To The Best Of Our Knowledge: "Repeat When Necessary"

AS: [00:00:15] It's To the Best of Our Knowledge. I'm Anne Strainchamps.

AS: [00:00:18] What's Your compulsion? That thing you can't stop doing. It could be something ordinary, like checking your phone every five minutes, or could be something more...unusual.

SB: [00:00:31] So Shala Nicely has classic OCD.

AS: [00:00:35] Science writer Sharon Begley.

SB: [00:00:39] She became convinced - for no obvious reason - that her cat Fred was in the refrigerator. So she opened the refrigerator once and n o - there was no cat inside. But then her brain got this itch. 'What if Fred was actually behind the gallon container of milk? Maybe I just didn't see him.' .

SB: [00:01:04] She opened it again. Still no. She would go away. She would tell herself 'no he's not there.' And then the thought would come back. And then she thought 'well, maybe, you know, he has quantum teleported into the fridge when my back was turned.' So she opened the refrigerator again. .

SB: [00:01:23] This is a very intelligent woman. But it consumed the better part of a day for her.

AS: [00:01:35] Shala managed to get over that particular compulsion. But some of the more classic OCD symptoms can be a lot harder to get rid of. Needing to wash and rewash your hands dozens of times a day. Checking and rechecking. Did you lock the door? Did you turn the lights? Or at the more extreme end, hoarding or compulsive shopping.

AS: [00:01:58] But the thing is: we all share this tendency, and in her new book, science journalist Sharon Begley argues that compulsions are not eccentric quirks limited to obsessive germaphobes or reclusive hoarders, but things many of us do every day, without even realizing it.

SB: [00:02:17] Right. And that's really the one of the messages that I really hope readers take away from the book. That just because you have a compulsion, just because you engage in a compulsive behavior, does not mean that your brain is broken. It could instead - and in many cases does - mean that you have found a way to alleviate anxiety. .

SB: [00:02:38] One Of the things that was so difficult as I was beginning the research and reporting for the book was just pinning down experts to explain what a compulsion is. Compulsions are driven by anxiety. There's either a little tickle in your brain, or a deep deep fear that something is about to go wrong or has gone wrong, and the compulsion is the way that you get rid of that anxiety. .

AS: [00:03:01] Was there, for you, a single moment or experience that made you want to write this book, and made you think about how some of this compulsive behavior isn't just extreme, but is stuff that you see - we all see -around us everyday? .

SB: [00:03:16] Yes. And it was indeed those everyday observations. As you know, I work in a newsroom, and for as long as smartphones have been around - and before that, BlackBerrys - no reporter can go anywhere without one of those devices, because your editor is always trying to find you, or a source finally gets back to you exactly at the moment when you have to go to the ladies room.

SB: [00:03:38] So I would look around at my colleagues - and myself - and think 'you know, we're carrying these phones but none of us seem very happy about it.' And that's the difference between an addictive behavior and a compulsive one. If you are addicted to whatever, roller coasters or whatever, they actually make you happy. You like it, in some sense it gives you pleasure. But when you are compulsively carrying around your smartphone - and having to check for texts or tweets or Facebook posts or whatever it happens to be, all the time - in so many cases it's not because of pleasure. It's because of anxiety, the fear that you are going to miss something.

SB: [00:04:16] So, you know, this is a very, very common behavior. And it was indeed the sort of instigation for me to do this book, asking how many of the behaviors that we do over and over and over again that we can't seem to resist doing are, in fact, because we need to drain away what would otherwise be intolerable anxiety, as opposed to because they make us happy, [or] they give us pleasure. .

AS: [00:04:40] So when I'm on a bus or standing at the bus stop and there are all those people tapping away at their phones all around me, they're not necessarily looking for distraction or pleasure even - they're anxious?

SB: [00:04:55] In many cases absolutely. And the reason is that the structure as it's called - the reward structure - of texts or e-mails or a tweet, whatever you're looking for on your phone, is what psychiatrists describe as "intermittent and variable" which simply means there like a slot machine. .

SB: [00:05:15] In a slot machine you could get orange, lemon, cherry... Pull after pull after pull and you never win. And then suddenly you get, you know, jackpot. So it's completely unpredictable. Same with ... let's do texts. You can get one after another after another, and every once in a while there actually is one that's important, and yeah, that you are really glad that you didn't miss, even for two seconds. So it's that uncertainty that tethers us to the phone. The other thing that's going on here is that more and more of us just simply cannot stand to be alone with our thoughts. .

SB: [00:05:52] And I'll give you just one sort of amazing experiment that pointed this out. Researchers took away the smartphones of a bunch of volunteers and the volunteers were told 'You can either just sit and stare into space and, you know, think about whatever problems you're having or think about what you're going to be doing tonight - you know, whatever. Or you can give yourself an electric shock. Almost half the people could not stand to just do the daydream, introspection thing and they preferred to give themselves electric shocks. .

AS: [00:06:23] You're kidding! [crosstalk] people would rather give themselves an electric shock rather than just sit there alone? .

SB: [00:06:31] Now, it wasn't everybody. It was about half. But still, that's an awful lot of

people who just needed the external stimulus of an electric shock rather than just sitting and thinking. So similar psychology is going on when we just can't stop looking at our screens. .

AS: [00:06:48] Well I know anxiety is on the rise. I think actually your book quotes a bunch of different studies, but it's just recently turned out to be what the most diagnosed mental illness on college campuses now. So does that mean that we're living in a country with rising levels of compulsive behavior? Are we all becoming compulsive?

SB: [00:07:09] I think it's just incontrovertible that there are just way more sources of anxiety today than at least, you know, 20-30 years ago. And whether its anxiety over environmental harms, or the next terrorist attack, or maybe a somewhat less fraught example, but even something as seemingly inconsequential as online shopping.

SB: [00:07:31] It Used to be you would go to a store. There was a limited supply. You would you would have a sense of what the entire supply was. You would make your choice, hand them your credit card, and off you go. And then came Zappos, where the number of pages is in the hundreds. So then you know, maybe you're on page 2 and you really like that pair of boots but something in your brain says 'what about page 712?' So it's not a surprise that many of us are feeling anxiety. And like the woman who keeps her house controlled and in order to a tee, we feel that we have to do one thing in our life to keep it under control, to give us a sense that we have agency, that we have some effect and control on the world. And for many people it's a compulsive behavior. .

AS: [00:08:17] Well This raises such an interesting question about how we label things, how we decide what's pathological, and what's normal and and what's not. I mean, you point out, for instance, that as a culture, we treat various compulsions differently. So something like hoarding we ridicule. Something like say compulsive exercising or workaholism is admired. So why is that?

SB: [00:08:45] Right so when I described these behaviors as existing along a continuum - on a spectrum - the obvious question is 'Okay, where at those extremes do you cross from 'sort of eccentric or quirky' into 'this is pathological. This is a mental illness'? And the best I could come up with was to defer to the official psychiatric explanation, which is this: If a behavior causes distress or impairment, then - if it meets other criteria for being extreme - it is a mental disorder. .

SB: [00:09:19] So in the case of a hoarder, the impairment obviously is that the building inspector will come and condemn your home. If it's keeping your house really, really neat, there is a condition called 'obsessive compulsive personality disorder,' which is short of OCD. And OCPD can manifest as extreme conscientiousness, neatness, etc. But if you're just doing those things and it's not causing you distress - it is not impairing you, it's doing the opposite - then it is not an illness. It is not pathological. It is coping. .

AS: [00:09:52] Now one of the things I'm wondering listening to you: throughout the course of the 20th century, we've kind of increasingly mythologized different kinds of behaviors that used to be seen as, you know, not necessarily so terrible. So I'm wondering: do you think the compulsions we see have just always been around, and now we're just starting to label them as such? Or if you look back in history, I don't know, has compulsive behavior waxed and waned, or changed over time? .

SB: [00:10:24] while certainly society's view of it has. And in the past, you know, official psychiatry has not covered itself with glory. It has pathologized. It has medicalized things that are, really, you know... I'm sorry: just part of the human condition. And they have learned a lesson from that. So they are pulling back in many cases - not across the board, but at least in some sense - and recognizing that. .

SB: [00:10:52] For Instance, to qualify for a diagnosis of obsessive compulsive personality disorder - OCPD - you have to meet so many criteria. I include a questionnaire in the book. And you know if you compulsively put the bathmat just so, and you compulsively do this and you compulsively do that, you still don't qualify. I mean, you really have to do a lot of these things a lot of the time in order to meet the diagnostic threshold. .

SB: [00:11:21] So Yes, that is absolutely a recognition that humans come in all sorts of varieties. Some of them are a little quirkier and, you know, we don't want to be in the position that psychiatry was 150 years ago, when it called slaves' propensity to escape a "mental illness." So that is not a good thing. .

AS: [00:11:43] Well, we've talked about compulsive behavior as a kind of coping mechanism. At the less pathological end, would you go so far as to say there are good things about compulsive behavior? .

SB: [00:11:55] There certainly are for society, in people who feel compelled to donate a kidney to a stranger. So I have a chapter on good compulsions, and that ranges from people who felt compelled to create art, to writers. But probably my favorites were the kidney donors. So when I came across people who donate a kidney to a stranger, I really, really pressed them to ask why they did it. What did they feel in the months or more leading up to their decision. How did they feel at the moment. And not for everyone, but for a substantial number of them, they described anxiety knowing that there were people on the transplant waiting list who have to undergo dialysis, and who in many cases died before they get the transplant, or who can't tolerate the dialysis. That made them literally anxious, they could not just sit still, they could not stand by knowing that there were people out there in the world suffering whom they could help and they felt compelled to donate a kidney. .

SB: [00:13:00] So you know, that's a very specific and stark example of 'thank goodness there are people who feel compulsion.'

AS: [00:13:09] Sharon Begley is the author of "Can't Just Stop: An Investigation of Compulsions."

AS: [00:13:16] What's it like to live with OCD? To have things that you wish you could stop doing, but somehow...can't? Well, meet my colleague Doug Gordon.

DG: [00:13:28] Hi. My name's Doug and I have OCD. Obsessive compulsive disorder.

DG: [00:13:35] Wait. Can I do that again. I stumbled a bit. Okay, nevermind.

DG: [00:13:42] I check things over and over again. For example, I make sure that the burners on the stove are all turned off. Even if I never turn them on.

DG: [00:13:52] When I park the car, I make sure that I turn the car headlights off.

Sometimes I even go right in front of the car, bend down and stare directly into the headlights, just a few inches away. What if someone sees me? Don't worry. I thought that covered.

DG, to unnamed observer: [00:14:10] "Oh hey, I didn't see you. Yeah, I'm just checking out the plastic covers on my headlights. Looks like there's a small crack in this one, doesn't there? I guess I better get that fixed. Okay. Have a good one!"

DG: [00:14:24] Do I wash my hands over and over again? Check.

DG: [00:14:26] Do I sometimes wash them again a few minutes later for no good reason? Double check.

DG: [00:14:33] Do I make sure the sliding glass door is locked before I go to bed? Yes.

DG: [00:14:37] And so on. Repeat when necessary. Repeat when necessary. Sorry, repeat repeat repeat necessary and so on....

DG: [00:14:45] And when my OCD is at its worst, the compulsions are always necessary.

DG: [00:14:54] ::off mic:: Let's do that again.

DG: [00:15:00] Why do I do it? It would be easy to say it has something to do with the fact that my dad was 50 years old when I was born. But blaming 50 year old Scottish spermatozoa is too easy. So why do I continue to do these irrational rituals? The obvious answer is that it's a compulsion.

DG Inner Critic: [00:15:33] "Brilliant observation Einstein."

DG: [00:15:33] Shut up inner critic!

DG: [00:15:35] It also has to do with the way that my brain is wired or should I say miswired. But I can't afford to hire a neuroelectrician. Do you know how much they charge?

DG: [00:15:44] On a subconscious level, it probably has to do with control. We live in a world in which we have very little control over our lives. By washing my hands over and over, and making sure that the clock radio alarm is set for AM and not PM, it's my small way of sticking it to the universe. I'm saying that I do have a small bit of control, some little bit of agency to smack down my angst, for at least a little while. Now if you excuse me, I left the kitchen tap running.

AS: [00:16:14] Doug Gordon. He's my colleague and a producer on To the Best of Our Knowledge. (Editor Update: He's now the host of his own show, BETA, on Wisconsin Public Radio)

AS: [00:16:21] And coming up: what Steve Jobs, Estée Lauder, and baseball legend Ted Williams had in common. How compulsions drove some of the greatest innovators in American history. Next.

AS: [00:16:32] It's To the Best of Our Knowledge from Wisconsin Public Radio and PRX.

AS: [00:17:39] I'm Anne Strainchamps. We're talking about compulsions this hour.

ES: [00:17:43] The sensation is analogous to being held at gunpoint. You have to do whatever it takes to make that feeling go away. So you do.

AS: [00:17:51] Ethan Smith has had OCD as long as he can remember. When he was little, he says it manifested in pretty traditional ways.

AS: [00:17:58] I had what's called "magical thinking," so I was afraid, let's say, if I didn't tap my toothbrush two times in each hand, a train would crash in Europe, or people would die, or something bad would happen to people that I love. I actually had one where I had to stare at a girl's boobs for 13 seconds without getting caught. And it would always come up when I was in synagogue, and if I didn't make it to 13, I'd have to do it again. But I also had to not get caught. In retrospect, that may not have been OCD at all - that just had been becoming a man.

AS: [00:18:29] But as Ethan got older, his OCD got worse. In high school, he became an extreme hypochondriac, terrified of getting sick. He carried a thermometer with him at all times. He took his temperature is 60-70 times a day. He went through years of therapy, he was hospitalized, at one point misdiagnosed as psychotic, before he and his parents finally found a treatment that worked, thanks in part to the OCD Institute or OCDI in Boston.

ES: [00:19:00] So the right treatment for OCD is what's called CBT ERP. The ERP is called "exposure response prevention." What it is is the person that has OCD is exposed to their greatest fear. You start very, very small and you slowly work up to your biggest fears.

ES: [00:19:24] Through a series of events, my OCD had shifted from fear of illness to ... I was afraid I was going to hit my head and cause a bleed, like a brain bleed. I would wrap my hands in the elastic of my underwear to protect myself.

ES: [00:19:46] And so the first ERP I did was I went to this clinic, and they explained to me what they'd be doing. So I sat down, and he hands me a piece of paper and a pencil, and he says "I want you to number the paper from 1 to 100." So I did.

ES: [00:20:01] And I was like "What are we going to do with this?".

ES: [00:20:03] He's like "I want you to hit your head on 100 objects around the office."

ES: [00:20:08] And I was like "excuse me?"

ES: [00:20:10] I would go up to each object, and it would take me at least five minutes to get my head close enough to touch it. I would touch it with maybe the force of a feather. And then toward the end, another therapist there came out of the office, heard what I was doing, and says "Oh well, let me help." And she takes a fire extinguisher off of the wall and hits me in the head with it.

ES: [00:20:35] Up to that point I was fine because I wasn't hitting my head hard enough to hurt myself. But in my mind, she had literally just killed me.

ES: [00:20:44] It was January 2, 2011. It was the day after New Year's. I wish you could see the pictures. I was really just a shell at this point. My hair overgrown, I had lost 100 pounds. I looked like I had stage 4 cancer from a mental illness — it was absolutely insane. And I went to go see my psychologist. We were doing a new exposure, which was to hit my head as hard as I could, and I refused to do it. It sounded crazy, like you could really hurt yourself — like legitimately hurt yourself. And he said "well, if you don't want to get well, then I'm just calling security." So I did. And he was really excited. He was like "Awesome job! Now I want you to go into town and go get a haircut."

ES: [00:21:26] The reason he told me that was because the whole idea is to fuel the anxiety and to keep living. So I went into the city, which was like a half mile walk down from the campus. There was tons of snow on the ground — ice, slippery, freezing — and I was sitting in the chair getting a haircut, and I just couldn't stop thinking about the bleed in my brain that caused, and that I really was going to die this time. And I got so freaked out that I was convinced that I was going to die. I needed to get to a hospital.

SB: [00:21:55] Well the only problem with that was I had signed a contract with my therapist and my parents that I would be cut off completely, considered dead to them, and every other miserable thing if I'd gone to a hospital. And that was their way of preventing me from getting my head checked out.

SB: [00:22:12] Of note: So like somebody would wash their hands because they feel dirty? And I was getting cat scans because I thought something was wrong with my head. And that's how severe it was. So that's why the contract was in place, to keep me from going to hospitals. But then I thought to myself "you know, what if I could get the hospital to come to me?" So I decided to stage an accident. And I walked about a half mile down from the barber shop and I ducked behind an apartment building and I found like a jagged rock. So I cut my head open. And then I walked a little ways and turned a corner and went to a not so busy street. And when no one was there I literally just fell face first into a snowbank. And I laid there for 25 minutes until a passerby walked up to me and shaked me. "Hey buddy, buddy, you OK?" So they took me to the hospital, I got a CAT scan, I was fine. And I went back to the OCD that night about nine o'clock. And first of all, I had this relief in me like, literally like I just shot up heroin. But I also felt like I hadn't done anything wrong. I saved my life, in my head.

SB: [00:23:24] I went into the office of my therapist and it was a phone sitting on the table. We were having a conference call between my therapist and my parents, and they said "well, your parents have sold everything you own to help pay for therapy, and you're going to stay in Boston and create a new life in exchange for that. You can continue to get outpatient treatment and have your life. Good luck."

SB: [00:23:47] Just to get the other side of perspective, that was described by parents as your son has a 50 percent chance he can make this work or he may kill himself. But you're out of options. Ultimately my parents decided to give me a shot at getting better.

SB: [00:24:07] The next day I got kicked out. So I found what was pretty much a crack house on the south side of Boston on Craigslist for $400 a month, and it was terrifying. People were doing drugs in the house, they were selling [drugs]. It was absolutely terrifying. And I went to my room and I closed the door and I put my dresser up against the door and I got into bed and I lay there for six days and I didn't move.

SB: [00:24:36] I was consumed with fear and anxiety and OCD thoughts and I felt abandoned. I couldn't believe that my parents and doctors had given up on me. About six days later, I got to the point where I was probably going to die, just because I wasn't taking care of myself and I wasn't eating and I was drinking and I wasn't taking ... I wasn't doing anything. I was going to the bathroom in the bed. And that's when I had the epiphany: I realized that nobody was coming to save me. It had to be me. I had to do it.

SB: [00:25:08] I remember standing up out of bed to go to the grocery store and get food. "Oh my god, what if I slip on the ice and hit my head?" And I got all nervous and sweating, I was about to get back in bed. I was like "No no. You have to risk it." And that was sort of the beginning of the eventual journey out of hell. Slowly but surely, you know, I started getting better. I moved to a house where they just did drugs. They didn't sell them. It was much better. And you know, I started having a life. And literally, at the end of August, I went in for therapy and I said "Can I leave now? Like, can I go to LA and follow my dreams and do what I've been wanting to do since I was born?" And they were like "Yeah!".

SB: [00:25:49] I was always sort of OCD slave. I always worked for OCD, since I was born. So when I got better, people were like "We're so glad you got your life back." I'd say "No, I was reborn. Like 100 percent." I did not get my life back. I didn't have a life compared to what I have now.

SB: [00:26:06] OCD does not play a role in my life today. If I check in with my thoughts right now, I have zero OCD thoughts. They're really just whispers, and I ignore them very, very quickly because for me, my bottom was so low that it's just like "you know what? All of the options that I'm afraid of are way better than the life I just came from.".

AS: [00:26:37] Ethan Smith is a writer, director and producer who lives in Los Angeles.

AS: [00:26:44] Think about the qualities that drive great American innovators. What comes to mind? Well they've got to be tenacious, independent, ambitious and you know what? It doesn't hurt to be a little obsessive. In his book "America's Obsessives," Journalist Joshua Kendall profiles seven iconic American innovators — from Steve Jobs to Estée Lauder to the baseball legend Ted Williams. He tells Steve Paulson these all-American super achievers had one crucial thing in common: They were compulsive.

JK: [00:27:17] And these were individuals who all had these obsessions and compulsions, but in their case, it led to staggering success. So rather than being a liability, the obsessions and compulsions were an asset and it enabled them to jumpstart their careers and to continue to function at extremely high level throughout their professional lives.

SP: [00:27:42] And it would seem because they were all perfectionists, in some way. I mean, I guess as the negative spin would be they were control freaks. But they wanted to get everything exactly right.

JK: [00:27:54] And that took a toll on their personal lives. Most of them were very unhappily married, or didn't have good relationships with their kids, but in their professional lives, it put them ... in Ted Williams' case, it put them in the Hall of Fame.

SP: [00:28:11] Ted Williams, who was obsessed with how he swung the bat.

JK: [00:28:14] Right. He was obsessed with his swing. He was so obsessed with hitting a

baseball that his pickup line to women was "Show me your swing." And he thought that that was a way of connecting. And he would literally carry the bat with him all over the place.

SP: [00:28:33] You're serious? Like he'd go to a restaurant and he'd carry his bat with him?

JK: [00:28:36] Not quite that extreme but when he was a manager of the Senators, he would be holding a bat at all times. And he had this hitter on the Senators - this is in the late 60s after he's retired from the Red Sox - and he tells the Senators' worst hitter "carry a bat with you wherever you go." And Brinkman has the best year of his career and hits about 280. So he tried to sort of steep his players in his own obsessions and it often worked.

SP: [00:29:04] It's fascinating. Well let's talk about some of the other people that you write about Henry Heintz, founder of the iconic ketchup company. What was his compulsion?

JK: [00:29:13] He loved measuring things and he carried a tape measure wherever he went. And in the middle of a meeting he might just start measuring the door or something. He took it pretty far. I mean he goes to Germany back to his native country with his family one summer and he keeps a diary. And in his diary, he's obsessed with the measurements of the ship and it's something that he can't stop thinking about.

JK: [00:29:41] And I guess other obsessives. One of the others is Melville Dewey, of the Dewey decimal system. The Dewey decimal system, you know, organizes knowledge through the number ten. It's a decimal system. And it really was the kind of Google of its age. But for Dewey, decimals weren't just a way of organizing information. They were a way of living. He used to say that he liked to sleep decimally.

SP: [00:30:09] What does that mean?

JK: [00:30:10] Sleep to 10 hours a night. You know he just felt most comfortable with ten hours a night.

JK: [00:30:18] And then Dewey, in his 50s, starts Lake Placid, which is a resort for very, very nervous teachers in upstate New York. And everything there is organized decimally. It has a 10 p.m. curfew, and there's a train that leaves from Lake Placid at 10:00 p.m., and again, tens we're kind of in his blood. But the amazing thing is that we know Dewey today because that obsession led to this innovation and it was again the Google of its age. It was instrumental in organizing knowledge at the turn of the 20th century.

SP: [00:30:55] But there's often a dark side to these obsessions. So in the case of Dewey, he also had kind of these sexual obsessions, didn't he?

JK: [00:31:04] Yes obsessions often go with sexual compulsivity Dewey, to put it mildly, couldn't keep his hands off the librarians. Today we're kind of used to sexual harassment, and we see it a lot, but in those days it was kind of in the closet. So any cases that we read about from the early 1900s must have been very extreme to get noticed. And for the women to be believed. And Dewey was kicked out of the American Library Association.

SP: [00:31:37] Wow. I mean he's the guy who basically revolution libraries and he got

kicked out of their trade group?

JK: [00:31:42] Yeah, and he had to retire at the age of 50 because over a 10 day trip, he grabbed four different women and they all complained. This was in about 1905.

SP: [00:31:54] Now there's another innovator you write about, the first woman we're talking about: cosmetics pioneer Estée Lauder, whose luxury brand was built really because of her nose. She had this incredibly fine sense of smell. And she came from rather humble background, didn't she?'.

SP: [00:32:15] Yes, most of them the obsessives came from kind of hardscrabble Dickensian childhoods, and that's often where the obsessions start.In Estée Lauder case, her mother is a Jewish immigrant from Hungary - she just knew Yiddish. And then her mother has six children, and then the father leaves. And so Estee's mother has six children and no husband in this strange country. And then she meets another European Jew, and she marries him. So problem solved. There's only one knot - which is that now she's worried that husband number two is going to leave her because he's ten years younger. And when Estée is about three or four years old, her mother begins every day with an elaborate beauty ritual. Her father goes out to work and her mother is scared that husband number two is going to leave. So she starts combing her hair, putting on makeup and just trying to be beautiful and as Estee, as a little girl, age three, is helping her mother every day.

JK: [00:33:28] Talk about a founding myth for someone who's going to found a beauty empire, a cosmetics empire. I mean, you know, getting it from your mother.

JK: [00:33:37] Well not only doing it to your mother - and that's what she did for the rest of her life every single day. She couldn't stop putting makeup on women. Because for her making her mother beautiful sort of kept her family intact and she couldn't stop doing it. I interviewed her granddaughter. She grew up in New York in the 1970s and Estée used to accompany her to PTA meetings at her private school. So soon as she meets the teacher, she gives the teacher a makeover.

SP: [00:34:08] Wait wait wait. Explain. She reaches out she touches the teacher's face?

JK: [00:34:13] Yes yes. She can't stop touching faces. She'd do makeovers on people in elevators, in trains. I mean, she cannot stop touching faces.

SP: [00:34:24] So in all of these cases, you're saying there was adversity in childhood that really created these compulsions. I mean they weren't necessarily born with them. I mean there was something that was happening in their childhood and they were kind of nervous wrecks. And this was the compensation.

JK: [00:34:42] Yes it was a kind of survival mechanism. People don't know this about Ted Williams, but his mother was very poor, and she wasn't around much when he was a kid. She wanted to save all San Diego's drunks, and she would be riding the buses at all hours of the night. He described her once as a Salvation Army nut. He was very isolated. And what he would do to calm himself down was swing the bat. And that's how he sort of bonded with his bat. The bat became kind of his attachment figure. Again I talked about his blanket. I mean that the bat became his connection to the world with him.

SP: [00:35:23] What I find amazing about this story is that just by swinging the bat over and over, again, you know probably watching yourself in the mirror do it, that you could actually become a great baseball player. Somehow wouldn't think that that kind of practice would actually turn into greatness.

JK: [00:35:42] And that's what's so interesting - because compulsion again are things that they can't stop doing. But you know in his case he just kept on swinging, and in Estee Lauder's case, she just kept on putting makeup on people, and you just do it again and again and again. And it led to some kind of major innovation, and kind of shaping our culture.

SP: [00:36:04] And yet when we talk about these kind of obsessive personality traits, I mean these are disorders, as far as I know. They are still classified as pathologies in the DSM, aren't they.

JK: [00:36:16] Yes. So there's a lot of confusion about the diagnostic nomenclature. The main confusion is between obsessive compulsive disorder, which is a very disabling, and I argue that these individuals had obsessive compulsive personality disorder, which is disabling when it comes to human relationships, but not necessarily when it comes to your profession. Now obsessive compulsive disorder are people who have a hard time functioning, and they have thoughts that are scary. So maybe they'll think that their hands are dirty, and they'll just keep washing their hands until they cut the skin. And they might spend 10 hours a day washing their hands. They're just convinced that they're infected with germs. So those aren't people who are going to start Apple, like Steve Jobs, or write the Declaration of Independence, like Thomas Jefferson, whom profile. Or build a billion dollar business, like Estée Lauder. People with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder are impaired from functioning. But people with obsessive compulsive personality disorder - so these are people who love rules and order and perfection - those folks can function at a very very high level. They almost function better than well because they have all the sort of extra juice.

SP: [00:37:38] So it sounds like what you're saying is we need a more nuanced understanding of compulsive, obsessive people. That it's not quite as blanket Lee negative as we tend to think. You're saying that I mean to some degree these people have have made the world or at least made America.

JK: [00:37:57] Yes yes. That they can be extremely influential and in their careers they can really stand out and just that our society is just so competitive. And it's been that way since the founding era that people who are perfectionists and you know a lot of them are just totally preoccupied with work. Think about Steve Jobs who basically revolutionized seven different industries. You know when he dies in his mid 50s I mean just the imprint that he left was amazing. But they're kind of on hyper drive. You know those stories about a woman who sees her baby under a car and just all of a sudden lifts the car up.

SP: [00:38:38] Right.

JK: [00:38:39] It's as if these innovators have that kind of energy you know day in and day out for decades.

SP: [00:38:45] You mentioned Steve Jobs. And I guess we all know, we've all heard stories about how perfectionistic he was in his work at Apple. In what way was he

obsessively compulsive?

JK: [00:38:59] Just about innovation and design. My book starts with a scene when he's building the first Macintosh computer and the factory has to be absolutely spotless. He says it should be so spotless that you can eat off the floor. And he also was obsessed with design when he's dying of cancer. He had tubes in his chest and you literally rips them out and he tells the doctor that he just can't stand the design.

JK: [00:39:29] I mean his claim to fame is designing these amazing products and that's just something he couldn't stop thinking about.

SP: [00:39:37] Well it's a great story. Thank you for coming in and talking about it.

JK: [00:39:40] My pleasure.

AS: [00:39:45] Joshua Kendall is the author of "America's Obsessives: The Compulsive Energy That Built a Nation. He was talking with Steve Paulson.

AS: [00:39:57] It's To The Best Of Our Knowledge from Wisconsin Public Radio and PRX.

AS: [00:41:09] Some time ago we started a poetry project where we asked some of our favorite poets to experiment with writing new work based on the news. This is news to find very broadly as current events in our world or even in their own personal lives. Well National Book Critics Circle Award winner Laura Kasischke wrote a poem about something that just happened or almost happened in her own life.

LK:

WTF

I see her just in time—a young
woman (a girl, frankly) with
her ear buds in. She's

one of the many who hasn't bothered
to look one
way, let alone both
ways, before
stepping into the street today—I see her
just in time to stomp the brakes
in order not to kill her. She

never knows what didn't hit her. She's
wearing a t-shirt with WTF on it. Of

course, I know what this means. I've
texted it to friends. I've
said it, outright, in public, have
whispered it, thought it, written it, been
at the center of what this means, and what it is. But

what I read, instead, seeing
her t-shirt's three
letters through my windshield
this afternoon is
What's to Fear? Because

she hasn't bothered to fear today, it seems.
Some other time I might have gotten

angry, honked my horn, unrolled my window, shouted
something out about
suicidal tendencies, childish stupidity—but

today, I say to her, silently, instead: May
such times continue
to slam their brakes for you, as
you continue on your way. Or may

you at least look up
just in time one day

to say to yourself something simple, like: I've made
a regrettable but rectifiable mistake, while

the motorcades pass through you without
wounding you, the flashing sirens and
lights, the patriotic parades, the hearses flapping
their miniature flags, the whole

vehicular physics of
everything slipping through you, waving
politely, as if Nothing might be the answer
to the question you're not asking:

What's to fear? As if

this could save someone so young
and so carefree (I used to be you) so that
you, too, might live
long enough to be
a driver in some distant future
slamming on the brakes
just in time to save
some people who weren't paying
much attention

to the world around them
because they didn't think
they needed to—people
like me and you.

AS: [00:43:39] Laura thank you so much for coming into the studio. And well, first of all, I'm glad you and the pedestrian are okay.

LK: [00:43:46] Ah, yes.

AS: [00:43:47] In the poem, this girl is wearing a T-shirt with the phrase "WTF" which is also what you titled the poem. It's just such a common throwaway phrase, but somehow just by putting it in the poem, you've made it so much more powerful or more significant. That was your intention?

LK: [00:44:08] Well thank you. Yeah. Honestly it's one of those moments where it didn't completely compute, when in this particular context - with her so close to being run over by me and my seeing that T-shirt in those letters - I did come to the conclusion that "WTF" could also stand for "what's to fear." You know it it seemed a strangely carefree for someone who had almost just died, you know, and didn't know it, or almost ended up in the hospital at least - I don't know if I would be killed her. I wasn't going that fast but it could have been bad.

AS: [00:44:48] Well I might be projecting this into the poem because I know that you often like working with fairytale elements, that those are things that you've drawn on in the past, and so there's a way in which this girl for me became not just an annoying college girl walking down a busy street in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She became like Red Riding Hood walking blithely through the forest, and not paying attention to the Big Wolf that was hiding behind the trees.

LK: [00:45:19] I like that yeah I like her archetypal potential there. I'm just attracted to that kind of stuff. I find it particularly applicable to female experience.

AS: [00:45:33] Why is that, particularly applicable to female experience?

LK: [00:45:36] I don't know. I mean, I certainly read fairytales to my son, but I don't think they cast the same kind of spell on him as a little boy as they did on me as a little girl, with witches and princesses and evil queens and stepmothers and just all the maternal stuff and the daughter stuff. You know?

AS: [00:45:59] Maybe those are some of the oldest stories that we read when we we're really young, in which girls and women have powerful roles to play?

LK: [00:46:09] Right. Or they have messages they're sending. I mean think of Little Red Riding Hood. All the warnings that are contained for girls in that story. I mean it don't go off the path. You don't go with the wolf. If you do, what you really are going to need is some man with an axe to chop open the wolf so you can get out again. There's a lot of... I don't know. I think it's got a lot to do with girlhood, and has a lot of messages for girls in that story.

AS: [00:46:37] Well I love this poem that at the heart of it feels to me is this adult woman looking at this young girl, on the cusp of adulthood who's not paying attention, and my association as a mother of a 21-year-old daughter is how you both want your child to feel

carefree and fearless, but you're also terrified for them.

LK: [00:47:04] I have a 21-year-old son. So I think about that a lot. And also, oddly enough, I teach college now in the same college campus where I was once a young woman. So I see versions of myself. And because my son is 21, and that my students are in that same age range, I have very maternal feelings towards a lot of the students, so this is a time when I'm just much more aware of .. political, military, world events, terrorists - you know - potential catastrophes at every turn. And I'm just aware of it, and you know and as you just said, and at the same time that I appreciate that the talk and the activism and everything, what I really want is for people like my students and my son to be able to live comfortable lives.

AS: [00:48:08] Right.

LK: [00:48:09] I know that that's a first world attitude but I have hope for them for that that they can keep thinking "WTF," what's to fear, not have anything to fear.

AS: [00:48:23] And I think that's any parent - anywhere - [their] desire is for their child, though, as you know, may the terrible events of their time somehow pass over their child. I wanted to ask you also about the settings of your poems. You know you write these poems that kind of take in some ways ordinary moments - in settings like this one. You know, it's a crosswalk. What's behind wanting to write poetry out of these everyday kind of settings?

LK: [00:48:56] Well, I only have so much to work with. I'm in the domestic situation in the Midwest, where I live. You know, I've been a mom. I drive around a lot. I do live outside of Ann Arbor, sort of in a suburban setting, I guess. But I also, I guess, I feel that it's fun or an interesting challenge to try to make things that are real ordinary have kind of mythical dimensions. But also I think that there's just inherently - in everything, all the ordinary things that we do - all kinds of weirdnesses and, you know, life in general is pretty odd. You know, when you really start to think about it.

LK: [00:49:43] I often think about [that] there's a writer who his name is Richard Grossinger. He lives in California and he he writes kind of new-agey books, but he also writes about astronomy and anthropology. And anyway, he was writing a book I guess about people who believe that they've been abducted by aliens. And so he went to Hamtramck, here in Michigan. He went to a meeting in the basement of a bank that he had read about in the newspaper or something. He called for people who had been abductees or believed that they had been abducted by aliens. So I guess he got to the meeting and the person leading the meeting said that they were very honored. I mean there were a lot of people there, and the leader of the meeting said that they were very honored that they had a visitor from Saturn in the audience. And then he said that he looked around and suddenly everyone looked like a candidate. That anybody could have been, any one of the people there could have been the elite among us, a space person. And sometimes I think that I was like look around at the bag or something and just realize how strange everything is.

AS: [00:50:51] So that's what I love about your poetry. You do that, whether it's you know suddenly for a split second you can see how weird and space alien-like everybody is, or that we could all just as well be characters in fairy tales. It's something about seeing the possibility for the mythic in ordinary everyday life.

LK: [00:51:13] Thank you. Well there was a movement for a little while in England, I guess in the 1960s. A poet, Craig Raine, who was [writing] Martian poetry. People were writing Martian poems. Wikipedia it! I showed it to my students recently. People writing poems about the world from the point of view of Martians.

AS: [00:51:34] What do Martians think about us?

LK: [00:51:37] Well he hasn't really good poem ... I'm sorry I can't remember the title of it right now, but in which Martians are looking at people who are holding books in their hands and the books are described as like magical birds that seem to be speaking to the people through their eyes and then at night they curl together in pairs and watch movies with their eyes closed, which is a way of suggesting dreaming from the point of view of a Martian - who wouldn't know what a dream was, I guess? The Martians don't have dreams, I guess.

AS: [00:52:15] You do make me want to spend at least 15 minutes in the next staff meeting imagining that everybody on our staff is a Martian.

LK: [00:52:21] Yeah. Or there was only one. You have to look around and figure out which one it is.

AS: [00:52:28] So this was so much fun. Laura, thank you so much for talking.

AS: [00:52:30] Thank you so much. Laura Kasischke has published nine novels and nine volumes of poems. Her most recent book is called "The Infinitesimals."

AS: [00:52:46] To The Best Of Our Knowledge comes to you from Madison, Wisconsin and the studios of Wisconsin Public Radio. Rehman Tungekar produced this hour. He had help from Charles Monroe-Kane, Mark Riechers and Doug Gordon. Joe Hartdke is our technical director. Steve Paulson is our executive producer, and I'm Anne Strainchamps. Thanks for listening.