them having sexual variety, having different partners promote that experience of feeling vital and alive.

Now, we have competing drives. We all do. So, we all have drives for security and comfort and then we have drives for freedom and adventure, let's say. So, they're in us. And some of us have more of one drive than the other but they're contradictory and they're very real. So, at one point in someone's life they might have more needs for security like, for example, when people are nesting when they're creating a family.

Those drives for monogamy and security are probably stronger than when they were younger or even when they're much older when security needs might take

forefront and then their sexual needs would sort of fall in place behind that. We could argue positive -- There are positive reasons to be monogamous and there are positive reasons for non-monogamy. I mean, that's all really true.

Robb: Great. I really like that. It's sometimes kind of a tough sell for folks to suggest that there are pluses and minuses to just about anything. If we can step back and be a little bit rational and dispassionate -- It doesn't mean that we entertain these things in real life per se. But if we can just have a conversation around it then maybe we can get a little bit of a deeper understanding. And again, I just think whether it's food or intimacy, it seems like if there's some emotional baggage that is kind of being drummed up because of kind of a mismatch between genetics and our environment, then if we can get some perspective on that, we might get a little bit better of a handle.

Marianne: I so agree. And you made a good point earlier that there is a strong argument from an evolutionary biology perspective that changing partners strengthens immune system and makes for stronger humans, basically.

Robb: Nothing alters the microbiome like, I guess, a wild night of sex. Totally makes sense. Doc, what about our childhood? How does that affect us as we develop a sense of self and sexuality and whatnot?

Marianne: Well, sexuality is so complex that you're right on. Our childhood does impact our expectations for who we should be as sexual beings, what we feel like is appropriate. We see sexuality modeled in our parents or not modeled and we make assumptions about that. And we all bring that into our adult sexual experience. Unfortunately, psychologists have focused largely on that as the single most important piece of the puzzle in sexuality, in adult sexuality.

And it's a very important piece but certainly not the single most important piece. Just as our individual psychology is a very important piece of the puzzle in determining who we are as adult sexual beings but it's not the only piece of the puzzle. Our personal experiences, our past sexual experiences all play a role in our mating strategies as adults, what we desire sexually. They're all a part of a very complicated soup.

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Robb: Right, right. Can you categorize maybe a couple of different buckets of what things occur that lead to a pretty good outcome as far as like somebody having a healthy sexuality versus some events or outcomes that shape someone in a way that maybe they have a more challenging sexual life later in their adulthood?

Marianne: Absolutely. So, probably the most obvious would be sexual abuse as being very damaging for many people in their efforts to have a satisfying sex life as an adult, at least if they're not able to get care and treatment around those traumas. Attachment issues. That's what psychologists call. The way that we -- Our comfort level with emotional intimacy and how we relate to people. And we develop our attachment style in relating to our parents when we're very young. Those styles are kind of set many psychologists would argue by the age of about three, yeah.

And so if you had, for example, parents that were generous with their love and stable and around a lot, you would likely grow up to expect that out of your partner and feel secure in an intimate relationship. If you had parents that were not generous with their love, maybe alcoholic parents who spent a whole lot of time either emotionally abusive or detached from the family, that child is going to learn that intimate relationships are not trustworthy, people aren't reliable.

That will then impact their experiences of sex. Either that child might tend toward, as an adult, having short term non-committed unemotional sexual relationships or they might become very dependent on their sexual life and their sexual partner, overly dependent really, because they're afraid of being abandoned. The attachment style can have a big impact as well.

Robb: What would play more into that sense of abandonment where the person, even if they're in a relationship that is not satisfying, maybe even abusive but they don't know when to call it quits because of the fear of what would happen when that relationship ends?

Marianne: Absolutely. So, self confidence is really a primary issue there. And dependency, even financial dependency. So, if a person feels not strong, not confident in themselves and their ability to take care of themselves or if they feel financially unable, then they would more likely stay in a relationship that wasn't good for them. Is that what you're asking?

Robb: Yes. Yeah. Okay, okay. Very, very interesting. So, circling back again to the brain, because this is where so much of this process, I mean, really most of the process occurs, what is it about our neural architecture that kind of creates this dynamic tension between the way that we're kind of wired up and the way that we're actually living today and how does that really manifest in sexual problems within relationships?

Marianne: Great question. So, we understand our sexual urges. Let's say, evolutionary psychologists understand our sexual urges and predispositions. And so driving that, driving from the hypothalamus, which is an ancient part of the brain, an ancient brain structure and some refer to it as the reptilian brain. Some people say that's an old fashioned notion but others refers to it as the reptilian brain.

Basically, the bottom line here is that this is an ancient part of the brain so these sexual desires and urges evolve from that place.

We in the 20<sup>th</sup> century try to make sex, we try to think about it and we try to pretend we can modify it as if we're approaching any logical challenge or topic and get it out of the reptilian brain and put it into our more modern part of the brain. But that's a failed effort quite frankly because that's not addressing sexual issues from whence they came.

Now, they can affect people's desire, their desire for sex, their physiological need or drive. These ancient urges can affect our choices of mate. It's very interesting because it's largely unconscious but people are aware of things like the scent of their partner or the symmetry of their partner's face, indicators of hormonal health. This is all instinctive and comes from the hypothalamus and the reptilian brain.

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These urges can impact the kind of sex people like quite frankly. So, sex that worked for our ancestors is likely the same kind of sex that's going to work for people today, that instinctive primal sex, which we can talk about if you'd like to. That relates to the sexual dance that we see in all mammals. There's a sort of a female flirting, like we see this with rats or dogs or monkeys. The female is somehow receptive or maybe it's a hormonal scent she emits somehow indicating to the male that she's receptive for sex.

And then the male goes for it. He's assertive. He makes sex happen and she allows it. That's this primal sexual dance that's really a part of all of our brain structure. That's why 50 Shades of Gray was so popular. That's why romance novels are so popular. That's why the Twilight series is so popular. That's why porn is so popular. It just repeats this same dynamic over and over again. That's another way that our instincts affect our sexual lives as adults. And, of course, mating strategies like we talked about earlier, which is monogamy or non-monogamy, that sort of thing.

Robb: Doc, this may just get into completely controversial land and if you're like I'm taking a pass on this--

Marianne: Robb, I live in controversial land.

Robb: I know. We talked about this before. I thought I had it hard talking about food from an evolutionary perspective but then you take sex and it's like, ugh. I have an easy job. I'll couch it this way. I have an opinion that kind of the modern way that we have kind of tried to make men and women the same. And this is kind of

an outgrowth of trying not to exploit people like historically women didn't get paid the same amount as men and they couldn't vote and there was all kinds of really nasty stuff that needed to be addressed.

But part of that process again, in my opinion, is that we've kind of androgenized both men and women and what it means to be female and what it means to be male are almost looked at as negatives that we need this absolute sameness. Otherwise, there's problem. And my sense of that is that that is a huge issue here that is actually the delta, the difference between male and female.

Or even in lesbian or gay relationships. There's still like a psychological delta between the two individuals that is the glue, the attractor, not two north facing magnets that repel, which is kind of what I see happening in a lot of relationships now. What do you think about that? Or am I just literally a caveman and should probably stay quiet?

Marianne: Robb, you just -- You really hit the nail on the head. It is absolutely controversial. But I have gained the courage to speak about it because, quite frankly, it's what works in my therapy room. When I talked about earlier in my career when I was working with a lot of women with low libido and we weren't necessarily accomplishing what we were setting out to do in therapy, I was feeling really guilty, getting a lot of money not helping people get what they wanted.

So, what I learned to do is interface with people in a way that got them what they wanted, got them what they paid for here. And that's what I learned through this evolutionary study. And, yes, it's opinion too. I like that you said that's your opinion. It is my opinion too but it is what I find works so frequently here in my office. And that is that, in general, there are a lot of similarities between men and women. We all can sit at a boardroom and interact in equally competent ways. We can parent largely equally competent ways.

But sex is a different issue, absolutely. We are different sexual beings, male and female. And there is something beautiful and highly erotic when we allow males to be masculine in a bedroom and females to be feminine in a bedroom. And I find that a lot of this work is simply giving men and women permission to feel those feelings because we're teaching them not to. So, as we, in my opinion, take people further away from those innate longings and desires, people, in my opinion, are going to rely more on things like porn or affairs because they're not creating that primal sexuality in their bedrooms.

Robb: I super agree but clearly we're nutcases here.

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The planet is only 6,000 years old evolutionarily, is the theory. But how do we affect some change with this? This makes me crazy when people ask me about, "So, how do we change the system," and everything? But some of what we're talking -- We're not suggesting that guys be complete lug nuts and frat boys or whatever. This is not promulgating rape culture. A lot of what I've seen pushing back against just let males be males females be females is the sense, well, that means you're promoting rape culture and stuff like that.

To me, it's actually promoting the exact opposite because people are actually healthy instead of needing to fill voids via power, which is mainly what this rape culture type stuff is. Do you agree with that? Or, again, am I like completely off in the weeds on that?

Marianne: Yeah, I absolutely agree with that. And I do want to say, if you recall, when we were speaking earlier about this sexual primal dance, the female initiates that dance. She engages the male with her receptivity either by strutting around in front of him like a little rat will do or by emitting a scent, regardless, she's saying, "I'm available." So, that right there takes us out of that realm of the male raping because she's engaged in that way. Gosh, this is tricky territory, Robb.

Robb: It is. It is. And I apologize. At the end of this, you'll send me an email and you're like, "You know what, can that one just get deleted and we'll do a different one?"

Marianne: I think that what happens is if we try to be too politically correct or we try not to generalize, we'll wind up not saying anything. There are, obviously, going to be exceptions to everything we say. But if we try to cover all those, we won't be able to impart any information. So, that's sort of where I've been with this stuff. It isn't about female passivity. This is about female receptivity. And that's what women read about in romance novels and that's what the Twilight series was about and 50 Shades. It's her receptivity.

And that doesn't mean that her receptivity can't be active and assertive because that's a version of female receptivity too. What, I think, you and I are talking about is taking what we've learned as a culture over these last decades, taking what we've learned, what the feminist movement has taught us. We become more well-rounded human beings. Men have learned to respect women. Women have learned to empower themselves. This is all necessary and very important for the kind of sex that we're talking about.

Because an empowered woman is the kind of woman who's going to be able to let go and enjoy herself. And a sensitive man is the kind of man who's going to be able to read her and make love to her in a way that feels good to her. So, it

really all flows. What we're talking about here isn't backwards. It's forwards. It flows from the last few decades of what we've learned about being human.

Robb: I like it. I like it. Well, and like you said, you can get in to some very controversial territory quickly, so I really appreciate you being willing to venture into those lens just a little bit. At the end of the day, when you are working with folks in this clinical setting, what are some of the exercises that you have folks do both for men and for women because I assume that this is a different process for each of these folks. What are just some of the exercises, self talk, sequencing that you help them?

And this is kind of funny too because you don't want sex to be a mechanical deal. You want it to be this like spontaneous exciting thing. And so that seems like a little bit of a challenge too. It's like, okay, we're going to -- It's kind of like when people say, "Well, we're trying to have kids." And it's like, "Man, that sounds like fun." Whereas, when you're 13 and trying to circumvent your parents' control over you, it's like the best thing in the world. How do you keep this thing kind of fun and, I guess, exciting but also set up in a way that people actually can develop tools to move their way through this?

Marianne: Yes, great question. And it is a process. It takes time to cultivate these aspects of ourselves because we become so far from that in our culture and as humans. We've sort of lost that contact with primal sex. So, step one really is a process of embodiment, of people becoming more tuned in to their bodies and their sensualities. So, that can be accomplished through regular yoga or some other kind of body activity that is not particularly -- I was going to say strenuous but that's not really the case.

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It can't be so like active that a person loses contact with their physical self. Like yoga and meditation bring us into our bodies. They get us to focus on our bodies. So, any activity that would help with that process. That's for men and women. Because if you're not embodied, you're not going to be in touch with your instincts or feel your body's longings -- and that's step one.

So, that piece is vital and takes some time. And then I do different things with men and with women. For men, if they resonate with these concepts of primal instinctive sex then we focus on activities that help them feel confident and bold and assertive. Because that's the kind of energy they want to bring into the bedroom as well as their sensitivity, their abilities to read their partners so that their boldness is well received and desired by their partners.

Just to rehash, embodying men, helping them be tuned into their bodies, which does help become tuned in to their emotions, and then cultivating their boldness. So, that might mean doing things with men. That might mean competitive sports or spending time with men or spending time in nature which kind of gets them to focus on their bodies and gives them a sense of confidence in terms of being able to survive in nature, those kinds of things.

With women, in addition to the embodiment piece, we work on letting go, how to surrender and how to do that really by herself first. Because that's a difficult challenge to learn how to let go with someone when you haven't kind of developed that within yourself first. Unfortunately, we've really discouraged women from feeling vulnerable and letting go. We're all about control these days. It can be a process for women to learn how to relax their bodies, open their bodies, open their hearts, and sort of like relax their mind and let their body follow.

So, practices like doing yoga hip openers, laying in the sun and stretching like a cat, things that allow them to let go. That's a process for females. As well as developing their confidence and assertively asking for what they want, coming on to their partner. Because, again, that's a part of female receptivity, is being confident sexually and creating an experience that feels good to her too. So, both of those pieces are important.

Robb: Wow, that's fantastic advice. Kind of possibly an off the wall question but -- So, I've been able to spend a little bit of, clearly the time and the culture that I'm born in the United States, but I've traveled a fair amount and it's funny I've historically been super clueless when somebody was actually throwing any type of sexual energy my way. In the United States, like two years later, I'll find out, "Oh yeah, I was totally into you." I'm like, are you kidding me?

But I've been able to spend some time like in and around Brazilian culture and some Central and South American culture and stuff like that and I have no doubt when somebody is throwing energy towards me from some of these other cultures. What is going on with that? What is that? Why are the gears not meshing there or is my threshold just so low that I'm a clueless idiot and I should be better at picking this stuff up?

Marianne: No, Robb. It's so funny. I mean, I have some female friends that literally spent most of their life in Brazil. They're from Brazil. And they approach sexuality very differently than my friends that grew up in the United States. I totally understand what you're saying. I think that in other cultures -- There are several reasons for that. I think in other cultures they are not trying so hard to be the same. Women aren't trying so hard to be like men and men aren't trying so hard

to be like women. I think they give each other a little more space and respect for differences.

And I'm also thinking that there's a little less intellectualization in some of these other cultures so they're a little less apt to analyze everything and critique everything and process everything through their frontal lobes as opposed to being more embodied. They give themselves more permission to be sensual and stay in their body versus think everything through so much. That's my impression.

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Robb: No, that makes a ton of sense. I mean, when you look at like Star Trek and Vulcans, that's not the person that you're like, "Wow, I really want to jump in the sack with them."

Marianne: Exactly.

Robb: Wow, okay. Well, Doc, this is really fascinating stuff. I'm just so excited for the work that you're doing. I guess, maybe one final question before we let folks know where to find you on the interwebs and whatnot: Do you see some benefit from modifying food and lifestyle along this kind of Paleo directions as far as sexuality and intimacy and whatnot?

Marianne: Absolutely. And movement as well. When the body is healthy, that's good for sex. Disease, diabetes and chronic fatigue and all those things bring with them many sexual concerns and dysfunctions. So, absolutely. If you address health issues with your population it's going to have a positive impact on their sex life. Absolutely. And as people move more and move more naturally, that kind of opens the door for their bodies to move in more natural ways sexually. So, your work totally supports my work.

Robb: Oh, fantastic. Well, I've got the easy job. You've got the tough one. So, I thank you for doing what you're doing. Doc, let folks know where they can track you down on the interwebs and also remind them about your books. We'll have all those in the show notes but just so that we get this in the podcast too.

Marianne: Oh, thank you. So, my website is [drbrandon.net](http://drbrandon.net). I'd love for folks to follow me on Twitter @drbrandon or Facebook, /drmariannebrandon. Yeah, I have an ebook that does kind of review a lot of what we talked about here and it's called *Unlocking the Sexy in Surrender: Using the Neuroscience of Power to Recharge Your Sex Life*. So, that might be a nice option for people who want to kind of explore these topics further.

Robb: Oh, fantastic. We will get a link to that in the show notes. That is great. Well, Doc, remind me again, where on the planet are you located? Where do you practice?

Marianne: I'm in Maryland, in Annapolis.

Robb: You're in Maryland. Okay, okay. Hopefully, I get to meet you in real life at some point. I'm really honored that you came on the show. Thank you for venturing into some areas that are a bit on the controversial side. We'll see what type of response we get but thank you again for coming on the show and thank you so much for the work you're doing. I just think it's incredible.

Marianne: And I feel the same about your work, Robb. You've done an amazing job teaching, educating people about how to eat and how to move. So, I feel the same way. And thank you. It was fabulous talking with you.

Robb: Great. We'll look forward to chatting again at some point in the future. Please have a great rest of your day.

Marianne: Thank you. You too.

Robb: Okay, bye.

Marianne: Bye.

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